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Asia-Pacific

Sclerotic one-party regimes, media control by oligarchs

[North Korea](#) (180th), [China](#) (179th), [Vietnam](#) (178th), [Myanmar](#) (173rd) – Asia’s one-party states and dictatorships are the ones that constrict journalism most, regimes with leaders who have continued to tighten their totalitarian grip on the public discourse. Starting with Xi Jinping, who secured a historic third term as China’s leader with a concentration of power without precedent since Mao Zedong, and has used it to pursue the crusade he launched against journalism ten years ago.

With the result that China is the world’s biggest jailer of journalists and press freedom defenders, closely followed by Myanmar, which has become a black hole for news and information ever since the military seized total control in a coup on 1 February 2021.

The other phenomenon that dangerously restricts the free flow of news and information is the acquisition of media outlets by oligarchs with close links with political leaders. This is particularly the case in “hybrid” regimes such as [India](#) (161st), where all the mainstream media are now owned by wealthy businessmen close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

At the same time, Modi has an army of supporters who track down all online reporting regarded as critical of the government and wage horrific harassment campaigns against the sources. Caught between these two forms of extreme pressure, many journalists are, in practice, forced to censor themselves.

The same trend is to be found in [Bangladesh](#) (163rd) and [Cambodia](#) (147th), where governmental persecution of independent media has intensified in the run-up to elections that are due to be held in the coming months.

Off limits

Another regional specificity is the persistence of issues and subjects which are regarded as off limits and therefore prevent journalists from working freely. This is clearly the case in [Afghanistan](#) (152nd), where the Taliban government tolerates no straying from their fanatical version of the Sharia and where women journalists are in the process of being literally erased from the media landscape. The media also know that targeting the sovereign too directly is very risky in such countries as [Bhutan](#) (90th), [Thailand](#) (106th) and the sultanate of [Brunei](#) (142nd).

On the other hand, changes of government loosened constraints on the media in [Pakistan](#) (150th) and the [Philippines](#) (132nd), even if these two countries continue to be among the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists. The replacement of one party or coalition in

government by another also explains why such countries as [Sri Lanka](#) (135th), [Malaysia](#) (73rd) and [Australia](#) (27th) have risen in the Index.

At the upper end of the Index, functional democracies such as [Taiwan](#) (35th), [Samoa](#) (19th) and [New Zealand](#) (13th) have enhanced their status as regional press freedom models. One of this year's surprises is the entry of [Timor-Leste](#), a young democracy still under construction, into the Index's top ten. It is a positive confirmation of the earlier observation about one-party regimes. Excessive, overly concentrated power is the main obstacle to journalistic freedom. It is when political, economic and judicial powers are balanced and regulated that press freedom can fully flourish.