



Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 110

Perceptions and Realities of Corruption in South Africa

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January 2013

Background

Corruption is a growing concern in South Africa. Cases of alleged corruption of government officials are detailed in the news media on a regular basis, and include allegations targeted at the highest levels of government. The Afrobarometer survey has been tracking public attitudes towards corruption since 2000. This bulletin outlines relevant results from the latest Afrobarometer survey (Round 5), conducted between October and November 2011 in South Africa, and compares them to findings from several previous surveys. The aim of this paper is to present data for discussion amongst key stakeholders; interpretations are, for the most part, left to the users. We begin with data on the importance of corruption on the public agenda in South Africa. Next, perceived levels of corruption amongst various government officials and representatives are detailed. This is contrasted with data on the reality of corruption by comparing it to the frequency of bribery. The bulletin concludes with data on the roles of government and media in the fight against corruption.

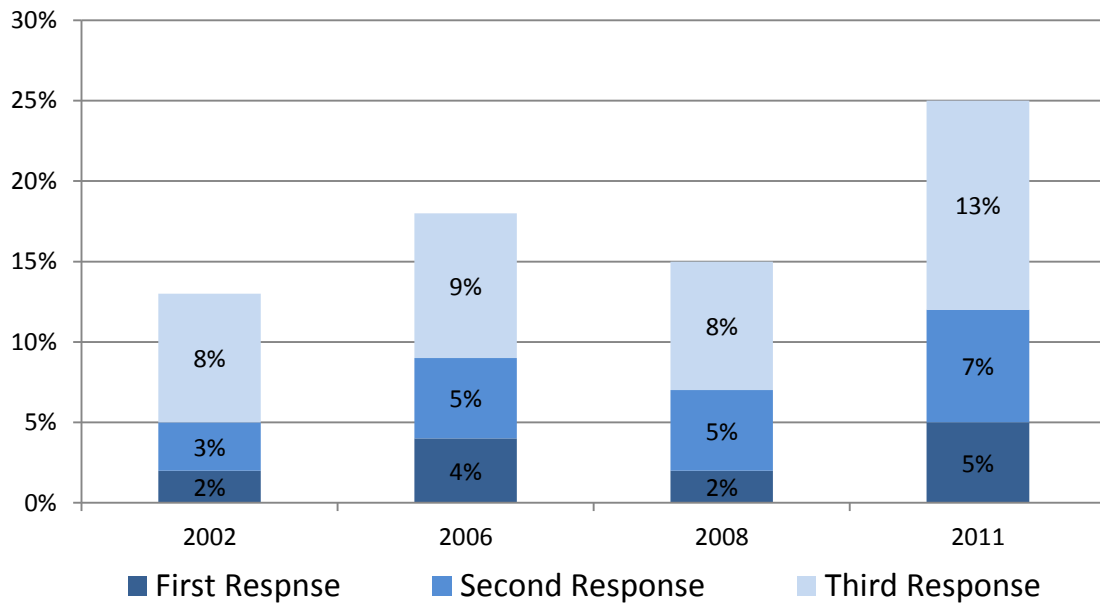
The Survey

During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys will be conducted in up to 35 countries in Africa, using a common survey instrument and methodology. The findings reported here draw from a recent survey in South Africa conducted between October and November 2011. This is the sixth Afrobarometer survey conducted in South Africa (others were conducted in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008). The survey was based on a nationally representative random sample of 2400 adult South Africans drawn from all nine provinces of the country. The findings reported here have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2% at a 95% confidence level. Fieldwork was conducted by Citizens Surveys, Ltd., with technical support from the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA).

