

Losing the war on graft? Tunisians dissatisfied with government's anti-corruption performance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 247 | Youssef Meddeb

Summary

Public outrage over official corruption was one of the main reasons for the wave of protests in 2010-2011 that led to the overthrow of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Just one day after Ben Ali's departure, the provisional government established a National Commission of Enquiry into Misappropriation and Corruption (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017). Laws and other mechanisms were adopted to try to tackle corruption, including the 2014 Constitution, which aims at addressing bad governance and corruption; the framework for Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's government, which lists fighting corruption as its third priority; and a whistle-blower protection law.

Yet a report of the National Commission of Enquiry into Misappropriation and Corruption revealed in November 2011 that corruption had increased at many levels of state institutions and society (National Strategy for Good Governance and Fight against Corruption, 2016). National and international reports and studies confirm the commission's revelations. The 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Tunisia 74th out of 180 countries, an insignificant change from 73rd in 2011 (Transparency International, 2018).

Afrobarometer survey findings paint a similar picture. Tunisian citizens say corruption continues to increase, and they consider it the third-most-important problem that the government needs to address. However, to a large majority of Tunisians, the government is performing poorly in its fight against 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 completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult Tunisians in April-May 2018. 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 Tunisia in 2013 and 2015.

Key findings

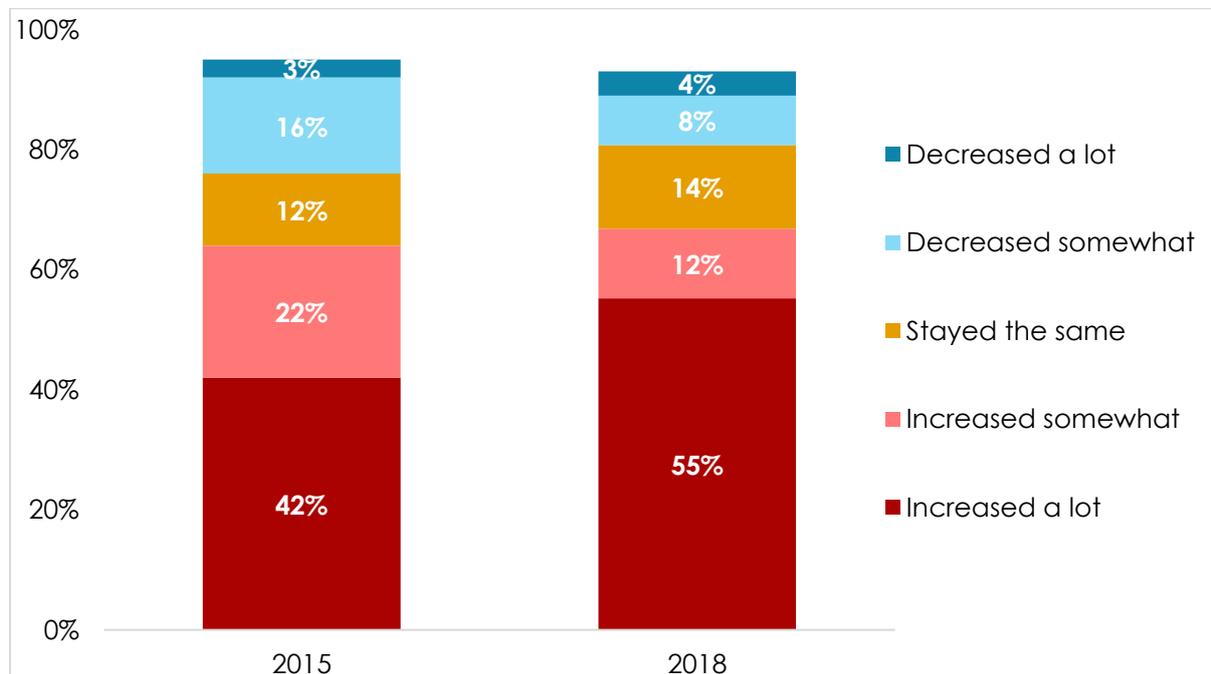
- Two-thirds (67%) of Tunisians say corruption has increased "somewhat" or "a lot" over the past year – no improvement in citizens' perceptions compared to 2015 (64%).
- Corruption ranks third among the most important problems that citizens want the government to address.

- To a large majority of Tunisians (64%), government is performing poorly in its fight against corruption. Citizens' assessments of government efforts in fighting corruption have remained critical since 2013 (67%).
- Government officials and members of Parliament are perceived to be the most corrupt. Three in 10 Tunisians say "all" or "most" government officials (31%) and members of Parliament (30%) are corrupt. Judges and traditional leaders are rated the least corrupt; 16% of respondents say "all" or "most" are corrupt.
- Perceived corruption in Parliament and the Presidency has increased by 13 and 7 percentage points, respectively, compared to 2015.
- Although a majority of Tunisians think that ordinary citizens can make a difference in fighting corruption, 61% say that people risk retaliation if they report incidents of corruption.
- Tunisians are divided as to whether authorities will act if they report corrupt behaviour.

Is corruption increasing in Tunisia?

