

## South Africans call on government to deliver solutions to corruption, poor services

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 651 | Jamy Felton, Shannon van Wyk-Khosa, and Nyasha Mpani**

### Summary

In South Africa, protests against poor public services are common, sometimes turning violent and destructive as citizens express their frustration with inadequate water supply, sanitation, housing, and electricity (Stoltz, 2023; Mpani, 2021; Njilo, 2020).

At the forefront of protesters' demands are calls for an end to widespread corruption that they say undermines the state's ability to deliver high-quality public services (SABC, 2022). Researchers agree, arguing that when corruption infiltrates the public sector, funds intended for infrastructure development, health care, education, and other critical areas are siphoned off or misused, leaving citizens with substandard services (Mpani, 2021; Comins, 2020; Ardigó & Chêne, 2017). Additionally, Kota (2021) notes that corruption fosters a culture of impunity and undermines the merit-based recruitment and promotion of competent public servants, further hindering the efficient delivery of public services.

Talk of the fight against corruption has dominated local and national election campaigns as well as the South African media. The government has taken a number of steps to fight corruption, including the establishment in 2010 of the Anti-Corruption Task Team, charged with fast-tracking high-priority investigations and prosecutions (South African Government, 2023). Last year President Cyril Ramaphosa closed the African National Congress' National Conference with a pledge to fight corruption and acknowledged that it is a threat to the ruling party (Magome, 2022). And in November, blaming poor service delivery on corruption, Ramaphosa said the government was working on new laws to eliminate corruption in municipalities (Mabaso, 2022).

In a country that is considered an economic powerhouse but where electricity outages are a daily occurrence and some areas still rely on weekly water-truck deliveries, political parties have used dissatisfaction with service delivery as a key driver for building support (Malinga & Beukes, 2021). But they have also been implicated in embezzlement scandals related to infrastructure projects and payments to the electric utility Eskom, resulting in public outcries and further erosion of service delivery (Daily Investor, 2023). Last year, an ANC majority in Parliament blocked probes into corruption at Eskom (Mail & Guardian, 2023) and into the Phala Phala scandal involving the alleged theft of \$4 million in cash from Ramaphosa's game reserve (Myeni, 2022), leading critics to suggest that the fight against corruption is all talk and no action (Merten, 2022, 2023).

Meanwhile, citizen trust in public institutions that are supposed to address corruption has been dwindling (Moosa & Hofmeyr, 2021); a study by Edelman Trust Barometer in 2021 reports that only 27% of South Africans trust their government (Richards, 2021).

Against this background, how do South Africans perceive service delivery and corruption?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that while service infrastructure covers much of the country, this does not translate into service delivery. Many citizens report going without enough water and electricity, and most say the government is doing a poor job of delivering key public services.

Majorities say the level of corruption in the country continues to increase, the government is failing in attempts to control it, and ordinary South Africans risk retaliation if they report it to the authorities. Overall, only one-third of citizens believe the government is truly committed to fighting corruption.

## 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 are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. 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 South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

