



Dispatch No. 431 | 8 March 2021

# Zambians approve of government's COVID-19 response despite questions about aid, vaccines

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 431 | Edward Chibwili

## Summary

Zambia recorded its first COVID-19 case on 18 March 2020. A week later, President Edgar Lungu closed all schools and universities, restaurants (except on a take-away basis), nightclubs, cinemas, and gyms; limited public gatherings to less than 50 people; suspended international flights except to and from Lusaka; ordered quarantining of travelers entering the country; and ordered mandatory mask-wearing in public (SATUCC, 2020; United Nations, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

Students in examination classes (grades 7, 9, and 12) were allowed to return to schools on 1 June to ensure that end-of-year examinations continued as planned (SATUCC, 2020). Online learning platforms and lessons on television and local radio stations helped support continuity of learning for children in non-examination classes (Ministry of General Education, 2020; World Vision, 2020). However, in rural areas, such distance-learning measures were far from ideal as learners without television sets, radios, or Internet services could not access such lessons.

Schools reopened on 11 September, ending closures that had lasted longer than in most other countries in the region (World Health Organization, 2020).

Meanwhile, most sectors of the economy suffered, with job losses expected to be most pronounced in the informal sector, which employs almost 70% of Zambia's workforce (United Nations, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2020; Zambia Statistics Agency, 2019).

As of 4 March 2021, Zambia had registered 80,687 cases of COVID-19 with 1,109 deaths in a population of about 17.9 million people (Zambia National Public Health Institute, 2021; Zambia Statistics Agency, 2020). The Zambian government is yet to acquire COVID-19 vaccines.

A new Afrobarometer survey in Zambia shows that a majority of citizens approve of the government's performance in managing the response to the pandemic, including keeping the public informed. While they found it difficult to comply with partial lockdown restrictions, they believe that such measures, including school closures, were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.

More than one in three Zambians say their households lost income during the pandemic, and nine out of 10 report that they did not receive government assistance. A majority of citizens believe that the assistance was not fairly distributed.

Most citizens say the pandemic does not justify postponing elections or limiting political campaigning, but they support censoring the media or using security forces to ensure compliance with public health mandates.

The study also shows that most Zambians do not trust their government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, although more than half say they are likely to try to get vaccinated

when a vaccine becomes available. About half of Zambians would choose prayer over a vaccine to prevent getting COVID-19.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults in November/December 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Zambia in 2012, 2015, and 2017.

## Key findings

- More than three-fourths (78%) of Zambians consider themselves well informed about the COVID-19 pandemic.
- More than one-third (35%) of Zambians report that someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income as a result of the pandemic.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Zambians say complying with the partial lockdown was "difficult" or "very difficult." Even so, a large majority (80%) consider the restrictions necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.
- School closures that affected all communities have strong public support (71%), although most respondents (79%) say schools should have reopened more quickly.
- A majority (70%) of Zambians say government assistance was distributed unfairly.
  - Fewer than one in 10 citizens (7%) say their household received pandemic-related assistance from the government.
  - Surprisingly, economically better-off and more-educated citizens are more likely to report receiving assistance than poorer and less-educated respondents.
- More than three-quarters (78%) of Zambians approve of the government's performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an overwhelming majority (92%) say the government has done a good job of keeping the public informed.
  - But only about one-third (36%) of citizens say they trust official COVID-19 statistics.
  - And almost three-fourths (72%) believe that "some" or "a lot" of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost to government corruption.
- While fewer than half (45%) of respondents say they trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, a majority (59%) say they are likely to try to get vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available.
  - Remarkably, rural residents (67%) and citizens with primary education or less (71%) are far more likely to say they will probably try to get vaccinated than

are urban residents (50%) and Zambians with secondary (54%) and post-secondary (49%) schooling.

- Slightly more than half (51%) of Zambians believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection.
- Almost three-quarters (74%) of citizens say a pandemic would not justify postponing elections or limiting political campaigns. In contrast, a majority say a public-health emergency would justify censoring the media (53%) and using security forces to enforce public health mandates (69%).
- More than two-thirds (69%) of respondents also say they are worried that politicians in Zambia will use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority.
- Looking ahead, only two in 10 Zambians (22%) expect COVID-19 to be a “somewhat” or “very” serious problem for their country over the next six months. But almost two-thirds (64%) would prioritize funding to prepare for health emergencies like COVID-19 over other health needs.

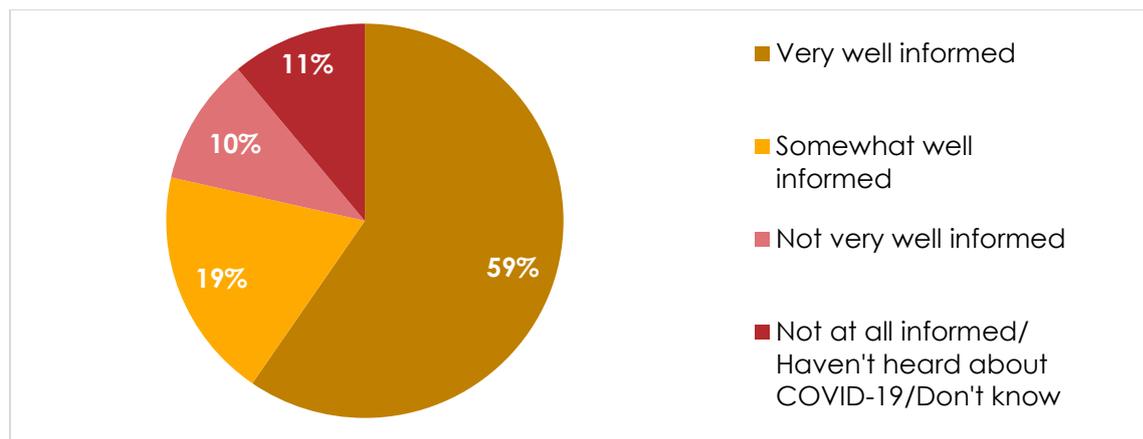
## Awareness

More than three-fourths of Zambians consider themselves to be “somewhat” (19%) or “very” (59%) well informed about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it (Figure 1).

