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CPI 2021 FOR SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: AMID DEMOCRATIC TURBULENCE, DEEP-SEATED CORRUPTION EXACERBATES THREATS TO FREEDOMS

With an average score of 33 out of 100, Sub-Saharan Africa shows no significant improvement on the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The gains made by a handful of countries are overshadowed by backsliding or stagnation in others and the region's poor performance overall, as 44 out of 49 countries assessed on the index still score below 50.

With the COVID-19 pandemic [severely hitting](#) the previously less-affected continent, alongside protracted [armed conflicts](#) and rising [terrorist threats](#), 2021 was a turbulent year for Sub-Saharan Africa. These worrying trends exacerbate the serious corruption problems that exist from long before.

To keep corruption out of the public eye, governments across the region have limited information and cracked down on independent voices calling out abuses of power.

On a continent where corruption plunders [precious natural resources](#) and impedes access to [public services for millions of people](#), the results of a decade of stagnation laid bare by the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) cannot be more devastating.

BEST AND WORST PERFORMERS

Seychelles (CPI score: 70) tops the 2021 index, while **Cabo Verde** (58) and **Botswana** (55) are the distant runners-up.

For countries at the bottom of the index, such as **Equatorial Guinea** (17), **Somalia** (13) and **South Sudan** (11), the way out of endemic corruption remains daunting.

GAINS NEED TO BE SUSTAINED

The performance of **Seychelles** (70, up 18 points since 2012) has steadily risen on the CPI over the past decade. During this time, substantial open government and anti-corruption reforms were achieved.

These gains need to be further solidified, not reversed. For example, the National Assembly of Seychelles recently voted to [remove a requirement](#) for spouses and family

members of high-level government officials to declare their assets, creating a new loophole.

Seychelles also needs to tackle the financial secrecy which has made it an attractive destination for dirty money from around the world.

Angola (29, up 7 points since 2012) marks a significant improvement on the CPI following the election of President João Lourenço in 2017, who has taken steps to crack down on corruption. Authorities have pursued high-profile corruption investigations into the former ruling family. Among them was [Isabel Dos Santos](#), the former president's daughter and ex-chief of the state oil company Sonangol. Dos Santos was the subject of the [Luanda Leaks exposé](#) and was also recently [sanctioned by the US government](#) for "significant corruption".

However, investigations are rarely opened in other cases, raising doubts about selective justice. In a [2019 survey](#), 39 per cent of Angolans said that the president was using the fight against corruption as a tool against political rivals.

According to the same survey, the majority also think that those who report corruption risk retaliation. People's concerns turned out to be justified when last June [authorities charged a journalist](#) with "abusing press freedom" after he exposed corruption in one of the country's provinces.

Country to watch: Senegal

Senegal's (43) performance on the CPI has significantly improved (from 36) in the last decade, gaining 9 points from 2012 to 2016. Advancements during this period include the creation of the Office for the Fight against Fraud and Corruption (OFNAC) and passage of the asset declaration law, among other reforms. But progress halted there, with Senegal's 2021 score dropping 2 points compared to last year.

In 2020, a national anti-corruption strategy was adopted, but its prospects are unclear as resourcing and implementation remain a challenge. In recent years, the work of anti-corruption institutions – such as OFNAC – has lacked rigour, and numerous denunciations by the public about mismanagement of public funds and natural resources have not been adequately investigated. Patchy enforcement of anti-corruption legislation is also a major concern.

In 2019, [previously unknown details](#) surfaced surrounding the 2012 sale of concession rights for two offshore oil blocks, implicating President Macky Sall and his brother Aliou Sall in possible foreign bribery. In response to public pressure, Aliou Sall [resigned from public office](#), but rejected claims that he received secret payments. Eventually, an investigation into his role was dismissed. Transparency International [has called for investigations in six countries](#) that have jurisdiction over the case.

In 2020, Freedom House downgraded Senegal's rating from "free" to "partly free", citing [politically motivated corruption prosecutions](#) of opposition leaders.

While media can operate with relative freedom, defamation laws constrain civil liberties. A [recent survey](#) revealed that a majority of Senegalese think corruption has increased, but many fear reprisals should they report it.

IMPUNITY MAKING THINGS WORSE

One of the top performers in the region, **Botswana** (55) has hit a historic low in 2021, recording a significant decline from a score of 65 in 2012. The result corroborates the findings of Transparency International's 2019 Global Corruption Barometer survey, which showed that most people in Botswana thought [corruption had increased](#). Concerns over impunity – such as in the case of the [alleged looting of the National Petroleum Fund](#) which implicated senior government officials – underscore the need to increase accountability for high-level corruption in the continent's oldest democracy.

Liberia (29), which dropped 12 points (from 41) since 2012, is a significant decliner on the 2021 CPI. Unresolved corruption allegations and a [persistent culture of impunity](#) are among the key concerns. Inadequate resourcing of anti-graft institutions and a weak judiciary [continue to undermine the fight against corruption](#) in the West African nation.

ACCOUNTABILITY HIGHS AND LOWS

The 2021 CPI shows that 80 per cent of countries across the region have stagnated in the last 10 years.

