



Dispatch No. 493 | 6 December 2021

# New president's 'zero tolerance' confronts Zambians' perception of government failure to control rising corruption

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 493 | Edward Chibwili**

## Summary

The damaging effects of corruption on countries, industries, and individuals are well documented, including its destructive drain on public trust and on the legitimacy of government institutions (Sullivan et al., 2012; Myint, 2000; Diamond, 2007).

In Zambia, corruption has made numerous media headlines in recent years, including reports on never-delivered fertilizer, a USD 42 million procurement of 42 fire trucks, a USD 17 million procurement of unsafe health kits, the disappearance of USD \$1 million worth of medications donated by the Global Fund, and the theft of more than USD 4 million meant for a social assistance program for the country's poor (Mofya, 2021; Nyambe, 2021; AFP, 2018; Papachristou, 2019). In Transparency International's (2020) Corruption Perceptions Index, Zambia dropped from 96<sup>th</sup> place out of 180 countries in 2017 to 117<sup>th</sup> in 2020.

President Hakainde Hichilema, who was elected in August 2021, has described corruption levels as "horrifying" and vowed "zero tolerance" for graft (BBC, 2021; Africanews, 2021).

Findings from the latest Afrobarometer survey, which was conducted well before Hichilema took office, show that a growing number of Zambians saw corruption levels in the country as rising and rated the government poorly on its anti-corruption efforts. About half of citizens who had contact with the police said they had to pay a bribe to obtain assistance. An overwhelming majority of citizens said that ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities.

## 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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults in November-December 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 were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, and 2017.

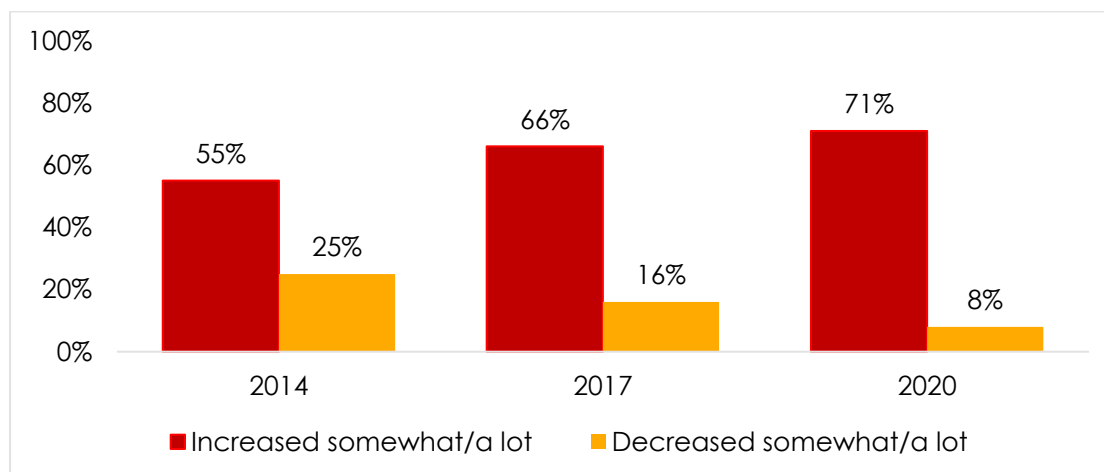
## Key findings

- As of late 2020, seven in 10 Zambians (71%) said the level of corruption in the country increased during the year preceding the survey, up from 55% in 2014.
- Eight in 10 citizens (79%) said the government was handling the fight against corruption “fairly badly” or “very badly” – a significant increase from 66% recorded in 2014.
- Among public institutions that the survey asked about, the police were most widely perceived as corrupt: 54% of Zambians said “most” or “all” police are corrupt.
  - More than half (53%) of respondents who sought police assistance during the preceding year said they had to pay a bribe.
- The proportion of citizens who said that “most” or “all” officials in the Presidency are corrupt has increased steadily, from 18% in 2013 to 40% in 2020.
- Eight in 10 Zambians (79%) said ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities.