Awareness is higher in cities (85%) than in rural areas (73%), among men (82%) than among women (75%), and among respondents with secondary (82%) or post-secondary (91%) education compared to those with primary education or less (69%) (Figure 2).

Citizens experiencing a high level of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> are substantially less likely to be well informed about COVID-19 (70%) than their better-off counterparts (80% of those with moderate lived poverty, 83% of those with low or no lived poverty).

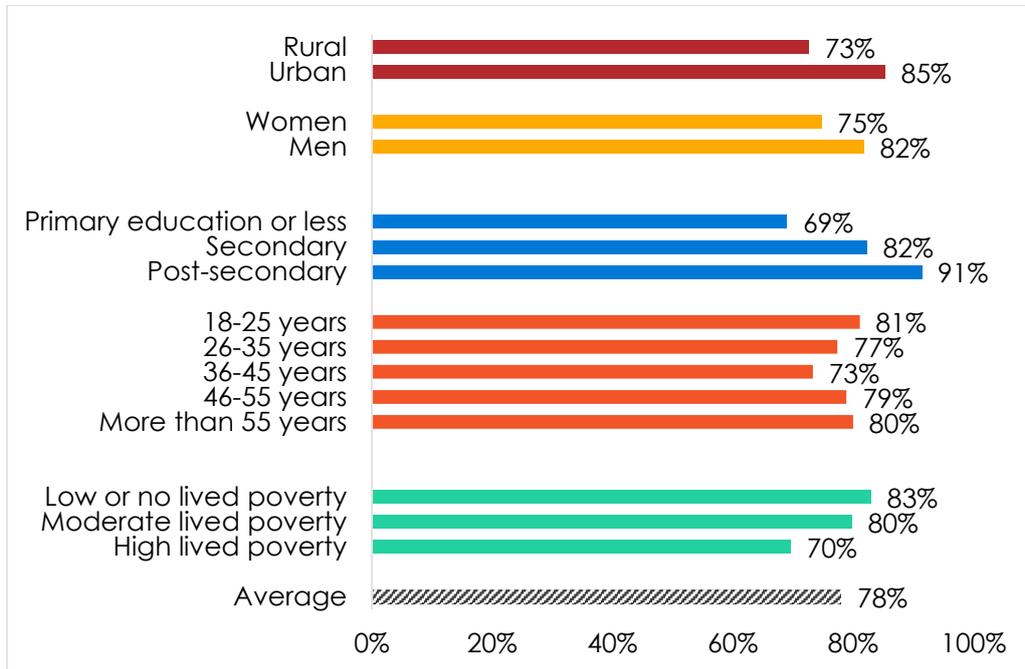
**Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Zambia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

<sup>1</sup> 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 (2020).

**Figure 2: Awareness of COVID-19** | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020



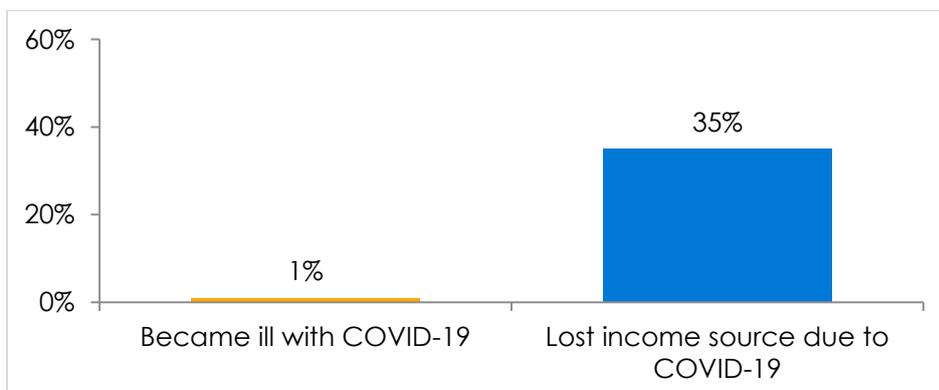
**Respondents were asked:** How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "somewhat" or "very" well informed)

### Impact

In the Afrobarometer survey, 1% of Zambians say a household member became ill with COVID-19, and more than a third (35%) report that someone in the household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 3).

