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CPI 2023 for Asia Pacific: Regional stagnation marked by inadequate delivery of anti-corruption commitments

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As the Asia Pacific region faces a big 2024 election year, with people coming out to vote in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Solomon Islands, South Korea and Taiwan, the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals another year of little to no meaningful progress towards curbing corruption. For five years in a row, the average CPI score for the region stagnates stubbornly at 45 out of a possible 100. Very few countries show sustained turnarounds that indicate significant changes in corruption levels and several historically at the top are slowly declining.

Sixty-eight per cent of the countries across Asia and the Pacific have a CPI score below 50. These weak scores reflect the lack of delivery by elected officials on anti-corruption agendas, together with crackdowns on organised civil society and attacks on freedoms of press, assembly and association.

Countries with continued high scores, such as **New Zealand** (85) and **Singapore** (83), maintain their positions at the top of the index globally, followed closely by other countries with stronger corruption control mechanisms, such as **Australia** (75), **Hong Kong** (75), **Japan** (73), **Bhutan** (68), **Taiwan** (67) and **South Korea** (63).

New Zealand's score has slowly declined since 2020. This decrease is attributed, in recent times, to a lack of confidence from the business community in the integrity of public contracting, taxation and trade opportunities. In 2022, **Australia** elected a government that prioritised establishing a [national anti-corruption commission](#) and has embarked on changes to public sector [whistleblower protections](#) and political financing, which require a comprehensive reform to ensure they are effective. **Bhutan** has also shown progress through strengthening its [anti-corruption agency](#).

The bottom of the index includes fragile states with authoritarian regimes, including **North Korea** (17) and **Myanmar** (20), with the latter dropping a staggering 10 points since 2017. **Afghanistan** (20) continues to face one of the worst [humanitarian crises](#) in history.

Rule of law at a crossroads: Cautious optimism in South Asia

In South Asia, both **Pakistan** (29) and **Sri Lanka** (34) grapple with their respective [debt burdens](#) and ensuing political instability. However, the two countries have strong

[judicial oversight](#), which is helping to keep the government in check. The Supreme Court of Pakistan strengthened citizens' right to information by [expanding this right](#) under Article 19A of its Constitution to previously restricted institutions. In Sri Lanka, the Supreme Court found that the former president, prime minister and other officials were responsible for the 2021 economic crisis.

India's (39) score has remained pretty much stagnant over the past decade showing no significant change. However, ahead of the elections, India sees further narrowing of civic space, including through the passage of a bill that could be a [“grave threat to fundamental rights”](#). As **Bangladesh** (24) emerges from least developed country (LDC) status, with economic growth supporting a continued [reduction in poverty](#) and improving living conditions, the flow of information on the public sector is hindered amidst an ongoing [crackdown against the press](#).

Country to Watch: Sri Lanka

The end of 2023 in **Sri Lanka** (34) marked the culmination of a civil society campaign to seek justice through the courts and hold the political leadership and [top officials accountable](#) for the large-scale debt default and resulting economic crisis. A petition before the Supreme Court was filed by civil society organisations in the public interest, arguing that government officials violated public trust due to their lack of accountable and transparent decision-making.

In this landmark judgement, the Sri Lanka Supreme Court found that former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, two former central bank governors and other top treasury officials [breached the public trust](#) and violated the constitution in their administration of the economy, ultimately causing the economic crisis.

As the country heads into a slow economic recovery, we continue to call for lasting reforms through improved legislative frameworks and increased [governance standards](#) that will prevent such economic catastrophes in the future.

Emerging out of the pandemic: ASEAN countries struggle to deliver on anti-corruption efforts

Across the ASEAN countries, **Malaysia** (50) remains above the regional average with [robust elections](#) alongside an anti-corruption commission that has delivered on high-profile cases over the last decade. In **Indonesia** (34), amidst [democratic backsliding](#), it remains uncertain whether the [severely disempowered](#) anti-corruption agency, the KPK, will be allowed to regain its former mandate any time soon or if it is destined to become a so-called paper tiger. In **Vietnam** (41), a promising high profile [anti-corruption campaign](#) is being marred by the [continued restriction](#) of critical voices, possibly

hindering the sustainability of such efforts. The **Philippines** (34) and **Thailand** (35) remain on the lower end of the spectrum.

Heading beyond short-term fixes: Stronger integrity infrastructure needed to limit executive power

China (42) has made headlines with its aggressive anti-corruption crackdown, [punishing over 3.7 million public officials](#) for corruption over the last decade. A closer study of the cases with guilty verdicts found that [public officials often use corruption](#) as a way to drive up their income. However, the country's heavy reliance on punishment rather than institutional checks on power raises doubts over the long-term effectiveness of such anti-corruption measures.

Mongolia (33) scores well below the regional average. Key pieces of legislation in Mongolia that could improve its fight against corruption remain in the pipeline, such as the [Whistleblower Protection Bill](#), the [Extractive Industries Transparency Law](#) and a [law for state-owned enterprises](#).

Double-edged sword: Geopolitics, elections and regional anti-corruption commitments in the Pacific

The Pacific continues to grapple with the impact of climate change and remains a focal point for geopolitical tensions between China and the West. While there's a steady influx of economic, military or financial incentives to support its development and climate goals, many Pacific countries have weak governance systems, which some donors overlook, exposing these substantial investments to [high risk of corruption](#).

Transparency International's [Global Corruption Barometer \(GCB\)](#) revealed the prevalence of corruption around election processes in Asia and the Pacific. The 2020 survey in Asia showed that nearly one in seven people had been offered bribes in exchange for votes in a national, regional or local election in the past five years. Meanwhile, in the Pacific region in 2021, approximately a quarter of respondents reported being offered a bribe for their votes. These findings show the serious implications for the ability of elections to bring in governments that can be trusted to control and curb corruption effectively.

Holding the lowest score in the Pacific region, **Papua New Guinea** (29) continues to stagnate. In 2022, the country experienced what sources called [the worst election](#) in its history. It undertook [a formal review](#) in 2023 to improve future elections, and strengthening its democracy would significantly enhance the country's ability to lower corruption levels. **Vanuatu** (48) continues to grapple with political instability exacerbated by natural disasters hindering proposed legal reforms, including one on [political integrity](#).

At the regional level, Pacific leaders continue to demonstrate some commitment to the fight against corruption with the gradual implementation of the [Teieniwa Vision](#). This set of collective anti-corruption priorities was endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum leaders in 2021. Progress has been slow and there has been limited involvement of regional civil society organisations around this initiative. ASEAN leaders should also continue to find common mechanisms to review their anti-corruption commitments under the [ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025](#), a ten-year plan aimed at instilling a culture of integrity and anti-corruption in the region. They should also continue strengthening their national and regional anti-corruption frameworks and increasing joint efforts to address grand corruption.

Country to Watch: Fiji

Following the 2022 elections, a new government took office in **Fiji** (52), ending the nearly 16-year rule of the Fiji First Party government headed by Frank Bainimarama. This period was known for the [erosion of institutions](#), weak democratic norms and an accepted disregard for the rule of law.

Some are only [cautiously optimistic](#) about the new government, as it may be too soon to tell if it will foster a more democratic state and take up the fight against corruption. However, its 100-day commitment was seen as ambitious and [some positive reform efforts](#) have already started. These include the repeal of repressive media laws and investigations into the conduct of previous elections and former leaders' alleged abuse of office.