Two-thirds (67%) of Tunisians say that overall levels of corruption in the country increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the year preceding the survey. While this assessment is similar to perceptions in Afrobarometer's 2015 survey (64%), the proportion of citizens who say that corruption levels increased "a lot" grew from 42% in 2015 to 55% in 2018, a 13-percentage-points increase in three years (Figure 1).

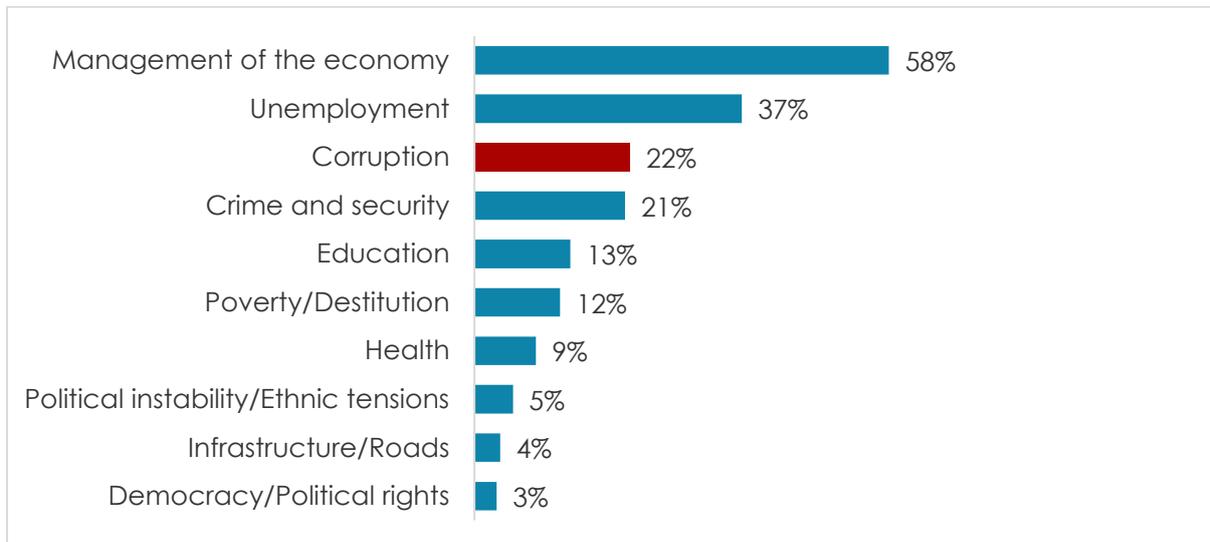
Figure 1: Perceived level of corruption | Tunisia | 2015-2018



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

To understand citizens' concerns, Afrobarometer asks respondents what they think are the most important problems facing the country that the government should address. Among Tunisians, corruption ranks at No. 3, cited by 22% of respondents as one of their top three priorities, behind management of the economy (58%) and unemployment (37%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most important problems that government should address | Tunisia | 2018



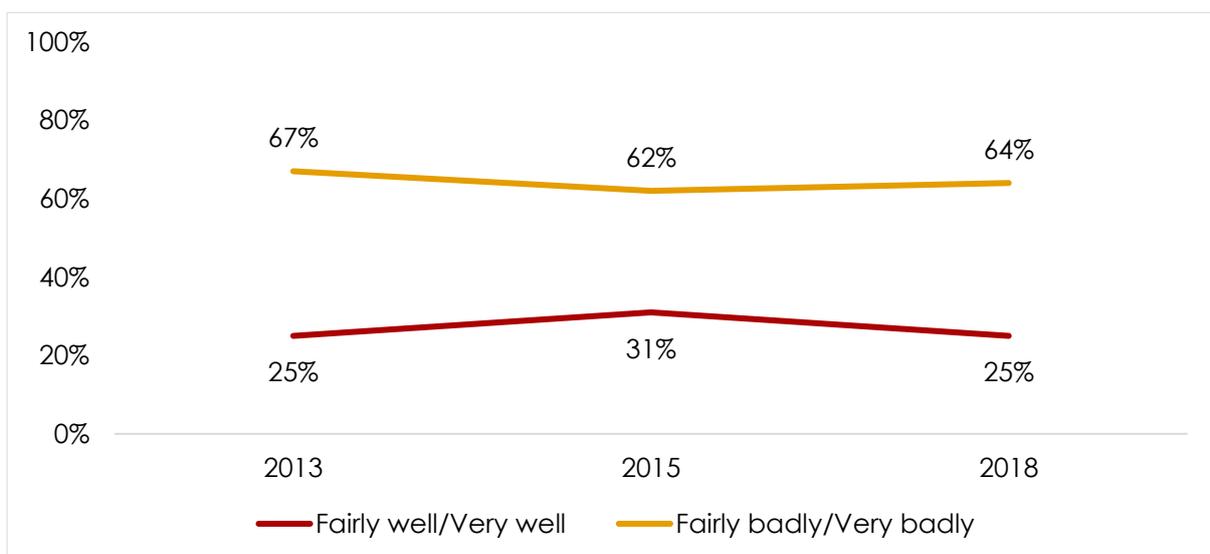
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person)

Citizens' assessments of government efforts in fighting corruption

In 2017, Chahed announced “war” on corruption. This was followed by a series of arrests and investigations targeting businessmen, politicians, the police, and customs officers. Yet the Afrobarometer survey shows that about two-thirds (64%) of Tunisians say the government is handling the fight against corruption “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Figure 3). Only one in four respondents say the government is doing a fairly or very good job of tackling the menace. This assessment has changed little since 2013 (67% fairly/very badly).