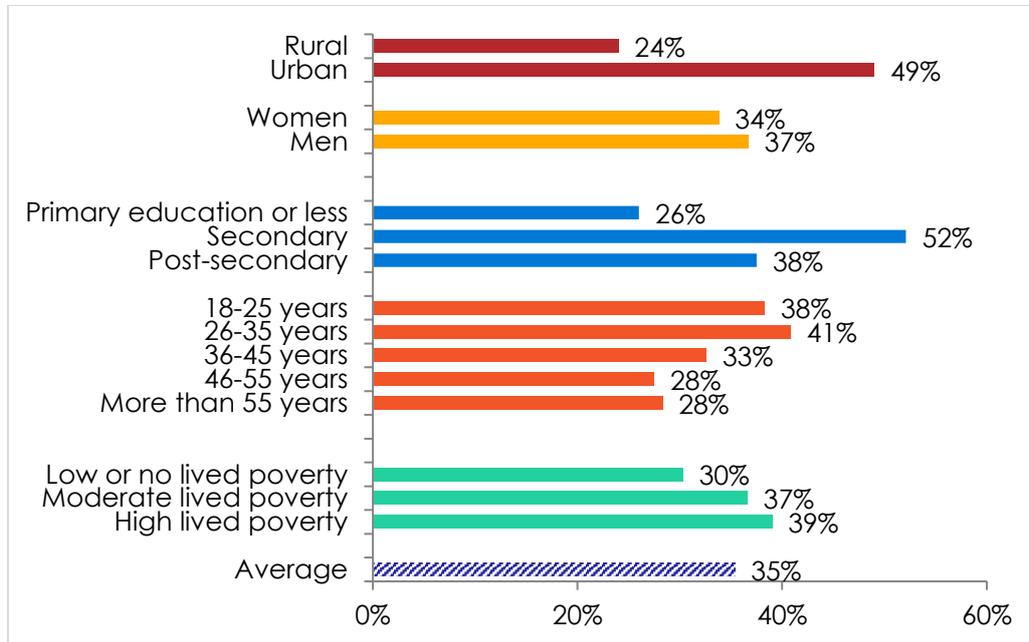
These economic losses are twice as prevalent in urban (49%) as in rural areas (24%), and are slightly more widespread among citizens experiencing moderate (37%) or high (39%) levels of lived poverty than among those with low or no lived poverty (30%) (Figure 4). Citizens with secondary education (52%) and young people (38%-41%) are also more likely to report such losses than their counterparts.

**Figure 3: Impacts of the pandemic** | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income?

**Figure 4: Lost income due to the pandemic** | by socio-demographic group  
 | Zambia | 2020



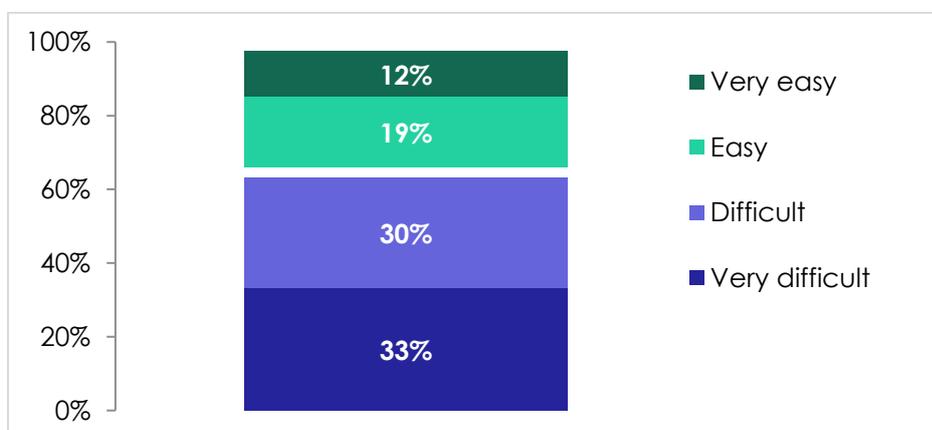
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income? (% “yes”)

### Lockdowns and school closures

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Zambians say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with partial lockdowns imposed by the government (Figure 5). Even so, most Zambians (80%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the restrictions were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 6).

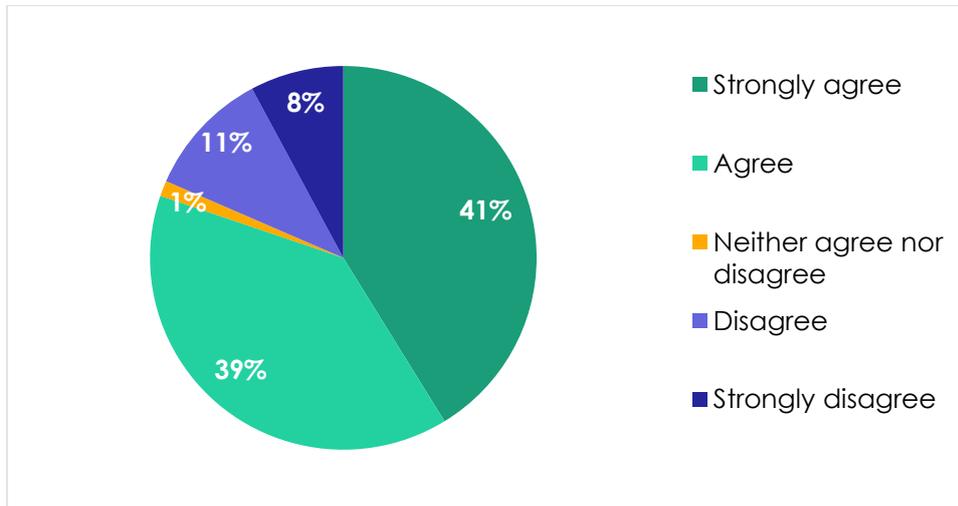
Similarly, seven in 10 Zambians (71%) endorse the government’s decision to close the schools (Figure 7), although most believe the schools were closed for “somewhat too long” (17%) or “much too long” (63%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 5: Difficulty of complying with lockdown** | Zambia | 2020



