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In Nigeria, perceived corruption remains high despite praise for president's anti-graft fight

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 187 | Oluwole Ojewale and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye

Summary

Since Muhammadu Buhari became president in May 2015, Nigerians have witnessed a series of investigations into alleged corruption by past and present government officials, including high-profile cases involving the former minister of petroleum and a former national security adviser (Al Jazeera, 2017; Vanguard, 2016; Oyibode, 2017). Buhari's anti-corruption campaign has not spared members of his own government: The secretary to the Government of the Federation and the director of the Nigeria Intelligence Agency were sacked and are being investigated on corruption charges (Kazeem, 2017; Gramer, 2017). This seems a departure from the norm of anti-corruption campaigns that target only members of the opposition or former governments.

Several steps have been taken to embed anti-corruption safeguards into government frameworks and institutions. In 2016, the Nigerian government announced a whistleblower policy (Proshare, 2017) aimed at exposing corruption and fighting financial crimes. Nigeria also joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP) (Nigeria Bulletin, 2017) – a symbolic and significant step toward increased transparency and accountability. Continued involvement in OGP offers the government a mechanism for comparing its practices to international standards, a benchmark that can be an effective tool in holding the government accountable (Igbuzor, 2017).

Despite these efforts, which have earned Buhari recognition from the African Union as an anti-corruption champion, the nation still ranked 136th (out of 176 countries) on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2017) and continues to grapple with corruption scandals amid calls for fiscal transparency and accountability in governance.

Afrobarometer's latest survey in Nigeria indicates that public perceptions of the government's fight against corruption have improved dramatically. Perceived corruption in the public sector, however, remains high, with the police perceived as the most corrupt and least trusted by citizens. Although most Nigerians think they can make a difference in the fight against graft, many still fear retaliation should they report an incident of corruption.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 35 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer national partners in Nigeria, CLEEN Foundation and Practical Sampling International, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 26 April and 10 May 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Nigeria in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

