

The Master of the High Court (Master's Office) is a branch of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ&CD). It administers deceased estates, insolvent estates, trusts, curatorships and guardianships. There are 16 Master's Offices across South Africa, each headed by a Master of the High Court and all overseen by the Chief Master of the High Court. The DoJ&CD's Director-General (DG) serves as the accounting officer. Although the Master's Office does not have a separate voted budget and its expenditure is incorporated within departmental programmes and sub-programmes, it administers the significant fiduciary Guardian's Fund. As of March 2025, this Fund held assets valued at approximately R22.3bn.¹

Flag Status

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
								
Improper appointments	Co-opting key functions	Climate of fear or favour	Corrupt awards	Financial malpractice	Obstructing accountability	Manipulating perceptions	Private gain	Shadow network

ISS Analysis

- ACTis has raised three flags for the Master's Office.
- The suspensions of multiple senior officials and persistent acting appointments across key offices and leadership roles indicate weakened institutional stability and diminished authority and accountability. This can create vulnerabilities that make effective oversight and organisational resilience harder to sustain.
- Allegations suggest that patronage networks direct the contracting of preferred service providers, that officials who resist are intimidated, and that officials may engage in bribery schemes to accelerate services and bypass formal administrative processes. These allegations reinforce governance concerns and weaken oversight and institutional resilience against maladministration and corruption.
- Together, these indicators suggest an informal influence operating alongside formal institutional structures, and point to state capture-related risks.
- Investigations, suspensions, disciplinary measures and recommendations from



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

oversight bodies are attempting to address the situation, suggesting that accountability mechanisms remain active. However, this has not yet translated into noticeable reforms or institutional recovery.

- These risks carry significant practical consequences. Backlogs and delays in appointing executors, amending trust deeds and finalising insolvencies create financial hardship for those who depend on the timely administration of matters before the Master's

Office. Mismanagement and lost documentation undermine service delivery. Perceptions that bribes or intermediaries are required to expedite services erode public confidence in the institution's fairness and integrity, weaken trust in formal administrative processes and create unequal access to services.²

Findings

Flag #1

Improper Appointments



The flag is raised due to concerns about senior leadership conduct and multiple acting appointments in senior leadership.

- The Master's Office has been without a Chief Master since 2023. Several acting appointments have filled the position. The most recent is Kalayvani Pillay, appointed in April 2025 and still in the position as of July 2026. Former DoJ&CD DG, Doctor Mashabane, told the press in September 2024 that the position had been advertised in 2023, but no suitable candidates were found. The Department of Public Service and Administration requirements do not allow senior posts to be filled six months before an election, which was held in May 2024.³ The reasons for the continued delay are unclear, but in April 2025, DoJ&CD Minister Mmamoloko Kubayi said the delays were due to necessary internal coordination and communication.⁴
- A Special Investigating Unit (SIU) investigation into allegations of maladministration and any resulting losses or prejudice suffered by the State was completed in October 2021. In April 2024, 13 senior managers and officials in Master's Offices across South Africa were placed on precautionary suspension as a result.⁵
 - The investigation focused on several areas, including the alleged payment of salaries to fictitious employees, irregularities in the appointment of service providers, unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, particularly relating to travel, accommodation and subsistence costs for officials working at offices other than their designated place of employment, the appointment of officials in a manner that was contrary to applicable legislation and policies, and alleged irregular procurement practices and other forms of maladministration.⁶
 - Suspensions included some of the most senior positions, including the Master and



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

Assistant Master of the North Gauteng High Court (Pretoria); Master, Deputy Master and Assistant Master of the South Gauteng High Court (Johannesburg); Master and Deputy Master of the Free State High Court; and Master of the Limpopo Division of the High Court in Polokwane.