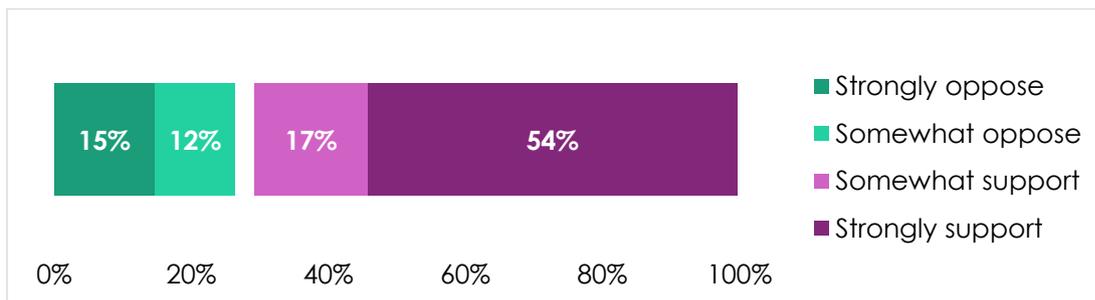
**Respondents were asked:** How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

**Figure 6: Support for lockdown** | Zambia | 2020



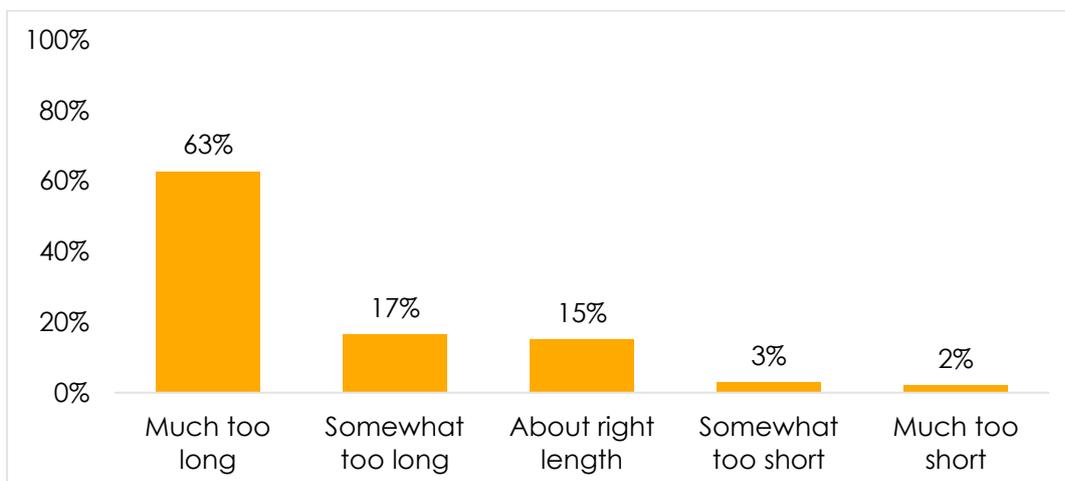
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people's livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

**Figure 7: Support for school closures** | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

**Figure 8: Length of school closures** | Zambia | 2020



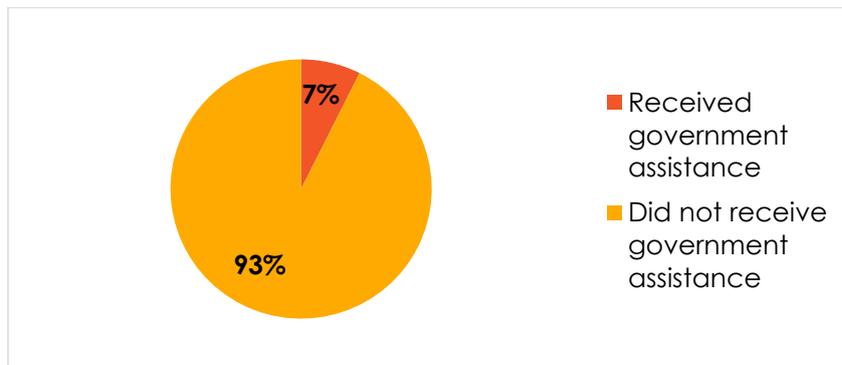
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

## Government assistance and performance

Fewer than one in 10 respondents (7%) say their household received special government assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 9). Slightly more respondents in urban areas (9%) than in rural areas (6%) report having received government assistance (Figure 10). Interestingly, citizens with post-secondary education are more likely to report having received assistance (13%) than are those with less schooling (5%-9%). Similarly, economically better-off citizens more frequently received assistance (11%) than poorer respondents (6%). Citizens aged 46-55 years are more likely than other age groups to report that they received government assistance during the pandemic.