## Level of corruption

More than two-thirds (71%) of Zambians said the level of corruption in the country increased “somewhat” (12%) or “a lot” (59%) during the year preceding the survey in late 2020. This reflects a significant increase compared to 2014 and 2017, when 55% and 66%, respectively, said corruption had increased (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Level of corruption | Zambia | 2014-2020**

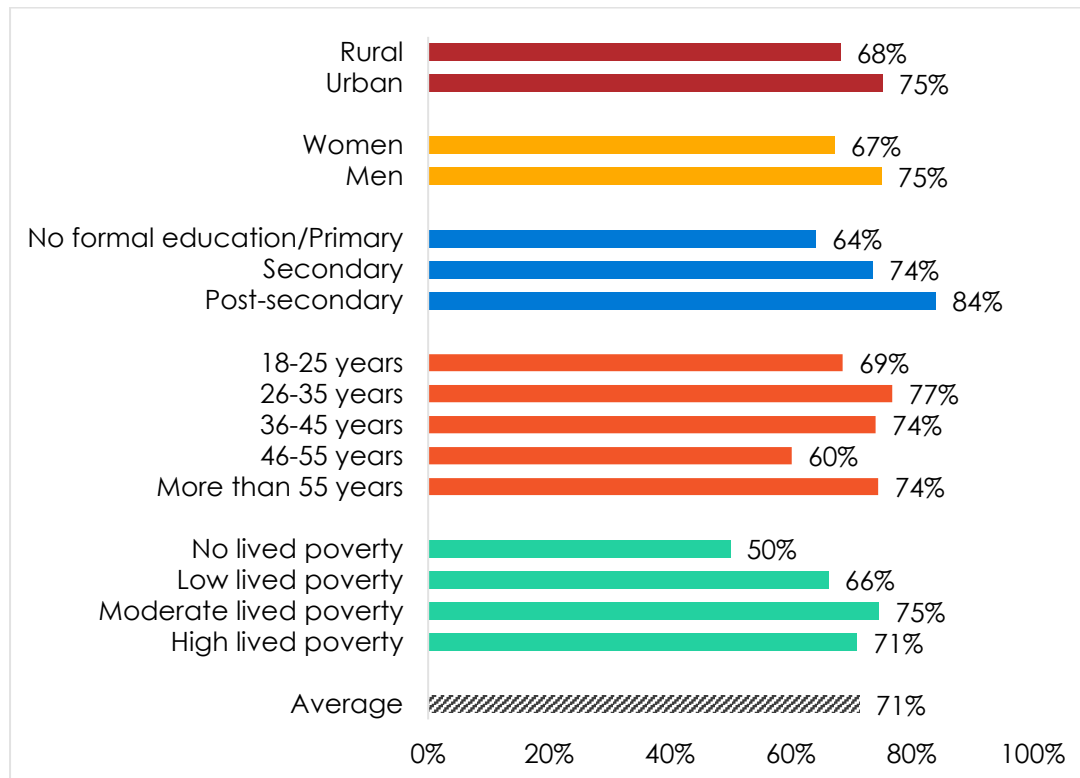


**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?*

Perceptions of increasing corruption were more common among urban residents (75%) and men (75%) than among rural residents (68%) and women (67%) (Figure 2). Citizens with post-secondary education (84%) were more likely than those with less schooling (64%-74%) to report increasing corruption. On the other hand, those experiencing a high or moderate

level of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> were substantially more likely to report increased corruption (71%-75%) than their better-off counterparts (50%-66%).

**Figure 2: Level of corruption increased** | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who said increased “somewhat” or “a lot”)

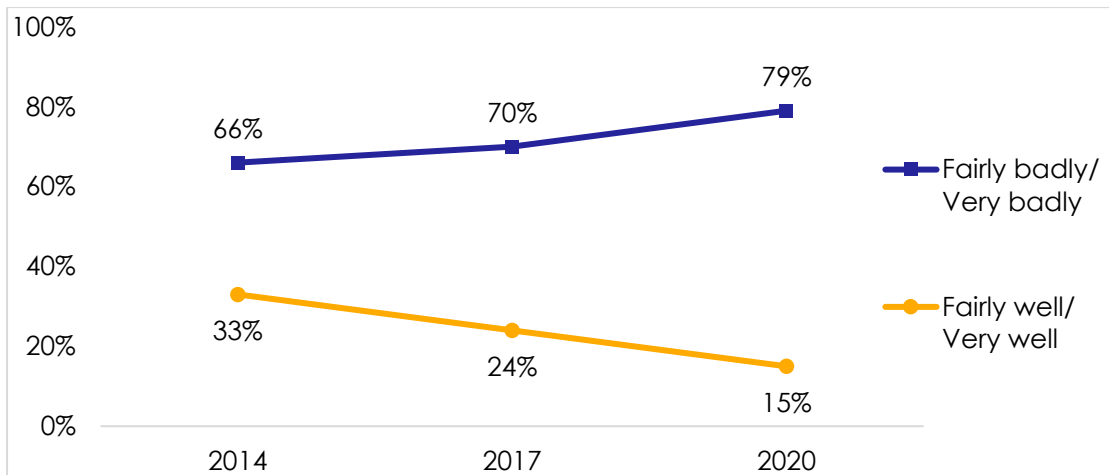
### Government performance fighting corruption

