



State Capture in Africa

How elite networks undermine democracy, development and security

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Key points

- State capture and the rise of “shadow states” have undermined development, democracy and security by enabling elite networks to reshape public institutions for private gain.
- In countries such as the DRC, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, informal networks linking politicians, business elites, judges, military officers and security actors increasingly operate both through and underneath formal democratic institutions.
- State capture takes different forms across contexts: Some systems rely heavily on militarization and coercion, while others operate through procurement systems, judicial influence and business patronage.
- In resource-rich states such as the DRC and Zimbabwe, capture networks linked to mining, fuel and smuggling have fuelled corruption, illicit financial flows, conflict and instability while limiting developmental gains.
- Captured systems weaken democratic accountability by hollowing out courts, regulators, and oversight bodies, while also reducing public trust, increasing the risk of autocratization.
- Effective responses require coordinated domestic and international action, including cross-border investigations, greater financial transparency, procurement reform, stronger oversight institutions, and support for investigative journalism and civil society.

Introduction

State capture has been increasingly recognized as a major governance challenge due to the way it helps to drive many of the most pressing problems facing contemporary states, including democratic erosion, corruption, economic exclusion, insecurity and declining trust in political institutions.¹ Concerns about the ability of powerful political and economic networks to manipulate public institutions for private gain have grown across a wide range of political systems, from South Africa under Jacob Zuma to debates about oligarchic influence, partisan institutional control, and weakening oversight institutions in the United States and other established democracies.² Consequently, state capture is understood not simply as a corruption issue, but as a broader threat to democratic governance, economic inclusion and political stability. These challenges are

particularly significant given that focus on governance and transparency among traditional donor countries is on the decline, as policy attention and aid budgets are reduced and diverted to other issues, such as defence, migration and other domestic priorities.

The recognition that state capture had become a major political and governance challenge, combined with the lack of systematic comparative evidence on how it operates across different African states, led to the initiation of the ‘State Capture and the Shadow State in Africa’ research project managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI).³ This report summarizes the project’s main findings, and puts them into conversation with some subsequent and emerging trends. The research focused on four countries at different stages of political and economic development: the Democratic Republic of Congo under Félix Tshisekedi, Uganda under Yoweri Museveni, Zambia under Edgar Lungu, and Zimbabwe under Emmerson Mnangagwa.

How the research was done

The briefing highlights why state capture is so difficult to research: The networks involved are often deliberately hidden behind informal relationships, intermediaries, offshore financial systems and institutions that operate with limited scrutiny. To trace these systems of power, the research combined interviews, official documents, court records, NGO reports, media investigations, academic literature and wider governance data. This required researchers to work at the intersection of academia, investigative journalism and detective work to map the relationships linking political leaders, business actors, security officials, judges and other influential intermediaries. By documenting how these networks operate in practice, the project shows how state capture shapes access to public contracts, strategic resources, security institutions, and political power, with significant consequences for development, democracy and security.

Conducted between 2020 and 2021, the project sought to understand how state capture operated within these political systems and how variations in leadership, institutions and political economy shaped different forms of capture.

The aim was not to suggest that all African states are captured, but rather to better understand why some appear more vulnerable than others, how capture operates in different contexts, and which institutions are most at risk. Moreover, the study does not argue that state capture is uniquely African. Instead, one of the project's central contributions is to illustrate the extent to which the networks that sustain state capture are often international in character—linking domestic political actors to foreign governments, multinational corporations, security providers, financial centres and other external partners. As a result, state capture is increasingly shaping development, democracy and security not only in Africa, but also in Europe, North America and other regions of the world.

The report first explains what state capture and the shadow state mean, highlighting how informal networks of political, economic, military and external actors can shape public institutions and state resources behind the scenes. Drawing on evidence from across the case studies, it examines how these networks operate in practice and explores

their consequences for development, security, and democracy. The report shows how state capture can distort economic decision-making, weaken public services, increase inequality and divert resources away from citizens, towards politically connected networks. It also analyses how the politicization of military, police, judicial and regulatory institutions can undermine the rule of law, weaken accountability and increase insecurity, coercion and political violence, while gradually eroding public trust and meaningful political competition. The report concludes by setting out recommendations aimed at strengthening transparency, accountability, institutional resilience and international cooperation against increasingly transnational systems of capture.