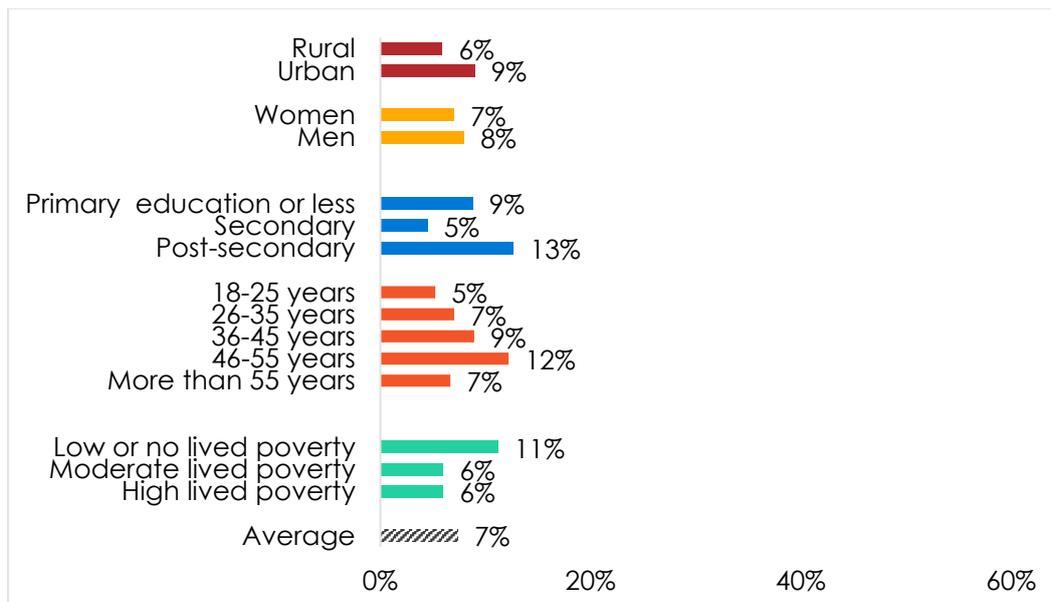
Seven in 10 Zambians (70%) say government assistance during the pandemic was distributed unfairly, favouring certain groups or regions (Figure 11).

**Figure 9: Received government assistance | Zambia | 2020**



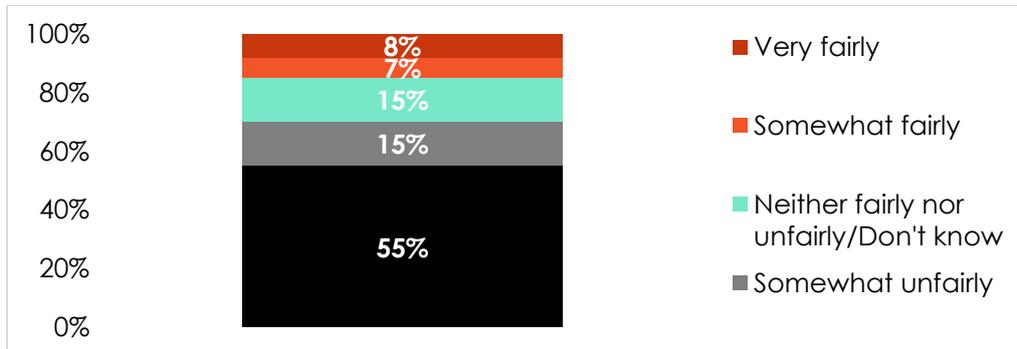
**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

**Figure 10: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% "yes")

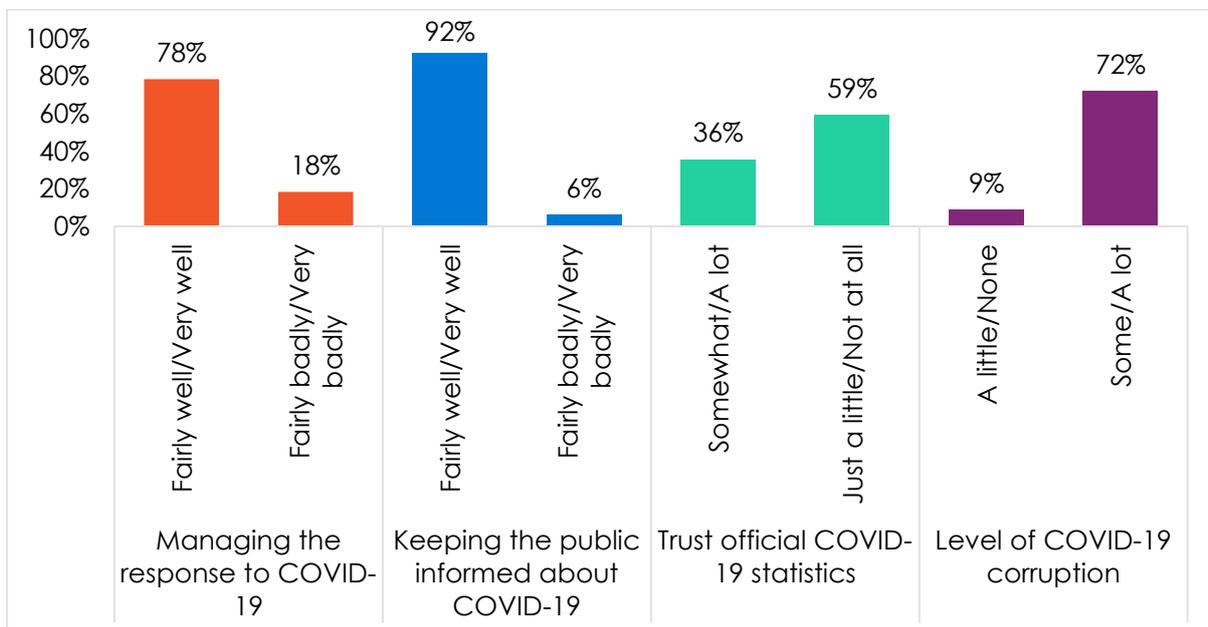
**Figure 11: Fairness of government assistance** | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favoring certain groups or regions?