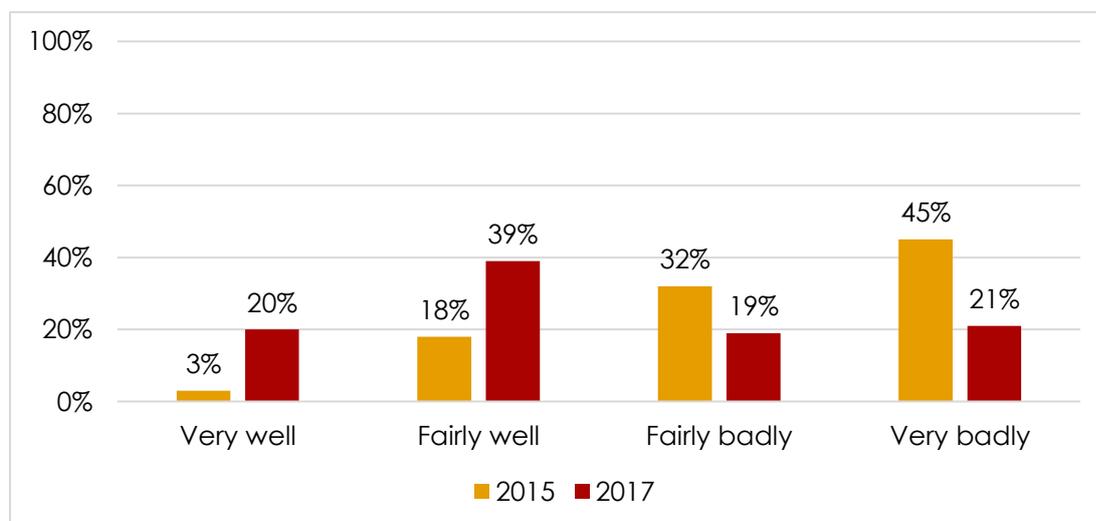
Key findings

- Six in 10 Nigerians (59%) say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” in fighting corruption – almost three times as many as gave a thumbs-up in 2015 (21%). However, Nigerians are evenly split (43% each) as to whether corruption has increased or decreased over the past year.
- Nine out of 10 Nigerians say at least “some” public officials are corrupt. The police are seen as most corrupt; 69% of citizens say “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt, followed by members of the National Assembly (60%) and local government councillors (55%). High perceptions of corruption are matched by high public mistrust.
- Among Nigerians who sought key state services last year, large proportions say they paid bribes to receive police assistance (68%), avoid problems with the police (44%), or get government documents (38%), water or sanitation services (34%), or medical care (20%).
- Even though a majority (54%) of citizens agree that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption, more than three-fourths (77%) fear retaliation should they report an incident of corruption.
- Large majorities believe it is “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that rich people can pay bribes or use personal connections to register land not owned by them (80%), avoid going to court (80%), and evade taxes (78%).

Nigerians praise government’s effort in handling corruption

Six in 10 Nigerians (59%) say the government is doing “fairly well” (39%) or “very well” (20%) in fighting corruption in the country (Figure 1). This presents a strong improvement from 2015, when only 21% approved of the government’s performance.

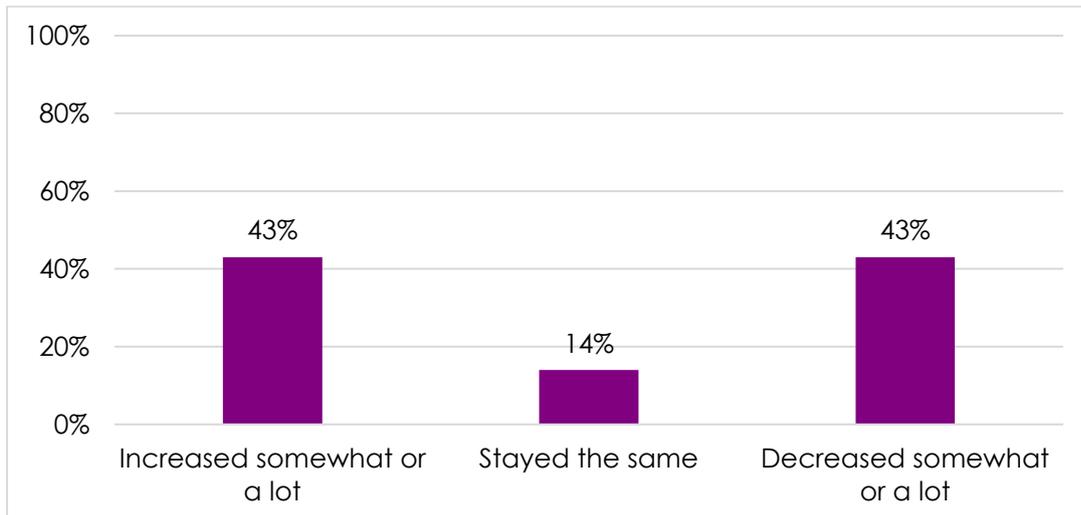
Figure 1: Government performance in fight against corruption | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

But Nigerians are evenly split (43% each) as to whether corruption in the country has increased or decreased over the past year (Figure 2). About one in seven Nigerians (14%) think the level of corruption in the country has stayed the same.

