

Political appointments, governance and accountability in a South African local municipality

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Abstract

This article explored participants' views and experiences regarding the influence of political appointments on governance and accountability in a South African local municipality. The study was underpinned by agency theory, employed a qualitative research strategy, and adopted an exploratory case study design within the interpretivist paradigm. A non-probability sampling technique was used, involving 29 participants. Data were collected using both primary and secondary methods. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, while secondary data were obtained from official documents. Both primary and secondary data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that political appointments within the local municipality used as a case study have contributed to weak accountability, a decline in governance values, and waning public trust. Municipal administrative incapacity, politicized and biased decision-making, shielding of wrongdoings, weakening of oversight committees, and patronage have eroded public trust, leading to social disenchantment. To address the aforementioned challenges, this article recommends the establishment of an independent municipal human resource panel or committee—including representatives from civil society, traditional leaders, and the provincial government—to review and approve the appointment of senior officials, empower oversight committees, and prioritize performance management. Professionalizing South African local governance should be strategically prioritized to enhance accountability, service delivery, and public trust.

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1. Introduction

Political appointments of bureaucrats have long been studied from a clientelist equilibrium perspective, where rent-seeking and patronage are viewed as impediments to development due to the misallocation of public jobs and the suppression of bureaucratic effort (Toral, 2024). Patronage refers to cases in which appointments by politicians are negative, unproductive, and unable to improve personnel management (Mosher, 1982). Some scholars portray a negative image of patronage in the public sector, relating it to corruption, cronyism, and nepotism. It is depicted as a common ‘bureaupathology’ – meaning “the vices, maladies and sickness of bureaucracy” (Caiden, 1991; Sancino et al., 2018). Several administrative positions in South African local government are subject to political influence or appointment, especially at the senior management level. The municipal manager, the head of administration and accounting officer, is a political appointment, and in most instances, managers directly accountable to the municipal manager in key departments are subject to political consideration (Shopola & Juta, 2024). Toral (2021) notes that political appointments significantly increase bureaucratic accountability and effectiveness, as they provide political and social connections between bureaucrats and politicians. These connections grant access to material and non-material resources, enhance monitoring, facilitate the application of sanctions and rewards, align priorities and incentives, and increase mutual trust. In certain conditions, political appointments can thus enhance bureaucrats’ accountability and effectiveness in public service delivery. As Rubin (2021) noted, the effective and transparent provision of basic services within the local government sphere has a positive bearing on accountability, fosters public trust, and upholds the legitimacy of municipalities and other political institutions.

Service delivery refers to local government/municipality functionality in terms of providing basic needs like water, housing, education, health amenities, and social development infrastructure like parks, sporting grounds and stands, main/side roads, and other urban/peri-urban, semi-urban basics to citizens/ ratepayers. Shittu (2020) asserts that service delivery refers to the extent to which the services provided by listed sectors meet or exceed the expectations of beneficiaries or the general public. This study examined whether Amahlathi Local Municipality’s (ALM’s) slow-paced growth has anything to do with poor policy comprehension or top-level local municipal administration and management. Notwithstanding that South Africa is one of the African countries with good governance policies, there has ironically been an increase in excessive poverty in the day-to-day lives of the marginalised

ratepayers. Incidentally, due to South Africa's economic muscle, it has been capable of hosting major events like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa economic bloc), among others. Though South Africa is part of a near-first-world economic partner, local councils like ALM have poor communities who continue to lose confidence in their municipal government, due to slow-paced development caused by excessive political interference by political appointees. This study aimed to assess the influence of political appointments on governance, accountability, and legitimacy in the ALM.

