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Twelve Years of Corruption Perception Index: A Tale of Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract: Corruption remains a major challenge to governance, public trust, and institutional legitimacy in Southeast Asia. This study compares trends in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in Malaysia and Indonesia from 2012 to 2024 using annual data published by Transparency International. It examines how changes in CPI scores and rankings corresponded with major political transitions, institutional reforms, and anti-corruption developments in both countries. Through a qualitative approach, this study interprets CPI trends alongside key political and governance events identified through content analysis. The findings show that Malaysia recorded higher CPI scores than Indonesia throughout the period, although its performance remained unstable post 2020 amid political turnover and governance uncertainty. In Indonesia, CPI data observed pre-2020 were not sustained, with subsequent declines coinciding with reforms widely seen as weakening the autonomy of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). These patterns imply that improvements in corruption perception are difficult to sustain without institutional continuity, credible enforcement, and political commitment to reform. By comparing two neighboring democracies with different reform paths, this study contributes to the broader debate on corruption, governance, and political accountability and offers policy-relevant insights to strengthen anti-corruption institutions in both countries.

Keywords: *Corruption Perception Index, governance, political transition, Malaysia, Indonesia*

1. Introduction

Corruption is a persistent challenge to effective governance, as it weakens public institutions, discourages investment, and undermines public trust. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia have continued to face corruption challenges. Nevertheless, both countries face corruption challenges with different impacts and scopes. Over the last ten years, changes in government, political transitions, and institutional reforms have shifted perceptions of corruption. Thus, the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International (2025) It is important for evaluating and comparing corruption perception in countries worldwide. As of March 2025, 180 countries have been analyzed by Transparency International (2025). The CPI scores range from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). These scores are based on many sources, such as expert opinions and public surveys. Nevertheless, they do not measure actual corruption cases, but comparatively assess how corruption in the government sector is viewed. The CPI trends in Malaysia and Indonesia depend on major political events, legal changes, and the changing roles of anti-corruption bodies.

In this study, the changing CPI trends in Indonesia and Malaysia, along with the factors causing such changes, are explored. Although both countries are in the Southeast Asian region, the corruption trend has been inconsistent over the years. In Malaysia, famous corruption scandals (for example, 1MDB), changes in the ruling government in a short time, and institutional reforms affected the CPI. On the other hand, the changes in governance and reduced power of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) have played a role in Indonesia's declining CPI. The effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts and the long-term impact of government reforms in these countries are concerning, given the inconsistent trend in perception toward corruption.

Although the Malaysian government introduced the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019–2023 to improve political integrity, public services, government contracts, and corporate governance, its progress has been limited mainly due to political interference, weak enforcement of laws, and a judiciary that is not fully independent. The plan only succeeded to a limited extent due to the influence of corrupted individuals and institutions. These conditions continue to erode public confidence and constrain progress in Malaysia's CPI performance. As emphasized by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (2019), effective anti-corruption

reform requires attention to addressing the serious institutional and governance problems that sustain corrupt practices. Based on this notion, this study examines the relationship between changes in government and CPI trends in Malaysia and Indonesia between 2012 and 2024. By relating political events and institutional development to shifts in CPI scores and rankings, this analysis seeks to clarify how anti-corruption efforts have been perceived over time and why longer-term structural reform remains essential.

2. Literature Review

Measurement of Corruption

Corruption remains a serious challenge for governments as it weakens public institutions, constrains economic growth, and erodes public trust. Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. (Transparency International, 2025). Johnston (2014) argues that corruption takes multiple forms, including bribery, favoritism, embezzlement, and the use of political office to benefit relatives, friends, or business associates. These practices weaken legal institutions and reduce fairness within democratic systems. Since corruption is often concealed, it is difficult to be directly measured. Hence, scholars and policymakers frequently rely on proxy indicators such as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) to assess perceived levels of corruption across countries.

