

RSF 2021 Index: Censorship and disinformation virus hits Asia-Pacific

The region's authoritarian regimes have used the Covid-19 pandemic to perfect their methods of totalitarian control of information, while the “dictatorial democracies” have used it as a pretext for imposing especially repressive legislation with provisions combining propaganda and suppression of dissent. The behaviour of the region's few real democracies have meanwhile shown that journalistic freedom is the best antidote to disinformation.

Just as Covid-19 emerged in **China** (177th) before spreading throughout the world, the censorship virus – at which China is the world's undisputed specialist (see box) – spread through Asia and Oceania and gradually took hold in much of the region. This began in the semi-autonomous “special administrative region” of **Hong Kong** (80th), where Beijing can now interfere directly under the national security law it imposed in June 2020, and which poses a grave threat to journalism. **Vietnam** (175th) also reinforced its control of social media content, while conducting a wave of arrests of leading independent journalists in the run-up to the Communist Party's five-yearly congress in January 2021. They included Pham Doan Trang, who was awarded RSF's Press Freedom Prize for Impact in 2019.

North Korea (up 1 at 179th), which has no need to take lessons in censorship from its Chinese neighbour, continues to rank among the Index's worst performers because of its totalitarian control over information and its population. A North Korean citizen can still end up in a concentration camp just for looking at the website of a media outlet based abroad.

China (177th)

In censorship's grip

Since he became China's leader in 2013, President Xi Jinping has taken online censorship, surveillance and propaganda to unprecedented levels. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), an agency personally supervised by Xi, has deployed a wide range of measures aimed at controlling the information accessible to China's 989 million Internet users. Thanks to its massive use of new technology and an army of censors and trolls, Beijing manages to monitor and control the flow of information, spy on and censor citizens online, and spread its propaganda on social media. The regime is also expanding its influence abroad with the aim of imposing its narrative on international audiences and promoting its perverse equation of journalism with state propaganda. And Beijing has taken advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its control over online information even more.

Countries that block journalism

At least 10 other countries – all marked red or black on the World Press Freedom map, meaning their press freedom situation is classified as bad or very bad – used the pandemic to reinforce obstacles to the free flow of information. **Thailand** (up 3 at 137th), **Philippines** (down 2 at 138th), **Indonesia** (up 6 at 113th) and **Cambodia** (144th) adopted extremely draconian laws or decrees in the spring of 2020 criminalising any criticism of the government's actions and, in some cases, making the publication or broadcasting of “false” information punishable by several years in prison.

Malaysia (down 18 at 119th) embodies the desire for absolute control over information. Its astonishing 18-place fall, the biggest of any country in the Index, is directly linked to the formation of a new coalition government in March 2020. It led to the adoption of a so-called “anti-fake news” decree enabling the authorities to impose their own version of the truth – a power that the neighbouring city-state of **Singapore** (down 2 at 160th) has already been using for the past two years thanks to a law allowing the government to “correct” any information it deems to be false and to prosecute those responsible.

In **Myanmar** (down 1 at 140th), Aung San Suu Kyi’s civilian government used the pretext of combatting “fake news” during the pandemic to suddenly block 221 websites, including many leading news sites, in April 2020. The military’s constant harassment of journalists trying to cover the various ethnic conflicts also contributed to the country’s fall in the Index. The press freedom situation has worsened dramatically since the military coup in February 2021. By resuming the grim practices of the junta that ruled until February 2011 – including media closures, mass arrests of journalists and prior censorship – Myanmar has suddenly gone back 10 years.

Pakistan (145th) is the other country in the region where the military control journalists. The all-powerful military intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), continues to make extensive use of judicial harassment, intimidation, abduction and torture to silence critics both domestically and abroad, where many journalists and bloggers living in self-imposed exile have been subjected to threats designed to rein them in. Although the vast majority of media outlets reluctantly comply with the red lines imposed by the military, the Pakistani censorship apparatus is still struggling to control social media, the only space where a few critical voices can be heard.

Pretexts, methods for throttling information

Instead of drafting new repressive laws in order to impose censorship, several of the region’s countries have contented themselves with strictly applying existing legislation that was already very draconian – laws on “sedition,” “state secrets” and “national security”. There is no shortage of pretexts. The strategy for suppressing information is often two-fold. On the one hand, governments use innovative practices often derived from marketing to impose their own narrative within the mainstream media, whose publishers are from the same elite as the politicians. On the other, politicians and activists wage a merciless war on several fronts against reporters and media outlets that don’t toe the official line.

The way **India** (142nd) applies these methods is particularly instructive. While the pro-government media pump out a form of propaganda, journalists who dare to criticise the government are branded as “anti-state,” “anti-national” or even “pro-terrorist” by supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This exposes them to public condemnation in the form of extremely violent social media hate campaigns that include calls for them to be killed, especially if they are women. When out reporting in the field, they are physically attacked by BJP activists, often with the complicity of the police. And finally, they are also subjected to criminal prosecutions.

Independent journalism is also being fiercely suppressed in **Bangladesh** (down 1 at 152nd), **Sri Lanka** (127th) and **Nepal** (up 6 at 106th) – the latter’s rise in the Index being due more to falls by other countries than to any real improvement in media freedom. A somewhat less violent increase in repression has also been seen in **Papua New Guinea** (down 1 at 47th), **Fiji** (down 3 at 55th) and **Tonga** (up 4 at 46th).

Other threats

In **Australia** (up 1 at 25th), it was Facebook that introduced the censorship virus. In response to proposed Australian legislation requiring tech companies to reimburse the media for content

posted on their social media platforms, Facebook decided to ban Australian media from publishing or sharing journalistic content on their Facebook pages. In India, the arbitrary nature of Twitter's algorithms also resulted in brutal censorship. After being bombarded with complaints generated by troll armies about *The Kashmir Walla* magazine, Twitter suddenly suspended its account without any possibility of appeal.

Afghanistan (122nd) is being attacked by another virus, the virus of intolerance and extreme violence against journalists, especially women journalists. With no fewer than six journalists and media workers killed in 2020 and at least four more killed since the start of 2021, Afghanistan continues to be one of the world's deadliest countries for the media.

Antidote to disinformation

A new prime minister in **Japan** (down 1 at 67th) has not changed the climate of mistrust towards journalists that is encouraged by the nationalist right, nor has it ended the self-censorship that is still widespread in the media.

The Asia-Pacific region's young democracies, such as **Bhutan** (up 2 at 65th), **Mongolia** (up 5 at 68th) and **Timor-Leste** (up 7 at 71st), have resisted the temptations of pandemic-linked absolute information control fairly well, thanks to media that have been able to assert their independence vis-à-vis the executive, legislature and judiciary.

Although imperfect, the regional press freedom models – **New Zealand** (up 1 at 8th), Australia, **South Korea** (42nd) and **Taiwan** (43rd) – have on the whole allowed journalists to do their job and to inform the public without any attempt by the authorities to impose their own narrative. Their good behaviour has shown that censorship is not inevitable in times of crisis and that journalism can be the best antidote to disinformation.