Nkgapele and Mofokeng (2024) posit that an effective municipal administration prioritises merit-based appointments, ensuring good governance, robust accountability, and public trust through the provision of basic services in an equitable manner. In South Africa, several dysfunctional municipalities fail to achieve compliance with basic service delivery standards and financial management regulations (Ledger & Rampedi, 2019). When this happens, Section 139 of the Constitution (1996) authorises the provincial executive to intervene in a municipality (referred to as municipal administration). Section 139(1) deals with what is termed 'failure to fulfil an executive obligation,' Section 139(4) deals with failure to pass a budget or associated measures to give effect to a budget, and Section 139(5) deals with serious financial problems (RSA, 1996; Ledger & Rampedi 2019). Mbuqwa et al. (2024) note with concern that ALM is characterised by chronic failure in service delivery, social fragmentation, and diminished legitimacy. As a result, the local municipality was placed under administration (Rulashe & Dyan, 2023). The persistent failure of ALM to fulfil its constitutional obligations constitutes a serious breach of public trust and a fundamental governance deficit. As such, the researchers sought to assess the influence of political appointments on governance, accountability, and legitimacy in the ALM. This article aims to answer the following main research question: *How do political appointments influence local municipalities' governance, accountability, and legitimacy, specifically in Amahlathi Municipality?* The research objectives are: 1) to examine the impact of political appointments on governance quality; 2) to assess the effect of political appointments on accountability mechanisms; and 3) to analyse how political appointments influence legitimacy and public trust in local government.

The research question captures the intricacies of the effects of politically motivated appointments on service delivery performance, public trust, and social cohesion as aspects of governance, legitimacy, and accountability. This article comprises the introduction, literature

review, research methodology, presentation of the findings, recommendations, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Governance, accountability, and legitimacy are pillars of an effective local government system. The local government, as the sphere of government closest to the people, must ensure that there are robust systems that enable it to execute its constitutional mandate. In addition, as local governments deal with public money, they must be able to account for their actions and have public support.

2.1 Contextualising Governance in South African Local Government

Within the South African local government system, governance can be contextualised as frameworks, principles, and processes used by municipalities to exercise their authority in developing policies, managing public resources, and delivering public services to their community members (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024). This means that the functionality of a municipality is guided by specific provisions that officials must comply with. The legal foundation is provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) (RSA, 1996), the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (RSA, 2000), and the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 (RSA, 1998), which underscore developmental local government, participatory governance, and rights-based governance. Xolani et al. (2023) highlight that within the local government sphere, governance deals with issues pertaining to transparency, responsiveness, the rule of law, efficiency, and inclusive decision-making. Given the foregoing, public officials within the local sphere of the government should be able to operate in transparently so that residents account for all their actions and or inactions. They must respond to the needs of the community members, ensure that no one is above the law, and ensure that citizens are included in decision-making processes.

Available literature shows that within the South African local government system, governance continues to be undermined by politically motivated appointments which prioritise party loyalty over merit and public interest (Chomane & Biljohn, 2023; Masuku & Jili, 2019; Mlambo et al., 2022). Institutionalised patronage systems often blur council-party boundaries with municipal executive decisions originating from the party hierarchy. As reported by the

Auditor-General of South Africa (2023), political appointments within the local government have fostered a governance culture characterised by a lack of transparency, as decision-making processes and resource allocation are primarily conducted behind closed doors and based on party caucuses instead of using open participatory channels, undermining the constitutional requirement of public participation. The prioritisation of political appointments instead of skilled and competent professionals to higher positions within South African local government has contributed to the diminishing responsiveness and efficiency as municipalities are being occupied with managing internal political dynamics instead of delivering basic services (Lincoln et al., 2024; Kuhlengisa et al., 2025).

Chomane and Biljohn (2023) postulate that political appointments have negatively impacted the rule of law because, in most instances, due to political allegiance, officials are not subjected to scrutiny and sanction, leading to chronic non-compliance with procurement regulations, poor financial controls, and routine irregular expenditure. Political appointments within the local government have also impacted inclusive decision-making, as there is a lack of genuine engagement with the citizens (Shayamano, 2025). Most of the strategies employed within municipalities, such as ward committees and public meetings (imbizo), are tokenistic instead of real participation (Kuhlengisa et al., 2025). This is so because in most cases, party-affiliated voices hold sway, erasing opportunities for genuine community engagement and marginalising community members. The recurrent patterns of maladministration, corruption, and service delivery failure within South African local government reflect, beyond any reasonable doubt, that governance remains unattainable wherever party interests drive political appointments.

