



The Impact of Corruption on Local Government Culture in Sri Lanka: Undermining Democratic Principles and Weakening Citizen Trust

Thiwankee Abeywardena Wickramasinghe
Senior Lecturer in Mass Communication
Department of Social Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka

Abstract

This study focuses on effect of corruption on the local government culture, with case studies from Sri Lanka. It specifically discusses how corrupt practices, over time, have corroded democratic principles through weakened citizen trust. In adopting qualitative methodology with structured in-depth interviews among local government officials, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens, this research uncovers rampant corrupt practices that sustain themselves in the form of nepotism, bribery, and tender manipulation. The findings point to large effects on transparency, accountability, and citizen participation, which consequences eventually decrease public trust in local institutions. The study calls for more robust anti-corruption measures and policy reforms geared toward enhancing governance to restore people's confidence.

Keywords: Corruption, Local Government, Democratic Principles, Citizen Trust, Sri Lanka

1 Introduction

Background and Significance of the Study

One of the major pervasive problems eroding democratic principles and weakening citizen trust in most developing countries, including Sri Lanka, is corruption within the institutions of local government. According to Samaratunge & Pillay (2011), the bureaucratic culture of Sri Lanka has contributed to corrupt practices to a considerable extent due to its centralized and authoritative culture, which also happens to be inflexible in structure. It is in the form of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement in words and actions consequently affecting public services delivery and quality of governance (Abeyagoonasekera, 2023). This research will explore how such corruption has influenced the local government culture of Sri Lanka, especially that which has weakened democratic principles and enforcement by undermining faith among its citizens in the system.

Problem Statement

Distorted forms of public policy and governance will result from corruption in local government (Benito et al., 2015). Principally, core democratic values of transparency, accountability, and citizen participation can potentially be affected adversely (Aranha, 2017). Indeed, deep-rooted corruption inside the structures of local governance has been singled out as one of the main obstacles to the effectiveness of administration and delivery of services not just in Sri Lanka but more pervasively (Ramesh & Vinayagathan, 2023). Thus, this study examines how institutional-level corruption within local government impacts democratic functioning and citizen trust.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To identify the various forms of corruption prevalent in local government institutions in Sri Lanka.
2. To analyze the impact of corruption on democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.
3. To examine the effect of corruption on citizens' trust in local government institutions.
4. To provide recommendations for policy reforms aimed at mitigating corruption and enhancing democratic governance in local government.

Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the common forms of corruption in local government institutions in Sri Lanka?
2. How does corruption affect the transparency and accountability of local government operations?
3. In what ways does corruption undermine citizen participation in local governance?
4. How does corruption influence citizens' trust in local government institutions?
5. What policy measures can be implemented to reduce corruption and strengthen democratic governance in local government?

Significance of the Study

In essence, what underpins the understanding of corruption's impact on local government culture is the fact that it primarily exemplifies situations where democratic principles are challenged at the local government level. It lays empirical evidence on how corruption erodes the citizenry's trust necessary for devising effective anti-corruption strategies. The findings may provide advice and point the way toward reforms that may be necessary to increase the level of transparency, accountability, and participation of citizens in local governance to policymakers and other stakeholders. In a broad sense, this research would like to contribute to the existing literature on governance

and development in Sri Lanka by the inferences that can shape local government institutions stronger and democratic.

Structure of the Paper

Organizing this paper, there are laid out six significant blocks. Apart from the introduction, there is also a review of the literature that will provide an overview of available studies on corruption issues in local government; effects on the democratic principles; and the specific context being Sri Lanka. The methodology section will identify how this paper will be designed, including which participants will be selected to study, what means of data collection will be employed, and the

methods of data analysis. The data section will present the outcome of those structured interviews, underlining emergent key themes and patterns. Discussion will be conducted in accordance with the existing body of literature and to discuss their implications for policy and practice. Conclusions drawn will, however, be indicative in summarizing the main facts established, contributions made to the field, and future research recommendations.

2 Literature Review

Overview of Corruption in Local Government

Corruption in local governments becomes a moderate malaise that seriously disturbs proper governance and development (Aranha, 2017). Manifested in various ways, it included bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, and fraud. These corrupt practices compromise the integrity of local governments and reduce public trust in them (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2009). It has been considered through most of the literature that corruption at the local government level is due to weak institutional frameworks, lack of accountability, and inadequate enforcement of anti-corruption laws in Baniamin & Jamil (2018).

