

Role of citizen: Mauritians value national identity but limit civic engagement

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 197 | Louis Amedee Darga

Summary

The Constitution of Mauritius grants citizens certain fundamental rights, including the right to be free and protected by the law, freedom of conscience, freedom of association, freedom of movement and of opinion, freedom to express themselves, freedom of religious belief, and the right to private property (Constitution of Mauritius, 1968).

With the exception of a five-year state of emergency in the 1970s, Mauritius has been a democracy since independence. While the rights to public protests and to worker strikes are framed by regulatory instruments, Mauritians have enjoyed a wide degree of freedom to associate, to express themselves, and to engage in civic action as they wish.

However, Mauritius' public space has long been marked by two elements that may affect whether Mauritians claim their rights and responsibilities as citizens to the fullest extent. One is a strong tradition of clientelism and patronage (Darga, 1998) in terms of public-sector employment, promotion, licensing, and contracting, which can make Mauritians wary of expressing themselves freely. The other is a pervasive awareness of ethnicity in political competition.

How do Mauritians see their role as citizens? According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, Mauritians express a strong sense of national identity but are unlikely to participate in political and civic activities, and most do not feel completely free to say what they think.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Mauritians in October 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Mauritius in 2012 and 2014.

Key findings

- Nearly nine out of 10 Mauritians say their national identity is at least as important to them as their ethnic-group identity.
- But most Mauritians do not engage in civic and political activities, such as taking an active role in religious or community groups, attending community meetings, joining

with others to raise an issue, contacting elected officials, or participating in election campaigns.

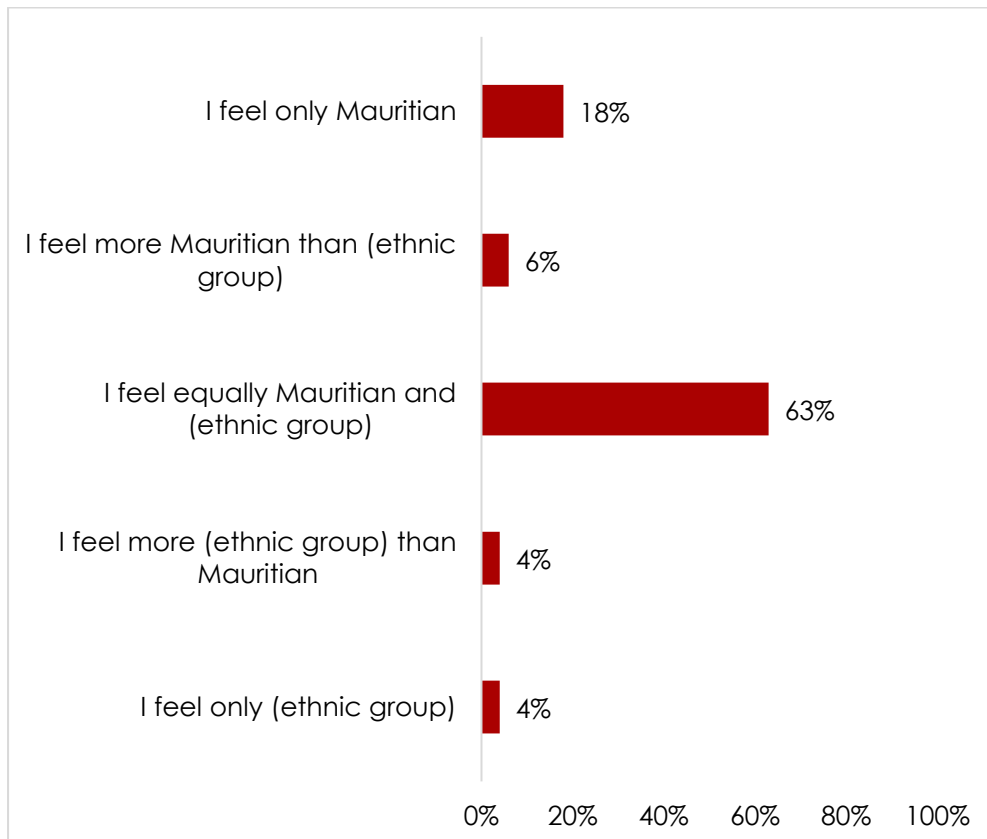
- More than seven in 10 respondents say people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (71%) – a sharp increase from 57% in 2014 – as well as which political organizations they join (71%) and how they vote (73%).
- About three in 10 Mauritians say freedom of speech and press freedom have declined compared to a few years ago.

