

POLITICAL CAPTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS IN PAKISTAN: EXAMINING THE PERFORMANCE OF ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Multiple institutions have been established in Pakistan to fight corruption, such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NAB), Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and the Anti-Corruption Establishments (ACEs) in the provinces; however, corruption is still a problem today. Existing literature often treats political interference and institutional weakness as separate explanations for this failure. This study investigates the performance of these three institutions and the reason behind their underperformance. The aim is to evaluate the impact of political capture and institutional weaknesses in Pakistan on anti-corruption effectiveness. A qualitative, document-based methodology is used, evaluating institutions across six factors: case handling and backlog, conviction rate, political neutrality, institutional independence, resources and capacity, and legal powers. The findings reveal the same trend in each of the three institutions decreasing conviction rates, continued backlogs, politically-tainted appointments, and legal changes that have reduced the scope of investigations. These weaknesses reinforce one another, with political interference limiting independence and legal reach, which further weakens performance. The study concludes that meaningful reform requires addressing political interference and institutional capacity together, rather than as separate issues.

Introduction:

Political capture, institutional weakness, and the performance of anti-corruption institutions are all tightly linked to Pakistan's governance (Hassan, 2025). Political capture is when the state institutions that are supposed to be independent are used by the ruling political groups for their own purposes. This can involve attacking a political adversary and shielding those who are politically allied from such attacks (David-Barrett, 2021). This is significant, as it reveals that corruption can persist even when the law is strong, but institutions are being abused for political purposes. Institutional weakness is issues within the institution, such as lack of resources, lack of

staff, poor legal authority and procedural delays (Akram, 2023). These issues create hindrances for the institution to perform its duty effectively (Tromblay, 2023). It is a very important idea because it reveals that, in practice, even a good designed institution can be inadequate, if it lacks in itself the strength to implement its own rules (Ali, 2024). Anti-corruption institutions are codesigned government institutions that are established to investigate, act against and prevent corrupt practices in public institutions (Sadiq, 2020). The importance of these institutions lies in the fact that they play a primary role in a state's efforts to establish trust and to make public officials accountable. These three ideas are the

foundation of this study, as studying each one individually is essential to understanding how they are related in Pakistan .

These thoughts have a clear and tangible significance in Pakistan. There are several institutions established to combat the corruption, namely the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) at the federal level, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments (ACEs) in each province respectively (Akram, 2023). NAB has the maximum powers under the law and can investigate and prosecute corrupt public officials before the Accountability Courts (Raza et al., 2020). Partly, the work of the FIA is focused on financial crimes and fraud, and that of the provincial ACEs on corruption within the provincial departments. Even though Pakistan has all these institutions, the current situation shows that corruption is still a big problem (Aziz et al., 2025). Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) puts Pakistan among the list of the least corrupt countries in the world, with a score of just 28 out of 100 (Hassan et al., 2026). Meanwhile, there is constant worry about the risk of political capture, with institutions such as NAB routinely being used to attack political enemies while those who are in power are held to a lower standard (Bashir & Ullah, 2026). Another indicator of institutional weakness can be how performance figures change over time, such as NAB's sharp decline from 58.2% to 32.1% conviction rate between 2018 and 2022. Even though Pakistan has anti-corruption institutions established in its law, their actual performance and independence is low as revealed by these numbers (Aziz et al., 2025).

These institutions continue to fall short of their objectives for a number of interrelated reasons. One of the biggest issues is the lack of accountability due to political interference, where accountability authorities are more likely to act against opposition politicians, compared to allies of the ruling party (Ferraz & Finan, 2025). This erodes their public confidence in these

institutions and makes it hard to make real reform. Changes in the law have also reduced institutional power at times for example, changes made to the NAB Ordinance in 2021 removed certain government decisions from NAB's scrutiny (Ismail et al., 2025). Along with political interference, these institutions also face every day administrative problems such as not enough staff, low funding, weak protection for witnesses, and slow-moving accountability courts (Aziz et al., 2025). All these issues together lead to case delays and inconsistent results in corruption cases. Over time, these political and administrative problems combine and continue to weaken how well these institutions perform.

