

Corruption in Kenya, 2005: Is NARC Fulfilling Its Campaign Promise?

Kenya's NARC government rode to victory in the 2002 elections in part on the coalition's promise to tackle the country's deeply-rooted corruption problem. Prior to the transition, Kenya was perceived as a virtual international pariah due to extreme levels of corruption, leading the IMF to freeze its lending to Kenya in 1997. In 2002, Kenya ranked 96th out of 102 countries according to Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 1.9 out of 10.¹ With the ascension to power of the NARC government came promises to reinvigorate the country's anti-corruption campaign, and soon after taking power the new government launched high-profile efforts to tackle police corruption, and to re-open the investigation into the infamous Goldenberg scandal, among other things. Soon after the new government took power in January 2003, a first Afrobarometer survey found that public hopes were high that the country was going to turn the page on this endemic problem.

How do the government's promises to eradicate corruption look two-and-a-half years further on, in 2005? A second Afrobarometer survey suggests that Kenyans' high hopes have been, if not dashed, then at least substantially diminished. Although first-hand experience of corruption has not changed dramatically, either for better or for worse, perceptions of the extent of the problem have deteriorated considerably. The public is sorely disappointed with the government's efforts to tackle the problem, which are now widely perceived to have failed. Transparency International's most recent (2005) CPI places Kenya at 144th of 159 countries, with a score of 2.1, only slightly higher than 2002.

The Afrobarometer survey, carried out by the Institute for Development Studies of the University of Nairobi, was conducted between 6th and 28th September 2005. It involved face-to-face interviews with 1278 Kenyan men and women of voting age, selected through a scientific random sampling procedure in accordance with international polling standards. Interviews were conducted in all eight of the country's provinces, and 51 of its 72 districts. Citizens of each province are represented in the weighted sample in proportion to their share in the national population. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3%. This survey follows a similar one carried out by the Afrobarometer in August-September 2003.

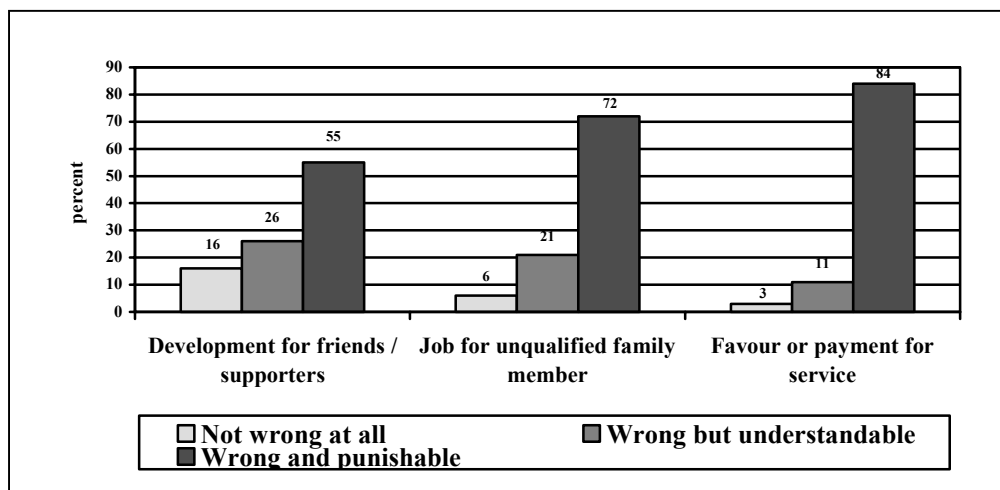
What is "Corrupt"?

It is sometimes argued that corruption is a cultural concept that has different meanings in different societies. Some contend that the international community may be defining as corruption actions that are normal cultural practices in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa (e.g., of "gift giving"). It is therefore useful to begin with a brief look at how our respondents define corrupt practices. We asked respondents about three different potential acts by government officials, and whether they considered the acts "not wrong at all," "wrong but understandable," or "wrong and punishable."