Ethnic or national identity?

For almost nine out of 10 Mauritians, their national identity is at least as strong as their ethnic identity. Almost two-thirds (63%) say they “feel equally Mauritian and (a member of their ethnic group)”; in addition, 18% say they “feel only Mauritian,” and 6% say they “feel more Mauritian” than ethnic (Figure 1). Only one in 10 say they feel only (4%) or more (4%) a member of their ethnic group.

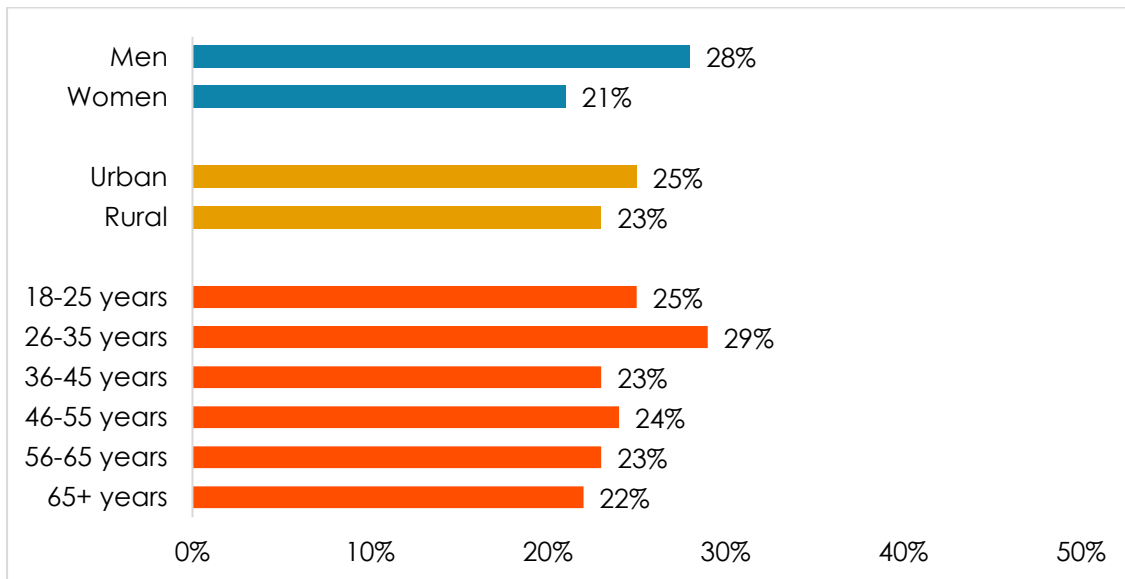
Looking at those for whom their national identity outweighs their ethnic identity, men (28%) are more likely than women (21%) to say they feel “only Mauritian” or “more Mauritian than (ethnic group)” (Figure 2). Young adults are slightly more likely to feel this way (29% among those aged 26-35) than other age groups.

Figure 1: Ethnic or national identity? | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Mauritian and being a _____ [respondent’s ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Figure 2: Feel only or more Mauritian | by gender, residency location, and age group | Mauritius | 2017



(Figure shows % who say they “feel more Mauritian” or “feel only Mauritian”)

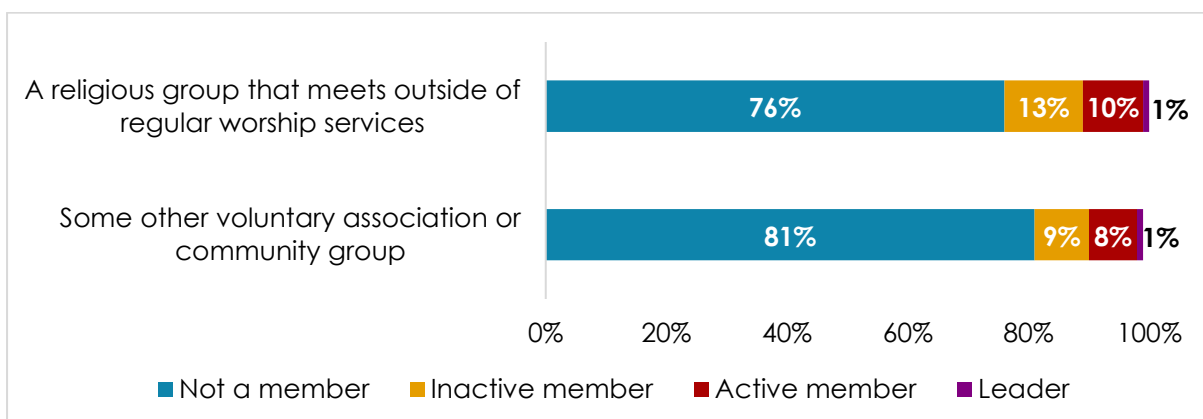
Participation in civic and political activities

Religious and community organizations

Most Mauritians are not active in religious or community groups. Only two in 10 citizens are active members or leaders of religious groups that meet outside of regular worship services (11%) or other voluntary associations or community groups (9%) (Figure 3).

