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AMERICAS: WEAKENING DEMOCRACY AND RISE IN POPULISM HINDER ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS

Region is failing to fight corruption despite some progress

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Translations: [ES \(/news/feature/el debilitamiento de la democracia y el auge del populismo en las americas\)](#)

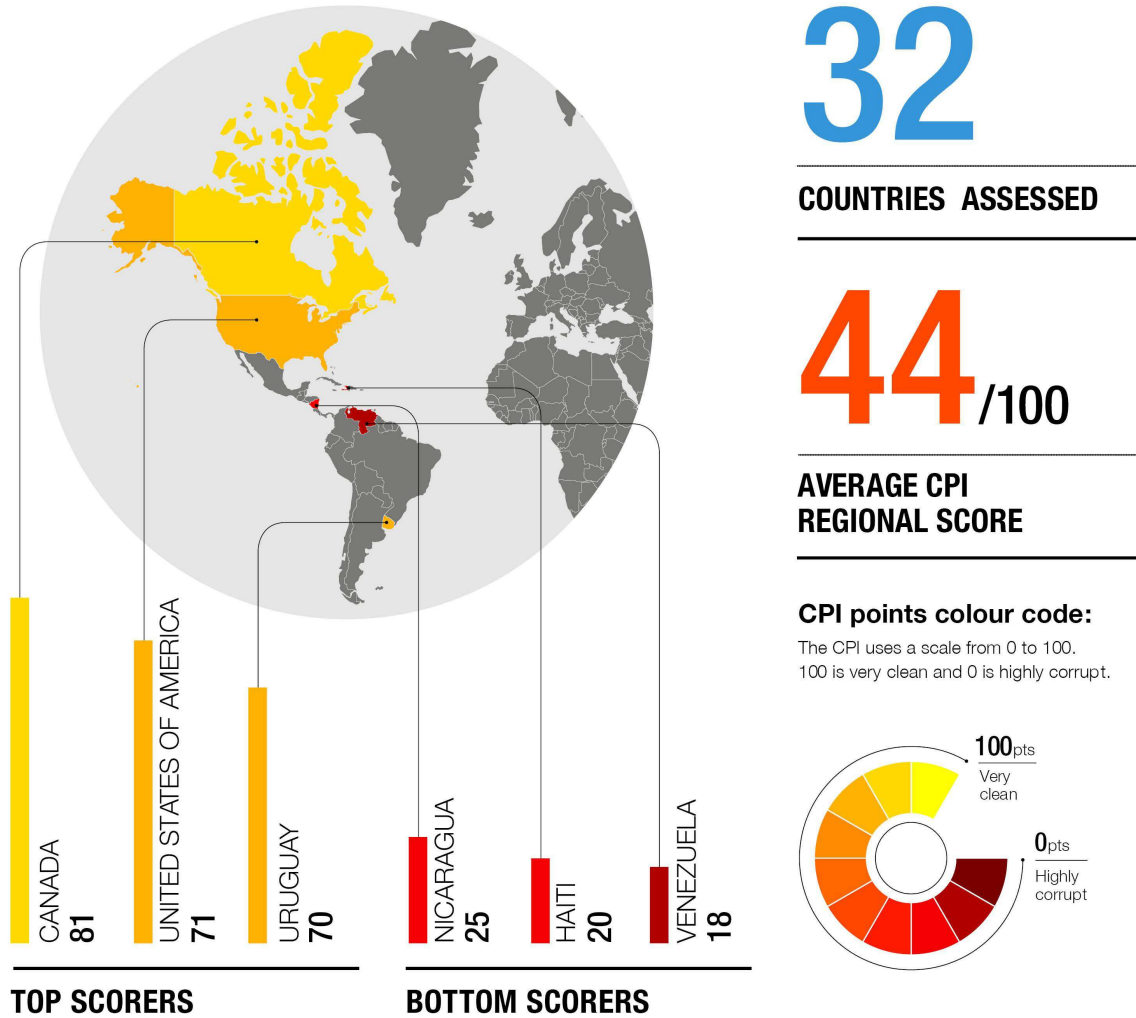
SNAPSHOT OF THE REGION

With an average score of 44 for three consecutive years, the Americas region continues to fail in making any serious inroads against corruption. Compared to other regions, the Americas is similar to Asia Pacific (average score: 44), but behind Western Europe and the European Union (average score: 66).