- Master of the North Gauteng High Court Penelope Roberts resigned, citing poor health, after disciplinary procedures began following her suspension in April 2024. Roberts was reportedly suspended after appointing a liquidator who had been removed from the Master's Office panel of approved liquidators.⁷
- The Johannesburg Attorneys' Association reportedly raised concerns about the extended acting appointments for the Masters of the High Court in Pretoria and Johannesburg. Beatrice van Wyk is acting Master of the Johannesburg office, and Nthabiseng Ntsoane is acting Master of the Pretoria office. They appear to have been acting since the suspensions in April 2024.⁸ The DoJ&CD reported in February 2026 that the Master's Offices in Bloemfontein, Mahikeng and Mbombela were also led by acting Masters. By July 2026, no further information was available on permanent appointments.

Flag #3

Climate of Fear or Favour



The flag is raised because a pattern of threatening officials who are not compliant with schemes involving corruption and maladministration exists.

- In 2024, allegations emerged that officials who attempted to prevent the irregular appointment of liquidators in the Master's Offices faced intimidation. The allegations were linked to claims that senior officials were appointing preferred liquidators to large estates and companies as part of a patronage network within the Master's Offices (see Flag #4: Corrupt Awards).⁹ Officials working in the Master's Offices have also reportedly been pressured by liquidators to reinstate suspended officials, whom they call their 'comrades'.¹⁰

Flag #4

Corrupt Awards



The flag is raised because certain liquidators have been repeatedly appointed irregularly.

- In 2024, reports surfaced of allegations that senior Master's Office officials, from across the country, had irregularly appointed preferred liquidators for cases involving large estates or companies, dating back to 2018.¹¹
- The allegations identified 18 liquidators who reportedly created a patronage system that involved bribing officials and manipulating the system so fees were allocated to



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

large estates. Many of these liquidators did not meet Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) and other appointment requirements.

- The allegations of patronage were reportedly supported by a forensic report submitted to the Master's Office in 2018, which found that several liquidators were appointed despite lacking qualifications and B-BBEE status, and that senior officials received kickbacks in exchange for the appointments.¹²
- The allegations regarding the irregularly appointed liquidators also formed part of the SIU's investigations, which were completed in 2021 and resulted in the suspension of 13 senior officials (see Flag #1: Improper Appointments).
- A 2018/19 report by the Public Protector found that a liquidator had been improperly appointed in one high-value case. The Public Protector recommended that the DoJ&CD and the Master's Office improve their policies on appointing and removing liquidators.¹³ It is unknown whether these changes were implemented.¹⁴
- In February 2026, allegations surfaced that officials in the Johannesburg Master's Office were receiving bribes through an informal 'runner' system to fast-track services for those 'willing to pay'.¹⁵



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

Recommended Actions

	DUTY BEARER	ACTION(S)	ASSOCIATED FLAGS
1.	Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (Director-General)	- Finalise recruitment processes for permanent appointments to Chief Master and other long-standing acting positions. - Publish progress reports on disciplinary processes and filling of vacancies to strengthen accountability and institutional stability. - Implement recommendations arising from the SIU investigation and publicly report on implementation progress. - Strengthen confidential reporting and whistleblower support mechanisms for officials reporting intimidation, threats or misconduct. - Investigate allegations of retaliation against employees raising concerns about maladministration or corruption in the Master's Offices and implement measures to protect them. - Ensure full implementation of the Public Protector's recommendations regarding liquidator appointments and supervision, as well as other appointment criteria issues. - Investigate allegations relating to bribery and informal payment systems within Master's Offices.	Flag #1: Improper Appointments Flag #3: Climate of Fear or Favour Flag #4: Corrupt Awards
2.	Department of Public Service and Administration	- Conduct a review of all acting appointments and succession planning arrangements within Master's Offices and investigate why there is such a high number of acting positions. - Provide an action plan, with reporting goals, for Master's Offices to permanently fill acting positions.	Flag #1: Improper Appointments
3.	Chief Master of the High Court	Commission an independent review of liquidator appointment practices across all Master's Offices to determine if any systems of patronage or favouritism	Flag #1: Improper Appointments Flag #4: Corrupt Awards



