

Cracking Down on the Free Press: Growing Authoritarianism in Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam

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AHRD	ASEAN Human Rights Declaration
AICHR	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AP	Associated Press
APHR	ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DFAT	Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ID	Identification (national ID)
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
ITE	Electronic Information and Transactions (Law)
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (plus other identities)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NICA	National Intelligence Coordinating Agency
NPA	New People's Army
NTF-ELCAC	National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict
PCOO	Presidential Communications Operations Office
RSF	Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières)
SMNI	Sonshine Media Network International
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VOA	Voice of America

1. INTRODUCTION

Cracking Down on the Free Press: Growing Authoritarianism in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam presents evidence of the shrinking boundaries of press freedom in three Southeast Asian nations. In Indonesia, where democratic institutions nominally remain intact, successive administrations have intensified legal intimidation of journalists. In the Philippines –once home to one of the region’s freest media landscapes – red-tagging and online harassment have been normalised through legal coercion. And in Vietnam, a single-party State, surveillance and a penal code are used to strictly control public discourse and suppress dissent.

Despite their differing political systems, all three governments are actively working to restrict critical and constructive journalism. A clear and deliberate pattern has emerged: journalists are increasingly portrayed as adversaries, and public scrutiny is reframed as a threat to national security.

By analysing legislative changes, surveillance practices, media platform manipulation, and various modes of intimidation, this report outlines how press repression has become integral to each country’s political logic. Yet within these constraints, resistance persists. Civil society groups, legal aid networks, and transnational coalitions continue to push back against these encroachments on the freedom of speech. Their efforts, while often precarious, form a crucial institutional buffer against the monopolisation of truth.

This report catalogues violations of free expression to trace how restrictions on the press function as a governance strategy – shaping not only what can be said, but who is allowed to speak, and under what conditions. By examining both the mechanisms of control and the actors challenging them, it offers a grounded account of how information power is being contested in real time and where that struggle still holds ground.

2. INDONESIA



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2.1 Democratic Backsliding and Media Freedom

Indonesia is experiencing significant democratic backsliding, with media freedom increasingly under threat, and journalists and media services facing growing harassment, intimidation, and even violence. The existing constitutional protections for freedom of expression and freedom of the press are not effectively implemented, creating a dangerous gap between legal ideals and day-to-day reality for journalists and civil society. Legal tools such as digital laws and the Indonesian Criminal Code are being used to silence dissent and restrict investigative reporting, creating an atmosphere of intimidation across the sector (Hikam Hulwanullah, 2025).

Although former President Joko Widodo came to power with a reform agenda, his ten-year presidency, which has now ended, was marked by many broken promises. During his time in office, media ownership became more concentrated in the hands of powerful politically connected groups, which led to tighter control over critical media and greater manipulation of public information (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). The transition of power from President Joko Widodo to Prabowo Subianto, a figure with a military background and past human rights concerns, only deepens fears about the future of democracy in the country (Hikam Hulwanullah, 2025).

In this sense, the structural entanglement between media and political elites further undermines independent journalism and media freedom in Indonesia. Nearly all major television networks are owned by oligarchs with direct political ties, many of whom have held or currently hold positions in government. This close relationship has turned newsrooms into political battlegrounds where editorial independence is compromised, and the content is shaped to serve economic and political interests rather than to act as a check on power. The status quo is weakening public trust in journalism and limiting the diversity of viewpoints available to Indonesian citizens (Perry World House, 2025).

2.2 Defamation Laws and Suppression of Protest Coverage

Indonesia's national and international legal frameworks protect the right to press freedom through a series of mechanisms. In 2000, the Constitution was amended in order to reinforce democracy as a fundamental principle of governance. Articles 28E(2) and (3) respectively state, "Each person has the right to be free in his convictions, to assert his thoughts and tenets, in accordance with his conscience"; and "Each person has the right to freely associate, assemble, and express his opinions." Article 28F is also relevant, guaranteeing the right to communication and to acquiring information for the development of each individual's social environment, as well as to seek, obtain, possess, store, process, and spread information via all kinds of channels available (UNESCO, n.d.).

This principle aligns with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), guaranteeing the freedom of speech and expression without intimidation. Indonesia has also ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), further strengthening legal protections (Hikam Hulwanullah, 2025).

In addition to constitutional and international protection, Indonesia has domestic laws concerning press freedom. These have been increasingly used to suppress dissent and restrict the media, particularly through the application of defamation laws and the suppression of protest coverage. The 2008 Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law has been central to these developments, employed to prosecute individuals for defamation and criminalise online speech (Al Jazeera, 2022). It also criminalised distribution or access to information or documents "contrary to the moral norms of Indonesia", and has been used to arrest journalists carrying out legitimate reporting (Freedom House, 2025).

During the first nine
months of 2021, at
least

81
people

were charged with
violating the ITE Law
(Al Jazeera, 2022).

Although the ITE Law was revised on December 5th, 2023, the amendments do not comply with international human rights law and international standards on freedom of expression and information, failing to rectify the main flaws of its previous version. It retained vague provisions criminalising “contents that violate propriety”, incorporated a new provision imposing criminal liability for intentionally disseminating content that a person “knew contained false statements that cause public unrest”, and disregarded public feedback during its drafting (International Commission of Jurists, 2023).

Other Indonesian laws besides the ITE, including the 2022 Criminal Code, also do not meet international standards. In March 2024, the Constitutional Court found three provisions relating to defamation in the Criminal Code to be unconstitutional (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Another issue concerns the suppression of protest coverage. Indonesia’s domestic legislation recognises the right to peaceful assembly, while the police are authorised to disperse assemblies in certain cases, there are significant reports of disproportionate action towards protesters (The Right of Peaceful Assembly, 2021). Amnesty International reported that in 2024, at least 344 individuals were arrested during protests, with many facing physical harm and exposure to tear gas (AP News, 2025).

2.3 Surveillance, Harassment, and Intimidation of Journalists

The oligarchic media ownership and the judicial trend of repurposing protection laws to criminalise the media are becoming built-in mechanisms in Indonesian society. If the media cannot be guaranteed independence in order to provide objective and impartial accounts of reality, due to corruption in law enforcement, intelligence units, and the judicial system, it is evident that press freedom will be under grave threat. When it comes to law enforcement responses, when reporters investigate sensitive topics and end up threatened or even killed, police investigations are often slow or inconclusive, especially when it comes to the involvement of powerful people. This also happens with the intelligence services, as Indonesia’s security and military intelligence units have reportedly used spyware imported from Greece, Israel, and Malaysia between 2017 to 2023 to spy on dissidents (AP news, 2025).

All this contributes to the erosion of the rule of law and press freedom as one of its main pillars. A visible consequence of this backsliding has been a disturbing escalation in violence and intimidation directed at journalists. In 2023, 89 attacks were documented against journalists and media services, the highest number in a decade. These included physical assaults, digital harassment and legal threats (Alliance of Independent Journalists, 2024). In 2024 and 2025, renewed physical and digital attacks are confirming this trend.

