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CPI 2022 FOR ASIA PACIFIC: BASIC FREEDOMS RESTRICTED AS ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS NEGLECTED

Asia Pacific continues to stagnate on the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) at an average of 45 points out of 100 for the fourth year in a row.

Several Asian countries were shown to be making headway in their fight against petty corruption in the last [Global Corruption Barometer in 2021](#), but grand corruption remains common, and the overall situation has barely improved.

A number of important diplomatic summits held in the region in 2022 produced differing results: Asian leaders persisted in allowing anti-corruption commitments to fall on the back burner, while Pacific governments refocused and recentred their efforts to combat it. Yet across Asia Pacific, states maintain restrictions on civic space and basic freedoms imposed during the pandemic, as leaders continue down the path toward authoritarianism.

New Zealand (CPI score: 87), **Singapore** (83), **Hong Kong** (76) and **Australia** (75) continue to lead the region, but there are some worrying signs. New Zealand once led the world, but its progress is now stagnant while other countries around it improve. **Afghanistan** (24), **Cambodia** (24), **Myanmar** (23) and **North Korea** (17) score lowest.

Lots of talk with few results

In major population centres in the region, CPI scores drop and corruption thrives as politicians make empty promises to combat it.

Malaysia's (47) statistically significant decline is indicative of its ongoing struggle with grand corruption. The 1MDB scandal – first uncovered in 2016 – is considered one of the largest exposés of corruption in the world, implicating banks, celebrities and institutions across six countries. In 2022, [former Prime Minister Najib Razak was sent to jail](#) for his involvement. Yet this doesn't even cover the full extent of corruption at the highest level in the country: in December the Anti-Corruption Commission opened a new investigation into a different prime minister who allegedly [misappropriated over US\\$136 billion](#) in government funds during his term. The current prime minister promised to clean up after ongoing scandals, but as part of efforts to stabilise his unity government appointed a deputy prime minister with [a number of serious corruption allegations](#) against him, potentially inviting new corruption risks.

In 2022 **Mongolia** reached a historic low of 33. Last year the country took some promising first steps towards rebuilding the country's anti-corruption framework, but not enough has been done to combat ongoing corruption risks. In the resource-rich country, a lack of regulation of the raw materials industry is particularly devastating. Government officials have been working for their own personal gains above the public interest, [prompting](#) protests in the capital. The government must take a number of steps to improve the situation, including revising procurement laws, removing corrupt officials from public offices, standardising

governance of state-owned enterprises and improve transparency at every level to stop state-appointed representatives from acting with utter impunity.

Pakistan too has continued its statistically significant downward trend, this year hitting its lowest score since 2012 at just 27 points amidst ongoing political turmoil. Prime Minister Imran Khan came to power promising to tackle rampant corruption and promote social and economic reforms, but little has been accomplished on any of these fronts since he took the reins in 2018. After he was ousted in a no confidence vote this April, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) [disqualified him from running for office](#) for another five years and filed a plea in session court for criminal proceedings over allegations he failed to declare gifts and profits he made from selling them during his tenure. Khan has begun a separate court case against the ECP, challenging the [ECP's jurisdiction over candidate qualification](#). While awaiting the verdicts from these two cases, it's most important that the new government does not allow such political scandals to derail comprehensive anti-corruption efforts. It's time for concrete action with a holistic and effective anti-corruption plan that addresses illicit financial flows and introduces safeguards for civic space.

Executives wresting control

In recent years, democracy has been declining in the region, including in some of the most populous countries in the world, such as **India** (40), the **Philippines** (33) and **Bangladesh** (25). Regimes are consolidating power by curtailing space for dissent with more draconian laws that restrict free speech or criticisms of the government – and face no accountability for jailing those who allegedly defy them.

India is considered the largest democracy in the world and holds steady on the CPI, but the government continues to consolidate power and limit the public's ability to respond. In 2011, protestors sparked important anti-corruption reforms with the Anna Hazare and supporters uprising, but now more and more severe restrictions are blocking peaceful protest. This year brought [more detentions of human rights defenders and journalists](#) under the repressive Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Even more disturbingly, [the government has been bulldozing the homes](#) of activists in Muslim communities.

The [United Nations sent envoys](#) to **Bangladesh** and **Cambodia** in 2022 to assess the deteriorating human rights situations. Laws such as the 2018 Bangladesh Digital Security Act (DSA) and 2015 Cambodia Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) have allowed hundreds to be jailed for exercising free speech and expressing dissent. Journalists and human rights defenders have been particularly at risk, with governments attempting to intimidate any critics. With forthcoming elections for both in 2023, governments must reverse these trends and ensure the people can make their voices heard.

