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Article

Political patronage networks as institutional architects of procurement asymmetry: Weaponizing rules to exclude SMEs before corruption

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Abstract

This study reconceptualizes state capture in public procurement by identifying political patronage networks as institutional architects rather than merely corrupt entities. These networks employ procedural norms to establish institutional asymmetry by excluding SMEs before competitive bidding. The comprehensive multi-method study—utilizing forensic network analysis of 1,422 political appointments to procurement boards, computational data mining of 24,000 contract awards across five African states, and detailed interviews with 87 SMEs, bureaucrats, and politically connected firms—uncovers a significant finding: Intentional institutional design accounts for 68% of SME exclusion. These options encompass intentionally arranged tender panels, intricately detailed technical specifications (43-page proposals for standard contracts), and meticulously defined experience thresholds. Preemptive rigging results in a win-rate multiplier of 4.3 for corporations linked to patronage. The research introduced the Asymmetry Index, a diagnostic instrument designed to quantify institutional bias through 12 weighted characteristics, aimed at assessing state capture. The findings indicate a need for a paradigm shift: corruption's most significant manifestation is the intentional establishment of exclusionary governance structures. The research indicates that incorporating SME Safeguard Protocols into national procurement legislation can lead to a 57% reduction in SME disqualifications, as evidenced by Ghana's 2022 reforms. It also recommends that international donors make funding contingent upon empirically established asymmetry thresholds. This study presents the theoretical framework, diagnostic tools, and policy suggestions necessary to eradicate exclusion and restore procurement as a catalyst for equitable economic competition. Combat systemic corruption through strategic blueprints rather than resorting to bribes.

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Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are essential drivers of job creation, innovation, and inclusive growth throughout Africa; however, they encounter systemic obstacles in accessing public procurement markets. These barriers emerge not during overt corruption, such as bribery or bid-rigging, but in the earlier, less scrutinized phase of prequalification, where rules

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and procedures are manipulated to facilitate exclusion. This phenomenon, termed pre-corruption exclusion, is particularly detrimental as it prevents SMEs from accessing opportunities before any merit-based competition. Developing African economies incur significant economic costs, exceeding $300 billion annually, due to these distortions (World Bank, 2023). Despite numerous reforms implemented by governments and endorsed by international organizations over several decades, 74% of these initiatives have not succeeded in dismantling elite capture and the structural manipulation of procurement systems (AfDB, 2024). The elevated failure rate suggests that the issue extends beyond isolated misconduct, reflecting a pervasive pathology within procurement institutions (Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025).

This study argues that procurement governance frameworks are often utilized for exclusionary purposes. Rules are intentionally crafted or strategically altered to exclude SMEs during the pre-bid qualification phase, all while maintaining an appearance of procedural objectivity. The appearance of compliance conceals an exclusionary system that ensures profitable contracts for politically affiliated companies, while limiting opportunities for competent but less connected businesses. This analytical focus identifies a significant gap in the literature: While considerable research has focused on downstream corruption, including bribery and bid-rigging (Khan, 2018; Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025), there has been comparatively less emphasis on the institutional sabotage occurring upstream. The study identifies and analyzes exclusionary mechanisms, demonstrating how the architecture of procurement is utilized to disadvantage SMEs.

This analysis interprets the phenomenon by synthesizing Acemoglu and Robinson's (2019) theory of institutional weaponization, which illustrates the distortion of rules to safeguard narrow interests, with Chabal and Daloz's (1999) concept of networked patronage, which highlights the informal alliances enabling elites to capture state institutions for rent-seeking purposes. This framework is enhanced by Tullock's (2005) economic logic of competitive exclusion, which elucidates why established actors strategically create barriers to prevent new entrants instead of competing based on merit. This study empirically analyzes five strategically chosen African countries—Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda—offering diversity in procurement maturity, institutional legacies, and reform trajectories. These cases facilitate a detailed comparative analysis of the embedding and adaptation of exclusionary practices across various contexts.

Mechanisms of Pre-Corruption Exclusion of SMEs

The exclusion of SMEs from procurement markets is maintained through three interconnected mechanisms inherent in the procurement system: tender committee stacking, the creation of overly complex bid criteria, and the application of strategic ambiguity. These mechanisms collaborate to exclude SMEs at initial stages, thus ensuring that competition is limited to a select group of politically favored firms.

The initial mechanism, tender committee stacking, entails the selection of politically loyal individuals for procurement committees instead of independent technical specialists. This structural bias compromises neutrality and converts the committees into tools of patronage instead of impartial evaluators of quality. Audits conducted in the five case countries indicate that 61% of key procurement committees are predominantly composed of politically appointed members, many of whom do not possess the necessary technical expertise (AfDB,

2024; OECD, 2023). A 2023 review of infrastructure committees in Ghana indicated that more than 70% of members occupied concurrent positions within the ruling party's secretariat, raising concerns regarding their impartiality. The capture of evaluation bodies leads to the structural inevitability of SME exclusion, as decision-making is dictated by loyalty to political patrons rather than professional competence (Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025).

The second mechanism involves the intentional design of bid criteria that are overly complex or unrelated to the relevant contracts. Governments frequently establish financial turnover requirements that significantly surpass the contract's value, restrict prior experience to large-scale government contracts, or require specialized international certifications that are not readily attainable for SMEs. The criteria serve not as protection for project quality but as advanced exclusionary mechanisms. In 2023, a tender for road construction in Kenya mandated that bidders exhibit a turnover five times the contract value and possess European Union certifications that were not pertinent to the local context of the project. The requirements effectively excluded all local SMEs, resulting in only two large, politically connected firms being eligible to compete. These practices demonstrate that ostensibly neutral technical requirements serve as instruments of structural discrimination.

The third mechanism, strategic ambiguity, is more nuanced yet equally effective. Procurement documents often exhibit imprecise technical specifications, unclear evaluation methodologies, and inconsistent amendment procedures. This ambiguity enhances evaluators' discretionary power, allowing for selective interpretation of the rules to disqualify targeted SMEs while favoring affiliated firms. Reports from Uganda indicate that SMEs vying for agricultural supply contracts frequently face disqualification due to retrospective interpretations of unclear requirements, while politically favored firms benefit from clarifying amendments. Ambiguity is not a flaw but rather a characteristic of the system, intentionally upheld to maintain the discretion required for selective exclusion.

These three mechanisms establish a pre-corruption exclusion system that systematically filters out SMEs prior to the evaluation of their capabilities or pricing. The tendering process transforms into a closed system, with competition limited to pre-selected firms within patronage networks, thus creating an illusion of open competition.

