

Asia

Authoritarianism prevents press freedom progress in much of Asia

Fiji falls furthest, but big advance by Maldives

Political power grabs dealt press freedom a great disservice again this year. A military coup caused Fiji (152nd) to fall 73 places. Soldiers moved into Fijian news rooms for several weeks and censored articles before they were published, while foreign journalists were deported. In Thailand, the endless clashes between “yellow shirts” and “red shirts” had a very negative impact on the press’s ability to work. As a result, the kingdom is now 130th.

The authoritarianism of existing governments, for example in Sri Lanka (162nd) and Malaysia (131st), prevented journalists from properly covering sensitive subjects such as corruption or human rights abuses. The Sri Lankan government had a journalist sentenced to 20 years in prison and forced dozens of others to flee the country. In Malaysia, the interior ministry imposed censorship or self-censorship by threatening media with the withdrawal of their licence or threatening journalists with a spell in prison.

War and terrorism wrought havoc and exposed journalists to great danger. Afghanistan (149th) is sapped not only by Taliban violence and death threats, but also by unjustified arrests by the security forces. Despite having dynamic news media, Pakistan (159th) is crippled by murders of journalists and the aggressiveness of both the Taliban and sectors of the military. It shared (with Somalia) the world record for journalists killed during the period under review.

The Asian countries that least respected press freedom were, predictably, North Korea, one of the “infernal trio” at the bottom of the rankings, Burma, which still suffers from prior censorship and imprisonment, and Laos, an unchanging dictatorship where no privately-owned media are permitted.

The media in China (168th) are evolving rapidly along with the rest of the country but it continues to have a very poor ranking because of the frequency of imprisonment, especially in Tibet, Internet censorship and the nepotism of the central and provincial authorities. Similarly in Vietnam (166th), the ruling Communist Party targets journalists, bloggers and press freedom activists over what they write about its concessions to China.

In the good news section, Maldives (51st) climbed 53 places thanks to a successful democratic transition while Bhutan (70th) rose another four places thanks to further efforts in favour of media diversity.

Asia’s few democracies are well placed in the rankings. New Zealand (13th), Australia (16th) and Japan (17th) are all in the top 20. Respect for press freedom and the lack of targeted violence against journalists enable these three countries to be regional leaders.

South Korea (69th) and Taiwan (59th) fell far this year. South Korea plummeted 22 places because of the arrests of several journalists and bloggers and the conservative government's attempts to control critical media. The new ruling party in Taiwan tried to interfere in state and privately-owned media while violence by certain activists further undermined press freedom.

Two Asian countries were included in the index for the first time: Papua New Guinea (56th), which obtained a very respectable ranking for a developing country, and the Sultanate of Brunei (155th), which came in the bottom third because of the absence of an independent press.