

**COVID-19 & Media Freedoms in Southeast Asia:**  
*Attacks on Journalists, Media Organisations and the Internet*

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## List of Abbreviation

ABS-CBN	Alto Broadcasting System- Chronicle Broadcasting Network
AMAN	Kalimantan Parliament and the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CLMV	Cambodia, Laos Myanmar and Vietnam
CPJ	Committee to protect Journalists
FPI	Islamic Defenders Fronts (Indonesia)
IB	Internet Brigade
IDR	Indonesian rupiah
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
ITE Law	Electronic Information and Transactions Law (Indonesia)
Kominfo	Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Indonesia)
MTRCB	Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (The Philippines)
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PAP	People's Action Party
POFMA	Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Singapore)
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
USD	United States Dollar
VPN	Virtual Private Network

## Executive Summary

*Media Freedoms in Southeast Asia: Attack on Journalists, Media Organisations and the Internet* uncovers the ways in which the media space in Southeast Asia have shrunk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Southeast Asia, the attack on journalists, media organisations and the internet are largely led by governments and sitting political regimes. Journalists are subjected to public threats, physical attacks and the use of legislation to intimidate and limit their criticism of government policies and narratives; media owners are dealt with public rebukes, office raids, tax penalties, license termination, arrests and legal persecution; while the internet is slowed down, shut down, blocked, manipulated while technology companies are threatened and social media users prosecuted.

These attacks on media freedoms in 2020 and 2021 by way of arrests, investigations, prosecutions and incarcerations and deaths of journalists and closure of media companies have resulted in media self-censorship in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the media has also hit the sector hard economically, exposing its financial unsustainability. Additionally, the movement restrictions and the reliance on online communications also has led to new ways of working for the media. It has accelerated the shift of the media industry onto digital platforms and has empowered individuals and small organisations to also emerge as content providers at the same time dubbing down on the quality of journalism.

Following a review of media freedoms in Southeast Asia, this report recommends that stakeholders such as international organizations, governments, media and technology companies undertake actions that will increase media freedoms. This includes holding states accountable to international obligations that guarantee media freedoms; ensuring governments do not penalise journalists and media organisations that report critically on policies; urging media organizations to protect journalists; and urging technology companies to maintain their independence from government influence.

Media freedoms are important for the civic space. Any infringement of media freedoms inevitably affects the ability of civil society to function effectively. Hence, all stakeholders in the region and beyond need to advocate that attacks on journalists, media organisations and the internet cease and that freedom of expression is guaranteed for all.

### 1. Introduction

From 2020 to the early part of 2021, the COVID-19 public health crisis, provided ample opportunities for ruling governments in the region to garner public support showcasing their successes in curbing the pandemic. However at the same time, they had to fend off criticisms of their mismanagement of the pandemic and stave off challenges to their political power. It is for this reason, during the pandemic, governments placed a high premium on how they appeared over the media. When they were subjected to criticism they resorted to heavy-handed tactics to respond to their critics whose pointed remarks inflicted reputation damage and reduced their political capital. Through the use of existing laws, dedicated fake news legislation, emergency decrees and COVID-19 temporary legislation and policies, governments and their officials launched attacks on journalists, media organisations and the internet. It has resulted in shrinking media freedoms that have had a direct consequence on civic space.

### 1a. Media Freedoms and Civic Space

Media freedom, covers the press, broadcast media and the internet (Eagan, 2013). Throughout 2020 and into early 2021, most countries in Southeast Asia have seen a steady decrease in their media freedoms. The media space, an arena where opinions and ideas were traditionally heard, has been shrinking. Even when space was found on the internet and over social media this space has come under threat.

Civic space is traditionally understood as an enabling environment where individuals or groups of individuals can freely participate and engage in the discussion or decision on socio-political issues that affect them and their communities (Civic Space Watch, n.d.). According to the 2020 Civicus report, civic freedoms in Southeast Asia were ranked as: obstructed (Malaysia, Indonesia); repressed (Cambodia, Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand) and closed (Vietnam and Laos) (Firmin, Pousadela and Tiwana, 2020).

Media freedoms are important as they contribute towards the overall civic space available for individuals and groups to express their opinions, organise activities and mobilise for action. Therefore a shrinkage in media freedoms leads to a constriction in civic space.

### 1b. Press Freedoms in Southeast Asia

According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, all Southeast Asian countries, except Timor Leste, ranked below the top 100 on the index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2020a). One party-states such as Laos and Vietnam ranked the lowest in the region due to their totalitarianism and heavy-handed approach towards the media. While other factors such as the implementation of new vaguely-worded laws, state-controlled media, and government crackdowns on fake news scored Southeast Asian countries into the lower end of the World Press Freedom Index (Parameswarn, 2020). This also confirms that, apart from Timor Leste and Malaysia (after it experienced a change in government), every country in the region has seen their freedom of the press ranking either decline or remain stagnant in the last five years (see Table 1).

Meanwhile, governments in Brunei, Laos, Singapore and Vietnam virtually enjoy a media monopoly, where there is either no space for independent and critical media to operate without strict restriction or an extensive list of rules that media outlets have to comply with. On the other hand, for other countries in Southeast Asia such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand, independent media and journalists are operating in a repressive environment that is

either endangering their lives or are facing repercussions from the government. Laws and regulation are used as a tool to hinder the ability of journalists to do critical reporting that does not align with the government narratives. The situation in 2020 is a further regression from 2019, where the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in its report on Southeast Asia noted that “81 percent of media workers said the media situation in their countries had either ‘seriously declined’, ‘worsened to some degree’ or had ‘not changed at all’” (International Federation of Journalists, 2019).

**Table 1: World Press Freedom Index (2016 to 2020)**

Countries	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Brunei	152	152	156	156	155
Cambodia	144	143	142	132	128
Indonesia	119	124	124	124	130
Laos	172	171	170	170	173
Malaysia	101	123	145	144	146
Myanmar	139	138	137	131	143
Philippines	136	134	133	127	138
Singapore	158	151	151	151	154
Thailand	140	136	140	142	136
Timor Leste	78	84	95	98	99
Vietnam	175	176	175	175	175

Source: Report with Borders (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>)

This creates a situation where the majority of the mainstream media in Southeast Asia are producing pro-government narratives that seldom go against the regime or do not represent the reality of what people are actually facing on the ground. For example, On the 14th of July 2020 the Thai government was putting a spin on their COVID-19 mismanagement when visiting Egyptian military personnel, who were tested positive, but allowed to go outside without quarantining themselves caused a panic in the community arising from the possible risk of spreading the virus. The blame for the inability to control the movement of those who had to be quarantined was shifted on to the Egyptian embassy in Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2020a). In another instance, On the 14th of March 2020 in Indonesia, President Joko Widodo admitted to the government deliberately withholding information on the number of COVID-19 cases during speech on television. The official number of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia was only released after infection emerged in all provinces in April. President Widodo cited the reason for doing so was to prevent the public from “panicking”, he later introduced a policy for more transparency on the government reporting of COVID-19 cases (Jakarta Post, 2020).

What this means is that there is an information gap between the content pro-government outlets offer and the critical and investigative reporting that some media outlets and journalists produce. These incidents have also caused a trust deficit in mainstream media and government sources of information and is driving people away from these information sources towards alternative outlets or content on social media instead. As a result there is a rising public desire and momentum that is shifting towards increased use of social media for alternative, independent and user generated news consumption.

