



FRONTLINE DEMOCRACY

MEDIA AMID POLITICAL CHURN



CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Overview	5
SPECIAL REPORTS	
The Media Gig Economy	14
Changing Political Narratives	20

The full IFJ South Asia Press Freedom Report 2024-25 is available at: <https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25>

The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, 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.

PDFs of country chapters are also available from each country page.

SUPPORTED BY:



This document has been produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSNN).
Afghan Independent Journalists’ Association
Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum
Federation of Nepali Journalists
Federation of Media Employees’ Trade Unions, Sri Lanka
Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka
Indian Journalists’ Union
Journalists Association of Bhutan
Maldives Journalists’ Association
National Union of Journalists, India
Nepal Press Union
Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association

South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSNN)
– Defending rights of journalists and freedom of expression in South Asia. samsn.ifj.org/

Editor: Laxmi Murthy
Executive Editor: Jane Worthington

Special thanks to:	Shreya Raman
Ujjwal Acharya	Adnan Rehmat
Naif Ahmed	Geeta Seshu
M Abul Kalam Azad	Marvi Sirmed
Subhechhya Bindu	Samim Sultana Ahmed
Shakila Esaqzai	John Troughton
Pulack Ghatack	Siana Upreti
Dilrukshi Handunnetti	Rinzin Wangchuk
Sabina Inderjit	
Khairuzzaman Kamal	SAPFR Editorial Review
Will McManus	Panel 2025:
Hujatullah Mujadidi	Mazhar Abbas
Ghulam Mustafa	Anuradha Bhasin
Ahmed Naish	Zaheena Rasheed
Lubna Naqvi	
Alexander Oluk	

Designed by: LX9 Design

Images: With special thanks to Agence France-Presse for the use of images throughout the report. Additional photographs are contributed by IFJ affiliates and also accessed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Licence and are acknowledged as such through this report.

Cover Photo: Mass national protests took over Pakistan following controversial new amendments to Pakistan’s Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) activists and leaders march in protest in Karachi on January 28, 2025. The widely condemned amendments criminalise ‘fake news’, restrict online expression, and broaden government control over media. CREDIT: SHAHID GHAZALI

Contents Photo: India’s media workers continue to face heavy challenges, including violence, concentrated media ownership, and political interference with the country ranked 159 of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. Police and media personnel pictured through the windows of a burnt vehicle at an accident site in New Delhi on May 26, 2024. CREDIT: ARUN SANKAR / AFP

UNESCO is pleased to support the South-Asia Press Freedom Report 2024-25 with limited financial assistance. However, since this report has been independently developed by the International Federation of Journalists, Asia Pacific, therefore, UNESCO has no influence over the content. The author(s) will be responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in the paper and for the opinions expressed therein, which will not be necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material throughout this book will not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers and boundaries.

CC-BY-SA license

Open Access is not applicable to non-IFJ copyright photos in this publication.

FOREWORD

There is no doubt that democracy in South Asia is facing a severe and troubling downward trajectory and, with it, an enormous crisis in collective political confidence.

Everywhere we look, nations are struggling not just to get the balance right but they are defaulting their citizens in democracy's fundamental fora – to respect basic human rights, to give clear regard to the rule of law, to value all people equally, to tolerate differences and opposing ideas and – importantly for the media – to allow true freedom of speech, association and belief.

A quick walk around the national headlines gives a pretty clear picture.

Under the strong arm of military control and its dominance over the country's political sphere, Pakistan is for all intents and purposes an authoritarian regime operating under the guise of democracy. Afghanistan remains shut down internally and locked off from the world under the ongoing repression and international isolation wrought by the Taliban regime. India's ever-increasing polarisation has the world's largest democracy precariously exposed to the whims of misinformation, state sanctioned propaganda and viral outpourings of hate speech. Bhutan may guarantee freedom of speech, but the situation on the ground remains constrained and fragile. Nepal's political instability and policy stagnation is fueling broader social discontent and a return of a determined and aggressive pro-monarchy movement. The Maldives is again tipping precariously toward unchecked state power via a heavily weakened opposition. Sri Lanka's ongoing penchant for restrictions and disruption of civic rights and its systematic failure to address past crimes remains a critical concern, even despite the political departure of the country's entrenched dynastic rule. And lastly, there is Bangladesh – an enormous democracy standing on extremely shaky ground after a mass popular uprising brought down the brutal dictatorship of Sheikh Hasina.

To say things are precarious in South Asia is a vast understatement. As for the media, the situation represents an even more formidable and perilous frontline.

In this report, **Frontline Democracy: Media Amid Political Churn**, we break down the complexities and challenges of an industry that is endeavouring to find level footing and steady ground in democratic spaces riven by political challenges and massive economic and civil disruption.

We also outline how the ongoing collapse of revenue streams and the fact that too many media houses remain compromised and over reliant on revenue from government advertising, means that too many journalists also remain unpaid while still working.

While the ever-expanding digiverse continues to offer immense opportunities for journalism and its potential to expose corruption and human rights violations as well as challenge mainstream and official narratives, the big question remains – how does it sustain? With so much of South Asia's media also in the midst of a fight for financial survival due to the drastic industry transformation, the stakes for democracy remain exceedingly worrying.

It is true that the rise and rise of the growing gig economy continues to have a profound impact on the way journalism in South Asia is being created and shared. While it is generating incredible opportunities for investigations, storytelling, monetisation and using secure channels to publish vital news in closed political spaces, it is also leading media workers into a world of contracts, precarious work, freelancing and unstable work with little or no job security. At the same time, the increasing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the industry continues to play out, destroying traditional media jobs with a flick of a key.

Compounding the financial challenges is the ongoing safety and security situation confronting South Asia's journalists and media workers both online and offline. From May 1, 2024, to April 30, 2025,



The ousting of iron-fisted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh had ripple effects across the region and strained ties with neighbouring India. After the embattled leader fled to India, the post-Hasina power vacuum also led to increased violence against members of the Hindu minority community. A vendor hangs a newspaper along a roadside in Hyderabad, India, on August 6, 2024. CREDIT: NOAH SEELAM / AFP

IFJ and its affiliates recorded around 250 media rights violations against media workers across the South Asia region. Targeted killings of journalists rose dramatically as violence escalated, up from eight deaths in 2023-24 to 22 killings in 2024-25, with Pakistan leading the tally with nine journalists murdered, Bangladesh with six and India with five. Bangladesh had the highest total number of violations amid its national wave of protests with at least 67 violations recorded, followed by Afghanistan with 48, Nepal with 41, and Pakistan with 35.

In this climate, the collective voice of industry unions is ever more critical.

Importantly, this report tells the story of how journalists and their representative bodies continue to fight for journalists' rights, wages and working conditions and how they are also standing up against increasingly authoritarian governments and calling them to account.

In every country, journalists and media activists continue to push back on this democratic frontline. Here they prevail and endeavour to find solutions to complex problems by forming alliances and working with civil society to establish stronger protections for media workers and drive future industry viability through the sharing of ideas and strategies.

With misinformation and disinformation now the number one risk facing the world, the imperative is evident that South Asia's media must remain the watch-dog to these fragile democracies. And journalists must continue to play the crucial role in shaping public opinion, disseminating facts and vital information and holding the power to account, while also supporting the process of political participation and public mobilisation.

But importantly, we must underline, there can be no robust fourth estate if there is no decent work for media workers. These brave and important people cannot sustain without a living wage. And there can be no democracy without them. This is the most critical frontline.

Jane Worthington
Director
IFJ Asia-Pacific

Read the full report **Frontline Democracy: Media Amid Political Churn** including country chapters and interactive violation listings online samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25



OVERVIEW

A TURBULENT YEAR

South Asia witnessed tremendous change over the past year – via transformation effected through electoral ballots, as well as feet on the ground. Student movements and everyday citizens were among those leading phenomenal pushbacks against entrenched authoritarian regimes, voting out incumbent governments and expressing unified dissatisfaction with misgovernance, corruption and overreach. Amid the upheaval, the media played a critical role in amplifying people's aspirations and speaking truth to the powerful.

The most dramatic political landscape transformation was the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of **Bangladesh**, when an immense student-led uprising brought to an end her increasingly iron fisted rule. Hopes are now pinned on the country's new Chief Adviser Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus to help rebuild state institutions, revive the economy, restore human rights and press freedom and combat deeply entrenched communal polarisation and a newly emboldened right-wing.

In **Sri Lanka**, the natural next step on from the people's movement of 2022 came with a major political shift achieved through the ballot in the September 2024 presidential election. The victory of Anura Kumara Disanayake, of the left of centre National People's Power (NPP) or Jathika Jana Balawegaya, followed by the party's definitive victory in November's parliamentary elections signified a departure from the country's deep-rooted dynastic rule under the Rajapaksa family, characterised by authoritarianism, corruption and economic chaos. The new president, known widely as AKD, has cast himself as a disruptor to the status quo for his anti-corruption platform and pro-

poor policies in the wake of the country's worst ever economic crisis, which is still having an impact on millions.

In **Pakistan**, political instability and intervention by the military apparatus in virtually every area of public space, was clearly evident during and following the national election in February 2024. Fraught with political repression and violence, the national elections were heavily tainted by allegations of rigging, voter suppression and technicalities that resulted in the deregistering of one major political party. When a post-election alliance brought to power two dynastic parties that had won fewer seats individually, the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) took to the streets in months-long, and often violent agitations that left many dead and injured. Ranked at 124, Pakistan's democracy ranking fell by six spots in the year to be listed among the top 10 worst performers in the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit released in February 2025. The Democratic Index now firmly terms Pakistan as no longer a democracy, but an authoritarian regime.

In **Bhutan**, a quiet but firm political upheaval resulted in the country decisively voting out the incumbent government and choosing to unequivocally place faith in one of the country's oldest political parties, the 18-year-old People's Democratic Party (PDP). The role of the media in voter literacy in a country where about half the population is under 25 years old, cannot be underestimated.

The atoll nation of the **Maldives** saw a peaceful transfer of power via the ballot, with the parliamentary elections of April 2024 again ushering in a government of the ruling People's National Congress

Supporters of the victorious Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) celebrate as the country's general election results are displayed live at the party's office in Bengaluru on June 4, 2024. CREDIT: IDREES MOHAMMED / AFP

with a thumping majority. While the electorate's message was in favour of stability, a weakened opposition has raised concerns about arming the new president, Mohamed Muizzu, with both executive and legislative control. Unchecked power has never boded well for freedom of the press, particularly in the case of the Maldives.

The **Indian** electorate returned the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power with a reduced majority. But hopes that the diminished numbers would temper aggressive and non-consultative policies have not been upheld.

Instability and shifting coalition dynamics marked **Nepal's** political scene in the past year. A fragmented parliament with no clear winners after the election in January 2024 ultimately led to KP Sharma Oli forming a coalition government with the centrist Nepali Congress in July 2024. It marks his fourth tenure as the country's prime minister. But fragile alliances and ongoing political instability in the country, including a resurgence of a pro-monarchy movement, have so far plagued attempts at legislative action, including long awaited amendments to policies and laws related to the media.

Amid the hope engendered by political change in its neighbourhood, **Afghanistan's** media faced yet another year of plummeting press freedom with the country now sitting just two places from the bottom of 180 countries in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index. Hard fought achievements over recent decades on access to information, media funding and viability, as well as gender equity and plurality are now all but erased. Yet Afghan journalists continued to cling tenaciously to hope, endeavouring to operate within a media landscape of heightened restrictions, especially for women.

