CLAMPDOWNS AND COURAGE
IFJ SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2017-2018

SIXTEENTH ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT (2017-2018)
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Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka
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Cover Photo: Students and activists holding ‘I am Gauri’ placards take part in a rally held in memory of journalist Gauri Lankesh in Bangalore, India, on September 12, 2017. The murder of Gauri Lankesh, a newspaper editor and outspoken critic of the ruling Hindu nationalist party sparked an outpouring of anger and demands for a thorough investigation. CREDIT: MANJUNATH KIRAN / AFP

This spread: Indian journalists take part in a protest on May 23, 2017 after media personnel were injured covering clashes in Kolkata between police and demonstrators who were calling for pricing reforms in the agriculture sector. CREDIT: MANJUNATH KIRAN / AFP

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A

s we fight for journalist rights for another year, there’s a

pervading sentiment emanating through the collective
discourse of media workers in South Asia. It is audible in the
treet demonstrations and protests of media workers.

It is there, between the lines, in journalist union statements and

in formal calls to government to do more for safety and protection
of media workers. It is written boldly and plainly in the protest
placards and banners carried by activists in cities and regional
centres; raw emotions and brave statements etched out each and
every time yet another attack or killing takes target on a journalist.

It is evident in the robust defence that plays out on social media
against the obscene trolling of women journalists and secular
bloggers in the online space.

It is heard every time a journalist is jailed or detained on spurious
and dubious charges, and in the passionate defence and campaigns
delivered by colleagues and family for their release. It is the
disturbing undertone in the ongoing discourse on the scourge of
fake news that is taking over the online space as well as mainstream
media. And it is there in the bleak silence of the many internet
shut downs that are plaguing freedom of expression and human
rights in South Asia.

In this vast and diverse region that is increasingly divided by
political extremism and suffering under authoritarian regimes with
little regard for freedom of expression or the public’s right to know,
one of the clear things that unites South Asia’s media is the shared
experience of challenging clampdowns and control. The juggernaut
of ever-evolving economic, social, cultural, political and, now,
technological impacts, is putting the profession of journalism under
pressure like never before.

Legacy media is slowly but surely being dismantled or
disembowelled, increasingly to push the agendas of media owners or
powerful political and business interests. Wages and job permanency
have been the casualty of an information revolution that has left
fewer journalists working harder than ever before. The pervading
question is: what kind of future will it be for South Asia’s journalists?

After the storm, what will this new media landscape reflect? With the
current trajectory of clampdowns and increasing controls, one could
be forgiven for pessimistically thinking, if there will indeed be one
and if press freedom can indeed survive.

As we release this year’s South Asia Press Freedom Report,
Clampdowns and Courage, Afghanistan’s media has endured one of
its darkest days and is in national mourning after another heinous
suicide bombing and bloody targeted attack. At least 10 journalists
lost their lives in a single deadly day on April 30, 2018 – nine in a
suicide bomb attack in Kabul, where the killer disguised himself as
a reporter at the scene of an initial bomb blast. In a separate incident,
Ahmad Shah, a young journalist with the BBC’s Pashto service, was shot dead by unknown gunmen
in Khost province. Our deepest sympathies go to all our colleagues
in Afghanistan who have lost 22 colleagues in this one single year of
review. Sadly, this epitomises the brutality of that country’s working
environment, where the Taliban and the Daesh frequently target
media and journalists while the state remains clearly unable to
provide any security to them.

In India, we saw a nation in mourning after the brutal shooting
of respected firebrand journalist Gauri Lankesh in the heart of
tech-city Bengaluru. In the aftermath, the protests in defence of
media took over the country and ignited a solidarity that went
beyond India’s borders across the region and epitomises the
sentiment of this year’s report.

We document the clampdowns, repression and muzzling by
legal means and more. But we also pay tribute to the other factor that
unites South Asia’s media – and that is courage.

In the face of adversity, its media fearlessly perseveres, despite
the suffering and despite increased controls and criminalisation of
their craft. We give special focus to the many rural journalists in small
towns and villages who risk their lives to bring their stories to their
communities and beyond. We shed light on the political crisis that is
enveloping the Maldives and the ongoing conflict in Kashmir, with
strong messages of resilience coming from both. We also document
the impact of the #metoo movement as we hear from women
journalists across the region about the insidious impact of sexual
harassment and how they are bravely working to change the story.

And we reveal journalists jailed, detained or disappeared for simply
trying to do their job.

For these reasons and more, Clampdowns and Courage
encapsulates a record of this past year and the work of many. And,
most importantly, we hope it will continue to support the South
Asia Media Solidarity Network to continue its campaign for justice –
because that is what we all deserve.

Jane Worthington
IFJ Asia-Pacific
OVERVIEW

The South Asian region remained vulnerable to the wave of populist authoritarianism evident elsewhere in recent years. The practice of journalism is deeply affected by these trends. Internet-based news platforms and social media continue their rapid growth, pressuring traditional media to evolve new modes of adjustment and accommodation. That new compact remains elusive and if anything, traditional media is pushing back by abandoning older and more valued attributes.

The internal political context in most of the eight South Asian countries, is marked by sharpening political polarisation. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan are scheduled to conduct national general elections later this year, and all these countries pose special challenges for journalists seeking free and fair access to news sites and non-hostile reporting environments.

Highlighting the insecure lives of journalists in war-torn Afghanistan, as many as ten journalists were killed on April 30, 2018. In addition to a journalist being gunned down in Khost in Eastern Afghanistan, nine journalists, including a female journalist, were killed in the line of duty in Kabul when a suicide bomber disguised as a journalist detonated himself among the reporters and camera crew who had rushed to cover an earlier suicide blast. A radical group that originated in the protracted conflict in the Arab world claimed responsibility for the attack, in which more than 50 people were killed. This deadly attack in one of the most fortified areas of the capital city follows a lethal blast at a voter registration centre just a week before which killed more than 50. A radical group that originated in the protracted conflict in the Arab world claimed responsibility for the suicide attack.

Since Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced a policy of negotiations with the Taliban - the country’s erstwhile rulers who have re-emerged as a ferocious guerrilla army – there were hopes that the politics of reconciliation may triumph over the long running insurgency. Media practitioners who have negotiated their own modes of engaging with the known threats while standing by professional codes, may have had reason to hope for an abatement of the daily hazards they face. The arrival of the alien radical element in Afghanistan and the brutal demonstration of its power to strike at will at the heart of the country’s democratic process, considerably raises the level of menace.

Afghanistan’s journalists are not entirely aware of the multiple directions from which threats emanate. Armed insurgents have carried out a number of targeted killings, but equally, there are hazards arising from potentially being at the wrong place at the wrong time and getting caught in crossfire or a blast. An official attempt to investigate every such instance since the political transition began in Afghanistan, has been launched with the cooperation of the country’s journalists. Progress however, has been slow and an environment of distrust between the political establishment and the country’s media practitioners is yet to be built. Assaults on journalists by political figures and their associates have been common, typically triggered by some form of critical reporting.

After the last general election to its national parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad, was boycotted by the principal opposition, the authorities, as the industry pushed back strongly. Authorities brought into play certain over-broad definitions of criminal activity, such as maligning national institutions and spreading “anarchy and extremism” to target particular journalists and media houses. Incidents of arbitrary detention and torture have been reported. And journalists who suffer the misfortune of being charged under the law, will potentially have to bear that millstone for long years.

Pakistan’s electronic media regulator remains prepared to apply the same regulatory template to the print media, which potentially would have to bear that millstone for long years. Pakistan’s electronic media regulator remains prepared to suspend all broadcasts under the slightest duress, as with a street demonstration that threatened to paralyse life in the national capital Islamabad and the adjacent city of Rawalpindi in November. There was in the course of the year, an effort to apply the same regulatory template to the print media, which was hastily withdrawn amid considerable embarrassment for the authorities, as the industry pushed back strongly.

Bangladesh faces another potentially divisive election before the end of the year. The government has ruled without serious opposition within parliament for an entire term, but has found it difficult to contain the forces of bitter partisanship on the street. This has infected the functioning of the media, with journalists often having to pick sides or risk being ostracised by both contending parties.

A proliferation of media outlets across all formats – print, visual and online – with no clear regulatory philosophy, has contributed to an erosion of trust in journalism in Bangladesh. Media practitioners and journalists who seek to uphold certain values, find their status questioned by association with the wider cohort of political operatives. For instance, securing a statutory wage board to stipulate appropriate levels of compensation for journalists – as provided under Bangladesh’s national law – has proved an uphill struggle for the country’s unions.

The government in Bangladesh has also armed itself with extraordinary powers to police the online and social media space. The number of arrests and prosecutions launched far exceed the capacity of the judicial instruments created under the law and often amount to a form of punishment without trial. This has caused some disquiet and the possibility of organised protests, especially from Bangladesh’s growing population of bloggers.

Pakistan also witnessed an effort at intensifying online policing through a newly enacted law on electronic crimes. Authorities brought into play certain over-broad definitions of criminal activity, such as maligning national institutions and spreading “anarchy and extremism” to target particular journalists and media houses. Incidents of arbitrary detention and torture have been reported. And journalists who suffer the misfortune of being charged under the law, will potentially have to bear that millstone for long years.

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Charges of “fake news” are freely traded, often with the fact-checkers being accused of the very vice that they seek to curb. The issue has been taken on board the regulatory agenda, though not in a manner that inspires great confidence among those worried about the corrosive impact of spurious news and information on the standards of civic and political life.

Political office holders and certain constitutional functionaries would likewise, have to respond to media coverage with an ability to distinguish between their institutional and individual roles. This aspect was highlighted through the year in contempt proceedings that the country’s Chief Justice launched against a newspaper for reporting certain discrepancies in its official records of his age.

A confrontation between the media and the police force in a province of Nepal occurred over the publication of the performance appraisals of certain police officers. An avoidable precedent could have emerged from the police demand that the media reveal its sources.

Other stories reporting malfeasance in government agencies and public corporations have attracted threats of retribution. The institutional means of grievance redressal obviously still have a long way to go before they gain general acceptance.

**Bhutan** will also go to the polls towards the end of the year to elect its third National Assembly since beginning the transition to a constitutional monarchy in 2008. Elections to the twenty seats in the upper house – the National Council – will conclude before that. A new constitution is in place and a number of laws have been enacted with implications for media functioning. There are worries that in the effort to play safe, the laws may tilt towards restraining media freedom. Bhutan will face a challenge in instituting a culture of competitive and professional journalism in a context where internet based platforms and the social media seem to be taking over the space for information transactions. In that sense, its challenges differ from other countries in South Asia, where traditional media are struggling to cope with the new communication technologies.

Concerns over the “viral effect” that could be engendered through the social media are acute in all South Asian democracies. There is also much worry over the absence of a professional process of curating content posed on social media. In polarised political milieus, journalists who take to social media to insist on adherence to traditional values of the profession, often become targets of abuse. These come frequently with threats of physical violence, a hazard that women especially are prone to. All countries in South Asia come frequently with threats of physical violence, a hazard that women especially are prone to. All countries in South Asia
Two days before the UN International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists (IDEI) on November 2, 2017, Kishitr Kumur, a journalist with the online portal The Quint, received a terse ‘apology’ of sorts from the Delhi Police: “Today was particularly bad because of stone pelting injuries. It was a mix-up, we are sorry.” The journalist had spent over two hours in a police lockup in New Delhi, after having had his footage of a slum demolition forcibly deleted.

This incident was relayed by his colleague Meghnad Bose at a meeting to observe IDEI, hosted by UNESCO in New Delhi. Bose himself was assaulted by the Delhi police in May 2017, while covering student protests. “If this is our fate in India’s capital, what must be happening to journalists in small towns and cities?” he asked.

However, it is not just in small-towns and villages that investigations are tardy. It was only six months after the murder of prominent editor Gauri Lankesh in the heart of tech-city Bengaluru in September 2017, that one of the accused, the suspected supplier of firearms was nabbed. The actual shooters are still at large.

Given this attitude of the law-enforcers, the struggle for justice is a long and painful one for the survivors and for families of those killed, their colleagues and journalists’ organisations. For some, there is no end to the punishing process. For others, the process doesn’t even begin.

When journalists dissent, uncover corruption or record patently illegal acts, they become targets. In India, over the last two decades, more than 30 journalists have been killed as a direct result of their professional work. The rate of convictions continues to be near-zero and the long road to justice is fraught with poor investigation, political pressure that often lets accused abscond or roam scot free and interminable trials that have not secured a single conviction to date. Ultimately, the incidents of crimes against journalists occur with impunity because those in power know they can get away with it.

So long as that climate remains unchanged, the numbers will not mount.

There is no quick fix. We know impunity is a warning of the breakdown of rule of law and democracy and contributes to the increase in murders and attacks. When journalists are threatened or attacked, the support of their colleagues and their employers will go a long way to combat impunity. We stage protests and release reports offering recommendations for change. We campaign to draw global attention to the weaknesses and failings of governments, courts and state forces in tracking down and prosecuting perpetrators. We follow cases and call on governments and their leaders to bear responsibility for the deathly smear that blights countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

In countries like Nepal and Pakistan, effective media monitoring networks keep tabs on violations as they occur and continue to push for meaningful change. In Pakistan, strengthening the capabilities of journalists to operate with more preparedness about risks, are beginning to make the impact needed.

India is currently debating the new Journalists Welfare and Protection Bill, 2017. This bill was introduced in National Assembly in 2014 – the government drafted the process to draft a law on journalists’ safety in 2015. Building upon the earlier drafts – one prepared by a Senate Standing Committee, headed by Senator Raza Zafar Haq, in 2011, and another submitted by Sahibzada Tanjil Ullah and others in National Assembly in 2014 – the government drafted the Journalists Welfare and Protection Bill, 2017. This bill was criticised and rejected by the stakeholders, including the media and journalists’ organisations.

For some years the movement in Pakistan for enacting a special legal framework on improving safety and security of journalists has intensified. The media stakeholders, particularly journalists and information practitioners, have continued to demand a comprehensive legislation to combat impunity for crimes against journalists. Responding to these demands, the federal government initiated the process to draft a law on journalists’ safety in 2015. Building upon the earlier drafts – one prepared by a Senate Standing Committee, headed by Senator Raza Zafar Haq, in 2011, and another submitted by Sahibzada Tanjil Ullah and others in National Assembly in 2014 – the government drafted the Journalists Welfare and Protection Bill, 2017. This bill was criticised and rejected by the stakeholders, including the media and journalists’ organisations.
Pakistan's 20,000 journalists. Others, including the Pakistan Broadcasting Association (PBA) and All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) also did not support the bill for various reasons. Upon an initiative from the Senate in November 2017, a new alternative draft model law on journalists’ safety was developed in collaboration with the PBFUJ, the media associations and the government through a subcommittee of the Senate’s Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting in January 2018. The draft, however, failed to be tabled as three-yearly Senate elections intervened in March 2018. The new Senate is expected to table this long-awaited legislative draft and adopt it later in 2018.

SRI LANKA: LETHARGIC INVESTIGATIONS

Progress around ending impunity for media rights violations, has been slower than expected. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights pointed out in his report to the 37th session of the UNHRC that “the High Commissioner remains gravely concerned about the violations of international humanitarian law”. It was noted that “the High Commissioner continues to receive reports of harassment or surveillance of human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations.”

