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Is Malawi losing the battle against 'Cashgate'?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 149 | Joseph J. Chunga and Jacob Mazalale

Summary

The negative effects of corruption on development are well documented (Lambsdorff, 2004; Açııkay, 2006; Runde, Hameed, & Magpile, 2014; Banerjee, 2016). Malawi's establishment of an Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in 1995 underlined the government's acknowledgement of the problem and determination to deal with it. In 2008, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) was launched to provide a holistic multi-stakeholder front against corruption. At the time, it was estimated that the country was losing one-third of its revenue through corruption (Government of Malawi, 2008). Government institutions were joined in the fight by civil society organisations through the Civil Society Action Against Corruption (CSAAC), the private sector through the Business Action Against Corruption (BAAC), and the media.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the 2013 revelation of massive plundering of government funds, dubbed Cashgate, has called for fresh reflections on the magnitude of corruption and the country's effectiveness in fighting it. Several convictions and sentences have been meted out against "Cashgaters" who defrauded the government through dubious procurements and the manipulation of government information management systems. Cashgate allegations against government and parastatal organisations continue to dominate the media, and many donors have withdrawn aid from Malawi citing concerns about corruption.

Findings from an Afrobarometer/Transparency International survey module suggest a widespread public perception that the country is failing in its fight against corruption. Popular perceptions of corruption are high and increasing over time. Large proportions of Malawians say they have to pay bribes to access various public services. The wealthy, in particular, are widely perceived as likely to use bribery and personal connections to their advantage. Half of all citizens believe that ordinary people can make no difference in the fight against corruption, and there is widespread fear that retaliation and other negative consequence may befall whistle-blowers. Overwhelmingly, Malawians feel the government is performing poorly in fighting 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 in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. The survey module on corruption was supported by Transparency International.

Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

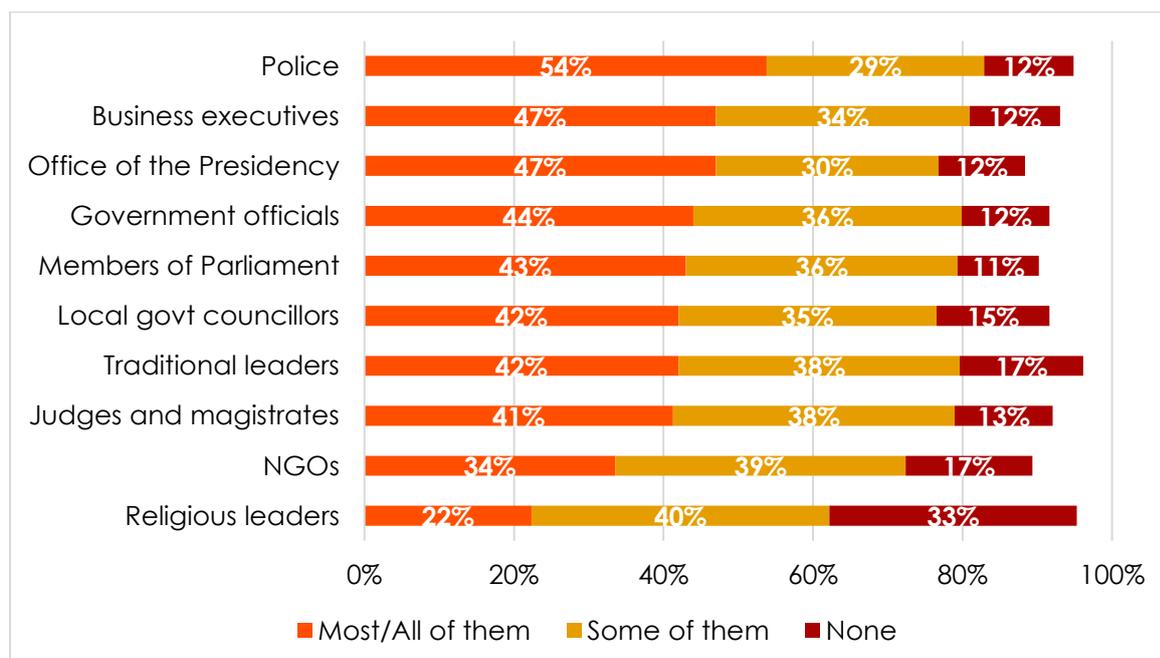
Key findings

- More than seven in 10 Malawians (72%) say corruption has increased over the past year, including two-thirds (66%) who say it has increased “a lot.”
- About half of respondents say that “most” or “all” police officers (54%), business executives (47%), and officials in the Presidency (47%) are involved in corruption. Religious leaders are seen as least corrupt (22%).
- Compared to 2014, popular perceptions of corruption increased in all categories of officials that the survey asked about.
- Most respondents say that the rich are more likely than ordinary people to get away with avoiding taxes, avoiding facing the law in court, or registering land that is not theirs by paying a bribe or using personal connections.
- More than eight in 10 Malawians (81%) say people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out about corruption.
- Citizens say the authorities are less likely to respond to reports of corruption (46%) than to reports of other crimes (69%) or teacher misconduct (60%).
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Malawians say the government is doing a poor job in the fight against corruption.

Corruption seen as rampant – and increasing – among officials

Malawians say corruption is pervasive in the country. A majority (54%) say that “most” or “all” police officers are involved in corruption, and almost half of Malawians say the same about the president and his officials (47%) and business executive (47%). Conversely, religious leaders (22%) and leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (34%) are considered least corrupt (Figure 1).

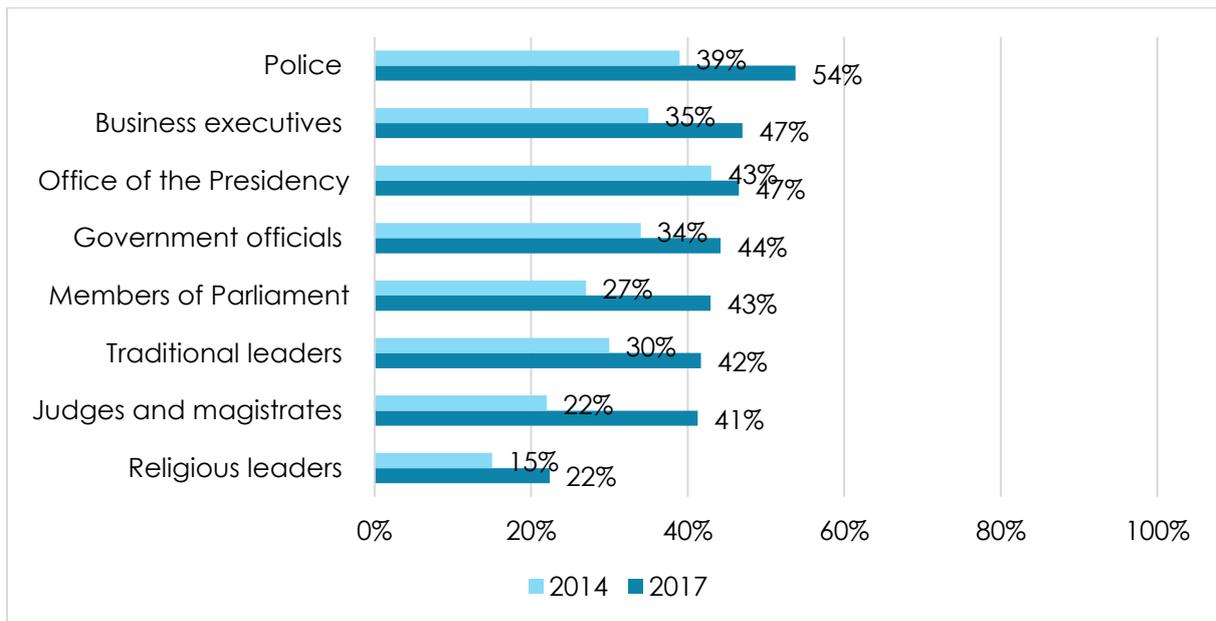
Figure 1: Corruption among public officials | Malawi | 2017



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?

