

CPI 2021 for Asia Pacific: Grand corruption and lack of freedoms holding back progress



Caption: Protest against the weakening of Indonesia’s anti-corruption agency (Image: Kevin Herbian/Shutterstock.com)

While countries in Asia Pacific have made great strides in controlling bribery for public services, an average score of 45 out of 100 on the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index shows much more needs to be done to solve the region’s corruption problems.

Some higher-scoring countries are even experiencing a decline as governments fail to address grand corruption, uphold rights and consult citizens.

The top performers in Asia Pacific are **New Zealand** (Corruption Perceptions Index score: 88), **Singapore** (85) and **Hong Kong** (76). However, most countries sit firmly below the global average of 43. This includes three countries with some of the lowest scores in the world: **Cambodia** (23), **Afghanistan** (16) and **North Korea** (16).

Among those with weak scores are some of the world’s most populous countries, such as **China** (45) and **India** (40), and other large economies such as **Indonesia** (38), **Pakistan** (28) and **Bangladesh** (26). A concerning trend across some of these nations is a weakening of anti-corruption institutions or, in some cases, absence of an agency to coordinate action against corruption.

31

COUNTRIES ASSESSED

45

AVERAGE REGIONAL SCORE

TOP SCORERS



BOTTOM SCORERS



Erosion of rights in Asia

Asia has witnessed 10 years of mass movements calling for action against corruption, but sadly little has changed. Public outrage has instead been co-opted by strongmen – in the form of populist leaders in democratic countries and authoritarians elsewhere.

From [India](#) to the [Philippines](#) (33) to [China](#), such leaders have been able to portray themselves as more effective than state institutions and win mandates to gain and stay in power. However, only a few of these countries have managed to make progress in controlling corruption and these gains remain fragile. Furthermore, in most countries, corruption is spreading through severe restrictions on the very civil liberties – like freedom of association and speech – which allowed people to take to the streets and call for action.

The case of **India** is particularly worrying. While the country's score has remained stagnant over the past decade, some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening. There are concerns over the country's [democratic status](#), as fundamental freedoms and [institutional checks and balances decay](#). Journalists and activists are particularly at risk and [have been victims of attacks](#) by the police, political militants, criminal gangs and corrupt local officials. Civil society organisations that speak up against the government [have been targeted](#) with security, defamation, sedition, hate speech and contempt-of-court charges, and with regulations on foreign funding.

In the case of **China**, the CPI shows a 9-point gain (from 36 to 45) since 2014. This is in line with President Xi Jinping's strong anti-corruption rhetoric. He has reinforced top-down controls and [clamped down](#) on some of the most brazen forms of corruption that deter investment and economic growth. However, [new forms of corruption have started to emerge](#), including collusion, where high-level officials use their powers to redistribute formerly state-owned assets to themselves and politically-connected firms. Furthermore, China's anti-corruption strategy is inherently limited by the country's [disregard for human rights and fundamental freedoms](#). This makes it impossible for civil society and a free press to serve as anti-corruption watchdogs.

Trend continues in the Pacific

Disrespect for human rights is also preventing progress against corruption in parts of the Pacific – government wrongdoing is concealed from the public and it can be risky to speak up about corruption.

Very few Pacific countries have specific laws on right to information and whistleblower protection. Those that do, have gaps in the legislation or barriers to implementation. For example, **Vanuatu's** (45) right to information unit is enshrined in law, but it is undermined by [recruitment delays](#) and the state's relatively [weak reach](#) outside of urban centres. **Papua New Guinea's** (PNG) and **Solomon Islands'** whistleblower protection legislation is [inadequate](#) and [poorly enforced](#). As a consequence, Solomon Islanders are [not reporting corruption](#).

Concerns have also been raised about [restricted media freedom](#). In **Fiji** (55), laws provide the government with direct oversight of the media and the ability to heavily fine critics. This fosters a climate of fear that [prevents journalists](#) from exposing corruption. In **Vanuatu**, the recent criminalisation of defamation is likely to have a chilling effect on [freedom of speech and press](#). And in **Australia**, [press freedom is also fragile](#), undermining public interest journalism and transparency.

