

Small improvements, not yet a ‘new dawn’: South Africans still see high levels of corruption

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 292 | Mikhail Moosa

Summary

In his first State of the Nation Address, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (2018) announced “a new dawn” signaling the end of “all the negativity that has dogged our country,” including perceptions of widespread corruption under his predecessor, Jacob Zuma.

Heeding calls from the judiciary and civil society, Ramaphosa has implemented a judicial commission of enquiry into “state capture,” the pernicious corruption within state institutions that has dominated South Africa’s media and public discourse (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Southall, 2018), and initiated reforms of malfunctioning state-owned enterprises. The private sector has also come under scrutiny, including allegations that Steinhoff, a multinational furniture company, was involved in illegal trading (McKune & Thompson, 2018) and that global consulting firms provided support to undermine state entities (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2018; Niselow, 2018).

Given corruption’s negative effects on the provision of government services and citizens’ trust in institutions and leaders (Felton & Nkomo, 2018), it is worth asking whether South Africans are seeing the “new dawn” that Ramaphosa has promised. Findings from the 2018 Afrobarometer survey show modest improvements in perceived corruption in the Presidency. But most South Africans still see corruption as increasing and bribery as an effective way of bypassing the law.

Moreover, efforts to curb corruption will be hampered by a widespread perception that reporting instances of corruption risks retaliation.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by Plus94 Research and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

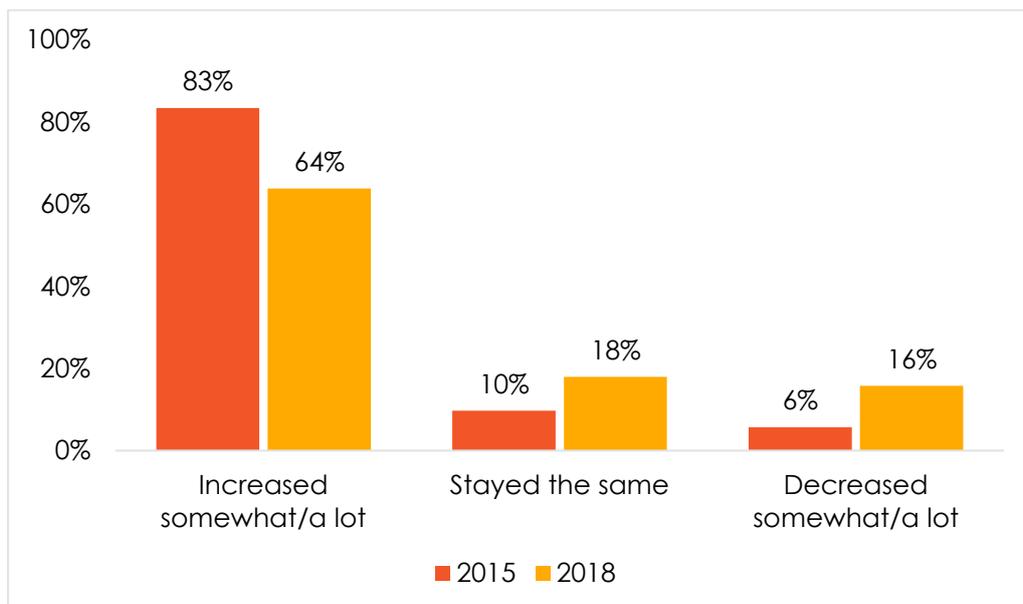
- Two-thirds (64%) of South Africans say the level of corruption in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” in the past year, an improvement from 83% who thought so in 2015. Only one in six (16%) believe corruption decreased.

- While a majority (58%) of South Africans believe ordinary people can fight corruption, almost two-thirds (63%) say reporting incidents of corruption risks retaliation or other negative consequences.
- The proportion of South Africans who think that “most” or “all” officials in the Presidency are corrupt decreased by 7 percentage points, from 46% in 2015 to 39%. Popular perceptions of pervasive corruption showed little improvement with regard to members of Parliament (44%) and rose by 9 percentage points for judges and magistrates (32%).
- The police remain the key institution most widely seen as corrupt (49%). The institutions considered least corrupt are nonstate actors: nongovernmental organizations (30%), religious leaders (28%), and traditional leaders (26%).
- Among respondents who had contact with basic public services in the previous year, one in four (26%) say they paid a bribe to avoid a problem with the police, while about half as many paid bribes to access school assistance (14%) or government identity documents (13%).
- A majority of South Africans say it is likely that people – especially the wealthy – can pay a bribe to avoid taxes, avoid going to court, and register land that does not belong to them.

