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## Batswana see civil liberties as largely intact, split on possible trade-offs for security

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 350 | Kabelo Moseki, Refilwe Sinkamba, Sonia Gaobolae, and Mogopodi H. Lekorwe**

### Summary

As Davis and Silver (2004) pointed out in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States, civil liberties ordinarily taken for granted in a democracy may be called into question when extraordinary events place them in conflict with other important values, such as security (see also Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell, & Tetlock, 1996). In a more recent example, citizens in several democracies have been contending with government restrictions on free movement and assembly prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Botswana, sub-Saharan Africa's longest-running multiparty democracy, has so far been spared such stress tests of its commitment to democratic ideals. But popular satisfaction with the way democracy is working has been declining steadily over the past decade, from 83% in 2008 to 57% in 2019. And media freedom was widely considered under attack during the Ian Khama presidency (2008-2018). Citing arrests of investigative journalists and a large-scale cyber-attack on a news website, the World Press Freedom Index demoted Botswana by eight places between 2013 and 2018 before moving it back up four spots to No. 44 in 2019, third in Africa after Ghana and South Africa (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

How do Batswana see their civil liberties? And how willing would they be to relinquish certain freedoms if their security were under threat?

According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, most Batswana feel free to speak, act, and vote, even though the proportions who say they are free to say what they think and join any political organization of their choice have declined over the past decade.

Most also see their news media as at least "somewhat" free, and support the media's role as a watchdog on government.

Batswana are more divided when it comes to possible trade-offs between civil liberties and security, with substantial proportions endorsing restrictions on free movement and religious speech to protect public safety.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Botswana, Star Awards Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Batswana in July-August 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3

percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Botswana in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

## Key findings

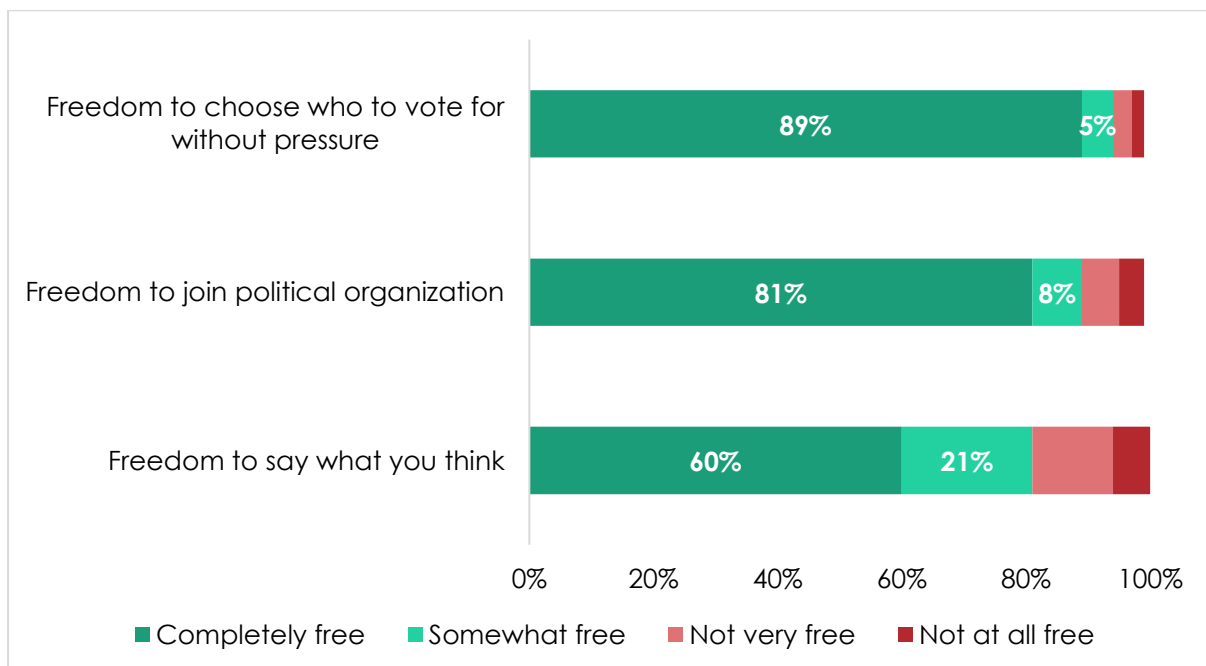
- Large majorities of Batswana say they feel “completely free” to say what they think (60%), join political organizations of their choice (81%), and cast their votes without pressure (89%). But perceptions of free expression and assembly have weakened over the past decade.
- A majority of citizens say that even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at will (52%) and to keep their personal communications private (64%). But substantial proportions of the population would give the government the right to restrict movement (46%) and monitor personal communication (33%) to protect public safety.
  - More than half (52%) of respondents say the government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship.
- A majority of Batswana say the news media should serve as a watchdog on government (72%) and should be free to operate without government interference (63%).