Local government corruption in Sri Lanka is equated with practices emanating from rooted, pervasive, and endemic situations. The administrative culture of the Sri Lankan state is indicative of a heavily centralized authority and hierarchical organizational structures with minimal space for transparency and accountability (Samaratunge & Pillay, 2011). According to Transparency International (2023), corruption at the local level has huge consequences for proper public service provision and in effect community development.

Impact of Corruption on Democratic Principles

More so, the direct threat that corruption poses to democratic principles includes transparency, accountability, and citizen participation (Okunola et al., 2019). It is in that vein that transparency features as the basic tenet of how a government shall carry itself out operations so that the public officials can operate in the best interest of the people they serve. Corruption has a way of undercutting the prevailing transparency by pushing for secrecy and the manipulation of information (Kolstad & Wiig, 2016).

Another basic democratic principle compromised by corruption is accountability. According to Kaufmann (2004), public officials who are corrupt will still undertake their practices since the enforcement mechanisms are weak and there is no oversight at the individual and collective level. This breeds a culture of malpractice since it is a no-accounting affair.

In the same way, corruption negatively affects citizen participation. In a corruption-built system, most citizens are excluded from processes, and their voices are quite minoritized. This diminishes not only the democratic process but reduces public trust in government institutions altogether (Hendryadi et al., 2019). The devastating impact of corruption on local governance in Sri Lanka was considerably made more widespread because effective citizen participation channels were lacking prior to that fact (Jaunky et al., 2020).

Citizen trust towards governmental institutions forms the most basic foundation for democratic governance. Trust emanates through considering that governmental officials exercise integrity around those they serve and also on being accountable to the public (Rothstein, 2017). Such trust can easily be rubbed off by corrupt practices, which break the people-public officers' relationship to the people-whom they should serve.

According to Transparency International, the Global Corruption Barometer reports that 40% of Sri Lankans believe local government officials are corrupt (Transparency International, 2023). In consequence, this brought about a lowering of citizen trust in local government. Governance consequently suffers from a decrease in citizen engagement and participation in public affairs.

Trust in the government is also affected with how the use of public services is perceived to be free of favoritism and corruption. Perceives patronage and service distribution based on bribery lower trust in the system by the citizens (Hendryadi et al., 2019). Such kind of situation has never been probabilistic as in Sri Lanka where inconsistent local government corruption has cond because of non-uniform population access to public services or resources (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2023).

The Context of Corruption in Sri Lanka

The sociopolitical background of Sri Lanka is very conducive to corruption taking place. It has a history of centralized authority and a hierarchy of government which lacks transparency and accountability (Lindberg & Orjuela, 2011). Political instability along with frequent changes in government has also helped breed corruption, where each new government that assumes power lacks the continuity and commitment that are necessary to impose effective anti-corruption measures.

Patron-client relations make for the highest influencer in corruption trends in Sri Lanka in the current day world. These relations establish a system of personalism and patronage, giving way to priorities of merit and abilities over connections and loyalty individually and more lead toward wide nepotism and favoritism (Perera-Mubarak, 2012). This culture undermines the rule of law and promotes corrupt practices from the lowest to highest levels of government.

Besides, weaknesses in the legal and institutional mechanisms for fighting against corruption exacerbate the situation. Although institutions against corruption have been created, they are mainly "quasi-dead" due to political interference, on the one hand, and to a lack of resources, on the other hand (Haque & Kneller, 2008). Since enforcement actions are not stringent and abated through external influences, corrupt practices have gone undetected to a larger extent of germinating corruption in grass-roots local government bodies (Samaratunge & Pillay, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The guide in designing the theoretical framework for this study is based on the principles of good governance and institutional theory. Principles of good governance call for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in government operations, core principles that ensure public officials work to serve the best interest of the citizens (Kolstad & Wiig, 2016).

Institutional theory provides clear insight into how organizational structures and processes bear upon behavior within the institutions of government (Scott, 2008). The formal and informal rules of the institution, as institutional theory has it, control actions taken by members of the institution. In Sri Lanka's local government context, institutional theory explains how both deeply entrenched patron-client relationships and hierarchical structures contribute toward corruption.