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

		have developed, resulting in irregular appointments. • Publish standardised appointment criteria (as per the Public Protector’s recommendations) and strengthen oversight mechanisms to ensure compliance with policy and legislative requirements. • Accelerate digitisation and service-tracking initiatives that reduce opportunities for discretionary intervention in administrative processes.	
4.	Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation	• Investigate allegations of bribery, fraud, intimidation or threats directed at officials where credible evidence exists.	Flag #4: Corrupt Awards



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

The 9 Flags

Flag #1

Improper Appointments

Improper appointments, dismissals or failure to remove individuals in senior positions may be used to drive a corrupt agenda.

Flag #4

Corrupt Awards

Contracts, licences, partnerships, loans and/or investments may be awarded irregularly and repeatedly benefit the same actors.

Flag #7

Manipulating Perceptions

A public narrative that frames misconduct as innocence may be promoted.

Flag #2

Co-opting Key Functions

Informal control may be established over critical functions within the institution to abuse them.

Flag #5

Financial Malpractice

The institution's financial management practices may be abused to advance a corrupt agenda.

Flag #8

Private Gain

Illicit gains may be distributed to benefit the same actors.

Flag #3

Climate of Fear or Favour

The working culture favours loyalty over duty; alignment with a corrupt agenda is rewarded, and resistance is punished.

Flag #6

Obstructing Accountability

The institution's internal operations might be deliberately obscured to hide potential misconduct.

Flag #9

Shadow Network

The same public and private actors may collude to gain control over an institution's assets and functions, benefiting repeatedly.

About ACTis

What is ACTis?

The Anti-Corruption Tracker Information System is an initiative of the Anti-Corruption and Accountability Project at the Institute for Security Studies. It provides analysis on corruption and state capture in South Africa, to inform early intervention and enforcement. It utilises a system of indicators and an AI-driven data-collection and analysis tool, validated by human experts. It identifies risks within individual government institutions and produces actionable recommendations to address them, with a view to disrupting patterns of state capture and corruption.

Findings are shared directly with government and other duty-bearers, civil society organisations, the media and the public, empowering authorities to intervene, strengthening accountability, and enabling citizens activism.

Links to ACTis Information:

Further project information may be found at the following links:

[Terms and Definitions](#)

[Project Methodology and Analytical Framework](#)

[About the Anti-Corruption and Accountability project](#)

[About the Institute for Security Studies](#)

Contact us:
actis@issafrica.org

Disclaimer: This report is produced in the public interest and is based on official public records and other reputable publicly available sources considered reliable at the time of publication. The ISS has taken reasonable care to verify the information presented. Any analysis or opinions expressed are based on the available information and do not constitute findings of criminal, civil or administrative liability.