Men are twice as likely as women to be part of religious groups (15% vs. 7%) (Figure 4). Religious groups are somewhat more popular among older citizens than other kinds of associations or community groups.

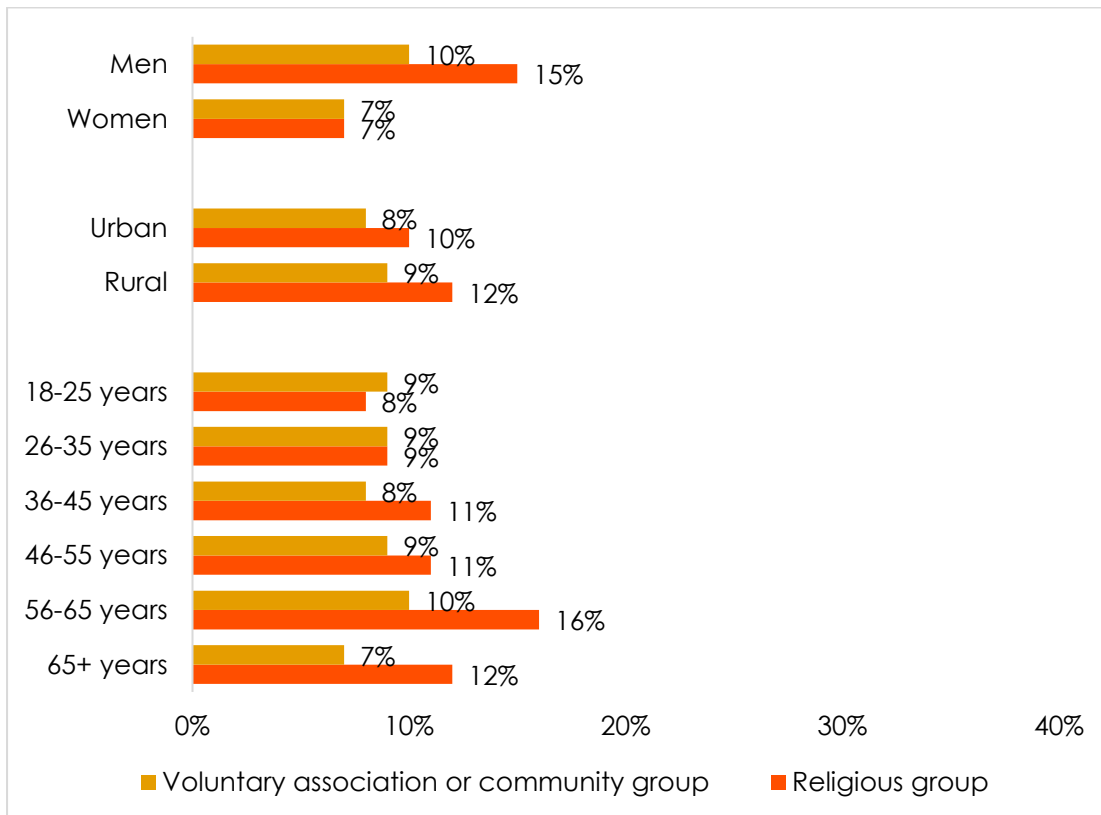
Figure 3: Participation in civil-society organizations | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member?

- A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services?
- Some other voluntary association or community group?

Figure 4: Participation in civil-society organizations | by gender, residency location, and age | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member? (% who say "active member" or "official leader")

