

Mauritians' dissatisfaction with leaders mirrors distrust, perceived corruption, economic strain

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 643 | Asafika Mpako

Summary

Home to a population of just 1.25 million, the Republic of Mauritius has long prided itself on the stability of its multiparty parliamentary democracy, its good governance, and its “economic miracle” transforming a low-income, agriculture-based economy into an economic powerhouse (Tan, 2023; Africanews, 2019; World Bank, 2022).

But cracks have appeared in recent years in the sheen of its reputation for good governance and economic development (Darga & Peeraullee, 2021; Financial Times, 2022).

After the 2019 general election – in which the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM) emerged victorious, confirming Pravind Jugnauth as prime minister – opposition candidates challenged the validity of the results, and Mauritians' confidence in the quality of their elections weakened (African Arguments, 2021; Darga, 2021).

Over the past two years, discontented Mauritians have repeatedly taken to the streets to protest rising food and fuel prices and government corruption (Moonien, 2022; Africanews, 2021, 2022; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022).

And even as the Democracy Index placed Mauritius among the world's 20 most democratic countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021), the V-Dem Institute (2022) cited it as one of the 10 most rapidly “autocratizing” countries.

Critics have accused the prime minister of undermining democratic practices, including evading questions about corruption scandals in which he may be implicated (allAfrica, 2020; Institute for Security Studies, 2018). Several other leaders have also been embroiled in corruption scandals, including former President Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, who resigned after allegations that she had misused a Planet Earth Institute credit card to buy personal luxury items (Al Jazeera, 2018).

In 2020, the European Union placed Mauritius on a blacklist for money laundering and terrorism financing, though this was reversed in early 2022 (Axis, 2022). Another blow arrived with the African Development Bank's revelation of procurement corruption in a large energy project (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

Against this backdrop, how do Mauritians' see their public institutions and leaders?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that Mauritians express low levels of trust in public institutions and in their elected leaders. Most citizens say corruption has increased and indicate that ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report it.

Fewer than half of Mauritians approve of the way the prime minister, president, and National Assembly members have done their jobs. Overwhelmingly, Mauritians say the government is performing poorly at keeping prices stable, narrowing income gaps, and creating jobs.

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 (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in March 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 Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- A majority of Mauritians express “just a little” trust or “no trust at all” in key political institutions and leaders, including the president (59%), the prime minister (54%), the National Assembly (57%), municipal/district councils (57%), and both ruling (56%) and opposition (58%) parties.
 - Even the judiciary is trusted “just a little” or “not at all” by almost half (48%) of respondents.
- More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say the level of corruption in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” over the past year.
- Almost three in 10 respondents say “most” or “all” officials in the prime minister's office (29%) and members of the National Assembly (28%) are corrupt, while large majorities see at least “some” corruption among all key public institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Nearly three-quarters (72%) of citizens believe that people who report acts of corruption to the authorities are at risk of retaliation or other negative consequences.
- Citizens offer mixed assessments of the job performance of their elected leaders, including their municipal or district councillor (50% approval), the prime minister (47%), and their National Assembly representative (42%).
 - Only 31% give President Prithvirajsing Roopun a passing mark.
- Large majorities say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at keeping prices stable (91%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (83%), and creating jobs (81%).

Trust in institutions and leaders

Levels of public trust in Mauritius' institutions and leaders, as shown in Figure 1, may be cause for concern on at least two counts.