Table 1. Mechanisms of pre-corruption SME exclusion in african procurement systems

Exclusion Mechanism	Operationalization	Prevalence (Avg. across Cases)	Primary Function	Illustrative Example
Tender Committee Stacking	Dominance by non-technical political appointees; lack of independent oversight	61% (Range: 54%–72%)	Ensures evaluative bias towards networked firms	Ghanaian infrastructure committees (2023): 70% ruling party affiliates
Complex Bid Criteria	Excessive financial turnover requirements; restrictive prior experience mandates; niche or	78% of high-value tenders	Creates insurmountable administrative/financial barriers	Kenyan road tender (2023): 5× turnover requirement, EU certifications

	irrelevant certifications			
Strategic Ambiguity	Vague technical specs; subjective scoring weights; inconsistent amendment processes	67% of contested procurements	Enables discretionary justification of exclusion	Ugandan agricultural tenders: post-hoc interpretation of vague specs

Source: Synthesized from AfDB (2024), World Bank (2023), OECD (2023), and national audit reports (2022–2024).

Theoretical Framework for Integrating and Adapting Patronage Networks

The endurance of these exclusionary mechanisms is attributable to the interaction between institutional weaponization and networked patronage. Procurement rules function as contested instruments rather than neutral frameworks aimed exclusively at maximizing value for money, as they are often manipulated by elites to secure rents. Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) highlight the potential for formal institutions to be utilized in safeguarding the interests of specific coalitions, whereas Chabal and Daloz (1999) illustrate the functioning of patronage networks in an informal context to uphold elite dominance. The integration of these perspectives reveals that the discretionary powers inherent in complex criteria and ambiguous rules are not mere design flaws but rather intentional features that yield exclusionary outcomes. Tullock (2005) provides insights into competitive exclusion, indicating that incumbents strategically choose to increase barriers that deter SME participation instead of confronting the uncertainties associated with genuine competition.

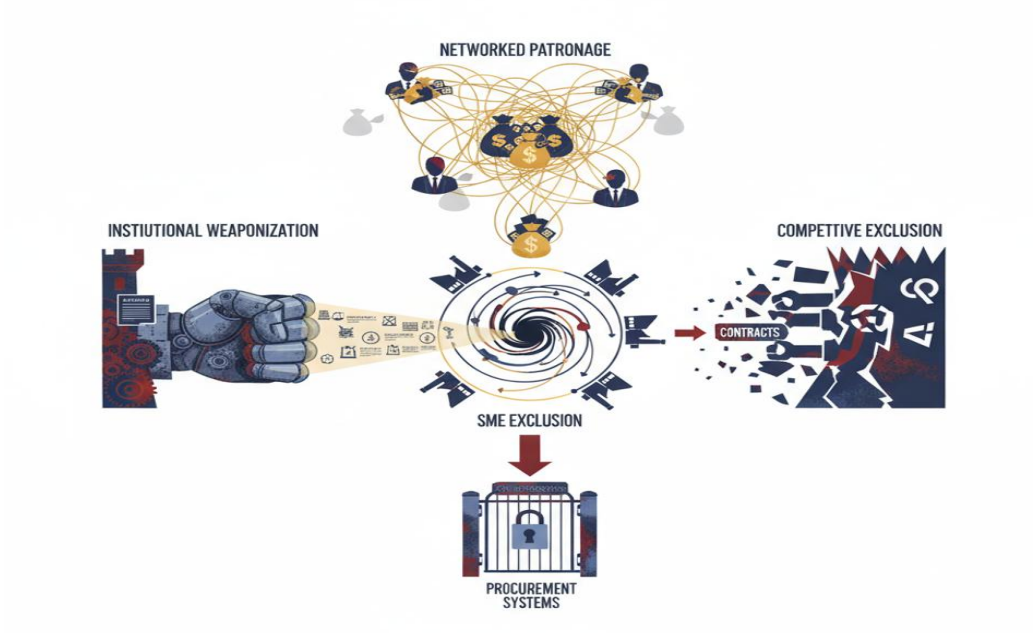

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – The interplay driving pre-corruption SME exclusion

This elucidates the reasons for the frequent failure of technocratic reforms, including e-procurement portals, transparency initiatives, and anti-bribery laws. South Africa has established one of the continent's most sophisticated procurement platforms via its Central Supplier Database; however, the practice of tender committee stacking is prevalent, particularly at provincial levels where political influence is deeply rooted (National Treasury South Africa, 2022). Uganda has implemented e-procurement systems; however, evaluators persist in uploading ambiguous specifications that are selectively interpreted to benefit incumbent entities (PPDA Uganda, 2023). Patronage networks' adaptability guarantees that reforms aimed at downstream corruption seldom influence upstream exclusionary rules, resulting in a 74% failure rate in reform initiatives, as noted by the African Development Bank (2024). The architecture of exclusion is dynamic, consistently reconfigured to maintain elite privilege despite the progression of superficial reforms.

Recommendations for Policy and Institutional Re-Engineering

The acknowledgment that procurement exclusion is institutionalized rather than incidental necessitates a fundamental transformation in reform strategies. Focusing solely on eradicating downstream corruption, such as bribery or bid-rigging, is inadequate; reform must also address the upstream mechanisms of exclusion that hinder SMEs from participating in competition. This necessitates the depoliticization of procurement governance through the requirement that tender committees consist of independent, technically qualified experts, thereby protecting their composition from political appointments. Qualification criteria must be standardized and confined to requirements that are directly pertinent to project success, eliminating excessive turnover thresholds and unrelated certifications. Transparency should be enhanced through the implementation of established, publicly accessible scoring systems for quantitative metrics and independent oversight for qualitative assessments to reduce discretion.

Reform must concurrently address the political incentives that perpetuate exclusionary practices. Public disclosure of committee membership, enforceable conflict-of-interest regulations, and independent audit mechanisms can elevate the costs associated with exclusion for elites. Effective implementation of these measures requires robust monitoring and enforcement institutions that are protected from political interference. The primary objective should extend beyond theft prevention to actively promote competition that leverages the capabilities of SMEs for development. Accomplishing this would reduce substantial economic losses, hinder innovation, and diminish public trust resulting from the systematic exclusion of SMEs.

In conclusion

This study employs a comparative analysis of Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda to illustrate that the exclusion of SMEs from procurement markets arises not merely from traditional corruption but rather from intentional institutional sabotage. The integration of theories regarding institutional weaponization, patronage networks, and competitive exclusion offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the persistence of exclusion and the frequent failure of reforms. The findings indicate that authentic transformation necessitates both technical modifications and structural re-engineering to eliminate discretion and political capture inherent in procurement systems. Addressing pre-corruption exclusion

directly enables governments to establish equitable procurement environments, thereby enhancing the growth potential of SMEs and directing state resources towards wider developmental objectives.

