

Singapore public service among world's least corrupt

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Singapore's zero tolerance for corruption has not been tarnished by the Brazilian bribery scandal that rocked Singapore government-linked firm Keppel Offshore & Marine (KOM), but political observers warned against complacency.

On Thursday, Transparency International (TI) released its latest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Singapore's squeaky clean image is getting even shinier as it moves up a notch in an international corruption perception index within the rarefied club of least corrupt countries.

Singapore, which had been ranked 7th in recent years, climbed to the 6th position in 2017, ahead of 179 countries. Singapore's score remained steady at 84, unchanged from 2016, but down one point from 2015.

The CPI ranks and measures countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption. The 2017 index is constructed based on 13 surveys and assessments of corruption. In the case of Singapore, surveys used to compile the score included the World Bank, the Bertelsmann Foundation, the Economist Intelligence Unit, PERC Asia Risk Guide and others. On a scale of 0 to 100, 100 means very clean and 0 reflects a deep-rooted, systemic corruption problem.

Once again, New Zealand is rated the least corrupt country in the world with 89 points. It was followed by Denmark with 88 points and Finland, Norway as well as Switzerland with 85 points.

According to Singapore's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), the corruption situation in Singapore remains under control and the country continues to see a low incidence of corruption. The number of corruption complaints received and cases registered for investigation hit new lows in 2016.

"Singapore is recognised worldwide for its efficient and clean public service. The incidence of public sector corruption in Singapore is one of the lowest in the world. With the strong mandate from the government, the CPIB will continue to fight corruption resolutely and safeguard the integrity of the Singapore public service," said Wong Hong Kuan, director of the CPIB.

Alejandro Salas, regional director at TI, told *The Business Times* that perceptions related to the saga involving KOM have not been picked up yet. The scandal broke in late December when US prosecutors disclosed that KOM had agreed to pay a US\$422 million settlement to avoid a criminal trial for bribing Brazilian officials. KOM, the world's largest rig builder, is a unit of Keppel Corp, which is 20.43 per cent owned by Temasek Holdings as at November 2017.

"...even countries like Singapore, that pride themselves for being clean and having a strong hand against corruption, still have a long way to go to fully eradicate corruption. The case is huge and clearly shows how there is corruption linked to Singapore. Furthermore, if the

country prides itself for being clean and firm against corruption, then the companies that bear the flag and are the face of the country around the world should 'export' those clean business practices they so much take pride in."

According to court documents released by the US justice department, KOM engaged in a scheme between 2001 and 2014 to pay US\$55 million in bribes to win 13 contracts with Petrobras and Sete Brasil - two Brazilian oil companies deeply mired in the country's wide-ranging Operation Car Wash graft scandal.

Mr Salas said the marginal improvements in the rankings masked a more worrying trend in the overall scores. For example, Singapore's score had fallen three points since 2012, while Japan and the US had barely moved.

"While no country in the Asia-Pacific region scored a perfect 100, not even New Zealand or Singapore, which both experienced their share of scandals in the last year, our analysis reveals little progress across the region. In the last six years, only a few countries experienced small, incremental changes indicating signs of improvement," TI said.

Local political observer Eugene Tan said rankings and scores aside, the Keppel saga has hurt Singapore's high standards of probity.

"We cannot casually differentiate corruption committed abroad from corruption committed domestically. Such inconsistent conduct is a sure recipe for tolerating corruption especially when it seems to convey benefit."

"We need to be very careful not to 'import' undesirable practices and undo a key strength of our reputation," said the law professor at the Singapore Management University.

Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said TI's ranking of Singapore shows that the city-state has a system that deters, investigates and prosecutes corruption firmly.

"... but also that there is an ethic of integrity alongside that deterrence that together minimise the commission of corruption," she said.

"That we are not at the top of the chart means that there are instances of corruption even if it is dealt with, but we have a system to address it and the incidence is low compared to elsewhere," Dr Koh said.

Dr Koh said Singapore firms which venture out to operate in jurisdictions that are much further down in TI's charts "must have a strategy and systems to safeguard ethical integrity".