Perceptions of corruption

Almost two-thirds (64%) of South Africans say corruption increased over the past year, including almost half (49%) who think it increased “a lot.” But this represents a substantial improvement from survey findings in 2015, when 83% reported increasing corruption (Figure 1). The small proportion of respondents who say corruption decreased almost tripled, from 6% in 2015 to 16%.

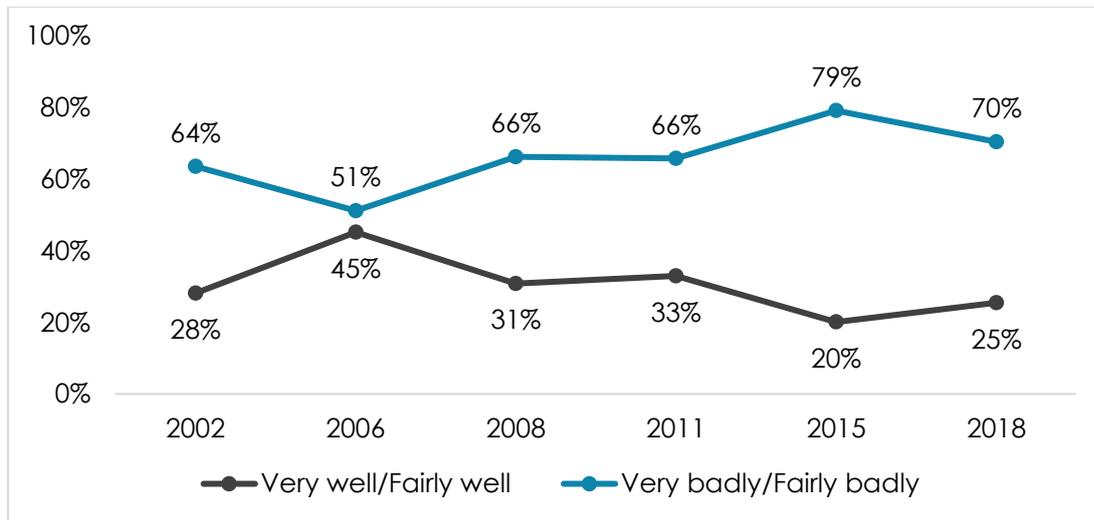
Figure 1: Is corruption increasing or decreasing? | South Africa | 2015-2018



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

In line with their perception of increasing corruption, most South Africans (70%) believe the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at fighting graft. While a modest improvement from 2015 (79% negative), popular disapproval of the government’s performance is higher than in any other survey round since 2002 (Figure 2). Only one in four citizens (25%) say the government is doing a good job on corruption.

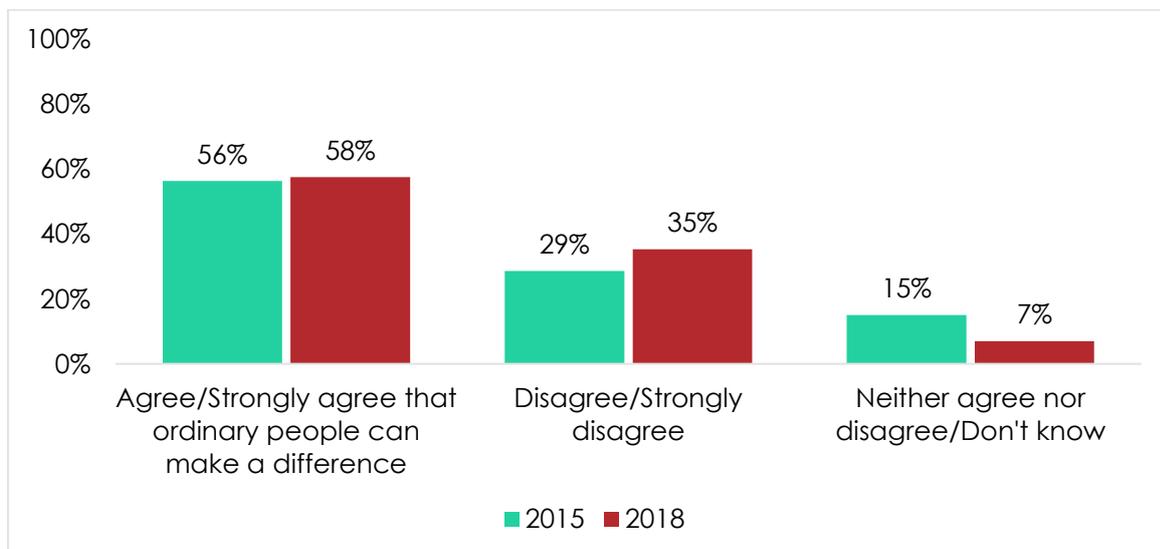
Figure 2: Government fighting corruption | South Africa | 2002-2018