Unfree digiverse

Across the region, the digital space continued to offer immense opportunities to expose corruption and human rights violations and challenge mainstream and official narratives. Online editions of mainstream media, as well as individual journalists, bloggers, podcasters and YouTubers have now claimed and marked out a critical space online. The problem remains, however, with maintaining professional standards and editorial verification processes.

In Pakistan, the passage in January 2025 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act (PECA) was met with vehement protests, hunger strikes and demonstrations across the country. Ostensibly created to combat 'fake news', the law has been termed "draconian" and an assault on free speech. Amended provisions to allow third-party legal entities to lodge complaints with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), raised concerns about suppression of dissent.

In February 2025, during her visit to Pakistan, IFJ president, Dominique Pradalie joined union leaders in a protest march in Islamabad against the controversial amendments to the PECA Act, urging Pakistani authorities to uphold freedom of expression, and repeal the PECA Act.

India globally ranks second after China in terms of internet users, now estimated at more than 806 million individuals. With social media user penetration at 34 per cent, the elections to parliament and several state assemblies in 2024 presented an opportunity for social media to fill gaps that mainstream media seemed hesitant to cover. The massive surge in digital advertising spending testified to the role of social media marketing, with the total election budget for political parties collectively reaching INR 13,000 crore (approximately USD 1.5 billion) across various media platforms. The ruling party had the most prominent online presence, using social media and artificial intelligence (AI) driven tools and influencers in its election campaigns. But other parties are fast catching up. These new avenues for dissent were also spaces that strongly peddled misinformation.

The Global Risks Report 2024, released by the World Economic Forum, currently ranks misinformation and disinformation as the number one risk now facing the world. Distorted and manipulated information, which has become increasingly easier with AI enabled tools, will continue to have far reaching impacts, it warns.

Reflecting the global trend, alarmingly though not unexpectedly, social media platforms in India were also used to spew hate and

In Pakistan, the passage in January 2025 of the controversial amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act was met with vehement protests, hunger strikes and demonstrations across the country.

polarise communities. A report 'Social Media and Hate Speech in India' of the Centre for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH), identified Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) as key drivers enabling, amplifying, and mainstreaming hate speech and extremist ideologies, spreading Hindu nationalist ideology and anti-minority rhetoric.

Government overreach and control was visible in the number of takedowns of YouTube – the highest globally over the last three months of 2024, for ostensibly violating "community guidelines". 'Sahayog', a portal launched in March 2025 to facilitate co-ordinated action on cybercrime, has come in for criticism by some of the major platforms. Elon Musk, owner of social media platform X has termed it a tool of censorship and refused to join the portal.

In another small pushback, on September 20, 2024, the Bombay High Court struck down the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023, which allowed the Central Government to form a Fact-Check Unit to identify online content regarding government business as "fake, false, or misleading".

Internet shutdowns continue to be another way of turning off the switch on information sharing that is unpalatable to governments. According to digital rights advocacy group Access Now, for the first time since 2018, India with a total of 84 internet shutdowns in 2024 was not ranked first in internet shutdown orders, following Myanmar this year with 85 shutdowns. Shutdowns were done on various pretexts: communal conflict, protests and instability, to prevent cheating in exams, and elections, with Manipur and Kashmir facing the highest number of shutdowns.

In Pakistan's elections there was a significant shift toward social media for campaigning, alongside traditional rallies and meetings. But the proliferation and ease of dissemination came with attendant problems of extreme polarisation, trolling and abuse. Disinformation and deepfakes muddled the waters and invited typical government responses of bans and suspensions of platforms and slowing down internet services.

During the Sri Lankan parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024, digital platforms became vehicles for misinformation and online abuse, with the Election Commission as well as tech giants standing by helplessly. Women candidates were exposed to malicious social media attacks, undermining their right to public office.

Is AI the future?

The rapid entry of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in newsrooms in South Asia has forced a hasty appraisal of its possibilities and challenges. 'Media Metamorphosis: AI and Bangladeshi Newsrooms 2024', a study conducted by the Media Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) found that, while 51 per cent of journalists have utilised AI tools, only 20 per cent of news organisations have institutionalised its use. ChatGPT was the most popular tool, accounting for 78 per cent of all usage.

While the impact of AI in Indian newsrooms has yet to be studied systematically, there is no doubt that India saw a spike in demand for services from AI content agencies, with political parties estimated to have spent over USD 50 million on AI-generated campaign material in 2024.

AI may not have taken off yet in Sri Lankan newsrooms, but in May 2024, state broadcaster Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) made history by using two AI versions of Chaminda Gunaratne and Nishadi Bandaranayake, two of SLRC's most popular news



Amendments to Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) were met with nationwide protests by journalists and freedom of expression activists. The PECA law presents a clear battleground for the media with the amendments effectively criminalising online disinformation. Leaders and activists of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists protest in Karachi on January 31, 2025. CREDIT: RIZWAN TABASSUM / AFP

anchors, taking a significant step in the use of AI tech in Sinhala language newscasting.

Newsrooms in Pakistan are increasingly using AI to enhance professionalism, but the impact of this transition on jobs and the media economy has yet to be systematically studied. The first country in South Asia to introduce a policy and legal framework to promote ethical and responsible use of AI is Pakistan. The country's Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications released a draft National AI Policy in May 2023, while the Senate introduced the "Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Act 2024," to regulate AI, mitigate associated risks, and penalise violations.

But even as governments and other stakeholders in South Asia confront the challenges of AI, make policies and draw up legal guidelines, one thing is clear: any regulatory framework must be undergirded by the ethics and morality of social justice and be strongly informed by the media sector as a key stakeholder.

A deathly toll

Reporting on the people's uprising in Bangladesh came with a heavy price. Security forces shot dead four journalists and one was hacked to death by anti-government protesters in the three weeks of mass uprising in July 2024.

Pakistan bore witness to the most violent year for journalists in the country in two decades with eight journalists killed in the period under review. Most were shot by unidentified assailants, and one was caught in sectarian crossfire while reporting. The rapid declines in journalist safety and the high death toll once again places Pakistan as the deadliest country in Asia-Pacific for media workers.

The horrific murder of Mukesh Chandrakar in Bastar in Central India illustrated the hazards of reporting from conflict zones and exposing corruption. Abducted, murdered and buried in a septic tank,

his body was discovered on January 2, 2025.

In Nepal, cameraperson Suresh Rajak of Avenues Television was burnt to death on March 28, 2025, while reporting atop a building in Kathmandu set alight by protestors during a violent pro-monarchy demonstration. The case once more underlined the real and present dangers for media workers on the frontline of political protests and civil unrest.

Righting wrongs

The mighty task of tackling ever increasing levels of impunity for crimes against journalists and media workers has so far eluded most governments of South Asia. Even in the stronger democracies, a failure to bring such perpetrators to justice is a blight that continues to plague the region.

The interim government in Bangladesh is now confronted by the expansive debris of human rights violations left by Sheikh Hasina's government. A 2025 report by the UN Human Rights Office estimates the number of deaths during the uprising at around 1,400 – around 13 per cent of them children – and thousands more injured between July 15 and August 5, 2024. A significant majority was shot by security forces. The report pointed to a media blackout enforced by the intelligence and security agencies through fear and intimidation to suppress news of the brutalities on the ground. "There are reasonable grounds to believe hundreds of extrajudicial killings, extensive arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture, were carried out with the knowledge, coordination and direction of the political leadership and senior security officials as part of a strategy to suppress the protests," it said.

In August 2024, on the tenth anniversary of the enforced disappearance of blogger Ahmed Rilwan, human rights and press freedom groups called on the Maldives' new government to publicly



On the tenth anniversary of the enforced disappearance of blogger Ahmed Rilwan, human rights and press freedom groups called on the new Maldives government to publicly disclose the long-demanded findings of a deaths and disappearances commission set up in 2019.

Repeated investigative failures continue to deny justice for Maldivian blogger and journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, who was forcibly disappeared by extremists on August 8, 2014. On the tenth anniversary of his abduction and murder, the Maldives Journalist Association (MJA) called for justice and a public enquiry. Impunity for the crime has prompted continued self-censorship in the media. CREDIT: MJA

disclose the long-demanded findings of a deaths and disappearances commission set up in 2019. The tardy prosecution in this pivotal case of key national interest has undoubtedly prompted continued self-censorship in the media regarding any matters that might be termed as anti-Islamic.

Small steps were taken to tackle impunity in Nepal with the passage in August 2024 of an amendment to the Enforced Disappearance Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act. Nepal saw the killings of 23 journalists during its decade-long insurgency (1996-2006), and proper investigation and action against perpetrators is still awaited. However, the amendment is unlikely to provide adequate justice to the families of the killed journalists due to loopholes and inconsistency with international law. The global civil society alliance CIVICUS has currently rated the civic space in Nepal as 'obstructed' on account of continuing violations of civil rights including arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force and the targeting of journalists.

The struggle for justice for Sri Lankan cartoonist and journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda who was abducted and forcibly disappeared in 2010 continues. Likewise, 16 years on from his murder, justice continues to elude Lasantha Wickrematunge, the slain editor of *The Sunday Leader*. Following public protests, Sri Lanka's Attorney General revoked his own recommendation to release three suspects linked to the journalist's murder. Among other long-running cases of killings and attacks documented during the war, criminal investigators finally arrested two ex-army intelligence personnel in connection with the abduction and torture of senior journalist Keith Noyahr in May 2008.

In March 2025, the Sri Lankan government tabled the long-suppressed 'Batalanda Commission Report' in Parliament, addressing alleged state-sponsored human rights violations, including illegal detentions and torture, during the 1988-1990 period of civil unrest. While the timing of the tabling of the report has been questioned, it allows hope that accountability for decades-old crimes may be fixed. The wheels of justice indeed turn slowly.

The civil war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, but its repercussions continue to be felt. Tamil journalists are still singled out for harassment by both state and non-state actors. Evidencing this, journalists from the North of the country presented a memo in June 2024 to the UNHCR in Jaffna calling for a UN-led process to

monitor violence against journalists in the country. Responding to government edicts prohibiting memorials to Tamil journalists and human rights defenders, in May 2024, Amnesty International issued a statement calling for justice for war victims and the right to mourn and to memorialisation. In northern Sri Lanka, the Mullaitivu Media Forum marked the 24th anniversary of the killing of senior Jaffna-based journalist Mylvaganam Nimalrajan, calling for an international investigation into crimes against journalists. It emphasised that the lack of closure perpetuated impunity and enabled perpetrators to continue without any fear of reprisals.

Attacking the messenger

Sheikh Hasina's dramatic exit from Bangladesh further emboldened opposition-supported miscreants to target journalists, particularly in areas outside the capital, Dhaka. As many as 99 journalists were injured in 51 separate incidents through to March 2025, with 47 attacks outside of Dhaka, mostly by members of the Bangladesh National Party and the Jamaat-i-Islami.

According to estimates by the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), almost 300 journalists and media workers were injured in 2024, many of them shot amid the country's rising wave of protests. Anger over news coverage led mobs to go on a rampage against individual journalists. Press clubs, newspaper offices and television studios were also attacked, equipment destroyed, broadcasts halted, and staff intimidated. The full number of these attacks is not known.

In Afghanistan, the AFJC recorded at least 172 violations against journalists and media outlets for the year up to March 2025. Its reporting highlights a 24 per cent increase in media rights violations compared to the previous year and reflects the worsening conditions for journalists and media organisations, as restrictions on press freedom continue to tighten. Meanwhile, Afghan journalists who have fled to neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, continue to face legal uncertainties, financial struggles, persecution, legal harassment and professional isolation.

