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The Role of Public Participation in Corruption Prevention in the Legal Systems of Iran, Norway, and Finland

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ABSTRACT

Corruption poses a persistent structural challenge to good governance, the rule of law, and public trust, prompting legal systems to increasingly prioritize prevention alongside traditional punitive responses. This article examines the role of public participation as a preventive mechanism in anti-corruption policy through a comparative analysis of the legal systems of Iran, Norway, and Finland. Using a scientific narrative review and descriptive legal analysis, the study explores how public participation is conceptualized, institutionalized, and operationalized within different legal, institutional, and cultural contexts. The analysis demonstrates that while all three systems formally recognize the importance of preventing corruption, they diverge significantly in the legal design and practical effectiveness of participatory mechanisms. In Norway and Finland, public participation is deeply embedded in governance structures through access to information laws, administrative transparency, protected reporting mechanisms, independent media, and decentralized oversight institutions, supported by high levels of social trust and legal certainty. In contrast, Iran's legal framework reflects a more centralized, state-centered approach in which citizen participation is primarily channeled through formal complaint mechanisms and remains constrained by procedural barriers, limited legal protections, and socio-institutional factors. The comparative findings highlight that effective public participation depends on a convergence of legal safeguards, institutional independence, transparency norms, and cultural legitimacy. The study argues that participatory mechanisms cannot be mechanically transplanted across legal systems and must be adapted to domestic constitutional principles and social realities. The article concludes by outlining policy-oriented implications for strengthening public participation in corruption prevention within Iran's legal system through gradual, context-sensitive reforms that enhance legal clarity, institutional responsiveness, and civic trust.

Keywords: *Corruption Prevention; Public Participation; Comparative Legal Analysis; Transparency and Accountability; Iran; Norway; Finland*

Introduction

Corruption is widely recognized as one of the most persistent structural threats to good governance, the rule of law, and sustainable development. Beyond its immediate economic costs, corruption undermines institutional legitimacy, erodes public trust, distorts decision-making processes, and weakens the normative foundations upon which legal systems rest. In contemporary legal and criminological scholarship, corruption is no longer conceptualized merely as a series of isolated criminal acts committed by deviant officials; rather, it is increasingly understood as a systemic phenomenon embedded within administrative, political, and social structures. Legal analyses of economic and administrative crimes in Iran have demonstrated that corruption often emerges where



discretionary power is insufficiently controlled and where preventive safeguards are weak, highlighting the limitations of reactive criminal justice approaches that rely primarily on punishment after harm has occurred (1). Similar insights have been echoed in comparative studies emphasizing that corruption flourishes not simply because of inadequate criminalization, but due to failures in transparency, accountability, and public oversight (2).

This growing recognition has contributed to a paradigmatic shift in anti-corruption policy from a predominantly repressive, state-centered model toward a preventive framework that emphasizes structural safeguards and social engagement. While traditional criminal policy has focused on investigation, prosecution, and punishment, contemporary approaches increasingly stress prevention as a more sustainable and effective strategy. Preventive criminal policy seeks to reduce opportunities for corruption, strengthen ethical norms, and enhance early detection mechanisms before corrupt practices become entrenched. Iranian legal scholarship has critically assessed the proactive dimensions of criminal policy against administrative corruption, arguing that reliance on punitive responses alone has proven insufficient in curbing systemic corruption (3). This critique aligns with broader international legal analyses that underscore the necessity of embedding anti-corruption efforts within administrative law, regulatory design, and participatory governance structures (4).

Within this preventive paradigm, public participation has emerged as a central normative and functional element. Public participation refers to the involvement of citizens, civil society organizations, media, and other non-state actors in monitoring public power, accessing information, reporting irregularities, and contributing to accountability processes. Unlike post-facto judicial cooperation, which occurs after corruption has already taken place, participatory prevention operates *ex ante* by increasing the visibility of public action and reducing the space for discretionary abuse. Studies on social prevention of administrative corruption emphasize that when citizens are empowered to engage in oversight, corruption becomes riskier, more costly, and less socially tolerated (5). This approach reframes citizens not merely as victims of corruption but as active agents in safeguarding legality and integrity.

The concept of corruption itself requires careful clarification in order to ground the analytical framework of this study. In legal terms, corruption generally encompasses the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, whether financial, political, or social. However, jurisprudential and doctrinal analyses reveal that the boundaries of corruption are neither fixed nor uniform across legal systems. Iranian jurisprudential studies examining concepts such as “corruption on earth” in economic crimes demonstrate how moral, religious, and legal interpretations intersect in defining corrupt conduct (6). Comparative legal research further shows that acts considered corrupt in one system may fall outside criminal definitions in another, raising issues of legal certainty and normative coherence (7). These definitional variations have direct implications for prevention, as they shape what behaviors are subject to scrutiny and public oversight.

Corruption prevention, as distinguished from corruption control or repression, refers to a set of legal, institutional, and social measures designed to reduce the likelihood of corrupt behavior occurring in the first place. Preventive measures include transparency requirements, conflict-of-interest regulations, access to information laws, ethical codes, and mechanisms for public reporting. Legal analyses of Iran’s capacity to prevent corruption have highlighted both the presence of formal preventive norms and the challenges associated with their fragmented implementation (8). International studies similarly emphasize that prevention is most effective when legal norms are complemented by societal engagement and a culture of accountability (9). Thus, prevention is not solely a matter of legal drafting but of institutional practice and social acceptance.

