

Mauritians' demand for democracy remains high despite waning quality

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 457 | Ziyanda Stuurman and Suhaylah Peeraullee

Summary

On 17 May 2021, former attorney general and prominent government critic Jayaram Valayden was detained by Mauritian security forces and charged with organizing a rally in contravention of the country's Quarantine Act, a COVID-19 containment measure that prohibits public gatherings of more than 10 people (CNBC Africa, 2021).

Though remarkable, the incident was just the latest in a series of government attempts to constrain political activity and dissent, a trend that has earned Mauritius a spot among the V-Dem Institute's (2021) "top 10 autocratizing countries" in the world (Kasenally, 2021; Degnarain, 2021). While Mauritius has retained its top position in the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, its score has been declining as social protections and the environment for human rights deteriorate (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

Recent criticisms have highlighted perceived irregularities and unfair practices in the 2019 national election that led to a significant decline in the V-Dem indicator for quality of elections (V-Dem Institute, 2021; Darga, 2021a). Restrictions on opposition parties and civil society organizations have contributed to worries about a weakening democracy (L'Express.mu, 2020; 2021a). A series of corruption scandals has tainted the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (National Audit Office, 2021; Lemauricien.com, 2020).

In April, the government's Information and Communication Technologies Authority proposed decrypting all social media content, including private messages – a move that critics in civil society and the media say amounts to implementing a digital surveillance system (L'Express.mu, 2021b; Saramandi, 2021).

Amid these concerns, how do Mauritians see their democracy?

Afrobarometer survey findings show that Mauritians are highly politically engaged, support democracy, and value their freedom of association and freedom of the media, including unrestricted access to the Internet and social media. However, their satisfaction with the way democracy works in Mauritius has declined significantly over the past decade. Their assessments of election quality have worsened, trust in public institutions and government officials is low, and a majority of Mauritians say the country is going in the wrong direction.

Key findings

- Many Mauritians are politically engaged, reporting above-average voter participation (86% in the last election) and substantial participation in community meetings (50% during the past year), joining others to raise an issue (38%), protesting (18%), and contacting local government officials (18%).
- Large majorities of Mauritians support democracy (76%) and reject non-democratic alternatives such as one-party rule (95%), one-man rule (90%), and military rule (90%).

- More than eight in 10 Mauritians (85%) say they should be able to join any organization they wish, irrespective of the government's approval, and two-thirds (67%) say the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
- But aspirations for democratic governance have been disappointed, as reflected in significant declines in the proportion of citizens who see their country as a functioning democracy, who are satisfied with how democracy is working, who see their most recent election as free and fair, and who express trust in their elected leaders and institutions.
- Large majorities of Mauritians get news from social media every day (69%), see social media as a positive force in society (64%), and want unrestricted access to social media and the Internet protected (66%).

Afrobarometer survey

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. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by Straconsult Ltd., interviewed 1,200 adult Mauritians in November 2020. 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 have been conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Political participation

Most Mauritian adults consistently report voting in national elections. In each of four Afrobarometer surveys since 2012, more than three-quarters have said they voted in the most recent election. Despite a decrease in election participation between 2012 (87%) and 2017 (76%), self-reported voting rebounded to 86% in the 2019 election (Figure 1).

That places Mauritius second-highest among 25 African countries surveyed between late 2019 and early 2021, trailing only Sierra Leone (88%) and well above the 71% average (Figure 2).

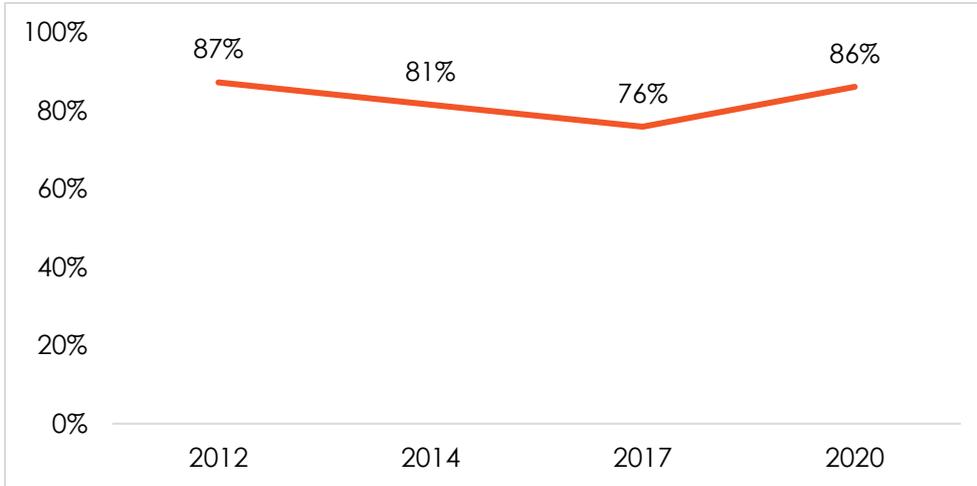
Men (89%), urban residents (89%), and those with post-secondary education (91%) are somewhat more likely to report having voted than their counterparts, but reported voting exceeds eight in 10 respondents across all key demographic groups (Figure 3).

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In addition to voting, Mauritians are active in other political processes. Fully half say they attended a community meeting "once or twice" (27%), "several times" (12%), or "often" (11%) during the previous year, while almost four in 10 (38%) say they joined others to raise an issue (Figure 4). About one in five