Zambians’ assessments of how well the government handles the fight against corruption have shifted significantly over time – and reached their worst level in 2020. Only 15% said the government was performing “fairly well” or “very well” in its anti-corruption efforts – less than half the approval level in 2014 (33%) (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the share of Zambians who said the government was handling corruption badly grew to 79%.

Assessments of the government’s anti-corruption efforts were almost identical across urban and rural areas and genders (Figure 4). Citizens with post-secondary education (85%) were more likely to see the government as failing in the fight against corruption in government than were those with less schooling (76%-79%). But again, citizens experiencing moderate (81%) or high (85%) levels of lived poverty were more critical than those with low (71%) or no (50%) lived poverty.

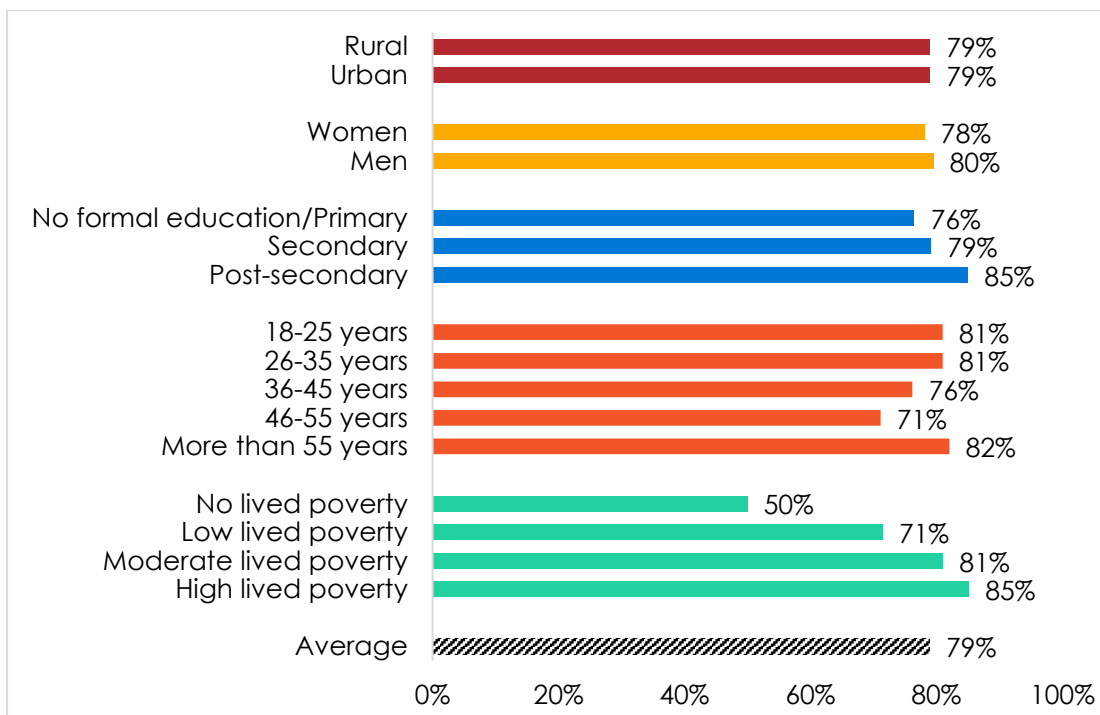
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

**Figure 3: Government handling of the fight against corruption | Zambia | 2014-2020**



**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?

**Figure 4: Government performing badly in the fight against corruption | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020**