Public participation in corruption prevention must also be distinguished from related but narrower concepts such as whistleblowing and judicial cooperation. Whistleblowing typically involves the disclosure of wrongdoing by insiders, often within organizational contexts, and raises specific issues of legal protection and retaliation. A substantial body of comparative research has focused on legal protections for whistleblowers as a key component of anti-corruption frameworks (10, 11). While whistleblower protection is undeniably important, public participation extends beyond this mechanism to include broader forms of civic oversight, such as citizen monitoring of public procurement, media investigations, and civil society advocacy. Models of legal protection for whistleblowers and justice collaborators demonstrate that without trust in protective frameworks, individuals are unlikely to report corruption, thereby weakening preventive capacity (12). However, an exclusive focus on whistleblowing risks overlooking other participatory channels that contribute to systemic prevention.

Civic oversight and social accountability are closely related concepts that further illuminate the participatory dimension of corruption prevention. Civic oversight refers to the monitoring of public authorities by citizens and organized groups, often facilitated by access to information and transparency obligations. Social accountability emphasizes the ability of society to hold power holders answerable through formal and informal mechanisms, including public discourse and reputational sanctions. Legal analyses of administrative corruption underscore that social accountability mechanisms can function as powerful deterrents when institutional enforcement is limited or delayed (13). Moreover, discursive studies of anti-corruption efforts in different legal fields reveal that public narratives and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping institutional behavior (14). These insights suggest that prevention operates not only through legal sanctions but also through social norms and collective vigilance.

The comparative focus on Iran, Norway, and Finland is grounded in the significant contrasts among these legal systems with respect to political structure, legal tradition, and institutional trust. Iran represents a system with a strong central state, a hybrid legal order influenced by statutory law and Islamic jurisprudence, and a historically state-driven approach to anti-corruption. Legal studies on legislative challenges in Iran's anti-corruption framework point to issues such as overlapping competencies, limited transparency, and insufficient integration of public participation mechanisms (15). In this context, examining the role of citizens in prevention requires attention to both formal legal provisions and socio-political constraints.

Norway and Finland, by contrast, are frequently cited as high-trust societies with strong traditions of transparency, administrative openness, and civic engagement. Although the present study does not aim to replicate corruption indices, comparative legal scholarship recognizes that these systems benefit from deeply institutionalized participatory norms, where access to information and public scrutiny are integral to governance. Studies on conflict of interest and institutional reforms in other jurisdictions illustrate how clear legal frameworks combined with societal trust can significantly reduce corruption risks (16). The inclusion of Norway and Finland thus allows for an exploration of how public participation functions in legal environments where prevention is embedded in everyday administrative practice rather than treated as an exceptional measure.

The rationale for this comparative selection also lies in the diversity of legal cultures and governance models. By juxtaposing Iran with Nordic systems, the study seeks to avoid simplistic generalizations and instead highlight how participatory prevention is shaped by contextual factors such as legal certainty, freedom of information, media independence, and social capital. Comparative administrative law research has shown that even highly effective preventive models are the product of long-term institutional evolution rather than rapid legal transplantation (4).

Therefore, comparison serves not to idealize one system over another, but to identify structural conditions that enable or constrain public participation in corruption prevention.

Methodologically, this study adopts a scientific narrative review combined with descriptive legal analysis. The narrative review approach is particularly suited to interdisciplinary topics such as corruption prevention, where legal norms, criminological theories, and governance practices intersect. Rather than conducting a statistical meta-analysis, this method synthesizes legal texts, scholarly analyses, and comparative studies to construct a coherent interpretive framework. Sources were selected based on their relevance to corruption, preventive criminal policy, public participation, and comparative legal analysis, with particular attention to peer-reviewed articles and authoritative legal studies published in recent years (3, 8). This approach allows for an in-depth examination of concepts and mechanisms that are not easily quantifiable but are central to legal understanding.

Descriptive legal analysis forms the second pillar of the methodology. This involves examining legal norms, institutional arrangements, and doctrinal interpretations within each system without imposing evaluative judgments at the outset. By describing how public participation is legally framed and practically operationalized, the study seeks to uncover both explicit mechanisms and implicit assumptions embedded in each legal order. Comparative reasoning is employed to identify convergences and divergences across systems, while remaining sensitive to contextual differences in legal culture and governance capacity. Prior comparative studies on anti-corruption laws have demonstrated that descriptive analysis is essential for avoiding normative bias and for understanding how legal rules function in practice (2).

The analytical logic of the study is therefore cumulative and comparative. It begins with a conceptual clarification of corruption and participation, proceeds to system-specific descriptions, and culminates in a comparative synthesis. Throughout this process, the focus remains on prevention as a dynamic interaction between law and society rather than a static set of rules. By grounding the analysis in established legal scholarship while maintaining a comparative perspective, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how public participation can function as a cornerstone of effective anti-corruption policy across diverse legal systems.

Theoretical and Normative Foundations of Public Participation in Corruption Prevention

The theoretical foundations of public participation in corruption prevention are rooted in a broader reconceptualization of governance that moves beyond hierarchical, state-centered control toward inclusive and interactive models of public power. Participatory democracy theory provides an essential starting point for this analysis by challenging minimalist conceptions of democracy that confine citizen involvement to periodic elections. Instead, participatory approaches emphasize continuous civic engagement in public decision-making, oversight, and accountability. Within this framework, corruption is understood not merely as a violation of criminal law but as a distortion of democratic processes and public trust. Legal scholarship has increasingly argued that when citizens are excluded from meaningful participation, the informational asymmetries and concentration of discretionary power that facilitate corruption are intensified (3). From this perspective, public participation becomes a structural safeguard that complements formal legal controls by embedding oversight within everyday governance practices.