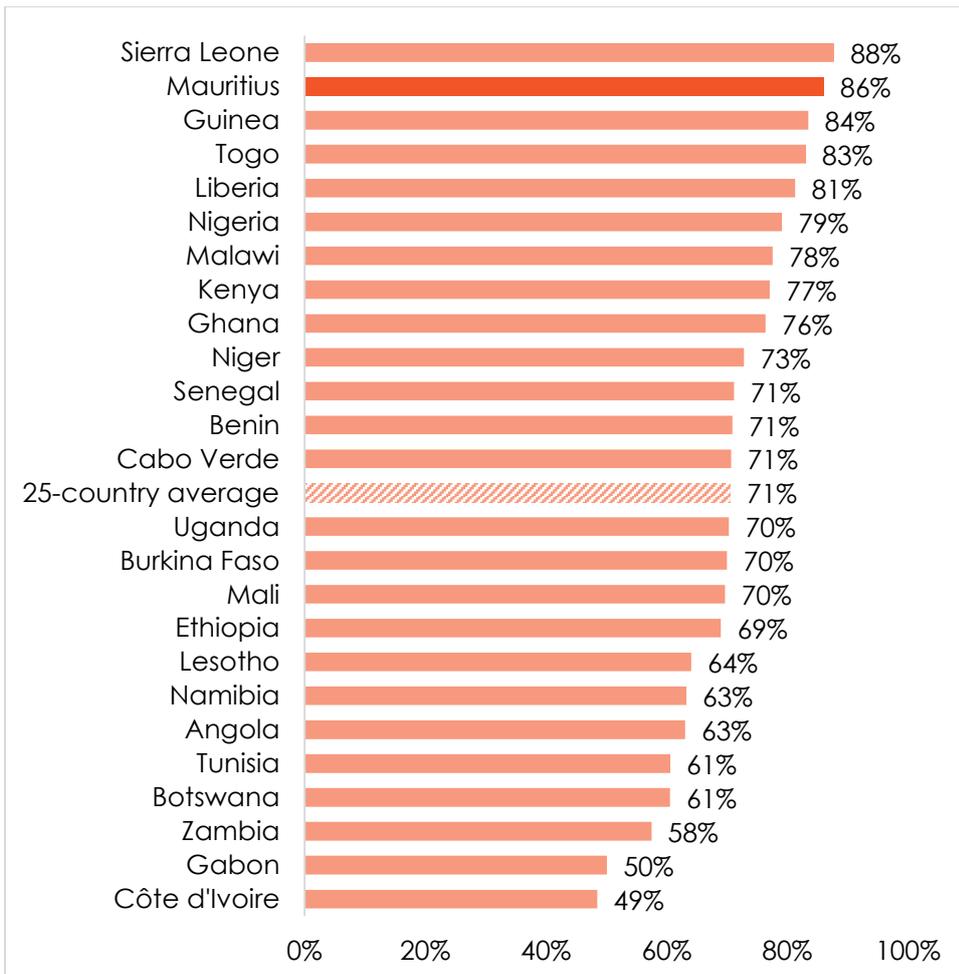
say they participated in a demonstration or protest march (18%) or contacted a local government official about an important problem or to give them their views (18%).

Figure 1: Voted in the most recent election | Mauritius | 2012-2020



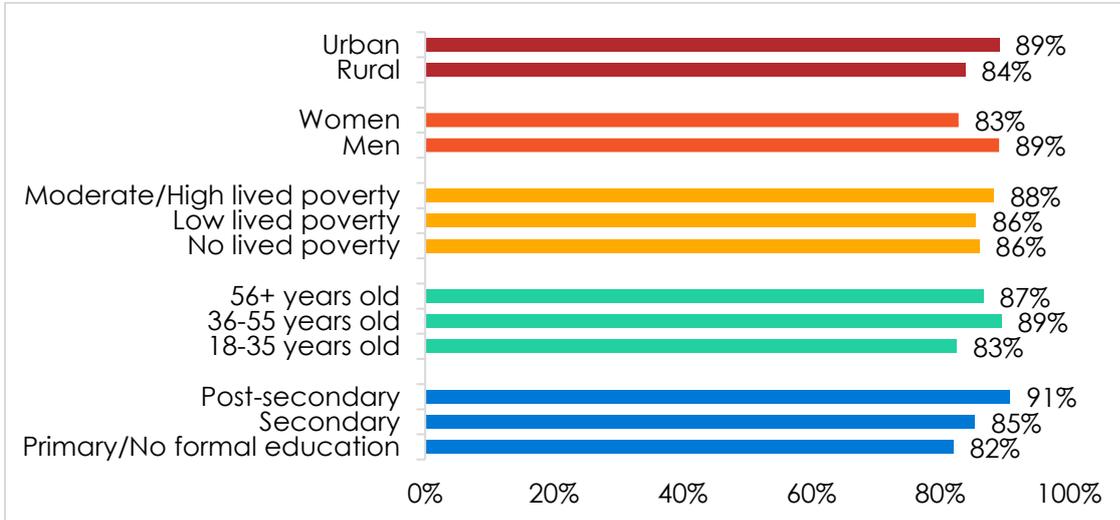
Respondents were asked: In the last election, held in [year], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who said they voted)

Figure 2: Voted the most recent election | 25 countries | 2019/2021



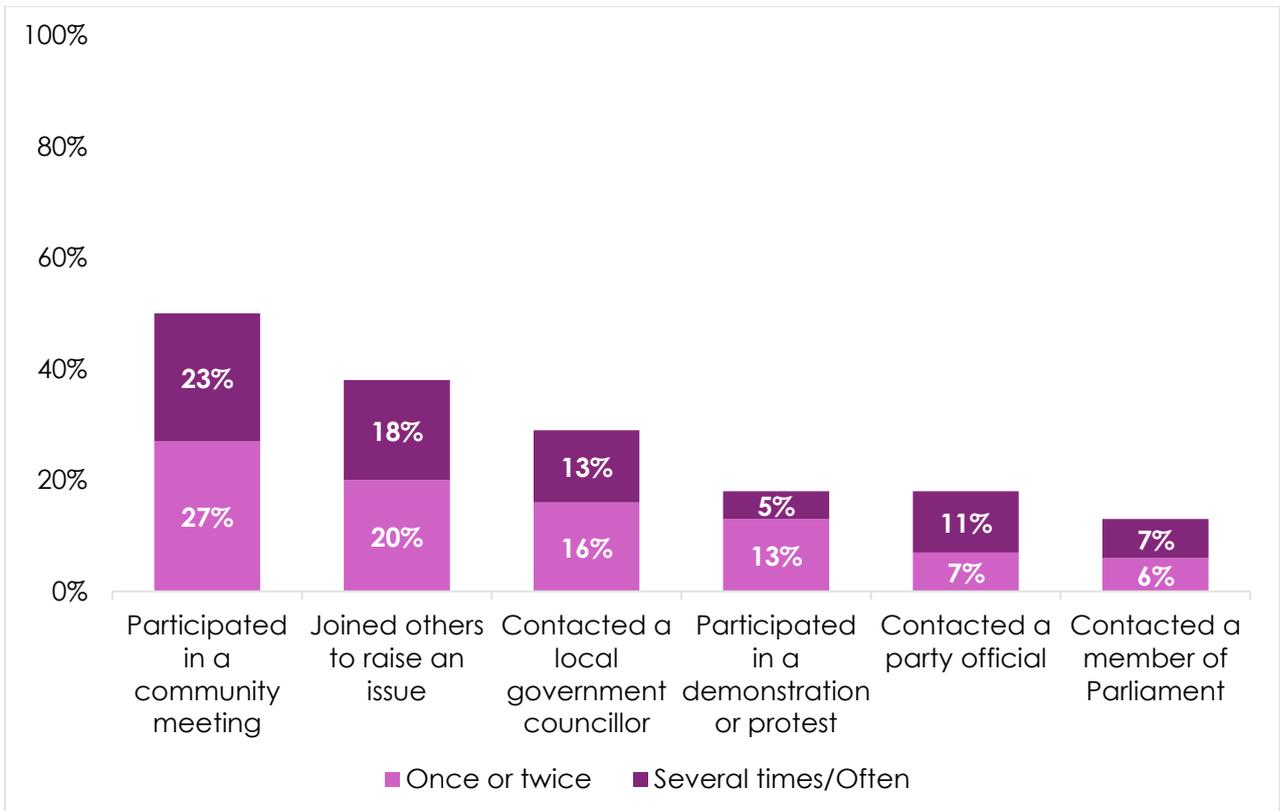
Respondents were asked: In the last election, held in [year], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted?