**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? (% who said "fairly badly" or "very badly")

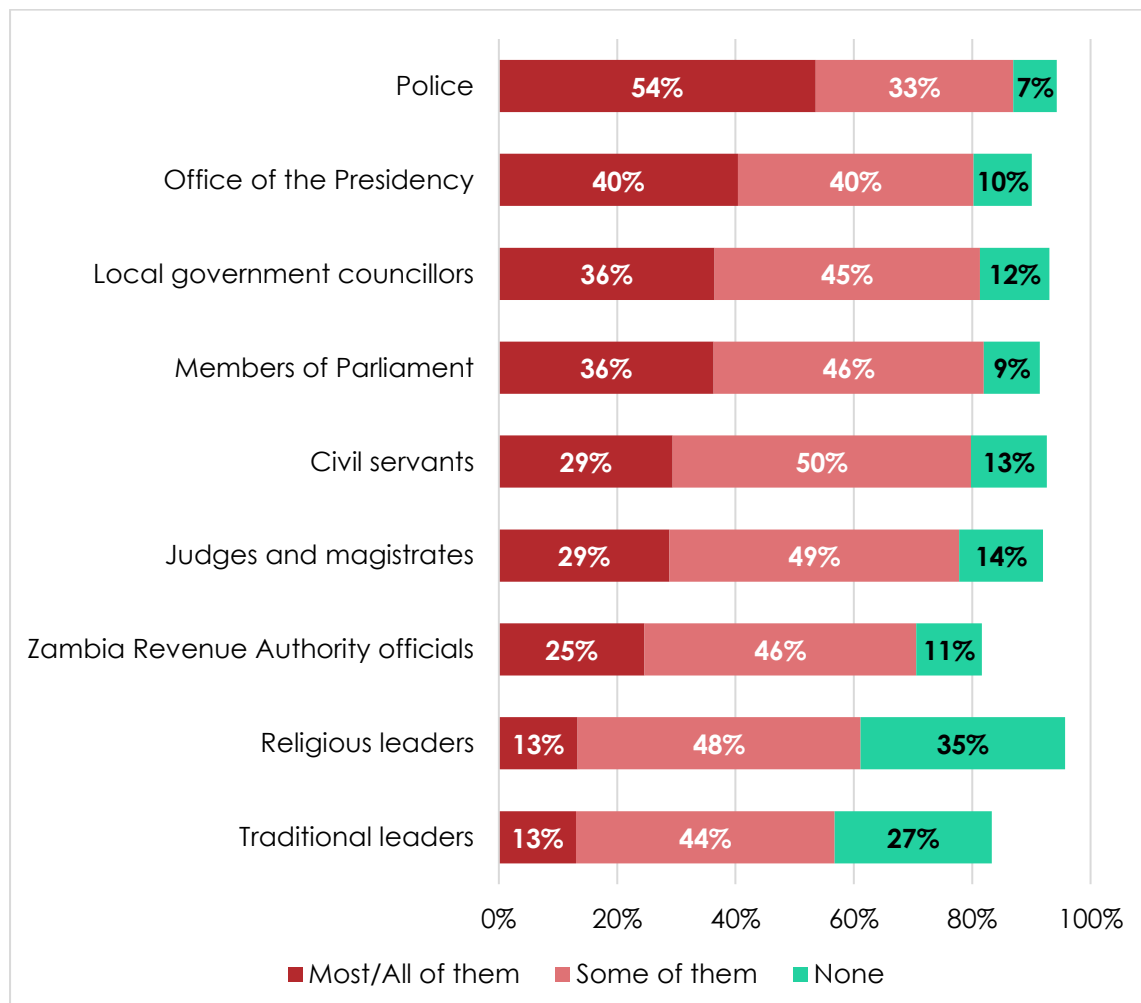
### Who is corrupt?

A majority of citizens saw at least "some" corruption in all of nine key categories of leaders that the survey asked about (Figure 5). As in many African countries, the police were most widely perceived as corrupt: 54% of Zambians said "most" or "all" police are involved in corruption, in addition to 33% who saw "some" of them as corrupt.

Substantial proportions also saw “most” or “all” officials in the Presidency (40%), local government councillors (36%), members of Parliament (MPs) (36%), civil servants (29%), judges and magistrates (29%), and officials in the Zambia Revenue Authority (25%) as corrupt.

Religious and traditional leaders received the best ratings, with 35% and 27% of respondents, respectively, saying that “none” of them are corrupt.