Kenyans are most willing to tolerate a public official who "decides to locate a development project in an area where his friends and supporters lived," with 16% saying they think such actions are permissible. But even in this case, a majority (55%) finds the act not just wrong, but punishable. Kenyans are even less accepting of a public official who "gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications": 72% consider this a punishable action. And fully 84% of all respondents think that an official who "demands a favour or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job" is violating his responsibility to the public. Clearly, traditional cultural practices, whether of gift giving or other varieties, do not, in the eyes of the public, entitle government officials to take advantage of them.

¹ See Transparency International, www.transparency.org.

Figure 1: What is Corrupt?

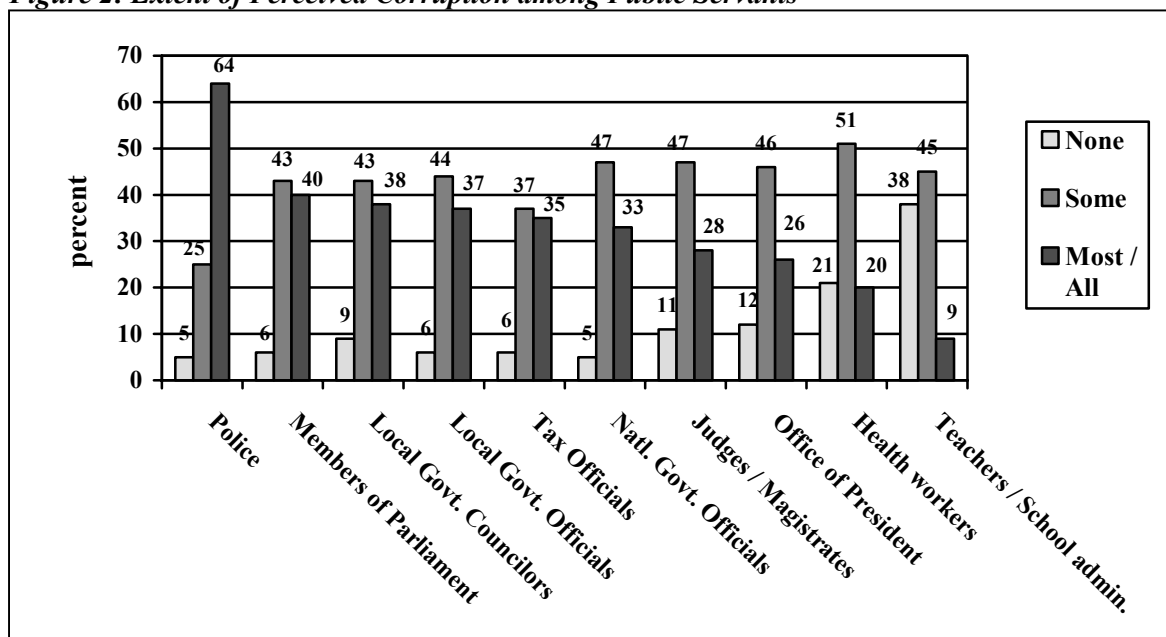


For each of the following, please indicate whether you think the act is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable: a) A public official decides to locate a development project in an area where his friends and supporters lived; b) A government official gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications; c) A government official demands a favour or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job. (%)

The Extent of Perceived Corruption

So just how much corruption do Kenyans think is going on around them? The answer turns out to be: quite a bit. When respondents were asked how many people from various sectors of the government and civil service they think are involved in corruption, across all 10 sectors only a minority – and in most cases, a tiny minority – responded that “none of them” were. Teachers and school administrators have by far the best reputation, with 38% of respondents saying none of them are corrupt, and a further 45% saying only “some of them” are. Just 9% say that “most” or “all” teachers and school officials are corrupt. Health workers also have a comparatively good reputation, with a total of 72% saying either than none (21%) or only some (51%) are corrupt. In sharp contrast, the police have far and away the worst reputation for corruption: nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) believe that most or all police are involved in corruption.

