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Singapore ranked fourth least corrupt country in the world: Transparency International



Singapore scored 85 points in the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index, the same score it achieved the previous year. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - The Republic has emerged in the top ranks of least corrupt countries, according to the results of a survey of 180 countries and territories by global anti-graft movement Transparency International released on Tuesday (Jan 25).

Singapore tied with Sweden and Norway and scored 85 points in the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the same score it achieved the previous year.

It was fourth after Denmark, Finland and New Zealand, which all scored 88 points, and was top in Asia.

Hong Kong was second (76 points) and Japan third (73 points) in Asia.

For the first time, this year's index offered a "comprehensive look at a decade of corruption, revealing which countries have improved, regressed or stagnated over the last 10 years", Transparency International said in a statement.

It noted that corruption levels remain at a standstill worldwide, with 86 per cent of countries making little to no progress in the last 10 years.

"Transparency International found countries that violate civil liberties consistently score lower on the CPI.



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"Complacency in fighting corruption exacerbates human rights abuses and undermines democracy, setting off a vicious spiral.

"As these rights and freedoms erode and democracy declines, authoritarianism takes its place, contributing to even higher levels of corruption," said the non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The CPI ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption on a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

In its 10-year analysis, Transparency International noted that out of the 23 countries whose CPI score significantly declined since 2012, 19 also declined on the civil liberties score.

It added that out of the 331 recorded cases of murdered human rights defenders in 2020, 98 per cent occurred in countries with a CPI score below 45.

Citing the Philippines as an example, Transparency International said the country has continued its fall, beginning in 2014, to a score of 33.

It noted that since winning the election in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte has been cracking down on freedoms of association and expression.

"It also has an exceptionally high murder rate of human rights defenders, with 20 killed in 2020," said the NGO.

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Transparency International also drew links between Covid-19 and corruption, noting that 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.

"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," it said.

In a statement, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), which is marking its 70th anniversary this year, said that despite the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the corruption situation in Singapore continues to remain firmly under control.

It noted that apart from the CPI released by Transparency International, the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy had ranked Singapore as the least corrupt country in its 2021 Report on Corruption in Asia, a position the Republic had held since 1995.

"Singapore's performance on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and other international indices is the result of the strong political will to fight corruption, as well as the constant vigilance and unwavering determination by the public service and the public to keep corruption at bay," said CPIB director Denis Tang.

In its analysis, Transparency International said countries in the Asia-Pacific region have made great strides in controlling bribery for public services.

But it added that its average score of 45 on the CPI "shows much more needs to be done to solve the region's corruption problems".

The NGO made observations about the two most populous countries in the region: India and China.

It said some of the mechanisms that could help rein in corruption in India, which scored 40 points on the CPI, are weakening with concerns over the country's democratic status.

Transparency International noted that China improved by six points since the rankings in 2018, and scored 45 points last year.

But it added: “Chinese President Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption rhetoric and clampdown on brazen forms of corruption that deter economic growth have shown some success, but new forms have emerged as high-level powers use their powers to redistribute assets among themselves and other elites.”

The organisation noted that Singapore has a modernised economy, efficient bureaucracy and strong rule of law, which contribute to its success on the corruption front.

“However, it continues to fall far behind on human rights such as freedom of expression and association, which means that any anti-corruption success is tied to the political will of the ruling elite and may not be sustainable,” it added.

Mr Wilson Ang, who heads the Asia regulatory compliance and investigations practice at global law firm Norton Rose Fulbright, disagreed with the view that Singapore’s success is not sustainable.

He noted that Singapore has performed well in the CPI rankings in the past 10 years through sustained efforts.

“In many other countries, the lack of political will or the instability of fractious partisan politics would negatively affect the ability to mount any sustained or coherent attack against corruption,” added Mr Ang.

A 2020 survey by the CPIB showed that 94 per cent of the public saw corruption control efforts in Singapore as being effective.

Mr Ang said strict anti-corruption laws and robust enforcement, coupled with a society that does not generally condone bribery, have contributed to the effectiveness of corruption control efforts.

Mr Wong Heang Fine, group chief executive officer of Surbana Jurong, noted the role the private sector has played in the fight against graft.

For example, the business community has joined forces with the public sector and citizens in the Anti-Corruption Partnership Network, a group the CPIB formed in 2018.

He also spoke about the challenges in fighting corruption in the built environment sector.

“Procurement, licences, permits and approvals are required at various stages of the delivery cycle, each one potentially becoming an opportunity for corruption,” Mr Wong told The Straits Times.

The Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants is a member of the network.

Its president, Mr Kon Yin Tong, said the institute is heartened that Singapore has maintained its high score in the CPI.

“This achievement is a testament to Singapore’s robust legal framework, stringent penalties and strong political will in fighting corruption,” he added.

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