Civic actions

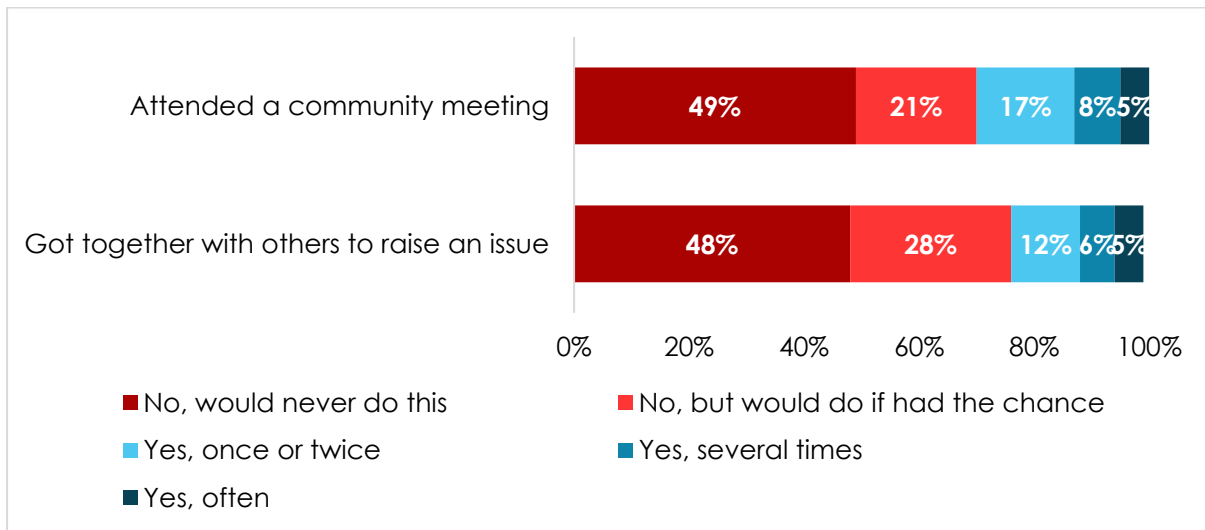
Most Mauritians did not attend a community meeting or get together with others to raise an issue during the year preceding the survey (Figure 5). In fact, almost half (49% and 48%, respectively) say they would never do so, while 21% and 28%, respectively, say they would do so if they had the chance. Only 30% say they attended at least one community meeting during the preceding year, while 24% say they got together with others at least once to raise an issue.¹

Men are more likely than women to attend community meetings (36% vs. 24%) and to get together with others to raise an issue (28% vs. 20%) (Figure 6). Likewise, rural residents are more active than urbanites when it comes to attending community meetings (35% vs. 23%) and joining others to raise an issue (27% vs. 20%).

One-third (35%) of respondents aged 56-65 say they attended a community meeting during the previous year – more than any other age group. Citizens with no formal education are least likely to attend a community meeting (13%) or get together with others to raise an issue (6%).

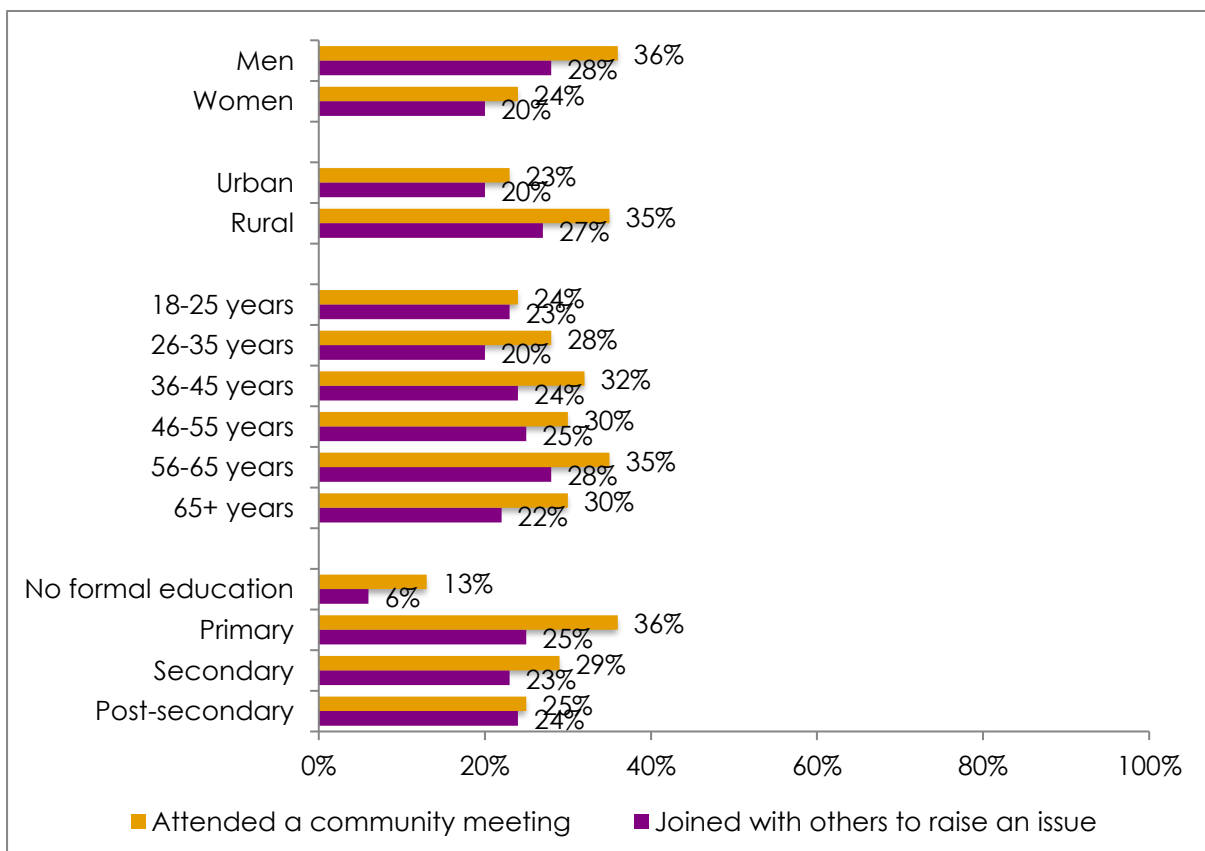
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of component categories.

