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CPI 2022 FOR THE AMERICAS: FERTILE GROUND FOR CRIMINAL NETWORKS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

For the fourth consecutive year, the Americas scores an average of 43 out of 100 in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). A lack of bold, decisive action to fight corruption and strengthen public institutions is fuelling organised criminal activities, undermining democracy and human rights, and threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is, in turn, sparking violence, environmental damage and migration across the hemisphere.

Since 2016, 27 out of 32 countries have stagnant corruption levels.

Leading the regional rankings are **Uruguay** and **Canada**, each with a score of 74, followed by the **United States** with 69. In **Venezuela** (14), **Haiti** (17) and **Nicaragua** (19), the countries with the lowest scores, it is difficult to draw a line between public institutions and criminal activities.

Corruption trends in the Americas

Weak and unaccountable public institutions in Latin America have created fertile ground for organised criminal networks to flourish, fuelling violence and insecurity. These are among the main concerns for Latin Americans, along with corruption and the economy. In many countries, law enforcement and corrupt officials collaborate with criminal gangs or accept bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to their illicit activities. In **Honduras** (23), **Guatemala** (24) and **Peru** (36), evidence suggests that organised criminals wield a strong influence over candidates and politicians, [financing electoral campaigns](#) or even [running for public office](#) themselves.

The impacts of these intertwined criminal and political interests are felt particularly by the most marginalised groups in society, and witnessed in the destruction of natural resources. Across the region, women, girls and migrants are [victims of human trafficking and sextortion](#), which usually involves public officials demanding [sexual acts in exchange for services](#) like awarding passports or granting passage through border controls. Corrupt networks also fuel wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, illicit gold mining, and slash-and-burn land clearance.

In the Amazon, the drug trade has brought violence to the ancestral territories of indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, which coincide with critical areas of high biodiversity. Moreover, in 2021, Latin American countries recorded the [highest number of killings of human rights defenders](#). **Colombia** (39) had the highest numbers of killings of human rights defenders with 138, followed by 42 in **Mexico** (31) and 27 in **Brazil** (38). Too often, murders of environmental and anti-corruption defenders go unpunished due to corrupt and criminal networks' infiltration of local governments and the justice system.

Meanwhile, to tackle organised crime and gang violence some governments have taken extreme measures that concentrate power in the executive branch, reducing transparency and accountability, and posing serious threats to human rights and basic

freedoms. For instance, the declaration of states of exception during 2022 in countries like **El Salvador** (33), **Ecuador** (36) and **Honduras** (23) – whilst constitutional and officially temporary – granted extraordinary powers to the executive branch to [suspend constitutional guarantees](#). They impacted people's rights to assembly, access to information, transit and basic procedures during an arrest. In the name of security, these governments [closed down civic space](#), shrinking its oversight capabilities and considerably increasing democratic backsliding and risks of corruption.

Well-functioning democratic systems boost transparency and accountability

In the **United States** (69), there are signs of improvement after several years in which anti-corruption and democratic norms were challenged. Significant pro-democracy initiatives were approved at the state and local levels, including measures to expand voting access. These bring greater transparency to election spending and increase voter choice. Furthermore, meaningful and appropriate [accountability actions](#) were taken after the January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Following years of neglect, funding for fighting foreign and transnational corruption has gone up.

In the Caribbean, the **Dominican Republic** (32) has gained four points in the CPI in the last two years by [strengthening the independence of its justice](#) and oversight bodies, enhancing transparency in public procurement, and enacting an asset forfeiture law – a key legal instrument to combat corruption and organised crime. However, the slow pace of the judicial processes has hampered progress with convictions for corruption. There is [concern in Dominican society](#) that the courts are not living up to the strong national demand to advance in the fight against corruption and crime.

Guyana (40) has [significantly risen in the CPI](#) over the last 12 years, however recently the country has stagnated. The oil-rich nation must still place stronger emphasis on building a well-functioning democratic system and implement greater levels of transparency and oversight, especially in the [extractive industry](#). Corruption in this sector implies the loss of billions of dollars, which could be used to improve public services and development in one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.. Corruption in this sector implies the loss of billions of dollars, which could be used to improve public services and development in one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.