How state capture works

State capture refers to the ability of powerful political and economic actors to shape state institutions, laws, policies and public resources for private and personal benefit. Unlike conventional corruption, which usually involves individual acts of bribery or misconduct, state capture is systemic. It works by gradually reshaping institutions meant to serve the public interest—such as courts, procurement bodies, regulators, electoral commissions, state-owned enterprises, and parts of the civil service and security sector—so that they protect entrenched networks of political and economic power instead. This often occurs through political appointments, patronage networks, procurement systems, control over state contracts and licences, influence over judges and regulators, and the politicization of oversight institutions.

As Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett argues, the process can be seen to erode democracy and development outcomes through the capture of three core pillars or domains: by manipulating the rules of the game; by capturing the implementation of state policy and resource allocation; and by weakening the accountability institutions designed to constrain abuses of power.⁴ It first gained prominence in debates about post-communist Europe,⁵ where oligarchs and political insiders used their influence over privatisation, regulation, and state institutions to dominate economic and political life. More recently, it has been used to analyse governance failures and democratic decline across Africa, Latin America, Asia and established Western democracies.

This does not always happen through the most high-profile institutions. Instead, capture often occurs through institutions that received relatively

Key terms

State capture: The systematic manipulation of state institutions, laws and public resources by powerful actors for private or personal benefit.

Shadow state: The informal networks of political, economic, security and other influential actors through which state capture is organized and sustained.

little public attention. The report demonstrates that regulatory agencies, procurement systems, implementing agencies and sections of the civil service have been frequently used to shape contracts, licensing systems, prosecutions and regulatory decisions away from public scrutiny. In Zimbabwe, companies linked to political and military elites were alleged to have manipulated fuel shortages to inflate prices and generate profits at the expense of citizens and businesses. In Uganda, politically connected business allies reportedly received tax waivers that deprived the state of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue that could otherwise have supported healthcare and education.⁶

The idea of the “shadow state” helps explain how state capture operates in practice. Drawing on William Reno’s work on the privatization of state authority and informal rule,⁷ the concept refers to the networks and relationships through which public institutions are coordinated and controlled behind the scenes. These networks often connect politicians, business actors, judges, military officers, senior civil servants, financiers and other intermediaries operating both inside and outside formal institutions. In many cases, some of the most influential actors are unelected individuals who exercise significant sway over public decision-making without democratic accountability. The South African experience under President Jacob Zuma gave the concept broader prominence, as investigations revealed how networks embedded across government, business and security institutions shaped public decisions, procurement systems and state contracts for private benefit.⁸ More recently, concerns about the Trump family’s rapidly expanding wealth and business interests during Donald Trump’s second term—with Forbes estimating that Trump’s personal fortune more than doubled in a single year, rising from roughly USD 2.3 billion to more than USD 5 billion—have pushed debates about kleptocracy, transnational patronage networks and state capture further into mainstream global politics. This is especially marked

given the growing role of international business deals, foreign investors, and cryptocurrency ventures in this expansion of wealth.⁹

As the US example suggests, state capture has a strongly international dimension. These networks rarely operate only within national borders. In many cases, they depend on relationships with multinational companies, offshore financial systems, international banking networks, regional political allies and organized criminal groups. In the DRC, shadow networks were deeply intertwined with regional and international smuggling systems linked to mineral extraction and armed conflict. In Zimbabwe, political and military elites relied heavily on cross-border commercial relationships connected to sectors such as fuel and mining. Offshore financial centres and international banking systems also enabled politically connected actors to conceal wealth and avoid accountability.

What drives variation in state capture?

The country studies in this report illustrate how these systems operated in practice, while also demonstrating how variations in political economy shape the way states engage with both domestic and international markets. One of the clearest findings is that state capture takes very different forms depending on the political and economic context. The actors involved, the institutions targeted, and the mechanisms used vary significantly across countries. In some systems, military and security actors sit at the centre of capture networks. In others, politically connected business actors, judges, ruling parties or senior civil servants play a more prominent role. Some systems rely heavily on coercion and control over sectors such as mining or fuel, while others operate more quietly through procurement systems, licensing arrangements, judicial influence and patronage networks.