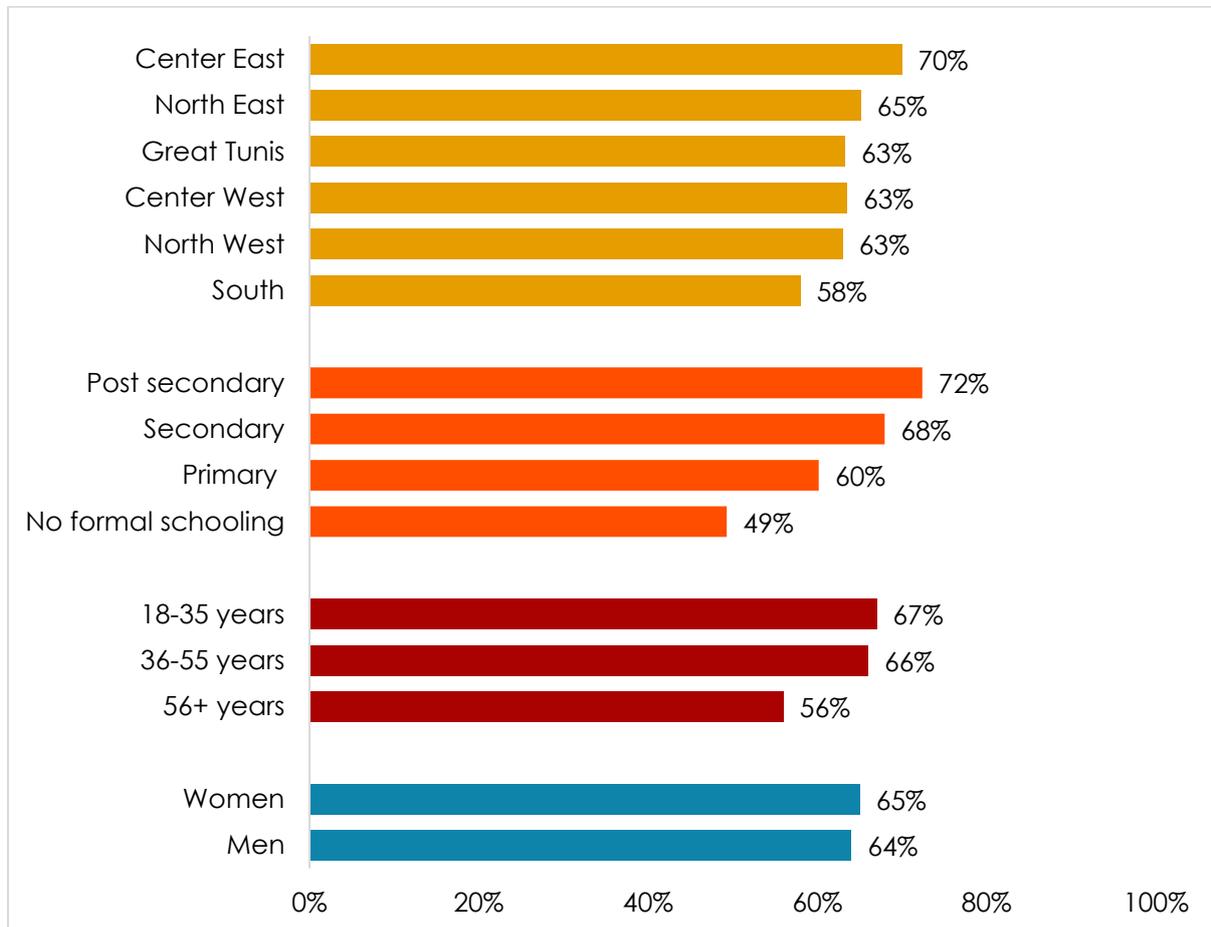
The perception that the government is performing poorly in fighting corruption is highest among younger citizens, those with post-secondary education, and residents of the Center East region (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Government performance in fighting corruption | Tunisia | 2013-2018



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: Handling fighting corruption?

Figure 4: Government performing poorly in fight against corruption
 | by socio-demographic group | Tunisia | 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: Handling fighting corruption? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Who is corrupt?