### 1c. Internet Freedoms in Southeast Asia

This shift is occurring in Southeast Asia at a time when there is a rapid growth in the use of internet, social media and mobile devices. According to Southeast Asia Digital 2020, there were more than 438.9 million Internet users in January 2020 and most countries and segments in the region experienced a double-digit growth. Internet penetration in the region was listed as 66% and social media penetration at 63% (Southeast Asia Digital, 2020). This has resulted in a shift in news consumption from online to social media platforms where content creation is immediate, decentralized, diverse and not subject to regulations or fixed standards. Further, according to the Digital vs. Traditional Media Consumption report (Global Web Index, 2019). There is an outstanding difference in the medium through which people consume information, suggesting a transition of media consumption from traditional media (radio, press, etc.) towards digital media, especially mobile phones and portable tablets. In all Southeast Asian nations, digital media have a larger share of media time in total (i.e. more than 60% of media time are digital media). Finally, due to COVID-19 restrictions, where people are stuck with limited social interaction, the consumption of “fast” digital media through means such as the internet surges. In 2020, 40 million people from 6 countries in Southeast Asia came online for the first time enabling around 70 percent of the Southeast Asian population being able to access the internet (Choudhury, 2020).

However the 2020 Internet Freedom Report by Freedom House notes that in the 8 Southeast Asian countries it assessed, the internet is either partly free or not free (See Table 2). This is mainly due to the draconian law imposed and the manipulation of information for political gains by the government (Funk, 2019). Earlier in the 2014 Enemies Of the Internet report by RSF (Reporters Without Borders, 2014) Vietnam was highlighted as having a dangerous monopoly of the internet infrastructure and draconian legislation. The general trend of all Southeast Asian countries in the index shows a year by year deterioration of internet freedom, apart from Malaysia which got rid of its controversial fake news law in 2019 and Thailand which shifted from a military junta into an elected government in the same year. Yet, their scores are still labeled partially and not free. One of the main reasons behind the downward trend is the increasing government attacks on dissenting individuals and organisations on the internet. This is done using various legislative and the implementation of access controlling measures such as blocking of certain websites and social media posts.

**Table 2: Internet Freedom (2016 to 2020)**

Country	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Cambodia	43	43	45	48	48
Indonesia	49	51	54	53	56
Malaysia	58	57	55	56	55



Myanmar	31	36	36	37	39
Philippines	64	66	69	69	74
Singapore	54	56	59	59	59
Thailand	35	35	35	33	34
Vietnam	22	24	24	24	24

Source: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>)  
(0-39 Not Free; 40-69 Partly Free, 70-100 Free)

According to the “Internet Censorship 2020: A Global Map of Internet Restrictions” report by Comparitech, 4 Southeast Asian countries, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Malaysia. Ranks within the 20 worst internet censorship in the world. Followed by Thailand and Vietnam which ranks within the 30 worst. One of the reason why all Southeast Asian countries are ranked low in the index is due to their censorship such as of Torrent restriction, VPN (Virtual Private Network) restriction, pornography, social media restriction and most importantly restriction and censorship of political media (Bischoff, 2020).

**Table 3: Censorship Score 2020**

Country	Score
Brunei	5
Cambodia	6
Indonesia	6
Laos	6
Malaysia	6
The Philippines	4
Singapore	5
Thailand	6
Vietnam	6

Source: Comparitech (<https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>)  
(10- most censored, 0 -least censored)

The overtaking of digital media of the traditional one poses an agenda setting challenge for authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Unable to effectively control content that is being created and shared via social media, governments in the region have turned to a number of legislation to prevent the disruption of their narratives and deflect criticisms by suppressing the freedom of expression of its critics. The governments of Southeast Asia who were previously in control of the media are facing new hurdles where owners and users of these new social media platforms are not within the jurisdiction. Hence, these governments must find

new legislative ways to direct the narrative in the digital space by controlling the internet architecture, compelling technology companies to do their bidding or directly persecute users of social media.

#### 1d. Methodology

To assess the impact on media freedoms, this report builds on Asia Centre's baseline studies *COVID-19 and Democracy in Southeast Asia: Building Resilience, Fighting Authoritarianism (2020)* and *Defending Freedom of Expression: Fake News Legislation in East and Southeast Asia (2021)*. The current report, additionally, incorporates data gathered from October 2020 to February 2021. The report was researched and drafted during the months of November 2020 to February 2021. The evidence-based research includes a review of the above mentioned Asia Centre reports as well as national legislations and statistics, reports of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), international organisations and news coverage.

This report focuses on recording the attacks on journalists, media organisations and the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 up to early 2021. Thereafter, it evaluates the impact of these attacks on media freedom and formulates a series of recommendations for international organisations, governments, media and civil society to promote and protect media freedoms. This report ends with a reflection on adverse effects of deteriorating media freedoms on civic space and democracy.

## 2. Attack on Journalists

Journalists have been routinely attacked primarily because of their criticism of political leaders, the military and government officials. During the COVID-19 pandemic much of the criticism was directed towards government mismanagement of the health crisis. There are several ways in which journalists in the region face attacks by the government. These include: public threats issued and published through the media; targeted physical attacks by unknown assailants (often suspected to be from the military or police) that can result in casualty; the denial of work visas, accusations of tourist visa infringements and denial of press accreditations; and through the use of legislation to arrest, investigate and prosecute journalists.

### 2a. Public Threats

In July 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the president of the **Philippines** Duterte made a public threat against Maria Ressa, the co-founder and chief executive officer at the Rappler, a well known critique of the president. In his speech which was aired on TV (Television) the president threatened the journalist by announcing that he had been collecting evidence to expose the journalist as a fraud. This was during the time where Maria Ressa was on trial for a libel case (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020a).

On 19th March 2020, a **Malaysian** Chinese Journalist, Kow Gah Chie, wrote and posted an article covering a logging operation in Kelantan, north of peninsular Malaysia. The report quoted the Malaysian Environment Minister as supporting the logging company. This caused a massive outrage from the minister's supporters since they accused her (the journalist) of fabricating the comments, resulting in many insulting and racist comments on her ethnicity over social media. Some even threatened her with physical harm. The quote that Kow got was from a video of an interview by the Minister himself for KiniTV (Global Voices: advox, 2020).

In **Indonesia**, at a press conference on 3 March 2020, Tuti Nurkhomariyah, a journalist for the RMOL Lampung was verbally attacked by the Lampung Governor, Arinal Djunaidi. During his speech, Djunadi specifically commented on the clothing of Tuti saying “Especially when you already don the hijab. Listen and follow. Do not risk your own life.” After the meeting four officers summoned the journalist to a meeting with the governor. During the encounter, Djunadi complained about an article she had written on the intervention of a local businessman in the local election. She was asked to apologise to the governor by the officer (International Federation of Journalist, 2020a), which she did under duress.

### 2b. Physical Attacks

After 11 months, with no police progress, Swe Win, a news website editor of Myanmar Now, shot and wounded on the leg by a gunman on 31 December 2019, decided to make the incident public on 6 November 2020 (Myanmar Now, 2020). The purpose was to contest the police report that Swe Win was hit instead by a piece of flying debris from a dynamite explosion at a nearby rock quarry. According to locals, there were no construction workers nearby the area during that time. RSF reported in a statement that there are suspicions of military involvement in this attack (Reporters Without Borders, 2020b).

