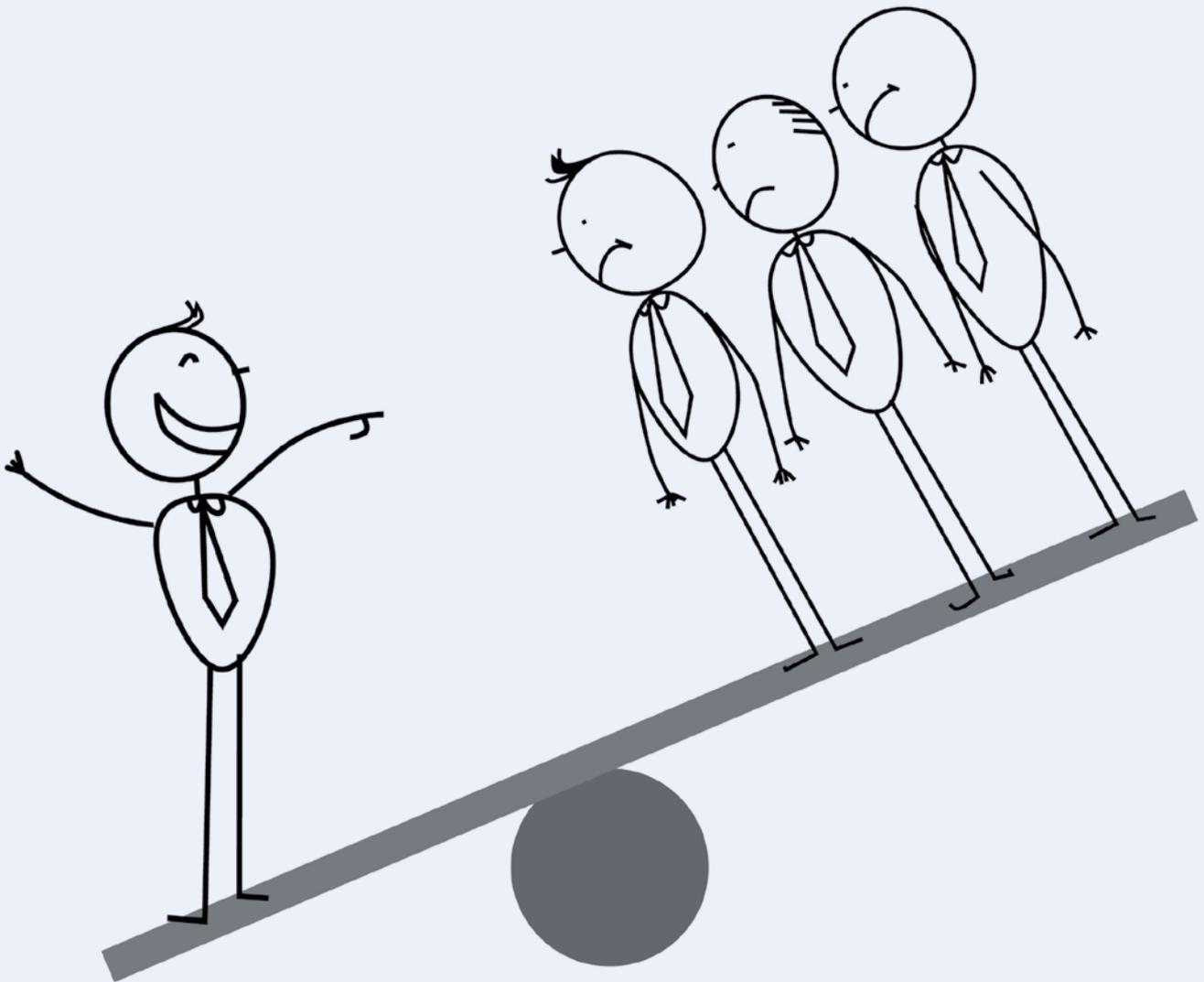


Business unusual: **PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION** in South Africa



Around three-quarters (74%) of all South Africans believe the incidence of corruption has increased in the past three years, while 10% feel it has declined and 12% report that it has remained unchanged over the period.

In recent years, there has been mounting attention and concern focused on corruption scandals involving the police, politicians and the nation's business elite, to the extent that Public Protector Thuli Madonsela recently proclaimed that the country has reached a tipping point in its battle against corruption. In this article, Steven Gordon, Ben Roberts, Jarè Struwig and Sipheshle Dumisa examine public attitudes towards corruption in the country. The results show high levels of dissatisfaction with the problem and widespread support for tougher action.