Closely connected to participatory democracy is social capital theory, which highlights the role of trust, networks, and shared norms in facilitating collective action. High levels of social capital are associated with stronger informal constraints on corrupt behavior, as individuals are more willing to monitor authority, share information, and sanction misconduct. Studies examining administrative corruption emphasize that where social trust is low and civic networks

are weak, citizens are less likely to engage in preventive oversight, even when formal legal mechanisms exist (13). Conversely, societies characterized by dense civic associations and trust in public institutions tend to exhibit greater resilience against corruption. Legal analyses of corruption prevention therefore increasingly recognize that law operates within a broader social ecosystem, and that participatory mechanisms are effective only when supported by social capital that encourages responsible engagement (9).

Transparency and accountability frameworks further elaborate the normative justification for public participation in anti-corruption policy. Transparency refers to the availability, accessibility, and clarity of information regarding public decision-making, while accountability concerns the obligation of power holders to justify their actions and face consequences for misconduct. Legal scholarship has long emphasized that transparency without participation risks becoming a purely formal exercise, as information disclosure alone does not guarantee scrutiny or corrective action (17). Public participation transforms transparency into an active preventive tool by enabling citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations to interpret information, detect irregularities, and exert pressure on institutions. In this sense, participation acts as the operational link between transparency norms and accountability outcomes, reinforcing the preventive logic of anti-corruption law.

Preventive criminal policy theory provides another critical lens through which public participation can be understood. Unlike traditional repressive criminal policy, which focuses on punishment after the commission of offenses, preventive criminal policy aims to reduce criminogenic conditions and opportunities. Iranian legal scholars have argued that administrative and economic corruption often persists because criminal law intervenes too late, after corrupt practices have become systemic (1). Preventive approaches therefore prioritize early detection, ethical regulation, and societal vigilance. Within this framework, public participation functions as an informal yet powerful preventive mechanism that complements formal controls. By increasing the likelihood that misconduct will be observed and reported, citizen engagement raises the perceived risks of corruption and alters cost–benefit calculations for potential offenders (5).

International legal instruments have played a significant role in institutionalizing these theoretical insights by framing public participation as a legal obligation rather than a discretionary policy choice. Global anti-corruption norms increasingly emphasize the role of citizens, civil society, and the private sector in preventing corruption. Comparative legal analyses demonstrate that international standards conceptualize public participation as encompassing access to information, involvement in policy processes, protection for whistleblowers, and mechanisms for civil society monitoring (8). These instruments reflect a normative shift from viewing corruption solely as a matter of criminal justice to understanding it as a governance failure that requires broad societal engagement. As a result, participation is embedded in regulatory systems through legally enforceable rights and duties rather than left to voluntary or informal practices.

Whistleblowing occupies a central position within these international frameworks as a specific form of participatory prevention. Whistleblowers provide insider information that is often inaccessible through ordinary oversight channels, making them crucial for early detection of corruption. Legal studies on the protection of whistleblowers consistently highlight that without adequate safeguards against retaliation, reporting mechanisms remain underutilized (18). Comparative research on legal protection models shows that effective whistleblower regimes require clear reporting procedures, confidentiality guarantees, and remedies for retaliatory actions (12). At the same time, scholars caution against reducing public participation to whistleblowing alone, as this risks

overburdening individuals while neglecting broader participatory structures such as media freedom and civic monitoring (11).

Access to information laws constitute another foundational element of participatory anti-corruption frameworks. The right to obtain information from public authorities enables citizens to scrutinize decision-making processes, public expenditures, and administrative conduct. Legal analyses of disclosure regimes emphasize that access to information is a prerequisite for meaningful participation, as citizens cannot monitor what remains hidden (17). However, access alone is insufficient if information is excessively technical, fragmented, or delayed. International experience suggests that participatory prevention is most effective when access to information is paired with institutional channels that allow citizens to question, challenge, and influence public action, thereby transforming transparency into accountability (14).

Civil society monitoring represents a further dimension through which participation is institutionalized in anti-corruption regimes. Civil society organizations, professional associations, and investigative journalists often act as intermediaries between individual citizens and state institutions, aggregating information and amplifying oversight efforts. Comparative legal research demonstrates that where civil society enjoys legal recognition and operational autonomy, it can significantly enhance preventive capacity by identifying systemic risks and advocating for reform (4). At the same time, the effectiveness of civil society monitoring depends on legal environments that protect freedom of expression and association, underscoring the interdependence between participatory prevention and broader constitutional guarantees.

Despite its normative appeal, public participation in corruption prevention is not without legal risks and limitations. One major concern involves the potential misuse of reporting mechanisms, including false or malicious accusations that can damage reputations and undermine due process. Legal scholars emphasize that anti-corruption frameworks must balance encouragement of reporting with safeguards against abuse, such as evidentiary standards and penalties for intentional false reporting (7). Without such safeguards, participatory mechanisms risk being perceived as tools for personal or political vendettas rather than instruments of integrity, which can erode public trust and discourage genuine participation.

Protection of due process constitutes another critical limit on participatory prevention. While transparency and public scrutiny are essential, excessive exposure of unproven allegations can compromise the presumption of innocence and the rights of accused individuals. Legal analyses of administrative and judicial corruption highlight the need to ensure that participatory mechanisms operate within clearly defined procedural boundaries (19). This includes rules governing confidentiality, investigation procedures, and judicial review. Effective anti-corruption systems therefore seek to integrate public participation into formal processes rather than allowing it to operate in an unregulated or ad hoc manner.

Privacy concerns further complicate the normative landscape of participation. Access to information and public oversight can conflict with the protection of personal data and legitimate confidentiality interests. Comparative studies on anti-corruption reforms emphasize that transparency must be carefully calibrated to avoid disproportionate intrusions into privacy, particularly in contexts involving sensitive financial or personal information (16). Legal frameworks must therefore articulate clear criteria for disclosure and exemption, ensuring that participation enhances accountability without violating fundamental rights.