## Civic and political freedoms

By large majorities, Batswana see themselves as enjoying political freedoms (Figure 1). Six out of 10 citizens (60%) say they feel “completely free” to say what they think, in addition to 21% who feel “somewhat free.”

Even more feel “completely free” to join political organizations (81%) and to vote for the candidate of their choice (89%).

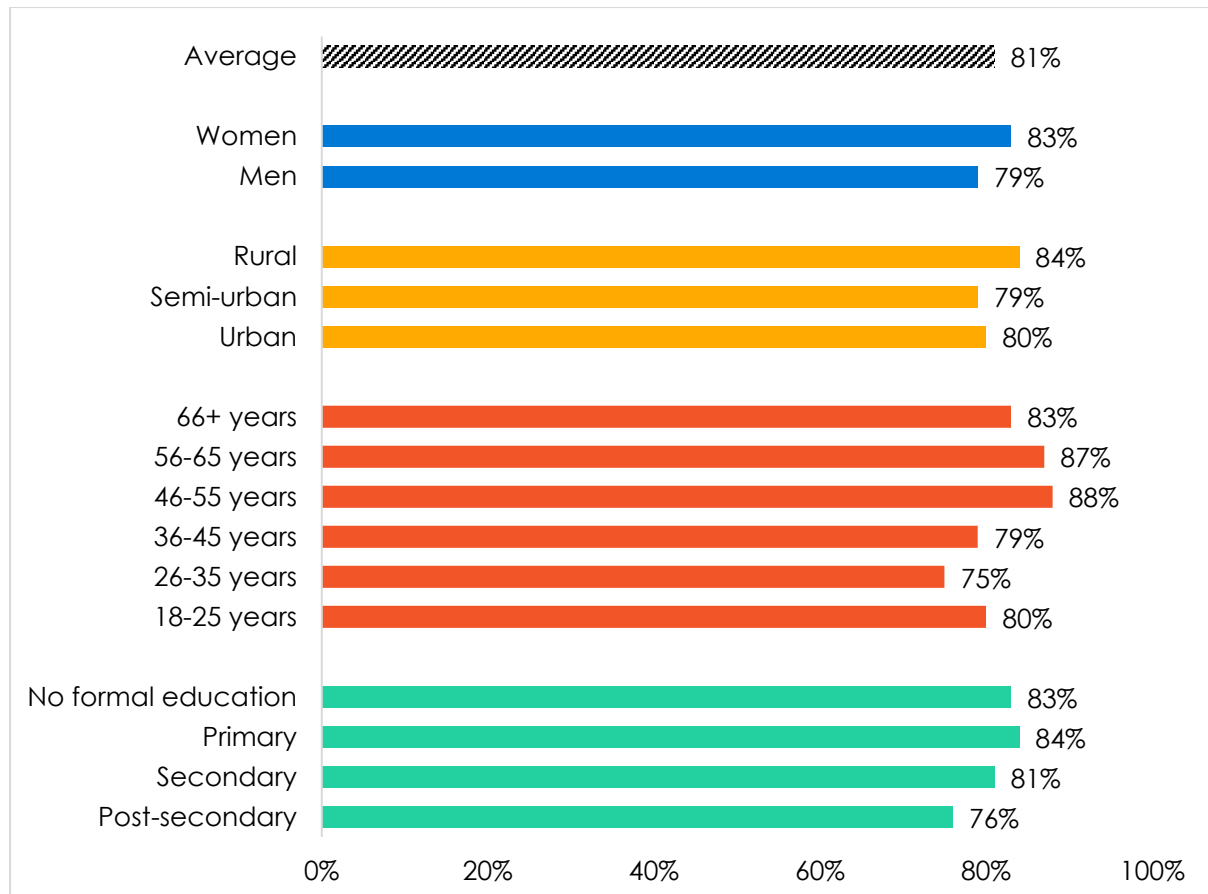
**Figure 1: Perception of civil liberties** | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organization you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?

