Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Criminal liability of and immunities for ministers

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Date: 5 September 2025

This Helpdesk Answer explores legal frameworks for holding ministers liable for corruption, focusing on European and OECD countries. First, the paper examines how liability is attributed to ministers through different pathways (political, legal and criminal), and the defences available to them. Next, it analyses the scope and limitations of immunities granted to ministers, highlighting their potential to obstruct accountability and undermine public trust. Analysis of OECD member states' constitutions demonstrates that immunities for ministers are much rarer than the ones granted to MPs.

Query

Please provide a summary and examples from European/OECD countries of the main aspects related to criminal liability for ministers and immunity provisions for them.

Main points

- Ministerial liability may encompass political, legal, and criminal responsibility. While ministers often enjoy less immunity than heads of state or parliamentarians, special impeachment procedures can act as de facto immunities. This can complicate efforts to hold ministers to account.
- Frequent defences against corruption charges include lack of intent, insufficient evidence, and entrapment. Arguments based on superior orders or cabinet approval are rare and generally ineffective in corruption cases.
- Across the 38 OECD member states, only four provide for immunities for their ministers, while all 38 ensure MPs have some form of immunity.
- Ministerial immunities vary significantly across countries, ranging from absolute protections to conditional procedural safeguards. While intended to preserve democratic functions, they can hinder investigations and prosecutions, especially when not clearly regulated or transparently applied.
- International standards call for a balanced approach, ensuring immunities do not obstruct justice. The UNCAC and Venice Commission recommend clear procedures for lifting immunities and emphasise the importance of maintaining accountability to prevent impunity and reinforce public trust.

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Introduction

Ministers are the top advisors to the head of government or of state. They usually lead departments or agencies and play a leading role in implementing the government's agenda and policies. However, there are substantial differences in their roles depending on the system of government in question.

Ministers in different systems of government

Ministers in **presidential systems** are appointed by the President and they are responsible and subordinate to the president, not to the legislature. In some countries, presidential appointments depend on parliament's approval, but it is rare that they are able to hold office in two branches of government simultaneously (Bulmer 2019). The make-up of the cabinet may be determined by the need to maintain a majority in parliament, but the president's mandate is not dependent on this majority to remain in power (i.e. there no 'vote of no confidence' procedure').

In **parliamentary systems** derived from the British 'Westminster model', found in many countries that are part of the Commonwealth, ministers are chosen from among the members of parliament (MP), usually senior MPs from the majority party or the governing coalition. The prime minister, along with the ministers, make up the 'cabinet', which is considered an executive committee of the legislature (Bulmer 2019). In many countries of continental Europe, there is a different tradition as far as parliamentary systems are concerned. There, it is often possible to appoint someone who is not an MP to become minister and, on the other hand, in some countries, such as Belgium, Netherlands and Norway, the positions of MP and minister are incompatible (Bulmer 2019). The cabinet combines executive and legislative leadership, but, since it only stays in power because of its majority support in parliament, ministers are responsible directly to their peers in parliament who can, by a vote of no confidence, remove them from office.

As heads of departments and agencies, ministers (often referred to as members of government) are likely to be involved in direct administrative and financial decisions, besides shaping public policy and legislation. Given their high-profile roles and substantial powers, it is not uncommon for ministers to be involved in corruption schemes.

However, there can be significant challenges to holding ministers to account. While there are different pathways to hold ministers liable for misconduct, these are usually affected by a level of 'political' interference. Even formal legal or criminal procedures,

such as impeachment proceedings, can often be undermined in ways that hinder accountability.

Civil and criminal proceedings against ministers might also prove impossible or improbable because of immunities and jurisdictional privileges that afford them protections that are not available to citizens in general. While ministers generally enjoy more limited protections than heads of state and members of parliament, in some countries they can still receive similar or equal levels of protection.

There is a rationale for immunities, including ensuring the freedom of expression of high-level officials. However, as noted by the UNODC (2017: 107), when assessing the state of implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), immunities and jurisdictional privileges also create "*potentially serious challenges regarding the investigation into and prosecution and adjudication of offences established in accordance with the Convention*". There are limitations to these immunities, and it is often possible to lift them, but this varies significantly from country to country.

