

# Africans see growing corruption, poor government response, but fear retaliation if they speak out

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 488<sup>1</sup> | Christiaan Keulder**

## Summary

Developing countries lose \$1.26 trillion a year to corruption, theft, and tax evasion, according to analysts' estimates – a sum large enough to lift 1.4 billion people above the poverty line for six years (Fleming, 2019). Unless we control corruption, development experts say, achieving the other Sustainable Development Goals will be all but impossible (United Nations, 2019; Rubio & Andvig, 2019).

Yet corruption scandals make almost daily headlines, in Africa as elsewhere. South Africa continues to wrestle with the fallout of state capture during Jacob Zuma's presidency (Alberts, 2020; Arun, 2020). Namibians are gearing up for one of their most prominent court cases ever, involving two ministers accused and imprisoned in the #Fishrot corruption scandal (Zenda, 2020; Iceland Review, 2020). Allegations of corruption involving COVID-19 pandemic relief pour in from Zimbabwe (Chingono, 2020), Somalia (Dhaysane, 2020), Kenya (Malalo, 2020), Nigeria (Financial Times, 2020), and other countries.

And ordinary Africans say things are getting worse rather than better. In Afrobarometer surveys in 34 African countries, a majority of citizens say corruption increased in their country during the previous year. Police are the worst offenders in citizens' eyes, but even many health-care providers demand bribes.

Most citizens say their government is doing too little to fight corruption. And in a bad sign for activists working to engage citizens on this issue, most Africans say people risk retaliation should they report cases of corruption to the authorities.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. The network has completed eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys cover 34 countries – 18 countries surveyed between July 2019 and April 2020 and 16 surveyed (after a hiatus due to COVID-19) between October 2020 and July 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this dispatch, based on data from 18 countries surveyed before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause in Round 8 fieldwork, was published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 421.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 to 2,400 that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, reported totals may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

## Key findings

### Extent of corruption

- On average across 34 countries, almost six in 10 Africans (58%) say that corruption increased in their country during the previous year, including 40% who say it “increased a lot.” One in five (21%) believe it decreased at least “somewhat,” while 16% say it stayed at the same level ([Figure 1](#)).
  - Perceptions of increased corruption levels are most widespread in Gabon (82%), Lesotho (78%), and Mauritius (77%) ([Figure 2](#)). At the other extreme, large majorities in Tanzania (77%) and Benin (70%) say corruption decreased.
  - The situation has worsened significantly over the past six years in 17 of the 31 countries surveyed in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 ([Figure 3](#)). Perceptions of increasing corruption have risen most dramatically in Mali (by +45 percentage points, from 31% to 76%), Senegal (+41 points), Gabon (+30 points), Guinea (+25 points), and Côte d'Ivoire (+24 points). In contrast, in five countries the number who report that corruption is increasing has dropped by more than 20 percentage points: Tanzania (-58 points), Benin (-53 points), Sierra Leone (-29 points), Ghana (-22 points), and Nigeria (-21 points).

### Who is corrupt

- Among key public institutions, the police are most widely seen as corrupt; on average, almost half (47%) of Africans say “most” or “all” police officials are involved in corruption, in addition to 38% who see “some of them” as corrupt (see also Sanny & Logan, 2020). More than one-third of citizens see corruption among most/all members of Parliament (MPs) (37%), civil servants (36%), judges and magistrates (35%), tax officials (35%), and Presidency officials (35%). Local government councillors fare only slightly better (31%) ([Figure 4](#)).
  - In 16 of the 34 countries, half or more of the adult population believe that “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt ([Figure 5](#)). This proportion exceeds two-thirds in Gabon (68%), Uganda (68%), Kenya (68%), and Liberia (67%) – three or four times the levels recorded in Cabo Verde (22%) and Morocco (15%).
  - Perceptions of institutional corruption have increased modestly over the past decade ([Figure 6](#)). On average across 30 countries consistently interviewed between Round 5 (2011/2013) and Round 8 (2019/2021), the proportion of citizens who see “most” or “all” officials as corrupt increased by 9 percentage points for the office of the

- president/prime minister, by 8 points for MPs, and by 6 points for judges/magistrates while remaining steady for the police, civil servants, and local government councillors.
- While perceived corruption varies greatly across countries and institutions, three countries – Gabon, Mali, and Liberia – appear among the five worst performers for a majority of the seven institutions ([Figure 7](#)), suggesting that in these countries corruption can be seen as endemic. In some other countries, perceptions of official corruption are notably high for some but not all institutions; this is the case in South Africa (Presidency, MPs, local government councillors), Guinea (civil servants, judges and magistrates, tax officials), and Cameroon (civil servants, judges and magistrates, tax officials).
  - Tanzania and Cabo Verde consistently rank at the least corrupt end of the scale across all institutions, often joined by Mauritius (for four institutions) ([Figure 8](#)).

### Experience of bribery

- Bribery is not an uncommon experience in most African countries ([Figure 9](#)). On average across 34 countries, fully one-third of citizens who dealt with the police during the previous year say they had to pay a bribe (36% of those who sought police assistance, 34% of those who encountered the police in other situations, such as a traffic stop or investigation).
  - The same is true for one in four citizens (25%) who tried to obtain a government document, and one in five who went for medical care (19%) or requested assistance at a public school (18%).
  - Self-reported bribe-paying varies widely across countries ([Figure 10](#)). Among citizens who sought a government identity document, for example, half of Cameroonians (52%) and Kenyans (50%) say they had to pay a bribe at least once. In contrast, fewer than one in 20 Cabo Verdeans, Mauritians, and Batswana report having to bribe someone to obtain such a document.
  - Looking at the share of the whole population who had to pay a bribe to obtain any of these public services, Cabo Verde again stands out (3%), followed by Namibia (8%), Mauritius (8%), and Botswana (9%). But six in 10 Liberians (60%) were exposed to bribery in exchange for public services during the previous 12 months, as were about half of Ugandans (53%), Cameroonians (50%), Guineans (50%), and Sierra Leoneans (49%) ([Figure 11](#)).

### Fight against corruption

- Almost two-thirds of Africans say their government is doing a “fairly bad” (25%) or “very bad” (40%) job of fighting official corruption. Only three in 10 (31%) approve of their government’s performance ([Figure 12](#)).
  - Only in three countries do more than half of citizens approve of their government’s anti-corruption efforts: Tanzania (84%), Benin (74%), and Botswana (57%) ([Figure 13](#)).
  - In 22 of the 34 countries, fewer than one-third of citizens give their government passing marks on corruption, including fewer than one in five Gabonese (14%), Liberians (15%), Zambians (15%), Senegalese (17%), Cabo Verdeans (17%), and

Sudanese (17%). Considering that Cabo Verdeans report some of the lowest levels of corruption in key institutions, one might be surprised at how critical they are of their government's anti-corruption efforts, suggesting that the level of perceived corruption in a country can be a poor predictor of the level of popular satisfaction with the government's performance on the issue.

- On average across 30 countries surveyed in both 2011/2013 and 2019/2021, positive assessments of the government's handling of corruption declined by 4 percentage points, including huge drops in Senegal (-38 points), Zambia (-36 points), Malawi (-20 points), Cabo Verde (-20 points), and Lesotho (-20 points) (Figure 14). Tanzania (+51 points), Benin (+27 points), and Burkina Faso (+18 points) top the list of eight countries with significant improvements in public ratings over the past decade.