Institutional theory argues that corruption in local government results from institutional weaknesses and failures of formal rules and regulations (Scott, 2008). Absence of accountability mechanisms and dominance of norms that emphasize personal networks at the expense of merit are very conducive to corrupt practices. Attention to these weak institutional practices becomes

very important with respect to reducing corruption and ensuring good governance in local government.

3 Research Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study attempts to take a critical look at the implications of corruption on local government culture in Sri Lanka. A qualitative research approach is appropriate for a study that seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding regarding the perceptions and attitudes of participants toward corruption and its effect on democratic governance and citizen trust (Bryman, 2016). This qualitative approach will quite easily facilitate the gathering of copious rich, in-depth data that can enable nuanced insights into the complex nature of corruption within institutions of local government.

Selection of Study Area and Participants

More focused attention is on a few local government authorities in Sri Lanka at the levels of urban councils, municipal councils, and pradeshiya sabhas. These areas were so selected because of their wide socio-economic and

administrative contexts, which give fairly representative views of corruption dynamics at the level of local government. In the selection of study areas, regions that had varying degrees of corruption based on corruption reports by Transparency International have been considered.

In this way, the participants for the present research have been selected using purposive sampling so that those who participate are people with specific experiences or knowledge about the phenomenon under study. Samples included local government officials, elected representatives, and civil society activists amongst common citizens. A sample size of 30 was selected with an imposing balance maintained between the stakeholder groups, so there would be maximum variation within them. Guest et al. (2006) conducted interviews with 30 participants, which was judged to be the number that would result in data saturation, where no new themes or insights could be likely to come from additional interviews.

Data Collection Methods

Data were, primarily, collected through structured interviews, complimented by document analysis and field observations. The application in this study of structured interviews was made based on the argument that if used sensibly, it could provide uniformity and comparability of responses while collecting detailed qualitative data. The interview guide was, therefore, developed based on the review of literature and research questions, and tries to elicit participants' experiences with corruption, its impact on transparency and accountability, citizen participation in this regard, and general trust in local government as pointed out by Bryman, 2016.

Document analysis: Under this were reviewed reports, policy documents, records at the local government offices supporting and complementing data obtained from this source to the interviews. Field observations: During visits to local government offices and public meetings, one was able to gather further insights on the operational context and interactions of officials with citizens in relation to a particular phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2018).

Structured Interviews

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews would have allowed for probing the respondents further; moreover, one could also pick up nonverbal behaviors which go with certain responses in this mode (Brinkmann, 2013). Since every interview was approximately 45 minutes to one hour long, the process of interviewing was audio-recorded with the consent of participants in order to ensure accuracy regarding data that was to be collected. The questions in the interview referred to issues such as the extent and expressions of corruption, its consequences for transparency and accountability, the function of popular participation, and finally, the general trust shown toward institutions of local government.

Techniques of Data Analysis

Such an objective to identify patterns and themes within this qualitative data set therefore precipitated a thematic approach to data analysis. At the outset, all the audio recordings for the interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by multiple rounds of coding applied to the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This initial

coding entailed the identification of relevant segments of text associated with the research questions and subsequent focused coding for broader themes and sub-themes.

The software NVivo was used for data management and organization. Having organized the data, it became possible to work through a formal and systematic process of coding the data. The themes were further iteratively refined so that while doing analysis they would connect with the data underpinning them and explosively answer meaningfully in the context of research questions (Guest et al., 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are very much an undercurrent in this research work because investigation into corruption is still sensitive, and the revelations might have consequences for the participants. Informed consent was given by all participants, clearly informed of the purpose of the study and their participation in it, including the freedom to withdraw from the study without any consequence at any time. According to Orb et al., (2001) there should not be undue influence on the respondents to favor the favored responses of the researcher.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using codes on the participants rather than their actual names and by securing all data. Finally, risks for the participants would be reduced by conducting the interviews in safe, neutral locations and by making sure that participants are aware that their responses are purely for research purposes and won't be passed onto any third parties.