The Federation of Nepali Journalists' (FNJ) monitoring mechanism recorded a total of 47 incidents of press freedom violations, including attacks, threats and harassment, both online and offline, by a range



Bangladesh's journalists faced harassment, arrests, and heavy restrictions while covering national anti-government demonstrations in 2024. Students protesting near Dhaka University in Bangladesh's capital on August 12, 2024, demanded accountability and a trial for Bangladesh's ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. CREDIT: LUIS TATO / AFP

of perpetrators including government functionaries. The arrest of Kailash Sirohiya, chairperson and owner of two prominent national dailies, *Kantipur* and *Kathmandu Post*, and a radio and television station over issues related to his citizenship seemed a clear case of intimidation and retribution by the then-Deputy Prime Minister Rabi Lamichhane, who was unhappy over reporting about him.

Narrative control

Across the region, governments attempted to shape public discourse through their hold and influence on the media and its owners.

In Sri Lanka, the media was called out for supporting alleged divisive stands and openly promoting select candidates, and amplifying these messages on social media. This invited a slate of take down notices from the Election Commission.

The false promises of ensuring press freedom made by the Taliban when they took on the reins of power in Afghanistan in 2021 were quickly belied. News media in the country are, for the most part, forced to exist as a propaganda wing of the government, with independent journalism being all but crushed. Reports are closely monitored and rejected for non-compliance with the rules of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, an agency set up in 1992 by the government under Burhanuddin Rabbani and now revived by the Taliban. Taboo subjects include women's rights, social justice and human rights.

A growing list of Taliban 'directives', with seven more issued in the past year, now strongly dictate and control the content and format of Afghanistan's newscasts. Bans include: criticism of Taliban officials,

women's voices, filming and recording video interviews with local officials, broadcasting of images of living beings, including animals. Additionally, terminology such as 'martyr' is required to be used when reporting Taliban casualties.

India's mainstream media continued to be reined in by repression or financial harassment via the foisting of legal cases or removing the non-profit status of some of its feistier media outlets. Control was also exercised through co-option and a system of rewards and incentives through advertisements. *Analysis* by the BBC found that major news websites in the country published larger volumes of content mentioning the incumbent prime minister and his party, with editorials predicting his win. Attempting to legitimise sycophancy, the government of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India, released the 'Digital Media Policy 2024' to not only regulate platforms with vague definitions of "anti-national" content, but also to develop a retinue of paid influencers. The move was vehemently opposed by journalist bodies.

International correspondents in India faced ramped up efforts to control their reporting. Work permits of several foreign correspondents were cancelled on flimsy grounds, a move that was particularly suspect during election year.

A report, 'Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media', released in May 2024 found that 87 per cent of respondents held the media accountable for political divisions in the country with television and internet news websites perceived to have the highest levels of sensational or biased coverage. This was a clear wake-up call for the media to regain public trust in the atoll nation.



Women's faces are concealed at a women's clothing shop in Kabul after an order by the Taliban's 'Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice'. The de-facto government took further action to exclude women in Afghanistan society, including banning women from speaking in public, acting in television programs, or having their voices heard on radio. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

Information is power

Access to information, one of the lodestones of credible journalism, has been steadily declining in various parts of the region. Afghanistan, once ranked number one of 130 countries in terms of access to information, has rapidly plummeted under the Taliban. With stringent controls over information, blocking requests, especially by women journalists, the rights once guaranteed by the Access to Information Law have atrophied. A 2024 report by the Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO) highlights that 38 per cent of women journalists cite gender discrimination as a major barrier to accessing information, while 33 per cent fear repercussions for exposing the truth. Furthermore, 58 per cent of women journalists have no legal recourse when their requests for information are denied, underscoring the failure of Afghanistan's current media system to uphold transparency.

In Bhutan, despite a government guideline issued in April 2024 to increase transparency and accountability, journalists reported that media spokespersons were variously unavailable or lacked the necessary information to handle media requests.

Upon assuming power in the Maldives, President Muizzu promised such high transparency in governance that the need to seek information would be redundant. However, this declaration has been belied, with the Attorney General's office challenging orders from the Information Commissioner to comply with right to information requests. Access to events and information was linked with proximity to the government, with critical news outlets like Adhadhu refused on coverage.

Media Closures

Job insecurity was a running theme across the region. The period under review saw ever more journalists and media workers lose their livelihoods with media closures due to government interference, revenue losses and industry job shedding.

A March 2025 report by the independent non-profit Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) reported that 22 outlets closed in the past twelve months. Several radio stations were allegedly shut down by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice because they played background music, or allowed women to call in during live programs, thereby crossing the Taliban's so-called "red lines." The economic downturn also resulted in the suspension of licenses of 17 media outlets in Nangarhar due to unpaid debts. Many local media outlets are struggling to renew their licenses and even pay electricity bills and taxes. Journalists' unions in the country estimate that almost half of Afghanistan's 4,001 male and 747 female remaining journalists are working without salaries or employment benefits.

The major political realignments of the past year had a direct impact on the media in Bangladesh. Political retribution and perceived proximity to the ousted regime also led to mass sackings and forced resignations of senior editors, news chiefs and reporters.

India's media saw an almost 15 per cent rise in industry layoffs in 2024-2025. Almost 200 to 400 media professionals lost jobs across print, television, and digital newsrooms in the first six months of 2024, a trend that is likely to continue. Several prominent small and medium print outlets were also forced to close down due to the high cost of printing, diminishing circulation and decline in advertisement revenue. Media closures inevitably led to an erosion in standards of decent work for media workers.

In India, a significant threat to access to information emerged in the shape of an amendment to the Right to Information Act, which was introduced in the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, a law that is meant to uphold the right to privacy. However, blocking access to anything termed as "personal information" even if it is public interest, is likely to impact attempts enhance institutional accountability.



Despite a government guideline issued in April 2024 to increase transparency and accountability, journalists in Bhutan reported that media spokespersons were variously unavailable or lacked the necessary information to handle media requests.

Aligning with the country's shifting media landscape, the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) held workshops on how to pitch stories related to climate change in Thimphu on March 24, 2025. CREDIT: JAB

Decent work challenged

The lack of decent and timely wages for journalists was highlighted in the tragic case of Nepali journalist Shyam Sundar Pudasaini, 33. The young investigative journalist collapsed upon return from work, prompting inquiries over working conditions and non-payment of wages. He is not the first journalist to die on the job waiting for rightful wages to be paid. Unsurprisingly, the long-awaited amendments to the Working Journalists Act and fixation of minimum wages once again came to the fore in media industry and union advocacy.

A submission to the Islamabad High Court in September 2024 by the Institute for Research, Advocacy, and Development (IRADA), revealed that over 250,000 Pakistani digital media workers lacked legal protections concerning fair pay and safe working conditions. With labour laws in dire need of reform to include the digital sphere, a whole section of media workers remains out in the cold, with no protections.

Unpaid salaries and wage theft in Pakistan is the most critical industry issues affecting the media sector in terms of the widespread and deeply entrenched nature of the problem dating back many years. The IFJ and the PFUJ continue to lobby on the issue, demanding solutions and holding media owners accountable. A hopeful breakthrough came in November 2024, when the Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting of Pakistan's National Assembly finally addressed the issue of unpaid salaries for media workers and recommended stronger measures to safeguard their rights.

Restructuring measures aimed at streamlining state broadcasters in Sri Lanka are set to see a merger of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and Independent Television Network. The move, aimed at getting the broadcasters out of massive debts, will also inevitably lead to more job losses in the beleaguered media sector which is yet to recover from post-pandemic downsizing.

Legalised harassment

In Bangladesh, the replacement of the draconian Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act of 2006 with the Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018, and then the Cyber Security Act (CSA) 2023, has not led to any substantial change on the ground. Journalist bodies continued to face repression under vaguely formulated provisions. Around 5,818 cases filed under the CSA and the previous two laws currently remain pending in the country's eight cyber tribunals.

The interim government, responding to demands for repealing or amending repressive legislation, in December 2024 released a draft Cyber Protection Ordinance. Disappointingly, it seems very similar to the CSA, for example by penalising "hurting religious sentiment" with a jail term and fine. Terming the draft as "conflicting to basic human rights," 100 distinguished citizens issued a joint statement in January 2025 demanding it also be scrapped.

Concerns remained over Sri Lanka's overly broad and vague Online Safety Act and its ability to severely curtail free expression. But even in the face of vehement opposition, an amendment bill was rushed through in August 2024, just ahead of the parliamentary election. In the run up to the presidential elections, a collective of 41 trade unions urged President Ranil Wickremesinghe to urgently repeal the OSA and other laws they say undermine democracy in Sri Lanka. Over 50 lawsuits are challenging the draft bill.

In India, the overuse of counter terror laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) as well as finance-related laws like the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) against media persons has tended to promote self-censorship. Kashmiri journalists have also borne the brunt of state repression with many battling long drawn-out cases, with some serving jail terms for their reporting. Others are routinely summoned to police stations for verification, coerced into revealing sources, placed on no-fly lists, have their passports revoked or their homes raided.

Regulatory laws in India such as the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill 2023 aimed at overhauling digital media regulations, continue to raise concerns about government overreach and potential censorship of OTT platforms and individual content creators. After backlash from independent media, the government withdrew a revised 2024 draft but reinstated the original 2023 version, keeping uncertainties alive over future regulatory controls.

After securing the parliamentary supermajority in the Maldives, the government proposed an amendment to the 2023 Evidence Act, which, among other concerns, allows courts to compel journalists to disclose anonymous sources in cases related to terrorism or national security. While the provision has not been enforced, the law still remains unchanged.

In Nepal, a heavy-handed approach to social media regulation saw the introduction in January 2025 of the Social Media Operation, Use and Regulation Bill. Critics argue that the bill, which criminalises online expression with harsh fines and jail terms, has potential to undermine freedom of expression and press freedom. The UNESCO review of the



India's diverse ethnic and linguistic landscape is still not adequately reflected in its media, and regional languages are often overlooked in favour of Hindi and English, further limiting access to information.

Journalists in the Kashmir Valley continued to be subjected to interrogation, harassment and unlawful detention by intelligence agencies. A Kashmiri journalist films as Omar Abdullah, Chief Minister of the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, speaks during a press conference in Srinagar on January 2, 2025. CREDIT: FIRDOUS NAZIR / NURPHOTO / AFP

bill states that provisions of the bill contradict international standards and are not in line with constitutional mandates of transparency, accountability and a multi-stakeholder strategy of digital governance. The Media Council Bill, passed on February 10, 2025, though a moderate version of the earlier draft, still contains problematic provisions such as the government's appointments of most of the council members, undermining its independence.

Pakistan's Punjab Defamation Act 2024, with its vague and over broad definitions, makes violations punishable with massive fines, and tribunals can compel deemed offenders to issue an "unconditional apology" and direct regulatory bodies to block their social media accounts. Journalists' bodies termed the law "draconian" and vigorously protested its enactment.

Some judicial pronouncements in India provide hope. Guaranteeing the right to free speech, on March 28, 2025, the Supreme Court of India stated that "reasonable restrictions" on the right to free speech should not be unreasonable or used to trample on citizens' rights.

Towards equity

Despite strides made in gender equity over the decades, India's [ranking](#) in the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Report slipped another two places to 129 out of 146 countries, and is now the third-lowest in South Asia. Its media also reflects this imbalance. Women still occupy less than a quarter of decision-making positions in India's media and the underrepresentation of women in union leadership positions is an ongoing and pressing concern. A survey report released in August 2024, revealed that over 60 per cent of women journalists were discriminated against at work based on their gender identity.