The proportion of Malawians who think that most or all officials of various kinds are corrupt has increased compared to the 2014 Afrobarometer survey. This is consistent across offices (Figure 2). The police, the president and his officials, and business executives remain at the top of the list in popular perceptions of corruptions, while religious leaders continue to rank as the least corrupt. There is a huge increase (19 percentage points) in the proportion of Malawians who think that most or all judges and magistrates are corrupt, jumping from 22% in 2014 to 41%. The next-biggest increase was for members of Parliament (16 points) and the police (15 points).

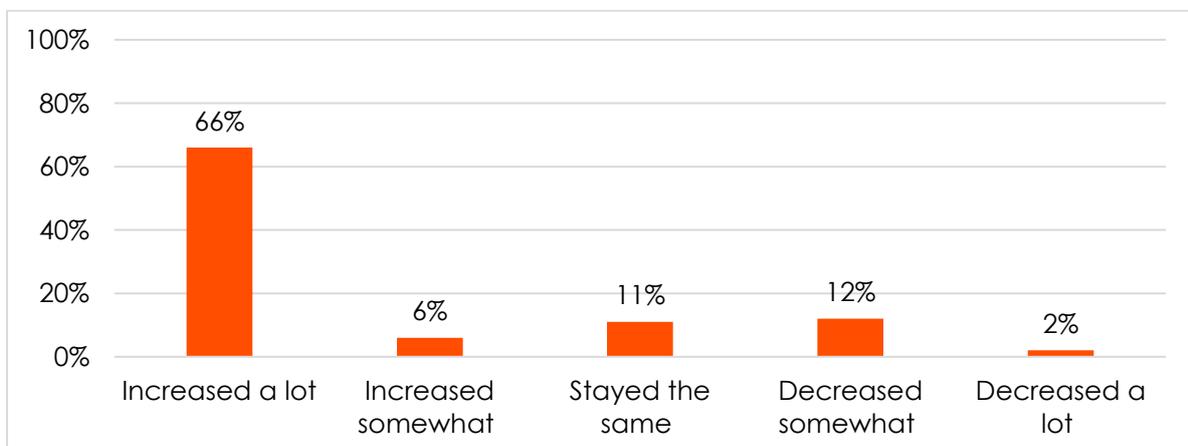
Figure 2: Trends in corruption among leaders | Malawi | 2014-2017



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? (% who say "most" or "all" of them are corrupt)

Overall, more than seven in 10 Malawians (72%) say corruption in the country has increased over the past year, including 66% who say it has increased "a lot" (Figure 3) Only 14% say corruption has decreased, while 11% say it has remained constant.