The Place of Corruption on the Public Agenda in South Africa

Afrobarometer asks respondents to name the three most important problems facing the country that government should address. Their responses define a public agenda of issues South Africans believe to be the most important, on which they want government to focus its attention. Corruption has risen on the public agenda during the past ten years. In 2002, 13% of respondents thought corruption was one of the most important problems facing the country. The 2011 survey however shows a dramatic increase, with 25% of respondents mentioning corruption as a priority issue for government to address (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Corruption on the Public Agenda



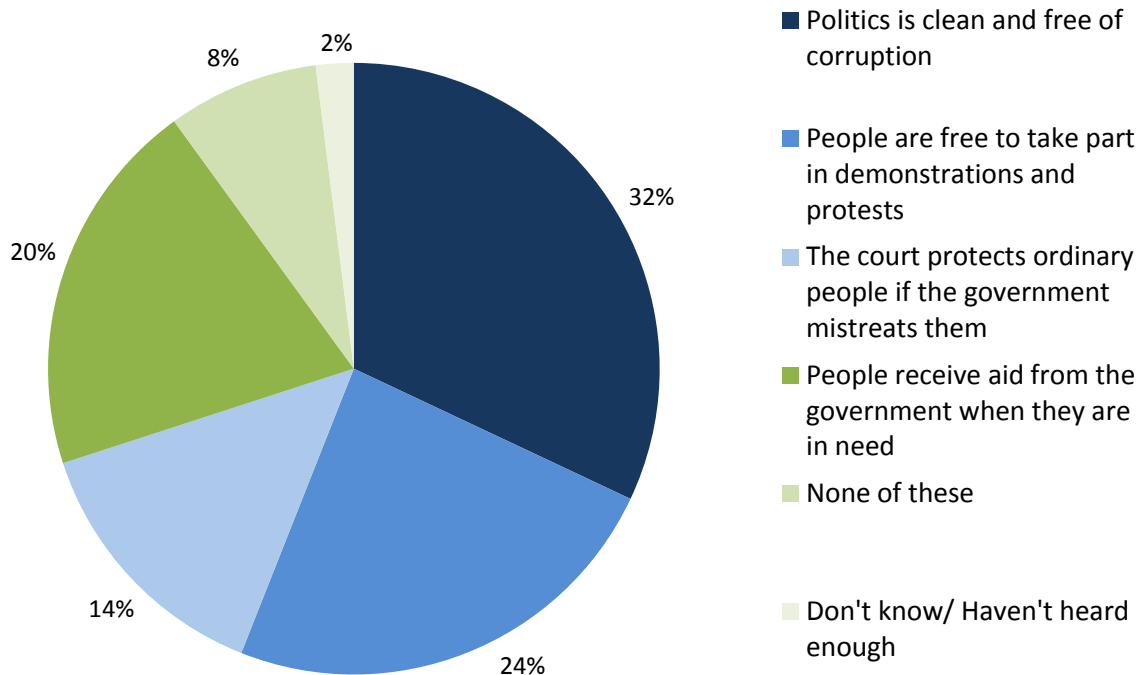
Question: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? Corruption.*

Moreover, this is the first time since 2002 that corruption has appeared in the top five priority issues. In all previous years, the top five issues were: unemployment; crime; poverty; housing; and HIV/AIDS. In 2011, for the first time, corruption was rated as more important than both HIV/AIDS and poverty, putting it in fourth place.

In 2011, the survey also sought to assess public perceptions about what citizens felt were the most essential characteristics of democracy. When asked to identify which of four options listed was an essential characteristics of democracy, nearly a third (32%) of the surveyed respondents chose “politics is clean and free of corruption” as the most important (Figure 2)¹.

¹ Note that this question was one of four questions where respondents were asked what they thought was the most essential characteristic of democracy. For each question, four different options were presented.

Figure 2: Corruption and Democracy



Question: Which one of these things would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?

Perceived Corruption Amongst Public Officials

The Afrobarometer survey also asks about the level of corruption amongst seven categories of public officials and government representatives. Table 1 shows that a significant proportion believe that many of these public officials and government representatives are involved in corruption. Respondents point to most corruption amongst the police (52% say “most of them” or “all of them” are corrupt), followed closely by local government councillors (51%) and government officials (50%). Far fewer respondents believe that South Africa Revenue Service (SARS) officials or judges and magistrates are corrupt (23% and 27%, respectively). The average percentage of people that think most or all officials across these different categories are involved in corruption is 40% in 2011, up quite substantially from 30% in 2008.

