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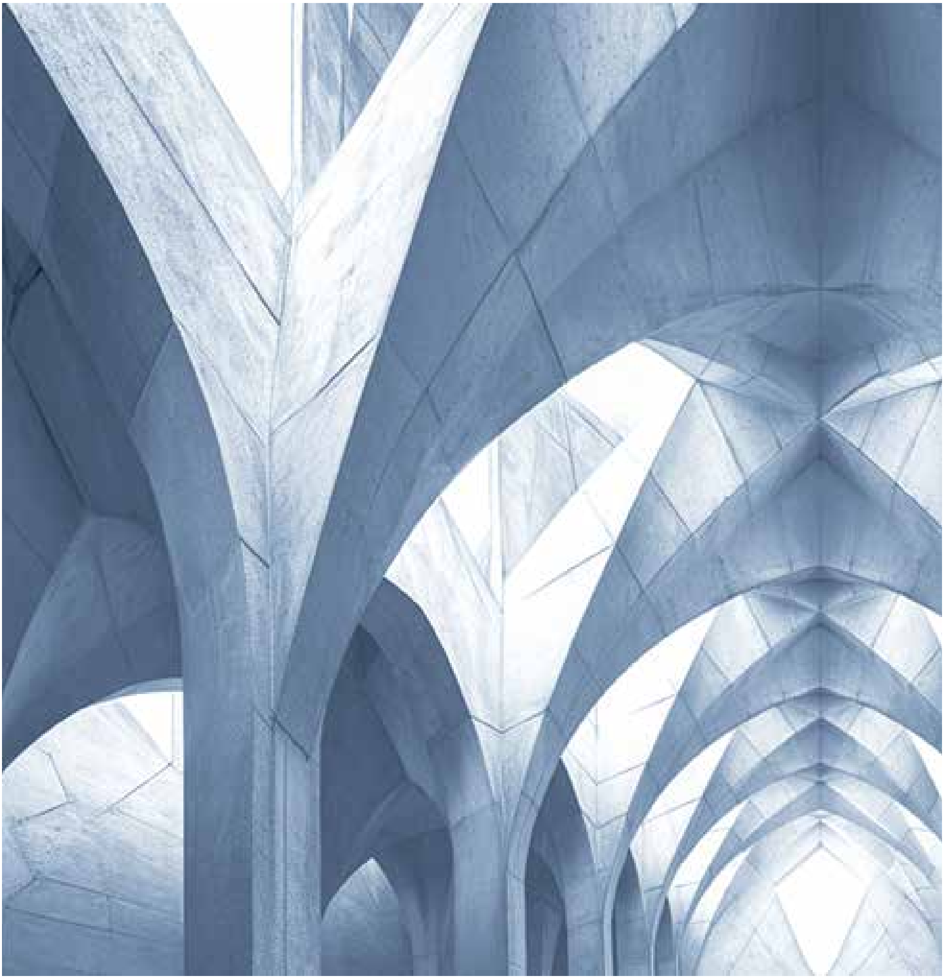
Beyond Enforcement: Singapore's Integrated Approach to Corruption



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Introduction

Singapore is renowned for its efficient government and stable politics, with a reputation as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, ranking 3rd out of 182 countries in Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index,[1] and the least corrupt country in Asia in Political and Economic Consultancy's 2026 report on Corruption in Asia.[2] Singapore's current reputation is all the more striking given that corruption was entrenched in the country a little more than 50 years ago.

According to the World Bank, corruption undermines savings, deters private investment and renders countries vulnerable to financial crises.[3] This means that anti-corruption efforts are not just a moral imperative; but for a small, trade-dependent state like Singapore – savvy economic strategy. Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew regarded the country's reputation for the rule of law as a "valuable economic asset, part of our capital", and that a clean and corruption-free governance environment provided investors with a stable business environment and a level playing field – one that was free from bribery and undue influence.[4]

1 Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2025: Singapore," https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025/index/sgp.

2 Political & Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd, "Annual Review of Corruption in Asia -- 2026," Asian Intelligence no. 1184, March 18, 2026, http://www.asiarisk.com/subscribe/ai/ai1184.pdf.

3 Wesberry Jr, James P. "International financial institutions face the corruption eruption: if the IFIs put their muscle and money where their mouth is, the corruption eruption may be capped." *Nw. J. Int'l L. & Bus.* 18 (1997): 498.