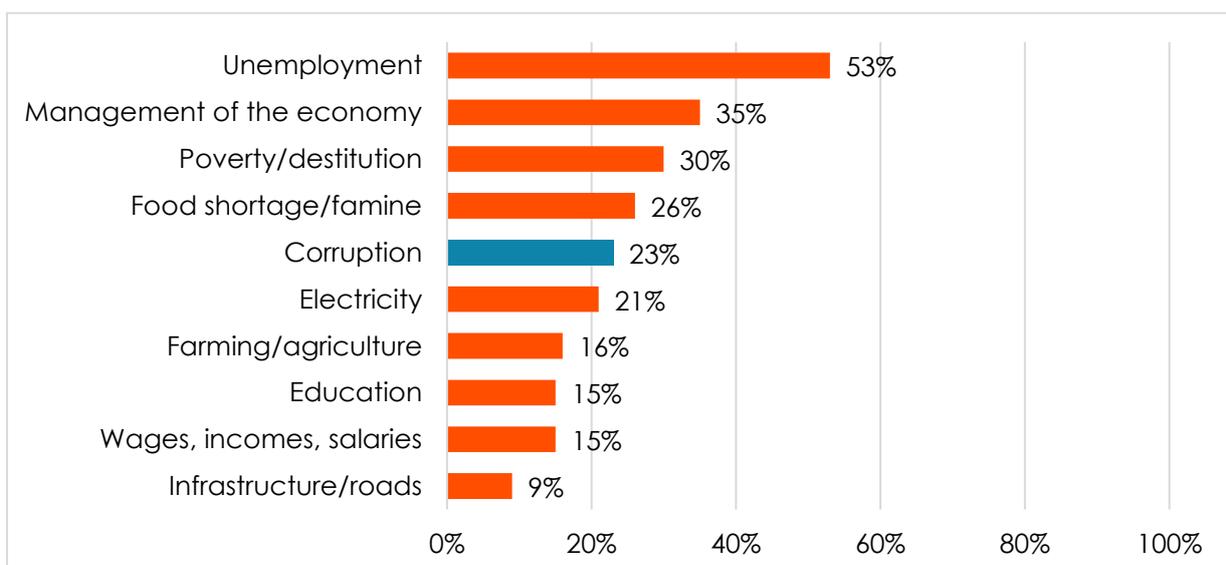
Figure 2: Level of corruption over the past year | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?*

When Nigerians are asked to cite the most important problems that government should address, corruption comes in at No. 5. About one-fourth (23%) of respondents mention corruption among their three priority problems – well behind unemployment (53%) and management of the economy (35%) but ahead of electricity (21%), agriculture (16%), and education (15%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Most important problems that government must address (top 10) | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents were allowed up to three responses. Figure shows % who cite each problem as one of their three responses.)*

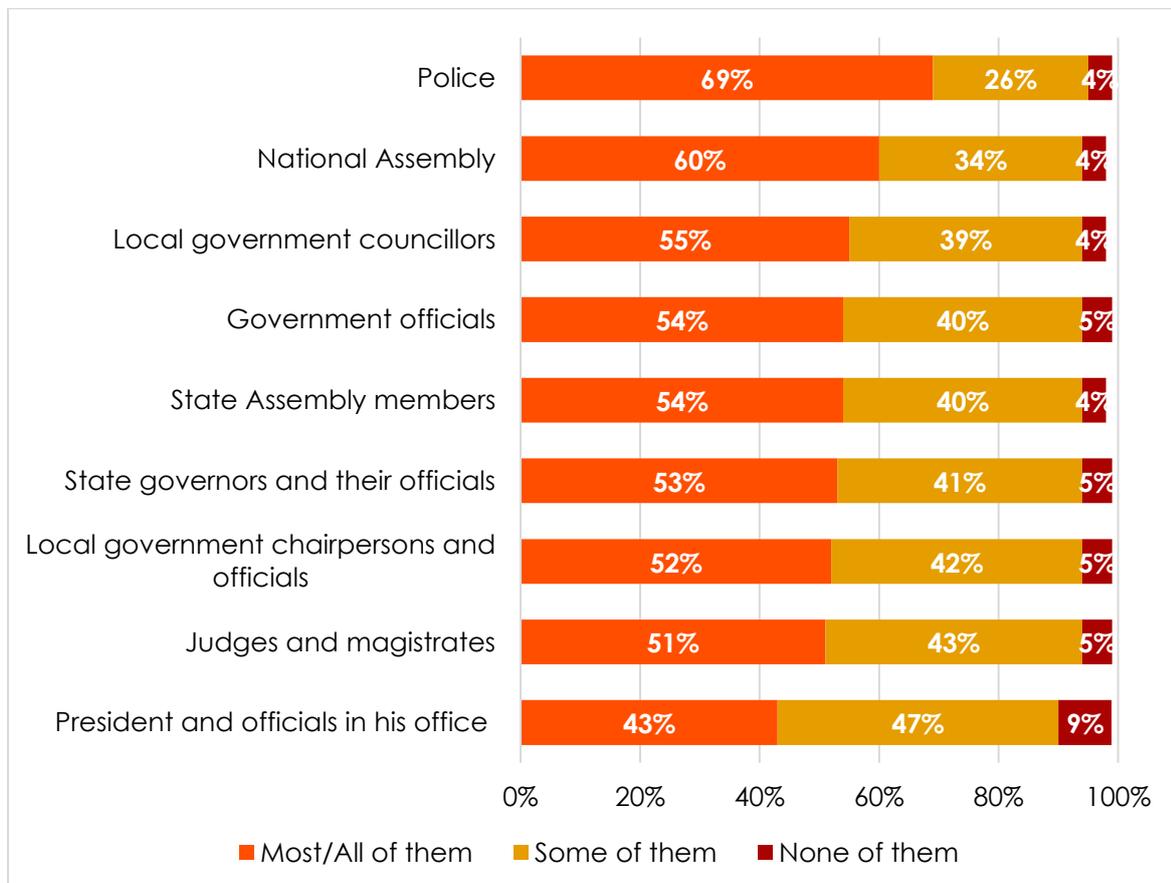
Who is corrupt?

