Rules Without will: Institutional, Political, Social, and Economic Determinants of Leadership Accountability in Kenya's County Governments

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Abstract
County governments in Kenya, established under the 2010 Constitution and operationalized through the County Governments Act, 2012, were designed to bring decision-making and public resources closer to citizens and to strengthen the accountability of local leadership. More than a decade into devolution, however, leadership accountability at the county level remains uneven: reports of resource mismanagement, weak oversight, and eroded public trust persist alongside pockets of genuine institutional progress, even though Kenya's formal rules for county accountability are, on paper, comparatively robust. This paper argues that the puzzle is not a shortage of rules but a shortage of will: formally strong institutions produce accountability only when political leadership is committed to enforcing and honoring them. It develops an integrated conceptual framework for understanding the determinants of leadership accountability in Kenya's county governments, synthesizing Agency, Stewardship, Institutional, and Stakeholder theories, situated within a critical realist epistemology, with the empirical governance literature on devolved administration in Kenya and comparable contexts. Four interacting clusters of determinants are identified and examined: institutional factors (legal-regulatory frameworks, oversight bodies, audit and disclosure regimes); political factors (political culture, leadership style, and political will); social factors (public participation, civil society engagement, and media scrutiny); and economic factors (resource allocation, financial management, and anti-corruption enforcement). Robust legal frameworks accomplish little without the political will to enforce them, and public participation is hollow without accessible information and a free press. Drawing on Kenyan and comparative evidence, the paper proposes a testable conceptual model, four interaction propositions, and a mixed-methods empirical research agenda for validating the framework across Kenya's 47 counties. It concludes with implications for policymakers, oversight institutions, and civil society actors seeking to strengthen devolved governance.

Keywords: Leadership Accountability; Devolution; County Governments; Kenya; Institutional Theory; Governance Determinants.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya in 2010 and the subsequent enactment of the County Government Act (2012), created 47 county governments and transferred substantial functions, resources, and political authority from the national government to subnational units (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; County Government Act, 2012). Devolution was conceived as a strategic corrective to decades of centralized rule, intended to decentralize resources and functions, bring service delivery and decision-making closer to citizens, deepen public participation in governance, and accelerate development at the grassroots level. Leadership accountability was positioned, implicitly and explicitly, as the mechanism through which these gains would be realized and sustained: county

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leaders were expected to be answerable for their decisions, transparent in the management of public resources, and responsive to the citizens they serve.

Leadership accountability, in this sense, is best understood as the combination of answerability—the obligation of leaders to explain and justify their decisions—and enforceability, the existence of mechanisms capable of imposing consequences when leaders fail to meet expected standards (Fox, 2007). It is inseparable from transparency, since scrutiny is impossible without visibility into government operations, and from ethical conduct, which sustains the legitimacy on which public trust depends. In Kenya's devolved system, the architecture of accountability includes legal and regulatory frameworks, oversight institutions such as county assemblies, the Office of the Auditor-General, and the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, mechanisms for public participation, and the scrutiny function performed by civil society organizations and the media.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite this progressive institutional architecture, county governments in Kenya continue to exhibit significant leadership accountability deficits. Reports from oversight and civil society bodies have repeatedly documented instances of financial mismanagement, weak internal controls, procurement irregularities, and limited responsiveness to public participation requirements (World Bank, 2019; Kenya, 2020). These failures are not attributable to the absence of formal rules; Kenya's legal and institutional framework for county accountability is, on paper, comparatively robust. Rather, the persistence of accountability failures suggests that formal institutional design interacts with political, social, and economic conditions in ways that either reinforce or undermine its intended effects (Barasa & Omariba, 2024; Mbui & Minja, 2023).