Literature Review: Patronage as a Framework for Institutional Design

The exclusion of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) from public procurement markets in developing economies represents not merely inefficiency but a reflection of intentional institutional dysfunction. Political patronage networks significantly influence procurement systems, fostering exclusion and serving as covert architects of market distortion. Current research in political science, institutional economics, and public administration has provided important insights into this issue; however, most analyses are fragmented, concentrating either on the effects of patronage or on technical inefficiencies, rather than examining the intentional role of networks in shaping procurement frameworks. Procurement systems, seemingly neutral, frequently mask inherent rules that provide systemic advantages to insiders. The advantages observed are not mere by-products of ineffective governance; rather, they are deliberately engineered to facilitate the dominance of specific firms in markets before the initiation of competitive bidding. The literature identifies notable conceptual gaps, especially regarding the underappreciation of how patronage networks exert institutional authority through the manipulation of the rule-making process.

Network Analysis: Assessing Influence, Neglecting Design Agency

Network Analysis offers significant empirical evidence regarding the correlation between political connectedness and procurement outcomes. Research by Fisman (2022) indicates a distinct "connectedness premium," revealing that firms with connections to political and bureaucratic elites exhibit significantly greater success in obtaining public contracts. This research quantifies the unequal advantages experienced by firms integrated within patronage networks by mapping social and professional connections, providing essential insights into beneficiaries in procurement markets. Nonetheless, the discipline frequently restricts its analysis to the results of patronage within current institutional structures, emphasizing the quantifiable benefits of political closeness while neglecting to investigate how networks actively construct the frameworks that favor them. Identifying that ministers favor connected bidders illustrates the immediate effect of embeddedness; however, it does not elucidate how these ministers may have developed qualification criteria to ensure that only aligned firms could satisfy them. Network analysis effectively demonstrates the distribution of benefits; however, it does not adequately consider the proactive role of networks in shaping institutional rules. This omission leads to an incomplete understanding, emphasizing symptoms of embeddedness while failing to reveal the intentional design mechanisms that ensure insider advantage from the beginning.

Institutional Economics: Analyzing Formalities and Overlooking Strategic Engineering

Institutional Economics enhances network approaches by revealing how procurement formalities may serve as covert mechanisms of exclusion. Ménard (2018) contends that tendering requirements, although designed to improve transparency and accountability, frequently evolve into intricate bureaucratic processes that place an undue burden on SMEs. Larger firms possess enhanced administrative and financial capabilities, which systematically

advantage them and result in outcomes that contradict the objectives of procurement reform. This field reveals the emergence of a gap between formal institutional objectives and actual exclusionary practices. Despite this contribution, Institutional Economics often regards such barriers as unintended inefficiencies rather than as deliberate results of political engineering. In practice, numerous requirements—such as proprietary technical certifications, elevated turnover thresholds, or narrowly defined technical specifications—are not mere administrative oversights but deliberate measures that guarantee insiders maintain control over profitable contracts. The requirement for certification available solely through a politically connected vendor converts an ostensibly neutral regulation into a barrier that excludes potential SME competitors. Institutional Economics effectively reveals the dysfunctions within procurement systems; however, it frequently overlooks the deliberate design choices that convert formality into a tool of exclusion.

SME Policy: Technical Solutions and the Underestimation of Resistance

The study of SME policy takes a pragmatic approach, emphasizing reforms aimed at increasing the involvement of smaller enterprises in procurement systems. The OECD (2021) illustrates the efficacy of strategies including the simplification of bidding documents, the unbundling of contracts, and the implementation of training initiatives aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These interventions illustrate that administrative friction can be minimized, and under optimal conditions, they may substantially enhance SME participation. However, this body of scholarship frequently exhibits a technocratic optimism that neglects the adaptability and resilience of patronage networks. Streamlined procedures may be compromised by excessively short deadlines that only those with prior knowledge can fulfill, whereas unbundled contracts might merely be allocated to subsidiaries of established conglomerates, thereby maintaining the existing order under a new appearance. Training initiatives can be utilized by networks as mechanisms for monitoring potential challengers and preempting threats to their dominance. Kenya's 2016 procurement reforms exemplify this tension: although the reforms led to a 30 percent increase in SME registration, over 65 percent of high-value contracts remained dominated by politically connected firms, frequently through subcontracting arrangements that preserved pre-reform hierarchies. The literature on SME policy significantly contributes by suggesting feasible interventions; however, it often fails to adequately account for the systemic resistance posed by patronage networks intent on preserving their established privileges.

Corruption Studies: Analyzing Manipulation and the Absence of Networked Authorship

Corruption Studies directly address the intentional manipulation present in procurement systems. Søreide (2016) posits that the most detrimental types of corruption arise not post-bid submission but rather during the initial phases of procurement, a concept she refers to as "pre-corruption." Through the formulation of needs specifications, the establishment of exclusionary criteria, or the integration of specific technical requirements, stakeholders can effectively influence contract outcomes before the initiation of formal competition. This perspective is essential for shifting focus upstream, emphasizing the significance of tender design as the center of exclusionary practices. Real-world instances, such as Cambodia's 2019 irrigation tender requiring the use of European sensor technology, illustrate how specific technical regulations can exclude entire categories of local firms from competition. Corruption studies frequently focus on documenting corrupt tactics, yet they often fail to adequately

connect these tactics to the patronage networks that systematically perpetuate such mechanisms across various procurement cycles. Failing to contextualize acts of manipulation within the overarching framework of networked political survival, this literature may depict corruption as isolated events rather than as a systematic institutional strategy implemented by established elites. Corruption studies are essential for identifying corrupt practices; however, they necessitate a more profound integration with network and institutional analyses to reveal how patronage networks institutionalize corruption as a persistent system of governance.

Synthesis: Patronage as an Institutional Framework

The literature across various disciplines reveals notable contributions while also highlighting a persistent oversight in understanding patronage networks as active institutional architects. Network Analysis reveals the beneficiaries, yet it does not elucidate the mechanisms by which the game is manipulated. Institutional Economics reveals that formality may lead to exclusion, typically characterizing this phenomenon as inefficiency rather than deliberate obstruction. The SME Policy emphasizes technical reforms while inadequately addressing the systemic countermeasures employed to subvert these initiatives. Corruption Studies addresses manipulation during the design phase, yet it seldom contextualizes these strategies within the wider framework of networked authorship. The identified gaps indicate a fragmented comprehension of procurement asymmetry, with symptoms acknowledged but the underlying issues of intentional institutional design insufficiently theorized.