The CPI is one of the most widely used indicators of perceived public-sector corruption. Published annually by Transparency International, it combines expert assessments and business survey data to assign each country a score from 0, indicating a highly corrupt public sector, to 100, indicating a very clean one. (Transparency International, 2025). Perceptions may be shaped by media coverage, political narratives, and broader economic conditions rather than direct observation of corrupt acts. For this reason, some scholars caution that the CPI captures perceived corruption rather than corruption itself, even though it remains useful for comparative analysis (Heywood, 2016). Despite these limitations, the CPI continues to serve as a valuable tool for examining broad corruption trends over time, particularly in contexts marked by political transitions and governance reform. (Rose-Ackerman, 1999).

Corruption Trends in Southeast Asia

Corruption remains deeply embedded in the political and economic structures of many Southeast Asian states (Hamilton-Hart, 2001). In Indonesia, corruption has long been associated with bureaucratic inefficiency, weak regulatory enforcement, and fragmented institutional control, all of which have constrained economic development and investor confidence. In contrast, corruption in Malaysia has often been linked to state-business relations and elite political bargaining, where access to state resources may be used to secure personal, fractional, or coalition advantage (Hamilton-Hart, 2001). Such patterns indicate that corruption in both countries should be understood not only as a governance problem but also as a structural constraint on institutional credibility and economic performance.

Corruption Trends in Malaysia and Indonesia

Malaysia and Indonesia have both experienced fluctuations in CPI scores and rankings, although the drivers and implications of these changes differ across the two countries. In Malaysia, CPI performance has been uneven and closely associated with political turnover, institutional credibility, and major corruption scandals. The 1MDB scandal, which unfolded between 2015 and 2018, significantly damaged Malaysia's global reputation and contributed to concerns about the integrity of its governance system (Jones, 2020). Mallow (2018) similarly argues that corruption in Malaysia is sustained by deeper structural weaknesses, including concentrated power, limited transparency, and weak public accountability. He further notes that the existence of anti-corruption laws has not always translated into effective enforcement. This gap suggests the insufficiency of legal measures alone without stronger oversight, institutional independence, and broader public accountability. Following the general election in 2018, Malaysia's CPI score improved due to governance reform under the 'Pakatan Harapan' administration (Jones, 2022). Nonetheless, the CPI has subsequently stagnated in the following years (2020-2022) due to political instability. This situation highlights the importance of political stability in maintaining corruption progress (Siddiquee, Noore Alam, 2022).

Indonesia, on the other hand, has long been struggling with institutionalized corruption. Nevertheless, major anti-corruption reforms between 2012 and 2019 improved CPI scores (Putriyana & Rochaeti, 2021). Under

President Joko Widodo's administration, the weakening of KPK eroded public trust in anti-corruption initiatives. The weakening was further reflected in the decline of CPI scores from 40 in 2019 to 34 in 2023. Unlike Malaysia, the corruption trend in Indonesia is showing gradual as opposed to abrupt changes, implying that institutional stability is crucial for long-term governance progress. On this matter, Butt (2019) critically examined Indonesia's anti-corruption reforms under the KPK. He elaborated on the initial success of KPK, followed by political resistance and weakening of the institution through legislative amendments, besides highlighting the structural and political factors undermining anti-corruption progress. The Indonesian government also introduced an anti-corruption plan that included clear goals and benchmarks (Wibisana & Marbun, 2018).

Social and Political Impact of Corruption

Corruption has serious effects. For instance, Najih and Wiryani (2020) studied how corruption affects Malaysians and Indonesians, further discovering that it makes people lose trust in the government, creates inequality, and makes important institutions weaker. Their study also mentioned that people's view of corruption affects their interest in joining political activities or trusting the legal system. Finally, the authors suggested letting the public take part in fighting it, protecting people who report corruption, and giving the media freedom to report the truth to reduce corruption.

Theoretical Perspective on Corruption and Governance

This study examines the corruption trends in Malaysia and Indonesia using popular ideas and analytical models on good governance. It proceeds from the view that corruption perceptions are not shaped by isolated scandals alone, but are also influenced by the strength of public institutions, the stability of political arrangements, and the credibility of legal enforcement. Hence, changes in CPI scores are examined in relation to institutional performance, political incentives, and the broader governance environment in each country.