While most Batswana, regardless of socio-demographic group, consider themselves “somewhat” or “completely” free to express their opinions, this perception is somewhat more common among women (83%) than men (79%) and among rural residents (84%) compared to their urban (80%) and semi-urban (79%) counterparts (Figure 2). Younger respondents tend to feel somewhat less free to speak their minds than their elders, as do the most educated respondents (76%) compared to respondents with less education.

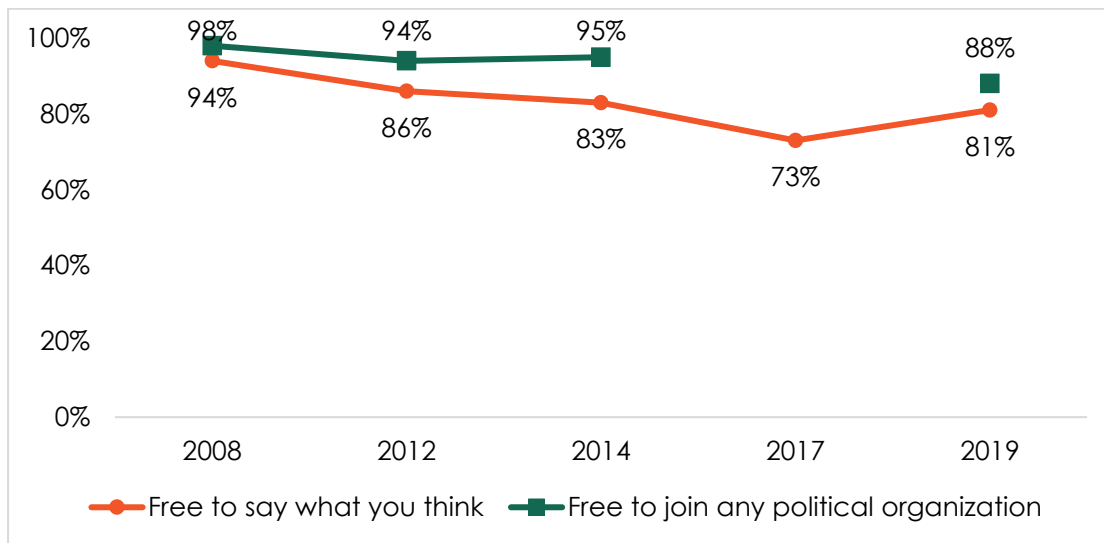
**Figure 2: Freedom to say what you think | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you to say what you think? (% who say “somewhat free” or “completely free”)*

Over the past decade, perceptions of freedoms have declined (Figure 3). The proportion of citizens who see themselves as somewhat/completely free to say what they think decreased from 94% in 2009 to 73% in 2017 before rebounding to the current level of 81%. Meanwhile, the share of respondents who say they feel free to join a political organization of their choice dropped by 10 percentage points over the same period.