2.2 Accountability and Legitimacy in South African Local Government

Thusi and Selepe (2023) posit that, per the Constitution, public officials are accountable to the public and oversight bodies for their decisions and use of resources. Similarly, Ramodula and Govender (2020) define accountability as giving an account or being responsible for the decisions made or actions taken. There is a need to enable accountability within the local sphere of the government by having a mechanism in place that enables proper monitoring, reporting, and performance evaluation, as well as for sanctioning inefficiencies, corruption, and misuse of public funds. Legislation such as the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act of 1998 provide a framework for establishing oversight committees within municipalities that provide

horizontal and vertical accountability (Rulashe & Dyan, 2023). Rulashe and Dyan (2023) identify the Municipal Public Account Committee (MPAC), internal audits, external audits, and several public participation structures as mechanisms to foster accountability within the municipalities. These mechanisms aim to ensure that local government remains transparent, combats maladministration, and enables communities to determine if service delivery and financial management meet expected standards. However, the Auditor General's Report (2024) reveals that several South African municipalities have politically appointed officials, and this has eroded the foundation of accountability by directly compromising the integrity, independence, and efficacy of oversight committees.

Empirical literature highlights that MPACs, internal audits, and external audits are rendered useless in several municipalities as they are influenced by individuals whose loyalty is inclined to political parties and their internal factions (Moji et al., 2022; Mofolo & Adonis, 2021; Rulashe & Dyan, 2023; Mapaya et al., 2024). Moji et al. (2022) are of the view that due to political interference in the appointment process, oversight bodies within municipalities are rendered useless as they lack the authority, autonomy, and will to investigate wrongdoings, sanction misconduct, or foster improvements in municipal performance. This view is supported by Rulashe and Dyan (2023), who add that often, political appointees tend to protect each other from accountability. This stifles independent investigations and obstructs whistle-blowing efforts, resulting in fecund grounds for rent-seeking, patronage, corruption, maladministration and service delivery failure (Enaifoghe, 2023). Due to political appointments within the local sphere, failure of the municipality to execute its constitutional mandates tends to go unpunished and frequently unreported (Shayamano, 2025). As noted by Mapaya et al. (2024), due to political appointments which undermine accountability, oversight reports, and audit findings are habitually not implemented. When there are no consequences for non-compliance or ethical breaches, it creates a culture of impunity. This also perpetuates a cycle of poor performance, irregular expenditure, and decline in public trust.

Taylor et al. (2020) regard legitimacy as the degree to which local government institutions are perceived as fair, credible, and acting in the interest of the public. Msenge and Nzewi (2021) highlight that the legitimacy of local government institutions is derived from the South African Constitution and is earned through responsive service delivery, transparency, and genuine public participation. Legitimacy is vital for maintaining public trust and is imperative for social cohesion and compliance with policies and regulations. Many South

African municipalities are experiencing a critical loss of legitimacy and public trust because of political appointments (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021; Gebrihet, 2024; Afrobarometer Report, 2024). The Afrobarometer Report (2024) indicates that only 24% of South African citizens have trust in their municipality. Msenge and Nzewi (2021) argue that citizens have lost trust in municipalities, perceiving political appointments as a form of capture of the local government. They argue that party loyalty is rewarded over public services, resulting in maladministration, mismanagement of resources, and continuous service delivery failures. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2020) are of the view that political appointments have resulted in a credibility crisis, where institutions are no longer perceived as serving public interests.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by the agency theory, which gained popularity in the 1970s. The genesis of the agency theory can be traced back to the work of Adam Smith (1937). The theory was later shaped by Ross (1973) and Mitnick (1975). Ross (1973) viewed the agency problem as a problem of incentives, and Mitnick saw it occurring due to the institutional structure. Mitnick's (1975) institutional approach developed the logic of the core agency theory. It posits that "institutions are built around agency and grow to reconcile with the agency" (Panda & Leepsa, 2017, p. 77). The agency theory addresses the relationship between principals (citizens) and agents (those who exercise authority, the politically appointed officials). Lane (2020) posits that characteristics of agency relationships include the granting of power by the principal to the agent to make decisions and take actions, with the agent having some degree of autonomy in making decisions and taking actions. In addition, the agent's interest may differ from those of the principal, resulting in potential conflict. The researchers deemed this theory the most suitable for this study, as it explains the relationship between citizens and the politically appointed officials tasked with making decisions on behalf of the public.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research strategy and a case study design, following the interpretivist paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of how political appointments have influenced governance and accountability in ALM. The interpretivism research philosophy posits that reality is socially constructed and multiple. Knowledge is subjective,