A further limitation in the existing literature is fragmentation. Much of the empirical scholarship on county governance in Kenya examines single determinants in isolation—leadership style and public participation (Njiiri et al., 2024), leadership and organizational performance (Paul et al., 2025), regulatory bodies and performance (Waikenda et al., 2019), or resource allocation and accountability (Ndungu, 2014)—without articulating how institutional, political, social, and economic determinants combine to produce, or fail to produce, accountable leadership. This paper addresses that gap by developing an integrated, theory-grounded conceptual framework that treats leadership accountability as the emergent outcome of interacting determinant clusters, rather than the additive sum of independent factors. Its central thesis, captured in the title, is that rules without will are inert: formal institutional design is a necessary but insufficient condition for accountability, and the missing ingredient in Kenya's devolved governance is most often political will rather than legal architecture.

1.3 Purpose and Contribution

This paper makes three contributions. First, it synthesizes four established organizational and governance theories—Agency, Stewardship, Institutional, and Stakeholder theories—into a single theoretical lens for analyzing leadership accountability in a devolved governance context, anchored in a critical realist epistemology that accommodates both structural constraint and human agency (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 2013; Sayer, 2000). Second, it develops an integrated conceptual model that identifies institutional, political, social, and economic determinants of leadership accountability and specifies plausible interaction effects among them, expressed as testable propositions. Third, it proposes a mixed-methods empirical research agenda for validating the framework across Kenya's 47 counties. Consistent with the conceptual nature of this contribution, the paper does not present new primary data; it is offered as a theoretical and policy-analytic synthesis intended to guide subsequent empirical investigation, including doctoral research on this subject.

1.4 Research Objectives

The paper is organized around five objectives: (i) to examine the influence of institutional factors on leadership accountability in Kenya's county governments; (ii) to examine the influence of political factors on leadership accountability; (iii) to examine the influence of social factors on leadership accountability; (iv) to examine the influence of economic factors on leadership accountability; and (v) to theorize how these four determinant clusters interact to produce the accountability outcomes observed in practice.

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2. Theoretical Foundations

Four complementary theories provide the analytical scaffolding for this paper. Each addresses a distinct dimension of the relationship between county leaders and the citizens, institutions, and resources they are entrusted with.

2.1 Agency Theory

Agency theory conceptualizes the relationship between citizens (principals) and government leaders (agents), focusing on the problems of information asymmetry, moral hazard, and adverse selection that arise whenever principals delegate authority to agents whose interests may diverge from their own (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Mitnick, 2007). Applied to county governance, agency theory explains why formal accountability mechanisms—audits, public disclosure requirements, and participatory oversight—are necessary: without them, county leaders (agents) have both the opportunity and, absent countervailing incentives, the motive to act in ways that serve personal or narrow political interests rather than the public interest of citizens (principals).

2.2 Stewardship Theory

Where agency theory assumes self-interested agents, stewardship theory offers a counterpoint, positing that leaders can be intrinsically motivated by duty, service, and organizational or collective success rather than purely by self-interest (Davis et al., 1997). This theory is analytically useful because it explains variation: some county leaders demonstrate high accountability even where formal enforcement is weak, suggesting that ethical leadership orientation—a political and cultural determinant—operates alongside and sometimes substitutes for formal institutional control.

2.3 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory examines how formal and informal rules, norms, and routines shape organizational behavior, and how organizations come to resemble one another through coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the Kenyan context, institutional theory illuminates how legal frameworks, oversight bodies, and administrative norms establish the formal architecture of accountability, while also cautioning that formal compliance (isomorphism) does not guarantee substantive accountability if enforcement and institutional culture are weak.

2.4 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory holds that organizations, including public institutions, should account to the full range of actors with a legitimate interest in their conduct—not only formal principals but also employees, civil society organizations, the media, and the broader citizenry (Freeman, 1984). This theory grounds the social determinants of accountability examined in this paper, particularly the roles of public participation, civil society engagement, and media scrutiny.

2.5 A Critical Realist Synthesis

These four theories are integrated within a critical realist epistemological stance, which recognizes an objective social reality (the structures, mechanisms, and institutions of county governance) that exists independently of any single actor's perception, while acknowledging that knowledge of this reality is mediated by social, cultural, and historical context (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 2013; Sayer, 2000). Critical realism distinguishes between the real (underlying generative mechanisms, such as legal frameworks and political incentive structures), the actual (events these mechanisms produce, such as an audit finding or a corruption scandal), and the empirical (what is observed and recorded). This stratified ontology supports the paper's central claim: leadership accountability is an emergent property generated by the interaction of institutional, political, social, and economic mechanisms, not a direct or linear function of any single one.