**Figure 3: Freedom to say what you think and join political organizations | Botswana | 2009-2019**



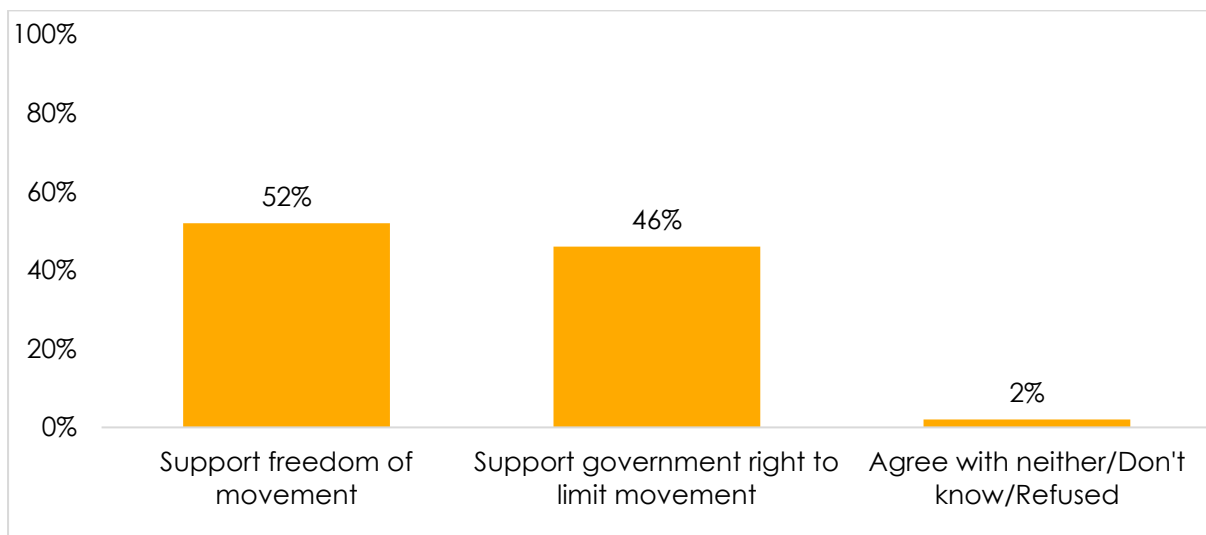
**Respondents were asked:** In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organization you want? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

### Freedom vs. government control

Substantial proportions of Botswana would be willing to give up some of their freedoms to help protect public safety.

While more than half (52%) of respondents say people should be free to move about the country even during threats to public security, almost as many (46%) say that under such circumstances the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Freedom of movement vs. restrictions during threat | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

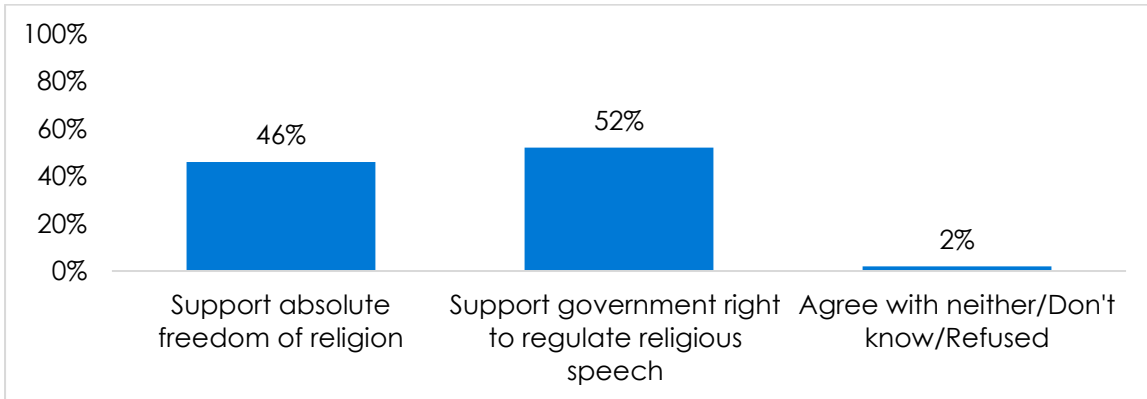
Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night.

Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent from moving around.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Similarly, they are divided on whether religious speech may be regulated, though here a majority favour giving government the power to impose restrictions (52%). Slightly fewer than half (46%) say freedom of religion should be absolute and the government should never be able to limit religious speech (Figure 5).

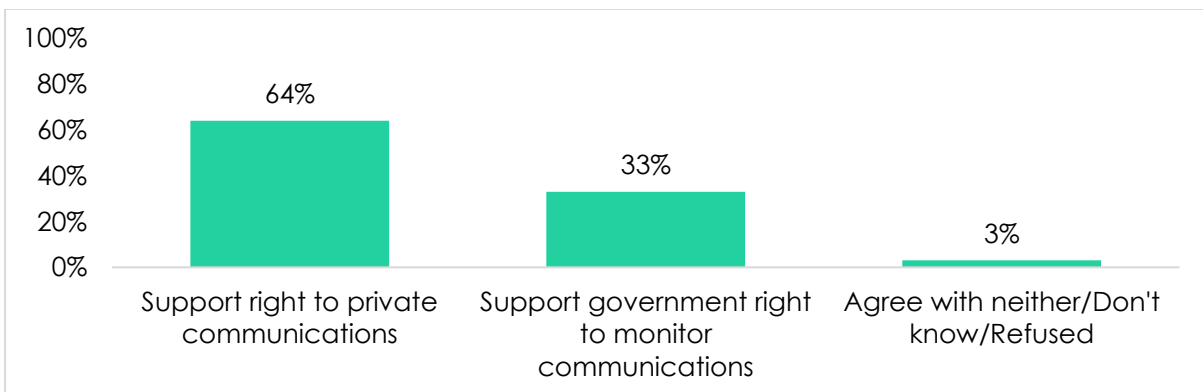
**Figure 5: Freedom of religion vs. government right to regulate religious speech**  
 | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.  
 Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Botswana are less willing to relinquish the privacy of their communications. By a 2-to-1 margin, they say people should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying (64%). Only about half as many (33%) believe that the government "should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence" (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Privacy of communication vs. government right to monitor** | Botswana  
 | 2019

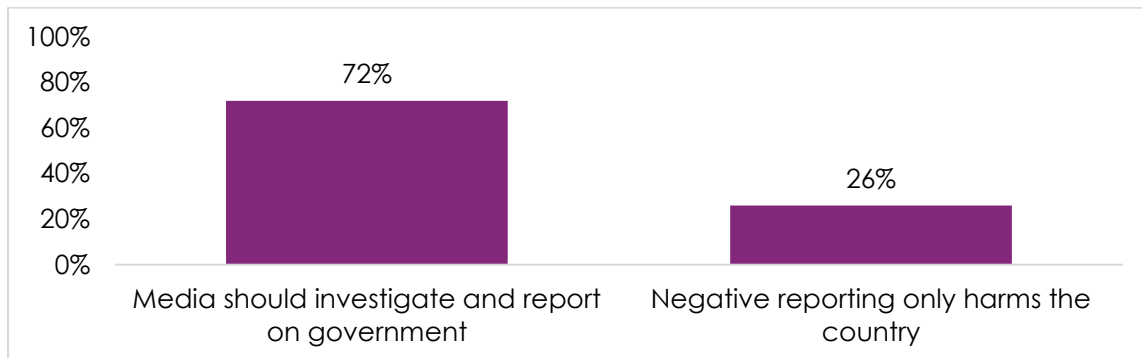


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence.  
 Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

## Media freedom

Batswana also value the freedom and watchdog role of the news media in their democratic society. Almost three-fourths (72%) of respondents “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the media “should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while only one-fourth (26%) instead say that “too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country” (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Support for media watchdog role | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