Governance Theories

This analysis draws on two broad theoretical perspectives: the good governance framework associated with the World Bank (1992) and Mungiu-Pippidi's (2015) argument on democracy and corruption. The good governance theory holds that corruption is less likely to persist where state institutions are transparent, accountable, and effectively monitored. In this context, a stronger judicial system, clear administrative procedures, and independent anti-corruption bodies create more conducive conditions for corruption control (Kaufman et al., 2011; World Bank, 1992). Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), however, argues that democracy itself does not guarantee lower corruption. Electoral competition may open space for reform, but such reform is unlikely to last unless it is supported by institutions' capability to enforce impartial rules. This character is especially related to Malaysia and Indonesia, where political change has not always translated into sustained improvements in corruption controls.

Analytical Models on Corruption

To reinforce the analysis, this study also draws on Rose-Ackerman's (1999) model of corruption and government model and Khan's (2018) political settlement framework. Rose-Ackerman (1999) depicts that corruption becomes worse when accountability is weak, allowing political actors to interfere in administrative or enforcement processes. Her model is useful for understanding why anti-corruption institutions often underperform when formal rules exist but are not applied consistently.

On the other hand, Khan's framework shifts attention to the distribution of power among political elites (Khan, 2018). It suggests that corruption often persists not simply because of weak institutions, but rather due to influential groups benefiting greatly from weak enforcement and having little incentive to support meaningful reform. This view helps explain why corruption measures lost momentum when they began to threaten established interests.

Collectively, these frameworks suggest that corruption perceptions are shaped less by formal commitments alone than by the actual credibility of institutions and political conditions under which they operate. In the analysis that follows, they are used to interpret whether changes in CPI scores are associated with stronger institutional autonomy or, conversely, with political instability and weakened enforcement.

3. Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a comparative case-study design to examine the corruption trends in Malaysia and Indonesia from 2012 to 2024. The analysis focuses on annual changes in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and interprets those changes in relation to major political developments, institutional reforms, and high-profile corruption-related events in both countries. Rather than treating CPI movement as a direct measure of actual corruption, this study utilizes it as an indicator of perceived public-sector integrity and examines how those perceptions may have shifted over time under different political and institutional conditions.

A structured content analysis was used to interpret CPI trends across the two countries. The unit of analysis was the country-year. For each year, the CPI score, CPI ranking, and relevant political or institutional developments that could shape public and expert perceptions of corruption were considered. These included changes in the government ruling party, major corruption scandals, legal reforms, and developments affecting anti-corruption institutions.

Data sources and scope

The primary dataset consisted of annual CPI published by Transparency International for Malaysia and Indonesia between 2012 and 2024. The period was chosen as it provides a continuous series of comparable annual observations for both countries. CPI scores ranged from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating lower perceived public-sector corruption. CPI rankings indicate a country's relative position compared with other countries in the same year, with lower numerical rankings reflecting better comparative performance (Transparency International, 2025).

The CPI was selected as it is one of the most widely used cross-national indicators of perceived corruption and provides a standardized basis for longitudinal and comparative analysis. In addition to CPI data, secondary sources were drawn, including academic literature, official reports, and documented political developments, to contextualize shifts in scores and rankings and to reduce overinterpretation of CPI as a standalone measure.

Malaysia and Indonesia were selected as both are important Southeast Asian countries with shared regional context but different political trajectories and institutional dynamics. Comparing the two nations allows one to examine how corruption perceptions may develop under different patterns of political competition, institutional reform, and governance continuity. The comparison is hence aimed at generating analytical insight into the conditions under which anti-corruption efforts appear more or less credible over time.

Content analysis procedure

The content analysis was conducted in three phases. First, annual CPI scores and rankings for both nations were compiled and organized chronologically to identify broad trends, periods of improvement or decline, and notable fluctuations over time. Second, key political and institutional developments during the same period were identified from secondary sources. Third, these developments were grouped into analytical categories to support systematic interpretation of CPI movement.

