

Corruption in Nigeria: Approval rating for government anti-graft efforts drops after strong gains in 2017

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Summary

Since assuming office in May 2015, the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari has taken several measures to curb corruption. These include the establishment of the Presidential Advisory Committee Against Corruption (PACAC), prosecution of high-profile corruption cases, suspension of top government officials alleged to be involved in corrupt practices, adoption of a whistleblower protection policy, and enhanced capacity building programs for officers of anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB).

These efforts have chalked up some successes, including the recovery of about N71.7 billion (\$184 million) by the federal government since the whistleblower policy was inaugurated in December 2016 (Daily Times, 2017). Even so, critics express distrust in the government's anti-corruption campaign, voicing concerns about possible abuse of the whistleblower policy, institutional weaknesses, and perceived discrimination and lack of transparency in the management and distribution of COVID-19 funds and palliatives (Action Aid, 2020; Vanguard, 2020). Some highly placed law enforcement agents have been accused of routinely converting funds recovered from corruption cases for their personal use; the acting chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission was recently suspended based on such an allegation (Africa Report, 2020). A study has found that some "structural and facility-level corruption and accountability issues" hinder health workers' efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (Conversation, 2020).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, conducted in early 2020, show that a majority of Nigerians perceive an increase in the level of corruption in the country, and the approval rating for the government's performance in fighting corruption has declined sharply. Large majorities of citizens endorse the media's watchdog role over government but do not feel safe reporting corrupt acts themselves.

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. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed 1,599 adult citizens of Nigeria in January-February 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of

error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

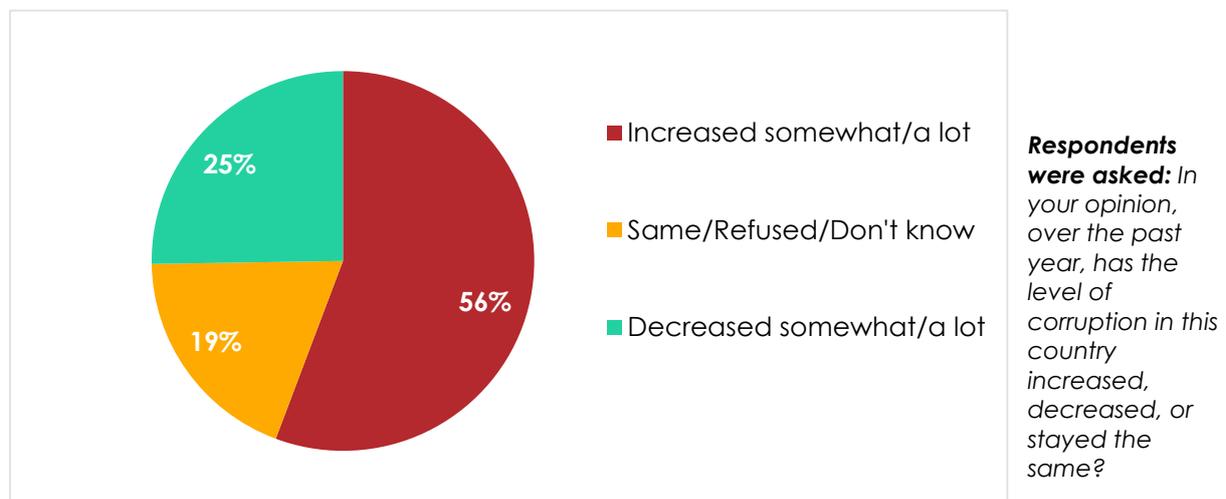
Key findings

- A majority (56%) of Nigerians say the level of corruption in the country increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the past year.
- Six in 10 respondents (61%) say "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt, an improvement from previous survey rounds. About four in 10 citizens see widespread corruption among elected officials and judges, while traditional and religious leaders are least commonly seen as corrupt (by 26% and 30%, respectively).
- Religious and traditional leaders are also considered the most trustworthy leaders in Nigeria, trusted "somewhat" or "a lot" by 61% and 54% of citizens, respectively. They outrank elected officials, including the president (39%), as well as the army (44%) and the courts (33%).
- Among Nigerians who had contact with key public services during the previous year, a large majority say they had to bribe the police at least once to get help (76%) or avoid a problem (68%). Four in 10 (40%) say they paid a bribe to obtain a government document, while a quarter or fewer paid a bribe for school services (25%) or medical care (21%).
- Fewer than three in 10 citizens (28%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in fighting corruption, half the proportion who approved of the government's performance in 2017 (59%).
- Eight in 10 Nigerians (83%) say ordinary citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption to the authorities, up from 77% in 2017.