When we look at the existing research on corruption in Pakistan, we find that most studies treat corruption, political interference, and institutional weakness as separate topics. Researchers have already conducted some good work; they have estimated the extent of corruption in Pakistan, its costs, the constitutional and legal powers of NAB and FIA, documented specific instances of political interference and noted administrative challenges like inadequate funding, understaffing and inadequate witness protection. This past research has been useful in describing different parts of the problem separately. But what is still needed is to put them all together. None of these three factors has been clearly demonstrated in study to be a single connected chain: how the political capture leads to poor performance of institutions and how that poor performance then facilitates the rise of corruption. This link between political capture, institutional weakness, and rising corruption has not been studied together for Pakistan's anti-corruption institutions. This is the gap that this study aims to fill by moving beyond describing these problems on their own, and instead looking at political capture and institutional weakness as connected factors that together explain why corruption keeps growing in Pakistan despite having anti-corruption institutions in place.

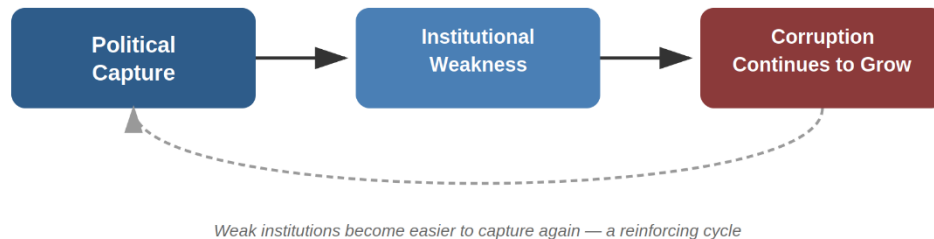


Figure 1: How political capture and institutional weakness reinforce each other to sustain corruption.

Problem statement:

The existence of several anti-corruption bodies in Pakistan such as the National Accountability Union (NAB), the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) and the Provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments does not seem to have led in any direction towards curbing the growth of corruption or restoring public confidence in these institutions. Multiple anti-corruption bodies are in place in Pakistan, including the National Accountability Union (NAB), the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA), and the Provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments, but these bodies appear to have made no significant progress in reducing the prevalence of corruption or increasing public trust in them. Preexisting studies simply attempt to attribute the lack of success to either political interference or administrative weaknesses, but not both. This leaves people in the dark about the reasons for the poor performance of these institutions, even though they have a formal legal mandate to do better. This study seeks to fill this void by looking at political capture and institutional weakness as interrelated reinforcing factors that together account for the ineffectiveness of Pakistan's anti-corruption institutions.

Objectives:

1. To explore the degree of political capture and the impact of this phenomenon on the independence and case handling of anti-

corruption institutions in Pakistan (NAB, FIA and provincial ACEs).

2. To evaluate the impact of institutional weaknesses (e.g. low funding, staffing capacity, legal authority) on the effectiveness of these institutions in carrying out their functions.

3. To examine link between political capture and institutional weakness, and how political capture contributes to the growing tide of corruption in Pakistan in spite of the presence of anti-corruption institutions.

Literature review:

The academic debate on anti-corruption governance in Pakistan often focuses on the conflict between formal law and the institutional realities of institutional dysfunction (Tasleem et al., 2026).

In the international literature, the study of political capture, institutional weakness, and anti-corruption institutions as interrelated yet distinct ideas have been investigated (Schwartz, 2026). Political capture is sometimes referred to as 'state capture', and there have been several attempts over the last quarter of a century to quantify this phenomenon, but most have focused on a single country or a handful of countries (Donaldson & Leuprecht, 2026). On institutional weakness, researchers have documented that both formal and informal institutions (laws, courts, parliaments, social norms, networks) influence the use of power in a country and that strong

institutions lead to accountability and stability, whereas weak ones allow powerful groups to dominate public resources. International studies of countries like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa have confirmed that, although in some countries there are robust anti-corruption laws, deceleration in the enforcement over time and political change can, in reality, lead to a decrease in enforcement (Donaldson & Leuprecht, 2026). This international literature explicitly reveals that corruption has nothing to do with just legal or technical matters, but is closely linked to political power and institutional strength.