One of the biggest threats to progress is grand corruption – systemic corruption involving high-level public officials and vast sums of money, often accompanied by gross human rights violations. And yet impunity has been the norm, rather than the exception.

All the while, the continent loses [tens of billions](#) of dollars annually in capital flight.

Country to watch: Mozambique

Although not statistically significant, **Mozambique** (26) has dropped 5 points (from 31) on the CPI since 2012. The country is still grappling with the [impacts of the "hidden debt" corruption scandal](#), exposed in 2016. In this scheme, senior officials in Mozambique reportedly conspired with bankers in Europe and businesspeople based in the Middle East to arrange a US\$2 billion loan to the country. The funds were allegedly misappropriated, including through bribes and kickbacks.

The ensuing financial crisis has meant that the Mozambican state is unable to fulfil its obligations, including [protecting the rights of people displaced](#) by the Cabo Delgado

conflict. Individuals accused of orchestrating the hidden debt scheme went on trial in late 2021.

The scandal and its aftermath exemplify the dangers of executive overreach and a [lack of effective checks and balances](#) – weak parliamentary oversight, in particular. The ongoing high-profile case offers hope, but also [serves as an accountability test](#).

Last year, the Pandora Papers investigations exposed nearly 50 politicians and at least [five current or former heads of state](#) from the continent – some of whom previously presented themselves as [anti-corruption reformers](#) – as abusing the global financial system and secretly moving their wealth offshore.

In **Nigeria** (24) – which hit a historic low on the 2021 CPI – [more than 100 powerful individuals](#) were exposed as having used anonymous companies to buy properties with a total worth of £350 million in the United Kingdom alone. Secretive dealings among Nigeria’s powerholders were previously reported as part of the [Panama Papers](#) and [FinCEN Files](#) investigations. Inaction over past disclosures has [created a sense of impunity](#), stalling anti-corruption progress in the country.

In late 2021, the [Congo Hold-Up investigations](#) sent shockwaves across the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (19). Individuals in former president Joseph Kabila’s inner circle [allegedly embezzled funds](#) from Congo’s central bank, a state-owned mining company and the tax authority, among others. Documents were leaked to journalists from a DRC subsidiary of **Gabon’s** (31) BGFIBank Group – a private bank reportedly used to [move at least US\\$138 million](#) between 2013 and 2018.

Fresh revelations by investigative journalists show a fuller picture of kleptocracy in **Equatorial Guinea** (17). Oil minister Gabriel Mbega Obiang Lima – President Teodoro Obiang’s son – [is alleged to have siphoned off](#) millions in state funds and bribes abroad. Some justice was achieved in the case of another member of the Obiang family – the infamous Vice President Teodorin Obiang – who was [definitively convicted for corruption in France](#). This historic ruling in a legal case brought by Transparency International France and Sherpa also upheld the decision to confiscate Obiang’s assets held in France, worth approximately EUR 150 million.

South Africa’s (44) former president Jacob Zuma is one of the few heads of state to face corruption charges in their own country. There have been positive steps to expose and address high-level corruption, such as the [commission of inquiry into state capture](#), known as the Zondo Commission. And yet the weakened law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies that were hollowed out during years of state capture have contributed to the [erosion of public confidence](#) that corrupt officials will be held accountable.

DEMOCRACY IN PERIL, CIVIL LIBERTIES UNDER ATTACK

According to [Afrobarometer's latest surveys](#), a majority of people across the region think corruption is on the rise, while simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction with the way democracy works.

This is not surprising; persistent corruption has gone hand-in-hand with [unconstitutional changes of power](#) in various parts of the continent. Elsewhere, governments imposed [disproportionate restrictions](#) on civic freedoms – often under the guise of containing the COVID-19 pandemic – limiting people's ability to hold power to account.

On the [2020 Democracy Index](#), Sub-Saharan Africa recorded its worst average score since 2006, primarily owing to a drop in countries' civil liberties scores. Repression continued in 2021, as governments used the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflicts as an excuse to [further crack down on rights](#).

Mali's (29) significant decline (from 35 in 2015) on the CPI has occurred concurrently with a drop in its civil liberties score. The country is facing political, institutional and security crises, having experienced three military coups since 2012. The ongoing armed conflict undermines key state functions, leading to a [vicious cycle of corruption and human rights abuses](#).

And while **Ethiopia** (39) registers a significant improvement (from 33) since 2012, its decline on civil liberties threatens to reverse any previous progress. The government has used the ongoing armed conflict in the Tigray region as a pretext to silence independent voices. In 2021, authorities [shut down a popular independent media outlet](#) and [arrested dozens of journalists](#) for their coverage of the civil war.

HOW TO BREAK THE CYCLE

The 2021 CPI results should serve as a wake-up call to societies across Sub-Saharan Africa. The magnitude of corruption challenges requires responses much bolder than ever before.

Sustainable progress on anti-corruption can only be achieved if societal and institutional checks on power are ensured. Governments must urgently roll back on the disproportionate restrictions on civil liberties and stop using the COVID-19 pandemic or ongoing conflicts as an excuse for stifling dissent.

And when allegations of abuse emerge, anti-corruption agencies and justice institutions must provide accountability – no matter how high-level the culprit.