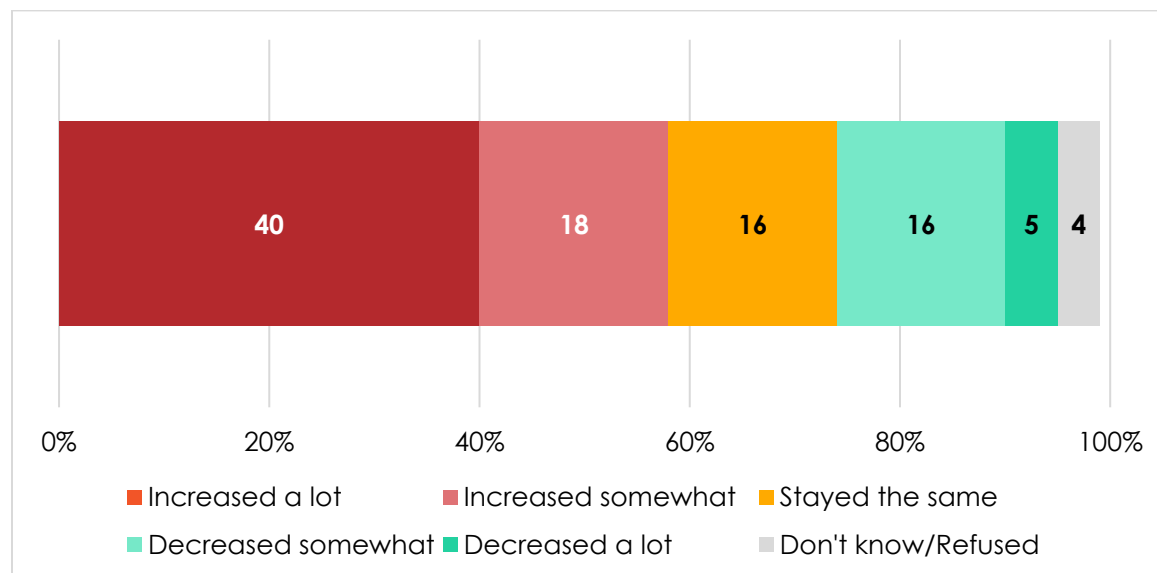
### Fear of retaliation

- Seven in 10 Africans (71%) say that ordinary citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities. Only one in four (27%) believe they can speak up without fear (Figure 15).
  - In Gabon, fear of retaliation is nearly universal (91%) (Figure 16). The Gambia (43%) and Morocco (48%) are the only countries where fewer than half of citizens share this view.

## Charts

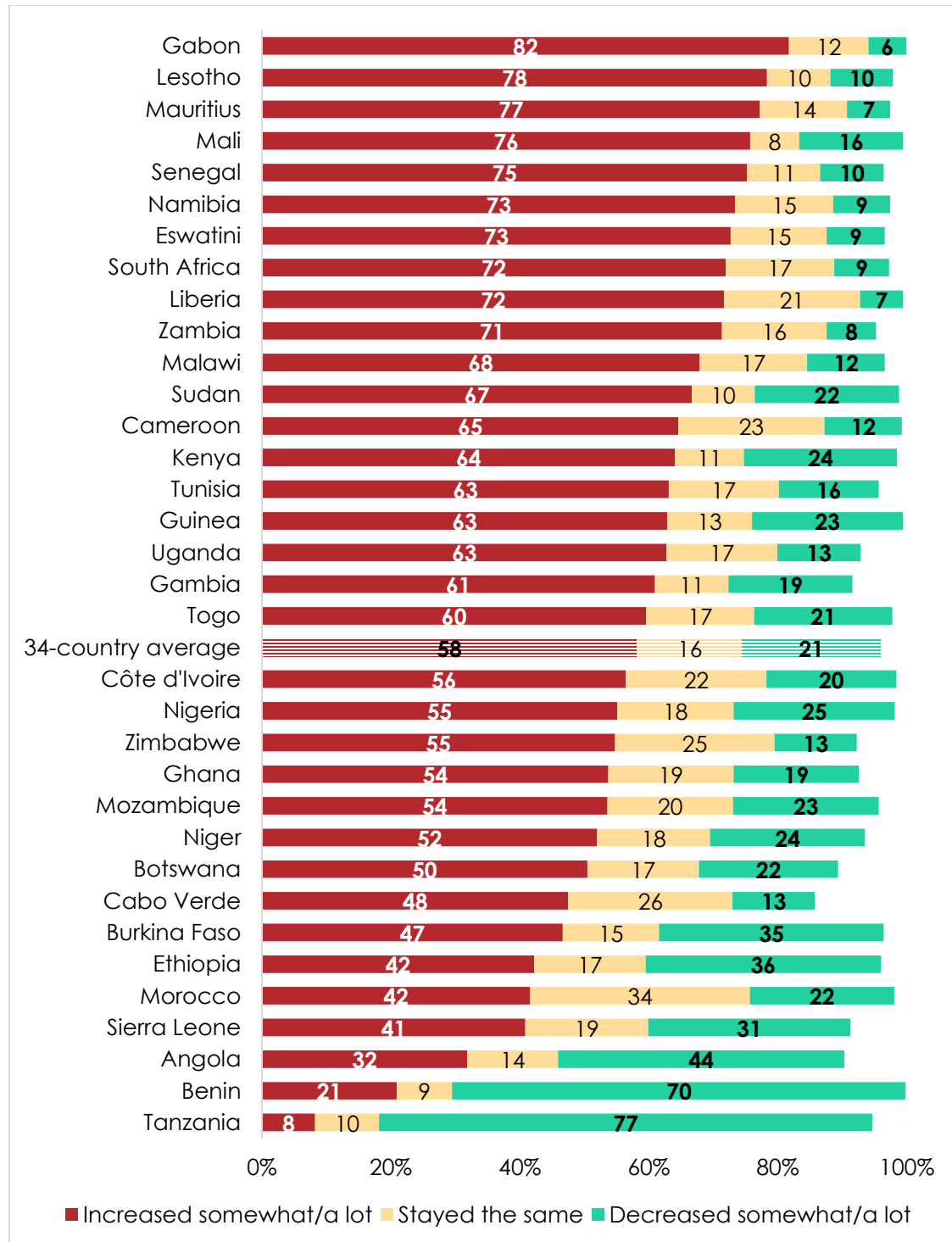
### Extent of corruption

**Figure 1: Corruption increased/decreased in previous 12 months | 34 countries**  
 | 2019/2021



**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 2: Corruption increased/decreased in previous 12 months** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**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: Perception that corruption is increasing (percentage points) | 31 countries\***  
 | 2014-2021

