



PRESS FREEDOM

IN SINGAPORE

WHAT IS PRESS FREEDOM?

According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has **the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.** Though Singapore's Constitution does not explicitly refer to press freedom, Article 14 guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression from which press freedom may be implied. This right however may be restricted as Parliament considers necessary or expedient.

In practice, press freedom means that journalists are able to carry out their work without threats to their safety, information can be freely published without disproportionate government interference.

WHY IS PRESS FREEDOM IMPORTANT?

Press freedom is essential to a functioning democracy where individuals are free to access information and make their own decisions. As founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew once said in 1955, "If you believe that men should be free, then, they should have the right of... free publication. Then, no law should permit those democratic processes to be set at naught."

The free press has been described as the "Fourth Estate" because of its role in keeping other institutions in society, such as the Government and large companies, in check. As former World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn puts it, "A free press is at the absolute core of equitable development because... if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus needed to bring about change."

HOW FREE IS SINGAPORE'S PRESS?

Singapore has been ranked very poorly on most press freedom indexes. In the most recent [2019 Press Freedom Index](#) by Reporters Without Freedom, Singapore was again ranked 151st out of 180 countries. In Freedom House's [Freedom of the Press 2017](#) report, Singapore was described as "Not Free" with a score of 67.

However, these indexes have been criticised by both Singaporean politicians and activists. As Professor Cherian George [noted](#), the Press Freedom Index is "methodologically and conceptually flawed" because it is based on respondents' subjective perceptions rather than a set of standards applied across countries. Nevertheless, there are obviously many restrictions on press freedom in Singapore, which the next page discusses.

RESTRICTIONS ON PRESS FREEDOM

LEGAL RESTRICTIONS

NEWSPAPER AND PRINTING PRESSES ACT

- Enacted in 1974, this Act allows a Minister to grant licenses to newspapers to operate in Singapore, which can be withdrawn as the Minister thinks fit
- No one can hold more than 5% of total votes attached to voting shares without approval by the Minister
- A permit is required for foreign publications to be circulated in Singapore
- The Minister may declare a foreign newspaper to be engaging in domestic politics and prohibit its distribution in Singapore

BROADCASTING ACT

- A license is required for the provision of any broadcasting services, such as TV or radio, in or from Singapore
- The Minister may proscribe a foreign broadcasting service if he is satisfied that its contents prejudices the public interest or offends against good taste or decency
- Online news websites that (i) report at least one article a week on Singapore news and (ii) are visited by at least 50,000 unique IP addresses from Singapore each month must post a performance bond of \$50,000 to operate

LAWS ON DEFAMATION

- Defamation includes libel (written) and slander (spoken)
- A person may be sued for (i) damages for civil defamation and (ii) prosecuted for criminal defamation under S 499 of the Penal Code
- Unlike other countries, the Singapore courts have rejected the "public figure" doctrine, which requires politicians or public figures to be more tolerant of criticism
- Instead, public leaders may demand more compensation because of "their standing in Singapore society and devotion to public service"

CALIBRATED COERCION

A concept developed by Prof Cherian George, "**calibrated coercion**" describes how the Singapore government has shifted from "blunter" instruments such as newspaper closures or arbitrary arrest to less overt methods of control and censorship. For instance, in the 1970s, newspapers like the Nanyang Siang Pau, Eastern Sun, and Singapore Herald were accused of involvement in "black operations" against Singapore's security and some editorial staff had been detained under the Internal Security Act.

Today, the press is effectively controlled by the regulatory framework as described above. Ideologically, the media is also viewed not as the Fourth Estate but as a constructive partner to the ruling government in nation-building, which has led the media to engage in serious self-censorship. Consequently, the Court of Appeal has described the media's role in Singapore as limited to "the traditional activities of reporting and commenting".

Journalists have also described the existence of amorphous "Out-of-Bounds (OB) markers", which they often discover only after they have crossed them. Furthermore, the lack of information in Singapore has resulted in some journalists being charged under the Official Secrets Act when they tried to engage in more investigative reporting.