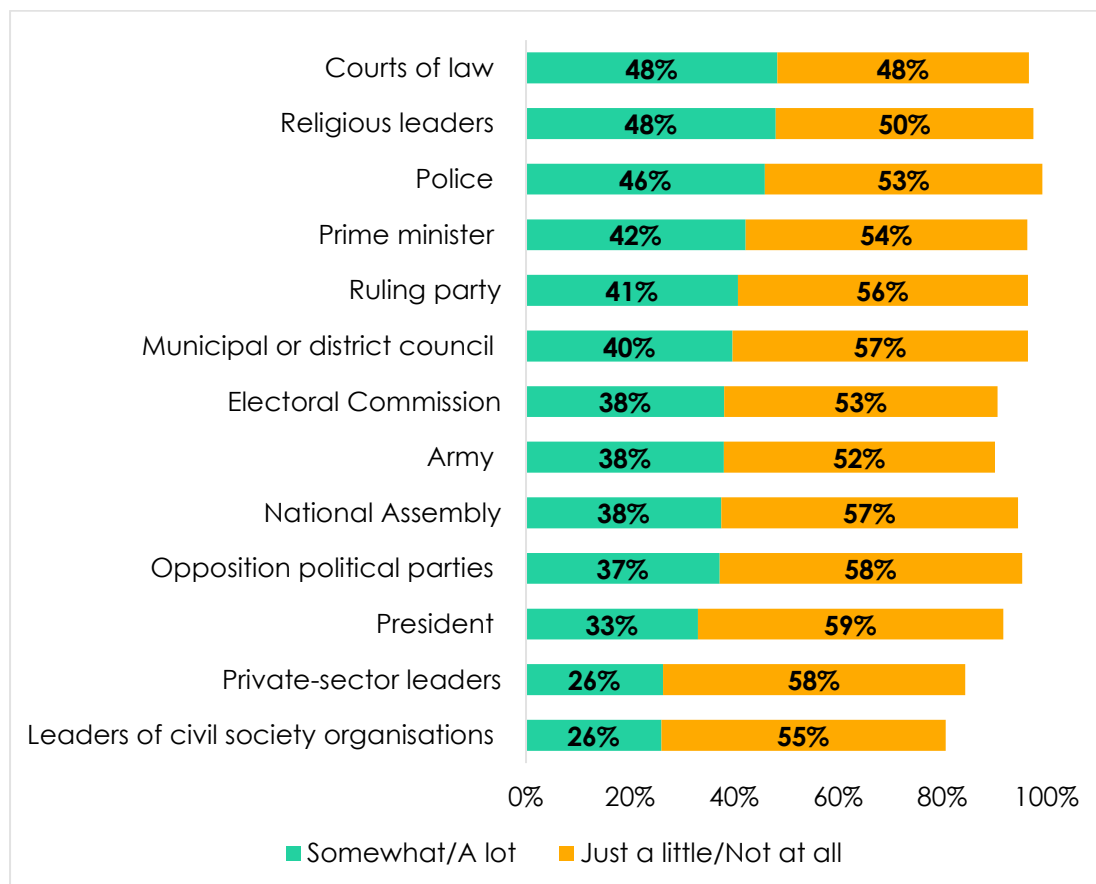
First, not one of the 13 institutions and groups of leaders manages to instill at least “some” trust in half of Mauritians. Courts of law and religious leaders come closest, with 48% each. Second, only one-third (33%) of Mauritians indicate that they trust the president (who is head of state, a largely ceremonial role) “somewhat” or “a lot,” while a majority (59%) say they trust him “just a little” or “not at all.”

The picture looks similar for the prime minister (who holds executive powers as head of government): 54% say they trust him “just a little” or “not at all.” Arguably, the degree of

public trust in the prime minister has implications for the extent to which he has leverage within government and in the broader society to shape discourse and implement change.

Trust is even weaker in leaders of the country's private sector (26%) and civil society (26%), who are tasked with supporting the democratic project.

Figure 1: Trust in institutions and leaders | Mauritius | 2022



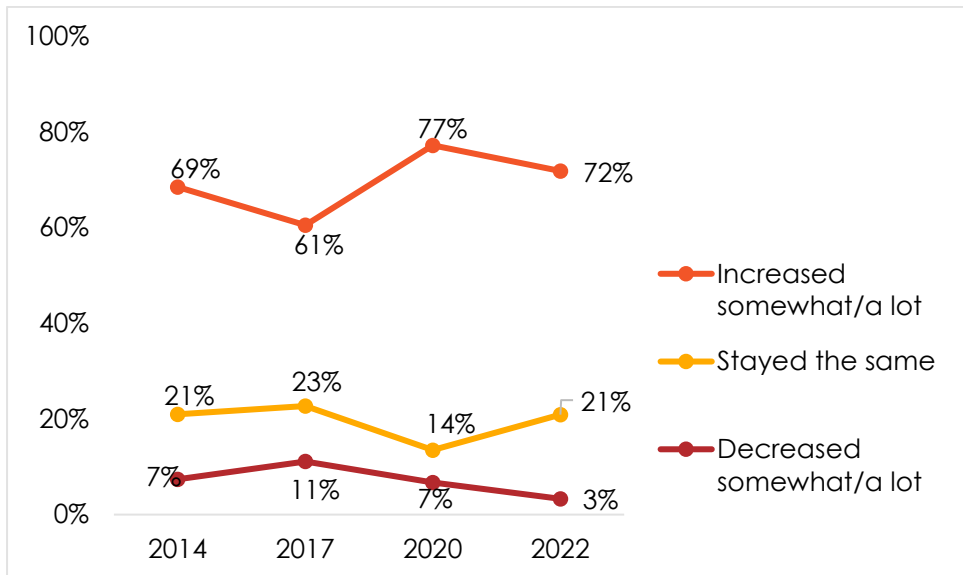
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't heard enough about them to say?

Moreover, more than seven in 10 Mauritians (72%) say levels of corruption in the country increased during the year preceding the survey (Figure 2). Although this reflects a modest drop from the 2020 survey (77%), only 3% of citizens think corruption decreased, while the proportion who see no change in corruption levels increased by 7 percentage points compared to 2020, to 21%.

The perception that corruption levels increased is highest among men (76%), younger respondents (76%-77% of those aged 18-44 years), citizens with secondary education (75%), and those experiencing low lived poverty¹ (79%) (Figure 3).