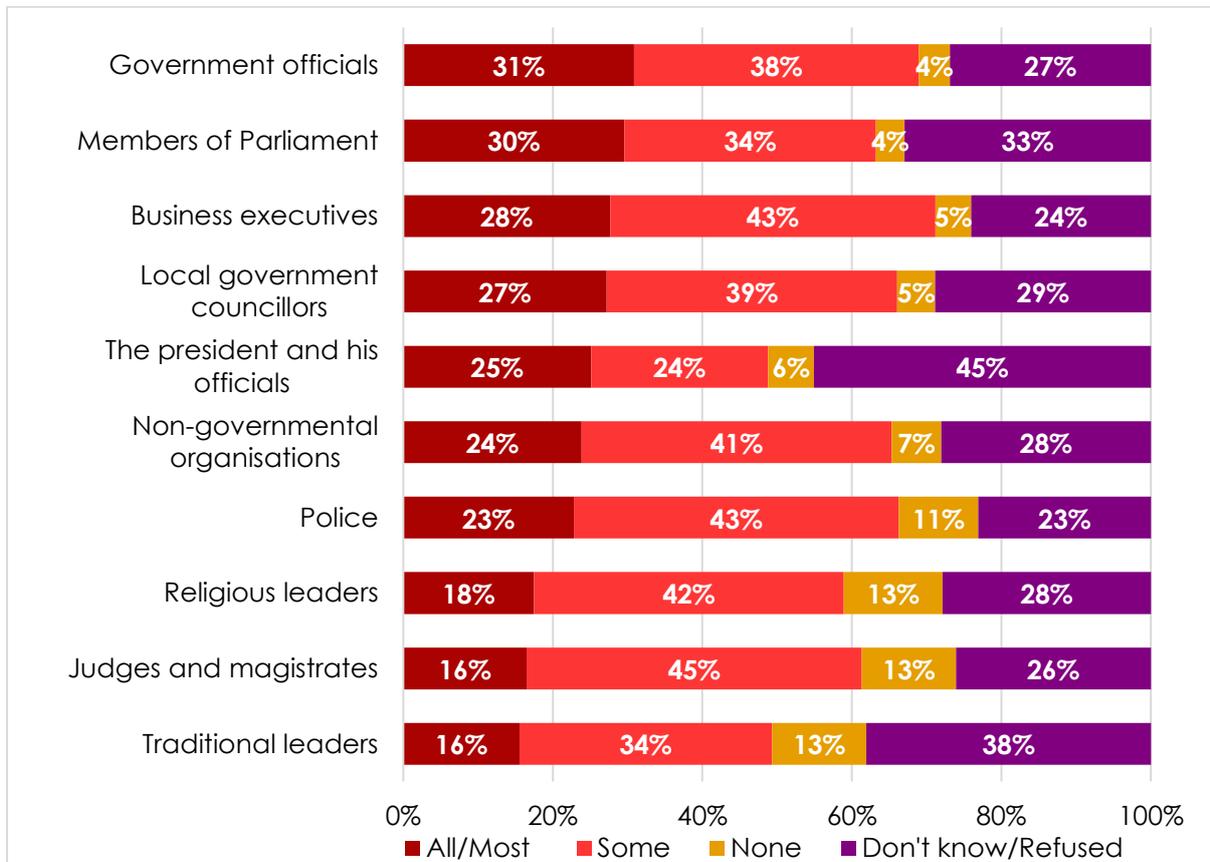
Among key public officials, government officials and members of Parliament are most commonly perceived as corrupt. Three in 10 Tunisians say "all" or "most" government officials (31%) and members of Parliament (30%) are corrupt (Figure 5). Judges (16%) and traditional leaders (16%) are least frequently seen as corrupt. Large proportions of the population – up to 45% of the sample in the case of the president – say they "don't know" or refused to answer the question.

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Perceived corruption in the presidency and Parliament increased drastically compared to

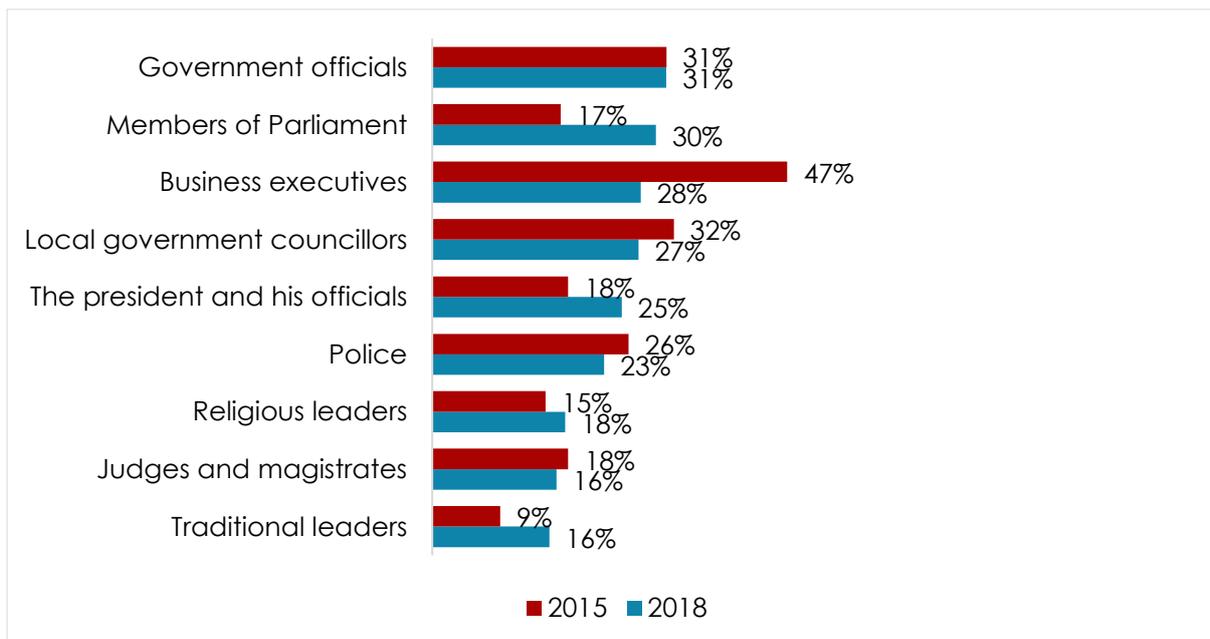
2013 and 2015, while perceived corruption among business executives (28%) declined compared to 2015 (47%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Who is corrupt? | Tunisia | 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?