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?

In the face of the government’s perceived failure to address corruption, a majority (58%) of South Africans say that ordinary people can make a difference in this fight. But the proportion of respondents who disagree increased by 6 percentage points, from 29% to 35%, between 2015 and 2018 (Figure 3).

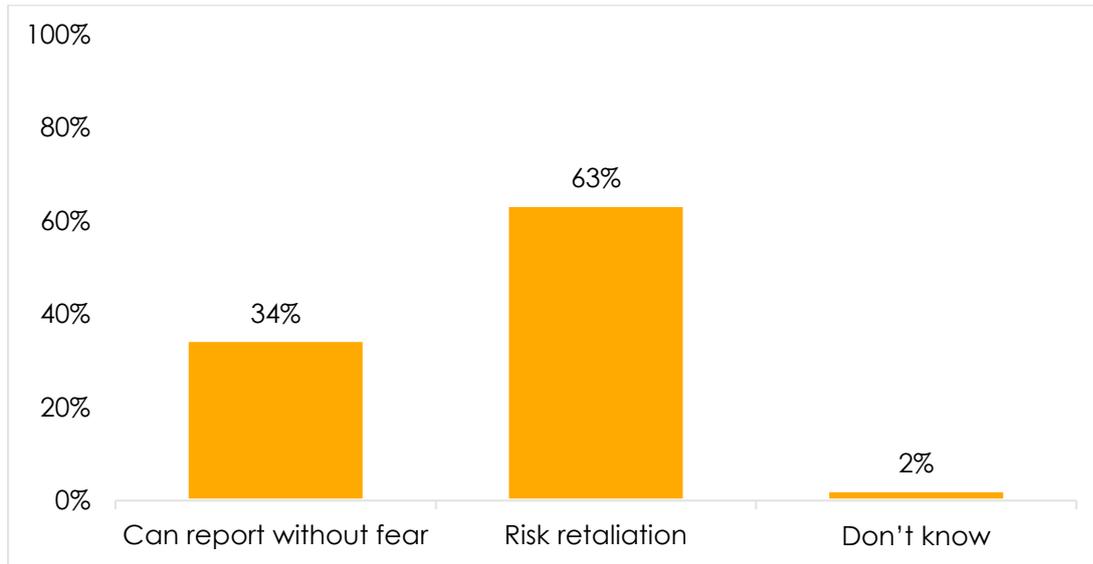
Figure 3: Can ordinary people make a difference in fight against corruption? | South Africa | 2015-2018



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.

While a majority of South Africans think they can help fight corruption, they also fear retribution: Almost two-thirds (63%) say ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption. Only one-third (34%) believe people can report corruption without fear (Figure 4).

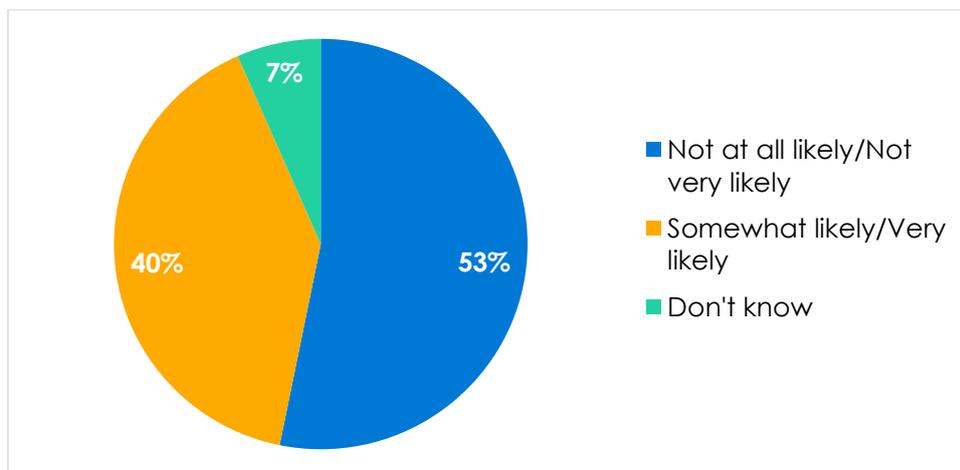
Figure 4: Can citizens report corruption without fear? | South Africa | 2018



