

## Corruption in Thailand: The Media are Only the Messengers

*“In the absence of political will and adequate legal institutions, the press can have only a limited impact on corruption. The greatest hope is that continued press freedom will help feed a desire for the deeper institutional changes necessary to create a transparent and less corrupt society.”*

The media are generally seen as a key element in combating corruption. Evidence from rich countries shows a strong link between press freedom and the fight against corruption. By ensuring public awareness of corruption, free and independent media promote transparency and good governance. The media assist by focusing a spotlight on corruption and building a public consensus for improvement.

*The story in Thailand is not so simple.*

According to the results of international surveys, the level of press freedom in Thailand is one of the highest in East Asia. Among the East Asian countries surveyed by Freedom House, only Japan, Taiwan and South Korea had greater press freedom than Thailand, and these are all much richer countries.

Unfortunately international surveys also show Thailand to have high levels of corruption. This remains true after taking account of its income level, and even more importantly, its level of press freedom.

*Why do standard expectations about press freedom and corruption fail in Thailand?*

We seek some answers to this puzzle.

*Do the Thai media fail to investigate and report about corruption?*

A survey of six Thai newspapers over the past five years reveals many news reports on corruption.

Topping the list were reports on abuses of power by public servants, followed by corruption in government procurement. The next most frequent reports were on vote-buying and political influence in public sector appointments. Private sector corruption stories (accounting for only about a quarter of all corruption reports) involved embezzlement, corporate fraud, and some instances of media corruption.

*Do media reports have any impact?*

Despite many reports on public and private corruption, the media have had very little impact, at least as measured by public follow-up actions and especially by prosecutions of those

allegedly involved in corrupt activities. Very few of the cases reported over the past five years have resulted in serious legal investigations, court cases, or prosecutions.

A news report certainly is not proof of guilt. This is a matter for the legal system to determine. What is clear, however is that, relative to those reported, there have been very few cases pursued through the legal system, and Thailand remains burdened with a perception of relatively high levels of corruption.

*Why do the Thai media have so little impact?*

The key factor is the absence of well-developed social, political and legal institutions to deal with corruption. Exposure of corruption is helpful only if there is a political will and there are social institutions to deal with it. Thailand is still very much in its infancy in this regard. While its media are relatively well advanced, other institutions lag behind, as does the political will to do anything about it.

Several other factors limit the effectiveness of the Thai press.

Thailand has exceptionally low levels of press readership. Freedom to report on corruption is useful only if people read the news. In fact, international experience shows corruption to be more closely linked to press readership than to press freedom. Unfortunately, Thailand has a very low level of press circulation by international standards, even after taking account of her level of economic development.

While exposure to the electronic media might be greater, the freedom of non-print media is much more seriously constrained. The electronic media are tightly regulated. Whereas the print media are largely in private hands and enjoy some important constitutional protections, the allocation of radio and TV outlets is entirely controlled by government agencies, including the military. Unfortunately, the electronic media are the most important source of news for large portions of the Thai population.

Furthermore the Thai press is not as free as commonly thought. Despite new constitutional protections of freedom of speech and of the press (Articles 39 and 41), the press is still hampered by strong libel laws. Whereas libel laws are commonly employed against the press, recent constitutional guarantees have not been tested in the courts, and there is increasing concern about the influence of strong political and commercial interests on media conduct and content.

The simple link between corruption and press freedom – greater press freedom being associated with less corruption – applies only among rich countries. Among lower income countries the relationship is much more complex. In the absence of political will and adequate legal institutions, the press can have only a limited impact on corruption. The media are only the messengers. The greatest hope is that continued press freedom will help feed a desire for the deeper institutional changes necessary to create a transparent and less corrupt society.

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