

**Press freedom ranking dips further**  
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Press freedom in Malaysia dipped slightly over the past year, resulting in the country's lower global and regional rating, said Freedom House in its annual survey of almost 200 countries.

While legal restrictions and other forms of intimidation and pressures had 'traditionally constrained' Malaysian media, 2006 had seen the use of these laws to further restrict and suppress freedom of speech and expression, it said in its country report.

**Freedom House press freedom ranking 2007**

Rank	Country	Rating	Status
1	Finland	9	F
	Iceland	9	F
3	Belgium	11	F
	Denmark	11	F
	Norway	11	F
100	Philippines	46	PF
	Senegal	46	PF
102	Comoros	48	PF
	Guinea-Bissau	48	PF
150	Cote d'Ivoire	68	NF
	Malaysia	68	NF
	Maldives	68	NF
	United Arab Emirates	68	NF
191	Burma	96	NF
	Cuba	96	NF
	Libya	96	NF
	Turkmenistan	96	NF
195	North Korea	97	NF

F : Free  
PF : Partially Free  
NF : Not Free

Source: Freedom House

Freedom House accorded Malaysia in its 'Global Survey of Media Independence' a score of 68 points out of 100, a number derived from an analysis of the legal, political, and economic environment surrounding and influencing the media.

It also accorded Malaysia a global ranking of 150 - standing on par with Cote D'Ivoire, Maldives, and the United Arab Emirates - out of a total of 195 nations.

This as well as its regional ranking of 31 out of 40 Asia-Pacific countries signify a lower ranking compared to the previous year. Last year, Malaysia ranked 141 globally, 28 regionally.

In the region, Malaysia trailed behind East Timor (42), Philippines (100), Indonesia (114), Thailand (126) and (122).

Freedom House is a Washington-based non-governmental organisation that advocates 'the expansion of freedom in the world.'

#### Incidents in the country

Among the incidents that led to Malaysia's downgrading, said Freedom House in its country report, was the government's use early in the year of the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) to suspend the Sarawak Tribune and Guang Ming Daily for reproducing the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad.

The act was again invoked in mid-February to prohibit the publication, distribution, or possession of any materials relating to the Danish caricatures. It was fear of the PPA that led the media to self-censor its coverage of major fuel price hike protests in April, said Freedom House.

In October, the government used the lack of information legislation to refuse publication of its data and analysis behind the official bumiputera corporate equity calculations used to uphold the country's affirmative action quotas.

Freedom House also noted that the government had forced the withdrawal of a study that challenged the government's data.

In mid-July, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi banned reporting on issues of race and religion, which was followed by Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin's warning of action against all media outlets that did not comply.

A few days later, the premier threatened to detain those who "spread untruths and slander" on the Internet and through mobile phones' short-messaging system.

This, said Freedom House, is in violation of the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act which guarantees that the Internet will not be censored.

Also noted was the Ministry of Internal Security's ban of 18 books under the PPPA on the grounds they might "disrupt peace and harmony."

The Weekend Mail and its editor were suspended in November for publishing a spread on what Malaysians think about sex.

Freedom House also cited the government's directive in December to news editors not to play up the soon-to-be-announced increase in highway toll charges and to "help manage the public outcry" that was expected to follow the announcement.

Another attack on press freedom had occurred in 2006 in the form of moves by political parties in cooperating with business groups to consolidate their hold on print media, said Freedom House.

It cited the business deal between the MCA and tycoon Tiong Hiew King and the proposed merger of three media groups in Malaysia and Hong Kong, which media groups fear would harm competition at home and abroad.

Late 2006 also saw moves for the merger in the Malay print industry to consolidate the hold of Umno, through its partnership with Media Prima Bhd, over the plurality of expression.

The bright spot

A bright spot in the otherwise gloomy outlook on press freedom, however, comes from the thriving online media.

"Highly critical blogs by Malaysian standards, such as Screenshots and Sangkancil, online news sites like Malaysiakini, and media watchdogs such as Aliran and the Center for Independent Journalism have been able to operate since Abdullah took over as prime minister in 2003," said Freedom House.

Even these alternatives to the government's monopoly on information continue to be subject to repeated instances of harassment at the hands of authorities, said Freedom House, which cited the moves to impose restriction on the Internet to prevent bloggers from "disrupting social harmony".

Globally, press freedom suffered a general decline over 2006, said Freedom House in its press release, with particularly troubling trends evident in Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America.

"Press freedom is like the canary in the coal mine," said Freedom House's Executive Director Jennifer Windsor.

"Assaults on the media are inevitably followed by assaults on other democratic institutions. The fact that press freedom is in retreat is a deeply troubling sign that democracy itself will come under further assault in critical parts of the world."

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