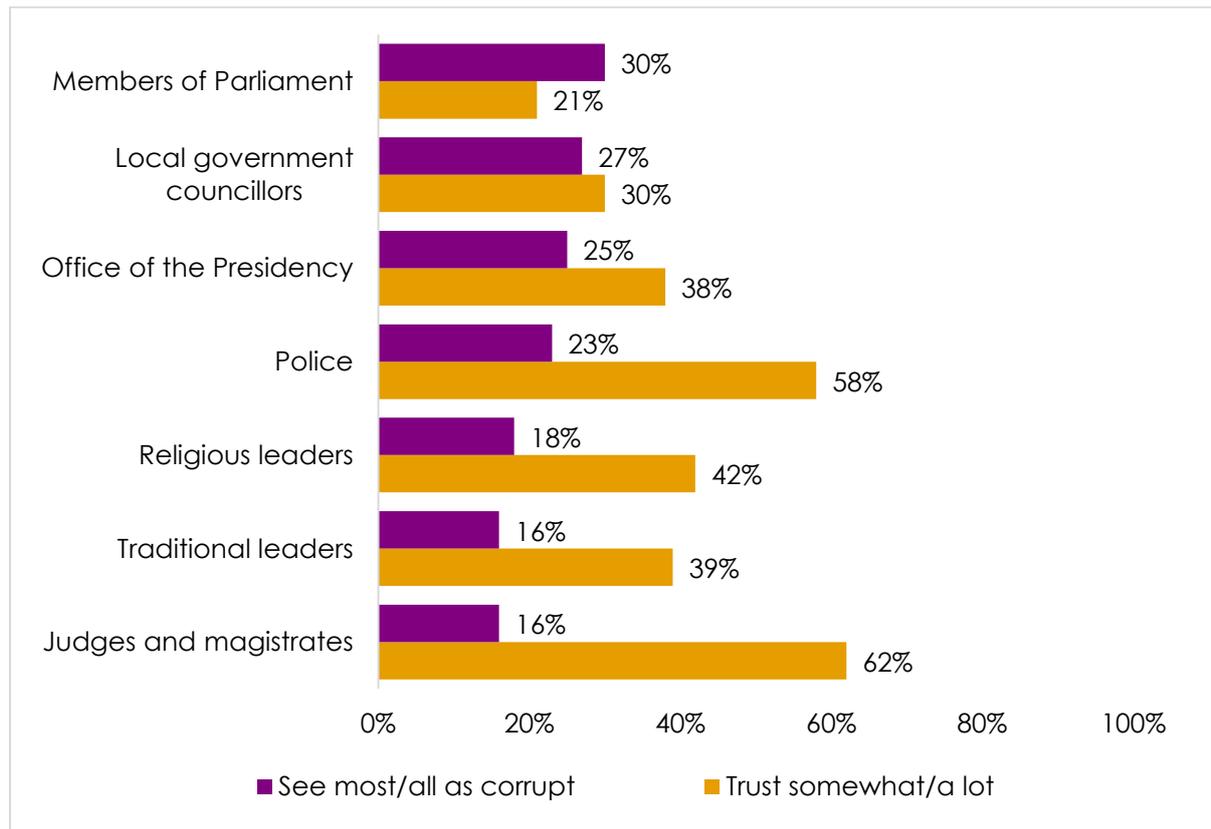
Figure 6: Who is corrupt? | Tunisia | 2015-2018



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" are corrupt)

Analyses from several continents have shown that there is a relationship between corruption and trust in institutions. Looking across 12 African countries, Armah-Attah, Gyimah-Boadi, and Chikwanha (2007, page 1) demonstrate that “corruption is a major, perhaps the major, obstacle to building popular trust in state institutions and electoral processes.” Afrobarometer data from Tunisia show that as perceived corruption increases, trust in institutions declines. The three institutions most commonly perceived to be corrupt – Parliament, local government councils, and the presidency – are also the least trusted (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Perceived corruption and trust in institutions | Tunisia | 2018