Despite their positive rating of the government's fight against corruption, citizens' perceptions of corruption among public officials remain high. Nine out of 10 Nigerians say at least "some" public officials are corrupt, including majorities who see corruption among "most" or "all" officials in every public institution that the survey asked about except for the Presidency (Figure 4). The police are seen as most corrupt; 69% of citizens say "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt. Next in line are members of the National Assembly (60%) and local government councillors (55%). The Presidency is ranked as the least corrupt public institution: 43% of Nigerians think that "most" or "all" officials there are corrupt.

Perceptions of corruption among leaders in the private sector and non-state institutions are lower, though four in 10 citizens still see "most" or "all" business executives (44%) and non-governmental organizations (40%) as corrupt (Figure 5). Perceived corruption is lower among traditional leaders (35% "most" or "all") and religious leaders (20%), although at least eight in 10 respondents see at least "some" of these leaders as corrupt.

Survey data from Nigeria support the well-established link between popular perceptions of corruption and trust. The three institutions perceived to be most corrupt – police, the National Assembly, and local government councillors – are also those that the greatest number of Nigerians say they trust "not at all" or "just a little" (Figure 6). On the other hand, fewer respondents perceive religious and traditional leaders and the president as corrupt and as unworthy of their trust.

Figure 4: Perceived corruption among public officials | Nigeria | 2017



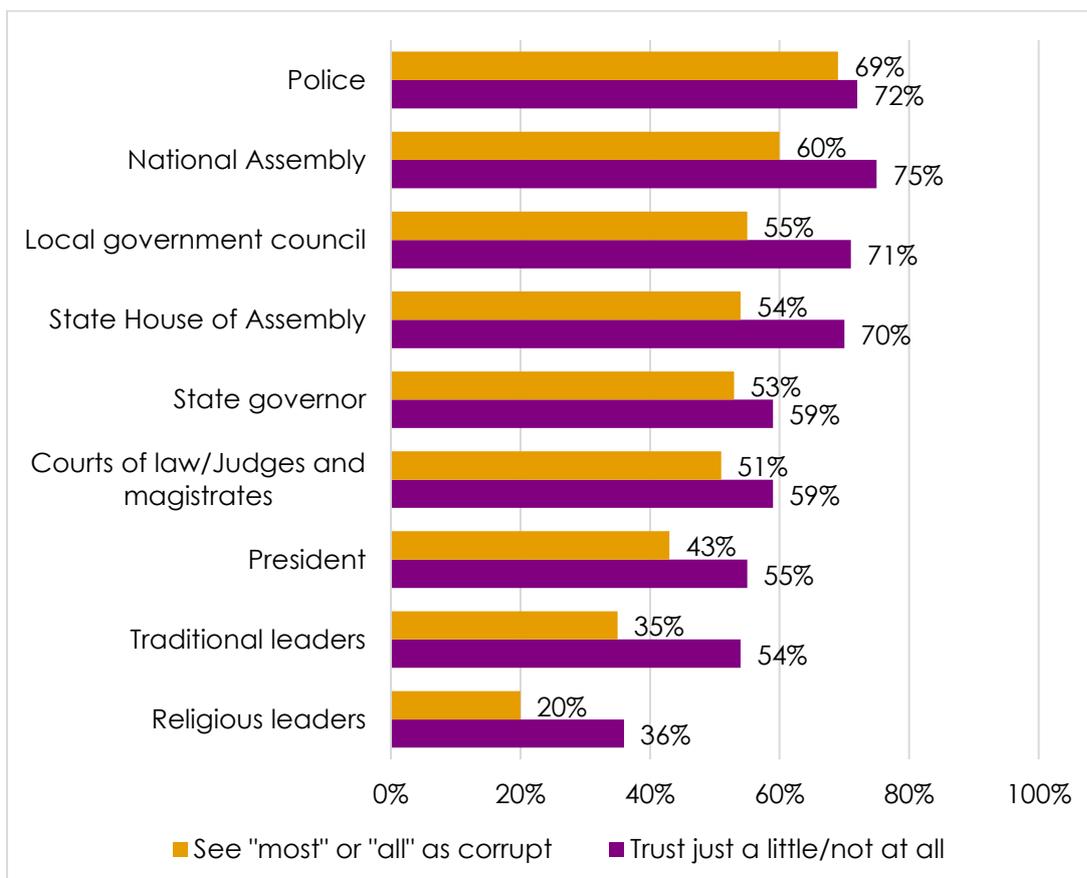
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 5: Perceived corruption among private-sector and non-state leaders | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 6: Corruption perceptions and mistrust of institutions | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked:

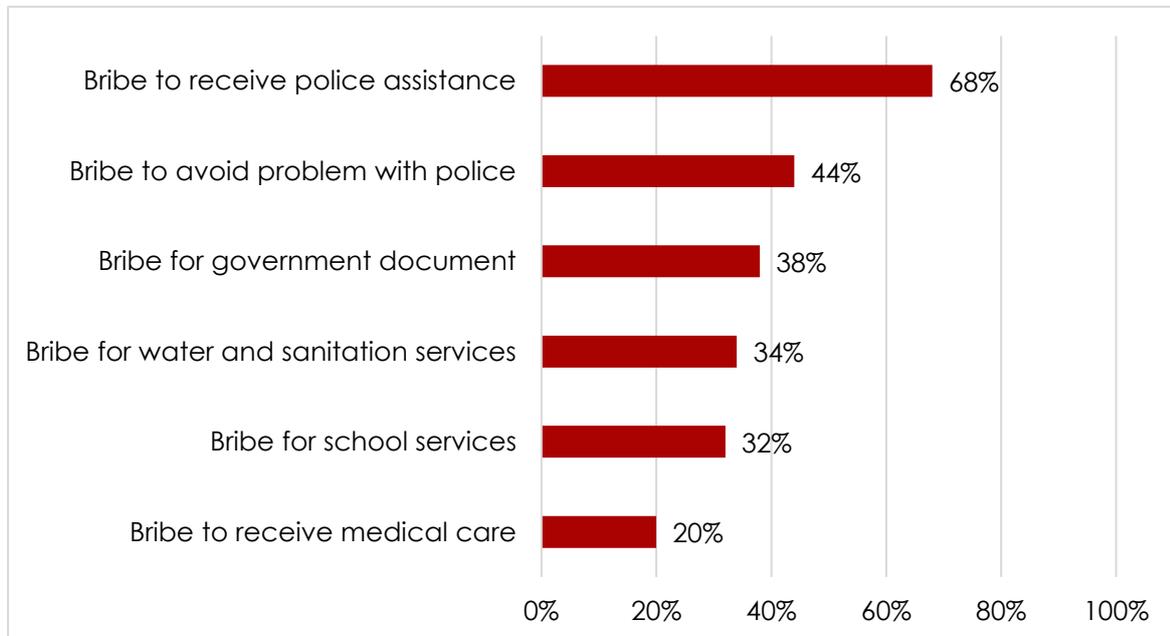
- How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?
- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Bribes for public service