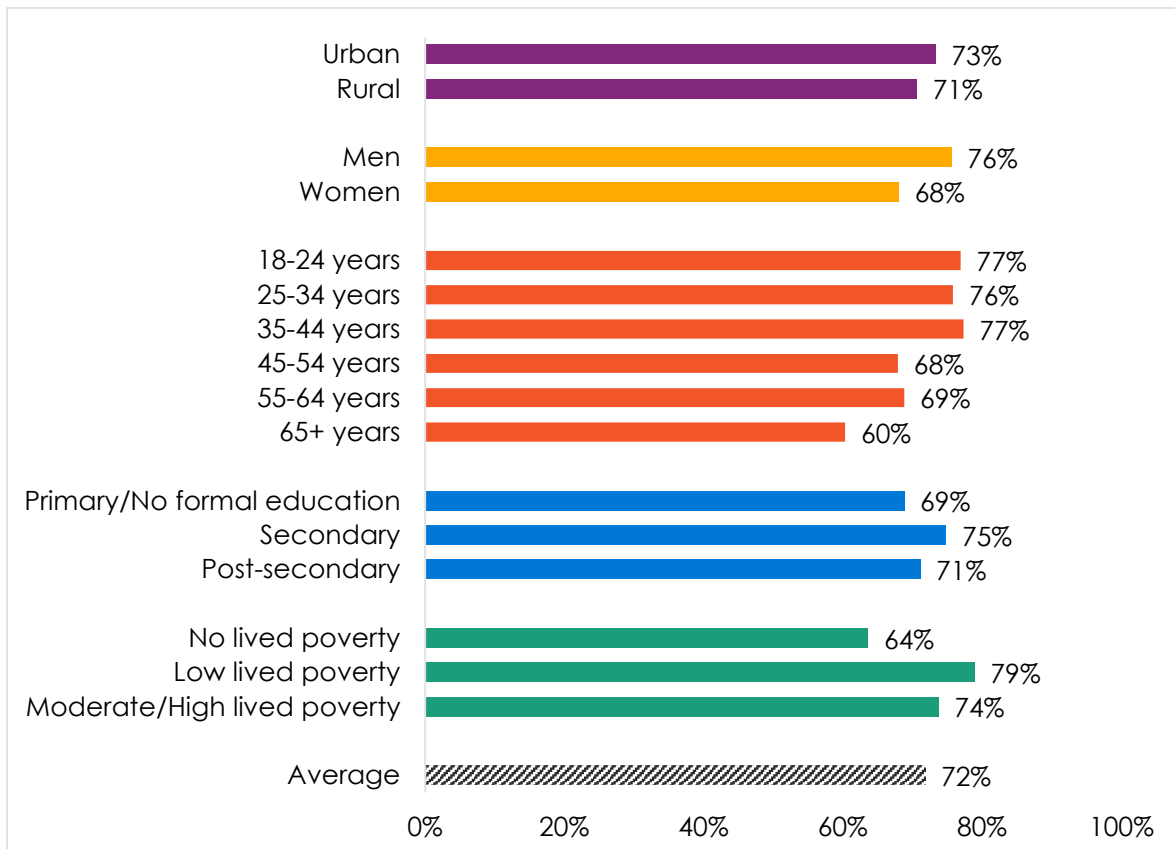
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 2: Perceptions of the level of corruption | Mauritius | 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?

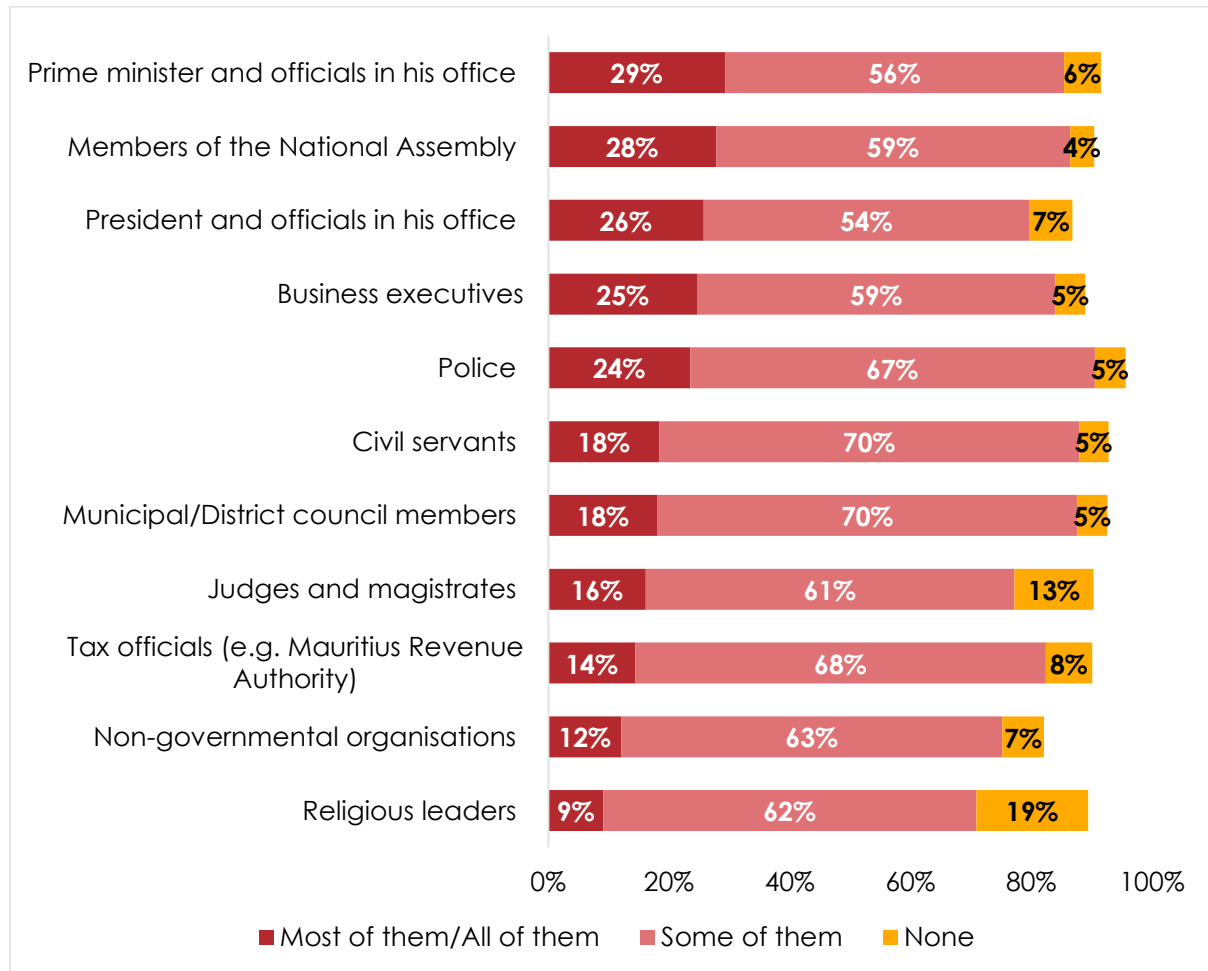
Figure 3: Level of corruption has increased | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say "increased somewhat" or "increased a lot")