01**Case Study 1: Assault of Rama Indra**

On March 24th, 2025, Rama Indra, a journalist for the online media outlet Beritajatim, was violently assaulted by police officers while filming the brutal arrest of a protester in Surabaya, a city in eastern Java (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

02**Case Study 2: Intimidation by Parcel Threats**

An unmarked package containing a severed pig's head was sent to the Tempo media office, followed by a headless rat carcass later that same week (The Guardian, 2025).

03**Case Study 3: Fatal Attack in North Sumatra**

In July 2024, a journalist and his family were killed when their home was destroyed in an arson attack, following his reporting on military links to illegal gambling in North Sumatra (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

These are just some of various examples. Foreign journalists visiting Papua face bureaucratic obstacles and deportation; internet blackouts during protests and self-censorship have inhibited press activity; journalists covering sensitive subjects, including LGBTQIA+ issues, organised crime, sexual assault and corruption, have faced harassment, violence and threats (Freedom House, 2025). Inevitably, all these incidents are fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship among Indonesian media professionals.

3. PHILIPPINES



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Following a decline in free press in the South-Pacific region, the Philippines was ranked 116th out of 180 countries by the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2025), and is a risky environment for journalism (Arao, 2024; Popioco, 2015). Yet, the media remains dynamic despite targeted attacks and harassment (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

3.1 Historical Context: Media, Democracy, and Power

During the colonisation of the Philippines, the press played a pivotal role in the nation's history. The newspaper *La Solidaridad* distributed in the country was crucial in emphasising the revolutionary sentiment against the colonisers. Under United States' (US) influence, the Manila Bulletin was founded in 1899 and still publishes to this day. It also symbolised the influence of media on politics and business after more and more Filipinos moved into pivotal positions within the company. After the country's independence in 1946, the media was crowned with "freest press in Asia" (Melencio, 2023; Neumann, n.d.).

Under the authoritarian leader Ferdinand Marcos between 1965 and 1986, the Philippines witnessed significant threats to its media, with great restrictions on the press. In

September 1972, the former president established a state of martial law because of “lawless elements” and “social disorder”. The military was promptly authorised to take over privately owned media outlets accused of involvement with the communist movement. During that time, propaganda circulated and spread information through Marcos’ network, leaving very little freedom for journalists (Antonio & Somera, 2023). However, the “mosquito press” played a significant role in informing, “becoming the source of information from the ground”, breaking through misinformation and exposing state-sponsored violence targeting journalists (Melencio, 2023).

[...] Deposed Pres. Ferdinand Marcos had known the power of the press all along that it was one of the weapons he wielded during the more than 20 years of his martial rule. Upon declaring on television martial law on 23 September 1972, two days after he officially signed Proclamation 1081 on 21 September political enemies, including the unfriendly press people to him, were all caught by surprise and put behind bars. There was a news blackout all over the country (Melencio, 2023).

The Philippines officially became a democracy with the adoption of the 1987 Constitution. Yet, Rodrigo Duterte’s six-year presidency, known as that of the ‘Punisher’, between 2016 to 2022 marked another important dip for free press in the country, as expressed in his inauguration speech, “Just because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you’re a son of a bitch” (RSF, 2025). His presidency was marked by widespread repression of the media, including violence against journalists, especially if they attempted to report on his “war on drugs”. During his fierce repression of the press, journalists were detained and some even lost their lives (RSF, 2025).

Since taking office in 2022, President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. has repeatedly pledged to protect press freedom (Antonio & Somera, 2023). While attacks have declined, structural risks remain (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). In comparison to 2024 where the country ranked 134th out of 180 countries by the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2025), it now ranks 116th (Reporters Without Borders, 2024-2025).

The press is still playing a pivotal role in the Philippines, pushing against restrictions. Yet, the rise of social media has also allowed for increased dissemination of misinformation and the establishment of troll farms, many of which are linked to political actors (Melencio, 2023). As reported by RSF, 45 percent of discussions about the elections originated from fake accounts and bots (RSF, 2025b).

3.2 Legal Restrictions: Libel, Red-Tagging, and Court Cases

Under Article 3 of the 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, the freedom is affirmed, “No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government

for redress of grievances” (The Republic of the Philippines, 1987). Various laws, such as the 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act, criminalised acts deemed “libellous” (The Republic of the Philippines, 2012). State control over public discourse persists (Cu, 2024), while journalists are subjected to fabricated criminal charges (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

In addition to legal measures, red-tagging has become a widely reported tactic used as a means to delegitimise critical voices and suppress opposition. Red-tagging refers to the labelling of individuals or groups, often without substantial evidence, as communists, insurgents, or sympathisers of armed rebel movements. Originally introduced in 1969 to counter the rise of communist organisations such as the New People’s Army (NPA), it has since developed into a broader strategy used against journalists, activists, and those who challenge government narratives (Human Rights Foundation, 2023).

A commonly cited case within this discourse is that of Maria Ressa, co-founder of Rappler and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Ressa was red-tagged on a programme broadcast by Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI), a media outlet said to have a pro-government stance. During the show, Lorraine Badoy, then spokesperson for the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), referred to Rappler as a “destroyer of the Philippines” and labelled Ressa an “enemy of the state” (Human Rights Foundation, 2023; Tuquero, 2022; Buan, 2022). Red-tagging has not only targeted prominent figures like Ressa, but has also been associated with broader patterns of harassment and violence. Between 2016 and 2022, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) recorded 32 red-tagging incidents and at least 23 journalist killings (Gupta, 2024; Human Rights Foundation, 2023).

3.3 Government Pressure, Disinformation, and Platform Control

Mainstream media ownership in the Philippines is increasingly concentrated with closer ties between media-owning families and political leaders (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). This consolidation contributes to control over the information presented to the public. Although internet and social media platforms offer space where independent outlets can operate, their economic viability remains uncertain (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Government pressure on the press in the Philippines manifests through legal and administrative measures that restrict the operations of independent media. These actions create a challenging environment for journalists seeking to report critically.

Disinformation and false news, especially through social media (RSF, 2025b; Melencio, 2023), further complicate the media landscape, undermining trust and making it difficult for the public to discern accurate information.

4. VIETNAM



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<https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/puesto-de-periodicos-matutino-29524294/>

4.1 State Media Dominance and Narrative Control

Vietnam’s media landscape remains firmly under state control, with all major outlets either government-owned or tightly regulated under the 2016 Press Law and its 2018 amendments. Article 4 of the Press Law explicitly mandates that the press act as both a “forum for the people” and the “mouthpiece of Party agencies” (Press Law No. 103/2016/QH13). Each week, propaganda officials meet with editors to enforce strict editorial compliance. Even content aligning with economic liberalisation has led to reprimands or shutdowns (ARTICLE 19, Vietnam: Freedom of Expression in Decline, 2023).