Figure 2: Extent of Perceived Corruption among Public Servants

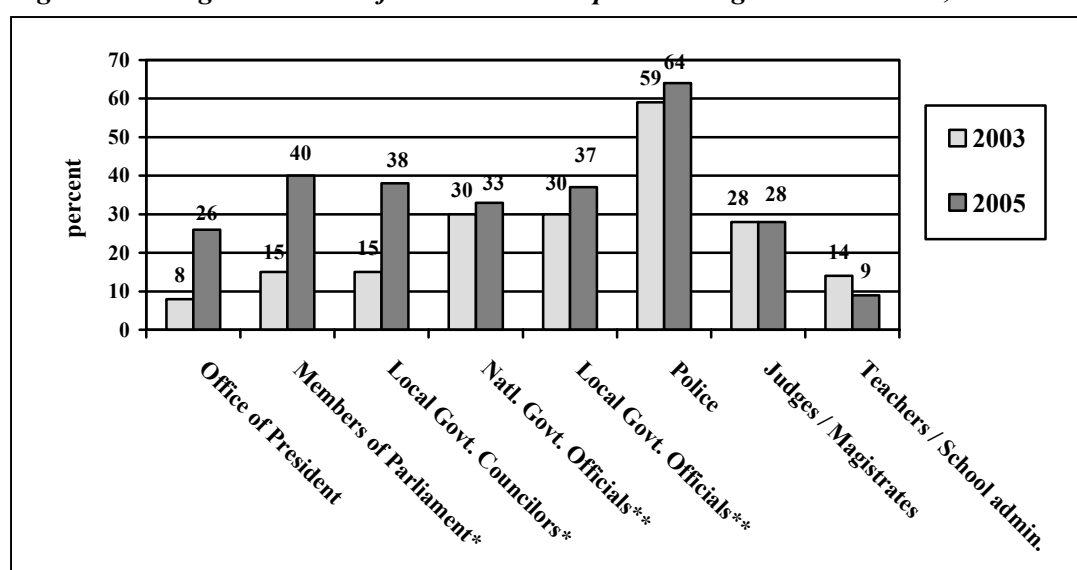


How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (%)

But of course, a key question with regard to corruption in Kenya today concerns the *trend*. Does the public believe that the government is indeed fulfilling its promise to conquer corruption, and that the situation is thus improving (i.e., corruption is on the decrease), or do they instead perceive that corruption has gone on unchecked, or perhaps even gotten worse?

A comparison of 2005 results with those from 2003 does not yield encouraging results for the government. Across six of eight sectors, the public reports higher levels of perceived corruption in 2005 than in 2003, and in some cases the difference is quite striking. For example, there has been more than a three-fold increase in the number reporting that most or all officials in the Office of the President are involved in corruption, from 8% in 2003 to 26% in 2005. Likewise, perceptions of the extent of bad behavior among MPs in 2005 (40%) are more than double those in 2003 (15%). Only among teachers and school administrators do we actually see a perception that corruption is declining. Perhaps by opening the schools to all, the government's free primary education policy has eliminated some opportunities for corrupt behavior among school officials.

Figure 3: Changes in Extent of Perceived Corruption among Public Servants, 2003-2005



(% "most" or "all of them" involved in corruption)

*In 2003, the question asked about "elected leaders, such as parliamentarians or local councilors," whereas these two groups were asked about separately in 2005.

**In 2003, the question asked about "government officials," whereas national and local government officials were asked about separately in 2005.