To better understand attitudes towards corruption in South Africa, the authors used data from the 2011 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey consists of nationally representative samples of South Africans aged 16 years and older living in private households. A total of 3 057 respondents took part in the 2011 survey which included a module of questions designed to reflect attitudes towards corruption.

LEVEL OF PUBLIC CONCERN

Freedom, security and justice are critical features of a democracy and have been enshrined in the Constitution. Corruption is seen as a major obstacle in realising these

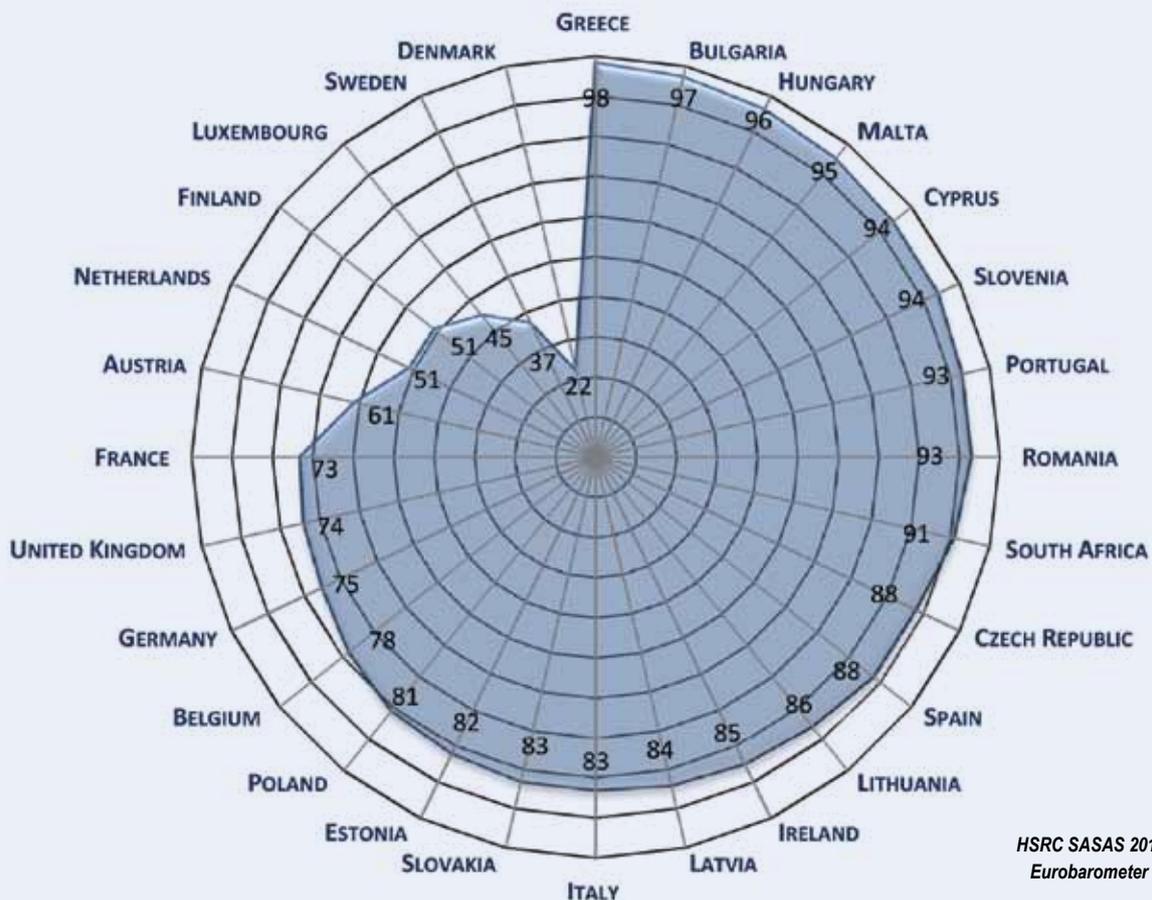
constitutional ideals. Justice Minister Jeff Radebe recently stated that: 'Corruption seeks to extinguish the flame that shines on all South Africans, the flame that promises freedom and security for all, the flame of democracy'. In response, the government has developed a series of anticorruption policies and interventions, including a wide-ranging legislative framework and the establishment of a number of task forces.