Three in 10 Mauritians (29%) say the prime minister and “most” or “all” officials in his office are corrupt, while more than half (56%) say “some” of them are (Figure 4). About a quarter of citizens see widespread corruption among members of the National Assembly (28%), officials in the Presidency (26%), business executives (25%), and the police (24%). Religious leaders (9%) are least likely to be considered corrupt.

Figure 4: Who is corrupt | Mauritius | 2022

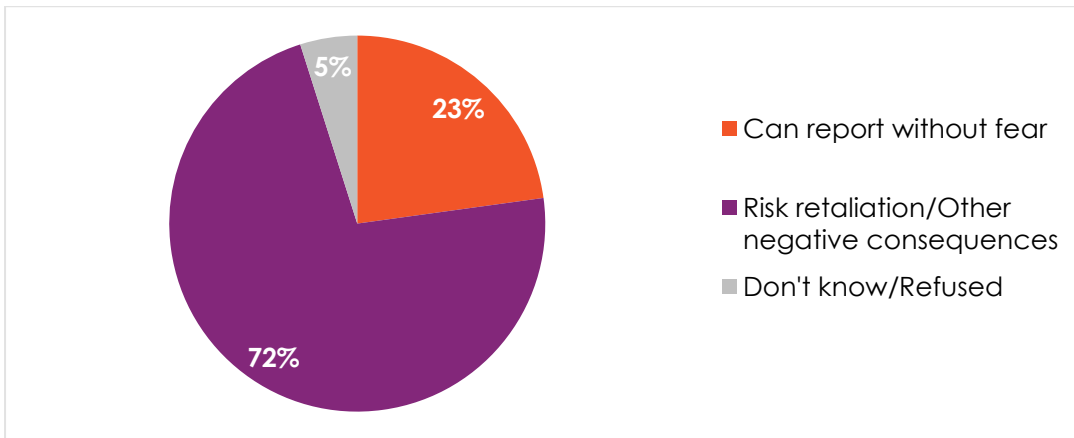


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

The ability of citizens to report corruption cases to the appropriate authorities is essential to anti-corruption work, yet almost three-fourths (72%) of Mauritians say ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they do so (Figure 5).

