

Close-up on... Asia

Asia still has the biggest representation in the 10 countries at the bottom of the ranking. Most of them are dictatorships, but they also for the first time include Sri Lanka (165th), which has an elected government and where the press faces violence that is only too often organised by the state.

At the other end of the spectrum, New Zealand (7th), Australia (28th) and Japan (29th) - countries where democracy is deeply anchored - are in the top 30. New Zealand is one of the only two non-European countries in the top 20, the other being Canada (13th).

Some young democracies have advanced significantly in the past year. Maldives (104th) now has a flourishing independent press. The same goes for Bhutan (74th), where the first privately-owned news media are gradually establishing a distinct identity for themselves.

Afghanistan (156th), on the other hand, has fallen in the ranking because of violence, not only by the Taliban and the warlords' henchmen but also by government representatives. Burma's position was already bad and now is worse (170th). The crackdown launched after the September 2007 protests never ended : dozens of journalists have been arrested or threatened, while the military censorship is relentless. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia (126th) got a bad score as a result of a journalist's murder that was probably instigated by a police officer, and the fact that control of the media was stepped up for the parliamentary elections. Vietnam (168th) fell six places as a result of a crackdown on the liberal media for being too probing in its reporting on corruption.

Major political changes took place in Pakistan (152nd) and Nepal (138th) but their effects on press freedom have not yet been felt. Gen. Pervez Musharraf's departure as Pakistan's president should benefit the press but the war with the Taliban is an even more serious problem for journalists.

The low ranking accorded to the United States outside of its own territory (119th) is due in part to the US military's abuses in Afghanistan where a fixer for a Canadian TV network was arbitrarily detained for several months without any form of trial.

China (167th) continues to have a low ranking despite the efforts of many news media to elude the straightjacket of censorship and police controls. The number of arrests and cases of news surveillance and control by the political police and Propaganda Department is still very high and prevents the new Asian power from achieving any significant improvement.