



Dispatch No. 522 | 26 May 2022

Malawians dissatisfied with government efforts on corruption, want swift action against corrupt officials

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 522 | Joseph J. Chunga and Raphael Nedi

Summary

Since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in 1994, corruption has held a persistent and prominent place in Malawi's political campaigns and government pronouncements. Like other presidential aspirants, President Lazarus Chakwera has talked tough and pledged zero tolerance for corruption (Aklilu & Agarwal, 2010; Sangala, 2017; Matonga, 2021).

Anti-corruption activists have welcomed positive signals, such as the appointment of Martha Chizuma – noted for her zeal against injustices when she was ombudsman – as director of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, the conviction of notable business moguls on corruption charges, the firing of some cabinet ministers, and the reshuffling of the cabinet to drop some ministers suspected of engaging in graft (Makossah, 2021; Namangale, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2022).

However, continuing reports of alleged state capture by influential business people such as Zuneth Sattar, his associate Ashok Kumar Sreedharan, and Abdul Karim Batawalala, along with allegations of corrupt practices by government officials and cabinet ministers, have sparked anger among civil society organisations and the public and raised questions regarding the government's commitment to uprooting corruption (Chinoko, 2022; Ogunmodede, 2022; Platform for Investigative Journalism, 2022).

The most recent Afrobarometer survey suggests that work remains to be done in the battle against corruption. A majority of Malawians say that corruption is increasing and that the government is performing poorly in dealing with the vice. Most want strong sanctions against cabinet ministers and businesses associated with corruption. But more than half also endorse amnesty for corruption suspects who return their ill-gotten gains.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in February 2022. 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

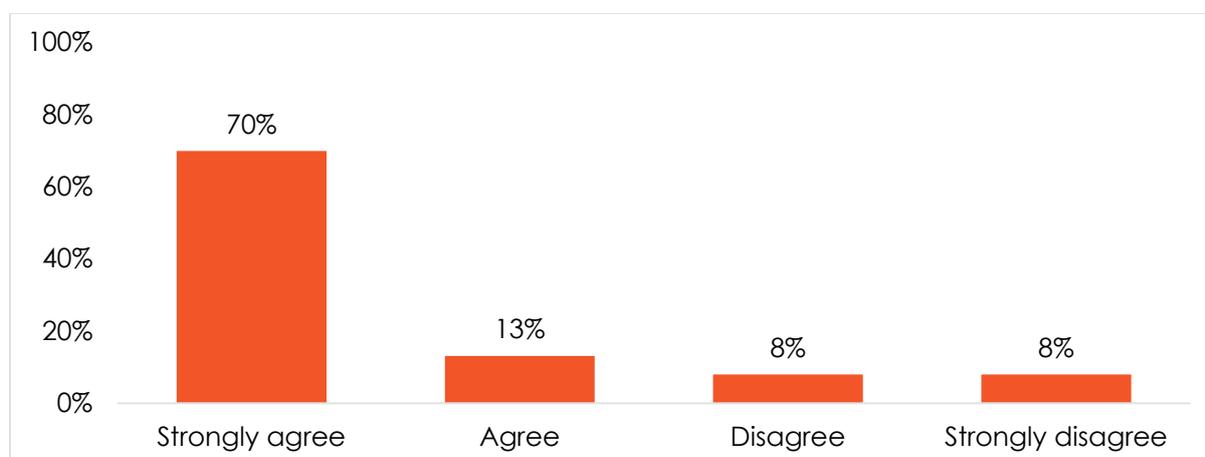
Key findings

- Most Malawians want to see swift action against government officials and business persons charged with corruption.
 - More than eight in 10 Malawians (83%) agree with the idea that cabinet ministers and government officials charged with corruption should be fired immediately.
 - Similarly, 82% “agree” or “strongly agree” with calls to debar businesses implicated in corruption.
 - However, 57% say suspects who refund proceeds from corruption should be granted amnesty.
- Two-thirds (66%) of Malawians say corruption in the country increased over the past year, including 57% who say it increased “a lot.”
 - More than half (57%) of citizens think “a lot” of the funds intended for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were lost or stolen due to corruption.
 - The police continue to top the chart of offices and institutions perceived as corrupt: 42% of Malawians say “most” or “all” police are involved in corruption.
- Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say the government is doing a poor job of fighting corruption, including 52% who say it is doing “very badly.”
 - A majority (54%) say the fight against corruption is worse under the Tonse Alliance government than it was during the DPP-led government.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Malawians say people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities.