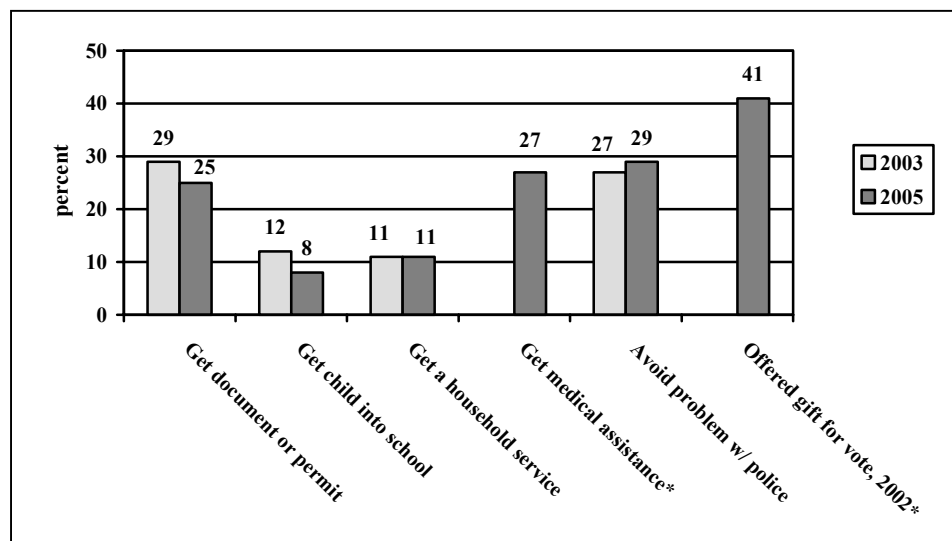
Finally, we also asked respondents about the flow of corruption in the opposite direction, i.e., from politicians to the public. When asked, "In your opinion, how often do politicians offer gifts to voters during election campaigns, an astonishing 94% respond that they believe this happens "often" or "always." Just 5% believe it "rarely" or "never" happens.

The Extent of Experienced Corruption

What underlies these perceptions of high levels of corruption, especially with respect to the police? Is it respondents' personal experiences with these individuals and institutions? Or are their views perhaps formed in response to other factors such as the extensive media coverage devoted to high-level corruption scandals in recent years?

We asked respondents about their own personal experiences of corrupt practices as they go about their daily lives. It turns out that Kenyans do in fact experience corruption firsthand on quite a regular basis. Roughly one in four had become victims of corruption within the past year in order to get a document or permit, and similar numbers fell prey as they sought medical assistance, or tried to avoid trouble with the police. All in all, 48% of all respondents report having to offer gifts, tips or bribes at least once within the past year to get government assistance, and 29% had to do so more than once.

Figure 4: Personal Experience of Corruption



“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: a) Get a document or permit; b) Get a child into school; c) Get a household service (like piped water, electricity or a phone); d) Get medicine or medical attention from a health worker; e) Avoid a problem with the police (like passing a checkpoint or avoiding a fine or arrest)? And during the 2002 election, how often (if ever) did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food or a gift, in return for your vote?” (% yes, i.e., “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often”)

*Question not asked in 2003.

Comparing these findings of actual experience of corruption to perceived levels of corruption discussed above, it is evident that Kenyans have ample experience of corruption on which to base their responses. If one out of four Kenyans finds himself forced to bribe or tip the police to avoid trouble every year, and we can assume that he or she shares this experience with friends and family, then it is little wonder that 64 percent view the police as a highly corrupt institution. The perhaps more surprising finding is that health workers receive one of the better (relatively speaking) evaluations in terms of perceived levels of corruption, despite the fact that Kenyans are almost as likely to find themselves forced to engage in bribery to protect their health as they are to avoid police problems. This suggests there is indeed more than just personal experience that is shaping public perceptions of various institutions. Nonetheless, Kenyans’ extensive personal experience of corruption certainly serves as the basis on which these negative perceptions are built.

It is also important to note, however, that there does not appear to be any clear trend, either upward or downward, in Kenyans’ personal experience of corruption. The government does not appear to have made significant strides in reducing the problem for the average Kenyan, but neither is the problem getting worse. This suggests that the sizeable negative trends in *perceived* corruption may have more to do with both the inevitable dwindling of the euphoria that initially greeted the NARC government, which possibly lead to inflated positive ratings (i.e., low perceived levels of corruption) during the 2003 survey, and with the public’s disappointment at the government’s failure to significantly improve the situation.