Figure 5: Civic actions | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Figure 6: Civic actions | by gender, residency location, age, and education level | Mauritius | 2017

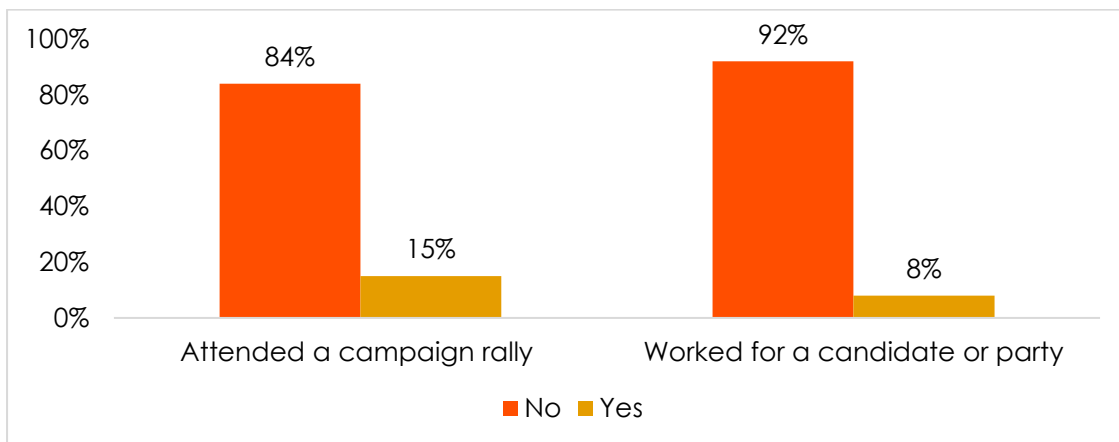


Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Participation in election campaigns

Only small minorities of Mauritians say they attended a campaign rally (15%) or worked for a candidate or party (8%) during the last national elections in 2014 (Figure 7). But 76% say they voted in the 2014 elections.