Canada is consistently a top performer on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 81 out of 100 on this year's index.

The United States remains in second place below Canada, but dramatically drops four points since last year to earn a score of 71, its lowest score in seven years. The US hovers close to Uruguay in South America, with a score of 70, and Barbados in the Caribbean, with a score of 68.

At the bottom of the index, Venezuela remains stuck at 18, reflecting systemic and persistent corruption across the country. Venezuela is followed by Haiti (20) and Nicaragua (25) to round out the region's worst performers.



CORRUPTION AND A CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

The number of poor performing countries in the Americas region should come as no surprise given the challenges to the democratic systems and diminishing political rights across North, South and Central America by populist and authoritarian leaders.

From President Trump (US) and President Bolsonaro (Brazil) to President Jimmy Morales (Guatemala) and President Maduro (Venezuela), the Americas region is witnessing a rise in some leaders and leadership styles that favour a number of the following tactics:

- an undermining of free and independent media, especially when coverage challenges leaders’ messaging
- a silencing and control of civil society and international organisations
- an increase in voter suppression and disenfranchisement
- an increase in anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, anti-indigenous and racist language
- a rise in public promises for simplistic and “strong hand” approaches to solving deep-rooted and complex societal problems, including corruption
- an interference with or blunt use of national institutions to weaken the system of checks and balances and increase executive power
- an increase in conflicts of interest and private influence

Unfortunately, this new reality, which is also part of a global trend, is transforming the “way of doing politics” across the region, where authoritarian-style leaders are undermining democratic practices.

! CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is challenged by populist and authoritarian rule.



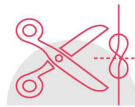
MEDIA MANIPULATION

Independent media are being undermined, especially when coverage challenges leaders' messaging.



INTERFERENCE OF STATE

Leaders interfere with and use national institutions to weaken checks and balances and increase executive power.



STRONG HAND APPROACHES

Leaders increasingly use simplistic and "strong hand" approaches to solve deep-rooted problems.



FINANCIALLY SUPPORTED CAREERS

Conflicts of interest and private influence over government decisions continue to grow.

IMPROVERS

Fortunately, the picture is not as gloomy everywhere in the region. Some countries have made commendable progress in the fight against corruption.

While still low, with scores of 34 and 35 respectively, Ecuador and El Salvador both increased their CPI scores by two points since 2017. In addition, with a score of 40, Argentina increased one point since 2017 and eight points since 2015, showing some significant improvement.

In these three countries, the justice sectors are advancing investigations and prosecutions on corruption cases against high profile individuals, including some former presidents. However, these countries also share a common challenge: a need to continue strengthening the independence of their judiciary systems to ensure impartial prosecutions, and that those found guilty of corruption receive appropriate punishment.

While freedom of the media and access to information are more robust in these countries, they could be stronger. These freedoms and liberties are essential for curbing corruption and contribute to a more aware and involved society that includes minorities and vulnerable groups, and that is able to demand accountability from those in power.

In El Salvador, our local chapter, **La Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE)** (<http://www.funde.org/>), is working to empower citizens to exercise their right to access information. Thanks to their work, citizens can access institutional email accounts, information on hiring processes of legislative advisors, state expenditures on art and information related to victims of armed conflict, among other information.

In Argentina, our local chapter, **Poder Ciudadano** (<http://poderciudadano.org/>), has advocated successfully to guarantee that asset-declarations from public officials' family members, including children and spouses, are available to the public. Thanks to the chapter's work, a regressive article of law that regulates asset-declarations was recently declared **unconstitutional** (<http://poderciudadano.org/el-gobierno-debe-hacer-publicos-los-bienes-de-los-conyuges-e-hijas-de-los-funcionarios/>).

DECLINERS

Since 2012, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua have seen a sharp decline in their respective scores, failing to make significant progress against corruption.

With a score of 25, Nicaragua dropped four points on the CPI in the last seven years. This steady decline reflects the country's political landscape and recent developments: After more than a decade in power, President Daniel Ortega controls most of Nicaragua's democratic institutions, curbing their effectiveness and independence. In recent years, the president also clamped down on the political rights of citizens, who despite a violent backlash, have taken to the streets in overwhelming numbers to protest against his authoritarian rule.