Independent voices have virtually disappeared. A recent report by The 88 Project – a non-profit organisation founded in 2012 that monitors and documents human rights developments in Vietnam, particularly in the areas of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly – noted that the number of press organisations has roughly halved, as financial penalties and legal reprisals have forced outlets to merge or close, leading to widespread self-censorship among remaining journalists. As one anonymous state journalist described it, newsrooms now “regurgitate carefully coordinated propaganda” that reinforces Party narratives (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Comparative Snapshot: Vietnam vs. the Philippines

Vietnam	Philippines
Ranked 174/180	Ranked 132/180
No independent national media; complete state control.	Independent outlets persist, but under legal siege.

(2024 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index)

While both governments apply pressure on dissenting journalism, Vietnam’s blanket censorship and control place it near the bottom of global rankings.

4.2 Internet Regulation: Restrictions on Online Speech

Vietnam’s authorities have progressively strengthened internet control through a patchwork of laws including the Cybersecurity Law, Press Law, Information Technology Law, and Telecommunications Law, enforced through a series of executive decrees, such as Decree 147 (Vietnam Ministry of Public Security, 2024). These legal measures compel platforms to store user data locally, cooperate with state-linked news agencies when amplifying content, and remove “illegal” posts – vaguely defined as those that endanger national security or “distort history” (ARTICLE 19, 2023a).

Did You Know?

Vietnam’s Cybersecurity Law (2019) mandates that global tech companies **store data locally and hand over user information** upon government request. This places it among **the most restrictive internet laws in Southeast Asia** - rivalling China’s Great Firewall in terms of state control.

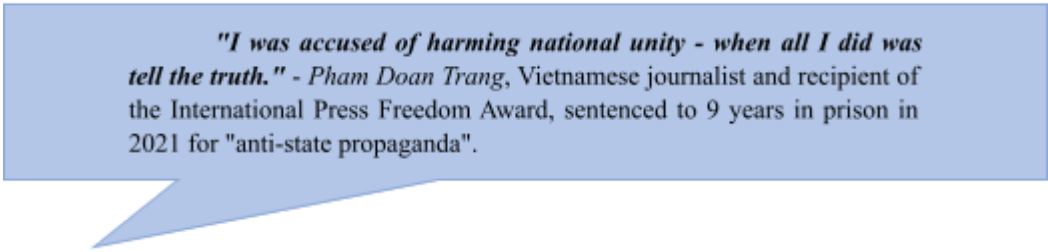
Decree 147, enacted in December 2024, further entrenches the regime’s online control: users must verify accounts via national ID; platforms must delete flagged posts within 24 hours; and citizen journalism about government corruption is explicitly banned (Vietnamese Government Gazette, 2024). As a result, over 2,300 Facebook posts were removed between July and December 2023. The 88 Project warns that this has created an “icy stranglehold on free speech”, turning a once-vibrant online sphere into a domain of self-censorship (The 88 Project, 2025). Meanwhile, messaging apps like Telegram have experienced intermittent blocks, as the government works to shut down dissident networks (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

4.3 Criminal Trials and the Silencing of Independent Journalists

Authorities have increasingly resorted to criminal prosecutions under broadly worded Penal Code provisions – Articles 109, 117 and 331 – to restrict journalistic freedom. Article 331, criminalising “abuse of democratic freedoms,” has become especially notorious. In a high-profile March 2025 case, independent journalist Huy Duc (also known as Truong Huy San) was jailed for 30 months on the basis of this article for Facebook commentary critical of the State (Reporters Without Borders, 27 February 2025; IFJ, 11 March 2025).

Similarly, lawyer and social commentator Trần Đình Triển was convicted in January 2025 and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment after posting public criticism of the former Chief Justice – again under Article 331 (AP News, 5 January 2025; Human Rights Watch, 7 January 2025). Human Rights Watch and The Project 88 argue that these trials are politically motivated, lacking fair-trial safeguards: pre-trial detention without legal counsel, denial of family visits, and closed courtroom sessions are routinely employed (Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2025; AP News, 5 January 2025).

These legal assaults are accompanied by other cases – such as that of blogger Ho Van Hai – where swift, one-day trials result in multi-year sentences under Article 88 for similar “anti-state propaganda” charges. Reports from Human Rights Watch and advocacy groups highlight that many journalists and activists have been detained or exiled in recent years, further silencing critical reporting and forcing survivors into self-censorship (Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2025; Reporters Without Borders, 27 February 2025).



"I was accused of harming national unity - when all I did was tell the truth." - Pham Doan Trang, Vietnamese journalist and recipient of the International Press Freedom Award, sentenced to 9 years in prison in 2021 for "anti-state propaganda".

Independent journalism in Vietnam is effectively paralysed. State-controlled media saturates the public discourse with Party doctrine while independent outlets and digital platforms face legal, technical, and physical suppression. Decrees and laws foster a climate of fear, turning commentary and journalism into potential criminal acts, especially under Articles 117 and 331. Trials are marred by due-process violations, reinforcing the narrowing of civic space.

5. TOOLS AND METHODS OF REPRESSION



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Across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, governments have increasingly employed a range of legal, technological, and psychological tools to suppress independent journalism and control the flow of information (Sinpeng, 2020). While each country has distinct political and historical contexts, their methods of repression share striking similarities—leveraging national security laws, digital censorship, content takedowns, and state-sponsored propaganda to stifle dissent and consolidate power (Sinpeng, 2020). These tactics not only erode press freedom but also reshape public discourse, ensuring that critical voices are marginalised while state narratives dominate.

5.1 National Security Legislation and Digital Censorship

National security legislation, often framed as necessary for stability, is increasingly repurposed to criminalise journalism and dissent. Such laws typically employ vague terminology like “fake news”, “trolling”, or “hate speech” to create legal grounds for silencing critics (Horder, 2021). Digital censorship, meanwhile, operates through both overt blocking and covert surveillance, enabled by collaborations between governments and tech corporations (Funk et al., 2024). These tactics reflect a shift toward networked authoritarianism, where regimes combine traditional coercion with digital controls to maintain power.

Indonesia

Indonesia's democratic backsliding has been facilitated by the misuse of laws ostensibly designed to maintain public order. As introduced in the previous chapter, the ITE Law (enacted in 2008 and revised in 2016) has become a primary tool for criminalising online dissent. Under its broad provisions, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens face prosecution for defamation, spreading false information, or inciting unrest (Al Jazeera, 2022).

High-profile cases, such as the arrest of journalists reporting on corruption, demonstrate how the law is wielded to intimidate critics (Alliance of Independent Journalists, 2024). Additionally, the government has expanded surveillance capabilities, requiring internet service providers to comply with data retention policies and allowing authorities to monitor digital communications under the guise of combating extremism (Paterson, 2019). This power is manifested in Article 40 of the amended ITE Law, which stipulates the obligation of internet service providers to comply with the orders of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, known as *Kominfo* (Paterson, 2019).