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?*

In addition to fearing retribution, citizens may not report corruption if they think that nothing will be done about it. More than half (53%) of South Africans say it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that someone would take action if they reported instances of corruption (Figure 5). Four out of 10 (40%) believe reporting corruption is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to result in the appropriate response.

Figure 5: Response to reporting corruption | South Africa | 2018



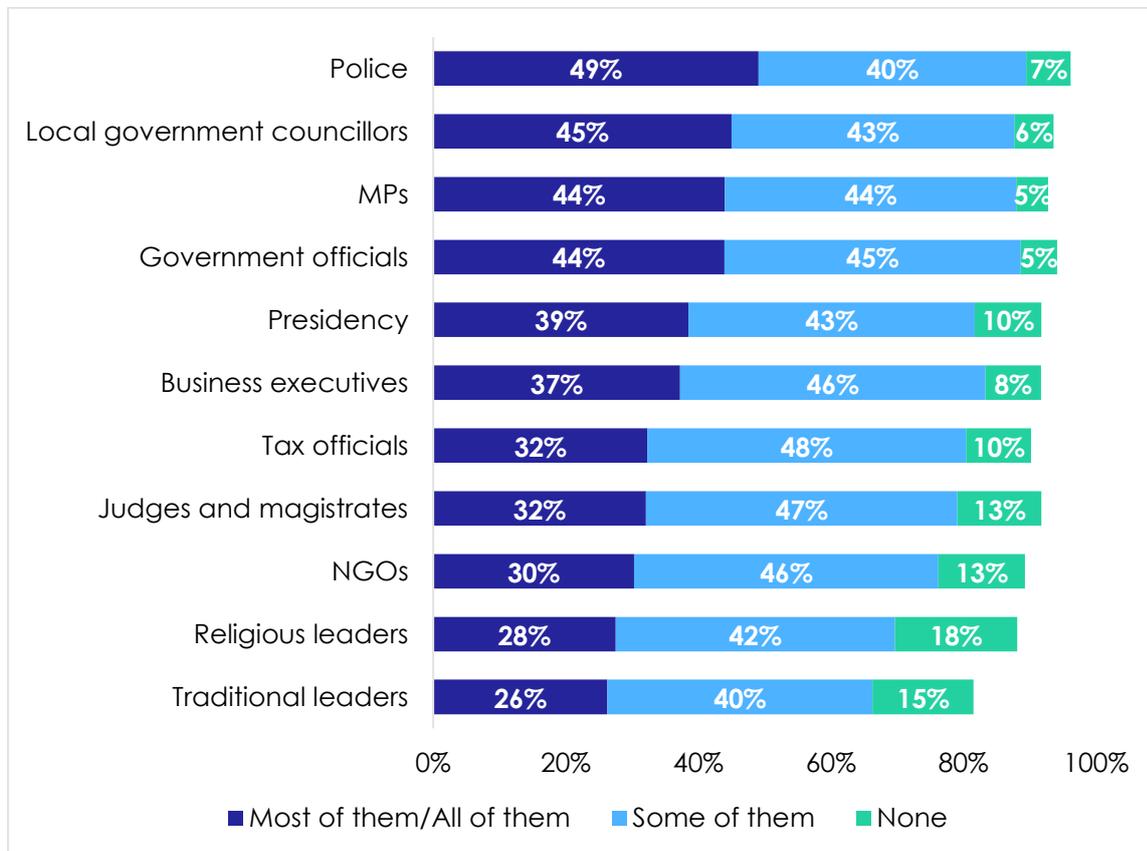
Respondents were asked: *How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to a government office or other public institution to report the following problems, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to your local government office to report corrupt behaviour like misuse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

Corruption in institutions

Much of the commentary on corruption in South Africa has centered on former President Zuma, state-owned enterprises, and the notorious Gupta brothers, but citizens perceive widespread corruption at the micro level as well.