In November 2017, emphasising that justice has not been delivered for the targeted crimes against journalists in Sri Lanka, the Free Media Movement urged the President of Sri Lanka to appoint a Presidential Commission of Inquiry with a comprehensive mandate for investigations.

On a positive note, during the period under review, notable progress was reported in the investigation into the murder of editor Lasantha Wickrematunga, outspoken critic of the Rajapaksa rule. He was assassinated on January 8, 2009. As part of the investigation, Senior Deputy Inspector General of Police Prasanna Nanayakkara was arrested on February 14, 2018 for allegedly instructing his juniors to block the investigation into Lasantha’s murder and destroy evidence gathered from the crime scene.

The involvement of military intelligence in the killing has come to light. Media reported that the then Head of Military Intelligence, Kapila Hendavitharana, was heading a killer squad and he reported directly to the then Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Several other high-profile arrests were on the cards, but the investigation appears to have lost steam.

In another positive development, the former Military Intelligence Director and Chief of Staff of the Army, Major General (Retired) Amal Karunasekara was arrested in 2018.

He is accused of the abduction and assault of journalist Keith Noyahr, then defence correspondent of The Nation. The family of the assassinated editor criticised President Maithripala Sirisena’s government for failing to prosecute the perpetrators nine years since the internationally condemned murder. Wickrematunga was stabbed to death in his way home, tortured, and left on the road to die in June 2009. His limbs were broken and he was suffocated with his hair. No progress has been reported with regard to this investigation.

Investigation into the killing of journalist-cartoonist Prageeth Ekalaigoda did not see much progress in 2017. The sustained campaign for justice has brought out some truths about the disappearance of Ekalaigoda in 2015-2016. Evidence shows that Ekalaigoda was taken to an Army camp and tortured. Both the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and State Counsel leading the case on behalf of the Attorney General’s department, have repeatedly informed the Courts of the Army providing false information, denying possession of evidence, delaying production of evidence, misleading investigations and intimidating witnesses. The progress of the investigation appears to have stalled, or even moved backwards in 2017, primarily due to lack of cooperation from the Army and key suspects being released on bail a few weeks after the President publicly questioned their detention. Meanwhile Sandya Eknaligoda continues the struggle for justice, with her simple question: “Where is Prageeth?”
On August 28, 2017, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the head of a religious cult called the Dera Sacha Sauda (Abode of Real Truth) was sentenced by a special court to 20 years imprisonment for raping two women. Elaborate, if somewhat bizarre, security arrangements were made for Justice Jagdeep Singh, who, with his staff was flown in from Chandigarh by helicopter to the special court set up in the premises of the district jail in Rohtak, around 66 km from New Delhi. A three-tier security ring with 4,000 personnel guarded the area around the jail where Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh was lodged. The Rohtak deputy commissioner Atul Kumar had earlier declared that shoot-at-sight orders would be issued, such was the influence of the Dera in the area (‘dera’ in Punjabi, which literally means a camp or settlement, in this context refers to a religious cult).

There was good reason for the high security. Three days before, when the court held Ram Rahim guilty of the crime, his followers went on a rampage, ransacking court premises, beating up journalists and setting fire to their outdoor broadcasting vans. Thirty-eight people lost their lives and over 250 others – including journalists – were injured in the violence. In Sirsa town, the headquarters of the Dera Sacha Sauda, curfew was imposed and an atmosphere of fear was heavy in the air.

If the district administration was caught by surprise at the scale of the violence and the savagery of the followers of Ram Rahim, one man was not. For 16 years, Anshul Chhatrapati had lived with the ever-present threat of violence as he doggedly pursued the case against Nirmal Singh and Kuldeep Singh, accused in the murder of his father, Ram Chander Chhatrapati, a highly respected journalist in Sirsa. The accused murderers are supporters of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and, according to the CBI investigation, had shot Ram Chander Chhatrapati for publishing an anonymous letter about the sexual exploitation of women in the ashram of the self-styled godman.

In a case related to another murder at the Dera, on February 22, 2018, the Punjab and Haryana High Court reserved an order on a petition filed by Khatta Singh, Ram Rahim’s former driver, who was earlier a witness for the CBI. In 2011, the CBI had declared him hostile for the CBI. In 2011, the CBI had declared him hostile for the CBI. In 2011, the CBI had declared him hostile for the CBI. In 2011, the CBI had declared him hostile for the CBI. In 2011, the CBI had declared him hostile for the CBI.

But for Ram Chander Chhatrapati, silence was never an option. Passionately interested in journalism even as a schoolboy, upon interrogation disclosed that he was from the cult and used a licensed revolver that belonged to a Dera employee Kishan Lal. The shooters had, the family later learnt, done so.

On September 22, 2002, the Punjab and Haryana High Court took suo moto notice of the letter and ordered a CBI enquiry. “All of this was reported by my father. Every single development was scaled up and every effort was made to discuss the revelations,” said Anshul. A month later, Ram Chander Chhatrapati was shot outside his home and succumbed on November 21, 2002.

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From the beginning, the identity of the perpetrators was known to the police. The shooters, had the family learnt, done quite a few ecce and were of Chhatrapati’s routine. The shooters, had the family learnt, done quite a few ecce and were of Chhatrapati’s routine. The shooters, had the family learnt, done quite a few ecce and were of Chhatrapati’s routine. The shooters, had the family learnt, done quite a few ecce and were of Chhatrapati’s routine.

Anshul recalled: “The Dera and the state government clearly had an understanding. The state government was putting pressure on the police to see that the Dera’s name must not be in the FIR; that the police’s needle of suspicion must be turned away from it.” The police even tried another old trick – to say that the shooting was due to a property dispute. But this did not work.

On November 23, 2002, the Chief Minister of Haryana
come to my house and said that the culprits, however powerful, would be booked. But the exact opposite happened. There was no interrogation of the Dera head, the police didn’t bring in the Dera angle. In Sirsa, a movement led by the powerful, would be booked. But the exact opposite happened. "So, I took on the mantle of the struggle for justice for my father. I wrote to the CM Haryana and demanded a CBI investigation. Ultimately, I had to knock on the doors of the court. On January 10, 2003, I filed a petition before the Punjab and Haryana High Court to demand a CBI investigation," Anshul said, adding that it was not easy as the government cracked down on anyone who supported him or spoke against the Dera.

On July 31, 2007, a CBI challan (summons) was filed and the charge-sheet was finally filed in 2008. But for years thereafter, the accused would file applications in court on some pretext or the other. Between 2008 and 2017, the case meandered along. The rape cases and the murder cases – of Ranjit Singh and Lekhraj Dhot from Sirsa, to help us. The senior lawyer, RS Cheema, worked pro bono. In fact, the Dera people had approached the more responsive media in Sirsa barely a week before he was shot, stepped in to secure the offices of the respected newspaper in 2014. The period between 2013 and 2017 marked the growth of the Dera. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh gained immense political clout and amassed a lot of wealth. He began appearing on television, with his own morning show. He adopted blingy and flamboyant costumes and gave advertisements in the newspapers and, in his television programmes, was often dancing and singing with his followers. He even acted in two bio-pics celebrating his cult status.

Throughout, the case meandered along. The Dera managed to stall proceedings at almost every turn. In 2005, Ranjit Singh’s father moved the High Court for a CBI investigation but the police said the two shooters were caught and the weapon recovered so there was no need for a CBI enquiry into his son’s murder. Finally, the court ordered a CBI investigation into all cases in November 2003. Anshul acknowledges that the fight was possible only because of the support from well-known advocates who refused to charge a puja. “We couldn’t afford a big lawyer. A supporter, Comrade Baidar Bakshi, got his son Ashwani Bakshi, a lawyer in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, and Lekhraj Dhot from Sirsa, to help us. The senior lawyer, RS Cheema, worked pro bono. In fact, the Dera people had approached him but he refused their brief. All of them put up the legal fight and stood by us throughout. We salute them.”

The Dera challenged the order of the CBI investigation in the Supreme Court in Delhi. Socialist leader Yogendra Yadav, who was well acquainted with Ram Chander Chhattarpal’s work and had met him in Sirsa barely a week before he was shot, stepped in to secure the offices of the respected former judge; the late Bajrangi Sachar. The Dera petition challenging the CBI investigation was dismissed in November 2004. The otherwise discredited CBI worked earnestly: “Apart from the murder cases, the rape cases were a shot in the dark. There was only an anonymous letter to go by. The CBI interrogated 18 girls. Only two came forward to file complaints. Their bravery must be commended. It is not easy. In one case, the in-laws were followers of the Dera so they threw the girl out. But her husband has stood by her,” said Anshul.

Intimidation, bomb threats and attempted assault followed, even as Gurmeet Ram Rahim was given Z plus security and moved around in a cavalcade of six cars with black window glasses. “Even the atmosphere in the court was so frightening when we used to go for hearings,” Anshul said.

But the CBI investigating officer and its Superintendent of Police, Armaandeep Singh, built a watertight case and withstood all the pressure, political and monetary. Regrettably, while the local media stayed away from following up on the case, possibly due to fear, Anshul continued to use the media as much as possible, in the most innovative manner. He continually briefed the media with updates on the case, even small incidents and developments. He would write letters to the High Court, the Supreme Court and to the Prime Minister. When the media in Haryana stayed quiet, he approached the more responsive media in neighbouring Chandigarh. And, when the media was unable to cover the case, he made use of alternate and social media. The electronic channels stayed away. Several channels would approach him for information and he would share it, only to find dead silence. “The channels keep asking, give us something different, something the stories can run with. But tell me, what can be a bigger story than a media worker being murdered?”

Today, Anshul awaits an elusive justice that now seems nearer. “I feel huge regret. Time is a great healer they say, but I don’t think so. My sister and brother were younger, so I had to take on. I took on the challenge. I have to get justice for him.”

On August 25, the self-styled ‘godman’ Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh was found guilty by a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court, on charges of rape and sexual assault of two female devotees. At least four outdoor broadcasting (OB) vans of media houses – NDTV, Republic TV, India Today and E+24 - were toppled, damaged and burnt near the court premises in Panchkula, Haryana. At least 38 media personnel registered a complaint regarding loss of equipment and vehicles. Reporter Rashid Raman and video journalist Shipendar Hayat from PTC News were attacked and robbed in Sirsa, near Dera Sacha Sauda, the headquarters of Ram Rahim Singh. Credit: Money Sharma/ AFP.
South Asia.

town reporters in three of the most populous countries in centred around capital Thimphu. The private media do front and centre of dangerous situations. In some countries mafias, puts members of the local media too often at the The open conflict between various communities, vested in the rural areas and small towns, where they also reside. at great risk to themselves. They face intimidation and little or no training, they are the first responders in their are the building blocks of the news-gathering industry, villages get little space in the city press; at best they may neglected.

Grassroots reporters' stories from small towns and villages get little space in the city press, at best they may feature as briefs on a local news page. Yet, these reporters are the building blocks of the news-gathering industry, the primary sources of news. Often with no facilities, and little or no training, they are the first respondents in their localities, rushing to the spot, carrying out their work often at great risk to themselves. They face intimidation and direct threats, caught between the various powers at play in the rural areas and small towns, where they also reside. The open conflict between various communities, vested interests, mining barons, tribal chieftains, land and liquor mafias, puts members of the local media too often at the front and centre of dangerous situations. In some countries like Bhutan, the journalist community is small and mostly centred around capital Thimphu. The private media do not employ any journalists in rural areas whereas IBN and Kaunsel, the two state-owned media houses have salaried correspondents in major regions.

This chapter explores the situation of rural and small-town reporters in three of the most populous countries in South Asia.

THE OPEN CONFLICT BETWEEN VARIOUS COMMUNITIES,vested INTERESTS, MINING BARONS, TRIBAL CHIEFTAINS, LAND AND LIQUOR MAFIAS, PUTS MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL MEDIA TOO OFTEN AT THE FRONT AND CENTRE OF DANGEROUS SITUATIONS.

THE IGNORÉD RURAL REPORTER

A majority of the South Asian population lives in rural areas – approximately 81 per cent in Nepal, over 70 per cent in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka and over 60 per cent in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Bhutan. Yet, the urban centric media in the region is focused on ‘national’ parliamentary politics centred around the capital cities and metropolises while the vast countryside is largely neglected.

Grassroots reporters’ stories from small towns and villages get little space in the city press, at best they may feature as briefs on a local news page. Yet, these reporters are the building blocks of the news-gathering industry, the primary sources of news. Often with no facilities, and little or no training, they are the first respondents in their localities, rushing to the spot, carrying out their work often at great risk to themselves. They face intimidation and direct threats, caught between the various powers at play in the rural areas and small towns, where they also reside. The open conflict between various communities, vested interests, mining barons, tribal chieftains, land and liquor mafias, puts members of the local media too often at the front and centre of dangerous situations. In some countries like Bhutan, the journalist community is small and mostly centred around capital Thimphu. The private media do not employ any journalists in rural areas whereas IBN and Kaunsel, the two state-owned media houses have salaried correspondents in major regions.

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INDIA: BELEAGUERED IN THE HINTERLAND

A Delhi-based journalist once got a call from a ‘national’ television channel requesting an interview. “I am out of town,” he responded. The channel said it would arrange to send a reporter to interview him at his hotel in Shimla, the capital of a northern hill state. The journalist waited for over an hour until finally a cameraperson arrived, luging his heavy equipment on his back. He was both reporter and videographer for the channel. He explained that he had taken so long to reach as the local bus hadn’t turned up. “The channel doesn’t give me a vehicle,” he said, panting from a steep walk uphill. This scene encapsulates the plight of many small-town reporters in India. Their employers, whether big or small media houses, do not provide vehicles or even a travel allowance. TV reporters and photographers are sometimes expected to buy their own equipment. The vast majority of rural reporters in India’s 70 districts are ‘stringers’ who often get nothing more from their employers than an identity card. This gives them some status with the district administration, an opportunity to rub shoulders with local officials, police and politicians. There is no appointment letter, contract, decent or regular payments.

Only a few editors recognise the value of the foot soldiers of journalism. A rare tribute to the rural reporter recently came from Uma Sudhir, Executive Editor with NDTV who won the Chami Devi Award for Outstanding Woman Journalist of the year 2017. In her acceptance speech she said, “…there is an army of reporters... across the country, reporting in different languages, for different media, who are driven by the passion for news and for truth.” (the) reporter is a first responder in the news chain. He or she knows best the ground reality and what exactly is the story. Allow the ground reporter that space, only then can journalism thrive and only then will you get real stories from the ground. Otherwise the real stories will be lost forever.

UNDERPAID AND EXPLOITED

Unfortunately, grassroots reporting is being increasingly devalued in the big ‘national’ media. Umakant Lakhera, vice president of the Delhi Union of Journalists and former bureau chief of a leading Hindi language daily, says, “Rural reporting is being finished. The market economy is not interested in impoverished villagers as they are not consumers. The government-owned media too has little presence outside the state capitals and big towns. Rural reporting is left to the uninsured or underpaid, exploited stringer.”

