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Eswatini losing the fight against corruption, according to its citizens

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 770 | Mbuso Dlamini

Summary

Despite the existence of an Anti-Corruption Commission since 1998, Eswatini continues to perform poorly on global corruption measures, calling into question the effectiveness of the government's anti-corruption efforts. The country's score on Transparency International's (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index has dropped by 13 points since peaking at 43/100 in 2014. Similarly, last March, the country got a failing score on the Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) control-of-corruption indicator for the first time, making it ineligible for MCC grants (Nhlabatsi, 2023). In 2022, the Public Accounts Committee revealed to Parliament that since 2018, E7.4 billion (\$404.3 million) in public funds, about 8% of the national budget for the same period, had been lost through unauthorised expenditures by government ministries (Dlamini, 2022).

These statistics suggest that corruption poses a significant threat to the government's drive to move away from dependence on Southern African Customs Union receipts and rely more on domestic sources of revenue to fund expenditures, as called for in the government's 2010 Fiscal Adjustment Roadmap (Ministry of Finance, 2010).

According to the findings of Afrobarometer's 2022 survey, a growing majority of Emaswati believe that corruption is increasing in the country while government efforts to combat it are failing. Most respondents say that people who report corruption risk retaliation and that the government is unlikely to take action in response to reported 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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

In Eswatini, the Afrobarometer team, led by QA Strategic Information, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens in October-November 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 Eswatini in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

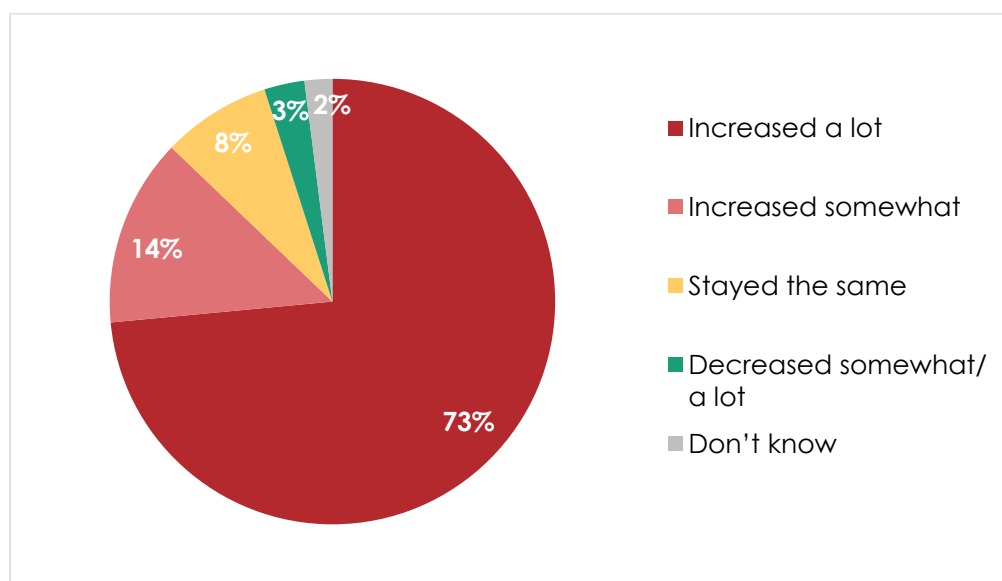
- An overwhelming majority (87%) of Emaswati say the level of corruption in their country increased over the past year. Almost three-fourths (73%) say it increased "a lot."

- Perceptions of increasing corruption are more widespread in Eswatini than in any of the 38 other countries surveyed in 2021/2023.
- The share of Emaswati who see corruption as increasing has risen sharply since 2018 (51%).
- More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) give the government poor marks on its efforts to fight official corruption, more than twice the disapproval rate registered in 2018 (38%).
- Most citizens (85%) say people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities.
 - And three-fourths (75%) consider it unlikely that the government would take action in response to reported corruption.
- More than half of respondents say “most” or “all” police officers (55%) and civil servants (51%) are corrupt, the worst assessments among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about. Half (50%) say the same about business executives.
- Two-thirds (67%) of Emaswati believe that “a lot” of the resources mobilised to combat COVID-19 were lost to corruption.
- Among citizens who interacted with key public services during the previous year, almost four in 10 (38%) say they had to pay a bribe to obtain a government identity document, while about one in three report having to pay a bribe to obtain police assistance (32%) or to avoid a problem with the police (30%).

