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BEYOND CORRUPTION: WHY GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE MATTERS MORE FOR PUBLIC TRUST

Public trust in government is often seen as a casualty of corruption. From high-profile scandals to everyday encounters with inefficient bureaucracy, South Africans have long viewed corruption as a core issue in governance. However, recent Afrobarometer data challenge this conventional wisdom, revealing that perceived government performance in service delivery is a far stronger predictor of trust in government than perceptions of corruption in South Africa. This insight is especially relevant today, as South Africa navigates the complexities of a Government of National Unity (GNU), continued service delivery breakdowns, and persistent high-profile corruption cases.

The Performance vs. Corruption Paradox

For decades, corruption has been a dominant theme in public discourse, with successive administrations pledging to stamp it out. Yet, our analysis of Afrobarometer data (2011–2023)

> "GOVERNMENT TRUST ISN'T JUST ABOUT CORRUPTION—IT'S ABOUT DELIVERY

reveals a counterintuitive trend: while perceptions of corruption remain high, they are not significant predictors of trust in government institutions. Instead, public trust correlates far more strongly with how well the government delivers basic services —clean water, electricity, healthcare, roads, and critically, employment.

Consider the case of local government. Afrobarometer Round 9 data show that 71% of South Africansexpressed distrust in local government officials. While corruption plays a role in this discontent, the driving force is poor service delivery: power outages, unreliable water supply, broken infrastructure, and ineffective waste management. People do not just distrust local authorities because of suspicion— they do so because the state is visibly failing them.

Similar patterns are evident in trust towards the police and judiciary. Surveys show low public confidence in these institutions, driven less by corruption per se and more by inefficiency, slow service, and a lack of responsiveness to ordinary people's needs. Trust, it turns out, is built not simply on clean hands, but on visible competence.

Lessons from the South African Frontlines

South Africa's ongoing energy crisis offers a clear example. The nation experienced over 300 days of load-shedding in 2023, with rolling blackouts becoming an inescapable part of daily life. While corruption at Eskom has been widely publicised—and in some cases prosecuted—what fuels public outrage is not just what was stolen, but what continues to be undelivered: reliable electricity. Government officials may pledge accountability, but the lights are still off.

Similarly, the 2023 cholera outbreak in Hammanskraal, which claimed over 30 lives, was not merely a tragedy— it was a scathing indictment of failed service delivery. Residents had been warning for years about poor water quality. The eventual health crisis, attributed to systemic mismanagement and infrastructure collapse, struck at the heart of public trust. Again, while corruption in water procurement contracts has been alleged, what eroded trust more deeply was the state's prolonged inaction and lack of urgency.

Meanwhile, in Gauteng, the province's two largest metros—Johannesburg and Tshwane—have become case studies in coalition instability. Repeated mayoral changes, political infighting, and policy paralysis have delayed essential service delivery, leaving ratepayers feeling neglected. When garbage piles up, taps run dry, and potholes remain unfilled, citizens rarely differentiate between whether the failure is due to incompetence or corruption—they simply see a state that is not working.

The GNU and the Trust Challenge

South Africa's emerging Government of National Unity presents both risks and opportunities. On paper, it signals a new political maturity, a willingness to

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collaborate beyond party lines. But in practice, coalitions in South Africa have often delivered chaos instead of coherence. Municipal coalitions in major metros have shown that fragmented leadership, blurred accountability, and political score-settling can grind governance to a halt.

Public trust in the GNU will not hinge on symbolism—it will depend on delivery. Can the GNU reduce load-shedding? Create jobs? Fix public transport? Ensure clean governance? If not, it will lose legitimacy faster than its constituent parties anticipate. Voters are watching not for moral posturing, but for measurable improvements.

Afrobarometer survey results for South Africa in 2024 found that 64% of South Africans are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working, and 85% believe the country is heading in the wrong direction. These are not just abstract sentiments—they are rooted in lived experiences of failing institutions. The GNU's success or failure will likely depend on how decisively it responds to these failures.

A Global Shift: Citizens Vote for Results

South Africa is not alone in this shift towards performance-based trust. Across the globe, voters are increasingly demanding results over rhetoric.

United States: Trump's Return, Performance Politics

In 2024, former President Donald Trump returned to office amid a deeply polarised electorate, economic uncertainty, and growing frustration with the establishment. While his administration remains dogged by ethical controversies and legal battles, Trump's electoral appeal has not evaporated. His

success hinges less on perceptions of personal integrity and more on the perception—among his base—that he delivers: tough immigration policy, lower taxes, and a strong national posture.

Trump's rhetoric around "draining the swamp" continues to resonate, despite the irony of his own controversies. Yet, public trust in the federal government remains low. Surveys show that Americans place more trust in local governments, which are perceived as more efficient in delivering day-to-day services. In states and cities where roads are paved, schools function, and public services are responsive, trust follows performance.

Europe: Eroding Trust Amid Service Strain

Across Europe, the performance-trust link is also visible. In France, mass protests in 2023 erupted not due to corruption, but due to pension reform—a direct service issue affecting millions. Similarly, in the UK, trust in the central government has been further eroded by mounting NHS backlogs, strikes, and economic stagnation.

Conversely, Nordic countries maintain high trust levels, not because they are immune to political scandals, but because their governments consistently deliver high-quality services. Citizens trust institutions that work.

Global South: Performance Over Purity

In the Global South, the trade-off between clean governance and competent governance is often stark. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi continues to command broad support despite persistent allegations of democratic backsliding and favouritism. His popularity is bolstered by the state's visible investments in roads, electricity, digital infrastructure, and welfare schemes. In short, he is seen to get things done.

In Kenya, President William Ruto's 2022 election campaign included strong anti-corruption rhetoric. However, within a year, public attention shifted towards his government's economic performance. Citizens now demand relief from high fuel prices, youth unemployment, and food insecurity—showing once again that delivery trumps declarations.

What Can Be Done?

If government performance drives trust more than anti-corruption efforts alone, what steps must governments—particularly South Africa's GNU—take?

1. Focus on Functional Delivery
Service delivery should be the core metric for evaluating governance. Every effort must be made to fix infrastructure, streamline local administration, and professionalise municipal management. Performance audits and real-time tracking of service outcomes should be public and transparent.

2. Marry Accountability with Outcomes
Anti-corruption is necessary—but not sufficient. Prosecutions must be followed by improvements in how institutions function. It's not enough to clean the house; the house must also run properly.

3. Empower Local Government
Local governments are the face of the state for most citizens. Decentralised, well-funded, and capable municipalities are essential. The national government should prioritise capacity building and financial oversightat the local level.

4. Build a Performance Compact within the GNU
Rather than vague promises of unity, the GNU should articulate a joint service delivery compact—setting measurable goals on power, water, transport, and jobs, and holding each department accountable across party lines.

Conclusion: Governance Must Be Felt to Be Trusted

As South Africa stands at the threshold of a new political chapter, one thing is clear: people want delivery, not declarations. While corruption offends the public conscience, it is the everyday experience of government—working taps, working hospitals, working jobs—that determines how citizens feel about their leaders.

For the GNU to succeed, and for South African democracy to renew itself, service delivery must become the true litmus test of leadership. Civil society, too, must demand not only clean governance but functional governance. For researchers and policymakers, trust-building strategies must begin with performance.

Corruption may erode trust—but inefficiency obliterates it. Where trust fails, democracy falters. But where the state performs, trust can grow—even in imperfect contexts. The road to renewed public confidence is paved not with slogans, but with potholes filled, lights on, and services delivered.

The path forward is clear: better governance, better delivery, and stronger trust.

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