

Japan Freedom of the Press Award: Shimbun Akahata

(Nominated by: Andy Sharp, *Nikkei Asia*)

Shimbun Akahata, the Japan Communist Party-run daily, played a pivotal role in uncovering the LDP's illicit political funding scandal, particularly on kickbacks within the party's factions. Their reporting, followed up later by mainstream media, shook Japan's political establishment – arguably leading to the downfall of one prime minister and the ruling coalition losing its majority in last October's lower house election.

Akahata's biggest scoop came during the election campaign when it revealed LDP HQ funneled 20 million yen to scandal-hit candidates running as independents.

Despite being dismissed as a party-affiliated publication, *Shimbun Akahata* has demonstrated journalistic integrity in holding the powerful accountable. Japan's mainstream media has long been hesitant to aggressively challenge the ruling party, partly due to reliance on exclusive press club access and a tendency toward self-censorship.

Their work is a testament to the vital role of independent watchdog journalism in Japan's democracy, and the FoP believes *Akahata* is worthy of the 2025 top award for the Japan category.

For reference:

<<https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/>>

<<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15060590>>

<<https://www.fccj.or.jp/number-1-shimbun-article/partys-over-or-it>>

<<https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/04/18/an-obscure-communist-newspaper-is-shaping-japans-politics>>

(Andy Sharp)

Japan Freedom of the Press Award (Honorable Mention): Hiroshima Peace Media Center

(Nominated by Justin McCurry, *The Guardian*)

The Hiroshima Peace Media Center's mission is to convey the horrors of nuclear weapons through the eyes of local people, including survivors of the atomic bombing. It also strives to inform younger generations through the involvement of local children, who work on articles alongside journalists from the *Chugoku Shimbun*, Hiroshima's daily newspaper. The center is a fitting recipient of the Japan FoP award on the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombing. The organization has come to renewed prominence amid growing security tensions involving nuclear powers, and ahead of the 80th anniversary of the world's only wartime nuclear attacks.

Launched in January 2008 by the *Chugoku Shimbun*, the center maintains a bilingual English-Japanese website with local and international news, special coverage of issues involving nuclear disarmament and proliferation, commentaries by prominent figures in the field, and an archive of content related to the world's first atomic bombing. The site offers a wealth of information to support the efforts of researchers, journalists, teachers, students, activists, lawmakers, and other peace advocates.

(Isabel Reynolds)

Justin McCurry's piece on the involvement of student journalists in the center's activities.

<https://www.fccj.or.jp/number-1-shimbun-article/pen-mightier>

Piece by director of the center:

https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc97_3.pdf

Freedom of the Press Asia Award: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation
(Nominated by David McNeill, *freelance*)

South Korea's media have been at the heart of the political turmoil that has gripped the country since the impeached president, Yoon Suk Yeol, declared martial law in early December. While the order was lifted after only a few hours, Yoon's attempted power grab had the media, as well as his political opponents, in its sights.

For the past four months, the South Korean public and the wider world have relied on journalists to tell the often-complex story of the aftermath of martial law in the face of fierce, and occasionally violent, intimidation from Yoon's supporters. The list of journalists who have found themselves on the wrong side of Yoon and his supporters is long, but one particular organization stands out for its fearless reporting: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation [MBC].

MBC reporters have continued to report with courage and an unshakable belief in facts-based journalism that has won them plaudits at home and overseas. When Yoon's supporters broke into the Seoul Western District Court earlier this year, they assaulted MBC journalists and stole their equipment. The incident reflected Yoon's contempt for the public broadcaster, the first media organisation to report his "hot mic" incident at the UN General Assembly in September 2022.

In a statement issued after the court violence, a defiant MBC said it "will never surrender to the forces of rebellion, just as it has stood up to the unruly powers that have continuously attempted to take control of the public broadcasting company". It is important to remember that MBC was also on a list of media that would have had their power/water supplies cut off had martial law succeeded.