Perceived corruption and trust in institutions

Despite the current government's initiatives to fight corruption, close to six in 10 Nigerians (56%) say that the level of corruption in the country increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the previous year, whereas only 25% believe it decreased (Figure 1).

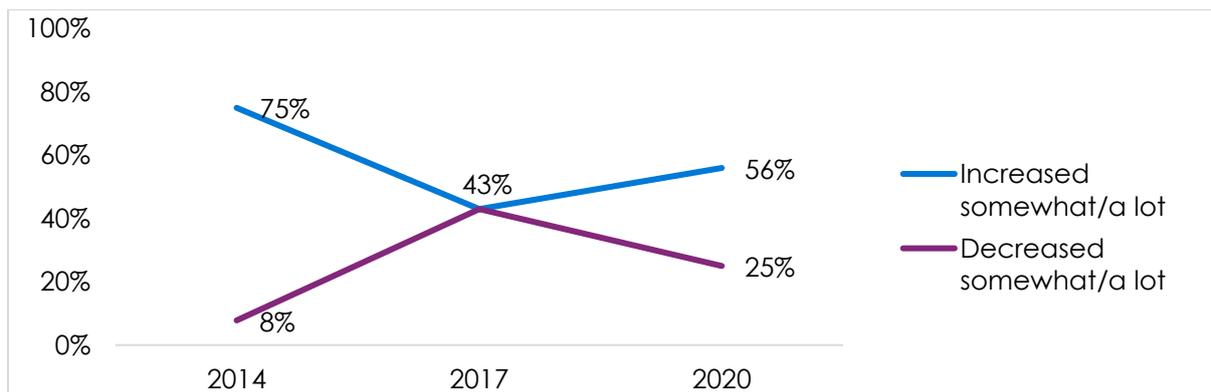
Figure 1: Level of corruption | Nigeria | 2020



Compared to 2017, perceptions of increasing levels of corruption rose by 13 percentage points, after a drastic decline from 2014 (75%) (Figure 2).

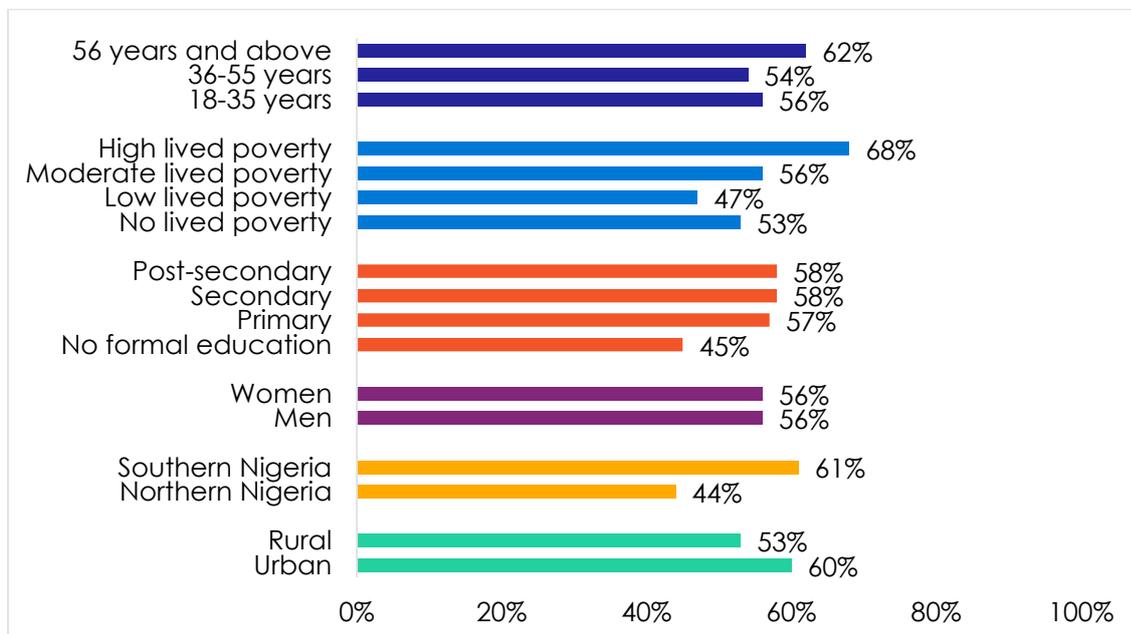
The perception that corruption increased is more common among the poorest respondents (68%) than among their better-off counterparts (47%-56%).¹ It is also more widespread among urban residents (60%) compared to rural dwellers (53%) (Figure 3). Southern, elderly, and literate citizens are more likely than northern residents, younger citizens, and those with no formal education to have a gloomy assessment of the level of corruption in the country.

