

Weak public trust, perceptions of corruption mark São Tomé and Príncipe institutions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 200 | Samuel Adusei Baaye and Trey Hale

Summary

Trust, as the “main motor of good governance,” drives legitimacy in government and public institutions, leading toward a well-governed society (Blind, 2006, p. 16; Hetherington, 2005). Trust in institutions supports economic development by promoting financial-sector stability and encouraging investment (Tonkiss, 2009). Trust can also increase voter turnout during elections (Gray & Caul, 2000), encourage a vibrant civil society, and assist with the implementation of government policies, programs, and regulations that depend on citizen cooperation and compliance (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). In extreme cases, a lack of public trust has led to failed states, revolutions, and civil wars (Diamond, 2007).

This dispatch examines popular trust in the political institutions of São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as its relationship to perceptions of corruption. The small island nation enjoys lively competitive elections and is rated as “free” by Freedom House (2018), with high scores on both political rights and civil liberties. Transparency International (2017) ranked São Tomé and Príncipe 64th out of 180 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index (where higher rankings represent lower levels of corruption), seventh-best in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite these favourable ratings, Afrobarometer survey data show that popular trust in state institutions is low while perceptions of corruption are widespread. These findings challenge São Tomeans working to reduce corruption and strengthen public trust in their democratic institutions.

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 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were completed 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 of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

This dispatch reports on findings of the first Afrobarometer survey in São Tomé and Príncipe, which was conducted in July-August 2015 by Afrosondagem of Cape Verde in partnership with a local consultant and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). The sample of 1,196 adult citizens yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- São Tomeans are remarkably mistrustful of state institutions and leaders: Not a single institution that the survey asked about is trusted even “somewhat” by a majority of citizens.

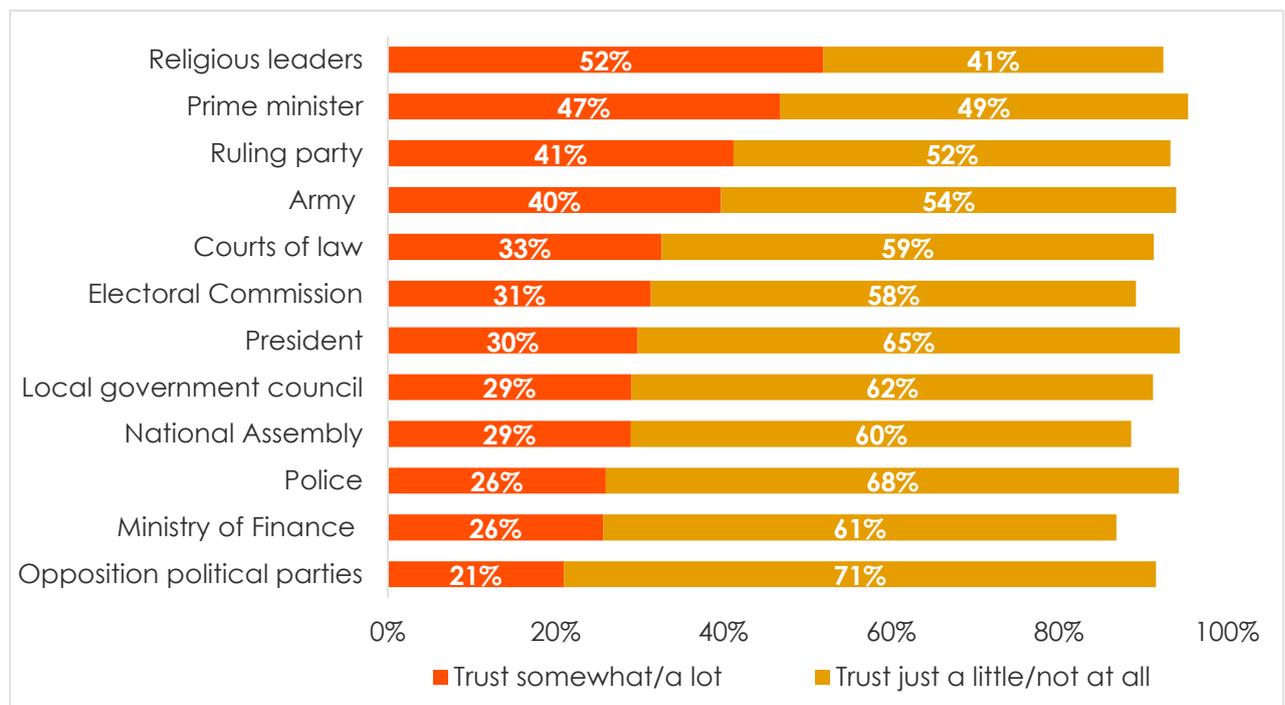
- A majority of São Tomeans see at least “some” officials in most key institutions as being corrupt. The police and judges/magistrates are most widely seen as involved in graft.
- A substantial proportion of citizens say they had to pay bribes to obtain public services during the previous year, especially to the courts and the police.
- Half (52%) of respondents who acknowledge paying a bribe during the previous year say they did not report the incident to the authorities.
- Half (50%) of respondents say people don't report corruption to the authorities because they're afraid of the consequences.
- Citizens who see state institutions as corrupt are less likely to trust those institutions.