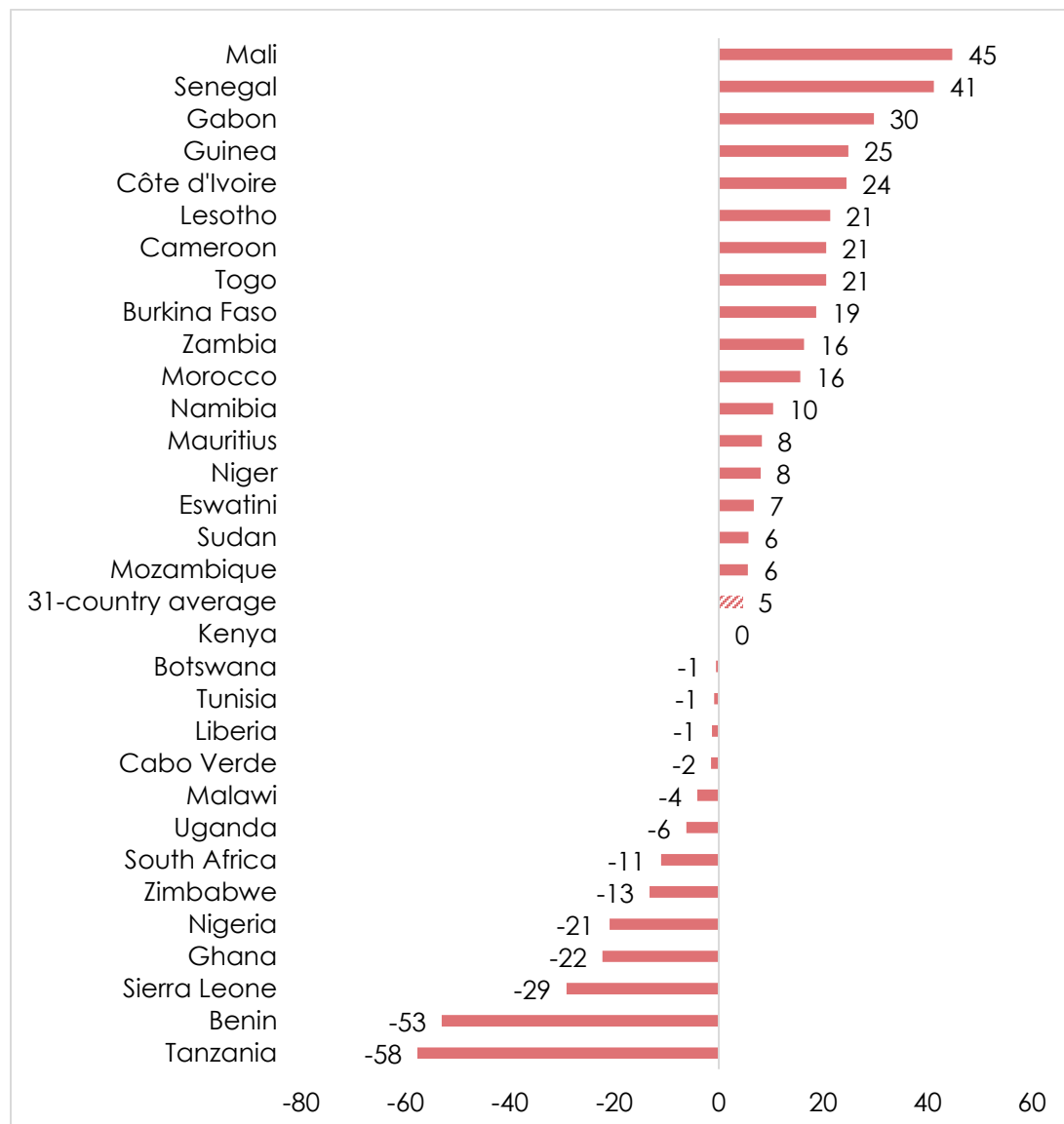
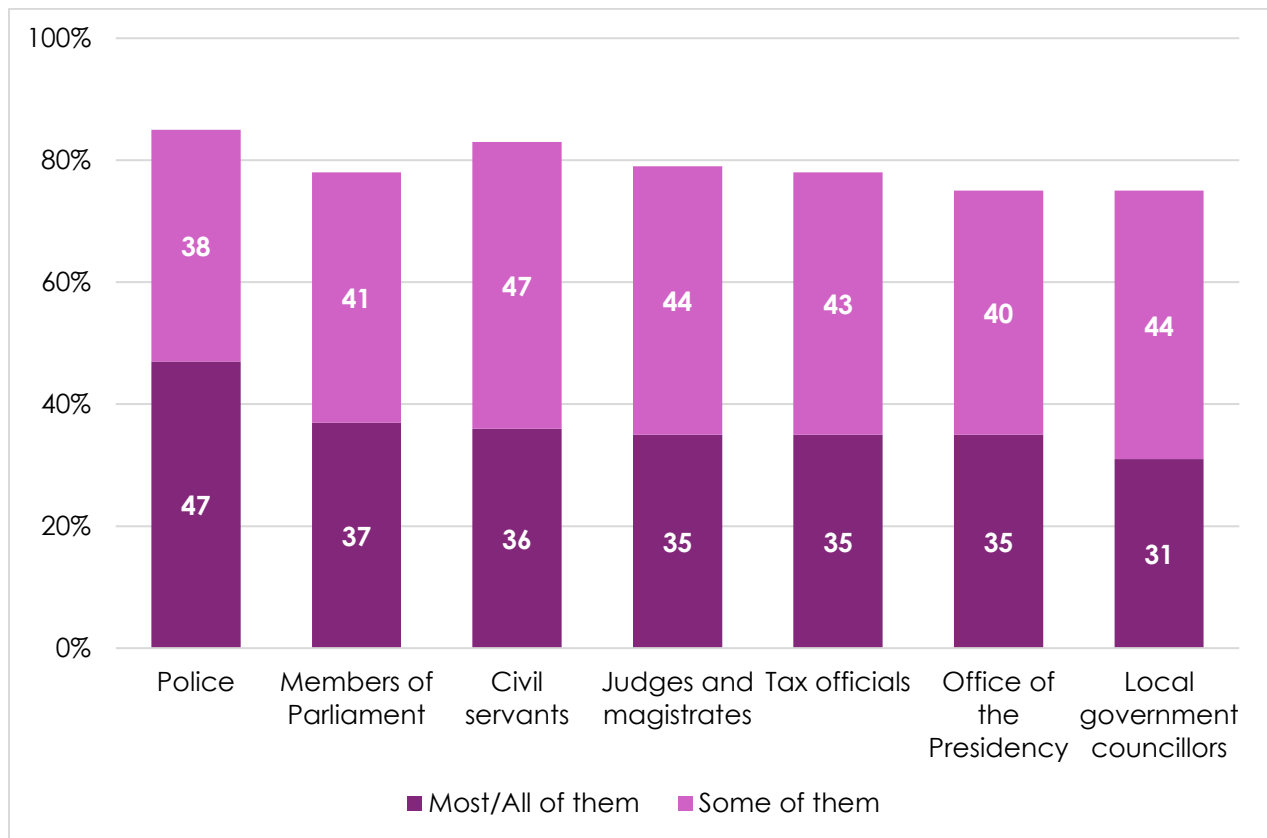


Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who say corruption increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the previous year. Positive numbers indicate increases in corruption. \*Angola, Ethiopia, and the Gambia were not surveyed in 2014/2015.

