



World Press Freedom Day 2025: Defending the Frontlines of Truth in Southeast Asia

JAKARTA/NEW YORK, 2 May 2025 — Ahead of World Press Freedom Day on Saturday 3 May, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) call for urgent action to safeguard press freedom and protect journalists across Southeast Asia.

As governments escalate efforts to control narratives, intimidate reporters, and manipulate technologies, journalism—and democracy itself—is under threat. Globally, near record-high numbers of journalists are [in jail](#), including many in Southeast Asia, with the media facing an unprecedented level of danger to do their jobs in keeping citizens informed.

“The freedom of the press is not merely a symbol of democracy—it is its very substance,” said **Mercy Chriesty Barends**, Chairperson of APHR and member of the House of Representatives of Indonesia. *“When journalists are silenced, citizens are kept in the dark. This World Press Freedom Day is a call to parliamentarians across the region to stand up, speak out, and defend the right to know.”*

“Journalists in Southeast Asia are on the frontline of resistance against authoritarianism,” said **Jodie Ginsberg**, Chief Executive Officer of CPJ. *“ASEAN governments must stop treating the press as a threat and start recognizing it as a pillar of democratic life. Journalists bring us news that is essential for our safety and stability, yet their ability to do so is facing an unprecedented level of attack.”*

Across Southeast Asia, journalists are under siege. The region remained one of the worst places for journalists, with at least 52 journalists behind bars on December 1, 2024, CPJ’s latest annual global [prison census](#) shows. Meanwhile the Philippines and Myanmar have consistently [ranked](#) as among the top offenders where murderers of journalists go free.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, leading independent news outlets such as [Tempo](#) and [Malaysiakini](#) face pressure for their groundbreaking work in exposing corruption and abuses. In the [Philippines](#), reporters face judicial harassment, digital attacks, and threats of imprisonment under cyber-libel laws.

In [Myanmar](#), the press has been crushed by the military regime, with journalists jailed, tortured, or killed. Similar crackdowns on media independence are unfolding in [Cambodia](#), [Vietnam](#), and [Thailand](#)—through laws that criminalize “fake news,” “defamation,” or vaguely defined threats to “national security.”

“Repressive laws are being used to disguise authoritarianism as legality,” said **Wong Chen**, APHR Board and Member of Parliament of Malaysia. *“What we are witnessing is a*

legal war on truth. Journalists who challenge power are being treated as enemies of the state, when in fact, they are defenders of public interest.”

The threats are also digital. Artificial intelligence is now misused as a tool of oppression, used to automate surveillance, generate deep fakes, and flood the public sphere with state-sponsored disinformation. Social media algorithms amplify propaganda while muting independent voices.

*“AI should serve the truth, not sabotage it,” said **Rangsiman Rome**, APHR Board Member and Member of the House of Representatives of Thailand. “Authoritarian regimes are using digital technologies to silence dissent in real-time. We urgently need ethical AI governance that protects freedom of expression—not undermines it.”*

Media independence is further eroded by the growing concentration of ownership in politically connected hands. Editorial policies are increasingly dictated by state-linked advertisers and elite interests, turning newsrooms into echo chambers of power.

*“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”, said **Arlene Brosas**, APHR Board Member and Member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines.*

APHR and CPJ call for:

- The formation of an inter-parliamentary alliance to uphold press freedom and resist the weaponization of law and technology against journalists;
- Stronger protection mechanisms for reporters, media workers, and whistleblowers facing threats;
- Reform of repressive legislation that criminalizes legitimate journalism under vague or sweeping charges;
- ASEAN’s active engagement in protecting press freedom and democratic space in the region.

*“Without press freedom, there can be no real accountability, no meaningful transparency, and no functioning democracy,” said **Angelina Sarmiento**, APHR Board Member and Member of Parliament of Timor-Leste. “We must reverse this dangerous tide through collective regional action—from parliaments to civil society and beyond.” ###*

About the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)

APHR is a regional network of current and former parliamentarians advancing human rights, democracy, and sustainable development in Southeast Asia. Established in 2004 and rebranded in 2013 to reflect broader regional challenges, APHR unites lawmakers from across the region to speak out against injustice, advocate for reform, and champion cross-border solidarity. With members from eight countries, APHR works through strategic partnerships,

international parliamentary inquiries, fact-finding missions, and public advocacy to spotlight urgent human rights issues and promote accountability. www.aseanmp.org

About the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. Founded in 1981, CPJ defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. www.cpj.org

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