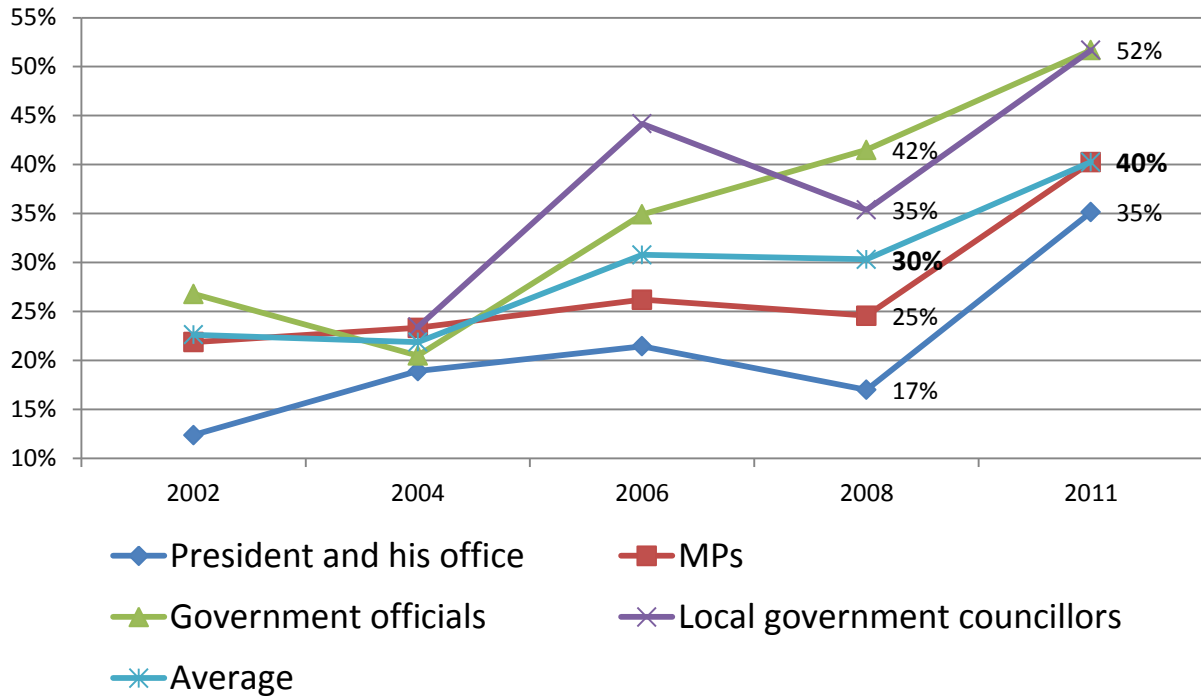
Table 1: Perceptions of Corruption (2011)²

	President and his office	MPs	Government officials	Local government councillors	Police	SARS	Judges and magistrates
All of them	9	8	10	14	12	5	6
Most of them	26	32	40	37	40	18	21
Some of them	51	48	41	38	41	41	46
None	8	6	5	6	4	18	17
Don't know/Haven't heard enough	5	5	4	4	2	18	10

