

June 2nd, 2020

RSF to candidates and parties: “Mongolia urgently needs media reform to tackle corruption”

Ahead of Mongolia’s legislative election on June 24th, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) calls on candidates and political parties to voice their commitment to press freedom and, when elected, to push reforms supporting ethical journalism as the best way to tackle corruption.

In January 2019, more than 20,000 people braved temperatures well below freezing in Ulaanbaatar’s main square to protest against the endemic corruption that plagues Mongolia. As the June 24th legislative elections draw nearer, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international non-governmental organization defending journalism, insists that a free and independent media sector is capital to expose corruption and urges candidates and political parties to push reforms to support the expansion of ethical journalism practices in Mongolia.

Despite being sandwiched between China and Russia, two global powers well-renowned for their wide-scale use of censorship and propaganda, Mongolia has established a vibrant democratic society with a flourishing media sector: over 500 media outlets and 5,000 journalists for a population of just three million. But these media, whether state or privately-owned, remain under pressure from political and economic forces and suffer from imperfect legislation and enforcement. As a result, Mongolia has made no meaningful improvement in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index and ranks this year 73rd out of 180, which is the same rank it had when the index was created in 2002.

Most Mongolian journalists have to face three significant obstacles, namely: an abusive defamation law that creates self-censorship and resulted in dozens of steep fines for journalists, which the media protested in a nation-wide TV-blackout in 2017; an amendment this January that makes the publishing of “false information” a criminal act, further incentivising self-censorship; the absence of any legal protection for confidential sources’ anonymity, which discourages whistleblowers; and the lack of effective enforcement of newsroom independence. In December 2019, in a commendable effort towards transparency, legislators passed a law requiring all broadcast media entities to disclose their direct ownership, but it is not enough to fix the systemic problem of conflicts of interest.

The principle of “press freedom” must not be misinterpreted as the right of media owners to freely disseminate content that suits their interests. Like any other freedom, freedom of the press requests proper regulations and democratic control to be fully effective. Freedom of opinion and expression as protected by Article 19 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights needs the implementation of safeguards to promote independence, pluralism and trustworthiness of news.

With this in mind, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) urges Mongolia’s parliamentary candidates and political parties to support reforms that would embrace the five following directives:

1) to strengthen media ownership transparency and independence of the newsroom from the boardroom; 2) effectively protect journalists and their sources against any form of harassment (judicial, physical and online); 3) to drastically scale up public media resources and strengthen guarantees of independence; 4) to establish an independent and transparent process against disinformation outside of the executive’s control; and 5) to make media literacy an integral part of the education system.

This reform should be placed above partisan disputes and involve the media themselves as well as representatives of civil society. We recommend that it follows the guidelines set by the Forum on Information and Democracy and the standards set by the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), two programs initiated by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) with the purpose of promoting a free circulation of information in the world and the expansion of journalism norms and ethics.

We are convinced that such reform would allow Mongolia to fight corruption effectively. When journalists don’t have to fear retributive defamation lawsuits and when editorial departments have the ability to publish stories independent of political or commercial pressure, corruption will start to subside.

We sincerely hope that Mongolia will embrace this opportunity to strengthen its democratic system by establishing the excellence of its media environment while strengthening its international prestige.

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