Trust in key institutions

To assess levels of popular trust in 12 key institutions and leadership groups, Afrobarometer asks respondents, “How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?”

Remarkably, in São Tomé and Príncipe, not a single state institution the survey asked about is trusted even “somewhat” by a majority of citizens (Figure 1). While 52% of respondents say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” the most trusted state institution, the prime minister, wins the trust (“somewhat” or “a lot”) of just 47%, while 49% say they trust him “just a little” or “not at all.” The prime minister is followed by the ruling party (Independent Democratic Action (ADI) at the time of the survey, 41%) and the army (40%). Fewer than one-third of citizens say they trust other institutions, with opposition political parties bringing up the rear (21%). Only 31% say they trust the National Electoral Commission – a matter of concern if elections are the most important instrument of accountability in a democracy.

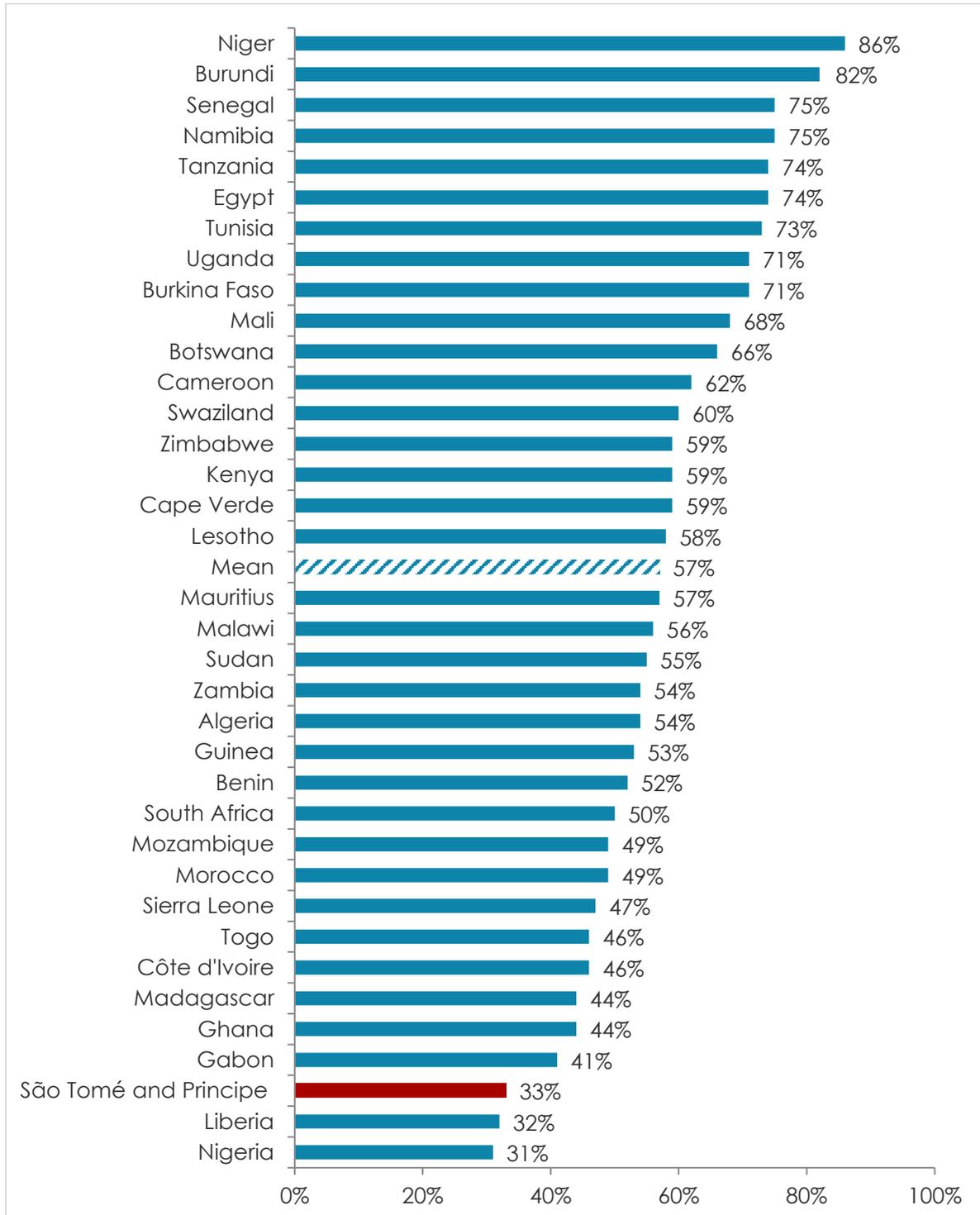
Figure 1: Trust in key institutions | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

These trust levels in core executive institutions (president/prime minister, army, police) place São Tomé and Príncipe near the bottom among 36 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015 (Figure 2) (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016).

