

Corruption and Human Rights

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This paper examines the relationship between the Human Rights Index (“HRI”),¹ the Corruption Perception Index (“CPI”)² and GDP per capita (measured in U.S. dollars)³ across 171 countries. The HRI reflects the degree to which people are “free from government torture, political killings, and forced labour, have property rights, and enjoy freedom of movement, religion expression and association.” The CPI measures perceived levels of public sector corruption, while GDP per capita represents the average economic output per person, serving as an indicator of national wealth.

Data was analysed for the most recent years in which it was available (2023 and 2024), and an aggregate dataset was created by taking the mean values of each variable across the two years. This approach allowed for both year-by-year comparison and a combined assessment of general trends across a 24-month period. Pearson correlation⁴ coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and direction of associations among the three variables. Notably, all correlations in this study were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

In addition to the international correlation analysis, this study also includes three in-depth country case studies of Iraq, South Korea and Saudi Arabia to illustrate how anti-corruption efforts and institutional reforms at the government level can significantly influence human rights outcomes. These case studies provide insight that complement the statistical findings, highlighting how institutional design and broader public participation can contribute to reduced corruption and the protection of human rights.

¹ *Human Rights Index*, Global Change Data Lab, Our World in Data (2024), available at <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/human-rights-index-vdem>.

² *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Transparency International (2024), available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>.

³ *GDP per capita (current USD)*, World Development Indicators, World Bank (2024), available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

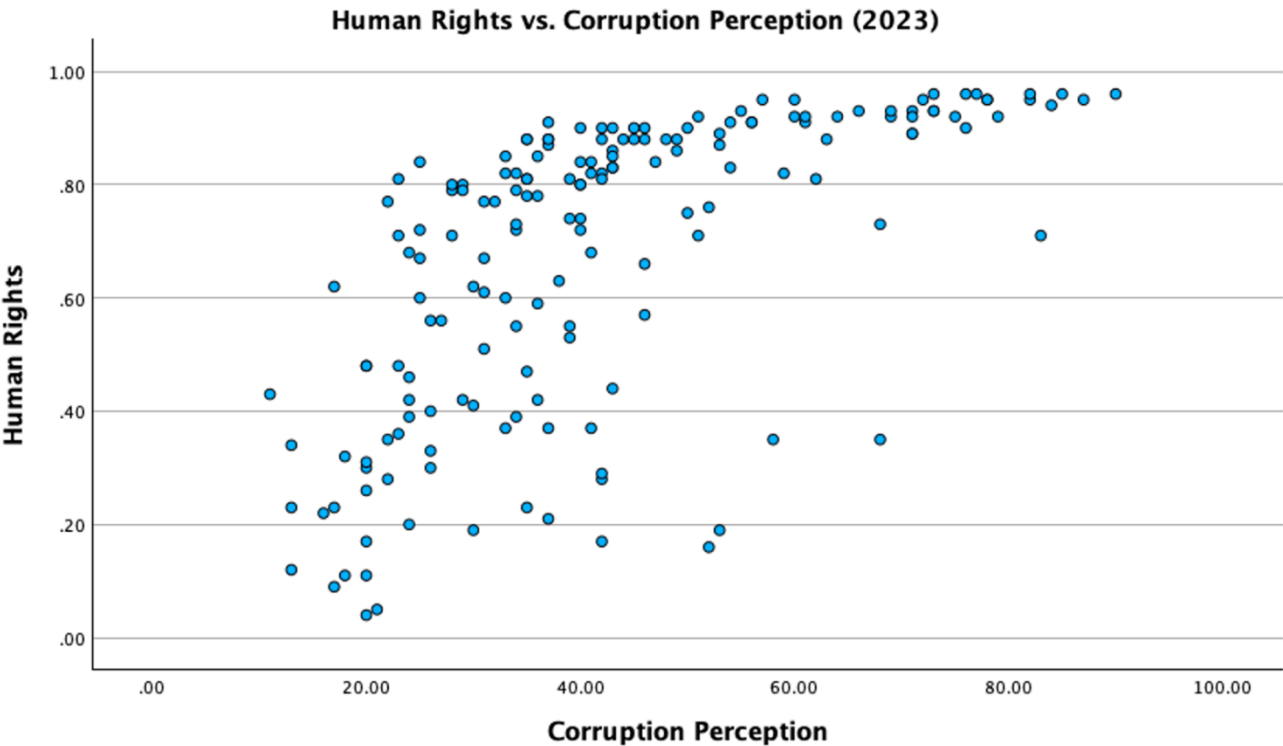
⁴ All analyses and visualizations were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 30.0.0.0 (172).