**Figure 5: Perpetrators of corruption | Zambia | 2020**

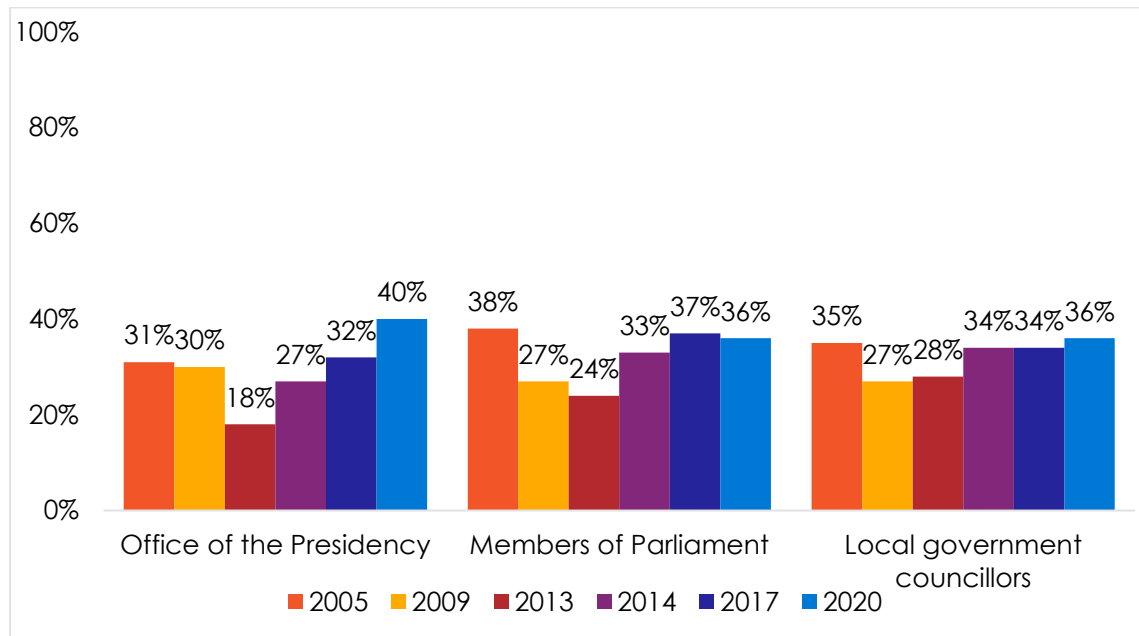


**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Among elected leaders, the Presidency showed the largest increase in perceptions of widespread corruption, climbing from 18% of respondents in 2013 to 40% in 2020 (Figure 6). Perceptions that most/all MPs and local government councillors are corrupt declined between surveys in 2005 and 2013 but have been rising since, returning to 2005 levels.

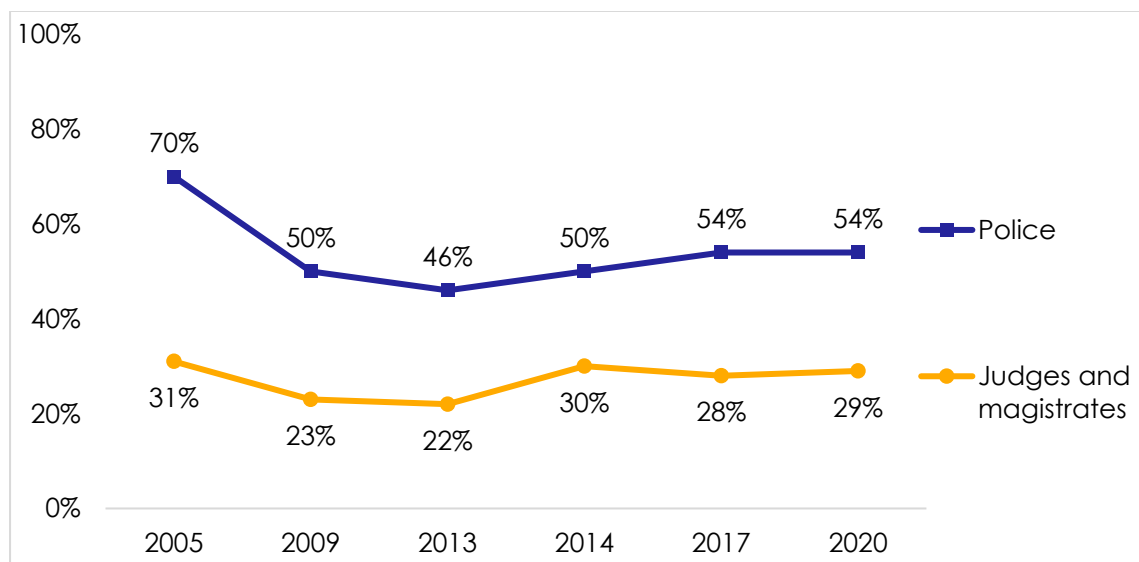
Likewise, perceptions of widespread corruption among the police decreased from 70% in 2005 to 46% in 2013 but have been climbing again since then. Perceptions of corruption among judges and magistrates follow a similar pattern, though at a considerably lower level (Figure 7).