Lakhera recalls the story of a colleague, a reporter for a big, national and influential Hindi paper but he couldn’t afford a vehicle of his own. Nor did he get a conveyance allowance. “One morning he was tipped off about a big accident outside the town. He hatched a ride to the spot, on a policeman’s bike. He was clueless on the roadsides, notebook in hand, when a passing truck ran him down. He was on duty when he died but his pregnant wife got practically no compensation from the newspaper.”

However, there is demand for local news in regions with languages within many states and language daily increasingly have district-level editions and even online local editions. Meerut based Mohammed Ali, a correspondent for the ‘Hindustan Times’ says that Hindi language journalism is flourishing in north India, with rural editions in every district and online versions too. The number of editions depends on the extent of trade and commerce in a district and the size and importance of a town. In Uttar Pradesh’s Meerut district, the leading Hindi daily Dainik Jagran has both a rural edition and a town edition. Editions are printed in the bigger towns and distributed by a ‘stringer’ in a town the daily Hindustan has a bureau with 20 staff members. D. Anjaneyulu, general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Working Journalists Federation, says that the growth of the electronic media has led to a proliferation of journalists in the rural areas of both Andhra Pradesh and the newly-carved out neighbouring state of Telangana. He says his union of 5000 has a majority of rural reporters and stringers. “Every big channel has a reporter for each of the 175 ‘mandals’ (administrative unit) in the state. They operate as journalists cum videographers. They get no honorarium, on the contrary they are expected to feed the channels by raising money for advertisements from businesspersons, sometimes a quota of a minimum of Rs 10,000 (USD 150) per month. Staff reporters also have to pay the costs of running the office by paying for rent, electricity, telephone and petrol.”

“These practices are giving journalists a bad name in rural areas,” complains Anjaneyulu. Journalists are forced to beg or blackmail businesspersons and politicians, he rues. Anjaneyulu says the situation of many rural journalists is pathetic; only a few who have an extra source of income, for instance from owning land, survive while the rest must extract money from wherever they can. “We do get some benefits from the state government, such as a bus pass and a health card for free medical care. The government also pays for risk insurance for hospitalisation and deaths. But, as unions we want the government to implement the law, that we can get our entitlements from the management, not government charity.”

W. Chandrakanth, editor of Hans India, concurs, “It’s a miserable life out there for rural journalists. There is no job security or income security as they fall under the hire and fire category. Low incomes or no direct income from the organisations means that they are left to fend for themselves (read extortion and blackmail). This forces them to compromise on their values and submit to the whims of local strongmen, politicians, officials and the mafia.”

Technology has made reporting easier, but it has also added to the burdens of most journalists. Often a media house owns both a newspaper and a TV channel and the stringer has to work for both: first file a TV report, then write up a news report, provide photographs and tweet news. Of course, salaries do not increase along with the burden of work. Explains Chandrakanth, “All that the stringer gets is the ‘line payment’ as they call it which means that if a cameraman cum stringer cum photographer sends a two-minute long report with bites, and it is aired for five to ten seconds, he gets paid for only the five to ten second period. Similarly in print, payments are abysmal. For spot news (which means coverage of a press conference of political leaders or officials) you get Rs 150 (USD 2.30). For a story (special or exclusive) you get Rs 250 (USD 3.80). Channels with lesser TRP ratings and less revenues do not pay even this much. Another system is also in vogue. If the scroll is for State-level usage, the stringer gets Rs 25 (US 38 cents) for the scroll. If it is used in district level coverage, then one gets Rs 10 (US 15 cents) for such a scroll. Dailies pay by the centimetre or length of the story or pay a few paisa per word.”

Veteran journalist Vijay Chawla from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh also observes that while journalists based in the state capital and big towns are reasonably paid, stringers are left to fend for themselves. “Go to a press club in any small town and you will meet all kinds of journalists. Many are on the
High Risks, Low Safety

Poor wages or no wage is only part of the problems that rural journalists face. Safety is another big concern, with local mafia or police quick to pounce on a reporter who dares to expose their misdeeds. Threats and warnings are common, thrashings not known and killings are becoming more frequent. In the year 2014 and 2015, according to National Crime Records Bureau data, the police registered 142 cases of ‘grievous hurt’ caused to journalists who were attacked by various vested interests. The toothless Press Council of India receives many complaints from journalists, as well as complaints against them, inquires into these complaints and may pull up local administrations or offending newspapers but the Council has no enforcement powers.

A complicit police force, an indifferent administration and a lax judiciary ensure impunity for criminals who target journalists. In conflict prone areas the plight of journalists is far worse. The state of Chhattisgarh where security forces are combating armed Maoists has seen repeated arrests of journalists.

Rural and small-town journalists in trouble get little support from their employers; it is a rare media group that provides a lawyer and other help to a reporter in trouble with the police. Some simply shed their responsibility by denying that the journalist is their employee; others may fire a reporter who is in the wrong.

Somu Nag, a stringer-cum-news agent with the Hindi daily Rajashtan Patrika in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, was arrested on July 16, 2015, for alleged connections with Maoists. No support was forthcoming from Nag’s employers. He was acquitted a year later, and all charges quashed due to lack of evidence.

Sanjosh Yadav, who used to gather news for Hindi newspapers including Dainik Nav Bharat and Dainik Chhattisgarh, was arrested by the police on September 29, 2015 on charges of rioting and accused of being a Maoist sympathiser. Yadav was acknowledged by the Dainik Chhattisgarh as having worked for them but continued to languish in jail for 16 months until he was granted bail. In December 2017 the Chhattisgarh government disclosed that it was interrogating journalists during the year. Most of them were charged with criminal intimidation and extortion because they had reported cases of corruption and police excesses. Alarmed by the extent of human rights abuse, journalists operating away from the state capital Sinnar are more vulnerable in terms of both physical safety and job security. Likewise, India’s north eastern states also are conflict prone and journalists are often caught in a pincer between the conflicting demands of armed groups and the army.

In non-conflict areas the dangers that rural and small-town reporters face are from a range of actors such as politicians, mafia, corrupt police officials, religious leaders, caste leaders, and the local panchayat. Mainstream media continues to get away with such paid coverage.

From above: Members of the right-wing Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) gather for a large-scale congregation in Meenad in northern India on February 25, 2016. Over 250,000 RSS volunteers from district groups in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand states were set to attend the RSS’s ‘Vijnana Shakti Sammelan’ congregation in Meerut. Credit: Sajjad Hussain/AFP

Sanjeev Sharma, a journalist from a small town in Madhya Pradesh was killed when a garbage truck deliberately hit him off his motorcycle. He was investigating illegal sand mining prior to his death. Credit: Facebook

CCTV footage of the garbage truck swerving to deliberately hit Indian journalist Sanjeev Sharma, who was knocked off his motorcycle and killed. Credit: Screengrab ANI/Telether

Drafted a law for protection of journalists, with help from the People’s Union for Civil Liberties. They are lobbying with the government to have the law enacted.

Sandep Sharma, a journalist in Bhind a small town in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh was mowed down by a dumpper truck on March 25, 2018, allegedly at the behest of sand mafia whose illegal mining he had exposed. Sharma had allegedly videotaped a police official taking a bribe. The murder itself was captured by CCTV cameras in the town.

On March 25, 2018 two journalists, Naveen Nishchal, who worked with a local Hindi magazine, were riding a bike when they were crushed to death under the wheels of a car in Bhopur, Bhopal. The vehicle was allegedly driven by a former village headman who had objected to Nishchal’s reportage.

Sandeep Sharma, a journalist from a small town in Madhya Pradesh was killed when a garbage truck deliberately hit him off his motorcycle. He was investigating illegal sand mining prior to his death. Credit: Facebook

Even a tweet or blogpost by a reporter may land them in trouble with officialdom.

In these polarised times all it takes to justify an attack is to label a journalist as anti-state or anti-national. On March 1, 2017 Bastar reporter Prabhat Singh sent a written complaint to Dantewada police against the members of a pro-police vigilante group Samajik Ekta March who had called him “anti-national” on a group chat on WhatsApp. Later that month Singh was picked up from his office by plainclothes police, beaten up and put behind bars. He told The Wire that he received no help from any of the media houses that he had worked for. People like Singh who insist on objective reporting become easy targets.

On the ground, militant gangs use the Hindutva agenda of the country’s ruling party to run riot, knowing they have impunity from police action. Honest grassroot reporting of a riot or religious conflict and the role of politicians in fomenting such troubles is fraught with danger for the local reporter. In most parts of India media is dominated by the Hindu upper castes, and concepts such as representation of other castes and religious minorities are simply not on the agenda.

Describing the dominant discourse of Hindutva (militant Hinduism) in mainstream papers, Meenut-based reporter Ali says, “The Hindu dailies constantly peddle Islamophobia. They distort, communalise, polarise every issue. In Uttar Pradesh under the Samajwadi Party government the media constantly questioned the government. Now, since the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party came to power, hate speech against the minorities is open. Media has become an extension of mainstream Hindutva logic. It is really disturbing.”

Breaking New Ground

A different breed of rural reporter is award-winning city-based journalists like Bharat Dogra and P. Sainath, who travel and report frequently from the countryside. Activist and bilingual journalist Dogra has travelled extensively and filed stories from remote corners of the country. P Sainath who was the first rural affairs editor for The Hindu, now runs the PARI network (People’s Archive Rural India) online which documents the culture, customs, economy and ecology of rural India.

Women journalists find it far harder to roam the countryside and report from it, given problems of safety and lack of social acceptance of women travelling alone male escort. Very few women have broken ground by working for small town newspapers and an intrepid few are district correspondents and stringers.

An alternative newspaper that breaks stereotypes is called Khubar Lahunia, (News Waves). This eight-page, multi-edition weekly is produced in several local languages by a collective of rural women journalists in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is the first newspaper in the country run entirely by women who are specially trained to cover development news at village level. The newspaper is written, produced and distributed by women and has more than 80,000 readers in the two states.

The collective also produces a weekly video news programme called Apjan Samachar (Our News) in Hindi and the Bhojpur and Bijuji dialects. Teams of two women, one holding a camera, go out to interview villagers for the
programme. Others have been trained as anchors, editors and producers. The programme is aired free at markets village or at the district headquarter on a projector or TV set. DVD copies are available for sale. Sadly, experiments like these have limited commercial viability and still depend on external funding from donor agencies.

In Chhattisgarh, the CGNet Swara is a unique mobile phone-based platform set up by former BBC producer Shubratnag Choudhary to give the marginalised tribal population a voice. Chhattisgarh is a conflict zone where a Maoist army is fighting the state, and in the interior, forested villages there is no television or newspapers. News about tribal issues and concerns rarely reaches the mainstream media; in some cases, such news is deliberately suppressed by the mainstream where it conflicts with media owners' business interests, for example, news about protests against mining or land acquisition. Given the adverse political climate, through CGNet Swara is often forced to play it safe and not report controversial news, it nevertheless provides an alternate forum to the tribal people.

Using YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms, small town journalists are selling news to different buyers and consumers. During last year's elections in Uttarakhand for instance news organisations such as UPTV, Uttarpradesh.org, Newstrack.com, Diyasandesh.in, and Earlynews.in raced for the alternate forum to the tribal people. They have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no comprehensive system or hotline to act when a rural journalist is attacked, kidnapped or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured.

PAKISTAN: IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, where according to the Rural Media Network of Pakistan (RMNP) the majority of journalists killed in the line of duty since 2000 belong to rural areas and small towns. Journalists in rural areas experience the same constraints as their colleagues in the city, but also face serious additional issues because of their location and the social differences in those areas. For journalists in rural areas, corruption, sectarianism, honour killings, gang rape and feudal powers all represent subject matter that is difficult to report on. Armed militancy, religious extremism, sectarian violence and terror attacks are the main problems for rural journalists. They put their lives in danger to cover assignments without insurance, safety equipment or proper safety training.

OFF-LIMITS

Censorship in Pakistan used to be straightforward. Certain topics were simply off limits, today, the situation is more complicated. There are still a large number of topics which are basically deemed no-go subjects for journalists. These include articles critical of the military or government, investigative reports, and any reporting on the Taliban or other similar groups. Journalists face problems while reporting on certain institutions and areas. They have concerns over their limitations to report on certain subjects in FATA, Balochistan and other restricted areas. Religious extremism continues to spread and there are many sectarian organisations fighting for domination. In addition, the drugs and arms mafia, assassins, ethnic groups and other criminal gangs are also active. Extremist leaders, keen to have their speeches denouncing other sects published in full, threaten journalists who resist. In an incident in July 2012 which is still fresh in public memory, an unidentified man in Chariogoth village in Punjab was publicly lynched on suspicion of blasphemy. The angry mob stormed the police station where he was held, set it on fire, and dragged the alleged blasphemer to his gory death. The president of the local Press Club Shahid Bashir was threatened with dire consequences by the head of a banned extremist outfit for not airing the footage of this incident on his TV channel. More recently, Qari Sahib, a member of the Lakhtak-e-Jhangvi group was hanged to death in March 2016, for his involvement in firing on a military vehicle in FATA and the Banu jail break in 2012 in which 384 Taliban members were freed and two constables shot dead. At Qari Sahib's funeral in Mauza Bagapur, close to the office of the Rural Media Network of Pakistan, members of the banned organisation chanted slogans and pressured local rural journalists to publish news depicting him as a victim of state machinery rather than as a militant and threatened them with dire consequences if they did not.

Local religious leaders do not understand that correspondents have no control over editorial policy, and journalists receive threatening text messages from militants over news coverage that is decided at city desks. The threats faced by journalists in remote areas of the country, vary from inflated figures harassing journalists who report on ‘honour’ killing and gang rape incidents, to targeting by the Taliban, other militants and even security agencies. Authorities often falsely accuse journalists of various crimes, according to journalists in Tehsil Liaquatpur of district Rahim Yarkhan in South Punjab who have tried to report on ‘honour’ killing. In Interior Sindh, rural journalists faced threats even from law makers and influential persons while reporting their misdeeds and corruption and were sometimes implicated in false cases. To cite just one example, in Bahawalpur district, journalist Gulham Rasool Khan who reports on corruption of government functionaries is facing several cases registered against him by the authorities.

Other important constraints on media freedom which impinge on journalists’ ability to do their job, are the culture of secrecy and bureaucratic restrictions on access to official information. Journalists find it almost impossible to find information related to large government deals or projects, and ministries remain tight-lipped on their activities and finances.

WALKING THE TIGHT ROPE

Historically the development of media in Pakistan has taken place in metropolitan centres and has not filtered down to rural areas. As a result, rural journalists remain neglected, often working in isolation with extremely limited support from media organisations in financial, moral and professional terms. Salaries for journalists in Pakistan are notoriously low, and rural journalists are particularly susceptible to unfair compensation. According to a survey in 2014, only 13 per cent of the rural journalists earned regular salaries, and 60 per cent worked entirely for free. Some rural journalists, also known as district correspondents, are engaged by media organisations for reporting news and views for their TV channels from the rural areas. While a few journalists at district headquarters are paid to some extent, at lower units like the tehsil head quarter, town and union council they are unpaid.

However, there is no comprehensive system or hotline to act when a rural journalist is attacked, kidnapped or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active or tortured.