Box: Link to GCB Pacific

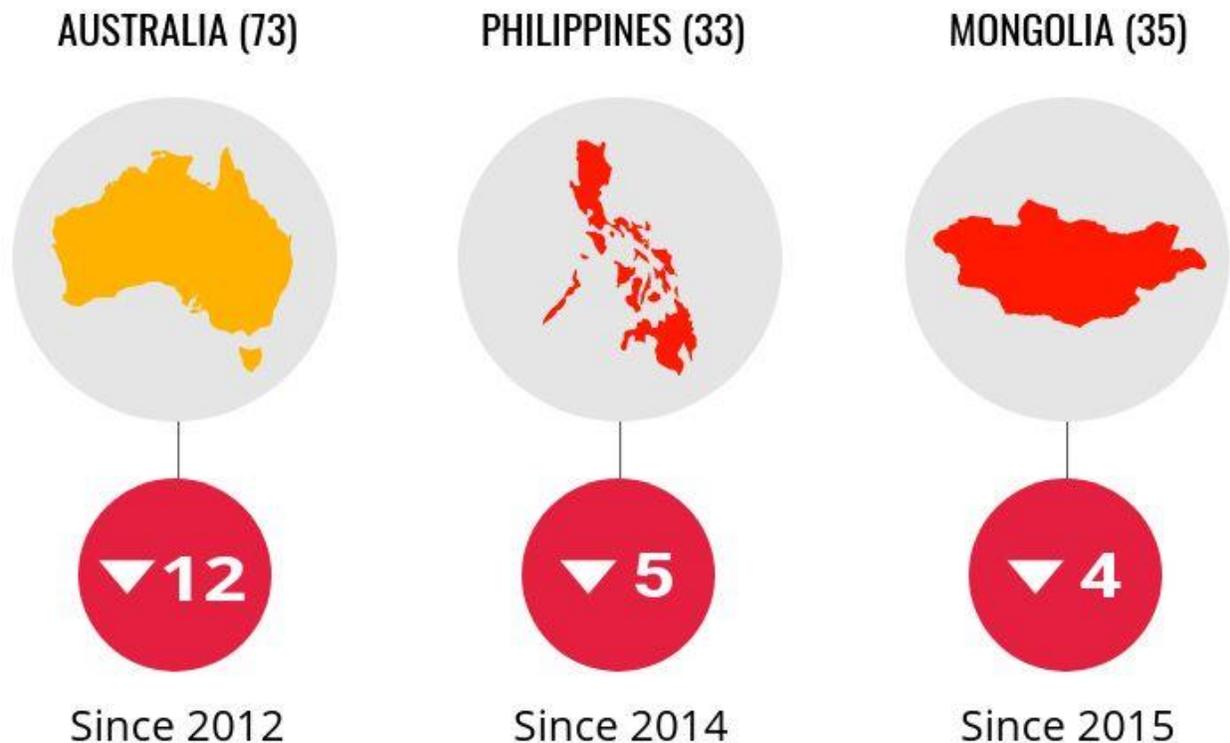
Overall stagnation

[Politically unstable](#) **Vanuatu** remains stagnant with 45, as does **Solomon Islands** (43) – which despite passing its anti-corruption law in 2018 – still does not have a [fully functional anti-corruption commission](#).

The inertia on the index continues along the Mekong river, with **Laos** scoring 30, **Thailand** (35), **Cambodia** (23) and **Vietnam** (39). Furthermore, the lowest scorers in the region, **Afghanistan** (16) and **North Korea** (16), have dropped even further (from 19 and 18, respectively) since last year. These two [fragile states](#) do not have the [basic institutional infrastructure](#) – such as mechanisms for administration and rule of law – to form an integrity system. They also repress citizens who speak out against corruption.

Mongolia reached a historic low of 35 in 2019 and has remained stagnant since then. However, some noteworthy improvements suggest the country is trying to rebuild its anti-corruption framework. These include [a new statutory law to protect human rights defenders](#) – first-of-its-kind in Asia – while plans to [extend legal protections to whistleblowers](#) and investigative journalists are finally [moving forward](#).

Most significant decliners



Most significant improvers

Sparks of hopeful change

Despite generally slow progress, a few countries have made some gains. **South Korea** (62), where civil society remains vibrant and rights are respected, has achieved a 6-point increase (from 56) over the last ten years.

PNG – while still the worst scorer in the Pacific with 31 – has shown an upward trend (from 25) since 2015. The government has reformed laws on key issues – like setting up an independent commission against corruption – and partnered with civil society to enable this process. However, to date these laws still remain largely [unimplemented](#).

Petty corruption down, but grand corruption persists

An encouraging development is the relatively low occurrence of petty corruption in many Asian countries. Tackling bribe-seeking for basic services lightens the economic burden on the poor, improving their standard of living.

Those countries stuck in the middle of the index, like [Malaysia](#) (48) and [Indonesia](#) (38), [Maldives](#) (40) face a more complex challenge: grand corruption. This is the abuse of high-level power that benefits the few at the expense of the many, and which can destroy whole sectors, create recessions and end democracies. In such cases mere technical interventions, useful in addressing petty corruption, are not enough.

Addressing grand corruption requires the systematic dismantling of rent-seeking structures and dishonest cultures that public officials use to pocket public funds. This needs to be driven by political leaders who [hold power to account, for the common good](#).

COVID-19 opening a door to corruption and repression

Alongside a massive public health mobilisation, Asian governments responded to the pandemic by rolling out some of the world's biggest economic recovery plans. But such large-scale responses, conducted without adequate checks and balances, inevitably lead to [corruption](#).



Caption: Health care worker speaks during a protest on Human Rights Day 2021 in the Philippines (Eloisa Lopez/Reuters)

Wrongdoing in emergency procurement has led to price inflating, the theft of medical supplies and [sales of counterfeit medicines and materials](#). This left many citizens more vulnerable to COVID-19 – and almost certainly cost lives.

