

Strengthening the Accountability Mechanisms as a Strategy to Counter the Risk of Corruption in the Public Sector of the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

Corruption is a complex and prevalent worldwide problem that affects nearly every country on the planet. The Maldives is no exception to the corruption problem, having experienced a loss of over 5.4 billion US dollars from government funds over the past decade. Accountability is championed as a mechanism to curb corruption. As such, this paper attempts to investigate the relationship between accountability and corruption risk within the Maldives public sector. Using organization as a unit of analysis, data was collected using an online questionnaire survey from the procurement and human resources departments of each government ministry and the Councils of the Maldives. A total of 434 questionnaires were emailed from which 205 responses were received and usable. The data was analyzed using PLS-SEM, showing a significant negative relationship between accountability and corruption risk. Interviews with subject-matter experts served to further validate the findings. The study emphasizes that addressing corruption necessitates a cultural shift toward accountability, offering valuable insights for policy decisions in the Maldives and other nations tackling corruption challenges.

Keywords: Corruption, Accountability, Maldives, Public Sector, Theory of Corruption

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption remains a pervasive challenge in governments worldwide (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), eroding public trust, hindering economic development, and undermining the very foundations of democracy (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Tran, 2021). Corruption can be defined in various ways, but fundamentally, it involves the inappropriate use of one's position for unlawful purposes (Klitgaard, 2015). Corruption poses a persistent challenge to the public sector of nations across the globe, transcending geographical, cultural, and political boundaries (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Corruption worsens poverty by redirecting public resources away from essential service provision and towards alternative uses (Sharma et al., 2021). Significantly, Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for nations to take decisive actions to substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all its forms by 2030. The United Nations (UN) began officially recognizing corruption as a global issue in 2000 by adopting Resolution 55/61. Subsequent resolutions were passed in 2001 and 2002, culminating in establishing the first-ever international treaty on corruption, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), in 2003 (Sekalala et al., 2020). In recent years, various United Nations human rights mechanisms have acknowledged the detrimental effects of corruption on human rights (Sekalala et al., 2020).

The Maldives is not exempted from the vices of corruption. It is noted that the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Maldives, released by Transparency International, saw a marked improvement, moving from 130th place in 2019 to 75th place in 2020. However, the slow rate of investigation into corruption cases, especially pivotal cases like the case of Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Company (MMPRC), in which, 79 million US Dollars were siphoned to private individuals through dodgy leases of islands and lagoons for tourism purposes during 2014 to 2015, have seen a lowering of the CPI Index of Maldives to 85th place in 2021, which remained the same in 2022 as well (Transparency International, 2023).

Notwithstanding the above, over the years, the Maldivian government has made efforts to combat corruption, including the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and various legal reforms. However, corruption remains deeply entrenched in the public sector. The existence of

corruption in government institutions and society at large poses a substantial barrier to the realization of the fundamental right to crucial necessities such as access to the best possible standard of healthcare (Sekalala et al., 2020). Traditionally, corruption has been perceived as a criminal offence against the state, with criminal prosecution serving as the predominant strategy to combat it (Man, 2022). However, this approach faces several challenges, including the limited enforcement of anti-corruption laws, the presence of immunity clauses in legislation and national constitutions safeguarding high-ranking government officials, and a lack of independence in anti-corruption mechanisms and judicial systems. Additionally, there are disagreements in defining corruption and what should be considered a criminal act, as well as difficulties in obtaining information or evidence due to high levels of secrecy, among other issues (Man, 2022). This is very evident in the Maldives whereby, high profile individuals sentenced under the charges of corruption are staying at home under lightened sentences. It is further noted that the current anti-corruption laws in Maldives in effect, do not cover bribery of foreign parties and officials of international public organizations, covered under UNCAC. It also does not provide a comprehensive definition of corruption or criminalize illicit enrichment.

In democratic systems, accountability serves as a deterrent to corruption, as constituents often closely monitor the actions of public servants (Alcántara-Lizárraga & Jima-González, 2022). Enhancing accountability in the public sector is crucial for the improvement of public services (Said et al., 2015) and the idea of accountability, which pertains to the methods by which individuals or groups are held answerable for their actions, is advocated as a means to curb corruption. Being held accountable entails being held responsible for one's conduct. Accountability, with proper governance and transparency in the public sector, are critical foundations for long-term economic success and social harmony (Hu, 2017) as they promote honesty and reduce the risk of corruption.