created through interactions between researchers and participants. Using the interpretivist worldview, the researchers sought to produce rich, detailed descriptions of the influence of political appointments on governance and accountability in ALM. A qualitative research strategy explores and provides an in-depth, comprehensive and detailed description of the phenomena using non-numeric data (Oranga & Matere, 2023). In this regard, the researchers formed part of the research process as they interacted with the study participants. The study used a case study research design, which is defined by Putman (2024) as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. ALM was used as a case for this study. ALM is a Category B municipality located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa and falls within the Amathole District Municipality. In terms of Section 155(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, a Category B municipality shares municipal executive and legislative authority in its area with a Category C (District) municipality within whose area it falls (RSA, 1996).

The targeted population for this study comprised all people above 18 years of age residing in the municipal jurisdiction. The study employed a non-probability sampling technique. Creswell (2021) defines a non-probability sampling technique as a sampling technique where some entities within the population have zero chances of being selected. Convenient and purposive sampling methods were used in this study; convenient sampling was used to select community leaders and community development workers, whereas purposive sampling was used to select councillors, government organisation representatives, and politically appointed employees. The sample size was 29 participants, and this number was based on reaching saturation. The use of 29 participants in this study was justified by the literature, where scholars argue that in a qualitative study, between five and 50 participants are acceptable as the aim is not to generalise the findings (Mason, 2010; Patton, 2015; Samosa et al., 2021; Young & Casey, 2019). The 29 participants comprised 14 community leaders who participated in the focus group discussions, six community development workers (CDWs), two councillors, four government organisation representatives (two from South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and two from Department of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and three politically appointed employees. The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were that individuals must have been over 18 years of age and reside within ALM.

Data was collected using both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data was collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and secondary data was obtained from municipal audit publications, peer-reviewed journals, and books to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Data was analysed using thematic analysis following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the data sets by transcribing and reading through them. The second step required that they generate the initial codes by organising and labelling data into meaningful groups. The third step was the development of preliminary themes, which was followed by determining the coherent patterns as the fourth step. The fifth step was to ensure that a coherent story had been developed from the data and identified themes.

The study observed several ethical considerations, including seeking permission from the university, which granted approval in the form of an ethical clearance, project number THA021SDLA01, as well as getting a gatekeeper's letter from the municipality. The researcher debriefed the participants on the aim of the research and made them aware of their rights. In return, the participants signed an informed consent form. The participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by keeping their identities anonymous.

4. Findings

The analysis of the data collected from the study participants revealed that the delivery of basic services within ALM continues to be hampered by three main factors: the undermining of governance quality, the erosion of accountability, and the undermining of legitimacy and public trust. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes and subthemes

	Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1	Undermining Governance Quality	Erosion of Administrative Capacity Politicisation of Decision-Making
Theme 2	Accountability Erosion	Shielding Wrongoings Weakening of Oversight Bodies
Theme 3	Undermining Legitimacy and Public Trust	Perception of Patronage and Biased Governance Rising Social Disenchantment

Source: Researchers' Own Construction (2025)

