Anti-corruption policy and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau

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The colonial background

Corruption was made illegal in the Straits Settlements in 1871, when the Penal Code described in Chapter B.I was enacted. Little concrete action followed. The first specific anti-corruption legislation was the Prevention of Corruption Ordinance of December 1937, whose scope was limited. Its revision in 1946 made corruption offences seizable and gave the police wider powers. Enforcement lay with the Anti-Corruption Branch of the police, an arrangement that required the police to investigate themselves. Its weakness became public in 1951. A consignment of 1,800 pounds of opium worth 400,000 dollars was hijacked at Punggol Beach by a gang that included police detectives. Few of those involved were prosecuted. The scandal led to the creation of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau in September 1952, independent of the police and initially placed under the Attorney-General.[1] The bureau thus began life as a response to corruption in the institution that was supposed to fight it. That origin explains a principle that has guided it ever since: corruption is investigated by a body outside the hierarchy it investigates.

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The Prevention of Corruption Act 1960

The People's Action Party came to power in 1959 on a platform that made clean government a central promise.[2] In that year the bureau was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which gave it its own premises in 1960. The decisive step was legislative. The Prevention of Corruption Act, dated 17 June 1960, replaced the colonial ordinance with a statute "to provide for the more effectual prevention of corruption".[3] After moves in the 1960s, the bureau returned in 1969 to the Prime Minister's Office, where it has remained.[4]

The Act rests on a broad definition of corruption. It covers gratification of every kind, offered or accepted as an inducement or reward, by any person, in the public sector and in the private sector alike. The penalties for each count are a fine of up to 100,000 dollars, imprisonment of up to five years or both, increased to seven years where the matter concerns a government contract or a public body. The Act presumes that a gratification given to an employee of the government or of a public body was given corruptly unless the contrary is proved. Its reach extends to corrupt acts committed abroad by Singapore citizens, while informers' identities are protected and bribes are forfeited.[5]

The extraterritorial provision deserves emphasis in a book about a financial centre. A Singapore citizen who pays a bribe to win a contract in a neighbouring country commits an offence that can be prosecuted at home, as if the act had been done in Singapore. The provision anticipated by several decades the foreign bribery offences that the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention later required its parties to adopt. Its limits are also clear. It applies to citizens and does not, by itself, reach foreign nationals working for Singapore companies abroad, a gap that the general rules on corporate criminal liability discussed in Chapter H.V only partly close.

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Organisation, powers and accountability

The bureau describes itself today as a government agency under the Prime Minister's Office, operating with functional independence. Its director reports to the Prime Minister. It is the only agency authorised to investigate corruption offences under the Act, in both the public and private sectors. It may also investigate other offences that it encounters in the course of its work.[6]

The location of the bureau inside the office of the head of government raises an obvious question. Who investigates the Prime Minister, or a minister whom the Prime Minister wishes to protect? The Constitution answers it through Article 22G. Where the Prime Minister refuses consent to an inquiry, the director may proceed if the President, acting in his discretion, concurs.[7] Its value lies above all in its existence, which places a second elected office between the bureau and any attempt to stop an investigation.

Other safeguards are internal. A Complaints Evaluation Committee was set up in 1989 to review how complaints are handled. In the same year the Corruption (Confiscation of Benefits) Act gave the state power to confiscate the proceeds of corruption. Singapore signed the United Nations Convention against Corruption on 11 November 2005.[8]

Political will at the top: from Wee Toon Boon to Iswaran

The credibility of an anti-corruption regime is tested by cases against the powerful. In 1975 Wee Toon Boon, Minister of State for the Environment, was convicted of corruption. He was sentenced to four years and six months, reduced on appeal to eighteen months.[9] In 1986 the bureau investigated Teh Cheang Wan, Minister for National Development, for bribes said to have been paid by private developers in 1981 and 1982. He took his own life on 14 December 1986 before he could be charged. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew read out Teh's farewell note in Parliament on 26 January 1987. His conclusion from the case was that there was no way a minister could avoid investigations, and a trial if there was evidence to support one.[10]

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The most recent test came almost four decades later. In July 2023 the bureau opened an investigation into S. Iswaran, Minister for Transport, in connection with gifts received from businessmen, among them the promoter of the Singapore Grand Prix. He was charged in January 2024 and pleaded guilty on 24 September 2024 to four charges of obtaining valuable things as a public servant under section 165 of the Penal Code and one charge of obstructing justice under section 204A. Two charges originally brought under the Prevention of Corruption Act had been amended to section 165 charges. On 3 October 2024 Justice Vincent Hoong sentenced him to twelve months' imprisonment, almost double the six to seven months sought by the prosecution, which the judge called manifestly inadequate. Iswaran began his sentence on 7 October 2024. He was the first minister charged and tried in court since Wee Toon Boon.[11]

The episode carries two lessons for the financial centre. The first is that the system reached a serving minister and his relations with one of the most prominent businessmen in the country. The second concerns the form of the case. The prosecution chose to proceed under section 165, which penalises the acceptance of valuables by a public servant from persons with whom he has official dealings, without the need to prove a corrupt bargain.[12] That choice illustrates how Singapore law protects the integrity of office even where corruption in the strict sense cannot be proved. It also explains why foreign businesses are advised to treat gifts and hospitality to officials with extreme caution.

Corruption in the private sector and in finance

The modern caseload of the bureau is dominated by the private sector. In 2025 it received 160 corruption-related reports, ten per cent fewer than the 177 of 2024, registering 68 of them as new cases for investigation. Of the 90 individuals prosecuted, 84, or 94 per cent, came from the private sector. The conviction rate, including withdrawals, was 91 per cent.[13] The pattern reflects success in the public sector more than a particular weakness of business. Where officials have ceased to take bribes, the remaining cases concern procurement within companies, kickbacks in construction and logistics and the bribery of employees by suppliers.