The unceasing drive for survival within organizations may result in an excessive focus on self-preservation (Frink & Ferris, 1996). Throughout history, there have been instances where failures in accountability have led to significant consequences. Examples such as the collapse of Barings Bank, and the downfall of the Arthur Andersen accounting firm during the Enron and WorldCom scandals, can be described as accountability

failures, not to mention the breakdowns in accountability within these two companies (Frink & Klimoski, 2004). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the presence of high levels of accountability can lead to reduced levels of corruption (Alcántara-Lizárraga & Jima-González, 2022). As a result, ensuring accountability in the public sector is a matter of utmost importance because its absence can result in governance failures, fraud, inefficiency, corruption, and poor financial management (Said et al., 2018).

In the case of the Maldives, an archipelagic nation known for its stunning natural beauty and reliance on tourism, the detrimental effects of corruption are felt acutely. As per the Annual reports of Anti-Corruption Commission of the Maldives, over the past 10 years, a total of 5.4 billion Maldivian Rufiyaa (approximately US\$ 365 million) was lost from the government coffers due to corruption and the commission has referred the cases to the Prosecutor General's Office to prosecute or to the relevant government institution for collection (Anti-Corruption Commission, 2022; Anti-Corruption Commission, 2021; Anti-Corruption Commission, 2020). As a nation heavily dependent on tourism and with a fragile political landscape, addressing corruption in the Maldivian public sector is not just a matter of good governance; it is essential for survival and prosperity. Thus, this study attempted to assess the intricate relationship between accountability and corruption within the Maldivian public sector. Therefore, the following research question was tested in this study: Is there a significant relationship between Accountability and Corruption within the Public Sector Organizations in the Maldives? The rest of the paper provides a literature review, followed by methodology, the results and discussions and a conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accountability can be described as a framework of incentives and penalties to ensure that individual conduct aligns with the established standards within an organization (Frink & Ferris, 1996). Accountability also plays a pivotal role in enhancing employee performance, fostering internal collaboration, and ensuring the overall efficiency of an organization (Li et al., 2022). The notion of accountability has also evolved and expanded into a concept of integrated financial management and responsible stewardship encompassing

the effective and efficient utilization of financial and other resources across all government operations (Bovens, 2007). Accountability is of utmost importance as it democratically showcases how the government carries out monitoring and control, preventing the concentration of power and enhancing the learning capacity and effectiveness of public administration (Said et al., 2015).

Overman and Schillemans (2021), discussed four types of accountability, relevant to the public sector. The first type is *bureaucratic or Administrative accountability*, which is an internal form of accountability that applies within bureaucratic organizations (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). This type of accountability requires individuals to be responsible for adhering to standards set within the organization. It centers around the concept of legitimacy. The second type is *Political accountability* where public sector employees are ultimately accountable to elected political leaders and the broader electorate (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Overman & Schillemans, 2021). This form of accountability is external and can lead to clashes between political expectations and internal organizational norms. The third type of accountability is *Professional accountability* which is a strong internal form of accountability particularly relevant for professionals in public administration (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Overman & Schillemans, 2021). Professionals prioritize their loyalty to their field over their organization and often extend their accountability beyond its boundaries. The last type of accountability is *Social accountability*, where public administration actors are accountable to various social stakeholders, including the general public, agency clients, or specific social groups (Overman & Schillemans, 2021). This type of accountability extends beyond the organization and involves external parties and legal, hierarchical, and political influences. Psygkas (2020), discusses a fifth type of accountability which is *legal accountability*. Legal accountability assesses whether administrative actions comply with the law. Judicial review can be understood in principal-agent dynamics, where courts ensure that administrative agencies adhere to legal limits, share information, and avoid unlawful or unreasonable actions. This oversight helps reduce information imbalances and agency costs, allowing democratic and constitutional principles to exercise effective supervision and control.