3. Conceptual Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations above, this paper conceptualizes leadership accountability in county governments as a dependent variable shaped by four independent but interacting determinant clusters: institutional factors, political factors, social factors, and economic factors. Table 1 summarizes the framework, which extends prior Kenyan county-governance frameworks (Barasa &

Omariba, 2024; Mbui & Minja, 2023) by explicitly modeling cross-cluster interaction rather than treating each determinant as independently and additively predictive.

Table 1: Determinant Clusters, Indicators, and Theoretical Grounding

Determinant Cluster	**Key Indicators**	**Primary Theoretical Grounding**
Institutional Factors	Legal and regulatory frameworks; oversight institutions; audits; access to information or disclosure	Institutional Theory; Agency Theory
Political Factors	Political culture; leadership style; political will	Stewardship Theory; Agency Theory
Social Factors	Public participation; civil society engagement; media scrutiny	Stakeholder Theory
Economic Factors	Resource allocation; financial management; anti-corruption enforcement	Agency Theory; Institutional Theory

Formally, the framework can be expressed as: Leadership Accountability = f(Institutional, Political, Social, Economic, and their interaction terms), where the interaction terms capture the reinforcing or offsetting relationships elaborated in Section 5. This specification distinguishes the framework from earlier determinant lists by treating accountability as a joint, non-additive product of structure (institutions), agency and will (political factors), voice (social factors), and resources (economic factors).

4. Determinants of Leadership Accountability: A Synthesis of the Literature

4.1 Institutional Determinants

Institutional determinants comprise the legal and regulatory frameworks, oversight bodies, and formal accountability instruments that structure county governance. Kenya's institutional architecture for accountability includes the Constitution (2010), the County Government Act (2012), the Public Finance Management Act (2012), county assemblies with legislative and oversight mandates, the Office of the Auditor-General, and the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. (Waikenda et al., 2019) found that the effectiveness of regulatory bodies is strongly associated with county government performance, but that implementation and enforcement gaps—rather than the design of the rules themselves—are the primary constraint on accountability outcomes. Similarly, (Oriku et al., 2020) demonstrated that accountability practices significantly moderate the relationship between county public service board functions and performance, underscoring that institutional mechanisms operate as conditioning variables rather than as accountability guarantees in themselves. (Amalia, 2023) further argues that public sector accounting and disclosure practices are central to accountability but require consistent enforcement to translate into genuine transparency. Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) helps explain a recurring pattern in this literature: counties often exhibit formal, isomorphic compliance with legal requirements—establishing audit committees, publishing budgets—without corresponding substantive accountability, because coercive pressure for formal compliance is stronger than the normative or enforcement pressure required for genuine behavioral change.

4.2 Political Determinants

Political determinants encompass political culture, leadership style, and political will—the extent to which county leadership is genuinely committed to accountable governance rather than merely compliant with its outward forms. Njiiri (2024) found that transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles had significant positive effects on public participation effectiveness in Kenyan county governance, while laissez-faire leadership had a significant negative effect, suggesting that leadership style is not incidental but a direct determinant of whether formal participatory mechanisms function as intended. Paul, Jemaiyo, and Eng'airo (2025) similarly found that strategic leadership—

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encompassing long-term vision, informed decision-making, and deliberate change management—significantly improves county government performance, including accountability-adjacent outcomes such as resource management efficiency. Barasa and Omariba (2024) documented how administrative and political interference constitutes one of the principal impediments to effective, accountable leadership in Kenyan counties, illustrating stewardship theory's proposition (Davis et al., 1997) that ethically oriented leadership can partially offset weak formal enforcement, while its absence can undermine even well-designed institutions.