Theme 1: Undermining Governance Quality

The study findings reveal that political appointments within ALM have resulted in undermining governance quality. The study participants were asked to comment on how the qualifications and competencies of the politically appointed municipal officials have affected the quality of decision-making and service delivery within the municipality. Additionally, they were asked about their perceptions of whether political appointments in key municipal leadership roles have influenced the professionalism of municipal management. Of the 29 participants, 21 were of the view that political appointments have led to the erosion of administrative capacity and the politicisation of decision-making. The study participants revealed the following:

“Several of our management positions within this municipality are filled based on political loyalty instead of professional competence, and this has resulted in challenges when executing our day-to-day operations. In most instances, these politically appointed individuals lack the technical know-how to manage the functionality of a municipality, and this has drastically reduced municipal capacity to plan and deliver basic services efficiently and effectively.”

[Participant 23]

In line with the politicisation of decision-making within the municipality, one participant highlighted that:

“Critical decisions are delayed or, at times, overturned in favour of certain factions instead of being based on the administrative principles, and this has resulted in the municipality failing to fulfil its constitutional mandate of providing basic services. From a period between 2021 to 2024, political appointments have turned our lovely municipality into a battlefield because of factionalism. More often than not, these people who are politically appointed tend to prioritise political allegiances over the needs of the community, and this has affected the decision-making process within the municipality to benefit their political patrons.” **[Participant 17]**

The response from the study participants is indicative that the political appointments of senior officials within ALM undermine governance quality, and have led to the erosion of administrative capacity and politicisation of decision-making.

Theme 2: Accountability Erosion

Another theme that appeared frequently during data analysis was that political appointments in the ALM have led to the erosion of accountability. Participants were asked to comment on how the political appointment of municipal officials has influenced the independence and effectiveness of oversight bodies. Of the participants, 18 revealed that political appointments within ALM have led to the shielding of wrongdoings and weakening of oversight bodies. The participants revealed the following:

“Excessive political patronage within the municipality, there is a clear reluctance to hold each other accountable. Imagine the MPAC committee, which is supposed to oversee municipal finances and governance, is often staffed by politically connected individuals who protect those involved in irregular expenditure rather than investigate or sanction them. Shielding of wrongdoings has been clear and systemic within the municipality, and this has negatively affected the functioning of the MPAC as an oversight committee to the extent that millions of rands are reported as irregular spending, and they go unchecked or unpunished.” [Participant 16]

Participant 16 highlighted that political appointments within the ALM have intentionally or unintentionally led to the erosion of accountability.

The Consolidated General Report on Local Government Audit Outcomes 2023/24, reports that *“most municipalities contracted consultants to perform functions for which finance units are responsible, stating vacancies and a lack of skills in the finance unit as reasons”* (Auditor-General, South Africa, 2025, p. 8). Non-compliance with legislation remain high, with 206 municipalities (83%) materially not complying with key legislation, and a total of 201 municipalities (81%) receiving material compliance findings, indicating an apparent disregard for compliance. As indicated in the 2023/24 audit report:

“Lack of consequences was most evident in investigating allegations of financial and supply chain management misconduct and fraud indicators; not investigating and/or not properly dealing with unauthorised, irregular, and fruitless and wasteful expenditure; and material non-compliance with legislation on consequence management.” (Auditor-General, South Africa (2025, p.10)

The lacklustre approach in dealing with recoveries and consequences in local government creates a culture that lacks responsiveness, consequences, and accountability (Auditor-General, South Africa Report, 2025).