Figure 3: Voted in the most recent election | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: In the last election, held in 2019, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted)

Figure 4: Political participation | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked:

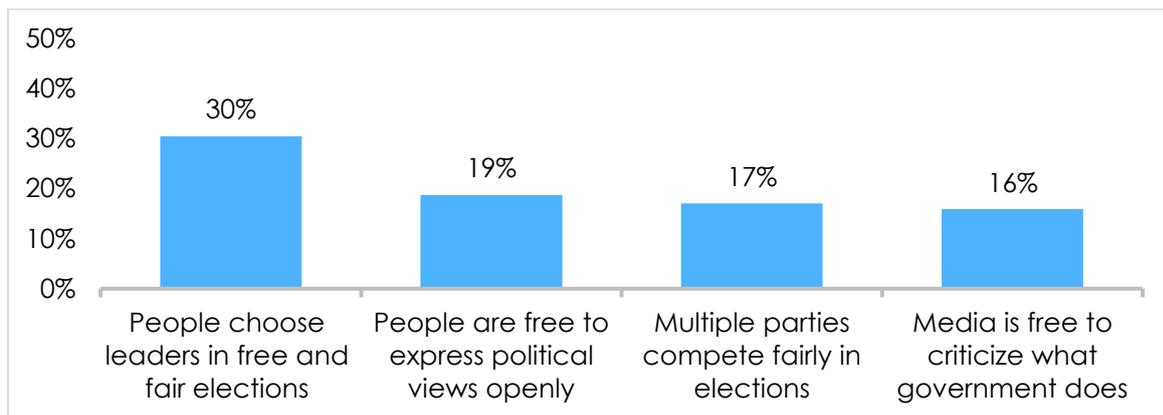
Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

Support for democracy

Almost a decade ago, Afrobarometer’s first survey in Mauritius (in 2012, during Round 5) shed light on Mauritians’ democratic aspirations. When asked what they consider the single most essential characteristic of a democracy, respondents most commonly cited people’s ability to choose their government leaders in free and fair elections (30%), followed by their freedom to express their political views openly (19%), multiple parties competing fairly in elections (17%), and the media being free to criticize government actions (16%) (Figure 5).

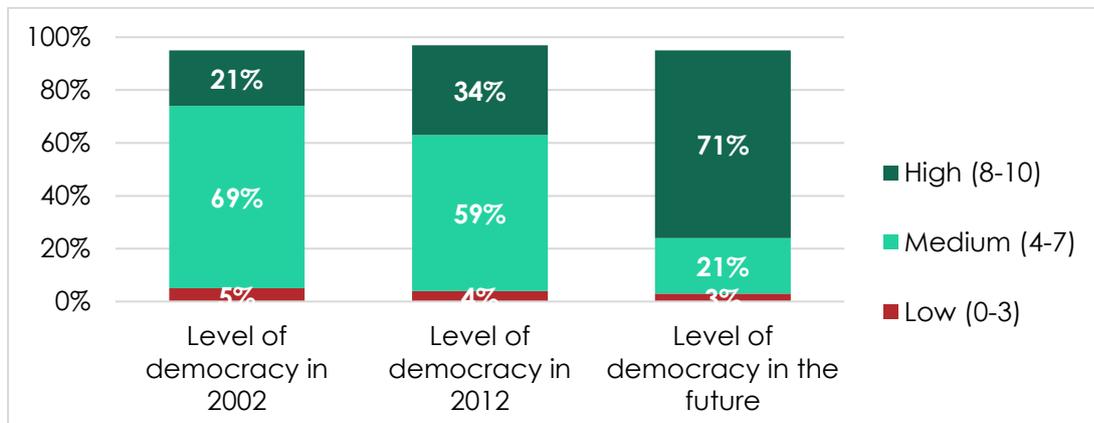
When asked, in 2012, to rate the level of democracy in the country at the time of the survey and 10 years earlier (in 2002), as well as the level of democracy they would want to see in the future, respondents indicated rising levels of perceived democracy and high hopes for the years to come (Figure 6). While only one in five citizens (21%) assessed the 2002 level of democracy as high (assigning a score of 7-10 on a 10-point scale), one-third (34%) considered the 2012 level to be high, and seven in 10 (71%) wanted a high level of democracy for Mauritius’ future.

Figure 5: Essential characteristics of democracy | Mauritius | 2012



Respondents were asked: Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?