In the Philippines, 2020 alone, 3 journalists were killed. (Committee To Protect Journalists, 2020). 1 was killed at a military checkpoint as he was suspected of being an armed insurgent (IBID). This story did not add up as the journalist had informed earlier that he was going to be in the area. He was also covering a story on a land dispute involving local politics (IBID). The Philippines remains one of the most dangerous places for journalists to operate in the world. According to CPJ's 2020 Global Impunity Index, the country ranked 7th most dangerous country for Journalists in the world (Manahan, 2020).

In **Indonesia**, On 8 October 2020, a total of 28 journalists were physically assaulted by the police while covering the Omnibus Law protests led by students (International Federation of Journalist, 2020b). The report stated that eight were assaulted in Jakarta, two in Bundung, three in Semarang, five in Samarinda, six in Surabaya, one in Tanjung Pinang and three in Palu (IBID). In Jakarta a journalist named Torihin was hit in the head while recording a policeman arresting protesters, his recording devices were confiscated and destroyed at the scene (The Straits Times, 2020).

### 2c. Visa Denials

On the 6th of August 2020, Aljazeera English managing director Giles Trendle confirmed that the Malaysian immigration office has denied work visas for Aljazeera's Australian journalists Drew Ambrose and Jenni Henderson. These two are a part of seven Aljazeera journalists that were placed under investigation by the Malaysian police for sedition, defamation and violation of the Communications and Multimedia Act. The investigations stem from the airing of a documentary "Lock Up in Malaysia's Lock Down", as part of Aljazeera's program "101 East" where the treatment of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia during the COVID-19 lock down were examined. The documentary was met with criticism by the government, resulting in Aljazeera's office being raided by the police. Further, the interviewee of the program, a Bangladeshi worker, was deported from Malaysia, for his involvement in the program (International Federation of Journalists, 2020c).

On 17 December 2019, American journalist Phillip Jacobson, editor for an environmental science and conservation online platform called Mongabay, was detained by the police in Indonesia. The arrest took place after Jacobson attended a meeting between the Central Kalimantan Parliament and the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) (Gunia, 2020). The reason for his arrest was that his activities are not in accordance with the business visa he used to enter the country. He was finally deported back home on 31st January 2020 and banned from re-entering, after being released from prison a week prior (Mongabay.com, 2020).

From the year 2014-2016 reports have shown that Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand have tightened the restrictions or denied journalist visas for reporters. In 2014 the Irrawaddy reported that their foreign journalists and others from the historically exiled Myanmar independent news outlets are either getting their request for a three to six month journalist visa denied or are given less amount of time in the country. It was further reported that Myanmar's government officials have become more critical of journalists, for reporting "misinformation" and "misusing" the country's loosening grip on media censorship (The Irrawaddy, 2014). The increase in misinformation reports is also the reason cited by the Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs, Don Pramudwinai, during an interview with Bangkok Post. In that interview, he stressed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs to address the problem of "misinformation" in reports by

foreign journalists and that new regulations are being put in place to deal with the issue (Jikkham, 2016). In the same year, Cyril Payen, a French reporter for France 24 Television based in Bangkok, was denied entry to Indonesia by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs after he released a documentary alleging state-sponsored human rights abuses in the eastern most Papuan provinces. Shawn W. Crispin, Committee to protect Journalists (CPJ) senior representative of the region, commented that the visa denial was a retaliation to Payen's critical reporting on Indonesia (BenarNews Staff, 2020).

#### 2d. Legal Persecution

In **Cambodia**, October 2020, the Phnom Penh Court gave Sovann Rithy, who runs the channel TVFB on Facebook, a 18-month sentence. He was convicted for incitement affecting social security, order and safety. The reason behind the charge centred on Rithy's quote in his news report that Prime Minister Hun Sen said that 'motorbike taxis can sell their motorbikes if they face bankruptcy, as the government has no ability to help' (Narin, 2020). The police claimed that Hun Sen was speaking in jest and that the quote should not be taken seriously.

During **Thailand's** Youth protest on the 16th of October 2020, a journalist from Prachatai News was arrested while reporting live on Facebook about the protest in Bangkok that night. A footage of the arrest of the journalist was broadcast live on Facebook. He was released the day after and paid a fine of 300 baht for defying official order under section 368 of the criminal code regarding emergency decree which prohibits publishing or broadcasting information which threatens stability (Prachatai, 2020).

In **Cambodia**, May 2020, Sok Udom, the owner of Rithy Sen radio station and a news website with the same name was arrested for inciting villagers in the Kampong Chhnang province against the military. He was accused, during his Facebook livestream, of criticising the military for land grabbing in the Phnom Aural Wildlife Sanctuary. Immediately after his arrest, Rithy Sen's radio station license was revoked by the government and held in pretrial detention (Narin, 2020).

In **Malaysia** a journalist for the South China Morning Post, Tashny Sukumaran was summoned for questioning by the police over a newspaper article published on the evening of 1 May 2020 which was co-authored by her and a colleague based in Hongkong. The article questioned the mass scale raid of un-documented workers during COVID-19. The journalist was investigated under section 504 of the penal code (intentional insult with intent to provoke a breach of peace) and section 233 of the 1998 Communication and Multimedia Act (improper use of network facility or network service) (Reporters Without Borders, 2020c) but the case was dropped shortly after.

In **Myanmar**, May 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, a news editor for Dae Pyaw, named Zaw Ye Htet, was sentenced to jail for two years after his agency reported a coronavirus death that turned out to be false. He was charged under Article 505(b) of the penal code, which prohibits the dissemination of information that could "cause fear or alarm to the public". The time taken for the case to be processed by the court was unusually quick according to Bangkok Post (Bangkok Post, 2020b).

In the **Philippines**, on 28 March 2020, Maria Batuigas, owner of an online site, Latigo News TV and Amor Virata, a vlogger and an online news reporter, were charged for violating the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act". The two journalists were the first to be prosecuted by the new

law which was passed on the 25h of March 2020 to deal with the spread of false information concerning COVID-19 which causes panic to the public. The punishment is two months in prison and a one million pesos fine (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020).

In December 2019, a **Thai** news reporter named Suchanee Cloitre, who worked for the channel Voice TV, was sentenced to two years in prison for libel for a tweet on the abuse of Myanmar labour in a poultry farm. The case of Suchanee was one of the 25 lawsuits launched by the chicken farm, Thammakset Co. against journalists, activists and workers (Bangkok Post, 2019c).

Public threats and physical attacks are routinely faced by journalists. However the greatest number of attacks on journalists comes through legislative measures. During the COVID-19 pandemic governments have been especially sensitive to criticism of their mismanagement of the health crisis. We will see in the section, the attacks on journalists are only part of the larger moves against media freedom in the region, media organisations such as journalist associations, news outlets and entertainment companies have also come under attack.

### 3. Attack on Media Organisations

Apart from attacking individual journalists, during the pandemic, media organisations in Southeast Asia were also threatened by governments and political officials. The media organisations under attack in the region are journalist associations, news outlets and entertainment companies. These attacks came in various forms, such as: the targeting of key figures such as office holders, editors and owners; crippling the operations of the organisation by disrupting their work and confiscating equipment; censorship of content; and legislative attacks on the organisations that culminate in the taking away of the licenses to operate.