These differences are summarized in Table 1, which highlights both how capture operates and the kinds of damage it causes. More militarized systems often generate greater intimidation, political violence, and uncertainty over where real authority lies. In Zimbabwe, military influence expanded significantly from the early 2000s onwards into sectors such as fuel, mining, procurement and agriculture. This blurred the line between civilian and military authority and increased uncertainty over whether ultimate power rested with elected leaders or senior security figures.¹⁰

Table 1. Variation in state capture and shadow states

Variation	How it shapes state capture	Examples
Civilian versus militarised capture	In some countries, security actors sit at the centre of capture networks. In others, capture is driven more through civilian patronage, procurement and judicial influence.	Zimbabwe and Uganda featured highly militarised systems linked to security elites. Zambia relied more on civilian politicians, judges and business elites.
Resource-based versus diversified economies	Resource-rich economies often generate larger and more entrenched capture networks because control over minerals, fuel or strategic sectors creates major opportunities for rent extraction.	In the DRC , shadow networks were tied to mineral extraction and smuggling. In Zimbabwe , elites benefited from fuel and mining networks.
Domestic versus transnational networks	Some systems rely mainly on domestic patronage networks, while others are deeply connected to multinational companies, offshore finance and transnational criminal systems.	In the DRC , capture networks were tied to mineral smuggling and armed groups. In Zimbabwe , political and military elites relied on cross-border fuel and mining networks.

In Uganda, the shadow state revolved around an alliance between President Yoweri Museveni’s family, senior military figures and selected business actors with privileged access to the presidency. Lisa Rolls argues that this network enabled politically connected actors to shape economic opportunities, direct investment relationships and sustain political control.¹¹

By contrast, systems in which civilian political and business networks play a more prominent role often operate through quieter but still highly damaging forms of influence. In Zambia, the shadow state relied less on military actors and more on relationships between civilian politicians, judges, senior officials, and business networks embedded in procurement and regulatory systems. Sishuwa highlights how these networks shaped judicial processes, state contracts, and access to economic resources, influencing both domestic accumulation and the country’s integration into the international economy while weakening institutional accountability.¹² Influence operated less through overt coercion and more through procurement systems, patronage, judicial influence, and privileged access to state resources. Similar patterns emerged in Benin and Tanzania, where capture became closely associated with executive dominance over courts, legislatures and electoral institutions.

The structure of the economy also shapes the form that capture takes. In countries where political and economic power is tied to high-value natural resources, shadow states often become both more deeply entrenched and more internationally

connected. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, Claude Wakenge argues that shadow networks became closely tied to mineral extraction, armed actors, cross-border smuggling systems and international commercial networks linked to the trade in cobalt, gold and other minerals. The fragmentation of political authority produced multiple overlapping networks competing for access not only to territory and resources, but also to transnational economic relationships and external sources of finance.¹³ One consequence of this internationalization is that resources are especially likely to be transferred to external financial centres and secrecy jurisdictions—particularly the United Arab Emirates, especially Dubai, as well as Switzerland, Mauritius and offshore territories such as the British Virgin Islands—where wealth can be hidden, protected or reinvested.¹⁴ This includes revenues from oil, gas, minerals and other natural resources, alongside public procurement funds, foreign aid and state contracts that are diverted through corruption and illicit financial flows, reducing the capital available for domestic investment, service delivery and long-term economic transformation.¹⁵

By contrast, in less resource-dependent economies such as Uganda before commercial oil production, shadow states have tended to rely more heavily on domestic patronage systems, procurement networks and political control over state contracts and regulation. In Uganda, international connections historically operated less through extractive industries and more through aid relationships, donor funding and the strategic management of external

partnerships. Although these systems were still connected to international markets and investors, their core operations were more nationally rooted and less dependent on transnational extractive industries or cross-border smuggling networks. This distinction is important because more internationally embedded shadow states are often harder to regulate and more resilient, drawing strength not only from domestic political alliances but also from external commercial, financial, aid and security relationships.

These differences have important implications for reform. Strategies that may work in systems dominated by military actors are unlikely to succeed in systems driven more by procurement networks, business influence or executive control over legal institutions. Understanding variation is therefore critical to designing effective responses to state capture—as discussed in the next section.

