

Sweden scores highest in 'Rule of law index'

Written by Johan Nylander / AFP

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An annual survey of the rule of law around the world released Monday sees weak protections for fundamental rights in China, "serious deficiencies" in Russia, and problems with discrimination in the United States.

Sweden and Norway scored highest on the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, which ranks countries on such key areas as whether the government is held accountable, there is access to justice, rights are protected and crime and corruption is prevented.

Sweden ranks first in three of eight areas -fundamental rights, open government, and regulatory enforcement- and is located in the top five in seven of the eight categories.

Sweden's administrative agencies and courts are rated among the most effective and transparent in the world, and generally observe fundamental rights.

"Achieving the rule of law is a constant challenge and a work in progress in all countries," said Hongsia Liu, the executive director of the project, which was funded by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

He said the index was "not designed to shame or blame, but to provide useful reference points for countries in the same regions, with comparable legal cultures and similar income levels."

In the case of China, the report noted that the Asian giant had made "major improvements" in the quality, effectiveness and accountability of its legal institutions.

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It came in second after Brazil among the so-called BRIC group of emerging powers -- Brazil, Russia, India and China.

But more progress was needed in the area of judicial independence, the report said.

"Indicators of fundamental rights are also weak, including labor rights (ranking 61st out of 66), freedom of assembly (ranking 66th), and freedom of speech (ranking 66th)," it said.

On India, the report found strong free speech protections, an independent judiciary, and a relatively open government with functioning checks and balances.

"However, the unsatisfactory performance of public administrative bodies keeps generating a negative impact on the rule of law," it said.

India's courts are congested, processing of cases is slow and law enforcement is deficient, with significant corruption and police discrimination and abuses "not unusual," it said.

Of the BRIC countries, Russia fared the worst in the rankings.

"The country shows serious deficiencies in checks and balances among the different branches of government (ranking 55th), leading to an institutional environment characterized by corruption, impunity, and political interference," it said.

"Violations against some fundamental rights, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of association, and arbitrary interference of privacy are areas of concern," it added.

The rule of law was also found wanting in countries like Iran, long at odds with the international community over its nuclear program and which ranked last in the world on protection of

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fundamental rights.

"As a state-dominated country, law enforcement in the country is relatively strong, but often used as an instrument to perpetrate abuses and favor the elites," the report said.

"Government accountability is weak (ranking 59th globally and last within the region), and corruption is prevalent. Courts, although fairly efficient, are subject to corruption and political interference."

In Latin America, Venezuela was rated "the worst performer in the world in accountability and effective checks on the executive power.

"Corruption appears to be widespread (ranking 54th), crime and violence are common (ranking 64th), government institutions are non-transparent, and the criminal justice system is ineffective and subject to political influence (ranking 66th).

"The country also displays serious flaws in guaranteeing respect for fundamental rights, in particular, freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to privacy," it said.

Western Europe was the top performing region of the world with most countries, except Italy, getting high marks in most categories.