There is a pervasive nationwide distrust of journalists, particularly those serving in rural sectors, due to a history of bribery and blackmail in the profession over the few past decades. This sordid past has eroded confidence in journalism as a whole, particularly when it is conducted by small, independent media outlets.
ON THE GROUND, MILITANT GANGS USE THE HINDUTVA AGENDA OF THE COUNTRY’S RULING PARTY TO RUN RIOT, KNOWING THEY HAVE IMPUNITY FROM POLICE ACTION. HONEST GRASSROOTS REPORTING OF A RIOT OR RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND THE ROLE OF POLITICIANS IN FOMENTING SUCH TROUBLES IS RAFTED WITH DANGER FOR THE LOCAL REPORTER.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

More needs to be done to address the serious problems that journalists in villages and small towns face on a daily basis as they attempt to report what is happening in rural areas to the wider world. The RMNP has been advocating that media houses should provide safety equipment to all correspondents, irrespective of their location, and reporters, camera crews and other support staff covering dangerous assignments must be provided insurance cover.

Families of journalists killed because of their work should be paid compensation, while assistance for any serious medical injuries incurred in the field should also be provided. Media houses also have a responsibility to cover instances of journalists being kidnapped and should ensure that attention remains on those cases until their release is secured. Alongside, there is a pressing need to improve capacity-building measures for journalists in the field, because professionalism and safety training is essential to developing media freedom in Pakistan. Less-than-professionalism and safety training are essential to building measures for journalists in the field, because safety training is essential to combat the many problems facing rural journalists.

BANGLADESH: IDENTITY CRISIS

There is no assessment – official or unofficial – journalists working in the rural or urban areas in the country. The Bangladesh Press Council, a quasi-judicial government body took the initiative to create a database for journalists across the country, but it has yet to complete the task, as there is plenty of scope to debate the question of who can be called a bonafide journalist. Records sent by Deputy Commissioners (DC) of all the districts – since newspapers are registered with the government, which are in turn registered with the DC – are in many cases not collated.

Bangladesh has a total of 3025 newspapers including 1078 daily newspapers, 1078 weeklies, fortnightlies and monthlies and 418 other publications. 672 of these are published in the capital city of Dhaka. Online newspapers have applied for registration with the RMNP, but it will take another 18 months to complete the process. According to the RMNP this is the only effort by the media to create an extensive database of journalists across the country. The RMNP has been advocating that a database of journalists is necessary to safeguard the rights of journalists. The RMNP has also been working towards identifying the problems of rural journalists and raising a voice for them. However, the organisation does not have branches in all the districts and upazilas. Abu Jafor estimates that there are about 15,000 journalists working in rural areas of Bangladesh, most of whom are not paid by their employers. They are dependent on other professions. Many of them are also involved in rent-seeking to survive. Besides the urban centres of Dhaka and Chittagong, there are only about around 600 journalists across Bangladesh, who are solely or largely dependent on journalism.

According to official records, 98.8 per cent people of Bangladesh speak Bangla while only 1.2 per cent people speak in other languages including Bihnpuriya Manipuri, Assamese, Tangchangya, Chakma, Koch, Garo and many others. Bangladesh has Bangla and English language newspapers. There is no newspaper published in any other language. Private television and radio do not telecast news in any language other than Bangla or English. Only the state-run Bangladesh Television telecast a weekly cultural program for indigenous groups in some other languages. The journalists working in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area or a few journalists working in Dhaka hailing from some indigenous communities, are conversant in Bangla and conduct journalism in Bangla or English.

NO SALARY POLICY

Low and irregular salaries and job security are the main problems for journalists in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas. This phenomenon is deterring the growth of professionalism and also causing concern about yellow journalism. Professional dignity is being marred by a “no salary culture” for rural journalists, which renders them vulnerable and lacking in security.

In addition to sending news reports, the local correspondents of the dailies have to collect advertisements from local sources, mostly from government offices, and they get a percentage of revenue from the advertisements collected. Journalists working in the districts and upazilas, bartending a few, are involved in dual professions. Many of them are involved in business, while some others are college teachers.

They also face physical risks because of their identity as journalists. Every Dhaka-based newspaper has a single correspondent in the respective towns, so it is easy to identify a journalist who has reported any misdeed done by any person or authority. Threats are ever present from the local administration, gangs and political actors. There is a minuscule number of women journalists in rural areas, who face multiple challenges. Indigenous journalists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face special vulnerabilities due to presence of army and insurgent groups.

Though the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) does not have units in all the districts, it is seen to protest major assaults on journalists working in any area of the country.

There are many organisations of journalists, but there is no common platform for rural journalists across Bangladesh. However, journalists are seen to protest jointly on various occasions, especially on issues like assaults on journalists, and this solidarity allows them to survive to tell the story.
Women journalists in South Asia are no longer willing to accept sexual harassment at the workplace. On April 17, 2018, the Governor of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu reached out and patted a senior journalist on her cheek when she asked a question at a press conference, ironically about sexual harassment at the university (of which the Governor is the ex-officio Chancellor). When she took to Twitter, strongly condemning the patronising act of touching her without consent, Lakshmi Subramaniam, senior correspondent, The Hindu, was signalling a notable shift in the response to sexual harassment. Her refusal to sweep sexual harassment under the carpet, garnered swift support from several organisations who stood in solidarity with her. Soon, social media was abuzz with condemnation of the Governor’s act. The overwhelming reaction against a powerful man misusing his position and public office, represents the beginning of a new chapter in the culture of trivialising sexual harassment. The Governor was forced to tender a written apology, though the apology contained the justification that he “apologized” her question and pat her cheek considering her to be “like my granddaughter”. Women journalists were having none of the standard family analogies and pointed out that the Governor’s act comes under the purview of Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Harassment of Women Act, 1998 as well as the central law against sexual harassment.

Ripples from the revelations of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry in the US reached South Asian shores in October 2017. The allegations against media mogul Harvey Weinstein, dating back several decades, revealed just how pervasive the problem was. Scores of women – today successful, well-known personalities from the film industry, academia, media, and even the South Asian studies departments, were coming forward to speak about sexual harassment, both in and outside the workplace.

#MeToo, sharing painful personal stories of exploitation and misuse of power. At around the same time when the #MeToo hashtag was going viral, revelations of sexual harassment in the academia, media, and the soap operas in the social network. “My husband will kill me if my photo gets published.” “My husband will not let me have a child.” “I was forced to have an abortion.”

Nothing is more urgent than the #MeToo movement, as getting into a fight means you are wasting your own time and given deadlines of journalistic assignments, time is precious.

#MeToo has had a very important impact on South Asian newsrooms. The female entitlement that defines most workspaces is a culture of subservience, flirtation and evasion. A study by Quartz at work journalist Leah Fessler in February 2017 revealed that these bots, with female names and voices, literally flirt with abuse. Based on her research, a petition addressed to Apple and Google’s Google Home replicate feminine stereotypes of subservience, or each person to figure her herself. But each time one of us speaks up and owns her truth, we make it a bit easier for other women to resist. Never forget, courage is contagious.

It took me a couple of years to understand this: sexual abuse at the workplace is not a battle any one of us is going to win alone. In fact, there’s no winning in a situation so awful - a legal route or official route alone cannot provide personal closure, that’s for each person to figure out for herself. But even there, patriarchy blocks our path. During one of my assignments after getting access into a Pashtun family, one of the women told me not to use her photo. “My husband will kill me if my photo gets published.”

#MeToo is based on the principle of ‘I will not be silenced’. The #MeToo movement is very important for women around the world. In Pakistan, it is not easy to come out and publicly talk about personal experiences of sexual harassment. Women are not only silenced but pushed to provide personal closure, that is for each person to figure out for herself. "Not having many women in the profession often made me feel on my own, especially as a freelance. Becoming a part of the Coalition of Women journalists and being able to mentor others can then be seen as an essential support network. Sara Farid is a freelance photojournalist living in exile in France."
Sometimes a bad thing may open up important discussions that didn’t take place due to social and religious restrictions. It is what happened in Pakistan recently. Sexual harassment was non-existent in our conversations, and most adults including parents avoided any mention of ‘inappropriate’ discussions. The mega porn scandal in Kasur and rapes and murders of minors made it to the news, followed by an outcry suddenly sexual harassment, rape and other ‘taboos’ were not only reported in main bulletins but a whole movement seemed to emerge. Women especially the media began speaking up against sexual harassment they had faced at the hands of colleagues at work, online and outside work. Men have begun to understand that it is not alright to say these things, to look at a woman in certain ways and to touch.

A couple of years ago I had been invited to speak on sexual harassment on Women’s Day by the provincial government of Sindh. I was sitting down some points and one of my male colleagues inquired what I was doing. When I told him, he laughed and commented that sexual harassment is a ‘figure of women’s imagination’. He said other things that I am sure colleagues inquired what I was doing. When I told him, he said he had not been aware of the issue.

With many people talking about sexual harassment in the media, among the people and other places like educational institutions it is hoped that the number of victims will increase. Many of these women will not speak up about and timely resolution of the issue will take place.

Lubna Jena Naggii is head of content, social media, Jagat/Geo Group, Karachi

Pakistan

Lubna Jena Naggii: The Discussion has Started

Back in 2002, carrying a camera and reporting for a TV channel was the most difficult thing to do in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan’s north-western province. Today, 16 years later as the first woman TV journalist in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa I can safely say that I have a will and a faith in your work you can achieve the most difficult things that seemed not only difficult but impossible.

When the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa saw a woman reporter walking around roads reporting protests and other events in public spaces where all the other journalists and media personnel were men they found it very hard to accept. In Pakistan society it is unpalatable that a woman would pick up a camera and actually go out to report: didn’t she know what she was getting into; didn’t she know how dangerous society was for her. But the same woman reporter ignored all that went out to report in the field. She wanted to prove that a woman could not only work outside in the field, but was capable of doing the job as well as anyone else. She had the talent to not only do the story from behind the desk but also confidently give beeps in front of the camera and analyse stories and situations on the spot. This was also a new thing considering the magnitude of misogyny in society, where the women remain silent and allow men to have their comparative positions. Men in high positions in the company have a very strong escape route from such accusations. Male counterparts with strong backup power politically, socially and officially are rarely punished. Instead, women media professionals are further victimised after being subjected to sexual harassment and speaking up.

Sometimes sexual harassment of female journalists is followed by an attempt to silence them. This happens in the media too – both to women (and others) who work in media. Female journalists have shared their own. Some media houses are sincere about combating sexual harassment, but their number is very few. And this reaction also depends on the victim’s and accused person’s comparative positions. Men in high positions in the company have a very strong escape route from such accusations. Male counterparts with strong backup power politically, socially and officially are rarely punished. Instead, women media professionals are further victimised after being subjected to sexual harassment and speaking up.

The good news is that the only woman reporter from Peshawar University’s Journalism Department willing to take to the field was capable of doing the job as well as anyone else. She had the talent to not only do the story from behind the desk but also confidently give beeps in front of the camera and analyse stories and situations on the spot. This was also a new thing considering the magnitude of misogyny in society, where the women remain silent and allow men to have their comparative positions. Men in high positions in the company have a very strong escape route from such accusations. Male counterparts with strong backup power politically, socially and officially are rarely punished. Instead, women media professionals are further victimised after being subjected to sexual harassment and speaking up.

Recently some women made complaints against him and he has been relocated to another department where his interaction with co-workers is restricted. He is under observation and there are indications that strict steps will be taken if and when there is evidence to back the large number of complaints against him, the department has not yet been able to take any action.

Nadia Sabobi is correspondent/producer with Geo TV Network in Peshawar.

Pakistan

Nadia Sabobi: Resilient Path Breaker

In a closed society with rampant victim blaming and entrenched impunity, Bangladesh media is still struggling even to recognise sexual harassment as a significant problem. So, the MeToo campaign didn’t work here. Only five female journalists and two female producers had the courage to use this hashtag. But none of them had star value or a visible position that could create a big difference. Being in a patriarchal society, Bangladeshi people have a long way to go to be sensitised about gender equity. Thinking about an abuse free, sexual harassment free society seems almost like a utopia. But women here are still struggling to turn that utopia into reality and have slowly started speaking up against sexual harassment.

A few women are going against society and trying to break the ice. With no support from managements, unions and associations, they are breaking barriers of social stigma on their own. Some media houses are sincere about combating sexual harassment, but their number is very few. And this reaction also depends on the victim’s and accused person’s comparative positions. Men in high positions in the company have a very strong escape route from such accusations. Male counterparts with strong backup power politically, socially and officially are rarely punished. Instead, women media professionals are further victimised after being subjected to sexual harassment and speaking up.

Only three women hold decision-making positions in online media; only two amongst 28 private TV channels and in the print media, that number is only one. So, the redressal mechanisms for complaints of sexual harassment are also male dominated. That makes a victim twice a victim. So, speaking up against sexual harassment is greatly risky. Women are accused of having vented in an attempt speaking up and are tagged as ‘bad women’. No journalist union or organisations are so far working consistently to combat sexual harassment. Some, like Bangladesh Shanghaibank Kendra arrange small-scale training programs but that is a drop in the ocean. Unions have thus far completely failed to become a pressure group against sexual harassment.

Nadia Sharmeen is with Ekattor TV, Dhaka.

Nadia Sharminen: Towards Utopia

In October 2017, feminism and social media were set aflame with a single hashtag – #MeToo. Most, if not all adult women have experienced harassment, assault, or abuse in some form. We know this.

Didn’t we? Doesn’t the media constantly report cases of gang rape from Jaffna to Tissamaharama? Wasn’t it the media that made us aware that the UNP female lawmakers who travelled on public transport in Sri Lanka said they had been sexually harassed? Isn’t it the media who makes sure that we are aware?

This happens in the media too – both to women (and others) who work in media. Female journalists have shared

Sri Lanka

Sharanya Sekaram: Time To Do Better

In a closed society with rampant victim blaming and entrenched impunity, Bangladesh media is still struggling even to recognise sexual harassment as a significant problem. So, the MeToo campaign didn’t work here. Only five female journalists and two female producers had the courage to use this hashtag. But none of them had star value or a visible position that could create a big difference. Being in a patriarchal society, Bangladeshi people have a long way to go to be sensitised about gender equity. Thinking about an abuse free, sexual harassment free society seems almost like a utopia. But women here are still struggling to turn that utopia into reality and have slowly started speaking up against sexual harassment.

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Nowadays, a new trend of sexual harassment has started which is hard for women to deal with: cyber bullying. Two women media professional filed cases against the harasser under the ICT Act. But in the aftermath of those complaints, they are getting more harassed and getting victimised online and offline. After their complaints became public and went viral online, not only from their colleagues and bosses, they also faced harassment from outsiders as well. They have had to go through a harrowing legal process and wait for a long time to get the judgment, during which time they faced obstacles in their new job for being so outspoken.

Women lose their jobs. They also face a great social harassment due to victim blaming. Their characters go through a post-mortem or scanning through a male point of view and they judge the woman as a “bad woman”. Little wonder then that hardly any women complain.

Nadira Sharmeen is with Ekattor TV, Dhaka.