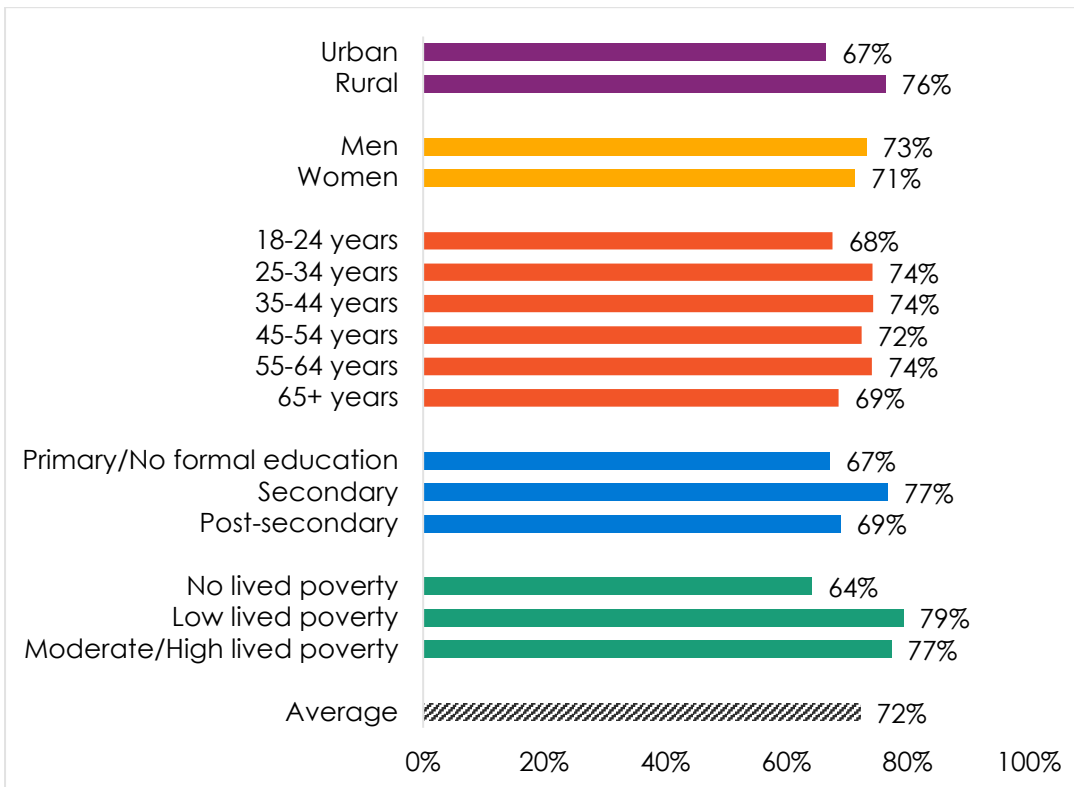
The view that people risk retaliation if they report corruption is more common among rural residents (76%) than urbanites (67%) and among those with secondary education (77%) compared to their counterparts in other education brackets (Figure 6). Economically well-off citizens (64%) are somewhat less concerned about retaliation than those experiencing some level of lived poverty (77%-79%).

Figure 5: Can people report corruption without fear? | Mauritius | 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?

Figure 6: People risk retaliation if they report corruption | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022

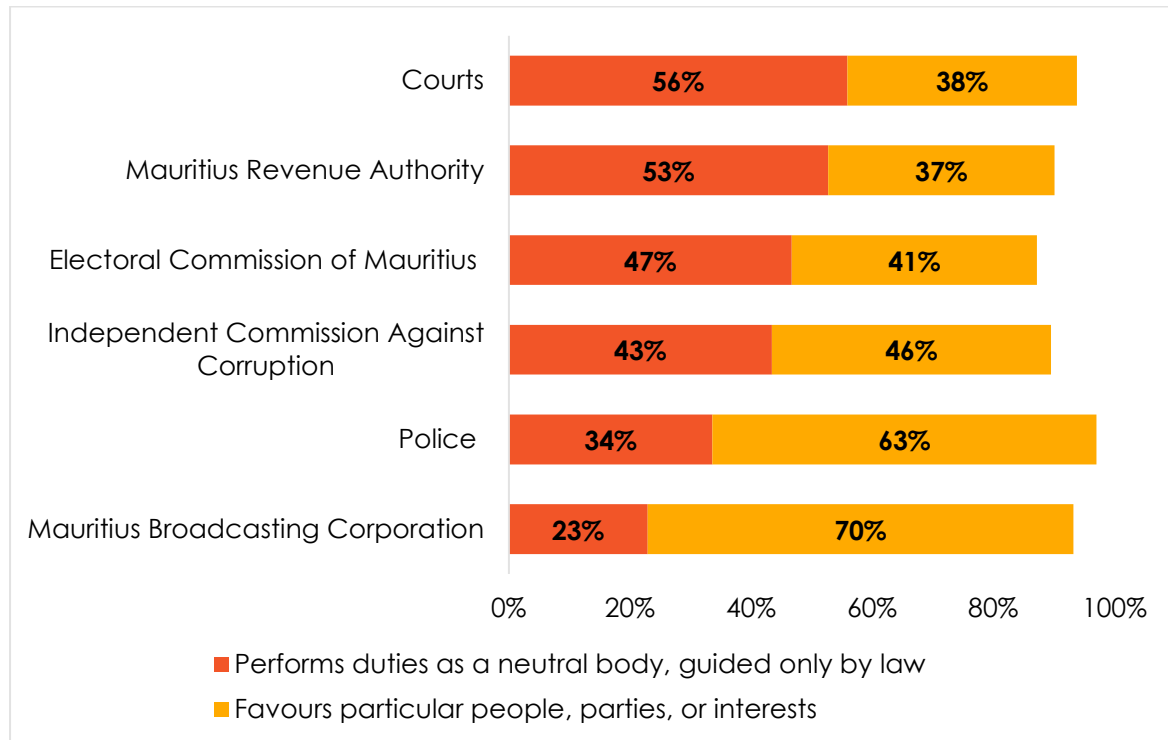


Respondents were asked: In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out? (% who say "risk retaliation or other negative consequences")

In addition to corruption, perceptions of official favouritism may influence citizens' trust in institutions underpinning constitutional democracy. Mauritians offer mixed assessments of whether several state institutions perform their duties as neutral bodies, guided by the law, or favour particular people, parties, or interests (Figure 7). Slim majorities see the courts (56%)

and the Mauritius Revenue Authority (53%) as neutral, but even here almost four in 10 citizens disagree. And only a minority vouch for the impartiality of other bodies, including the Electoral Commission of Mauritius (47%), the Independent Commission Against Corruption (43%), and the police (34%). Worst, fully 70% say the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation plays favourites.