The Philippines

In the Philippines, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 has provided the state with sweeping powers to suppress critical voices. The law's vague definition of terrorism enables the government to label journalists, human rights advocates, and opposition figures as threats to national security (Ratcliffe, 2020). This ambiguous definition has enabled authorities to detain individuals for extended periods without formal charges or due process. Section 29 of the Act authorises the apprehension and initial 14-day detention of terror suspects, extendable up to 24 days, without requiring formal charges. High-profile raids on outlets like Rappler and the arrest of journalists under dubious charges, illustrate how counterterrorism laws are weaponised for political ends (Simon et al., 2023).

Complementing its legal arsenal, the Philippine government has also been accused of cyber surveillance against media workers, further chilling investigative journalism. The National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA), in collaboration with the NTF-ELCAC, has allegedly carried out monitoring operations, intimidation tactics, and suppression efforts against legally operating activists and civil society organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2025). These groups are often falsely labelled as fronts for or affiliates of the New People's Army—the Communist Party of the Philippines' armed faction—as a justification for harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Vietnam

Vietnam's authoritarian regime maintains one of the most restrictive digital environments in Southeast Asia, enforced through a web of laws like the Cybersecurity Law of 2018 and Decree 72. These regulations compel social media companies to store user data locally and remove content deemed “anti-state” upon request. During the reporting period in 2023, Zing News faced two separate fines in June and July totalling 423 million dong (\$17,400) combined, for reportedly publishing news content beyond its officially approved mandate (Freedom House, 2024).

The Vietnamese government maintains an extensive surveillance apparatus, including the notorious “Force 47” of cyber monitors that systematically tracks online discourse. This monitoring system enables authorities to prosecute even privately expressed dissent using national security laws (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). In addition to this military-affiliated unit, the state has established Task Force 35—a separate entity specifically designed to combat perceived anti-government propaganda. This task force draws its personnel from various sources, including state workers, pro-regime political organisations, and civilian collaborators spanning all socio-economic backgrounds (Freedom House, 2024).

5.2 Content Takedowns and Platform Control

Content removal and platform manipulation are hallmarks of information control regimes, where states co-opt or coerce digital intermediaries to curate online discourse. Theories of platform governance highlight how governments exploit private companies' profit motives to enforce censorship, often through opaque “voluntary” agreements (Gorwa, 2024). Meanwhile, networked disinformation models show how states flood platforms with propaganda to drown out dissent (Gorwa, 2024).

Indonesia

Indonesian authorities have increasingly pressured social media platforms to remove content deemed threatening to social harmony or national stability. While some takedown requests target legitimate threats, like extremist propaganda, many are politically motivated. Investigations into government corruption, reports on police brutality, and even satirical memes mocking public officials have been flagged for removal. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, often comply to maintain access to Indonesia's vast digital market, leaving journalists and activists vulnerable to arbitrary censorship (Rahman et al., 2022). The government has also floated the idea of a national firewall, akin to China's Great Firewall, which would further centralised control over online discourse (Ro'is, 2023).

The Philippines

Under both the Duterte and Marcos administrations, the Philippine government has weaponised platform policies to silence critics. Government agencies routinely report accounts of independent media and activists for “violation community guidelines”, leading to suspensions or outright bans (Amnesty International, 2024). Facebook, the country’s dominant social media platform, has faced criticism for acquiescing to government pressure, including the removal of pages exposing extrajudicial killings during Duterte’s drug war (Amnesty International, 2024). Meanwhile, pro-government troll farms operate with impunity, flooding social media with disinformation while legitimate reporting faces suppression.

Vietnam

Vietnam’s approach to platform control is among the most aggressive in the region. Global tech companies, including Facebook and YouTube, comply with over 90 percent of government removal requests, erasing content critical of the Communist Party (Amnesty International, 2020). Independent media outlets like Radio Free Asia and Voice of Vietnam are routinely blocked, while domestic alternatives like Lotus Social Network operate under strict state oversight (Freedom House, 2024). The government has also invested heavily in artificial intelligence-driven censorship tools, automatically flagging and removing dissident keywords, images, and videos before they gain traction (VOA News, 2023). This system ensures that only state-sanctioned narratives dominate the digital space.

5.3 Propaganda, Disinformation, and State Messaging

Contemporary authoritarian regimes have refined information control into a sophisticated strategy, combining traditional propaganda with digital-age disinformation to manipulate public perception while silencing dissent. This modern approach operates through the systematic framing of dissent as a threat to stability, flooding media ecosystems with state-approved narratives that overwhelm independent voices, and disseminating manipulated or fabricated content to distort reality (Kalathil, 2020). Digital tools have exponentially amplified these tactics, enabling governments to deploy troll armies, fake accounts, and algorithmic manipulation that create artificial consensus and harass critics—a practice known as “computational propaganda” (Woolley & Howard, 2018). By saturating public discourse with manufactured content and conflating criticism with national betrayal, these regimes erode press freedom not through brute force alone, but by reshaping the very terrain of factual debate.

Indonesia

While Indonesia's media landscape remains relatively diverse compared to its neighbours, state propaganda and disinformation have grown more sophisticated. Government-aligned media outlets frequently amplify narratives that frame critics as destabilising forces, exploiting religious and ethnic divisions to deflect scrutiny. During elections or periods of social unrest, coordinated disinformation campaigns target opposition figures, often with the tacit approval of officials (Saraswati et al., 2020). The military and police have also been linked to troll networks that harass journalists, creating an environment where independent reporting is met with both legal and online retaliation (Saraswati et al., 2020).

The Philippines

The Philippines has become a hotspot for state-backed disinformation, with pro-government influencers and troll armies manipulating public opinion. The Marcos family's rehabilitation, for instance, was heavily supported by online networks spreading historical revisionism to whitewash allegations of corruption and human rights abuses (Carranza, 2022; VOA News, 2022). Government communication offices, such as the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO), have been accused of bankrolling fake news outlets that attack critics while glorifying officials (PCOO, 2021). This ecosystem not only drowns out independent journalism but also fosters a polarised information environment where truth becomes increasingly subjective.

Vietnam

Vietnam's Communist Party maintains one of the world's most regimented propaganda systems, where state-controlled media and a vast network of cyber monitors work simultaneously to enforce ideological conformity. The government actively promotes narratives of national unity and economic progress while labelling dissent as "anti-party" or "reactionary"—a framing tactic designed to equate criticism with treason (BBC News, 2024). Online, thousands of party-aligned commentators, dubbed "online opinion shapers", flood social media with pro-government messaging, drowning out independent voices in what scholars term "information flooding" (Kumar, 2021). These online opinion shapers are indeed part of the Force 47 or associated parties (Kumar, 2021). The result is a meticulously curated information ecosystem where dissent is not just suppressed but rendered invisible, and where citizens, bombarded by state-sanctioned narratives, increasingly internalise the regime's dogma as truth.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS



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Across Southeast Asia, journalists are constrained in their ability to broadcast openly as it usually entails an adverse response from states. In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, media operations are shaped by a complex mix of legal regulations, policies, and political contexts. Even though their respective governments attempt to uphold press freedom with their regulations, the reality is harsh for many members of the press. They are often confronted with roadblocks and endanger themselves for the sake of upholding the truth (Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2024).