The balance between transparency and legal certainty represents a final theoretical challenge. Legal certainty requires that individuals and institutions can predict the legal consequences of their actions, while transparency and

participation introduce elements of openness and scrutiny that may evolve over time. Scholars analyzing corruption criminalization argue that vague or overly broad participatory mandates can create uncertainty and discourage legitimate administrative discretion (2). Consequently, participatory mechanisms must be clearly defined in law, specifying their scope, procedures, and limits. This legal structuring ensures that participation functions as a preventive tool rather than a source of instability.

Taken together, these theoretical and normative foundations demonstrate that public participation in corruption prevention is neither a purely moral aspiration nor an informal supplement to state action. It is a legally structured mechanism grounded in democratic theory, social capital, transparency, and preventive criminal policy. International norms and comparative legal scholarship converge on the view that participation enhances prevention by redistributing oversight, reducing informational asymmetries, and embedding integrity within social practices. At the same time, the effectiveness and legitimacy of participatory prevention depend on carefully designed legal safeguards that protect due process, privacy, and legal certainty. This theoretical framework provides the evaluative lens through which the subsequent country-specific analyses of Iran, Norway, and Finland will be conducted.

Public Participation in Corruption Prevention in the Iranian Legal System

Public participation in corruption prevention within the Iranian legal system must be understood against the backdrop of a constitutional order that formally recognizes public oversight while simultaneously channeling anti-corruption authority through centralized state institutions. The Iranian Constitution embeds notions of accountability, supervision of public affairs, and responsibility of officials within a framework that assigns the primary role in safeguarding public interest to state organs. Legal analyses of Iran's criminal and administrative policy emphasize that corruption is perceived as a serious threat to public order, economic justice, and social trust, warranting strong state intervention (1). Within this paradigm, citizens are acknowledged as beneficiaries of integrity and legality, yet their direct role as preventive actors is often framed indirectly, mediated through institutional mechanisms rather than autonomous civic action.

From a constitutional perspective, public participation in supervision is conceptually present through principles emphasizing accountability of officials and the duty of the state to respond to public grievances. However, doctrinal studies note that these principles are largely operationalized through formal complaint and inspection systems rather than participatory governance models (15). Oversight is thus institutionalized vertically, with citizens positioned as complainants who trigger administrative or judicial review rather than as continuous monitors of public action. This approach reflects a legal culture that prioritizes order, hierarchy, and centralized control, which in turn shapes the modalities of public engagement in corruption prevention.

Statutory mechanisms constitute the primary channels through which citizens may participate in anti-corruption processes. Public reporting mechanisms allow individuals to submit complaints regarding administrative misconduct to designated bodies, including supervisory and inspection institutions. Legal research on administrative corruption in Iran highlights that these channels are formally available but procedurally complex, often requiring complainants to navigate opaque bureaucratic processes (13). While such mechanisms theoretically enable early detection of corruption, their effectiveness depends heavily on citizens' confidence in institutional responsiveness and protection. Empirical legal studies suggest that delays, lack of feedback, and limited transparency in complaint handling can discourage sustained public engagement (3).

Administrative complaint systems are complemented by inspection bodies that possess broad authority to investigate misconduct within public institutions. These bodies play a central role in Iran's preventive framework by monitoring compliance with legal and ethical standards. However, their operations are largely internal and expert-driven, with limited avenues for ongoing citizen involvement beyond the initial submission of information. Analyses of preventive criminal policy argue that this institutional design reinforces a reactive model of participation, where citizens contribute episodically rather than systematically to corruption prevention (8). As a result, public participation remains auxiliary to state oversight rather than constitutive of it.

The role of media and civil society in corruption prevention presents a more complex picture. Media outlets and journalists have historically contributed to exposing corruption and stimulating public debate, thereby exerting indirect preventive pressure on officials. Legal analyses emphasize that media scrutiny can function as a powerful deterrent by increasing reputational costs associated with corruption (14). Nevertheless, the scope of media participation is shaped by regulatory constraints and political sensitivities, which may limit investigative reporting in certain areas. Civil society organizations similarly operate within a regulated environment that affects their capacity to monitor public administration and mobilize citizens. Comparative legal research underscores that where civil society's legal space is constrained, participatory prevention tends to be fragmented and dependent on informal networks rather than institutionalized channels (4).

Whistleblowing represents one of the most direct forms of citizen participation in corruption prevention, particularly when corruption occurs within closed administrative environments. In Iran, the legal position of whistleblowers remains a subject of scholarly debate, with studies pointing to the absence of a comprehensive and coherent protective framework (8). While certain legal provisions implicitly recognize reporting of wrongdoing, they do not consistently provide guarantees against retaliation, such as dismissal, demotion, or legal harassment. Comparative research on whistleblower protection highlights that without explicit safeguards, individuals face significant personal risks that deter reporting, even when corruption is evident (18).

The lack of robust whistleblower protection has been identified as a critical weakness in Iran's participatory prevention architecture. Legal analyses of proactive criminal policy note that reliance on individual courage without institutional protection undermines preventive objectives (3). Studies examining models of legal protection for whistleblowers in other jurisdictions demonstrate that confidentiality, anonymity, and access to remedies are essential components of effective reporting systems (12). In the Iranian context, uncertainty regarding legal outcomes and potential reprisals contributes to a culture of silence, particularly within public organizations where hierarchical relationships are strong.

Procedural barriers further complicate citizen involvement in corruption prevention. Complex evidentiary requirements, ambiguous jurisdictional rules, and prolonged investigative processes can discourage individuals from pursuing complaints. Legal scholarship has emphasized that when citizens perceive reporting as burdensome or futile, participatory mechanisms lose their preventive value (13). Moreover, the absence of clear feedback mechanisms leaves complainants uncertain about the impact of their actions, weakening trust in the system. These procedural challenges illustrate how formal availability of participation does not necessarily translate into practical effectiveness.