Fire cabinet ministers and bar businesses, but grant amnesty

Amid allegations of corruption by government officials, the president has been under pressure to ensure that all suspected officials are fired from his cabinet. An overwhelming majority (83%) of Malawians support the idea that the president should immediately fire any minister charged with corruption, including 70% who “strongly agree” (Figure 1).

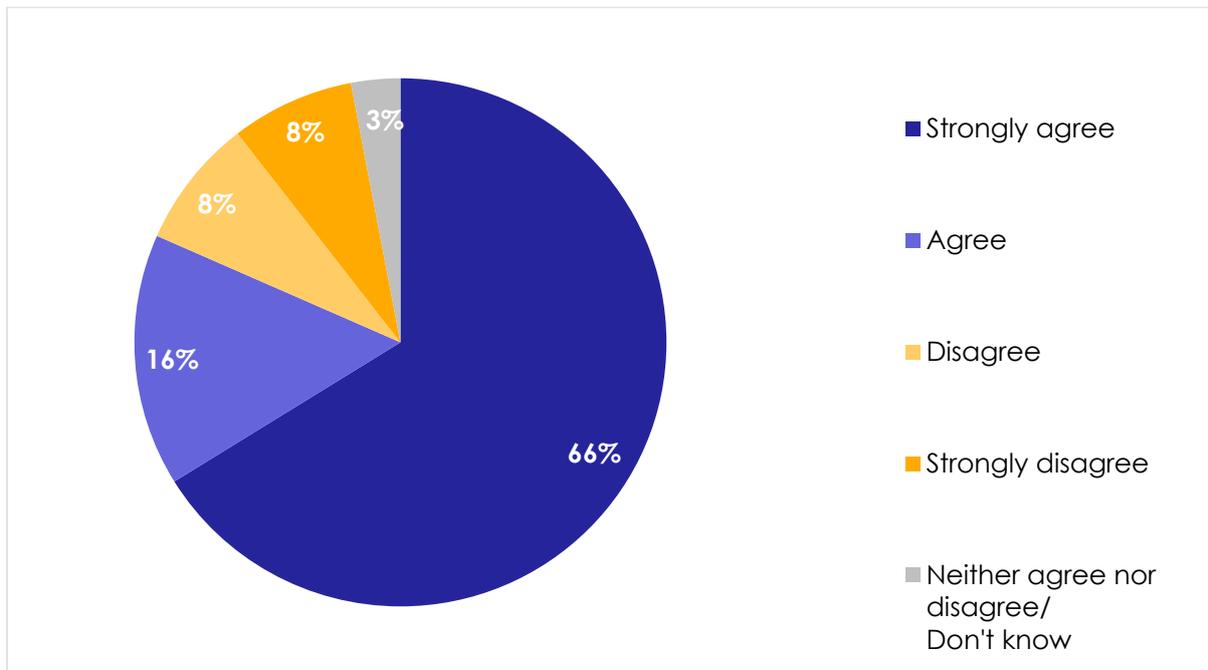
Figure 1: Should cabinet ministers and government officials facing corruption charges be fired? | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking at the fight against corruption in Malawi, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Cabinet ministers and government officials who have been charged with corruption crimes should be fired immediately?

A similarly high proportion (82%) support the idea of debarring businesses accused of corruption from all government procurement processes (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Should businesses implicated in corruption be debarred from government procurement? | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking at the fight against corruption in Malawi, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *Businesses implicated in corruption should immediately be debarred from all government procurement processes?*