The same ideas have been examined in Pakistan by focusing on its own institutions, their shortcomings and their performance. Research on NAB has found that ruling political groups have failed to create the right political environment for NAB to work properly, causing the institution's problems to outweigh its benefits (Aziz et al., 2025). Wider investigations into the oversight institutions have revealed that institutions like NAB, the Election Commission of Pakistan and Public Accounts Committee have been unable to demonstrate fair and effective accountability over the years due to political interference, as well as the shortcomings of the oversight institutions themselves, particularly the selective application of criminal charges against opposition figures, and the lack of action against corruption allegations against ruling elites, undermining the reputations and independence of the institutions (Tasleem et al., 2026). Some studies that are Pakistan-centric have taken the next step and directly connected both ends of this chain: one study on Pakistan's political institutions states that the connection between the two is a two-way street; the relationship between corruption and weak institutions is bidirectional, meaning that weak institutions encourage corruption and corruption, in turn, weakens institutions (Bashir & Ullah, 2026). It is one of the few studies that considers political weakness and institutional decline as a mutually reinforcing cycle, instead of two separate issues, but has a broad focus on political institutions in Pakistan and not specifically on the

bodies that target corruption such as NAB and FIA (Raza et al., 2020).

Moreover, the investigation brings to the fore the use of the National Accountability Bureau as a political tool, rather than an independent agency, with selective prosecution to stamp out opposition but failing to tackle systemic corruption among the civil service (Ismail et al., 2025). This lack of operational autonomy effectively transforms the agency into a tool for partisan victimization, thereby undermining its legitimacy and public trust (Aziz et al., 2025). Furthermore, the bureau has, historically, denied legal power to the military and judiciary, as well as a large portion of the private sector, which is only to be expected, but has also allowed for an environment of impunity for powerful actors to exist while forcing accountability on public officials and weaker actors (Hassan et al., 2026).

Despite this growing body of research, most existing studies still look at political capture and institutional weakness as two separate topics rather than one connected process, particularly when it comes to Pakistan's dedicated anti-corruption institutions. Global research tends to be quite general in its approach to 'state capture,' whereas most Pakistan-specific research tends to be quite specific in its description of a particular institution such as NAB or FIA, but in neither case is there a clear progressive strand of the work which, by step-by-step analysis, maps out how the institution is damaged by political interference and how the damage then enables further corruption. It is this gap that has been addressed in the present work. This study addresses this gap by linking the two strands of research together and regarding political capture and institutional weakness as two reinforcing, if intertwined, factors: it uses existing case evidence to show, step by step, how political interference undermines Pakistan's anti-corruption institutions in particular and how institutional weakness ultimately allows corruption to persist in spite of the presence of such institutions.

Research Questions:

1. How far has the political capture of anti-corruption bodies (NAB, FIA, and provincial ACEs) in Pakistan progressed and to what degree has it impacted their independence and case handling?
2. How do institutional weaknesses (e.g., funding, staffing, legal authority) restrict the capacity of these institutions to carry out their responsibilities?
3. How does the combination of political capture and institutional weakness contribute to the continued growth of corruption in Pakistan, despite the presence of anti-corruption institutions?

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative, document-based research design to examine the performance of Pakistan's three main anti-corruption institutions the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and the Provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments

(ACEs). The institutions chosen are representative of the core of anti-corruption enforcement at federal and provincial levels. They are evaluated based on six factors case handling and development of backlog, conviction rates over the years, neutrality in the selection of cases, institutional independence from political interference, resources and staffing, and legal powers as developed through legislative changes like amendments to the NAB Ordinance. Secondary sources of data include official annual reports, judicial documents from Accountability Courts, independent evaluations including Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, government and legislative documents and previous academic studies. Each institution is analysed individually regarding these factors and then compared to detect similar trends of political capture and institutional weakness in all three. Interviews were not conducted and therefore the study is based on documented and reported information, which is recognized as a limitation of the scope of the study.