**Figure 6: Most/all elected leaders corrupt | Zambia | 2005-2020**



**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: The president and officials in his office? Members of Parliament? Local government councillors? (% who said "most of them" or "all of them")

**Figure 7: Most/All police and judges corrupt | Zambia | 2005-2020**



**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: Police? Judges and magistrates? (% who said "most of them" or "all of them")

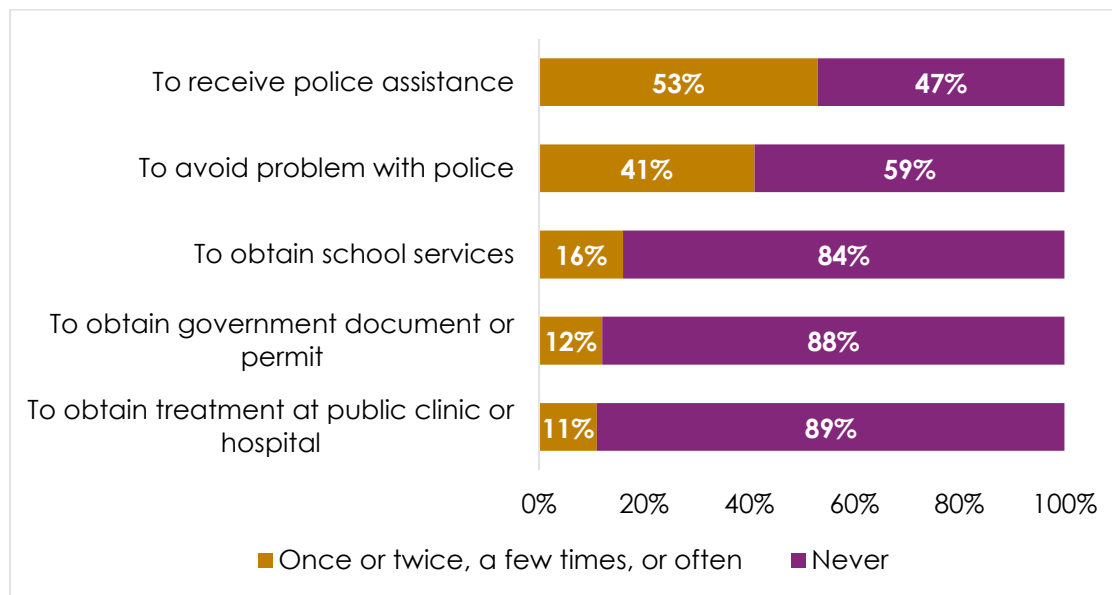
### Experience of corruption

Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they had contact with key public services during the preceding year and, if so, whether they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to obtain the services they needed. The most frequent experiences of having to pay a bribe were among respondents seeking assistance from the police or hoping to avoid a problem

with the police: 53% and 41%, respectively, said they had to pay a bribe “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often” (Figure 8).

About one in six (16%) said they had to pay a bribe to obtain school services, while one in 10 said they did so to obtain a government document or permit (12%) or to get medical care (11%).

**Figure 8: Paid bribes in exchange for public services | Zambia | 2020**

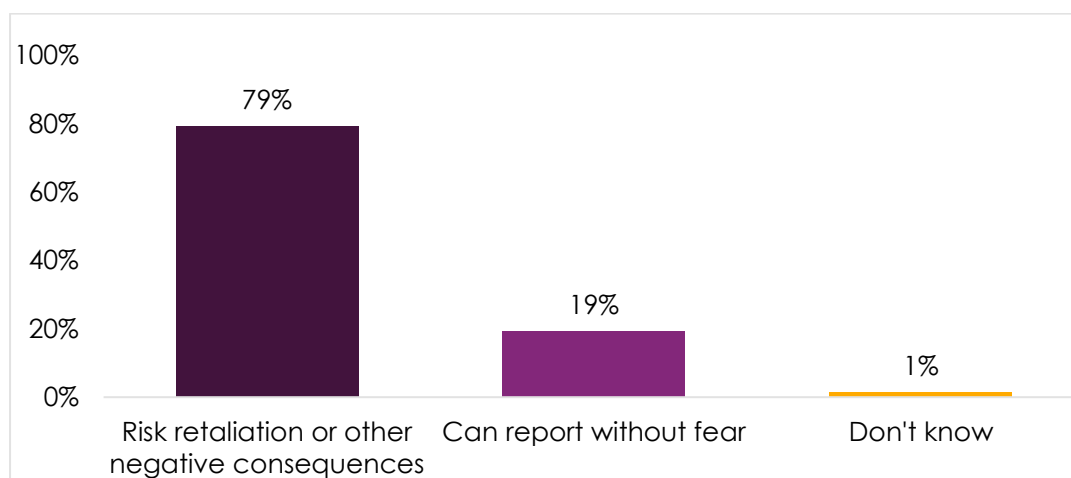


**Respondents who said they had contact with key public services during the previous year were asked:** How often, if ever did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [in order to obtain the needed service]? (Note: Respondents who had no contact with these services are excluded.)