Inaction, setbacks and instability

Canada's (74) score has stagnated after several years of decline. Rocked by allegations that Chinese officials [intervened in Canadian politics](#), once again highlighted the need to tackle opaque influence and the political integrity deficit within the country.

Chile (67) and **Costa Rica** (54) – traditionally top Latin American CPI performers – are not prioritising the fight against corruption. Chile has been stagnant for years, despite the clear importance of tackling growing organised crime and [insecurity in the country](#), which rank among the public's [biggest concerns](#).

Costa Rica has dropped four points in the last three years, reaching its lowest ever score. Recent [corruption scandals](#) point to transparency deficits, overpricing and a lack

of competition in the infrastructure sector, which is a trend that can be seen across the region. Allegations of [illegal political financing](#) during the electoral campaign of President Rodrigo Chaves may also help explain recent results.

Yet, both Chile and Costa Rica have solid democratic institutions and opportunities to reverse these trends. In **Chile**, the constitutional reform process as well as the first National Integrity Strategy present a unique opportunity to strengthen accountability, modernise public institutions and improve trust in the State. Costa Rica's [national integrity strategy](#), if well implemented, can become a model for other countries in the region.

With six changes of government in six years and five former presidents under investigation, **Peru** (36) is suffering from violence and political instability driven by corruption. The recent [attempt to dissolve the parliament](#) and alter the order by former president Pedro Castillo – also under investigation for corruption – is the latest expression of a long-standing political crisis that prevents the country from building a more democratic and inclusive society. Reforms adopted in recent years have been postponed or sabotaged. These include the modernisation of the civil service, the improvement of the public integrity regime, and greater autonomy of the transparency authority. The processes need to be reinvigorated. Swifter progress is also needed in emblematic corruption cases, while conducting them with all legal guarantees.

Mexico (31) has not been able to improve its score in the CPI for a third consecutive year. After four years of President Lopez Obrador's (AMLO) government, there have been no convictions of major public officials or private executives in [corruption cases](#) – some of them involving his political network. Furthermore, the political tension between the President and autonomous oversight institutions responsible for ensuring access to information (INAI) and for guaranteeing free and fair elections (INE) signal a tendency to undermine the necessary checks and balances of a functioning democracy.

In the Caribbean, drug cartels have taken advantage of weaknesses in law enforcement institutions, high levels of corruption and unguarded coastlines. According to Transparency International's [Global Corruption Barometer for 2019](#), 50 per cent of people consider the police corrupt in **Jamaica** (44), while in **Trinidad and Tobago** (42) that figure soars to 61 per cent. In Jamaica, while there is [lack of trust in the national police](#), there is an opportunity to build it, as 62 per cent of Jamaicans are willing to work with police on community projects.

Panama (36) remains stagnant – having dropped two points on the index since 2012 – and unable to improve its score from 2021, reflecting poor institutional conditions to fight corruption and end impunity, particularly in cases of grand corruption. Between July and August 2022, a wave of protests paralysed the country with a violent and prolonged social outburst. The events were an [organic response](#) to public institutional corruption and unjustified growth of the government payroll, while the country's population, with one of the highest inequality rates in the region, was facing increases in the cost of medicines, basic food items and gas.

Worst performers

In the worst performers this year, including **Venezuela** (14), **Nicaragua** (19), **Honduras** (23) and **Guatemala** (24), elites and organised crime have co-opted state institutions. In Venezuela, illegal business represented 21 per cent of its 2021 GDP – criminal groups exercise vast control over gold mining operations, using extortion and paying off military commanders to maintain their illegal activities. These groups are responsible for human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, the killing of indigenous leaders and the displacement of their communities, forced prostitution, and labour exploitation of both adults and children, as well as contamination and other serious environmental crimes.

In **Honduras**, [extortion](#) of small businesses and ordinary citizens by criminal gangs is a significant problem that goes unpunished. It holds back economic development and heightens insecurity with illegal flows of money going to the financial system. It is estimated that Hondurans pay [US\\$737 million per year](#) on extortion, representing 16 per cent of the country's annual GDP.