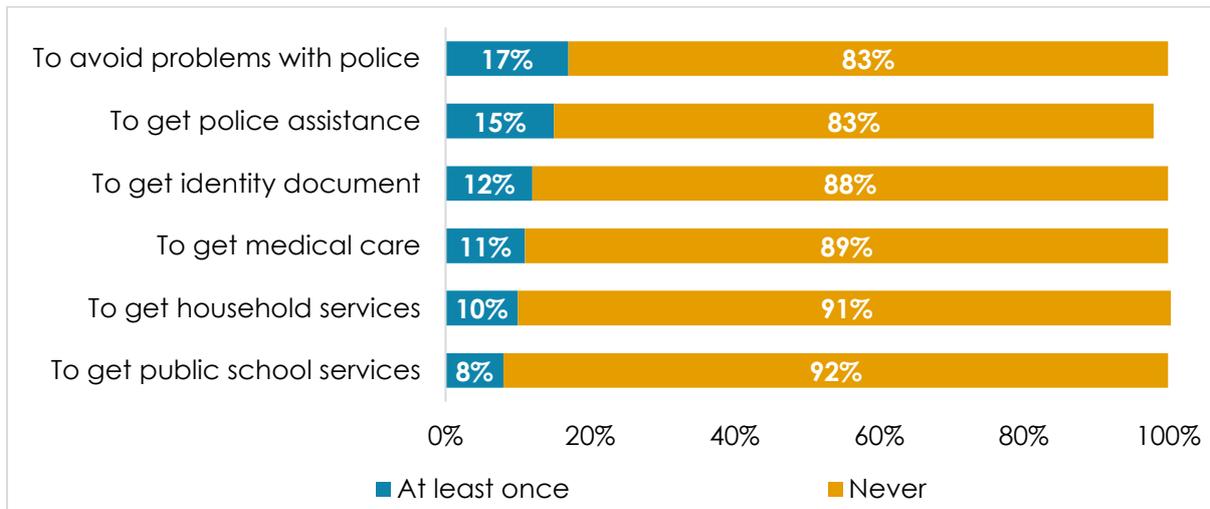
Respondents were asked:

- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?
- How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Citizens' experience with corruption and role in fighting it

Afrobarometer asks citizens whether had contact with certain public services during the previous year and, if so, whether they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to obtain the services they needed. Among respondents who had contact with these public services during the previous year, the police rank as the institution that citizens most frequently acknowledge bribing. Almost two in 10 say they paid a bribe at least once, during the previous year, to avoid problems with the police (17%) or obtain assistance from the police (15%) (Figure 8). One in 10 say they paid a bribe at least once to obtain identity documents from the government (12%), medical care at a public health facility (11%), water/sanitation or electricity services from the government (10%), or public-school services (8%).

Figure 8: Paid bribe to obtain services | Tunisia | 2018



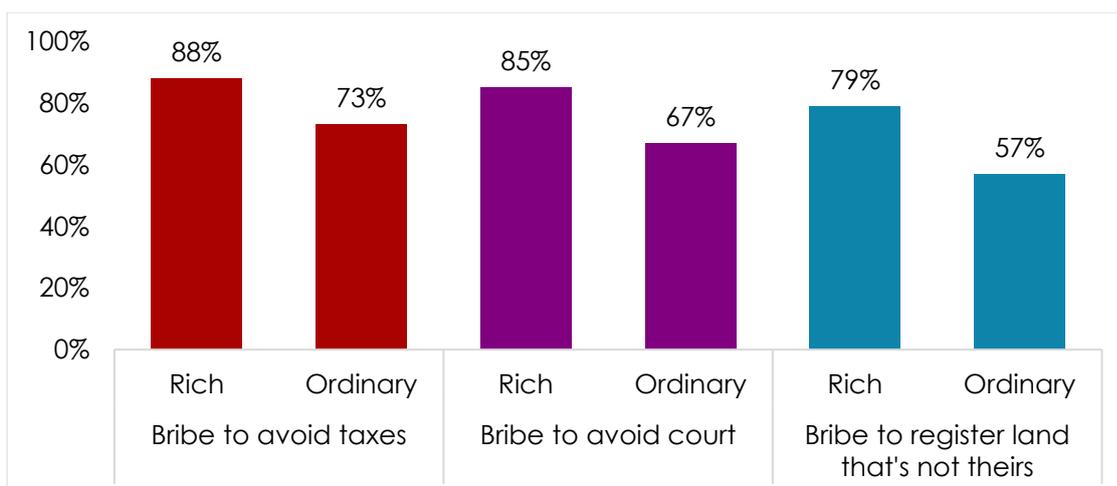
Respondents who said they had contact with selected public services during the previous year were asked: And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour:

- For a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?
- For a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?
- For a government official in order to get the document you needed?
- For a government official in order to get the services you needed?
- For a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?
- For a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

(Note: Figure excludes respondents who said they had no contact with these public services during the previous year.)

Large majorities of Tunisians say both rich and ordinary persons could pay a bribe or use personal connections to avoid taxes, to avoid going to court, and to register land that's not theirs (Figure 9). The rich are seen as more likely than ordinary persons to be able to do so.