About half (49%) of respondents say “most” or “all” police officials are involved in corruption (Figure 6). Almost as many think most/all local government councillors (45%), members of Parliament (MPs) (44%), and government officials (44%) are corrupt. About four in 10 (39%) see pervasive corruption in the Presidency, while one-third see most/all tax officials (32%) and judges and magistrates (32%) as involved in graft. The institutions considered least corrupt by South Africans are nonstate actors: nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (30%), religious leaders (28%), and traditional leaders (26%).

Figure 6: Perceived corruption in institutions | South Africa | 2018

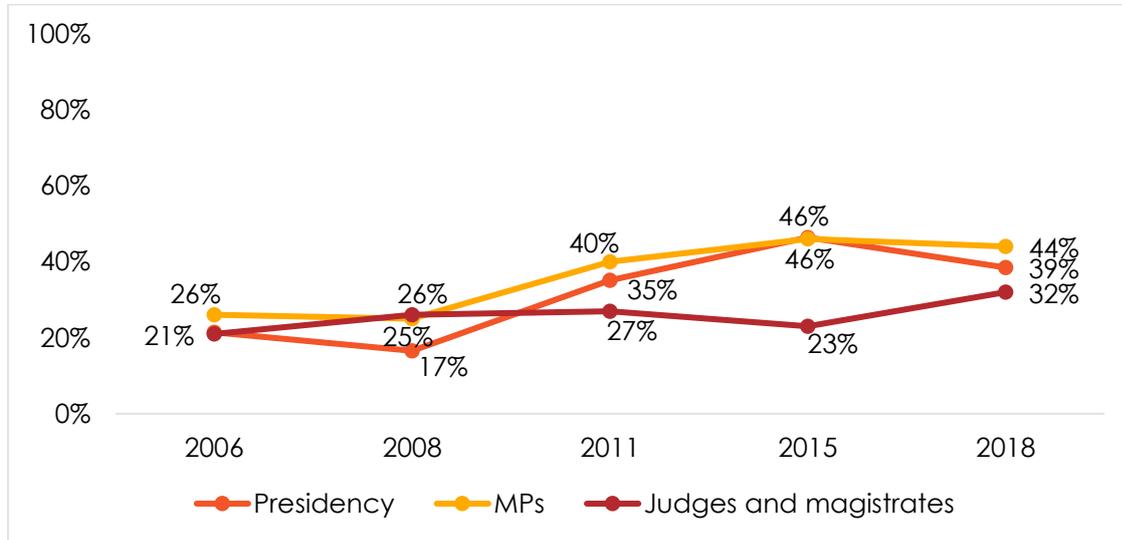


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Popular perceptions of pervasive corruption in the Presidency and Parliament increased by about 20 percentage points between 2008 (when 25%-26% of respondents said “most” or “all” were corrupt) and 2015 (46%) (Figure 7). Between 2015 and 2018, perceived corruption declined by 7 percentage points for the Presidency (39%) but held fairly steady for MPs (44%).

The judiciary is less commonly perceived as corrupt than other branches of government, but the proportion of South Africans who see most or all judges and magistrates as involved in corruption increased by 9 percentage points between 2015 and 2018, from 23% to 32%.

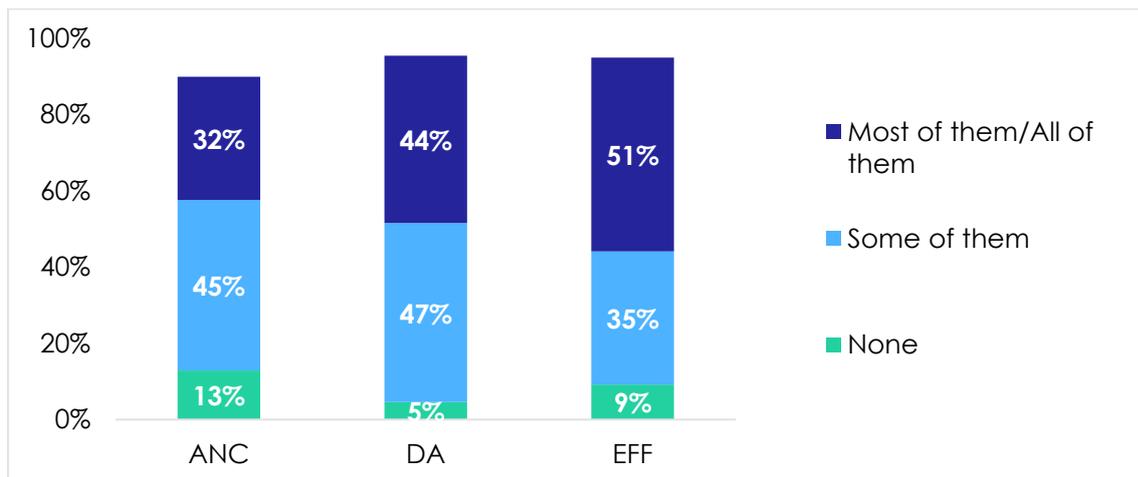
Figure 7: Perceived corruption in the Presidency, Parliament, and courts
 | South Africa | 2006-2018