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

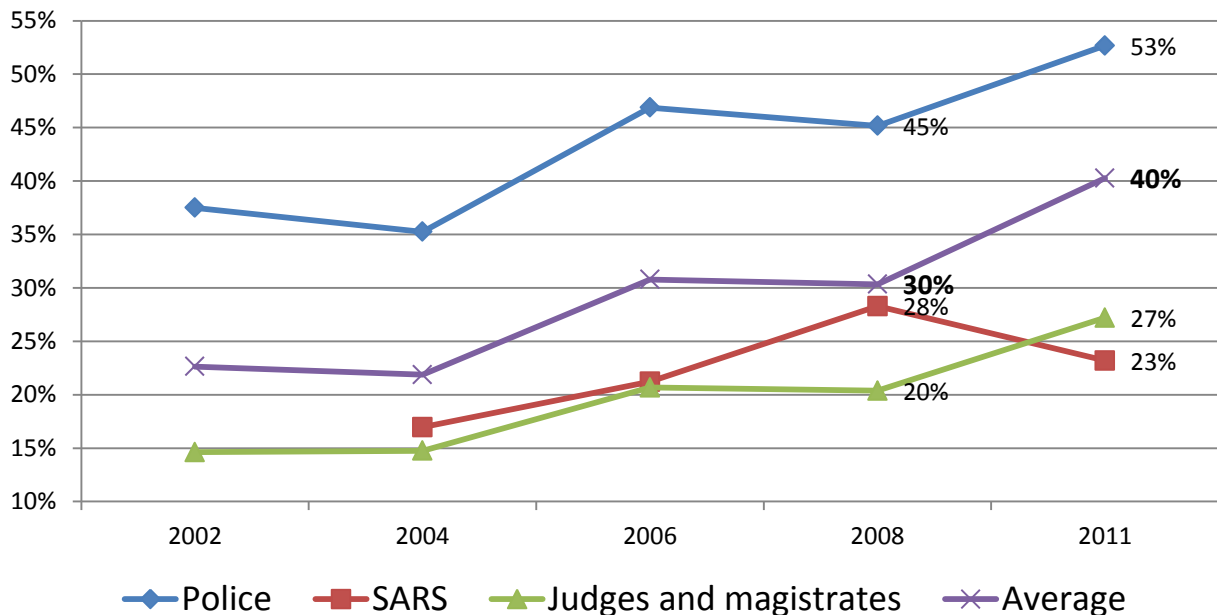
² Here and elsewhere, figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 3: Perceptions of Corruption Over Time



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

Figure 4: Perceptions of Corruption Over Time



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

Note: Figures 3 and 4 represent South Africans who thought that "all of them" or "most of them" are involved in corruption.

As Figures 3 and 4 illustrate, on average and across different political actors and institutions, South Africans consistently perceive increasing amounts corruption over time. In particular, both figures highlight the substantive increase in perceived corruption between 2008 and 2011.

The Experience of Corruption: Bribery

In contrast to the perceived prevalence of corruption amongst officials and representatives, the actual number of times that people report having paid a bribe to government officials is very low. An average of 65% said they never paid a bribe, and an additional 27% state they have not done so during the last year. These figures are similar for different government services, including getting a document/permit; accessing water or sanitation services; obtaining treatment at a health facility; dealing with a police, e.g., at a checkpoint, or in avoiding arrests or fines; and getting children into primary school (Table 2). In previous survey rounds, the results from these indicators have been similar.

Table 2: Experience of Bribery (2011) for South Africans Accessing/ Experiencing Particular Public Goods and Services

	Get a document or a permit	Get water or sanitation services	Get treatment at a local health clinic or hospital	Avoid a problem with the police, like passing a checkpoint or avoiding a fine or arrest	Get a place in a primary school for a child
Never	90	90	88	89	90
Once or twice	5	5	6	6	5
A few times	3	3	5	3	2
Often	1	1	2	1	2
Don't know	0	0	0	1	1
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No experience with this in past year (% of South Africans)	30	27	25	28	27

Question: In the past year, how often, if ever, have you had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to government officials in order to... (%)