Observed Correlations Between Corruption, Human Rights and GDP

Human Rights vs. Corruption

A strong positive correlation was observed between the HRI and the CPI across both years and in the aggregate dataset. In 2023, the correlation was $r = 0.628$ ($p < .001$). In 2024, the correlation increased slightly to $r = 0.636$ ($p < .001$). When both years were averaged into the aggregate dataset, the correlation remained strong at $r = 0.634$ ($p < .001$). These results indicate that countries perceived as less corrupt tend to have higher levels of human rights protection. The scatterplots for each year show an upward trend, with higher CPI scores associated with stronger human rights performance.

Graph

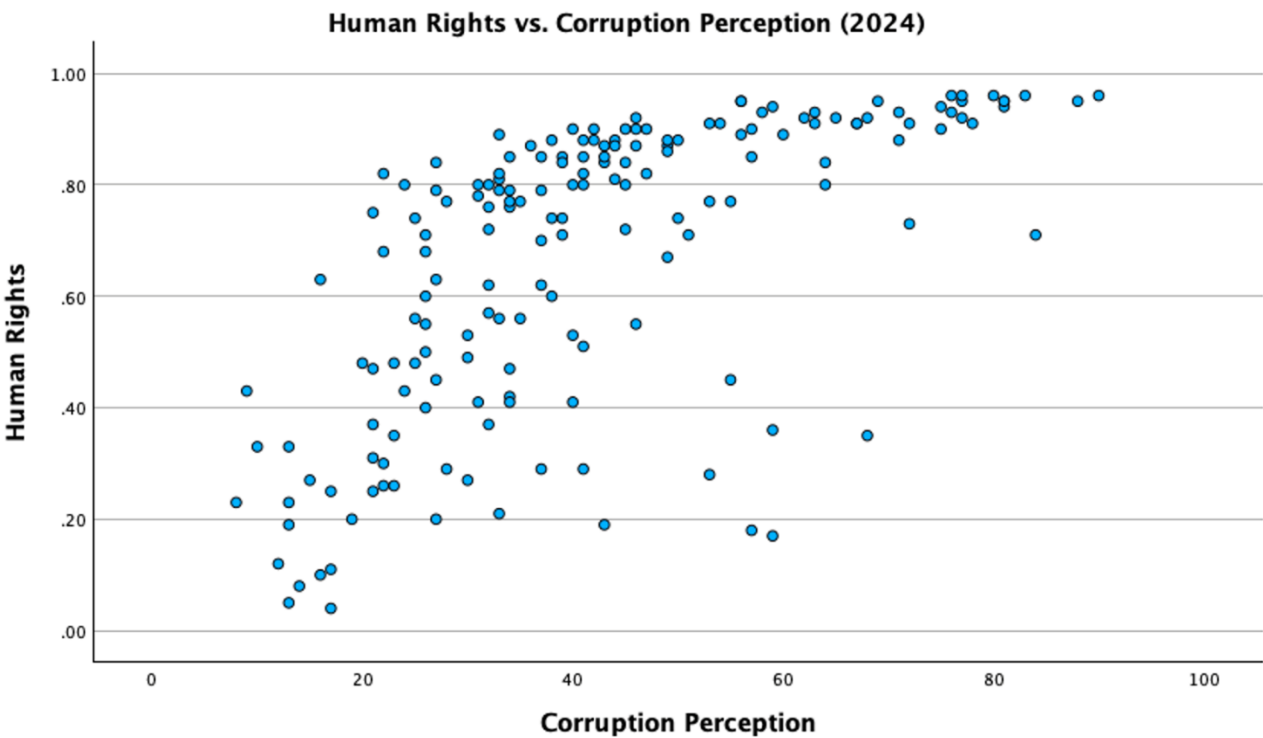


Correlations

		Corruption Perception	Human Rights
Corruption Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.628**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Human Rights	Pearson Correlation	.628**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Graph