Cultural and political factors also play a decisive role in shaping public participation in Iran. Trust in institutions is a key determinant of whether citizens are willing to engage in preventive oversight. Studies on administrative corruption suggest that perceptions of selective enforcement or lack of impartiality can erode confidence and reduce

willingness to report misconduct (15). Fear of retaliation, whether legal, professional, or social, further constrains participation, particularly in contexts where personal networks and informal relationships are deeply embedded in administrative life. These factors interact with legal structures to produce a cautious and risk-averse participatory culture.

The centralized nature of anti-corruption enforcement in Iran reinforces these dynamics. Authority to investigate and sanction corruption is concentrated within state bodies, which can limit opportunities for decentralized or community-based oversight. Legal analyses argue that centralization may enhance coordination and consistency, but it can also distance citizens from preventive processes and reduce perceived ownership of anti-corruption efforts (1). In such a system, participation is often framed as cooperation with authorities rather than independent oversight, which shapes both expectations and behavior.

A critical assessment of Iran's legal framework thus reveals a significant gap between formal provisions and practical outcomes. On paper, citizens possess avenues to report corruption and seek accountability, yet in practice these avenues are constrained by legal ambiguities, institutional inertia, and socio-cultural barriers. Comparative studies on corruption criminalization caution that overemphasis on punitive measures without parallel investment in participatory safeguards can lead to symbolic compliance rather than substantive prevention (2). In Iran, this tension manifests in a system that recognizes the importance of public involvement rhetorically but has yet to fully operationalize it as a preventive strategy.

At the same time, Iranian legal scholarship increasingly acknowledges the potential of social prevention and civic engagement in addressing administrative corruption. Research on social prevention emphasizes that empowering citizens through clear legal rights, simplified procedures, and protective measures can enhance early detection and deterrence (5). Such analyses suggest that strengthening public participation does not require abandoning centralized enforcement, but rather complementing it with legally structured participatory mechanisms that distribute oversight more broadly across society.

The Iranian experience therefore illustrates the complexities of integrating public participation into a legal system characterized by strong state authority and evolving governance norms. The gap between law in books and law in action underscores that preventive effectiveness depends not only on legal texts but on institutional trust, procedural design, and cultural acceptance. Understanding these dynamics is essential for any comparative assessment of public participation in corruption prevention, as it highlights both the constraints and the latent capacities within Iran's legal framework.

Public Participation in Corruption Prevention in Norway and Finland

Public participation in corruption prevention in Norway and Finland is embedded within governance systems characterized by administrative openness, high institutional trust, and a long-standing commitment to transparency as a legal and cultural norm. In these legal systems, corruption is not treated solely as a criminal deviation to be addressed ex post through prosecution, but as a governance risk to be mitigated through continuous public scrutiny and accountability. Comparative legal scholarship emphasizes that such systems rely on preventive architectures in which citizens are structurally positioned as participants in oversight rather than as external complainants reacting to institutional failure (4). This participatory orientation is reflected in the design of legal frameworks governing access to information, public administration, and oversight institutions, which collectively transform transparency into a functional instrument of corruption prevention.

Access to information laws constitute the cornerstone of participatory prevention in both Norway and Finland. These laws grant citizens broad rights to obtain documents and data held by public authorities, subject only to narrowly defined exceptions. Legal analyses of transparency regimes underscore that when access to information is treated as a default right rather than an exceptional privilege, citizens are empowered to monitor public decision-making continuously (17). In the Nordic context, administrative openness is not limited to reactive disclosure upon request; it is complemented by proactive publication of government data, budgets, procurement information, and policy documents. This proactive transparency reduces informational asymmetries that typically enable corrupt practices and allows citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations to identify irregularities at early stages.

Open government data initiatives further institutionalize public participation by making large volumes of administrative information accessible in usable formats. Comparative governance research highlights that open data transforms transparency into an interactive process, enabling citizens to analyze patterns, compare outcomes, and hold officials accountable through evidence-based critique (14). In Norway and Finland, open data policies are integrated into administrative routines, reinforcing a culture in which public scrutiny is anticipated and normalized. This normalization of oversight significantly alters the behavioral incentives of public officials, as decisions are made with the expectation of visibility and potential public evaluation.

Independent media play a critical intermediary role in translating transparency into effective corruption prevention. Legal studies on accountability emphasize that freedom of the press allows information disclosed under access laws to reach broader audiences and generate public debate (9). In Norway and Finland, media institutions benefit from strong legal protections and professional norms that support investigative journalism. Media scrutiny operates as a decentralized form of oversight, amplifying citizen concerns and placing sustained pressure on public institutions to maintain integrity. This media-driven participation complements formal legal mechanisms by addressing areas that may fall outside the immediate reach of administrative inspections.

Whistleblower protection regimes represent another essential pillar of participatory prevention in these systems. Comparative research on legal protection for whistleblowers demonstrates that robust safeguards are indispensable for encouraging insiders to report misconduct without fear of retaliation (10). Norway and Finland have developed legal frameworks that clearly define reporting channels, ensure confidentiality, and provide remedies against adverse actions. Studies examining whistleblower protection models stress that legal certainty regarding rights and procedures is crucial for fostering trust in reporting mechanisms (12). As a result, whistleblowing is perceived not as an act of personal risk-taking, but as a legitimate and protected contribution to public integrity.

High levels of social trust further enhance the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms in Norway and Finland. Social capital theory suggests that trust in institutions and among citizens facilitates cooperation and reduces tolerance for corruption. Comparative legal analyses indicate that where citizens trust that reports will be handled impartially and that legal protections will be enforced, they are more likely to engage in preventive oversight (13). In these societies, trust is both a precondition and an outcome of participatory governance: transparent and responsive institutions reinforce trust, which in turn sustains citizen engagement.