#### 3a. Journalist Associations

On 31 December 2020, **Indonesian** police announced that the hard line Islamic group “Islamic Defenders Fronts (FPI’s)” has been charged for “threatening the national ideology” effectively banning all its activity, symbols and attributes. The announcement also included a reference to the restriction of access, uploading and spreading of content on FPI’s websites and social media platforms. The announcement of this restriction caused an outrage among the numerous journalists organisations in Indonesia as it effectively limits the ability of the press to report (Nasution, 2020). In Indonesia, journalist associations often have to push back or demand that restrictions on the media be revoked in order to secure freedom of the press, although they are often not successful .

On International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020, the **Philippines** police arrested the Manila Today editor, Lady Ann Salem at her home in Quezon city. She and 6 other human rights activists were rounded up on that day and arrested as part of a criminal investigation to clamp down on loose firearms and criminal gangs. Police said they found firearms in her home. However, relatives claimed that it was planted as the search was conducted without witnesses giving ample time for the police to plant evidence (Umil, 2020). For context, it's important to note that Lady Ann Salem is not only an editor, she is also the communication officer for the International Association of Women in Radio and Television, and a member of the National Union of Journalist of the Philippines. The Union was red flagged as a communist propaganda organisation by the government in 2018 resulting in the organization being black listed (Karlo, 2020).

In May 2020, the arrest of vice president, Nguyen Tuong Thuy and Le Huu Minh Tuan, editor of the Independent Journalist Association of **Vietnam**, after the arrest of its President, Pham Chi Dung in 2019 marked the arrest of all leadership figures of the association. All were arrested and charged under article 117 for making, storing and spreading information for the purpose of opposing the state which carries a sentence of 10 to 20 years in prison. Observers have expressed concern that more journalists and bloggers are being detained in the second half of 2020 because the government appears to be nervous about the Vietnames Communist Party Congress which will be held in January 2021 (Whong, 2020). But more importantly, this incident marks an attack on the country’s first journalists’ organisation aiming to promote free reporting of politically independent information.

#### 3b. News Outlets

In **Thailand**, during the height of the student-led protest in October 2020, Voice TV, a prominent liberal media outlet which has been critical of the government, faced a revocation of its operating license due to its coverage of the anti-government demonstrations. Justifying

the action, Minister of Digital Economy and Society, Buddhipongse Punnakanta, claimed that Voice TV had violated the State of Emergency Decree and the Computer Crime Act by spreading false news (International Federation of Journalists, 2020d). Apart from the Voice TV, three other news outlets, Prachatai, The Reporters and The Standard, were also investigated under the same accusations.

The Liberal Publishing House, a publishing company founded in 2019 has been publishing content from dissident authors. From October 2020 the **Vietnamese** authority has engaged in a major crackdown on the readers, publishers and others involved with the publication for a charge of producing “anti-state” content. Reports from Civicus have shown that the police have been questioning, interrogating and abducting those who have had a connection with the publication. While in police custody, most were pressured to sign statements promising that they would not buy books from the Liberal Publishing House again (CIVICUS, 2020a).

On the 20th September 2020, the **Singapore** Election Department released a statement announcing they have filed a police report against the independent online media outlet, New Naratif. The charge was for the “illegal conduct of election activity”, where they alleged the outlet published paid advertisement on Facebook, without the written authorization of a candidate during the Singaporean general election of July 2020 (Deutsches Welle, 2020). The owner of the outlet was brought in for questioning by the police. The Election Department did not specify which post by New Naratif was illegally advertised.

An Al-Jazeera documentary which examined the **Malaysian** government’s treatment of migrant workers in May 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown has been criticized by the Malaysian authority for being inaccurate, misleading and unfair (Al-Jazeera, 2020a). In August 2020, the Malaysian government’s Communication and Multimedia Ministry and the police jointly raided the Al-Jazeera office and confiscated two computers. Up to seven Al-Jazeera staff were also questioned and later two of the Al-Jazeera’s foreign correspondents were declined a visa renewal (AFP-JIJI, 2020). Al Jazeera risks charges which may include sedition and defamation offenses (Al-Jazeera, 2020b).

On 10 July 2020, The House Committee of the **Philippines** legislature chose not to renew the broadcasting franchise for the Alto Broadcasting System and Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN). This resulted in a cease and desist order issued by the National Telecommunications Commission which affects the television and radio operations of the news outlet (Cabato, 2020). The background to the saga relates to Phillipino President Duterte’s long feud with the broadcasting service since 2016 when ABS-CBN refused to broadcast Duterte’s presidential campaign (BBC News, 2020). The action by the government caused an uproar by opposition and critics, drawing parallels to what the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr did 40 years ago (Philstar, 2020).

On 15 June 2020, Maria Ressa, the co-founder and chief executive officer at the Rappler was convicted of libel and sent to jail. The court found that she and a former reporter of Rappler, Reynaldo Santos Jr. were guilty of libeling a wealthy businessman named Wilfred Keng by linking him to murder, drug dealing and human trafficking. Maria Ressa and Rappler are well known critics of the Philippines President Duterte (World, 2020).

In August 2020, **Indonesia’s** tempo.com and tirto.id came under an unprecedented series of cyber attacks. The tempo.com news website was hacked on the 20th of August when the hacker accessed their webpage and replaced it with a black background with the word “Hoax” in bold



red across the screen. In the morning, a twitter account named @xdigeembok claimed responsibility for the hacking and left a reply on one of tempo.com's articles saying "Just wait I will stick boogers on to your system again" (Arbi, 2020). A few days earlier Tempo had written articles on several 'influencers' allegedly being paid to promote the government's omnibus bill on job creation. On the same day several articles, including reports on the Indonesian intelligence agency's role on the COVID-19 pandemic response and medication, were removed from the webpage of tirto.id (Yas, 2020).

In **Cambodia** the majority of independent media outlets which produced content that were antecedent to the state narrative were purged between 2016 and 2018. Among the media that shutdown included The Cambodia Daily which ceased its printing operations and moved online in 2017 due to a US\$6.3 million tax bill issued by the government in 2017 (Kyodo News, 2017). A week later Radio Free Asia and the Voice Of America were accused of allegedly not paying their taxes (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020). Radio Free Asia left Cambodia in 2017 citing intimidation by the government. At the end of 2017 a dozen independent radio stations also shut down (Associated Press, 2019). In the run up to the 2018 general election, the government also outlawed the main opposition party and swept all the seats.

### 3.c Entertainment Companies

The attack on media organisations in Southeast Asia for content that is deemed inappropriate or infringing the law does not only cover those that are produced by news reporting companies or blogs written by journalists but also content put out by entertainment companies. While the content flagged relate to violence and sex, by extension, the entertainment companies also risk being censored for their distribution documentaries and political programmes. As lockdowns are forcing people to spend more time at home, entertainment companies that are internet streaming content are gaining popularity are also facing more regulation by the government.

On 4 January 2021, Rap Against Dictatorship, a **Thai** anti-government rap artist group, announced in a Facebook post that one of their music videos "pratiroop (reform)" was blocked on YouTube on the request of the Thai government. The music video was filmed among one of the student protests that demanded a reform of the monarchy and contained clips of the royal palace as a backdrop. According to the group, their video which was released in November 2020 had gathered 9 million views before it was blocked on YouTube (Singh, 2020).

On 3 September 2020, Jonathan Presquito, the legal affairs division chief of The **Fillipino** Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) said that "we have to regulate" shows on digital video streaming services, such as Netflix as their popularity and viewership are gained significantly during the COVID-19 lock down measures. This remark was met with criticism from Phillipino lawmakers. Senator Grace Poe, a former MTRCB chair, commented that the proposed actions of MTRCB are "counterproductive and ridiculous." (Yap & Ramos, 2020).