Limitations

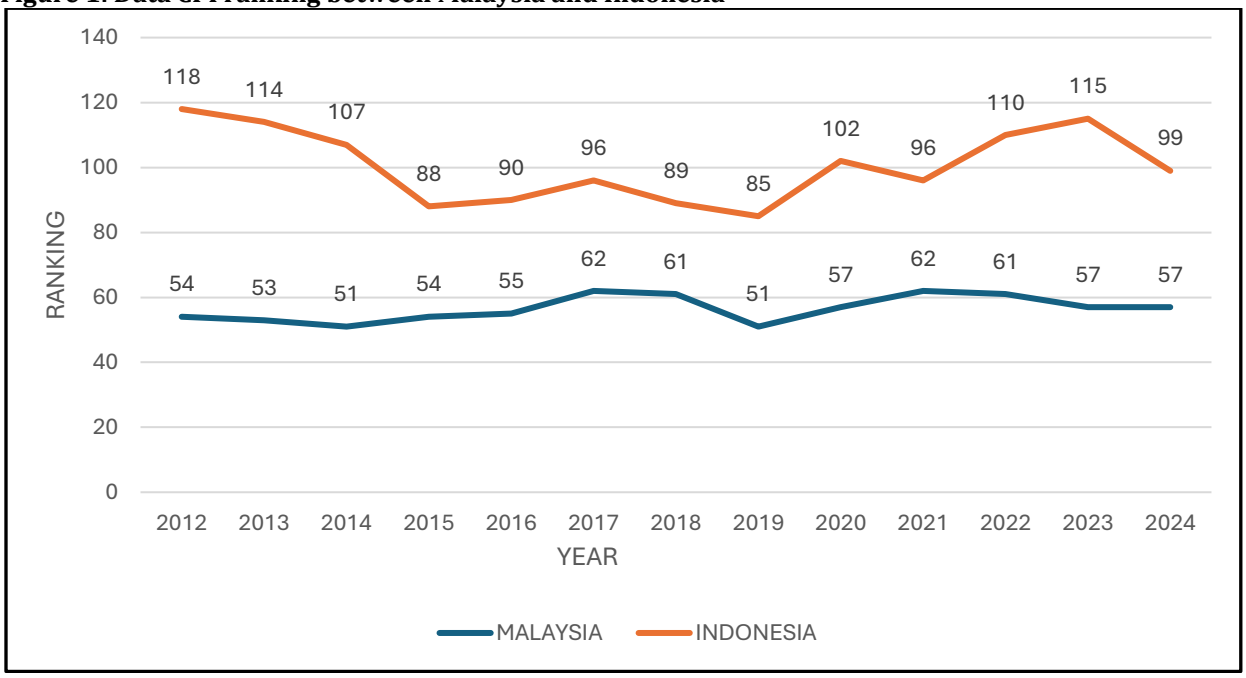
The use of CPI as a perception-based index has some limitations. First, it does not measure actual corruption directly or capture all forms of corruption, particularly those occurring outside the public sector or through informal networks. Moreover, changes in ranking are relative and may reflect improvements in other countries rather than a decline in the country examined. For these reasons, CPI results were interpreted cautiously and used as an indicative rather than standard evidence of corruption trends. Therefore, the analysis focused on changes in perceived corruption in relation to political and institutional developments, rather than claiming to measure corruption itself.

4. Findings

The CPI Index published by Transparency International reports focuses on two related but distinct measures, a score and a ranking. The score ranges from 0 to 100, with a higher score indicating a cleaner perceived public sector. The ranking reflects a country's relative position among countries assessed in a particular year, with a lower numerical rank implying better comparative performance. As depicted in Figure 1, both Malaysia and Indonesia recorded fluctuating CPI rankings over the study period. Malaysia's ranking ranged from 51 to 63 between 2012 and 2024. Its better comparative positions were recorded in years such as 2019, when it was ranked 51st, while weaker relative performance was observed in 2017 and 2021, when it was ranked 62nd. This pattern suggests that Malaysia's standing remained comparatively stronger than Indonesia's throughout the period, although its performance was uneven rather than consistently improving.