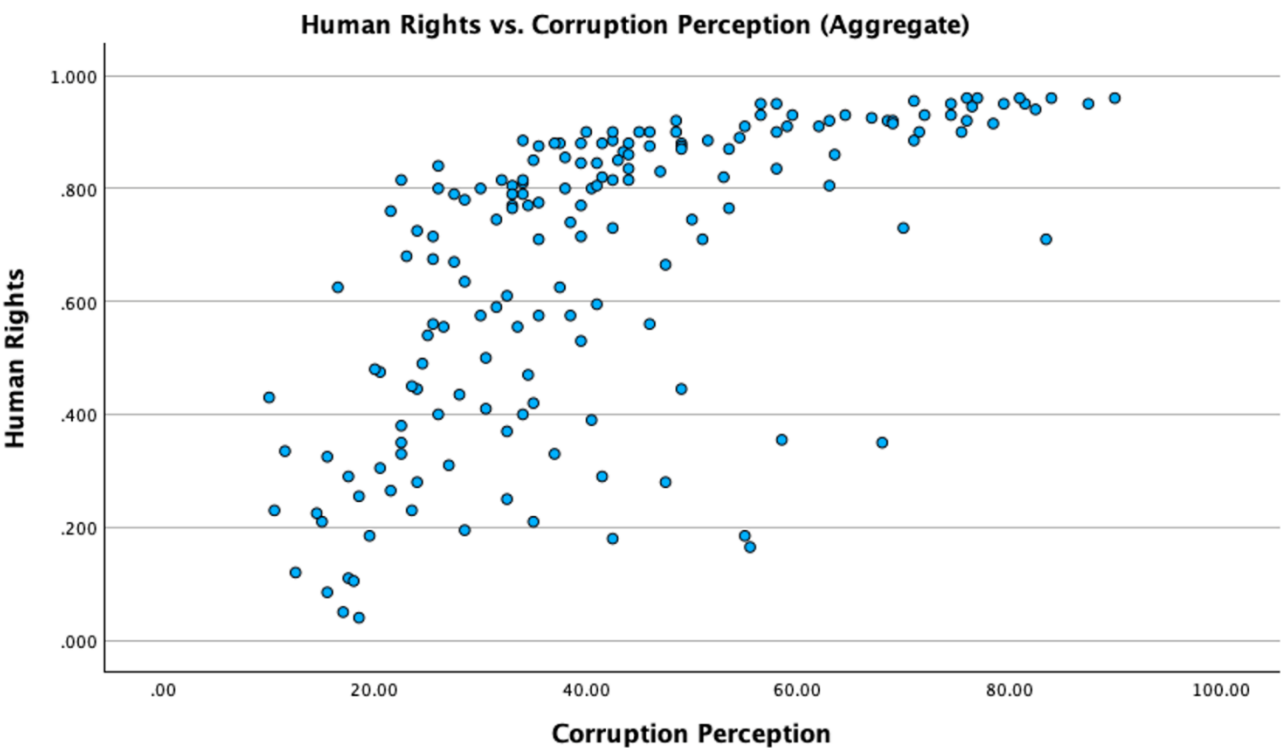


Correlations

		Corruption Perception	Human Rights
Corruption Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.636**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Human Rights	Pearson Correlation	.636**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Graph



Correlations

		Corruption Perception	Human Rights
Corruption Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.634**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Human Rights	Pearson Correlation	.634**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

GDP vs. Human Rights

The relationship between GDP per capita and the HRI also evidenced a positive correlation, though more moderate in strength. In 2023, the correlation was $r = 0.390$ ($p < .001$). In 2024, it increased slightly to $r = 0.405$ ($p < .001$). The aggregate dataset produced a similar correlation of $r = 0.400$ ($p < .001$).

This implies that wealthier nations generally perform better on human rights indicators, although economic prosperity alone does not guarantee stronger human rights outcomes. The scatterplot reveals a clustering of lower-income countries with more variable human rights scores, while higher-income countries are concentrated near the upper end of the index. This pattern suggests that while economic development provides a supportive environment for human rights, additional social, political and institutional factors also play important roles.

Graph



Correlations

		GDP	Human Rights
GDP	Pearson Correlation	1	.390**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Human Rights	Pearson Correlation	.390**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
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Graph