Klitgaard (1988), proposed a metaphorical formula for corruption, also referred to as Klitgaard's theory on corruption, which can be expressed as:

$C = M + D - A$ (Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion – Accountability). In this formula, the renowned author advocates that to decrease corruption, it is essential to reduce monopoly power and discretion while enhancing accountability. Corruption is more likely to happen when an entity or individual monopolises a resource or service, exercises discretion in its distribution, and is not held accountable for their actions. Building upon Klitgaard's (1988) representation of corruption, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) introduced integrity and transparency into the equation. This expanded formula for corruption can be expressed as: Corruption (C) = (Monopoly (M) + Discretion (D)) - (Accountability (A) + Integrity (I) + Transparency (T)) (Obuah, 2010). According to Obuah (2010), corruption often arises due to excessive government intervention in the economy, which creates opportunities for rent-seeking. Rent-seeking is a redistributive activity that consumes resources and can lead to corruption when an individual or entity holds a monopoly over goods or services, and exercises discretion in their distribution. Corrupt individuals, due to their monopoly (Halter et al., 2009), tend to leverage their discretionary authority to engage in corrupt practices, especially in a society with weak institutions (Dong et al., 2011) and a deficiency of accountability (Halter et al., 2009).

To mitigate the risk of corruption, anti-corruption efforts must focus on reducing monopoly, constraining and making clear the use of discretion, and fostering accountability through various means. Consequently, the initial strategy in the fight against corruption involves enhancing systems where monopolies are eliminated or rigorously regulated, official discretion is transparent, and transparency is increased. It is crucial to raise the likelihood of detection and the consequences of corruption, for both those offering and accepting bribes, reinforcing accountability measures (Klitgaard, 2015).

In addition, accountability is consistently intertwined with and has evolved as one of the benchmarks of good governance (Said et al., 2018). It signifies that public organizations, while handling public affairs, managing public finances, and ensuring the realization of human rights, should do so in a manner fundamentally devoid of abuse and corruption, and compliance with the rule of law. In the public sector, accountability necessitates that the government is held accountable to the public and can provide justifications for the origin and allocation of public resources (Almquist et al., 2013).

Furthermore, accountability mechanisms play a vital role in governance, providing tools to assess and, when necessary, sanction behavior (Bovens, 2007). These mechanisms encompass various formal tools like elections, audits, and performance reporting as well as informal processes of accountability (Benjamin & Posner, 2018; Romzek et al., 2012). Their common objective is to monitor the implementation of public policies, enhance organizational outcomes, and discourage undesirable behavior among public managers (McCubbins et al., 1987).

Moreover, not only does individual bribery represent a violation of personal, professional, and public responsibility (Tiki et al., 2020), but other forms of compromised accountability, such as inaction, can contribute to the perpetuation of a corrupt system or network, particularly when public service managers fail to exercise formal sanctions. This inaction is evident in the absence of managerial and legal accountability, inadequate oversight, deficient legislation, and sometimes, outright disregard for both (Tiki et al., 2020). In the Maldives, this inaction is noticeable in the limited number of cases prosecuted and the relatively small amount of money recovered in corruption cases. Therefore, Klitgaard's (1988) argument that corruption persists when the benefits of corruption outweigh the punishment times the probability of punishment ($\text{benefits of corruption} > \text{punishment} \times \text{probability of punishment}$) applies to the country. Given the past history, the probability of facing any form of punishment for corruption in the Maldives is nearly non-existent. As such the accountability construct was taken from Klitgaard's corruption theory and applied to this study.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected using the survey method, which is a quantitative research approach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A questionnaire was designed and utilized as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire items were developed based on variables identified in the literature, and they underwent refinements based on input from academics, respondents, pre-tests, and pilot testing.

The questionnaire gathered respondents' opinions, perceptions, or attitudes using a five-point Likert scale on the survey instrument (Kokolakis,

2017; Warmbrod, 2014). The Likert scale, commonly employed by researchers like Alrajeh and Shindel (2020) and Dilekli and Tezci (2019), enabled the assessment of behaviors and perceptions using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 signified “Strongly Disagree,” 2 is “Disagree,” 3 represents “Neutral,” 4 indicated “Agree,” and 5 signifies “Strongly Agree.” As recommended by Kusmaryono et al., (2022), different 5-point options were assigned to determine which attitude scale items could measure the dependent variable corruption risk and are given as (1) “never”, (2) “rarely”, “(3) “sometimes”, “(4) “often” and (5) “always”. This scale was used to measure the dependent variable corruption risk since it measured the number of times the respondents have encountered the mentioned instances in the questionnaire, which represented risk of corruption.