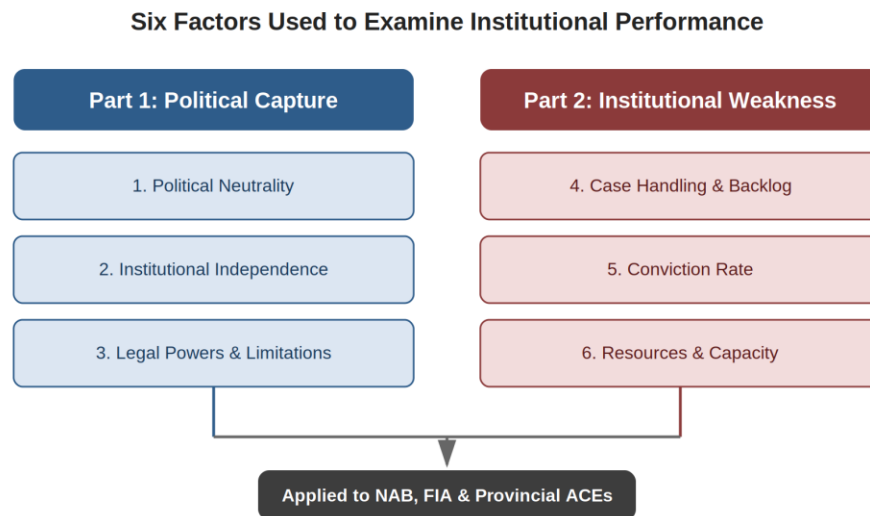


Figure 2: The six factors examined, grouped under political capture and institutional weakness.

Examining the Performance of Anti-Corruption Institutions

This study focuses on the two interrelated aspects of Pakistan's anti-corruption institutions with an eye on their performance. In Part One, political capture is explored in light of three factors: political neutrality, institutional independence,

and legal powers and limitations. Part Two examines institutional weakness, using three factors: case handling and backlog, conviction rate, and resources and capacity. Each factor is discussed separately below.

Part One: Political Capture

Factor 1: Political Neutrality

Political neutrality is used to describe how an institution uses its powers equally across all individuals or how it uses more force against those who oppose the ruling government and more leniency against those who support it (Brewer & Young, 2025). The federal accountability body has been repeatedly accused of selective accountability, with opposition figures' cases moving more quickly through the process, whereas allegations against ruling elites have been processed more slowly or even stalled completely, depending on the political landscape (Ali, 2018). Legislative changes, including the 2021 and 2022 amendments to its enabling ordinance, have been described by different political actors as either narrowing or expanding political misuse,

depending on who was in power at the time (Korejo et al., 2023). The federal investigative body has also been embroiled in politically sensitive issues, such as the high-profile investigations against political parties after judgement in elections, raising questions as to whether the cases were being opened for evidence or to satisfy political agendas (Ahmed, 2025). The provincial level bodies are closer to the provincial governments and local power structures, and hence potentially subject to the same risks of political influence, but it is less easy to document and review the pattern than it is for the federal bodies (Ali, 2018).

As a general rule, the dimension of political neutrality seems to be most frequently contested in all three institutions, and is a key factor in the perception of their performance by the public.

Institution	Neutrality Concern	Evidence Type
NAB	Frequently accused of selective action against opposition figures; law changed repeatedly by different governments	Documented, widely reported
FIA	Drawn into politically sensitive investigations tied to election and party-funding disputes	Documented, case-specific
Provincial ACEs	Close proximity to provincial governments raises similar risk	Limited public documentation

Sources: Dawn News reporting; The Express Tribune reporting; National Accountability Ordinance amendment records (2021–2022).

Factor 2: Institutional Independence

Institutional independence means the degree of autonomy that an institution has regarding the leadership and appointments of its members and over its operations in general, without interference from external political force (Schwalbe et al., 2025). The government and the opposition leader in parliament have determined who would head the federal accountability body in the past, with the process recently described in an independent evaluation as being encouraging political bargaining rather than open and merit-based, while one of the body's past chairmen resigned over “interference” and “pressure”, and a second chairmanship went ahead without full

consultation with the opposition because of a parliamentary wrangle (Ali, 2018). Consequently, the appointments process is now to be reformed by introducing a commission system with judges, civil service and civil society (this is still to be implemented). In a similar manner, the federal investigation body works within the executive and is subject to the ministerial lines of communication, with leadership and priorities changing as governments change (Sadiq, 2020). The provincial level institutions are subject to even greater administrative control, being generally located within provincial home departments, as opposed to the federal institutions, and therefore

more closely aligned to political control (Zaheer et al., 2025).

In each of the three levels, the pattern is that the independence of institutions is weak, not just

because of informal political pressures, but because of institutional design.