4.3 Social Determinants

Social determinants concern the mechanisms through which citizens and civil society exercise voice: public participation, civil society engagement, and media scrutiny. Public participation is both a constitutional requirement and, according to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), a normative expectation that governance should be responsive to the full range of affected parties. (Srinivasan et al., 2019) demonstrated, through a pilot study using interactive radio in Siaya County, that structured public participation and social accountability mechanisms can meaningfully enhance citizen engagement and governance outcomes when they are genuinely accessible rather than merely procedural. This finding is consistent with the broader international literature: (Fung, 2015) and (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012) both find that participatory mechanisms such as citizen oversight committees and participatory budgeting improve governance outcomes primarily when they are backed by real decision-making influence rather than symbolic consultation. More recent Kenyan evidence corroborates this: (Wasike et al., 2024) found that the effectiveness of county communication approaches is a key determinant of whether public participation functions as intended under the County Government Act (2012), while (Ng'etich & Choge, 2025), examining Nandi County, found that weak civic education and limited awareness continue to depress citizen engagement in project identification and budget processes despite the existence of a legal participation mandate. Media and civil society scrutiny complement direct participation: (Fox, 2007) distinguishes between 'soft' accountability, which relies on answerability alone, and 'hard' accountability, which requires enforcement capacity typically supplied by an active press, independent civil society organizations, and, ultimately, sanctioning institutions.

4.4 Economic Determinants

Economic determinants comprise resource allocation, financial management practice, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures. Ndungu (2014), examining Kiambu County, found that resource allocation transparency and financial management practices are significant predictors of accountability outcomes, with weak financial controls directly associated with resource diversion. Mbui and Minja (2023), in a study of Embu County, linked governance practices—including financial oversight—to overall county government performance, reinforcing the proposition that economic determinants are not merely outcomes of accountability but also its enabling or constraining conditions. Cross-nationally, (Brunetti & Weder, 2002) provide robust evidence that press freedom—an economic-adjacent institutional condition affecting the cost of concealment—is associated with lower corruption, while Transparency International Kenya (2020) documents the persistence of corruption risk in Kenyan public financial management despite constitutional and legislative reform. Agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) is particularly salient here: financial mismanagement is a canonical agency problem, in which agents (county officials) with informational advantages over principals (citizens) can divert resources in the absence of credible monitoring, risk audits, procurement transparency, and participatory budget oversight mitigation.

5. Interactions and Feedback Loops: Toward an Integrated Model

The literature reviewed in Section 4 demonstrates that each determinant cluster has documented, independent associations with leadership accountability outcomes in Kenyan county governments. However, treating these clusters as independent and additive obscures a recurring empirical pattern: strong performance on one determinant frequently fails to translate into accountable governance when other determinants are weak. This paper advances four interaction propositions, offered as a basis for future empirical testing rather than as established findings.

Proposition 1 (Institutional–Political interaction, the "rules without will" proposition): The accountability-enhancing effect of institutional frameworks (legal rules, oversight bodies, audit regimes) is conditional on political will. Where political will is low, formally strong institutions produce largely symbolic, isomorphic compliance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) rather than substantive accountability—rules exist, but without the will to enforce them they do not translate into accountable leadership.

Proposition 2 (Social–Institutional interaction): Public participation and civil society scrutiny substitute, in part, for weak institutional enforcement by generating reputational and electoral costs for unaccountable leadership; however, this substitution effect requires a baseline of access to information that only institutional disclosure mechanisms can supply.

Proposition 3 (Economic–Institutional interaction): Financial management quality mediates the relationship between institutional oversight and accountability outcomes: audit and disclosure mechanisms detect financial mismanagement but do not, by themselves, present adequate financial management capacity and systems within county treasuries.

Proposition 4 (Political–Social interaction): Leadership style moderates the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms: participatory and transformational leadership styles amplify the accountability effects of public participation (Njiiri et al., 2024) laissez-faire styles suppress them even where participatory structures formally exist.
Taken together, these propositions suggest that leadership accountability in Kenya's county governments should be modeled and, in future empirical work, tested as a function of both the main effects of the four determinant clusters and their pairwise interaction effects, consistent with the critical realist premise that observable accountability outcomes (the empirical and the actual) are generated by underlying, interacting structural and agentic mechanisms (the real).