4 Ravi Ratnasabapathy, "Drawing Lessons from Singapore's Success," *Echelon*, December 19, 2019, https://echelon.lk/drawing-lessons-from-singapores-success.

Introduction

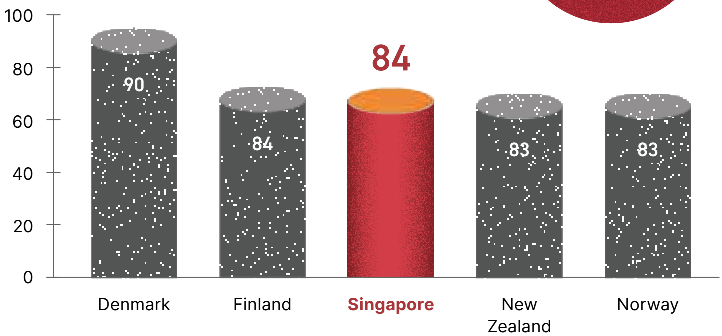
In this policy explainer, we trace Singapore's transformation from a society where corruption was a "way of life" to one of the world's least corrupt nations. We examine how three key pillars – robust legal enforcement and institutional independence, comprehensive state modernisation and rapid, equitable economic growth – were developed in tandem and reinforced one another to simultaneously address corruption's interlocking causes. In doing so, we offer a model for understanding how integrated governance can drive systemic change.

NOW

Corruptions Perceptions Index 2025

Higher Score = less perceived corruption

#3
IN THE WORLD OUT OF 182 COUNTRIES



Least corrupt country in Asia
PERC Corruption in Asia 2026

A reputation earned through
- **Integrity**
- **Accountability**
- **Good governance**

Pre-independence

Singapore's judicial heritage in its pre-independence years was a "hotchpotch tapestry of laws, regulations and legal precedents"[5] – hardly a solid foundation for tackling corruption. Corruption had become deeply entrenched, permeating everyday society and entwining itself with illegal activities such as gambling, drug trafficking and illicit alcohol, all of which frequently implicated the local police. This rampant lawlessness sat in uneasy tension with Singapore's strategic significance as a trading port and naval base

A traffic policeman guiding vehicles in front of the General Post Office, Singapore, in the 1950s. Credit: Singapore Police Force Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

5 Clement Liew, *Scrupulous, Thorough, Fearless* - The CPIB Story (World Scientific), 5.

Pre-independence

for the British. Legislation such as the Prevention of Corruption Ordinance (POCO) existed largely in name only, its enforcement too weak to pose any meaningful deterrent.[6]

Colonial anti-corruption efforts were largely reactive. This pattern was evident across British-administered territories, where administrations aware of endemic corruption nonetheless defaulted to investigative commissions in lieu of substantive reform, often clinging to the misguided belief that the core of their administrative structures remained sound.[7] For example, commissions of inquiry in 1879 and 1886 exposed rampant corruption within the Singapore Police Force (SPF), yet neither led to meaningful reforms. The lack of punitive responses further reinforced the perceived low-risk/high-reward nature of corruption. In 1886, of the 1,229 cases of crime and serious rule breaking by law-enforcement officers, only 105 ended in dismissal.[8] Crucially, there were few significant repercussions beyond minor fines or forced retirements for violators.[9]

The POCO had been passed in 1937 by the British colonial government to assign responsibility for corruption prevention to the SPF's Anti-Corruption Branch (ACB), even though the SPF itself was rife with corruption. Moreover, only the Criminal Investigation

6 Jon S. T. Quah, "Curbing Corruption in Singapore: The Importance of Political Will, Expertise, Enforcement, and Context," in *Different Paths to Curbing Corruption*, Research in Public Policy Analysis and Management, vol. 23 (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2013), 147, https://doi.org/10.1108/S0732-1317(2013)0000023006.

7 Ray Yep, "Beyond the 'Great Man' Narrative: Scandals, Cumulative Reforms and the Trajectory of Anti-Corruption Efforts in Colonial Hong Kong before MacLehose Years," *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 18, no. 2 (2022): 154–170, https://doi.org/10.1108/STICS-12-2020-0031.