Figure 2: Trust in the state* | 36 countries | 2014/2015

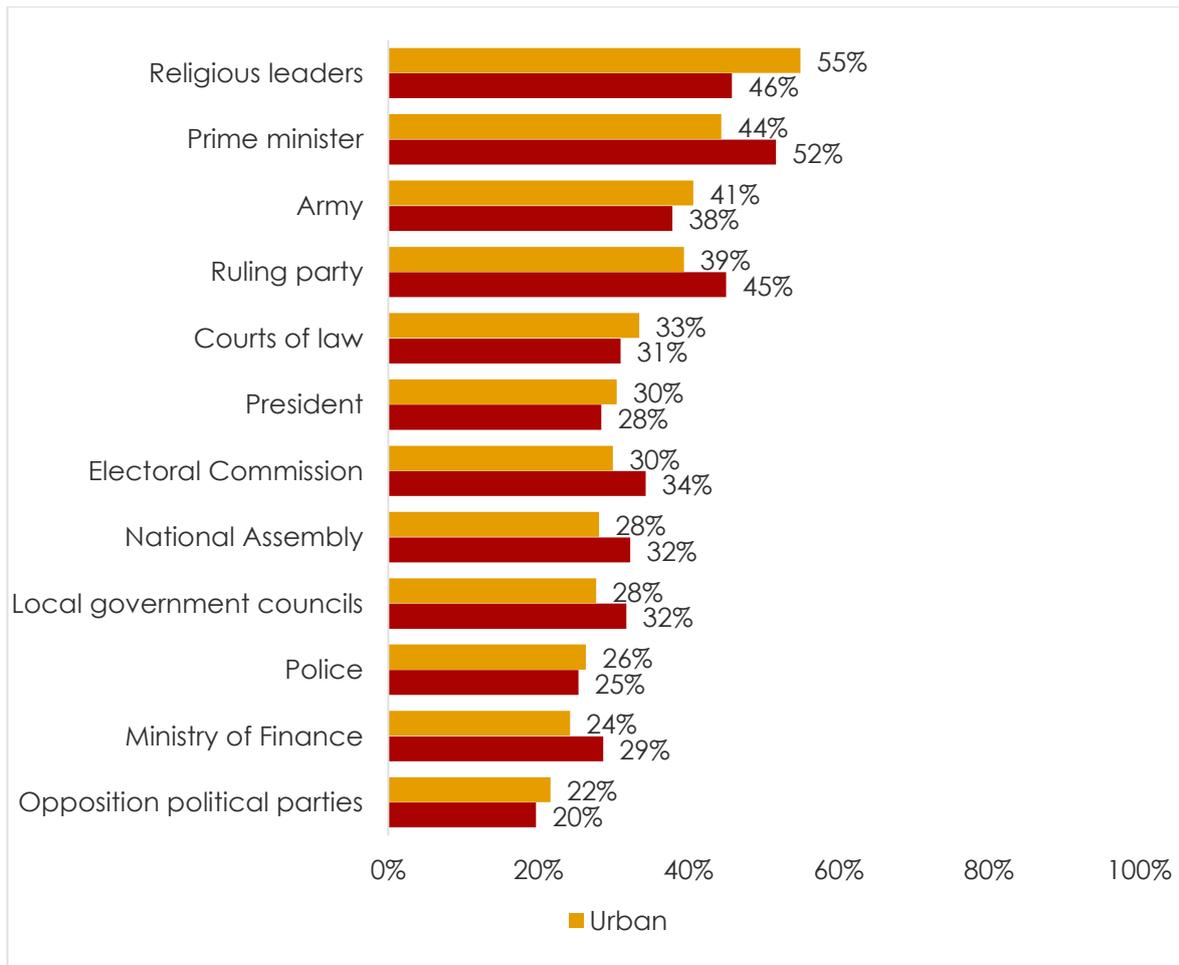


* Core executive institutions only (president or prime minister, army, police)

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

Men and women express similar levels of trust in the institutions of São Tomé and Príncipe. Rural residents are somewhat more likely than their urban counterparts to trust the prime minister (52% vs. 44%), the National Assembly (32% vs. 28%), the Electoral Commission (34% vs. 30%), local government councils (32% vs. 28%), and the Ministry of Finance (29% vs. 24%), and are less likely to trust religious leaders (46% vs. 55%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Trust in key institutions | by urban vs. rural residence | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