Administrative openness also contributes to legal certainty, a factor often overlooked in discussions of participation. Clear rules governing disclosure, reporting, and oversight ensure that both citizens and officials understand their rights and obligations. Legal scholarship on corruption criminalization warns that vague or unpredictable participatory mandates can undermine legitimacy and deter engagement (2). In contrast, the Nordic approach emphasizes precise legal definitions and procedural safeguards, allowing participation to operate within

a stable legal framework. This clarity reduces the risk that participation will be perceived as arbitrary or politically motivated.

Ombudsman institutions occupy a central position in the participatory architecture of Norway and Finland. These independent bodies serve as accessible channels through which citizens can raise concerns about maladministration and misconduct. Comparative administrative law research highlights that ombudsmen enhance corruption prevention by providing low-threshold, non-adversarial mechanisms for addressing grievances (4). By resolving issues before they escalate into systemic corruption, ombudsman institutions contribute to preventive governance while reinforcing citizens' sense of agency and trust.

Civil society organizations further institutionalize participation by aggregating individual concerns and engaging in sustained monitoring of public policies. Legal analyses emphasize that civil society acts as a bridge between citizens and the state, translating dispersed information into collective oversight (5). In Norway and Finland, civil society benefits from legal environments that protect freedom of association and expression, enabling organizations to operate independently and critically. Their activities include policy analysis, advocacy, and collaboration with public authorities, which together enhance the preventive capacity of the system.

Decentralized oversight mechanisms complement centralized institutions by distributing monitoring functions across multiple levels of governance. Comparative studies on administrative law forms suggest that decentralization reduces concentration of power and creates multiple points of scrutiny (4). In the Nordic context, local governments, audit bodies, and sector-specific regulators each play roles in ensuring integrity. Citizens engage with these institutions through local participation channels, reinforcing the perception that corruption prevention is a shared responsibility rather than a distant state function.

Despite these strengths, Norway and Finland have developed structural safeguards to prevent abuse of participatory mechanisms and to protect procedural fairness. One key safeguard is the careful regulation of reporting processes to prevent malicious or unfounded accusations. Legal research on unlawful acts and legal certainty underscores the importance of distinguishing genuine corruption reports from other forms of complaint to protect due process (7). Clear evidentiary standards and investigative procedures ensure that participation does not compromise the rights of accused individuals or undermine institutional credibility.

Privacy protection constitutes another critical safeguard. While transparency is extensive, disclosure regimes in Norway and Finland incorporate exemptions to protect personal data and sensitive information. Comparative analyses of conflict-of-interest regulation emphasize that balancing openness with privacy is essential for maintaining public confidence (16). Legal frameworks thus delineate the scope of permissible disclosure, ensuring that participation enhances accountability without infringing fundamental rights.

Judicial oversight further reinforces procedural fairness by providing remedies against misuse of participatory mechanisms. Courts play a role in reviewing administrative decisions related to access to information, whistleblower protection, and sanctions, ensuring compliance with legal standards. Legal scholarship highlights that judicial review contributes to the legitimacy of participatory governance by offering neutral adjudication of disputes (19). This judicial backstop reassures citizens and officials alike that participation operates within the rule of law.

Cultural norms also function as informal safeguards against abuse. High levels of social trust and strong professional ethics discourage frivolous reporting and encourage responsible engagement. Comparative studies suggest that where participation is culturally normalized, social sanctions against misuse can be as effective as

legal penalties (9). In Norway and Finland, participation is embedded in a broader integrity culture that values fairness, accuracy, and proportionality.

The interaction between law, culture, and administrative practice ultimately produces the preventive outcomes observed in these systems. Legal norms establish rights and procedures, administrative practices operationalize transparency and responsiveness, and cultural values sustain trust and engagement. Comparative research cautions that these elements are mutually reinforcing and cannot be isolated without undermining effectiveness (4). The Nordic experience demonstrates that public participation in corruption prevention succeeds not because of any single mechanism, but because of an integrated governance ecosystem.

This analysis also underscores the importance of avoiding uncritical idealization. While Norway and Finland exhibit low levels of perceived corruption, their systems require continuous maintenance and adaptation. Legal scholarship emphasizes that complacency can erode preventive safeguards if transparency and participation are taken for granted (8). Ongoing evaluation, legal reform, and civic education remain essential to sustaining participatory prevention.

In comparative perspective, Norway and Finland illustrate how legally structured participation, supported by social trust and administrative openness, transforms citizens into active contributors to corruption prevention. Their experience highlights the potential of participatory governance to complement formal enforcement while maintaining procedural fairness and legal certainty. At the same time, it reveals that such outcomes depend on deep alignment between legal frameworks, institutional practices, and cultural norms, offering valuable insights for comparative analysis without suggesting simple transposition to other legal systems.

Comparative Analysis, Challenges, and Policy Implications

The comparative analysis of public participation in corruption prevention across Iran, Norway, and Finland reveals both converging normative commitments and deep structural divergences in legal design, institutional practice, and societal context. All three systems formally recognize corruption as a serious threat to public order and legitimacy, and all acknowledge, at least at the level of principle, the importance of prevention alongside repression. Legal scholarship across jurisdictions converges on the view that punitive criminal law alone is insufficient to address systemic corruption and that preventive mechanisms must be embedded within governance structures (1). However, the manner in which public participation is legally conceptualized and practically operationalized differs significantly, shaping the scope, depth, and effectiveness of citizen involvement in each system.