With CPI scores of 67 and 28 respectively, Chile and Mexico have experienced a five and six point drop since 2012, respectively. In the past few years, both countries experienced huge corruption scandals. These involved political leaders, including several governors in Mexico, and highly respected sectors traditionally considered free of corruption, such as the **Chilean police force** (<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40283143>).

Chile Transparente (<http://www.chiletransparente.cl/>), our local chapter, joined a special investigative commission working on the police scandal. Proposed improvements include expanding police trainings to address integrity and ethics issues, and creating an integrity commission capable of operating independently and conducting investigations.

In Mexico, basic political rights, including **freedom of expression** (http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/docs/2018_06_18_CIDH-UN_FINAL_MX_report_ENG.pdf) and **press freedom** (<https://www.ifex.org/mexico/2018/08/27/violencia-libertad-expresion/>), have sharply declined. **Without a free media** (<https://rsf.org/en/reports/mexicos-tragic-record-missing-journalists>) to provide oversight to government, the ability to prevent and denounce corruption is limited.

Over the past decade, Mexico has witnessed growing social support for anti-corruption reforms. In 2015, these efforts led to constitutional reform and the creation of a new national anti-corruption system. In the past year, a broad coalition composed by **Transparencia Mexicana** (<http://www.tm.org.mx/sistema-nacional-anticorrupcion-2-0-eduardo-bohorquez/>) advocated for the implementation of these reforms and the **creation of an independent attorney general's office** (http://elpais.com/internacional/2018/12/11/mexico/1544551932_888333.html).

STAGNATING COUNTRIES

Most English-speaking Caribbean countries score exactly the same as last year, showing complete stagnation. Despite the current administrations in Jamaica, the Bahamas and Barbados, which rose to power based on bold anti-corruption platforms, any visible improvements are still very limited.

In Jamaica, the **Petrojam scandal** (<https://rightstepsandpouitrees.wordpress.com/tag/a-review-of-aspects-of-pcj-and-a-comprehensive-audit-of-petrojam-limited/>), involving the country's only state-owned oil company, shows that nepotism, mismanagement of public funds and other forms of corruption are still well-rooted in the Caribbean. Procurement and contract awarding are particularly problematic. In the Petrojam case, the company could not account for approximately US\$40 million in income between 2013 to 2018. In response, National Integrity Action (NIA), our local chapter in Jamaica, **is calling for the government to rectify these irregularities** (<http://www.wiredja.com/news/local-news/jamaica-nia-s-dr-trevor-munroe-weighs-in-on-the-petrojam-debacle>) and prosecute public officials as soon as possible.

COUNTRIES TO WATCH

The two largest economies in the region, US and Brazil, are key countries to watch and monitor moving forward due to the influence they play in the region and around the world.

With a score of 71, the US, dropped four points since last year to earn its lowest score on the CPI in seven years. The country is currently witnessing threats to its system of checks and balances, as well as an erosion of ethical norms at the highest levels of power.

The low score comes at a time of growing nativist populist sentiment, a **[rise in hate crimes](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/hate-crimes-fbi-2017.html)** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/hate-crimes-fbi-2017.html>), trenchant political polarisation and the longest government shutdown in US history. All of these factors combined only exacerbate the **[loss of public trust in America's foundational institutions](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_in_the_usa_the_difference_a_year_makes)** (https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_in_the_usa_the_difference_a_year_makes).

With a score of 35, Brazil, dropped two points since last year to also earn its lowest CPI score in seven years. Similar to the US, Brazil has recently seen a rise in populism.

Previous anti-corruption efforts helped bring corrupt individuals from across political parties and the private sector to justice. In 2014, the **[Lava Jato operation](https://www.transparency.org/getinvolved/awardwinner/operation_car_wash_task_force)** (https://www.transparency.org/getinvolved/awardwinner/operation_car_wash_task_force), which involved a network of more than 20 corporations, including the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, has since grown into one of the largest money laundering cases worldwide. To date, it involves **[more than US\\$788 million dollars across nine countries in Latin America and others overseas, reaching as far as Angola and Mozambique](https://www.transparency.org/news/pressrelease/prosecutors_from_14_countries_must_act_quickly_to_bring_the_corrupt_to_just)** (https://www.transparency.org/news/pressrelease/prosecutors_from_14_countries_must_act_quickly_to_bring_the_corrupt_to_just).

