

‘Free’ local press has limitations: report

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Political polarization, self-censorship and indirect Chinese influence limit the diversity of opinions represented in Taiwan’s mainstream media, according to a new report from the US-based watchdog Freedom House.

The report, Freedom of the Press 2013, was released in Washington on Wednesday and generally gave Taiwan a high rating, but said that the legal environment had become slightly more restrictive over the past year.

“Taiwan’s media environment is one of the freest in Asia, with a vigorous and diverse press that reports aggressively on government policies and alleged official wrongdoing,” the report said.

However, during elections in January last year, observers noted the strong party affiliations of media outlets as evidenced by their preferential treatment of candidates, the report said.

“Attempts by tycoons with significant business interests in Taiwan and China to gain greater control of the media market during the year sparked protests from students, journalists and social activists who were concerned that press pluralism was gravely under threat,” the report said.

Nevertheless, Taiwan was judged to have a “free” press with an overall “freedom score” of 26 points, just one point less free than the previous year.

By way of comparison, Hong Kong was said to have only a “partly free” press, with Beijing’s interference intensifying.

China was said to have a “not free” press and to be home to “the world’s most sophisticated censorship apparatus.”

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Of the 197 countries and territories assessed, a total of 63 (32 percent) were rated “free,” while 70 (36 percent) were rated “partly free” and 64 (32 percent) were rated “not free.”

The analysis found that less than 14 percent of the world’s inhabitants lived in countries with a free press, while 43 percent had a partly free press and 43 percent did not enjoy a free press.

Norway and Sweden were judged to have the world’s freest press, with Taiwan sharing 47th place with four other countries.

In a commentary on the report, Radio Free Asia said that it was “especially troubling” that there had been a noticeable decline in Hong Kong’s media environment, “which may be interpreted as a distressing indicator of things to come.”

Freedom House said when releasing the report that the percentage of the world’s population living in societies with a fully free press had fallen to its lowest in over a decade.

Reasons for the decline included the increasingly sophisticated repression of independent journalism and new media by authoritarian regimes, radical Islamists and organized crime groups.

“The overall decline is also a disturbing indicator of the state of democracy globally, and underlines the critical need for vigilance in promoting and protecting independent journalism,” Freedom House president David Kramer said.

The world’s eight worst-rated countries were Belarus, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In these countries, citizens’ access to unbiased information was said to be severely limited and dissent was crushed through imprisonment, torture and other forms of repression.

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