However, the survey reveals that in spite of these efforts, many South Africans are of the view that corruption still represents a salient societal concern. In late 2011, there was almost universal agreement (91%) that corruption represents a major problem. Furthermore, many South Africans acknowledge that corruption is escalating in the country. In 2003,

only 9% mentioned corruption in their list of the top three challenges facing the country, but this had increased to 26% by 2011. Around three-quarters (74%) of all South Africans believe the incidence of corruption has increased in the past three years, while 10% feel it has declined and 12% report that it has remained unchanged over the period.

This professed aversion to corruption is not unique to South Africa and appears to be characteristic of nations that have undergone a transition to democracy in recent decades. Indeed, comparative results from Eurobarometer suggest that South Africans share a common concern over corruption with many post-transition nations such as former communist Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage reporting corruption as a societal problem in South Africa and Europe



Sources:
HSRC SASAS 2011; Special Eurobarometer 325 (2009)

Apart from government-led anticorruption initiatives, South African citizens also demonstrate a resolute belief in the role of ordinary individuals in addressing corruption.

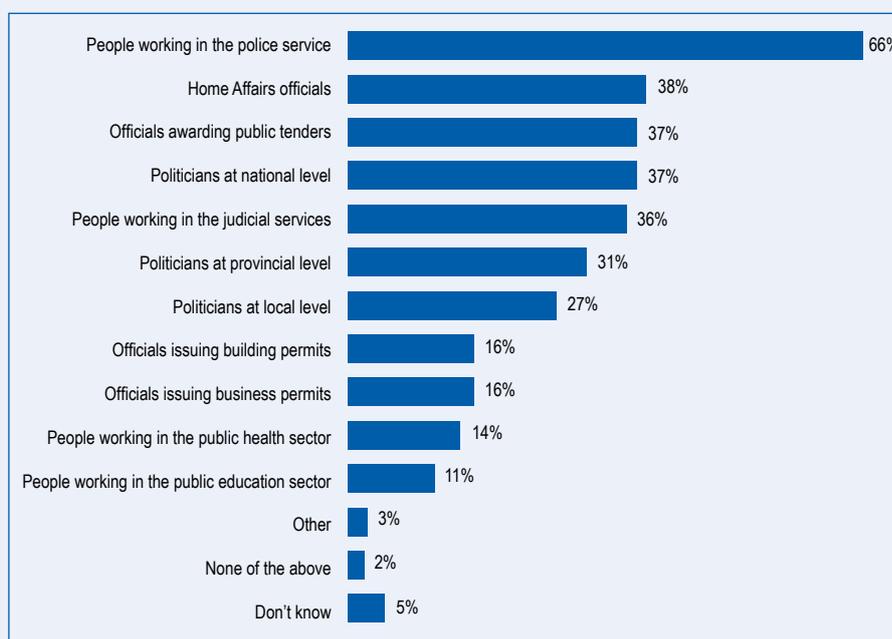
WHERE IS CORRUPTION?

Respondents were asked to identify the areas of public service in which they felt bribery and abuses of power for personal gain were noticeably widespread (Figure 2). The most commonly cited state representatives were the police, with two-thirds (66%) of South Africans expressing the view that bribery and corruption are endemic in the South African Police Service. More than a third of South Africans hold the view that there is considerable bribery and corruption among Home Affairs officials (38%), national politicians (37%), officials awarding public tenders (37%), and people working in the judicial services (36%). The extensive exposure afforded to corruption cases by the media in recent years, including high-level policing scandals and tender irregularities, are likely to have fuelled these perceptions (Figure 2).