While highlighting an extreme degree of abuse and corruption in many of Brazil's institutions, it also revealed a growing cynicism and sense of hopelessness among citizens. With several powerful leaders implicated in the scandal, the bar for opposition candidates was set fairly low.

Capitalising on this environment, President Bolsonaro rose to power with promises to end corruption. The president made it clear that he will rule with a strong hand, favouring highly populist language that threatens many of the democratic milestones achieved by the country.

Our local chapter, **[Transparency International Brazil](https://transparenciainternacional.org.br)** (<https://transparenciainternacional.org.br>) (TI-Brazil), has developed a **[mega-package of 70 measures for a new anti-corruption agenda](https://unidoscontra corrupcao.org.br/#as-novas-medidas)** (<https://unidoscontra corrupcao.org.br/#as-novas-medidas>) that respect the rule of law and human rights.

Including input from several partners in the public and private sectors, the anti-corruption package includes proposals for institutional reforms, draft bills, constitutional amendments, draft resolutions and other rules to control corruption and tackle its systemic roots. TI-Brazil will seek to persuade the Bolsonaro administration to adopt these recommendations when creating an anti-corruption strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Now, more than ever, action is needed across the Americas to fight against corruption and defend democracy. Citizens, activists and reform-minded leaders throughout the region need to intensify their efforts by:

- defending the historical gains in anti-corruption legislation and democracy, particularly institutions that create checks and balances to state power

- keeping a close watch on political speech that falsely uses the fight against corruption to undermine democracy and propel authoritarian or populist individuals to power

- ensuring that free speech and political rights do not continue to decline, and speaking out against any attempts to control the media or civil society groups

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Sub-Saharan Africa: undemocratic corruption efforts

This year's Corruption Perceptions Index shows a gloomy picture for Africa – only eight out of 43 out of 100 on the index. Despite African leaders in declaring 2018 as the Year of Integrity and Zero Corruption, this has yet to translate into

(/news/feature/cpi2018-subsaharan-af)

scoring America's debilitamiento de la democracia y el populismo

As in previous years, many of the countries in the Americas have scored low on the Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2018, the index shows a gloomy picture for the region, with only eight out of 43 countries scoring 45 or more out of 100. Despite the fact that many countries in the Americas have declared 2018 as the Year of Integrity and Zero Corruption, this has yet to translate into significant progress in the fight against corruption.

(/news/feature/el_debilitamiento_de_la_democracia_y_el_populismo)



Corruption checks and balances weaken

The Corruption Perceptions Index 2018 paints a gloomy picture for the Middle East and Northern Africa where

threaten anti-corruption efforts

Tackling the crisis of democracy, promoting rule of law and fighting corruption

In a region where only one country scores 45 or more out of 100 on the index, there has been minimal progress in combatting corruption over several years. As Transparency International celebrates its 25th anniversary, we are witnessing a worrying situation where democratic progression has slowed to a near halt. Indeed, even some countries which were demonstrating robust and open governance systems, are now starting to backslide with democratic norms, while their institutions are under threat.

incremental progress by a select few, most notably Egypt, which has scored 59 out of 100.

(/news/feature/weak_checks_and_balances_threaten_anti_corruption_efforts_across_the_mena)

(/news/feature/tackling_crisis_of_democracy_promoting_rule_of_law_and_fighting_corruption)

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For the majority of people living in rural Nepal, getting a basic level of good medical facilities is difficult. And it is also not easy to file a complaint about poor health services at government hospitals. Here is how we have helped.

Netflix's new series based on the Lava Jato case, The Money Game was just released on their platform so we've compiled a list of the best 5 Netflix series that show different faces of corruption. Check them out! ☐



The 5 best Netflix series about corruption (that aren't House of Cards)

Everyone knows House of Cards as the Netflix show about corruption, but over the last few years, the popular streaming service has...

Real Lives, Real Stories: Nepal

This story is part of Real Lives, Real Stories, a series written by staff from our national chapters in the Asia Pacific region. Stories...

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