The study took an organizational-level approach when examining the Maldivian Public Sector Organizations, encompassing Ministries and councils. This approach was chosen in alignment with the suggestion by Khan et al. (2021), which recommended adopting an institutional approach for measuring the variables identified in the research. Between April and December 2022, a questionnaire survey was administered to all Maldives Public Sector Organizations, including Ministries, City Councils, Atoll Councils, and Island Councils. The study collected a total of 205 responses. It was noteworthy that all the responses received were complete, without any missing data, as the Google form used for the survey required respondents to answer all questions.

In research, common method bias can potentially lead to inflated associations between the variables under investigation (Conway & Lance, 2010). To address this issue and in line with the recommendations provided by Podsakoff et al. (2012), several procedural and statistical measures were implemented in this study. Firstly, scale items were refined to reduce ambiguity, as ambiguous items can necessitate individuals to construct their own interpretations, leading to difficulties in comprehension (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Additionally, this study mitigated social desirability bias by incorporating statements representing the organization rather than focusing on individual perspectives. Furthermore, statistical techniques were employed, including the unmeasured latent method factor technique and the correlation-based marker variable technique. Harman’s single-factor test was conducted using the SPSS, which indicated that the cumulative

squared percentage of variance was less than 50%. Additionally, the survey questionnaire included the 3-item Cognitive Rigidity marker variable, as proposed by Oreg (2003), to assess correlation-based marker variables. Both tests confirmed no evidence of common method bias in the collected data.

In addition, subject experts were purposefully chosen for interviews to collect information with regard to accountability in the public sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study employed the Partial Least Squares (PLS) modelling with the SmartPLS 4.0.9.6 version as the statistical tool. PLS modelling is often used for exploratory work to develop hypotheses, especially when there is a limited prior understanding of how variables are interconnected. In this study, the use of a new measurement instrument to test hypotheses related to accountability, categorized it as primarily exploratory.

Measurement Model

To assess the developed model, the approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was employed, involving a 2-step process. First, the measurement model was tested to assess the validity and reliability of the data, in accordance with the guidelines provided by Hair et al. (2019) and Ramayah et al. (2018). Subsequently, the structural model was tested to evaluate the hypotheses that had been formulated.

In the assessment of the measurement model, several criteria were examined. First, the loadings of the items were evaluated, with the expectation that they should be greater than or equal to 0.5. Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were assessed, with the criteria that AVE should be greater than or equal to 0.5, and CR should be greater than or equal to 0.7. As presented in Table 1, all AVE values exceeded 0.5, and all CR values exceeded 0.7. Furthermore, all outer loadings were above 0.5.

In the second step, discriminant validity was evaluated using the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) criterion, which was suggested by Henseler

et al. (2015) and updated by Franke and Sarstedt (2019). According to this criterion, the HTMT values should be less than or equal to 0.90 in the more lenient criterion and less than or equal to 0.85 in the stricter criterion. As indicated in Table 2, the HTMT value was below the stricter criterion of 0.85, suggesting that respondents perceived the constructs as distinct. Therefore, both of these validity tests collectively demonstrated that the measurement items were both valid and reliable. The figure 1. below depicts the PLS model of the study.

Table 1: Measurement Model of the Constructs

Constructs	AVE	CR
Accountability	0.596	0.955
Corruption Risk	0.545	0.944

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	1	2
1. Accountability		
2. Corruption Risk	0.393	

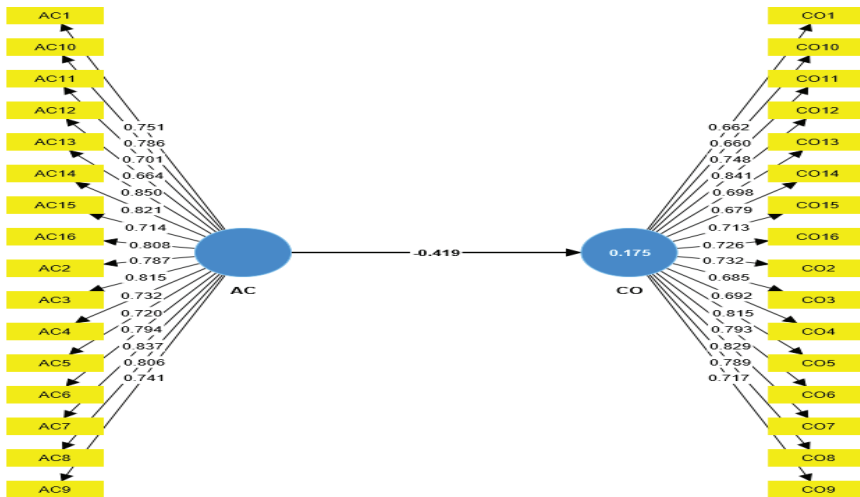


Figure 1: PLS Model

The above Figure 1 shows the PLS model with the factor loadings. Factor loading indicates the extent to which an item accurately reflects the

fundamental construct it is intended to measure. The following Table 3 shows the measurement items for constructs accountability and corruptions.

