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Singapore

Country:

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Year:

2015

Press Freedom Status:

NF

PFS Score:

67

Legal Environment:

24

Political Environment:

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Economic Environment:

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Legal Environment

While Article 14 of the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, there are restrictions on these rights. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the Defamation Act, the Internal Security Act (ISA), and articles in the penal code allow the authorities to block the circulation of news deemed to incite violence, arouse racial or religious tensions, interfere in domestic politics, or threaten public order, the national interest, or national security. The Sedition Act, in effect since the colonial period, outlaws seditious speech, the distribution of seditious materials, and acts with “seditious tendency.”

Parliament has been dominated by the People’s Action Party (PAP) since 1959, and ruling party members are quick to use harsh civil and criminal defamation laws to silence and bankrupt political opponents and critical media outlets. With bloggers and online discussion groups increasingly offering alternative views and a virtual channel for expressing dissent, the government has begun to crack down on postings it deems offensive. In May 2014, blogger Roy Ngerng published a critique of the government’s management of a state pension fund, prompting a defamation lawsuit from Prime Minister Lee Hsien. Ngerng publicly apologized for the blog post and offered to settle the matter out of court for S\$5,000 (US\$3,900) but Lee rejected the offer. In July, Lee requested a summary judgement, asking that Ngerng’s apology serve as proof of wrongdoing and that a court move to assess damages. In November, Singapore’s High Court granted Lee’s

request, stating that Ngerng had indeed defamed the prime minister, though the court had yet to decide the damages total at the year's end. Significantly, this type of ruling is only possible if the judges believe that the accused has already admitted guilt and is unable to present an effective defense against the allegation; media freedom advocates criticized the decision for denying Ngerng an opportunity to defend himself. Additionally, in June 2014, Ngerng was dismissed from his job at a government hospital. In a public statement, hospital officials said Ngerng had improperly pursued personal interests during working hours, and noted that employees "cannot defame someone else without basis."

The Singaporean judiciary lacks independence and systematically returns verdicts in the government's favor. Journalists and other commentators who raise questions regarding judicial impartiality are vulnerable to charges of "scandalizing the judiciary," an offense similar to contempt of court. In a January 2014 decision unrelated to Singaporean politics, an appeals court overturned a lower court's order for Singapore-based blogger James Dorsey to disclose his sources for an article about the relationship between World Sports Group (WSG), a Singapore-based marketing agency, and Mohamed Bin Hammam, a former vice president of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) who had been banned from the association following bribery allegations. The court also ordered the WSG to pay Dorsey's legal costs.

Singapore has no freedom of information law, and attempts by opposition legislators to introduce such a bill have not been successful.

Annual licensing requirements for all media outlets and internet service providers have been used to inhibit criticism of the government. Websites offering political or religious content are required to register with the Media Development Authority (MDA), and a website's owners and editors are criminally liable for any content that the government finds objectionable. Under new regulations that took effect in 2013, any news website posting an average of at least one Singapore-related news article per week for over two months, and with at least 50,000 unique viewers per month over the same period, must apply for an individual license at the cost of S\$50,000 (US\$40,000). In 2014 the MDA ordered two prominent news websites, the *Online Citizen* and the *MotherShip*, to obtain licenses under the Broadcasting Act in order to continue publishing. In 2013, the MDA had also ordered the *Independent Singapore* and the *Breakfast Network* to register; the latter moved to close rather than comply with the order. Although the MDA initially said that individuals expressing personal views on their own blogs would not be subject to the licensing fees, it later qualified its remarks, stating that if blogs "take on the nature of news sites, we will take a closer look and evaluate them accordingly."

The new regulations also oblige website owners to remove "prohibited content"—as defined under the Internet Code of Practice—within 24 hours after being notified by the MDA. Any websites that do not comply with the conditions may be fined or suspended. The MDA has suggested that the licensing regime could be extended to foreign news sites covering Singapore news. It defended the regulations as a necessary measure to protect "the social fabric and national interests" of Singapore and restrict content that "incites racial or religious hatred; misleads and causes mass panic; or advocates or promotes violence." Foreign media are also subject to pressure and restrictive laws such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, and are required by the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts to post bond and appoint a local legal representative if they wish to publish in Singapore.

Political Environment

Administration officials encourage journalists to provide favorable coverage of the PAP and its goals. Films, television programs, music, books, and magazines are sometimes censored; recently, the government on several occasions has moved to prohibit material that references same-sex couples. All films with a political agenda are banned unless sponsored by the government. The majority of print and broadcast journalists practice self-censorship to avoid defamation charges or other legal repercussions. Coverage of sensitive socioeconomic and political topics has typically been less restricted online.

Journalists can generally gather news freely and without harassment. Cases of physical attacks against members of the press are extremely rare, and none were reported in 2014.

Economic Environment

Nearly all print and broadcast media outlets, internet service providers, and cable television services are owned or controlled by the state or by companies with close ties to the PAP. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service is the only completely independent radio outlet available in the country. With a few exceptions, satellite television is prohibited. A substantial variety of foreign newspapers and magazines are distributed uncensored, but the government is authorized to limit the circulation of print editions. About 82 percent of the population used the internet in 2014.

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