

ASIA-PACIFIC AREA



VIOLENCE AND CENSORSHIP ON THE RISE IN ASIA

Violence and impunity persist in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Philippines, more repression in Sri Lanka, Vietnam and China

In **Afghanistan** (150th) and **Pakistan** (151st), violence remained the main concern for journalists, who were under constant threat from the Taliban, religious extremists, separatist movements and political groups. With 10 deaths in 2011, Pakistan was the world's deadliest country for journalists for the second year in a row.

In the **Philippines** (140th), which rose again in the index after falling in 2010 as a result of the massacre of 32 journalists in Ampatuan in November 2009, paramilitary groups and private militias continued to attack media workers. The judicial investigation into the Ampatuan massacre made it clear that the response of the authorities was seriously inadequate.

Journalists continued to be exposed to violence in **Bangladesh** (129th) and **Nepal** (106th), although less than in the past. In Nepal, journalists were regularly subjected to threats from rival political groups and their supporters. In Bangladesh, opposition groups and the ruling Awami League took turns to attack and obstruct the press. Despite genuine media pluralism, the law allows the government to maintain excessive control over the media and the Internet. In Nepal, a decline in attacks by Maoist groups in the south and greater efficiency on the part of the justice system account for the modest improvement in the country's ranking. However, press freedom was marred by threats and attacks by politicians and armed groups throughout the year.

Authoritarianism and ambivalence at the bottom of the index

Freedom of information worsened considerably in two Asian countries under authoritarian rule.

China, which has more journalists, bloggers and cyber-dissidents in prison than any other country, stepped up its censorship and propaganda in 2011 and tightened its control of the Internet, particularly the blogosphere. The first protest movements in Arab countries and the ensuing calls for democracy in China's main cities set off a wave of arrests with no end yet in sight.

In the autonomous regions of Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, protests by minorities regularly gave rise to a harsh crackdown by the authorities. In Beijing and Shanghai, international correspondents were particular targets of the security forces and had to work under the continual threat of expulsion or having their visas withdrawn. Journalists were prevented from covering most of the events that threatened China's stability or might have given it a negative image.

Vietnam (172nd) appeared to follow China's repressive lead and fell seven places. Politically committed journalists and pro-democracy bloggers were harassed by the authorities while the courts continued to invoke state security to hand out prison sentences ranging from two to seven years. The blogger Pham Minh Hoang, for example, was sentenced to three years in prison and three years under house arrest on 10 August on a charge of trying to overthrow the government.

Reporters Without Borders promotes and defends the freedom to be informed and to inform others throughout the world. Based in Paris, it has ten international offices (Berlin, Brussels, Geneva, Madrid, Montreal, New York, Stockholm, Tunis, Vienna and Washington DC) and more than 150 correspondents in all five continents.

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In **Sri Lanka** (163rd), the stranglehold of the Rajapakse clan forced the last few opposition journalists to flee the country. Any that stayed behind were regularly subjected to harassment and threats. Attacks were less common but impunity and official censorship of independent news sites put an end to pluralism and contributed more than ever to self-censorship by almost all media outlets.

Burma (169th) showed signs of beginning to carry out reforms including partial amnesties and a reduction in prior censorship, but it remained largely under the control of an authoritarian government run by former members of the military junta reinvented as civilian politicians. Less than 10 of its journalists remain in prison at the start of 2012.

In **North Korea** (178th), although news and information was able to move across its borders to a greater extent, no one knows whether this will continue under Kim Jong-un, the son and heir of Kim Jong-il. The dynastic succession, the dominance of the military machine and the government's desire for power give no grounds for optimism.

At the top, the good boys turn bad

Those who are traditionally good performers did not shine in 2011. With **New Zealand's** fall to 13th position, no country in the Asia-Pacific region figured among the top 10 in the index.

Hong Kong (54th) saw a sharp deterioration in press freedom in 2011 and its ranking fell sharply. Arrests, assaults and harassment worsened working conditions for journalists to an extent not seen previously, a sign of a worrying change in government policy.

In **Australia** (30th), the media were subjected to investigations and criticism by the authorities, and were denied access to information, while in **Japan** (22nd) coverage of the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear accident gave rise to excessive restrictions and exposed the limits of the pluralism of the country's press.

Causes for concern

In **India** (131st), journalists were exposed to violence stemming from the persistent conflicts in the states of Chhattisgarh and Jammu and Kashmir. The threat from mafia groups operating in the main cities of the country also contributed to self-censorship. However, the authorities were no better. In May, they unveiled the "Information Technology Rules 2011," which have dangerous implications for online freedom of expression. Foreign reporters saw their visa requests turned down or were pressured to provide positive coverage.

In **Indonesia**, an army crackdown in West Papua province, where at least two journalists were killed, five kidnapped and 18 assaulted in 2011, was the main reason for the country's fall to 146th position in the index. A corrupt judiciary that is too easily influenced by politicians and pressure groups and government attempts to control the media and Internet have prevented the development of a freer press.

Illegal detention and intimidation in **Mongolia** (100th) and the **Maldives** (73rd) showed up the weakness of press freedom there. A climate of religious intolerance prevailed in the Maldives, where media organizations were subjected to threats by the authorities and had to deal with an Islamic affairs ministry bent on imposing the Sharia to the detriment of free expression.

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