8 Liew, *Scrupulous, Thorough, Fearless*, 27.

9 Ibid., 29.

Pre-independence

Department (CID) within the 17-person ACB was tasked with corruption enforcement. With CID's primary responsibility being the investigation of serious crimes, anti-corruption enforcement was not structured as an organisational priority.[10]

During the Japanese occupation, corruption deteriorated into a "social norm".[11] The hyperinflation and shortages that characterised Japanese occupation decimated the livelihoods of civil servants, leading to widespread bribery, blackmail and extortion. With the Japanese military administration focused on maintaining control over occupied territories, corruption was tolerated as long as it did not threaten Japanese rule, reflecting an occupier's mindset that prioritised wealth and resource extraction over long-term prosperity and development.

Post World War II, corruption remained entrenched with the return of the British. A watershed moment for the colonial administration came with the 1951 "Opium Heist" that exposed the brazen reality of corruption. That year, a shipment of 1,800 pounds of opium, worth about 400,000 Malaysian Dollars (S$2.45 million today), was hijacked at 'Pongoll' Beach in northeast Singapore by a band of robbers. What made the scandal explosive was the discovery of three police detectives among the culprits.[12] This represented a serious breach of public trust at a time when opium trafficking was seen as a major problem. A special team from the ACB

10 Quah, "Curbing Corruption in Singapore," 142.

11 Liew, *Scrupulous, Thorough, Fearless*, 41.

12 Quah, "Curbing Corruption in Singapore," 145.

Pre-independence

investigated the case and unearthed further involvement of senior police officers. However, only one Assistant Superintendent was dismissed and another officer retired.[13]

The "Opium Heist" exposed serious weaknesses in Singapore's anti-corruption machinery, and the government formed a Special Investigations Team comprising officers from Special Branch and the Courts to review the deficiencies in the ACB's investigation and prosecution of the incident. Eventually, the colonial government conceded the need for an anti-corruption body independent of the police force, leading to the creation of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) in 1952. However, CPIB's small staff and limited powers were manifestations of the colonial government's lack of political will;[14] and officers' short secondments, limited time and capacity to conduct thorough investigations and the social stigma of investigating fellow police officers continued to hamper anti-corruption efforts for many more years under the colonial administration.[15]

13 Vincent Lim, "An Overview of Singapore's Anti-Corruption Strategy and the Role of the CPIB in Fighting Corruption," UNAFEI, 2018, 92, https://www.unafei.or.jp/publications/pdf/RS_No104/No104_18_VE_Lim_1.pdf.

14 Khoo, "Integrity and Independence," 126.

15 Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage," https://www.cpib.gov.sg/who-we-are/our-heritage/.

Post independence

Between 1946 and 1959, Singapore's governance structure transformed drastically as it approached political independence. This journey began with the replacement of the British Military Administration with a civil government in 1949, which led to internal self-governance with Singapore's first general election in 1959.[16] For a newly independent nation-state, economic development, efficient government and social stability were critical elements for survival in an unfriendly region. It was during this period that Singapore realised that an integrated approach beyond just legal enforcement was required to effectively combat corruption.

16 Ibid.

Post independence

Where the approach of prior governments had relied narrowly on legal instruments without simultaneously addressing other domestic factors, Singapore's new government made a strategic decision to complement its anti-corruption efforts with comprehensive state modernisation.

Credible and sustained commitment from political leadership had long been considered the bedrock for effective anti-corruption action.[17] With national survival at stake, the People's Action Party (PAP) was determined to bring down corruption systematically and aggressively. Lee recounted later in his memoirs: "[F]rom the very beginning we gave special attention to where discretionary powers had been exploited for personal gain and sharpened the instruments that could prevent, detect, and deter such practises".[18]

Towards this end, the PAP's decision to adopt an all-white uniform helped to communicate their commitment towards "purity, integrity, and incorruptibility" in an emphatic way.[19] The values of Singapore's founding generation of leaders left a deep impression on the culture of public service, and the PAP continued to anchor its political legitimacy in clean and honest government.[20]

17 Lim, "An Overview of Singapore's Anti-Corruption Strategy," 98.

18 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 182

19 Khoo, "Integrity and Independence," 126.

20 Ng Li Sa, Ong Toon Hui, and James Wong, "Integrity: Fundamentals for Singapore's Governance Success," *Ethos*, no. 19 (July 2018), https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-19/integrity-fundamentals-for-singapores-governance-success/.

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

Singapore's founding leadership recognised that corruption was not a single problem with a single solution, but arose from an interlocking set of causes that required a coordinated response across three mutually reinforcing pillars. First, the country strengthened the scope and powers of anti-corruption agencies by vesting the CPIB with further legal powers and enough autonomy to be impartial. Second, the government simultaneously embarked on a comprehensive state modernisation project to improve state capacity and efficiency; aggressively streamlining administrative processes and putting in place merit-based hiring with competitive remuneration, which reduced corruption's temptation. Lastly, rapid and equitable economic growth greatly improved standards of living and generated sufficient tax revenues to fund national priorities, including law enforcement efforts.