In contrast, Indonesia displayed greater volatility over the 12 years. Even though the country started with a low ranking of 118 in 2012, there has been a slight improvement. A temporary setback was recorded in 2023, when Indonesia ranked 115th, before progressing to 99th in 2024. Such an improvement in ranking position, a jump of 16 positions, may indicate better progress in anti-corruption efforts. Overall, while both nations have shown efforts in curbing corruption, Malaysia has maintained a stable position, whereas Indonesia experienced greater fluctuations, suggesting periodic governance challenges or reforms affecting its CPI.

Figure 1: Data CPI ranking between Malaysia and Indonesia

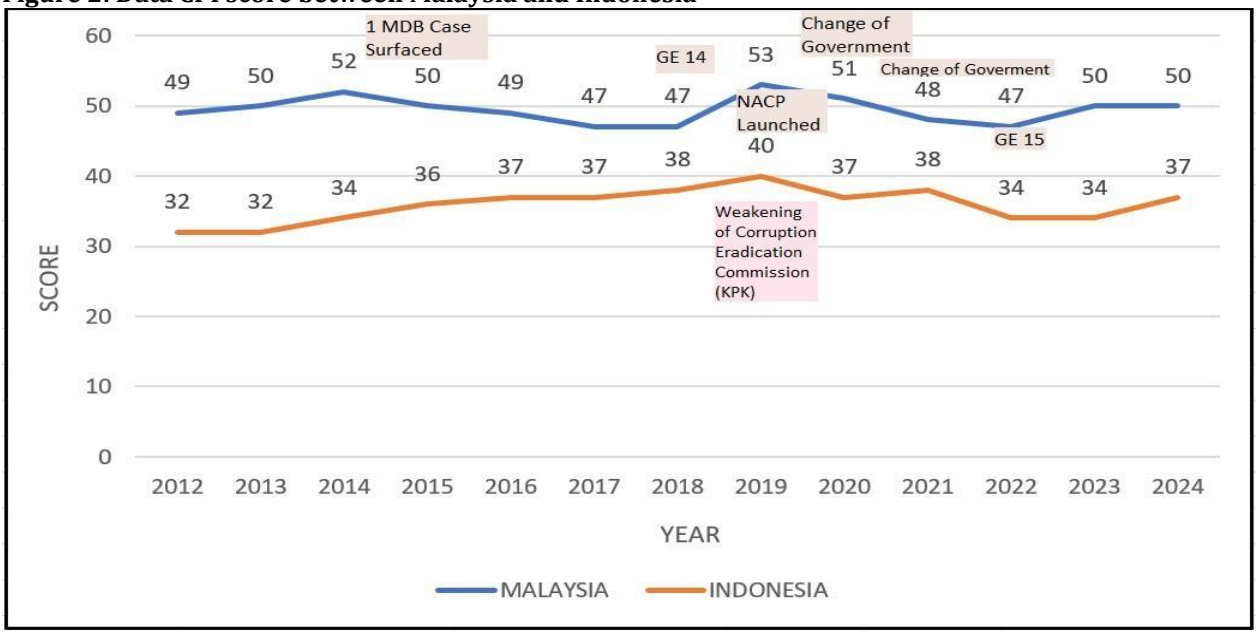


Source: Transparency International (2013 to 2025)

Figure 2 overleaf presents the CPI scores for both nations. Malaysia consistently recorded higher scores than Indonesia throughout the study period, indicating a stronger overall perception of public-sector integrity. Malaysia's highest score was 53 in 2019, while its lowest score of 47 was recorded in 2017, 2018, and 2022. Although the 2019 result suggests a period of improved confidence in governance, the subsequent declines were attributed to the absence of sustained progress.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's CPI score rose from 32 in 2012 to 40 in 2019, implying a gradual improvement in perceived corruption control during the period. However, this trend did not continue. The score declined to 34 in 2022 and 2023 before increasing slightly to 37 in 2024. It indicates that earlier gains in corruption control were not fully established and that institutional progress remained unstable.