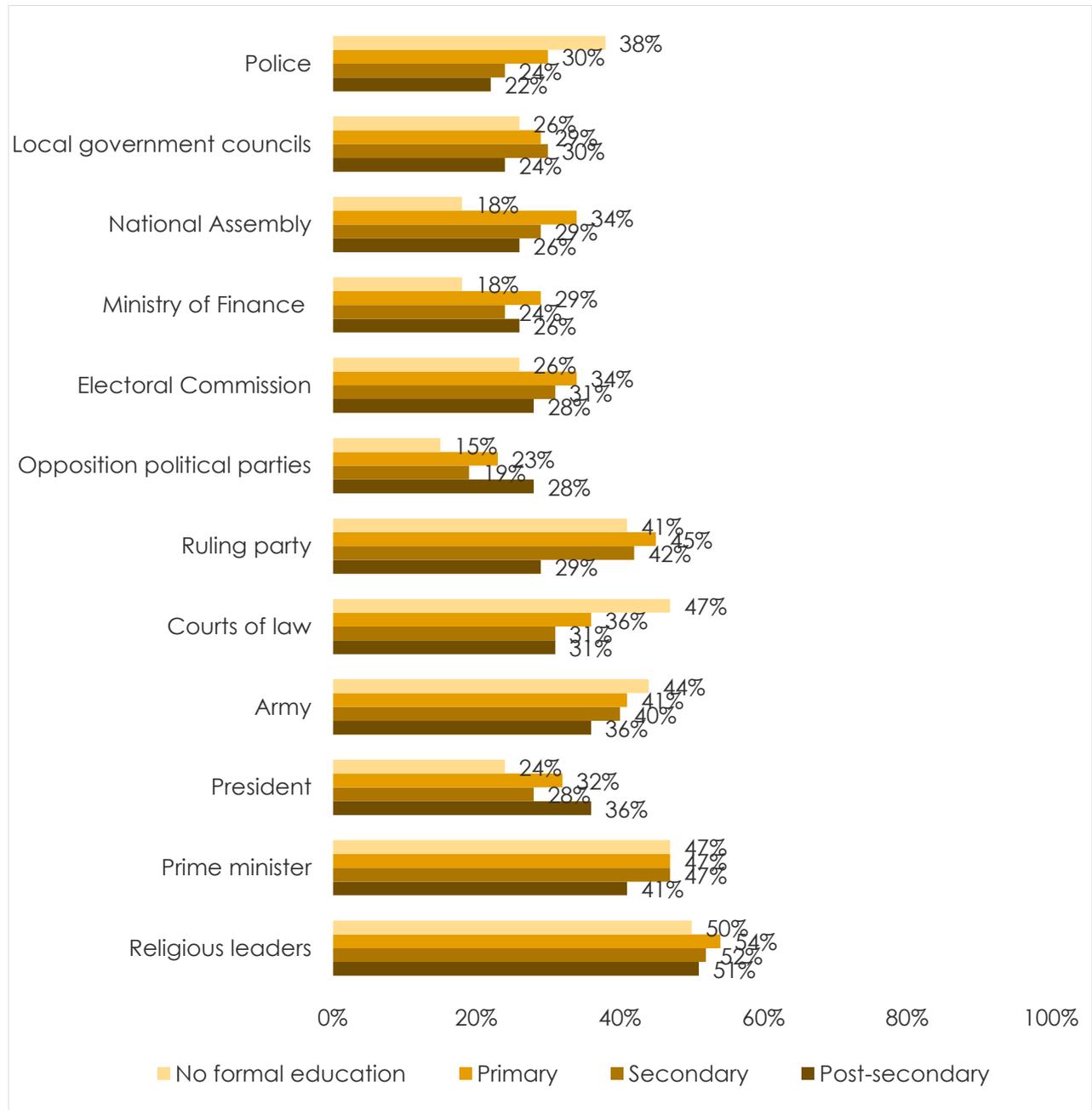
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

As might be expected, trust levels vary by party affiliation,¹ with party adherents expressing more trust in their own parties.

Differences in popular trust based on respondents' educational attainment can be observed for some institutions and political leaders (Figure 4). Trust in the army, police, and courts of law decreases as education levels increase. Those with no formal schooling are least likely to trust the National Assembly, the Ministry of Finance, the president, and opposition parties.

¹ Political party affiliation is measured by responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 4: Trust in key institutions | by educational attainment | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



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")

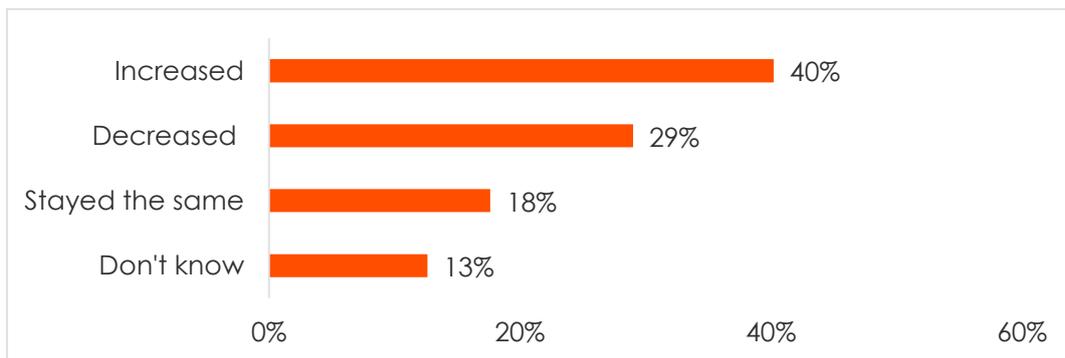
Corruption

If São Tomeans are relatively distrustful of state institutions and political leaders, one plausible contributing factor to explore might be perceptions of official corruption, as prior research has shown that citizens are less likely to trust institutions or leaders if they think they are corrupt (Bratton & Gyimah, 2016). Public-sector corruption, or the appropriation of public resources for private gain (Fukuyama, 2011), can range from minor patronage to institutionalized bribery and kleptocracy (Blind, 2006) and has harmful effects on government services. For

example, corruption in the health sector has been shown to reduce the resources available for health care, thereby lowering the quality and effectiveness of health care services while increasing the cost of provided services (Nordberg & Vian, 2008).

In line with its Transparency International rating, São Tomé and Príncipe's government has won praise for denouncing corruption, passing and publicizing an anti-corruption law, and instituting anti-corruption reforms in the oil sector and the Customs and Tax Department (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Ordinary São Tomeans, however, are not as complimentary: A plurality (40%) say that corruption levels in the country increased during the 12 months before the survey, while 29% say they decreased and 18% say they stayed the same (Figure 5).