## Key findings

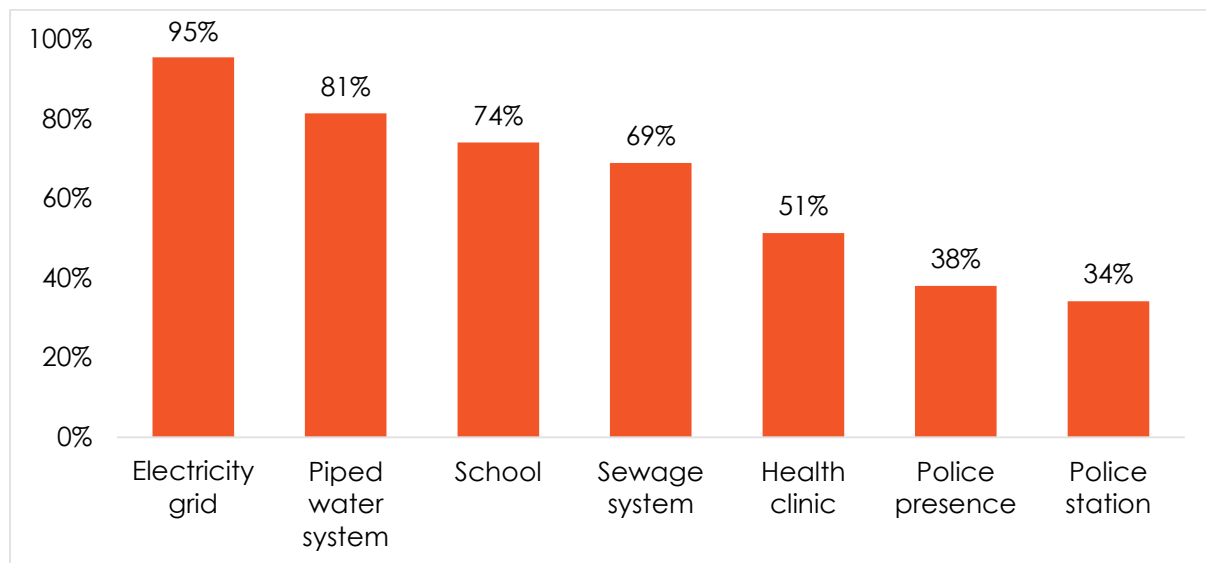
- Most survey enumeration areas have a piped water system (81%) and access to an electricity grid (95%). But 42% of South Africans say they went without enough water at least several times during the previous year, and 21% say they have functioning electricity only "occasionally" or not at all.
- Few citizens approve of the government's performance on delivering services such as water and sanitation (28%) and electricity (12%). Both ratings are significantly worse than in 2021.
- More than eight in 10 South Africans (82%) believe corruption increased over the past year, and only 10% say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" at fighting it.
- A growing proportion of respondents say "most" or "all" officials in key public institutions are involved in corruption, including in the Presidency (65%, up from 53% in 2021) and in Parliament (63%, up from 51%).
- Close to three-quarters (72%) of South Africans say ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities.
- Only one-quarter (25%) of citizens believe that the government is likely to take action in response to reports of corruption, and only about one-third (34%) think the government is committed to fighting corruption.
- Nonetheless, more than half (54%) of South Africans believe that the government has the capacity to fight corruption.
- Large majorities say that cabinet ministers and government officials charged with corruption should step down immediately (80%) and that companies implicated in corruption should be barred from doing business with the government (76%).

## Service delivery in South Africa

Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each sampled census enumeration area (EA) that they visit about the services and facilities that are available in the area. Since the EAs visited are selected to represent the population and the country as a whole, these data provide reliable indicators of infrastructure and service availability.

In South Africa, more than nine out of 10 EAs (95%) had an electricity grid, 81% had a piped water system, and 69% had a sewage system. Three-fourths (74%) had a school, 51% a health clinic, and 34% a police station within easy walking distance (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Infrastructure and services available in the area** | South Africa | 2022



**Enumerators recorded:** Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area? Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or in easy walking distance? (% "yes")

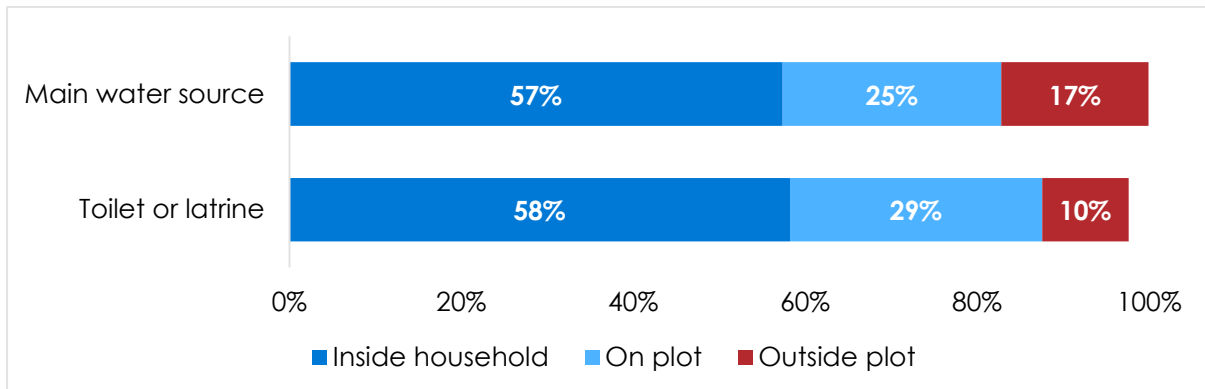
Despite the extensive reach of water and sewage systems, South Africans indicate that this does not necessarily translate into adequate access to these resources. Fewer than six in 10 citizens (57%) say their main source of water is inside their house, while 25% rely on a source elsewhere on their plot and 17% must leave their plot to access water (Figure 2).