Figure 9: Bribery by the rich vs. ordinary people | Tunisia | 2018



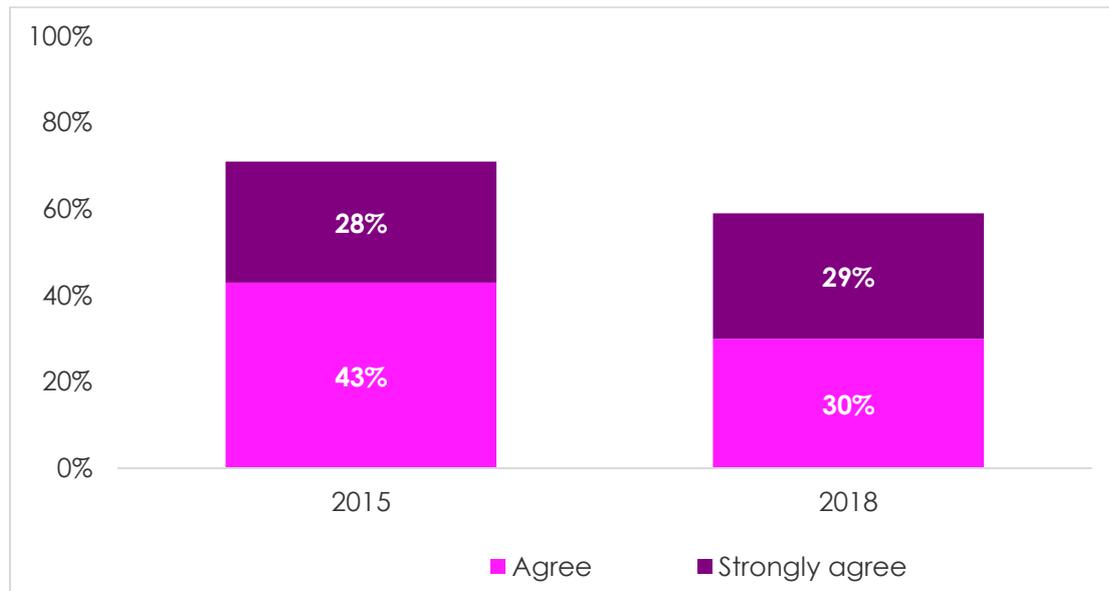
Respondents were asked: In this country, how likely do you think it is that an ordinary person/a rich person could pay a bribe or use personal connections to get away with:

- Avoiding paying taxes they owe to government?
- Avoiding going to court?
- Registering land that does not belong to them?

(% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

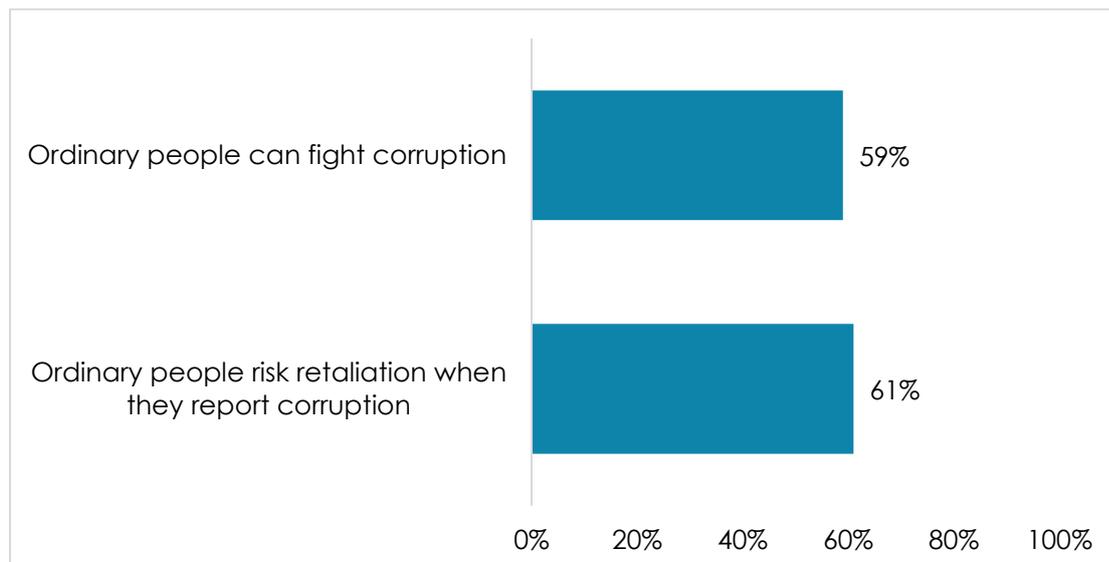
Advocates argue that there is no way to end corruption without the participation and engagement of citizens (GIZ, 2017; Lashin, 2014; Transparency International, 2016; World Bank, 2015). About six in 10 Tunisians (59%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that ordinary citizens can make a difference in the fight against corruption (Figure 10). This proportion has, however, declined compared to 2015 (71%). Moreover, just as many (61%) say that people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Citizens’ role in fighting corruption | Tunisia | 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?