What are the consequences of state capture?

Despite significant variation across countries, state capture generates a number of recurring consequences. In almost all cases, it weakens accountability, distorts economic decision-making and reduces trust in political institutions. Yet the precise effects depend heavily on how capture is organized. More militarized systems, such as those identified in Zimbabwe and Uganda, tend to generate greater coercion, intimidation and political violence. Systems driven more through civilian patronage, procurement networks and judicial influence—such as Zambia or Benin—often produce quieter but still highly damaging forms of institutional erosion, including distorted contracting systems, weakened oversight and the politicization of legal institutions. The structure of the economy also shapes outcomes. In resource-rich countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe, control over minerals, fuel and other strategic sectors intensified corruption, illicit financial flows and competition over access to state resources.

These patterns matter because they shape the kinds of political and economic crises that emerge over time. In some contexts, capture contributes to insecurity, militarization and violent competition over resources. In others, it gradually hollows out regulatory systems, procurement processes and legal oversight—weakening institutional credibility and public trust. The sections that follow focus on three of the most important consequences of state capture:

development and economic inclusion; security and stability; and democracy and accountability.

Development and economic inclusion

One of the most damaging consequences of state capture is its effect on development and economic inclusion. In captured systems, public institutions and economic policy are increasingly shaped by politically connected insiders rather than broader national priorities. Procurement systems, licensing arrangements, tax exemptions and access to state resources become tools for rewarding allies and protecting elite networks. As a result, economic opportunity is distorted, public resources are diverted away from development priorities and inequality often deepens. This is especially true in countries where shadow state networks become internationalised, as noted above, due to tendency to shift resources out of the country, after which they are lost to national development efforts.

The economic effects of capture vary depending on the form that it takes. In some systems, military and political elites dominate strategic sectors such as fuel, mining, agriculture or infrastructure. In others, politically connected businesses benefit through procurement systems, regulatory influence and privileged access to state contracts. In both cases, political power becomes closely tied to economic privilege, weakening fair competition and reducing the ability of the state to direct resources towards long-term development goals.

Zimbabwe provides one of the clearest examples of how captured economic systems can become intertwined with political survival. From the early 2000s onwards, military and political elites expanded their influence into sectors including fuel, mining, procurement, and agriculture.¹⁶ Access to lucrative opportunities became increasingly tied to political loyalty, while companies linked to political and military actors were accused of exploiting fuel shortages to inflate prices and generate profits. Despite significant mineral wealth, developmental gains remained limited. Zimbabwe's broader developmental trajectory also reflected deepening state failure, including recurring cholera outbreaks, collapsing health infrastructure, chronic electricity shortages and repeated failures in water provision and waste management—all of which highlighted the declining capacity of the state to provide basic public services.

Uganda illustrates a somewhat different model centred on networks linking political elites, security

actors, and business interests.¹⁷ Politically connected actors benefited from privileged access to contracts, state resources, and tax exemptions. One particularly important mechanism was the extensive use of tax waivers for politically connected businesses, which reportedly deprived the state of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue that could otherwise have supported healthcare and education.¹⁸ Uganda recorded relatively strong economic growth for much of Museveni's rule, but the captured nature of the state meant that the benefits of growth were unevenly shared. Although human development indicators improved, progress fell short of what might have been expected given the scale of aid inflows and the country's reputation as a "donor darling", while inequality rose markedly, with the Gini coefficient increasing from around 39 in 1996 to more than 45 by the early 2000s.¹⁹

The Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrates how state capture can become especially destructive in resource-rich economies. Networks linked to political elites, armed actors, and business interests became deeply embedded within mineral extraction and cross-border smuggling systems.²⁰ In some mining areas, companies and traders reportedly faced dozens of formal and informal taxes imposed by state officials, security actors and armed groups. Despite possessing some of the world's most valuable mineral reserves, the DRC remained among the world's poorest countries in human development terms. Its HDI score stood at 0.52 in 2023, placing it among the lower-ranked countries globally, while much of the wealth generated by extractive industries failed to translate into improvements in infrastructure, public services or living standards.

