



2019 RSF Index:

Asia-Pacific press freedom impacted by political change

What with totalitarian propaganda, censorship, intimidation, physical violence and cyber-harassment, a lot of courage is needed nowadays to work independently as a journalist in the Asia-Pacific countries, where democracies are struggling to resist various forms of disinformation.

Two significant rises in the Index – both of 22 places – highlighted the degree to which a country’s political ecosystem impacts the freedom to inform. In [Malaysia](#), the ruling coalition [was ousted in an election](#) for the first time in the country’s 62 years of independence. This blew fresh air through the ossified media and transformed the environment for journalists, propelling Malaysia to 123rd place. In [Maldives](#), the election of a new president who had given firm – and partially kept – [promises to improve press freedom](#) enabled this Indian Ocean archipelago to jump to 98th place

News “black holes” sink further

Conversely, two countries already festering near the bottom of the Index – [China](#) and [Vietnam](#) – both managed to fall another place, to 177th and 176th respectively, because of the monopoly of power exercised by their presidents, Xi Jinping and Nguyen Phu Trong. The first amended the constitution in order to be “president for life” in March 2018. The second now heads both the Communist Party and the state. In each country, the ruling elite suppresses all debate in the state-owned media while cracking down relentlessly on citizen-journalists who try to make a dissenting voice heard. Around 30 professional and non-professional journalists are detained in Vietnam, and nearly twice as many are detained in China.

China’s anti-democratic model, based on Orwellian high-tech information surveillance and manipulation, is all the more alarming because Beijing is now promoting its adoption internationally. As well as obstructing the work of foreign correspondents within its borders, China is now trying to establish a “new world media order” under its control, as [RSF showed in its latest report on China](#).

[Laos](#) also fell one place to 171st, above all for preventing journalists from covering the dramatic collapse of a dam in July 2018. These one-party states are inexorably drawing closer to their [North Korean “brother”](#), which managed a miniscule one-place rise to 179th thanks to the semblance of an opening as a result of the summits that brought Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and President Trump together.

Growing censorship and self-censorship

While the islands of press independence are under attack, the Chinese system of total news control is increasingly serving as a model for other anti-democratic regimes such as [Singapore](#) (151st), which has established self-censorship as the norm, [Brunei](#) (152nd, -1) and [Thailand](#) (136th). Similarly, censorship has become the norm in [Cambodia](#) (143rd), where the government has [eliminated all independent media](#), and [Hong Kong](#) (73rd), where the [leading traditional media now readily comply](#) with Beijing's dictates.

In the absence of editorial independence vis-à-vis the authorities, [Papua New Guinea](#) (38th) and [Tonga](#) (45th) also saw an increase in self-censorship in 2018. In [Pakistan](#) (142nd, -3), the military establishment's harassment of the media in the run-up to the general election in July 2018 resulted in an [increase in censorship](#) comparable to the worst moments during Pakistan's military dictatorships.

Deadly field reporting

Reporters are also exposed in the field in Pakistan, where the environment is extremely unsafe. At least three were killed in connection with their work in 2018. The security situation is even more worrying in [Afghanistan](#) (121st, -3), where – despite the government's efforts – 16 media professionals were killed in connection with their reporting, nine of them in a [double bombing](#) that explicitly targeted the press. Much courage is now needed to be a field reporter in Afghanistan. Although less dramatic, the situation was also worrying in [Bangladesh](#) (150th), where reporters covering protests and the election were the [targets of unprecedented violence](#).

Physical violence against journalists is encouraged by the fact that the perpetrators usually enjoy complete impunity, as is still the case, for example, in [Sri Lanka](#) (126th). In [India](#) (140th, -2), at least six journalists were also killed while trying to work in 2018. This tragic toll was accompanied by an increase in violence coming from all quarters, including the [security forces](#), [organized crime](#) and [political activists](#).

Cyber-harassment and disinformation

India's journalists are being attacked online as well as in the field. All those who dare to criticize Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist ideology online are branded as "anti-Indian" scum who must be purged. This results in appalling [cyber-harassment campaigns](#) in which journalists are threatened not only with death but also rape (as the troll armies like harassing [women journalists](#), in particular). The same phenomenon is found in the [Philippines](#) (134th, -1), where attacks against the independent press by President Rodrigo Duterte's government are accompanied by coordinated cyber-attacks. The most emblematic case is undoubtedly that of the news website *Rappler* and its editor, **Maria Ressa**, who is the target of both recurring online harassment campaigns and a [series of prosecutions](#) orchestrated by different government agencies.

The use of social networks is also worrying in [Myanmar](#) (138th, -1), where [disinformation and anti-Rohingya hate messages spread on Facebook](#) without being moderated, benefitting the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, who reacted with a [deafening silence](#) to the

[seven-year jail sentences](#) imposed on *Reuters* journalists **Wa Lone** and **Kyaw Soe Oo** in September 2018 for trying to investigate the Rohingya genocide.

Democracies swamped

These waves of disinformation are helping to erode democracy throughout the region, and press freedom with it. Democratic countries are having more and more difficulty in resisting this toxic groundswell, with the result that many are failing to improve their ranking in the RSF Index. On the grounds of regulating social networks, some countries such as [Nepal](#) (106h) and [Samoa](#) (22nd) have, for example, adopted repressive laws that hamper investigative journalism.

The absence of structural reforms that foster greater press freedom is also preventing countries such as [South Korea](#) (41st) and [Indonesia](#) (124th) from progressing. And independent journalism is rendered extremely difficult when the media environment becomes too polarized, as in [Taiwan](#) (42nd) and [Mongolia](#) (70th).

Pluralism in danger

Finally, it is becoming increasingly difficult for media pluralism to resist the imperatives of media ownership concentration and business interests, as in [Japan](#) (67th) and [Australia](#) (21st, -2). [New Zealand](#) (7th, +1) is exposed to similar phenomena, but has a regulator that was able to prevent too much media concentration. It therefore rose one place, in a sign that institutional guarantees pay off.

Some modest victories have been seen in this otherwise disturbing landscape. By providing balanced coverage of general elections in 2018, the media in [Fiji](#) (up 5 at 52nd), [East Timor](#) (up 11 at 84th) and [Bhutan](#) (up 14 at 80th) fulfilled their role although still in the process of construction in these young democracies. The progress achieved by these three countries showed that enabling journalists to work freely, without fear of harassment or reprisals, is important for a democratic society's development.

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