Who is corrupt

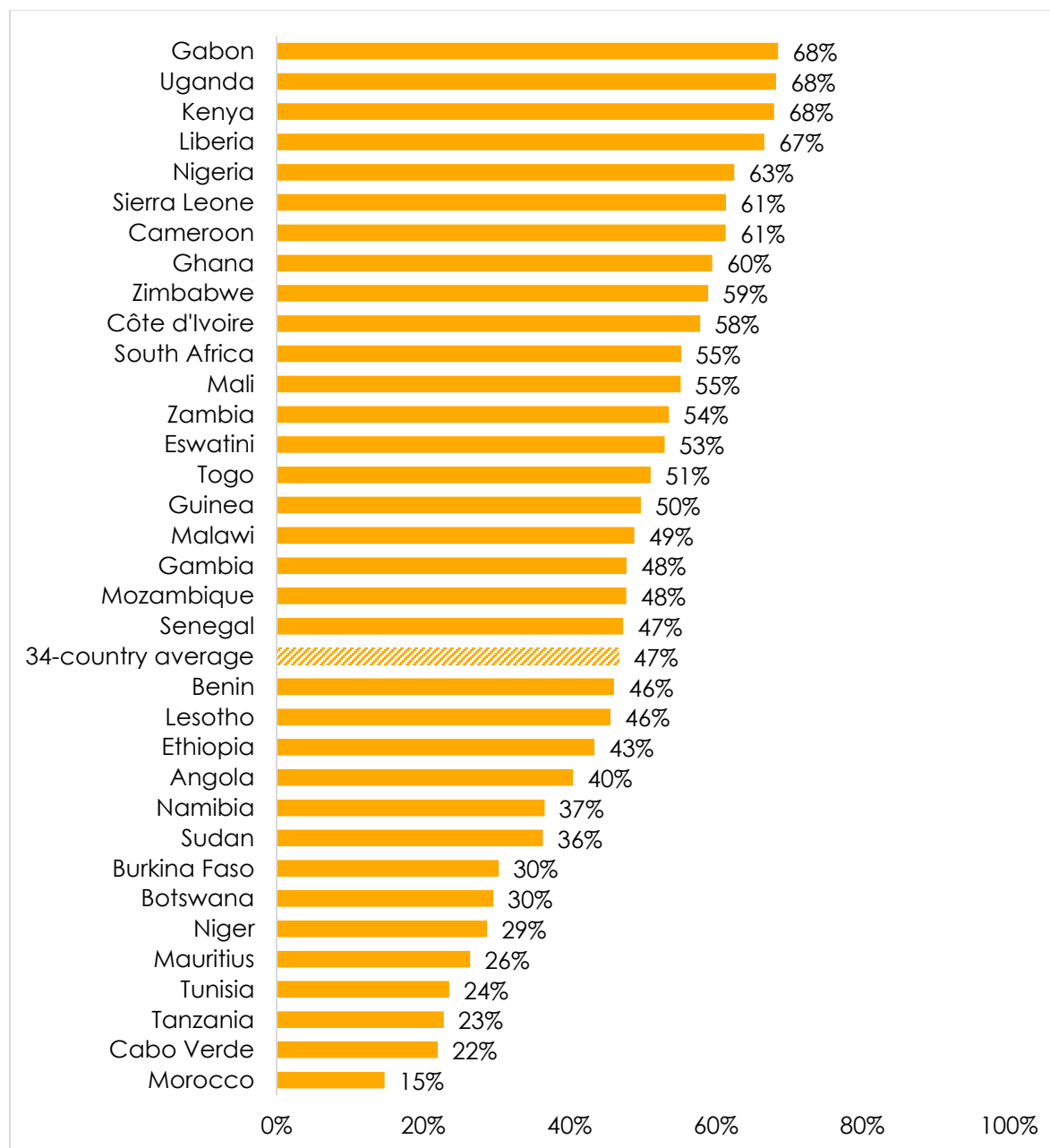
**Figure 4: Corruption in key public institutions** | 34 countries\* | 2019/2021



**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")

\*The question about local government councillors was not asked in Angola.

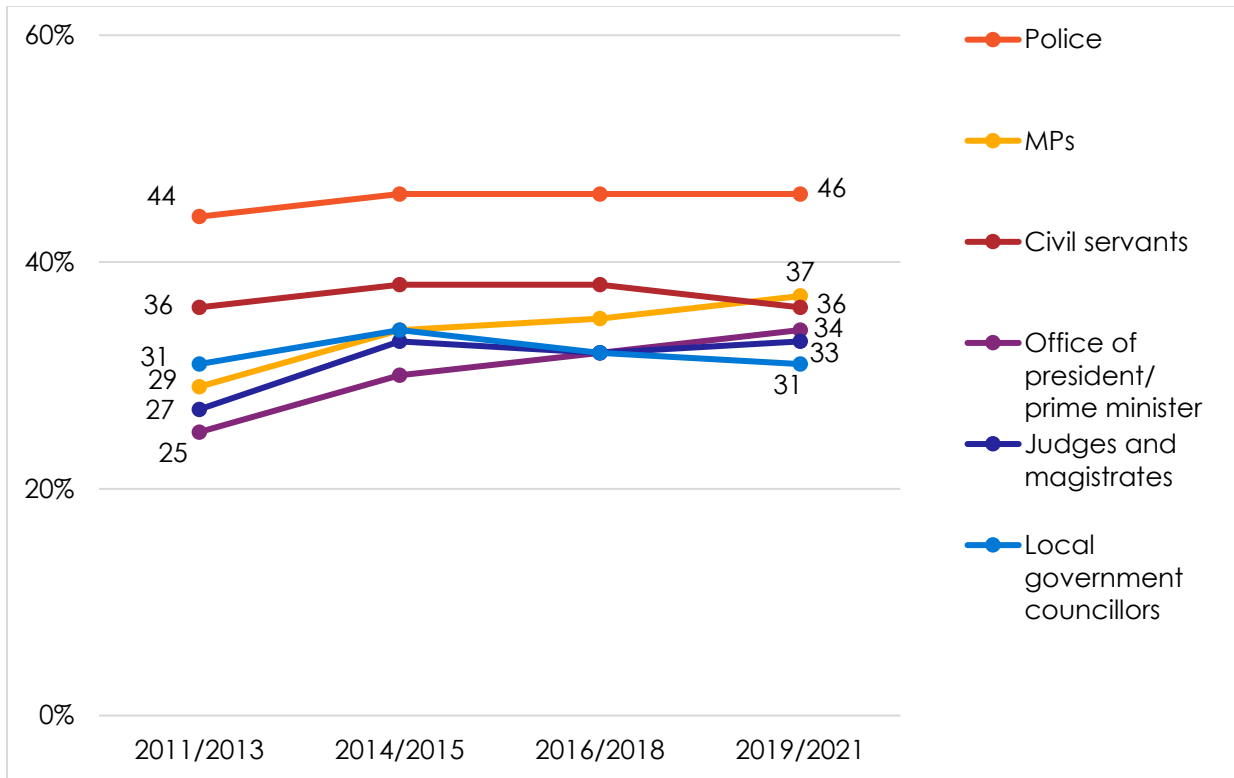
**Figure 5: Perceived corruption among the police** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**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")