Similar proportions report having a toilet or latrine in their home (58%) or elsewhere on their plot (29%).

In addition, more than half (59%) of South Africans say they or a family member went without enough water at least once during the previous year, including 25% who lack water "many times" or "always" (Figure 3).

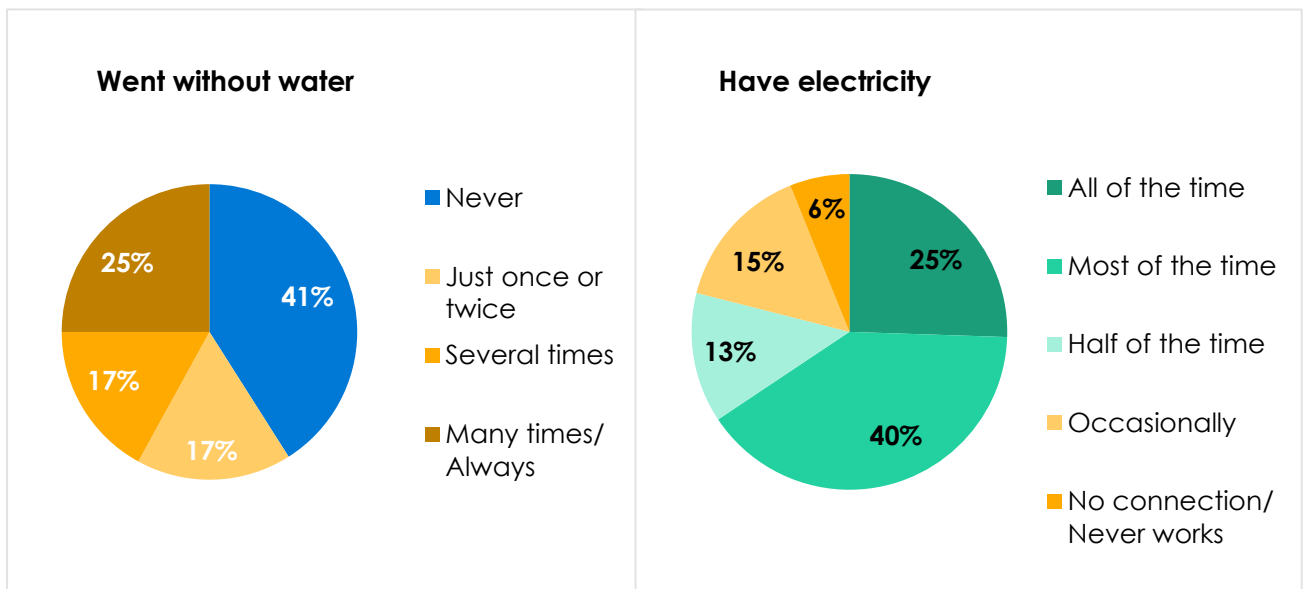
About one in five (21%) say they have functioning electricity only "occasionally" or not at all.

**Figure 2: Location of water source and toilet** | South Africa | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether each of the following is available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use? A toilet or latrine?

**Figure 3: Access to water and electricity** | South Africa | 2022



**Respondents were asked:**

Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use?

