Politicians seen as corrupt and largely above the law

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

SOUTH AFRICA is currently ranked 72nd out of 175 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, released in November. The report, based on surveys of 1,000 people in each country, shows that public sector corruption is getting worse, particularly since 2009. 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 is 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 deliberated policies, standards and legislation specifically designed to enable the state to tackle corruption through both criminal and civil action. However, when asked who can be held responsible, 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 2011 Afrobarometer report shows that South Africa was ranked fifth lowest among African countries when it comes 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 in this regard was Mozambique, 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 R30 billion 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.

Curruption 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 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 no surprise 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 principles for political power. In order to truly implement Mandela’s legacy, it is now up to those men and women of principle in the ANC to step forward and start taking those to whom he ascribed his proud legacy.

The Cape Argus has committed itself to The Press Code of Professional Practice, which prescribes that news must be reported in a truthful, accurate, fair and balanced manner. If we don’t live up to the Press Code, please contact The Press Ombudman, 2nd Floor, 7 St David’s Park, St David’s Place, Parktown, 2193 or PO Box 47221, Parklands 2121, or e-mail pressombudsmann@ombudsmann.org.za or telephone 011 484 3612/3.