



# IFJ BHUTAN COUNTRY REPORT: NAVIGATING CHANGE

23RD ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2024-2025  
**FRONTLINE DEMOCRACY:** MEDIA AMID POLITICAL CHURN



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# BHUTAN

**B**hutan has marked a pivotal milestone in the country's political landscape in recent years, characterised by a pronounced shift in voter sentiment and a high level of anti-incumbency awareness in the electorate. One of the country's oldest political parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), now leads the country having emerged victorious in both the primary and general elections of Bhutan in late 2023 and early 2024 respectively.

This key political transition saw the ousting of both the ruling party, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), and the opposition, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT). The DNT's abrupt exit can be attributed to several factors including public dissatisfaction with governance, economic struggles due to the Covid-19 pandemic and perceived failures to address critical social issues. The electorate's collective memory of the country's challenges during the DNT's tenure likely fuelled the anti-incumbency sentiment, prompting voters to seek a fresh alternative.

As Bhutan navigates its path in a rapidly changing political landscape, the electoral outcomes serve as a reminder that democracy is an ongoing process — one that reflects the people's will and demands continuous engagement, reassessment and a steadfast commitment to serving the public good. In this context, the role of the media as the fourth pillar of democracy, to inform and report in the public's interest, remains as vital as ever.

## A changing landscape

Since Bhutan transitioned to a democratic constitutional monarchy in 2008, significant reforms have been achieved in the media sector. In 2006, print media licensing was liberalised, leading to the emergence of 11 private newspapers, two magazines, and five radio stations, which enhanced public access to diverse news and entertainment. The 2008 Constitution also went on to enshrine right to information, freedom of speech, opinion and expression, creating a crucial environment for democratic dialogue in the country for the first time.

In a wider social context, the media has also played a significant role in promoting Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework both nationally and internationally, further contributing to public discourse that supports democratic values while seeking to maintain the nation's traditional culture. Radio, especially in remote regions, has been crucial in disseminating information and engaging a broad range of Bhutanese people.

But it has not all been plain sailing for the country's media. Bhutan's media landscape has faced considerable upheaval in recent years, driven by rapid technological changes, financial instability and a shortage of skilled personnel that has been marked by high attrition among senior journalists in the media industry.

The period from 2006 to 2011 is often referred to as a "golden era" for media expansion in Bhutan, but the industry has since experienced a steady decline, with the closure of five newspapers, three radio stations, and two magazines in the period since 2013. Market saturation, economic constraints, and government policies, such as the country's e-procurement policy - which requires all tenders and contract awards to be published via a government website - have significantly pressured the viability of print media in the country. Limited readership, coupled with Bhutan's small economy and scarce resources, continues to make it challenging to sustain mass media operations.

Currently, Bhutan's media landscape comprises seven newspapers, one television station, four radio stations, and three over-the-top (OTT) platforms. Notably, newspaper circulation has significantly decreased, and media outlets are facing high staff turnover. This industry instability further undermines the critical development of an experienced cadre of journalists reporting in the country, thus further compromising the quality and consistency of news coverage.

All newspapers have been transitioning to digital platforms, significantly reducing the number of print editions in circulation, and exploring additional online revenue streams. According to the Bhutan

Media Foundation, with a total population of under 700,000, there is now one newspaper for every 111,032 Bhutanese. The debate continues as to how many media outlets can be realistically sustained in the country, with some suggesting as few as three outlets – representing a huge drop from the current total of 15 outlets.

At the same time, the emergence of social media platform influence has also heightened the importance of journalism to serve as a watchdog against the dissemination of misinformation, rumours, propaganda and biased coverage. The arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is another concern yet to be tackled.

## Questioning press freedom

The challenges confronting Bhutan's media have been reflected in its declining position in the global press freedom rankings. In 2021, Bhutan was positioned 33rd out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, but its rating plummeted to 90 in 2023 and further deteriorated to 147 in 2024, placing the country now alongside nations like Turkey (145), China (146) and Saudi Arabia (148).

The decline shocked the industry and sparked demands from journalists, editors, and even government officials for a comprehensive review of the media landscape to identify its strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for change. Meanwhile others challenged the veracity of such rankings, considering that Bhutan is a relatively safe environment for media professionals and lacks the severe threats experienced by journalists in its neighbouring countries when it comes to violence or persecution.