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For financial institutions the Act matters in three ways. Bank employees who accept inducements to approve loans, to steer business or to overlook irregularities commit offences under section 6, which covers agents in the private sector. Banks that pay inducements to win mandates from state-owned entities abroad expose their Singapore-citizen staff to the extraterritorial provision. Above all, banks hold the money. The proceeds of foreign corruption flow through accounts in financial centres. Singapore's exposure to this risk became evident in the 1MDB affair, which Chapter E.VI examines. The anti-corruption regime and the anti-money laundering regime therefore meet at the counter of the private bank.

Notes

1. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): in 1871 "corruption was made illegal"; "the first anti-corruption legislation was introduced with the enactment of the Prevention of Corruption Ordinance (POCO)" in December 1937; revision in 1946. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): in 1951 "a consignment of 1,800 pounds of opium worth $400,000 was hijacked at Punggol Beach", with police detectives among the robbers; "the inception of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau in September 1952", placed under the Attorney-General's purview. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Politics of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Singapore has been "governed by the People's Action Party (PAP) since 1959". ↩
3. Prevention of Corruption Act 1960, 2020 Revised Edition, Singapore Statutes Online (sso.agc.gov.sg, accessed November 2026), long title: "An Act to provide for the more effectual prevention of corruption. [17 June 1960]". ↩
4. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): 1959, "the CPIB was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs"; "CPIB was given its own office space in 1960". Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): placed under the Prime Minister's Office in 1963, transferred to the Attorney-

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General's Chambers in 1965, returned to the Prime Minister's Office in 1969 and "has since remained under the PMO". ↩

5. Wikipedia, "Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau" (accessed November 2026), summarising the Prevention of Corruption Act: extraterritorial reach over corrupt acts by Singapore citizens abroad; fine of up to S$100,000 and/or imprisonment of up to five years per count, seven years for government contracts; presumption that gratification to certain government or public body employees is corrupt; forfeiture of bribes; protection of informers. The table of contents of the Act on Singapore Statutes Online (accessed November 2026) lists s. 6 "Punishment for corrupt transactions with agents", s. 7 "Increase of maximum penalty in certain cases", s. 8 "Presumption of corruption in certain cases" and s. 37 "Liability of citizens of Singapore for offences committed outside Singapore". ↩
6. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Roles & Functions", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): CPIB is "a government agency under the Prime Minister's Office, operating with functional independence"; it is "the only agency authorised to investigate corruption offences under the Prevention of Corruption Act 1960", in the public and private sectors, and may investigate other offences under any written law. ↩
7. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 22G, text on constituteproject.org ("Singapore 2016", accessed November 2026): notwithstanding the refusal of the Prime Minister's consent, "the Director may make such inquiries or carry out investigations into such information, allegation or complaint" if "the President, acting in his discretion, concurs therewith". Wikipedia, "Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau" (accessed November 2026): the director "reports directly to the Prime Minister but may also additionally report to the President". ↩
8. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): "A Complaints Evaluation Committee was set up in 1989"; the Corruption (Confiscation of Benefits) Act was enacted in the same year. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg (accessed

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November 2026): Singapore signed the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) on 11 November 2005. ↩

9. Wikipedia, "Corruption in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Wee Toon Boon "was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to four years and six months in prison", later reduced to 18 months on appeal. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Our Heritage", cpib.gov.sg: the conviction showed the bureau's execution of political will "in an impartial manner". ↩
10. Wikipedia, "Teh Cheang Wan" (accessed November 2026): alleged bribes in 1981 and 1982 from private companies; died on 14 December 1986 before he could be charged; Lee Kuan Yew read out the suicide note in Parliament on 26 January 1987; Lee: "there is no way a Minister can avoid investigations, and a trial if there is evidence to support one" (the article cites *The Straits Times*, 27 March 2015). The article is inconsistent on the amount ("two bribes of $400,000 each" in one passage, "bribes totaling $1 million" in another), so the text gives no figure. Wikipedia, "Corruption in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Teh died on 14 December 1986 before charges were filed. ↩
11. Wikipedia, "Prosecution of S. Iswaran" (accessed November 2026): investigation began on 11 July 2023; first charged on 18 January 2024; two charges under section 6(a) of the Prevention of Corruption Act amended to section 165 Penal Code charges; on 24 September 2024 he pleaded guilty to four section 165 charges and one section 204A(a) charge. Wikipedia, "Prosecution of S. Iswaran" (accessed November 2026): on 3 October 2024 Justice Vincent Hoong sentenced him to 12 months' imprisonment, the prosecution's request of six to seven months being "manifestly inadequate"; he began serving the sentence on 7 October 2024 and moved to home detention on 7 February 2025. Wikipedia, "Prosecution of S. Iswaran" (accessed November 2026): the first minister charged and tried in court since Wee Toon Boon in 1975. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: Singapore* (accessed November 2026): "He was the first political official in decades to be tried for corruption in Singapore." ↩

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12. Penal Code 1871, s. 165 (public servant obtaining any valuable thing, without consideration, from a person concerned in any proceeding or business transacted by such public servant). ↩

13. Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, "Effective Enforcement and Collective Action Key to Keeping Singapore Corruption Free", press release, 28 April 2026: 160 reports in 2025, "a 10% decrease from the 177 corruption-related reports received in 2024"; 68 registered cases; 90 individuals prosecuted, of whom 84 (94%) from the private sector; conviction rate of 100% excluding and 91% including withdrawals. ↩

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