

FILM REVIEW


Rehad Desai and Mark J. Kaplan, dirs. *How to Steal a Country*. 2019. 1 hour 33 minutes. English. South Africa. Uhuru Productions. Price not available.

For much of Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma's presidency, one of the critical public discourses in South Africa centered on state capture by the Gupta brothers, Ajay, Atul, and Rajesh (Tony) Gupta. The resulting political debates brought together citizens, political actors, commercial enterprises, media practitioners, judicial systems, and corporate entities. The interim measure was the 2018 creation of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector, including Organs of State (also known as the Zondo Commission or State Capture Commission). The commission was a public platform for discussing "state capture" headed by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. While the commission concluded its work in 2022, by that time it had outlived the Zuma presidency, who resigned amidst public outcry in 2018 after nine years in power. These events comprise the subject matter of Rehad Desai and Mark J. Kaplan's film *How to Steal a Country* (2019), whose narrative can be summed up as a conflict between public interest, private enterprise, and political processes in postapartheid South Africa. The term "state capture"—used broadly in media reportage of the Gupta's influence in South Africa—finds its way into the film, where Advocate Ngoako Ramatlhodi, a former Cabinet Minister, says of the presidency: "What he has done is to auction executive authority." This sets the agenda for the film, which generally thematizes the alleged control of state organs.

This film's most prominent narrative strand is that of the *media as an activist and public protector*. It starts with a scene where whistleblowers have presented a hard drive with confidential information about the Guptas to the press and human rights activists. After that, the film prioritizes offline media efforts, with some reference to online media and how they contribute to public information, mobilization, and, eventually, a legal inquiry process. These are entwined into the central narrative of politics, corruption, and public activism. Some of the significant images which characterize the Guptas within the film include their 2013 arrival into the country by landing in Waterkloof Air Force Base; their conspicuous material affluence, such as the wedding ceremony of their niece at Sun City; the aerial shots of their extensive Johannesburg residence; and their vast business enterprises within the country, especially their uranium and coal companies. The story of private entrepreneurship unfolds alongside political arrangements where the presidency is accused of colluding with the Guptas to loot the country's resources.

From a glance, the structure of *How to Steal a Country* actuates the well-known dramatic template, with inciting incidence (the curious arrival of the Guptas as state guests and their successful infiltration of the country's top political leadership), rising action (their increasing political influence and economic accumulation), climax (decisive public outcry leading to the Zondo Commission of Inquiry), and resolution (resignation of the president and commencement of judicial procedures concerning the alleged state capture). Yet, the film prioritizes the subject matter over the narrative.

The key highlights of the film's subject matter include the Guptas' economic deals: their strategic investment in the travel, energy, mining, media, and information technology sectors, some of which the film connects with their corrupt dealings with the state. The features of the political process in the film include the media interviews of President Zuma's son, Duduzane Zuma, over his involvement with the Guptas' business enterprises; the breakthroughs in investigative journalism and activist efforts to prove the political and economic "capture" of the nation; the sessions of the Zondo Commission of Inquiry where the then President Zuma testifies; the resignation of President Zuma from presidency; the effort to apprehend the Guptas, which does not succeed as they flee their home before the police arrive; and the reporting at the end of the film, through onscreen text, of the monies recovered from some of the companies involved in the Guptas' corrupt business practices. Through these narrative beats, the film takes the viewer through the private machinations of corrupt businesses, the public outcry over the ongoing ruination of the economy, and the political milieu within which these scenarios unfold.

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[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.156](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.156)