The police also rank as the institution that citizens most frequently acknowledge bribing. Among respondents who requested assistance from the police during the previous year, more than two-thirds (68%) say they paid a bribe at least once to get the help they needed, while 44% who dealt with the police in other situations (e.g. at checkpoints, during traffic stops or an investigation, etc.) say they paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police (Figure 7). These findings align roughly with a study by the National Bureau of Statistics showing that among adult Nigerians who had contact with a police officer in the preceding 12 months, almost half (46%) bribed an officer at least once (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017).

The Afrobarometer survey found that among respondents who had contact with relevant public services during the previous year, about one in three paid a bribe at least once to obtain a government document (38%), water or sanitation services (34%), and school-related services (32%). About one in five (20%) say they paid a bribe to get medical care.

Figure 7: Paying a bribe to obtain government services | Nigeria | 2017



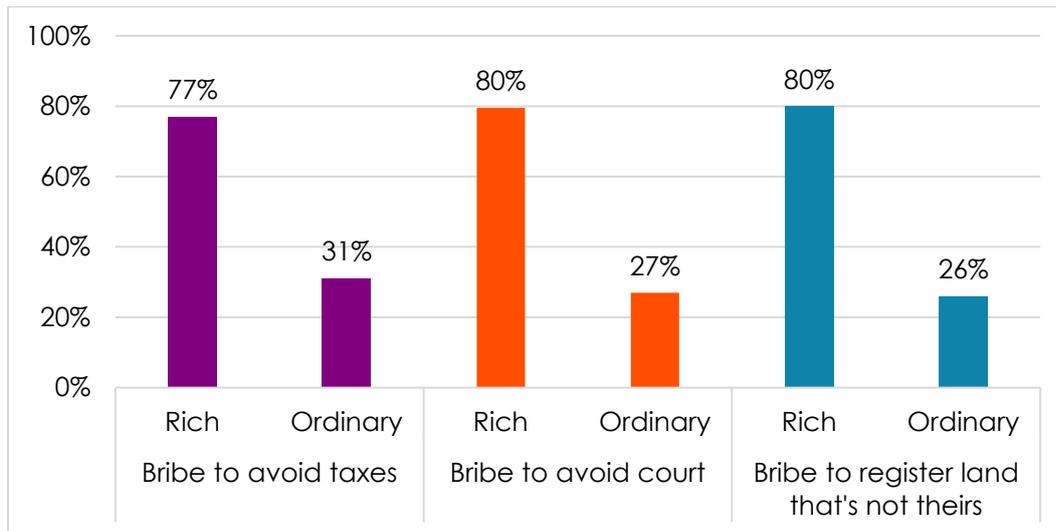
Respondents who said they had contact with selected public services during the previous year were asked: And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour:

- For a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?
- For a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?
- For a government official in order to get the document you needed?
- For a government official in order to get the services you needed?
- For a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?
- For a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

(% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often." Note: Figure excludes respondents who said they had no contact with these public services during the previous year.)

Nigerians also believe that the rich are far more likely than ordinary people to use bribery or personal connections to obtain desired results. Large majorities see it as "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that rich people could pay bribes or use their connections to register land not owned by them (80%), avoid going to court (80%), and evade taxes (78%) (Figure 8). In contrast, fewer than one-third of Nigerians say it is likely that ordinary people could do the same.