The first and most foundational of these pillars was the establishment of a credible, independent legal enforcement regime.

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

Pillar 1 - *Robust legal enforcement and institutional independence*

The CPIB's autonomy and independence was enshrined both in legal frameworks and reinforced through government and social norms. The Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) – which replaced the POCO – was enacted in 1960 and significantly changed the corruption calculus. In order to change the commonly held view of corruption as a "low-risk/high-reward" activity, the PCA revised its definition to explicitly include various forms of gratification (money, reward, gift, property, employment, discharge of any obligation, favour or service)[21] in the public and private sector, and made the penalty for corrupt behaviours much more severe.[22] Minister for Home Affairs (1959-1963) Ong Pang Boon said in the legislative assembly that the bill reflected the new government's determination to "stamp out bribery and corruption in the country, especially in the public services".[23]

The PCA also placed the burden of proof on the accused. Under the PCA, any gratification given or received by a person in the employment of the Government or a public body would be deemed corrupt, and the burden of proof to rebut this presumption rested on the accused. This represented a radical shift from the provisions of the colonial-era POCO, which had been widely considered as dated and inadequate. Moreover, evidence of living beyond one's

21 *Prevention of Corruption Act 1960*, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PCA1960.

22 Khoo, "Integrity and Independence," 126.

23 Singapore. Legislative Assembly, *Debates, Official Report*, vol. 12, 13 February 1960, cols. 377ff (Ong Pang Boon).

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

means could now be used as an indicator of corruption for public sector employees. The PCA also significantly enhanced the CPIB's legal powers, budget and staff strength. At the second reading of the bill in February 1960, Ong noted that the existing ordinance had not empowered the CPIB with enough authority to tackle corruption effectively. Under the PCA, CPIB officers were vested with new and extensive powers to carry out their investigations, such as arresting suspects, accessing their financial accounts or searching their premises for evidence.[24,25]

CPIB's first logo introduced in 1979, courtesy of CPIB

In 1969, the CPIB was placed under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), reporting directly to the Prime Minister. This arrangement accorded the CPIB significant operational independence from other government departments.[26] A further constitutional safeguard was introduced in 1991 through Article 22G of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, which addressed the risk of political interference in CPIB investigations. Under normal circumstances, the CPIB Director had to seek the prime minister's consent before opening a formal investigation. However, should the prime minister withhold or withdraw that

24 Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Prevention of Corruption Act," https://www.cpib.gov.sg/about-corruption/legislation-and-enforcement/prevention-of-corruption-act/.

25 National Library Board Singapore, "Prevention of Corruption Act is Enacted," *Singapore Infopedia*, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=d3a2f37c-a193-4bf0-ab2d-7585b113d112.

26 CPIB, "Our Heritage."

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

consent, Article 22G empowered the CPIB Director to approach Singapore's elected president directly for concurrence. This ensured that no sitting government could unilaterally block an investigation.[27] Beyond corruption, the CPIB was also empowered to investigate any other arrestable offence surfaced in the course of its investigations.[28] Additionally, CPIB may, in the course of its investigations, review government departments to identify corruption-prone areas or loopholes in their procedures and recommend changes to address them.[29] Taken together, these decisions ensured that the CPIB continued to be well-resourced and independent enough to investigate corruption across all sectors and levels of government.

In practice, the CPIB did not shy away from investigating even senior political leaders and civil servants. In 1986, Minister for National Development (MND) Teh Cheang Wan was alleged to have received bribes totalling SGD1 million for helping private companies retain and buy state land for development. CPIB launched an investigation with Lee's approval, but Teh died by suicide before he could be charged in court.[30] Other high-ranking civil servants such as Glenn Knight, Choy Hon Tim and Peter Lim were also severely punished for corrupt dealings. In a 2012 speech at the 60th anniversary

27 Global Legal Insights, "Bribery and Corruption Laws and Regulations 2026: Singapore," https://www.globallegalinsights.com/practice-areas/bribery-and-corruption-laws-and-regulations/singapore/.