Even when immunities do not impede prosecution, given the complexity of corruption cases, it might be difficult or impossible to prove that a bribe has been offered, accepted or paid. For this reason, the UNCAC included criminalisation provisions with a wider scope and reach. An example of this is the 'abuse of function' offence, which serves as a catch-all provision, encompassing various types of misconduct. The UNCAC encourages States to adopt legislative or other measures to establish, "as a criminal offence when committed intentionally, the abuse of functions or position, that is, performing or failing to perform an act in violation of the law by a public official for the purpose of obtaining an undue advantage for themselves or for another person or entity" (UNCAC 2003, Art. 19).

However, when bringing this offence into domestic legal frameworks, a number of countries included mandatory elements to the offence – such as the actual obtention of undue advantage or the production of harm or injury – that restrict its scope and contradict the original intention of the UNCAC.

Criminal liability for ministers

Ministers or member of governments can be held responsible through different pathways. Broadly speaking there are three types of ministerial responsibility (Venice Commission 2013: 4-5):

1. Political: this encompasses, potentially, everything a government minister does or fails to do. The media, the public, political opposition or the head of government do not need to 'prove' that a minister has committed any wrongdoing in order to hold them politically responsible. The outcome of political responsibility can be wide-ranging: from criticism in public debates, committee hearings, special committees of inquiry, losing an election, suffering a vote of no-confidence, being compelled to resign due to public pressure or being fired by the head of government.
2. Legal: this covers cases where a minister breaks the law and there are potential legal consequences, which will likely be determined following administrative or judicial proceedings. They include disciplinary measures, obligation to pay compensation, dismissal from offices, ineligibility to run for office, as well as imprisonment and fines.
3. Criminal: it is a sub-category of legal responsibility that covers the cases in which the legal consequences are criminal penalties.

The definition of criminal penalty is thus especially relevant for defining whether the responsibility in question is effectively criminal or merely legal. The European Court of Human Rights uses three criteria to determine if a sanction is criminal or not: (i) the classification of the offence in domestic law; (ii) the nature of the offence; and (iii) the nature and severity of the penalty (Venice Commission 2013: 5).

The attribution of criminal responsibility to ministers may be governed i) by ordinary rules applicable to everyone; ii) by criminal provisions applicable to all public officials; or iii) by special rules for ministers, either substantial or procedural.

Among the criminal provisions that are only applicable to public officials, the Venice Commission (2013: 9) notes that abuse of office is present in most of European countries' criminal code (25 out of the 30 surveyed by the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation in 2012).

Regarding special rules, it is uncommon for states in Europe to have a different and/or specific set of substantial rules on ministerial criminal liability, such as, for example, different penalties for ministers. Substantive differences usually relate to offences that only ministers can commit, such as failing to comply with the duty to provide parliament

with information he or she possesses or failing to resign after a parliamentary vote of no-confidence (Venice Commission 2013: 11).

Procedural rules do vary more often, and it is common in Europe for countries to institute special impeachment rules to assess the criminal liability of ministers. Impeachment proceedings may cover all or some of the aspects of the procedure, including investigations, the decision to initiate proceedings, the rules on prosecution and the composition of the body that will issue a ruling. These rules are more 'political' in the sense that impeachment procedures will involve political actors in one or more stages, typically the parliament (Venice Commission 2013: 6).

This 'political' dimension of impeachment proceedings can make it difficult to initiate investigations or prosecutions, and it "*may in effect function as a kind of procedural immunity, which is also a challenge under the rule of law*" (Venice Commission 2013: 6).

During legal proceedings, there are other obstacles that might make it difficult to establish criminal liability. Besides immunity provisions, which will be discussed in later in the paper, there are various possible defences.

