

Malaysia's press freedom ranking in free fall
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Malaysia crashed into the bottom quarter of 173 countries in the worldwide press freedom ranking index released today by Paris-based watchdog Reporters sans Frontieres (RSF, Reporters Without Borders).

In the latest 2008 ranking, Malaysia fell eight spots to 132. Last year, it was placed 124th while in 2006, it was at 92.

Iceland, Luxembourg and Norway share the No 1 spot, with United Kingdom (23), Japan (29) and United States (36).

According to the index, Malaysia was placed fifth among 10 Southeast Asian countries after Timor-Leste (65), Indonesia (111), Thailand (124), Cambodia (126).

"In the face of mounting criticism, the government of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reacted with a crackdown," lamented RSF, referring to several incidences last year.

It said that the mainstream press made no attempt at balance remarks by the authorities attacking the organisers of two major demonstrations last year which were led by election reform movement Bersih and Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf).

"The Internal Security Ministry asked some media on three separate occasions in November not to report on unauthorised demonstrations.

"Thus a march on Nov 10 calling for free and transparent elections passed off without any coverage, apart from online, including by the daily Malaysiakini, which also revealed in June (2007) that the authorities had ordered radio and television not to allow too much airtime to the speeches of opposition leaders."

Umno-linked NST ticked off

RSF also ticked off Umno-linked New Straits Times for abruptly halting the columns by two independent-minded writers.

"Officially for technical reasons, the columns written by Zainah Anwar, promoting the rights of women, and another by Amir Muhammad disappeared within five days or one another.

"Zainah had headlined her last piece, 'Let's give freedom a good press'. Amir Muhammad, a respected film-maker and writer, had broken one of the country's taboos by rehabilitating communists who fought for independence in the 1940s.

"He posted on his blog the uncut versions of his articles, which were regularly re-written by the daily's management."

The press freedom watchdog also said that the management and former managers of NST sued bloggers Jeff Ooi and Ahiruddin Attan for "defamation", after they posted articles "demonstrating that some news and editorials in the daily lacked objectivity".

Bloggers threatened by ISA

RSF added the attacks against bloggers continued last year.

"Abdullah had called bloggers 'liars' while (last) July, (then) law minister, Nazri Abdul Aziz, said the government would not hesitate to resort to the Internal Security Act (ISA) to punish them."

Popular blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, who was eventually detained under ISA last month, was interrogated by the police in July last year after he posted criticism of the king.

"Nathaniel Tan, a blogger and member of the opposition PKR was held in custody for four days, apparently because of a link from his blog to a website hosting news termed as an 'official secret' relating to a corruption case implicating (then deputy) internal security minister, Johari Baharum."

The press freedom watchdog also cited two cases of journalists being threatened, one of whom was beaten up by unknown men.

Photo-journalist R Raman of the Tamil-language Malaysia Nanban was left in a coma after being assaulted by two thugs in his office in Johor Baru.

Meanwhile, his colleague, M Nagarajan, received a phone call threatening to kill him if he continued to write articles about poor conditions in the schools.

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