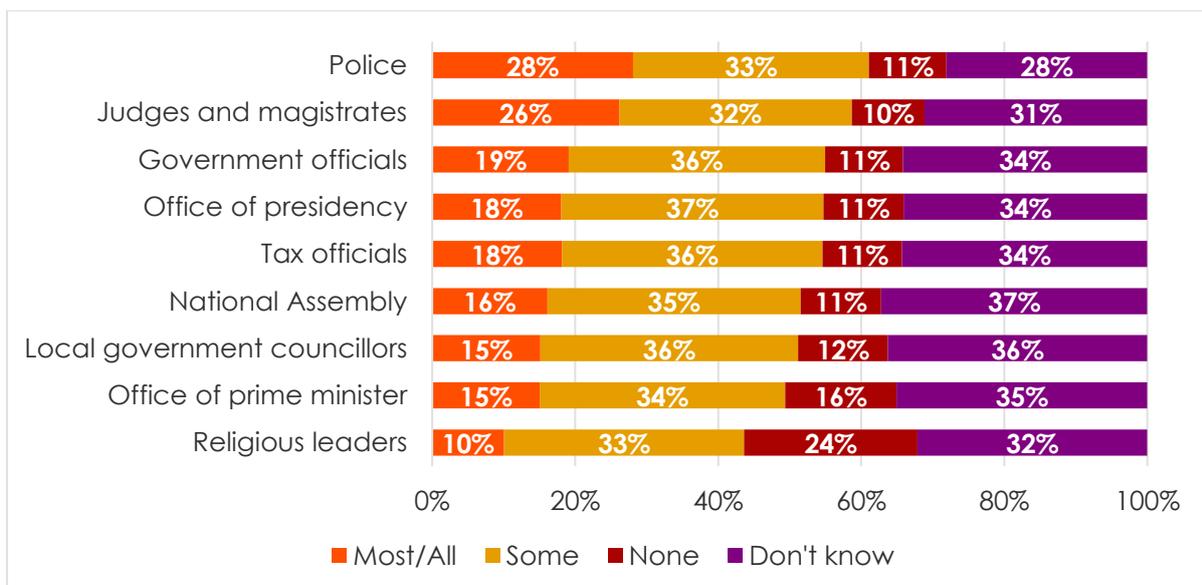
Figure 5: Perceived change in corruption levels | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



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

A majority of São Tomeans view at least "some" officials in most key institutions as being corrupt (Figure 6). The police and judges/magistrates are most widely seen as corrupt; 61% and 59% of respondents, respectively, believe that at least "some" of these officials are corrupt, including 28% and 26%, respectively, who say "most" or "all" of them are corrupt.

Figure 6: Perceived corruption among officials | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



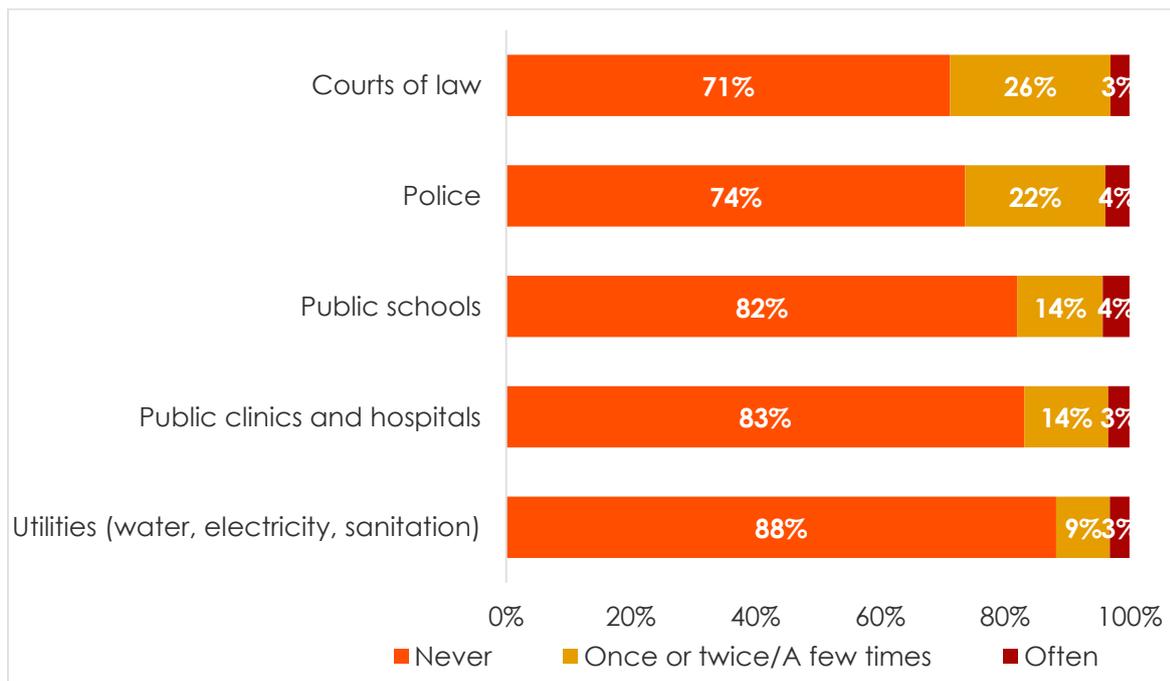
Respondents were asked: *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (Note: Due to rounding, the reported percentages of combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of the sub-categories.)*

Only about one in 10 citizens believe that “none” of the police, judges, government officials, Presidency officials, tax officials, National Assembly members, or local government councillors are corrupt. Slightly more respondents see all prime ministry officials (16%) and religious leaders (24%) as untainted by graft. Notably, large proportions of the population – around three in 10 – say they “don’t know” how many officials are involved in graft – perhaps an indication that, as explored below, they fear retribution.