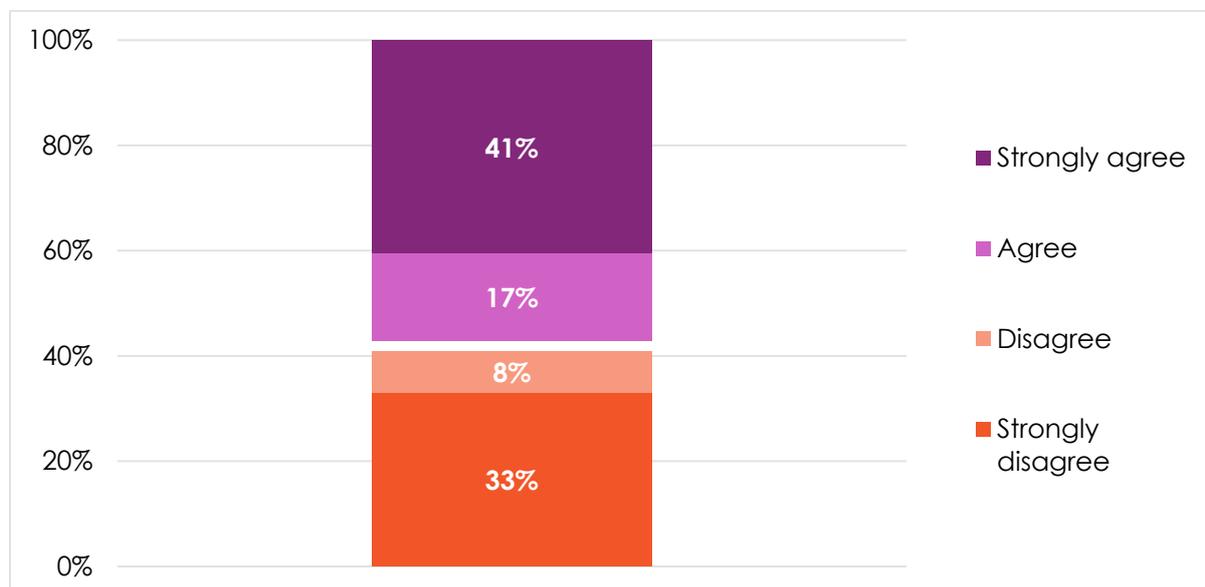
In January, Malawi's attorney general announced a 60-day amnesty for people accused of corruption who return the proceeds of their corrupt practices (Mlanjira, 2022). The announcement was condemned by some institutions and members of the public who argued that the attorney general has no legal basis for his decision, with some quarters accusing the government of conspiring with the corrupt individuals to escape the arms of justice (Kasanda, 2022).

However, when asked whether corruption suspects should be granted amnesty if they return the proceeds of corruption, more than half (57%)¹ of Malawians say yes (Figure 3).

Support for amnesty is weakest in the Northern region (51%, compared to 58% in the Southern and Central regions) (Figure 4). And the idea has fewer fans among citizens with secondary or post-secondary education (53%) than among their less educated counterparts (58%-60%).

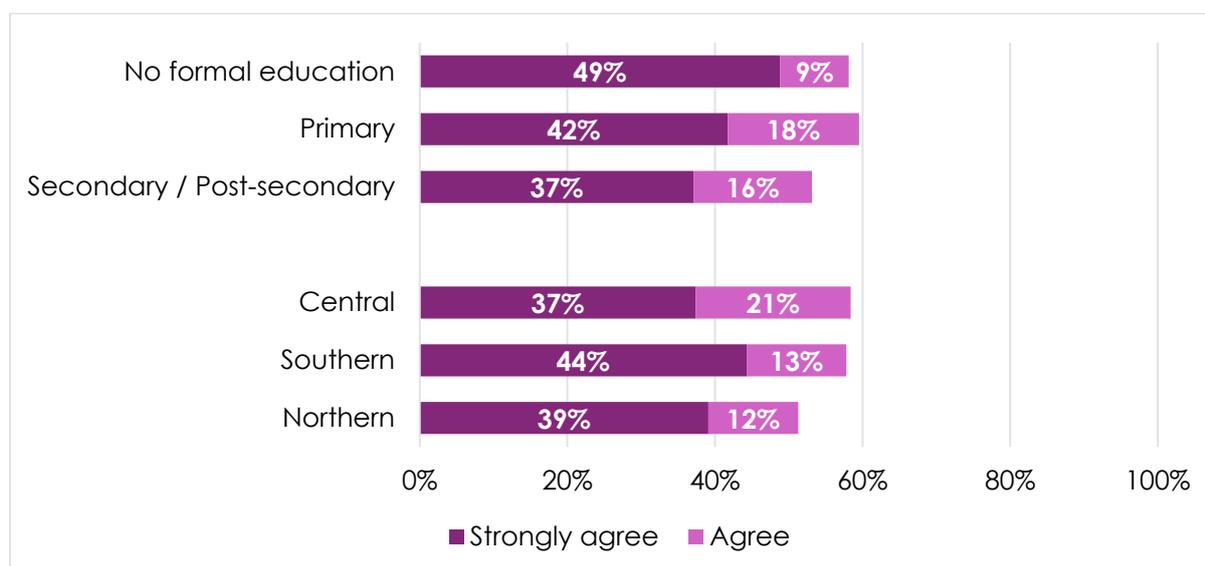
¹ Due to rounding, the total percentage for combined sub-categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of the sub-categories, e.g. 41% "strongly agree" plus 17% "agree" equals 57% "agree/strongly agree."

Figure 3: Should suspects who return proceeds of corruption be granted amnesty?
 | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking at the fight against corruption in Malawi, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: All corruption suspects who have refunded the proceeds of corruption within a specified period should be granted amnesty?