Likewise, India's diverse ethnic and linguistic landscape is still not adequately reflected in its media, and regional languages are often overlooked in favour of Hindi and English, further limiting access to information. The representation of marginalised communities in the newsroom remains abysmal.

Women journalists in the Maldives faced harassment on the job, most of it online. At an Internet Governance Forum in October 2024, journalists spoke about harassment reaching their families and some said they were avoiding investigative journalism as a result. The response by social media platforms is less than ideal, pointing to a need to localise interventions, for example, teaming up with Meta and X to improve hate speech detection in the national language, Dhivehi, to enable journalists to push back against online harassment.

The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) made history by electing a woman journalist, Nirmala Sharma, as its chairperson for the first time in its seven-decade-long existence. With nearly 30 years of experience in the print and electronic media in Nepal, Sharma's election comes after consistent capacity building and leadership training interventions by the women's councils of the FNJ.

A major gender mapping project across five regions of Pakistan by the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) and supported by the IFJ in early 2025 revealed stark disparities, with representation as low as three per cent and stressed the need for intervention to increase gender equity. Globally women comprise only 24 per cent of news content, with Pakistan's representation even lower at 11 per cent. Participants advocated for reforms including equitable inclusion and a broader movement for gender parity within the Pakistani media.

The representation of women journalists' unions and press clubs in Pakistan's ten largest cities was abysmally low, according to a study conducted by the Women Journalists Association and Freedom Network in early 2025. Only two press clubs (Lahore and Islamabad) reported slightly more than ten per cent share of women in their member rolls. The inclusion of women in the federal union however saw some improvement, with four women leaders elected to the new Federal Executive Council of the PFUJ.

In January 2025, journalist Asma Sherazi fought back against the harassment directed at her and other women journalists, declaring "enough is enough". A petition from the Digital Rights Foundation, calling for an end to the systematic harassment of orchestrated attacks against media professionals by political factions and their supporters was met with widespread support among the media.

Who owns the media?

A free press is critically linked to media ownership, and every government attempts to institutionalise its support of its cronies, in return for a media that follows the official narrative.

In Bangladesh, industrialists and politicians who were bestowed media licenses by the previous government still remain loyal to Sheikh Hasina's regime. This proximity of business interests of media owners with the government has long been a barrier to independent journalism in the country. However, a new 'Media Reform Policy' of 2025 drafted by the country's interim government is finally set to address this issue. Just how impactful the policy can be remains to be seen in a country where media freedom has been stymied for so long.

The draft Media Transparency (And Accountability) Bill 2024 in India is aimed at increasing transparency in ownership with the emergence of media monopolies; financial coercion through the misuse of the power to allocate government advertisements and coercive actions against journalists by State and non-State actors. The bill is likely to be presented as a private member's bill in Parliament. A report by the Press Council of India's sub-committee on "Advertisements for print media" in September 2024 recommended that allocation be made proportional to their circulation and other qualitative parameters.

The Maldives' 42 news outlets are unable to sustain themselves through private sector advertisements alone, leading to a worrying



A demonstrator holds a placard protesting the new Social Media Bill tabled in Nepal's federal parliament on February 12, 2025. The controversial bill allows authorities to ban media platforms and remove content in violation of government conditions. Unions and media stakeholders say the provisions are a government attempt to impose censorship and curtail basic human rights. CREDIT: SUBAAS SHRESTHA / NURPHOTO / AFP

dependence on politicians, businessmen and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that is fraught with favouritism and lacks transparency. Moreover, financial dependence on SOEs has gone hand in hand with manipulation and leverage, shaping news reportage in unhealthy ways. In February 2025, Moosa Rasheed, a senior journalist at *Mihaaru*, the leading local newspaper, resigned in protest over alleged government influence.

In Pakistan, government-issued advertisements continue to be a major revenue source for the media. The government has reportedly allocated PKR 16 billion (USD 58.2m) in advertisements over the past five years.

The decisions by the newly-elected Trump administration to dismantle the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) has had serious consequences for media in Afghanistan, leading to reduced funding for organisations such as Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). These outlets have long provided independent news coverage to Afghanistan, and their funding cuts could weaken access to reliable information in the country.

In Bhutan, a proposal is on the anvil to put down a clear and fair advertisement policy based on market principles and explore strategies for supporting independent journalism, as well as digital media. The Social and Cultural Affairs Committee is also tasked with reviewing media legislation and policies, assessing the impact of government interventions, and evaluating public perceptions of freedom and transparency. Its report is expected by May 3, 2025.

Standing together

Despite the clampdowns within borders, innovative occupation of the airwaves ensures that a few critical voices are making themselves heard. Afghan journalists in exiled media outlets such as Radio Azadi,

Afghanistan International, Etilaatroz, Zan Times, and Hasht-e-Subh, remain critical of the Taliban regime.

Bangladeshi media in exile such as the Sweden-based Netra News, and Zulkarnain Saer Khan, a London-based investigative journalist in exile, have managed to expose abuse of power, rights violations and corruptions by leaders of Hasina's party and civil and military officials associated with her government through his social media platforms.

In November 2024, journalist bodies in the Maldives mobilised around concerns related to media regulation, opposing the move to merge the media council and broadcasting commission through Maldives Media and Broadcasting Commission Bill or grounds that the would erode the self-regulatory aspect. The proposed legislation was dubbed the "media control bill" and a campaign, an exhibition of people's power, with the slogan 'Hatharehge Hagguugai' asserting citizen power. Political will, not laws alone, can enable the media to evolve with professionalism and independence.

In Nepal, the merger of the state-owned Nepal Television and Radio Nepal into the National Public Service Broadcasting Agency was welcomed, since this reform has been a decades-long demand. Former FNJ president Mahendra Bista was appointed as the first chairperson of the new entity.

Policy changes backed by financial investment proved to be of immense support to Pakistan's media community working in some of the most challenging environments in the region. The provincial governments of Balochistan, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa put down enhanced amounts to journalists' welfare funds and to develop press clubs in the province – crucial hubs for the media community.

These concrete steps towards enhancing journalists' rights stand as an example of multi-stakeholder action and vigorous solidarity in the journalist community. ■

SPECIAL REPORT

THE MEDIA GIG ECONOMY

Across South Asia, news reporting and information published in the public interest continue to be severely compromised by the media industry's ongoing economic turmoil and struggle for viability. The “defanging” of legacy media – so it is economically weakened and overly dependent on government advertising for sustaining revenue – is a widespread phenomenon across the region. Independent media across the board is also struggling to survive amid a flood of distracting content generation, some of which is Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled. The end result is further hastening a concerning and rapid downslide of public interest journalism.

Scores of journalists and media workers in South Asia are today staring at a future of precarity even as they join the media gig economy. Here they risk safety and security as they valiantly endeavour to self-publish on social media platforms, or pitch for editorial space in an increasingly regulated and polarised world. In this scenario, it is little wonder that journalism, especially investigative reportage, is itself struggling to survive.

The rising tide of gig workers now is engaged in livelihoods outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement. They comprise both platform workers whose work is based on online software apps or digital platforms, and non-platform gig workers such as casual wage workers and own-account workers in conventional sectors, working part-time or full-time. According to World Bank estimates, there are now about 435 million online gig workers, (including journalists, editors, and content creators), constituting at least 12.5 per cent of the global labour force.

Anti-labour laws

In India, two decades of contractualisation and the countrywide abrogation of the responsibility of newspaper managements to implement statutory Wage Board awards has ultimately resulted in the denial of a fair wage to the country's newspaper employees. Large-scale retrenchments with little or no notice, leave alone compensation, have now become the norm.

To add to this, the scrapping of hard-fought labour laws of over six decades that prescribed the working conditions of journalists in newspapers has resulted in further weakening of journalist rights at work. The Working Journalists and other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Service) and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (WJA) 1955, was among the 29 central labour laws repealed by the Indian government in 2019-20. When the Act was replaced by the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code 2020, it also expanded the definition of ‘working journalists’ to cover electronic/digital media. Yet at the same time, this ended the Wage Board that protected wages and service conditions of journalists leaving journalists and media workers entitled in law only to minimum wages. Other special provisions governing termination, retrenchments, layoffs and closures or gratuity payable after specified years of service have also either been given the go-by or diluted.

Amid a sustained climate of layoffs stretching over a decade, Pakistan's eighth wage award implementation remains minimal and still is yet to be reformed to cover electronic or digital media. An IFJ-commissioned study by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA), found that gaps in the wage award's implementation has led to media workers being increasingly engaged on contracts. In its report, IRADA estimated that approximately 80 per cent of Pakistan media employees now work under contracts or third-party contracts. Collective bargaining agreements exist in just a handful of outlets.

In Nepal, salaries of working journalists have not been increased for the past six years despite the setting up of the Minimum Wages Fixation Committee. Indeed, bad working conditions in the media industry have literally become a matter of life and death.

The growing information abyss

The gradual erosion of the credibility of legacy media, and the crackdown on independent media seeking to disseminate information critical of the government, has created an information abyss. With most South Asian currencies tanking against the dollar, the cost of imported newsprint, on which the print media in the region relies, is prohibitive. Additionally, governments are themselves sounding the death knell of print media, by imposing crippling new taxes and removing tariff exemptions that allow media to function as a ‘public good’. In Pakistan, the All Pakistan Newspapers Society strongly opposed this crushing of the newspaper industry and managed to roll back the proposed changes.

Media companies are increasingly focusing on leaner operations with skeletal staff, maintaining a narrow focus on daily news. A bulk of news information now flows from freelancers – reporters, researchers, photographers and videographers who all face uncertainty over assignments, fair remuneration, and timely payments.

Many of the journalists who are sacked either join the growing ranks of freelancers competing to survive or move into ancillary media jobs or better paying, more reliable gigs in communication services, content writing, project or public relations work.

The “defanging” of legacy media, so it is economically weakened and overly dependent on government advertising for sustaining revenue, is a widespread phenomenon across the region.

The explosion in the use of social media networks as publishing platforms has aided myriad autonomous voices to self-publish, albeit in an increasingly crowded digital media space. Platforms run by transnational tech companies are now helping journalists put out stories that do not find space in legacy media. But this model also makes them vulnerable to the ever-present threat of regulation and censorship, both from the respective governments as well as the censorship and community standards of the tech platforms themselves.

Freelancers, self-publishing writers and journalists who are part of the swelling ranks of independent media gig workers are valiantly trying to bridge the gap, but for the majority, the challenges are two-fold and immense.

On the one hand there are grave concerns about the very nature of journalism and the changes in the processes of information gathering and dissemination, and on the other media gig workers are teetering on the edge of precarity. In addition, the creator economy has mushroomed and the vast ecosystem of individual influencers with their own brands, online audiences and paid for content, who move in and out of “journalistic” activity such as interviews and opinions, have disrupted traditional journalism approaches.

New realities

The dominant reality today is that most media gig workers operate with no formal contracts, and too often rely on tenuous verbal contract arrangements. From making blind pitches to developing personal links with commissioning editors, their negotiations for submitting story briefs and finalising other terms, such as travel reimbursement and a fair and timely payment for their submission, are one-sided, often dependant on the whim of the commissioning editor or the media company's own pay standards.