Level of corruption in Eswatini

Citizens report that corruption is on the rise in Eswatini. Almost nine of every 10 Emaswati (87%) believe that the level of corruption in the country increased in the past year, including 73% who say it increased “a lot” (Figure 1).

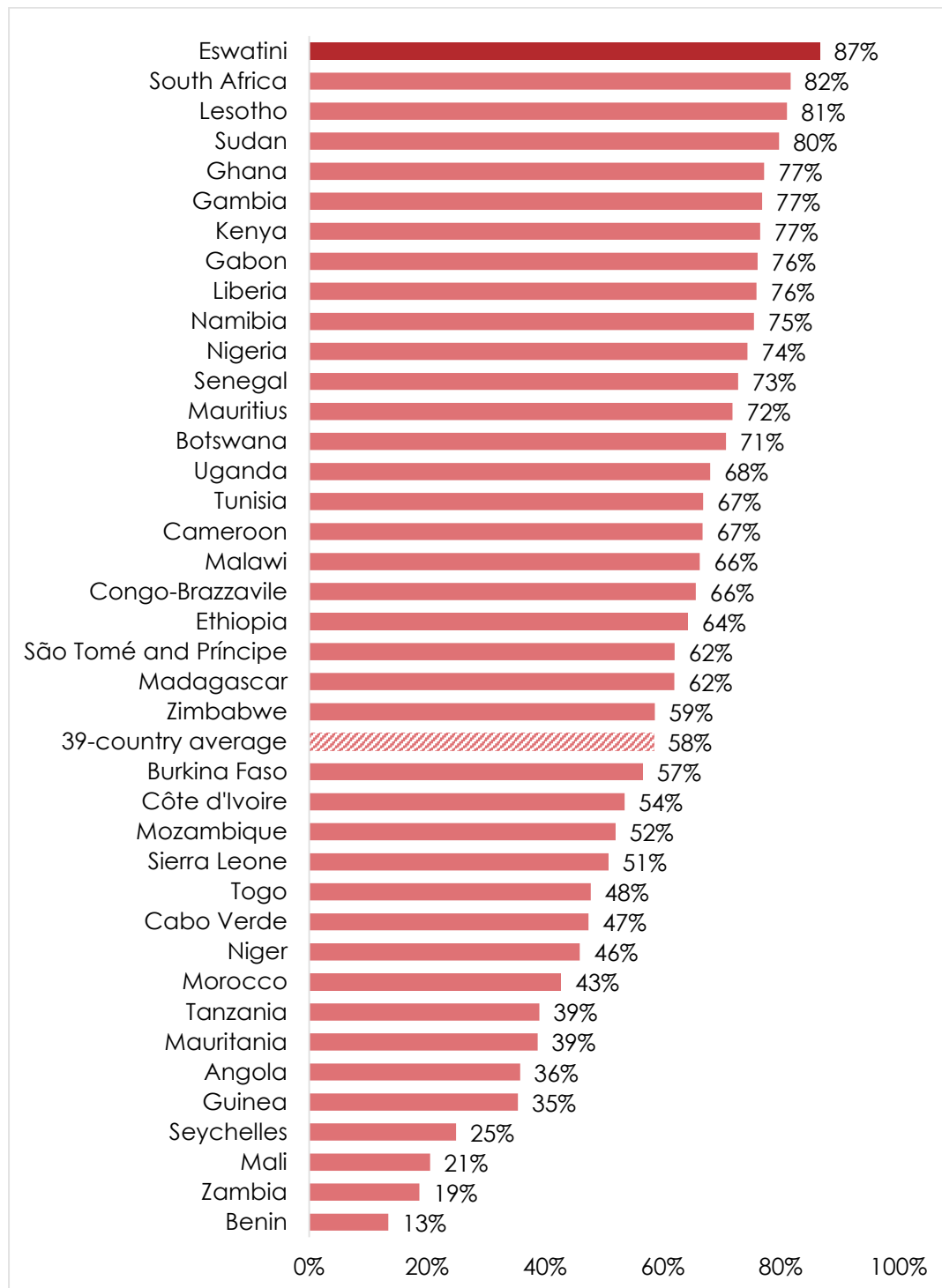
Figure 1: Perception of increasing corruption | Eswatini | 2022



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

Perceptions of increasing corruption are higher in Eswatini than in any other country surveyed during Afrobarometer's Round 9 (2021/2023), far above the 39-country average of 58% (Figure 2). The second-highest proportion is in fellow SACU member state South Africa. Benin stands out with just 13% of its citizens saying corruption increased during the previous year.