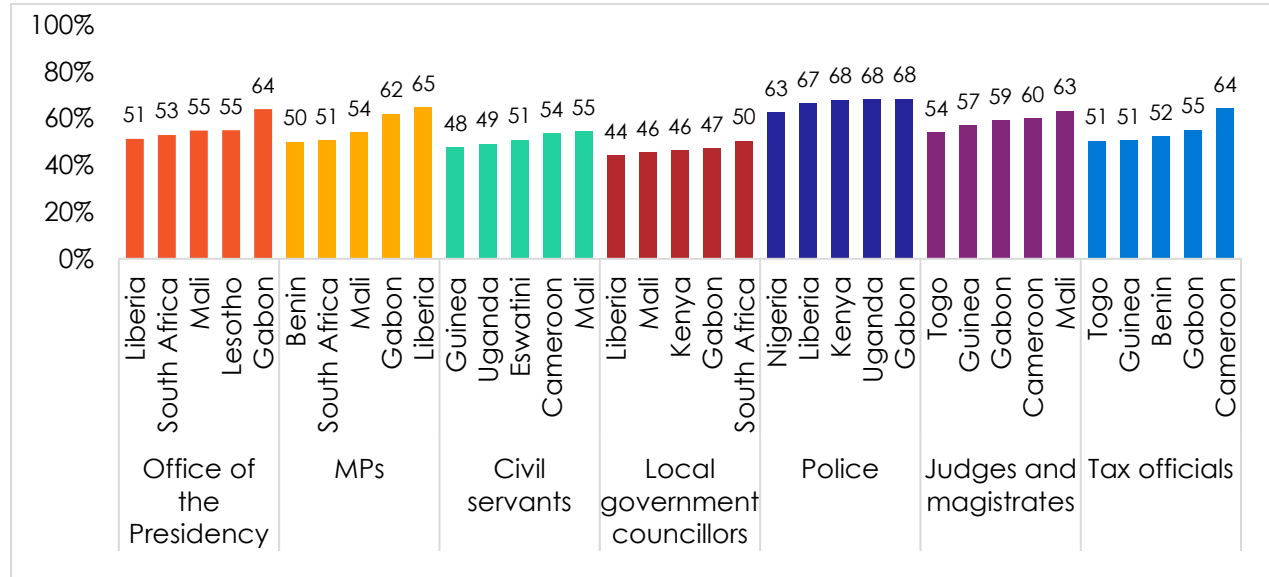
**Figure 6: Changes in perceived corruption** | by key institution | 30\* countries | 2011-2021



**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")

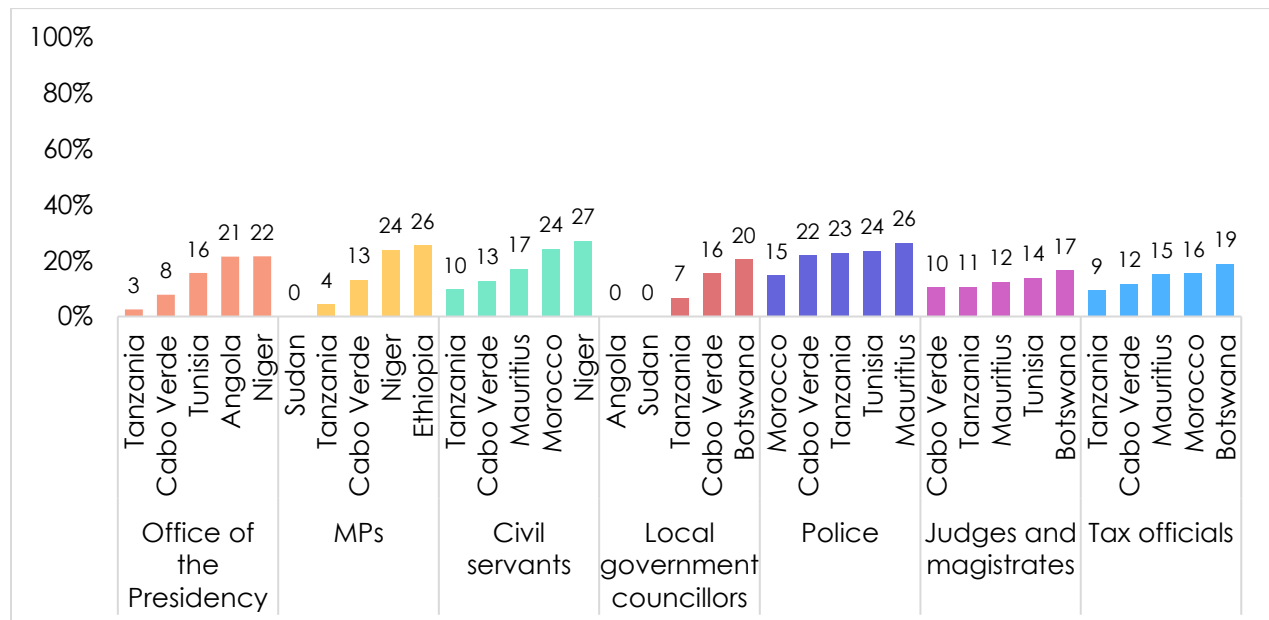
\* Question about prime minister not asked in Morocco in 2011/2013. Question about local government councillors not asked in Malawi in 2014/2015.

**Figure 7: Countries with highest perceived corruption** | by key institution | 34 countries  
| 2019/2021



**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 shows, for each of seven institutions, the five countries where the largest proportions of respondents say "most" or "all" officials are corrupt.)

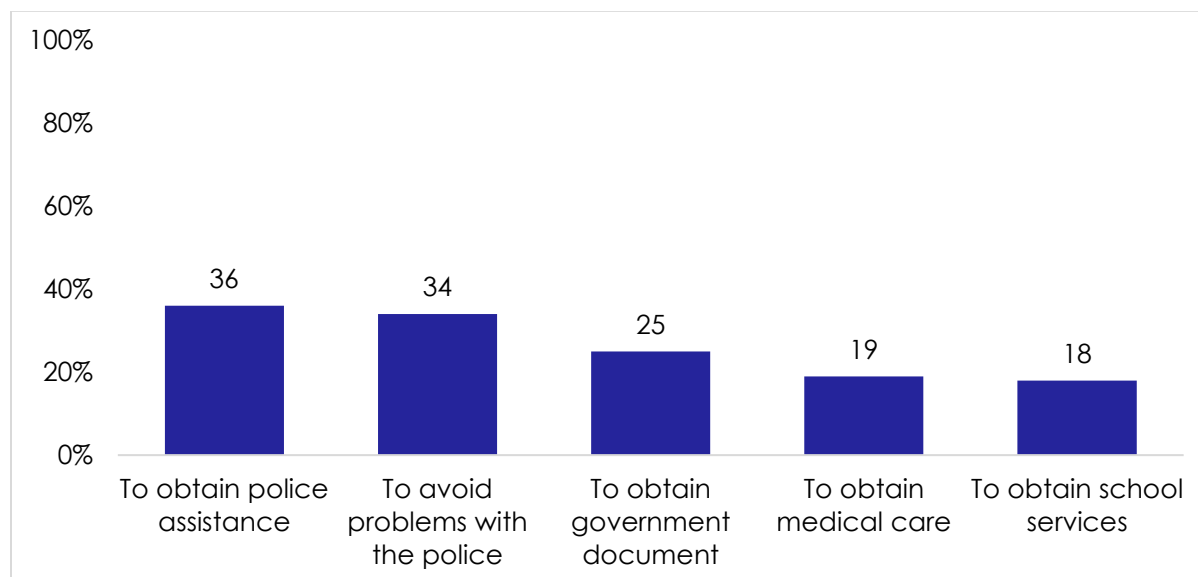
**Figure 8: Countries with lowest perceived corruption** | by key institution | 34 countries  
| 2019/2021



**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 shows, for each of seven institutions, the five countries where the smallest proportions of respondents say "most" or "all" officials are corrupt.)