6.1 Constitutional Guarantees vs. Reality

Indonesia

In Indonesia's 1945 Constitution, free speech is protected by Article 28E, which elaborates on people's freedom to express their thoughts, whether spoken or written, and to establish coalitions. Moreover, Article 28F entitles any person to acquire, disseminate, and store information through any kind of channel available (Aqsa, 2020, p. 5).

From 2018 to 2021, Indonesia's Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) revealed that the police were the leading offenders in press attacks. Journalists covering protests have been susceptible to physical assaults by police officers, coercing them to stop filming and

delete their footage. On top of that, there are reported incidents of psychological terror as a tactic to discourage the press. For instance, in 2024, a number of journalists were sent a parcel that contained decapitated heads of pigs, and later on, dead rats (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025; Mariani, 2025).

Philippines

The freedom of the press is part of the broader rights of Filipino citizens to free speech and expression, and peaceful gatherings. This rights cannot be fully enjoyed if the views and opinions of the media are suppressed. According to Section 4, Article III of the 1987 Constitution, which is under the Bill of Rights, no law should be passed that would take away people's freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, petitioning the government to address their problems, and publishing news or opinions (Ubac, 2024).

On the other hand, the government has taken advantage of influencers and trolls to instigate distrust of the traditional press and disinformation. At the same time, media workers are continuously attacked, killed, threatened, and under surveillance. Among the common charges against them are cyber-libel, illegal possession of firearms, libel, and terrorist financing (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2024; International Federation of Journalists, 2024).

Vietnam

Article 10 of the 1947 Constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of association, expression, press, and speech of Vietnamese citizens. In the same light, Article 25 of the 2013 Constitution guarantees these civil liberties (VOV World, 2020). However, referring to the Criminal Code, Articles 117 and 331 are dubbed by international human rights defenders as instruments to curtail opposing opinions. Article 117 penalises the creation, distribution, and storage of information or materials to be used against the State. Whereas, Article 331 punishes any abuse of democracy that undermines national interests and rights (Radio Free Asia Vietnamese, 2024a).

Despite the regulations that are supposedly meant to assert the rights of the people, reality is far different, with authorities utilising the security of the nation and anti-slander clauses to limit the press. Independent journalists are ceaselessly obstructed in their freedom to move and are exposed to different kinds of harassment and attacks whenever they divulge sensitive matters. Apart from that, they are being closely monitored and threatened with having their credentials revoked if they do not instil self-censorship (Voice of America, 2024). With the widespread use of the internet, the government has also resorted to strict policing of the online network and filtering digital information (Bemma, 2020).

Constitutional guarantees for free speech and the press are established in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. In the face of legal safeguards, journalists have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, and physical assaults. National security is also increasingly being used to vindicate the legal charges and the stifling of media workers.

6.2 Media Laws, Licensing, and Regulatory Controls

Indonesia

In 2024, the draft of the proposed revisions to the Broadcasting Law was leaked, causing public concern. If approved, the amendment would prohibit the “exclusive broadcast of investigative journalism.” This is problematic as investigative reporting is a key aspect of journalism, and under this new bill, it is loosely conceptualised. Thereby, the intended target of the ban and its aftermath on regular reporting remain unclear (Souisa, 2024). Another draft Law on the National Police risks press freedom as it could enlarge the authority of the police without taking into account issues about their accountability and professional compliance. Alluding to national security, the police can disrupt internet access and are allowed to wiretap (AJI, 2024).

On the contrary, a positive turn has been made by the Constitutional Court in 2025, as it approved a petition to prevent the government or a company from filing defamation cases in the event that they receive admonishments. It was made evident that only persons can forward defamation complaints, pushing ahead (The Straits Times, 2025).

Philippines

Under former President Duterte’s administration, the Anti-Terrorism Act was put in place in 2020, which was highly criticised for being vague. The unclear definitions of its provisions and the notion of terrorism unnerved citizens because it enables the government to designate any person or group as terrorists, even with insufficient proof. Hence, the law constitutes a threat to human rights as it could be misused to stifle diverging voices, which can make media practitioners particularly vulnerable (Human Rights Foundation, 2023).

Since the state has the regulatory power to allocate broadcasting frequencies, companies are required to obtain a franchise through legislation that can be granted by Congress. This has been abused by former President Duterte for personal reasons as he has been vocal on several occasions in blocking the franchise renewal of ABS-CBN, the biggest player in the country’s media industry, which resulted in their shutdown (Reyes, 2020). Due to hefty financial expenses owing to airtime fees, license fees, and satellite costs, CNN Philippines also closed its doors after nine years of service, further shrinking media coverage in the country (Cordero, 2024).

Vietnam

The law dictates that only the state and its auxiliary entities are allowed to have ownership of media agencies. Accordingly, the ruling Communist Party orders that outlets act as the mouthpiece of the organisation and its organs. The department responsible for the Party’s central propaganda conducts a weekly meeting in Hanoi to ensure that the outlets do not publish anything unfavourable (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

In cyberspace, the government formed a dedicated cyber enforcement unit called Force 47, operated by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). They can hack websites that oppose the government and crack down on online content across social media platforms that is deemed to condemn state actions (Bemma, 2020). The Controversial Decree 147 was also ratified in 2024, and it is an internet law that expands the power of the government to control internet providers and their users. In the name of state interest and security, authorities will be able to gain access to online information, necessitating social media channels to store and share data with the government when obligated. Many conveyed their disapproval as this new law serves as another medium for the government to silence anti-state sentiments from the press and the public alike (Deutsche Welle, 2024).

It is conspicuous how recent legal and regulatory developments present challenges to the freedom of the press in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. These new regulations expand police authority while maintaining vague definitions of offences.. The combination of these two is dangerous to media personnel, as they can lead to censorship and expose them to legal constraints. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed on media licensees and ownership diminish the independence and the credibility of journalists, influencing bias in reporting.

6.3 Implementation Challenges and Selective Enforcement

Indonesia

The media is strained by impediments when accessing information, since they are typically oriented by people in power to only report on topics they consider appropriate (Uli, 2025). In line with this, newsrooms exercise self-censorship from pressure exerted by government institutions to change any articles that might damage their image. Likewise, some media executives make a conscious decision to keep good ties with persons of influence (AJI, 2024).