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? (% who say "most" or "all")

Popular perceptions of corruption in the Presidency are so strong that even among supporters of the governing African National Congress (ANC), only about one in eight (13%) say the office is free of graft (Figure 8). One-third (32%) of ANC supporters say "most" or "all" officials in the Presidency are involved in corruption, a somewhat rosier view than among supporters of the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) (44%) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (51%).¹

Figure 8: Perceived corruption in the Presidency | by partisan affiliation | South Africa | 2018



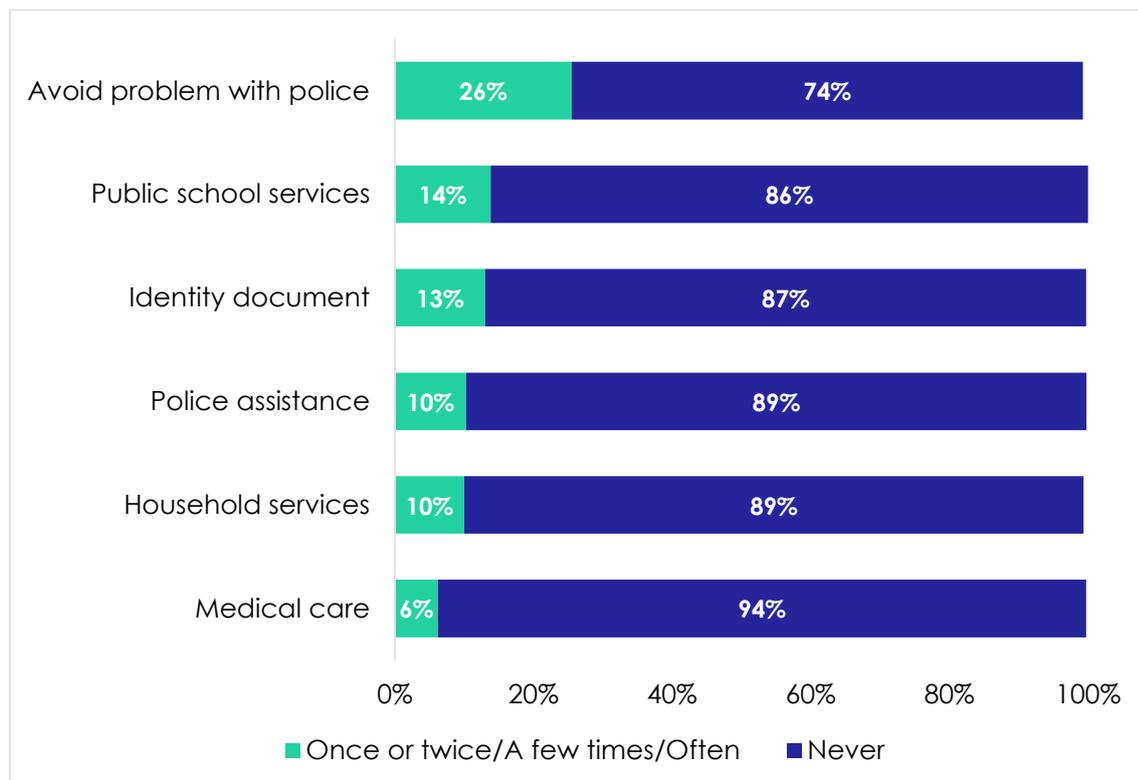
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? Office of the Presidency

¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Use of bribery

Official corruption enables a culture of bribery. Although the vast majority of South Africans say they did not engage in bribery during the 12 months preceding the survey, some acknowledge resorting to paying bribes to access government services (Figure 9). Among survey respondents who had contact with basic service providers in the past year, one in four (26%) say they paid a bribe to avoid a problem with the police, while about half as many paid bribes to access school assistance (14%) or government identity documents (13%). One in 10 say they paid a bribe to obtain police assistance (10%) or utility services (10%), while one in 10 did so get medical care (6%).