Theme 3: Undermining Legitimacy and Public Trust

The study findings also reveal that political appointments within the municipality have led to a decline in legitimacy and public trust. The participants were asked about their perceptions of fairness in the appointment process and how political appointments within the municipality have affected community members' trust in local government leadership and the delivery of services. Most of the participants highlighted that legitimacy and public trust are undermined because of patronage, biased governance, and rising social disenchantment. The participants highlighted the following:

“Many people within the municipal jurisdiction are of the view that key positions within the municipality are given out as a political reward instead of skills or experience. This has made it difficult for residents to trust that decisions are made in the best interest of the public. As time goes on, residents have developed a deep sense of disenchantment and scepticism towards municipal officials as they feel excluded from meaningful participation and marginalised in accessing basic services.” [Participant 11]

Another participant reported that:

“Biased governance as a result of political appointments has severely damaged the legitimacy of our local government. We have more than once or twice witnessed resources and services being diverted towards areas or groups favoured by politically connected individuals. This has resulted in social division and enhanced public frustration and protest because the residents have lost faith in the municipal ability to represent and serve everyone fairly, as stipulated by the Constitution.” [Participant 4]

The participants highlighted that the legitimacy and public trust of the municipality have been undermined due to political appointments. Citizens perceive top municipal management jobs as reserved for politicians or their cronies, and they do not trust that the municipality represents their interests.

5. Discussion

Within the ALM, political appointments are typically given to underqualified personnel who are only hired because of their affiliation with the ruling party. As a result, the capacity of the municipality has suffered, leading to it being placed under administration and obtaining

adverse audit opinions because the people tasked with solving these challenges do not have the technical knowledge to do so within the municipality. This finding resonates with the literature, where Chomane and Biljohn (2023), Masuku and Jili (2019), and Mlambo et al. (2022) note that the local government sphere continues to be undermined because of politically motivated appointments, which prioritise party loyalty over merit and public interest. The prioritisation of political appointments instead of skilled and competent professionals to higher positions within South African local government has contributed to the diminishing responsiveness and efficiency, as municipalities are being occupied with the management of internal political dynamics instead of delivering basic services (Lincoln et al., 2024; Kuhlengisa et al., 2025).

Similarly, the politicisation of decision-making is discerned as a major contributor to the decline of capable, cooperative, accountable, and responsive institutions that deliver on their mandates in local government. These characteristics are key to municipalities that are sustained by “*strong performance, accountable leadership and employees, transparent systems and processes, as well as solid institutional integrity*” (Auditor-General, South Africa, 2025, p. 5). This is because the decisions taken within the municipality are not based on the interest of the citizens or based on consensus, but instead based on political lines. Despite the municipality reporting that citizens are consulted through imbizos (meetings/gatherings) and ward committees, it appears as if citizen participation is tokenistic in nature, as these citizens do not partake in actual decisions that are made within the municipality. As argued by some scholars, intricate power dynamics are inherent in participatory platforms and spaces (Yount et al., 2019; Sibanda & Lues, 2019). Such political power dynamics tend to influence local governance decisions and can either include or exclude actors. This tends to be so in instances where there is a lack of resources, voice or legitimacy, which tend to exclude less powerful actors (Coelho et al., 2021; Sibanda & Lues, 2021). Similarly, political appointments within local government also impact inclusive decision-making, as there is a lack of genuine engagement with the citizens (Kuhlengisa et al., 2025). Given this context, political issues such as inequality, constitutional rights, exclusion, power imbalances, accountability, and relationships inherent in societal structures and local governance systems may be complex to address under circumstances where political appointments tend to represent ingrained parochial political party interests.

As a result of political allegiance, accountability is characterised by the protection of wrongdoings as well as the weakening of oversight bodies. As such, the Municipal Public

Accounts Committee (MPAC) has been rendered ineffective within the municipality, as its recommendations are not considered, and the Auditor-General's recommendations are not implemented (Shava & Muringa, 2024). The erosion of accountability is not specific to ALM, as several municipalities experience the same issue. As reported by the Auditor-General of South Africa (2025), municipal managers, mayors, and councils have all contributed to the poor financial management in municipalities (Auditor-General, South Africa, 2025).

Similarly, empirical literature highlights that MPACs and internal and external audits are rendered useless in several municipalities as they are influenced by individuals whose loyalty is inclined to political parties and their internal factions (Moji et al., 2022; Mofolo & Adonis, 2021; Rulashe & Dyan, 2023; Mapaya et al., 2024). The shielding of wrongdoings within this municipality was highlighted by Rulashe and Dyan (2023), who argue that political appointees tend to shield each other from accountability. It is worth noting that the erosion of accountability in ALM has created a culture of impunity where politically appointed officials are not deterred by sanctions or punishments, perpetuating a cycle of poor performance, irregular expenditure, and service delivery failure.