Figure 3: Increased levels of corruption | Malawi | 2017

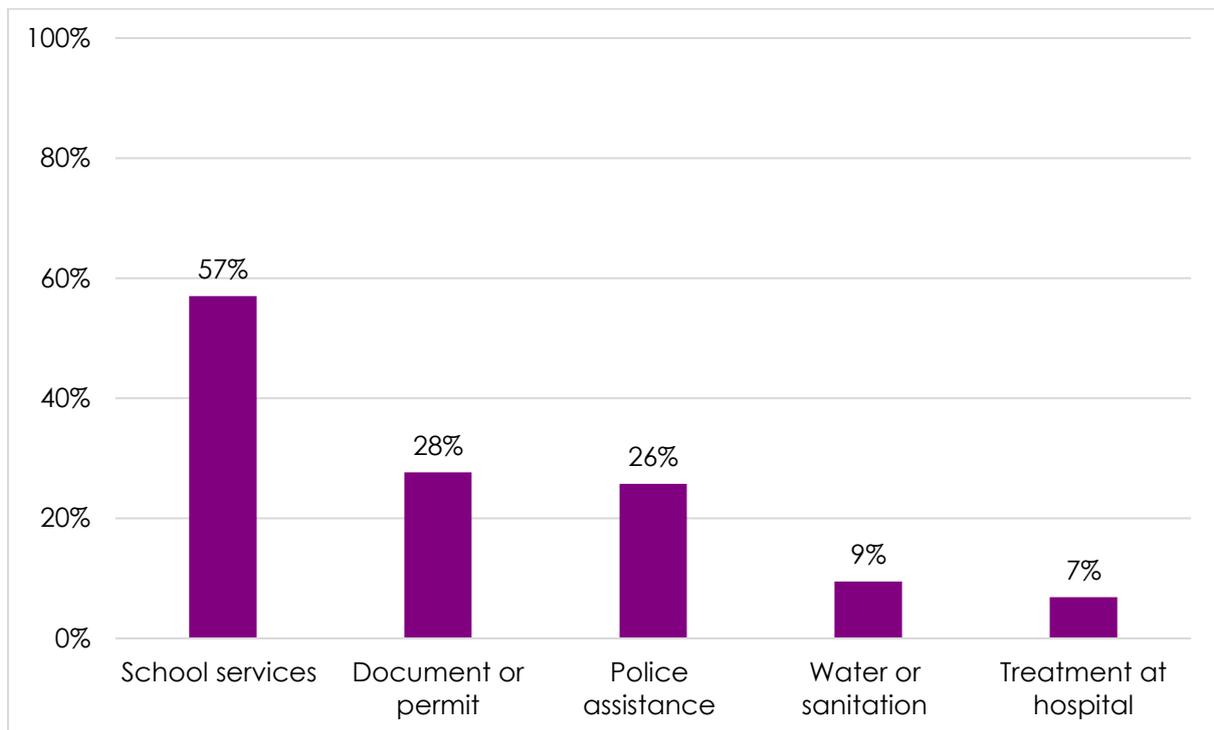


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Bribes to access public services: Personal experiences

Among respondents who said they had sought to obtain various public services during the year preceding the survey, substantial proportions say they had to pay bribes to get the assistance they needed. This was most prevalent for education services: More than half (57%) of respondents who sought assistance at public schools say they paid a bribe “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often.” More than one-fourth of respondents say the same about obtaining public documents and permits (28%) and for police assistance (26%), while about one in 10 say they paid bribes to get water, sanitation, or electricity services (9%) or health-care services in a public clinic or hospital (7%).

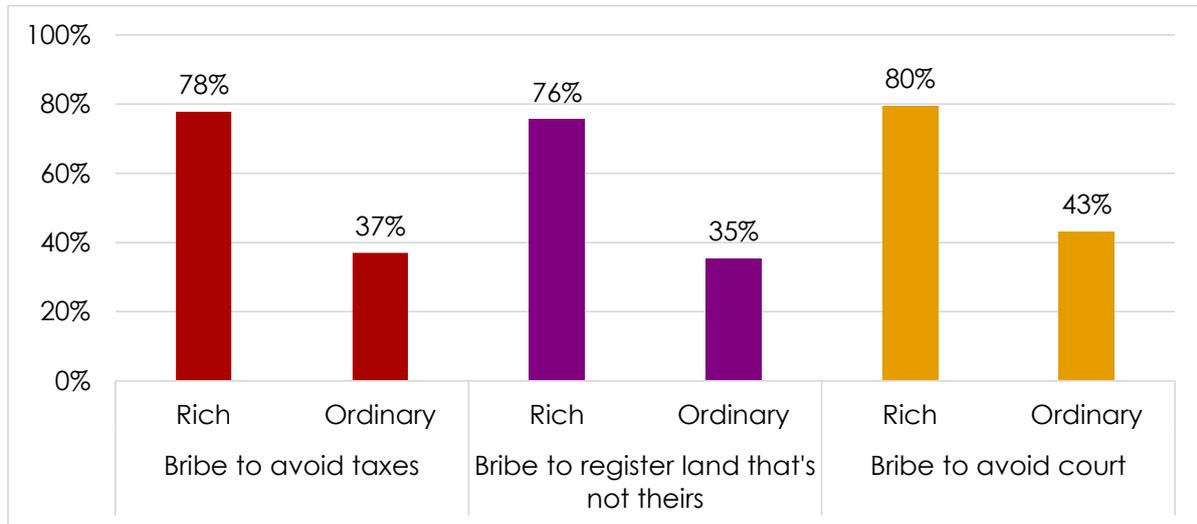
Figure 4: Paying bribes to obtain public services | Malawi | 2017



