

Concerns grow over press freedom, 'self-censorship'

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Taiwan's efforts to cement ties with China could undermine its vibrant media environment by skirting topics deemed sensitive to Beijing, observers say.

Concern has grown after Taiwan's ranking fell 23 places to 59th place in this year's press freedom index released by Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) last week.

The sharp drop has left Taiwan trailing behind Hong Kong, which came in at 48, as well as African nations such as Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso.

In one example of the problems Taiwan's journalists say they are facing, one reporter complained about pressure from the authorities when covering an exiled Chinese dissident's visit.

"They told me he's a 'bad guy' who likes to brag so why bother writing about him," the reporter, who asked not to be named, said. "They believe they are doing the right thing for the big picture, for the greater good in history."

While RSF said Taiwan's press freedom was not in danger, it attributed the downgrading partly to the ruling party's attempts to interfere in the media.

"The state must take action to improve records and prevent restrictions, violence or any sort of obstacle to the media freedom," said Vincent Brossel, head of RSF's Asia desk.

The index, based on questionnaires completed by hundreds of journalists and media experts, reflects press freedom violations that took place between September last year and August this year.

The government has denied interfering.

"We did not see any media being pressured for criticizing the government when it was not doing enough. The government humbly accepted the criticism," Cabinet Spokesman Su Jun-pin (蘇俊平) said.

Some observers and journalists say the RSF index is a warning of how far Taiwan is prepared to go to appease its giant neighbor.

"More media outlets are self-censoring on sensitive issues such as the Dalai Lama or Rebiya Kadeer by downplaying their coverage or focusing on negative angles," said Leon Chuang (陳冠中), head of the Association of Taiwan Journalists.

Beijing accuses the Dalai Lama of trying to separate Tibet from China and blames Kadeer for bloody ethnic unrest in her home region Xinjiang in July.

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It all comes down to business, as public and private sectors aim to cash in on China's economic clout, Chuang said, adding: "It is a threat to Taiwan's press freedom and diversity. If this persists, we will only be getting select coverage and one-sided stories."

Ties with China have improved since President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) became president but were strained by the Dalai Lama's recent visit. Beijing was also angered by screening of a Kadeer biopic but reportedly is planning to reward Taipei by signing a key financial pact after she was barred from visiting.

"We see political considerations weighing on the handling of news as the government makes the development of cross-strait ties its priority," said Lo Shih-hung (羅世雄), a media expert at National Chung Cheng University.

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