Figure 7: Participation in 2014 national elections | Mauritius | 2017

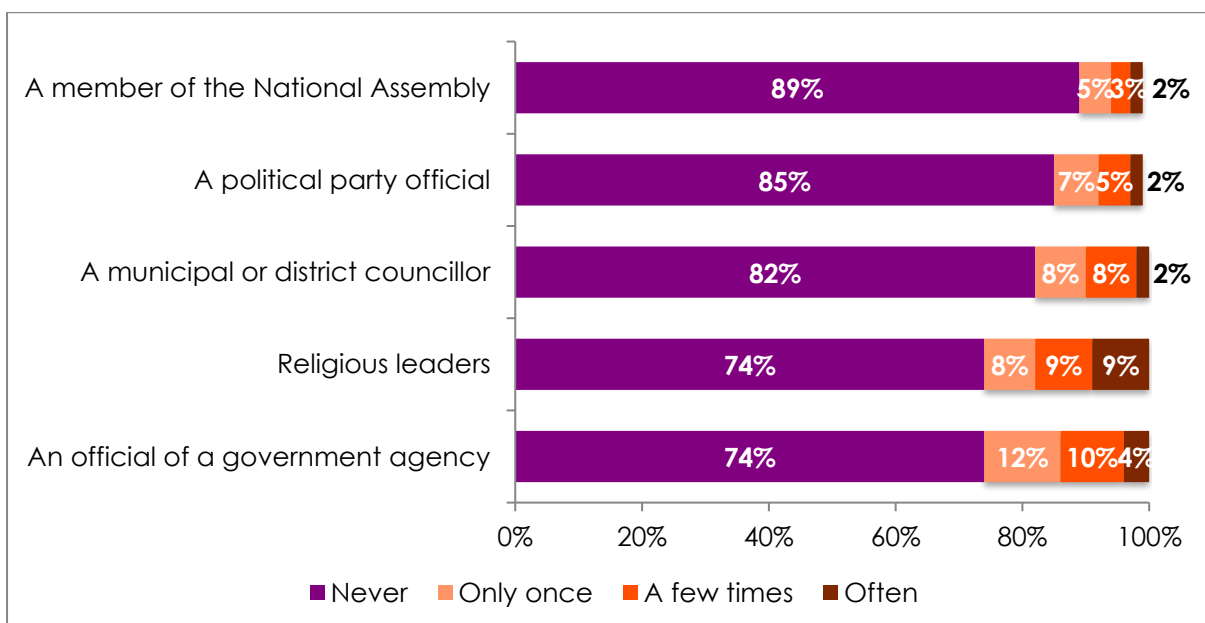


Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in 2014, did you: Attend a campaign rally? Work for a candidate or party?

Contact with officials to discuss problems

About one in four Mauritians say they contacted an official of a government agency (26%) or a religious leader (26%) during the previous year to discuss an important problem or give them their views (Figure 8). Fewer contacted a municipal or district councillor (18%), a political party official (15%), or a member of the National Assembly (11%) about a problem or to share their opinions.

Figure 8: Contact with officials | Mauritius | 2017



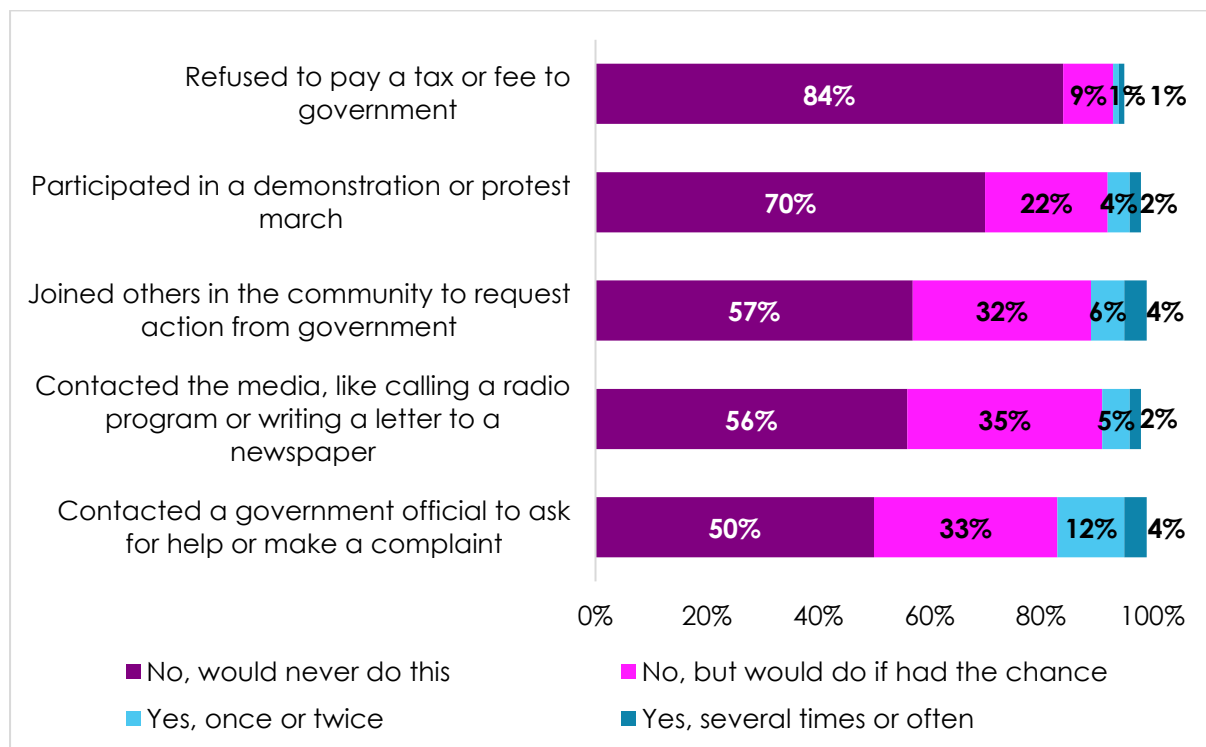
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