State capture also distorted markets and weakened private sector development. Politically connected firms often gained unfair advantages through procurement systems, licensing arrangements, tax exemptions and privileged access to contracts. This discouraged investment and created economies in which political connection mattered more than productivity or innovation. In Zambia, procurement systems and state contracts became closely tied to networks linking politicians, judges, senior officials and business elites.²¹ Although Zambia experienced periods of economic growth linked to copper exports, its HDI score effectively flatlined from the mid-2010s, while rising debt levels, repeated electricity shortages, high youth unemployment and persistent poverty highlighted the limited developmental impact of this growth.

Across these different contexts, state capture repeatedly blurred the boundary between public authority and private enrichment. Institutions that were supposed to support development instead became mechanisms for extracting resources, protecting insiders, and sustaining power. Captured systems therefore often became better at distributing privilege than delivering development. One important implication of this finding for international donors, institutions and development organizations is that providing foreign aid and other forms of economic investment risk without tackling state capture risks scarce resources being diverted in ways that enrich the elite while increasing inequality and further entrenching the shadow state.²²

Security and stability

State capture undermines security by tying institutions responsible for law, order and public protection to political survival, coercion and illicit networks. In more militarized systems, this often increases intimidation, political violence and the use of security forces against opponents. It can also blur the line between civilian and military authority, weakening command structures and creating uncertainty over where real power lies. Even in less militarized systems, the politicisation of police, intelligence agencies, courts and oversight bodies can weaken the rule of law and reduce the capacity of the state to provide impartial security and protection.

The Democratic Republic of Congo provides the starkest example of how state capture can become intertwined with conflict and insecurity. Networks linked to political elites, armed groups, traders, and security actors became deeply embedded within mineral extraction and cross-border smuggling systems.²³ Competition over access to minerals reinforced overlapping systems of political protection, illicit extraction, and violence. ACLED data shows that political violence in eastern DRC increased significantly between 2021 and 2024, driven by the expansion of the M23 insurgency, regional tensions, and ongoing conflict between armed groups and state forces.²⁴

Zimbabwe illustrates a different but related pattern in which military influence became increasingly central to both politics and the economy. From the early 2000s onwards, military and political elites expanded their influence into sectors including fuel, mining, procurement and agriculture.²⁵ This blurred the distinction between civilian and military authority, while security institutions became increasingly tied

to protecting ruling networks and strategic economic interests. Although Zimbabwe did not experience large-scale armed conflict on the level of the DRC, the militarization of politics contributed to repeated cycles of repression, intimidation and political violence around elections and opposition mobilization.

Uganda displayed a somewhat similar dynamic. Networks linking political elites, senior military figures and business actors became central to both regime stability and access to economic opportunity.²⁶ Over time, this concentrated political, economic and coercive power within overlapping networks connected to the presidency. The result was not civil war, but the increasing politicization of security institutions and growing use of coercive power to manage dissent and protect ruling interests. Zambia demonstrates that state capture can also undermine security and stability in less militarized systems. Capture operated more through networks linking politicians, judges, senior officials, and business elites than through direct military influence.²⁷ However, this still weakened institutional trust and the rule of law by politicizing procurement systems, public contracts and sections of the judiciary.

The wider experience of West Africa demonstrates how state capture and shadow state networks can become internationalized. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, growing frustration with corruption, insecurity and long-standing ties to France contributed to support for military takeovers. Critics argued that French political, military and commercial influence had become embedded within governing networks, benefiting political elites and external actors while failing to improve security or deliver development.²⁸ The spate of coups in the region—including Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023)—was therefore celebrated in some quarters as replacing the exploitative relations of *‘Françafrique’* with an opportunity for these countries to secure genuine independence from (neo)colonial control.²⁹ Yet some of the juntas that replaced these governments then developed new security partnerships with the Wagner Group, the Russian private military company linked to the Kremlin that combined military support with political influence and commercial interests across Africa. In doing so, they risked replacing one set of extractive relations with another, and hence ensuring the continuity, rather than the replacement, of a globalised shadow state. In Mali, for example, Russian security support became tied to wider political and commercial relationships linked to gold mining concessions, energy projects, arms deals and other strategic sectors.³⁰

Across these different contexts, state capture weakened the ability of security institutions to operate impartially and effectively. Military, police, intelligence, and judicial actors became increasingly tied to protecting ruling networks, controlling economic resources, or sustaining political authority. Over time, this reduced accountability, increased coercion and political violence, and created opportunities for collusion with armed groups, smugglers and illicit economic actors. State capture therefore undermines not only development, but also security and stability.