28 Vanessa Lim, "How Did CPIB Come About and What Powers Does It Have in Investigating Corruption in Singapore?," *Channel NewsAsia*, July 14, 2023, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/cpib-corrupt-practices-investigation-bureau-powers-iswaran-ong-beng-seng-3626341.

29 Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Roles & Functions," https://www.cpib.gov.sg/who-we-are/our-work/roles-functions/.

30 CPIB, "Our Heritage."

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

celebrations of the CPIB, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (founding Lee Kuan Yew's eldest son) reiterated Singapore's commitment to its zero tolerance policy towards corruption, even when the facts were "awkward or embarrassing".[31] This commitment was again demonstrated when, in 2024, the CPIB charged and prosecuted Minister for Transport (MOT) Subramaniam Iswaran for "obtaining, as a public servant, valuable things for no consideration"[32] from local businessmen Ong Beng Seng and Lum Kok Seng,[33] leading to his resignation and subsequent imprisonment.[34]

And yet, legal deterrence alone could not address the structural conditions that made corruption attractive in the first place. This was a challenge that required a parallel transformation of the civil service itself.

31 Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at CPIB's 60th Anniversary Celebration," 18 September 2012, https://www.cpib.gov.sg/press-room/speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-cpibs-60th-anniversary-celebration.

32 Lawrence Wong, "Statement by PM Lawrence Wong on the Sentencing of Mr S Iswaran," press release, Prime Minister's Office Singapore, October 3, 2024, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/statement-by-pm-lawrence-wong-on-the-sentencing-of-mr-s-iswaran/.

33 Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore, "AGC Press Release - S Iswaran Pleads Guilty and Convicted of Four Charges Under s 165 and One Charge Under s 204A of the Penal Code, for Obtaining Gifts from Two Local Businessman and Obstruction of Justice," September 24, 2024, https://www.agc.gov.sg/newsroom/agc-press-release-s-iswaran-pleads-guilty-convicted-of-four-charges/.

34 Iswaran accepted a series of valuable gifts including Formula 1 tickets, Premier League and West End theatre tickets, bottles of wine and whisky, a Brompton T-Line bicycle and travel (a private jet flight to Doha, hotel stay and business-class return); with the total value the prosecution put at about S$403,300. The court also found Iswaran had paid for one of the Doha–Singapore air tickets in a manner that amounted to obstruction of justice. The trial judge imposed a 12-month prison term, saying that a sentence substantially higher than the prosecution's recommendation (six to seven months) was warranted because of the duration of the misconduct, Iswaran's high office and the harm to public trust; For examples of press coverage, see "Singapore's Ex-Transport Minister Jailed for 12 Months in Landmark Ruling," *Al Jazeera*, October 3, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/3/singapores-ex-transport-minister-jailed-for-12-months-in-landmark-ruling.

Pillar 2 - *Comprehensive state modernisation*

While legal mechanisms were critical in deterring corruption, the creation of a responsive and efficient civil service helped reduce the need and incentives for corrupt acts.

In 1959, the Singapore government embarked on administrative reform to improve civil service organisational effectiveness by rationalising the structure and procedures of the public bureaucracy.[35] Singapore's civil service was reorganised into nine ministries while underperforming statutory boards such as the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) and Singapore Harbor Board (SHB) were replaced with the Housing Development Board (HDB) in 1960 and the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) in 1964 respectively.[36] A shift to client-oriented public administration was initiated in the 1960s through "attitudinal reforms" to change the mentality of Singaporean civil servants inherited from the colonial administration.[37] As red tape was cut and public services digitalised, citizens gained reliable access to efficient government functions, drastically reducing the need to "resort to bribery to get things done".[38]

Beyond service reforms, the adoption of merit-based recruitment and promotion by the Public Service Commission (PSC) served to

35 Benedetto Francesco Ballatore, "The Reform of the Public Administration in Singapore: A Model to Follow in Italy?," *Amministrativ@ mente — Rivista di Ateneo dell'Università degli Studi di Roma "Foro Italico"* 5–6 (2014).

36 Jon S. T. Quah, "Good Governance, Accountability and Administrative Reform in Singapore." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 17–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44288863.

37 Ballatore, "The Reform of the Public Administration in Singapore".

38 Ng, Ong, and Wong, "Integrity: Fundamentals for Singapore's Governance Success."

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

dismantle entrenched patronage networks. This was especially critical in Singapore's multiracial context, where perceived favouritism along ethnic lines would have been deeply destabilising. Lee Kuan Yew himself reaffirmed this when, in a 2012 interview, he identified "a level playing field for all" as one of the decisive factors behind Singapore's success.[39] Complementing the fair employment process were "clean" public sector wages – competitive, comprehensive and transparent salaries without hidden benefits.