Figure 2: Level of corruption | Nigeria | 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?

Figure 3: Increased level of corruption | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 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 say "increased a lot" or "increased somewhat")

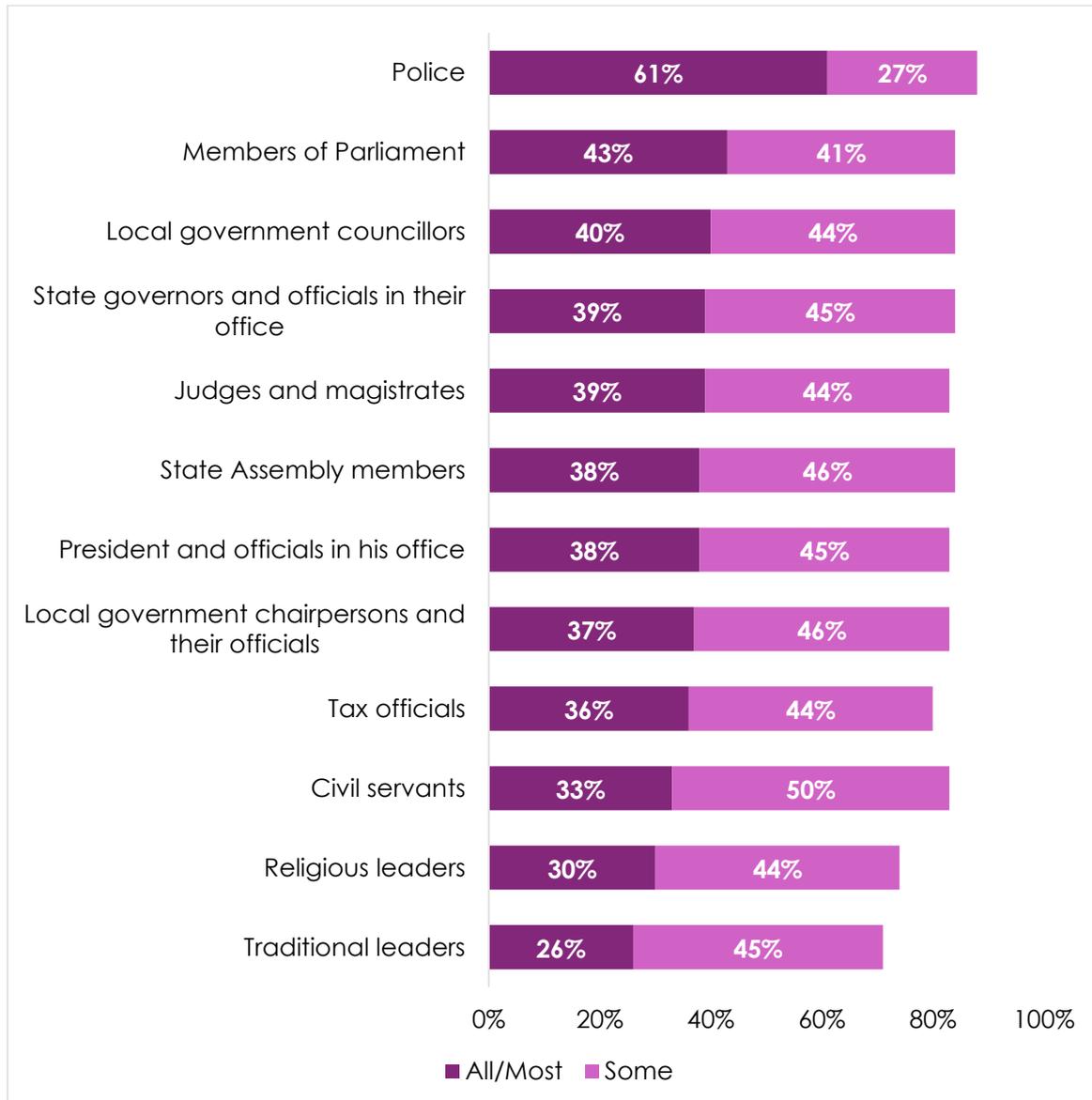
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Among a variety of key formal and informal leaders, all are seen as plagued by widespread corruption by a significant proportion of the population (Figure 4). The police fare worst; 61% of respondents say “most” or “all” of them are corrupt, although this reflects a consistent improvement since 2012 (78%) (Figure 5).

Roughly four in 10 respondents see corruption among “most” or “all” members of Parliament, local government councillors, state governors, judges and magistrates, State Assembly members, Presidency officials, and local government chairpersons.