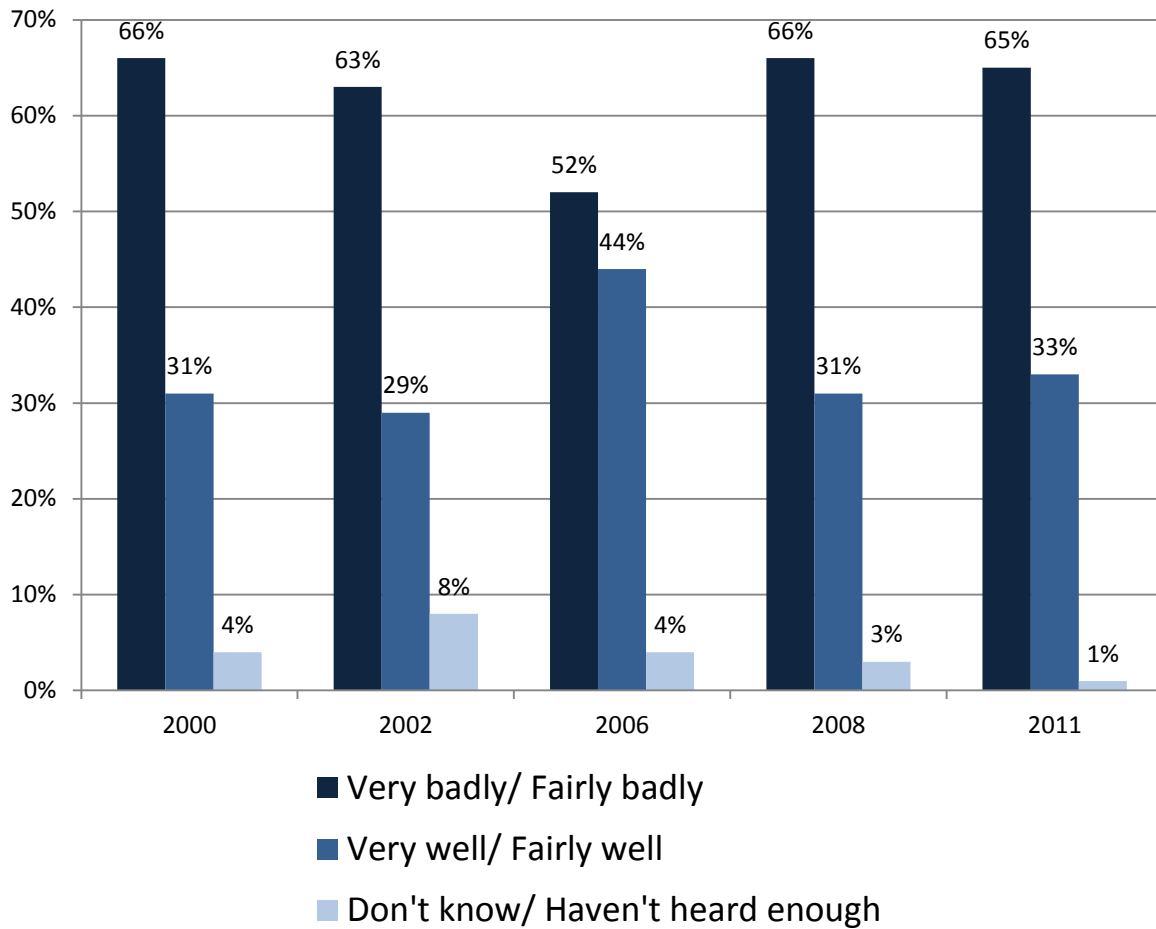
Note: This data representation only includes South Africans who needed to get a document or permit, etc. The percentage of South Africans that did not access the particular public good or service is denoted by the “no experience with this in the past year” category.

Fighting Corruption: The Roles of Government and the Media

In the fight against corruption, both government and the media can play important roles. When asked to assess the performance of the current government in fighting corruption in government, a third of the surveyed respondents approved the government for a well done job; 25% said “fairly well”, and 7% “very well”. However, a majority of people rate the government’s performance in fighting corruption in government as “fairly bad” (30%) or “very bad” (35%) (Figure 5).

These figures have been fairly similar since 2000, with the exception of 2006, when a larger proportion (44%) of respondents approved the government’s performance in fighting corruption.