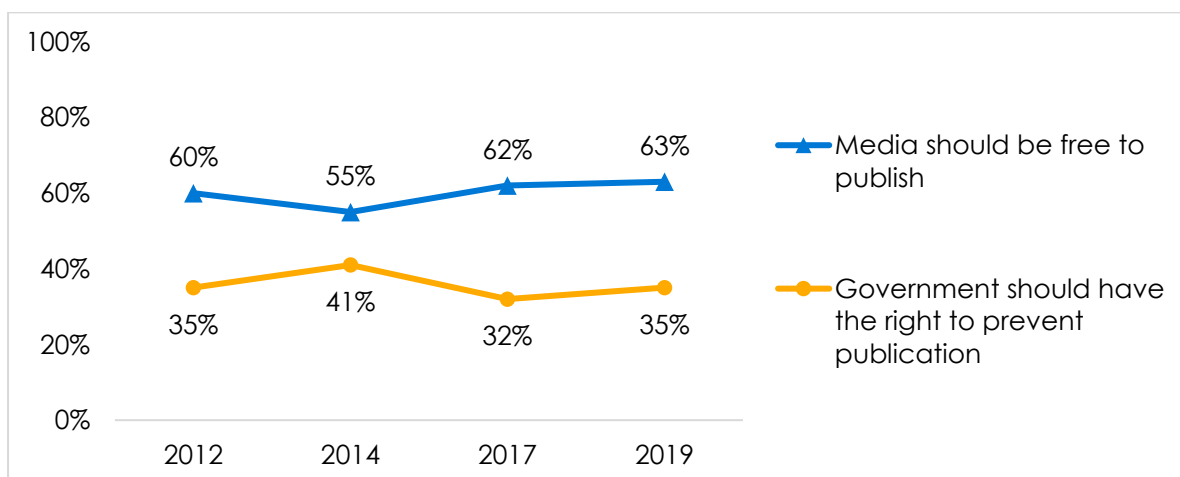
Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

By a nearly 2-to-1 margin, citizens also favour the media's freedom from government interference (63%) over the government's right to prevent publications it considers harmful to society (35%) (Figure 8). Support for media freedom has generally remained strong in Botswana even as it has declined elsewhere in Africa (Conroy-Krutz & Sanny, 2019).

**Figure 8: Support for media freedom | Botswana | 2016/2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

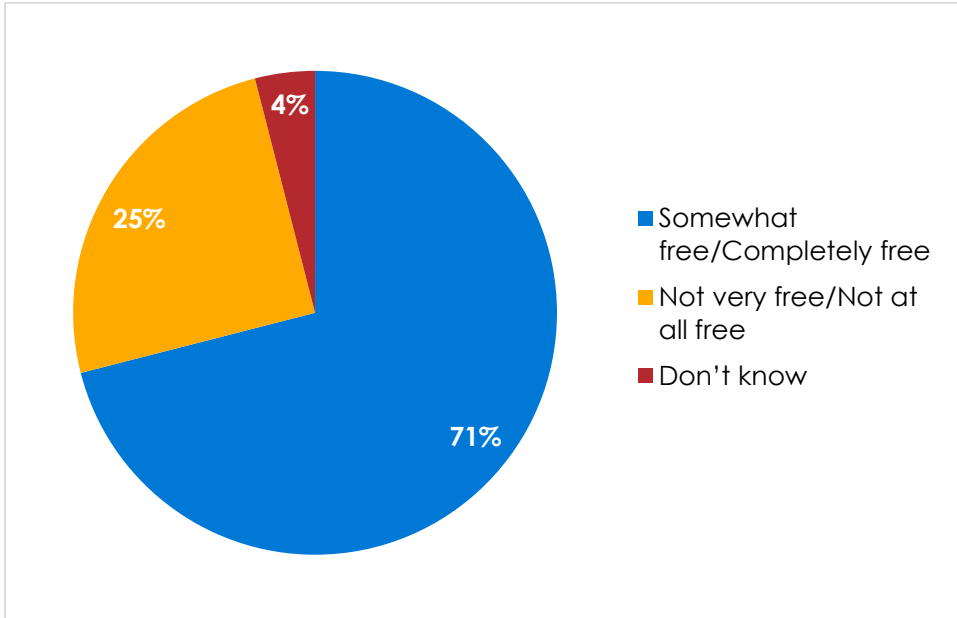
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