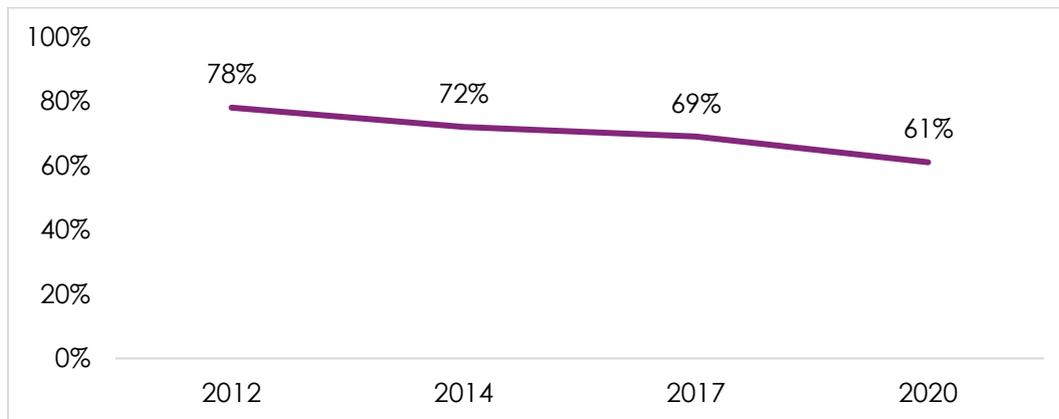
Traditional and religious leaders are least widely considered to be corrupt (26% and 30%, respectively).

Figure 4: Perceived corruption among officials | Nigeria | 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?

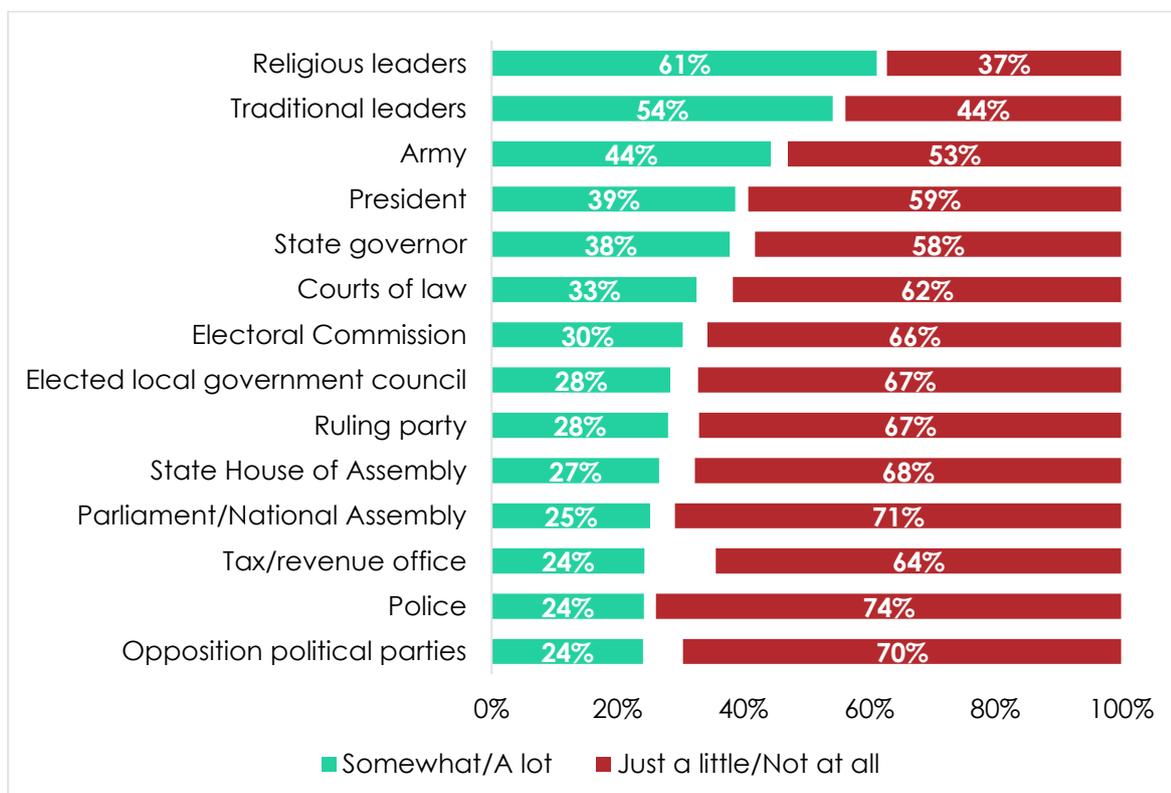
Figure 5: Perceived corruption among the police | Nigeria | 2012-2020



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? (% who say "most" or "all")

Religious leaders and traditional leaders are also the most trusted leaders in Nigeria; 61% and 54% of respondents, respectively, say they trust them "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 6). These informal leaders outrank the army (44%), the courts (33%), and key elected leaders, including the president (39%), state governors (38%), local government councils (28%), and members of the State House of Assembly (27%) and Parliament (25%). Opposition political parties, police, and tax officials are the least trusted groups (each by 24%).