4 Findings

Overview of Interview Results

In-depth structured interviews with local government officials, elected representatives, and CSOs, as well as ordinary citizens in Sri Lanka, revealed extremely valuable insights on the corruption culture that has emerged within local government. Respondents indicated several types of corrupt practices, their effects on democratic principles, and the consequent erosion of trust by the citizen. Data obtained from such interviews were thematically analyzed, and a few themes and patterns emerged addressing the research questions of this study directly.

Themes and Patterns Identified

Three primary themes emerged from the interview data:

- 1. Corruption Practices and Their Prevalence**
- 2. Effects on Democratic Principles**
- 3. Impact on Citizen Trust**

Theme 1: Corruption Practices and Their Prevalence

Several practices that are very widespread dominate local government according to participants, pointing to generalized corruption in Sri Lanka. The most common forms of corruption identified by participants included

bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, fraud, favoritism, kickbacks, misuse of public funds, manipulation of tenders, illegal land sales, and conflicts of interest. These practices were scored for prevalence by participants, thus providing a quantitative measure.

Table 1: Prevalence of Different Corruption Practices in Local Government

Corruption Practice	Prevalence Score (1-10)
Bribery	8
Nepotism	9
Embezzlement	7
Fraud	6
Favoritism	8
Kickbacks	7
Misuse of Public Funds	8
Manipulation of Tenders	9
Illegal Land Sales	6
Conflict of Interest	7

The prevalence scores, based on participants' perceptions, indicate that nepotism and manipulation of the most common corrupt practices include tenders within local government. Deeply entrenched in the culture of administration, these practices are hard to challenge due to the fact that

enforcement mechanisms are often weak, and a culture of impunity exists. According to one respondent from civil society, "The manipulation of tenders is almost a norm here. Contracts are awarded based on connections rather than merit" (Civil society activist).

Besides, there is rampant bribery, especially at the point of procurement. According to a local government official in the procurement division, "Bribery is rampant, especially in procurement. Contractors know they have to pay if they want their bids to be considered." This has fostered a situation whereby people secure public projects and hand services through unscrupulous deals devoid of fairness and efficiency, hence resulting in substandard works.

Theme 2: Impacts on Democratic Principles

It has a profound impact on democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. Most of those who responded tended to say that corrupt practices erode transparency in government operations

because they promote secrecy and manipulation of information. This lack of transparency denies the citizens an opportunity to access the right kind of information regarding activities and decisions taken by the government. "Transparency is non-existent. Information is manipulated to cover up corrupt activities," said one respondent (Civil society activist).

Corruption also militates very strongly against accountability. Many participants noted that corrupt officials are seldom held accountable, due to the lack of oversight and enforcement measures taken against anti-corruption laws in force. This breeds a culture of impunity, as the corrupt practices become so ordinary and expected (Kaufmann, 2004). A local government auditor revealed, "We know about the corruption, but there's little we can do. The system protects those in power" (Local government auditor).

Therefore, corruption is the most significant hindrance to citizen participation in local governance. Most of those who participated in this study complained that they were being left out in the decision-making process, with their voices sidelined. Corruption promotes a movie of impediments to effectual citizen participation since public officers prefer meeting their selfish needs at the cost of the general public. "Our voices are ignored. Decisions are made behind closed doors with no regard for public input" Ordinary citizen.

Topic 3: Impacts on Citizen Trust

The corruption in the institutions of the local government adversely affects citizens' trust. From the interviews, it emerged that the way in which citizens trust local government is affected by perceptions about widespread corruption and favoritism. Many of those interviewed self-reported to believe that local government officials have a greater interest in personal enrichment than in serving the public good. One of the respondents replied, "I don't trust the local regional government. They are all corrupt and only care about how to line their own pockets." Ordinary citizen.

Moreover, the problem of mistrust is furthered by the perception of unfairness in the distribution of public services. Normally, it is based on favoritism and bribery rather than merit and need—the perception that finally ends up causing a loss of faith in the system and discouraging citizens' involvement in governance procedures. "Public services are a joke. Without connections or money, you get nothing" Ordinary citizen.

