



RSF 2020 Index: Asia-Pacific – hyper-control and national-populist excesses

You could still harbour serious hopes about press freedom in Asia and Oceania in 2010 but the past decade has seen a steep decline, with the adoption of undemocratic and totalitarian practices, the emergence of a populism that unleashes hatred on journalists, and extreme media polarization. The region is facing huge challenges.

One of the lessons of the 2020 Index in Asia and Oceania is that press freedom is potentially in danger in any country. The proof is Australia (26th), formerly cited as a regional model, which has fallen five places, above all because of federal police raids on a journalist's home and the state TV broadcaster's headquarters. The precedent set by the raids poses a serious threat to investigative reporting and the confidentiality of journalists' sources. It also drew Australians' attention to the fact that their constitution is completely lacking in guarantees for the right to inform and to be informed.

This is all the more alarming because Asia has the world's worst violator of this freedom. North Korea (down 1 at 180th) is back in its former position at the very bottom of the Index after climbing one place in 2019 because of the semblance of an opening to foreign journalists during the summit meetings in June 2018 and February 2019 between President Trump and "Supreme Leader" Kim Jong-un.

In the race to be toughest on press freedom, North Korea is still closely followed by China (177th), which never stops enhancing its system of information hyper-control and persecution of dissident journalists and bloggers. Further evidence of this came in February 2020, when it arrested two of its citizens for taking it upon themselves to cover the coronavirus crisis. The world's biggest jailer of journalists, China is currently holding around 100, of whom the vast majority are Uyghurs.

Undemocratic systems, a geopolitical challenge

Vietnam (175th) has risen one place in the 2020 Index but, rather than signifying any real improvement, this is just a bounce back after the previous year's one-place fall, which was due to the level of repression in 2018. Laos (172nd) has fallen yet again, above all because of the regime's crackdown on the nascent blogosphere.

In a novel development, these four Communist one-party states have been joined in the Index's "black zone" by a regime that is an expert in wielding absolute control over news and information – Singapore (158th). Thanks to an Orwellian law that is supposed to combat "fake news," it has fallen seven places in a single year.

The Sultanate of Brunei (152nd) has also reinforced its information control arsenal by an addition to its criminal code – the death penalty for any written or spoken statement deemed to have blasphemed Islam. Two other regimes in the region have managed to enhance their

system for cracking down on dissent: Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodia (down 1 at 144th) and Gen. Prayut's Thailand (down 4 at 140th).

Pakistan (145th), which has brought almost all of the traditional media into line, is now stepping up its attempts to silence online critics, with the result that it has fallen three places. Similarly, by trying to impose draconian legislation, Nepal (112th) has fallen six places.

Political and religious intolerance

The geopolitical challenge to press freedom posed by these alternative authoritarian systems is being accompanied by an increase in a "national-populism" that tolerates no critical journalism, regarding it as "anti-government" and, by extension, "anti-national."

This puts reporters who try to do their job on the front line. They have been the targets of police violence on the streets in Sri Lanka (down 1 at 127th) and during pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong (80th), the semi-autonomous territory that has fallen seven places, one of Asia's biggest falls.

They have also been attacked by pro-government political activists, as in Bangladesh (down 1 at 151st), Philippines (down 2 at 136th) and India (down 2 at 142nd). By completely depriving the Kashmir Valley's 8 million inhabitants of Internet access, New Delhi also imposed the biggest electronic curfew in history.

India's Hindu nationalist right is also an example of the extraordinary intolerance that religious extremists have shown towards journalists who don't share their views, an intolerance displayed by the Taliban in Afghanistan (down 1 at 122nd) and Buddhist fundamentalists in Myanmar (down 1 at 139th). All are always quick to try to impose their world vision on the media.

Troll armies

This ideological loathing of the very idea of an independent press finds a natural terrain for expression on the Internet, a major battleground in the information war. Physical attacks against journalists are often accompanied or preceded by online threats from troll armies and click farms. In Asia, these digital soldiers are the spearheads of an uninhibited national-populism that feeds on online disinformation and hate speech.

In this extremely complex environment, the media can play an absolutely decisive role in ensuring that democracies function as they should, especially during elections. This is the case in Indonesia (up 5 at 119th), where President Jokowi is in a position to put press freedom at the centre of his second term.

The big rises by Malaysia (up 22 at 101st) and Maldives (up 19 at 79th) confirm the dramatic effect that a change of government through the polls can have in improving the environment for journalists and combatting self-censorship.

The media have managed to impose themselves as a major player in emerging democracies such as Bhutan (up 13 at 67th), East Timor (up 6 at 78th) and Samoa (up 1 at 21st). In countries where the government is less tolerant towards critical media, such as Fiji (52nd) and Mongolia (down 3 at 73rd), journalists have managed to resist, above all thanks to legal guarantees.

Concentration and polarization

In confirmed democracies, governments readily use national security as a pretext for curbing journalistic freedom. This is often seen in South Korea (down 1 at 42nd), where the law provides for severe penalties for the publication of information deemed to be sensitive, especially in connection with North Korea.

The consequences of media ownership being concentrated in ever fewer hands continues to be one of the biggest threats to press freedom in democracies in Asia and Oceania. This is the case in Japan (up 1 at 66th), where newsrooms are still heavily influenced by management within the “keiretsu,” the conglomerates that own the media in Japan, which put their business interests first.

Business imperatives also threaten media independence by tending to encourage an extreme polarization and search for sensationalism, as is the case in Tonga (down 5 at 50th), Papua New Guinea (down 8 at 46th) and Taiwan (down 1 at 43rd). Even the regional model, New Zealand (9th), has fallen two places because media ownership continues to be highly concentrated. It shows that regardless of where in the world you want to exercise the right to press freedom, you have to keep fighting for it.