Figure 4: Suspects who return proceeds of corruption should be granted amnesty
 | by education level and region | Malawi | 2022



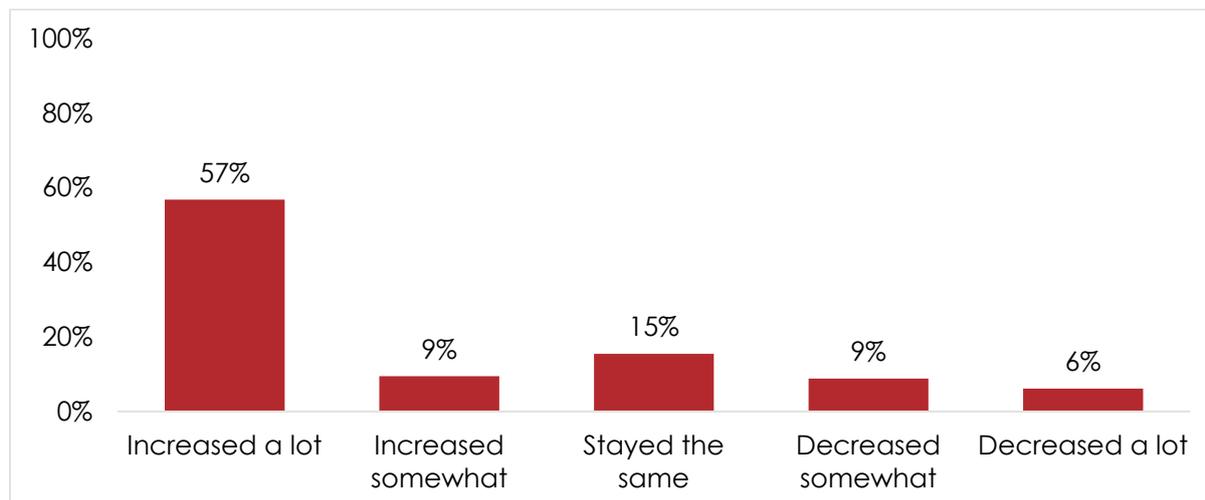
Respondents were asked: Looking at the fight against corruption in Malawi, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: All corruption suspects who have refunded the proceeds of corruption within a specified period should be granted amnesty?

State of corruption

Two-thirds (66%) of Malawians say corruption has increased in the country over the past year, including 57% who say it has increased “a lot” (Figure 5).

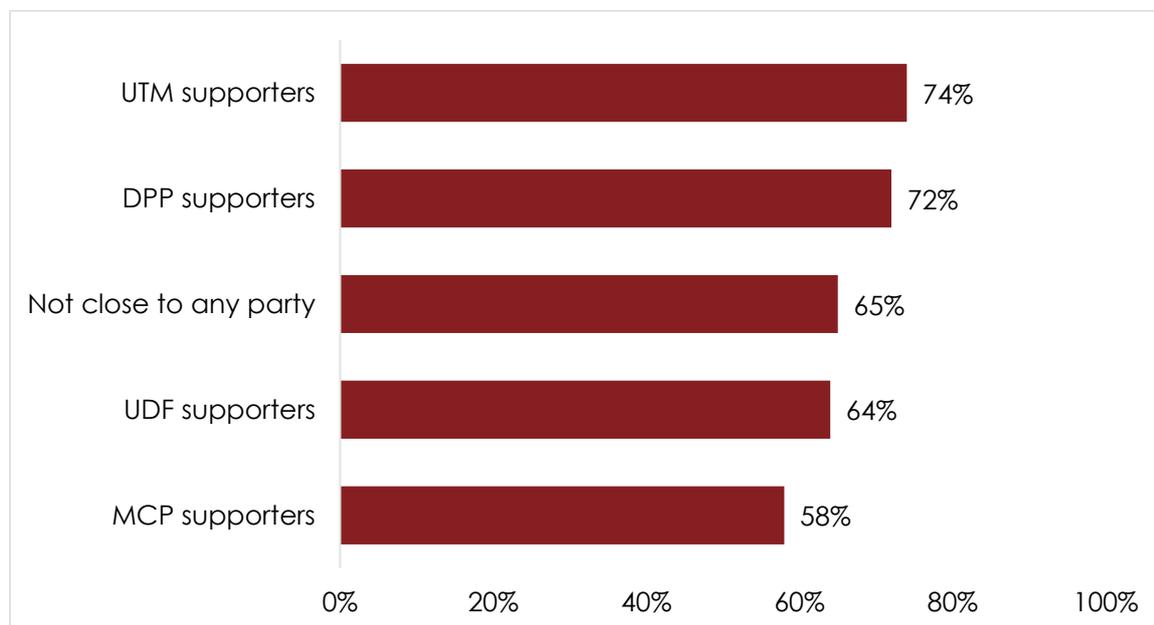
Even among supporters of the political parties forming the ruling Tonse Alliance, majorities believe that corruption increased over the past year. Close to six in 10 MCP supporters (58%) hold this view, as do 74% of UTM adherents – roughly the same level as among supporters of the main opposition party, the DPP (72%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Has corruption increased or decreased? | Malawi | 2022