39 "Lee Kuan Yew: The Chance of a Lifetime," *Urban Solutions*, no. 2 (February 2013).

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

These civil service reforms, reinforced by increasingly effective enforcement, reconfigured the calculus of corruption; shifting it from a "low-risk/high-reward" into a "high-risk/low-reward" activity. They also achieved a dual purpose: deterring corruption while rewarding merit. This was reflected in a 1985 article in The Straits Times, which quoted Lee Kuan Yew: "Pay political leaders the top salaries that they deserve and get honest, clean government — or underpay them and risk the Third World disease of corruption."[40] Today, Singapore maintains competitive public sector wages, with the salaries of top public officials pegged to their private sector counterparts. When asked about consistently high ministerial salaries, Lee Hsien Loong reaffirmed their important role in preventing corruption: "if you don't do that [pay people what they are worth], either you compromise the quality of your civil service or people will find ways to make up and compensate."[41]

However, even a reformed civil service, staffed by well-paid and merit-selected officers, would only go so far in a society where poverty and material desperation remained widespread. This leads us to broad-based economic growth as the indispensable third pillar.

40 "PM: Pay Well or We Pay for It...," *The Straits Times*, March 23, 1985.

41 "PM Lee: Pay Public Officials What They're Worth, or People Will Find Ways to Camouflage Compensation," *Mothership.SG*, July 29, 2020, https://mothership.sg/2020/07/high-government-pay-corruption-lee-hsien-loong/.

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

Pillar 3 -
Rapid, equitable economic development

It would be incomplete to examine the success of Singapore's anti-corruption efforts in isolation from the country's economic transformation. When the People's Action Party took office in 1959, Singapore was a highly unequal country with a GDP per capita of just US$400.[42] It was plagued by the poverty, inflation and chronic shortages that had long underpinned corruption during the colonial era. Eradicating these underlying socioeconomic conditions was a development imperative, but this also served to bolster the effectiveness of the country's anti-corruption efforts.[43]

Crucially, Singapore's economic growth in the decades since independence was broad-based and equitable. It succeeded in raising literacy rates, improving living conditions and alleviating unemployment across society rather than concentrating gains at the top. Broad-based improvements meant that conditions breeding corruption were addressed at scale: better-paid civil servants had less incentive to solicit bribes, and citizens with more reliable access to well-paying jobs and efficient government services felt less need to pay them.[44] As Singapore's economy grew and living standards rose — with GDP per capita reaching $90,674 by 2024[45]

42 "Singapore — GDP per Capita," *IndexMundi*, last modified December 28, 2019, https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/singapore/gdp-per-capita.

43 Jon S. T. Quah, "Singapore's Success in Combating Corruption: Lessons for Policy Makers," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7, no. 4 (2018): 385–395, https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-03-2017-0030.

44 Ibid.

45 World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US$) - Singapore," World Bank Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=SG.

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— the material desperation that had made bribery feel necessary and rational to ordinary citizens and civil servants alike was progressively eliminated.[46]

Beyond poverty alleviation, Singapore's founding leaders understood that clean governance could be a strategic economic asset. For a small, trade-dependent city-state with no natural resources, the integrity of the state was itself a developmental resource.[47] Lee Kuan Yew was explicit that a reputation for integrity, rule of law and reliable institutions would serve as a competitive advantage in attracting foreign investment,[48] and said as much in a 2005 speech at the Asian Strategy And Leadership Institute (ASLI):

> *"In the Third World a clean, efficient, rational and predictable government is a competitive advantage [... it allowed] us to charge a premium. Investments, especially those with long amortisation, welcome the predictability and openness we offered."*[49]

Rather than a coincidental by-product of anti-corruption enforcement, clean governance was deliberate economic strategy. Where other governments treated integrity more as a

46 Quah, "Singapore's Success in Combating Corruption."

47 "How Lee Kuan Yew Engineered Singapore's Economic Miracle," *BBC News*, March 23, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-32028693.

48 Pradumna Bickram Rana and Lee Chia-yi, "Economic Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew: Lessons for Aspiring Countries," (2015).