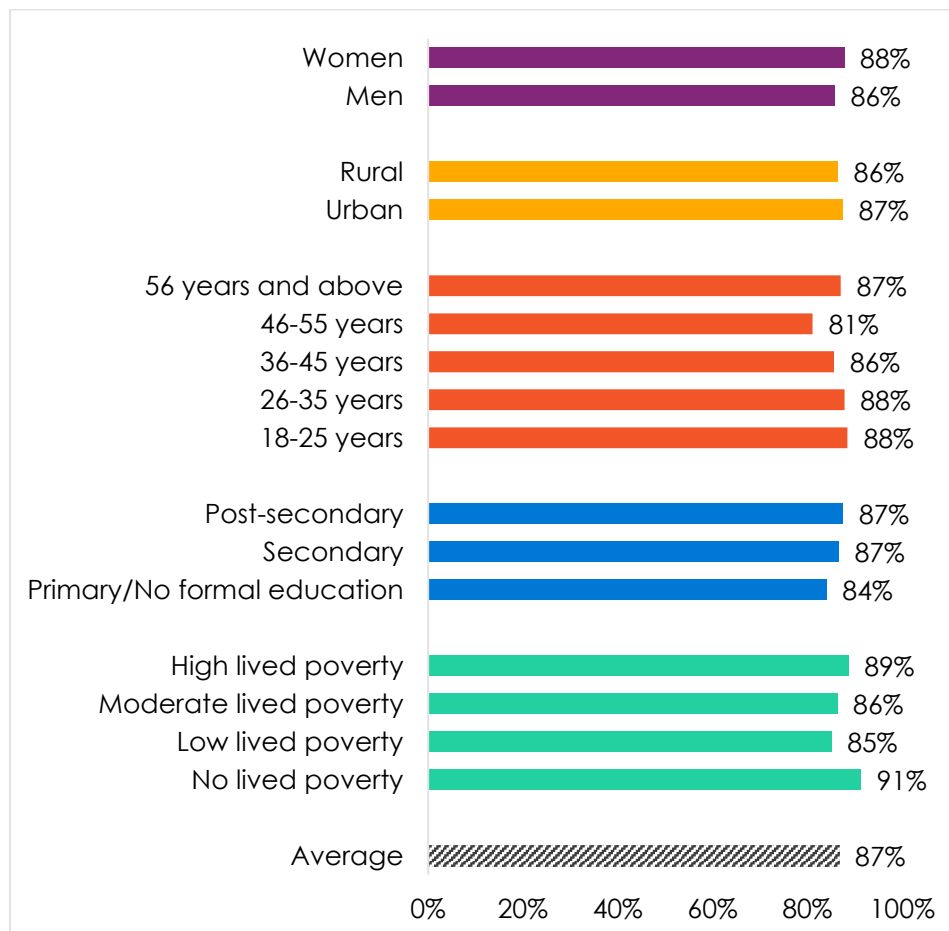
Figure 2: Perception of increasing corruption | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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 corruption has increased "somewhat" or "a lot")

Assessments that corruption increased are consistent across key demographic groups, exceeding 80% no matter the respondent's gender, urban or rural location, age, education level, or economic status (Figure 3). The category with the largest proportion of citizens who say that corruption has increased is economically well-off citizens (91% of those experiencing no lived poverty¹).

Figure 3: Perception of increasing corruption | by demographic group | Eswatini | 2022