Five journalists were killed during the anti-government protests in Bangladesh during July and August 2024, with hundreds more attacked, shot, threatened and detained. Media personnel gather near a gate of the High Court in Dhaka on July 31, 2024, as protestors call for justice for those arrested and killed in the violent nationwide demonstrations. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

Testimonies from numerous journalists reveal the extreme vulnerability faced by freelancers. “I was working on a detailed story about riot victims. I had to travel extensively to shoot the interviews, but I barely got enough to cover the travel,” said one multimedia journalist in India. Even after the story is published, payments take months to arrive, said another. “We can't even make too much of a noise, or we'll be seen as troublemakers and won't get future assignments,” said a journalist who had to send several reminders to a prominent media house for payment.

In a world of information overload, where clickbait, attention grabbing and search engine optimisation (SEO) is paramount, journalists are frequently finding themselves outpaced by media professionals trained in advertising and copywriting. One journalist who worked with a television channel in India and quit to join a content writing start-up, found the rate per word abysmal, making even content writing unsustainable.

While there is no firm data available, anecdotal evidence suggests that a majority of independent media workers have moved to self-publishing and social media platforms. Forced out of legacy media, reporters and opinion makers, especially in smaller towns and districts, have taken to YouTube, Alphabet's video publishing platform, and Facebook, Meta's social networking platform, to publish reports.

While these newly minted media gig workers gain in terms of popularity and influence, the shift has not come without its challenges. Monetisation on YouTube is linked to the number of views and personality-led journalism, meaning only a handful of journalists manage to make enough, above the commission that the platform takes as its share.

Journalists who have shifted to platforms indicated in interviews that their reportage today is fraught with censorship, as court orders for

takedowns are swiftly complied with. Furthermore, monetisation of their content sometimes skews content creation. For instance, explainer videos are more popular than ground reports or interviews, one popular YouTuber said. Maintaining journalistic standards in the race for eyeballs is the flip side of the freedom to produce and share content.

While there are platform-based initiatives in the media industry, a majority of media gig workers – freelancers, content writers, editors, photographers, graphic designers, and illustrators – are non-platform gig workers. Do they earn a fair wage that guarantees a decent livelihood, or organise collectively to demand better contracts and working conditions that guarantees their dignity? Can they be guaranteed the right to communicate information without being silenced?

This is the challenge that some unions and associations in South Asia are taking up. Through mapping and research, they are endeavouring to better understand the new realities of this growing cohort. The results of the annual ‘IFJ Asia Pacific Affiliate Snapshot’ revealed that six of the ten responding South Asian IFJ affiliates listed job security and wages as a key area members most need support on in 2025. The Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association and the Journalists’ Association of Bhutan have made constitutional changes over the past two years to expand membership coverage, including for freelance journalists. In Sri Lanka, the Free Media Movement (FMM) listed freelance journalists as the group of media workers it wants to organise and support in 2025, and said it presented the biggest opportunity for growth, while the Indian Journalists Union said it was trying to support freelance journalists working in rural and semi urban areas. Both the FMM and the Federation of Media Employees’ Trade Unions (FMETU) listed organising gig and freelance workers as their greatest need in terms of training and support to build membership and power at work. The focus is on the future: digital, freelance, women and youth journalists.



Although digital media workers generally believe that legacy media unions and the Digimap network provided moderate support for workers' rights and welfare, there was a clear need for these organisations to focus on income generation, career growth, fair wages, and digital media training.

A campaign by the Digital Media Alliance Pakistan (DigiMAP) in December 2024 called for wage equality and job security for digital media workers in the country. The network was supported by the IFJ to conduct a survey of digital media workers as part of its 'Promoting Labour Rights, Gender Equality, and Freedom of Association in Pakistan's Media' project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). CREDIT: DIGIMAP

Survival efforts and viability

In the Maldives, the saturation in the local media market which serves a small population and is largely confined to the capital of Male. This results in fierce competition for eyeballs and some volatility in the industry's sustainability. Funding for media is divided between private business and state-owned enterprises, further increasing the vulnerability and susceptibility of journalists and editors.

There has been no increase in salaries of working journalists for the past six years in Nepal. In February 2025, speaking in a program organised by the Minimum Wages Fixation Committee, Nepal's government expressed readiness to amend the Working Journalists Act (WJA) to increase the minimum wage of journalists, and accepted the government's failure to fully implement the Act.

A legal brief furnished in the Islamabad High Court by the Institute for Research, Advocacy, and Development (IRADA), with IFJ's support, stated that over 250,000 digital media workers in Pakistan lacked legal protections for fair pay and safe working conditions. The brief recommends legal protections against at-will termination, obligatory employer contributions to welfare schemes, compulsory gratuity, provident fund, insurance, and penalties for delayed or non-payment of wages.

Digital media networks, such as the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) and DIGIPUB News India Foundation are also both making some impact in the digital space to represent journalists within the gig economy. Though their structural model, which is based on outlet membership rather than an entirely individual journalist membership, has its limitations and an internal conflict of interest when it comes to negotiating better wages.

DigiMAP's IFJ-supported 2024 study, 'Profiling the Professional Space of Digital Media Workers in Pakistan', gave some insight into the experiences and conditions of more than 100 digital media workers across its 34 member organisations. This included demographic patterns, employment terms, working conditions, professional roles, and career aspirations within Pakistan's digital media landscape. Its survey found that the network's digital workforce was relatively young, with 75 per cent falling in the 18 to 35 age range and was predominantly male (60 per cent men to 40 per cent women), with men occupying more technical and leadership roles. Women were more likely to be in creative, advocacy, and communication roles. The survey found the sector to be unstable and informal, with many younger workers more likely to work without formal contracts or secure employment arrangements. At least 39 per cent of

journalists surveyed were employed on a regular basis, while at least 20 per cent worked on unpaid or voluntary terms.

Interestingly, DigiMAP's research ascertained that although digital media workers generally believe that legacy media unions and the network provided moderate support for workers' rights and welfare, there was a clear need for these organisations to focus on income generation, career growth, fair wages, and digital media training.

In a positive trend, some Pakistani digital creators managed to increase their earnings and viewership in 2024. For example, the earnings of individual Pakistan-based YouTube creators surged by 25 per cent to over PKR 10 million (USD 36,000) annually. This presents as an opportunity for stronger wage security and a potential for union organising efforts and training to maintain professional journalism standards.

Another story of hope in the gig space is that of Pakistan independent, video-first newsroom The Centrum Media (TCM). Established by Pakistani journalist Talha Ahad, TCM runs a podcast, communications arm and content studio and has a staff of more than 40 with around 18 to 20 people working on news and six people on its podcast. Its revenue streams include branded content, digital advertising, training, consultancy work and partnerships with development organisations, though it is firm that it is trying to run as a business, not as an NGO or a newsroom reliant on grant funding because of sustainability issues.

Meanwhile in Sri Lanka, the post-Covid trend of lean teams continued. Benefits such as cost of living and travel allowances, available before 2020, have not being restored, and salary cuts continue to be in effect. Some well-known newsrooms continue to delay payment of monthly salaries to permanent staff.

A Cabinet-appointed committee on March 23, 2025, recommended a series of restructuring measures for Sri Lanka's state-owned institutions. Three state broadcasters are to be amalgamated under the new scheme for efficiency and profitability. The inevitable staff reduction will fuel an employment crisis within state media. This financial crunch is creating more problems for freelancers who are made to wait for months for payments.

Disruptions in the age of AI

Apart from state regulation, journalism's biggest challenges in this ecosystem come from the double-edged sword of technology, particularly AI. For at least four decades, rapid changes in technology in the media industry have significantly altered the production and dissemination of news.



AI was heavily used to create deepfakes and spread misinformation during election campaigns, including resurrecting the voices of deceased leaders. CREDIT: YOUTUBE AND X.

The use of generative AI, machine learning and large language models (LLMs) is the latest and perhaps the most drastic disruptor of the news production cycle. *The New York Times*, Centre for Investigative Reporting and other publishers, in late 2023 took ChatGPT maker OpenAI and Microsoft to court in the USA over copyright infringement. The petitioners allege that millions of articles published by *The Times* were used to train automated chatbots that now compete with the news outlet as a source of reliable information, and that the defendants were liable for "billions of dollars in statutory and actual damages". The case, which is still pending in court, will no doubt have global ramifications on the future of the industry and regulation of AI in terms of authors' rights.

That said, the media industry is making use of AI in a myriad ways that are also still unregulated. Automation is already in use in global news agencies for generating and repackaging information to different audiences (sports highlights, weather reports, financial data, etc.), and creative work is impacted by generative AI apps. Today, AI-enabled programs are used for story selection; putting together entire reports, photographs, captions, and graphics; devising newsletters; and "basic editing tasks, including headline-writing and fact-checking.

AI-enabled news anchors are used by some broadcast channels, among them two AI newscasters on the main news broadcast of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation; Sana and Lisa in private television channels, Aaj Tak and OTV, respectively, in India; and the public broadcaster Doordarshan's AI Krish and AI Bhoomi for agricultural news. The latter deliver updates to Indian farmers around the clock and can speak in 50 languages.

What room is there for humans in the equation when AI anchors can work 24x7 without any leave, do not need to be paid and can be programmed to work in multiple languages. The impact of more widespread deployment of AI in the media sector is likely to precipitate the existing employment-related crises and further declines in the industry.

Apart from state regulation, journalism's biggest challenges in this ecosystem come from the double-edged sword of technology, particularly AI.

There is a clear dearth of discussion on the ethical use of AI, as well as norms to regulate it. The need for greater media literacy to educate and create awareness amongst the general public on AI-generated content has been recognised, but concrete steps are still to be taken. Journalists unions and media houses must be at the forefront of this discussion and engage with governments and regulatory bodies.

In India, AI was heavily used to create deepfakes and spread misinformation during election campaigns, including resurrecting the voices of deceased leaders. In Pakistan, where media literacy remains limited, deepfakes are being weaponised, damaging the reputations of particularly women politicians, often through sexually explicit fabrications. Pakistan however, stands out as the first country in the region to attempt to regulate AI through the 'Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Act 2024', a draft of which was introduced in the Senate.

In Bhutan, the government is watchful over the use of AI by social media platforms to disseminate fake news, while in the Maldives, a Media Control Bill was scrapped following criticism it would be used against legitimate journalism instead of disinformation.

Apart from addressing the perils of using AI for spreading fake news, there still needs to be greater discussion on the challenges to laws governing intellectual property, copyright, and the fair use of digital content. This is a pressing issue, given the large volume of information that is currently generated by the media and by independent journalists, who are either freelancers or self-publish on platforms such as Medium and subscription-based apps like Substack.



At least half of Afghanistan's remaining media workforce currently work without wages or employment benefits. The Taliban's authoritarian rule has systematically eroded democratic institutions and fundamental freedoms, particularly in targeting women and the press. Afghan female journalists wear facemasks as they attend a press conference in Kabul on September 19, 2024. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

Freelancer rights

For several years, freelancers, a majority of them women, have discussed the need to strengthen protections. This includes formalised contracts with detailed elements such as timely and decent payment and the inclusion of kill fees to protect themselves when story ideas are not accepted, or when the media company to which they pitch, terminates their arrangement midway through the project.

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMII) has come up with a charter to ensure formal contracts are given to freelancers. However, in the absence of concerted pressure from journalists, and with an ever-expanding pool of freelance labour readily available, media companies have not responded to calls for greater discussion on this issue.

In 2022, Niti Aayog, India's premier government policy think tank, made a series of recommendations on improving the terms of employment of gig workers. The brief said that gig workers must be given fair pay, sick leave, health insurance, occupational work accident insurance, support when work is irregular, and a framework for operationalising the Code on Social Security 2020. However, there is yet to be any progress on this.

In Sri Lanka and Pakistan, national media unions are among those developing programs to train and organise freelancers and ensure they are better represented in the broader collective, as well as in leadership.