It has become a common occurrence for the police to confiscate or destroy the gadgets used by journalists when covering public protests, even if the journalists present proper documentation as members of the press (Wahid, 2024). This prevalent predicament is brought about by negligible oversight of police misconduct without proper supervision and application of legal measures for their committed violations (AJI, 2024).

Philippines

There is a strong call for the government to support the constitutional rights of the people and for national laws to harmonise with international legal standards. Journalists who have lost their lives or have been oppressed due to their line of work are most of the time not granted justice because of slow judicial proceedings. As such, there are still many unresolved cases relating to the homicide of countless media personnel since 1986 (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2025).

Moreover, institutionalised red-tagging or the act of labelling an individual or an entity as associated with communist groups, makes them targets of security forces, and subject them to arbitrary arrests. This kind of stereotyping is very harmful to victims as it could further violate their human rights (Ki, 2021). On this account, numerous activists, ethnic groups, and journalists have been red-tagged, leading to their harassment and murder. As previously mentioned, one such individual of prominence is Maria Ressa, a journalist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 (Human Rights Foundation, 2023).

Vietnam

While the constitution instils the public's human rights, it is visible that other laws, such as the penal code and the cybersecurity regulations, are in conflict with fortifying the free press. Rules that impose limits on the freedom of speech are employed by authorities to punish journalists who speak ill of the state. Moreover, topics like corruption of officials, human rights, political criticisms, and the relationship with China are usually redacted (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Enforcers commonly cite vague offenses to justify their arrest of press correspondents, which include the execution of activities that can harm the country, the orchestration of state propaganda, and public disorder (Nguyen, 2023). Consequently, convicted journalists are given harsh sentences with imprisonment that go beyond ten years, followed by house arrests (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). They also suffer from poor jail conditions as they are denied adequate medical services and drugs, leading to the deterioration of health for some of the convicts (Radio Free Asia Vietnamese, 2024b).

Irrespective of the laws that are supposed to secure press freedom, their implementation is flawed. This failure can be attributed to several factors, including the control of media by powerful and influential individuals, the existence of contradictory regulations that undermine journalistic independence, and the tendency of the state to associate the members of the press with radicalism.

7. JOURNALIST SAFETY AND PROTECTIONS



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7.1 Threat Patterns: Harassment, Violence, and Intimidation

In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (2025-a), the Philippines ranked 116th, Indonesia ranked 127th, and Vietnam ranked 173rd out of the 180 countries surveyed. It is evident that harassment and violence against journalists persist in these three countries, posing ongoing challenges to the integrity of journalism and free speech.

Indonesia

Attacks and intimidation of journalists in Indonesia have alarmed both national and international communities, with the AJI documenting 38 cases of violence against journalists in its 2025 report (Uli, 2025). Recently, Tempo, a prominent national news magazine, has endured numerous intimidation and harassment attacks, including distributed denial of service (DDoS) incidents on its website (Lamb, 2025). A mutilated pig's head and decapitated rats were also sent to Tempo's office in Jakarta, and the packages were addressed to investigative journalist Francisca Christy Rosana. Aside from the packages, Rosana herself was doxed, and a relative was harassed and received threatening phone calls (Lamb, 2025).

These patterns of harassment against journalists are not unusual. According to the Deputy Editor in Chief of Tempo, “Bombs, doxing, hijacking of phone numbers. We have had so many threats in the past. But now it’s very physical. For the first time animals and organs have been used as messengers ... It’s very scary” (Lamb, 2025). The Committee to Protect Journalists and the AJI have condemned these attacks and have called it as a “dangerous and deliberate act of intimidation” resulting in news agencies engaging in self-censorship due to the pervasive fear of potential threats (Lamb, 2025).

Philippines

Similar to Indonesia, state-sanctioned threats and violence against Philippine journalists are also evident. Since 1986, around 147 journalists have been murdered in the Philippines (Reporters Without Borders, 2025-b). From 2022 to 2025, there have been 184 recorded attacks against media workers, with five cases of killings, 86 cases of intimidation, 33 cases of assault and harassment, and 18 cases of cyberattacks (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2025). Of these cases, it was found that 42 percent of the perpetrators were mainly state actors such as the military/police and local/national governments, while 32 percent of the cases were caused by private individuals.

In 2022, Percy Lapid, a long-standing Philippine journalist of 35 years and who often talked about corruption in the government, was shot dead one evening on his way to record a radio show. His death sparked outrage in the media sector and heightened the urgency to call on the government to combat attacks against media workers in the country (Ratcliffe, 2022).

Another threat to press freedom occurred with the arrest of journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio in 2020 on the grounds of terrorist financing. Ms. Cumpio used to cover reports of police and military abuse in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines. She remains in detention as her case is unresolved and still undergoing trial (Reporters Without Borders, 2025-b).

Vietnam

Compared to Indonesia and the Philippines, the Vietnamese government imposes a tighter control over media publications. While the 2013 Constitution of Vietnam enshrines press freedom as a fundamental right, the right is significantly restricted in practice (DFAT, 2025). Similar to Indonesia and the Philippines, journalists in Vietnam also face arbitrary arrest and prosecution under the country’s Criminal Code on the grounds of anti-state propaganda (DFAT, 2025). Independent journalists who write on critical and sensitive issues often face violence and harassment from security officials, including journalist Pham Doan Trang, who was beaten up by officers with their motorcycle helmets, where she suffered a concussion (US State Government, 2025).

7.2 Legal Aid, Support Networks, and Protection Mechanisms

A prevalent pattern among the three countries is the lack of robust protection mechanisms provided in the laws and by the government to protect journalists. In fact, it is the state organs or the government officials themselves who are the main perpetrators of violence against journalists. Consequently, legal aid and support networks are predominantly advocated by civil society organisations.

Indonesia

On paper, Indonesia appears to uphold press freedom through its ratification of the ICCPR and the protection afforded under its 1945 Constitution, which enshrines freedom of expression as a fundamental right. However, in reality, there are still hundreds of threats and violence against journalists and censorship in the media, which makes the right to freedom of expression illusory.

In a recent interview, Wahyu Dhyatmika (2025), the CEO of Tempo Digital, expressed his views on the reason for the decline in press freedom in Indonesia:

Why is there more violence against journalists? Because there is less commitment from the media owners or the media companies to protect their journalists. They tend to pursue a more informal solution, like trying to reconcile the case by demanding an apology instead of getting the case to court. So there is no legal mechanism to make sure that this never happens again.

So I think there is a correlation between the lack of independent media in Indonesia and the decline of press freedom. And the lack of independent media in Indonesia is caused by the business model crisis, the media's dependency on one revenue stream, which is the government.

Indonesia's legal protection mechanisms for journalists are inadequate, leading to a decline in press freedom. Consequently, independent groups and civil society organisations, such as the AJI, have been providing support networks and aid through research initiatives to advocate for freedom of expression.