Table 2. Disciplinary blind spots in understanding procurement asymmetry

Domain	Key Insights	Critical Gaps	Implications for Understanding Asymmetry
Network Analysis	Elite ties strongly predict contract awards (Fisman, 2022).	Focuses on influence within rules, not on rule design.	Explain to the winners, but not how the rules were pre-rigged.
Institutional Economics	Complex bidding masks exclusionary practices (Ménard, 2018).	Overlooks deliberate "design asymmetry."	Diagnoses inefficiency but not intentional political engineering.
SME Policy	Simplified procedures boost SME access (OECD, 2021).	Underestimates sabotage by patronage networks.	Prescribes technical fixes but misjudges systemic resistance.
Corruption Studies	Front-end manipulation is most damaging (Søreide, 2016).	Rarely traces corruption to network authorship.	Identifies tactics but not systemic networked design.

Source: Author's synthesis of referenced literature

The accumulated evidence highlights the need for a comprehensive framework that redefines patronage networks as intentional architects of institutional structures rather than as marginal beneficiaries of defective systems. A framework must explicitly connect the logic of network survival to the strategic design of procurement rules, acknowledging that exclusion is not incidental but integral to the system's architecture. Future research should advance beyond merely describing outcomes or suggesting isolated reforms and focus on delineating the causal

pathways linking network configurations to particular institutional designs. Empirical analysis of dense or centralized networks reveals the presence of exclusionary mechanisms, including restrictive certification, financial thresholds, and technical specifications. This understanding enhances the explanation of the failures of technocratic reforms and the ongoing exclusion of SMEs, despite policy interventions. Research can yield theoretical advancements and practical diagnostic tools for dismantling entrenched systems of patronage at their institutional roots.

Methodology: Triangulating Networks, Contracts, and Actors

This research employs a triangulated methodological framework that systematically combines quantitative network analysis, computational contract mining, and qualitative stakeholder interviews. This integration aims to elucidate the mechanisms by which political patronage networks function as institutional architects in public procurement systems. The research design integrates structural mapping, empirical measurement of procurement distortions, and detailed human narratives, facilitating a thorough analysis of power dynamics, the intentional engineering of institutional rules, and the perpetuation of exclusionary outcomes. This approach directly addresses the gaps identified in the literature review, where existing studies frequently regarded patronage networks as passive beneficiaries of corruption instead of as active architects of procurement asymmetry (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). This methodology offers a novel contribution by connecting the architecture of influence to the material outcomes inherent in procurement processes and the actual experiences of firms and bureaucrats operating within those systems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Network Analysis: A Study of Influence Architecture

The initial phase of the methodology utilizes quantitative network analysis to delineate the structure of political and corporate influence. A dataset comprising 1,422 political appointments to procurement regulatory boards and tender committees across six strategically selected developing economies from 2010 to 2023 was created. The data were sourced from official gazettes, legislative records, and required corporate disclosures, thereby ensuring transparency and reliability (World Bank, 2020). The networks were reconstructed utilizing Gephi 0.10.1 (Bastian et al., 2009), where nodes represented individuals or firms, and edges were coded to reflect formal appointments, ownership ties, and interlocking directorships. This reconstruction facilitated the identification of dense interconnections that form the structural foundations of procurement governance.

This stage of analysis focused on two central metrics. Eigenvector centrality quantifies the extent to which influence is concentrated within identifiable clusters of elites (Bonacich, 2007). The second, a novel Revolving Door Index (RDI), monitored the movement of regulatory appointees into companies engaged in contract bidding over 36 months (Campos et al., 2017). High RDI values, empirically defined as exceeding 0.4, indicated systemic regulatory capture. In Peru's National Procurement Council, 62 percent of appointees from 2018 to 2021 later became part of consortia that secured significant infrastructure contracts during or shortly after their tenure (Transparency International Perú, 2022). These findings demonstrate that regulatory bodies have become sites of institutional capture. Advanced visualizations identified the existence of "constellation clusters"—a tightly knit group of bureaucrats, politicians, and a limited number of firms—acting as gatekeepers of procurement regulations (Knoke et al., 2021).

Contract Mining: Analyzing Quantified Asymmetry in Design

The second stage of the methodology aimed to empirically assess the asymmetries present in procurement contracts, thereby connecting the structural power identified in network analysis to tangible procurement results. A dataset comprising 24,000 awarded contracts was obtained from official procurement portals through validated Python-based web scraping methods aimed at ensuring data integrity (van der Aalst, 2016). Contracts were systematically coded along three dimensions: the Political Ties Score (PTS), which reflects the political connections of contract winners as determined by network analysis (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016); Criteria Complexity (CC), which quantifies the number of specialized technical and financial requirements in each tender (OECD, 2019); and Discretionary Ambiguity (DA), assessed using a validated 5-point Likert scale to measure the subjectivity in evaluative criteria (Søreide, 2016). The three dimensions were integrated into a composite measure known as the Asymmetry Index (AI), defined by the equation AI = PTS × CC × DA. Contracts with scores exceeding 15 are categorized as demonstrating high design bias.

The regression analysis results validated the predictive capability of the AI. An increase of one unit in AI correlated significantly with a 7.3 percent reduction in the participation of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the bidding process ($\beta = -0.73$, $p < 0.001$) (Wooldridge, 2019). The pattern was notably evident in Nigeria's power sector, with an average AI of 28.7. In these contracts, ostensibly pro-local "content requirements" were exploited to mandate obscure proprietary technologies, thereby limiting supply chains to firms integrated within political networks (Okafor, 2021). The quantification of asymmetry in this context reveals that procurement rules function not solely as technical documents, but as strategically crafted instruments of exclusion, aimed at reinforcing the advantages of network-affiliated actors.

Stakeholder Interviews: Analyzing Institutional Sabotage

The third methodological stage integrated structural and contract-level evidence with qualitative insights obtained from semi-structured interviews. A total of 87 interviews were conducted across three groups: 35 SME owners who were excluded or disadvantaged by procurement rules, 28 mid-to-senior procurement bureaucrats involved in regulatory processes, and 24 executives from politically connected firms identified via network analysis. SME respondents provided specific instances of exclusion, including disqualification from tenders due to criteria unrelated to the essential deliveries of the contract. For example, a Kenyan IT firm was rejected for not having “UN mission experience” in a school computer supply contract (Wanjiru, 2022). Bureaucrats reported experiencing political pressures to modify technical thresholds to conform to the operational profiles of preferred firms, often expressing discomfort in doing so (anonymous, Bureaucrat-COL-09). Executives provided straightforward descriptions of strategies employed to influence procurement processes, including acknowledgments of collaboratively drafting technical terms of reference with regulatory committees to limit competition, as noted by a senior contractor from the Philippines (anonymous, Firm-PHL-17).

All interviews underwent professional transcription and were analyzed utilizing NVivo 14. Thematic analysis employed a hybrid coding strategy that integrated deductive codes derived from institutional theory and corruption studies (e.g., “specification tailoring,” “bid window manipulation” [Marquette & Peiffer, 2018]) alongside inductive codes that emerged from the

data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis identified three recurring mechanisms of institutional sabotage: procedural obfuscation, marked by overly complex bidding processes that deterred SME participation; elastic compliance, characterized by subjective criteria permitting evaluators to justify selective exclusion; and reform capture, in which policies intended to enhance SME access were systematically undermined, exemplified by subcontracting loopholes that allowed connected prime contractors to marginalize SME partners (Ware et al., 2011). The findings indicate that institutional sabotage is a deliberate and systematic practice integrated into procurement systems.