Experience of bribery

**Figure 9: Share of service users who had to pay a bribe to obtain each public service**  
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**Respondents were asked:**

*In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] 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?*

*In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?*

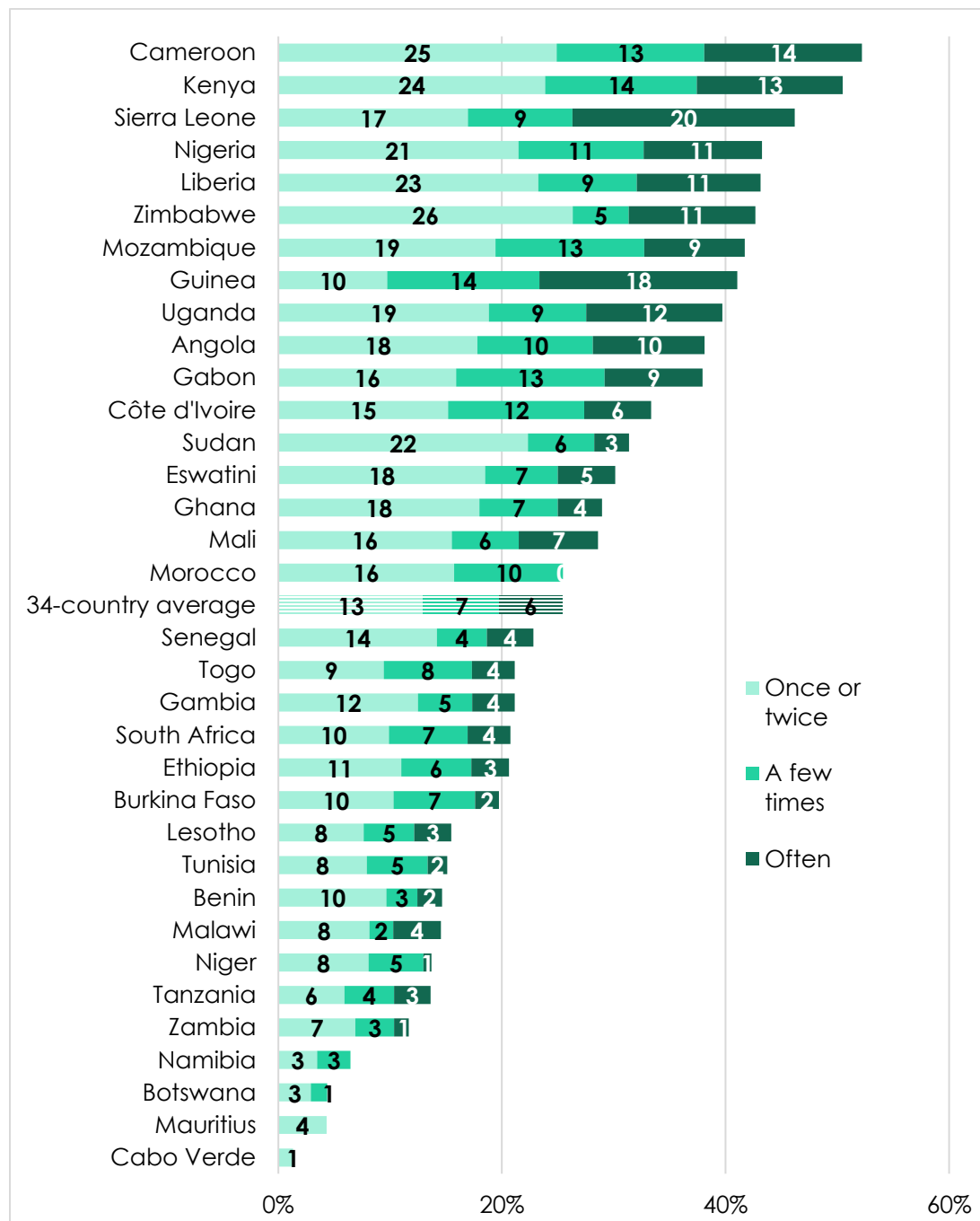
*In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?*

*In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?*

*In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] How often, if ever did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?*

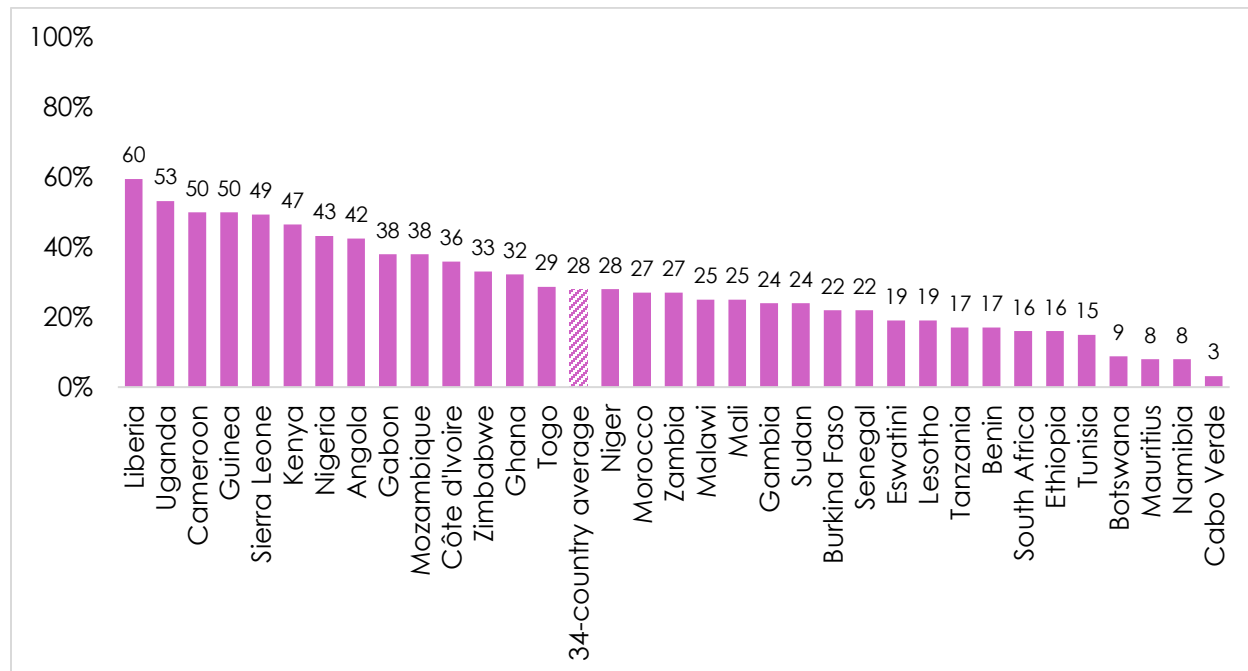
*(% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often." Respondents who did not have contact with these services are excluded.)*

**Figure 10: Share of citizens seeking identity documents who had to pay a bribe**  
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**Respondents were asked:** In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?  
 (Respondents who did not try to get an identity document are excluded.)