Figure 2: Data CPI score between Malaysia and Indonesia



Source: Transparency International (2013 to 2025)

Malaysia outperformed Indonesia in CPI scores throughout the study period, but this should not be read as evidence of steady progress. Its scores improved briefly and then began to lose its momentum after 2019. Comparatively, Indonesia started with a lower score, improved gradually, and then experienced a clear setback before a slight recovery in 2024. In both countries, the overall pattern shows that the real challenge is not in starting anti-corruption reform but rather keeping its progress over time.

Discussion

Malaysia's experience is broadly consistent with Mungiu-Pippidi's (2015) argument that democratization alone does not guarantee sustained corruption control. The 2018 electoral transition was followed by an improvement in CPI performance, suggesting that political turnover may create an opening for reform. However, this motion was not maintained after 2020. The pattern indicates that electoral change, while politically significant, is insufficient on its own unless it is accompanied by sturdy institutional reform and consistent enforcement. In this context, the Malaysian case supports the view that anti-corruption improvement relies less on leadership change than on the stability and credibility of the institutions following it.

This interpretation aligns with the good governance framework. (World Bank, 1992), which emphasizes the role of transparent institutions, accountability, and administrative consistency in reducing corruption. Malaysia's fluctuating CPI trend suggests that political changes did not translate into stable governance gains. Frequent changes in leadership after 2018 may have weakened policy continuity and reduced the consistency of anti-corruption efforts. The findings, therefore, imply that institutional stability matters more than short-term political transition when corruption is assessed over time.

On the other hand, Indonesia's CPI score improved gradually before weakening after 2019, when reforms affecting the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) were widely seen as reducing its autonomy. This trail is consistent with the good governance view, since declining institutional independence was accompanied by a deterioration in corruption perception. It also reflects Khan's political settlements framework (2018), which argues that corruption persists where powerful political actors have incentives to weaken enforcement institutions or preserve arrangements protecting the elite interests. In the case of Indonesia, the weakening of KPK suggests that formal commitment to anti-corruption can be undermined when reform compromises established power structures.

Rose-Ackerman's (1999) The model of corruption and government further helps explain this outcome. Her argument emphasizes that anti-corruption laws are unlikely to be effective when enforcement bodies lack independence or when political members can interfere with implementation. The comparison between Malaysia and Indonesia reaches a common conclusion: anti-corruption progress is difficult to sustain when institutions lack autonomy and have inconsistent enforcement, while reform depends too heavily on changing political leadership to strong governance arrangements.

Overall, the findings suggest that improvements in corruption perception require more than legal frameworks or public commitments, as they ultimately depend on credible institutions, political restraint, and the continuity of reform across periods of leadership change.

Policy Recommendations

The findings recommend that Malaysia and Indonesia strengthen their institutional safeguards, legal protections, and governance mechanisms if anti-corruption efforts are to be sustained. First, anti-corruption agencies in both countries must be managed with independence and transparency. In Malaysia, this means reinforcing the autonomy and credibility of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), particularly in cases involving senior political members. Meanwhile, Indonesia requires the restoration and protection of the institutional independence of the KPK so that it can function effectively without political interference. Both countries must also empower the broader enforcement environment in which anti-corruption agencies operate. Anti-corruption efforts are unlikely to succeed if prosecution processes, oversight bodies, and judicial institutions remain vulnerable to political pressure. Institutional independence must therefore be matched by consistent legal enforcement and clear accountability mechanisms.