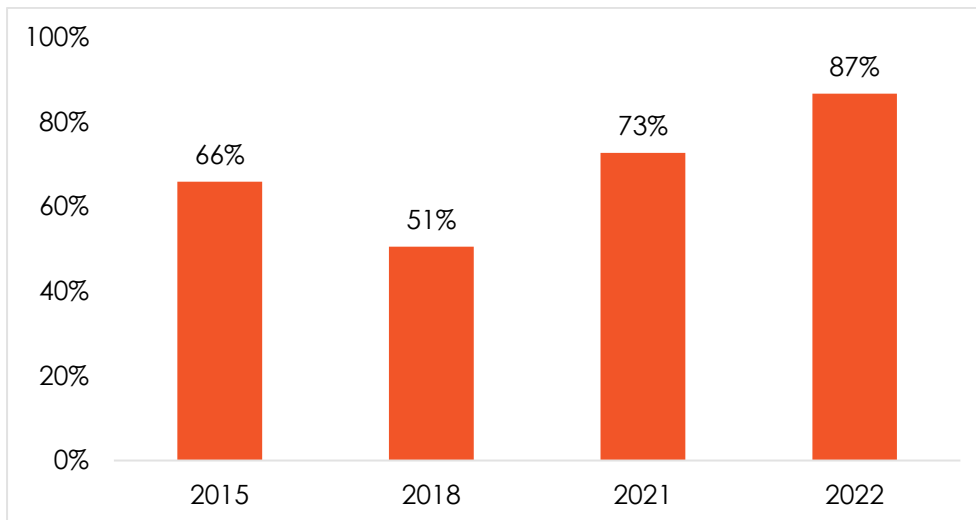


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say corruption has "increased somewhat" or "a lot")*

A review of citizens' perceptions over time shows a steep and continued rise in recent years in the share of Eswatini who believe that corruption is increasing in the country, from 51% in 2018 to 87% in 2022 (Figure 4).

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 4: Perception of increasing corruption over time | Eswatini | 2015-2022

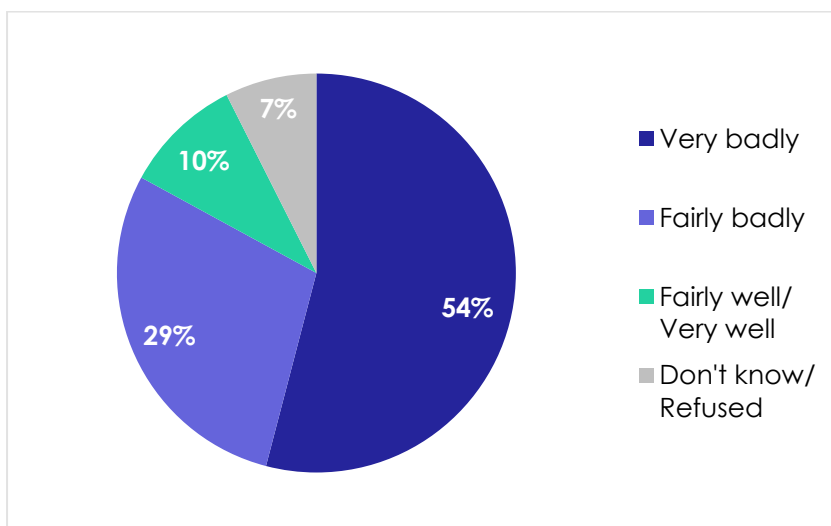


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say corruption has “increased somewhat” or “a lot”)

Government performance in fighting corruption

What do Eswatini make of their government's efforts to eradicate corruption from within its ranks? More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in the fight against corruption (Figure 5). Only one in 10 (10%) think it is doing a good job on corruption.

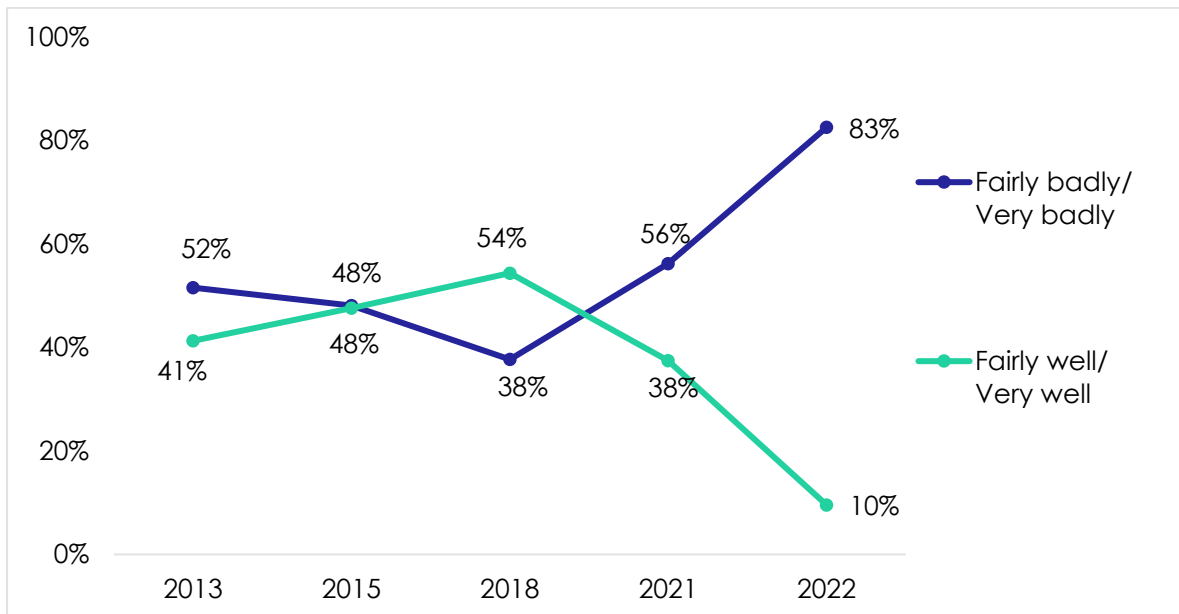
Figure 5: Government performance in fighting corruption | Eswatini | 2022