Case Studies/Examples from the Interviews Case Study 1: Manipulation of Tenders

One of the participants, a local contractor, explained how public tenders are rigged to favor some people or companies that are close to the government. He narrated how the tender for a road construction project was given to the mayor's relative's company, yet it was inexperienced in similar projects and had bid higher than other competing firms. This manipulation did not only result in inferior work but also stole the trust from other contractors and from the public. "It's frustrating to see contracts go to unqualified companies just because of their connections" (Local contractor).

Case Study 2: Nepotism in Employment

A civil society activist gave an example of how a local government office has persistently been employing relatives and friends of the elected people to the exclusion of qualified candidates. Nepotism resulted in inefficiency and poor service delivery because many of the people hired were unskilled and unqualified. It demeans qualified people, defeats the merit principle in public service, he said. They overlook the qualified candidates in favor of relatives and friends of officials. It's demoralizing. Civil society activist.

Case Study 3: Bribery for Basic Services

Many others narrated how they had to pay bribes for simple services like obtaining permits or registering property. One citizen testified that he paid a bribe so that his building permit would be expedited though all requirements were in order. It has been so normalized in practice that citizens feel no choice but to abide, hence further entrenching corruption in everyday interactions with local government. "I had to pay a bribe just to get my building permit approved. It's a regular thing now." Ordinary citizen.

Data Analysis and Scoring System

Guided by these observations, a scoring system was developed to quantify the extent and impacts of the various corruption practices. Other scoring variables that follow include frequency of occurrence, perceived severity, and impact on governance and citizens' trust.

Table 2: Scoring System for Corruption Practices

Corruption Practice	Frequency (1-10)	Severity (1-10)	Impact (1-10)	Total Score (out of 30)
Bribery	8	7	8	23
Nepotism	9	8	9	26
Embezzlement	7	7	7	21
Fraud	6	6	6	18
Favoritism	8	7	8	23
Kickbacks	7	7	7	21
Misuse of Public Funds	8	8	8	24
Manipulation of Tenders	9	9	9	27
Illegal Land Sales	6	6	6	18
Conflict of Interest	7	7	7	21