Table 3: Measurement Items

Accountability			Corruption Risk		
Item No.	Measurement Item	FL	Item No.	Measurement Item	FL
AC13	Our organization takes legal action against anyone who has engaged in corrupt behaviour.	0.850	CO12	Taking no action after a suspected act of corruption or not addressing the issue promptly, thoroughly, fairly, or professionally.	0.841
AC7	Our organization plans activities and then checks whether the activity went as per the plan.	0.837	CO7	Favouritism in the procurement process (i.e., purchasing goods and services from friends, relatives, or other associates when there are no apparent benefits to the organization (e.g., At higher prices, lower quality goods/ services etc).	0.829
AC14	Our organization will follow due diligence before acting against anyone suspected of corruption.	0.821	CO5	Favouritism in the hiring process (e.g., hiring friends, or relatives who are less qualified than the rest of the applicants for a position within the organization)	0.815
AC3	Our organization set targets for employees, monitors, if they are met and act if targets are not met.	0.815	CO6	Favouritism in job promotions (i.e., promotions and salary hikes given to employees despite their poor performance (e.g., based favouritism, nepotism).	0.793
AC16	Our organization reports corruption to relevant authorities	0.808	CO8	Decisions are influenced by people outside the organization (e.g., political leaders).	0.789
AC8	Our organization hold leaders responsible when activities do not go as plans.	0.806	CO11	Misuse of public property or office assets for personal use (computers, stationaries, cars etc)	0.748
AC6	Our organization checks and takes actions when budgets are not met or when expense budgets are overspent.	0.794	CO2	Favourable treatment of some matters, which allows avoiding or cutting some costs, depriving others of the benefit (for example waiving fees and other payments).	0.732

AC2	Our organization has policies where each employee is held accountable for their action.	0.787	CO16	No integrity in the information provided (i.e., no transparency or dual checking process).	0.726
AC10	The employees of our organization are made aware of the ramification of any corrupt behaviour.	0.786	CO9	An employee's integrity is the only barrier to corruption in performing his/her job as there are no specific anti-corruption regulations.	0.717
AC1	Our organization has mechanisms in place to hold the managers accountable for their decisions and actions.	0.751	CO15	E-government systems were misused or not properly used.	0.713
AC9	Our organization has written down rules and clear lines of authority which are disclosed to the public.	0.741	CO13	The anonymity of whistleblowers is not protected.	0.698
AC4	Our organization has an effective and efficient performance management system in place.	0.732	CO4	Changes brought to policies such as the procurement policy and recruitment and selection policies for personal benefit.	0.692
AC5	Our organization has rules regarding physical access to office buildings and other assets.	0.720	CO3	Monetary rewards to speed up a service or to get preferential treatment.	0.685
AC15	Our organization has policies in place regarding the actions to be taken in case of suspected corrupt action by an employee.	0.714	CO14	Actively hiding acts of corruption and bribery from the public or if any such issues were leaked to the public, non-response from the organization regarding how it was handled.	0.679
AC1	Our organization has mechanisms in place to hold the managers accountable for their decisions and actions.	0.701	CO1	A single employee accessibly dominates and controls a particular process.	0.662
AC12	Our organization has mechanisms in place to stop retaliation for reporting suspected misconduct (e.g., conflict of interest, bribery, or corruption).	0.664	CO10	The employees in the organization misuse time (for example, taking long breaks, doing personal work during office hours etc).	0.660

As shown in Table 3, items AC13, AC7, AC14, AC3, AC16 and AC8 had a factor loading of above 0.80, which showed that these items strongly reflected the measured construct, accountability. Most of these items were

related to taking legal actions, reporting acts of corruption and setting targets and holding relevant authorities accountable to it. In addition, all the remaining items except AC12 had a factor loading of higher than 0.70, indicating that these items also accurately reflect the measured construct. AC12, which measured mechanisms against retaliation had the lowest factor loading. However, it was still above the acceptable threshold of 0.50 for exploratory studies. Among the measurement items of risk of corruption, the highest factor loading came from an item reflecting conservation and use of public interest (CO12) and the items reflecting conflict of interest (CO7 and CO5), all having factor loadings of above 0.80. All items except CO13, CO4, CO3, CO14, CO1, CO10 had factor loadings of above 0.7, with the mentioned items having a factor loading above 0.5, which was deemed acceptable. This showed that measurement items used to measure the constructs truly reflected the constructs measured.