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?

After declining between 2013 and 2018, the share of respondents who disapprove of the government's performance on corruption more than doubled in just four years, from 38% in 2018 to 83% (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Government performance in fighting corruption | Eswatini | 2013-2022



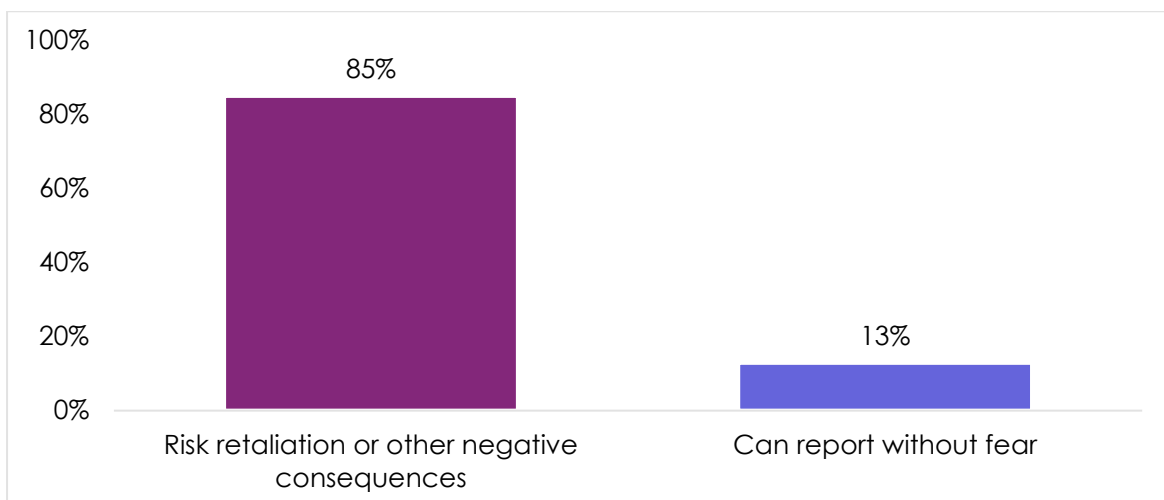
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

Can Emaswati report corruption without fear of retaliation?

Against this backdrop of increasing perceived corruption and worsening government performance in combating it, we turn now to look at whether ordinary Emaswati believe they can report corruption without fear. Here we see that more than eight in 10 respondents (85%) say that ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption (Figure 7). Only 13% believe that people can safely report incidents of corruption.