**Figure 11: Share of total population exposed to bribery to obtain any public service**  
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**Respondents were asked:**

*In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] 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?*

*In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?*

*In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?*

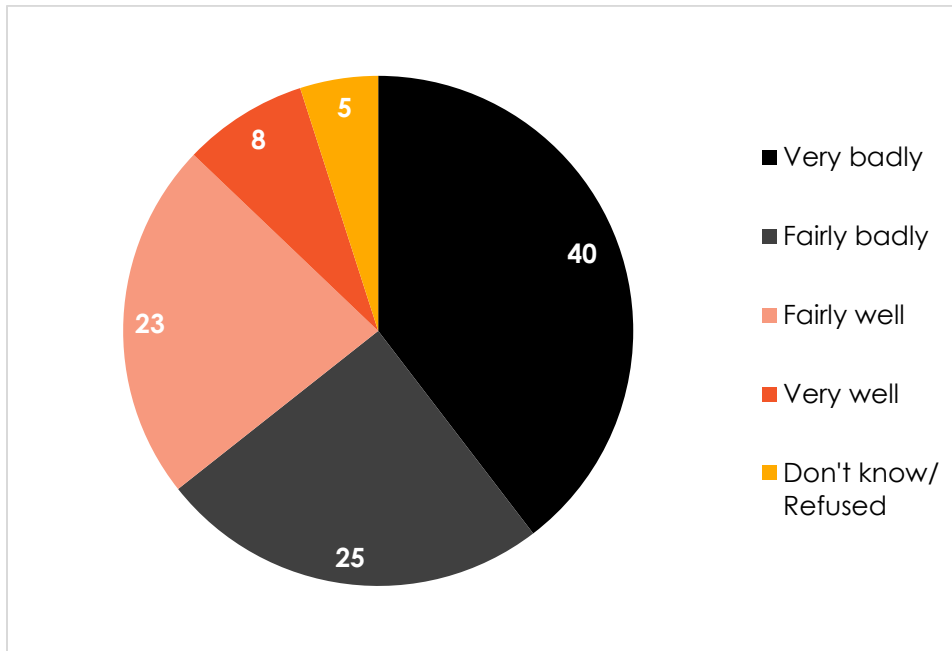
*In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?*

*In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] How often, if ever did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?*

(% of **all respondents** who say they ever paid a bribe ("once or twice," "a few times," or "often") for **any** of these services or to avoid problems in the past year)

*Fight against corruption*

**Figure 12: Government performance in fighting corruption | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



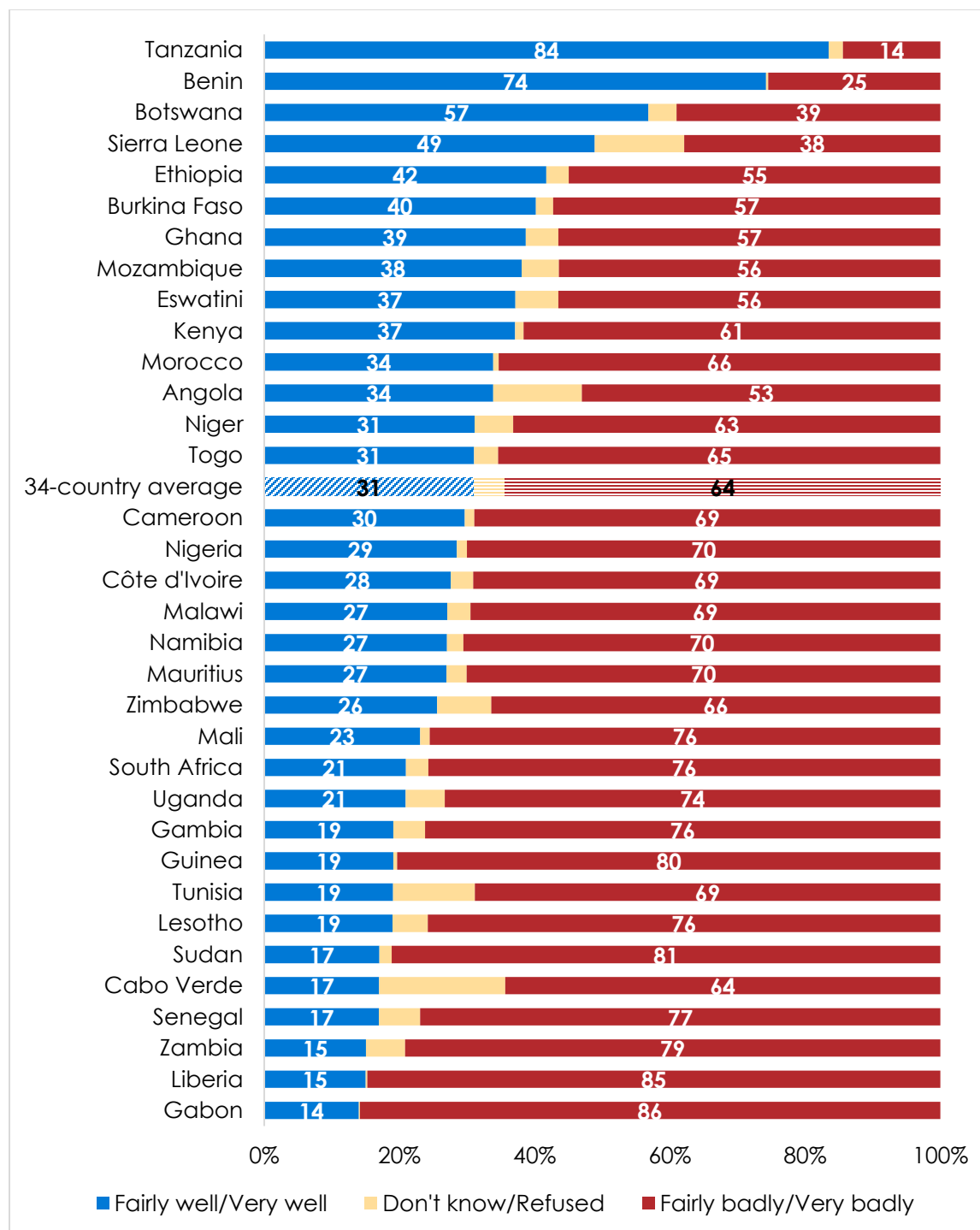
**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

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**Figure 13: Government performance in fighting corruption** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**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 14: Change in approval of government performance in fighting corruption (percentage points) | 30 countries | 2011-2021**

