

Asia-Pacific – Press Freedom Index 2013

Burmese spring an exception to decline in freedom of information in Asia

Only three Asian countries are in the top 25 percent of the table, while 15 countries are among the bottom 45 places. Unsurprisingly, one-party authoritarian governments figure more than ever among the predators of press freedom and languish at the bottom end of the table.

Burma's paper revolution

Burma went through dramatic changes in 2012 and moved up to 151th place, a rise of 18 places, jumping ahead of its usual bedfellows in the media repression stakes. There are no longer any journalists or cyber dissidents in the jails of the old military dictatorship. Legislative reform has only just begun but the steps already taken by the government in favour of the media, such as an end to prior censorship and the permitted return of media organizations from exile, are significant steps towards genuine freedom of information.

China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea: no signs of improvement

North Korea (178th), **China** (173rd), **Vietnam** (172nd) and **Laos** (168th), all ruled by authoritarian parties, still refuse to grant their citizens the freedom to be informed. The control of news and information is a key issue for these government, which are horrified at the prospect of being open to criticism. North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, who succeeded his father Kim Jong-il on 30 December 2011, appears to rule in concert with the military junta.

In Vietnam and China, those involved in online news and information, such as bloggers and netizens, are forced to deal with increasingly harsh repression. Many Tibetan monks have been convicted or abducted for having sent information abroad about the disastrous state of human rights in Tibet. Commercial news outlets and foreign media organizations are still censored regularly by the propaganda department. Faced with the growing power of social networks and their ability to muster support, the authorities have redoubled their efforts to hone their capability to track "sensitive" content and delete it immediately from the Web. In less than a year, Vietnamese courts have sentenced 12 bloggers and cyber-dissidents to jail terms of up to 13 years, making the country the world's second biggest prison for netizens, after China.

General decline in freedom of information in South Asia

The Indian subcontinent was the Asian region that saw the sharpest deterioration in the climate for those involved in news and information in 2012. In the **Maldives**, which crashed to 103rd place (-30), the events that led to the resignation of President Mohammed Nasheed in February led to violence and threats against journalists in state television and private media outlets regarded as pro-Nasheed by the coup leaders.

Attacks on press freedom have increased since then. Many journalists have been [arrested, assaulted and threatened](#) during anti-government protests. On June 5, the freelance journalist and blogger **Ismail “Hilath” Rasheed** narrowly survived the first attempted murder of a journalist in the archipelago.

Four journalists were killed in India and Bangladesh in 2012, which fell to 140th and 144th respectively in the index. In India, the “world’s biggest democracy”, the authorities insist on censoring the Web and imposing more and more taboos, while violence against journalists goes unpunished and the regions of Kashmir and Chhattisgarh become increasingly isolated. Bangladesh is not far behind. Its journalists are frequently targets of police violence. When they are not acting as aggressors, the security forces stand by passively while enemies of the media enjoy impunity and are rarely brought to justice. The killers of the journalists **Sagar Sarowar** and **Meherun Runi**, and those behind the double murder, remained at large and the investigation was cynically entrusted to the Rapid Action Battalion where it remains bogged down.

The ability of journalists to work freely in **Pakistan** (159th, -8) and **Nepal** (118th, -12) continued to worsen in the absence of any government policy to protect media workers. Despite having a diverse and lively media, Pakistan remains one of the world’s most dangerous countries for reporters.

Japan resorts to press restrictions

Japan, demoted from 22nd to 53rd place, recorded the biggest drop of any Asian country. The reason was the ban imposed by the authorities on independent coverage of any topic related directly or indirectly to the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Several freelance journalists who [complained that public debate was being stifled](#) were subjected to censorship, police intimidation and judicial harassment.

The continued existence of the discriminatory system of “kisha clubs”, exclusive press clubs which restrict access to information to their own members, is a key element that could prevent the country from moving up the index significantly in the near future.

Afghanistan: genuine but fragile improvement

Afghanistan (128th, +22) has a considerably better rating than in previous years, although violence against journalists did not disappear completely and the government neglected to tackle the issue of impunity. No journalists were killed in 2012 and arrests of media workers declined. The withdrawal of some foreign troops from the international coalition and deteriorating conditions in neighbouring Pakistan meant these improvements were precarious.

Cambodia and Malaysia: drift towards authoritarianism

Conditions for the media are critical in **Cambodia**, which fell 26 places to 146th in the index, its lowest ever position. Since 2011, news organizations, in particular independent local and foreign radio stations, have been subjected to a policy of censorship orchestrated by an increasingly ruthless information ministry. On 1 October 2012, [Mam Sonando](#), the owner of an independent radio station, was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for insurrection and inciting others to take up arms against the state. The decline in freedom of information also involved deadly attacks and death threats aimed at journalists who exposed government corruption and illegal activities harmful to the environment.

Malaysia (145th) also presented a sorry record, falling 23 places to a position below the one it had in 2002. Despite an all-out battle by rights activists and online media outlets, a campaign of repression by the government, illustrated by the crackdown on the "Bersih 3.0" protest in April, and repeated censorship efforts, continue to undermine basic freedoms, in particular the right to information.

Papua-New Guinea and Fiji: threats against journalists greeted with indifference

Threats to the media should not be taken lightly in these two Pacific archipelagos. In **Papua-New Guinea** (41st, -6), the security forces are regularly involved in attacks on journalists. In **Fiji** (107th), despite a 10-place rise explained in part by the decline of other countries in this section of the index, news organizations are threatened under the Media Industry Development Decree with exorbitant fines, or even imprisonment, as in the case of a recently convicted editor of the Fiji Times.