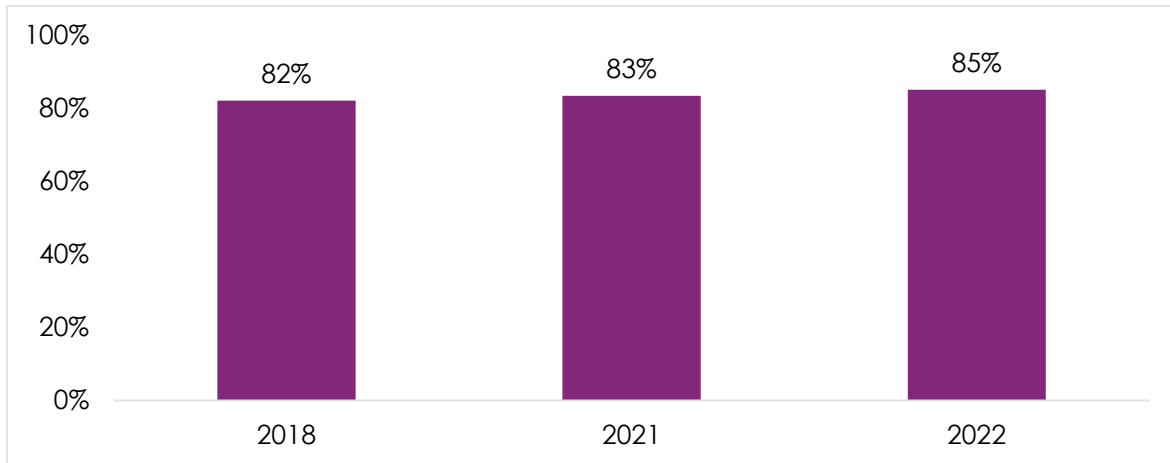
Fear of retaliation has been consistently high over time, reported by more eight in 10 respondents since 2018 (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Can people report corruption without fear of retaliation? | Eswatini | 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 8: Fear of retaliation | Eswatini | 2018-2022

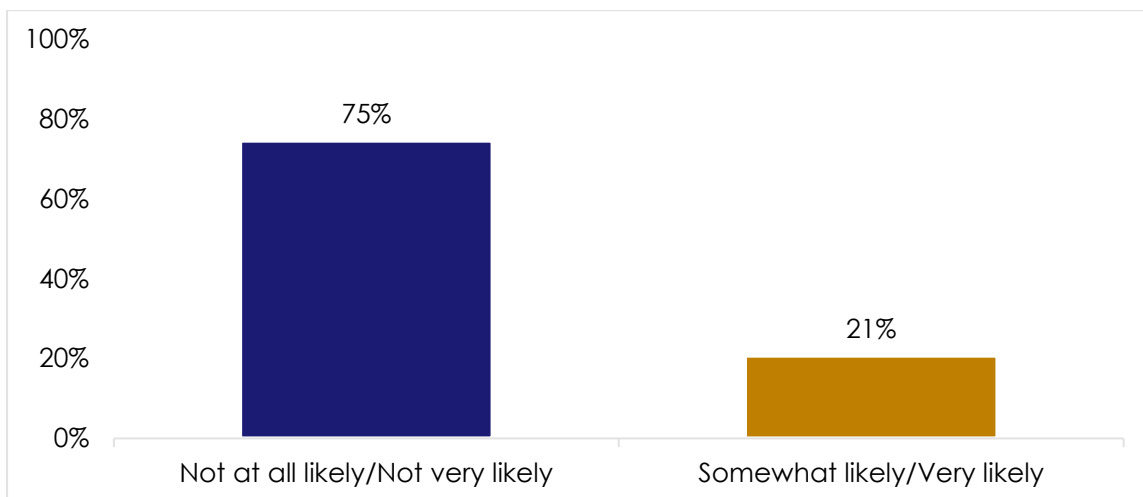


Respondents were asked: *In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out? (% who say “risk retaliation”)*

Likelihood of government action on reported instances of corruption

It is also clear that Eswatini do not believe there is much point in reporting corruption to the authorities. Three out of four respondents (75%) say it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that someone would take action if they approached a local government office or the Anti-Corruption Commission to report corruption (Figure 9). Just one in five (21%) expect such reports to generate a government response.

Figure 9: Likelihood of government action on reported corruption | Eswatini | 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 the Anti-Corruption Commission to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes?*