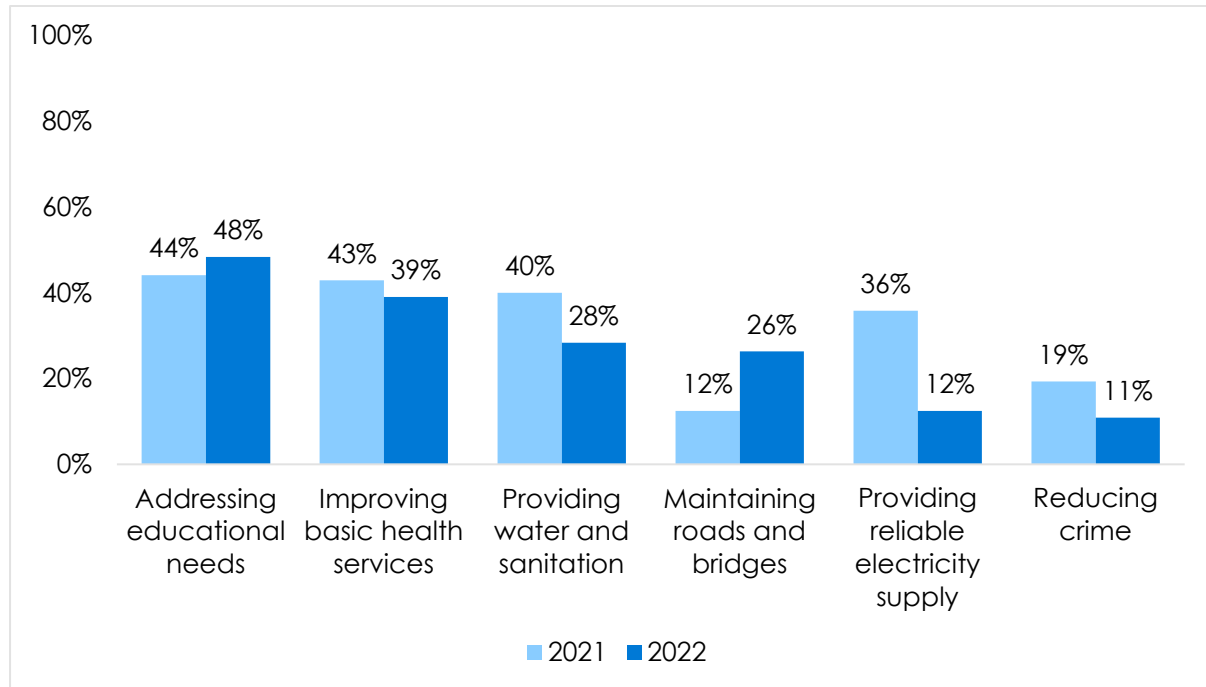
Do you have an electric connection to your home from Eskom? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

A lack of services despite the presence of service-delivery infrastructure may point to institutional dysfunction within municipalities. South Africa's post-apartheid local governments inherited service-delivery infrastructure that was not inclusive. Limited by a lack of organisational resources, capacity, and professionalisation, they have struggled to reimagine the system so that it caters to the needs of all citizens (Mail & Guardian, 2021).

Whether or not they have personally suffered shortages of water, electricity, and other essential services, most South Africans believe that the government is failing to provide for its citizens. Only 28% say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on providing water and sanitation services, a 12-percentage-point drop compared to 2021 (Figure 4). And

only about one in nine think it is doing a good job of providing reliable electricity (12%) and reducing crime (11%), both significantly worse ratings than a year earlier.

**Figure 4: Government performance on service delivery** | South Africa | 2021-2022



**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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

### Perceived corruption

Corruption compounds institutional inefficiencies when it comes to service delivery as public officials use the limited financial resources meant to serve communities for personal gain.

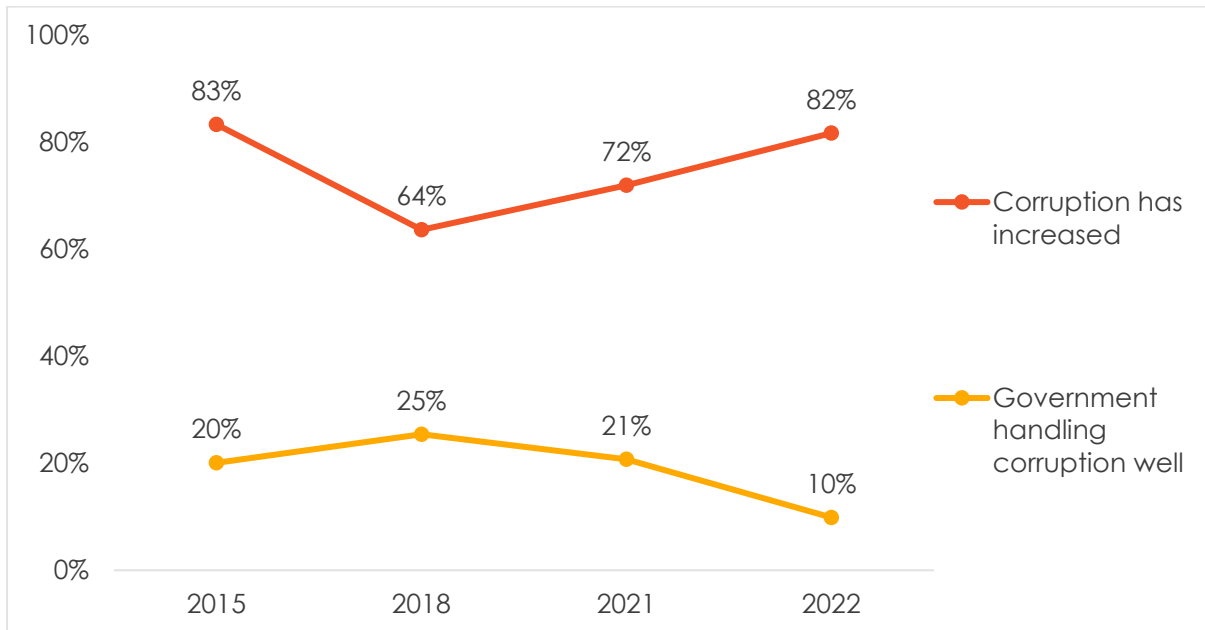
Jacob Zuma's departure from the Presidency in February 2018 seemed to renew hope among South Africans for progress in the fight against corruption. Citizens' perceptions of worsening corruption dropped by 19 percentage points between surveys in 2015 and August-September 2018, from 83% to 64%, while the share of people who believed that the government was handling corruption well rose by 5 points. Since then, however, the proportion of respondents who say corruption increased during the previous year has climbed back up to 82%, and only 10% now give the government a passing grade on its anti-corruption efforts (Figure 5).