Afrobarometer also provides insight into perceived levels of corruption in five public sectors involved in delivering public services. Respondents who say they interacted with a public clinic or hospital, a public school, a public utility (water, sanitation, or electricity), the police, or a court of law during the previous year were asked how often, if ever, they had to “pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour” to obtain the needed service.

As shown in Figure 7, three in 10 respondents (29%) who dealt with the courts during the previous year say they had to pay a bribe. The police did only slightly better (26%), followed by public schools (18%) and public clinics and hospitals (17%). The public utility sector had the lowest frequency of bribery or gift-giving (12%). It should be noted that these numbers may be subject to social acceptability bias as some survey respondents may have been unwilling to admit having engaged in corruption.

Figure 7: Bribe-paying to obtain public services | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



Respondents who said they had interacted with the relevant 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 [to obtain needed services]? (Respondents who said they had no contact with these services are excluded.)

The data from São Tomé and Príncipe support the negative relationship between institutional trust and perceived corruption, i.e. the idea that if citizens think given institutions or leaders are corrupt, they are less likely to trust them. Looking at the eight institutions or groups for which Afrobarometer has data on popular trust and perceived corruption, a strong relationship of higher corruption with lower trust holds true for all eight (Table 1).

Table 1: Correlation between trust and corruption | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015

	Pearson correlation coefficient (two-tailed)
Prime minister	-0.36***
Religious leaders	-0.33***
Local government officials	-0.29***
Police	-0.29***
National Assembly	-0.25***
Courts	-0.24***
President	-0.2***
Tax department	-0.19***

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?

*** Significant at $p < 0.001$

While this analysis does not show the direction of causality, it seems intuitive to see perceptions of corruption as influencing an individual's trust in institutions and political leaders, perhaps with a lesser reverse effect. The political science literature often treats corruption as a determinant of trust in political bodies and institutions, as in Diamond's (2007, p. 6) statement that "nothing is more toxic to public trust in government than extensive ... corruption."

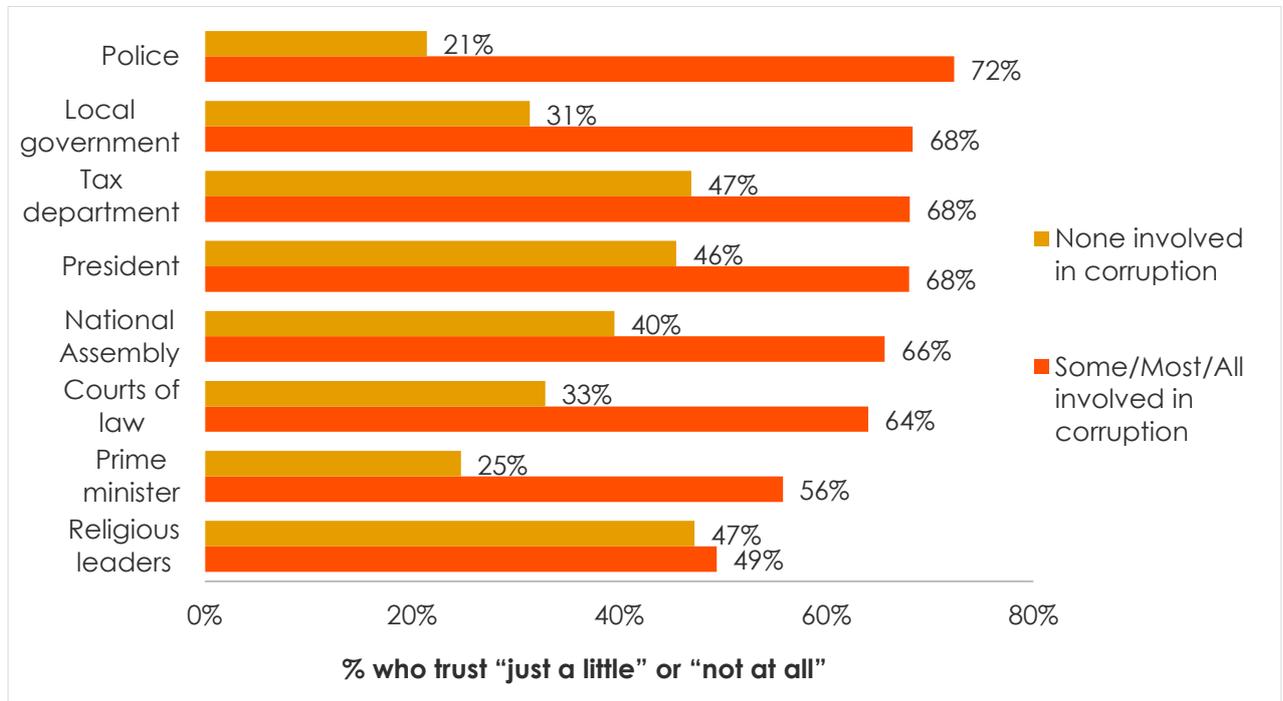
Using this assumption about the direction (shown in Figure 8) of the relationship between corruption and trust, we find that perceived corruption explains up to 13% of the variation in trust in the case of prime minister. In the tax department, the weakest observed relationship, perceived corruption accounts for about 4% of the variation in institutional trust. This shows that someone's perception of corruption can be an important predictor of distrust, though undoubtedly other factors are at play as well.