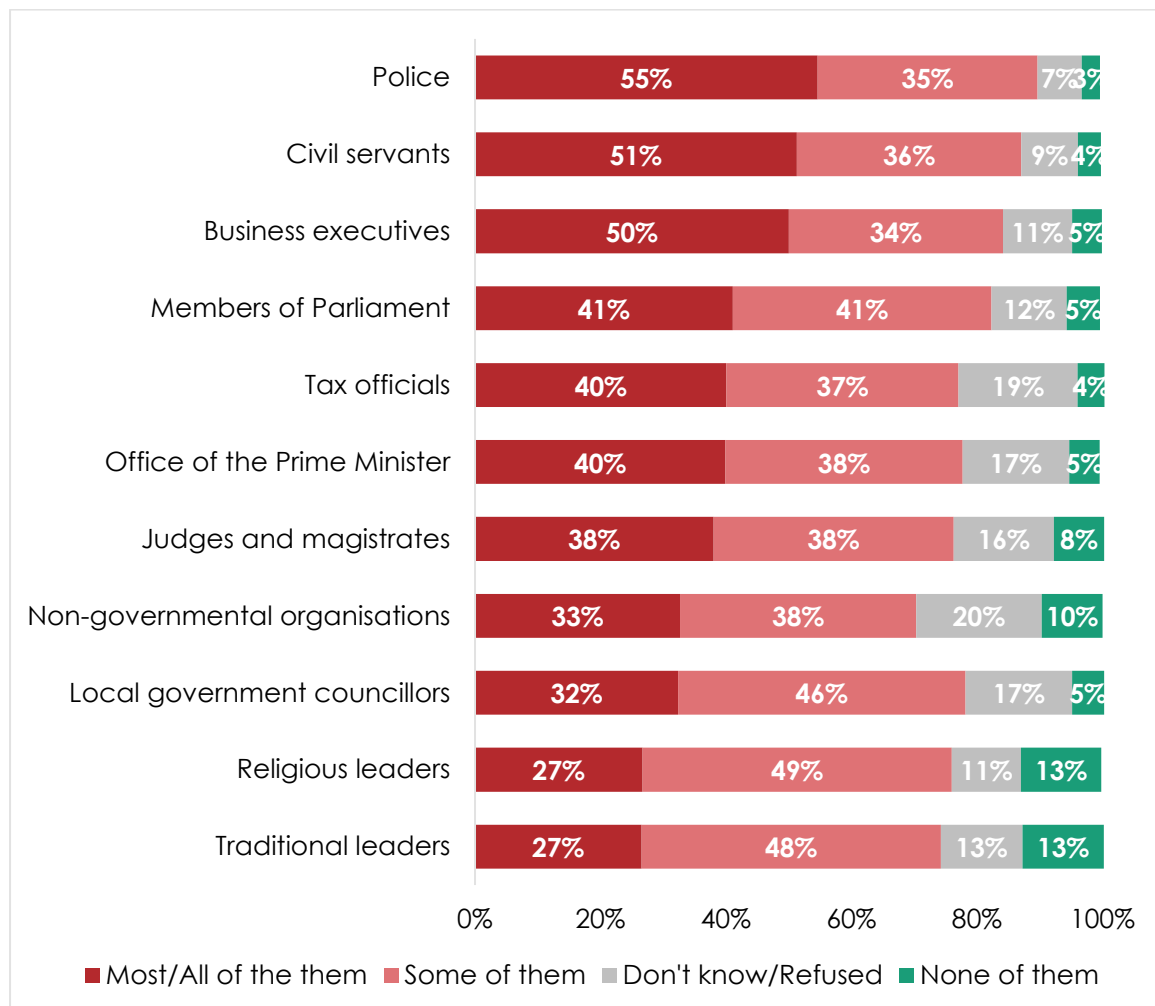
Perceived corruption among leaders

Next we consider the perceptions of Eswatini regarding the extent of corruption among key public, private, and non-government entities in the country. At least half of citizens believe

that “most” or “all” police officers (55%), civil servants (51%), and business executives are involved in corruption (Figure 10). In addition, about one-third (34%-36%) of respondents say that “some” of these authority figures are corrupt.

The findings are somewhat better for members of Parliament (41% “most” or “all” corrupt), tax officials (40%), officials in the Office of the Prime Minister (40%), and judges and magistrates (38%). Perceived widespread corruption is lowest among traditional and religious leaders (27%), though almost half (48%-49%) of citizens think “some” of these leaders are corrupt.