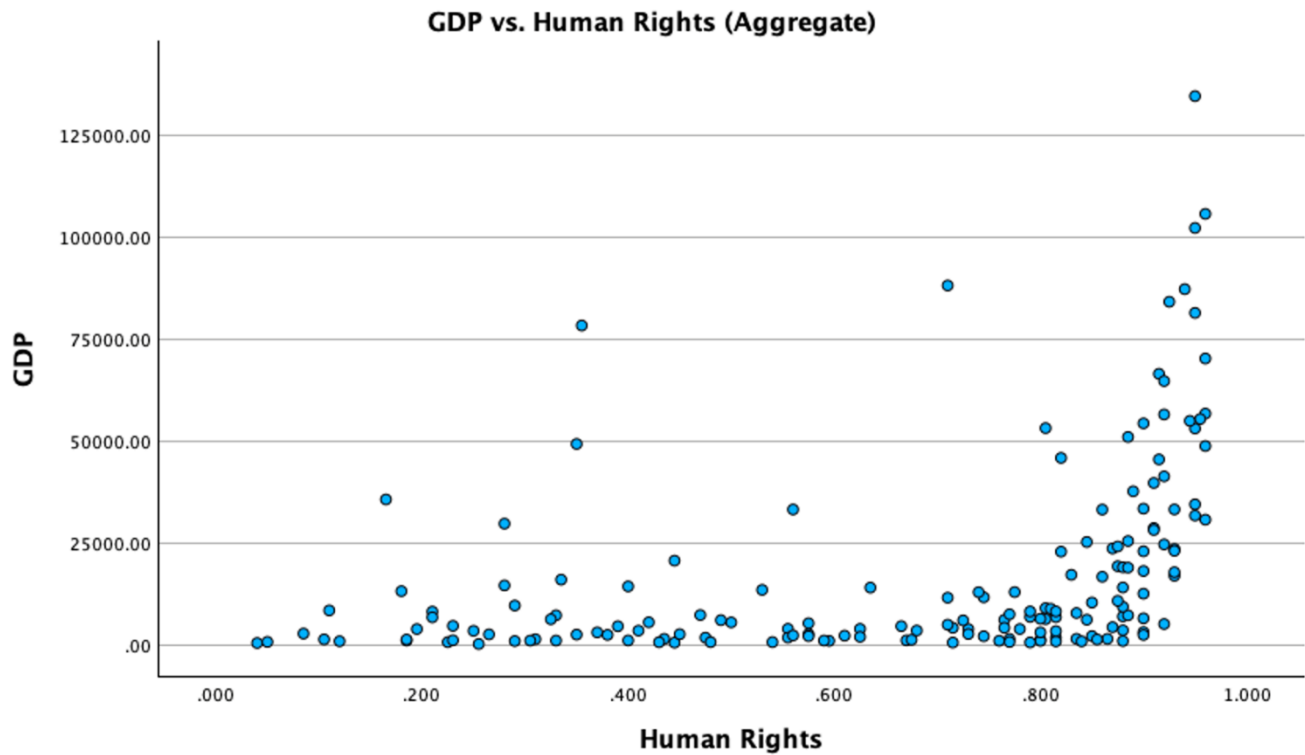


Correlations

		GDP	Human Rights
GDP	Pearson Correlation	1	.405**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Human Rights	Pearson Correlation	.405**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

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Graph



Correlations

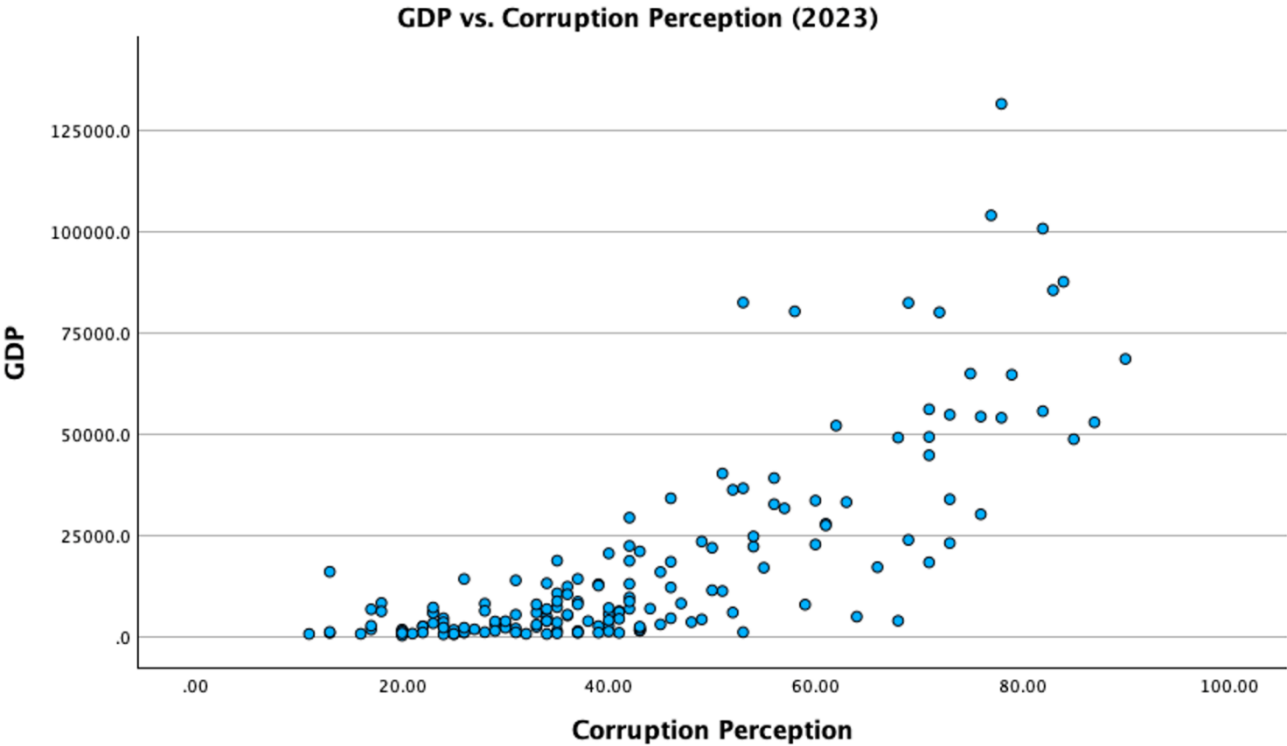
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	N	171	171
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GDP vs. Corruption