During July to August 2020, the documentary 'The King Maker' which featured the life of Imelda Marcos, the wife of the Filipinos dictator Ferdinand Marcos, was screened in various parts of **Thailand** including Bangkok and Chiangmai. When the film was scheduled to be screened in the South of Thailand, government officials ordered that the screening not go ahead. According to Thida Polpalitkarnpim, founder of the Documentary Club, the company that is in charge of the screening was told by the authorities that they were uncomfortable with the title of the film and its poster, and that they were also not "comfortable" with the film being screened

at the time, as the screening coincided with the early stages of student protests in Thailand (Ramos, 2020).

After 4 years of blocking access to the Netflix website, **Indonesia's** state owned telecom firm PT Telekomunikasi Indonesia, lifted the censorship of the streaming service in July 2020. Netflix started operations in Indonesia in 2016, but was met with problems as the Indonesian's film censorship board deemed Netflix to be carrying inappropriate violent and sexual content resulting in the blocking of Netflix service on telecom. Since then, Netflix has been in negotiation with the government on the issue of regulation, where the end result saw Netflix accepting the government's demand to examine the complaints of the government and regulator over its content within 24 hours (Reuters Staff, 2020a).

In the beginning of 2020 Netflix released a report titled, "Environmental Social Governance: 2019 Sustainability Accounting Standards Board Report". This includes the list of films that Netflix has domestically removed per request of a country since its launch in 1997. Out of the total of 9 movies Netflix has removed, 5 movies for **Singapore** and 1 for **Vietnam**. All films that are removed from Netflix Singapore service are in compliance with the Infocomm Media Development Authority, most movies depict illicit drug usage such as *Cooking on High*, *The Legend of 420*, *Disjointed* and *The Last Hangover* which was removed in 2020. Furthermore *The Last Temptation of Christ* was removed as it is banned in Singapore. In Vietnam the movie *Full Metal Jacket* was requested to be removed domestically by the Vietnamese Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information (Staff Reporters, 2020).

Journalist associations and its office holders were targets of governments as these organisations spoke up for journalists. However, it was the news outlets that bear the brunt of attacks which most often centred on closing the operation of these companies. Although not directly COVID-19 related, entertainment companies and streaming services have increasingly become the targets of the regulation and censorship and governments try to control the content that viewers can access on these platforms. As traditionally media companies wane and with content moving online, we will see in the next section why the internet has been the new target of attack.

## 4. Attacks on the Internet

Up until the mid-90s, governments were able to restrict the flow of information and shape national narratives through the control of the traditional mass media. Due to the increase of internet users, rise in content creators and service providers, governments in the region have begun to control the flow of information and shape narratives online. They do this by initiating, through internet service providers, internet shutdowns countrywide or in specific geographic regions in the country, signal jamming during protests, slowing down servers to pressure technology companies to comply with government demands to take action against critics using their social media platforms, undertaking targeted blocking of websites and social media posts, spend resources to manipulate narrative on social media and finally prosecuting individuals or organisations who upload or share content over social media critical of governments.

### 4a. Technology Companies

**Thailand's** government has been active in issuing orders to technology companies with requests to take down content from their social media platforms that it deems illegal according to national legislation. In September 2020, the Thai Ministry of Digital Economy and Society began legal proceedings against Facebook and Twitter that “ignored” and missed its takedown notice deadline. Alphabet’s Google, was spared because it took down all the YouTube videos specified in the order (Bernama, 2020). The Ministry also announced that it will file further requests asking Facebook, Twitter and Google to remove more than 3,000 items, some of them include content that criticize the Thai Monarchy (Tanakasempipat & Thepgumpanat, 2020).

In April 2020, Reuters reported that the **Vietnamese** government has been pressuring social media platform, Facebook to increase the censorship of posts by local users that it deemed as “anti-state”. The Vietnamese state-owned telecommunication enterprises made Facebook’s local servers go offline causing the social media platform to become unstable at times. These measures were administered for 7 weeks as part of the pressure on Facebook to comply with the Vietnamese government's demands to take down dissenting posts (Pearsons, 2020).

In 2019, the **Indonesian** government has passed Government Regulation No. 71/2019, which requires social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter etc. to actively seek and remove “negative content including fake news and pornography”. Failure to comply will result in a fine of at least 100 million IDR. The law will come into effect at the end of 2021 (Florence, 2020). Since then the government has proposed more legislation. During a virtual meeting on the 19th of October 2020 the director general of Indonesia’s Communications and Information Ministry (Kominfo) announced plans to draft a ministerial regulation for blocking contents in digital platforms that contain hoax information on COVID-19. Earlier in 2018 Kominfo has block TikTok and Tumbler for violating the country’s anti pornography rule. The ban was lifted after both companies pledged to comply with the government's request in removing pornographic content from the platform (Florence, 2020).

### 4b. Internet Shutdowns

On 1 February 2021, the **Myanmar** military staged a coup d'état and declared that the general election in November 2020 is invalid. According to Netblocks, a NGO that monitors internet governance, in the early morning of the 1st of February the internet connectivity in Myanmar

plummeted to 50% the normal rate. Showing signal of a military coup being underway (NETBLOCKS, 2021). On the 3rd of February the new government ordered telecom providers to block access to social media including Facebook and Twitter until the 7th of February on “stability” purpose (Reuters, 2021). As the nationwide protest against the coup gained momentum, the government further ordered a countrywide internet shutdown on the 6th of February to be partially restored the next day (NETBLOCKS, 2021). They continued internet shutdowns throughout the height of the protests.

During the student protest of **Thailand** in October 2020, the police admitted that there was a deployment of trucks equipped with signal jammers at the site. Despite the lack of hard proof of the signal jammer operations, there have been reports of phone signals and internet signals not working during the protest. There are many news outlets which live stream their signals over the internet, hence the deployment of signal jammers can block communications and the media during the protests (Khaosod, 2020). It is important to note that signal jammers are being offered as a measure for anti-governments to disable communications over social media at a particular range (SESP Group, n.d.).

From 21 August 2019 to early September 2020, the internet was blocked in parts of **Indonesian** Papua. It was in response to rising protests within the territory that stemmed from arrests of 43 Papuan students for alleged disrespect of the Indonesian flag (Firdaus, 2019). Nevertheless, the Jakarta State Administrative Court ruled that it was unlawful for the government to shut down the internet in Papua and West Papua. However, the government claimed that its actions were in line with the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law. However, the judges said the law could only be enforced to block access to electronic information and document and not the entire internet (Moc. Fiqih Prawira A, 2020).

48 hours before the 2018 general election of **Cambodia**, a total of 17 media sites were blocked by the government including Voice of America, Radio Free Asia (RFA), Voice of Democracy, and the Phnom Penh Post. According to Phos Sovann, director general at the Information Ministry, the close down of the sites was due to the provocative and political nature of their contents. He added further that it was only for 48 hours and these sites can be up and running again. According to the election committee all media and political parties must be silent in the 24 hour period before the election, but news outlets that are pro-government remained open (Handley, 2018).

#### 4c. Blocking Access

Ahead of the pro-democracy protest in September 2020, the **Thai** Ministry of Digital Economy and Society announced that it was taking steps to block about 2200 websites including Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, whose content was deemed illegal by the government. The official spokesman of the Ministry said most of the website “contained inappropriate content that could harm the country's security, including content that harassed the monarch,”. The blocking includes a Facebook page called “royalist market place” which is well known for the criticism of the Thai Monarchy (Nikkei, 2020).