Figure 10: Who is corrupt? | Eswatini | 2022

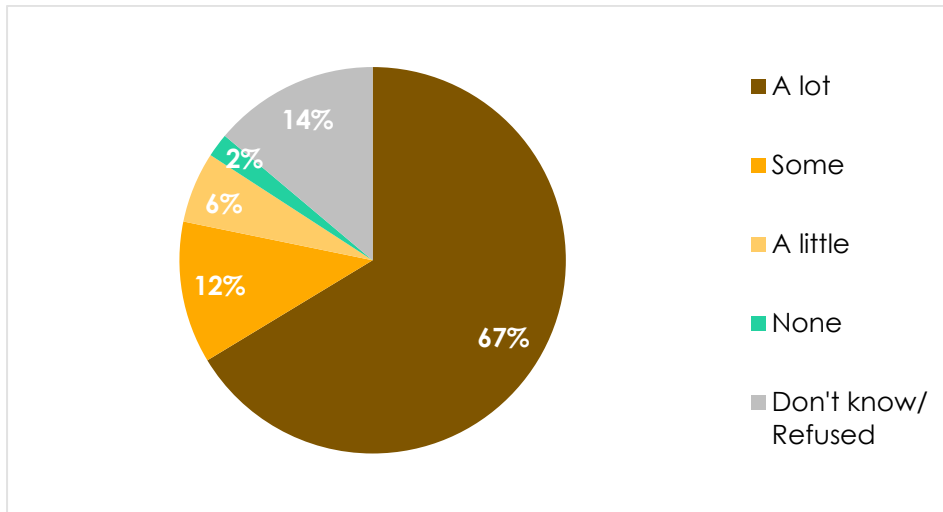


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Corruption and COVID-19

After the first reported case of COVID-19 in Eswatini in March 2020, the government, with assistance from local and international partners, mobilised extensive funds and resources to contain the disease and manage its impacts on society. But according to most Emaswati, even these critical resources were not immune to the scourge of corruption: Two-thirds (67%) of respondents believe that “a lot” of the resources made available to fight COVID-19 were ultimately lost to corruption (Figure 11). Only 2% say there was no pandemic-related corruption.

Figure 11: Proportion of COVID-19 resources lost to corruption | Eswatini | 2022



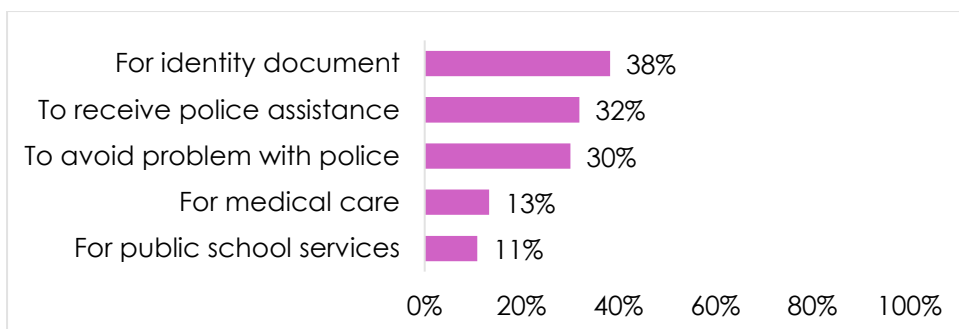
Respondents were asked: Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption?

Citizens' experiences with corruption

Lastly, we consider citizens' personal experiences with corruption when they interacted with selected public services during the previous year. Respondents who had not interacted with these services were excluded from these questions.

More than a third (38%) of Eswatini who sought to obtain a government identity document say they had to "pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour" for a government official in order to obtain the needed document (Figure 12). About one in three report having to pay a bribe to obtain police assistance (32%) or to avoid a problem with the police (30%), while bribe payment was less common among those seeking medical care (13%) and services from a public school (11%).

Figure 12: Payment of bribes to access public services | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents who sought selected public services in the previous 12 months were asked: And 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?

For a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

For a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

For a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?

For a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?

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

Conclusion

Most Emaswati see government efforts to eradicate corruption within its own institutions as largely ineffective. This perception is supported by the Auditor General's findings on the magnitude and persistence of unauthorised expenditures by government departments.

Of equally great concern is that citizens believe they risk retaliation if they report corruption, and do not believe that reporting instances of corruption to the state will result in any meaningful action. This means that citizens cannot participate effectively in the fight against corruption, a fact that anti-corruption strategies will have to address urgently.

Another interesting finding is that half of Emaswati believe that “most” or “all” business executives are involved in corruption, suggesting that the scope of the fight against corruption needs to be extended beyond government entities.

Lastly, tackling perceived corruption among tax officials will be of strategic importance to the government's drive to increase voluntary tax compliance to improve domestic revenue collection and reduce reliance on outside sources of revenue such as SACU receipts.

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