South Korea offers a useful policy reference as its anti-corruption progress has been supported by stricter legal enforcement, stronger oversight, and digital governance reforms. Its experience suggests that transparency, particularly in procurement and public administration systems, can reduce opportunities for discretionary abuse and strengthen accountability (Cahyawati et al., 2023; Public Procurement Service Korea, n.d). Its success lies in the strict enforcement of anti-corruption laws, transparent rules on political funding, and the use of strong digital governance systems. The Korean government established the Korea Independent Commission Against Corruption (KICAC) in 2002 and later integrated it into the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC) in 2008. Later, what became the key factor to South Korea's success in mitigating corruption was the enactment of the Kim Young-ran Act (also known as the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act) in 2016. Its successful implementation was driven by strict compliance and monitoring, as well as clear punishments, which translated to a significant reduction in bribery in the public sector. Additionally, the South Korean government introduced e-government systems, such as digital transparency platforms for public procurement and financial disclosures, reducing opportunities for corruption. (Cahyawati, D., Chandranegara, I., Burhanuddin, N., & Yani, 2023; Ramli, 2001). The Korea Online E-Procurement System (KONEPS) was developed by the Public Procurement Service (PPS). It functions to automate the entire procurement process, reduce human intervention, ensure transparency, and promote equal access to government contracts. (Public Procurement Service (PPS) Korea, n.d.). Furthermore, KONEPS integrates over 130 public organizations and aids in eliminating paper-based bidding, lowering the opportunities for bribery. This digital solution, along with South Korea's fourth position in the United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI) in 2024, proved that a digital tool can serve as a powerful tool for anti-corruption globally. (United Nations, 2025).

For Malaysia and Indonesia, the main lesson is not institutional imitation but the value of combining legal independence with credible monitoring and administrative transparency. Malaysia and Indonesia do not need to replicate the South Korean model in totality, but they can draw important lessons from it. Reforms that combine institutional independence, enforceable legal standards, and digital transparency tools are more likely to produce stable gains than those that rely primarily on political promises. Without stronger institutional protection and more consistent enforcement, anti-corruption strategies in both countries are likely to continue making uneven progress and could easily slip backward.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has compared the CPI scores and rankings in Malaysia and Indonesia from 2012 to 2024 to examine how corruption perceptions changed alongside political transition, governance reform, and institutional development. The findings showed that both countries experienced fluctuating CPI trends, although the patterns differed. In Malaysia, changes in CPI performance were closely associated with political instability, leadership turnover, and the continuing effects of major corruption scandals. In Indonesia, earlier gains were not sustained, and the subsequent decline in CPI scores coincided with concerns over weakened anti-corruption enforcement, particularly in relation to KPK.

Collectively, these findings suggest that political change itself is insufficient to generate lasting improvements in corruption control. Electoral turnover may create opportunities for reform, but progress is difficult to sustain without credible institutions, consistent enforcement, and continuity in governance. Thus, anti-corruption efforts are more likely to succeed when they are supported by institutional independence rather than short-term political force.

From a policy perspective, Malaysia and Indonesia need to strengthen the autonomy, credibility, and effectiveness of their anti-corruption institutions. For Malaysia, this requires greater political stability, stronger judicial independence, and more consistent enforcement in cases involving senior officials. Indonesia, on the other hand, needs to restore confidence and trust in anti-corruption institutions, reinforcing regulatory transparency, and protecting the enforcement agencies from political interference. Both countries would benefit from reforms that combine legal accountability, institutional independence, and administrative transparency. Without these conditions, anti-corruption efforts are likely to remain uneven and vulnerable to reversal.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, it relies primarily on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) as the indicator of corruption trends. Although CPI is widely used for comparative study, it measures perceived public sector corruption rather than actual corruption. Hence, it may not capture the informal, concealed, or private-sector corruption practices. Secondly, this study utilizes structured content analysis and secondary sources to fieldwork, interviews, or stakeholder-based evidence. As a result, the analysis is better suited to identifying patterns and contextual associations than to establishing direct causal relationships. Thirdly, the interpretation of political progress and institutional change inevitably involves some degree of changing corruption perceptions in relation to governance developments rather than as a definitive measure of corruption itself.

Future Research

Future research could strengthen this study by incorporating additional governance indicators, such as interview-based evidence or country-specific institutional data, to triangulate CPI trends and better understand them.

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