Figure 8: Bribery by the rich vs. ordinary people | Nigeria | 2017



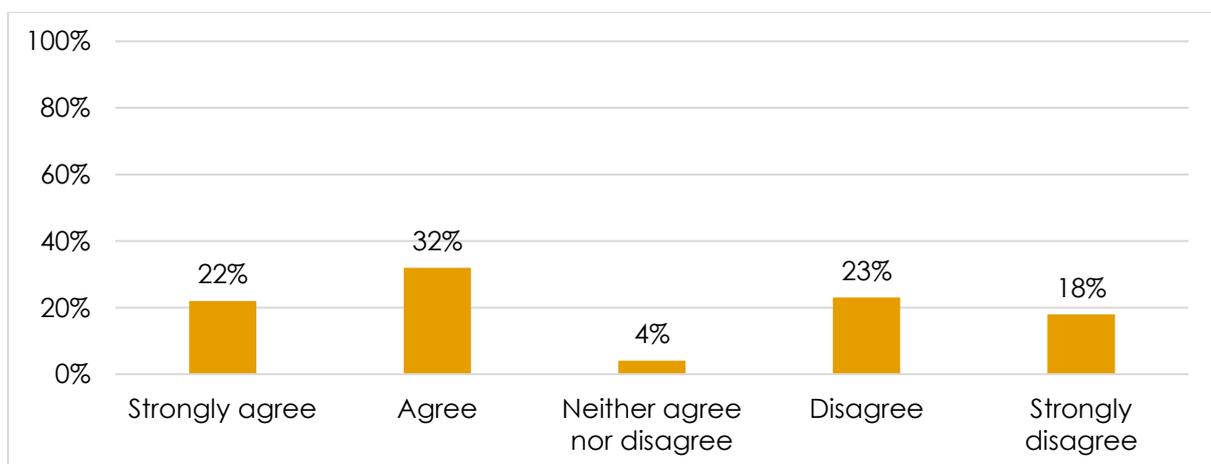
Respondents were asked: In this country, how likely do you think it is that an ordinary person/a rich person could pay a bribe or use personal connections to get away with: (A) Avoiding paying taxes they owe to government? (B) Avoiding going to court? (C) Registering land that does not belong to them? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Citizens' role in fighting corruption

A slim majority (54%) of Nigerians "agree" (32%) or "strongly agree" (22%) that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption (Figure 9). Four in 10 Nigerians (41%) think otherwise.

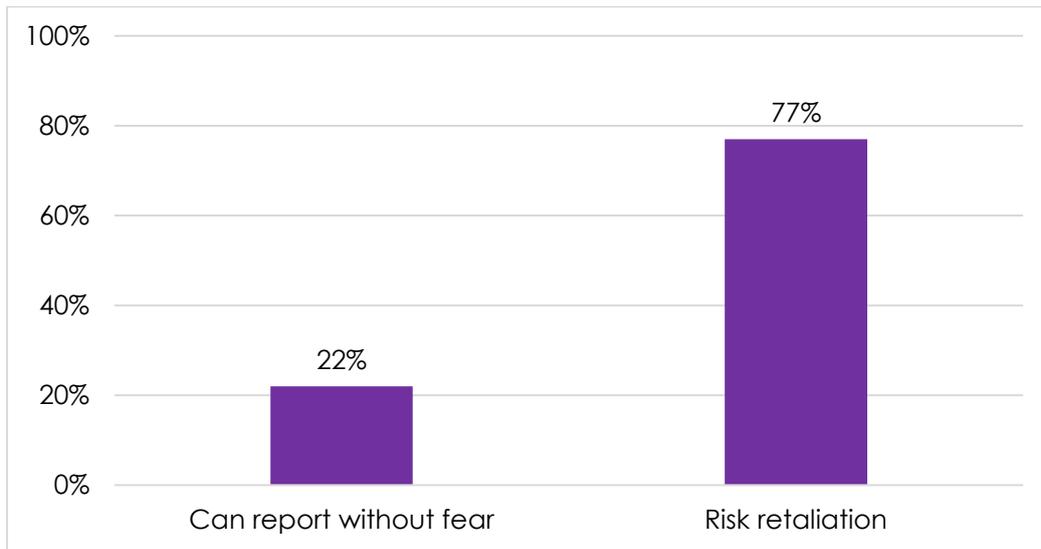
But in spite of the whistleblower protection law passed to protect citizens who disclose corrupt acts to the authorities (Punch, 2017), only about two in 10 (22%) believe that people can report corruption without fear. A vast majority (77%) say ordinary citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out (Figure 10), suggesting that the whistleblower policy will have to be backed by widely publicized enforcement to convince citizens that they can safely report suspected cases.