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring

References

- ¹ DoJ&CD, Annual Report on Guardian Fund, 2025, https://static.pmg.org.za/Guardians_fund_Annual_Report_2025.pdf, p. 6.
- ² GroundUp, Johannesburg Master Office: allegations of corruption and incompetence, 17 February 2026, <https://groundup.org.za/article/johannesburg-masters-office-allegations-of-corruption-and-incompetence/>; Daily Maverick, 'Soul-crushing' Master's Office stuck in cycle of delays and dysfunction, 18 August 2026, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-08-18-soul-crushing-master-s-office-stuck-in-cycle-of-delays-and-dysfunction/>.
- ³ News24, Dealing with corruption at Master's Office not child's play, says Department of Justice DG, 12 September 2024, <https://www.news24.com/politics/dealing-with-corruption-at-masters-office-not-childs-play-says-department-of-justice-dg-20240912>; Moneyweb, Acting Chief Master speaks out about challenges facing Master's offices, 12 September 2025, <https://www.fisa.net.za/moneyweb-acting-chief-master-speaks-out-about-challenges-facing-the-masters-offices/>; DoJ&CD, Master of the High Court, <https://www.justice.gov.za/master/contacts.htm>; FISA, New Acting Chief Master appointed, 8 May 2025, <https://www.fisa.net.za/new-acting-chief-master-appointed-2/>.
- ⁴ MoneyWeb, Masters office left rudderless due to lack of masters, 11 April 2025, <https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/south-africa/masters-offices-left-rudderless-due-to-lack-of-masters/>.
- ⁵ DoJ&CD, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development places senior managers and other officials in the Masters Offices on Precautionary suspensions, 26 April 2024, https://www.justice.gov.za/m_statements/2024/20240426-MasterOffices.html; SIU, R7 of 2020 - Department of Justice and Constitutional Development in the Masters Office and the Office of the Chief Master, 28 October 2021, <https://www.siu.org.za/reports/r7-of-2020-dojcd-in-the-masters-office-and-the-office-of-the-chief-master/>.
- ⁶ DoJ&CD, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development places senior managers and other officials in the Masters Offices on Precautionary suspensions, 26 April 2024, https://www.justice.gov.za/m_statements/2024/20240426-MasterOffices.html; SIU, R7 of 2020 - Department of Justice and Constitutional Development in the Masters Office and the Office of the Chief Master, 28 October 2021, <https://www.siu.org.za/reports/r7-of-2020-dojcd-in-the-masters-office-and-the-office-of-the-chief-master/>.
- ⁷ News24, Dealing with corruption at Masters' Office is not 'child's play' says Department of Justice DG, 12 September 2026, <https://www.news24.com/politics/dealing-with-corruption-at-masters-office-not-childs-play-says-department-of-justice-dg-20240912>.
- ⁸ GroundUp, Johannesburg and Pretoria Masters offices still without permanent heads, 6 February 2026, <https://groundup.org.za/article/johannesburg-and-pretoria-masters-offices-still-without-permanent-heads/>.
- ⁹ City Press, Master's office captured by rogue agents described as an 'Afrikaner Broederbond', 28 July 2024, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/masters-office-captured-by-rogue-agents-20240728>.
- ¹⁰ News24, Worse than anyone thought: Masters office in turmoil as director general confronts corruption, 15 July 2026, <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/worse-than-anyone-thought-masters-office-in-turmoil-as-director-general-confronts-corruption-20240715>; City Press, Master's office captured by rogue agents described as an 'Afrikaner Broederbond', 28 July 2024, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/masters-office-captured-by-rogue-agents-20240728>.
- ¹¹ City Press, Master's office captured by rogue agents described as an 'Afrikaner Broederbond', 28 July 2024, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/masters-office-captured-by-rogue-agents-20240728>.
- ¹² City Press, Master's office captured by rogue agents described as an 'Afrikaner Broederbond', 28 July 2024, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/masters-office-captured-by-rogue-agents-20240728>.
- ¹³ Public Protector, Report on investigation into alleged maladministration by the master of the South Gauteng High Court, involving the irregular appointment of the provisional liquidator and subsequent failure to supervise the provisional liquidator resulting in prejudice to Mr Sipho Dube, 18 December 2018, https://www.pprotect.org/sites/default/files/legislation_report/Report%20on%20an%20investigation%20into%20alleged%20maladministration%20by%20the%20Master%20of%20South%20Gauteng%20High%20Court.pdf.
- ¹⁴ City Press, Master's office captured by rogue agents described as an 'Afrikaner Broederbond', 28 July 2024, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/masters-office-captured-by-rogue-agents-20240728>.
- ¹⁵ GroundUp, Johannesburg Master's Office: allegations of corruption and incompetence, 17 February 2026, <https://groundup.org.za/article/johannesburg-masters-office-allegations-of-corruption-and-incompetence/>.



Flag raised



Flag lowered



Under monitoring