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## Corruption's drag on democratic states

**By Christopher Walker and Sanja Tatic**  
**NEW YORK**

The difficult, ongoing battle to achieve governance that is effective, democratic, and responsive to ordinary citizens faces a particularly pernicious obstacle: entrenched corruption.

A source or symptom of wider problems confronting society, corruption is both a barrier to strengthening democratic institutions and harmful to development. And while every country confronts this scourge to one degree or another, for transition countries whose democratic reforms hang in the balance, this is an especially critical challenge.

In order to acquire a stronger understanding of the forces at work inhibiting the establishment of democratic governance, Freedom House's study of governance, "Countries at the Crossroads," examines 30 strategically important states around the globe that are struggling to consolidate democratic institutions.

These countries - from Armenia to Malaysia to Zimbabwe - are evaluated on four indicators of good governance: accountability and public voice, civil liberties, rule of law, and anticorruption and transparency. While none of these countries is a strong governance performer overall, performance in anticorruption and transparency was pointedly weak with an average score of 2.71 (on a scale of 0 to 7, with 7 being strongest), more than a full point lower than the strongest overall category (civil liberties). And corruption shows itself to be a resilient and global problem: None of the 30 countries in the study scored above a 4.0 on the anticorruption measure.

The study found Zimbabwe, Azerbaijan, Yemen, Kazakhstan, and Bahrain to be the weakest performers on the corruption indicator. In these countries, powerholders effectively maintain a chokehold on the state institutions, placing a premium on private benefit for the ruling elite.

Zimbabwe was the worst performer in the anticorruption and transparency category, which takes into account the performance of the authorities in fighting corruption by evaluating the existence of laws and standards to prevent and combat corrupt practices, the enforcement of such measures, and overall governmental transparency. The Zimbabwe report found that "the primary interest of the Mugabe government is to retain power through a system of patronage that includes access to both state and private assets" and that "the ruling ZANU-PF party owns a wide range of businesses, allowing party elites to profit personally."

In Kazakhstan, where President Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled for a decade and a half, the report finds that "the government of Kazakhstan is unlikely to take decisive steps to eliminate corruption as long as Nazarbayev remains president of the country."

These examples are illustrative and not exhaustive. Similar accounts were found in many of the other countries examined, where kleptocratic regimes siphoned resources that should be devoted to citizens' needs and development.

Meanwhile, countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, which have made progress in important areas of governance and have public mandates to take on corruption, are still finding it difficult to make deeper institutional reforms

against corruption.

In Ukraine, for example, the breakthrough in the exposure of corruption on a grand scale following the Orange Revolution "was not accompanied by a change in the structural incentives for politicians and civil servants to blur the line between private and public interests."

Georgia, which improved its performance on corruption by putting in place several important reforms (for example, by overhauling the legendarily corrupt police), nonetheless is also experiencing difficulty in pushing reform to the next level and in meeting expectations of its citizens and international institutions alike.

Part of the corruption challenge is its comprehensiveness. Reform of any single sector is not sufficient to tackle the problem. In fact, the weakest performing states tend to have crosscutting governance deficiencies. These include weak capacity and independence of the law enforcement community and judiciary, as well as civil society.

The news media is critical. The study found that restrictions on press freedom often are most severe in countries where corruption is most rampant - underscoring the vital role that the press can play in exposing corruption and airing debates about how best to address it.

Given the vastness of the problem and the stakes involved for powerholders who benefit from corrupt networks should they lose their position, there is no single, simple solution for tackling this challenge.

Western governments, major transnational institutions, and the international business community all will need to redouble efforts to fight corruption in developing transition states. However, despite the important role of international institutions, national governments and domestic actors remain indispensable.

If the battle to curb corruption and improve governance is to be won, it will require a commitment from international and domestic actors alike. Success in this effort would open the field for these countries to join the community of stable, free, and democratic nations.

• *Christopher Walker and Sanja Tatic are coeditors of Countries at the Crossroads, Freedom House's annual study of democratic governance, whose 2006 findings are being released on Aug. 3.*

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