Figure 9: Paying bribes for services | South Africa | 2018



Respondents who said they had contact with key public services were asked: How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for:

A police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

A teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?

A favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?

A police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

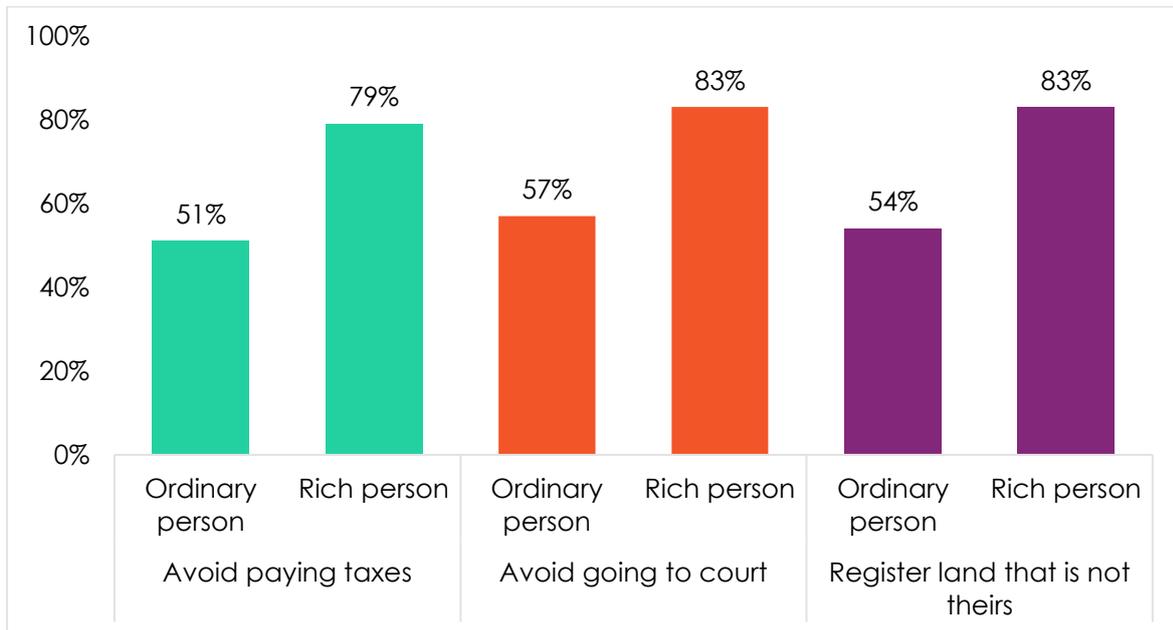
A government official in order to get the services you needed?

A health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?

(Note: Respondents who said they had no contact with these services during the previous year are excluded.)

Moreover, most South Africans believe that people can use bribery to circumvent the law (Figure 10). Majorities say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that ordinary people could use bribes or personal connections to avoid paying taxes (51%), avoid going to court (57%), and register land that doesn’t belong to them (54%). And far larger majorities – around eight in 10 – say it’s likely that wealthy people could do this.

Figure 10: Can pay bribe to circumvent the law | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how likely do you think it is that an ordinary person/rich person could pay a bribe or use personal connections to get away with: Avoid going to court? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Conclusion

Just a year into his presidency, facing his first national election campaign in 2019, Ramaphosa appears to still have work ahead to convince South Africans that his "new dawn" is coming. There are small signs of improvement: Compared to 2015, citizens are somewhat less likely to see corruption in the Presidency.

But most South Africans still see corruption in the country as increasing, as affecting all branches of government, and as an effective means of circumventing the law. Some citizens must resort to bribery in order to access essential state services from corrupt officials. And while a majority of citizens think ordinary people can help fight corruption, they also see reporting corruption as both a risky and probably ineffective exercise.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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