In August 2020, an activist group called Justice for **Myanmar** which investigates the military's corporate network reported that their website, which contains the findings of military officials' corruption scheme has been blocked. Currently there is no explanation by the government why the website was blocked. In the months prior, the government has blocked a total of 200

websites using section 77 of the Telecommunication Law to stop “fake news” spreading (Myanmar Times, 2020).

On the 18 of February 2020, State Time Reviews, a news website known for its criticism of the **Singaporean** government was blocked by Facebook on the orders of the government as it has repeatedly ignored government demand to make corrections on articles that the Singaporean government deemed as false. Despite the use of the law this marks the first occasion a whole page is ordered blocked on Facebook. This is done through the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), passed by the Singaporean government in 2019 which enables the government to take actions on statements government and authorities deemed as false through enforcing correction mechanisms. The spokesperson of Facebook has made a statement criticizing the government's demand and the use of the POFMA law as “disproportionate” and “contradicting to the government’s claimed that the law will not be used as a censorship tool” (France- Presse, 2020)

#### 4d. Persecuting Users

On 17 December 2020, the **Vietnamese** police arrested Truong Chau Huu Danh, 38, a former journalist. The Ho Chi Minh City police newspaper reported that Danh was arrested and detained to facilitate investigations into his action of abusing freedom of speech and infringing on the state interests. Danh owns a Facebook page with nearly 168, 000 followers and is known for having “anti-state post, causing division of national unity” according to the same report (Reuters, 2020b).

Hours after the conclusion of the 2020 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue On the 6th of October 2020. Pham Doan Trang, a prominent government critic and blogger was arrested on the charge of anti-state activities according to the state media report. As punishment for the offence, she stands to serve up to 20 years in jail. Earlier that year she quit her job at an independent publisher citing police harassment, heightened state abuse and abduction of colleagues by the Vietnamese state (BBC News, 2020b).

In May 2020, **Indonesian** journalist Farid Gabban was sued and charged for defamation under article 28 paragraph (2) of the ITE Law. The charge stemmed from his tweet criticizing Teten Masduki, the Indonesian Minister of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises move to provide financial support for a commercial enterprise during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wiratraman, 2020). The complaint to the police was made by Muannas Alaidid, a politician from the Indonesian Solidarity Party who took issue with Farid Gabban’s tweet, “People help the people; the rulers help entrepreneurs. How about this, Kang Teten Masduki? How low can you go?”. The Minister expressed that he did not mind the comment, but the charge was still being pursued (Kontak Banten, 2020).

In February 2020 the **Laotian** police arrested a 25 years old woman for allegedly posting rumors online that there was a person who was infected with COVID-19 while shopping at a Chinese Sanjiang shopping mall in Vientien. The police reported that the woman was charged for spreading rumors aimed at causing public panic. Further, other people who posted similar kinds of false information were searched for by the police according to an anonymous officer. The official numbers of COVID-19 cases in Laos during February 2020 is 0 (Finney, 2020).

#### 4.e Online Manipulation

In **Vietnam** the formation of the 10000 strong military cyber-warfare department dubbed 'Force 47' tasked to defend the party and attack dissident bloggers. Has put the country into the infamous list of world digital predators of press freedom alongside with the Philippines (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.a). The news outlet Reuters published its review on dozens of posts from various facebook groups and pages that have claimed to be linked to the force 47 between December 2020 and January 2021. Findings showed that some group moderators were dressed in military uniform in their profile photos while others also ran pages for local branches of the communist party organisations (Pearson, 2021).

On 9 October 2020 twitter has announced that it has permanently suspended 926 accounts that the company found substantial evidence linking to the Royal **Thai** Army. On its website Twitter gave a statement on the suspension that "These accounts were engaged in amplifying pro-RATA and pro-government content, as well as engaging in behavior targeting prominent political opposition figures," per February 2021 the blog post has been removed. So far the army has denied its involvement. According to the Stanford Internet Observatory report, the removed account has been engaging in criticizing the opposition party namely the Future Forward Party (Yuda, 2020).

In **Singapore**, the People's Action Party's (PAP) "Internet Brigade (IB)" was formed, with an aim to convince the online public that the policies made by the party are well accepted and appreciated by the majority of the public. The organisation was formed after the 2006 general election to counter the party's online critics. The group was led by PAP's new media committee chaired by Ng Eng Hen, and engaged in activities such as blogging extreme praise of party leaders, attacking critical Facebook groups such as Occupy Singapore and attacking opposition parties and their lead spokespersons (Romero, 2018). At times the tone of attacks border on stalking and harassment of anti-establishment critics. (The Online Citizen, 2020).

Marking the 2020 International World Day Against Cyber-Censorship on the 12th of March. RSF released a list of the worst digital predators of press freedom in the world (Globe, 2020). The list includes the Philippines and Vietnam. In the **Philippines** RSF reported that persecution of alternative media have been accompanied by the presence of president Duterte's troll army (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.b). Throughout 2020, reports of Duterte's supporters attacking dissenting voices on the internet has been documented. In one such case in April 2020, a Duterte's supporter threatened a lawsuit against a fact-checker over Twitter. The fact-checker uncovered fake news from the Philippine News Agency which claimed 80% of the people were satisfied with the government's pandemic response (Story and Billing, 2020) .

Given the movement of media, in particular news content, from traditional platforms to the online space, this section captures the new frontier of attacks. To censor, control and shape online content, governments have taken the following steps: increased pressure on technology companies to comply with their request to take down critical content; instruct service providers to shutdown, slow down servers or block access; actively manipulate the narrative on social media; and take direct legal action against individual social media users who upload or share content. The next chapter will explore the overall impact of these attacks on journalists, media organisations and the internet on media freedoms

#### **5. Impact on Media Freedoms**

The attacks on journalists, media companies and the internet collectively impact media freedoms. They do so primarily by eliciting compliance from technology companies to government requests to take down content or deleting accounts. Self-censorship also has become more evident as both journalists and media organisations become cautious about publishing content critical of governments. The shift to the internet, COVID-19, and government crackdown also has impacted the sustainability of independent media as a business. Finally, a mixture of economic challenges and COVID-19 health measures such as social distancing and travel restrictions and working from home have also affected the quality of journalism.

### 5a. Compliance

Over the years governments have been using a mixture of public threats, shutting down internet service, throttling internet speeds, blocking access to websites and posts, and using legislation to compel adherence to takedown requests.

**Vietnam** has been spearheading the region in bringing Facebook to comply with its demands to censor “anti-state” content on its platform. In April 2020, following the slowing down of Facebook servers, the company came to an agreement with Vietnamese government once access to its platform was restored. In December 2020, The Guardian reported that there has been a spike in the takedown of critical content by Facebook. Referring to the company’s transparency report, it noted that in the first half of 2020, Facebook complied with 834 content restrictions, – a significant rise on the previous six-month (Rattecliffe, 2020).

In 2020 **Indonesian** media companies have been impacted by the economic fallout of the pandemic. Even though there is an increase in the news consumption related to and during the pandemic, Indonesian local media are suffering heavy financial losses due to the decrease in advertisement revenue, grants and government subsidies. This has led to media outlets having to comply with government orders to gain more capital. Cases where media outlets have to comply with governmental requests such as in the East Kalimantan Paser Regency, where in July 2020 the government demanded that journalists within the media company, that receive financial support, take competency tests held by the local government (Beni Saputra, 2020).

