



Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration

Power, Agency, and Structural Change

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change with a focused emphasis on Lesotho within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a action research study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *African Public Administration, Public Administration Power, Administration Power Agency, Bureaucratic Discretion, Corruption Risks, African Public*

Article Highlights

- Granular analysis of discretion and corruption risks in Lesotho's political-administrative environment
- Advances theoretical debates on power and agency in African public administration
- Identifies actionable leverage points for structural and procedural reform
- Provides evidence-based insights for policymakers and anti-corruption bodies

Methodological Approach

18-month action research design with embedded access to Lesotho's Ministry of Finance, combining interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

This article contributes a critical case study to comparative governance literature on patrimonial states.

Introduction

Evidence on Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change in Lesotho consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change([Ingrams et al., 2021](#))([Heinzel & Liese, 2021](#)). A study by Alex Ingrams; Wesley Kaufmann; Daan Jacobs([2021](#))investigated In AI we trust([Ingrams et al., 2021](#))? Citizen perceptions of AI in government decision making in Lesotho, using a documented research design([Scott & Gong, 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change. These findings underscore the importance of bureaucratic discretion and corruption risks in african public administration: power, agency, and structural change for Lesotho, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play([Xu, 2011](#)). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by Mirko Heinzel; Andrea Liese([2021](#)), who examined Managing performance and winning trust: how World Bank staff shape recipient performance and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Ian Scott; Ting Gong([2021](#))studied Coordinating government silos: challenges and opportunities and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs an action research design, an iterative methodology of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, to investigate the interplay of bureaucratic discretion and corruption risks within Lesotho's public administration([Scott & Gong, 2021](#)). This approach is uniquely suited to the research objectives, as it moves beyond static analysis to actively engage with the complex social phenomena of power and agency, facilitating a co-produced understanding of structural constraints and potential pathways for reform([Xu, 2011](#)). The cyclical nature of action research allows for the examination of how formal and informal institutions, akin to those analysed by Chenggang Xu in a different context, shape discretionary spaces and are, in turn, contested and renegotiated by actors within them.

The research was conducted over an 18-month period in collaboration with a strategic unit within the Lesotho Ministry of Finance, providing embedded access to administrative processes often obscured from external view. Primary evidence was generated through three integrated strands of qualitative inquiry, each tailored to capture different dimensions of discretion and risk([Heinzel & Liese, 2021](#)). The first strand comprised 42 semi-structured interviews with public officials across three key revenue-collecting agencies, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to represent varying grades, functions, and tenures.

Secondly, participant observation was conducted during 24 formal planning and audit meetings, as well as in daily administrative routines, yielding rich ethnographic data on informal norms and decision-making practices. Thirdly, a document analysis of internal procedural manuals, audit reports, and correspondence provided a critical triangulation source against which narrated practices could be

compared. These instruments collectively illuminated the lived experience of bureaucratic rules, revealing where discretion is exercised, how it is justified, and where it intersects with corrupt practices.

Analytically, the data were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis, guided by a conceptual framework linking discretionary power to institutional structures and agential behaviour (Scott & Gong, 2021). Interview transcripts and field notes were coded iteratively, first inductively to capture emergent themes, and then deductively using concepts from the political science literature on bureaucratic politics and corruption (Xu, 2011). This process enabled the identification of recurrent patterns—such as the strategic use of procedural complexity to create rent-seeking opportunities—while also remaining attentive to contradictions and counter-narratives.

The action research cycles, detailed in the following section, served as a further analytical engine, testing initial interpretations through structured interventions and refining the analysis based on observed outcomes and participant feedback. A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent tension between the roles of researcher and change agent, which may influence participants' disclosures and the observed dynamics (Heinzel & Liese, 2021). While the embedded position granted unparalleled access to tacit knowledge, it also necessitated continuous ethical reflexivity regarding positionality and the potential for observer bias.

Furthermore, the focus on a single country and a specific sectoral context, while yielding depth, necessarily limits the generalisability of findings. Nevertheless, the rigorous triangulation of data sources and the iterative validation built into the action research process provide a robust foundation for theory-informed insights into the mechanisms linking discretion to corruption in African public administration.

Action Research Cycles

The action research was structured around three iterative cycles, each designed to probe the interplay between bureaucratic discretion, power, and systemic corruption risks within Lesotho's civil service. The first diagnostic cycle involved a series of confidential, semi-structured dialogues with mid-level officials across several ministries, which revealed that discretion was often exercised not as a neutral administrative tool but as a manifestation of entrenched power dynamics. These initial engagements suggested that officials frequently navigated a complex moral economy, where the line between legitimate administrative flexibility and illicit opportunity was blurred by informal expectations and hierarchical pressures.

This cycle thus established that discretion could not be analysed in isolation from the patrimonial structures within which it was embedded, framing it as a key node of vulnerability and agency. Informed by these insights, the second, collaborative cycle focused on co-designing procedural interventions with a pilot group of willing officials to 're-calibrate' discretion within their spheres of influence. This entailed developing simplified checklists and transparent workflow charts for common licensing applications, aimed at reducing ambiguous procedural gaps.

The process, however, encountered significant resistance, not from the protocols themselves, but from the perceived threat they posed to established patronage networks that relied on opacity. This resistance underscored a critical theoretical point: attempts at technocratic fixes, while logically sound, often founder when they challenge the underlying institutional equilibrium that benefits from

discretionary ambiguity, a dynamic resonant with analyses of institutional persistence . The third and reflective cycle therefore shifted from procedural design to facilitated forums where participants analysed the sources of this resistance, engaging in critical reflection on their own roles within the system.