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

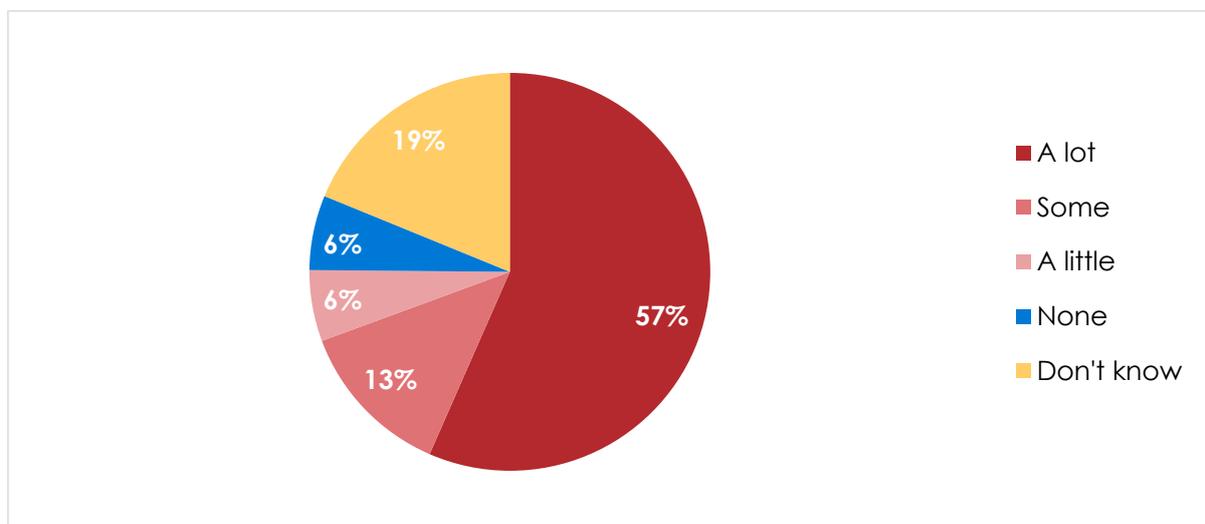
Figure 6: Corruption has increased | by political party affiliation | Malawi | 2022



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

Reflecting the same perspective, seven in 10 Malawians think “a lot” (57%) or “some” (13%) of the funds meant for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were lost or stolen due to corruption. Only 6% of citizens think none of the COVID-19 funds were stolen (Figure 7).

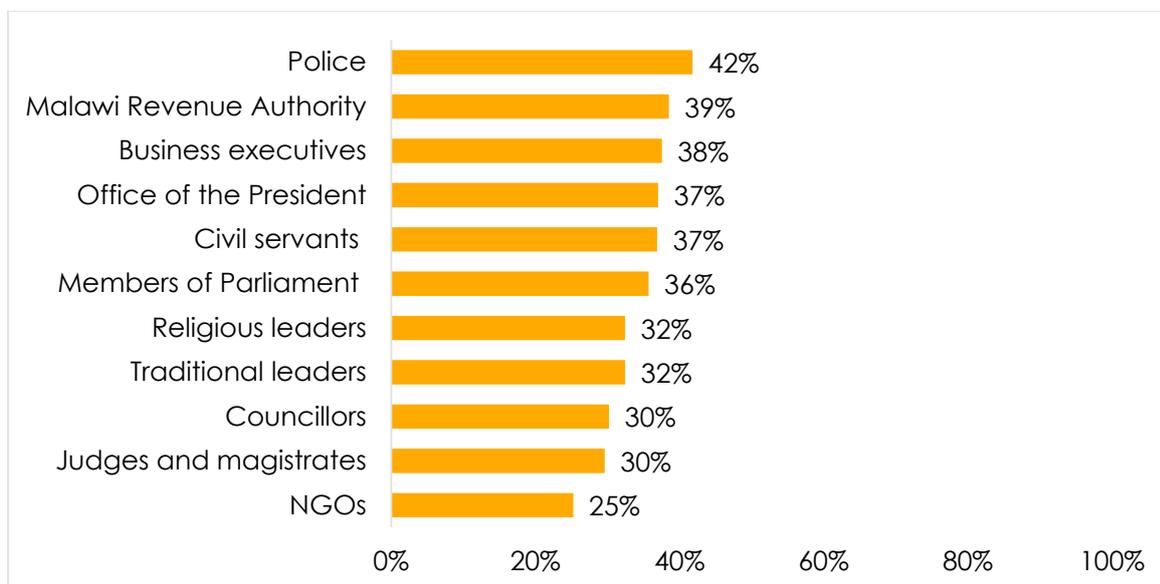
Figure 7: Were COVID-19 funds lost to corruption? | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption?

