

Flawed Democracies

Center unveils new tool to track political accountability around the world

WASHINGTON, April 29, 2004 — In an unprecedented international investigation into the precise extent of openness, accountability and governance in 25 countries that hold elections, no country ranked in the top tier, the Center for Public Integrity has found.

In the defining characteristic of a representative democracy—holding free and fair elections—all of the countries studied are susceptible to abuses of power, whether from a lack of transparency, a lack of accountability from an independent agency overseeing the electoral process, or having no disclosure requirements or limits on money from individuals and corporations flowing into the political system.

No single country achieved a "very strong" ranking on the Public Integrity Index, a measure of the existence and effectiveness of laws and institutions that promote public accountability and limit corruption, and the access that citizens have to information with which they can hold their governments accountable.

That is one of the many findings of the Global Integrity Report, offering unprecedented quantitative, qualitative and comparative information on national institutions that prevent abuses of power and promote public integrity.

The scourge of corruption is one of the greatest challenges that citizens face. It erodes public trust in government, undermines the rule of law, weakens the effectiveness of governance at all levels, and hinders economic growth by discouraging investment.

Of the 25 countries, just six ranked "strong": the United States, which finished first, followed by Portugal, Australia, Italy, Germany and South Africa. Seven countries—the Philippines, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Venezuela and Ghana—received "moderate" rankings while Nigeria, Panama, Nicaragua, Ukraine, India, Indonesia, Namibia, Turkey, Russia, and Kenya received "weak" scores. Guatemala and Zimbabwe, the other two countries surveyed, finished in the "very weak" category.

The United States ranked first in two of six broad areas studied, including "very strong" ratings in the Civil Society, Public Information and Media category and the Branches of Government category. It finished 19th in the Oversight and Regulatory Mechanisms category, in part because, unlike other countries studied, the United States has no national ombudsman, whose role is to make the government more open and accountable to members of the public.

For the study, an on-the-ground team of more than 150 social scientists, journalists and analysts collected or reviewed data on 80 Integrity Indicators—measures of the presence and effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms—divided across six broad categories: civil society, public information and media; electoral and political processes; branches of government; administration and civil service; oversight and regulatory mechanisms; and

anti-corruption mechanisms and rule of law. The indicators allowed Center researchers to quantify each country's response to controlling corruption.

Other features assessed by the Integrity Indicators include participation; accountability, such as giving reasons for policy decisions; immunity from prosecution; conflict-of-interest regulations; and safety—i.e., freedom from threats in terms of being physically harmed, imprisoned or killed. (See the Methodology for more information.)

In addition to the quantitative measurements, the Global Integrity Report provides specific and comprehensive country information that includes:

- country facts, or basic statistical data on population, the economy, and the political environment;
- a corruption timeline, which offers a unique political/historical timeline of significant corruption-related events;
- a corruption notebook, a 2,000-word original essay by a leading investigative journalist from the country on the culture of corruption;
- an integrity assessment, a 3,000-word report compiled by the lead social scientist to highlight the main features of each of the six main categories that make up the Integrity Indicators.

The countries studied—including the largest democracy on each continent—were chosen to generate a sample with geographic, economic and political diversity. The selection of countries includes six from Africa and seven from Latin America.

Findings

Corruption cannot thrive in an environment where the public is informed about the true extent and specific nature of abuses of power; sunshine is the best disinfectant, as the saying goes. A free press and access to information are critical in holding government accountable—if corruption is to be addressed, it must first be exposed. Similarly, government officials must be accountable to the law.

The Global Integrity Report found that such standards are not maintained in many of the countries studied. Among the findings:

- In 18 of the countries, there are no laws to protect civil servants who report corruption—whistle-blowers—from recrimination or other negative consequences. In practice, Portugal is the only country where civil servants who report corruption are "often" protected from recrimination or other negative consequences. In the other 24 countries, such protections are only afforded "sometimes," "rarely" or "almost never";
- In 15 of the countries, journalists investigating corruption had been imprisoned, physically harmed or killed;
- In three countries, Guatemala, Mexico and Zimbabwe, both journalists and judges have been physically harmed in the past year;

- In 14 of the countries, the head of state cannot be prosecuted for corruption;
- In six countries, the ruling party controls two-thirds or more of the seats in the national legislature, reducing the opposition parties' ability to enhance government accountability;
- In seven of the countries, the top executive branch official is not required to file a personal financial disclosure form, preventing the public from seeing what private interests its leader has.

The report also found that the phenomenon of money buying political favors is international in scope, as the following examples illustrate, and in many cases continues, with public integrity mechanisms in this area universally weak.

In the Philippines, former President Joseph Estrada got large donations from, among others, a tobacco tycoon who wanted reprieve from a tax evasion case. After Estrada took office, his commissioner of the Bureau of Internal Revenue dropped the case against the tobacco tycoon.

In Germany, investigations found that large corporations, through methodically committed tax fraud, had provided several million marks for party funds and financial resources for politicians. In November 1999, the German public learned that Helmut Kohl, who was the federal chancellor from 1982 to 1998, had millions of marks laundered during his tenure by organizations in Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

In the United States, Enron, one of President George W. Bush's top donors over his career, spent millions of dollars on politicians and parties from the late 1980s to the time of its collapse in December 2001, and received billions of dollars' worth of favorable treatment from federal and state government officials on no fewer than 49 occasions.

Political party finances are secret in 10 of 25 countries, the Global Integrity Report found. Fourteen of those countries allow unlimited contributions to parties by corporations, and 17 countries have no laws restricting how much parties can spend to influence elections.

Of the 25 countries surveyed, only two—Germany and Mexico—ranked "very strong" in the electoral and political processes category, which assesses electoral processes, election monitoring agencies and political party finances. Four countries—India, Japan, Kenya and Zimbabwe—had no independent agency to oversee political party finances. In fifteen countries that did have legal oversight of party finances, the responsible agency rarely or almost never launched independent investigations. In thirteen countries, the agency rarely or almost never imposed a penalty on those who broke campaign finance laws.

Altogether, including researchers, writers and editors at the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C., the Global Integrity Report is a collaboration involving some 200 people on six continents (20 of the 25 journalists were drawn from the Center's International Consortium of Investigative Journalists). The massive project, conceived by Charles Lewis and directed by Marianne Camerer, was funded by Open Society Institute

and the McCormick Tribune Foundation. (See The Investigative Team for a complete list of everyone involved.)