Moreover, a large majority (70%) of South Africans say "a lot" of the money meant for efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic was lost to corruption, up by 5 percentage points compared to 2021 (Figure 6).

In line with these perceptions, the proportion of respondents who believe that "most" or "all" officials in key public institutions are involved in corruption has also increased in most cases (Figure 7). At least six in 10 citizens see widespread corruption in the Presidency (65%, up from 53% in 2021), in Parliament (63%, up from 51%), and among local government councillors (60%, up from 50%).

Perceptions of widespread corruption have also increased with regard to the police (61%), civil servants (53%), and tax officials (37%) while holding steady for judges and magistrates (37%).

**Figure 5: Perceptions of corruption** | South Africa | 2015-2022

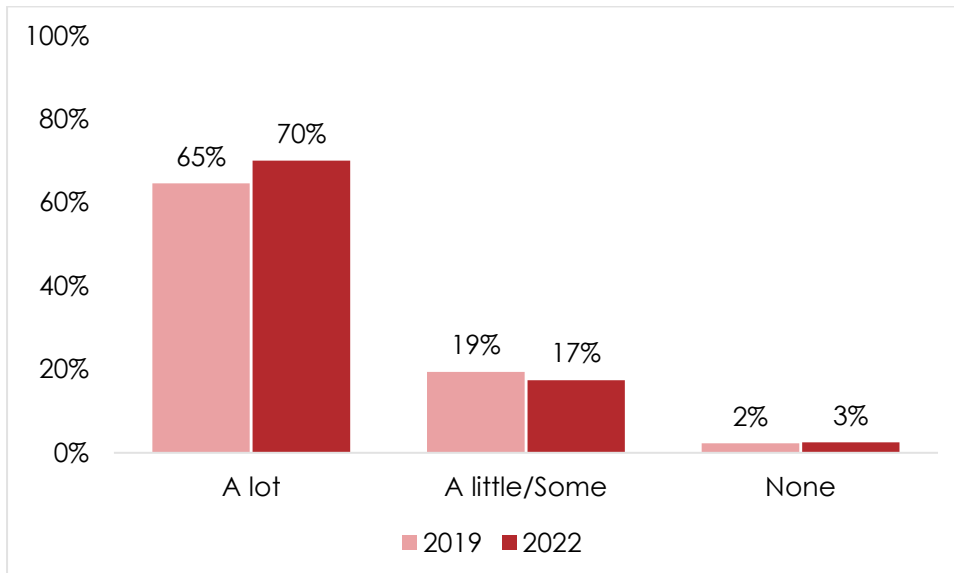


**Respondents were asked:**

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? (% who say "very well" or "fairly well")