Figure 6: Level of democracy in the past, present, and future | Mauritius | 2012

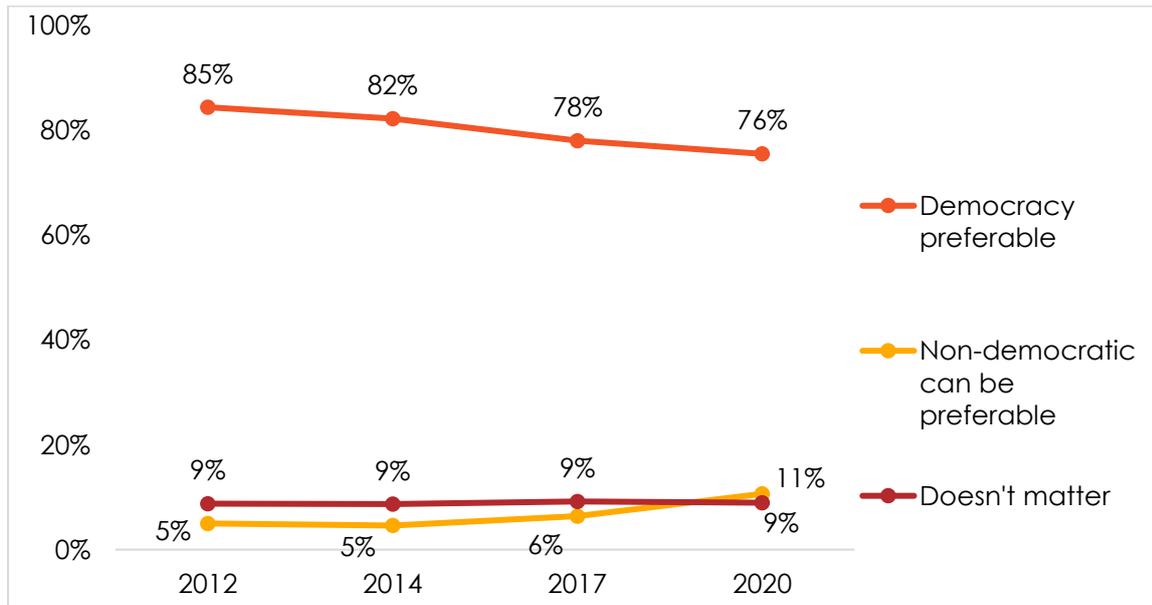


Respondents were asked: On a scale between 0 and 10, where 0 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic, where would you place each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Our country today? Our country 10 years ago, in 2002? And on the same scale, where would you want our country to be in the future?

Almost a decade later, more than three out of four Mauritians (76%) still say democracy is preferable to any other system of government, although that proportion represents a 9-percentage-point decline since 2012 (85%) (Figure 7).

Moreover, they overwhelmingly reject authoritarian alternatives to democratic governance such as one-party rule (95%), one-man rule (90%), and military rule (90%) (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Support for democracy | Mauritius | 2012-2020



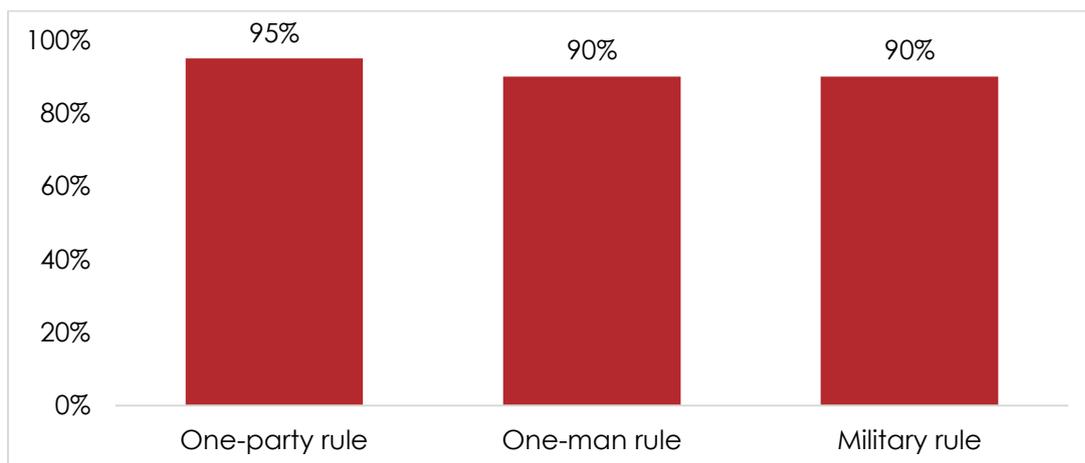
Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Figure 8: Rejection of non-democratic alternatives | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

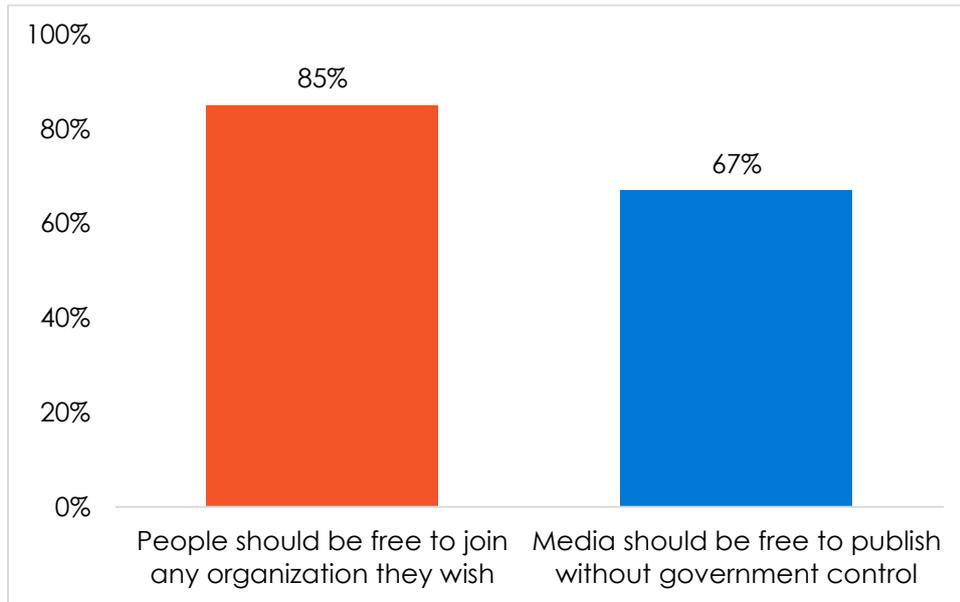
The army comes in to govern the country.

Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the prime minister can decide everything.

(% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with each alternative)

In their current conception of the society they want, an overwhelming majority (85%) of Mauritians say they should be able to join any political organization they wish, whether or not the government approves of it; only 14% say the government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies (Figure 9). And two-thirds (67%) say the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Figure 9: Support for freedom of association and media | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: *Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country.*

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.

Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 2)

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 disapproves of.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

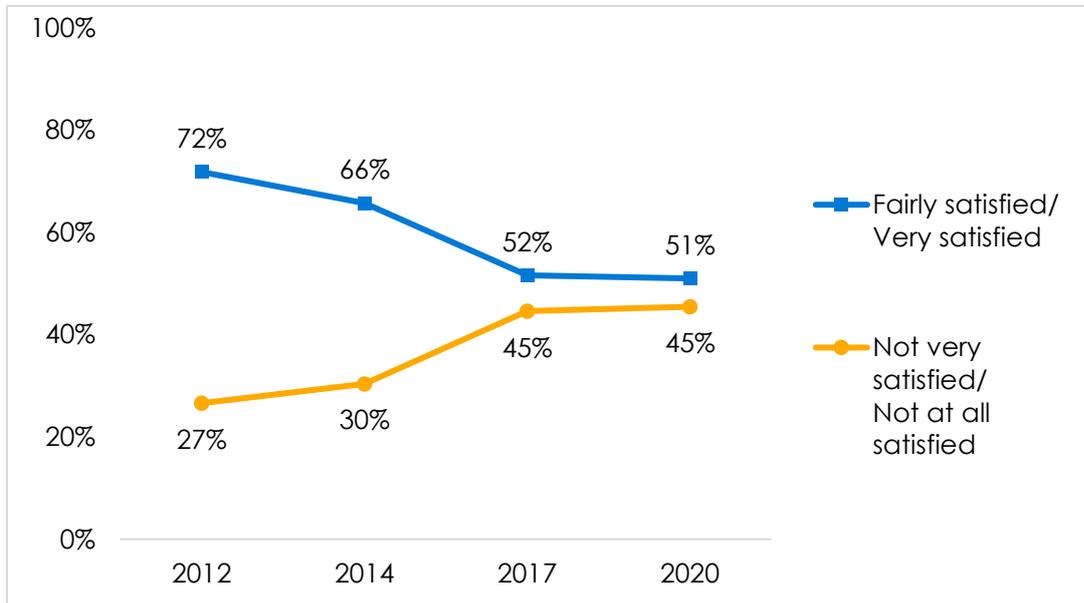
Are Mauritians getting the democracy they want?

If Mauritians were hopeful for a high level of democracy a decade ago, survey findings now indicate some disappointment in the democracy they are getting. Only half (51%) of respondents say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy is working in the country, a 21-percentage-point drop from 72% in 2012 (Figure 10).

Poor citizens are particularly unhappy with the country's democracy: Only one in four (26%) of those experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty say they are fairly/very satisfied, compared to 62% of the economically best-off citizens (Figure 11).

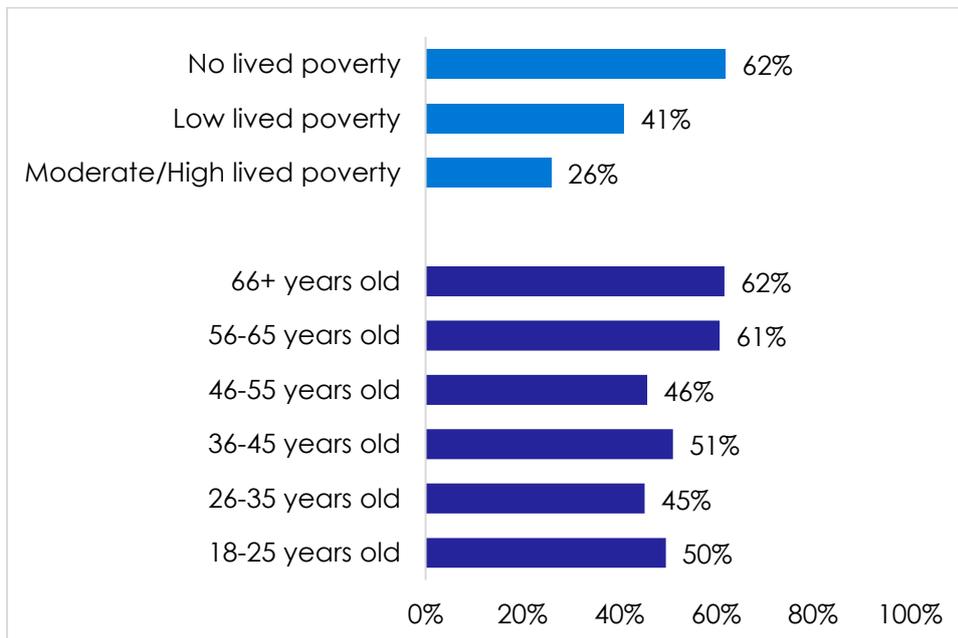
Older citizens are the only age group in which a solid majority (61%-62% of those over age 55) express satisfaction with the functioning of the country's democracy.

Figure 10: Satisfaction with democracy | Mauritius | 2012-2020



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Mauritius?

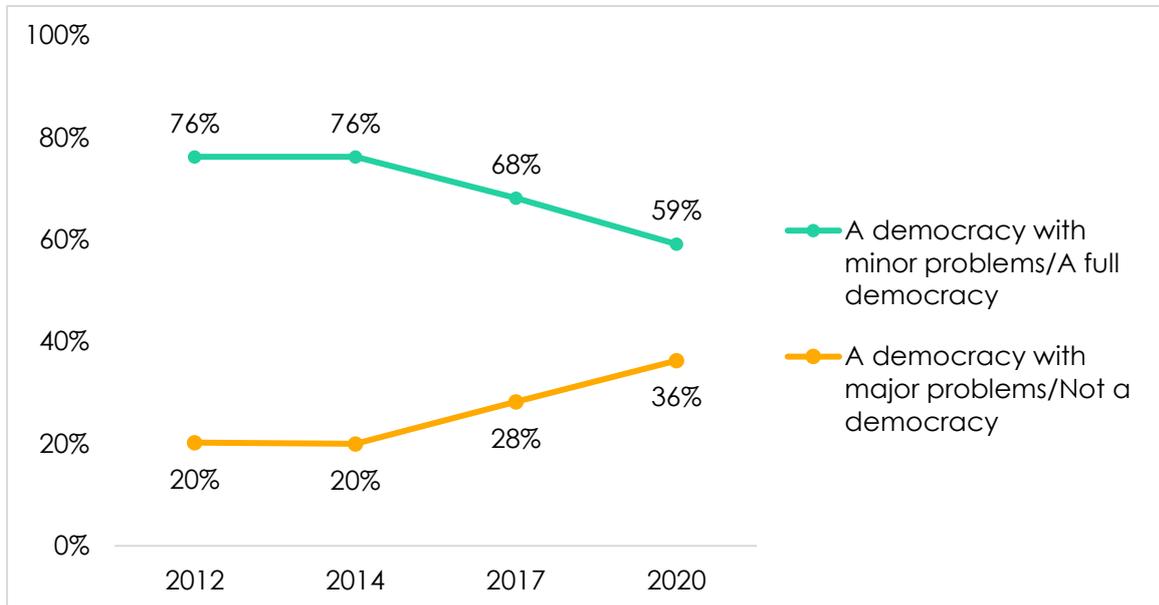
Figure 11: Satisfaction with democracy | by lived poverty level and age | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Mauritius? (% who say "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")

Citizens' dissatisfaction is also reflected in their assessment of the extent to which their country is a well-functioning democracy. While six in ten (59%) describe the country as "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems," this proportion represents a 17-percentage-point decline since 2015 (Figure 12).