6. Policy and Practical Implications

The framework developed here carries several practical implications. For county governments, the analysis suggests that investment in any single determinant in isolation is unlikely to yield proportionate accountability gains; for instance, digitizing procurement or budget disclosure (an institutional intervention) will have limited effect without complementary investment in civic education that enables citizens to interpret and act on disclosed information (a social intervention). For national oversight bodies, including the Office of the Auditor-General, the Controller of Budget, and the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, the framework implies that enforcement consistency, rather than additional rule-making, is likely to be the higher-leverage intervention, since Kenya's institutional design is already comparatively comprehensive (Waikenda et al., 2019). For civil society organizations and the media, the analysis reinforces the importance of translating raw disclosure into accessible, locally relevant information, a function highlighted by Musungu Wasike et al. (2024) and consistent with Fox's (2007) distinction between soft and hard accountability. Finally, for national policymakers, the interaction-based framework suggests that accountability reforms should be sequenced and bundled—pairing legal reform with enforcement capacity-building, and public participation mandates with civic education—rather than pursued as isolated legislative interventions.

7. Toward Empirical Validation: A Mixed-Methods Research Agenda

This paper is conceptual in nature and does not present new primary data; its purpose is to establish a theoretically grounded and internally coherent framework capable of guiding subsequent empirical inquiry. Consistent with the critical realist stance adopted in Section 2, empirical validation of the framework and its interaction propositions should combine quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). A quantitative strand would employ a stratified random sample of county officials, civil society representatives, and citizens across a representative selection of Kenya's 47 counties, using structured Likert-scale instruments to measure perceptions of institutional, political, social, and economic determinants, with regression and moderation analysis used to test the interaction propositions advanced in Section 5 (Vaus & Vaus, 2013). A qualitative

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strand—semi-structured interviews with county officials and oversight-body representatives, alongside focus group discussions with citizens and civil society actors—would probe the contextual and experiential dimensions of accountability that quantitative measures alone cannot capture, consistent with the critical realist distinction between the empirical (what is measured) and the real (the underlying mechanisms that generate it). Triangulating these strands would allow future research to test not only the significance of individual determinants but the interaction effects that this paper argues are central to understanding why accountability outcomes vary so markedly across otherwise similarly structured county governments.

8. Limitations

Because this paper is a conceptual synthesis, its principal limitation is the absence of new primary empirical data; the propositions advanced in Section 5 are theoretically derived and require empirical testing before they can be treated as established findings. The framework also draws predominantly on studies of individual Kenyan counties, which, while valuable, may not generalize uniformly across the considerable institutional, economic, and political heterogeneity of Kenya's 47 counties. Finally, the four-cluster typology, while analytically useful, necessarily simplifies a more continuous and overlapping reality; for example, media scrutiny (classified here as social) also performs an institutional-adjacent enforcement function, and financial management capacity (classified as economic) is itself partly a product of institutional design.

9. Conclusion

More than a decade after the introduction of devolved governance, leadership accountability in Kenya's county governments remains an unresolved and consequential governance challenge. This paper has argued that the persistence of accountability deficits, despite a comparatively robust formal institutional framework, is best explained not by the failure of any single determinant but by the interaction—or lack thereof—among institutional, political, social, and economic determinants. The recurring pattern in the literature reviewed here is precisely the one signaled by this paper's title: Rules Without Will. Kenya's counties are not, in the main, short of legal frameworks, oversight bodies, or audit regimes; they are short of the political will, civic capacity, and financial management systems needed to make those rules operative. Grounded in Agency, Stewardship, Institutional, and Stakeholder theories, and situated within a critical realist epistemology, the integrated framework developed here reframes leadership accountability as an emergent property of a governance system rather than the additive outcome of independent variables. The four interaction propositions advanced in Section 5 offer a concrete, testable agenda for future empirical research. If validated, this framework would support a shift in accountability reform strategy in Kenya and comparable devolved systems—from the proliferation of formal rules toward the deliberate, sequenced strengthening of the will and capacity required to enforce them.

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