Figure 9: Can citizens make a difference in the fight against corruption? | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption?

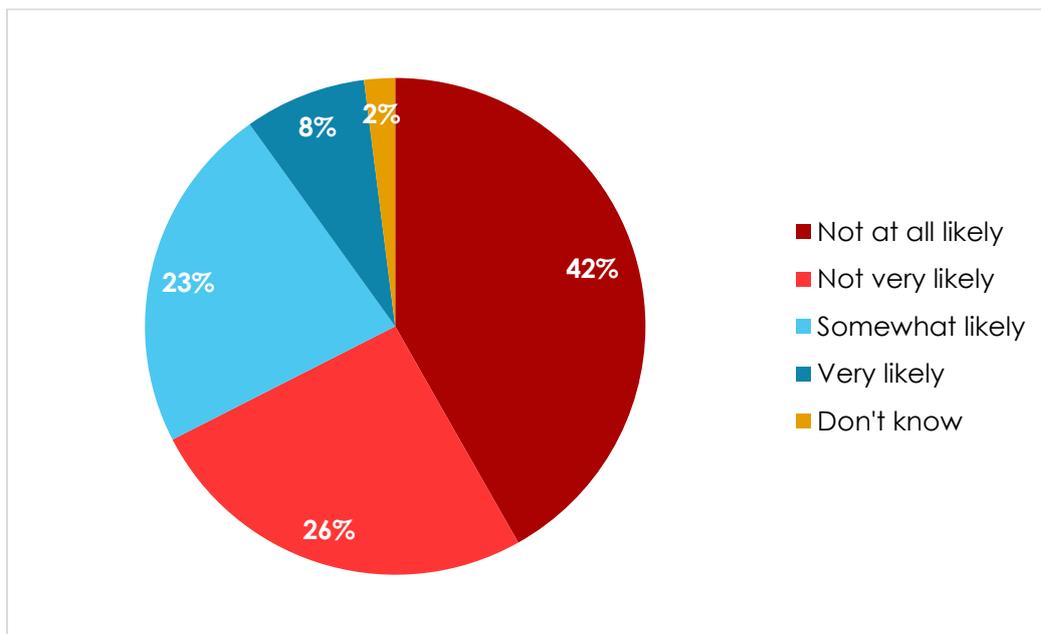
Figure 10: Can people report incidents of corruption without fear? | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?

Another reason why citizens may not feel encouraged to report corruption is the widespread perception that authorities will not take appropriate action. More than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians say it is “not at all likely” (42%) or “not very likely” (26%) that the authorities will take action if they report corrupt behaviour, such as misuse of funds or requests for bribes by government officials, police, or school or clinic staff (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Will the authorities take action when corruption is reported? | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to a government office or other public institution to report the following problems, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to your local government office to report corrupt behavior like misuse of funds or requests for bribes by government officers, police, or school or clinic staff?

Conclusion

Although Nigerians say the government is performing well in fighting corruption, citizens' perceptions of corruption in the public sector are still high, matched by high levels of popular mistrust in public institutions. The fight against corruption in Nigeria is missing a significant element of citizen participation, as the fear of retaliation and the perception that appropriate action will not be taken discourage citizens from reporting corruption cases. These findings suggest that more stringent policies and enforcement need to be put in place to stir public interest in fighting the menace of corruption.

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