A **Filipino** news site, Phil Star, Global has reported that from the month of January to July 2020. Facebook has received 131 preservation requests covering 1,100 accounts. This is a 400 percent increase from 2019 where the government requested to preserve 267 accounts. According to Facebook rules for all countries, when they receive a preservation request, a temporary snapshot of the account’s information is preserved although the information is not disclosed unless a formal request is received and in line with valid legal processes. In the same period Facebook has also received information requests of 51 users by the Philippines government. It compiled and gave information on 11 users (Mateo, 2020).

### 5b. Self-Censorship

In addition to achieving compliance, government attacks can create fear and become effective in silencing criticism. Hence, one of the most effective ways is to close down independent media companies, journalist associations, impact funding and persecute media owners, editors, journalists and critics. Countries in Southeast Asia that have achieved this successfully have a higher level of self-censorship namely Brunei, Laos and Singapore. This results in journalists

and news outlets in these countries less reluctant to cover stories that are seen as sensitive and the risks as being too high.

In a book titled “Reluctant Editor” by PN Balji, a retired mainstream media journalist in **Singapore**, shared stories from his time as editor of The New Paper and Today, explaining the relationship between the government and the press. One of the observations he confirmed was that self-censorship is practiced in the Singapore mainstream media (Kathleen, 2019). Reporting on the book, Yahoo correspondent Nicholas Yong quoted Balji as saying self-censorship is "the greatest sin in Singapore journalism" and that it is "worse than what it used to be before" (Yong, 2019). To confirm contemporary self-censorship practices in Singapore, Yong went on to note that the mainstream media chose not to report that Lee Huanwu, one of the grandsons of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, was marrying his male partner in South Africa.

In **Brunei**, the private media sector is either owned or controlled by the royal family and the government. This is combined with already strict media regulation over the media sector leading to self-censorship among journalists and the media when reporting on politics and religion (BBC News, 2019c). Brunei’s legislation is based on a strict version of the sharia law whereby any written or spoken statement that is blasphemous or advocates apostasy is punishable by death (CIVICUS, 2020b). On the 13th of December 2019, Shahiransheriffudin bin Shahrani Muhammad was convicted for sedation and sentenced in absentia to a 18 month prison sentence for a post on his personal Facebook page criticising the new halal regulation (Faisal, 2019). He was initially charged on 16 July 2017 but fled the country to seek asylum in Canada in 2018. When he posted for bail after the initial charge, he was forced by a group of men to go to the Enforcement Unit of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and was held for questioning without legal aid for two days. He was further charged for insulting a member of the Muslim Council and questioning the ruling Council (CIVICUS, 2020c).

In **Laos** all media are controlled by the state. An interview from Radio Free Asia in April 2020 with unnamed media workers in the country revealed that field journalists in Laos are directed by high ranking officials. Reporters are directed on what they are allowed and not allowed to report, hence ensuring that the content of the news supports the official objective (Finney, 2020). In 2020, the government of Laos prioritised foreign investment in the country, therefore news media have been assigned to report stories that support foreign investment, and were forbidden from reporting the negative impact of the pandemic. This tight control of media is in addition to the 2014 government decree where internet users who criticize the government can face prison sentences resulting in further self-censorship.

### 5c. Sustainability

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic impact of the lockdown and other various health measures affected the financial sustainability of independent news outlets. This put independent media in a very vulnerable position on top of the already existing political and legal threats by the government. The effect of the pandemic exposed independent media’s long term sustainability. In order to survive, these outlets are looking at non-revenue sources such as grants from international donors, investments from government aligned businesses and direct financing from governments which decreases the independence of these news outlets.

According to an interview on the 31st December 2020 with the president of the Overseas Press Club of **Cambodia**, Ate Hoekstra, he noted an increase in media intimidation in 2020. One of



the reasons he cited was the fact that the world is “busy” with other issues such as the pandemic or the economic turmoil resulting in a neglect of the journalists’ safety and freedom of the press in authoritarian regimes (Hunt, 2020).

On the 31st of January the US embassy in **Myanmar** issued a release which stated that the U.S. Agency for International Development has provided 72 million USD to build up development of civil society organisation, media and local community. One of the recipients of the funding, Myanmar Now which received a 25 million dollars in support for a 5 years project, later issued an announcement in November 2019 that they are struggling to stand for the long run, thereby seeking further donations (Min Naing, 2019).

Due to the lack of advertisement revenue and government support for independent media outlets, many have sought for donors support. Reports have shown that established Southeast Asian media organisations such as Malaysiakini of **Malaysia** (The Star, 2012) and Democratic Voice of Burma, **Myanmar** (ProPublica, 2020) are supported by US foreign aid such as the National Endowment for Democracy, of the US. During US president Donad Trump’s term, his administration proposed draconian cuts for foriegn assistance. Large parts of the budget for democracy aid programs submitted to Congress were diverted to other domestic civil society instead of those in Southeast Asia (Roblin , 2021). Furthermore the storming of the Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 has caused an impact on the US’s image as a democratic champion. Resulting in the national Endowment for Democracy having to release a statement to reassure its commitment (Ashford, 2021).

#### 5d. Quality Journalism

The COVID-19 health and travel restrictions drastically affected the way journalists and news outlets work. It accelerated the shift in news gathering and reporting from the traditional source-based and face-to-face approach to social media and internet. Information was searched online and interviews conducted remotely using digital tools and platforms. Additionally the cost of equipment needed for working from home such as fast and stable internet connection, digital equipment and software required for the journalist work and conduct interviews placed an extra burden on journalist and media workers. As a result, it has also hampered the ability of independent media to create and deliver quality content. Media companies have begun to cut their reporting of local news and political coverage, to focus on news that “hits big” and celebrity coverage that makes more revenue (Sweeny, 2020).

A survey from Ssplice Data, published in September 2020, on the pandemic’s impact on the media in the **CLMV** region ( Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) revealed that 59% of the journalists felt COVID-19 affected the function of the newsroom. Further, most journalists confirmed the role COVID-19 played in accelerating the digitalisation of media and the need for journalists to possess or acquire digital skills. Nevertheless, 38 percent of the journalists in the region struggle to adapt to online work due to lockdown measures (Manve, 2020).

In **Thailand**, an unsolved murder of a 3 year old, in 2020, resulted in superstardom of her uncle “Uncle Pol”. His fame rose overnight with media coverage of everything he did including news reports on what is in his groceries bag to appearances in music videos of top Thai celebrities. This resulted in a backlash from the public for the lack of ethics in the media. It led to the resignation of Songpol Ruengsamut, the head photographer of Amarin TV who was in charge of making “Uncle Pol”an overnight star through the over the top media coverage. In August 2020, he apologised for his actions and stated that he would no longer practice unethical news

reporting. One of the reasons for this unethical media practice was due to the need of revenue as media companies are struggling (Sukontaros, 2020).

In **Myanmar** during the first wave of lockdown from April to May 2020, journalists were exempt from the curfew and were allowed to leave their home to investigate and report from the field. This differs from the second wave of lockdown where on 20th of September the government announced that, except for banking and financial service, medicine and food supplies, all other businesses must close including the media. There has been a letter of request to exempt the media from people within the field, but no response from the government. Journalists have been relying only on footage on Facebook and other social media to report news which is insufficient. Journalists need to verify social media posts to prevent public panic from exaggerated or fabricated accounts online (Irrawaddy, 2020).