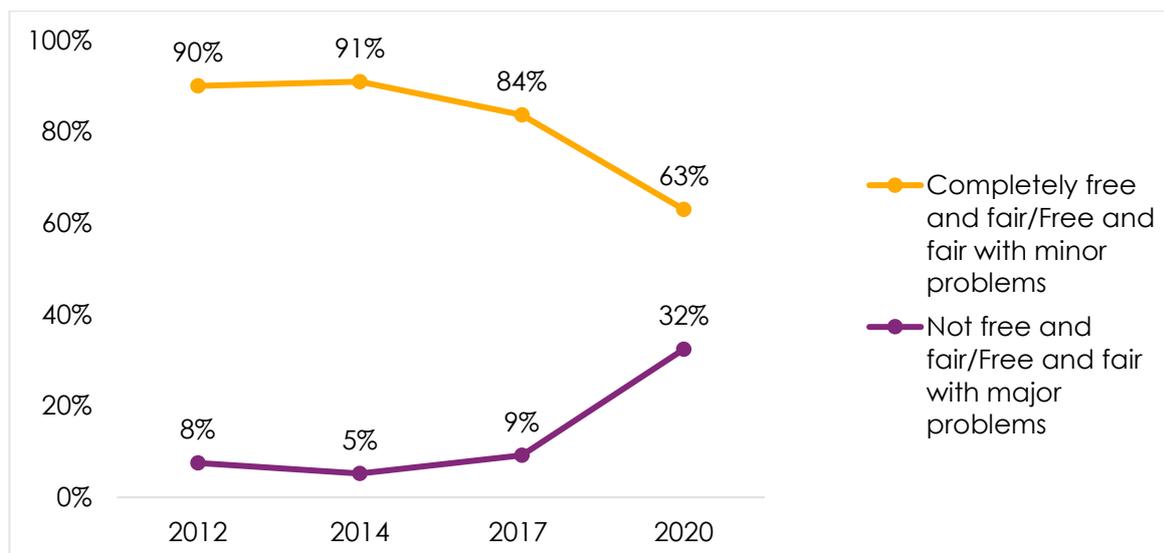
Figure 12: Extent of democracy | Mauritius | 2012-2020



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Mauritius today?*

Moreover, although a majority (63%) of citizens perceive the 2019 elections to have been “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems,” positive assessments of national elections have declined by 28 percentage points from 2014 (Figure 13) (see also Darga, 2021a).

Figure 13: Freeness and fairness of the most recent election | Mauritius | 2012-2020

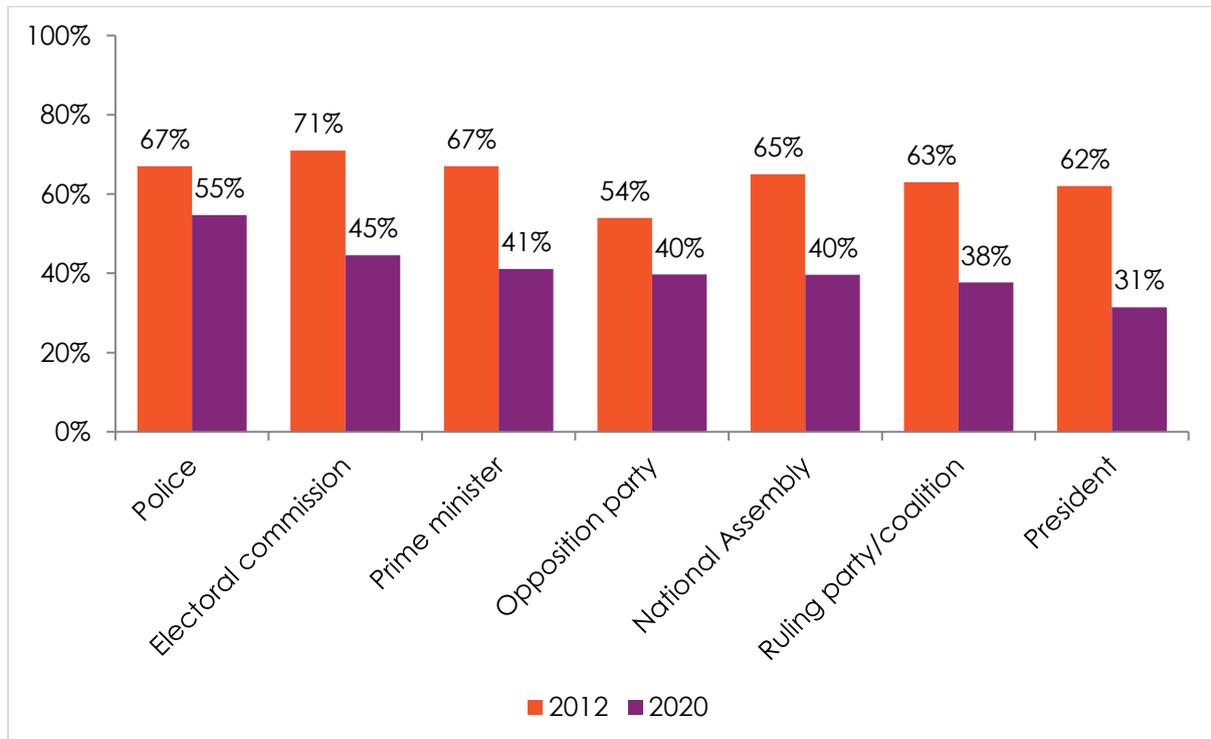


Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [year]?*

In line with concerns about democracy and elections, only a minority of Mauritians say they trust key political institutions and leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” including the prime minister (41%), the president (31%), the National Assembly (40%), and the ruling and opposition parties

(38% and 40%, respectively). Compared to the 2012 survey, levels of popular trust in the political class and key institutions have dropped dramatically (Figure 14).