PERCEIVED REASONS FOR CORRUPTION

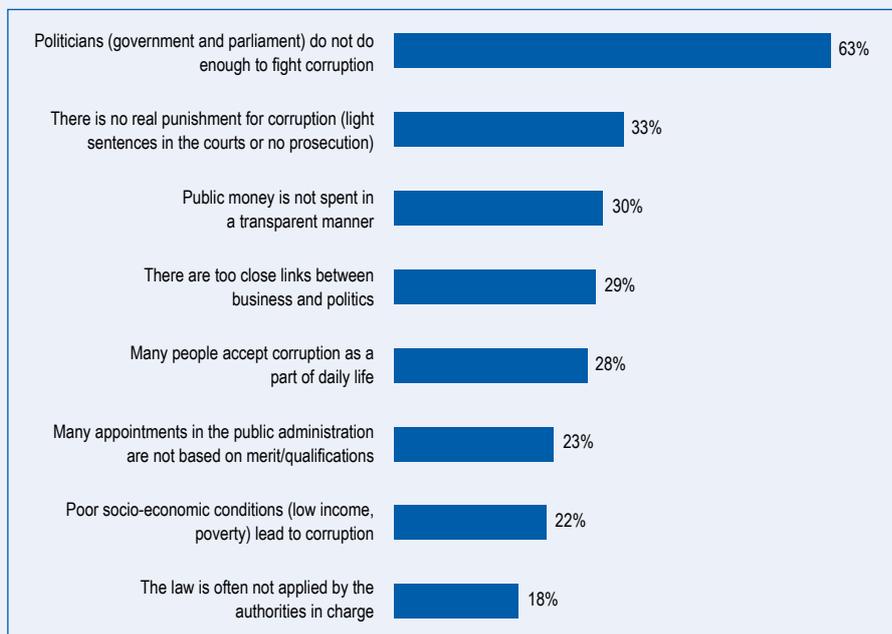
South Africans were asked to specify the main reasons why corruption exists in our society (Figure 3). The predominant response, mentioned by almost two-thirds (63%), is that the national government and parliament are not doing enough to fight corruption. A secondary cluster of reasons mentioned by close to a third of South Africans include the lack of adequate punishment by the judicial system (33%), a lack of transparency in public spending (30%), the close links between business and politics (29%), and the societal acceptance of corruption as part of daily life (28%). Slightly lower shares cite factors such as inappropriate public appointments, poor socio-economic conditions, and inconsistent application of the law by authorities (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Which public officials and leaders do South Africans consider corrupt?



Source: HSRC SASAS 2011

Figure 3: Why is corruption prevalent in South African society?



Source: HSRC SASAS 2011

FIGHTING CORRUPTION

Reflecting further on the aforementioned results, while a majority believe the government and parliament are not doing enough, there does appear to be public division about the effectiveness of pre-existing interventions, with 54% stating that existing governmental measures to combat corruption are effective and 39% offering a critical evaluation. This disagreement may be attributable to the demand for greater punitive measures for those found guilty of corruption among certain segments of society. For instance, more than three-quarters (77%) of adult South Africans believe that court sentences in corruption cases are too light. Recent high-profile corruption scandals in the media may also be responsible for polarising public perceptions on state efficacy in handling corruption.

Despite dissatisfaction with the handling of corruption cases by government and the courts together with entrenched views on corruption among the police, citizens tend to believe that preventing corruption is ultimately the job of these institutions. Asked to name the institutions that should be responsible for preventing and fighting corruption, 73% identified the police and 69% identified national government. Furthermore, the police are seen as the most trusted institution (66%) to resolve any issues of bribery or corruption that members of the public might personally experience, followed to a lesser extent by the courts (38%) and the media (17%). No other source was trusted by more than a tenth of the adult population. Taken together, these results may suggest the desire by a majority of citizens for the police and government (and to some degree the courts) to become legitimate and capable actors in the fight against corruption, despite concerns with present performance.

Apart from government-led anticorruption initiatives, South African citizens also demonstrate a resolute belief in the role of ordinary individuals in addressing corruption. South Africans do not seem to want to accept corruption as part of daily life, and the majority indicated that they wanted to take a proactive stance in combating corruption. An

overwhelming 85% claimed that they would report an incident of corruption, 83% stated they would support a colleague or friend if they fought against corruption, while 82% agreed that ordinary people could make a difference in the fight against corruption.

CONCLUSION

The 2011 SASAS results create the impression of a critical citizenry in South Africa, one which tends to recognise corruption as a serious societal challenge and which possesses a strong desire for a corruption-free democracy. People are willing to harness their individual agencies in combating corruption, but also have an urgent mandate for the state to respond more decisively. Of particular note, there is a strong awareness of the ongoing problems beleaguering the police. While regarded as the most likely to be characterised by widespread corruption, this is also the institution that citizens feel should be most responsible for taking the lead in preventing and tackling corruption and that is most trusted to assist victims in corruption cases. Similarly, many South Africans seem frustrated with court outcomes, provoking a demand for more punitive sentencing. For some the statistics discussed in this article may represent compelling signs of democratic anxiety, yet they may also be taken as encouraging from an accountability perspective where citizens actively monitor and hold public and private institutions to account.

Authors: Steven Gordon, Master's intern; Ben Roberts and Jarè Struwig, SASAS coordinators; Siphesible Dumisa, Master's intern, Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery research programme, HSRC.

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