### Reporting corruption

While many Zambians saw corruption as widespread in public institutions, eight in 10 (79%) said ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities (Figure 9).

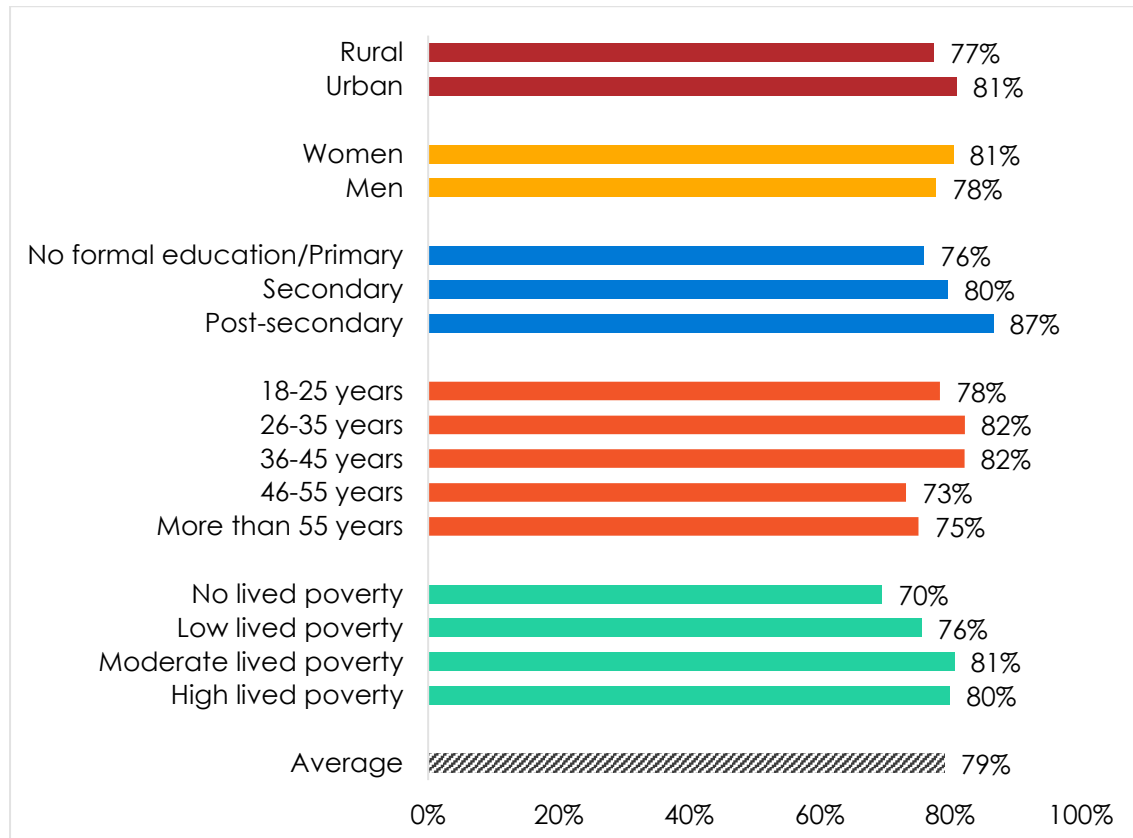
**Figure 9: Reporting corruption | Zambia | 2020**



**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?

The belief that people risk retaliation if they report corruption was most common among respondents with post-secondary education (87%), those experiencing moderate (81%) or high (80%) lived poverty, and those in the 26-45 age bracket (82%) (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: People risk retaliation if they report corruption | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020**



**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? (% who said they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out)*