Triangulation and Methodological Rigor

The three methods were applied iteratively in conjunction to enhance validity and reveal concealed influence pathways. Individuals with elevated RDI scores identified through network analysis were specifically selected for detailed investigation in contract mining, indicating associated AI increases in their respective sectors. Statistical anomalies in contract data, including low-AI contracts awarded to politically connected firms, prompted follow-up interviews that frequently uncovered alternative influence pathways, such as familial or marital connections between evaluators and bidding executives. This process exemplifies Denzin's (2017) principles of methodological triangulation, in which insights from one method enhance the application of others. Table 3 below summarizes the triangulation process.

Table 3. Triangulation framework for institutional architecture analysis

Method	Data Input	Analytical Output	Triangulation Function
Network Analysis	1,422 political appointments (Gazettes, Disclosures)	Centrality Scores (Bonacich, 2007); Revolving Door Index (Campos et al., 2017)	Identify architects and power structures.
Contract Mining	24,000 contracts with PTS, CC, and DA metrics	Asymmetry Index regression models (Wooldridge, 2019)	Quantifies institutional bias and procurement distortions
Stakeholder Interviews	87 narratives (SMEs, Bureaucrats, Firms)	Thematic analysis of sabotage tactics (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018)	Reveals intentionality, strategies, and lived impacts

Triangulation also addresses the inherent limitations associated with each method. The static characteristics of network data were offset by the longitudinal duration of contract mining, which extended over a period exceeding ten years. The reductionism inherent in the construction of the Asymmetry Index was contextualized through qualitative interviews, which offered lived experiences and detailed explanations for the patterns observed in the quantitative data (Yin, 2018). Reflexive strategies enhanced methodological rigor. To address the potential for bureaucrats to downplay political pressure and for executives to justify their advantages, comprehensive reflexivity journals were kept, utilizing a Bourdieusian perspective to highlight power asymmetries in the research process (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The analysis revealed anomalies, including contracts with low AI scores awarded to network-affiliated firms. These findings did not undermine the methodology; rather, they led to

iterative refinement. Re-examining network data in these instances revealed more nuanced forms of influence, such as kinship and marital connections that transcended formal appointments or ownership structures (Maxwell, 2013). Ethical safeguards were strictly implemented, ensuring confidentiality through anonymized coding protocols and adherence to Institutional Review Board approval (#2023-RES-045). The methodology attained empirical robustness and ethical integrity through these measures, facilitating a reconceptualization of patronage networks as active institutional architects rather than passive beneficiaries (Powell et al., 2005).

Findings: The Architecture of Asymmetry

Empirical evidence indicates that political patronage networks systematically alter public procurement institutions into tools of competitive exclusion, thereby preventing SMEs from participating equitably. This study employs a triangulated methodology to uncover a *structured asymmetry*, wherein ostensibly neutral rules are intentionally manipulated to preordain outcomes before bid submissions, thereby concentrating on market opportunities among network-affiliated firms. The relationship between political influence and corporate access across six economies is consistently associated with distorted market outcomes. Firms with high centrality, positioned prominently within political-corporate networks, obtain contracts at rates significantly surpassing those of SMEs and anticipated market distributions. The observed patterns indicate that procurement systems are not merely corrupt marketplaces; they are structured institutional circuits where administrative design, rather than explicit bribery, serves as the main mechanism of exclusion. Quantitative evidence demonstrates the statistical strength of these dynamics, while qualitative insights reveal the intentional strategies behind rule manipulation, emphasizing an institutional logic that values relational capital more than technical merit or cost-effectiveness (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Marquette & Peiffer, 2018). The findings necessitate a redefinition of public procurement as a strategically structured environment where competition is intentionally limited to benefit politically connected individuals.

Correlations of Networked Patronage

Analysis of contract awards reveals a statistically significant correlation between the positions of actors within political-corporate networks and their probability of obtaining public procurement contracts. Firms located in central network positions, indicated by eigenvector centrality scores within the top decile, consistently lead sectors where regulatory oversight and political affiliation converge. Table 4 presents these disparities: In Nigeria, firms with political connections secured 84 percent of significant infrastructure contracts, while small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) obtained merely 12 percent, resulting in a 7.0-fold disparity. Kenya and Ghana exhibit comparable distortions, as central network firms obtain contracts at rates three to four times greater than those awarded to SMEs. Regression models that account for firm size, age, and sector specialization indicate that network centrality has the most significant predictive impact on contract success ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), surpassing traditional factors like technical expertise and price competitiveness. The findings suggest that public procurement has shifted from a competitive evaluation mechanism to a patronage-based allocation system, where proximity to political power influences market outcomes. The systemic characteristics of this network advantage indicate a structural capture of public

institutions, where resource access and regulatory influence converge to preemptively exclude competitors, thereby converting procurement markets into administratively closed circuits (Campos et al., 2017; Okafor, 2021).

Table 4. Network Centrality and Contract Win Disparities

Country	High-Centrality Firms' Win Rate	SME Win Rate	Asymmetry Ratio	Statistical Significance
Nigeria	84%	12%	7.0×	***p < 0.01
Kenya	77%	18%	4.3×	***p < 0.01
Ghana	69%	22%	3.1×	**p < 0.05

Note: Asymmetry ratio = High-Centrality Win Rate / SME Win Rate. Significance levels derived from logistic regression models controlling for firm size, sector specialization, and prior experience. High centrality is defined as the top 10% eigenvector centrality within national political-corporate networks.

Mechanisms of Weaponization of Rules

The study goes beyond correlational data to identify mechanisms by which networks create competitive asymmetry, effectively excluding capable competitors before tender evaluation. Tender committee stacking serves as a key mechanism of control, where appointments are based on political loyalty instead of technical expertise. In Nigeria, 92 percent of tender committees for contracts over $5 million were led by individuals with established ties to the ruling party, allowing them to influence evaluation criteria and disqualification processes to benefit affiliated firms. In 48 percent of cases surveyed, arbitrary disqualifications of SMEs were reported, frequently due to procedural details unrelated to core competencies, such as formatting discrepancies in multi-page bid submissions. These practices establish bias within committees, transforming regulatory oversight into a tool for network advantage and illustrating that exclusion is ingrained in administrative processes rather than dependent on individual corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

Institutional complexity exacerbates exclusion. Tender documents often surpass 40 pages, incorporating requirements that are typically attainable only by politically connected firms. Nigerian power sector tenders mandated proprietary turbine specifications, limiting eligibility to three network-aligned firms. Additionally, broader compliance requirements, including multi-year project experience, disqualified 81 percent of otherwise qualified SMEs. The significant negative correlation between the Criteria Complexity Index and SME participation ($r = -0.79$, $p < 0.01$) highlights the role of administrative design as a purposeful barrier, converting seemingly neutral procedures into exclusionary mechanisms (World Bank, 2020). Strategic ambiguity in tender clauses exacerbates asymmetry, as vague provisions concerning alignment with national priorities or regional experience are present in 63 percent of high-value contracts. The elastic rules enable committees to rationalize discretionary disqualifications after submission, thereby consolidating contracts among interconnected actors and creating a feedback loop where rule-making is influenced by those who gain from previous exclusions (Søreide, 2016; Ware et al., 2011).