Nadia Sabobi is correspondent/producer with Geo TV Network in Peshawar.
MARYAM MEHTAR: BREAKING TABOOS
director, and person working in media and creating to be treated and portrayed as such – not as grotesque are important allies in helping us combat issues, and should question why we need to publish it at all. The public interest benefit of the story, then perhaps we a reproductive health clinic; carried articles on rape describe the women who filed the petition. This is the same newspaper that regularly accompanies its pieces with salacious cartoons of women, and published a piece that ridiculed a woman who accessed services in a reproductive health clinic; carried articles on rape of young women on ‘gossip’ sites reinforcing victim blaming. The list goes on. To start is simple, we need to closely examine the stories we choose to give attention and space to, and if we find we are unable to frame them in a way that doesn’t reinforce negative stereotypes or find the public interest benefit of the story, then perhaps we should question why we need to publish it at all. The media plays a crucial role in ensuring that people are viewed as human beings with dignity and rights. They are important allies in helping us combat issues, and show the world that women are people who deserve to be treated and portrayed as such – not as grotesque caricatures in gossip pieces whose aim seems to be to provide cheap entertainment and not much more. It is now time for every journalist, sub-editor, editor, director, and person working in media and creating content to step up and do better. To better. Media now needs to be the reason #MeToo becomes the catalyst for change, and not the reason it will continue to exist. 

Two years ago, I decided to report on the issue of sexual harassment of women, but everyone refused to work with me. I began delving into my questions, even a young woman who I had thought was very enlightened, attacked me for thinking she and I were the only women to be able to talk about such matters. But I have continued to speak out. In December 2017, I gave a frank interview to The New York Times. Here is an excerpt: ‘You’re funny, Maryam, but I guess you’re a virgin so when you’re ready to have sex, let me know and I will be glad to...’ Her male co-worker, writing on her Facebook account finished obscenely. I was 19 am on my way home from an Afghan working woman. The journalist Maryam Mehtar, 24, said she had already that morning been harassed or assaulted at least five times: in the bus to work, on the street waiting for her; Maryam man who grabbed her buttocks, by another man who asked how much she charged and by a young boy who said she had a ‘pretty vulva’. Finally, in the relative safety of her own office, she opened the computer to read the Facebook offer from one of her colleagues to deflower her. Here is an interview with The New York Times and Impact Vice about the harassment of journalists and women at the workplace in Afghanistan, the only response was that some re-published the report on social networks and some appreciated my courage to speak about this issue. The struggle to survive has made it hard for anyone to be sensitive and care for the lives of others, let alone prosecute someone for persecution of women. Dozens of people are killed every day in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, and people are somehow ignored to violence of all kinds. It becomes ‘natural’. When there is a problem for a woman or girl, there is some activism equals social media. However, the excitement of social networks does not last too long. If people sometimes try to organise a demonstration, they are suppressed by the government. When the Hazara community took to the streets on July 23, 2016, the government did not take responsibility for securing the rally, and three large bombs exploded, killing hundreds of people. It is evident that the lives of common people do not count for anything in Afghanistan. Media houses are expected by law to prevent sexual harassment of women in their offices, but many of them do not, and gender policies are non-existent. Women are often victimised by their managers, colleagues, and clients. ‘Women journalists, like sexual harassment and do not address issues that deeply affect women at the workplace in Afghanistan, the only women journalists, like sexual harassment in most media houses in Afghanistan. Women journalists are subjected to harassment from various quarters: senior officials, co-workers and influential people are sometimes targeted in the course of their work. Such harassment makes it difficult for women journalists to carry out their professional duties. As it is, women face immense discrimination at the workplace, with low wages, discrimination in beats assigned, and inequality in promotions and opportunities. Their work is often not given due, and their work is sometimes published under others’ bylines. Women are often forced out of the profession due to harassment that is sometimes intolerable. This is the story of a journalist we shall call ‘Nabila’. When she was appointed by a certain media house, she was delighted that her dreams were coming true. However, that was the beginning of a nightmare. That night itself, the boss of the new media house called her and started a series of daily phone calls. She had to accept his ‘friend’ request on Facebook. She even had to go on long drives with him. Next came the direct demand for sex. Even when Nabila indicated that she was not interested in a sexual relationship with him, he kept pressuring her. Through phone calls, Facebook and in person, he kept pursuing her. He was forced to take help from friends and seek legal advice. She gathered evidence and with the support of her friends, sued her boss for sexual and online harassment. She also got journalists’ organisations to make written complaints against the boss. The police arrested him, and he was let off on bail. However, in Nabila’s view, she did not receive justice for all that she had been through. Most media houses are not women-friendly or geared to ensuring that women professionals are given opportunities. Journalism organisations too are more engaged with economic issues, and do not address issues that deeply affect women journalists, like sexual harassment at the workplace. This is because journalists’ union is male dominated. This needs to change, so that women’s issues are taken seriously by media houses and journalists’ organisations too. Lately, Raysha Begum is district correspondent with Boishakhi Television and Daily Observer. There is no policy against sexual harassment in most media houses in Bangladesh. Women journalists are subjected to harassment from various quarters: senior officials, co-workers and influential people are sometimes targeted in the course of their work. Such harassment makes it difficult for women journalists to carry out their professional duties. As it is, women face immense discrimination at the workplace, with low wages, discrimination in beats assigned, and inequality in promotions and opportunities. There is a recently launched women’s group to protect women journalists from such harassment. Lately, Raysha Begum is district correspondent with Boishakhi Television and Daily Observer. Lately, Raysha Begum is district correspondent with Boishakhi Television and Daily Observer. Lately, Raysha Begum is district correspondent with Boishakhi Television and Daily Observer. Lately, Raysha Begum is district correspondent with Boishakhi Television and Daily Observer. 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Sarah B Haider is a freelance journalist.
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

INTERNET BLACKOUTS: THE SOUTH ASIAN SHADOW

Internet shutdowns and deliberate slowdowns are increasing the world over and are now also a barometer on press freedom and freedom of expression controls. South Asia has witnessed the highest number of internet shutdowns globally, with India earning the dubious crown for the country with the highest number of internet shutdowns.

Internet shutdowns are "any intentional disruption of the broadband or mobile internet or internet-based mobile apps, by an order of the authorities or threat of non-state party, to control communication or online content or slowing down the access to general public."

As well as causing massive economic losses, they also create adverse social impacts in access to vital information and affect crisis communication by general citizens. Shutdowns also impede the work of journalists in critical ways. When the internet is blocked or slowed, or social media is shut down, a valuable journalism tool is lost, for research, verification and essential communication. Internet shutdowns prevent journalists from freely accessing information and disseminating news, and also stop citizens from accessing and sharing information. They pose a threat to human rights and block the public's right to know, and have emerged as a significant tool of censorship by governments which are increasingly utilising shutdowns under the guise of security.

In view of its growing impacts on freedom of expression, journalists and media, the IFJ in 2017 carried out its first major campaign against shutdowns. The #JournosAgainstShutdowns campaign documented instances of internet shutdowns in South Asia, and by effect aimed to raise awareness about its impact on media and journalists, and build solidarity to advocate against the abuse of shutdowns to silence or curb freedom of expression.

During the period covered in this report (May 2017 to April 2018), South Asia experienced at least 79 shutdowns of various magnitude. India alone shut down the internet, mostly at state or district level, as many as 82 times whereas Pakistan had 17 instances, compared to Sri Lanka which has experienced a separate state. In Sri Lanka, a week-long social media ban was ordered following the violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims.

Despite its increasing abuse by governments, there remains no substantive data or evidence to prove that internet shutdowns can scale down violence. But there is clear evidence that shutdowns deprive citizens' access to basic, sometimes life-saving services at a time of crisis. Sri Lanka, according to some estimates, lost USD 30 million due to its week-long shutdown.

South Asia is at a critical juncture when it comes to freedom of expression online. While there is a massive increase in numbers of users and growing access to the internet, this has been countered with ever-increasing curbs on freedom of expression in the digital space.

Internet shutdowns are being flagged as a major issue in the region by the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) and freedom of expression is the casualty. There is an urgent need for journalists, journalist unions and media rights organisations in South Asia to join the growing advocacy against internet shutdowns in order to defend the rights of journalists and protect freedom of expression.

Indian security forces walk next to burning vehicles set alight by rioting followers in Panchkula on August 25, 2017 following the conviction of a 'godman' for rape. At least 14 people were killed when clashes broke out in northern India after a court convicted a Hindu guru for raping two of his followers, opening up a long-standing rift between the region's majority Hindu and Muslim populations. Credit: Sanjay Janojia/AFP

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>STATE/PROVINCE</th>
<th>AREA IMPACTED</th>
<th>SERVICES AFFECTED</th>
<th>DURATION IN DAYS</th>
<th>JUSTIFICATION DETAILS OF SHUTDOWN, SUSPENSION, BLOCKING, DISRUPTION</th>
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<td>Apr 17</td>
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<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>Social Media, mobile internet</td>
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<td>SMS, mobile internet</td>
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<td>Karachi, Hyderabad</td>
<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
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<td>Killing</td>
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<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
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<td>Sheivpur</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Killing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Aug 25 | India   | Jammu & Kashmir | Kashmir Valley | SMS, mobile internet | 1 | Information Control | Applied to忍不住［radical］ | }
| Aug 24 | India   | Punjab | Punjab | SMS, mobile internet | 3 | Court case | All mobile internet services and SMS blocked following the court verdict on the rape case against a cell leader. |
| Aug 24 | India   | Himachal Pradesh | Kangra and Firozbad | SMS, mobile internet | 3 | Court case | All mobile internet services and SMS blocked following the court verdict on the rape case against a cell leader. |
| Aug 24 | India   | Chandigarh | Chandigarh | SMS, mobile internet | 3 | Court case | All mobile internet services and SMS blocked following the court verdict on the rape case against a cell leader. |
| Aug 14 | Pakistan | Islamabad | Islamabad | Mobile internet, SMS | 1 | Information Control | Government suspended mobile services to maintain security situation for flag hoisting ceremony on the Independence Day. |
| Aug 14 | Pakistan | Rawalpindi | Rawalpindi | Mobile internet, SMS | 1 | Information Control | Government suspended mobile services to maintain security situation for flag hoisting ceremony on the Independence Day. |
| Sept 2 | India   | Jammu & Kashmir | Shopian and Kulgam | Mobile internet | 1 | Killing | Suspected after clashes broke out after killing of a militant. |
| Sept 4 | India   | Jammu & Kashmir | Kupwara | Mobile internet | 1 | Killing | Suspected after two militants were killed. |
| Sept 5 | India   | Bihar | Madhubani, Supaul, Saharanpur, Purnea, Darba | Internet | 1 | Communal clashes | Suspected following communal tensions. |
| Sept 8 | India   | Himachal Pradesh | Sirsa | Mobile internet | 3 | Protests | Suspected to prevent rumour mongering and disturbance of public order. |
| Sept 9 | India   | Jammu & Kashmir | Baramulla | Internet | 1 | Violence | Internet services suspended as a preventive measure after a gunfight between militants and security forces. |
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS - SOUTH ASIA - MAY 2017 - APRIL 2018

DATE | COUNTRY | STATE/PROVINCE | AREA IMPACTED | IMPACT | SERVICES AFFECTED | JUSTIFICATION | DETAILS OF SHUTDOWN, SUSPENSION, BLOCKAGE, INTERRUPTION
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Jan 4 | India | Maharashtra | Kolhapur | 1 Internet | Protests | Suspended following protests by Dalit groups during a strike.
Jan 9 | India, Jammu & Kashmir | Anantnag, Kulgam, Shopian, Anantnag, Kulgam | 3 Mobile internet | Protests | Suspended following protests.
Jan 15 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Pulwama, Shopian, Anantnag, Kulgam | 1 Internet | Killing | Information Control | Shut down in anticipation of militant activity on Republic Day.
Jan 25 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Kastore Valley | 1 Mobile internet | Information Control | Shut down following violent activity on Republic Day.
Jan 27 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Noida | 2 Internet | Clashes | Shut down following violent clashes.
Feb 13 | Bangladesh | Country-wide | Bangladesh | 1 Internet | Information Control | The Bangladeshi Telecommunication Regulatory Commission instructed all internet service providers to shut off mobile internet and reduce broadband speeds to 25 kbps from 8:00am-10:30am on exam days for the rest of Feb. On Feb 12, 2018, the government backtracked and allowed internet speeds to rise to 80 kbps.
Feb 13 | India | Rajasthan | Tonk | 1 Mobile internet | Assault | Suspended to prevent rumour after an alleged assault on two minority group men and a police officer by political cadres.
Feb 18 | India | Rajasthan | Firozabad | 1 Mobile internet | Assault | Suspended to prevent rumour after an alleged assault on two minority group men and a police officer by political cadres.
Mar 1 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Pulwama, Shopian | 1 Mobile internet | Killing | Suspended following the killing of a militant.
Mar 2 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Pulwama, Shopian | 1 Mobile internet | Killing | Suspended following the killing of a militant.
Mar 3 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Bhagalpur | 1 Internet | Security | Suspended to prevent communal riots.
Mar 18 | India | Rajasthan | Tonk | 1 Internet | Violence | Suspended following the village pelted by miscreants from a mosque.
Mar 24 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Pulwama, Shopian | 1 Internet | Killing | Suspended following the killing of two militants.
Mar 24 | India | Odisha | Bhubanak | 2 Internet | Security | Suspended as a precautionary measure to maintain communal harmony.
Mar 25 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Baranagala, Rajgam | 3 Mobile internet | Killing | Suspended following the killing of two militants.
Mar 26 | India | Bihar | Aurangabad | 1 Internet | Security | Internet service providers to block Telegram and WhatsApp anduspend Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter.
Mar 29 | India | West Bengal | Asansol, Ranagpur | 1 Internet | Security | Suspended following protests by Dalit groups.
Mar 29 | India | Bihar | Samastipur | 1 Internet | Communal clashes | Suspended following violent communal clashes.
Mar 29 | India | Bihar | Darjeeling | 45 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended following protests, clashes and strikes.
Mar 31 | India | Rajasthan | Jaitran | 1 Internet | Security | Suspended following the killing of two people in an encounter with militants.
Apr 1 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Anantnag, Ganderbal | 2 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended following violent communal clashes.
Apr 1 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Anantnag, Ganderbal | 7 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended following violent communal clashes.
Apr 1 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Anantnag, Ganderbal | 1 Internet | Killing | Mobile internet following the killing of two militants by the security forces.
Apr 1 | India | Punjab | Prinship | 2 Mobile internet | SMS | Strikes | All mobile services, except voice calls, suspended due to strike called by Dalits.
Apr 2 | India | Rajasthan | Jaipur, Bharatpur | 1 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended due to violent protests by Dalits.
Apr 2 | India, Madhya Pradesh | Gwalior, Mienen, Bhopal | 1 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended due to violent protests by Dalits.
Apr 2 | India | Punjab | Jhukaravanag, Hapur, Taluban | 3 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended due to violent protests by Dalits.
Apr 3 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Shopian, Pulwama, Shopian, Anantnag, Qazigund | 1 Mobile internet | Killing | Suspended following the killing of two people in an encounter with militants.
Apr 3 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Meerut, Aligarh, Saharanpur | 1 Mobile internet | Protest | Suspended following a protest by Dalit groups.
Apr 9 | India | Rajasthan | Jaipur, Bharatpur | 1 Internet | Communal clashes | Suspended following violent clashes between civil groups.
Apr 9 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Saharanpur, Hapur | 1 Internet | Communal clashes | Suspended following violent clashes between civil groups.
Apr 9 | India, Madhya Pradesh | Gwalior, Mienen, Bhopal, Taluban | 3 Internet | Communal clashes | Suspended following violent clashes between civil groups.
Apr 11 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Anantnag, Kulgam | 1 Internet | Killing | Suspended following violent clashes between civil groups.
May 17 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Meerut | 1 Internet | Security | Suspended following the killing of two people in an encounter with militants.
May 17 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Saharanpur | 2 Mobile internet | Violence | Suspended following violent communal clashes.

