

# Assault on civic freedoms persist in Asia and Pacific according to the CIVICUS Monitor

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**Findings based on data released today by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) which rates and tracks respect for fundamental freedoms in 196 countries.**

**People Power Under Attack 2018**, a new report released today by the CIVICUS Monitor shows that the state of civic freedoms in the Asia and Pacific region remains dismal. Out of the 23 countries in the Asia region, four countries are rated closed, six repressed and ten obstructed. Civic space in South Korea and Japan is rated narrowed, while Taiwan is the only country that is rated open. In the Pacific, the story is slightly more positive with seven countries rated open and two rated as narrowed. However, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru are being downgraded to join Fiji in the obstructed category.

“A staggering 94 percent of people in the Asia Pacific region live in countries with closed, repressed or obstructed civic space,” said Josef Benedict, Civic Space Research Officer at CIVICUS. “Activists are facing increasing levels of persecution in the region and the media is under assault. As governments seek ways to remain in power, citizens who take to the streets to seek changes are frequently met with violence and many are prosecuted.”

Nauru is being downgraded due the increasing restrictions on press freedom in the country. This is hampering independent scrutiny of Nauru’s policies and practices, especially of the Australian-run refugee detention centres on the island, where there have been widespread reports of abuse. As for PNG, media freedom continues to deteriorate there with journalists subject to harassment and attacks because of their reporting. Land rights, environmental and anti-corruption activists have also faced threats and arrests.

Our research reveals that censorship is the most common civic space violation in the Asia Pacific region, occurring in at least 20 countries. Censorship in China has increased under Xi Jinping with the government selectively blocking critical outlets and social media sites while North Korea continues to have some of the tightest censorship controls in the world. In Pakistan, the military escalated its censorship of the media ahead of the July 2018 elections while in Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen shut down dozens of news outlets in 2018 and ordered the blocking of websites.

“The Chinese leadership has devoted more and more resources to controlling content online to silence important voices advocating reform. Other tactics being used by governments - from Pakistan to Fiji - to control the public narrative include taking news channels off the air, intercepting the circulation of newspapers, blocking websites or intimidating and prosecuting journalists,” said Benedict

Other major civic space violations documented by the CIVICUS Monitor in the Asia and Pacific region include the detention of human rights defenders (HRDs), with large numbers detained in both China and Vietnam. Other countries where HRDs are detained include Myanmar, Thailand and India. Our research also documented civic space violations around peaceful protests in the

region including the prevention and disruption of protests; protesters being detained in 21 countries; and excessive or lethal force used in 16 other countries including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam.

Our research shows there has been a sharp decline in respect for civic space in Bangladesh, where repressive laws are increasingly being used to target and harass critics and journalists, and there has been a crackdown on freedom of peaceful assembly.

“Ahead of elections in December, serious threats to civic space remain a worry in Bangladesh, which has been on our watchlist since August,” said Benedict. “Scores of activists and government critics have been detained around protests and some are facing criminal defamations charges. It is crucial that the international community step up and call on the authorities to end its repression.”

Despite the bleak picture, some positive civic space developments have also been documented in the region. In June 2017, Mongolia passed legislation to protect the LGBTI community from hate crimes after relentless advocacy by civil society; political prisoners have been released in the Maldives following elections; while in the Solomon Islands, a new Whistleblowers Protection Act was passed in July 2018 that is designed to protect activists exposing corruption from reprisals.

A bright spot in our research on the region is Malaysia, where the change of government in May 2018 has resulted in some progressive steps towards enhancing civic freedoms. Scores of activists and other government critics facing prosecution under the Sedition Act and the Peaceful Assembly Act for expressing themselves or participating in peaceful protests have been acquitted by the courts or have had their charges dropped. The government has also committed to ratify international human rights treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and repeal or revise an array of restrictive laws used by the previous regime to silence dissent.

[Over twenty organisations](#) collaborate on the CIVICUS Monitor to provide an evidence base for action to improve civic space on all continents. The Monitor has published more than 1,400 [civic space updates](#) in the last two years, data which is analysed in People Power Under Attack 2018. Civic space in 196 countries is categorised as either **closed**, **repressed**, **obstructed**, **narrowed** or **open**, based on a [methodology](#) which combines several sources of data on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

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**For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact::**

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