Respondents who sought 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 for [a teacher or school official/a health worker or clinic or hospital staff/a government official/a police officer] in order to get the services you needed from them? (% who say “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Overwhelming majorities of respondents say wealthy Malawians are “somewhat” or “very” likely to get away with paying bribes or using personal connections to avoid paying taxes (78%), to register land that’s not theirs (76%), or to avoid going to court (80%) (Figure 5). In contrast, only about half as many respondents say the same about ordinary citizens, though these proportions are still alarmingly high: About four in 10 Malawians believe that ordinary people use these corrupt practices to avoid paying taxes (37%), register land that doesn’t belong to them (35%), or avoid going to court (43%).

Figure 5: Bribery by rich vs. ordinary people | Malawi | 2017

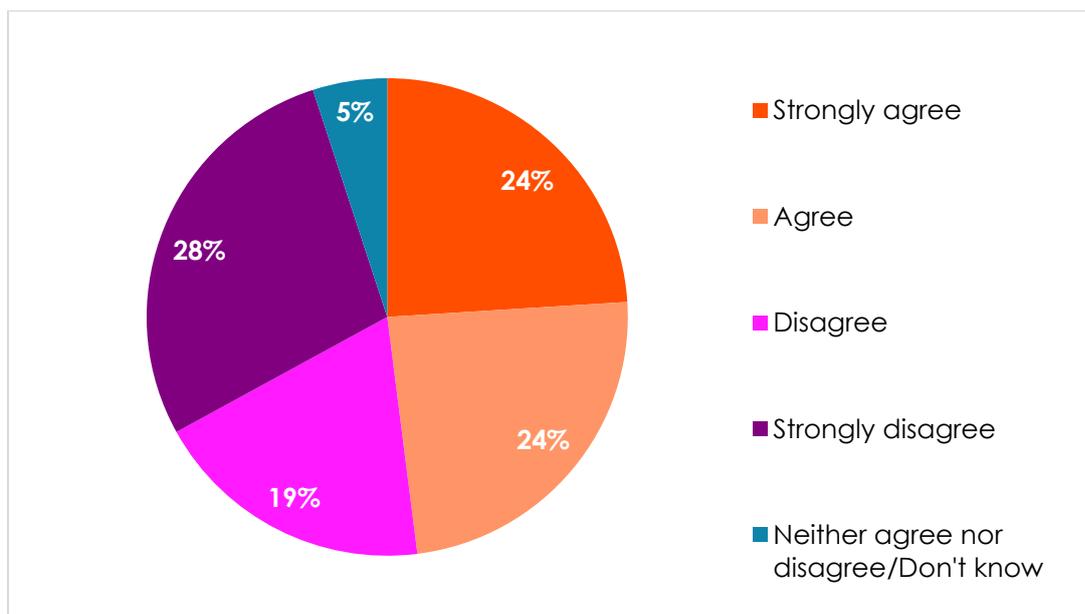


Respondents were asked: In this country, how likely do you think it is that [an ordinary person/a rich person] could pay a bribe or use personal connections to get away with: Avoiding paying taxes they owe to government? Avoiding going to court? Registering land that does not belong to them? (% who say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

Fighting corruption

Malawi's National Anti-Corruption Strategy is built around the idea of concerted efforts by all stakeholders, emphasizing "public involvement as the bedrock for supporting the anti-corruption drive" (Government of Malawi, 2008, p. 7). But only about half (47%) of Malawians believe that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption, while about the same proportion (48%) say they cannot (Figure 6).

