

# Politicians seen as corrupt and largely above the law



IT'S MY HOUSE

President Jacob Zuma's private homestead, Nkandla was upgraded with public money

A string of surveys reflect a deep disillusionment with government officials, writes the Institute of Security Studies' **Gareth Newham**

AS THE world remembers Nelson Mandela's death, the fact that he was a man of principle is a clear element of his success as a leader and overall greatness. He understood the vital importance of the constitutional principles of accountability and the rule of law.

It is therefore saddening to see how far some in the ruling elite have strayed from the example set by this great man.

An important barometer of the extent of this problem is growing public sector corruption, whereby public funds are being diverted away from the public good towards private interests.

Of course private sector corruption is also a problem, but until we get a handle on corruption in government, private sector corruption will flourish.

South Africans certainly think that public sector corruption is getting worse. Transparency International's 2013 global Corruption Perception Index shows that South Africa has dropped 34 places since 2001, with half the decline of 17 places occurring since 2009.

South Africa is currently ranked at number 72 out of 175 countries and heading downwards.

The Human Sciences Research Council's annual South African Social Attitudes Survey shows the proportion of people who think that tackling corruption should be a national priority almost doubling, from 14 percent to 26 percent in the five-year period

between 2006 and 2011.

This trend is supported by the latest 2013 Afrobarometer report, "Governments falter in fight to curb corruption", released in November. The report, based on surveys of 51 000 people in 34 African countries, shows that South Africa is one of the countries where there is a notable increase in public perceptions that corruption is getting worse, particularly since 2008.

This is in contrast with countries such as Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal and Zambia, where people believe that their governments

are making gains in curbing public sector corruption.

Interestingly, South Africa is better placed than many other African countries to tackle this problem.

There are 13 public sector agencies that have a particular legal or policy role to play in fighting graft.

Moreover, a number of national mechanisms – such as the National Anti-Corruption Task Team – have been established to co-ordinate the functions of these agencies.

South Africa has also dedicated policies, standards and legislation specifically designed to enable the state to tackle corruption through both criminal and civil action.

The question then becomes why, with all these resources available to tackle corruption, do South Africans perceive the government to be failing in this regard.

For example, Afrobarometer has

found that on average a little over half (56 percent) of people on the African continent thought that their governments were doing a poor job in "their efforts to fight corruption". However, South Africa performed notably worse than the average, with two out of three citizens (66 percent) believing the government to be performing poorly in fighting graft.

Importantly, these opinions are not held because South Africans are regularly confronted with public sector corruption. In fact, the 2013 Afrobarometer report shows that South Africa was ranked fifth lowest among African countries when it came to citizens having direct experiences of paying a bribe for public services.

Only 15 percent of South Africans said they had paid a bribe in the previous year compared with an average of 30 percent of Africans who had paid a bribe. The worst performer was Sierra Leone, where 63 percent said they had paid a bribe. So why do South Africans have such negative perceptions of corruption?

Arguably, it is because the public are aware that politicians and public officials divert public funds away from service delivery into

their back pockets.

In 2011 the former head of the Special Investigating Unit, Willie Hofmeyr, reported before Parliament that between R25 billion and R30bn was lost to the government procurement budget each year due to this type of fraud. There is evidence that the heart of the problem lies in the lack of accountability for maladministration and corruption.

Corruption Watch states that this problem starts with the president – while there are various efforts by the government to tackle corruption, "these actions were countered by the continuing impunity on the part of those who were politically and financially powerful".

In particular, it was explained that the "Gupta wedding saga and on-going fiasco surrounding the president's private Nkandla residence are indicators in the past year of impunity in operation".

Little symbolises the nature of our public sector corruption challenge better than the scandal of R215 million of public money being diverted away from the public good to upgrade Jacob Zuma's private homestead. It is therefore not surprising that research data supports the argument that corruption committed by politicians and government officials is driving negative public perceptions of corruption in South Africa.

According to the 2013 Afrobarometer Survey, perceptions of the office of the president being corrupt more than doubled, from a low of 13 percent in 2002 to

35 percent in 2011.

Zuma is not solely responsible for all corruption in the public sector, but he certainly has stymied any progress that could have been made in this regard. He has repeatedly appointed people of low ethical standards to key positions in cabinet and the criminal justice system. As a result, citizens are less trusting of their national leaders.

This can partly be explained by the sad reality that some in the ruling elite have jettisoned principle for political power. In order to truly honour Mandela, it is now up to those men and women of principle

in the ANC to step forward and start taking to task those who besmirch his proud legacy.

There is no moral justification for the spending

on Nkandla and the unethical behaviour of some of our cabinet ministers. Rather than trying to justify the indefensible or attacking important institutions such as the Public Protector, the ANC now needs to be at the forefront of holding its leaders to account for corruption and maladministration.

Failing to do so will not only undermine Mandela's proud legacy, but will further damage South Africa's prospects of solving its most pressing problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

● Gareth Newham is the head of the Governance, Crime and Justice Division at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria. This article first appeared in ISS Today, the ISS's weekly online newsletter.

66%

The percentage of South Africans who believe the government to be performing poorly in combating graft

10.8%

The decrease in citizens' confidence in national government since 2012



THE GUPTA SAGA AND NKANDLA ARE INDICATORS IN THE PAST YEAR OF IMPUNITY IN OPERATION

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