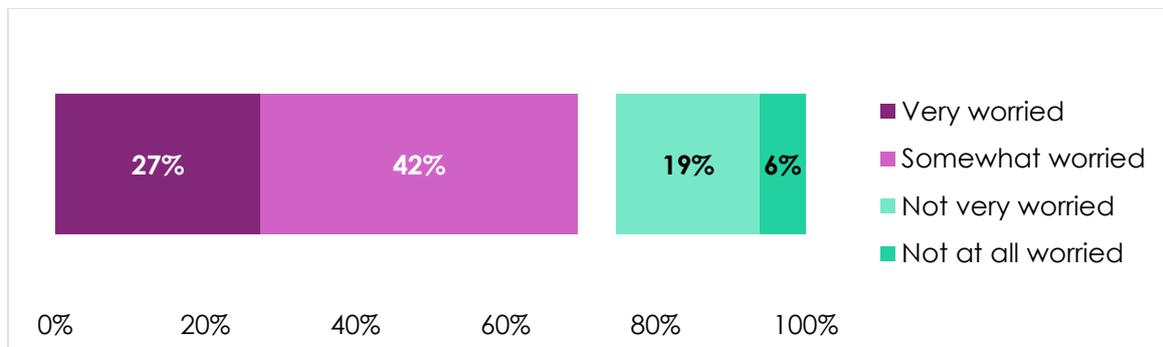
Figure 14: Trust in institutions | Mauritius | 2012-2020



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

This lack of trust may even be reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than two-thirds (69%) of Mauritians say they are "somewhat worried" or "very worried" that politicians are using or might use the pandemic as cover to increase their power and authority (Figure 15) (see also Darga, 2021b).

Figure 15: Worried about politicians' intentions | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Mauritius: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?

Taken together, these negative trends may contribute to Mauritians' increasingly gloomy view of their country's overall direction. More than half (54%) say the country is going in the wrong direction, a 14-percentage-point increase from 40% in 2012 (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Overall direction of the country | Mauritius | 2012-2020

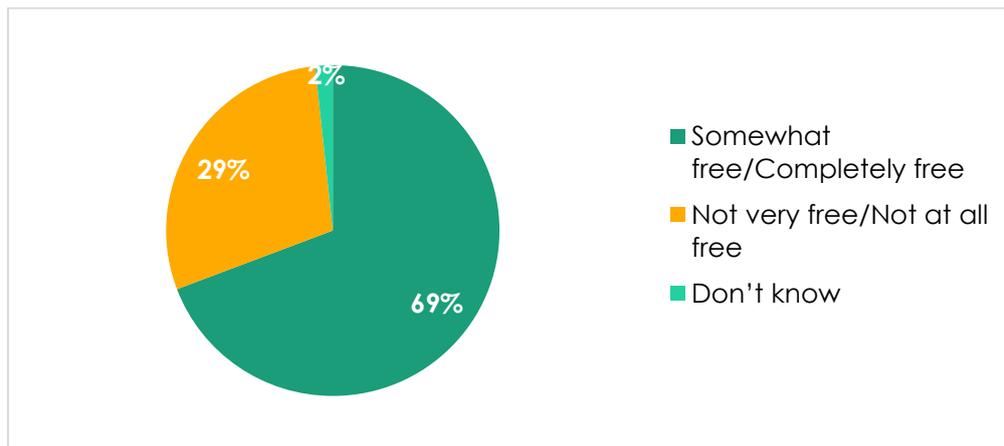


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Media freedom and access to the Internet and social media

If a free media is an essential characteristic of democracy, and one that two-thirds of citizens value (Figure 9), it is also widely seen as a reality in Mauritius: Almost seven in 10 (69%) respondents say the media is "somewhat free" or "completely free" to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government (Figure 17).

Figure 17: How free is the media? | Mauritius | 2020



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?

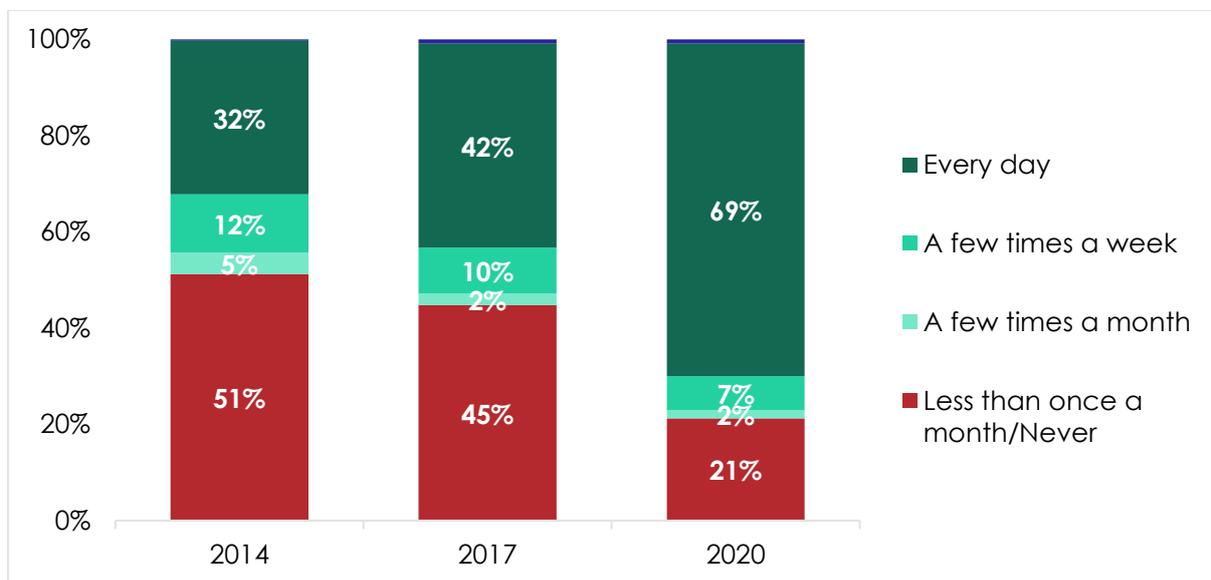
Among the various media channels, digital platforms are becoming an increasingly important source of news for Mauritians. Over the past six years, the share of citizens who say they get news every day via social media has more than doubled, from 32% in 2014 to 69% in 2020 (Figure 18).

Among Mauritians who say they have heard of social media, large majorities say it makes people more informed about current events (87%) and helps them have more impact on political processes (69%). Smaller majorities also say that social media makes people more likely to believe false news (62%) and more intolerant toward those with different political opinions (53%) (Figure 19).

But overall, almost two-thirds (64%) see the effect of social media on society as “somewhat positive” or “very positive” (Figure 20).