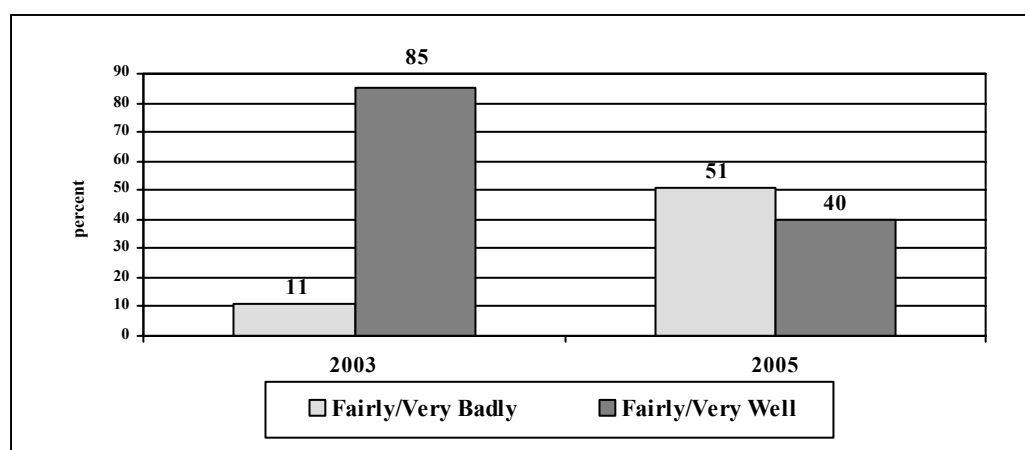
Kenyans’ actual experience of corruption may, however, be even higher than these figures suggest. A second set of questions about the quality of education and health services found 18% reporting that they had faced demands for illegal payments in public schools during the past 12 months (encompassing not just placements but all school-related requests, e.g., for passing marks, etc.), and fully one-in-three respondents (34%) report being asked for illegal payments in public clinics or hospitals during the same time period.

Kenyans’ assessments of the high incidence of vote-buying practices is also based on extensive personal experience. Fully 41% report being offered gifts or other incentives for their votes in the run-up to the 2002 national elections.

NARC's "War on Corruption": A Battle Lost?

We've seen that perceptions of corruption have in many cases worsened considerably, while actual personal experience of corruption has remained relatively steady. How are these trends reflected in the public's overall evaluation of the government's handling of the corruption issue? The answer is: not well at all. In fact, government ratings for handling of corruption have plummeted. In the euphoric days of 2003, when the public still held out high hopes that the government was truly set on tackling the corruption issue, fully 85% said that the government was handling the problem "fairly well" or "very well." By 2005, this extremely supportive public has transformed into a disillusioned one: a majority of 51% now say the government is handling the matter "fairly badly" or "very badly," compared to just 40% who still believe in the government's efforts – less than half the proportion of two years ago.

Figure 5: Government Handling of Corruption

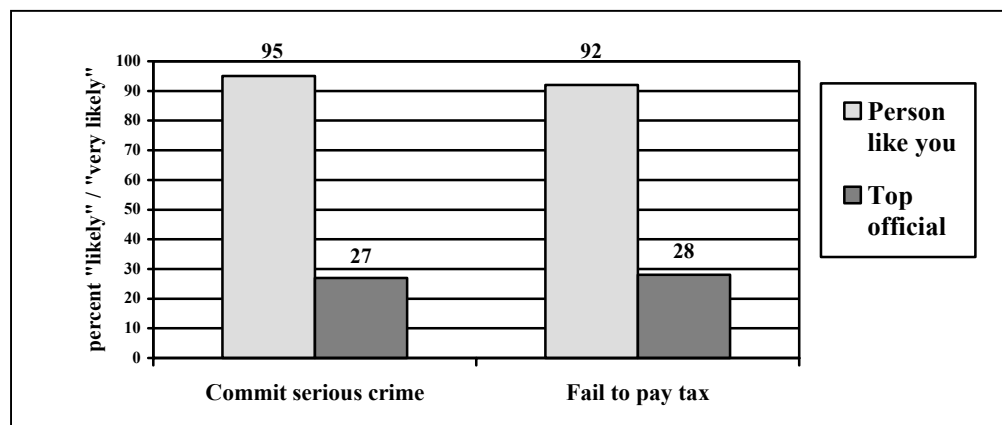


"How well or badly would you say the government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government." (%)

This dissatisfaction may be particularly strong because so much of the corruption that the public hears about in the media – in contrast to what they experience themselves in their daily lives – involves enormous sums of money and many of the country's leading politicians and civil servants. In fact, Kenyans believe that that government is far more likely to come after petty crime and corruption, while leaving the "big fish" among the political elite to continue their illicit behavior unchecked. While more than 90% believe that an ordinary person like themselves would be punished if they committed a serious crime or evaded tax payments, only one-quarter think it is likely that the government would punish a top government official for doing the same. Kenyans clearly perceive that a culture of impunity continues to exist among the country's leading political and government figures.

