

## PRESS STATEMENT

3 May 2025

### **World Press Freedom Day 2025: There Is Hope - Stop Backsliding and Move Forward with the Promised Reform**

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) commemorates World Press Freedom Day (WPF) 2025 by paying tribute to and honouring the tireless work of the journalists and media workers, and acknowledging the mounting challenges they face in upholding a free and fair press that serves public interest.

This year's WPF theme, "*Reporting in the Brave New World – The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Press Freedom and the Media*," resonates deeply with Malaysia's current media landscape. Notably, Malaysia has shown some improvement in this year's [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\) World Press Freedom Index](#) - rising to the 88th rank from last year's dismal ranking of 107. While this progress is a welcome sign, it must not mask the systemic constraints that continue to inhibit media freedom in Malaysia, particularly in the face of rising digital authoritarianism and the increasing use of AI in news production.

AI and other digital tools are rapidly becoming embedded in Malaysian media practices. Newsrooms are experimenting with AI for research, content generation, translation, and social media trend analysis. Outlets such as [The Star](#), [Astro Awani](#) and [Free Malaysia Today](#) have reportedly explored AI-assisted reporting to streamline workflows and expand reach. While these tools can help enhance efficiency and access to information, they also raise critical ethical questions about editorial standards, misinformation, transparency, and accountability.

This shift is even already affecting livelihoods: the layoffs at Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL), parent company of China Press, Sin Chew Daily, and Nanyang Daily, where [44% of staff](#) are being let go in favour of AI tools. It is within this climate and ecosystem that we have seen the job security and economic livelihood of journalists constantly threatened; with publications like [Malaysiakini](#), [The Malaysian Insight](#) and [Petra News](#) moving toward massive layoffs and downsizing as part of their economic viability and sustainability measures.

When economic expediency leads to AI being used as a substitute rather than a support for human-driven journalism, the public suffers the loss of contextual, ground-level reporting essential for participatory democracy.

Nevertheless, AI is not the only root of the problems plaguing Malaysia's media landscape. It lies in decades of authoritarian media control, opaque ownership structures, and legal harassment and intimidation.

The continued use of outdated and repressive laws like the Sedition Act 1948 and Section 233 of the amended Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 continues to chill freedom of expression. The passing of the Online Safety Act 2024 and potential amendments to the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1982 risk further entrenching government control over digital media under the guise of public safety and public morality. In 2024, Malaysia witnessed a persistent pattern of harassment and legal intimidation against journalists and media organisations. Cases such as the conviction of *Sarawak Report* editor [Clare Rewcastle-Brown in absentia for defamation](#) and police investigations into [Bloomberg's Ram Anand](#) illustrate how laws are increasingly used to suppress critical reporting. Journalists from [Free Malaysia Today](#), [Malaysiakini](#) and [Tamil media outlets](#) also faced legal threats when reporting on critical political controversies, while [DNS blocking](#) and the [suspension of Awesome TV](#) exposed deeper issues of regulatory overreach, opaque procedures and lack of media independence. These developments underscore the urgent need for comprehensive legal reforms and the adoption of a rights-based approach to protect press freedom in Malaysia.

Further, the growing influence of conservative values, on the basis of *race, religion and royalty (3R)* in society suggests a trend in how the government continues to wield existing laws to suppress the press. This was evident in the [disproportionate response against \*Sin Chew Daily\* over its printing error involving the national flag](#)—an incident marked by unrestrained nationalism and racism that ignored international human rights standards of legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality in restricting media freedom or freedom of expression. Malaysia’s governance must instead be guided by principles rooted in the public interest, not punitive nationalism or political expediency.

Reform however, is possible! The recent passing of the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) Bill marks a potential turning point. As an independent, multi-stakeholder body, [the MMC expected to be established in June 2025](#), could serve as an impartial mechanism to uphold media ethics, resolve disputes, and protect journalistic integrity. Coupled with the initiative by the [Legal Affairs Division under the Prime Minister’s Office to established a Protem Committee to draft the right to information \(RTI\) bill](#), the media would be better equipped to access public information and relatedly challenge disinformation and use AI tools ethically—strengthening public trust and media resilience.

As such, CIJ urges the government to move forward to lift the culture of fear and threats, and stop backsliding on their promises for reform. We must move towards creating a free, independent and enabling environment for media to ensure ethical, public interest reporting by initiating a comprehensive legislative reform of laws in line with Malaysia’s international human rights obligations and amend or repeal:

- Sedition Act 1948,
- Section 233 Communications and Multimedia Act 1998,
- Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984
- Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972,
- Section 203A, 298A, 500, 504 and 505(b) the Penal Code.

In the interim, a moratorium on the use of these laws is necessary while reforms are underway.

WPF 2025 is a call to action. Malaysia must move beyond symbolic improvements and invest in real, structural change. AI must be harnessed ethically, not as a cost-cutting replacement, but as a tool that complements and elevates public interest journalism. The MMC must be empowered to protect media freedom, and journalists must be supported, not silenced.

Only through a free, independent, and ethical media landscape can Malaysia build an informed society grounded in democratic values.

**You are invited to join us at the Media Freedom Day on 17 May 2025 at Gerakbudaya where we will be launching CIJ’s *Media Landscape Report 2024*. The event is organised by GERAMM and supported by CIJ. Further details will be announced soon.**

**3 May 2025**

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*The Centre for Independent Journalism is a feminist, non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free where all peoples will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek and impart information.*