Despite the fact that whistleblowers, journalists and a vigilant public can help safeguard funds from corruption, COVID-19 has also been used as an excuse to suppress criticism. **Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cambodia** and **Singapore** are just a few countries that have increased [digital surveillance](#) to silence those trying to hold governments accountable during the pandemic. As authoritarian regimes refine their cyber-surveillance technologies, vicious online harassment by [government-backed trolls](#) is further [restricting freedom of speech](#).

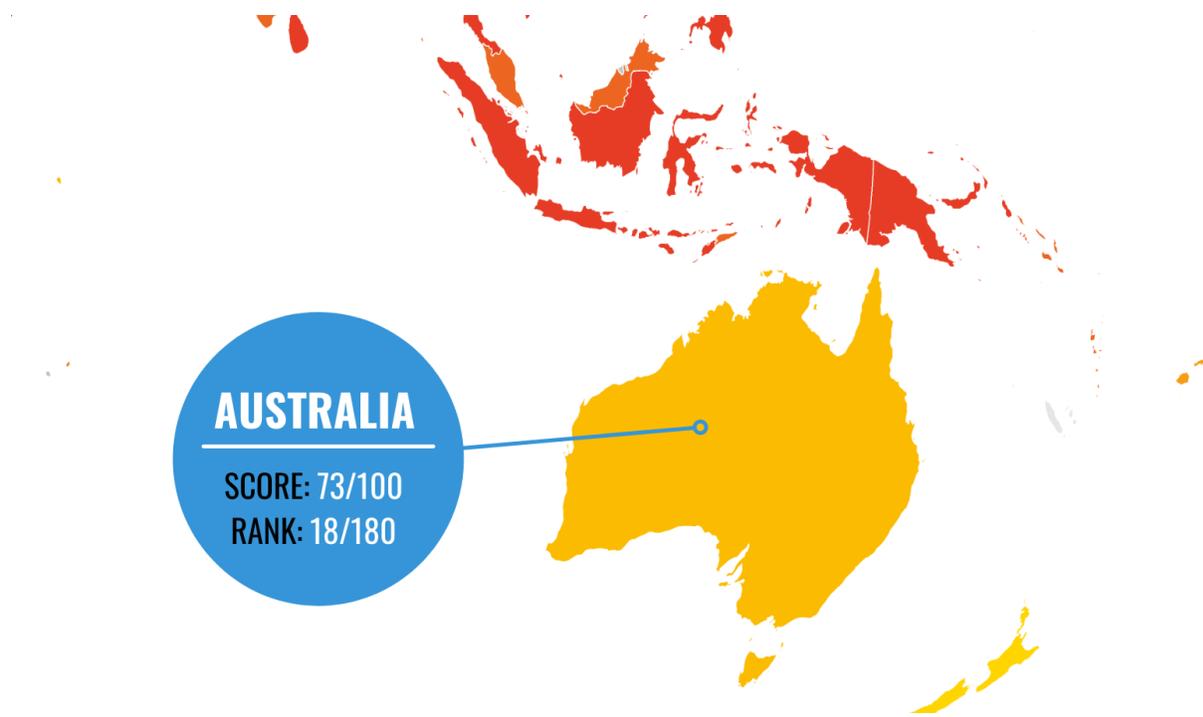
In Pacific Island nations like [PNG and Fiji](#), governments have responded to the pandemic by adopting authoritarian approaches, including granting [new powers](#) to [PNG's prime minister](#). Such measures have [weakened accountability](#) and reduced public oversight. This follows a wider trend of [limiting consultation and access to power](#) in Pacific countries – [women are particularly underrepresented](#) in public decision-making.

Australia slipping backwards

Australia (73) has been one of the world's most significant decliners (from 85) over the last decade – and it has lost four more points this year. The country continues to have [no national integrity](#)

[commission](#) to prevent and detect corruption. Also, [lobbying regulations fall short](#) of international standards and enforcement is weak against companies paying [bribes to secure contracts abroad](#).

Graphic: Australia country to watch



This shortcoming creates major corruption risks in other Pacific countries too. Many businesses working in the Pacific, particularly in the extractives sector, are registered in Australia – but most people surveyed by the [2021 Global Corruption Barometer](#) believe there is widespread corruption in business (56 per cent) and government contracts (68 per cent).

Australia – together with Pacific Island governments – must address these corruption risks, and strengthen the [weak anti-money laundering laws](#) that are reportedly allowing corrupt proceeds to be laundered there and allow perpetrators avoid accountability.

How to build back better

To forge ahead together in sustainable anti-corruption efforts, [economic recovery strategies](#) should address the fundamental failings that have led to many countries' corrupt systems. Effective control of corruption and common prosperity can only be achieved through the engagement of informed people who are able to assemble freely, speak openly and blow the whistle on corruption without fear of reprisal.

Countries with no anti-corruption agency or weakening institutions should uphold the 2012 Jakarta Statement on Principles for Anti-Corruption Agencies, its Colombo Commentary and regional commitments such as the Teieniwa Vision, alongside all other steps required by the UN Convention against Corruption.

Ordinary people can also make a difference by voting out corrupt politicians. Strong institutions, voter education and protected human rights can serve as safeguards for free and fair elections for countries holding electoral processes in 2022 – and beyond.

Box linking to the CPI human rights analysis article.