Figure 7: Perceived favouritism in institutions | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you think it performs its duties as a neutral body guided by law, or would you say it makes decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests, or haven't you heard enough to say?

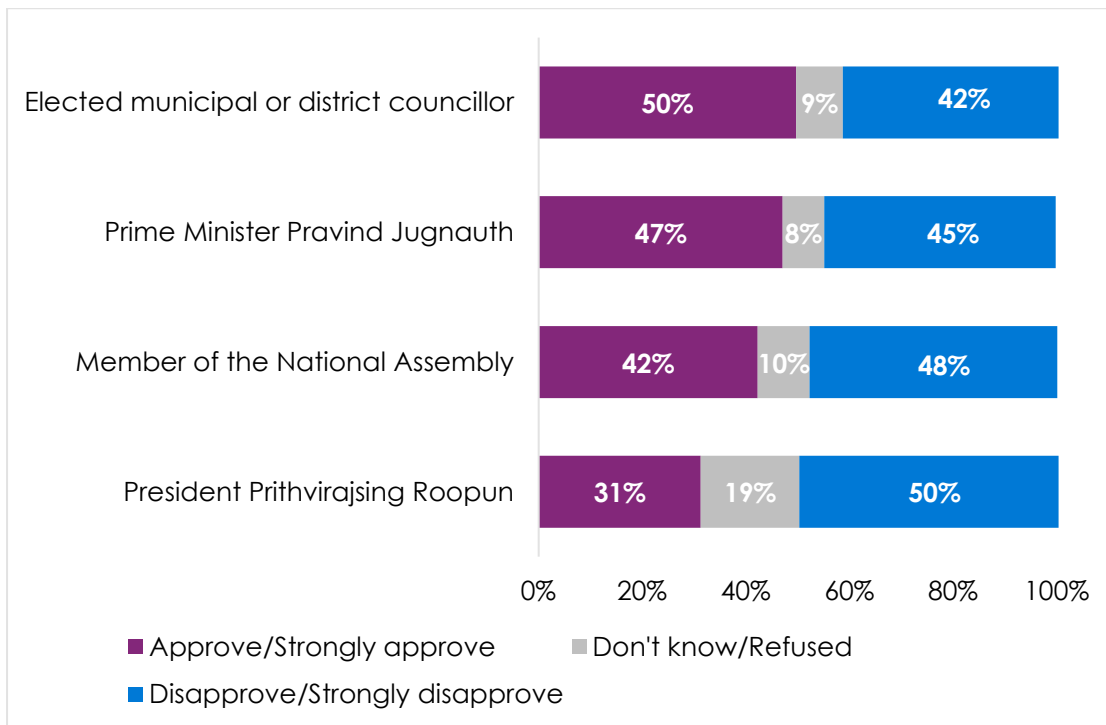
Job performance of elected leaders

Mauritians are also sharply divided in their assessments of their elected leaders' job performance. Half (50%) "approve" or "strongly" approve of the performance of their elected municipal or district councillor, while fewer offer favourable appraisals of the prime minister (47%), their member of the National Assembly (42%), and the president (31%) (Figure 8).

The prime minister's performance wins greater approval in rural areas than in cities (53% vs. 39%) and gets its greatest applause among older citizens (60% of those over aged 65) (Figure 9). Approval ratings decrease as respondents' education levels rise, ranging from 50% of citizens with primary or no formal education to 44% of citizens with post-secondary qualifications. But respondents experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (37%) give the prime minister lower marks than those experiencing no lived poverty (54%).