In its assessment, the World Press Freedom Index highlighted the challenges for journalists of publishing investigative reports in Bhutan's confined media space, as well as noted online harassment campaigns by political activists using disinformation, defamation, and personal and/or racist attacks as a means to silence critical journalism in the country. It also highlighted growing bureaucratic obstacles, tighter controls on information, heightened self-censorship, and increasing government influence over the media as key influences in the ranking.

The fourth elected government, having been in office for just three months when the country's sudden decline in press freedom was reported, called for an examination of the media environment in the interests of transparency and emphasised its commitment to championing free and independent media. It also publicly urged the press to not shy away from critique and engagement, affirming its support for accountability to the people of Bhutan.

## Comprehensive review

Faced with a crumbling print media industry and declining content quality, media workers have pushed for a national assessment of media literacy in Bhutan, stressing the importance of education in media consumption in the face of changes to traditional media and the growing impact of social media platforms, including the rise of mis/disinformation.

Media and JAB leaders voiced that media literacy was vital for fostering a more informed citizenry capable of critical thinking on reporting and responsible engagement with media. Such an effort would also contribute to the development of a Media Perception Index for Bhutan.

In response to these industry concerns, the National Council of Bhutan (NC), began a comprehensive review of Bhutan's media landscape in late 2024. Also known as the House of Review, the NC comprises 20 elected members from the country's districts as well as five eminent members appointed by Bhutan head of state, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

The NC's Social and Cultural Affairs Committee was tasked with thoroughly reviewing Bhutan's media legislation and policies, assessing the impact of government interventions, exploring strategies for

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supporting independent journalism, and evaluating public perceptions of freedom and transparency. The review was also required to scrutinise the effectiveness of existing policies and the role of digital media in shaping Bhutan's public discourse.

In its final report released in November 2024, the NC emphasised that as Bhutan approached its 16th year of democracy, the state of the country's media was a vital indicator of the legitimacy of its democratic system. The review was the first parliamentary initiative to evaluate and propose measures to enhance Bhutan's media environment and address challenges surrounding freedom of expression in the country.

### Establishing an industry baseline

The state of Bhutan's working conditions for media workers is not fully known or reported. While Bhutan's constitution nominally guarantees the right of workers to form unions, including media workers, the right to strike is not legally protected. Workers may bargain collectively, and anti-union discrimination is prohibited.

With financial backing from the Department of Media, Creative Industry and Intellectual Property (DoMCIIP) within the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) has also undertaken an assessment of its own of the media landscape, including an industry-led opinion survey on journalists, journalism and the state of the media.

The data gathered from JAB's survey is due to be launched soon and will hopefully provide important insights into the challenges faced by journalists and the overall sustainability of Bhutan's media. It also aims to guide appropriate interventions by Bhutan's authorities and other stakeholders to improve Bhutan's press freedom ranking and address the overall media situation.

JAB said the comprehensive study was necessary to establish a robust baseline for future reference and identify systemic problems and challenges faced by media houses and journalists. Special focus was given to access to information, the legal and policy framework, and existing standard operating procedures for public information sharing.

It says a media impact study or assessment has not been conducted in the country since 2013. Previously, the government conducted assessments every five years.

### Toward greater transparency

Freedom of expression is guaranteed in Bhutan's Constitution, meaning journalists can hold government bodies accountable and they can openly report on issues when agencies or officials fail to share information.

Far from acting as 'mouthpieces', state-owned media outlets such as *Kuensel* and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service consistently publish critical assessments on the performance of the government and bureaucracy, evidenced by the frequency and intensity of critiques on various topics ranging from policy to public services.

Current regulations do not, in practice, hinder journalists from covering critical issues nor limit their access to information. The government frequently holds 'Meet the Press' sessions, where the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers engage directly with journalists, providing updates and addressing crucial questions. Additional inquiries directed at relevant ministers are also permitted beyond these sessions.

When responses to media requests are limited or information withheld, Bhutan's media workers retain the right to report such incidents, thus raising public awareness on the public's right to know.

In a bid to enhance access to information, DoMCIIP issued a standard operating procedure (SOP) on April 28, 2023, aiming to guide

government agencies in sharing public information with the media, outlining turnaround times for information sharing, despite certain exemptions. The National Council in November 2024 subsequently urged the government to remove all barriers to reporting and promote transparency and accountability while strictly implementing the SOP for information sharing.