Overall, more than three-fourths (78%) of Zambians believe that their government has done “very well” or “fairly well” in managing the response to the pandemic, and an overwhelming majority (92%) say the government has done a good job of keeping the public informed (Figure 12). However, only slightly more than one-third (36%) say they trust official COVID-19 statistics, and a strong majority (72%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost or stolen due to government corruption.

**Figure 12: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic** | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:**

How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Keeping the public informed about COVID-19?

How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

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

## Vaccines

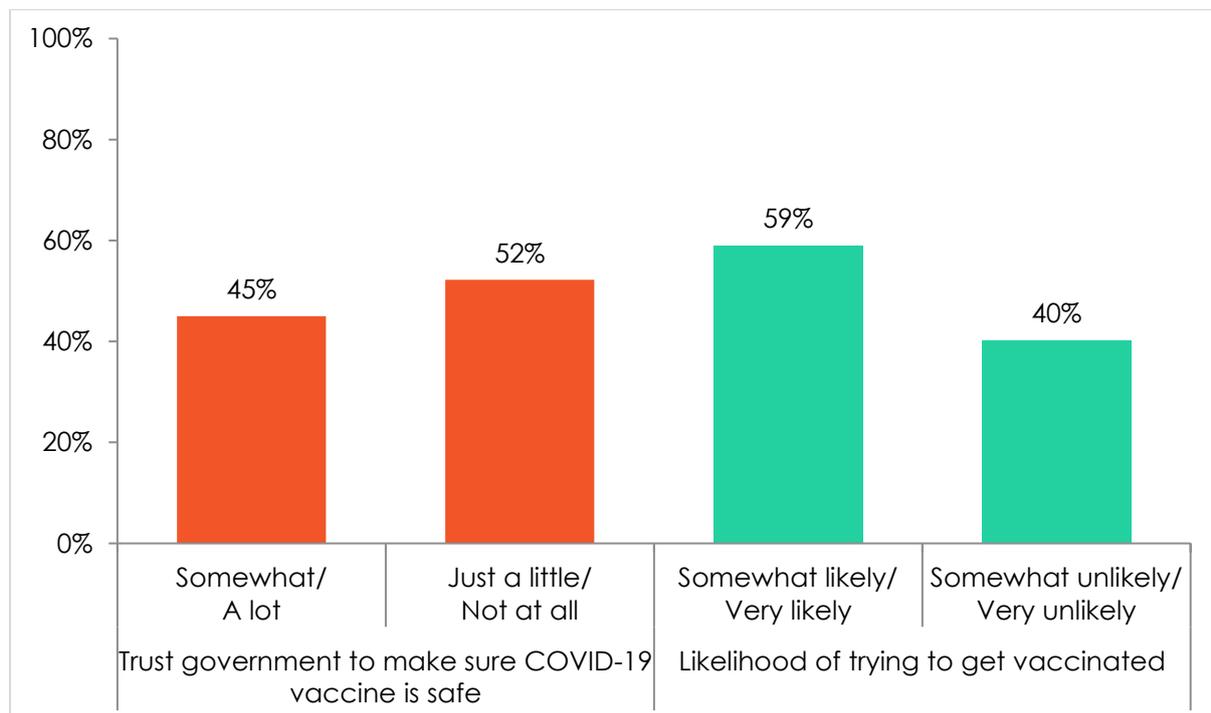
Fewer than half (45%) of Zambians say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any COVID-19 vaccine is safe before it is used in the country. Nonetheless, six in 10 citizens (59%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available (Figure 13).

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

Zambians experiencing high levels of lived poverty (48%) are less likely to say they will try to get vaccinated than better-off respondents (61%-62%) (Figure 14). But remarkably, citizens with primary education or less (71%) are more likely to indicate a willingness to be vaccinated than those with secondary (54%) or post-secondary (49%) schooling.

Although more than half (59%) of Zambians say they will probably try to get vaccinated, only one in five (22%) believe that a vaccine is more effective than prayer at preventing coronavirus infections. Fully half (51%) say prayer is “somewhat more” or “much more” effective than a vaccine, while 26% believe that the two are about equally effective (Figure 15).

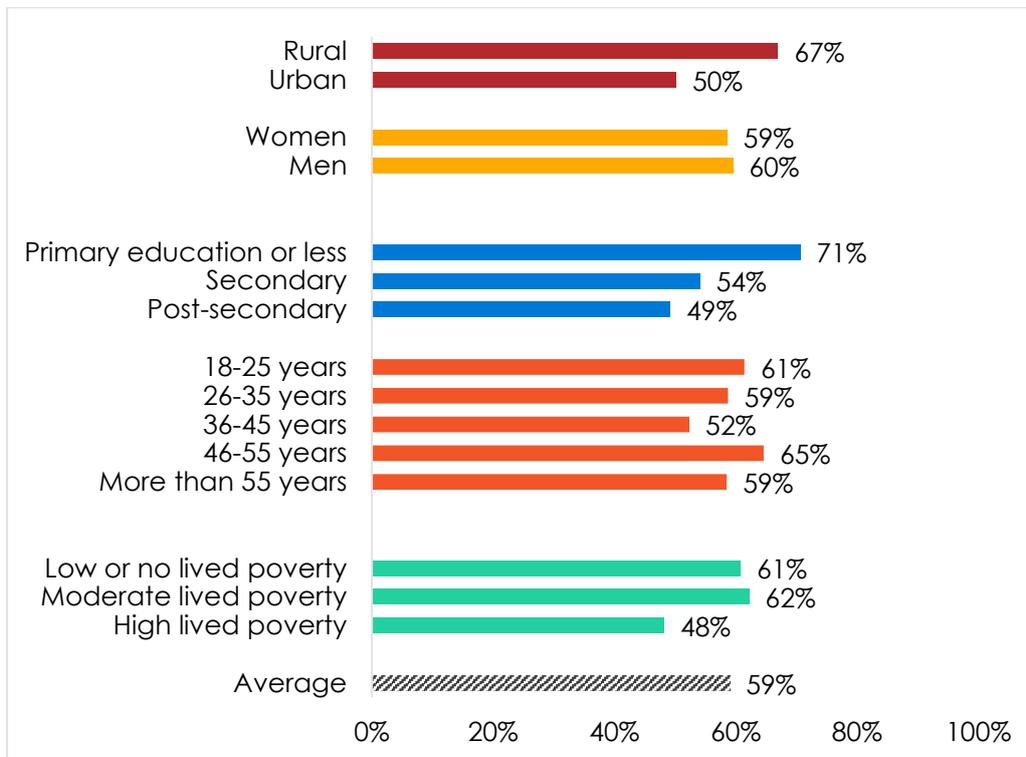
**Figure 13: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Zambia | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:**