In terms of legal design, Iran, Norway, and Finland exhibit markedly different approaches to structuring participatory prevention. In Iran, public participation is primarily mediated through formal complaint mechanisms and centralized oversight institutions, reflecting a legal tradition that emphasizes hierarchical accountability and state stewardship over public affairs (15). Citizens are legally positioned as informants or complainants who activate institutional responses, rather than as autonomous monitors embedded within governance processes. By contrast, Norway and Finland adopt legal frameworks that explicitly institutionalize participation through access to information rights, proactive transparency obligations, and legally protected reporting channels. Comparative analyses of administrative law forms demonstrate that such decentralized and rights-based designs distribute oversight functions more broadly across society (4). This structural difference has profound implications for how participation is perceived and practiced in daily administrative life.

Institutional trust constitutes another major axis of divergence. In the Nordic systems, high levels of trust in public institutions create a virtuous cycle in which citizens are willing to engage in oversight because they expect fair treatment, impartial investigation, and meaningful outcomes. Studies on administrative corruption underscore that trust enhances willingness to report misconduct and to participate constructively in governance (13). In Iran, by contrast, empirical and doctrinal analyses suggest that perceptions of selective enforcement, procedural opacity, and limited feedback can undermine trust and discourage participation (3). This does not imply an absence of trust altogether, but rather a more cautious and conditional engagement that constrains the preventive potential of public involvement.

Citizen empowerment also differs significantly across the three systems. In Norway and Finland, empowerment is grounded in legally enforceable rights to information, expression, and participation, supported by independent institutions such as ombudsmen and courts. Legal research highlights that empowerment is not merely symbolic but operational, enabling citizens to influence administrative behavior through sustained scrutiny (17). In Iran, empowerment is more limited and episodic, shaped by procedural barriers and the absence of comprehensive protective frameworks for participants. The legal position of whistleblowers illustrates this contrast particularly clearly. While Nordic systems provide explicit protections that reduce personal risk and normalize reporting, Iranian law lacks a coherent and integrated whistleblower protection regime, thereby placing a disproportionate burden on individuals who expose corruption (8, 18).

Enforcement capacity further differentiates these systems, not only in terms of resources but in the relationship between enforcement and participation. In Iran, anti-corruption enforcement is highly centralized, with specialized bodies exercising significant authority over investigation and sanctioning. Legal analyses suggest that while centralization can enhance coordination, it may also distance citizens from enforcement processes and reduce opportunities for decentralized oversight (1). In Norway and Finland, enforcement capacity is complemented by decentralized monitoring, media scrutiny, and civil society engagement, creating multiple layers of preventive control. Comparative studies emphasize that such multi-layered enforcement architectures reduce reliance on any single institution and enhance resilience against corruption risks (4).

Despite these differences, certain similarities emerge that provide a basis for comparative learning. All three systems recognize, at least rhetorically, the value of transparency and accountability as foundational principles of anti-corruption policy. Legal scholarship across jurisdictions acknowledges that access to information and public scrutiny can function as deterrents by increasing the visibility of public action (14). Moreover, each system grapples with the challenge of balancing participation with due process and legal certainty. Concerns about false reporting, reputational harm, and procedural fairness are not unique to any one context, underscoring the universal need for safeguards that prevent misuse of participatory mechanisms (7).

The comparative analysis also highlights the structural conditions necessary for effective public participation in corruption prevention. Legal protections for participants constitute a foundational requirement. Without clear guarantees against retaliation and abuse, participation remains fragile and selective. Comparative research on whistleblower protection demonstrates that legal certainty regarding rights and remedies is a decisive factor in encouraging reporting (12). Institutional independence represents a second critical condition. Oversight bodies, media institutions, and civil society organizations must operate free from undue influence in order to function as credible monitors. Studies on administrative and judicial corruption warn that dependence or politicization of oversight institutions undermines both prevention and public trust (19).

Transparency norms form a third structural pillar. Effective participation requires not only formal access to information but also proactive disclosure and data usability. Legal analyses of disclosure regimes emphasize that transparency must be designed with the user in mind, enabling citizens to interpret and act upon information (17). Cultural legitimacy constitutes a fourth and often underappreciated condition. Participation must be socially accepted and valued as a legitimate component of governance rather than viewed as disloyalty or interference. Comparative studies suggest that where civic engagement is culturally normalized, participatory mechanisms are more likely to be used responsibly and sustainably (9).

The question of transferability lies at the heart of the comparative exercise. While the Nordic experience offers valuable insights, the analysis demonstrates that participatory mechanisms cannot be mechanically transplanted into Iran without careful adaptation. Legal transplants that ignore differences in legal culture, institutional capacity, and social norms risk becoming symbolic or ineffective. Comparative criminal law scholarship cautions that adopting foreign models without contextualization can create normative dissonance and undermine legitimacy (2). For example, expansive access to information laws require not only legal enactment but also administrative readiness and cultural acceptance of openness, conditions that evolve over time rather than instantaneously.

Similarly, robust whistleblower protection regimes depend on judicial independence, organizational ethics, and social trust, which cannot be legislated into existence in isolation. Studies examining legal protection models emphasize that effectiveness arises from the interaction of law, enforcement, and culture, rather than from statutory text alone (10). In the Iranian context, strengthening participation therefore requires incremental reform that aligns with existing constitutional principles and institutional realities, rather than wholesale importation of foreign frameworks.

Policy-oriented implications for Iran emerge from this comparative analysis. One implication concerns the need to clarify and consolidate legal norms related to public participation. Fragmented and implicit provisions should be harmonized into a coherent framework that explicitly recognizes participation as a preventive tool rather than merely a procedural option. Legal scholarship on social prevention suggests that clarity enhances both utilization and legitimacy of participatory mechanisms (5). Another implication involves enhancing legal protections for participants, particularly whistleblowers, through clear definitions, confidentiality guarantees, and accessible remedies. Comparative evidence indicates that even modest protective measures can significantly increase reporting and early detection (12).