Its refusal to give in to intimidation has earned it the respect of a large number of South Koreans. MBC's flagship programme MBC News Desk drew huge viewing figures ahead of the second, successful attempt to impeach Yoon, and the broadcaster continues to rank as the country's preferred source of TV news. As Gallup Korea commented: "Since the launch of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration in 2022, MBC has made significant strides."

For these reasons, MBC is a deserving recipient of the FCCJ Freedom of the Press Asia Award.

https://imnews.imbc.com/news/2025/society/article/6678619_36718.html

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/South-Korean-media-accuse-Yoon-of-eroding-press-freedoms>

<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250211001651315>

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-01-14/national/politics/Interior-minister-requested-help-in-cutting-power-water-to-leftleaning-media-during-martial-law-Fire-commissioner/2221875>

<https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10017150>

(Justin McCurry)

Freedom of the Press Asia Award (Honorable Mention): In-Depth Solomons

(Nominated by Elizabeth Beattie, *The Japan Times*)

This Solomon Islands-based news organization is a small, independent investigative journalism organization founded in 2023 by local journalists. They focus on stories other local media, including state-funded television media, underplay if not ignore. Though only two years old, they've scored some impressive results. A series of reports about a corrupt prime minister led to his decision to not seek re-election last year.

Given (1) the growing strategic importance of the Solomon Islands and the fact it's an underreported (in Japan at least) part of the Asian region; (2) concerns about how an increased Chinese presence will impact press freedom in a country where independent media are few and far between; and (3) the dogged efforts of the "In Depth Solomons" reporting team so far, especially last year's stories about a corrupt former prime minister, the FoP believes they are more than worthy of the 2025 Honorable Mention award for the Asia category.

For Reference:

<<https://indepthsolomons.com.sb/>>

<<https://ipi.media/investigative-journalism-solomons-islands/>>

(Eric Johnston)

Lifetime Achievement Award: Jiro Ishimaru
(nominated by Justin McCurry)

For over 20 years, Asia Press, a network of citizen journalists in North Korea, has been filing stories about Asia's most secretive and politically isolated nation. The reporter behind that network, Jiro Ishimaru, has taken considerable risks to maintain it, making reporting trips inside the north, traveling along the North's entire border with China where he liaises with reporters and colleagues, and interviewing hundreds of North Koreans inside and outside the hermit kingdom.

Asia Press has for many years been an invaluable source on everything from the inner workings of the Kim regime to life for ordinary North Koreans. Its reports on a famously impenetrable country, which regularly polls near the bottom of most press-freedom rankings, are widely cited in the western and Japanese media. Ishimaru avoids hyperbole and has been a consistently sober and accurate source of information for journalists in the region. Ishimaru likens the subject of his life's work to Japan's sick neighbor, a patient who "refuses to have its pulse checked". "I thought we could help our sick neighbor by gathering accurate information from inside North Korea and providing it to concerned parties on the outside so that they would know what kind of helping hand the patient truly needs. Trying to find both the diagnosis and the treatment was the very reason why we wanted to cultivate a group of journalists inside North Korea. We believed creating an information network connecting the people in North Korea with the outside world would help us understand what's wrong with our neighbor. In broader terms, we thought such an information network would in the long run help improve human rights and the daily lives of North Korean people, as well as ease tensions between the two Koreas and contribute to the peace and stability of East Asia."

He is a worthy winner of the lifetime achievement award.

References: <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/23year-old-homeless/>
http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/04/04/national/magazine-aims-to-report-on-reality-of-life-in-north/#S74quence_1
<http://www.thenation.com/article/156450/north-koreas-citizen-journalism>
[https://www.amazon.com/Books-ISHIMARU-Jiro/s?](https://www.amazon.com/Books-ISHIMARU-Jiro/s?pf_rd_p=80000000-0000-4000-8000-000000000000)