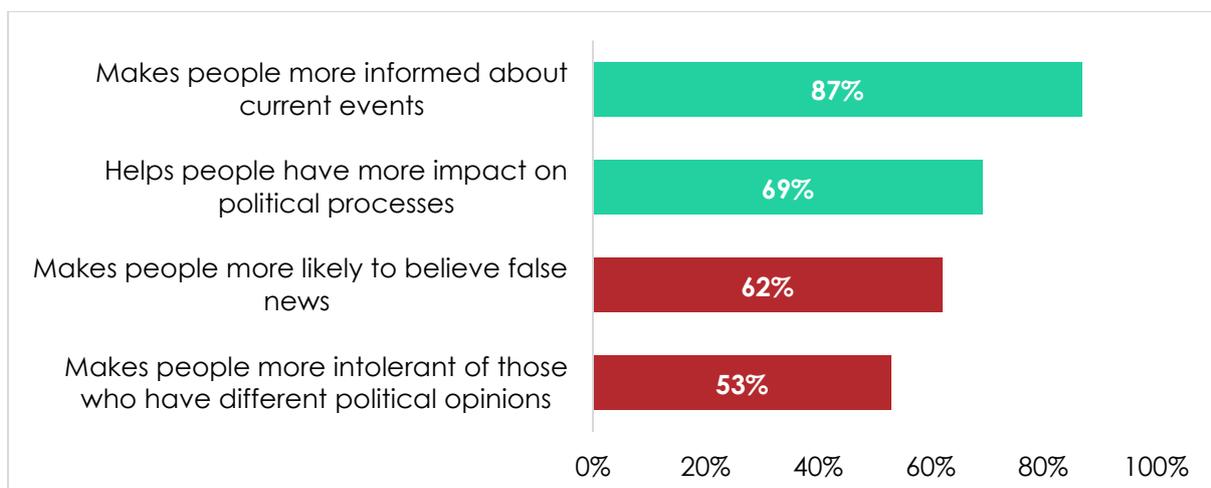
And two-thirds (66%) of all respondents say that unrestricted access to the Internet and social media should be protected. Only 21% want access to be regulated by the government (Figure 21).

Figure 18: Use of social media as source of news | Mauritius | 2014-2020



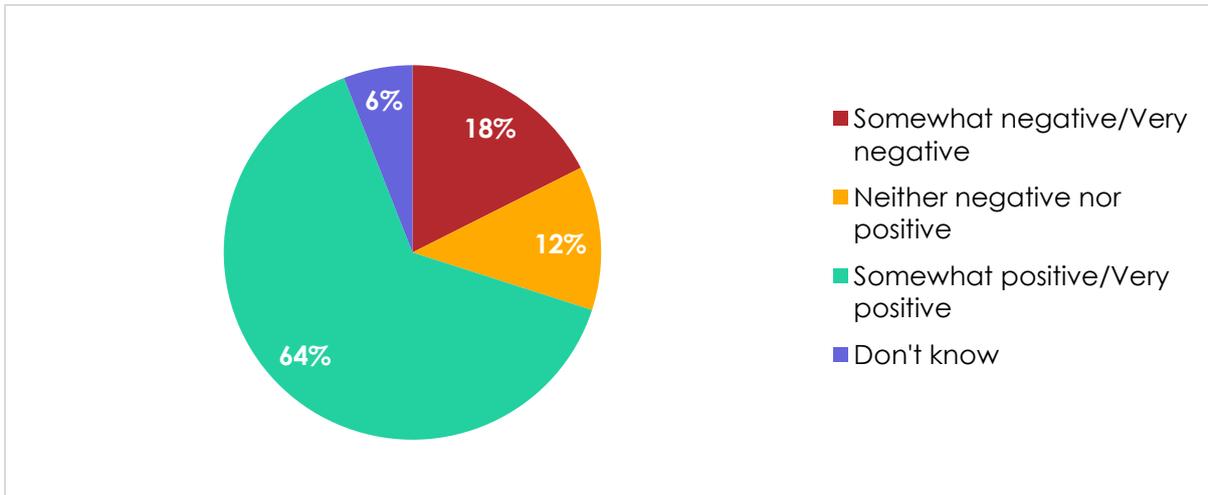
Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following source: Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others?

Figure 19: Effects of social media | Mauritius | 2020



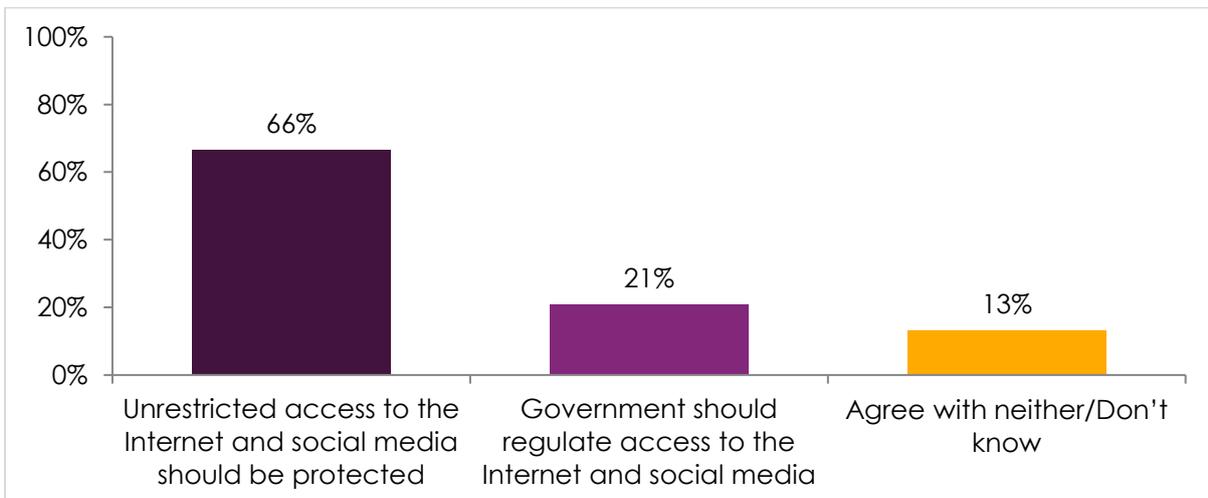
Respondents who said they had heard of social media were asked: Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that with the following statements about social media (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Figure 20: Is social media good or bad for society? | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents who said they had heard of social media were asked: Overall, do you think that the effects of social media on society are mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 21: Should access to the Internet and social media be protected or regulated? | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizen and should be protected.
 Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing Mauritians, so access should be regulated by government.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Conclusion

Mauritians vote in large numbers, are relatively engaged in their country's political processes, support democracy, and overwhelmingly reject non-democratic forms of governance.

A decade ago, Mauritians expressed a high level of demand for democracy and high hopes for democratic governance by their leaders. But for many, the quality of their democracy is not living up to their expectations. Only half are satisfied with democracy in their country, a

sharp decline over the past decade. Few express trust in public institutions and leaders, and a majority believe that the country is going in the wrong direction.

In opposition to attempts by their government to censor social media, majorities of Mauritians use social media every day, think social media is good for society, and want unrestricted access to social media and the Internet to be protected.

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