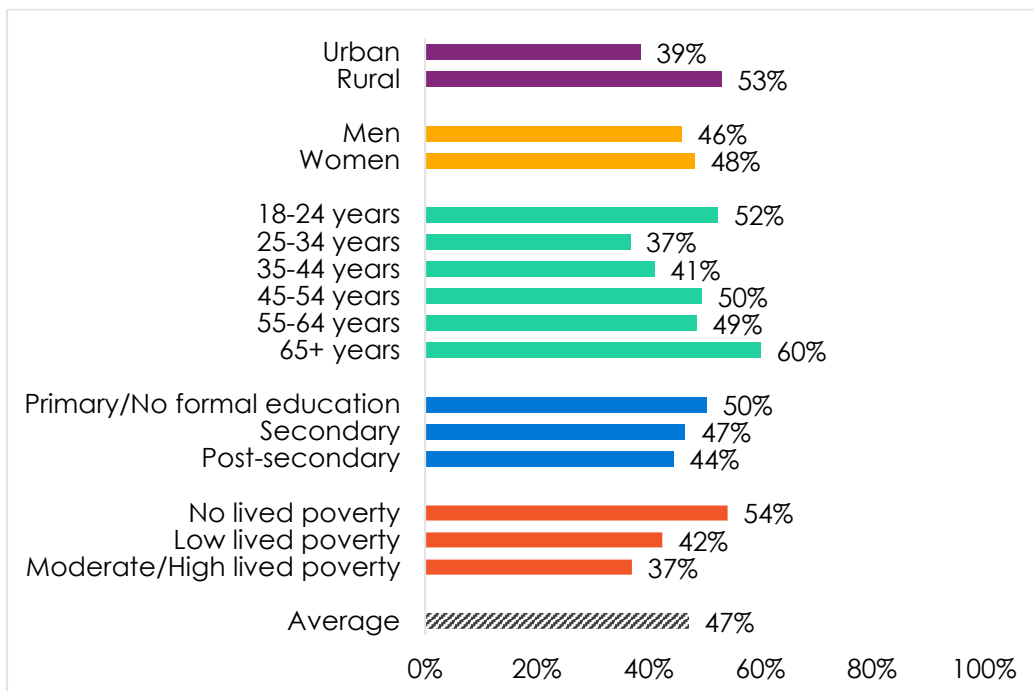
The proportion of citizens who approve of the prime minister's performance has seen a modest decline, from 54% in 2020 to 47% in 2022, though the share who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" has remained constant (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Performance of elected leaders | Mauritius | 2022



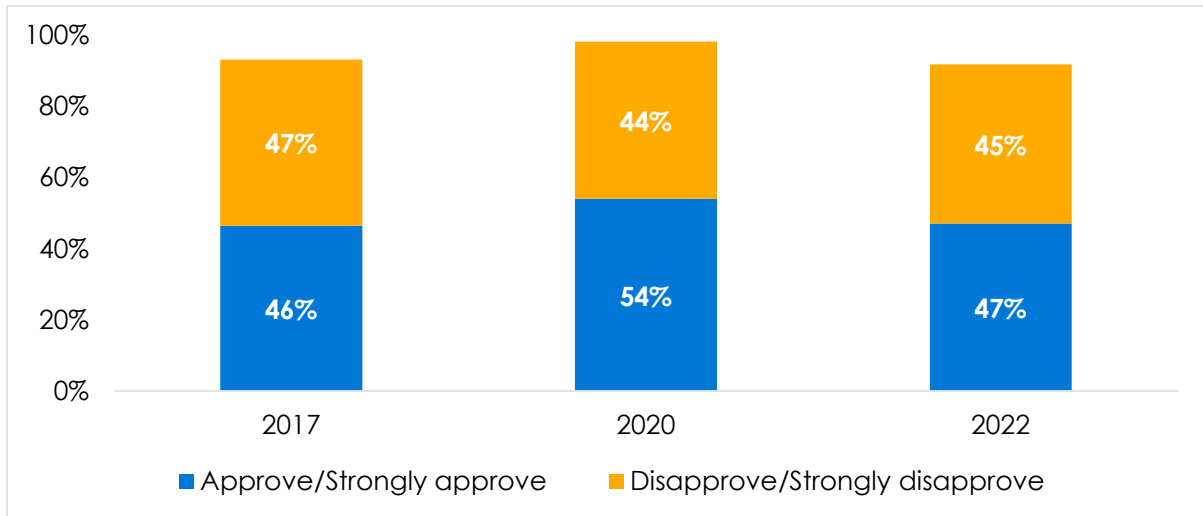
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 9: Approval of prime minister's performance | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Figure 10: Performance of prime minister | Mauritius | 2017-2022