The strongest relationship was found between the CPI and GDP per capita. In 2023, the correlation was $r = 0.774$ ($p < .001$). In 2024, it was $r = 0.765$ ($p < .001$). The aggregate dataset showed a slightly stronger correlation of $r = 0.777$ ($p < .001$). These results indicate that countries with higher income levels tend to have lower perceived corruption. The scatterplots demonstrate a clear positive upward linear trend across years and in the aggregate data. This relationship likely reflects the role of stronger institutions, transparency and governance mechanisms in promoting economic prosperity.

Graph

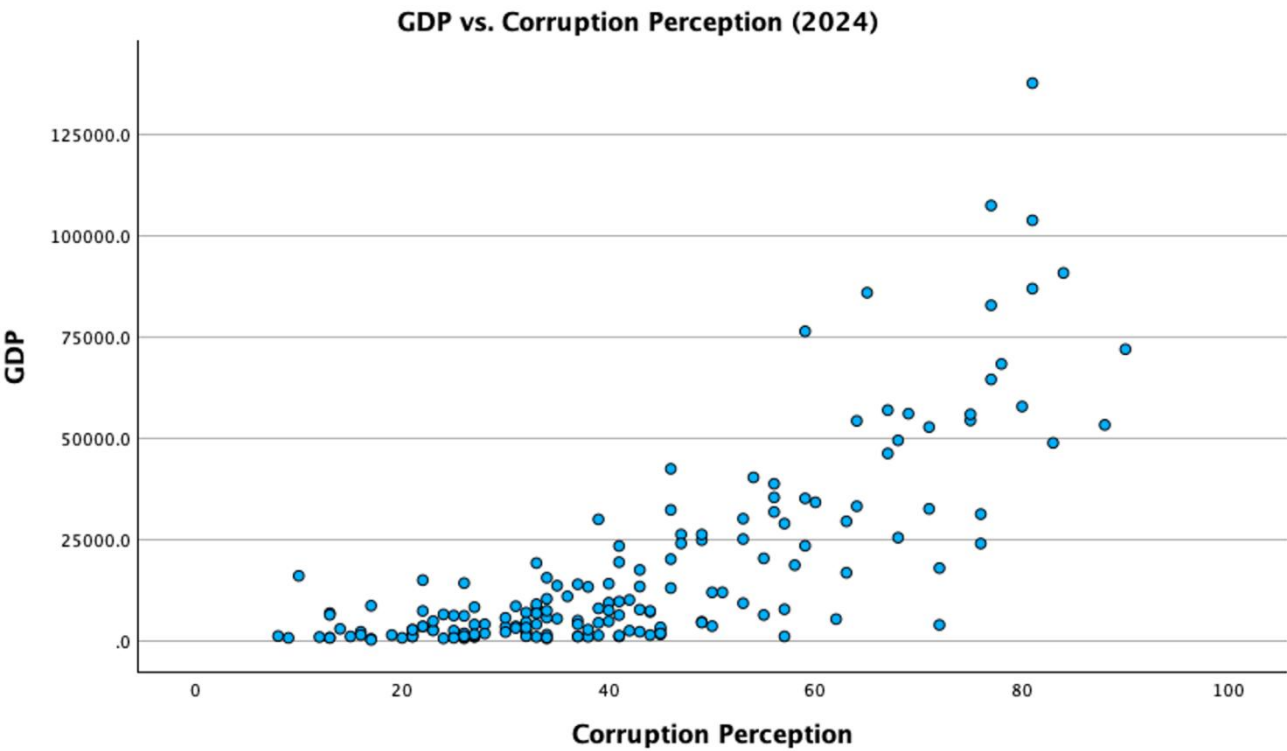


Correlations

		GDP	Corruption Perception
GDP	Pearson Correlation	1	.774**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
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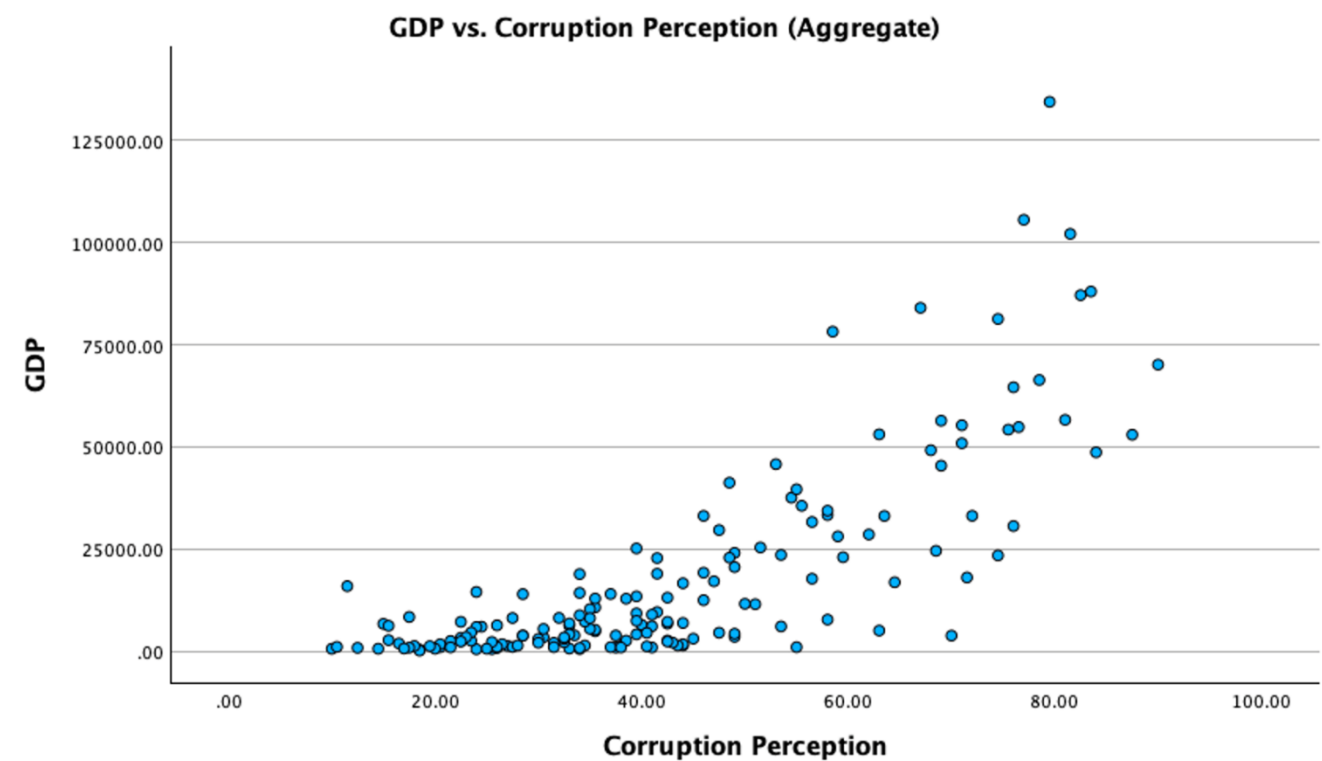


Correlations

		GDP	Corruption Perception
GDP	Pearson Correlation	1	.765**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	171	171
Corruption Perception	Pearson Correlation	.765**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	171	171

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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Correlations

		GDP	Corruption Perception
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Analysis

The data confirms a positive correlation between strong human rights records and low levels of corruption. According to the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (“OHCHR”), the relationship between human rights and corruption is not merely correlational; it is also causal: corruption has an adverse impact on human rights by undermining economic and social rights, such as the rights to healthcare and education, and by violating civil and political rights, such as the right to a fair trial. OHCHR has further noted that corruption “has a destructive effect on State institutions and on the capacity of States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights particularly of those persons and groups in situation of vulnerability and marginalization.”⁵ Corruption diverts public revenues and cripples public budgets that would otherwise be used to provide social benefits, such as education, healthcare,

⁵ “Corruption and human rights: OHCHR and good governance,” U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/good-governance/corruption-and-human-rights>.

housing and public subsidies. Corruption also undermines the institutions that guarantee due process, justice and the rule of law, including courts, the police and the public prosecution. If judges, prosecutors, or police investigators can be influenced by the payment of bribes, the fair administration of justice and public trust in the courts is irreparably compromised.

In states with high levels of corruption, the rights of the poor and of other disadvantaged groups are disproportionately impacted as they are often more reliant on the very public services that are diverted as a result of corruption. They also have limited financial means to afford alternative services offered by the private sector.