Among key institutions and leaders, the police are most widely perceived as corrupt: 42% of Malawians say “most” or “all” police are involved in corruption, followed by the Malawi Revenue Authority (39%), business executives (38%), the Office of the President (37%), civil servants (37%), and members of Parliament (36%) (Figure 8).

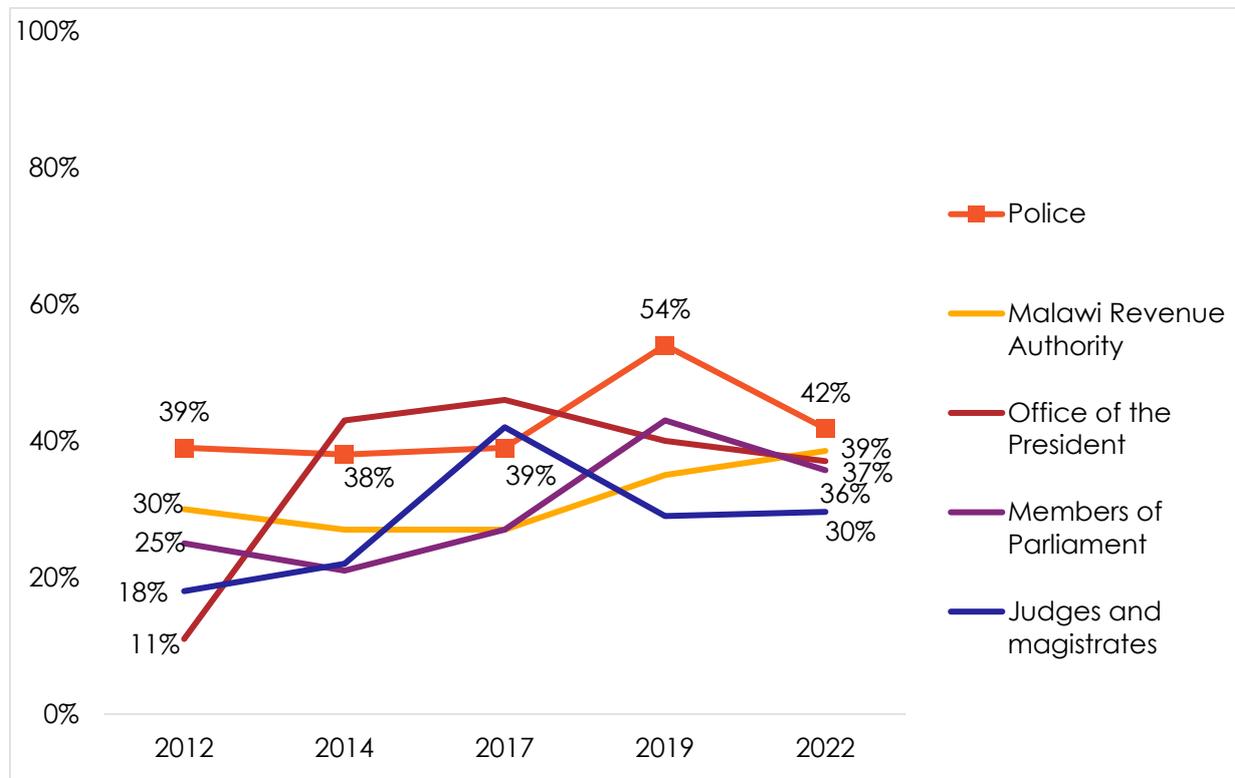
Figure 8: Most/All perceived as corrupt | Malawi | 2022



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 of them” or “all of them”)

Over the past decade, perceptions of widespread among the police, as well as other key institutions, have generally increased. However, perceived corruption among the police dropped by 12 percentage points, from 54% to 42%, between 2019 and 2022 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Most/All perceived as corrupt | Malawi | 2003-2022