Possible defences

There is a host of defences that can be brought against corruption charges. Demonstrating that one of the elements of the offence in question is not present is one defence commonly used. As some form of intent, whether general and/or specific, is often required to establish whether a corruption-related offence was committed, the lack of intent, if demonstrated, can be enough to prove innocence. Insufficient evidence and entrapment, whereby law enforcement officials induce someone to commit a crime, are two other possible defences.

One can also question whether it would be possible for a minister to argue that his or her actions, while unlawful, were taken under the general direction or with specific approval of the head of state or of the cabinet and, for that reason, no sanction should be imposed. This is different from a defence focused on coercion or duress, when the defendant is forced or threatened into committing an act of bribery, for example.

There are two hypothetical scenarios under which such an argument can be made.

The first scenario is that the minister is attempting to make what became known as the 'superior order' defence. This defence is based on the dilemma that officials (especially soldiers) are under to balance the duty of (military) obedience with the need to preserve the supremacy of the rule of law. This juxtaposes the risks of an official being punished for failing to comply with an order on one hand, with the risks of being sanctioned for complying with an order that is unlawful under the domestic or international legal framework on the other hand.

While not applicable to corruption, it is informative to note that the Statute of the International Criminal Court lays out the specific conditions under which the superior order defence is acceptable:

> Article 33. The fact that a crime within the jurisdiction of the Court has been committed by a person pursuant to an order of a Government or of a superior, whether military or civilian, shall not relieve that person of criminal responsibility unless:
> (a) The person was under a legal obligation to obey orders of the Government or the superior in question;
> (b) The person did not know that the order was unlawful; and
> (c) The order was not manifestly unlawful.[1]

These are circumstances rarely found in corruption cases. The forms of behaviour that are set out in the UNCAC in Articles 15 to 25, such as bribery, embezzlement and abuse of function, are well-known to be unlawful. In fact, the expectations on public officials are not only that he or she should know what types of orders are lawful or not, but that, in case they become aware of corruption incidents while performing their duties, they should report this to the appropriate authority. According to the UNODC (2017: 176), 40% of States parties to the UNCAC had established a legal obligation for public officials to report corruption to law enforcement authorities. While the effectiveness of this type of provision as public policy designed to increase the number of corruption reports is largely unproven (France 2023), it underscores the widespread expectation that public officials are familiar with what constitutes corrupt conduct.

The second scenario is one where the head of state or the cabinet has lawmaking powers to unilaterally make an act or omission – that would generally be considered unlawful – legal for a particular case. In this case, there is a broader issue about the legitimacy of unilateral decisions taken by government officials, motivated by partisan or personal interests, in vacating a law that was regularly enacted. This would compromise the rule of law and the principle the everyone is equal before the law.

In exceptional circumstances, where emergency powers are granted to the executive branch, the concentration of lawmaking powers may create a situation in which a decision taken by the cabinet or the head of state overrides standard procedures and laws. If orders issued by the cabinet or the president have the force of law, the minister's actions in complying with said orders are not criminal, even if they would be unlawful in regular times. These powers have been abused in numerous cases, which has led various states to introduce limits and safeguards needed to preserve the rule of law. For example, in Argentina and Poland, even in times of martial law or states of emergency, the head of state may not unilaterally change criminal law (Bulmer 2018).

[1] The Statute specifies that genocide and crimes against humanity are manifestly unlawful.

In ordinary circumstances in which the rule of law is preserved, implying that the minister acted unlawfully under the orders of the cabinet or the head of state might lead to a wider investigation into the potential liability of all individuals involved in an alleged corruption scheme – regardless of rank. After all, the UNCAC determined that State Parties should "*establish as a criminal offence, in accordance with its domestic law, participation in any capacity such as an accomplice, assistant or instigator in an offence established in accordance with this Convention*" (Article 27, 1).

However, to assign criminal liability it is necessary to 'individualise' conduct and determine if and whether the acts or omissions committed by each individual fulfil all the necessary requirements of the respective criminal offence. The concept of collective responsibility found in parliamentary systems does not a have direct criminal parallel.

Collective responsibility

In parliamentary systems, cabinet collective responsibility is a century-old convention that is considered to be a 'key mechanism by which the executive branch of government is ensure to speak with one voice' (Taylor 2016).