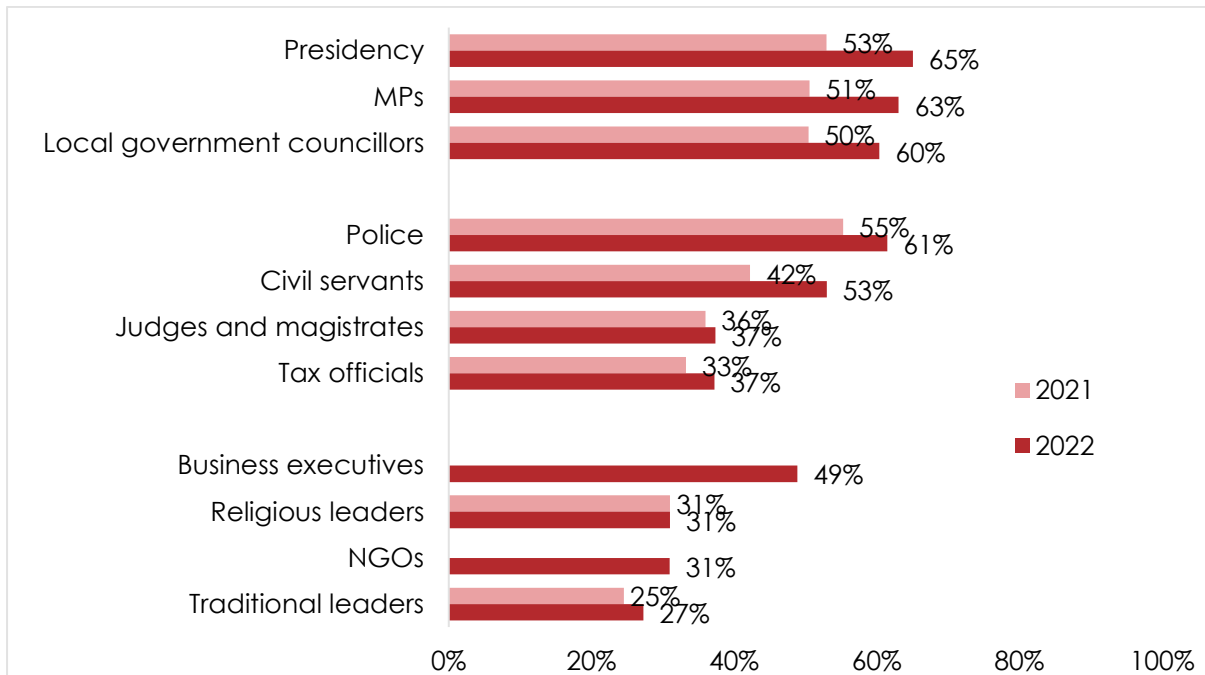
In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say "increased a lot" or "increased somewhat")

**Figure 6: COVID-19 funds lost to corruption** | South Africa | 2021-2022



**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?

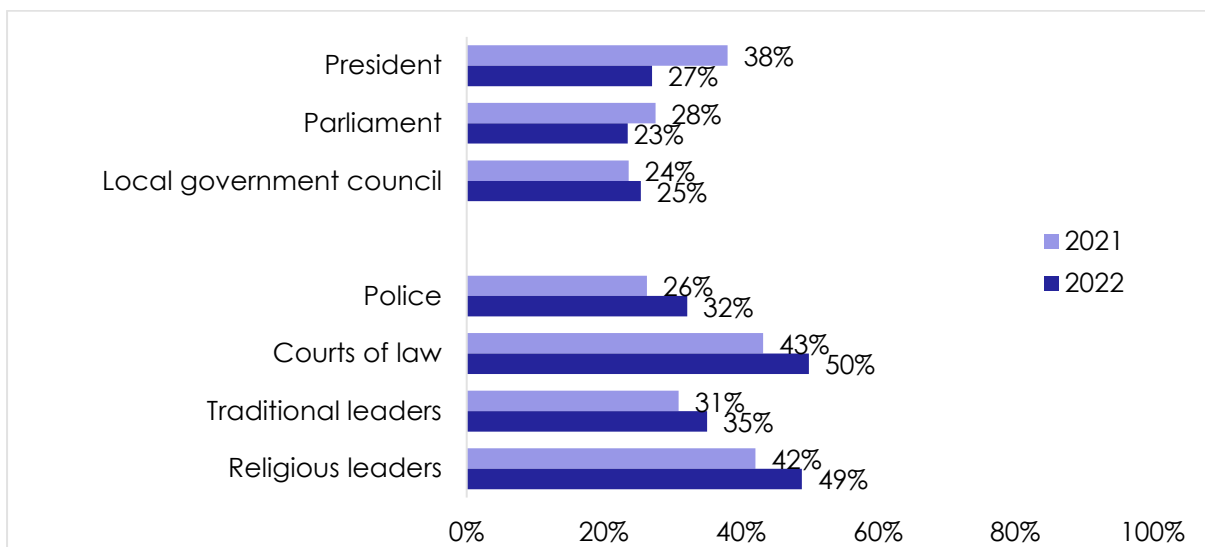
**Figure 7: Most/All perceived as corrupt** | South Africa | 2021-2022



**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 "all of them" or "most of them")

Meanwhile, public trust in key institutions and leaders remains weak, and in some cases has declined (Figure 8). Only 27% of South Africans say they trust the president "somewhat" or "a lot," an 11-point drop compared to 2021. Trust in Parliament declined from 28% in 2021 to 23% amid ongoing corruption scandals involving some members of Parliament and perhaps a perception of inefficiency in passing anti-corruption laws, such as its decision to block the establishment of a committee to investigate the Phala Phala scandal (Siyolo, 2023).

