



[Print](#)

## Freedom Of The Press - Singapore (2011)

**Status: Not Free**  
**Legal Environment: 24**  
**Political Environment: 23**  
**Economic Environment: 21**  
**Total Score: 68**

Media freedom in Singapore continued to be constrained in 2010, with the vast majority of print and broadcast journalists practicing self-censorship for fear of harsh defamation charges. The November 16 sentencing of British author Alan Shadrake on contempt of court charges for a book criticizing the nation's use of capital punishment seemed to substantiate claims that Singapore's government routinely uses the judiciary as a means of going after its critics.

Freedoms of speech and expression are guaranteed by Article 14 of the constitution, but there are restrictions on these rights. The Newspapers and Printing Presses Act (NPPA), the Defamation Act, and the Internal Security Act (ISA) also constrain press freedom, allowing the authorities to restrict the circulation of news deemed to incite violence; arouse racial or religious tensions; interfere in domestic politics; or threaten public order, national interest, or national security. The Seditious Speech Act, in effect since the colonial period, outlaws seditious speech, the distribution of seditious materials, and acts with "seditious tendency." The media also face harsh punishments for perceived personal attacks on government officials. As suggested by the case of Shadrake, the Singapore judiciary lacks independence and systematically returns verdicts in the government's favor, further undermining press freedom in the city-state. The 2010 publication of Shadrake's book *Once a Jolly Hangman: Singapore Justice in the Dock*, which questioned the impartiality and independence of Singapore's courts in applying the death sentence, led to his arrest in July and a sentence of six weeks in prison with a 20,000 Singapore dollars (US\$15,400) fine for "scandalizing the court" in November. Authorities indicated in news reports that they were still considering additional criminal defamation charges at year's end.

Singapore's Parliament has been dominated by the ruling 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. Foreign media in Singapore are also subject to such pressures and restrictive laws. For example, the New York Times Company, threatened by a lawsuit for an article by Philip Bowring called "All in the Family" that was published in the February 15 edition of the *International Herald Tribune*, was forced to apologize both to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and to his father, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding prime minister. In addition to the apology, the company was required to pay US\$114,000 in damages. Foreign media are required by the Ministry of Information, Communication, and the Arts to post bond and appoint a local legal representative if they wish to publish in Singapore.

Films, television programs, music, books, and magazines are sometimes censored; all films with a political purpose are banned unless sponsored by the government. In July, the government banned another film by Singaporean filmmaker and blogger Martyn See about prominent political prisoner Dr. Lim Hock Siew's arrests and detention under the ISA in 1963. Unlike previous bans, when See's films could still be viewed on the internet, the government's Media Development Authority ordered See to remove all digital copies of the film uploaded on YouTube and his own blog. Journalists, in general, can cover the news freely and without harassment. Cases of physical attacks against members of the press are extremely rare, and none were reported in 2010.

Nearly all print and broadcast media outlets, internet service providers, and cable television services are either 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 station available in the country. Satellite television is forbidden. A substantial variety of foreign newspapers and magazines are distributed uncensored, but the government is authorized to limit the circulation of print editions. Annual licensing requirements for all media outlets, including political and religious websites, have been used to inhibit criticism of the government.

The internet was accessed by 70 percent of the population in 2010. Internet use is widespread in Singapore, but the government attempts to restrict and control it by licensing internet service providers. Websites offering political or religious content are also required to register with the government's Media Development Authority (MDA), thus making a website's owners and editors criminally liable for any content that the government finds objectionable. Although the ruling party has been successful in curbing dissenting opinion among traditional print and broadcast media, the internet has proven more difficult to control, and new media continue to occupy a small but significant democratic space. While not commercially viable, bloggers and discussion groups nevertheless offer alternative views and a virtual channel for expressing dissent.