Institution	Independence Indicator	Assessment
NAB	Chairman appointed via government-opposition consensus; reform to commission-based process pledged by 2027	Limited, reform pending
FIA	Operates under federal ministerial oversight	Limited, executive-controlled
Provincial ACEs	Function within provincial home departments	Most limited, closest to political authority

Sources: National Accountability Ordinance appointment clauses; independent governance assessment reports; news reporting on NAB chairman appointments.

Factor 3: Legal Powers and Limitations

Legal powers and limitations concern what the scope of the authority of an institution is, and how it is modified by legislation, and this directly affects what it can and cannot investigate (Luna-Pla, 2024). The legal powers of the federal accountability body have undergone a transformation in a series of amendments made in 2021 and 2022, where the routine procedural issues and decisions taken by the cabinet were exempted from their review, the taxation-related issues were taken out from their ambit, and their powers were limited to the amount exceeding Rs 500 million (Korejo et al., 2023). Independent analysis of challan filing and conviction rates

revealed that these changes had a noticeable impact on the case numbers filed with the federal accountability body and the number of convictions achieved (Ahmed, 2025). The federal investigation body and the provincial-level agencies are still largely operating under the older Prevention of Corruption Act of 1947, which was never intended for modern financial crimes, and does not have provisions that are appropriate to the modern methods of corruption (Ali, 2018). These laws, taken together, indicate that institutional performance is not only influenced by political interference or resource constraints, but also the legal constraints which have been constricting over the years and not stretched.

Institution	Legal Change / Limitation	Effect
NAB	2021-2022 amendments exempted cabinet decisions, taxation matters; restricted cases to Rs 500m+	Reduced scope, lower case filings and convictions
FIA	Relies partly on outdated 1947 Prevention of Corruption Act	Limited fit for modern financial/cyber crimes
Provincial ACEs	Same outdated legal framework as FIA	Limited fit for modern financial crimes

Sources: National Accountability (Amendment) Ordinances 2021-2022; Supreme Court of Pakistan verdict on NAB amendments (2023); academic journal analysis of NAB law effectiveness.

Part Two: Institutional Weakness

Factor 4: Case Handling and Backlog

In anti-corruption institutions, case backlog is an issue that is persistent in one form or another throughout Pakistan. Hundreds of references have been returned to the federal accountability body over the last few years, and its jurisdiction has been further curtailed after amendments to the law were approved in 2023 that transferred a number of pending investigations and trials to other authorities, and that left hundreds of cases under its jurisdiction pending before the Supreme Court (Lughmani et al., 2023). The federal investigation body for financial and cyber-crimes is overwhelmed by an ever-growing workload and thousands of inquiries are pending on tens of thousands of complaints, and some high-profile

financial crimes are still outstanding for more than 10 years because they are too complex (Sithari et al., 2024). The provincial-level accountability bodies demonstrate a similar pattern of slow case movement and investigation delays, but do not provide as much public information about cases that have been backlogged or not investigated as do the federal accountability bodies and are not as confident in their ability to accurately estimate the number of cases that have been backlogged (Sadiq, 2020). A lack of consistent reporting is a measure of poor institutional transparency (Sithari et al., 2024).

Overall, the backlog in all three tiers seems to be a result of a mix of legal disruptions, administrative capacity relative to caseload, and variations in public reporting.

Institution	Reported Backlog Indicator	Data Transparency
NAB	598 references returned by courts (2022–2023); ~ 300 cases pending before Supreme Court	Moderate – some figures publicly reported
FIA	11,000+ pending inquiries from 35,000+ complaints; ~ 16,700 pending cyber cases in Punjab alone	Moderate – sector-specific data available
Provincial ACEs	No consistent published backlog figures; anecdotal reports of slow case movement	Low – limited public reporting

Sources: NAB Prosecutor General data; Supreme Court of Pakistan verdict on NAB amendments (2023); FIA cybercrime wing reports.