Measures to Combat Corruption

Several states have implemented programs that have successfully combatted corruption or bribery. We examine several of these programs below.

Iraq's Corruption Trial Monitoring Programme

Beginning in 2022, the U.N. Development Program (“UNDP”) and OHCHR, through the Human Rights Office of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq (“UNAMI”), jointly operated a Trial Monitoring Programme under the UNDP Anti-Corruption and Arbitration Initiatives’ umbrella and in cooperation with the Supreme Judicial Council in Iraq. The Trial Monitoring Programme focused on high-profile corruption cases tried before the Central Anti-Corruption Criminal Court (“CACC”) as the primary judicial mechanism for reviewing cases of grand corruption across Iraq. The Trial Monitoring Programme aimed to support Iraq in implementing its obligations under the CACC and to provide recommendations to enhance the efficacy of the CACC, while promoting “transparency and trust in Iraq’s anti-corruption measures.”⁶

The Programme monitored 184 grand corruption cases in the calendar year between August 2022 and July 2023. Of these, 179 monitored cases were resolved (150 in the CACC and 29 in the Integrity Courts). In contrast, in the nearly three-year period from October 2019 to July 2022, only 173 judicial decisions were resolved.⁷ Moreover, between the reviewed (2019-2022) cases and the monitored (2022-2023) cases, there was a general increase in the number of high-level defendants tried before the CACC, with some categories (*i.e.*, deputy ministers) seeing a 600% increase in the number of cases.⁸ This suggests that when ministries open their courts to trial monitors and public reporting, a powerful message is sent to judges, prosecutors and defence attorneys: the world is watching. This, in turn, ensures a more efficient management of case dockets that might otherwise lag. It also promotes the prosecution of actors who might otherwise never be tried and the protection of due process rights. As trial monitors report on judicial proceedings in publicly issued reports, judges are afforded an added incentive to ensure that due process rights are respected and visibly upheld.

South Korea's Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission

South Korea’s creation of an independent anti-corruption agency in 2008, the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (국민권익위원회) or “ACRC,” was a step towards preventing bribery, corruption and the abuse of power. The main objective of the ACRC is to protect people’s rights and promote transparency by resolving

⁶ “Iraq Judicial System and Grand Corruption Cases: The Central Anti-Corruption Criminal Court,” Trial Monitoring Programme First Report (August 2022-July 2023), UNDP (2024), p. 4, available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-09/UNDP_IQ_TM_First_Report_English_F.pdf.

⁷ “Trial Monitoring First Report,” UNDP and the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq (2024), p. 2.

⁸ *Id.*, p. 5.

grievances and proposing reforms in a timely manner. Notably, the ACRC has a digital portal called e-People, which allows individuals and entities to report acts of corruption. Over the years, e-People has become increasingly accessible and secure, launching a pilot version that supports 16 languages and features encryption software to protect the confidentiality of whistleblowers.⁹ In 2025 alone, the ACRC reported the processing of over 10 million civil complaints through the e-People portal and has plans of introducing AI to support faster response rates.¹⁰ The e-People portal along with the Act on the Prevention of Corruption (2008) are the cornerstones of South Korea's broader strategy to reinforce government accountability and strengthen public trust.

South Korea's anti-corruption commission and related reforms have shown tangible success. The ACRC found that public institutions' acceptance rate of its "recommendations for correction" is around 96%, demonstrating strong institutional compliance and high levels of trust.¹¹ Additionally, the ACRC has also proposed strict anti-graft regulations such as the 2016 Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, which tightened gift-giving and hospitality rules for public officials. This act has received overwhelming support with surveys reporting that 87.7% of the general Korean public believe that the Act had a positive social impact.¹² As a result of these institutional changes, international corruption indices reflect a steady improvement; South Korea's CPI score reached a record of 61/100 in 2020, ranking 33rd worldwide, which reflects a climb from 52nd place just four years earlier in 2016.¹³ Moreover, the country is now rated as "very low risk" for business bribery and recently achieved its best-ever rankings in measures of public sector integrity. Such progress indicates that ACRC's model has been generally effective in combating corruption and fosters the hope that similar frameworks could be replicated in other countries. In fact, other countries have already shown interest in adopting similar programs. Tunisia has signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation and is conducting a feasibility study to adopt the e-People platform.

