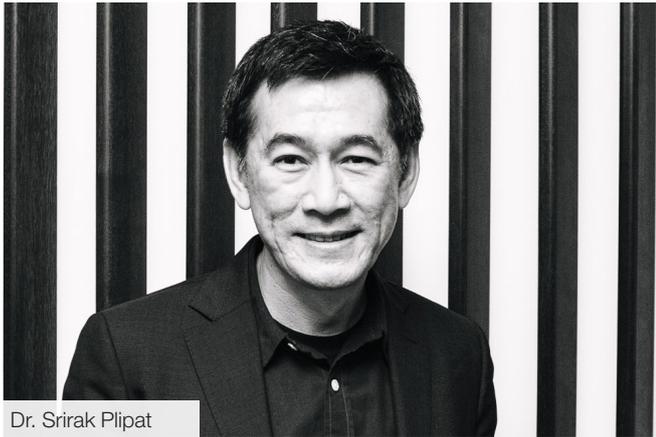


FREEMUSE: NATIONALISM IS BREEDING INTOLERANCE FOR ARTISTS' VOICES

By Wendy Mitchell



Dr. Srirak Pliapat

When we think of oppressive regimes that suppress artists' voices, we tend to think of them as remote outposts, not in the heart of Europe.

But the 2020 State of Artistic Freedom report from Freemuse found that the global region that puts artists in prison the most is Europe. Spain had 14 artists in prison in 2019, mostly rappers jailed for terrorism-associated charges or charged with insulting the Spanish royal family. Turkey and Russia are other dark spots in Europe in terms of artists' rights.

"We have to respond to the worsening situation in Europe," says Dr. Srirak Pliapat, Executive Director of Freemuse. "It's worrying that we are not swinging back to the right direction [with censorship]. We're going further in the wrong direction."

He explains, "A few years back, we started to see that artistic freedom has hit a new low. The traditional authoritarian regimes haven't shown improvement, and then Trump came into America and sent a message of nationalism, and silenced people. In Europe, more conservative nationalist politicians have gained seats in 14 countries. This nationalism politics has led to intolerance growing."

Roots in protecting musicians

This annual report is only one activity for Freemuse, a Copenhagen-headquartered independent international organisation advocating for and defending freedom of artistic expression. Freemuse tries to work with individual cases and also with "systemic work" including addressing national censorship boards in many countries; it wants to look at "root causes not just symptoms."

Freemuse now advocates for all kinds of artists, having grown out of an initial idea in 1998 to protect musicians from censorship, and expanded to other art forms in 2011. Also in 2011, Freemuse created its Advocacy and Campaign Guide to suggest practical actions that organisations and individuals can take to support artists at risk (<https://freemuse.org/advocacy/advocacy-campaign-guide/>).

Freemuse works to protect the right to artistic expression, as guaranteed by international human rights conventions, is respected around the globe. Freemuse also ensures that violations are monitored and violators are held accountable.

Some of Freemuse's work is public – some examples include the Let Women Sing initiative and supporting campaigns to free Pussy Riot or Oleg Sentsov – but some endeavours happen without fanfare. "We go public when we think it can be effective," Pliapat explains. "There are cases when you do advocacy behind the scenes."

"Many governments want to save face publicly," he adds. For instance, in Iran, Freemuse advocated for two musician brothers, Mehdi and Hossein Rajabian, to be released from prison in 2017. The government freed the brothers but "said they had never been in prison, saying they were 'in hospital'. We can live with that as long as they are out."

Pliapat worries things could get worse for artists' rights because of governmental power grabs during 2020's COVID-19 pandemic. "I think the initial indication has shown that after the pandemic, the world will go back even stronger on nationalism. Governments are telling companies and citizens what to do – and this is beyond the protection of public health in some places, Hungary for example... That will eventually come down to artists, who are told when they can or cannot express certain feelings."

Censorship on social media is another worrying trend, and Freemuse is "asking social media companies to be more transparent. We want to know how many artworks and films are being taken down, and what content is targeted and why." In just one example from 2019, Myanmar sentenced film director and film festival organiser Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi to one year in prison because of Facebook posts critical of the military and the 2008 Constitution.

Freemuse has met with the partners of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk and is currently "discussing how best to collaborate... it's great to have the Coalition off the ground," Pliapat says. He says the film world can learn from how the music industry has organised itself. "Musicians have had a longer tradition to organise themselves fighting for the rights of musicians, like with the International Music Council [set up in 1949]."

Freemuse of course works with many partners already, such as the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, Icorn, freeDimensional, PEN International, Artists at Risk Connection, Index on Censorship, Article 19, Arterial Network and Freedom Now, plus many local research and advocacy partners around the globe.

Pliapat, in addition to being a former director at Amnesty International, is a former documentary film producer and writer. Film is a unique art form that needs protecting in unique ways, he notes. "Filmmaking is a longer process when you compare it to other forms of art. When you tell a story on film, you tell it exactly how you want the audience to hear it. That's what makes film so powerful."

He continues, "You don't just listen for a few minutes, film allows people to think and have that change process of transformation, that's what makes film very special and a very powerful tool. That's why filmmakers can get in trouble. When filmmakers use films to ask questions about society, LGBTI rights for instance, in some places, society is not ready to have that debate. It shows how powerful films can be speaking to their audience. Films can change how people view the world."

UK-based Wendy Mitchell is editor of EFA Close-Up, contributing editor at Screen International and a consultant for the San Sebastian, Rotterdam and Zurich film festivals. Her website is filmwendy.com

FREEMUSE'S STATE OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM 2020 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Across all art forms

- **57** artists persecuted in **20** countries
- **44** artists threatened/harassed in **22** countries
- **28** artworks and venues destroyed/damaged in **15** countries
- **22** artists received travel bans in **11** countries
- **10** artists abducted, **9** in China and **1** in Zimbabwe
- **6** artists and audience members attacked in **4** countries
- **4** artists sanctioned/fined in **2** countries
- **352** acts of censorship in **73** countries
- **71** artists who were imprisoned in **2019** in **16** countries
- **85** artists detained in **27** countries

Film specific states

- **107** documented cases of film censorship in **31** countries
- **105** registered acts of artistic freedom violations against filmmakers and their works
- **62%** of film cases where violators were government authorities

How filmmakers and their works were violated:

- censored **73**
- persecuted **10**
- imprisoned **8**
- threatened/harassed **7**
- prosecuted **4**
- detained **2**

Censorship of filmmakers and films in regions

- Asia & Pacific **33%** (top 3 countries: China, India, Malaysia)
- Europe **23%**
- Middle East & North Africa **23%**
- North & South America **16%**

Main rationales for violations in film

- politics **38%**
- indecency **13%**
- religion **12%**
- LGBTI **11%**
- conflict **9%**



LGBTQI+ CENSORSHIP PARTICULARLY IMPACTED FILM IN 2019

ROCKETMAN, the biopic of musician and gay icon Elton John, was censored or banned in several countries in 2019. In June 2019, the film was banned outright in Samoa and Egypt. The film was released in Russia and Malaysia in 2019, but several of its scenes depicting kissing and sex between men were deleted.

Full report at <https://freemuse.org/news/the-state-of-artistic-freedom-2020/>