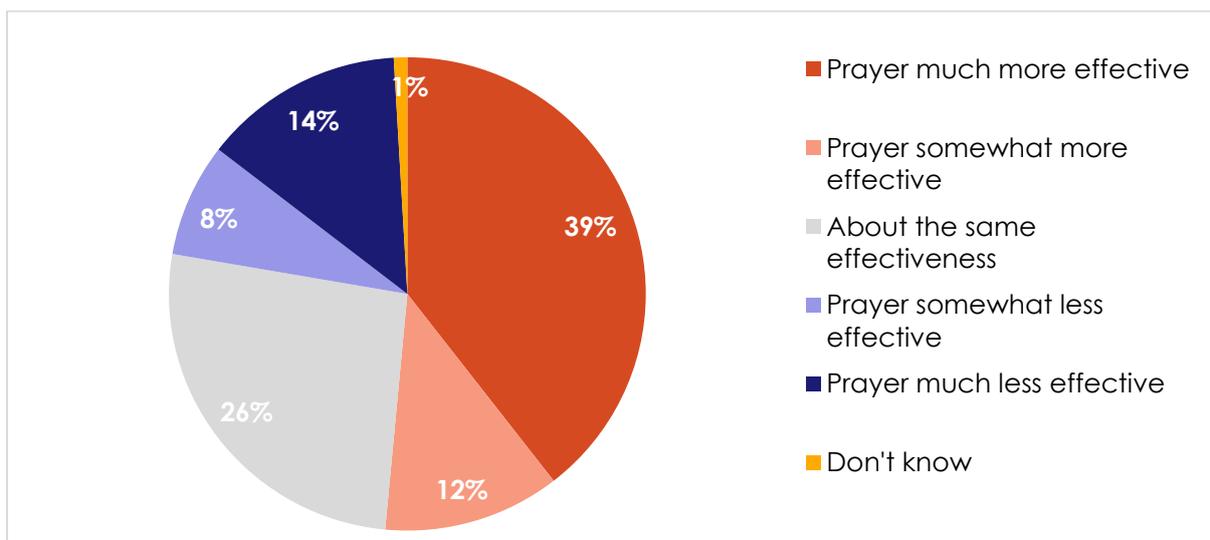
*How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Zambian citizens is safe before it is used in this country?  
If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?*

**Figure 14: Likely to try to get vaccinated** | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

**Figure 15: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19?** | Zambia | 2020



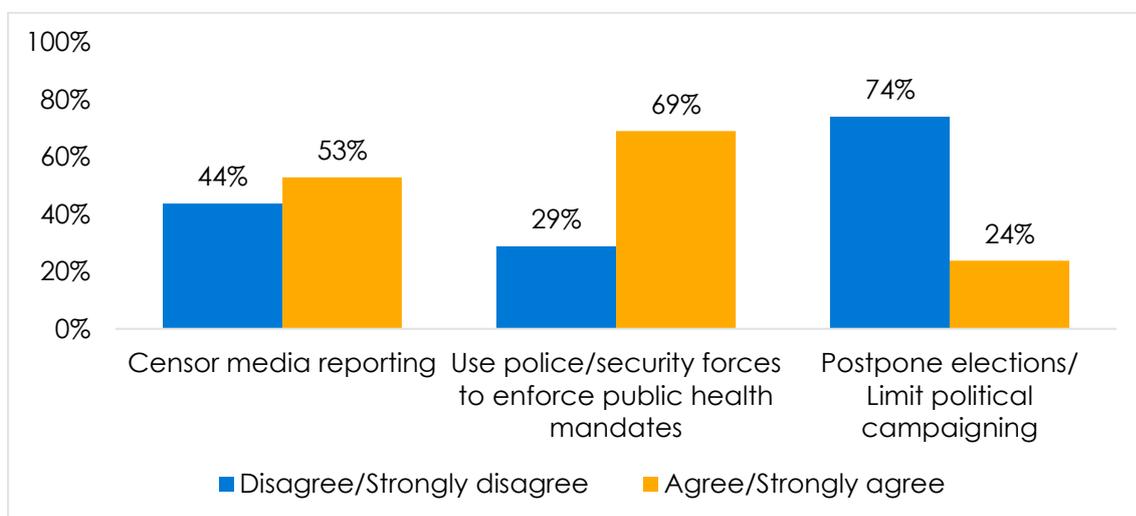
**Respondents were asked:** *Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?*

## Restricting freedoms and democracy?

With elections in Zambia scheduled to take place in August 2021, citizens are keenly aware of political developments and the potential impact of the pandemic on elections planning. Almost three-quarters (74%) of Zambians say that the pandemic does not justify postponing elections or limiting political campaigns (Figure 16). In contrast, more than half (53%) believe it could justify censoring the media, and more than two-thirds (69%) consider using security forces to enforce public health mandates justified during a health emergency.