THE SIX BIGGEST SHUTDOWNS

DATE | COUNTRY | STATE/PROVINCE | AFFECTED | DURATION | IMPACT | JUSTIFICATION | DETAILS
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
June 18, 2017 | India | West Bengal | Darjeeling | 45 | Mobile internet, SMS | Protests, strike, clashes | Mobile and broadband internet was cut off due to political protests, clashes and strikes.
Sept 28, 2017 | India | Bihar | Nawada | 40 | Internet | Clashes | Internet services suspended after communal tensions.
Apr 27, 2017 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Regional | 31 | Social Media, mobile internet | Information Control | Blocked to prevent circulation of videos and photos showing alleged military abuse.
Nov 1, 2017 | Afghanistan | Country-wide | National | 20 | Telegram, WhatsApp | Unknown | The Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority directed internet service providers to block Telegram and WhatsApp services, it was not fully implemented.
July 10, 2017 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Regional | 15 | Mobile internet, Internet | Violence | Mobile and broadband internet suspended after the terrorists opened fire on a bus full of pilgrims.
May 24, 2017 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Saharanpur | 12 | SMS, mobile internet | Communal clashes | Suspended to stop rumours following violent communal clashes.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS BY COUNTRY (MAY 2017-APR 2018)

COUNTRY | NO. | TOTAL
--- | --- | ---
India | 82 | 97
Pakistan | 12 | 1
Afghanistan | 1 | 1
Bangladesh | 1 | 1
Sri Lanka | 1 | 1
TOTAL: | 97 | 97

IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2017–2018

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS FOR INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN SOUTH ASIA

DATE | COUNTRY | STATE/PROVINCE | AREA IMPACTED | IMPACT | SERVICES AFFECTED | JUSTIFICATION | DETAILS OF SHUTDOWN, SUSPENSION, BLOCKAGE, INTERRUPTION
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Jun 18, 2017 | India | West Bengal | Darjeeling | 45 | Mobile internet, SMS | Protests, strike, clashes | Mobile and broadband internet was cut off due to political protests, clashes and strikes.
Sept 28, 2017 | India | Bihar | Nawada | 40 | Internet | Clashes | Internet services suspended after communal tensions.
Apr 27, 2017 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Regional | 31 | Social Media, mobile internet | Information Control | Blocked to prevent circulation of videos and photos showing alleged military abuse.
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July 10, 2017 | India | Jammu & Kashmir | Regional | 15 | Mobile internet, Internet | Violence | Mobile and broadband internet suspended after the terrorists opened fire on a bus full of pilgrims.
May 24, 2017 | India | Uttar Pradesh | Saharanpur | 12 | SMS, mobile internet | Communal clashes | Suspended to stop rumours following violent communal clashes.

SHUTDOWN DURATION IN DAYS (COLOUR CODED)

| 1 | 2-5 | 6-10 | 10-20 | 20+ |
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---

THE SIX BIGGEST SHUTDOWNS

1. Following a killing
2. Security
3. Protests
4. Violence
5. Communal Clashes

IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2017–2018

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS FOR INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN SOUTH ASIA
ROCKY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

The war-torn country of Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, with an alarmingly high number of killings, attacks and threats as well as a country hidden by suicide bombings and widespread attacks that inevitably capture journalists in their wake.

April 30, 2018 was the deadliest day for journalists in Afghanistan that highlights the precarious situation of journalists in the war-torn country. Ten journalists were killed in a single day. Nine journalists, including a female journalist, lost their lives in the line of duty in capital Kabul when a suicide bomber disguised as a journalist detonated himself among the reporters and camera crew gathered at a heavily fortified area of the city to cover an earlier suicide attack. Among those killed was AFP chief photographer Shah Marai. The Islamic State (also known as ISIL or ISIS, or Daesh) claimed responsibility for the horrific incident in which at least 50 other people were killed. On the same day, Ahmad Shah, a journalist with BBC Pashto service, was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Khost province. Shah, 29, was on his bicycle on his way to home when the gunmen killed him. This terrible day brought into sharp attention the condition of journalists in Afghanistan where the Taliban, and the Daesh frequently target media and journalists, in a situation where the state is unable to provide any security to them.

Since the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces in late 2014, militant groups – including the Taliban and the Islamic State (ISIS) – have become even more active around the country, including in capital Kabul, frequently targeting the media and journalists. The Afghan National Security Forces continued the offensive against militant groups, with clashes intensifying throughout the year.

The National Unity Government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, nevertheless has remained in a stable position since coming to power three-and-half-years ago, but the pace of change on media safety has proved a sticking point for the government is committed to freedom of speech and knows that it is a basic civil right for our people,” he wrote. The government is committed to improve the security situation for media and investigate cases of murders of journalists to end impunity, it is hard to say there has been any substantial change in the situation on the ground for media workers. Afghanistan’s media today remains under review (May 2017 to April 2018), 22 journalists and media workers were killed, giving it the dubious distinction of being the country with the most number of journalists killed in South Asia. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in February, 2018 raised an alarm that the Taliban had begun forcing media outlets in several provinces to pay arbitrary taxes to be allowed to continue operating. The targets included Ghaznivian, a privately-owned TV in Ghazni, Radio Killid and Radio Sama, all of whom refused to pay and sought state protection. Some media outlets reportedly paid the ransoms.

NEW CYBERCRIME LAW

On June 10, 2017, President Ashraf Ghani signed into law a bill targeting online crime and terrorism amid concerns it could limit free speech. The Cyber Crime Law criminalises a range of online activities including hacking, spreading ethnic hatred, distribution of online defamatory speech, exposing government secrets and cyber-terrorism. But Media watchdog group Nai has warned that the law could have a detrimental effect on access to information and limit freedom of speech because vague wording could have multiple interpretations. Access to the internet in Afghanistan has grown in the past decade to reach approximately 12 per cent of the population, a report by Internews in October 2017 stated. While much of Afghanistan remains rural, over 8.5 million Afghans are using the internet in cities including Kabul, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. Social media penetration has followed the same course, challenging traditional media platforms and providing new platforms for public discourse. Facebook is the most popular social media platform with 95 per cent internet users using it while Instagram (10 per cent) and Twitter (6 per cent) are distant followers.

In October 2017, Afghanistan tried to block two popular internet messaging services - Telegram and WhatsApp - citing security concerns. The Afghan Telecommunications Regulatory Authority then sent a letter sent to internet service providers asking them to block the services for 20 days from November 1 on request of the security agencies. After widespread criticism, acting minister for telecommunications, Shahzad Aryobee, posted a Facebook message claiming that the telecom regulator was merely upgrading its service with gradual blocks on the two services, citing complaints about inefficiency. “The government is committed to freedom of speech and knows that it is a basic civil right for our people,” he wrote. The announcement prompted the telecom regulator to claim the ban was needed to test and implement “a new kind of technology” to address citizens’ complaints. Meanwhile, the revised Access to Information Act was approved by the Cabinet and will be adopted as a legislative decree. One of the major changes is the independence of the Oversight Commission on Access to Information (OCI). Earlier, this commission had close ties with the Ministry of Information and Culture, but on the basis of the new law, a more independent commission would be set up.

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Since 2000, 74 journalists and media workers have been killed in Afghanistan. In 2017 and early 2018, the majority of the journalists and media staff killed were victims of attacks on media houses or were among the casualties of large suicide attacks, claimed by the ISIS. On May 7, 2017, Asadullah Khuzad, a reporter for Peshawar newspaper who had previously worked for Radio France, was killed by unknown gunmen in a targeted attack while leaving his home in Pul-u-Khumri in Baghlan province. Khuzad was also a civil society activist and a critic of the government. Four media workers of the state-owned Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA) died in Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, when its office was attacked by suicide bombers. Mohammad Amir Khan, Zainullah Khan, Abdul Latif and Ghani were killed and 17 other staff injured when the four attackers, including two suicide bombers, forced their way into the RTA station. Two of the attackers blew themselves up 2014, militant groups – including the Taliban and the

and 302 FM radio stations, where approximately 12,000 journalists are employed. Afghanistan has a few hundred newspapers, 174 radio stations, 68 private TVs, 22 state-owned provincial channels (RTA) and 11 news agencies. In the period under review (May 2017 to April 2018), 22 journalists and media workers were killed, giving it the dubious distinction of being the country with the most number of journalists killed in South Asia. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in February, 2018 raised an alarm that the Taliban had begun forcing media outlets in several provinces to pay arbitrary taxes to be allowed to continue operating. The targets included Ghaznivian, a privately-owned TV in Ghazni, Radio Killid and Radio Sama, all of whom refused to pay and sought state protection. Some media outlets reportedly paid the ransoms.

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A political gathering in Kabul outside the Qasr-E-Naween.

but they cannot silence us,” the station’s news director Abid an injured anchor. “This is an attack on freedom of media.

situation under control, the network went back on air with an injured anchor.

up at the front gate, while the other two attackers entered the main building. It took the security forces more than three hours to end the assault.

On May 31, TOLO TV’s Naween, Press TV reporter Habibullah Hassanzada, Mohammad Omer Urzangi of National Radio Television and BBC driver Mohammad Nazir were among victims of the explosion in the Zanbaq Square in Kabul, which killed at least 80 people and injured 350. Three more journalists of BBC Kabul and a reporter of TV1 channel were also injured in the gruesome attack near the office to the TV1 channel, which was forced to go off air for several hours following the attack.

On October 12, 2017, after five months of relative calm from the early spate of killings, there was an attempt to kill Shur Mohammad Jalish, the head of Janower TV. Despite injuries, he survived the attack but his guard lost his life.

Jalish was on the way home from work when his car was attacked by unidentified gunmen near his residence in Pul-i-khumani, capital of Baghlan.

On November 7, 2017, Sayed Naqibullah, the security guard of Shamshad Television, was killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the network’s front gate. Two other gunmen dressed as Afghan police went on to storm the TV station’s offices in Kabul and climbed to the roof to fire at security personnel. Staff were trapped inside, with some jumping out of windows and others escaping through a neighbouring building. After Afghan forces brought the situation under control, the network went back on air with an injured anchor.

"This is an attack on freedom of media but they cannot silence us," the station’s news director AbdEhsas said.

From left (top): Afghan journalists take cover behind an ambulance near the Intercontinental Hotel during a confrontation between gunmen and Afghan security forces in Kabul on January 21, 2018. Gunmen stormed a luxury hotel in Kabul killing at least six people, including a foreigner, during a twelve-hour fight with security forces that left terrified guests scrambling to escape and panic at the building’s al-Raqiq.

"This situation is unacceptable for Afghan security forces killed four attackers during the attack. The explosion claimed the lives of 19 people, including eight policemen.

On the evening of April 10, 2017, Sayed Mehdi Hosaini, a journalist with Jomhor News Agency, was among 40 people killed in the multiple blasts at a Shia cultural centre in Kabul. The blast also left 80 more people injured, including nine journalists - seven from the AYA News Agency and two from Shamshad TV.

On January 21, 2018, two journalists of RIA narrowly escaped an attack by an armed group. A vehicle carrying journalist Baz Shimbay and cameraperson Mohamad Rafig came under attack in Battikot district of Nangarhar province when the group opened fire on the car. The driver was killed on the spot but the two journalists, who were shot on the upper part of their bodies, survived the attack.

From left (bottom): Shamshad TV presenter on air hours after the Shamshad TV offices were stormed by gunmen. The TV anchor is his hands bandage from the attack as he presents the evening news. Credit: Screeshot/Shamshad TV

Allegations of killings, attacks and abductions, in as many as 401 cases, will only encourage more crimes against the media.

STAFF WERE TRAPPED INSIDE, WITH SOME JUMPING OUT OF WINDOWS AND OTHERS ESCAPING THROUGH A NEIGHBOURING BUILDING, AFTER AFGHAN FORCES BROUGHT THE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL, THE NETWORK WENT BACK ON AIR WITH AN INJURED ANCHOR.
Media watchdog group Nai registered 190 cases of violence against journalists including killing, wounding, abducting, threatening, and intimidation of journalists and media workers in Afghanistan since 1982 as crimes against humanity or war crimes at the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Taliban, the ISIS and the Haqqani Network were named as the major perpetrators. The registered cases include 48 killings, 74 injuries, 15 abductions and 53 threats and harassment of journalists and media personnel.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee in its annual report, said that 2017 was the worst year ever for Afghan journalists. It estimated that 115 Afghan journalists were killed or kidnapped by the Taliban and other militant groups. The committee said that the situation has improved after the Taliban’s defeat in the 2019 presidential election.

Afghanistan is likely to hold parliamentary and district elections on October 20, 2018, after more than a three-year delay due to security threats and disagreement within the government itself. There are still doubts that the elections will be held in the wake of increased violence by the militant groups. The country is also scheduled to hold presidential and provincial council elections in 2019. During the elections, not only are the roles and responsibilities of media and journalists important for democracy, the media become vulnerable to threats and attacks from all sides. Violence against journalists is at a peak, and the media is facing challenges due to financial constraints, and high security threats due to extremism. If the Afghanistan government fails to effectively tackle the situation, democracy in the country will be endangered due to lack of independent media and critical voices.

Several media outlets have financial debts to government-related institutions. Some media have not paid their taxes, a number of media have delayed them and face a tax penalty. A mechanism has been worked out in order to wave some of the arrears and also allow media outlets to pay pending taxes in instalments. In August, 2017, President Ashraf Ghani issued a presidential order to waive penalties on taxes to be paid by the media; and payment of due taxes in monthly instalments but this had addressed just a part of media outlets.

In a meeting with president all other financial debts of media such electricity bills and fees for use of frequency and taxes of other media outlets were discussed. President ordered a sub-committee to review all these problems and come up with a package of suggestions to deal with. According to reports from the subcommittee, media outlets owe more than 600 million Afghans (USD 8.5 million).

The Federation of Journalist and Media Institutions, which was launched as the Federation of Afghan Journalists in 2012, now has 15 affiliated membership organisations with the mandate of securing and protecting journalists and media. The Federation prepared the first draft of the ‘Journalists and Media Security and Safeguarding Procedures’ in December 2015 which was approved by the cabinet of the National Unity Government. Several structures were proposed, including a Coordination Committee to liaise between the Ministry of Interior and Provincial Police Headquarters, and tasked with coordinating mechanisms to enhance the security of the journalists and the media; a Committee to Support the Journalists and Media at the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and NDS in the provinces tasked with eliminating threats of terrorist groups against journalists and the media; and the Joint Committee of Media and Government to insure the implementation of aforementioned Safeguarding Procedures in the capital and all provinces.