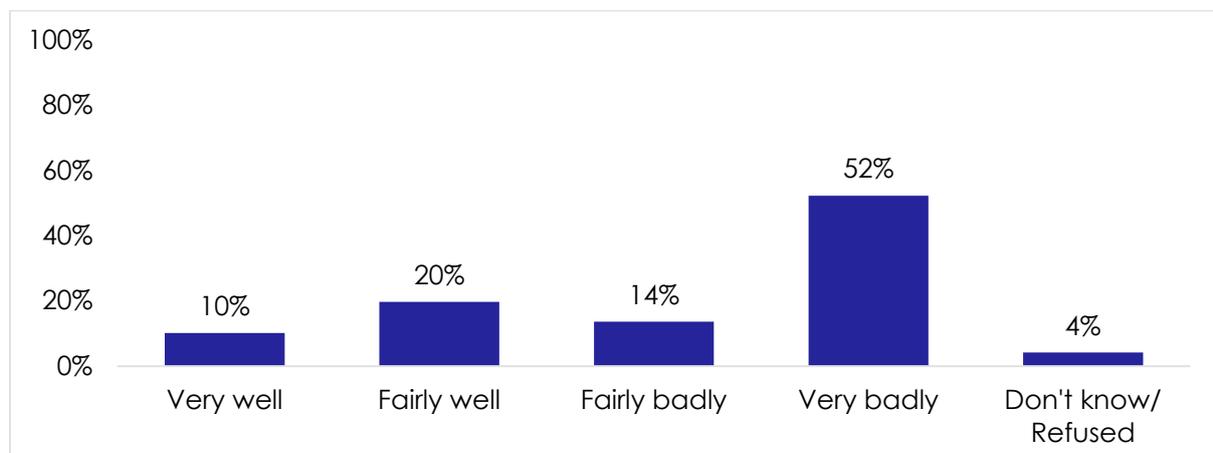


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% Most/All of them)

Government efforts against corruption

Despite government efforts to highlight the issue of corruption, most citizens are not impressed. Two out of three Malawians (66%) say the government is doing a poor job on corruption, including (52%) who say it is doing "very badly" (Figure 10).

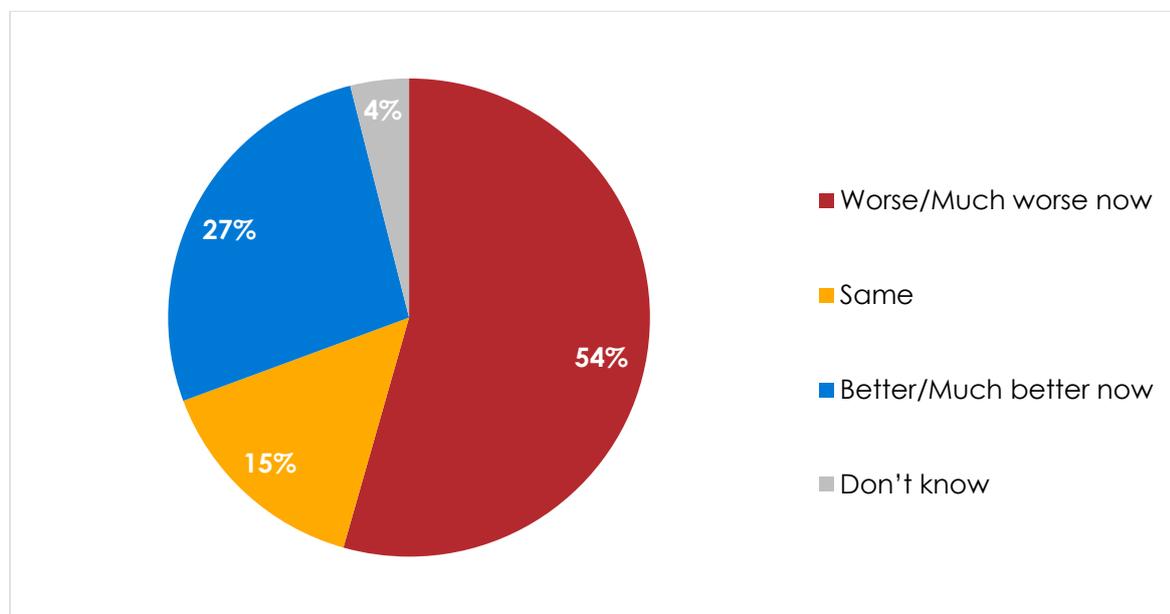
Figure 10: Government handling of the fight against corruption | Malawi | 2022



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?