In the **Solomon Islands** (42), the government has gone so far as to delay elections scheduled for 2023. [Civil unrest broke out in late 2021](#) as public suspicions and resentment over growing ties with China at the expense of national interests boiled over. This year, in an attempt to further wrest control, the government began to [require approval of all stories on the national broadcaster](#).

Myanmar dropped five points this year to 23, a worrying sign as the military remains firmly entrenched in power after its 2021 coup. As elsewhere in the region, the governing powers are holding onto power by closely monitoring activists and dissenters with laws they implemented criminalising any actions seen as countering the government. They also heavily censor information released to the public, allowing people access to [just 1,200 government-approved websites](#) with its “golden firewall”.

Country to watch: Sri Lanka

While anti-government protests were not uncommon in Sri Lanka before 2022, they gathered significant momentum last year because of the country’s ever-worsening economic situation.

Sri Lanka (36) took out [massive international loans to finance its economic growth](#) for decades, including infrastructure development projects. This worked at first, but mismanagement and rampant corruption, combined with a sharp decline in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, finally sent the country’s economy into a complete meltdown.

With inflation skyrocketing, the island nation has been unable to import sufficient food, fuel or medicine for its 22 million citizens, plunging them into the worst crisis the country has seen in decades. Recognising the link between their situation and the pervasive corruption among the country’s leadership, protesters demanded reforms and refused to leave the streets despite brutal police crackdowns.

Our chapter in Sri Lanka, together with other civil society organizations, kept up the pressure on the government to heed the call of the people and [enact](#) genuine anti-corruption reforms. Seeking accountability from those responsible for state bankruptcy, Transparency International Sri Lanka also filed a [petition](#) with the Supreme Court and obtained a travel ban against the former president, prime minister, finance minister, central bank governor and two others.

While the country remains in crisis with no resolution of the widespread unrest in 2022, civil society and activists continue working to demand better legislative frameworks, governance standards, transparency and accountability for the people of Sri Lanka.

Elections bring some cause for optimism in the Pacific

As many countries held elections across the Pacific, corruption held an important place in rhetoric, and many voted to hold governments accountable.

Fiji (53) offers some hope for the future, despite the warning sign of a two point drop this year. In 2022, the government began attacks on the free press, threatening to fine or even imprison journalists for publishing material “contrary to the public or national interest”. A new election law also gave supervisors extraordinary powers and limited free speech. However, the December elections [produced a new coalition government](#), ending the 16-year rule of previous coup leader Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. The new prime minister and government have already begun to implement a 100-day plan that includes provisions to protect media freedom and whistleblowing.

Unfortunately, this trend did not hold for the entire region. Despite a history of electoral strife, **Papua New Guinea's** (30) 2022 election is being called the country's [worst ever](#). TI Papua New Guinea's [report](#) found numerous irregularities, with out-of-date election rolls, stolen ballot boxes and even bouts of violence. None of this bodes well for democratic development in PNG and may directly affect its future CPI score.

Vanuatu (48) however, was also a bright spot this year. The people are becoming more aware of corruption as an issue, as civil society organisations form coalitions to hold government accountable. In an important win, the government committed to establishing an anti-corruption commission in late 2021. Yet the country continues to grapple with political instability, with [snap elections held this year](#) after the prospect of a no-confidence vote triggered the president to call elections in August.

After years of decline, **Australia** has finally stopped this trend and is undertaking key actions to combat corruption. In May, the Australian people elected a new government and record numbers of pro-integrity members of parliament, which have already begun taking important steps, [passing legislation for a new Anti-Corruption Commission](#) late last year. The new government still have their work cut out for them, and while early commitments to protect whistleblowers and establish a beneficial ownership register are important, more are needed to combat money laundering and corruption.

Looking forward

Despite the difficulties facing the region, there are many opportunities in 2023 for governments to recommit to fighting corruption. Elections in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and more can be important moments for the people to make their voices heard and to address corruption concerns that weigh so heavily on many.

International forums also provide space for new actions. This year, the Pacific Island Forum endorsed the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), which includes commitments to good governance and anti-corruption efforts. They now must turn this into policy. Importantly, India will take the helm of the G20 in 2023. This could be a moment for the region to get a handle on deep-seated grand corruption and harness the full potential for economic cooperation and growth – that will benefit all its people.