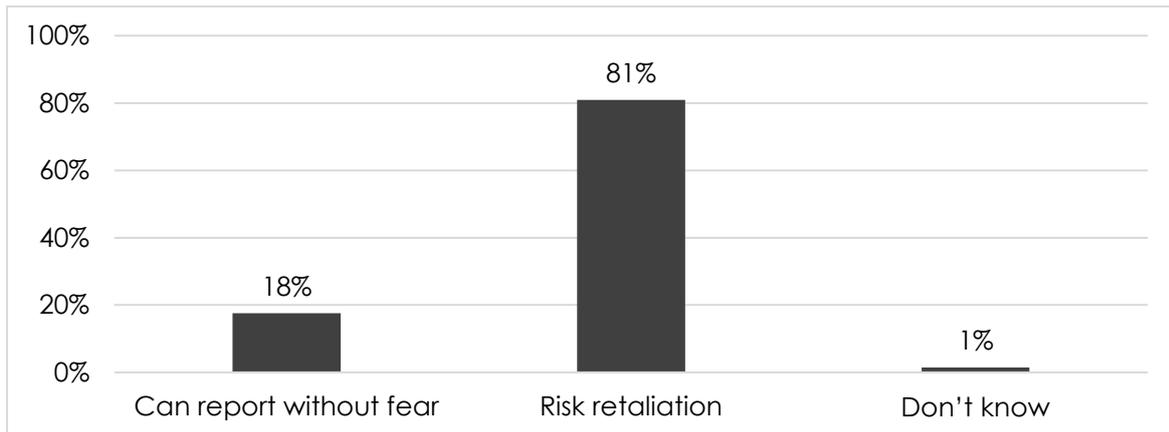
Figure 6: Can ordinary people make a difference in corruption fight? | Malawi | 2017



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.

One key avenue through which ordinary people might be able to fight corruption is through reporting cases they experience or witness. This requires an environment in which people feel safe to report corruption. According to finding of this survey, more than eight in 10 Malawians (81%) say that reporting corruption to authorities exposes people to risks of retaliation or other negative consequences. Only 18% think that ordinary people can report corruption without fear of any repercussions (Figure 7).

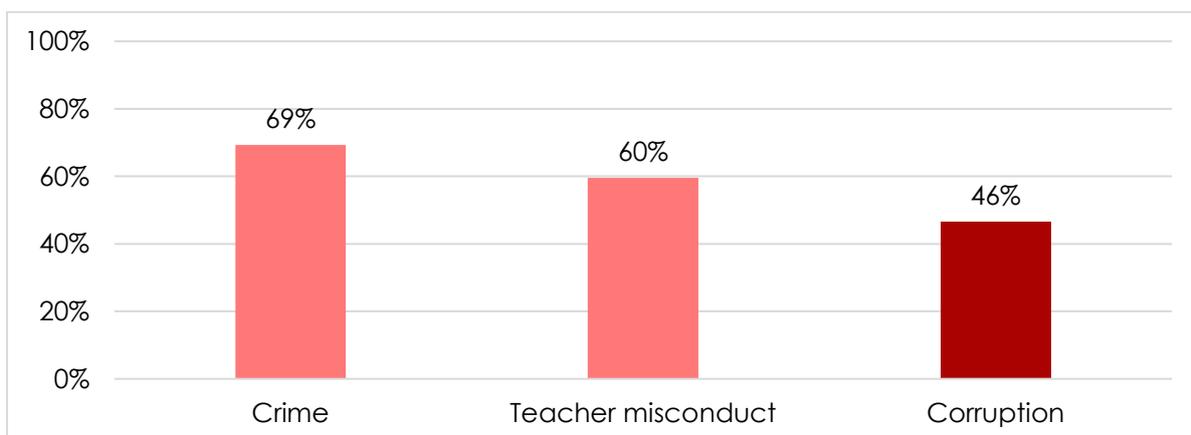
Figure 7: Risk of reporting corruption | Malawi | 2017



