

Do South Africans feel we are winning the war against corruption?

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In a telephone study conducted by RS, South Africa's leading marketing insights company, in January 2005 amongst a sample of 500 SA adults in metropolitan areas and who had access to a landline telephone, attitudes and perceptions of adult South Africans towards issues around corruption were investigated.

In a second study conducted telephonically amongst a sample of 300 SA adults in metropolitan areas and who had access to a landline telephone over the period 17 to 19 June 2005, just after the Schabir Shaik trial verdict and the subsequent firing of Jacob Zuma by President Mbeki, RS looked to see how these events had affected people's attitudes to corruption.

Both studies were conducted for e-tv's "Judge for Yourself" discussion programme on Sunday nights, and is hosted by Judge Dennis Davis.

Attitudes to corruption in general have hardened

Attitudes to corruption have hardened in the last few months. In January 2005, RS found that 74% of those polled felt that corruption was becoming a way of life in South Africa. That figure has risen to 83%. Similarly, in January, the feeling that there is corruption in senior levels of Government was given by 79% - an already high figure. That has crept up to 86%.

- "Corruption has become a way of life in South Africa."
 - Agree - 83%
 - Blacks 81% (up from 69%)
 - Whites 87% (up from 74%)
 - Indians and coloureds 86% (up from 79%)
 - Disagree - 15%
 - Don't know - 1%
- "There is corruption in senior levels of Government."
 - Agree - 86% (blacks 82%, whites 90%, Indians and coloureds 90%)
 - Disagree - 8%
 - Don't know - 6%

Not surprisingly, almost everyone feels that this needs to be eliminated:

- "Corruption needs to be eliminated in Government."
 - Agree - 95%
 - Disagree - 4%
 - Don't know - 1%

The good news

The good news is that the President's handling of Jacob Zuma is felt to have sent a very positive message in this regard:

- "The release of Jacob Zuma sends a clear message on corruption to the rest of Government."
 - Agree - 86% (blacks 80%, whites 94%, Indians and coloureds 90%)
 - Disagree - 12%
 - Don't know - 3%
- "Firing Jacob Zuma has demonstrated President Mbeki's commitment to a transparent Government."
 - Agree - 83% (blacks 77%, whites 93%, Indians and coloureds 87%)
 - Disagree - 11%
 - Don't know - 6%

To go even further, the President's approval rating has shot up to a remarkable degree in the last few months, some of which must be attributable to his handling of the former Deputy President. We found that, in January, his approval rating was 48% (amongst a sample of 659 adults who had access to a landline telephone in metropolitan areas). The study RS conducted just five days after he fired Jacob Zuma, gave the President an incredible approval rating of 83%, and this is universal across all races:

- Blacks - 83% (up from 72%)
- Whites - 79% (up from 29%)
- Coloureds and Indians - 84% (up from 41%)

Only 4% gave a "don't know" response (compared with 13% in January) with 13% feeling that the President is not doing a good job. This is a truly remarkable improvement, also showing that many people previously sitting on the fence now approve of the way the President is doing his job.

Bribery in the system

Similarly, there is a widespread view that many police officers take bribes - and this view has strengthened since January:

- "Many police officers take bribes."
 - Agree - 85% (up from 75% in January)
 - Blacks 89% (up from 85%)
 - Whites 76% (up from 65%)
 - Indians and coloureds 86% (up from 74%)
 - Disagree - 8%
 - Don't know - 7%

Bribery of justice officials is felt to be a problem by a very worrying three-quarters of people interviewed, and especially whites:

- "It is easy for criminals to bribe justice officials."
 - Agree - 73% (blacks 68%, whites 83%, coloureds 78%, Indians 84%)

- Disagree - 14%
- Don't know - 13%

Some positives

Whilst there are serious concerns about these issues, there is some reason for hope. In January, RS found that the rest of Africa was felt to be worse:

- "Corruption is not as bad as elsewhere in Africa"
 - Agree - 47%
 - Disagree - 34%
 - Don't know - 20%

This suggests that we are not as bad as the rest of Africa - but, given the already serious concerns raised about corruption here, this may be more a statement about how bad the rest of Africa is rather than that we are better.

The role of the media is seen to be even more necessary

In January, 67% of people we polled felt that the media exposes most corruption. Now, that figure has risen to 74%.

- "The media exposes most corruption"
 - Agree - 74% (blacks 76%, whites 65%, Indians and coloureds 78%)
 - Disagree - 22%
 - Don't know - 4%

The role of the media is clearly a central one. It is also clear that the people interviewed, whilst being very positive about the role of the media, feel that the media must be ever vigilant.

The arms deal - where to now?

There is a strong view that the arms deal has been tainted by corruption:

- "There was no corruption in the arms deal."
 - Agree - 18% (no differences between race groups)
 - Disagree - 65%
 - Don't know - 18%

This view is consistent across all demographic groups. Hence, in line with Patricia de Lille's call for the investigation into the arms deal to continue, a considerable majority of people agree:

- "The investigation into the arms deal needs to be re-opened."
 - Agree - 72% (no differences by race group)
 - Disagree - 19%
 - Don't know - 8%

And when we asked if the firing of Jacob Zuma made a difference, the feeling strengthened:

- "Even though Jacob Zuma has been fired, the arms deal still needs further investigation."
 - Agree - 85% (blacks 80%, whites 90%, Indians and coloureds 94%)
 - Disagree - 10%
 - Don't know - 4%

It is quite clear that people feel that others are implicated in corruption in this deal and that they, too, need to be found and tried.

Summary

People's attitudes to corruption and the need to eliminate it have hardened since January. President Mbeki's firing of Jacob Zuma is felt to have sent a very positive message here, to the extent that his approval rating has risen to a remarkable degree.

Whilst the situation is not as bad as in the rest of Africa, there is clearly a serious concern over corruption in general in South Africa, and in government, the police force and the justice system in particular. The perception that people feel it is becoming a way of life and that it is a growing problem are clearly very worrying perceptions.

The resignation of five ANC MPs over the Travelgate affair, along with the comments made by the ANC's Chief Whip, Mbulelo Goniwe, about rooting out corruption, can only help the positive message the President has already sent out.

The investigative role of the media has grown in importance.

It seems that the Schabir Shaik outcome, the "Zuma affair" and the Travelgate saga have put corruption centre stage in South Africa.

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