In these highly corrupt environments, increasing violence, together with the violation of social and economic rights disproportionately affect historically marginalised groups. This leads to massive migration to other countries in the region. In order to reduce gang violence, **El Salvador** and Honduras declared states of exception. In El Salvador, this has triggered unjustified arrests and abuses of power. [The emergency regime](#) has also been used to repress and silence voices critical of the government and limit even further the right to access information.

In most of these countries, the fight against corruption is led almost exclusively by civil society organisations and independent media, with support from the international community. However, the co-opting of justice institutions and the criminalisation of actors who report corruption has triggered human rights abuses against journalists, activists, indigenous peoples and prosecutors. In **Guatemala**, for instance, the unjustified arrests of the journalist [José Rubén Zamora](#) and former prosecutors [Virginia Laparra](#) and [Samari Gómez](#) are emblematic examples.

Country to watch: Brazil

In the last four years, **Brazil** (38) faced an [unprecedented dismantling of anti-corruption frameworks](#) that had taken decades to build. Despite repeated claims that he ran a corruption-free government, former-president Jair Bolsonaro, his cabinet ministers, allies and even family members were subject to corruption investigations. His government created the largest institutionalised corruption scheme ever known in Brazil, known as the “secret budget.” Through this scheme, billions of Reais were allocated to favour political allies, with serious impacts on health, education and infrastructure policies. Bolsonaro's government attacked civic space, with intimidation, defamation, fake news and direct strikes against civil society organisations, journalists and activists. This period was also [dire for the environment](#) and the rights of indigenous people, women and the LGBTQ+ community.

This anti-democratic movement [culminated on the assault](#) of the national congress, presidency and supreme court buildings on 8 January 2023 by Bolsonaro's supporters, in an attempt to challenge the October election results in which now President Lula da Silva won. They vandalised the three buildings, while local police forces stood by.

Following the attack, public authorities, some linked to former President Bolsonaro, were held responsible for negligence.

Even though violent anti-democratic attacks will be a challenge to president Lula da Silva's administration, his government should find ways to address the current obstacles to anti-corruption. President Lula's ruling party, the PT, or Workers' Party, has also been involved in major corruption scandals – including the one that led to the [Operation Car Wash investigation](#) that successfully brought a corruption case against him until the Supreme Court annulled his conviction. However, it was also during Lula and his successor Dilma Rousseff's administrations that Brazil made significant advances on anti-corruption.

Lula and his party have yet to offer a concrete anti-corruption plan for the future, nor laid out how they will re-establish the autonomy of key institutions, such as the Prosecutor General's Office, Federal Police and environmental agencies. By adopting transparent and ethical standards, and re-opening up government for social participation and scrutiny, the new government could have a positive impact in the region and beyond, especially in the Global South.

Country to Watch: Colombia

Gustavo Petro's victory in the 2022 presidential elections has generated expectations of change in **Colombia** (39), which has not improved its score in this year's CPI. Massive protests across the country between 2019 and 2021 were sparked by high levels of corruption and social inequality. Likewise, illicit financial flows derived from corruption and organised crime, such as illegal deforestation, are barriers to achieving the country's social, economic and environmental agenda.

The country needs greater transparency in its political system, greater control over discretionary public procurement mechanisms, more independence in oversight agencies and the judicial system, and protections for whistleblowers.

The new government must maintain an effective separation of powers and guarantee conditions for civil society, the media and other non-state actors to exercise control over power, especially at the local level in the context of the 2016 peace agreements. The local elections to be held in October 2023 will once again test the transparency and efficiency of the electoral system, as well as the country's ability to open spaces for new political actors.

A way forward

Governments in the Americas should strengthen their institutions to ensure the necessary checks and balances to fight corruption effectively. Governments should also guarantee adequate conditions for civil society, activists and different communities to participate in public life and demand accountability without fear of retaliation. Only by promoting integrity and transparency in [criminal justice institutions](#) is it possible to protect those who denounce corruption and end the impunity for corruption, abuses and crimes. Given that corruption networks are becoming more sophisticated, it is necessary to make better use of technology during investigations, enhance collaboration

between prosecutors from the region, and implement more comprehensive measures to stop the flows of dirty money from corruption and organised crime.

The challenges are immense, but with a joint effort by different sectors, the construction of consensus and more participation, the Americas has the opportunity to overcome them and build more democratic and inclusive societies with greater levels of integrity in public life.