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?*

Moreover, there is a fairly widespread feeling that even if one reports corruption, the authorities are unlikely to take action. About half (48%) of Malawians say that public officers are “not at all likely” or “not very likely” to act on reports of corruption, while 46% say they are “somewhat” or “very” likely to respond. Expectations that the authorities will take action are lower in cases of corruption than in cases of other crimes reported to police (69%) or teacher misconduct reported to a school (60%) (Figure 8).

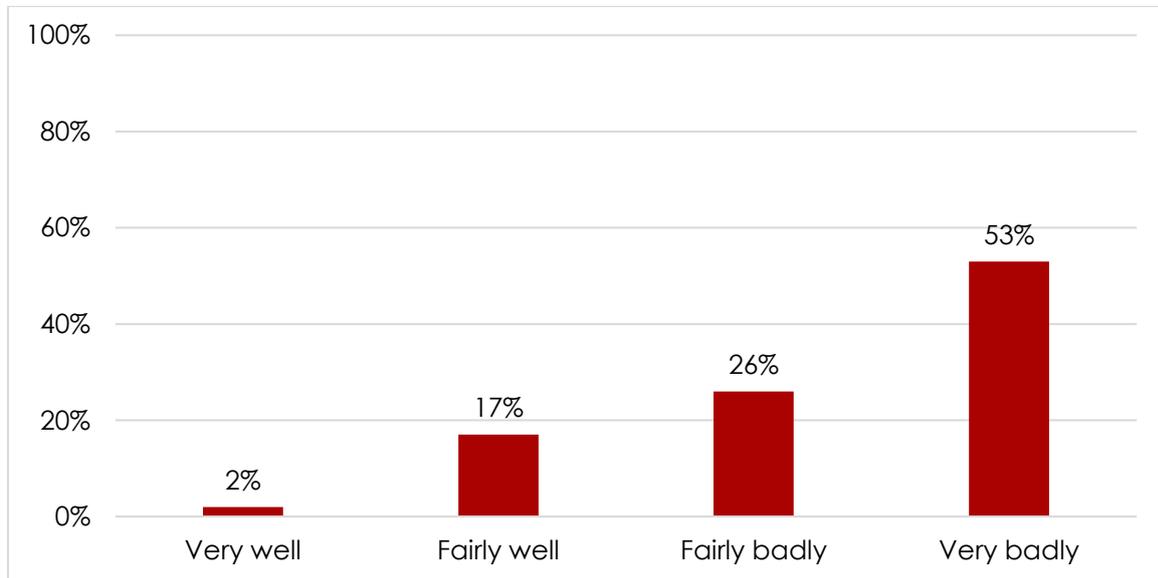
Figure 8: Likelihood of action by authorities in response to corruption reports vs. other complaints | Malawi | 2017



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 the local school to report teacher misbehaviour such as absenteeism or mistreatment of students? If you went to your district council to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes by government officers, police, or school or clinic staff? If you went to the local police to report a crime?*

When asked how well the government is performing in fighting corruption, Malawians overwhelmingly say it is doing “fairly badly” (26%) or “very badly” (53%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Government handling of fighting corruption | Malawi | 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?

Conclusion

Corruption poses a serious challenge to the development of Malawi. Lambsdorff observed that “an increase in corruption by one point on a scale from 10 (highly clean) to 0 (highly corrupt) lowers productivity by 4 per cent of GDP (2004, pp. 10-11). Popular perceptions of increasing levels of corruption are thus cause for concern for a country pursuing economic growth and a public-sector reforms agenda. Especially worrying is that ordinary Malawians fear repercussions if they report corruption, and many doubt that the authorities will take action even if they do blow the whistle. The government's strategy for fighting corruption needs serious reflection about how to inspire the general public to join the fight.

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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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