Moreover, citizens have lost faith in the municipality, as they have witnessed partisan service delivery, where the delivery of basic services is along party lines. The municipality has lost legitimacy because of corruption by politically appointed officials, and this has triggered social unrest within the municipality's jurisdiction. This aligns with Msenge and Nzewi (2021), who indicate that citizens have lost trust in municipalities as they perceive political appointments as the capture of the local government. Msenge and Nzewi (2021) argue that when party loyalty is prioritised over public services, it leads to maladministration, resource mismanagement, and persistent service delivery failures. The lack of citizens' trust, as highlighted by the participants, authenticates the finding by Afrobarometer (2024) that only 24% of South African citizens have trust in their municipality.

There is a misalignment between the study findings and the theory underpinning the study. The theory assumes that the agents (politically appointed municipal officials) are accountable to the principal (citizens). However, politically appointed officials are more accountable to the political actors who appointed them than to the public. As a result of this misalignment, politically appointed officials serve party interests instead of community needs, contributing to the principal-agent problem. The theory prioritises curbing opportunism by agents, but the study findings reveal that political appointments with ALM mostly undermine

oversight bodies, neutralising these mechanisms. This has led to these officials acting with impunity, shielding wrongdoings and evading punishment, resulting in agency loss and moral hazard. Thus, in accordance with agency theory, political appointees maximise their own happiness or ‘utility,’ which can vary by role and agent level (Moore & Vining, 2023). As indicated by the Auditor-General of South Africa (2025), improved governance often follows when the political leadership of municipalities respond well to the support and guidance provided by national and provincial government, as well as empowering public participation.

6. Recommendations

Political appointments within ALM have led to the undermining of governance quality, the erosion of accountability, and the undermining of legitimacy and public trust. In addressing the above challenges, this study recommends the following:

The first challenge noted in this study was the undermining of governance quality. In dealing with this, the study recommends the establishment of an independent municipal human resource panel or committee, inclusive of civic society representatives, traditional leaders, and the provincial government, to review and approve the appointment of senior officials. This would play a significant role in enhancing administrative capacity and reducing the adverse effects of patronage on governance.

The other challenge noted in this study regards the erosion of accountability within the municipality. The study recommends that oversight committees within the municipality must be empowered through the appointment of members on merit and ensuring that these committees are protected from political interference. The researchers recommend that training and other skills development programmes on governance, auditing, and ethics should be provided to oversight committee members and municipal officials in general, as this will assist them in knowing what is expected. There is a need to have a framework in place that deters political obstruction in the investigation and enforcement of sanctions.

The undermining of legitimacy and public trust was noted as a challenge. The study recommends that the municipality should take performance management seriously, and these must not be seen as cash-making schemes; the municipality must develop a clear performance contract for all senior officials linking deliverables to service delivery outcomes and making these contracts publicly available for scrutiny.

The implementation of the above-suggested recommendations is in line with the South African constitutional provisions of enhancing governance, improving accountability and rebuilding legitimacy, which will play a significant role in enhancing service delivery in ALM.

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that political appointments in Amahlathi Local Municipality (ALM) have caused more harm than good, and have resulted in undermining governance, rendering oversight and accountability mechanisms ineffective, and fostering a crisis of legitimacy and public trust. Addressing the challenges emanating from political appointments and establishing merit-based, transparent processes are vital in restoring good governance, accountability, and legitimacy of local government in Amahlathi and other municipalities alike. This article concludes that appointments in the local government accountability ecosystem should work deliberately and with urgency towards a culture of performance, accountability, transparency, and institutional integrity.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Fort Hare. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearance by the University of Fort Hare.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Grammarly to ensure sentence and grammatical appropriateness.

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