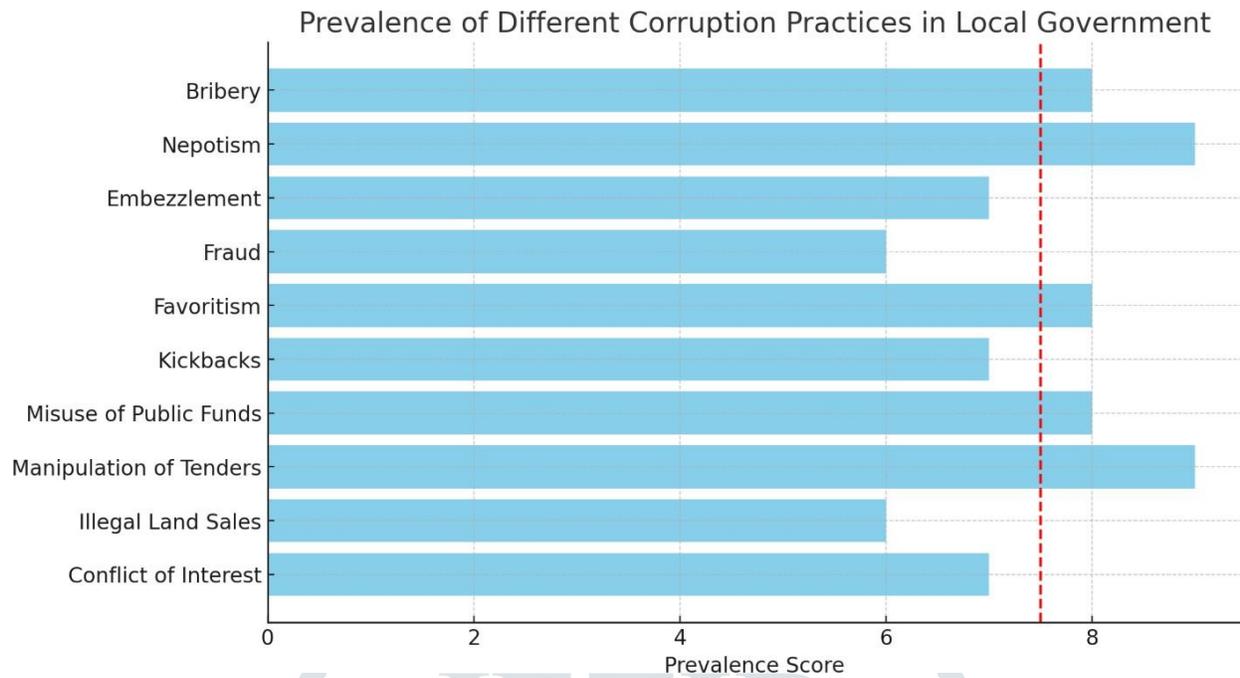


Figure 1 - Prevalence Of Different Corruption Practices In Local Government

Frequency, Severity, And Impact Of Corruption Practices

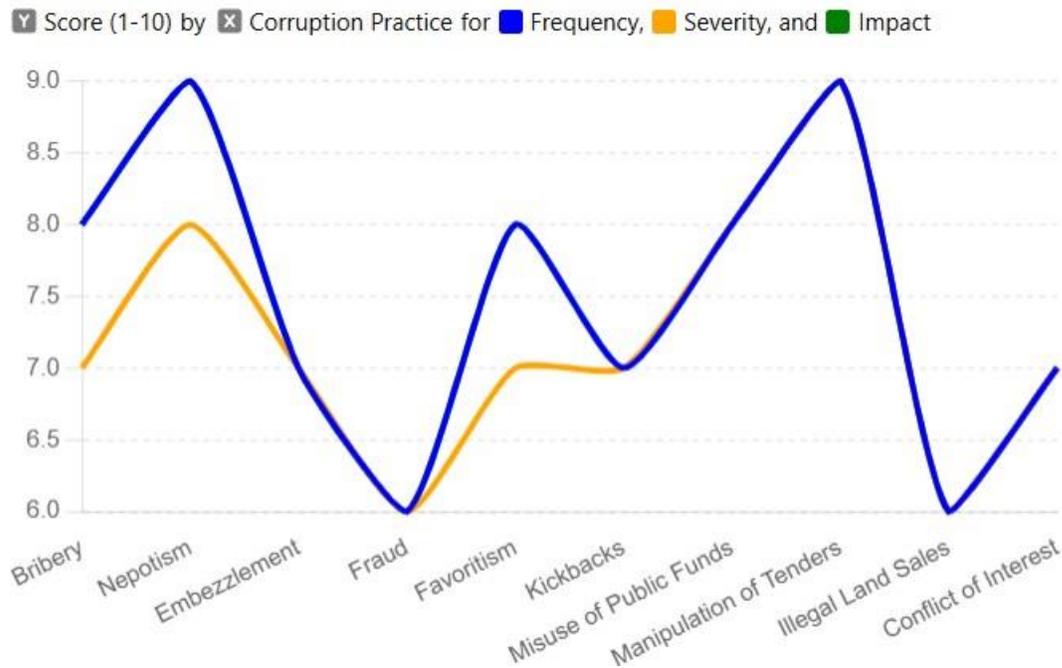


Figure 2 - Prevalence and Impact Scores of Corruption Practices

The scoring system provides an overview of the extent and impact of the most common types of corruption in local government. As can be derived from the above bar chart, manipulation of tenders, nepotism, and misuse of public funds ranked as the biggest problems given their sizeable prevalence, with a strong impact on democratic principles and citizens' trust.

Preliminary findings from the structured interviews and analysis thereafter paint a dangerous picture of corrupt practices that seem to have taken root in the local government institutions in Sri Lanka. In fact, different corrupt

practices annihilate democratic principles citizen trust and hamperefficient governance. This would involve a multi-pronged approach: institutional framework strengthening, improvement in transparency and accountability, and fostering a culture of integritywithin local government.

5 Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this research portray how corruption has trickled down into the local government institutions within Sri Lanka. The practices of bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, and tender manipulation were simply too high, hence testifying to a deeper systemic problem within the administrative culture. This supports previous research showing extensive coverage of corruptionin South Asian countries where informal norms override formal rules and regulations in conjunction with patron-client relationships, as postulated by Baniamin & Jamil (2018).