49 [1] Lee Kuan Yew, "Address by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew at the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute's 'World Ethics and Integrity Forum 2005,'" speech, Kuala Lumpur, 2005, Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, https://www.cpib.gov.sg/press-room/address-minister-mentor-lee-kuan-yew-asian-strategy-and-leadership-institutes.

Three mutually reinforcing pillars

moral aspiration, Singapore's leadership also viewed it as a savvy business proposition.

A central element of this strategy was ensuring a genuine level playing field for investors. A clean government meant that firms competing for public contracts or operating within Singapore's regulatory environment did so on the basis of the price and quality of their products and services, rather than on their willingness or ability to offer bribes or cultivate political patronage.[50] This predictability and fairness reduced transaction costs and made Singapore a reliably attractive destination for serious long-term investment, in particular from multinational corporations with their own compliance obligations and reputational concerns.[51]

The international validation of this approach has been substantial. Singapore has consistently ranked among the top performers on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index — placing 3rd globally in 2025[52] — and has been recognised as the least corrupt country in Asia in Political and Economic Risk Consultancy's assessments, a position it has held since 1995.[53] Singapore has also repeatedly ranked highly in surveys on the ease of doing business and competitiveness.[54]

50 Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, *PACT: A Practical Anti-Corruption Guide for Businesses in Singapore*, Singapore: CPIB, 2026, https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/423/62182041-41cf-4591-b2aa-6d0fd8a1c9f1/pact_2018.pdf

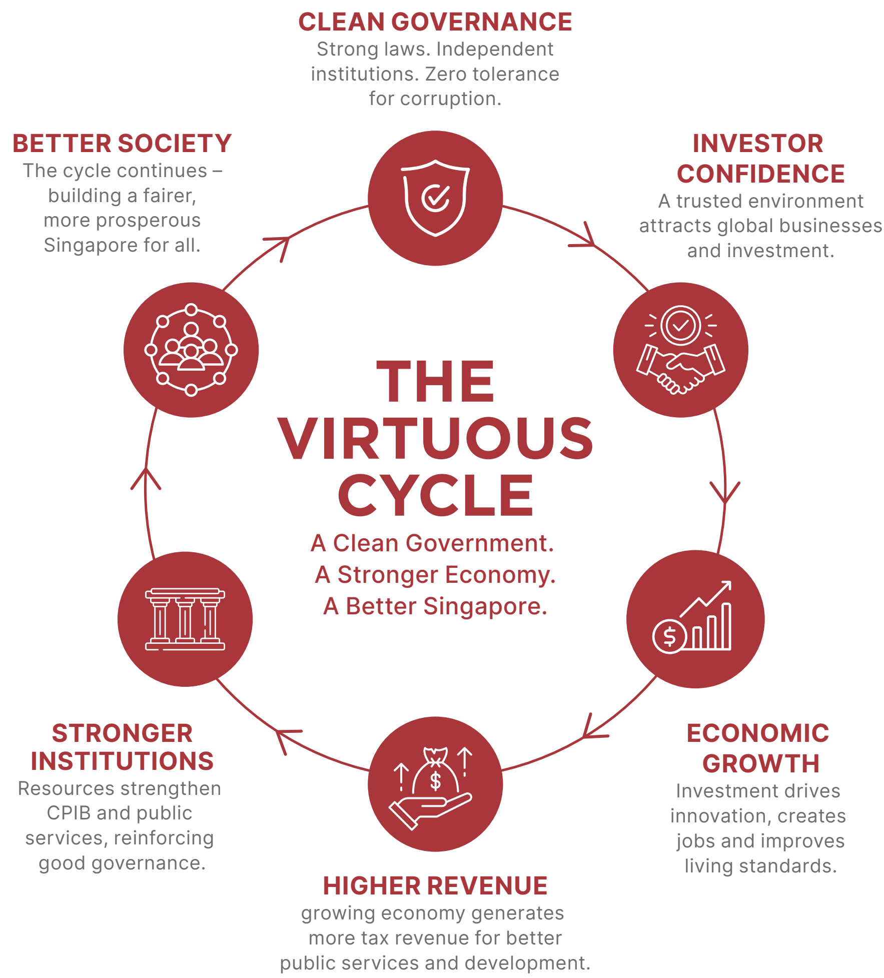
51 "Why Stability and Transparency Make Singapore a Global Business Hub," B2B Services Singapore, August 12, 2025, https://btobservices.com.sg/why-stability-and-transparency-make-singapore-a-global-business-hub/.

52 Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2025: Singapore."