**Enhancing safety, reducing impunity**

The latest subcommittee report shows that they have reviewed around 700 cases out of which 172 cases were considered to be prosecuted. Of these, 56 cases have been completed and sent to the prosecutor’s office. According to the prosecutor’s report, more than 40 cases, including some cases of murder of journalists, have been completed and submitted to the courts. More than 10 lawsuits have been handed down by courts and criminal sentences have been issued against journalists for abuses of cases. Based on the Subcommittee report in 60 cases where mostly were insulting of journalists, they have withdrawn their cases.

The Subcommittee’s investigations showed that of the 172 cases, perpetrators in 24 cases are from the NDS; in nine cases are governors’ guards; in seven cases MPs; in three cases are presidential guards; in six cases judges and prosecutors and nine cases of foreign forces. There are also three cases of Afghan journalists killed outside the country. All these cases were sent by Joint Committee of Media and Government to the Ministry for further investigation.

Of the 172 cases, only one case was not completed due to lack of sufficient documents. Since the creation of the Joint Committee in summer 2016 to December 2017, more than 50 cases of violence have been registered with the Committee, of which 29 cases have been examined by the Subcommittee and have been submitted to justice institutions. Fourteen of these cases were completed and submitted to courts and others are under prosecution. Another 21 cases were resolved by traditional means.

The only cases of violence against journalists and media workers that still need to be tracked are cases that have occurred since the formation of the National Unity Government in 2014 until the creation of the Joint Committee in the summer of 2016.

According to the report of the Subcommittee, these cases currently number more than 160 and investigations have recently begun.

**Journalist Support Fund**

About seven years ago, a structure was established under the name of the Financial Fund for Journalists, which, in order to achieve its goals, gained some financial assistance from a number of political and capital personalities, and provided part of this money as a contribution to several journalists in need. With more journalists and media workers having lost their lives or been injured, following discussions, the Joint Committee made it possible to make procedures for using the fund more accessible and effective in order to help media workers genuinely in need in a meeting with president he promised to help the Federation with fundraising. Now it is seeking another meeting with president to provide all prepared documents to ensure the prosperity of the fund activities and to commence fundraising.

**More than 10 lawsuits have been handed down by courts and criminal sentences have been issued against the perpetrators of cases.**
BANGLADESH

LONG ARM OF THE LAW

Journalists and the media of Bangladesh are facing diverse challenges and pressures that include muzzling by legal means, loss of business, physical assault, threats, arrests and abduction. The growth in the number of media outlets in the country is somewhat matched by their independence, in that newspapers are seen to publish news involving corruption in influential quarters while television channels also broadcast news and live talk-shows criticizing the powerful. However, there exists a palpable veil of silence. The government is appeasing right-wing radicals. No one wants to be seen in opposition when the political establishment is the reason behind media ownership, barring a few instances, remains with the government, Information Minister Hasanul Huq Inu told the country’s parliament on January 11, 2018. But does Bangladesh really have a robust media industry? It is apparent that those with the financial heft can easily become editors of national dailies, even without becoming journalists. An owner of a registered daily newspaper need not appoint a single journalist or publish the paper regularly. It need be published only when an advertisement is arranged – by threat or bribes – through the government agencies. The practice of pocketing a percentage by publishing special advertisements in unknown dailies is rampant, even among reputed companies and agencies. Finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhith on August 8, 2017 threatened the government’s report on the existence of so many newspapers in Bangladesh terming those “rubbish”. The Minister said that he doubted whether there were even 15 newspapers, at best 20. “Some 500 newspapers! All bogus. You want me to fix a pay scale for them? No, not at all! I will fix pay scales for these 15 or 20 newspapers,” he told journalists. Information Minister Hasanul Huq Inu, on January 14, 2016, told the parliament that the owners themselves had become editors of 1005 daily newspapers out of the country’s 1078 dailies. That means 93 percent dailies in Bangladesh have owners cum editors. Only 7 percent dailies have professional editors.

WEAK FROM WITHIN

The practice of becoming an owner of a media house without any accountability to pay the journalists or other employees is a threat to press freedom in Bangladesh, say activists. “Corrupt practices are weakening the media, leaving professionals vulnerable. Other forms of corruption are arising out of these practices. In reality, press freedom in Bangladesh is only freedom for owners to do as they please. External pressures hamper press freedom less than the inherent weakness in the media industry,” said Omar Fanaque, Secretary General of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists.

“We can withstand outside pressures provided we have economic freedom. Our journalists are helpless, as they have no job security,” said Syed Issaq Reza, Chief Editor of GTV. The phenomenon of television channels mushrooming in a short span of time, is a mark of the decaying industry. Investors are coming forward in this sector without assessing business viability, as they have other motives behind becoming media owners, say experts.

The government, on January 29, 2018 formed the ninth Wage Board for revising the national salary structure for journalists and workers employed in the newspapers and news agencies. But, most of the journalists do not get salaries and remuneration as stipulated by the successive eight wage boards. Electronic and online media have no service rule or boards. Electronic media are not in a strong position in Bangladesh, given the fears of media outlets being shut down at any time.
There are pressures from the government, opposition parties and also other powerful groups. The ownership pattern of the electronic media is the main problem, since the government issues licenses on political considerations. The professional editor as an institution is not robust, and editors fear taking independent decisions.

**ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE**

Agitating journalists of Bangladesh breathed a sigh of relief when missing journalist Utpal Das was found on December 20, 2017, more than two months after his abduction on October 10. The cheers of the journalists, who observed continuous protest programs demanding the rescue of Utpal Das, however, hides the shadow of fear, because the mystery behind his disappearance remains. It is not clear whether the abduction was work related, and the perpetrators are also yet to be identified.

Raza Ahmed, former general secretary of the Dhaka Reporters Unity, who spearheaded the journalists’ campaign to rescue Utpal, said, “The fear will persist unless police identifies the perpetrator responsible for the abduction.” Utpal Das, reporter with online news outlet Pubshoboshmbd, is one of a dozen people in Bangladesh who vanished under mysterious circumstances in 2017, but he is one of the few victims of suspected abductions who resurfaced. Das narrated: “I was standing outside the Star 2017, but he is one of the few victims of suspected abductions for whom the government has denied such allegations.

**LEGAL MUZZLE**

Kamrunnahar Shova, a senior reporter of the English daily Financial Express, is the most recent journalist to have been sued under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2007. A case was filed against Shova and two other persons in Joydebpur thana in Gaibandha over a Facebook post on March 26, 2018. Since August 2017, Section 57 of the ICT Act functions almost like an instrument reserved for the influential persons and the authorities, who have the ability to get approval from the police headquarters before suing anybody under the draconian law. The Inspector General of Police on August 2, 2017 issued an order directing police units across Bangladesh to take approval from the headquarters before recording any case under the said section.

Section 57 criminalises criticism or revealing any information, which may be defamatory to any person or institution or may go against any faith. At least 73 cases filed under Section 57 are currently pending with the lone cyber tribunal of the country. Of the accused, 25 are journalists who were sued either for publishing news items on their websites or on Facebook.

Meanwhile, the government made a commitment to dissolve the harsh law, but it is being replaced by a draft cyber security act, which, according to critics, is even harsher. Rights activists and journalists raised a voice against the draft Digital Security Act 2018, already approved by the cabinet on January 29 and awaiting approval by the parliament.

The European Union and 10 countries including the US also expressed concern over several sections of the proposed law saying, it would “supress freedom of expression in multiple ways and also obstruct people’s right to seek justice”.

Law enforcers still have not revealed a motive or released an investigation report into the killings although six suspects have been in custody for about six years without charges filed against them in the case.

Judy has extended the deadline 54 times for submitting an investigation report. The couple is among 24 journalists killed in Bangladesh since 1996. The ministry of at least 21 murders remains unsolved for over two decades, as the local press demands answers and justice for their slain colleagues.


In March 2017, a court in Dhaka convicted six accused in the murder of photographer Aftab Ahmad in 2013. A Bhaluka Court on November 30, 2016 sentenced nine persons to life imprisonment for killing Manik Saha. Nine persons on June 23, 2013 were awarded a life term for killing Gautam Das. These three cases are now pending with the High Court as the convicts have appealed against their sentences. No other cases of killings have received judgments, showing the prevalence of impunity for killing journalists. Fortunately, no journalists have been killed in the line of duty since February 2017. This provides a slight ray of hope amidst the clouds of despair in Bangladesh.
BHUTAN

EMERGING CONTROLS

Bhutan, the small Himalayan Kingdom, rarely makes global news. In 2017, however, the standoff between India and China regarding the Doklam plateau, at the border of China and Bhutan, but strategically important for India, made headlines. Bhutan chose to remain largely silent, and the year was politically calm, with the general election planned for November 2018.

The forthcoming election has brought to the fore issues relating to freedom of expression, especially on the internet, and media rights while covering elections. A new law, which the government claims will strengthen the independence of the media and promote a free and vibrant media industry, is however a matter of concern for the media in Bhutan. The small media community, largely dominated by state-owned print, radio and television; and dependent on government advertising, faces multiple challenges to truly become independent and vibrant.

The media has evolved over the past few years and the biggest challenge for Bhutanese media is sustainability and reach as most of the media are confined to the capital Thimphu. Skilled human resources and accessibility of information are other challenges that the Bhutanese media face.

NEW RESTRICTIONS

On December 5, 2017, the National Assembly unanimously passed the Bhutan Information Communications and Media Bill 2017. The Act repealed the Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act 2006. Information and communications minister, DN Dhungyel, said that the new law would strengthen the independence of the media and promote a free and vibrant media industry. It is envisioned that the establishment of a Media Council would help “to promote and protect freedom and independence of the media” and to “serve as a standard-setting body, and regulate or curtail harmful, offensive, illegal or antithetical content on the Internet and other ICT and media services”. The Council also has the right to hear complaints and settle disputes in relation to offences related to media content that is not criminal in nature. The new Act aims to address the rapid changes in the internet and media landscape. However, there is a danger that it could be used to curtail free speech as members of the Council will be government appointees and only one among five members represents the private media sector.

THE ELECTION AND THE MEDIA

On April 20, 2018, the country elected 20 members of the 25-member National Council, the upper house of the bicameral parliament. The King, known as Druk Gyalpo (‘Dragon King’), as the head of state nominated the five remaining members of the Council.

In view of the National Council election, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) brought into effect the Media Coverage of Elections Rules and Regulations of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2018, and appointed a media arbitrator responsible for media coverage and advertising as per the election rules. Although the ECB claimed that media houses were consulted during the drafting of the regulations, media professionals, claimed that they were not consulted and did not receive any request for feedback.

The ECB, as early as February 2018, notified all media houses to refrain from publishing content on candidates until the “Application for Election Campaign Fund” was released on March 20 following the scrutiny of nominations of candidates.

On March 4, The Journalist, an English-language weekly, published a profile of a candidate inviting an investigation by the media arbitrator. The private newspaper published a profile of a candidate inviting an investigation by the media arbitrator. The private newspaper later apologised for the story and on March 12 suspended its managing editor, Sonam Tashi, for a month after the office of the media arbitrator asked it to take action against a reporter and the editor for the story. The newspaper also withdrew the unsold copies of the newspaper.

The ECB spokesperson denied any pressure by the media arbitrator on The Journalist and said the newspaper realized the mistake and took action after the media arbitrator asked for a clarification.

The Journalist’s chief editor, Ugyen Tenzin, in a report published in Kuensel daily said the newspaper accepts that it contravened the Election Act and the managing editor was reprimanded and severe administrative action taken against him.

The Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB), an IFJ affiliate, said the role and powers of the office of the media arbitrator needs clarity; and also said that the association discourages professional misconduct among members as well as arbitrary decisions against journalists.

The ECB has also asked media houses to submit a report of their coverage of the elections, thus introducing new bureaucratic controls.

The level of pressure that the ECB and the media arbitrator exerted on the media is exemplified by an editorial in Kuensel, the state-owned daily, published on March 15, 2018. It said: “Heavy-handed policing of media by some constitutional offices that overstep their mandate is making election reporting difficult. This is not healthy for the nation. A pity.”

The editorial further said: “In a democratic society, media’s role is critically important. Without responsible and fearless media, there will not be robust system of checks and balances. When newsrooms are kept on a tight leash, it either means we have dirty secrets to hide or ugly intrigues laid out for the future.”

While calling media to be more professional and responsible, the editorial further stated: “Today, media as the voice of the people is being threatened by public offices with this mandate and that, overstepping each other. The least these overbearing offices can do is recognise their own mandate and let media do their job... Otherwise, the tussle between media and the powerful offices will continue and the biggest loser will be the nation and her people.”
The ECB on August 15, 2018, issued directives to bring down number of television channels permitted to broadcast and distribute in Bhutan to 56 effective from September 1. The move, supposedly to ‘to standardize and to bring uniformity among the number and types of TV channels in the country’, cut off 91 television channels that were previously distributed in Bhutan. The BCMA said that in an assessment, it found that some channels, such as India’s Life Ok were not “decent” channels and were not in line with Bhutanese culture.

**INACCESSIBLE INFORMATION**

In December 2017, the government barred media from attending the Sherig Conference at the Sonamthang Central School in Paro, Bhutan. The five-day conference, an important annual event of the Ministry of Education, assesses issues and challenges faced by the education sector attended by representatives from all over the country. Minister for Education Norbu Wangchuk told the media that they would not be permitted to attend the conference and would instead be provided press releases on the matters discussed.

At a press meeting during the conference, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay said the Sherig Conference was closed to media as participants would hesitate to raise issues in the media’s presence. He added that the most important thing the media needed to know was the conference resolutions.

**More Regulations**

The Bhutan Information Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) in December 2017 cancelled the licence of a weekly Dzongkha language newspaper, Drak Yoezer, for failing to meet circulation requirements. The paper started its operations on February 19, 2011 with 2,500 printed copies and employed about 10 staff. The BCMA also cautioned media houses that there would be zero tolerance to non-compliance and asserted that a circulation audit would henceforth be mandatory.

An editorial in the state-owned Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation (BBSC) Nu 224,625 (USD 3,450) for reporting on banned film ‘Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait’, on December 21, 2016. The authority also alleged that BBSC broadcasted clippings of the film that were not certified, disseminating incorrect information and for misleading the public. The BBSC refused to pay the fines and the BCMA moved court. There were accusations and rebuttals in the court until mid-2017. The case is still pending.

**Growth of Social Media**

Bhutan witnessed exponential growth of social media users in recent times. Internet penetration stands at 45 per cent while Facebook use is 43 per cent, with more than 350,000 Facebook users in Bhutan, which has a population of 820,000. Misuse of social media is becoming a matter of serious concern for the state in Bhutan. The year saw circulation of wrong and inappropriate content and deception, misinformation and fake news.

The ECB notified the public as well as social media users that any post, tweet, comment or opinion of a candidate must be in conformity with the election code of conduct. The ECB also urged the responsible use of social media while refraining from any posts related to the elections, which can be construed as a campaign.

Additionally, the commission warned social media users to refrain from any posts related to the elections, which can be construed as a campaign. The commission said the Sherig Conference was closed to media as participants would hesitate to raise issues in the media’s presence. He added that the most important thing the media needed to know was the conference resolutions.

The government said that the conference was a working meeting and media was only allowed to attend the inaugural session.