Originally, the practice of ministers of government presenting a unified front to the monarch, without indication of internal dissent, was essential to wrestle power away from the monarchy. As monarchs lost power, 'collective responsibility' became a tool to ensure that the cabinet faced the rest of parliament (and the public) united. The unanimity principle ensures that all members of government speak and vote together in parliament (Gay & Powell 2004).

According to the UK's Institute for Government (2019), it has two main components: (i) it allows ministers to have free and frank discussions prior to coming to a collective decision and ensuring that these discussions remain confidential; (ii) once a position is agreed, all ministers are expected to abide by it and vote[2] with the government.

As such, the possible defences to avoid criminal liability discussed above afford little legal protection to ministers for corrupt offences. However, another obstacle to investigating and prosecuting ministers accused of corruption relates to the immunities that can afford them substantive or procedural protections. This is discussed in the next section.

[2] While there is a little flexibility in terms of publicly demonstrating dissent (when a free vote is allowed, for example), it is fully expected that MPs in the cabinet vote with the government. The 'payroll vote' is the group of MPs that hold office as ministers and that are restricted from voting against the government by internal rules (Institute for Government 2024).

Immunities for ministers

Immunities, as well as jurisdictional privileges,[3] afford public officials some level of protection against the enforcement of civil and criminal legal rules that would otherwise be applied. Immunities were created for and can serve legitimate purposes. However, even in democratic contexts, they can also produce unintended consequences in limiting the right to justice and preventing effective accountability of senior office holders.

Types of immunities

There are a host of classifications of immunities that are useful for understanding their variations and consequences**. Immunity from foreign jurisdictions** is considered a cornerstone of diplomacy and international relations, and it is regulated by international conventions such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic relations. The focus of this section is on **immunity from the domestic jurisdiction**.

Personal immunities are attached to the persons because of the office they hold, covering all acts performed by them and enduring until they leave office. After that, it might be possible to conduct enforcement proceedings against those persons.

Functional immunities are attached to the (public) function one holds, covering acts conducted in the performance of this official function and remaining in effect after the end of office (Medecins sans Frontières 2025).

Absolute immunity (or non-liability) is usually attributed to specific acts in the conduct of public office, such as opinions expressed and votes cast. In this case, they are unlimited in time and prevent any type of legal proceeding to take place. For example, the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Union states that "*Members of the European Parliament shall not be subject to any form of inquiry, detention or legal proceedings in respect of opinions expressed or votes cast by them in the performance of their duties*" (article 8) (European Parliament 2020: 23).

Immunities can also apply to different stages of enforcement or judicial proceedings. **Immunity from jurisdiction** or from legal process is such that the individual cannot be investigated or more often prosecuted by any court (example, article 31 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations). **Immunity from arrest** (or personal inviolability) prevents an individual from being subject to any form of arrest or detention (article 29

[3] Sometimes, compared to normal citizens, certain categories officials can be subject to a different level of authority within the judicial system, such as the Supreme Court, for example.

Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations). It might be the case that an individual enjoys the immunity from arrest while in office, but not complete immunity from prosecution, so prosecution may take place, but the enforcement of a prison sentence, for example, will only happen after he or she leaves public office.

There is a rationale for providing immunities to different sets of public officials. The United Kingdom was the first to codify legal protections for members of parliament in the late 17th century against the monarchy and, currently, immunities for MPs are almost universally found in country's constitutions. The goal of these provisions is to protect MPs from prosecution and retaliation from other branches of power, allowing them unimpeded performance of public functions (Vrushi 2018: 2).

Immunities also seek to ensure that members of parliament have full enjoyment of their freedom of expression, and routinely single out "opinions and votes" as explicitly protected forms of exercise of their public functions.

Heads of state also routinely enjoy immunity and other types of jurisdictional privileges. The justification is that politically biased prosecutions and retaliations against presidents could take up much of their time and contaminate public debate, undermining their ability to govern effectively. In this sense, immunities also prevent prosecutors and the courts from exerting excessive influence over democratically-elected officials (Emmons 2024). Some also argue that immunities allow for presidents to make decisions based on the public interest, rather than "choosing the less optimal, but "safer" option to avoid prosecution" (Rivkin Jr. & Foley 2024).