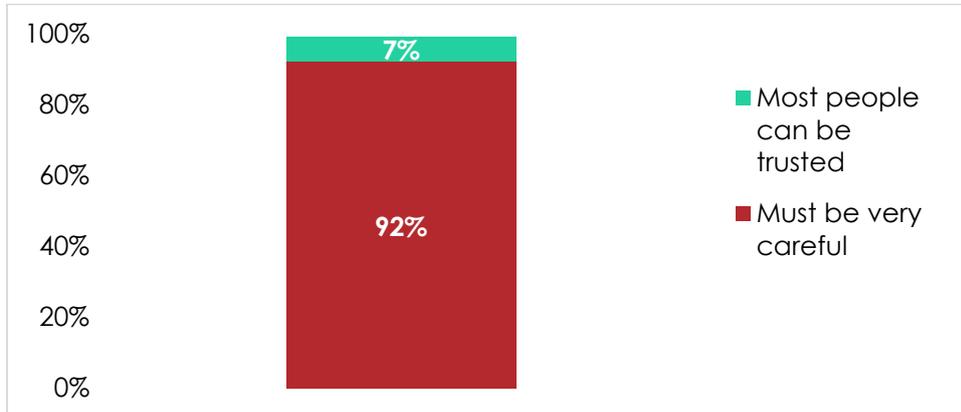
Figure 6: Trust in officials | Nigeria | 2020



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

More generally, Nigerians are also quite distrustful of their fellow citizens. Nine in 10 respondents (92%) say that one must be very careful in dealing with people, while only 7% say that most people can be trusted (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Trust in fellow citizens | Nigeria | 2020

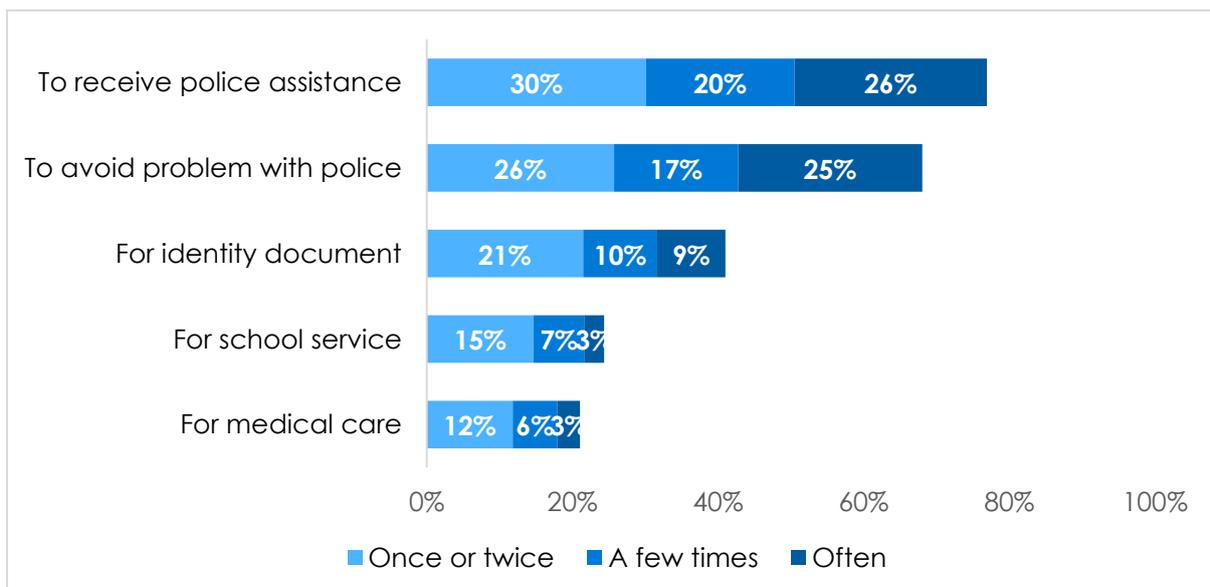


Respondents were asked: Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you must be very careful in dealing with people?