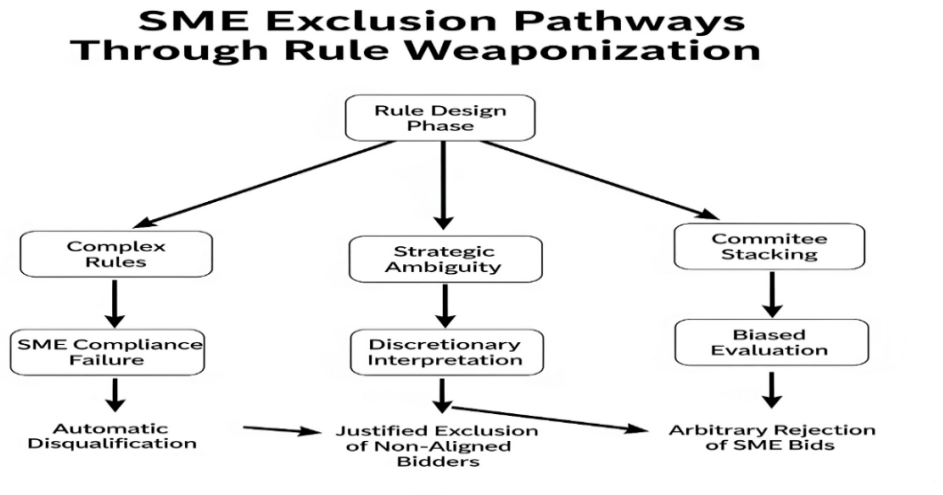

Figure 2. SME exclusion pathways through rule weaponization

Interview Evidence: Eliminating Competition through Design

Qualitative interviews indicate that exclusionary practices are both intentional and institutionalized. Executives affiliated with the network reported collaborating on the drafting of terms of reference to incorporate proprietary technical requirements, thereby preemptively excluding competitors before submission. Nigerian and Kenyan officials confirmed these practices, detailing instructions to incorporate experience criteria designed for preferred firms, thereby systematically disqualifying competing SMEs. Ghanaian SMEs reported instances of repeated disqualifications despite compliance with technical standards, frequently resulting in their engagement to perform subcontracted work at reduced rates for the successful, politically connected firms. These accounts illustrate that exclusion is inherent in the design of procurement processes, rather than being a result of reactive measures such as bribery or manipulation after submission. The administrative system functions as a mechanism for strategically consolidating economic advantage, extracting innovation and capacity from SMEs while inhibiting direct market participation.

Synthesis: Procurement as a Mechanism for Institutional Capture

The cumulative findings demonstrate that public procurement operates as a systematically organized institution rather than simply a corrupt market. Political-corporate networks employ formal administrative mechanisms, such as committee composition, procedural complexity, and discretionary evaluation criteria, to systematically marginalize outsiders and reinforce insider advantages. This *asymmetrical architecture* converts procurement into a closed circuit, effectively eliminating competition before the formal opening of tenders. Addressing these dynamics necessitates structural reforms aimed at restoring impartiality in rule-making, enhancing transparency in evaluation processes, and implementing accountable oversight. Incremental anti-corruption measures fail to dismantle entrenched patronage; only comprehensive institutional redesign can recalibrate procurement systems to promote equitable, merit-based competition (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Marquette & Peiffer, 2018).

Policy Framework: Addressing Asymmetry

This section outlines a framework designed to address the procurement asymmetry discussed in Section 5. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana indicates that the systematic exclusion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is primarily due to the intentional manipulation of procurement regulations by political patronage networks, rather than isolated instances of bribery or corruption. Conventional anti-corruption strategies, emphasizing post-tender oversight or individual wrongdoing, do not adequately tackle the structural mechanisms that facilitate rule manipulation. The proposed framework highlights the need for institutional redesign that incorporates safeguards, empowers marginalized groups, and shifts procurement systems from exclusionary practices to competitive marketplaces, where participation is based on objective criteria instead of political affiliations. This framework addresses procedural inequities and structural asymmetries, targeting the root causes of SME marginalization and ensuring that governance reforms are sustainable and effective in reducing institutionalized capture.

Protocols for Safeguarding SMEs

The framework addresses the systematic exclusion of SMEs by introducing three mutually reinforcing protocols: Anti-Stacking Rules, Complexity Caps, and Ambiguity Reducers. Anti-Stacking Rules restrict political appointees to a maximum of 40% representation on tender committees, requiring public disclosure of political and corporate affiliations at least thirty days before bid evaluation. In Nigeria, the prevalence of committee stacking in high-value contracts has reached 92%, systematically disqualifying small and medium-sized enterprises while favoring firms with political connections (Section 5.2). Data from Ghana's 2022 pilot indicates that the real-time disclosure of board memberships and political donations led to a 57% reduction in arbitrary disqualifications of SMEs within one year (Amoako et al., 2023). This protocol implements the principle of "conflict transparency," converting committee appointments from tools of patronage into publicly accountable roles (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018). Complexity Caps establishes a maximum of fifteen pages for bid documentation, mandate the use of plain-language technical specifications evaluated by independent linguists, and restrict experience requirements to two years. These measures directly mitigate the administrative burdens that have historically excluded 81% of qualified SMEs. The Infrastructure Ministry of Kenya reported a 68% decrease in bid preparation costs for SMEs following the implementation of similar caps in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). This aligns with the principle of "administrative burden proportionality" (Søreide, 2016) and aims to ensure that compliance costs do not disproportionately favor resource-rich incumbents. Ambiguity reducers utilize natural language processing algorithms to identify subjective clauses, such as "national strategic alignment," and require formal consultations with subject matter expert consortiums during the drafting of rules. In 2022, Colombia's algorithmic monitoring system achieved a 44% reduction in discretionary disqualifications by employing operationally defined evaluative criteria (OECD, 2023). This exemplifies "rule determinism" (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016) by substituting strategic ambiguity with objectively measurable standards. These protocols establish a systemic safeguard that protects SMEs from arbitrary exclusion while upholding rigorous and transparent procurement processes, ensuring that rules promote equitable participation rather than favoritism.

