

Book Review

The Shadow State: Why Babita Deokaran Had to Die

Jeff Wicks

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What occasioned me to purchase *The Shadow State: Why Babita Deokaran Had to Die*¹ was the phrase ‘shadow state’ in the title. The phrase was popularised by William Reno in his various publications on private militias, endemic corruption, and African strongmen in West Africa.² More specifically, a shadow state refers to –

[A] system of governance in which a form of parallel government is established by a coalition of domestic leaders, local intermediaries, and foreign companies, such that the formal apparatus of the state is not where real power lies. The shadow state is characterized by the presence of private armies, the corrupt distribution of state contracts, and the centrality of private personal networks’.³

Having taught modules on shadow states and what it portends for the future, I was horrified that such a phrase would be used to describe South Africa. After reading this riveting book by News24 investigative journalist Jeff Wicks, I cannot but agree with his conclusion that South Africa is a shadow state. Such a position is reinforced by scholars, such as Prof. Andre Duvenhage, who worryingly argues that South Africa has become a ‘mafia state’ where one cannot differentiate between criminal and political elites.⁴ It is precisely this nexus between organised crime syndicates and politicians that is explored by Jeff Wicks against the background of the murder of Babita Deokaran.

The book tells two interconnected stories. The first is the story of a hardworking single mother – Babita Deokaran. She was the chief accountant at the Gauteng Department of Health. Wicks provides a moving account of Deokaran’s life, her values, and her heroism in taking a principled stance against corruption. On 23 August 2021, Deokaran was brutally gunned down. Twelve bullets pierced her body shortly after she had dropped her daughter at school. In asking the question why she had to be killed, Wicks’ second story begins. What follows is a jaw-dropping exposé of corrupt officials, African National Congress (ANC) politicians and extraction syndicates, as they siphoned off billions meant for the most vulnerable patients seeking assistance from public hospitals in South Africa.⁵

The Gauteng Department of Health budget of R66 billion is the largest provincial department in South Africa.⁶ Little wonder, then, that it was the target of various criminal syndicates. Deokaran became especially suspicious of the procurement office at the Tembisa Provincial Tertiary Hospital, where the entire value chain of state procurement

had been captured. Following a deep dive into its purchases, she became aware that this single hospital was swallowing up the lion's share of the entire Gauteng Department of Health. Between April and July 2021, there were 2 454 individual transactions worth a staggering R843 266 937. What was especially suspicious was that all the contracts were valued just under R500 000, which necessitated securing only three quotes. Passing the R500 000 threshold, however, requires a more comprehensive tender process. On 3 August 2021, weeks before her death, Deokaran stopped contracts worth R104 million from being paid, and urged for an investigation into almost R1 billion already paid out.

She was well aware that “closing the taps” might well result in dire consequences. A week before her death, Deokaran sent an urgent WhatsApp message to her immediate superior, Lerato Madyo. At the time, Madyo was the chief financial officer of the Gauteng Department of Health. The message read, ‘Morning CFO, I am just worried that the guys in Tembisa are going to realise we are not releasing their payments and know that we are onto something. Our lives could be in danger.’⁷

Jeff Wicks’ painstaking investigation exposes the systemic abuse of public funds ‘and the networks of patronage linking civil servants – often abetted or coerced by their political principals drawn from the rank and file of the ANC’.⁸ These networks found their way into the highest office in the land.⁹ For instance, a R125 million tender was awarded to a company called Royal Bhaca Projects. Its sole director was Chief Madzikane II Thandisizwe Diko who was married to Khusela Diko, President Ramaphosa’s spokesperson. Meanwhile, cousins Hangwanei Morgan Maumela and Aluwani Maumela’s scores of companies managed to secure R35 965 699 in contracts. One third of the funds that Deokaran had stopped just before her death was destined for these companies. It subsequently became known that the Maumelas were family of President Ramaphosa.

The ability of the justice system to cope effectively with the threat posed by the country developing into a shadow state is seriously doubted. Wicks demonstrates how shoddy the Hawks’ investigation into Deokaran’s murder was.¹⁰ The investigating office did not pursue the paymaster who hired the six assassins. Moreover, the investigating officer also did not pursue valuable evidence when presented, and ordered the release of Khanyisani Mpungose, the alleged gunman. Mpungose was subsequently killed shortly after he was released. This begs the question of why these gross failures occurred in the investigation.

For this book, Wicks was both forensic investigator and investigative journalist – following the money trail from both the hitmen who assassinated Deokaran, and the money leaving Gauteng hospitals. While Wicks’ research was thorough and meticulous, there are shortcomings, since the broader strategic picture is left out. A brief perusal of many of Wicks’ sources shows that many of the sources were newspapers articles. The broader tapestry in which this systemic looting occurred would have been brought to the fore had the author also consulted with available literature on the subject. Books, such as those by Pieter Louis Myburgh, *The Republic of Gupta: A Story of State Capture*, as well as *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule’s Web of Capture*,¹¹ would have lent a comparative dimension to *The Shadow State* allowing Wicks to examine the trends in the looting of state coffers. Other books, such as *Shadow State: The Politics of State*

Capture by Chipkin and Swilling,¹² would have enriched the discussion in terms of the interface between organised crime syndicates and political class.

Wicks' account is a wake-up call for all South Africans, and exposes the shadow state in all its brutal ugliness. What is clear from Wicks' account, is that there never was a "new dawn" following the looting during the Zuma years. State capture never stopped – there were just "new pigs at the trough". In the years after apartheid, South Africa has morphed into a shadow or mafia state. *The Shadow State: Why Babita Deokaran Had to Die* turned out to be the best book I have read in years. I would highly recommend this book for policymakers, business leaders, academics and the general public concerned about the direction of the country.

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Endnotes

- ¹ J Wicks, *The Shadow State: Why Babita Deokaran Had to Die* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2025).
- ² W Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); W Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); W Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ³ N Cheeseman, E Bertrand & S Husaini, *A Dictionary of African Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- ⁴ *BusinessTech*, 'South Africa Now a Mafia State', 1 October 2025. <<https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/838762/south-africa-now-a-mafia-state>> [Accessed on 22 October 2025].
- ⁵ Wicks, *The Shadow State*, 47.
- ⁶ Gauteng Province Treasury, *Statement on the Expenditure of the Gauteng Provincial Government as at the End of the 2024/2025 Financial Year*, media statement, 12 May 2025, 3. <<https://cmbinary.gauteng.gov.za/Media?path=treasury/Documents/Media%20Alerts%20and%20Statements/Gauteng%20Treasury%20Statement%20on%20Gauteng%20Provincial%20Government%20expenditure%20for%202024-25%20financial%20year.pdf&Item=671&Type=Documents&Location=/treasury>> [Accessed on 10 November 2025].
- ⁷ Wicks, *The Shadow State*, 70.
- ⁸ Wicks, *The Shadow State*, 95.
- ⁹ Wicks, *The Shadow State*, 57.
- ¹⁰ Wicks, *The Shadow State*, 147.
- ¹¹ PL Myburgh, *The Republic of Gupta: A Story of State Capture* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2017); PL Myburgh, *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Mageshule's Web of Capture* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2019).
- ¹² I Chipkin & M Swilling, *Shadow State: The Politics of State Capture* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018).