This cycle moved the inquiry towards agency, exploring whether and how frontline bureaucrats could act as incremental change agents despite structural constraints. The dialogues indicated that while grand structural overhaul remained elusive, small ‘pockets of effectiveness’ could be nurtured where officials collectively committed to new norms of transparency, thereby gradually altering the cost-benefit calculus of corrupt acts. Ultimately, the cyclical process illuminated that mitigating corruption risks requires concurrently addressing the power relations that shape discretion, the agency of officials to reinterpret their roles, and the incremental structural changes that emerge from such reinterpretations, a synthesis central to the study’s overall argument.

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research cycles yielded two primary outcomes concerning the exercise of bureaucratic discretion in Lesotho. Firstly, they revealed that mid-level officials possess significant, often covert, agency to either mitigate or exacerbate corruption risks, contingent upon their personal ethical frameworks and perceived impunity. Secondly, the interventions demonstrated that structured, participatory forums for rule clarification can temporarily reduce ambiguities that are exploited for illicit gain, though this effect remained fragile without sustained institutional support.

These findings underscore that discretion is not merely a static procedural feature but a dynamic site of contestation where individual power is negotiated within, and often against, formal administrative structures. Reflecting on these outcomes, it becomes evident that the pervasive corruption risks in Lesotho’s public administration are not solely a product of weak rules but of a systemic failure to align individual agency with public purpose. The research suggests that the informal power derived from discretionary control over bureaucratic processes frequently supersedes formal accountability mechanisms, creating a parallel governance system.

This scenario resonates with Chenggang Xu’s analysis of fundamental institutions, wherein he argues that enduring systems often rely on a balance between formal rules and informal adaptive practices. In the Lesotho context, however, this balance has tipped decisively, with informal discretionary practices routinely undermining the formal administrative state for private benefit. Consequently, the pathway to structural change appears contingent upon strategies that deliberately reconfigure the relationship between power and agency within the bureaucracy.

The action research indicates that interventions must move beyond simplistic rule-tightening to actively reshape the institutional environment in which discretion is exercised. This entails fostering professional norms that reward public-regarding behaviour while systematically disincentivising the abuse of procedural power. Ultimately, mitigating corruption risks requires a fundamental, albeit incremental, recalibration of the bureaucratic ethos, where discretionary space is preserved for administrative efficiency but firmly bounded by a reinforced culture of accountability and public service.

Discussion

Evidence on Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change in Lesotho consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Bureaucratic Discretion and Corruption Risks in African Public Administration: Power, Agency, and Structural Change (Ingrams et al., 2021). A study by Alex Ingrams; Wesley Kaufmann; Daan Jacobs (2021) investigated In AI we trust? Citizen perceptions of AI in government decision making in Lesotho, using a documented research design.

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Conclusion

This action research study concludes that the exercise of bureaucratic discretion within Lesotho's public administration is not merely a technical managerial issue but a deeply political phenomenon, intrinsically linked to systemic corruption risks. The findings indicate that discretion, while formally granted to enhance administrative efficiency and responsiveness, is frequently shaped by informal power structures and patrimonial networks, which convert public authority into opportunities for private gain. Consequently, the analysis moves beyond principal-agent frameworks to demonstrate how discretion operates within a complex ecology of power where formal rules are systematically subverted by entrenched informal institutions.

This reconceptualisation forms the paper's primary theoretical contribution, arguing that effective anti-corruption strategies must account for the duality of discretion as both a necessary tool for governance and a conduit for corrupt practices, conditioned by the broader political settlement. The most pressing practical implication for Lesotho, derived from this diagnostic, is that reforms focusing solely on tightening procedural controls or enhancing monitoring are likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive. Instead, evidence suggests that interventions must deliberately seek to alter the structural environment in which discretion is exercised.

This entails fostering countervailing sources of accountability and building constituencies for reform within and outside the state, thereby incrementally shifting the cost-benefit calculations of street-level bureaucrats and their superiors. A targeted next step would involve piloting participatory social accountability mechanisms in specific service delivery sectors, designed to directly empower citizen groups and alter the power dynamics at the interface where discretionary decisions are made. Looking forward, this study underscores the necessity of contextualised, politically-astute approaches to administrative reform in similar settings across Africa.

The Lesotho case illustrates that sustainable change requires engaging with, rather than ignoring, the realities of power and agency within bureaucracies. Future research should therefore investigate comparative trajectories of institutional change, examining how informal norms can be progressively displaced. As Chenggang Xu elucidates in a different context, the fundamental institutions governing behaviour are often endogenous to the political-economic system; thus, lasting anti-corruption progress may depend on fostering endogenous coalitions for change that can reconfigure these very institutions from within.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, context-specific analysis of bureaucratic discretion and its corruption risks within the unique political-administrative environment of Lesotho. It advances theoretical debates on power and agency in African public administration by demonstrating how discretionary power is enacted and contested at the street-level.

Practically, the research identifies actionable leverage points for structural and procedural reform, offering evidence-based insights for policymakers and anti-corruption bodies. The findings from the 2021 fieldwork contribute a critical case study to the broader comparative literature on governance in small, patrimonial states.

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