Paying bribes to access public services

Among Nigerians who had contact with key public service institutions, substantial proportions said they had to pay a bribe “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often” to obtain the help they needed. The most frequent experience of paying a bribe was among citizens who wanted assistance from the police (76%) or wanted to avoid a problem with the police (68%) (Figure 8). Four in 10 (40%) say they paid a bribe to obtain identity cards, while a quarter or fewer reported paying a bribe for school services (25%) or medical care (21%).

Figure 8: Paid bribes to access public services | Nigeria | 2020



Respondents who had contact with key 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 public official to obtain the needed assistance or avoid problems]? (Note: Figure excludes those who had no contact with these public services.)

The role of government, media, and individuals in fighting corruption

When asked to assess the performance of the current government in fighting corruption in government, fewer than three in 10 citizens (28%) say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” a U-turn from the dramatic improvement recorded in 2017 (Ojewale & Appiah-Nyamekye, 2018). Seven in 10 citizens (70%) rate the government’s performance as “fairly bad” or “very bad” (Figure 9).

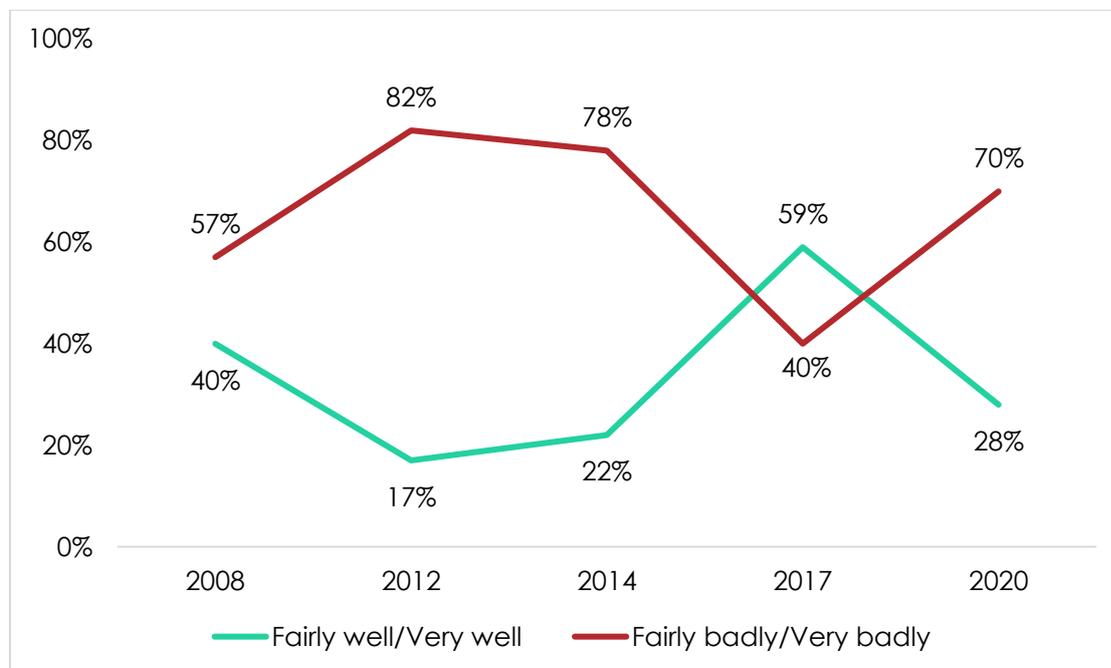
Compared to 2017, the proportion who say the government is doing a good job in fighting corruption has dropped by half (from 59% to 28%) after soaring from 22% in 2014.

Southerners, urban residents, older citizens, those experiencing high lived poverty, and the educated hold a more negative opinion of the government’s anti-graft performance than northerners, rural residents, younger citizens, those who are economically better off, and citizens with no formal education (Figure 10).

In addition to doubts about the government’s anti-corruption efforts, eight in 10 Nigerians (83%) say ordinary citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption to the authorities, an increase from 77% in 2017 (Figure 11). Only one in seven (14%) believe that ordinary people can report corruption without fear of being victimized, suggesting that a lack of protection for whistleblowers may be an important reason that citizens don’t get involved.