Philippines

Given the rise of cyber-libel charges against journalists, civil society groups and non-governmental organisations have taken action to protect free speech and support journalists' rights. The NUJP launched the Media Legal Defense Network (MLDN) in the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication in Diliman, Quezon City to help journalists who face legal problems (Marzan & Angelo, 2025). This initiative is supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) and human rights lawyers from different universities who offer their services for legal assistance and case consultations. It is the NUJP's belief that journalism and democracy must be upheld, and a collaboration with lawyers and other human rights advocates is necessary to defend free speech (Marzan & Angelo, 2025).

Vietnam

Vietnam continues to pose significant challenges for journalists. Hence, human rights organisations remain actively engaged in providing legal aid and support networks for journalists. On May 6th, 2025, during Vietnam's Human Rights Day, PEN America (2025), along with the Committee to Protect Journalists, Legal Initiative for Vietnam, PEN International, Reporters Without Borders, Vietnamese Abroad PEN Centre, and Vietnamese Advocates for Change, sent a letter to the US Secretary of State to solicit assistance to Vietnamese journalists and to advocate for funding to support Vietnam's independent media outlets. Furthermore, the letter urged the US to facilitate discussions with the Vietnamese government to release currently detained journalists and to end the harassment, threats, and intimidation faced by media writers (PEN America, 2025).

7.3 Obstacles to Justice and Institutional Inaction

Indonesia

According to the AJI (2025), there are internal and external threats to press freedom. Externally, media outlets are prevented from having editorial independence from the government due to their affiliations with politicians and the financial support they receive from local governments. In addition, the rise of political oligarchs who control ownership of most national media companies has influenced the narrative in the media, skewing towards politicians' interests while stifling dissenting opinions and limiting press independence (Dewi, 2025). Internally, journalists subject themselves to editorial self-censorship due to the ongoing fear of violence and threats faced by media personalities.

Moreover, achieving justice for journalists who face violence and harassment presents significant challenges when the government itself is the perpetrator of such acts. In 2024, perpetrators of attacks against journalists were identified from various sources, including the police (19 cases), the military (11 cases), mass organizations (11 cases), government officials (four cases), and legislative officials (two cases), among others (Alliance of Independent Journalists, 2025). Despite numerous cases of attacks against journalists being reported to the police, there is often limited progress in the legal resolution of these cases, leaving them unresolved.

Philippines

While it has been noted that there were fewer journalists killed under the current regime of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as compared to former President Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, the country remains a hostile environment for journalists. Red-tagging or the "labelling individuals or organisations as communist sympathizers or terrorists without substantial evidence" among journalists remains a persistent threat (Gupta, 2024). The government's basis for red-tagging is rooted in the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which punishes acts of terrorism.

In 2018, during President Duterte's regime, the NTF-ELCAC was established to combat local insurgents and defeat terrorist groups in the country. However, critics have argued that this Task Force was created to further legitimise red-tagging among journalists, and that the vague term of 'terrorism' under the law poses a risk to target individuals and organisations who are critical or express their opinions against the government (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2025).

Several organisations, such as the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (2025), have urged relevant institutions to take necessary steps to preserve a free press in the country, such as strengthening prosecution mechanisms for press freedom violations, protecting journalists under threat, penalising red-tagging, and promoting government accountability.

Vietnam

Aside from traditional newspapers and magazine publications, online and social media platforms are also heavily regulated by the Vietnamese government. The government's imposition of strict rules on social media has further resulted in the decline of free speech. For instance, journalist Truong Huy San was sentenced last February 2025 to 30 months in prison due to several Facebook posts which were found by the People's Court of Hanoi to be inimical to state interests (The Vietnamese Magazine, 2025).

Significant obstacles to justice remain due to Vietnam's repressive and ambiguous laws. The 2018 Law on Cybersecurity requires tech companies, such as Facebook and Google, to remove any unlawful or false information that violates national security or spreads dissent against the government. However, the law is vague and its interpretation gives the government wide discretion to determine what is considered false or unlawful information (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025). Furthermore, the government has severely restricted media access and ordered the blocking of websites that disseminate information critical of the Communist Party or provide content on politics and human rights (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Given the stringent control exerted by the government over the media landscape, securing justice for journalists who were imprisoned for expressing their independent views remains a formidable challenge.

8. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES



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8.1 Press Freedom Under Threat: National Security Narratives and Cross-border Repression

In Southeast Asia, freedom of speech has been contentious between government leaders and their people because collective harmony is more valued (De Leon, 2024). In recent years, the restriction of freedom of the press in Southeast Asia has been a growing trend of human rights abuses, ranging from prosecution, intimidation, to forced disappearance (De Leon, 2024). According to the World Press Freedom Index in 2024, every country in Southeast Asia, except Timor-Leste, is ranked below 90 out of 180 countries. Only Timor-Leste remained in the top half because the country has not jailed a single journalist since its independence. In contrast, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam have been placed near the bottom due to the increasing crackdown on reporters who threaten the status quo (De Leon, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

The key justification, reflected regionally, is concerns relating to national security, creating harmful environments for the press to operate. This section will highlight this trend, which occurs in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The cases of two journalists from

Vietnam will also be highlighted as a cross-border repression of journalists who are under threat of forced disappearance and detention (De Leon, 2024; AJR Contributor, 2024).

Regional trend: National security concerns as justification of press freedom suppression

Under Rodrigo Duterte's administration in the Philippines, the government cited national security concerns as a primary reason for restricting freedom of expression, particularly among journalists. For example, the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) enacted during Duterte's presidency allows the Philippine government to exploit terrorist threats as a justification for restricting freedom of speech and prosecuting government critics and activists. Many local journalists have been charged based on the ATA, which imposes 12 years of maximum imprisonment. Duterte's government accused political opponents without evidence of terrorist involvement and proceeded to arrest and conduct extrajudicial killings by vigilante groups (De Leon, 2024).

This trend is mirrored in Indonesia, where legislation has likewise been weaponised to restrict media independence. Several bills grant draconian power to the government to silence political dissent and opposition (CIVICUS, 2024). The Anti-Terrorism and National Security Law, Army Bill, Broadcast Bill, and Police Bill, for example, consist of restriction of freedom of expression both offline and online. The Law on Mass Organisations also allows Indonesian authorities to strip the legal status of civil society organisations if they are regarded as a threat to national unity or the *Pancasila* ideology (CIVICUS, 2024).

In Vietnam, the restriction of press freedom through the national security narrative is also emphasised. This trend has now penetrated into Vietnam's cyberspace after the country enacted the Cybersecurity Law in 2018. Many human rights defenders feared that this law might become a political tool to "suppress freedom of speech rather than to protect national security" (RFA Vietnamese, 2024). The law restricts the opposition to the state, the distribution of false information, and the violation of national security. Any offenders will be fined and prosecuted for spreading propaganda against the Vietnamese government (RFA Vietnamese, 2024).