Going forward, more of South Asia's media unions would well benefit from conducting regular surveys of media workers to identify the categories of available work and the terms of work contracts,

More of South Asia's media unions would well benefit from conducting regular surveys of media workers to identify the categories of available work and the terms of work contracts, the use of technology, remuneration and payment schedules.

the use of technology, remuneration and payment schedules. The IFJ maintains that one of the biggest potential areas for future mobilisation is the setting up of freelancer hubs or working groups within unions, to organise this growing workforce – a trend that is already well underway in other parts of the world and in the expansion of unions to cover more digital creatives.

The challenge remains to ensure that journalists continue to speak truth to power in a rapidly changing media world, despite state regulation and censorship of information through monopolistic digital distribution platforms, and despite the rise of a new gig world of work.

An informed, innovative and collective approach is vital to protect the democratic exchange of verified information within and amongst the people of South Asia. Alongside, governments must extend protections to media gig workers to end unfair labour practices and actively work to defend worker rights and decent working conditions as part of the national commitments to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ■

Elimination in numbers

The rise of the gig economy has gone hand in hand with the collapse of the traditional media industry economic models and the incursion of new technologies in the creation of journalist work. Both have wrought a tsunami of job losses in the world of journalism globally.

In August 2024, an India-based media tracking website estimated that 200-400 media professionals had lost their jobs in the first half of 2024. Of these, 20 per cent were from print media, 18 per cent from television, and about ten per cent from digital media. These losses were about 15 per cent higher than in 2023.

In Pakistan, despite a massive growth in digital media, the industry has continued to weather significant job losses and financial instability over the past decade. This situation was further amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic when 8,000 out of 20,000 jobs, or two-fifths of industry roles, were eliminated.

Job shedding is not a recent phenomenon for the media sector. For more than two decades now, journalists have been pushed out of organised workplaces with alarming regularity. A survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy said that the media and publishing industry in India had witnessed job losses of a stupendous 78 per cent.

An estimated 2,500 journalists lost their jobs during the pandemic lockdown in India alone, and a significant majority scarcely received even a day's notice from some of the biggest media houses, leave alone fair compensation. Shockingly, barely a few months later, these very same media houses put out notices for recruitment.

Reports of retrenchment in established media companies rarely provide information on the exact number of sacked journalists, much less on the terms of a painful and traumatic severance, the legal processes adopted, if any, and if monetary compensation was offered and whether it was commensurate with provisions in labour laws. This information is also not widely available through the trade union and industrial relations framework, due to the deliberate weakening of trade unionism in many countries of South Asia, despite the existence in principle and law of trade union rights and the right to collective bargaining.

Even as they 'restructure' for leaner operations, the hidden objective of the media retrenchment cycle is the benching of some of the most senior media employees, while fresh recruits are employed and exploited at cheaper rates. Union prohibitions are frequently strongly written into their contracts – despite the illegality of such practices.

Even as they 'restructure' for leaner operations, the hidden objective of the media retrenchment cycle is the benching of some of the most senior media employees, while fresh recruits are employed and exploited at cheaper rates.

Political upheaval has also driven further major job losses. In Bangladesh, emerging out of an intense struggle against its authoritarian government ousted amid massive public protests in 2024, the transition to a new era of democracy has not been smooth. Journalists in the country have been arrested and attacked, and their press credentials withdrawn. More than 100 senior journalists were summarily sacked after the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. There have been no protections for them.

According to a survey of 30 television channels conducted by the Broadcast Journalists Centre in Bangladesh, more than 150 broadcast journalists lost their jobs in the year, mostly after Hasina's ouster. At least 48 per cent of the channels did not provide termination benefits, while 45 per cent did not give a notice period for termination, both of which are mandated by law. Less than half of the channels paid their workers on time, while 20 per cent kept their workers waiting for several months for salaries. Since the uprising, two television stations and one Bangla daily have been shut down, leaving hundreds of journalists and media workers jobless.

In Afghanistan, at least half of the total of 4,001 male journalists and 747 female journalists, a majority from the provinces, currently work without wages or employment benefits. According to the Afghan Independent Journalists Union (AIJU), job security is still not guaranteed even in Afghanistan's largest media outlets.

In Bhutan, the closure of five newspapers, three radio stations and two magazines over the past decade has severely impacted employment for journalists in the tiny Himalayan nation. In addition, the viability of print media itself is a challenge, given the country's relatively small economy, scarce resources, the government's e-procurement policy on the award of tenders, and the grant of government advertisements to websites instead of print media. ■



During the country's presidential elections in 2024, many Sri Lankan publications were accused of blatantly violating election laws by promoting select candidates and creating divisive media narratives, inviting a slate of take down notices. A vendor arranges newspapers with front pages on the election results in Colombo on September 23, 2024. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

SPECIAL REPORT

CHANGING POLITICAL NARRATIVES

In the period under review, South Asia faced political turmoil, democratic backsliding, and worsening press freedom. Significant political upheavals in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, crucial electoral processes in Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and another year under an authoritarian regime in Afghanistan brought to the fore the vital role of the media as a ‘watchdog’ and fourth pillar of democracy.

Elections, military interventions, and government crackdowns reshaped governance while independent journalism suffered further legal, financial and physical repression. Across the region, growing media censorship, digital control, disinformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and state-backed narratives signalled a deepening crisis for both press freedom and democracy.

Key political changes were experienced in most countries of the South Asia region, with a slate of elections throughout 2024. This report details the unfolding stories of these countries, starting with the two most populous electorates of India and Pakistan, followed by the monumental people's uprising in Bangladesh and the key events that led to a major political transition in Sri Lanka.

INDIA: Propaganda and the press

India's political and media landscape endured significant changes and upheaval, with the 2024 general elections ultimately reducing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) majority. Assembly elections also took place in several politically significant states.

In a noted repressive climate, some of the key digital media outlets such as The Wire, Scroll, NewsLaundry, The NewsMinute, and Article 14 played an increasingly vital role in documenting and amplifying issues despite ongoing financial crackdowns and legal intimidation. Through investigative reporting, fact-checking, and grassroots-level coverage, it was independent media that continued to challenge the mainstream media's pro-government narrative and expose electoral irregularities, helping preserve public accountability in an increasingly hostile information ecosystem.

The growing consolidation of media ownership, by industrialists closely aligned with the government over the past decade, continues to pose a grave threat to press freedom and democratic discourse.

The acquisition of Network 18 and its stable of channels and digital outlets by the Mukesh Ambani led-Reliance Industries back in 2014, was just the beginning of the downslide. Then there was the Adani Group's 2022 takeover of New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV) – once a flagship of independent news – and its infusion of INR 900 crore (USD 9 billion) into its media arm which seemed to signal a death knell for the independent electronic news media outlet. Such aggressive expansion and monopolisation by powerful business elites now threatens to convert these once robust editorial platforms into echo chambers for government-friendly narratives, undermining critical journalism, side-lining dissenting voices, reinforcing a climate of fear and self-censorship and further eroding democratic accountability.

In the period, the role of the media as a watchdog took a beating in the world's largest democracy, with mainstream media frequently accused of promoting government narratives and failing to provide critical coverage of electoral processes.

Investigative platforms like The Reporters' Collective lost tax exemptions, while other digital news organisations faced regulatory pressure, leading to a chilling effect on independent journalism.

Surge of disinformation

Disinformation propagated by the IT cells of various political parties has been used to manipulate narratives and employ deepfake technology to target political opponents. This troubling trend was highlighted in the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risk Report which identified India as having the highest risk of misinformation and disinformation worldwide. Another study by the Indian School of Business and CyberPeace documented that social media platforms were responsible for 77 per cent of misinformation in the country, with X (formerly Twitter) accounting for 61 per cent and Facebook for 34 per cent, respectively.

The influence of “Big Tech” and social media in shaping public discourse became increasingly evident. Politicians leveraged platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X to spread propaganda, suppress opposition, and further fuel misinformation. In addition to mis/disinformation, India experienced a significant surge of hate speech incidents in the period targeting religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. According to a report by the Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) released in February 2025, such incidents increased by 74 per cent in 2024. The report found that despite their own community standards prohibiting hate speech, social media platforms failed to enforce their guidelines, allowing violative content to spread unchecked in the Indian context in 2024.

The escalation of hate speech was particularly pronounced during the general election period, with political rallies and religious gatherings serving as common platforms for disseminating divisive rhetoric. High-profile figures, including national leaders, were implicated in propagating hate speech, contributing to heightened communal tensions and undermining social cohesion.

Despite the alarming rise in incidents, India is still to enact specific legislation to penalise hate speech, while the Hate Crimes and Hate Speech (Combat, Prevention And Punishment) Bill, 2022, introduced in the Upper House of Parliament in December 2022 has not been discussed with all stakeholders. This legal vacuum allows hate speech to flourish unchecked, especially when perpetrators are politically influential. Frequently, senior political leaders accused of promoting divisive rhetoric invariably invoked the right to free speech as a shield, avoiding accountability and reinforcing impunity. Such a climate continues to further embolden repeat offenders and severely undermine social harmony and democratic discourse.

Despite mounting pressures on press freedom and an overwhelming tide of state-backed disinformation, India's independent digital media mounted a robust pushback during the 2024 elections. Fact-checking organisations such as Alt News and Boom Live, alongside influential YouTubers such as Dhruv Rathee, played a pivotal role in countering misinformation and offering critical perspectives. In a notable initiative, five independent media outlets – NewsLaundry, The News Minute, The Wire, The Caravan, and Scroll – collaborated to cover the election results through audience-funded broadcasting. This innovative model of public-supported journalism underscored both the resilience and relevance of independent media amid shrinking civic space.

Digital control

India's regulatory laws, such as the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill 2023 which is aimed at overhauling digital media regulations, have raised concerns about government overreach and potential censorship of OTT platforms and individual content creators. After a backlash from independent media, the government withdrew a revised 2024 draft only to reinstate the original 2023 version, keeping uncertainties alive over future regulatory controls.



The role of the media as a watchdog took a beating in the world's largest democracy, with mainstream media frequently accused of promoting government narratives and failing to provide critical coverage of electoral processes. Security personnel carry Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and other voting materials as they leave for polling stations in Patna on May 31, 2024. CREDIT: SACHIN KUMAR / AFP

Despite mounting pressures on press freedom and an overwhelming tide of state-backed disinformation, India's independent digital media mounted a robust pushback during the 2024 elections.

This growing governmental control over digital spaces, combined with economic and legal pressures on independent journalism, signalled a worsening crisis for press freedom and democratic accountability.

In the lead-up to the general elections, the government intensified efforts to suppress dissenting voices online. An executive order was issued to X mandating the takedown of posts critical of the government and blocking of accounts – including those of journalists – that challenged official narratives. The move drew criticism from digital rights groups as a blatant violation of free speech and democratic norms. Meanwhile, X has taken the Government of India to court, alleging that its SAHYOG portal, set up as a coordinated effort to fight cybercrime is actually a “censorship portal” that allows local police and different parts of the government to indiscriminately demand takedowns of online content. The portal was originally conceptualised to be a platform that would facilitate coordination among law enforcement agencies, social media platforms and telecom service providers to help in quicker takedowns of unlawful content. Yet media outlets have called on the government to provide the full details of the features of the SAHYOG portal for public perusal to ensure that it does not bypass the legal frameworks for online content regulation.

PAKISTAN: Military overreach and democratic challenges

Pakistan continued to face instability, military interference, and press repression amid a political mire and social unrest following the February 2024 elections.

After Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) candidates were barred from contesting under the party's electoral symbol due to legal challenges and the party's deregistration by the Election Commission of Pakistan, PTI-affiliated politicians contested as independent candidates. Yet while these independents won 93 seats – making them the largest single bloc – they still lacked formal party status in the National Assembly. A technicality upheld by the court denied their claim over reserved seats, leaving them short of a majority.

In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) – the country's two largest traditional parties – were able to form a post-election alliance. Despite winning fewer seats individually, their combined strength, bolstered by reserved seats and allied parties, enabled them to command a parliamentary majority. This then allowed the National Assembly to re-elect Shehbaz Sharif (PML-N) as Prime Minister.

In retaliation, PTI cadres and supporters took to the streets protesting against the alleged rigging and manipulation of the electoral process by the military establishment. The first of the protests were violently suppressed, leaving at least 12 dead. At the same time, the military continued to expand its control over the judiciary, enabling PTI founder chairman and former Prime Minister Imran Khan's imprisonment and silencing the opposition.

More protests followed throughout the year. According to Carnegie Endowment's Global Protest Tracker, there were at least ten significant protests in the country from May 2024 to March 2025 on



In January 2025, despite widespread and ongoing protests calling for his release, a Pakistani court sentenced Khan to 14 years in jail after finding him guilty of corruption.

When a post-election alliance brought to power two parties in Pakistan that had won fewer seats individually, the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) took to the streets in months long, and often violent agitations. Supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan take part in a rally on the outskirts of Islamabad on September 8, 2024. CREDIT: FAROOQ NAEEM / AFP

various issues related to controversial legal amendments, banning of social movements, education policy, military plans against extremist movements, deadly militant attacks, blasphemy charges and the arrest of Imran Khan.

In January 2025, despite widespread and ongoing protests calling for his release, a Pakistani court sentenced Khan to 14 years in jail after finding him guilty of corruption.

Increased military influence in politics also saw anti-democratic moves such as the 26th Constitutional Amendment in October 2024, further undermining judicial independence by amending the procedure of appointments of judges, and amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) a month later. The latter criminalised disinformation, especially online speech deemed “anti-state” or “against national security” and also increased state surveillance. Journalists also faced mass arrests, torture, and targeted killings.

The use of AI in Pakistan's political sphere is well-documented with both PTI and military-backed digital teams engaging in AI-generated propaganda and disinformation campaigns. PTI is becoming extremely adept at employing AI-generated content, such as speeches and videos, to circumvent censorship and rally supporters, including a fake victory speech by former PM, Imran Khan, which spread confusion. A TRT World Research Centre report noted PTI's use of AI-powered virtual rallies, claiming over five million views despite internet disruptions.

Pakistan's social media penetration is 66.9 million users as of January 2024, or approximately 26 per cent of the total population, according to DataReportal. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) figures dated only from 2023 put the telecom penetration rate in the country at 81 per cent. The history of misinformation suggests fertile ground for AI-driven propaganda.

Elections and political turmoil

The country's marred general elections, widely criticised for being rigged allegedly by the military-led deep state, set the political tone for the year under review.

Civil society organisations, independent media, and opposition parties cited pre-election arrests of (PTI) leaders, restricted media coverage, and allegations of vote tampering as key issues of concern. The Election Commission of Pakistan was also accused of bias, particularly for withholding reserved seats for women and minorities from the PTI-backed Sunni Ittehad Council.

Pakistan witnessed a sharp rise in repression of dissent during the reporting period. According to Amnesty International, 4,000 PTI supporters were detained by the police ahead of a massive national protest by the party in November 2024. Another report claimed at least 1,000 people were arrested on the day of the protest march. However, a fact-finding mission of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan found it challenging to corroborate the accounts and testimonies of families, the government, the PTI, and journalists.

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances reported having registered 379 new cases of missing persons in 2024. Investigative journalist Matiullah Jan was arrested in November 2024 under terrorism and narcotics charges, widely seen as retribution for critical reporting. In March 2025, prominent woman activist Mahrang Baloch was jailed following protests over disappearances in Balochistan.

Digital repression and narrative control

The government intensified digital repression through a series of restrictive measures, including the January 2025 amendments to the PECA act which granted sweeping powers to imprison social media users for alleged “false information”. An earlier February 2024 dictate to block X nationwide, on the basis of protecting national security, remains in place. In November 2024, a VPN ban was proposed, justified under “Islamic laws”, to prevent the circumvention of internet restrictions. These actions severely curtailed digital freedoms, limiting access to independent news, encrypted communication, and real-time political discourse, further tightening the government's control over online spaces.

The ongoing tensions between digital platforms and governmental regulations in Pakistan have been evident in the government's periodic bans of social media platforms in the past. Between 2020 and 2021, the government imposed and lifted four bans on TikTok, citing concerns over immoral and indecent content.

In response to the proliferation of disinformation, various social media platforms implemented fact-checking measures. For instance, TikTok launched the Pakistan Election Center, a dedicated hub directing users to authoritative election information, aiming to combat misinformation and uphold election integrity. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives remained limited. Moreover, the government's resistance to independent verification undermined these measures.

However, in the period under review, some positive efforts pushed back against disinformation in Pakistan. The US Consulate in Lahore



Bangladesh's media was systematically controlled and suppressed during mass protests in 2024, preventing journalists from reporting the full story. Bangladeshi photojournalist Shahidul Alam (centre) stands alongside advocates at a High Court building gate in Dhaka on July 31, 2024, during a protest demanding justice for the victims arrested and killed in the nationwide violence. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

funded training for journalists on digital verification and UNESCO held consultations to introduce the Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms towards fostering conducive environment for public discourse on freedom of expression and access to information online.

Digital rights activists (e.g., Bolo Bhi, Bytes for All, and Digital Rights Foundation) led cyber-safety and counter-misinformation work, while independent journalists increasingly used YouTube to bypass censorship. Though limited in reach, these efforts marked important resistance to the state's narrative control and contributed to preserving online civic space despite increasing authoritarian pressures.

BANGLADESH: Mass uprising

During the reporting period, Bangladesh faced political turmoil marked by contested elections, mass protests, military intervention, press suppression and the ouster of its long-serving prime minister.

The January 2024 elections, boycotted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), had already seen the ruling Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League secure a fourth consecutive term in a largely uncontested race. This was little surprise given that leading up to the vote, Hasina's government intensified its crackdown on dissent, jailing opposition leaders and using laws like the Cyber Security Act to stifle criticism.

International observers criticised the elections for lacking transparency and a level playing field for all parties. With it, press freedom further deteriorated, and journalists attacked, arrested, and censored. Religious minorities in Bangladesh faced violence, and AI-driven disinformation campaigns further distorted public discourse and media independence. The year highlighted the fragility of Bangladesh's democratic institutions, with the media frequently caught in the crossfire of political struggles.

During the reporting period, Bangladesh faced political turmoil marked by contested elections, mass protests, military intervention, press suppression and the ouster of its long-serving prime minister.

By mid-year, Hasina's iron grip on leadership was faltering and her repressive tactics triggered nationwide uprisings. Widespread discontent over alleged election rigging and economic grievances fuelled mass protests, particularly among students.

The student-led protests in mid-2024, initially sparked by opposition to a discriminatory public sector job quota system, escalated into nationwide demonstrations against the Hasina government. The full-fledged uprising calling for democratic reforms was met with brute force, leading to violent clashes and violent crackdowns by security forces, including the use of live ammunition. Some reports indicate that at least 215 protesters were killed, but independent investigations estimate the figure to be as high as 1,400 deaths. As unrest intensified in August 2024 and protesters stormed government buildings, the military intervened, propelling the 76-year-old prime minister to resign and flee to India. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was appointed interim leader, tasked with restoring order and facilitating democratic reforms.

Media suppression

The Hasina government has long been widely condemned for its aggressive attacks on the media, including arbitrary detentions and



Sri Lanka grappled with economic challenges, the legacy of political dynasties and pressing demands for institutional reform. Police use water cannons and tear gas to disperse education professionals protesting salary abuses in Colombo on June 26, 2024. Public frustration with corruption and economic mismanagement drove a significant political shift in the country's presidential and national elections in late 2024. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

financial harassment of journalists. Independent media outlets, as a means to survival, have been forced into self-censorship, fearing government retaliation. Under Hasina's leaderships, countless journalists fled the country to escape persecution, leaving the country's already fragile press landscape further weakened.

Media workers in Bangladesh suffered immensely during the past year. Journalists covering the protests faced violent attacks, with at least 250 media professionals injured by security forces or pro-government supporters. Tragically, several journalists were killed in the firing line by security forces. On July 18, 2024, Hasan Mehedi, a journalist with the *Dhaka Times*, was fatally shot while covering protests in Dhaka's Jatrabari district. Additionally, on July 19, freelance video journalist Tahir Zaman Priyo was killed in Dhaka, and on July 18, Shakil Hossain, a correspondent for Bhorer Awaj, and Abu Taher Md Turab, a reporter for the Daily Naya Diganta, were both shot dead in Sylhet.

Despite the dramatic change in government from the authoritarian rule of Sheikh Hasina, media suppression has persisted. Between October and November 2024, the Press Information Department revoked the accreditation of 167 journalists without clear justification, sparking outrage among the press freedom advocates. Notably, many of these journalists had previously covered the Prime Minister's Office and the Awami League, leading to concerns that the mass terminations were politically motivated.

Growing polarisation

In the wake of initial optimism surrounding Yunus' appointment, concerns have emerged regarding the legitimacy of the interim government. Civil society groups called for immediate elections to secure broader public support. Additionally, reports surfaced of a growing Islamist influence within the transitional administration, raising fears over threats to secularism.

The post-Hasina power vacuum also led to increased violence against members of the Hindu minority community. Attacks on Hindu communities intensified in this period, with reports of vandalism

and forced displacements. The government's inadequate response exacerbated fears of persecution while pro-government media attempted to downplay the crisis.

During the political upheavals in Bangladesh between May 2024 and March 2025, social media emerged as both a mobilisation tool and a disinformation conduit.

Both the previous Awami League-led government and opposition factions reportedly employed AI-driven propaganda to manipulate public opinion. For instance, deepfake videos targeting female opposition politicians, such as Rumin Farhana and Nipun Roy, were disseminated to discredit them. Additionally, misleading narratives on communal violence were propagated online, with exaggerated claims about attacks on Hindu communities and fabricated reports of cricketer Liton Das's house being set ablaze, which were later debunked.

As Bangladesh navigates this transition, press freedom and democratic integrity remain under threat, with ongoing political volatility raising concerns about the country's future.

SRI LANKA: A much awaited transition

Sri Lanka underwent a major political shift with the victory of Anura Kumara Disanayake of the left of centre National People's Power (NPP) or Jathika Jana Balawegaya in the September 2024 presidential election, followed by the NPP's landslide victory in November's parliamentary elections. Public frustration with corruption and economic mismanagement over recent years largely drove the movement.

The elections were widely deemed free and fair, though concerns over voter education on preferential voting arose. Civil society observed that public discontent with established parties fuelled the NPP's success, particularly its anti-corruption stance and focus on economic reform. However, despite electoral success, Sri Lanka continued to grapple with economic challenges, the legacy of political dynasties, and pressing demands for institutional reform.