Democracy and accountability

State capture weakens democracy by hollowing out the institutions meant to hold political leaders accountable. In captured systems, courts, electoral commissions, regulators, security institutions, and parts of the civil service increasingly serve elite interests rather than the broader public good. Elections may still take place and constitutions may remain formally intact, but political competition becomes less fair, oversight institutions lose autonomy, and unelected networks gain growing influence over public decision-making.

The democratic impact of state capture varies depending on the form that it takes. In more militarized systems, capture often increases repression, intimidation and the use of coercive power to shape political outcomes. In more civilian systems, democratic erosion tends to occur through procurement systems, judicial influence, executive dominance and the weakening of oversight institutions. Zimbabwe provides one of the clearest examples of how militarized state capture can undermine democratic institutions. From the early 2000s onwards, military and political elites expanded their influence across sectors including fuel, mining, procurement and agriculture.³¹ This blurred the distinction between civilian and military authority and contributed to repeated cycles of repression and intimidation around elections. Zimbabwe’s Liberal Democracy Index fell from around 0.28 in 2013 to 0.20 in 2024, while indicators measuring judicial independence, media freedom and electoral integrity also deteriorated significantly.³²

Uganda illustrates a somewhat different pattern in which networks linked to the presidency, security actors and business interests became increasingly central to political and economic life.³³ Over time, this concentrated political, economic and coercive power within overlapping networks connected to the

ruling elite. Elections continued to occur regularly, but opposition actors faced growing restrictions, intimidation and unequal access to state resources. Uganda's Liberal Democracy Index fell from around 0.35 in 2013 to approximately 0.22 in 2024.³⁴ In Zambia, capture operated less through overt militarization and more through networks linking politicians, judges, senior officials and business elites.³⁵ This weakened democratic accountability by politicizing procurement systems, sections of the judiciary and public administration. Although Zambia experienced a democratic opening following the 2021 election, earlier periods were marked by growing executive influence over state institutions and declining institutional independence.

Democratic erosion also frequently occurs through institutions that receive relatively little public attention. Regulatory agencies, procurement systems, implementing bodies and sections of the judiciary were often more vulnerable to capture than higher-profile institutions. In Nigeria, allegations involving "billionaire judges" raised concerns that politically connected actors could use financial influence to avoid accountability. In Mozambique, security officials, judges, electoral authorities, and sections of the media were accused of colluding with ruling party networks to disadvantage opposition parties during elections.³⁶

More recent comparative data reinforces these patterns. The Democracy Capture project led by the Centre for Democratic Development–Ghana, which assessed 370 institutions across ten African countries, has created one of the most systematic cross-national datasets yet developed to assess the extent and forms of capture that can be observed in Africa. The project found evidence of at least some level of capture in about 60 per cent of the institutions studied.³⁷ The findings suggest that democratic erosion increasingly occurs not simply through coups or the abolition of elections, but through the gradual capture of regulators, procurement systems, courts and oversight institutions from within.

Across these different contexts, state capture weakened the distinction between public institutions and elite networks. Courts, regulators, electoral institutions, procurement bodies and security agencies increasingly became tied to protecting ruling interests rather than ensuring accountability and equal treatment under the law. Over time, this hollowed out democratic institutions, reduced public trust and made it more difficult for citizens to hold leaders accountable.

What can be done?

State capture is difficult to reverse because it operates through networks rather than single institutions. Reform therefore needs to target the wider system: The politicians who enable capture; the officials who implement it; the judges and regulators who protect it; the businesses that profit from it; and the international financial centres that help move and hide the proceeds. Institutional reform matters, but by itself it is not enough. Effective anti-capture strategies need to combine prosecution, transparency, international accountability, civil society mobilization and protection for independent oversight bodies.

Pursue corruption and criminality across borders.