When asked to compare the current Tonse Alliance government with its predecessor DPP-led government when it comes to fighting corruption, more than half (54%) of citizens say the Tonse Alliance is doing worse (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Tonse Alliance vs. DPP era: Fighting corruption | Malawi | 2022



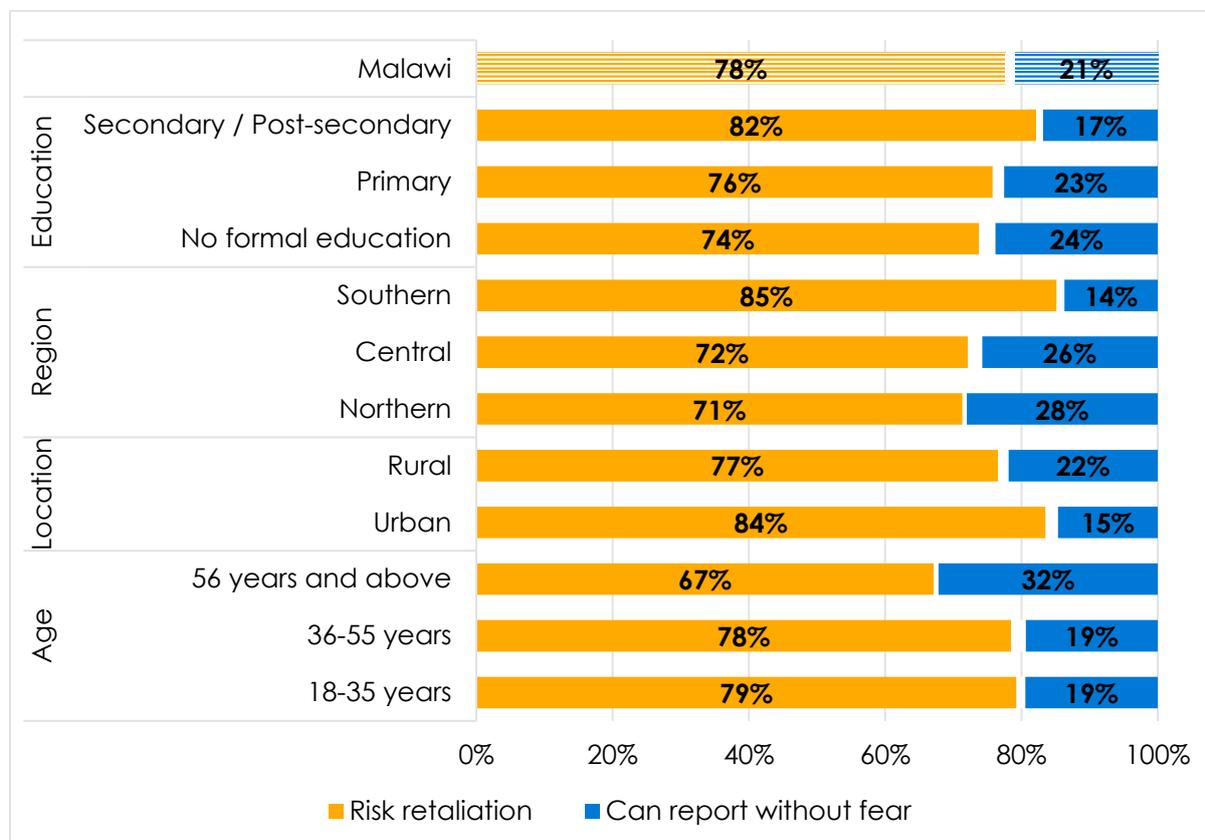
Respondents were asked: I would like to ask a few questions about the performance of the previous Democratic Progressive Party or DPP government and the current Tonse Alliance government. Would you say the following are now better, worse, or have remained the same: Fighting corruption in government?

Reporting corruption: Citizens fear retaliation

While Section 51 of the Corrupt Practices Act (Government of Malawi, 2004) provides for protection for people who report corruption when they witness it, more than three-fourths (78%) of respondents think that citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities. This fear cuts across key demographic groups but is particularly high among those with secondary or post-secondary education (82%), urban residents (84%), and residents of the Southern region (85%) (Figure 12).

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Figure 12: Can people report corruption without fear of retaliation? | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



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?*

Conclusion

In response to civil society complaints about rampant corruption in the country, Minister of Information Gospel Kazako has been quoted as arguing that “all these activities by civil society are a result of what this government has done, which is fighting corruption to the core. There has been an increase in interest in matters of corruption fight because President Chakwera struck a common chord in terms of the fight against corruption and everyone is joining in. ...” (Sabola, 2022). The gist of his argument is that it is the interest in fighting corruption that has increased, not the level of corruption.

If so, it will require more tangible results to convince Malawians, most of whom believe that corruption is on the increase and that the Tonse Alliance government is not handling it decisively enough. Most citizens favour tough sanctions against those involved in corruption, be they cabinet ministers, public officials, or connected businesses, even if they also endorse amnesty for those who give back the fruits of their graft.

For a government that campaigned on zero tolerance against corruption, and a country badly in need of resources to improve service delivery, this is a call for more action.

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