Actions when dissatisfied with government performance

A majority of Mauritians say they “would never” engage in certain lawful citizen actions to express dissatisfaction with the government’s performance (Figure 9). About one in six (16%) say they contacted a government official during the previous year to ask for help or make a complaint, and one in 10 or fewer say they joined others in the community to request action from the government (10%); contacted the media, such as calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper (8%); participated in a demonstration or protest march (6%); or refused to pay a tax or fee to the government (3%) to voice their displeasure.

Figure 9: Actions to express dissatisfaction with government performance

| Mauritius | 2017



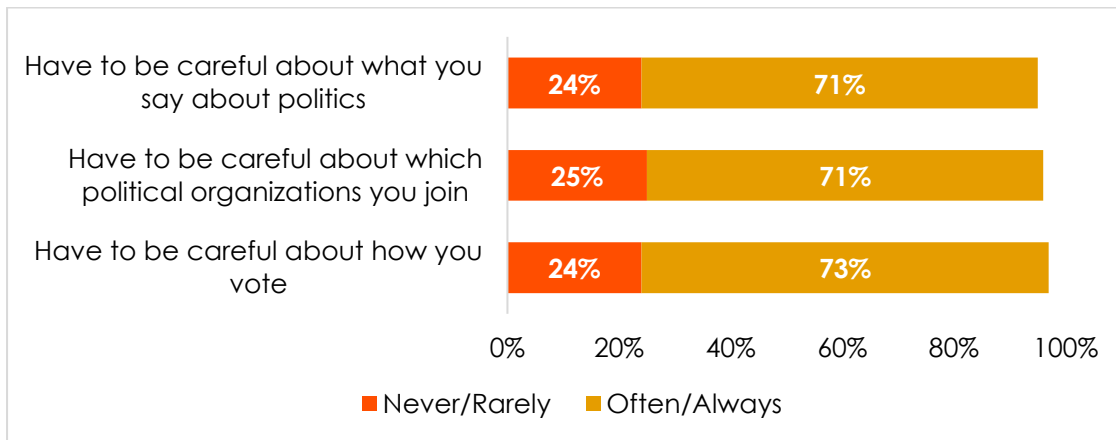
Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Caution regarding political involvement

If most Mauritians do not engage in civic and political activities, one reason may be a widespread feeling that political rights are constrained. Almost three-fourths (71%) of respondents say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics – a 14-percentage-point increase from 2014. Seven in 10 respondents also say that people must “often” or “always” be careful about which political organizations they join (71%) and how they vote (73%) (Figure 10).

Caution regarding joining political organizations is most common among young respondents (aged 18-25 years) and increases with education level, ranging from 59% among those with no formal education to more than 70% among those with at least a secondary education (Figure 11). For more on Mauritians’ perceptions of their democracy, please see Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 185.)

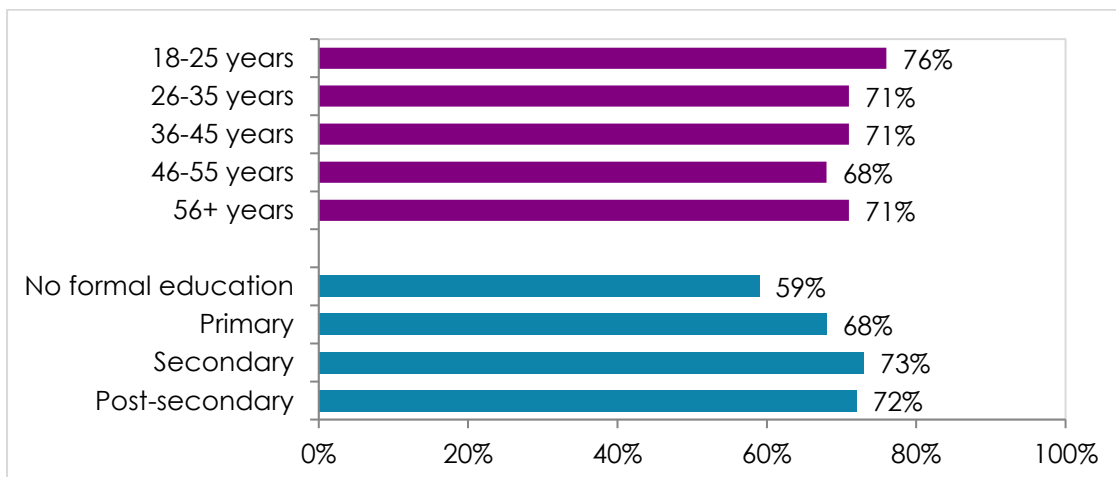
Figure 10: Political involvement | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to:

- Be careful of what they say about politics?
- Be careful about which political organizations they join?
- Be careful about how they vote in an election?