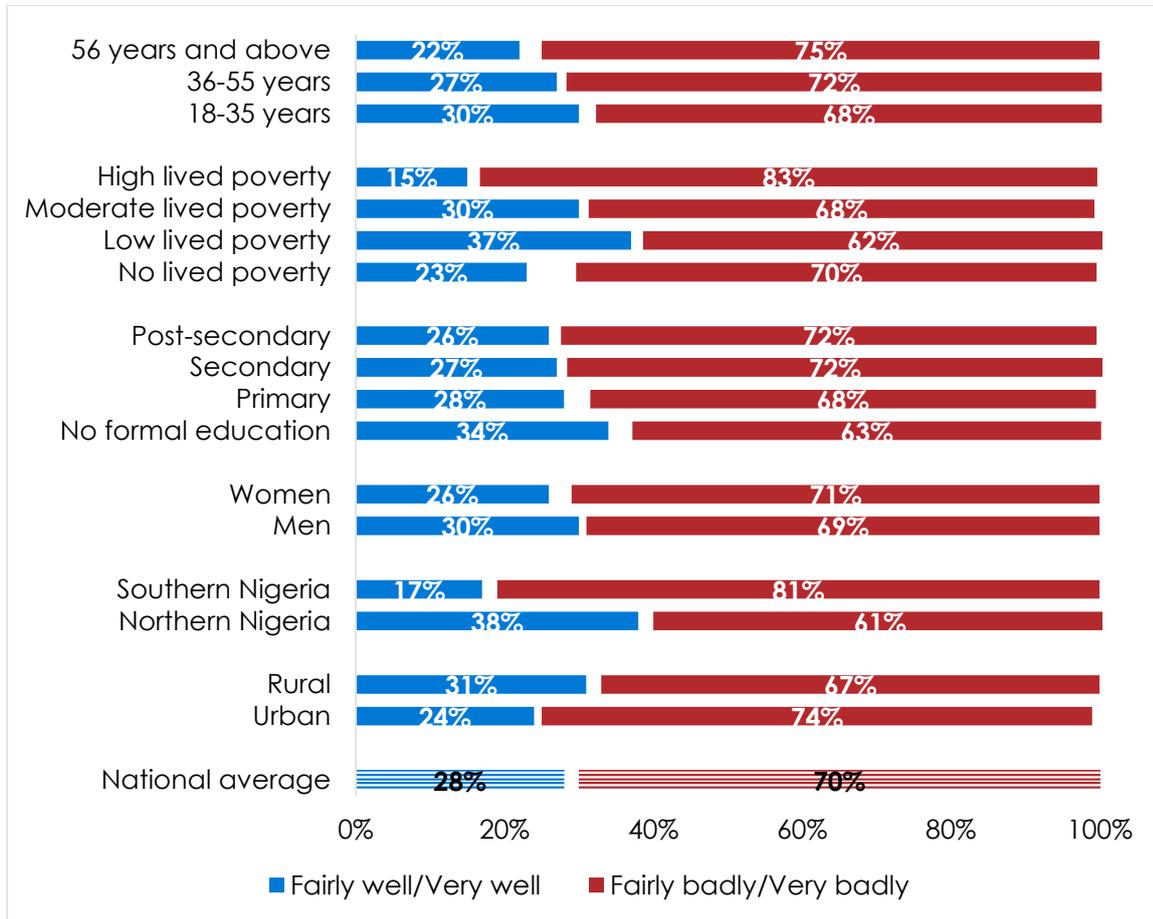
But Nigerians largely support the media’s watchdog role over government. Three-quarters (76%) of them “agree” or “strongly agree” that the news media should “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” a view that has been fairly stable since 2008 (74%) (Figure 12). Just two in 10 (21%) say instead that too much reporting on negative events, such as government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

Figure 9: Government performance in fighting corruption | Nigeria | 2008-2020



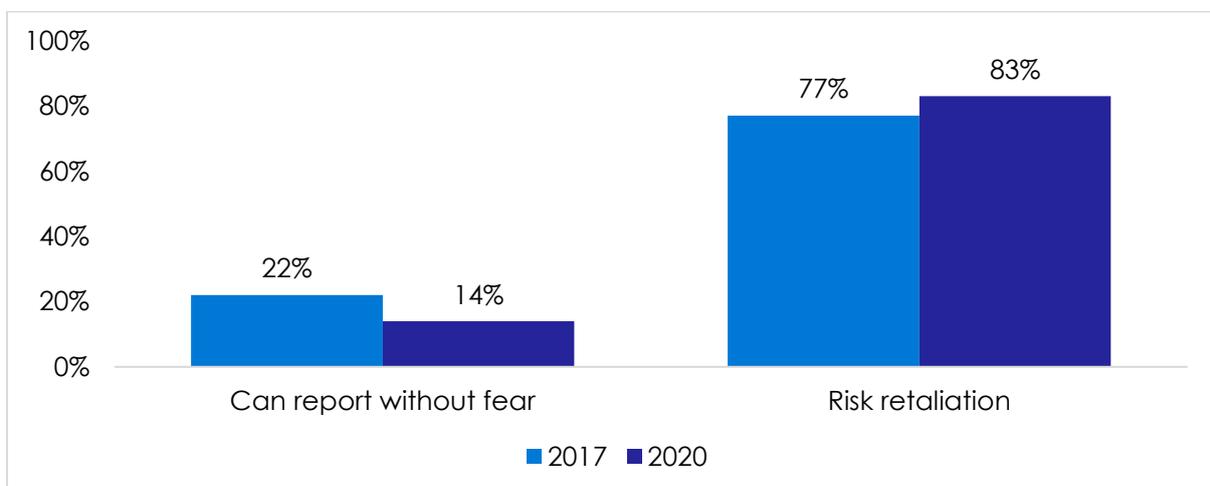
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