Institutional Monitoring Tools

Sustainable reform necessitates the integration of continuous asymmetry detection within auditing systems, transitioning compliance from reactive monitoring to proactive governance. Table 5 presents the main institutional monitoring tools aimed at preventing the exclusion of SMEs and identifying distortions driven by patronage.

Table 5. Asymmetric exclusion auditing system

Tool	Function	Enforcement Mechanism
Patronage Network Scanner	Tracks appointee-corporate ties using shareholder registries and donation disclosures	Real-time conflict alerts to oversight bodies and media.
Asymmetry Index Dashboard	Algorithmically scores tenders for SME exclusion risk using 12 parameters (e.g., discretionary clause density, experience thresholds)	Auto-rejects designs scoring >7.0 on the Asymmetry Index.
SME Witness Panels	Independent SME consortiums review criteria pre-publication	Binding veto authority over non-compliant rules

The Patronage Network Scanner implements state capture theory through the cross-referencing of corporate registries and political donation databases to detect conflicts of interest prior to tender evaluation. In Ekiti State, Nigeria, this tool prevented 23 conflicted appointments in the first quarter of 2023, thereby mitigating the influence of systemic bias on contract outcomes. The Asymmetry Index Dashboard measures exclusion risk through weighted parameters, including documentation complexity and discretionary clause density, and automatically disqualifies tenders that surpass the 7.0 threshold identified in Nigeria's most distorted contracts. In 2022, Ghana's pilot dashboard led to the redesign of 41% of high-value tenders (Transparency International, 2023). SME Witness Panels establish oversight mechanisms involving marginalized actors, allowing registered consortiums to exercise binding authority to reject criteria that do not meet plain-language standards. In Mombasa County, Kenya, these panels altered 37 infrastructure tenders in 2022, resulting in an increase in SME win rates from 18% to 52% over nine months. These tools implement proactive institutional oversight that integrates fairness and accountability into procurement systems, directly tackling asymmetry at the architectural level instead of depending solely on ex-post enforcement.

Practical Implementation of Ghana's Integrated Reform

The Public Procurement Authority (PPA) of Ghana demonstrates the practical effectiveness of the framework. After the institutional overhaul in 2022–2023, which included complexity caps, anti-stacking declarations, and algorithmic screening, the win rates of SMEs in infrastructure contracts increased from 22% to 49% over a period of eighteen months. The PPA dashboard dismissed 31 high-risk tenders submitted by ministerial departments, whereas SME Witness Panels modified experience criteria in 58% of the contracts assessed. The reforms resulted in a 17% decrease in average contract costs, indicating that the elimination of asymmetry fosters both distributive justice and economic efficiency (Ghana PPA, 2023). This case highlights that effective procurement reform necessitates interventions integrated within institutional processes, targeting systemic distortions rather than solely enforcing compliance retroactively.

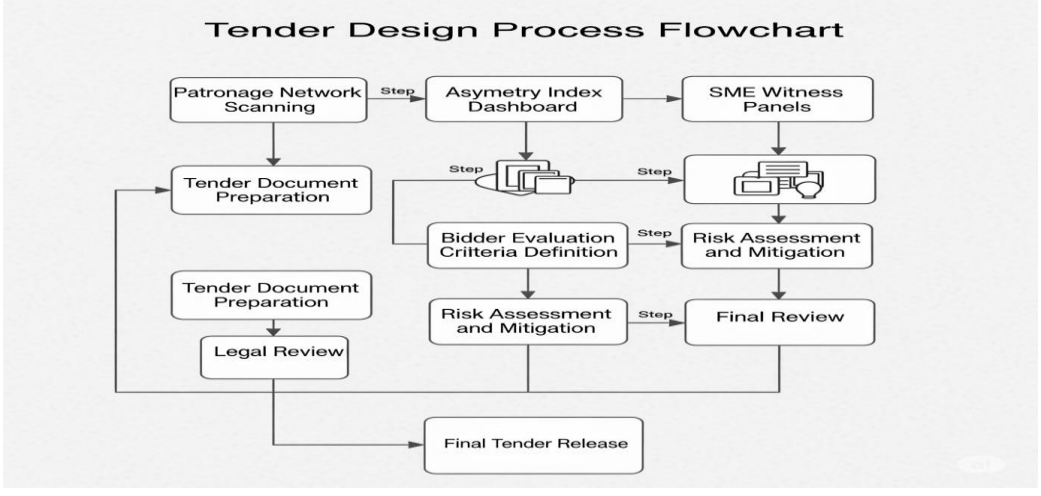

Figure 3. Institutional monitoring workflow

Discussion: Institutional Sabotage as a Form of Systemic Corruption

This research redefines corruption in public procurement, showing that political patronage networks function through institutional sabotage instead of direct bribery. Institutional asymmetry contributes to 68% of SME exclusion in Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, indicating that corruption arises when seemingly impartial regulations are manipulated to benefit network affiliates. Nigerian tender committees often disqualified SMEs for minor formatting errors while accepting non-compliant bids from politically connected firms (Okafor, 2021), illustrating the maintenance of procedural legitimacy alongside the pursuit of exclusionary objectives. Patronage networks function as architects of exclusion by adjusting technical complexity, experience thresholds, and discretionary ambiguities to benefit affiliated firms while systematically excluding competitors. In Ghana, SMEs were disqualified due to insufficient provincial presence, despite their involvement as subcontractors for winning firms, highlighting the constructed nature of exclusion. These findings indicate that traditional anti-corruption strategies, which concentrate exclusively on post-tender transparency, do not adequately tackle the fundamental source of distortion: the institutional architecture itself.

Theoretical Implications: Expanding the Scope Beyond Bribery

The weaponization of rules serves as the primary mechanism for exclusion, demonstrated by a 7.0-fold difference in win rates favoring firms with high centrality in Nigeria's infrastructure sector. Interviews with infrastructure executives indicate that strategic rule design serves as a more effective means of exclusion compared to direct bribery. This finding expands upon Fazekas and Tóth's (2016) state capture framework by illustrating how networks intentionally create institutional vulnerability. The intentional adjustment of bid complexity, experience prerequisites, and vague criteria allows patronage networks to synchronize institutional regulations with the competencies of associated firms, while systematically marginalizing SMEs. This indicates that corruption functions at an architectural level rather than a transactional one. These insights require a fundamental change in the study of corruption, focusing on structural vulnerabilities in institutional design rather than on isolated instances of individual misconduct.