Cross-border repression: The cases of Vietnamese journalists in Thailand

There are two cases of Vietnamese journalists who disappeared in Thailand and were later found in state custody. Trương Duy Nhất was a Vietnamese journalist working for Radio Free Asia (AJR Contributor, 2024). In 2014, he was imprisoned for two years after exposing the Vietnamese Communist Party leaders on the internet. In 2019, he managed to flee to Thailand but disappeared while seeking refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangkok in 2019. Eventually, he was found captive in police custody in Hanoi and sentenced to ten years in prison in 2020 (AJR Contributor, 2024).

Đường Văn Thái was another Vietnamese journalist and a member of the Independent Journalist Association of Vietnam. He also fled Vietnam to Thailand as he was under threat

after exposing government corruption. He faced the same pattern as Truong (AJR Contributor, 2024). While he was waiting for the third-country resettlement assistance of the United Nations, he disappeared in 2023 and later found to have been taken back to Vietnam. These cases demonstrate examples of the lack of safety for journalists across Southeast Asia. Even though they managed to escape their home countries and sought a safe haven in a neighbouring country, their safety was not guaranteed (AJR Contributor, 2024).

8.2 ASEAN's Stance and Regional Diplomacy

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) stipulates the importance of freedom of speech as a part of human rights in many of its legal frameworks, including the ASEAN Charter (2008) that emphasises Member States' commitment to protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in Article 1.7 (ASEAN, 2008). The 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) is another framework that provides the right to freedom of expression without interference with individual autonomy through Article 23 (AHRD, 2012). While the AHRD adopted several standards from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), this legal framework remains a non-binding mechanism (Barron, 2021). Unlike the UDHR, Article 8 of the AHRD allows ASEAN Member States to justify media censorship on the grounds of national security and public order as highlighted in the previous section (Barron, 2021).

In terms of an institution, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) is in charge of fostering regional diplomacy on human rights, including freedom of the press (AICHR, 2023). Recently, the AICHR regional consultation was organised in Jakarta, Indonesia, on December 1st and 2nd, 2023, where participants discussed freedom of opinion and expression. However, the consultation mainly focused on the challenges and practices on how Member States address hate speech, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation (AICHR, 2023).

The recent meetings of the ASEAN Digital Ministers in September 2023 also concentrated on combating fake news and promoting digital literacy by issuing the Guideline on Management of Government Information in Combatting Fake News and Disinformation in the Media Mechanisms on Disinformation in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2023). Anti-fake news issues are often used to justify state control of information rather than promoting media freedom (De Leon, 2024).

As mentioned in the previous section, Southeast Asian countries prioritise national security and collective harmony over freedom of speech (De Leon, 2024). Overall, ASEAN currently lacks a coherent, enforceable policy framework for protecting freedom of the press. Instead, ASEAN pursues the principle of non-interference in each member's internal affairs, which allows its members to individually take action on press freedom (Suzuki, 2019). The AICHR is also a toothless body that has no enforcement power, cannot investigate violations, and rarely addresses press freedom directly (Hara, 2019).

8.3 Role of Non-Organisations (NGOs) and International Watchdogs

Civil society and journalists in Southeast Asia have tried to fill the gap that ASEAN lacks through cross-border coalitions. The notable example of the recent NGOs' roles in promoting freedom of the press is the collaboration between the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on May 2nd, 2025, or the World Press Freedom Day. The CPJ and APHR jointly called for urgent action to safeguard press freedom and protect journalists across Southeast Asia (CPJ, 2025).

Both organisations highlighted the escalation of governments' attempts to control narratives in their favour, the intimidation of reporters, and the manipulation of technologies against the press. Until December 1st, 2024, at least 52 journalists were imprisoned (CPJ, 2025). Specifically, they noted that the Philippines is among the countries that do not hold offenders accountable for the murders of reporters and does not protect journalists from judicial harassment, digital attacks, and threats of imprisonment under cyber-libel laws (APHR & CPJ, 2025). In Indonesia, for example, independent news organisations such as Tempo have been under pressure for exposing corruption and abuses (APHR & CPJ, 2025). Meanwhile in Vietnam, media independence is threatened with the criminalisation of fake news, defamation, and vaguely defined threats to national security (APHR & CPJ, 2025).

The APHR and CPJ urged governments across ASEAN to consider journalists in a more positive light as significant actors in democratic society instead of a threat to national security. Arlene Brosas, APHR Board Member and Member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, stressed that “journalism is not a crime. It is a civic duty. A silenced press does not ensure stability—it ensures impunity. When journalism dies, democracy follows. We must not allow that silence to define Southeast Asia's future” (APHR & CPJ, 2025).

On this occasion, the joint statement between the APHR and CPJ called for the following actions from ASEAN Member States (APHR & CPJ, 2025):

- Forming an alliance across Southeast Asian parliaments to ensure press freedom is upheld and to prevent the misuse of legal and technological means against journalists,
- Strengthening protection mechanisms for staff in news media industry as well as whistleblowers who are threatened,
- Considering the reform of repressive legislation that penalises journalists by providing sweep power to states,
- Actively engaging in protecting press freedom and democracy (APHR & CPJ, 2025).

These recommendations by the APHR and CPJ underscore a growing consensus that state-centric security narratives must give way to a rights-based approach in Southeast Asia. While civil society is stepping up, lasting change requires the ASEAN to move beyond declarations toward enforceable protections.

CONCLUSION

What this report reveals is not an aberration but a trajectory. Press freedom in Southeast Asia—specifically in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—is being systematically redefined through law, technology, and the strategic deployment of fear. These governments are not merely reacting to threats; they are manufacturing them. Journalists are prosecuted under defamation laws, arrested using counter-terrorism legislation, and targeted by digital smear campaigns – often without legal recourse, and increasingly, without public outcry.

The legal instruments differ: Article 331 in Vietnam, the ITE Law in Indonesia, the Anti-Terrorism Act in the Philippines, but their structural purpose is the same – to convert dissent into criminality, and to transform the media into a mouthpiece for the state. What once posed as regulation has hardened into repression. What is framed as ‘stability’ now looks more like enforced silence.

Yet silence is not absolute. The mobilisation of legal defence networks, the reinforcement of journalist safety mechanisms, and international advocacy are not peripheral – they are essential bulwarks against this repression. More than that, they signal a shift: resistance to authoritarianism is no longer just a matter of principle, but a fight for survival – for the press, for civic space, and for the democratic structures still holding the line.

Importantly, avoidance is not acceptance. Across these three countries, the act of reporting under constant threat has itself become a form of resistance. Some journalists stay. Others flee, but continue to write. Support networks rise where institutions fail. This report not only documents repression; it records the fragile conditions under which dissent endures. At stake is more than the freedom to report, it is the public’s right to know. If that right collapses, authoritarianism ceases to be a creeping threat. It becomes the new normal: quiet, efficient, and largely uncontested.

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