Figure 10: Government performance in fighting corruption | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2020



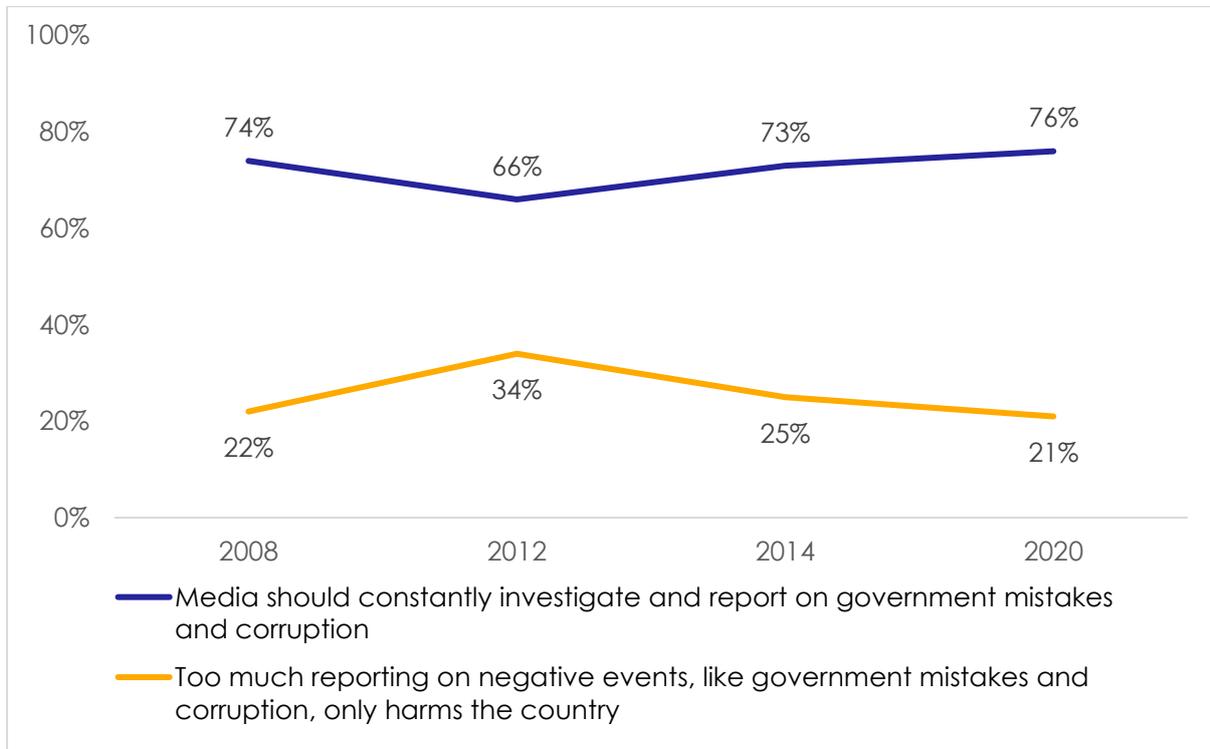
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Figure 11: Risk of retaliation for reporting corruption | Nigeria | 2017-2020



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?

Figure 12: Support for media's watchdog role | Nigeria | 2008-2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Conclusion

In spite of the government's anti-graft efforts, a majority of Nigerians say the level of corruption in the country has increased and the government is doing a poor job of fighting it. Large majorities of citizens endorse the media's watchdog role over government but do not feel safe reporting corrupt acts.

These findings suggest a need for the government to review its anti-corruption strategies and frameworks that would reduce corruption, especially among government officials.

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Raphael Mbaegbu is the head of social research at NOIPolls, the Afrobarometer National Partner, in Abuja, Nigeria. Email: rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com.

Chukwudebe Nwanze is a senior research associate at NOIPolls. Email: dnwanze@noi-polls.com.

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