

Press freedoms in Taiwan have declined for a second straight year, according to a new report released by a US-based non-profit watchdog.

In its annual report on press freedoms around the world, released on Thursday, Freedom House ranked Taiwan as having the 47th-freest media environment, a drop of four places from last year and a dramatic 14-place drop since 2008.

In its rankings against other Asian countries, Taiwan dropped to eighth place this year, down from second place last year and first place in 2008. Other nations tied in rankings with Taiwan include Grenada, Papua New Guinea, Poland and Spain.

"Taiwan's media environment is one of the freest in Asia, with a vigorous and diverse press that reports aggressively on governmental policies and alleged official wrongdoing," the report said. "Nevertheless, a revival of 'embedded marketing' amidst economic difficulties resulting from the global financial crisis, actions by media owners and government influence over the editorial content of publicly owned outlets posed challenges for media independence during the year."

Among the issues mentioned in the report included a controversy concerning board members at the Public Television Service (PTS) and personnel changes the government made at state-owned media that "have raised concerns that their aim is to influence the editorial content of the nonpartisan outlets."

"Local media monitoring groups and international observers noted in 2009 that criticism of the government in the Central News Agency's [CNA] coverage appeared to have been markedly toned down since the end of 2008, when the former spokesperson for President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) electoral campaign was appointed as deputy president and CNA staff reported receiving editorial directives to alter certain content," the report said.

"Also of note was the influence of owners over the editorial content of media they acquire. After Tsai Eng-meng (蔡英孟), a businessman with significant commercial interests in the People's Republic of China [PRC] purchased the China Times Group in November 2008, a series of incidents in 2009 — including Tsai's own comments to the media — pointed to a subsequent change in editorial policy in the direction of softening criticism of the Ma administration, Beijing or improvements in cross-strait ties. This also raised concerns over the potential direct or indirect influence of the Chinese government on free expression in Taiwan," it added.

This issue was also raised in testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier this year given by Robert Herman, an official at Freedom House.

"As Taiwan's economic ties with the People's Republic of China increase and its market opens to greater Chinese investment, concerns over a potential increase in self-censorship on topics sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party have emerged," he said.

## Taiwan's press freedoms in decline, watchdog says

Written by Taipei Times

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Meanwhile, the Want Want China Times Group posted a statement on the China Times' Web site yesterday, saying that "the Want Want China Times Group will never alter its stance on defending press freedom and safeguarding freedom of expression."

At press time, there were no comments from the Government Information Office.

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