It is important, however, to keep all of this in perspective. While corruption is seen by many both inside and outside of Kenya as an important issue, perhaps *the* critical issue for the Kenyan government to address, the average Kenyan appears to have more pressing concerns. When asked what the most important problems are in the country that the government should address, just 4% of all responses (each respondent could give up to three answers) cite corruption as a leading concern. Among the public's priorities, corruption falls well behind a host of other economic and social issues, including unemployment, poverty, food supply, education, roads and infrastructure, water supply, health and crime. Of course, those who focus on corruption argue that extensive corruption is one of the main reasons the government does not make adequate progress in many of these other sectors, and this may well be true. But this nonetheless suggests that the government could hold the public's support if it succeeds in some of these other sectors, even if the war on corruption ultimately fails.

Figure 6: Likelihood of Punishment

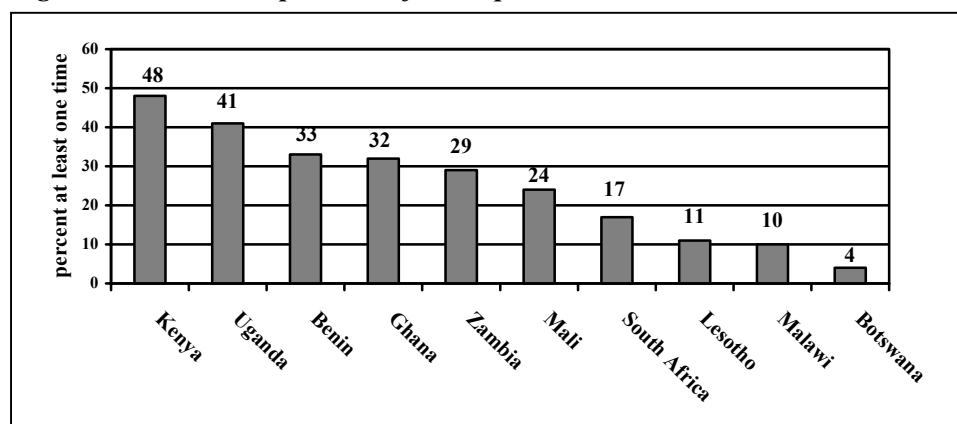


“How likely do you think it would be that the authorities could enforce the law if: a) a top government official committed a serious crime; b) a person like you committed a serious crime; c) a top official did not pay a tax on some of the income they earned; d) a person like you did not pay tax on some of the income they earned.” (% “likely” or “very likely”)

Kenya in Comparative Perspective

Finally, how do perceptions and experiences of corruption and the government’s handling of it in Kenya compare to other countries in Africa? We currently have data from recent Afrobarometer surveys in nine other countries. The most notable finding is that Kenyans experience far more corruption in their daily lives than respondents in any of the other countries. As mentioned, 48% of Kenyans have had to pay a bribe at least once in the past year to obtain basic government services, compared to a mean across the other nine countries of 22%.

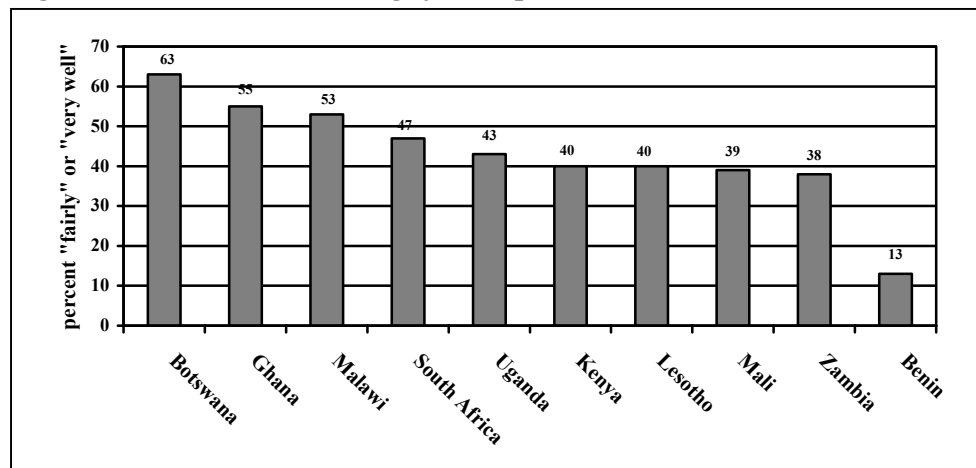
Figure 7: Personal Experience of Corruption, across Countries