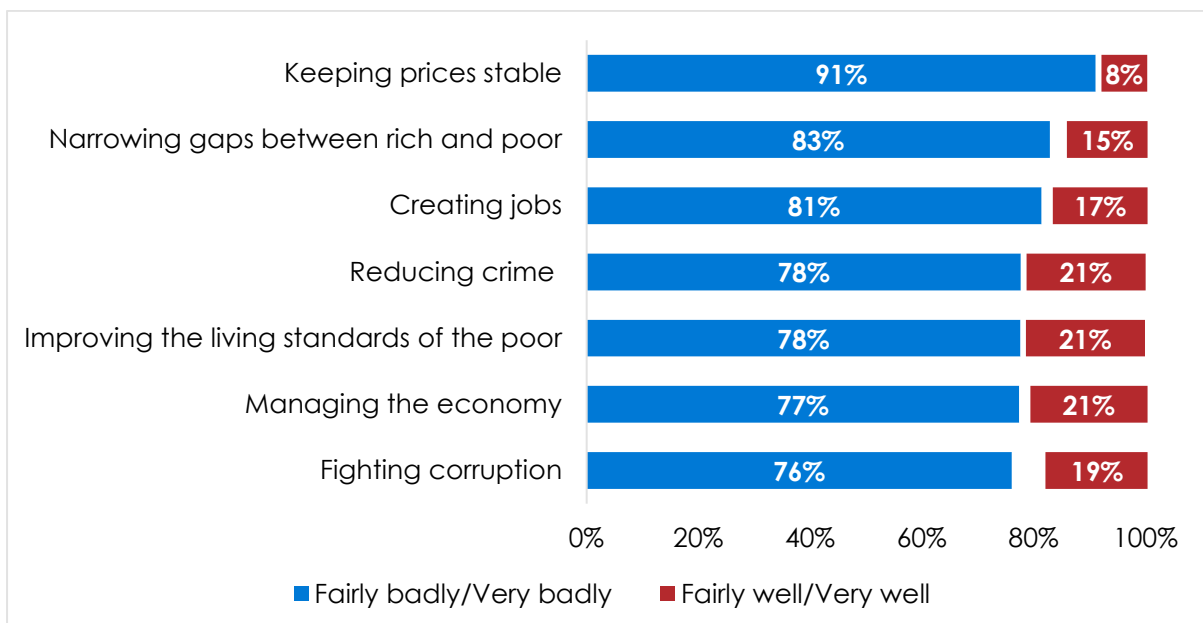


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth?

Government performance

Elected leaders' less-than-stellar job-performance assessments may reflect their perceived failure to address key economic challenges. By large majorities, citizens say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" at keeping prices stable (91%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (83%), and creating jobs (81%) (Figure 11). More than seven in 10 also disapprove of the government's performance on reducing crime (78%), improving the living standards of the poor (78%), managing the economy (77%), and fighting corruption (76%).

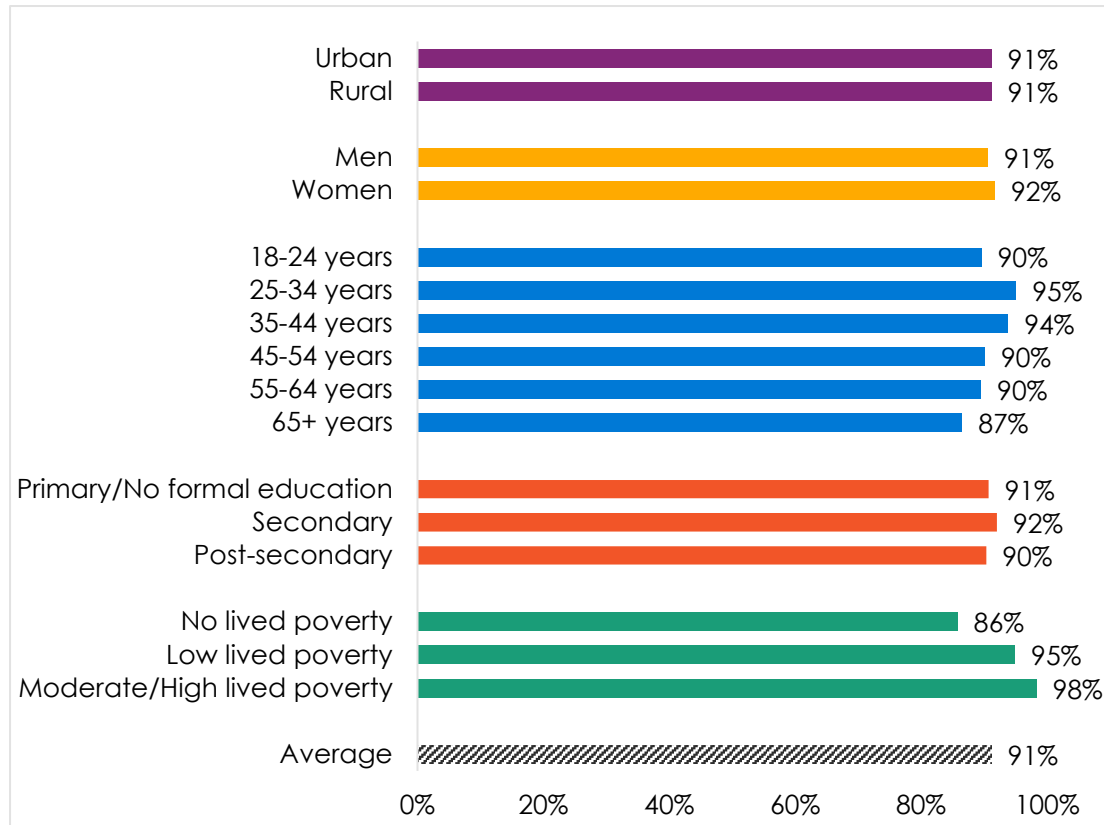
Figure 11: Government performance | Mauritius | 2022



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?

Disapproval of the government's performance on keeping prices stable is high across key demographic groups, but is especially high among the poorest citizens (98%, compared to 86% among the best-off) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Poor government performance on keeping prices stable
 | by demographic group | Mauritius | 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: Keeping prices stable? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show a deficit of public trust in Mauritius' key democratic institutions and its elected leaders. A majority of citizens say that corruption is getting worse and that ordinary people risk retaliation if they report it.

Citizens' evaluations of their elected leaders' performance suggest that Mauritians hold them responsible for the country's difficulties. Large majorities say the government is performing poorly on key challenges facing the country, including fighting corruption, managing the economy, reducing crime, and keeping prices stable.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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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