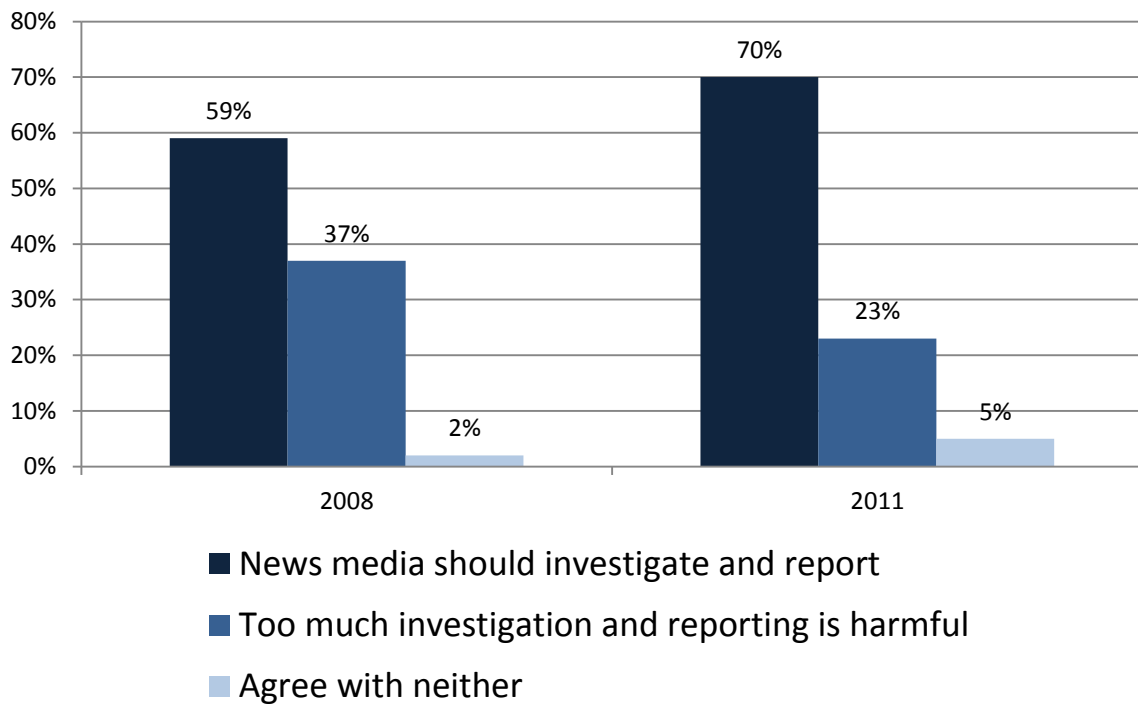
Figure 5: Government Performance in Fighting Corruption



Question: 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.

The Afrobarometer survey also asked citizens whether the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, or whether too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country. More than two-thirds (70%) support a watchdog role for the media (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Role of the Media in Fighting Corruption



Question: Which of the following statements is closest to your view. Choose statement 1 or statement 2.
Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

Compared to 2008, people believe more strongly in the role of the media in fighting corruption: the number of people agreeing with the statement that the news media should constantly investigate and report on government corruption has increased from 59% to 70%.

Conclusion

It is clear that corruption is considered an important issue by South Africans. It is frequently cited as a critical issue facing the country, and many people believe that there are high levels of corruption in various parts of government. At the same time however, the incidence of bribery appears to be relatively low when compared to the perceived corruption figures. This may be because people are reluctant to admit to paying bribes and therefore the incidence of bribery may be under-reported. In addition, people may think of nepotism, procurement fraud, and other misuse of state resources when asked about corruption, rather than considering only petty bribery. This is a second potential explanation for the differences between perceptions and reality appearing from the survey results. Finally, in the fight against corruption, opinions on the performance of government appear to have remained fairly constant over the past ten years, whereas the role of the media is considered more important now than it was a few years ago.

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge generous core support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 5 research, capacity building, and outreach activities. Idasa is the Afrobarometer partner in South Africa - for more information on Afrobarometer work in South Africa please contact Anyway Chingwete, AB Project Manager, achingwete@idasa.org.za or visit: www.afrobarometer.org.