Figure 8: Assumed direction of corruption effect on trust



Figure 9 illustrates differences in trust based on different levels of perceived corruption. As we would expect, the proportions of those who express "just a little" or no trust are considerably higher among individuals who believe that "some," "most," or "all" of the officials in a given institution are involved in corruption, compared to those who believe that "none of them" are corrupt. For example, among those who believe that at least some police officers are corrupt, 72% mistrust the police, compared to 22% of those who say that "none" of the police are involved in corruption.

Figure 9: Lack of trust in key institutions by perceived level of corruption | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



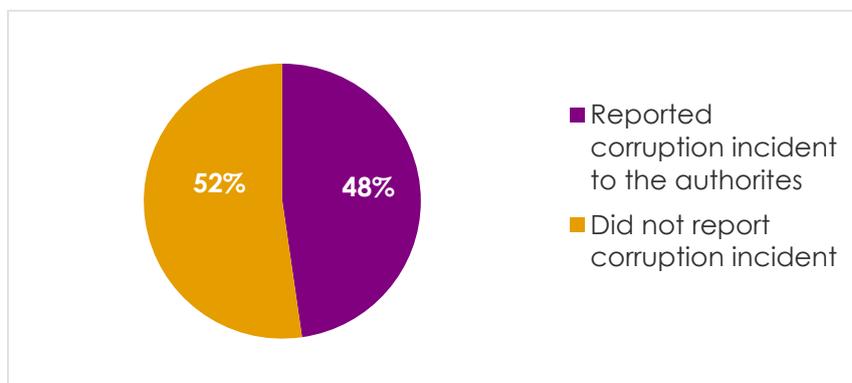
Respondents were asked:

- 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? (Figure shows % who say they trust them "just a little" or "not at all")

Popular response to corruption

If perceived corruption is a driver of popular mistrust, does it get the popular response it deserves? Media outlets may seize the opportunity to cover high-profile corruption cases, but many instances of corruption fly under the radar. In São Tomé and Príncipe, Afrobarometer found that of all respondents who say they paid bribes to obtain public services during the previous year, half (52%) did report these incidents to the authorities (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Reported corruption incident to authorities | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015

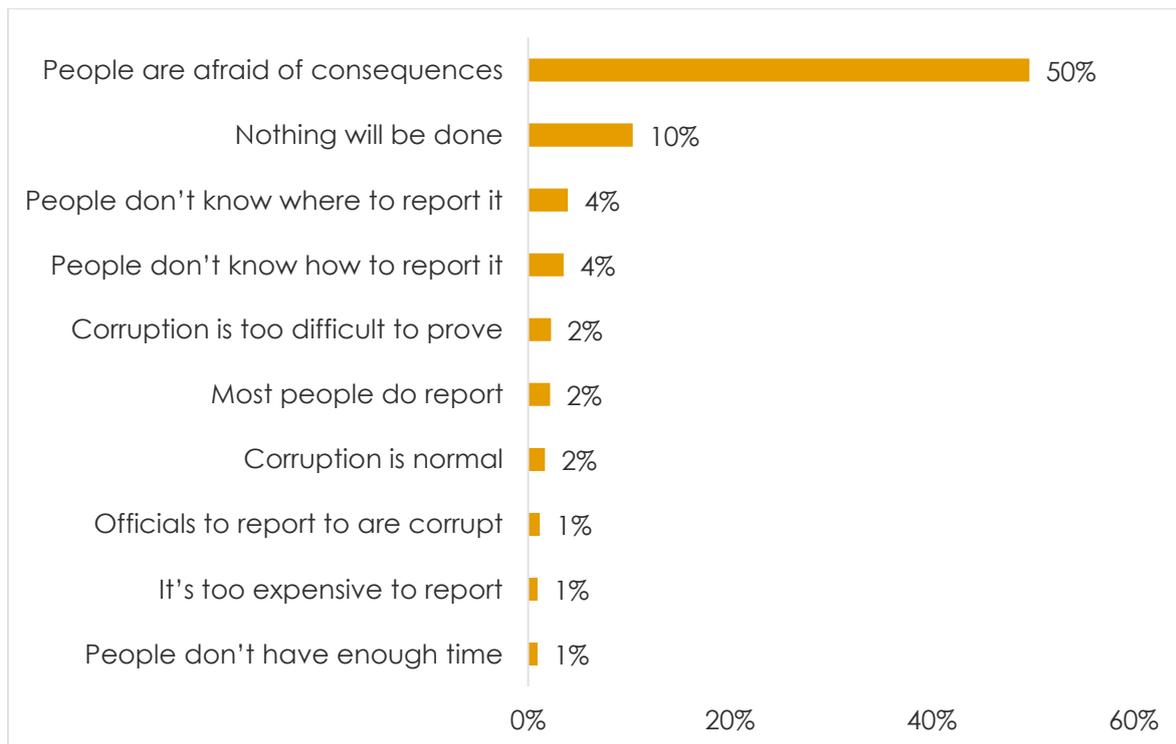


Respondents were asked: If you ever paid a bribe for any of the services discussed above, did you report any of the incidents you mentioned to a government official or someone in authority? (Respondents who had no contact with these services or say they did not pay bribes are excluded.)