Institutional reforms also hold promise for strengthening participation. Enhancing the transparency and responsiveness of complaint-handling bodies can rebuild trust and encourage sustained engagement. Legal analyses emphasize that feedback mechanisms and timely resolution are essential for maintaining citizen confidence (13). Supporting the role of media and civil society within the bounds of law can further diversify oversight and reduce overreliance on centralized enforcement. Comparative research demonstrates that pluralistic oversight ecosystems are more adaptable and resilient (4).

Cultural and educational measures complement legal reform. Promoting a public understanding of participation as a civic responsibility aligned with integrity and legality can gradually shift perceptions and norms. Studies on corruption as a violation of social and human rights suggest that framing participation in normative terms can enhance moral commitment to prevention (9). Such efforts must respect constitutional values and social sensitivities, reinforcing rather than undermining institutional legitimacy.

A forward-looking perspective on participatory criminal policy in Iran thus emphasizes gradual integration rather than abrupt transformation. By aligning legal protections, institutional practices, and cultural narratives, public participation can evolve from a marginal and reactive element into a meaningful component of corruption prevention. The comparative experience of Norway and Finland demonstrates the long-term benefits of embedding participation within governance systems, while also illustrating the importance of contextual adaptation. Ultimately, strengthening public participation in Iran requires a nuanced strategy that draws on comparative insights without disregarding domestic legal and social realities, positioning participation as a complementary force within a coherent and constitutionally grounded anti-corruption framework.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of public participation in corruption prevention through a comparative analysis of the legal systems of Iran, Norway, and Finland, with the aim of clarifying how law, institutions, and society interact to shape preventive capacity. By adopting a narrative review and descriptive legal analysis, the article has moved beyond narrow, enforcement-focused understandings of anti-corruption policy and highlighted the importance of participatory governance as a structural element of prevention. The comparative approach has demonstrated that while all three systems recognize corruption as a serious threat to public order and legitimacy, they diverge significantly in how they conceptualize and operationalize citizen involvement in addressing this threat.

One of the central conclusions of the study is that public participation is not an accessory to anti-corruption policy but a constitutive component of effective prevention. Where citizens are legally empowered, institutionally protected, and culturally encouraged to engage in oversight, corruption becomes more difficult to conceal and sustain. The experiences of Norway and Finland illustrate how access to information, administrative openness, and protected reporting mechanisms can transform citizens from passive recipients of governance into active participants in safeguarding integrity. In these systems, participation operates continuously, shaping administrative behavior through visibility, accountability, and social expectations rather than relying solely on punitive intervention after harm has occurred.

At the same time, the analysis has shown that public participation cannot be reduced to isolated mechanisms such as whistleblowing or complaint submission. Effective participation requires an integrated framework in which transparency, institutional responsiveness, legal certainty, and social trust reinforce one another. The Nordic experience demonstrates that participatory prevention is the outcome of long-term alignment between legal norms, administrative practice, and civic culture. This alignment ensures that participation functions responsibly and constructively, without undermining due process or legal stability.

In contrast, the Iranian legal system reflects a more centralized and state-centered approach to corruption prevention, in which public participation is formally acknowledged but practically constrained. Citizens are primarily positioned as informants who activate institutional responses rather than as ongoing monitors embedded in governance processes. Procedural complexity, limited legal protection for participants, and concerns about retaliation have restricted the preventive potential of public involvement. The gap between formal legal provisions and practical effectiveness underscores that participation cannot flourish in the absence of trust, clarity, and institutional support, even when reporting channels formally exist.

A key insight emerging from the comparative analysis is that participatory mechanisms are deeply context-dependent. Legal transplants that ignore differences in legal culture, institutional capacity, and social norms risk

producing symbolic reforms without substantive impact. The Nordic models cannot be mechanically replicated in Iran, as they are rooted in historical trajectories of administrative openness, judicial independence, and social trust that have developed over decades. Effective reform therefore requires contextual adaptation rather than imitation, focusing on gradual integration of participatory elements within existing constitutional and institutional frameworks.

The study also highlights the importance of balancing participation with legal safeguards. While transparency and public oversight are essential for prevention, they must be carefully structured to protect due process, privacy, and legal certainty. Unregulated or excessive exposure can undermine trust and legitimacy, ultimately weakening preventive capacity. The comparative findings suggest that participation is most effective when it operates within clear legal boundaries that define rights, procedures, and responsibilities for all actors involved.

From a policy perspective, the findings point toward a reform trajectory for Iran that emphasizes incremental strengthening of public participation rather than radical restructuring. Clarifying the legal status of participants, particularly whistleblowers, simplifying reporting procedures, and enhancing institutional responsiveness can create a more supportive environment for citizen engagement. Strengthening the role of media and civil society within legally defined limits can further diversify oversight and reduce overreliance on centralized enforcement. These measures can enhance prevention while preserving constitutional principles and institutional coherence.

More broadly, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views corruption prevention as a shared societal responsibility rather than an exclusive function of the state. Public participation, when properly designed and supported, redistributes oversight across society and embeds integrity within everyday governance practices. This redistribution does not weaken the state; rather, it complements formal enforcement by extending the reach of prevention into spaces that centralized institutions cannot continuously monitor.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis underscores that the effectiveness of public participation in corruption prevention depends on the convergence of law, institutions, and culture. Norway and Finland demonstrate the long-term benefits of embedding participation within transparent and trustworthy governance systems, while Iran's experience highlights the challenges and opportunities of integrating participatory elements within a more centralized legal order. A forward-looking approach to anti-corruption policy in Iran should therefore focus on cultivating the legal and social conditions under which participation can operate as a credible and constructive preventive force, contributing to the gradual strengthening of integrity, accountability, and public trust in the legal system.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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