The media landscape remained fraught with challenges and journalists were forced to operate in the shadow of the draconian



A weakened opposition in the Maldivian Parliament has often meant a lack of checks to legislative overreach, with the media being tasked with a heightened watch-dog role to flag excesses by a government armed with unchecked power

The Maldives' shifting political landscape, combined with mounting media restrictions, signalled concern over future press freedoms and the suppression of dissenting voices. Former government ministers and members and supporters of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party took to the streets in Malé on January 31, 2025, accusing the new government of oppressing its people. CREDIT: MOHAMED AFRAH / AFP

Online Safety Act 2024 that enables censorship, mass surveillance and invades privacy. Independent media continued to struggle to operate freely, often facing legal intimidation and government influence over narratives.

The NPP's rise presented both opportunities and risks for press freedom. While President Disanayake pledged media independence, concerns arose over potential overreach and state co-optation of media institutions.

Social media played a crucial role in shaping public discourse but also served as a platform for disinformation. Both government-aligned and opposition groups are known to use AI-driven propaganda, complicating the information landscape. Despite efforts by social media platforms to enhance fact-checking and curb misinformation, challenges remained in ensuring accuracy without suppressing free expression.

As Sri Lanka navigated its political transition, protecting press freedom, combating misinformation, and strengthening democratic institutions remained key challenges. Independent media and civil society remained vigilant about concrete democratic progress and also tracked impunity in perpetrators of crimes against humanity, and against journalists.

In March 2025, the Sri Lankan government – possibly due to media pressure – tabled the long-suppressed 'Batalanda Commission Report' in Parliament, addressing alleged state-sponsored human rights violations, including illegal detentions and torture, during the 1988-1990 period of civil unrest. Likewise, pressure from journalists' unions resulted in the Attorney General revoking his January 2025 release of three suspects detained in connection with the 2009 assassination of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge.

MALDIVES: Consolidation of power

Between May 2024 and March 2025, the Maldives underwent significant political shifts, with the media playing a crucial role in shaping democratic discourse amid increasing government control.

The January 2024 parliamentary elections saw a landslide victory for the People's National Congress (PNC), led by President Mohamed Muizzu. This supermajority allowed the PNC to amend the constitution unopposed, strengthening its pro-China stance and reversing the previous administration's pro-India policies. Allegations of vote-buying and undue influence surfaced, but international observers found no major irregularities.

The evolution of the media landscape in the Maldives has gone hand in hand with the birth of democracy in the atoll nation, ever since the

first independent magazines and newspapers were registered along with the registration of political parties for the first time back in 2005.

But too frequently a weakened opposition in the Maldivian Parliament has often meant a lack of checks to legislative overreach, with the media being tasked with a heightened watch-dog role to flag excesses by a government armed with unchecked power. Press freedom advocates feared there would be nothing standing in their way if the ruling party wished to once again curtail freedom of expression or clamp down on unfriendly coverage as it did under the dictatorial rule of former president, Abdulla Yameen from 2013 to 2018 and the 30-year rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom from 1978 to 2008.

In the period under review, press freedom in the atoll nation remained constrained, with independent media facing self-censorship, blocking of websites, economic limitations due to dependence on advertisements from state-owned enterprises, and political co-option due to alignment with politicians. State-aligned media dominance and vague legal restrictions further suppressed independent reporting, discouraging investigative journalism and critical discourse.

Social media was a battleground for political narratives, with both government and opposition forces deploying AI-generated disinformation. Efforts to regulate misinformation included community-led fact-checking initiatives, but their effectiveness remained limited due to low digital literacy. The Maldives' shifting political landscape, combined with mounting media restrictions, signalled growing concerns over future press freedoms and the suppression of dissenting voices.

In 2024, the President's Office submitted 75 complaints to the Maldives Media Council (MMC) alleging the spread of false information by media outlets. Additionally, the government exerted pressure on the MMC to rescind an investigative journalism award granted to the documentary 'Skeelan', which exposed sensitive issues related to the President's family. During this time, the Maldives witnessed the government's concerted efforts to suppress dissenting voices and control the media landscape.

NEPAL: A Shaky polity

Nepal experienced political instability and media suppression in the period under review, after the elections in January 2024 led to a fragmented Parliament, with the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), led by KP Sharma Oli, emerging as the largest party but falling short of a majority.

By July 2024, Oli formed a coalition government with the centrist Nepali Congress, marking his fourth tenure as prime minister.



Independent journalists and media unions monitored and reported government resistance to critical coverage, highlighting the need for stronger legal protections to safeguard press freedom.

Members of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) protest on March 30, 2025, against the killings and attacks on journalists, and the arson and vandalism against media houses in Nepal following pro-monarchy protests in the country. Over the past year, the FNJ recorded a total of 47 incidents of press freedom violations, including the killing of two journalists. CREDIT: FNJ

However, concerns arose over the ideological inconsistencies of this alliance, fuelling fears of political instability and policy stagnation. Critics argued that the alliance was more about power sharing than addressing pressing national issues, reflecting a pattern of political instability that has hindered Nepal's development.

Various pro-monarchy forces regrouped in the period with the aim of reinstating the Hindu kingdom, claiming that “two decades of bad governance, diminishing national image and the country's standing in foreign relations [have] made it necessary to restore the Hindu kingdom.”

The pro-monarchists called for the return of Gyanendra Shah – the last royal ruler of Nepal before the monarchy was dissolved – and demanded a constitutional monarchy with a Hindu identity. They accused several political parties, including that of Prime Minister Oli, of being corrupt and incompetent in leading the country. Large-scale protests in March were accompanied by widespread vandalism, destruction of government offices, shopping malls, media outlets and private houses. The Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), the Maoist Centre, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Socialist) all strongly condemned the monarchist violence. Although the support for monarchy in Nepal has grown in recent years, the chances of the return of the monarchy remain slim within the constitutionally enshrined Republic.

Nepal's media landscape has historically been vibrant, playing a crucial role in democratic transitions. However, during this period, it faced challenges fulfilling its watchdog role. Instances of threats, intimidation and legal pressures against journalists were reported, leading to self-censorship. Press freedom declined, with journalists facing intimidation and legal threats. An example was that of Kailash Sirohiya, the owner of Nepal's largest news organisation, Kantipur Publications, who was arrested in May 2024 over alleged citizenship law violations, raising concerns over press freedom.

Independent journalists and media unions monitored and reported government resistance to critical coverage, highlighting the need for stronger legal protections to safeguard press freedom.

Big Tech and social media

Social media again became a key battleground narrative control while disinformation surged. The controversial 2025 Social Media Bill, which required platforms to register with the state and imposed heavy penalties for non-compliance, was heavily criticised by

journalists, press freedom advocates and unions for suppressing free speech, further restricting digital freedoms, increasing surveillance, and deepening Nepal's democratic challenges.

Both government-aligned and independent social media actors sought to influence public discourse, with political entities leveraging coordinated campaigns to suppress dissenting voices. A November 2023 ban on TikTok, justified by concerns over cybercrimes and social disharmony, was finally lifted in August 2024 following an agreement with the authorities.

Major social media platforms, including Meta and X, introduced stricter fact-checking policies, but their effectiveness was limited due to Nepal's resource constraints. Meta replaced its third-party fact-checking program with a user-driven 'Community Notes' system, aligning with a broader push for minimal content moderation under the new US administration's policies.

The spread of disinformation remained a pressing issue, exacerbated by limited digital literacy among Nepalese citizens. The Media Council Bill and the AI concept paper published in July 2024 are likely to affect the media in as yet unpredictable ways.

BHUTAN: Peaceful transition

Bhutan navigated a period of political stability and continued its commitment to democratic processes amidst significant political and media developments. The parliamentary elections, held in two rounds in late 2023 and early 2024, resulted in the People's Democratic Party (PDP), led by former Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, return to power. The media played a vital role in this peaceful electoral transition, despite facing ongoing and well-documented challenges in resources and capacity.

The rise of social media as a dominant force in public discourse highlighted the need for enhanced digital literacy and robust fact-checking mechanisms in the country to safeguard the integrity of information and strengthen Bhutan's democracy.

Use of platforms like Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, X, and Instagram has steadily grown. However, the spread of misinformation remains a growing concern. In response, independent media and civil society groups launched fact-checking initiatives. A Bhutan Media Foundation report highlighted the continued need for greater advocacy on social media ethics, privacy, and the security to combat digital disinformation and protect public discourse.



News media in Afghanistan are now largely forced to exist as a propaganda wing of the government. Reports are closely monitored and rejected for non-compliance with the rules of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Ministry Deputy Mohammad Faqir Mohammadi (centre) speaks during a press conference in Kabul on August 20, 2024. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

AFGHANISTAN: Democracy dismantled

There is no debating that Taliban's authoritarian rule has severely restricted press freedom in Afghanistan, resulting in the targeting of journalists, especially women, with arrests, violence, and censorship.

Today, the country's independent media operate under extreme constraints, with an ongoing flow of journalists fleeing into exile across borders to neighbouring countries and beyond. In this environment, social media is both a tool for resistance and a deft tool for the Taliban's propaganda machine, making unbiased reporting increasingly difficult and dangerous.

Since its takeover in August 2021, the Taliban's authoritarian rule has systematically eroded democratic institutions and fundamental freedoms, particularly in targeting women and the press. Afghanistan's once-vibrant media landscape developed over decades, has dramatically deteriorated under Taliban control. Journalists face threats, arbitrary arrests, and violence, making independent reporting nearly impossible.

Women journalists continue to be forced out of their profession due to various oppressive policies. Fortunately, some of the exiled Afghan journalists, such as those at *Zan Times* and *The Afghan Times*, continue to document human rights abuses and the situation in the country but still their lives remain under threat.

The Taliban's censorship extends to social media to suppress dissenting voices through surveillance and control. Meanwhile, journalists struggle to counter disinformation due to ongoing official and unofficial restrictions on access to information, especially for women. An increasing number of bans, including on women in state media, and on broadcasting film, music, women's voices, and images of living beings, including animals, has severely diminished the scope of news coverage and coverage of critical issues.

Despite these challenges, Afghan journalists persist in resisting Taliban narratives. But with censorship tightening and press freedoms shrinking, the Afghan media ecosystem remains under severe threat, further marginalising independent journalism and any hope of democratic discourse.

South Asia's political shifts

What is clear is that the period under review witnessed profound political shifts and an alarming decline in press freedom across South Asia.

State control over independent media intensified, with governments weaponising legal, financial, and regulatory mechanisms to stifle dissent, while journalists faced violence, imprisonment, and exile (please see country reports and detailed listing of violations of journalists' rights samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25).

Disinformation, often AI-driven, became a primary tool for narrative control, further eroding democratic accountability. While elections in multiple countries led to political realignments, they were often marred by manipulation, military interference, and the suppression of opposition voices.

Digital censorship expanded extensively, with governments in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives tightening their grip on social media and online discourse. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's totalitarian rule silenced independent journalism, while in Bhutan, media remained fragile, grappling with the newer dilemmas posed by misinformation.

Despite the fragility of the media landscape and new and evolving challenges, independent media continued to resist, exposing corruption, human rights abuses and electoral fraud. The survival of democracy in South Asia hinges on the protection of press freedom and the resilience of independent journalism. How that sustains is a question that the media industry continues to grapple with. ■



Major political realignments had a direct impact on the media in Bangladesh. Political retribution and perceived proximity to the ousted Hasina regime led to mass sackings, protests against media outlets and forced resignations. Bangladesh Army personnel stand guard as protesters stage a demonstration in front of the Prothom Alo newspaper's office in Dhaka on November 25, 2024. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP



23RD ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2024-2025
**SEE FULL NATIONAL REPORTS AND VIOLATION MONITORING
DATA ONLINE AT [SAMSN.IFJ.ORG/SAPFR24-25](https://samsn.ifj.org/sapfr24-25)**