Factor 5: Conviction Rate

The conviction rate is one of the most obvious measures of the effectiveness of institutions because it shows the proportion of registered cases that reach a court of law and aren't dropped or stalled. The federal accountability body's conviction rate has also dropped significantly over recent years, from around 58% in 2018 to about 32% in 2022, although officials have at times reported a higher rate of convictions – which themselves questions the consistency of reporting from institutions (Afzal et al., 2023). The body's conviction rate varies significantly according to type of case, and in the case of cybercrime in particular, it has not been high – since 2020, just

over 7,000 individuals have been arrested, and only 222 of those have been convicted. Conviction rates are not easy to measure at the provincial level for corruption cases, but do range significantly in some provinces, from less than 5% to near 38%, reflecting the fact that the level of convictions is increasingly dependent on the capacity and resources of the province where charged than on a national standard (Sadiq, 2020).

The low conviction rates and the inconsistencies in conviction rates suggest that the quality of prosecution, evidence management and the follow-up in institutions are not satisfactory and should be improved.

Institution	Reported Conviction Indicator	Trend
NAB	58% (2018) declined to 32% (2022)	Declining
FIA	<5% in cybercrime cases (2020–2025); higher in select financial cases	Inconsistent across case types
Provincial ACEs	No dedicated corruption-specific data; broader provincial conviction rates range 2%–38%	Highly variable by region

Sources: NAB annual performance data; FIA cybercrime wing statistics; provincial government judicial reports.

Factor 6: Resources and Capacity

Resources and capacity are the staffing, budgeting, technical tools and training that an institution has to conduct their investigations effectively (Lu et al., 2023). Across the federation and province, there is a lack of coordination between anti-corruption agencies, inadequate focus on prevention of corruption and poor utilization of investigative resources, as revealed by an independent governance diagnostic assessment (Sadiq, 2020). A special unit within the federal investigation body, the specialized cybercrime wing of the FBI, is a perfect reflection of this strain, as they report a large number of employees are missing and they have a small core group of technically trained staff to deal with a very large

number of complaints (Sithari et al., 2024). The federal accountability body has made some efforts to increase its capacity, such as establishing a forensic science lab and a dedicated training center for investigators and prosecutors, but this has not been enough to eliminate large case backlogs (Lughmani et al., 2023). Provincial-level bodies have fewer specialized resources than Federal-level bodies and are funded from general provincial government funds, not dedicated budgets, meaning they are less likely to conduct complex financial investigations (Sadiq, 2020).

In general, there are some capacity-building initiatives, but in all three institutions, funding and staffing are a constant constraint.

Institution	Capacity Indicator	Assessment
NAB	Has forensic lab and training academy, but backlog persists	Moderate, improving slowly
FIA	Reported personnel shortfall in specialized wings (e.g., cybercrime)	Limited relative to caseload
Provincial ACEs	Rely on general provincial funding, fewer specialized resources	Weakest capacity overall

Sources: Independent governance diagnostic assessment of Pakistan's anti-corruption bodies; FIA cybercrime wing reports; NAB institutional records.

Conclusion:

In combination, these six factors reveal that Pakistan's anti-corruption institutions do not perform well because of any single issue but rather because of multiple issues that compound. Case backlog and low conviction rates are the real-world

consequence of more fundamental problems, such as insufficient resources, limited law enforcement authority and doubts over political neutrality and independence, all of which slow investigations and decrease prosecution success. These institutions were set up with real powers on paper, but their

capacity to employ those powers independently and consistently has been repeatedly limited, including by legal amendment (which has reduced institutional powers), by the nature of processes for their selection (which have been shaped by political consensus) and by accusations of selective accountability. This reinforces the central theme of the current study: political capture and institutional weakness are linked phenomena, and the former compromises the capacity of the latter to effectively counteract corruption, while the latter makes it even harder to effectively counteract corruption at the political level. The pattern is found in all three institutions studied, but in slightly different, yet recognisable, forms in each at the federal and provincial level, indicating that any serious reform must consider both the political interference and the structural capacity, and not treat them as separate problems.

Recommendations

- Improve institutional leadership appointment system. Shifting to a merit-based, commission-led selection process would reduce political bargaining and strengthen institutional independence.
- Enhance the law and increase investigative authority. Review amendments to limit institutional authority, to ensure there is a proper legal reach to conduct corruption investigations at all levels. Invest resources, capacity, transparent reporting.
- Performance and accountability would be enhanced by increased staffing and funding, particularly at the provincial level, and by a uniform system of public reporting.

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