However, more than two-thirds (69%) of Zambians say they are “somewhat worried” or “very worried” that politicians are using, or might use, the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority (Figure 17).

**Figure 16: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | Zambia | 2020**



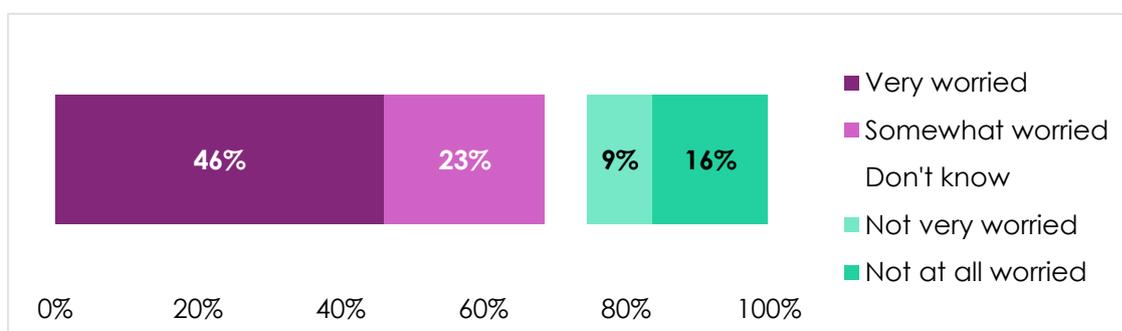
**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

Censoring media reporting?

Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?

Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

**Figure 17: Worried about politicians’ intentions? | Zambia | 2020**

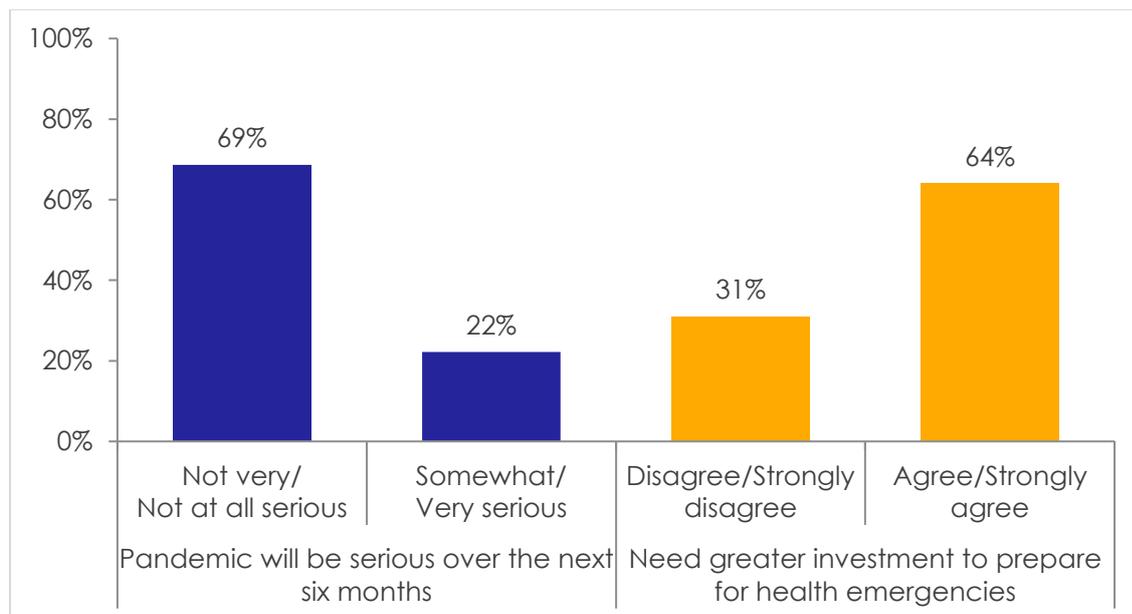


**Respondents were asked:** In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Zambia: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?

## Looking ahead

Looking ahead, more than two-thirds (69%) of Zambians do not believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a serious problem for their country over the next six months (Figure 18). Even so, a clear majority (64%) say the government should invest more resources in preparations for health emergencies like COVID-19, even if that would mean fewer resources for other health services.

**Figure 18: Future impacts of COVID-19 | Zambia | 2020**



### Respondents were asked:

*Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Zambia over the next six months?*

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.*

## Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that while the Zambian government enjoys widespread popular approval of its management of the response to COVID-19, it faces a challenge when it comes to public trust. About seven in 10 Zambians say government assistance during the pandemic was distributed unfairly. Similar majorities believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost to corruption, and that politicians might use the pandemic for political mileage. And fewer than half trust the government to make sure that vaccines are safe – yet a majority say they are likely to get vaccinated.

With the country’s general elections scheduled for August, most citizens oppose government measures that would postpone elections or limit political campaigns. But they indicate a willingness, during a public-health crisis, to accept censorship of the media and the use of security forces to enforce public health mandates.

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**Edward Chibwili** is a research fellow at the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia. Email: [edward.chibwili@unza.zm](mailto:edward.chibwili@unza.zm).

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