**Figure 8: Trust in institutions** | South Africa | 2021-2022



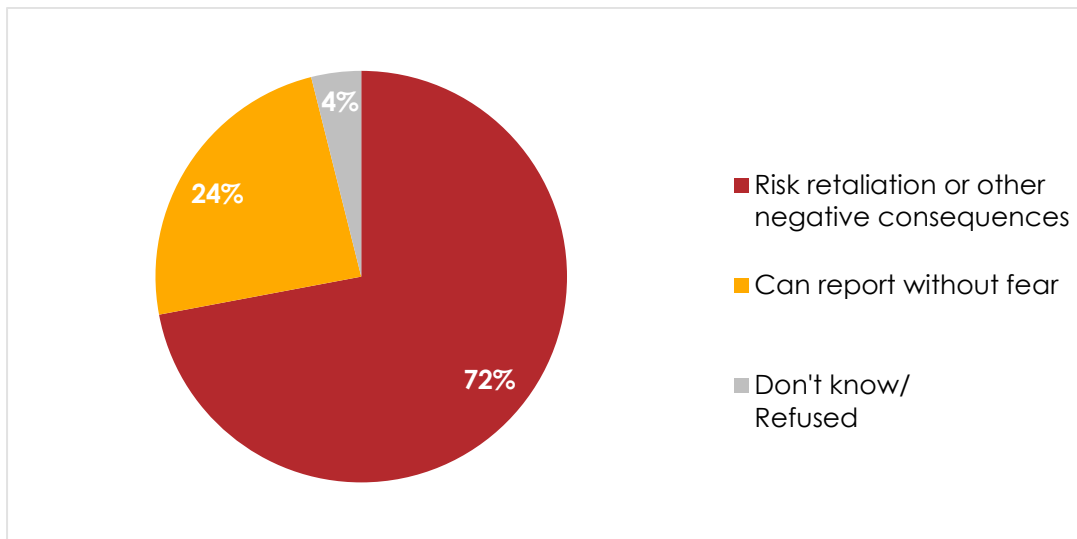
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

## Do South Africans feel powerless?

An effective anti-corruption campaign requires the participation of whistleblowers and ordinary citizens, who must feel safe enough to speak up. Calls for an overhaul of the Protective Disclosures Act, intended to protect whistleblowers, have intensified since the August 2021 killing of Babita Deokaran, an accounting director who uncovered R1 billion rands' worth of corruption in the Gauteng Health Department (Bhengu, 2023; Ndaba, 2022). Although whistleblowers in South Africa have some protections, critics say protected activities are too narrowly defined to provide adequate safeguards (Wright, 2022).

In thinking of a way forward, many South Africans may believe this is a battle they cannot fight. Almost three-quarters (72%) say ordinary people who report incidents of corruption risk retaliation or other negative consequences (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Can people report cases of corruption without fear? | South Africa | 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?*

And even if they reported corruption, only a quarter (25%) believe the government is likely to take action (Figure 10).

Tellingly, only about one-third (34%) of South Africans believe the government is committed to fighting corruption.