Figure 11: People have to be careful about which political organizations they join | by age and education | Mauritius | 2017



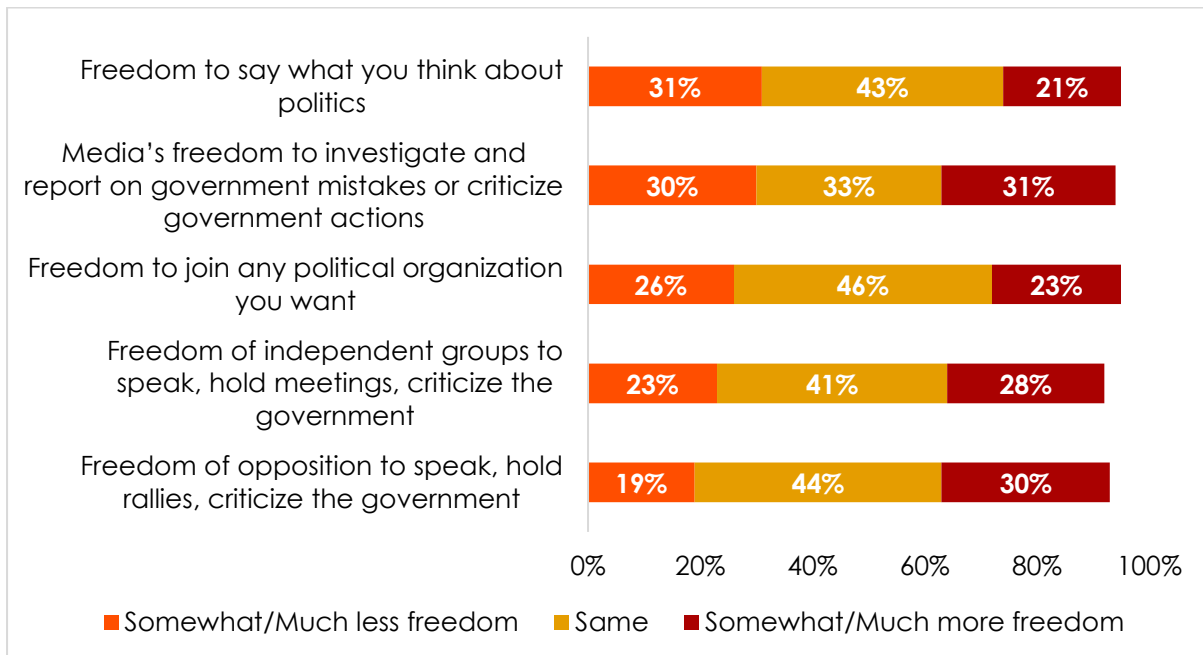
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful about which political organizations they join? (% who say "often" or "always")

Moreover, sizeable minorities of Mauritians say their political freedoms have eroded over the past few years. About three in 10 (31%) say citizens now have "somewhat less" or "much less" freedom to say what they think about politics, while 21% say they have "somewhat more" or "much more" freedom and 43% believe little has changed (Figure 12).

Mauritians are evenly divided in their view of press freedom: Three in 10 (30%) say the media has less freedom than a few years ago to investigate and criticize government actions, while about the same proportions believe that media freedom has increased (31%) or stayed the same (33%).

Views on the evolution of other political rights are similarly divided, including the freedom to join any political organization (26% somewhat/much less) and the space for independent organizations and opposition parties to speak, hold meetings, and advocate their views (23% and 19%, respectively, somewhat/much less).

Figure 12: Trends in political freedoms | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

- Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?
- Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?
- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

Conclusion

While Mauritians value their national identity, most do not fully assume their role as citizens by engaging in civic and political activities. Women, urban residents, and those without formal education are less likely than men, rural residents, and the better-educated to participate in civic activities such as attending community meetings and joining with others to raise an issue. Moreover, most Mauritians say they have to be careful about voicing their political opinions and joining political organizations.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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