53 Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Limited," https://www.cpib.gov.sg/research-room/international-rankings/political-and-economic-risk-consultancy-limited/.

54 For example, see "Singapore is World's Most Competitive Economy in 2024: IMD," Singapore Business Review, published approximately May 2024, https://sbr.com.sg/economy/news/singapore-worlds-most-competitive-economy-in-2024-imd.

Three mutually reinforcing pillars



Three mutually reinforcing pillars

Taken together, these results demonstrate that Singapore's economic success and its anti-corruption record have not been in tension; they have gone hand-in-hand, each reinforcing the other in a virtuous cycle that continues to distinguish Singapore from its regional peers. Early anti-corruption successes boosted investor confidence and supported rapid economic growth, which in turn generated the tax revenues needed to fund and staff the CPIB at the level required for it to remain effective — even as the growing scale and complexity of the economy raised the demands placed upon the organisation. In other words, clean governance produced growth, and growth funded cleaner governance.

Empirical evidence supported this virtuous cycle: Daniel Treisman's landmark 2000 cross-national study found a clear correlation between higher GDP per capita and lower corruption scores across both the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank Control of Corruption Index, suggesting that economic affluence and institutional integrity tended to reinforce one another over time.[55] Moreover, a study of companies listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange between 1995 and 2014 found that a single point improvement in an anti-corruption index was associated with a 12.8% increase in net profit margin and 11.7% increase in asset growth — suggesting that cleaner governance translated directly into better business performance.[56]

55 Daniel Treisman, The Causes of Corruption: A Cross-National Study (*Journal of Public Economics*, 76(3), 2000), 399.

56 Ahmed Badawi and Anas AlQudah, "The Impact of Anti-Corruption Policies on the Profitability and Growth of Firms Listed in the Stock Market: Application on Singapore with a Panel Data Analysis," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 53, no. 1 (2019).

Conclusion

Legal enforcement was the bedrock of Singapore's anti-corruption success. But as this case study has shown, great cities don't just rest on bedrock. Singapore's approach worked because enforcement was never treated as isolated and self-sustaining; instead, it was complemented by two equally critical pillars: comprehensive state modernisation that reduced both the incentive and opportunity for corruption, and broad-based economic growth that addressed corruption's underlying material causes while generating the revenues to sustain enforcement.

The lesson for policymakers is that these pillars are mutually dependent. Legal enforcement without civil service reform

Conclusion

leaves patronage networks intact. Economic growth without institutional integrity concentrates gains and breeds new channels for corruption. And state modernisation without political will, of the sort that Singapore's founding leadership demonstrated by prosecuting senior civil servants and political office holders for wrongdoing, is purely cosmetic. Singapore's distinctive contribution was recognising this interdependence early and acting on all three fronts simultaneously.

Despite the occurrence of public corruption scandals over the decades, Singapore's government maintained a continual re-commitment to clean governance. In 2012, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated this commitment at the CPIB's 60th anniversary:

> *"Let me be quite clear: We will never tolerate corruption. We will not accept any slackening or lowering of standards. Anyone who breaks the rules will be caught and punished. No cover ups will be allowed, no matter how senior the officer or how embarrassing it may be. It is far better to suffer the embarrassment and to keep the system clean for the long term, than to pretend that nothing has gone wrong and to let the rot spread. [...] The political leaders have to continue to set high standards of honesty and integrity; the society must continue to reject corruption, not just because of the rules and penalties, but because this reflects the society we want to live in, and the values we uphold and hold ourselves to. Then we can keep Singapore special and a home which we will continue to be proud of."*[57]

57 Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at CPIB's 60th Anniversary Celebration."

About the Case Study Unit at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) is an autonomous, professional graduate school of the National University of Singapore. In addition to Masters and PhD programmes, the LKYSPP offers high quality customised Executive Education programmes that cater to the needs of time-constrained senior managers and professionals, with the aim of delivering creative solutions to real management and leadership challenges.

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Case Insights Unit, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

The Case Insights Unit (CIU) produces case studies that cover a wide range of issues in public policy and governance with an Asian focus. CIU's repository of over 240 case studies can be found in the LKYSPP Case Study Library. These case studies, which integrate theory and practice, are regularly used for classroom teaching in degree and executive education programmes at the School, and are also freely accessible to the public. In addition, CIU works with organisations that commission case studies, and provides training and consultancy on writing and using case studies. Through its work, CIU aims to position the School as a leader and champion of using case studies in public policy education and training.

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