On both accounts, immunities contribute to the separation of powers, by preventing politically motivated investigations or prosecutions against public officials. Hence, they are granted not to benefit these individuals, but in the name of the public interest since these guarantees contribute to their ability to fulfil their democratic mandates without fear of harassment from the executive, the courts and/or political opponents (Venice Commission 2014: 3).

Considering the varied roles ministers play in governments across different countries and the different origins of systems of government, ministerial immunities have distinct justifications.

However, in both presidential and parliamentary systems there are fewer compelling reasons to provide ministers with special immunities than is the case for heads of state or members of parliament. In presidential systems, ministers are key members of government but do not wield the same level of power as presidents. Investigations into and prosecutions of a minister would likely not present the same foundational challenge to the separation of powers as is posed by the criminal prosecution of the head of state.

In parliamentary systems, there are countries where the minister must be an MP, such as Australia and New Zealand, and the immunity provisions are therefore the same

(Bulmer 2019: 3). However, where ministers are not MPs, the rationale of protecting them against retaliation from the executive or judicial branches of government for their opinions or votes no longer applies. Unsurprisingly therefore, as discussed below, data shows that immunities for ministers are much less common than for MPs.

Negative consequences of immunities

Immunities represent a restriction on the right to access the courts and the right to a fair trial, especially for individuals or groups who consider themselves somehow harmed or injured by acts or omissions committed by public officials who have immunities. They also stand in stark contrast with the principle of equality before the law, given that these are protections not granted to other citizens (European Parliament 2014: 10).

Immunities may also prove to be an obstacle to ensuring effective accountability for public officials, allowing for a vicious cycle of impunity not only on corruption cases, but also human rights violations. For these reasons, there are multiple international standards and recommendations to ensure there is an adequate balance between the benefits and the risks of immunities.

For example, when assessing the right to redress of victims of disparaging comments made by members of parliament who enjoy immunity, the European Court of Human Rights noted that there was a need for a clear connection between the MP's opinion on one hand and their parliamentary activity on the other hand in order for the immunity to 'override' the right of victims of verbal attacks (European Parliament 2014: 10).

International standards

The UNCAC provides that States should take measures necessary to strike "*an appropriate balance between any immunities or jurisdictional privileges accorded to its public officials for the performance of their functions and the possibility, when necessary, of effectively investigating, prosecuting and adjudicating offences* [...]" (Article 30, 2). Its Interpretative Notes suggest that this balance should established or maintained in law and in practice (UNODC 2010: 261).

The UNODC (2017: 108) recommends that "*the circle of persons enjoying immunities or privileges [...] should not be too broad, but reasonably compact and clearly defined*". The scope of immunities should also not be excessive, considering the UNCAC provisions. The attribution of near-absolute immunity for governors and deputy governors is, for example, considered to be in contradiction with Article 30(2) of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNODC 2017: 108).

The UNODC's Oslo Statement on Corruption Involving Vast Quantities of Assets recommends that "no functional immunity from prosecution should be granted to

public officials engaged in corruption involving vast quantities of assets" (Recommendation 43).

The Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), when evaluating the implementation of the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption, has also sought to assess the impacts of immunities and other procedural privileges on the enforcement of "persons who are entrusted with top executive functions". The Fifth Evaluation Round Questionnaire requires countries to provide detailed information on how immunities can impact investigation and prosecution of these individuals (GRECO 2017). Serbia's assessment, for example, includes a recommendation that "immunity provided to Government members ought to exclude corruption-related offences" (GRECO 2022: 4).

In most cases, immunities have to be waived or lifted before prosecution can take place and a criminal process allowed to take its course. It might be possible to conduct, even without waivers, preliminary investigations, but with significant limitations, such as the impossibility of applying special investigation techniques and interviewing suspects. These limitations are especially problematic for corruption cases, which are difficult to detect and prove (UNODC 2017: 107).