Structural Model

Once the measurement model was successfully assessed, the study turned to evaluate the results of the PLS-SEM by considering standard evaluation criteria. According to Hair et al., (2019), these criteria include the coefficient of determination (R²), the statistical significance and relevance of path coefficients, and a check for collinearity issues. In the structural model assessment, multiple regression equations were estimated to determine the coefficients that describe the relationships between the constructs. It is crucial to examine collinearity to ensure it does not distort the regression results. Collinearity issues are more likely when Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values exceed 5 (Mason & Perreault, 1991; Becker et al., 2015). In this study, all indicators had VIF values below the threshold of 5, indicating no significant collinearity concerns.

With collinearity ruled out as an issue, the R² value for the endogenous construct was investigated. R² quantifies the variance explained by each endogenous construct and ranges from 0 to 1. Higher R² values represent greater explanatory power. As described by Henseler et al., (2009) and Hair et al., (2011), R² values can be considered significant, moderate, or weak at 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25, respectively. In this study, the R² value for the construct “accountability” was weak, with an R² of 0.175, indicating that the constructs explained 17.50% of the variance in risk of corruption. To

test the significance of the path coefficients obtained through the consistent PLS Algorithm data, bootstrapping was conducted using 5000 iterations, as recommended by Ringle et al., (2015). The results of the bootstrapping-derived path coefficients between the exogenous and endogenous variables are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Direct Relationship between the Variables

No	Path	Beta	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Result
H1	AC -> CO	-0.419	-0.437	0.061	6.868	0.000	Supported

As shown in Table 4, the Hypothesis tested was supported as it generated a p-value <0.01. The hypothesis suggested a negative correlation between accountability and risk of corruption within the public sector of the Maldives. As shown in Table 4 in the Maldivian public sector, accountability had a highly significant negative relationship with corruption risk ($\beta = -0.419$; $p < 0.01$). The accountability’s T-value for risk of corruption was 6.868, indicating a strong correlation significantly higher than the 2.58 significant level. Additionally, the negative Beta value demonstrated a negative relationship between accountability and risk of corruption, suggesting that accountability can be used as a deterrent in curbing corruption in the public sector of the Maldives.

Corruption is more likely to occur in environments with unclear and unenforced rules, inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems, or a lack of transparency (Vian, 2020). Further, as Klitgaard’s theory emphasises, lack of accountability breeds corruption. Lambert-Mogiliansky (2015) also underscored the relationship between transparency, accountability, and corruption, explaining that without evidence of an official’s behavior, such as performance metrics, audit results, disclosures, or complaints from service users, citizens are powerless to prevent corrupt officials from misappropriating funds, as the officials are not held responsible in such cases. Conversely, when policies, procedures, performance metrics, and entitlements are made public, it becomes easier to identify illicit behavior (Vian, 2020). Increased transparency in government processes empowers citizens and oversight agencies to identify performance gaps and ensure public servants are held accountable. Amagnya (2023) concluded that, in contrast to the prevalence of corruption, the absence of deterrents was a

more reliable predictor of support for corruption across various models. This highlights the significance of accountability mechanisms in deterring corruption.

Many research studies have also emphasized the pivotal role of accountability in combatting corruption and upholding integrity within the public sector. Tiki et al. (2020) emphasized that a lack of accountability can foster corruption and hinder its resolution. Nuswantara et al. (2017) highlighted the crucial function of accountability as a preventive measure against fraud in public organizations. Klitgaard (2008) posited that implementing mechanisms incentivizing individuals to act in the public interest and avoid corruption risks is essential for fostering accountability. Kock and Gaskins (2014) revealed a negative correlation between heightened “voice and accountability” and reduced government corruption, underscoring accountability’s role in curbing corrupt practices. Furthermore, Jadara and Al-Wadi (2021) confirmed that both accountability and transparency contributed significantly to reducing administrative and financial corruption. These findings collectively stressed the importance of accountability mechanisms in addressing corruption and maintaining the integrity of public institutions.