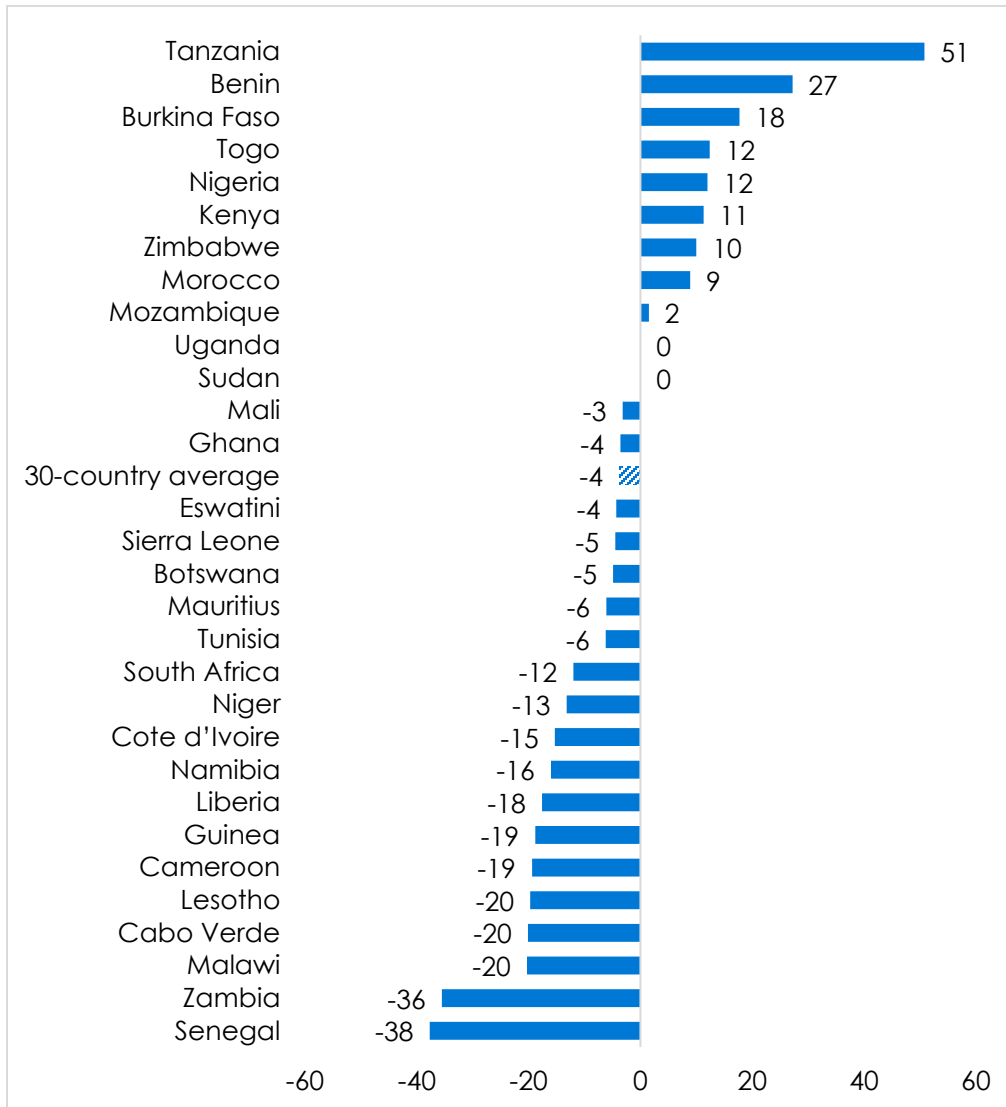
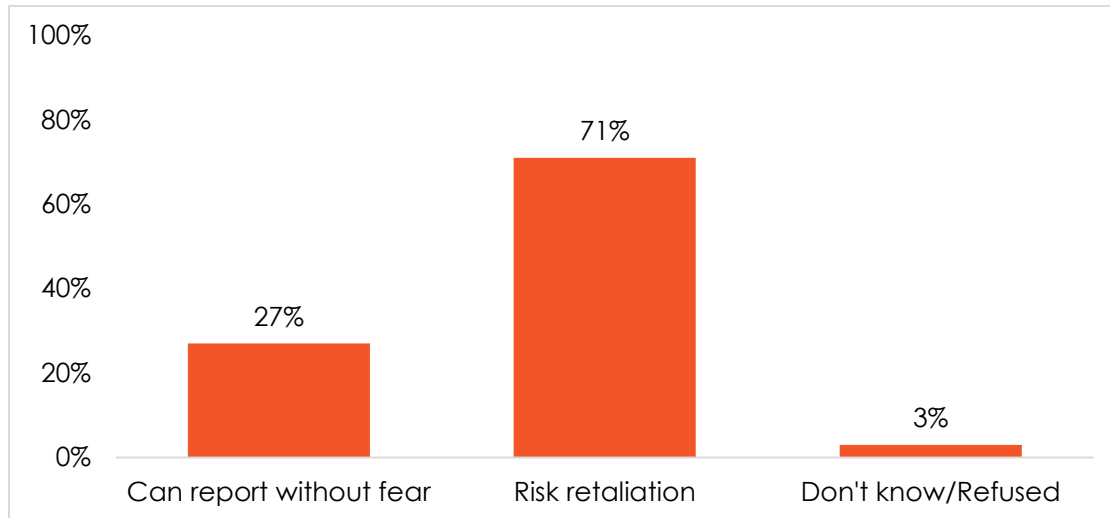


Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who say the government is handling the fight against corruption "fairly well" or "very well." Positive numbers indicate increases in approval.



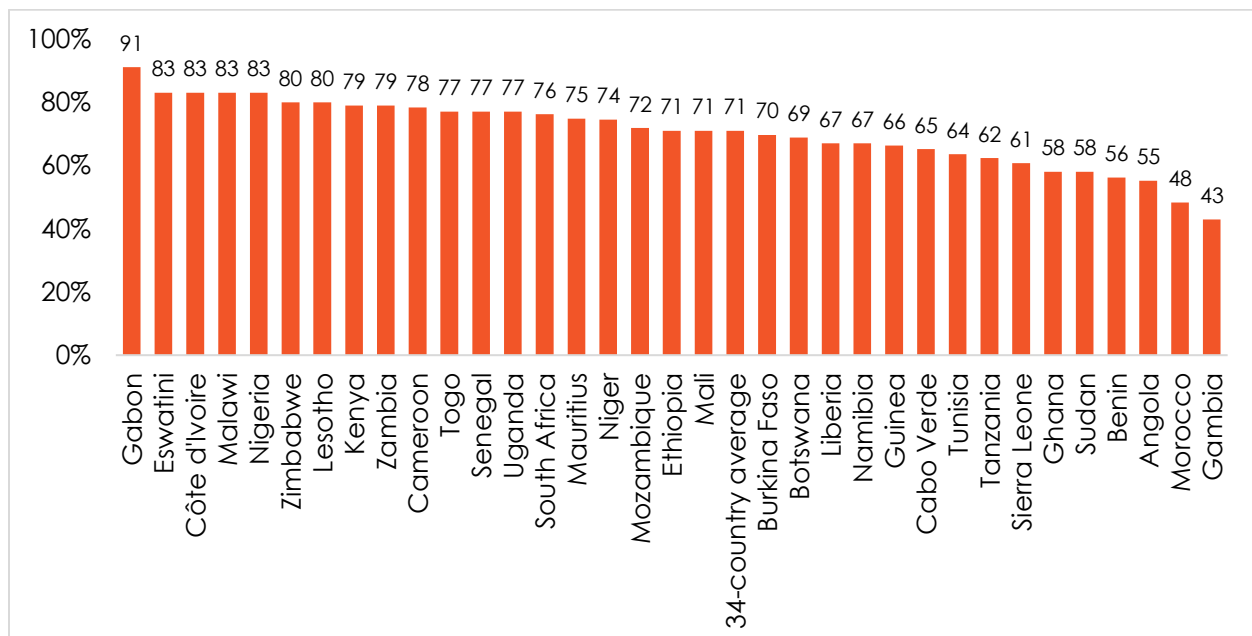
Fear of retaliation

**Figure 15: Do you risk retaliation if you report corruption?** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**Respondents were asked:** In this country, can ordinary people report incidences of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?

**Figure 16: Risk retaliation if report corruption** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



**Respondents were asked:** In this country, can ordinary people report incidences of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out? (% who say they risk retaliation)

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## Appendix

**Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds**

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	DDc. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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