The Venice Commission (2014: 31-32) has proposed procedural guidelines for the lifting of immunities for members of parliament, some of which are also applicable to the lifting of ministers' immunities:

- Procedures on the lifting of immunities should be clearly regulated and in compliance with general principles of procedural law, including the rights of both parties to heard.
- Procedures should be transparent and known to the public.
- These procedures should respect the principle of presumption of innocence and they should not seek to assess the question of guilt.

In terms of substantial reasons to lift immunities, the Venice Commissions (2014: 29-30) recommends that the following criteria be taken into account: the seriousness of the offence; whether the individual was caught in flagrante delicto; whether the concerned acts were committed in relation to the performance of official duties or of other personal or professional functions.

Comparative perspective

According to a 2013 World Bank assessment of 88 countries, less than half offered any protection to ministers, while 84 out of these 88 countries provided some type of protection for MPs (Vrushi 2018).

Research conducted for the purpose of this Helpdesk Answer into the constitutions of the 38 OECD member countries found that all of them have provisions regarding

immunities for MPs.[4] However, only 4 out of these 38 countries have constitutional provisions relating to immunities of ministers and/or members of government.[5]

Table 1: Ministerial immunity provisions in OECD countries

Country	Constitutional provision on ministerial immunity
Belgium	Art. 101 - No minister can be prosecuted or be the subject of any investigation with regard to opinions expressed by him in the exercise of his duties.
Netherlands	Article 71 - Members of the States General, Ministers, State Secretaries and other persons taking part in deliberations may not be prosecuted or otherwise held liable in law for anything they say during the sittings of the States General or of its committees or for anything they submit to them in writing.
Switzerland	Art 162. Immunity 1. The members of the Federal Assembly and the Federal Council[6] as well as the Federal Chancellor may not be held liable for statements that they make in the Assembly or in its organs. 2. The law may provide for further forms of immunity and extend its scope to include other persons.
Turkey	Article 106 - During their term of office, Vice-Presidents of the Republic and ministers shall enjoy legislative immunity for offences not related to their duty. However, an absolute majority of the national assembly can decide to investigate ministers for allegations of criminal activity related to their duties and refer them to the judiciary for prosecution.

Source: Data collected by the author from the constitutions available in the Constitute Project.

In Montenegro, members of government enjoy the same immunities as members of parliament, which include protections from being "*called to criminal or other account or detained because of the expressed opinion or vote in the performance of his/her duty*" (article 86). Similar provisions in Serbia's Constitution state that both the Prime Minister and members of government "*shall not be held accountable for opinions expressed at sittings of the Government and sessions of the National Assembly, or for the cast vote at the sittings of the Government*" (article 134).

[4] A complete list of OECD-member countries is available here: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/members-partners.html

[5] While immunity provisions are most commonly found in constitutions, they could, in theory, be also found in laws and regulations, which were not studies for the purpose of this Helpdesk Answer.

[6] Art 178. Federal Administration
1. The Federal Council is in charge of the Federal Administration. It ensures that it is organised appropriately and that it fulfils its duties effectively.
2. The Federal Administration is organised into Departments; each Department is headed by a member of the Federal Council.

Kosovo's Constitution offers even broader protections for members of government, stating that they "*shall be immune from prosecution, civil lawsuit and dismissal for actions or decisions that are within the scope of their responsibilities as members of the Government*" (article 98).

In other countries, there are special procedural rules about investigating and prosecuting ministers. For example, in Portugal, the Constitution requires the authorisation of the Assembly of the Republic to detain, arrest or imprison a minister, except for a serious crime punishable by imprisonment for a maximum term of more than three years or discovered in flagrante delicto (article 196). In Lithuania, there is also a requirement of consent from Parliament to hold ministers criminally liable, arrested or have their freedom restricted (article 100). Similarly, in Italy, ministers are subject to normal judicial procedure for crimes committed in the exercise of their duties, but this requires an authorisation to be given by the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies (article 96).

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