Further, a study conducted by Cao and Cong (2023), revealed that as accountability becomes stronger, purchasers in public private partnerships projects tend to prioritize user satisfaction more. Conversely, in settings with higher levels of corruption, user satisfaction receives less emphasis. It is important to note that corruption poses a significant barrier to sustainable socio-economic and political development in various economies, including advanced, developing, and emerging ones (Cao & Cong, 2023).

Moreover, Psygkas (2020), argued that in presidential systems, the president engages in a competition for control over the bureaucracy with the independently elected legislature. This means that administrative agencies may have several political principals (Strauss, 1984). This dynamic can lead to the bureaucratization of politics, as the president often appoints individuals who are politically aligned with them to key administrative positions, hoping that these officials will advance the president’s agenda rather than that of their political rivals in the legislature (Ackerman, 2017). While there may also be a professional civil service, the substantial

number of political appointees can undermine the perception of apolitical policymaking within the executive branch (Psygkas, 2020). The separation of powers framework results in a system with multiple political principles. This begets agency problems which may further aggravate fraudulent actions such as corruption. It is noted that the outgoing government of Maldives reportedly had 719 political appointees while the incoming government has pledged to cap the figure at 700 (Avas.mv, 2023), which can be perceived as a high number for a small developing nation.

In addition, the subject experts who were interviewed expressed their concerns with regard to accountability in the public sector of the Maldives. Expert 2 noted the following;

“There are no consequences for being involved in corruption. As long as you are affiliated with the government present at the time, you get immunity from any charges or action. If there is a change in government, you can change sides, as often seen in the political spectrum of the Maldives.”

Further, all the experts agreed that the existing accountability measures within the public sector are ineffective. They note that no or few actions are taken with regard to issues noted in Audit reports or ACC reports. They also noted that money lost in corruption was not recovered, with expert 1 noting the following;

“There is minimal effort to recover the money lost in corruption cases. Since there is no accountability, perpetrators are able to get away after indulging in corrupt behaviour.”

Regarding the obstacles in enforcing the existing accountability measures, all the experts agreed that there were obstacles. These included loopholes in the legislation and a lack of effective control mechanisms. Expert 3 noted the following;

“We are unable to prosecute anyone in several cases due to loopholes in the legislation such as definitions of terms and the way evidence must be collected. Even after, detailed investigations, cases have to be abandoned sometimes, since the courts will not accept the cases due to procedural issues.”

Expert 1 also notes the following;

“We require an accountability framework in the public sector. That way the organizations also will be better equipped to deal with such cases when they occur as they will be more aware of what is required of them.”

Furthermore, all the experts agreed that enhanced accountability can reduce the risk of corruption within the public sector of the Maldives.

Thus, the findings of this research align with Klitgaard’s (1998) theory, which posits that corruption exhibits a negative relationship with accountability. In addition, these findings are in harmony with the conclusions drawn by Nuswantara et al. (2017), Kock and Gaskins (2014), and Jadara and Al-Wadi (2021), all of whom identified a negative correlation between accountability and corruption. These findings were further validated by the responses from the subject experts interviewed.

CONCLUSIONS

Without a solid understanding of accountability, organizations are more susceptible to failure through fraudulent actions such as corruption. The more deeply accountability is comprehended, the higher the chances of achieving long-term success. Accountability serves as an explanation for the ongoing failure of a criminal justice system to successfully prosecute a prominent and pervasive criminal problem, such as systemic corruption. This alignment of results underlines the potential for policymakers in the Maldivian government to prioritize the development of effective accountability mechanisms as a strategic approach to mitigating corruption risks within the public sector of the Maldives. This is particularly important in small island nations like the Maldives, where resources are limited and interconnectivity is high.

The findings of this study revealed that achieving meaningful progress in the fight against corruption necessitates a cultural shift towards accountability. The significance of this research lies not only in its academic contribution but also in its potential to inform policy decisions, both in the

Maldives and other nations grappling with corruption challenges. As the study delved into the intricacies of accountability and corruption, it strived to provide a nuanced understanding, specific to the Maldivian context. The study is limited to only Government Ministries and Councils and future research could be extended to include all the organizations including state-owned enterprises, law enforcement agencies, legislative bodies such as Parliament and Independent Commissions.

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