

RSF's 2018 Index Asia-Pacific democracies threatened by China's media control model

The Chinese model of state-controlled news and information is being copied in other Asian countries, especially Vietnam and Cambodia. North Asia's democracies are struggling to establish themselves as alternative models. Violence against journalists is increasingly worrying in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and the Philippines.

The Asia-Pacific region still has the world's worst violator of the freedom to inform: North Korea (180th). The recent widespread adoption of smartphones in North Korea has unfortunately been accompanied by draconian control of communications and the national intranet. The state news agency *KCNA* is the only authorized source of news for all of the country's media. Just reading, viewing, or listening to a foreign media outlet can lead to a spell in a concentration camp.

More censorship and surveillance in China

Unchanged at 176th in the Index, Xi Jinping's China is getting closer and closer to a contemporary version of totalitarianism. During [President Xi's first term](#), censorship and surveillance reached unprecedented levels thanks to the massive use of new technology. Foreign reporters are [finding it harder to work](#) and ordinary citizens can now be jailed just for sharing content on a social network or during a private chat on a messaging service.

More than 50 professional and non-professional journalists are currently detained in China, many of them the victims of [mistreatment and a lack of medical care](#) that poses a threat to their lives. [Liu Xiaobo](#), a Nobel peace laureate and recipient of RSF's Press Freedom Prize, and the dissident blogger [Yang Tongyan](#) both died last year from cancers that were left untreated in detention.

Internationally, the Chinese government is trying to establish [a "new world media order" under its influence](#), by exporting its oppressive methods, information censorship system and Internet surveillance tools. Its unabashed desire to crush all pockets of public resistance unfortunately has imitators in Asia.

Under Chinese influence

This is particularly so with Vietnam, which at 175th is just one place above China in the Index. Its traditional media are completely controlled, but citizen-journalists defend the freedom to inform with great courage, and [the government's response](#) has been [merciless](#). Bloggers used to be sentenced to two years in prison, but now those who blog about banned subjects such as corruption or environmental disasters can expect [a 15-year jail term](#).

Cambodia, another country that seems to be taking the dangerous Chinese road, has fallen 10 places in the Index to 142nd, one of the biggest falls in the region. Prime Minister Hun Sen's regime launched a [ruthless offensive](#) against media freedom in 2017, [shutting down more than 30 independent media outlets](#) and jailing several journalists in a completely arbitrary manner.

His suppression of independent voices, his increased dominance of the mass media and his meticulous control of social media are a disturbing echo of the methods used in China, which has invested millions of euros in Cambodia's pro-government media. The Chinese model's influence is also felt by the media in [Thailand](#) (140th), [Malaysia](#) (145th) and [Singapore](#) (151st).

Hate speech

The other fall in the region that speaks volumes is Myanmar's (down six places at 137th). In the past year, the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi [has lost all credibility](#) as regards its obligation to defend the role of the media in a functioning democracy.

The worst violations took place after the start of the Rohingya crisis in August 2017. The international community now knows that "elements of genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" occurred, to use the UN's terms. But proper reporting on this tragedy from within Myanmar is still impossible because the military continue to deny access. Two *Reuters* reporters who tried to investigate [are still in prison](#).

Myanmar's coverage of the Rohingya crisis has been marked by the growth of hate messages on social networks, [especially Facebook](#). Any journalist who does not fall in with the prevailing anti-Muslim discourse is subjected to [violent verbal harassment](#) by Buddhist extremists. This has done much to encourage self-censorship within the media.

Leaders hostile to press freedom

Hate speech is also an issue in the continent's other giant, [India](#), which has fallen another two places to 138th. Ever since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, Hindu fundamentalists have been referring to journalists in extremely violent terms.

Any investigative reporting that annoys the ruling party or any criticism of Hindutva, an ideology that blends Hindu nationalism with an almost fascistic rhetoric, elicits a torrent of online insults and [calls for the death of the reporter or writer responsible](#), most of it coming from the prime minister's troll army.

This unbridled verbal violence serves to support a leader who asserts himself as a strongman, a leader whose authority does not tolerate being undermined by reporters or editorialists.

As elsewhere in the world in 2017, this verbal violence has tragically led to physical violence. The newspaper editor **Gauri Lankesh** was [gunned down](#) outside her home in September after being the target of hate speech and death threats for criticizing Hindu supremacy, the caste system and discrimination against women.

The physical violence against journalists is largely responsible for India's low ranking. At least three journalists were [murdered in connection with their work](#). More [were killed in circumstances that were unclear](#), as is often the case in rural areas, where reporters are poorly paid. The situation in the Kashmir Valley, a [news black hole](#), contributed to the poor ranking of a country whose long tradition of vibrant media could nonetheless enable it to rise again in the Index.

In the Philippines, down six places at 133rd, the dynamism of the media has also been checked by the emergence of a leader who wants to show he is all powerful. President Rodrigo Duterte lost no time in warning the "sons of whore journalists" that they would not be spared.

There have been countless examples of [Philippine government harassment](#) of [media that voice any kind of criticism](#) of Duterte's "war on drugs." Here again, verbal violence and physical violence are closely linked. With four journalists murdered in connection with their work in 2017, the Philippines is one of the continent's [deadliest countries](#).

Physical violence

The high level of violence to which reporters are exposed in Pakistan (139th) accounts for its failure to rise in the Index. What with death threats, [abduction](#) and torture, journalists are still [threatened](#) by both Islamic fundamentalists on the one hand and by the all-powerful intelligence services on the other.

Violence is even more worrying in neighbouring Afghanistan (118th), where 18 journalists and media workers were killed in 2017. It nonetheless rose two places in the Index, above all because of an [improvement in the legal environment](#) with the creation of coordinating committees for the safety of journalists and media. These committees handled around 100 cases in the past year, with the result that in some cases sanctions were imposed on senior civilian and military officials.

Similarly, the efforts undertaken in Sri Lanka to combat physical attacks against media personnel and impunity for acts of violence against journalists account for its 10-place rise in the Index to 131st.

Democracies that resist

Despite an overall improvement in the media environment in Mongolia, pressure on the media during the presidential election accounts for its slight fall (down two places at 71st). Japan's rise (up five places at 67th) reflects a relative easing in pressure on the media from Shinzo Abe's nationalist government, although journalists are still constrained by the weight of tradition and business interests.

Hong Kong (70th) and Taiwan (42nd) each rose three places, resisting China's growing influence in their different ways.

South Korea (up 20 places at 43rd) rose more than any other country in the Asia-Pacific region. After a terrible decade, the new president, Moon Jae-in, has brought a breath of fresh air that helped [resolve a conflict](#) between journalists and management at the public broadcasting service. Structural problems still need addressing, including decriminalizing defamation and repealing a national security law that continues to threaten journalists.

Near the top of the Index, Australia has not budged from 19th place, above all because media ownership continues to be highly concentrated. Simple legal safeguards would nonetheless have allowed it rise a few places.

This was the case in New Zealand, which is up five places at 8th. The authorities blocked a proposed merger between the country's two biggest media groups, thereby providing media pluralism and independence with new guarantees. At the same time, investigative reporting should soon be strengthened by a law protecting whistleblowers. A good example to follow.

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