When São Tomeans are asked why people don't report corruption incidents, by far the most common answer (50%) is that they are "afraid of the consequences" (Figure 11). One in 10 (10%) say that "nothing will be done" if corruption is reported, while 7% say they don't know where or how to report it. About one in five respondents (21%) say they don't know why people don't report corruption they experience or witness.

Widespread fear of negative consequences feeds into a vicious cycle in which corruption leads individuals to mistrust public institutions and avoid confronting corruption, further undermining trust.

Figure 11: Reasons for not reporting corruption | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015

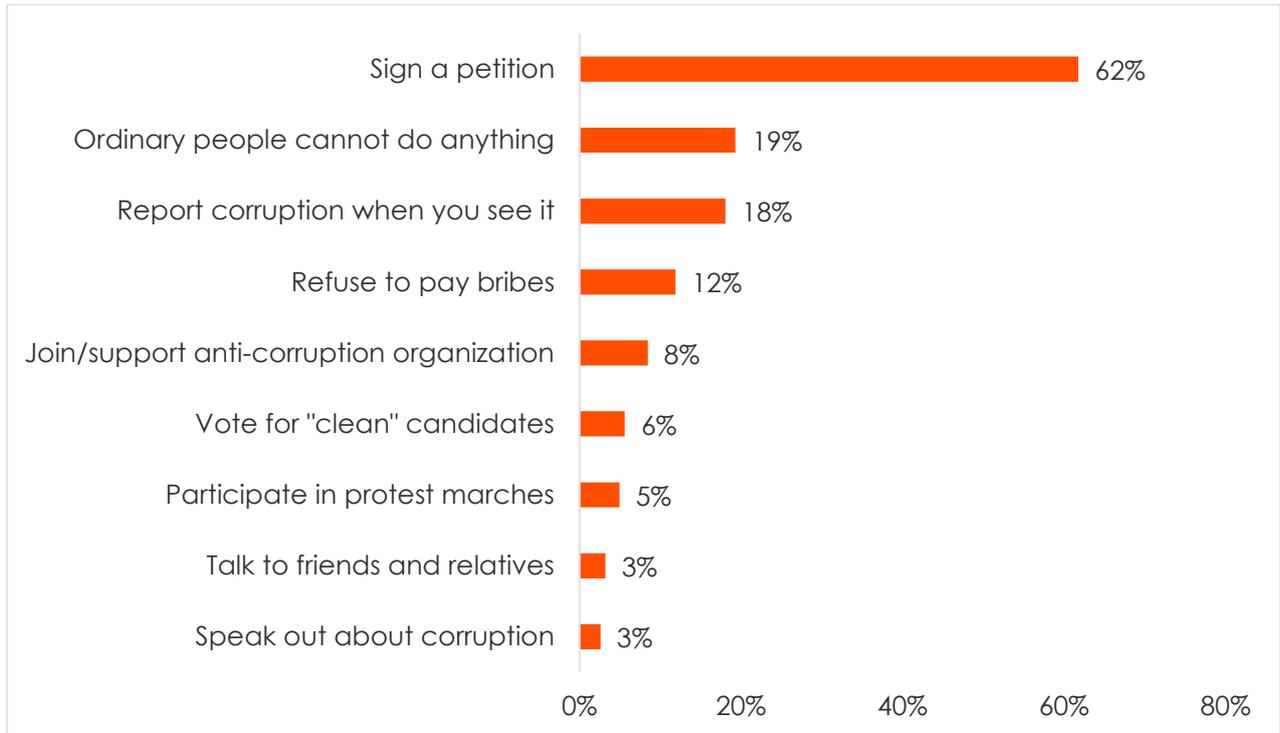


Respondents were asked: Some people say that many incidents of corruption are never reported. Based on your experience, what do you think is the main reason why many people do not report corruption when it occurs?

Effectively combating corruption takes political will and dedication from political leaders, an active and engaged civil society, and strong governance measures that can effectively check and respond to instances of corruption. Additionally, citizens can play an active role in combating corruption from the ground up. Half (50%) of surveyed São Tomeans agree that "ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption."

The most effective thing that ordinary people can do to help fight corruption, according to São Tomeans, is to sign a petition (62%) (Figure 12). Fewer than one in five respondents mention reporting corruption (18%) and refusing to pay bribes (12%). About two in 10 say that "ordinary people cannot do anything" (19%) or that they don't know (22%).

Figure 12: Most effective thing ordinary people can do to fight corruption
 | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2015



Respondents were asked: What is the most effective thing ordinary people like you can do to help combat corruption in this country?

Conclusion

The question of why São Tomeans trust – or don't trust – their political leaders and institutions leaves ample room for future research. But perceived corruption appears to play a role, with potential harmful consequences for the legitimacy of state institutions. The country's leaders have demonstrated an interest in curbing corruption. These findings linking perceived corruption and institutional trust support further measures in that direction.

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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