Journalists have reported that too often media spokespersons or focal points are unavailable or lack the necessary knowledge on the information sought. "We've seen improvements in accessing information compared to previous years, although we still encounter occasional challenges with some bureaucratic or constitutional bodies," noted one senior journalist from a private newspaper.

### Supporting gender equality

Bhutan has a notable presence of women journalists in the media industry who make significant contributions to public discourse and are actively involved in covering a range of topics from mental health and women's issues to government policies and social injustices.

Although physical violence against journalists in Bhutan is virtually non-existent, the problem journalists face is more societal, especially for female journalists reporting from the field or facing social pressures around motherhood, for example. One senior female journalist from a print media outlet noted that: "Women reporters frequently encounter dual challenges in their work. The professional risks associated with reporting, such as harassment, threats, and censorship, are intensified by gender-based discrimination, which includes online harassment, limited access to sources, and obstacles to career advancement."

JAB has long underlined the importance of all journalists knowing their rights, duties and code of ethics as well as strengthening their professional skills. In 2024, around 25 women journalists from various media outlets as well as freelancers joined a three-day workshop from July 22-24, in Paro. The workshop titled "EmpowerHer: Amplifying the Voice of Women Journalists", aimed to support young to mid-career women journalists by providing comprehensive training in multimedia storytelling, investigative reporting, and digital media tools, along with mentorship and networking opportunities.

Out of the 155 members registered with JAB, 70 are women journalists, and 40 per cent of them are freelancers. Two female journalists were among the 14 recipients of the 2024 South Asia Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity, recognising their contributions to advancing gender sensitivity in South Asian media. Both winners, reporter Yangyel Lhaden and freelancer Damchoe Pem, are members of the JAB.

The country's Annual Journalism Award, held on May 3, 2024, also honoured two female journalists. Reporter Tshering Dema from *The Bhutanese* won the 'Most Promising Young Journalist of the Year Award', while Chencho Dema, senior reporter for *Kuensel*, won the 'Female Journalist of the Year' award.

### Way forward

During its 34th session in November 2024, Bhutan's National Council recommended the government urgently review and amend existing legislation, including the Information, Communications and Media Act, 2018, and the Copyright Act, 2001, to address the challenges and advancements posed by digital transformation in the industry.

Another pressing recommendation was the reassessment of Bhutan's Media Council. Originally established as an independent organisation in September 2019 under the provisions of the Information, Communications and Media Act of Bhutan, 2018, the council was



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subsequently closed in 2022. This followed the enactment of the Civil Service Reform Act of Bhutan, 2023, where the council's authority was then reinstated to the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA).

The NC recommendation was that a Media Council should complement the efforts of the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) in overseeing and regulating media. This includes addressing harmful, offensive, illegal or otherwise objectionable content in media.

The NC's House of Review recommendations also included the drafting and adoption of a national information and digital policy to ensure equitable access to accurate and reliable information, protect citizens' privacy and security online, and foster responsible digital engagement.

Seven other recommendations were also issued. These included the establishment of a clear and fair advertising policy for the allocation of public advertising, based on market principles focusing on reaching the intended audience rather than merely supporting the media, and creation of a venture capital framework and payment gateway for the digital economy. With all Bhutan's media outlets moving towards digitising their content, the lack of an international payment gateway like PayPal for Bhutan severely impacts the media's ability to generate additional revenue.

So too, the review recommended formation of a high-level committee with government agencies, media representatives and civil society to develop a five-year strategic roadmap to strengthen the role of media in governance in Bhutan, along with the industry's own desired review of current regulations which have not been updated to keep pace with changes in the industry, technology and society.

Concluding, the National Council maintained that the way to ensure a sustainable, transparent, and vibrant media landscape in Bhutan was by taking the lead in supporting the growth of a more professional and

responsible media, while maintaining an arm's length policy. Regular media development and impact assessments, and circulation audits would serve to ensure the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of media operations in the country.

The National Council is expected to follow up on these recommendations during the summer session of Parliament. A positive sign is that the current government has been advocating for greater transparency by encouraging its bureaucracy to share the public's right to information via regular press conferences with the media.

This document has been produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN).

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The online report also includes full country reports for the region, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2024 to April 2025.

**Online report: [samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25](http://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25)**

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Front cover: Since Bhutan transitioned to a democratic constitutional monarchy in 2008, significant reforms have been achieved in the tiny country's media sector. But in 2024, the government and media began reviewing its media legislation and policies to seek redress to press freedom criticisms.  
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