And in practice, most Botswana think their news media is indeed free to operate without government censorship or interference: Seven out of 10 respondents see it as “completely free” (50%) or “somewhat free” (21%), while one in four (25%) say it is “not at all free” or “not very free” (Figure 9).

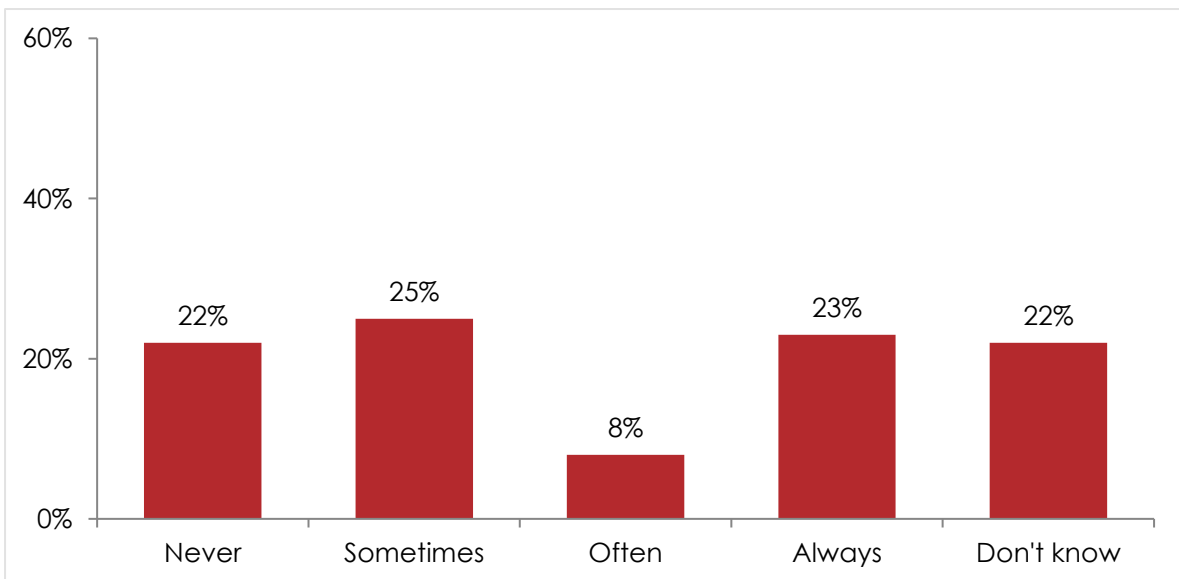
**Figure 9: How free is the media | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?

Even so, fewer than one in three respondents (31%) say the media “often” or “always” provided fair coverage to all candidates during the 2014 election campaign. Almost half say this “never” (22%) or only “sometimes” (25%) occurred (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Did media provide fair coverage in the 2014 election? | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** During the last national election campaign in 2014, how often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates?

## Conclusion

Most Batswana continue to feel free to say what they want, vote their preference, and join political organizations of their choice, although a modest downward trend in perceived freedom of speech and assembly suggests they aren't taking these civil liberties for granted.

A majority also see the news media as generally free, and popular support for a media that can report without government interference is stronger in Botswana than in most African countries.

When it comes to possible trade-offs between civil liberties and security, around half of Batswana would accept curfews and roadblocks to limit movement and government regulation of what is said in places of worship. But a majority would insist that personal communications remain free from government monitoring.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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