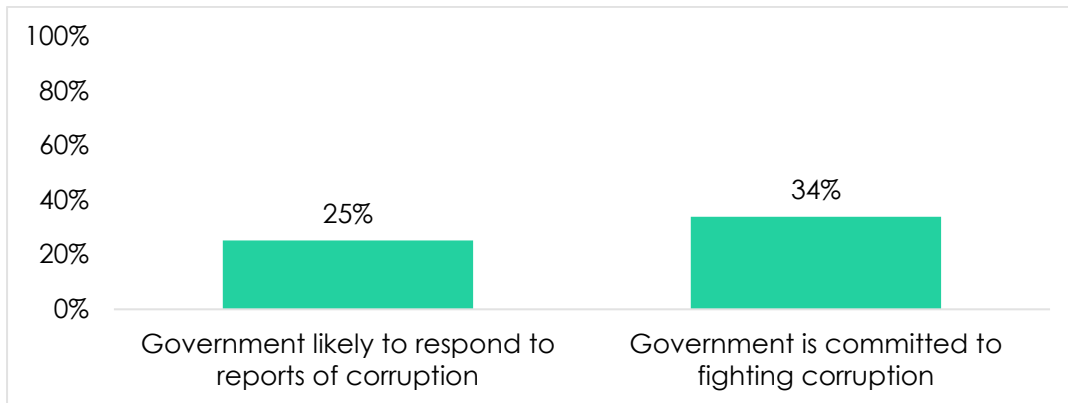
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**Figure 10: Government's response to corruption | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:**

*How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to a local government office or anti-corruption authority to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

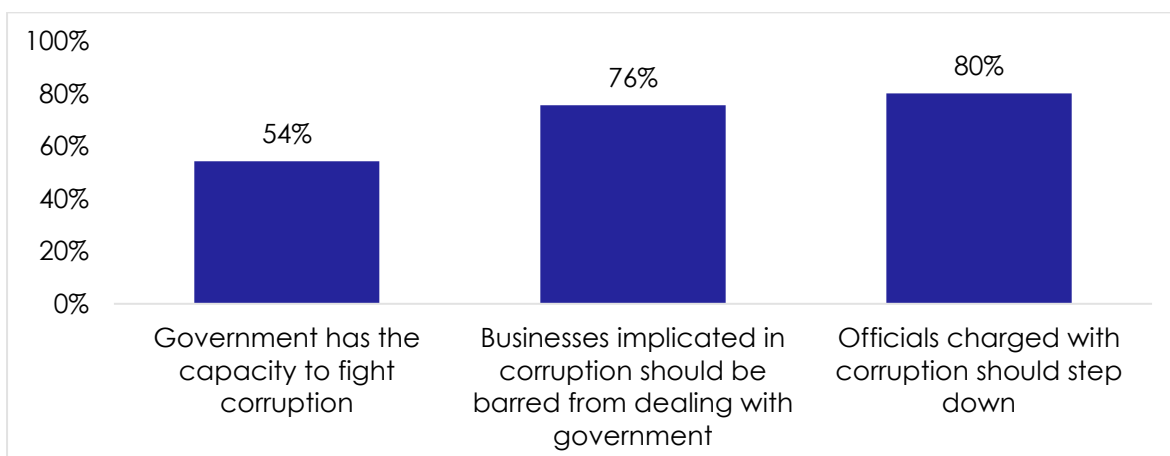
*For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The government is committed to act against all acts of corruption. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")*

**Government should do more to fight corruption**

Although many South Africans may feel powerless against corruption, there is still hope that it can be overcome: More than half (54%) of citizens believe that the government has the capacity to take action against all cases of corruption if it makes a concerted effort.

And most citizens support decisive action. More than three-fourths say that cabinet ministers and government officials who are charged with corruption should step down immediately (80%) and that companies implicated in corruption should be barred from doing business with the government (76%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Ways to fight corruption | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** *For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say:*

*Cabinet ministers and government officials who have been charged with corruption should step down immediately?*

*Businesses implicated in corruption should be barred from doing business with the government?*

*The government has the capacity to act against all acts of corruption?*

*(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")*

## Conclusion

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that South Africans are increasingly dissatisfied with the government's provision of key public services. In growing numbers, they also believe that corruption is widespread in key public institutions, particularly among elected leaders and civil servants. In fact, a majority of South Africans do not perceive the government as being genuinely committed to combating corruption.

These findings underscore the urgent need for decisive action, rather than mere rhetoric, to address graft and ensure that resources are allocated to the public services they are intended to support. Practical solutions could include implementing more severe consequences for officials and companies involved in corruption and establishing secure channels for citizens to report corruption to the authorities.

Requiring public servants to disclose their financial interests, providing training and resources to foster ethical leadership, and rewarding ethical behaviour are also ways to promote transparency and accountability. Collaboration with civil society is vital, as is empowering law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and anti-corruption bodies. Cooperation with international organisations and foreign governments can also play a role in addressing corruption through information sharing and mutual assistance in investigations and prosecutions.

Importantly, despite their scepticism regarding the government's commitment to fighting corruption, a majority of South Africans still believe that success is possible if there is a genuine will to tackle the issue.

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