Anti-corruption agencies, prosecutors, financial intelligence units and international law enforcement bodies should pursue state capture cases across the jurisdictions through which money, contracts and assets move. Capture networks frequently rely on foreign bank accounts, shell companies, property markets and international intermediaries to hide wealth and avoid accountability. One of the clearest examples was the prosecution linked to former Zambian president Frederick Chiluba, in which a UK court ruled that millions of dollars in public funds had been channelled through London bank accounts and financial networks involving actors in Switzerland, Belgium, and elsewhere.³⁸ Cross-border investigations, asset confiscation, mutual legal assistance and enforcement should therefore become central components of anti-capture strategies.

Close financial loopholes. Financial regulators, tax authorities and international financial centres should strengthen beneficial ownership rules, enforce anti-money laundering standards and close loopholes that allow politically exposed persons to hide wealth offshore. Shadow-state networks frequently depend on shell companies, anonymous property ownership, offshore accounts and opaque commercial structures operating through jurisdictions such as Dubai and other major financial hubs. Greater transparency over company ownership, property transactions and extractive-sector revenues would make it harder for elites to conceal illicit wealth.³⁹ International frameworks such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) are intended to address illicit transnational financial networks, but in practice it often remains too easy for states to leave grey lists through reforms that appear technically compliant without substantially improving transparency or enforcement.⁴⁰

Clean up procurement. Public procurement agencies, ministries of finance, audit institutions and parliamentary oversight committees should treat procurement systems and state-owned enterprises as front-line anti-capture priorities. In many of the cases examined here, procurement systems became key mechanisms through which ruling networks distributed patronage and rewarded allies. Governments should expand open contracting systems, strengthen conflict-of-interest rules, require public disclosure of major contracts, and increase the independence and capacity of audit institutions. Extractive industries, infrastructure projects, fuel contracts and state-owned enterprises require high levels of scrutiny because they combine large financial flows with concentrated political discretion.⁴

Protect oversight institutions. Parliaments, judicial councils, civil service commissions and constitutional reform bodies should strengthen protections for institutions most vulnerable to capture. These include regulators, procurement bodies, anti-corruption agencies, prosecutors, audit offices, electoral commissions and implementing agencies. Transparent appointments, secure tenure, independent budgets and stronger safeguards against executive interference are essential to reducing elite influence over these bodies.

Support investigative journalism. Independent media organizations, investigative journalists, whistle-blower networks, universities and civil society organizations require greater legal, financial and political protection. Investigative journalism and civil society research play a critical role in uncovering procurement scandals, tracing illicit financial flows, documenting abuses and mapping elite networks. Support should include legal defence funds, investigative grants, cross-border reporting partnerships, digital security and stronger whistle-blower protections.

Notes

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3 RVI and the research team are grateful for support from the Open Society Foundation. See the Democracy in Africa website for more: <https://democracyin africa.org/democracy-capture-and-the-shadow-state-in-africa/>

4 Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett, 'State Capture and Development: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26/2 (2023): 224–244.

Reduce external support for capture. Development finance institutions, bilateral donors, security partners and multinational corporations should ensure that external partnerships do not unintentionally reinforce captured systems. Infrastructure finance, extractive-sector investment, security cooperation and development programmes can all strengthen elite patronage networks if safeguards are weak. Risk assessments should therefore examine not only corruption narrowly defined, but also the wider political and economic networks surrounding major projects and partnerships.

Build broad coalitions. Anti-capture strategies are most effective when supported by broad coalitions rather than isolated reforms. Reformers inside the state need stronger partnerships with investigative journalists, professional associations, trade unions, civil society organizations, independent courts, regional organisations and international partners. The aim should be to raise the political and financial costs of capture and protect institutions that resist co-option.

Finally, many of these reforms are becoming harder to implement due to cuts in foreign aid. At the very moment when capture networks are becoming more sophisticated and transnational, many of the organizations responsible for exposing corruption and strengthening accountability are facing growing financial pressure. Yet failing to address state capture is likely to generate even greater long-term costs. Captured systems weaken democratic accountability, distort development, fuel inequality, undermine state effectiveness and contribute to conflict, insecurity, organized crime, illicit financial flows, terrorism and displacement. State capture is therefore not simply a domestic governance issue, but a driver of many of the interconnected global challenges facing governments today.

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