Saudi Arabia's National Anti-Corruption Commission

Saudi Arabia's National Anti-Corruption Commission, also known as the Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority (هيئة الرقابة ومكافحة الفساد) or *Nazāha*, was established by King Abdullah under a Royal Order issued on 18 March 2011. The Commission holds jurisdiction over all governmental bodies and agents, as well as over private businesses where Saudi Arabia owns 25% or more of its capital. All governmental bodies and businesses that are 25% Kingdom-owned are required to disclose the financial details of their projects, contracts and general operations to the Commission.¹⁴

⁹ "ACRC Introduces Generative AI to the e-People System – Initiating Innovation in AI-Based Civil Complaint Services," International Ombudsman Institute (2025), available at <https://www.theioi.org/ioi-news/current-news/acrc-introduces-generative-ai-to-the-e-people-system-initiating-innovation-in-ai-based-civil-complaint-services?>

¹⁰ "ACRC Korea Transparency Newsletter (Jun. 2025)," Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (2025), available at <https://www.theioi.org/ioi-news/current-news/acrc-introduces-generative-ai-to-the-e-people-system-initiating-innovation-in-ai-based-civil-complaint-services?>

¹¹ "ACRC is Committed to Resolve 20 Million Civil Complaints Yearly Filed with the Commission," Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (2022), available at https://www.acrc.go.kr/board.es?mid=a20301000000&bid=62&tag=&act=view&list_no=38675&nPage=1

¹² "Improper Solicitation and Graft Act: Public Perception on the Act and Its Effectiveness," Clean Portal, available at <https://www.clean.go.kr/menu.es?mid=a20106040400&utm>.

¹³ "Korea ranked 33rd in 2020 Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International," Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (2021), available at https://www.acrc.go.kr/board.es?mid=a20301000000&bid=62&tag=&act=view&list_no=13073&nPage=15#:~:text=Korea%E2%80%99s%20score%20and%20ranking%20increased,to%2033%20th%20in%202020.

¹⁴ "Overview," National Anti-corruption Commission, available at <https://nazaha.gov.sa/Index>.

The Commission has several objectives, one of which is to receive and analyse reports and statistics from entities falling under the Commission's jurisdiction. With that information, the Commission identifies areas where corruption could take place and then implements preventative measures. Another objective is to receive complaints of corruption from citizens and to communicate "detected violations" to the investigation agency. Thereafter, the Commission is responsible for supervising the investigations and advising the Saudi authorities to take precautionary measures against persons guilty of engaging in corruption. At the same time, the Commission must report all violations to the King "for further action." After determining areas of weakness and making reports to investigators, to authorities and to the King, the Commission is tasked with continuous follow up.¹⁵

The following are some of the Commission's previous activities:

- Referring corruption cases to supervisory authorities, including the Control and Investigation Board and the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution;
- Retrieving funds embezzled or gained by corruption;
- Investigating potential corruption relating to a construction company that won a contract to repair a hospital in Mecca, which was inexplicably and unjustifiably delayed on several occasions; and
- Investigating an embezzlement of vaccines and medical equipment from a Directorate of Health Affairs warehouse.

Saudi Arabia has experienced a significant improvement on the CPI in recent years. On the 2024 CPI, Saudi Arabia scored 59 points out of 100, ranking 38th in the world globally.¹⁶ This all-time high reflects a dramatic improvement from its scores preceding the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission. In 2006, for example, Saudi Arabia held a record low of 33 points, ranking 70th globally.¹⁷

Concluding Remarks and Limitations

The data tells a clear story: States with less corruption tend to experience stronger human rights protections and higher income levels. Across all datasets analysed (2023, 2024 and the aggregated means), the correlations among the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Human Rights Index and GDP per capita were positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level and consistently moderate to strong in magnitude ($r = 0.39-0.78$). This statistical consistency reinforces the conclusion that national prosperity, institutional integrity and respect for human dignity are mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, the case studies of Iraq, South Korea and Saudi Arabia illustrate that tangible progress is possible when transparency and accountability are institutionally prioritized. From Iraq's monitored corruption trials to South Korea's digital reporting systems and Saudi Arabia's oversight commission, institutional reform consistently strengthens trust, justice and human rights.

With that being said, a few limitations are important to note. First, several countries were excluded due to missing data in one or more indices, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Bahamas, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Laos and North Korea. Although the number of included countries (171) vastly outnumber those listed, such absences may nevertheless affect regional representation, especially in East Asia or the Caribbean. Second, the data in this paper used conditions from 2023 and 2024 only. It is possible that the relationships reported in this paper are a contemporary snapshot rather than an extensive long-term perspective.

¹⁵ "Objective and Powers," National Anti-corruption Commission, available at <https://nazaha.gov.sa/PageDetails/?q=5Jo3hlo6HudwEuL6+MPDzg==>.

¹⁶ *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Transparency International (2024), available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>.

¹⁷ *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Transparency International (2006), available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2006>.

Future research should work towards incorporating data spanning a larger timeframe to assess whether these relationships have remained consistent over time.