(% who had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to government officials at least once in the past year to obtain services indicated in Figure 4)

In contrast, despite the very low levels of satisfaction with the government’s handling of the fight against corruption, which have plummeted so sharply since 2003, the ratings of the Kenyan government relative to others are not exceptional. In fact, they appear to exemplify the “norm.” While Botswana, and to a lesser extent, Ghana and Mali, stand out for having majorities that give their governments positive ratings, Kenya is very close to the 10-country average of 43% (“fairly” or “very well”). For the most part, governments of these African countries are not making great strides in the battle against corruption.

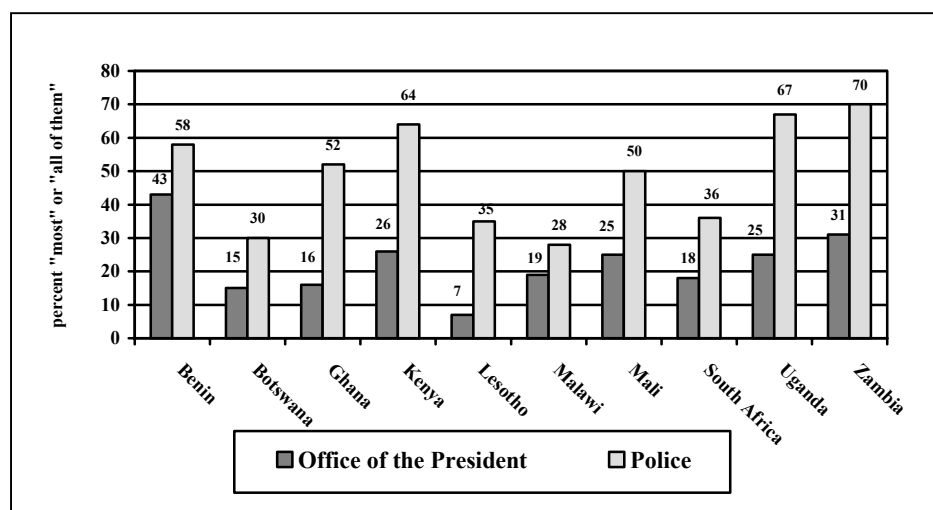
Figure 8: Government Handling of Corruption, across Countries



"How well or badly would you say the government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government." (% "fairly" or "very well")

Finally, comparing perceived corruption levels just for officials in the Office of the President, as well as police, we see that Kenyan police are indeed ranked among the worst (64% "most" or "all" corrupt), along with the forces in Uganda (67%) and Zambia (70%). The Office of the President, on the other hand, falls closer to the middle of the pack. Perceived levels of corruption (26% "most" or "all" involved) are only slightly above the 10-country mean of 23%.

Figure 9: Extent of Perceived Corruption among Public Servants, across Countries



"How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: a) The President and Officials in his office; b) The police?" (% "most" or "all of them")

Conclusions

Overall, the public perceives little or no progress in the government's purported efforts to tackle corruption. Despite some piecemeal improvements, for the most part they have witnessed a persistent culture of impunity for political elites and government officials, and they continue to face unprecedented levels of corruption in their daily lives. While this is not necessarily the public's highest priority problem, it is likely that this failure has nonetheless been seriously damaging to the government's standing. The high hopes of the transition era have largely been dashed, as the practice of corruption both petty and grand remains "business as usual" in Kenya.

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 18 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department for International Development (UK), the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org.