

Free Speech Under Attack in Southeast Asia

Mainstream and social media are increasingly the target of state censorship in the region.

By Mong Palatino

June 05, 2014



One undeniable and distressing sign that Southeast Asian democracy is **regressing** is the rising incidence of media freedom violations in the region. If political reforms are slow or are being reversed, the state of free speech is faring even more badly.



Image Credit: Rohan Radheya

The muzzling of the press under Thailand's **coup** regime reflects the exceedingly difficult conditions facing journalists today, not just there but in other Southeast Asian states as well.

However, Thailand's situation needs particular attention because of the sudden reversal of people's hard-won civil liberties, as the army continues to tighten its grip on Thai society. When martial law was declared, the army quickly seized control of media facilities, such as the newsrooms of television, radio stations and newspapers. TV was only allowed to broadcast army announcements and patriotic songs from the Second World War era. Critical editors and journalists were summoned and silenced by the junta. "Inappropriate" websites were blocked, and dissenting netizens were warned that they could face prosecution for undermining authorities.

Proof of the army's distrust of news agencies is a government report **warning** citizens that they could suffer from mental stress if they consume too much news. To remain healthy, the public was advised to read only news stories from state-run sources. Indeed, free speech was an early casualty under Thailand's military dictatorship.

Elsewhere in the region, media is also being restricted through more intense regulation. Policymaking, which has targeted both the mainstream and new media, avoided direct censorship in favor of vague and broad measures that diminished opportunities for free expression, while expanding the regulatory powers of the state.

For example, East Timor's parliament has recently **passed a media law** which was immediately condemned by human rights advocates and journalists as a threat to media freedom. They specifically **questioned** the mandate of a proposed Press Council that will oversee and approve media licenses.

In Cambodia, a draft cybercrime law **criminalizes** web content that generates “political cohesiveness” – whatever that might mean. In the Philippines, the Supreme Court affirmed the legality of cyber libel. In Singapore, there is concern that the anti-harassment law could be used to **prevent** journalists and researchers from pursuing critical or investigative topics involving the government. Indonesia said it needed to protect the public from porn when it banned video-streaming website Vimeo, but this action infuriated many people who responsibly using the site to access information.

While media laws can provide protection to media producers, they are also often used to intimidate or even punish government critics. There is a recent trend of public officials pursuing or threatening to use legal actions against critics.

In Singapore, the prime minister has **sued** an unknown blogger for defamation, even though the latter has apologized. In Malaysia, the prime minister has threatened to take legal action against an independent website for allowing “**sedition**” comments on their portal. In Myanmar, some journalists were **detained for reporting about corruption**, or for interviewing government officials during office hours.

Vietnam’s mainstream media remains under strict state surveillance, while **social media** networks are regularly blocked. Dissident bloggers are arrested and given harsh prison sentences. When Brunei announced its plan to implement Sharia Law in the whole country, the Sultan **warned netizens** not to criticize the policy. The Philippine press is one of the freest in the region since it does not have a board of censors, yet the Philippines is listed among the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists because of the high number of unsolved media killings.

It seems that the vision of a single ASEAN community uniting on a common platform has been realized already. But rather than economic integration or joint military exercises, this shared platform is the undermining of free speech and the heavy regulation of the media.