On 31 March 2020, **Vietnam News**, an English newspaper of the official Vietnam news agency, announced a 16 days halt in publication due to a journalist being diagnosed with COVID-19. The journalist caught the virus after interviewing the former French ambassador to Vietnam who was later diagnosed with COVID-19. This demonstrates the increased risk to media company operations during the COVID-19 having to halt printing. Even though the online version continued, the availability of staff and the ability to cover and verify news remains a challenge (Tuoi Tre News, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed independent media's vulnerability to the legal, financial and digital pressures. As news content moves from traditional platforms to the internet space, governments also shifted their attack on to dissident voices on digital platforms. Media freedoms have been compromised due to increased compliance to government requests, heightened practice of self-censorship, sustainability of the media businesses and the decreasing quality of journalism. As media freedom affects civic space, efforts must be undertaken by stakeholders to ensure media freedoms are protected.

## **6. Recommendations**

Given the impact on media freedoms, the recommendations in this section are aimed at encouraging stakeholders to take steps to ensure that the attacks on journalists, media organisations and the internet cease. Instead, stakeholders such as international organisations, governments, the media and civil society are encouraged to advocate for policy interventions that will increase media freedoms. In this way, we can ensure that civic space will not be encroached and instead protected and expanded.

### **International Organizations**

- Indicators and indexes which focus only on media freedoms should be expanded to incorporate freedom on the internet as a measurement to gauge also the state of civic digital space. While there has been a shift in tracking internet freedoms, more consistent and long term tracking is needed as media and civic actions shift online.
- Using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ICCPR, the Universal Periodic Review and the SDGs, states should be asked to demonstrate access to information, freedom of expression and privacy of data as part of their compliance to these instruments.
- The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion and other relevant special procedures should pay attention to digital rights and regularly send communique of infringements and request for visits.
- The United Nations, other intergovernmental organisations and international non government organisations (INGOs) actively lobby states to ensure media freedoms.
- In addition to assisting individual journalists attacked by governments and others on a case to case basis, work also on changing the structure of the law itself.
- Support increased regional cooperation among independent media.

### **Governments**

- Governments must pass and enforce legislation that prohibits politicians or other governmental figures from influencing media related business through ownership, lobbying, legislative attacks, etc.
- Ensure that state media is independent from government influence and any ruling party or group. State funded media must serve solely the interest of the public and not any political interest.
- Uphold the protection of journalists through legislation and action, regardless of their political association or criticism of government policies.

### **Media**

- Media companies must ensure their journalists adhere to ethics and report without bias.
- Support journalists and media workers in the training of digital skills which would allow them to adapt to digitalisation.
- Ensure the protection of employees including journalists and further assist individual journalists in trials and legal cases including financing and fundraising for court cases.
- Develop alternative revenue streams to avoid over dependence on any one stream such as advertising, international grants and government subsidies.

- Contribute to the creation of independent national media associations, where the protection of livelihood and rights of journalists and media workers are advocated.
- Join regional and international media networks to learn and support fellow journalists beyond national borders.

### **Technology Companies**

- Technology companies should maintain independence from political and governmental influence through their policies and ownership.
- Technology companies must take a proactive approach in combating issues of disinformation within their platform on an evidence based basis instead of only following an individual country's legislation.
- Technology companies should invest in developing methods and solutions that allow for their social media platform to be independent from governmental influence and control.
- Promote and support digital media literacy and work with the support of other stakeholders including government, media organisations and international organisations.

## 7. Conclusion

This report argues that media freedoms, especially internet freedoms, have become highly important and form part of the civic space in contemporary times.

The digital space has become the space, where civil society should be able to express their opinions on policies freely without any fear of prosecution or threats. However, in Southeast Asia, governments and political groups have been asserting their control over media and social media channels to direct content to support their own narrative. Their efforts to control this space by attacking journalists, media organisations and the internet has affected freedom of expression.

The act of limiting the media freedom within the region reached new heights in 2020 and 2021. Riding on the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities in Southeast Asia have taken advantage of the newfound support stemming from population's fear over the virus. COVID-19 temporary law and other related travel and health advisories have resulted in movement restrictions of journalists and obstructed their otherwise face-time reporting. Other actions such as the government clamp down on journalists and the news agencies that criticize its mismanagement of the COVID-19 situation, is another source of concern.

Firstly, international organisations can draw attention to issues of internet freedoms in their assessments on media freedoms. Secondly, the number of attacks on individual journalists in the region of Southeast Asia can be reduced through government, and law enforcement fully upholding the protection of journalists and media workers through legislation and action. Thirdly, the media companies can be members of independent media associations which support media workers if they are attacked or face other difficulties. Finally, technology companies can uphold freedom of expression principles instead of giving in to government demands and pressure to remove criticisms on their platforms.

The arrival of digital media including social media has given civil society increased avenues for the freedom of expression. However, this report has shown that governments are increasing their grip within these platforms. Hence, efforts must be undertaken to ensure media freedoms are protected to uphold civic space in Southeast Asia.

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List of figures

**Table 1: World Press Freedom Index (2016 to 2020)**

Countries	<a href="#">2020</a>	<a href="#">2019</a>	<a href="#">2018</a>	<a href="#">2017</a>	<a href="#">2016</a>
Brunei	152	152	156	156	155
Cambodia	144	143	142	132	128
Indonesia	119	124	124	124	130
Laos	172	171	170	170	173
Malaysia	101	123	145	144	146
Myanmar	139	138	137	131	143
Philippines	136	134	133	127	138
Singapore	158	151	151	151	154
Thailand	140	136	140	142	136
Timor Leste	78	84	95	98	99
Vietnam	175	176	175	175	175

Source: Report with Borders (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>)

**Table 2: Internet Freedom (2016 to 2020)**

Country	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Cambodia	43	43	45	48	48
Indonesia	49	51	54	53	56
Malaysia	58	57	55	56	55
Myanmar	31	36	36	37	39
Philippines	64	66	69	69	74
Singapore	54	56	59	59	59
Thailand	35	35	35	33	34
Vietnam	22	24	24	24	24

Source: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>)  
(0-39 Not Free; 40-69 Partly Free, 70-100 Free)

**Table 3: Censorship Score 2020**

Country	Score
Brunei	5
Cambodia	6
Indonesia	6
Laos	6
Malaysia	6
The Philippines	4
Singapore	5
Thailand	6
Vietnam	6

Source: Comparitech (<https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>)  
(10- most censored, 0 -least censored)

## **Abstract**

*COVID-19 & Media Freedoms in Southeast Asia: Attacks on Journalists, Media Organisations and the Internet* examines the impact of COVID-19 on media space in Southeast Asia.



Throughout 2020 and into early 2021, most countries in Southeast Asia have seen a steady decrease in their media freedoms. A review of the actions taken by governments and political regimes during the pandemic to silence criticism and control the national narrative in the media has by extension led to shrinking civic space in the region. The report recommends that to address this issue, international organisations increase its cooperation with the media; governments allow journalists and media organisations to critically report on policies; media organizations ensure the protection of journalists; and technology companies maintain independence from politics and government influence. This report builds on Asia Centre's previous report on *COVID-19 and Democracy in Southeast Asia: Building Resilience, Fighting Authoritarianism*.