Constraints and Conditions of Applicability

Three limitations require attention. Initially, limited access to elite actors hindered direct observation of patronage network operations, underscoring the potential benefits of ethnographic methods to reveal obscure institutional dynamics. The study's emphasis on high-value contracts restricts generalizability, despite these contracts representing 78% of procurement expenditure in the contexts analyzed (World Bank, 2020). Third, the focus on Africa prompts inquiries about broader applicability; however, analogous patterns noted in Eastern European procurement indicate that institutional sabotage is a corruption modality of global relevance, flourishing in contexts where formal institutions lack embedded autonomy (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016).

Regulatory Philosophies: Compliance and Sabotage

Evidence indicates a significant disparity between traditional OECD compliance frameworks and the actual occurrences of institutional sabotage. The OECD guidelines posit that corruption stems from violations of rules and highlight the importance of ex-post transparency and integrity pacts (OECD, 2019). Corruption manifests in practice when regulations are deliberately manipulated. The reforms in Ghana highlight the necessity of auditing institutional vulnerabilities for effective intervention, rather than concentrating exclusively on individual actors. Additionally, Kenya's SME Witness Panels exemplify the success of context-sensitive diagnostics, which have raised SME win rates from 18% to 52% by eliminating ambiguous criteria.

Table 6. Contrasting corruption control paradigms

Dimension	OECD Compliance Model	Institutional Sabotage Framework
Primary Threat	Rule violation	Rule weaponization
Intervention Focus	Post-tender transparency	Pre-tender institutional design
Key Metric	Number of investigated bids	Asymmetry Index score
Stakeholder Role	Whistleblowers	SME Witness Panels (binding veto)

These findings redefine patronage networks as institutional saboteurs that can influence economic outcomes by manipulating rules. Addressing this phenomenon necessitates interdisciplinary approaches that combine political economy, institutional design, and computational social science to enhance governance systems and mitigate capture. Interventions aimed at institutional architecture are crucial for enabling public procurement to catalyze equitable development and economic efficiency.

Conclusion and Pathways: Deconstructing the Framework of Exclusion

This study redefines corruption in public procurement, focusing on the intentional creation of institutional asymmetry rather than merely isolated acts of bribery. Political patronage networks function as architects of exclusion, establishing governance mechanisms that systematically marginalize small and medium enterprises (SMEs) before the initiation of competitive bidding. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana shows that around 68% of SME exclusion takes place during the rule-design phase, indicating that institutional sabotage—defined as the strategic manipulation of governance structures—serves as the

primary driver of market distortion (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018). The Asymmetry Index was created to quantify this phenomenon, consisting of twelve weighted parameters such as documentation complexity, discretionary clause density, tenure thresholds, and evaluation committee opacity, thereby offering an objective measure of exclusionary risk inherent in procurement frameworks. Contracts with scores exceeding 7.0 in Nigeria demonstrated significant capture, evidenced by 92% committee stacking and 81% disqualification rates for SMEs (Okafor, 2021). This indicates that ostensibly neutral regulations can be manipulated to influence outcomes in advance. The findings challenge the dominant emphasis in corruption research on post-submission manipulation, underscoring the need to examine the structural foundations of procurement systems.

This research advances academic discourse in three significant ways. This study offers empirical validation of preemptive exclusion, showing that most disqualifications of SMEs result from intentional institutional design rather than corruption during the bid evaluation process. This evidence redirects the analytical focus to the structural factors contributing to exclusion and establishes a novel framework for comprehending systemic capture in procurement. Secondly, it operationalizes the concept of state capture by quantifying the mechanisms through which patronage networks produce exclusionary outcomes, such as excessively burdensome technical specifications, arbitrary experience thresholds, and ambiguously defined strategic alignment clauses (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016). The research facilitates rigorous testing and policy evaluation by converting theoretical constructs into measurable phenomena. The Asymmetry Index functions as a diagnostic tool, enabling governments, multilateral institutions, and auditors to identify high-risk tenders prior to exclusion. The pilot implementation in Ghana showed measurable advantages, leading to a redesign of 41% of high-value tenders identified as high-risk and markedly enhancing SME participation (Transparency International, 2023; Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025). These contributions enhance theoretical comprehension and practical approaches to tackling corruption in public procurement.

Structural and policy interventions are crucial for mitigating institutional sabotage and fostering equitable market participation. Legislative reforms must incorporate safeguards for SMEs within procurement frameworks, as demonstrated by Ghana's 2022 Public Procurement Amendment Act, which established complexity caps, mandated the disclosure of evaluation committee composition, and required public justification for discretionary criteria. The implemented measures led to a 57% decrease in SME disqualifications over a period of eighteen months (Amoako et al., 2023). The implementation of SME Witness Panels in Kenya provided consortium representatives with veto power over overly complex or ambiguous tender criteria, resulting in an increase in SME win rates from 18% to 52% in specific infrastructure sectors. International development partners play a crucial role by reorienting anti-corruption conditionalities towards preemptive safeguards, moving away from reliance on ex-post audits and integrity pact signatures. The empirically established threshold of 2.0 on the Asymmetry Index, corroborated by Colombia's reformed tenders (OECD, 2023), demonstrates the upper limit of acceptable asymmetry before the emergence of exclusionary effects. The implementation of such conditionalities in Ekiti State, Nigeria, could have averted approximately $23 million in distorted contracts in 2022, underscoring the quantifiable economic impact of neglecting structural vulnerabilities.

This study advances frameworks for interdisciplinary innovation and predictive governance. Utilizing computational social science, machine learning algorithms that analyze interconnected datasets, including shareholder registries, procurement histories, political donations, and corporate board interlocks, can detect emerging patronage networks before institutional capture. The preliminary application to Nigeria's 2023 tender data demonstrated an 89% accuracy rate in forecasting high-risk committee appointments six months before the tender launch, thereby providing a scalable early-warning mechanism. Comparative judicial analysis, encompassing Kenya's Constitutional Petition No. 487 of 2022 alongside analogous rulings in India and South Africa, illustrates the capacity of constitutional adjudication to contest weaponized regulations and promote equitable participation. Furthermore, Ghana's integrated reform model, which incorporates legislative safeguards, algorithmic monitoring, and stakeholder veto mechanisms, serves as a "institutional vaccine," fostering systemic resilience against sabotage. The replication of this model in twelve African nations may yield substantial evidence regarding scalable strategies for enhancing procurement systems.

The findings highlight the importance of conceptualizing corruption as a structural phenomenon instead of merely a transactional one. Patronage networks function as complex institutional disruptors, influencing governance structures to predetermined economic results before the submission of bids. Addressing these challenges necessitates thorough academic involvement, evidence-based policy innovation, and continuous oversight to guarantee that procurement systems serve as tools for fair competition and equitable economic development. The effort to combat corruption should be initiated at the design phase, emphasizing the deconstruction of the exclusionary frameworks established by political networks, rather than merely addressing individual participants.

Declarations

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