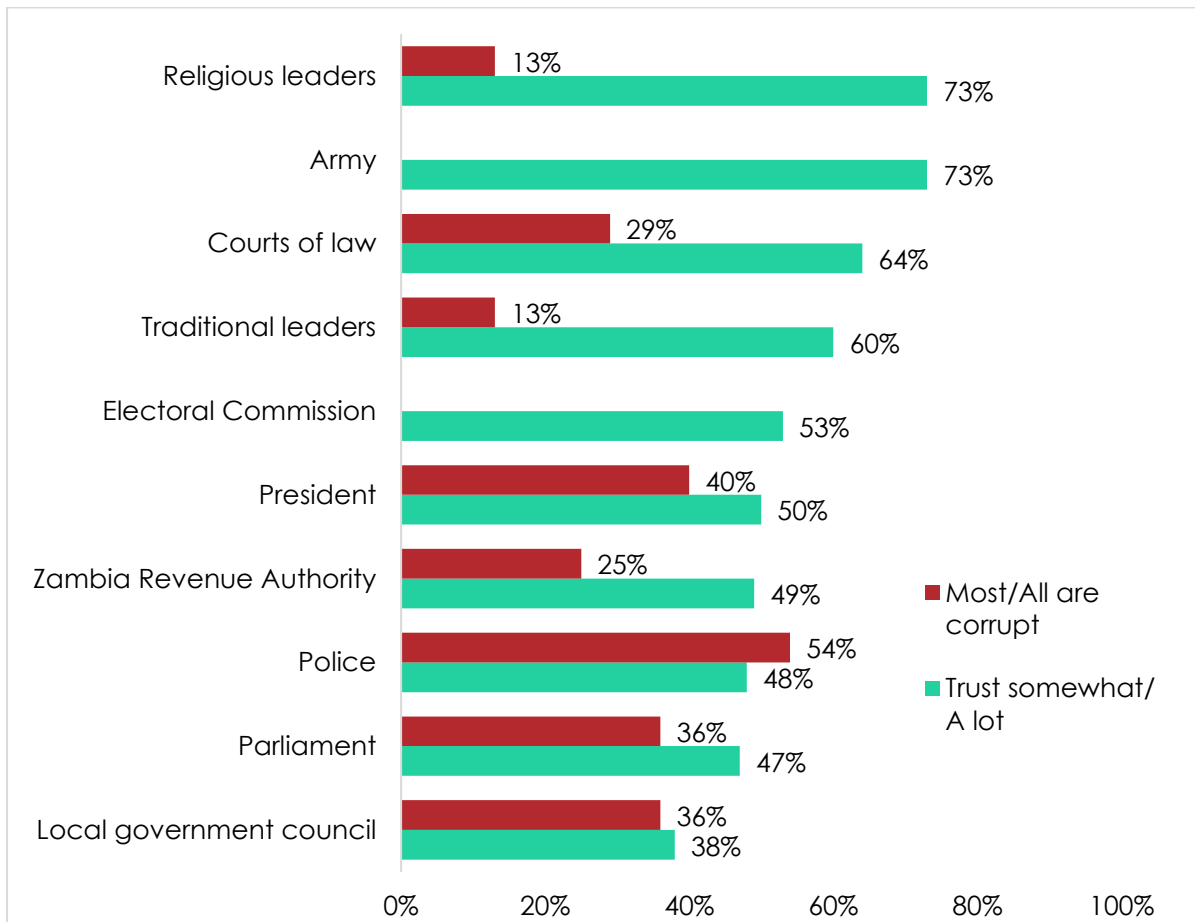
### Trust in institutions and leaders

One of corruption's many negative effects on society is its undermining of public trust in institutions and leaders (Armah-Attoh, Gyimah-Boadi, & Chikwanha, 2007). In Zambia, we see that institutions and leaders more widely seen as corrupt tended to be considered less trustworthy (Figure 11). For example, religious and traditional leaders, whom just 13% of citizens saw as mostly corrupt, enjoyed some of the highest trust ratings (73% and 60%, respectively, who trust them "somewhat" or "a lot"). By contrast, no more than half of Zambians expressed trust in the president, the police, Parliament, and their local government council – all considered largely corrupt by more than one-third of citizens.

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**Figure 11: Trust in institutions | Zambia | 2020**



**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?*

**Conclusion**

As of late 2020, a majority of Zambians said corruption was on the rise and the government was doing a poor job of fighting it. Among government institutions, the police were most widely seen as corrupt, and a large proportion of citizens who dealt with the police reported having to pay a bribe. A growing share of citizens also saw widespread corruption in the Presidency.

Given these perceptions and experiences, the new president's "zero tolerance" pledge is certain to be put to the test. One important challenge to a successful anti-corruption fight may be Zambians' widespread belief that people risk retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, the European Union Delegation to the African Union, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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