Figure 11: Ordinary citizens can fight corruption – but risk retaliation | Tunisia | 2018

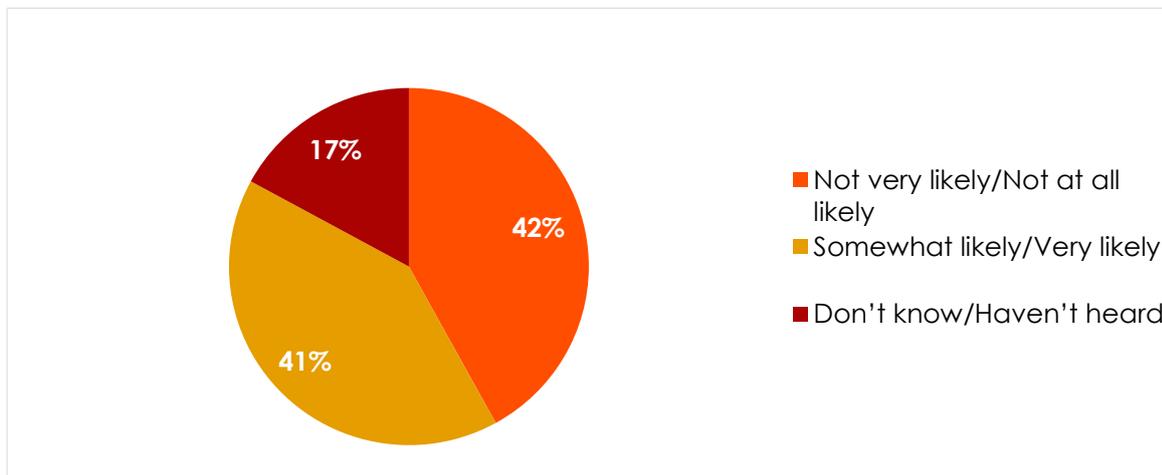


Respondents were asked:

- Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)
- 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?

Tunisians are divided as to whether they could get the authorities to take action if they went to their local government council to report corruption. Four in 10 (41%) say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they get a response, but about the same proportion (42%) see it as “not very likely” or “not at all likely” (Figure 12).

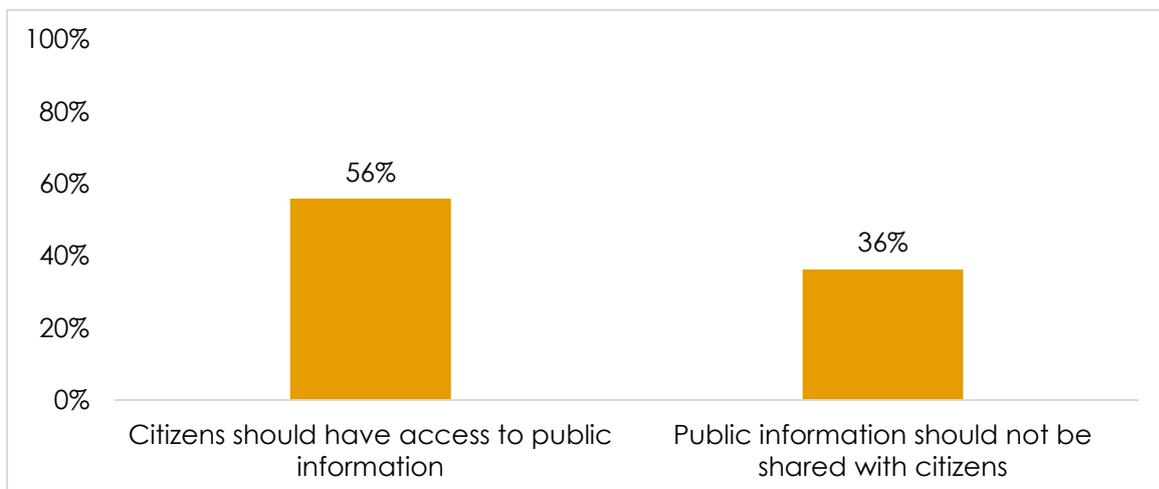
Figure 12: Will the authorities take action when corruption is reported? | Tunisia | 2018



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to your local government council to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes by government officers, police, or school or clinic staff?

According to the United Nations Development Programme's Anti-Corruption for Development portal (2016), “transparency and social accountability are key elements in the fight against corruption.” Afrobarometer asked citizens whether they agree or disagree with the idea that information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials and should not have to be shared with the public. A majority (56%) of Tunisians disagree, favouring citizen access to information held by public authorities. About one-third (36%), however, agree with restricting such information to government officials (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Should citizens have access to public information? | Tunisia | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public.

Conclusion

A majority of Tunisians say the level of corruption in the country has increased over the past year, and they give the government failing marks on fighting corruption despite its promises and a series of arrests and prosecutions of corrupt officials. The three institutions that are most commonly perceived to be corrupt – Parliament, local government councils, and the presidency – are also the least trusted.

While a majority of Tunisians say that ordinary citizen can make a difference in the fight against corruption, the survey noted that far fewer people believe this now than did in 2015. Moreover, a majority of Tunisians say they risk retaliation if they report incidents of corruption, and many Tunisians are doubtful that the authorities will act if they do report.

These findings raise questions about the adequacy and public awareness of the government's anti-corruption measures, and suggest that further efforts are needed to build popular trust in institutions and engage citizens in fighting corruption.

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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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 247 | 29 October 2018