The high marks in terms of prevalence regarding nepotism and manipulation of tenders indicate that these activities are more firmly entrenched in local government operations. Regarding the indications from participants, these modes of corruption not only mean impaired integrity of the procurement cycle but also result in substandard project outputs as well as services to the public. This agrees with literature indicating how nepotism and favoritism stand as one of the major challenges towards attaining merit-based governance and efficiency in public service delivery.

The results of this study add more weight to existing literature staying the course of corruption ondemocratic principles and citizens' trust. It is a very dangerous involvement against transparency and accountability, in particular with regard to enhancing the culture of secrecy and impunity. Similar observations have been replicated in other studies suggesting that corruption is one such factor which really erodes public trust and hinders effective functioning toward democratic institutions (Aranha, 2017; Benito et al., 2015; Ferraz & Finan, 2007).

Of major concern, however, is the influence corruption has on citizen participation. Manyparticipants in this study complained about lack of involvement in decision-making by local government officials and unresponsiveness to their concerns. This is similar to findings from othercontexts; corruption has been shown to reduce the willingness of citizens to engage with any stateinstitution and participate in activities that are civic in nature (Zaloznaya et al., 2018).

A recurring negative impact of corruption mentioned in the literature is the erosion of public trust.Of course, all studies confirm that if citizens believe public servants to be corrupt, their trust in government will be low, and accordingly, so are civic engagement and obedience to public policies(Gong, 2006; Masters & Graycar, 2016). This work fares no differently: it states that with pressuring urgency, measures aimed at restoring confidence and integrity among citizens toward local government institutions should be re-engaged.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have major implications for policy and practice in addressing corruption within the institutions of local government in Sri Lanka. In the first instance, there is the need for strong anti-corruption frameworks that lay emphasis on transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. According to Samaratunge & Pillay, institutional mechanisms that monitor and enforce anti-corruption laws have to be strengthened in order to ensure that corrupt practices are curbed, and good governance enhanced.

Merit-based recruitment and procurement processes can considerably reduce the effects of nepotism and tender manipulation. One should ensure that the public officials are competitively selected based on qualifications and competence instead of acquaintances. This can enhance efficiency and effectiveness in the way local government operations are run (Masters & Graycar, 2016).

Notably, good cultural practices in institutions of local government have to be fostered. This may be attained through routine training and capacity-building for public officials on the requirement for ethical conduct and accountability. This approach encourages whistleblowing or protects whistleblowers in a bid to expose corruption and take appropriate action against such practices as ensured by Kaufmann in 2004.

Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding important insight into the impact of corruption on the culture of local government institutions in Sri Lanka, this research also has limitations by the facts. Being qualitative, the findings are majorly impressionistic, based on what participative respondents from sampled local government institutions have said; hence, subjective and not good for generalization.

Furthermore, the sample size of 30 participants, although sufficient for qualitative studies, may not include fully all the corruption practices carried out by various regions and categories of local government authorities. Future research with a higher and more representative sample size would give a much broader-angle perspective of understanding to the issue.

The study relies further on self-reported data, which is vulnerable to social desirability bias, whereby individuals underreport their engagement in or even knowing corrupt practices. Mixed methods could remarkably improve the reliability and validity of the findings by using quantitative questionnaires with objective measures of corruption.

6 Conclusion

The findings of this research confirm the pervasive nature of corruption in local government institutions, with practices such as nepotism, manipulation at tenders, and bribery topping the list. Such corrupt practices inflict heavy damage to democratic principles, erode citizens' trust, and affect effective governance.

The study contributes to the existing body of literature with empirical evidence on specific forms of corruption that exist within the local government structure of Sri Lanka and their consequence on democratic governance. It puts forward the need for tackling corruption in order to enhance transparency, accountability, and participation by citizens.

Future research should investigate precisely how corruption has affected the local government sectors of education and health; that will really give a better understanding of its effects. Longitudinal studies on changes in corruption practices and their impact over time would be valuable.

Curbing corruption at the local government level is one of the most important tasks for growth and sustainability in democratic governance in Sri Lanka. Through comprehensive anti-corruption policies and practices, building a culture of integrity, and strengthening citizen participation, this can be achieved. In this respect, Sri Lanka shall consolidate its local government institutions to function in a manner that serves public interest efficiently and effectively.

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