**Supporting Journalists**

JAB, the IFJ affiliate in Bhutan, has been relentlessly working to support media development through skill development of journalists in the country. During the last year, JAB, with support from the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), and Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) conducted various trainings. The activities of JAB included Annual Journalism Conference, Annual Journalism Award, giving away a total of 18 journalism grants to journalists; training on basic journalism skills, long-form narrative and storytelling, code of conduct and editing. During the year, JAB also published the first volume of the JAB Occasional Journal, *Bhutan Press Mirror* and opened the Bhutan Press Club. It also organised four one-day community workshops with 200 community members in rural areas to strengthen two-way communication between media and the communities.

With the National Assembly election scheduled for November 2018, the tightening of rules on media by the ECB during April 2018 election indicates that the media will probably face more restrictions and pressure from the state in the coming year. The media will continue to struggle in the small market centred around capital Thimphu, for sustainability and independence; while the government tries to impose the role of the media as merely to report the official documents. The internet and social media will bring in more issues and the state’s response could be regulations that curtail the fundamental right to freedom of expression.
REGULATING DISSENT

Late March this year, Mahesh Hegde, owner of the Postcard News website, was arrested in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, on charges of causing ill-will on religious grounds. A monk of the Jain faith had a few days before, suffered serious injuries in a road accident. Hedge picked up one among many images of the monk circulating over the internet and pushed it along on his website with the embellishment that his injuries had been inflicted by a violent mob of Islamic radicals. Hegde added the legend that nobody was safe in Karnataka as long as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah rules. It just so happens that Siddaramaiah is from the main party in opposition to India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Hegde’s twisting of fact was clearly part of the build up to the campaign for elections to the state legislative assembly due mid-May in Karnataka. Postcard News is one among a growing ecosystem of websites that style themselves in a new idiom of nationalism, as articulating a supposedly long-suppressed majority voice in India. This idiom of majoritarian nationalism flourishes on antagonism – often confected in deliberately misreported facts – about the country’s principal religious minority. It used to be referred to as ‘hate speech’ at one time, a very poorly defined category of offences in most parts of the world. In India, the harsh reality is that even with a surfeit of laws in place, the actual record of applying legal sanctions on hate speech has been indifferent.

A recent review of press freedom in India concluded that ultra-nationalist elements seeking to “purge” all traces of what they deem “anti-national” thinking from the public domain, have created an aura of fear among journalists and social media users. “Online smear campaigns” have been frequent, suffused with crass insults and threats of physical violence, that especially target female media practitioners. Journalists willing to run the risks have uncovered what seem to be organised efforts to capitalise on the vast scope of viral multiplication that the social media “hashtag” affords, to intimidate reporters who hold the misdeeds of elected politicians to the light.

This problem was clearly not on the minds of the official information agency of the Indian government on April 2, when it announced fresh guidelines on the accreditation of journalists, ostensibly to check the menace of “fake news”. Media accreditation is granted to journalists after a specified number of years in the profession. If anything, this waiting period is sufficient assurance that professionals granted accreditation to access the official corridors in the national capital, will be immune to the temptations of fake news. The April 2 notification put journalists on notice of a “three strikes and out” policy. Any accredited media person found to have propagated ‘fake news’ would be put on notice and issued a formal warning after a second offence. A third transgression would lead to termination of privileges.

Following strong protests from the media community, the notice was withdrawn, with the stricture ostensibly issued from the highest political authority – the office of the Prime Minister of India – that the information agency had gone beyond its jurisdiction. Guidelines on accreditation and their revision, the Prime Minister’s Office said, were within the jurisdiction of the Press Council of India (PCI) and that was the appropriate forum for debating the issue.

It was not a source of comfort for journalists that the Chairman of the PCI, Justice C.K. Prasad, a retired judge of the Supreme Court of India, was already on record that he found little objectionable in the April 2 notification, since the problem it addressed was real and serious.

It so happened that Justice Prasad had at the same time, convened a meeting of the PCI to which few of the representatives of the journalists’ unions and professional bodies were called. The reason given for the move was supposedly, the ongoing reconstitution of the PCI. Eight professional bodies – including IFJ affiliates, the Indian Journalists’ Union and the National Union of Journalists of India – wrote on the eve of the proposed meeting to the Prime Minister, urging that the reconstitution of the PCI be placed on hold since it was not in accordance with fair and democratic procedure.

This was one among a series of rather questionable decisions with a bearing on the media regulatory framework, where efforts to bring a semblance of order to a scenario of rapid flux continue to flounder. Little in the official response seems to indicate a genuine urge to get the best of the new modes of information sharing and communication, while safeguarding against hazards such as fake news. A day had not passed since...
the Office of the Indian Prime Minister ordered that the ‘fake news’ circular issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting be held in abeyance, before it announced the formation of a committee that will frame regulatory rules for news portals and media websites.

Five among the ten members of the committee were to be the secretaries of various ministries: civil servants who begin their careers administering a district and then serve various functional ministries in the states and the Indian union. Others were to be the representatives of the PCI, and various associations of the news broadcast and entertainment industries. Missing entirely were natives of the digital domain, of which a good number exist in India, that manage to set new standards on fact-checking both official claims made by the current regime, as well as their noisy cohorts of online propagandists.

The basic premise of the order constituting this committee to frame rules has been called out as false. The order claims for instance, that all other media – print and electronic included – are under surveillance, while the online media functions in a regulatory vacuum. Critics of the move point out that India’s Information Technology Act, as adopted in 2000, incorporates Section 69, which provides for the interception, monitoring or decryption of any information stored in any computer resource, if a public authority or agency of the state thinks it warranted. In 2008, Section 69A was drafted onto this act by an amendment, authorising any state agency within the jurisprudence of public order, national defence, and a number of other criteria, to order the blocking of public access to any information through a computer resource.

In a significant judgment in 2015, India’s Supreme Court struck down Section 66 of the IT Act which allowed for the criminal prosecution of certain kinds of messages posted on social media. After 25 years since its enactment, the court had held that Section 66A, in the interests of public order, national defence, and a number of other criteria, to order the blocking of public access to any information through a computer resource.

By 2017, the figures had not changed very much in respect to the regulatory authority through, protests to the regulatory authority though, went unheeded. In its July 2017 edition, the Ericsson Mobility Report which has become something of a standard reference source for trends in the telecom and internet domains, observed that total global “traffic in mobile networks increased by 70 percent” between the end of the first quarter of 2017 and the corresponding point of time the earlier year. “Part of this increase”, it said, “was due to one Indian operator’s introductory LTE offer that included free data traffic”. Mobile subscriptions had registered a 4 per cent growth over the year. In terms of the net additions during the relevant quarter of 2017, India had the largest number at 43 million, with China second at 24 million. “The strong subscription growth in India”, the report concluded, “was mainly due to an attractive LTE ‘welcome offer’ by one operator, with free voice and data”.

Global, smartphones accounted for 80 per cent of the total number of new mobile connections in the quarter, a figure expected to increase rapidly. Data traffic over mobile networks in 2017 grew 70 per cent globally, with video traffic accounting for over 50 per cent of total data. Jio’s entry in India had contributed to a dramatic growth in data traffic. Though the report uses a broader geographic category (India, Nepal and Bhutan), the vast part of the increase in data

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Deadly rumour mongering

For the giant social media firms and other online platforms driven by advertising revenue, the commercial calculation has proved decisive. YouTube, Google, Facebook and Twitter are known to have complied with demands from official quarters to remove certain kinds of content from their sites, simply because they all have operations in India and could potentially be subject to local liability laws. The Indian market though is of such immense and prime importance that none of them would like to defy the official censor and risk being blocked.

It is a curiosity of the current state of the media in India, that the various excesses that are instigated through the heightened connectivity that social media enables, have never seriously attracted sanction or prosecution, or even an official reprimand. There was in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, a particularly gruesome incident in May 2017, when seven people were hacked to death in a village in the state, on suspicions of running a child trafficking racket. Four of the victims were cattle-traders who had happened to be passing through the district at the time. They belonged to a religious faith – the largest minority in India – that has been long stigmatised for its ostensibly derogatory for the cow, sacralised as an object of veneration by some within the majority faith. Rumours of the child trafficking ring had circulated over WhatsApp for a month and may have fused with a heightened vigilantiism against people of the stigmatised faith, to provoke the hideous act of violence.

Photographs and videos of the lynching were widely circulated throughout WhatsApp and other social media soon afterwards. There was nothing to suggest that the baleful mood had abated through WhatsApp and other social media since, through heightened connectivity that social media enables, have never seriously attracted sanction or prosecution, or even an official reprimand. There was in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, a particularly gruesome incident in May 2017, when seven people were hacked to death in a village in the state, on suspicions of running a child trafficking racket. Four of the victims were cattle-traders who had happened to be passing through the district at the time. They belonged to a religious faith – the largest minority in India – that has been long stigmatised for its ostensibly derogatory for the cow, sacralised as an object of veneration by some within the majority faith. Rumours of the child trafficking ring had circulated over WhatsApp for a month and may have fused with a heightened vigilantiism against people of the stigmatised faith, to provoke the hideous act of violence.

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traffic in this region between 2016 to 2017 – 0.3 exabytes per month to 1.0 – could be attributed to India. Data usage per smartphone within this geographic region increased from 1.5 to 4.1 gigabytes per month over the year.

India’s trajectory is a few steps behind the global trend in some respects, though the magnitude of the transition, because of the sheer size of the country, has attracted global attention. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) has since 2011 been carrying out an annual survey of the digital media with substantial samples drawn from a large number of countries. While India is yet to figure in this annual survey, the global trends it highlights are clearly applicable in India and the evidence comes both anecdotaly and from evidence from diverse sources.

In its survey published in October 2017, the RISJ identified a number of distinct trends. There was firstly, an increasing dependence on the smart phone for accessing news and information. “Distributed discovery” was becoming more important, with particular news sources less likely to be remembered than the platforms they were discovered on. Beyond these platforms, the growth of “private” messaging apps such as WhatsApp in news discovery was growing. And with all these multitudes of sources and choices, the vital attribute of “trust” was eroding in both social media and news.

SENSATIONALISM REIGNS

In a scenario of great uncertainty, traditional media have been trying to gain some leverage through the online space, driving traffic to their sites using the hashtag as bait. The hashtag strategy perhaps goes along with an editorial policy of soft-pedalling the criticism of established authority, since the largest number of mouse-clicks today seem to be reserved for news items – fake or otherwise – that embellish the image of the ruling party and its top leadership. This tendency was most in evidence over the year under review in coverage of the death of the Bollywood actor Sridevi Kapoor – often celebrated as India’s first female superstar – in a hotel room in Dubai in February 2018. A thorough forensic audit was a legal necessity under Dubai law, given the circumstances of the death. This process alone and the findings that emerged were sufficient to trigger a frenzy of speculation across India’s new media — social and traditional alike — complete with news anchors and reporters re-enacting the hotel room scenes in the minutes before the actor’s death. It was sharply criticized as “voyeuristic” and “insensitive” by commentators. In India’s widely-circulated English language daily, the Hindustan Times, an editorial went so far as to express “shock and trauma, one of the many warriors for the new hyper-nationalism in the virtual space tweeted a message that the “merciless” murder of “Commy (sic, Commie) Gauri Lankesh” was all about her deeds coming back to haunt her. Gauri Lankesh was an outspoken journalist who inherited Lankesh Patrike, a newspaper that her equally irrevant and iconoclastic father had founded and named after himself. She had since kept that effort at sharp social critique afloat under her own name, associating herself with human rights causes and speaking up strongly and frequently against the effort to stifle dissent under the cloak of the new nationalism. Gauri Lankesh’s assassins were waiting for her as she arrived home and sped away on motorcycles after shooting her dead. The method was eerily similar to that employed in three murders of public figures involved in campaigns against superstition and religious obscurantism. Narendra Dabholkar in the northern Maharashtra city of Pune in August 2013, Govind Fansare in the southern Maharashtra town of Kolhapur in February 2015 and M.M. Kalburgi in the northern Karnataka town of Dharwar in August 2015. Unlike in the three earlier instances, one arrest has been made in the Gauri Lankesh killing. K.T. Naveen Kumar, allegedly an activist of an extremist group in the northern district of Karnataka, was arrested in March 2018, six months after the murder. Very little has since come to light about the circumstances of the murder and the others who may have been involved.

Incitement to murder, sexual violence and extreme nationalism – which often takes the form of a bullying partnership for Indian sport, principally involving the iconic national cricket team – have become accepted parts of social media practice. Mainstream media which has long years of experience in the more sober and responsible idiom, could potentially call out these abuses, but financial fragility renders their voice weaker than in earlier years. The menacing prospect today in India is that the mainstream media may be opting to piggyback on the rampant abuses of the social media, to retrieve their commercial fortunes from a rapid plunge into the red.
F or more than three decades, journalists in Kashmir have been braving the challenges of living and reporting in a conflict zone. While the territorial dispute and internal strife are decades old, since the 1990s, Kashmir Valley has been in the throes of an armed insurgency, and intense militarisation and arbitrary use of draconian laws. The media has had to balance pressures from all sides: the government, security forces, militants, and the Kashmiri public. Journalists perform the difficult task of informing the public while risking life and limb, dashed headlong into dangerous volatile situations with no protective gear or safety training. Precarious working conditions – low wages, no salary, benefits, medical, life or risk insurance exacerbate the risks for journalists in Kashmir.

From 2016 onwards, the spike in unrest and mass uprisings of ordinary Kashmiris – especially youth – following the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani by security forces in July saw special challenges for the media.

EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

When the armed insurgency erupted in 1990 following what is termed the ‘Gawkadal massacre’ when paramilitary forces opened fire, killing about 50 unarmed protesters, there were only five or six Urdu newspapers being published from Srinagar. The international press was ejected from the Valley, and until 1995, there were no English dailies published in Kashmir (national dailies published from Delhi were distributed in the Valley). Now, there are about 61 registered Urdu newspapers, the prominent ones being: Al Safa Aftab, Srinagar Times, Kashmir Uzma, Nida-e- Mashaq, Uquab and Amaaq. The main English dailies out of 34 are: Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Images, Kashmir Observer, Kashmir Monitor, Kashmir Life, Kashmir Times and Kashmir Reader. These newspapers took on the challenging task of reporting the militancy and its impact on common Kashmiris, the might of the Indian state and human rights violations committed by the security forces and also by the armed militants.

There are now television channels based in the state other than cable TV and national channels broadcast in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which are sometimes blocked by cable operators under directions of the state government. Journalism as a profession is not yet institutionalised in Kashmir. Structures of recruitment, wages, promotions and benefits are not uniform in any media house. For most media houses, the small scale of operations and lack of standard practices and media staff vulnerabilities and their jobs insecure. Precarious working conditions are exacerbated by the conflict. Salaries are poor, with journalists working for as little as Rs 3500 (USD 50) per month. Interns often carry major tasks, sometimes with no salary for up to six months. In such a scenario, there are no appointment letters, medical benefits, insurance or pensions or provident funds. Written contracts are not drawn up and jobs and work assignments go according to oral agreements which are not binding. Reporters who travel for stories are last and end up paying for conveyance themselves, unless they are lucky enough to hitch a ride with their colleagues from the national or international media. Photojournalists buy their own equipment, having to bear the costs of repairs and upgrades themselves. Phone bills are also borne by reporters.

In addition, saturation of the job market, with newly established journalism schools in Baramulla and Anantnag producing 120 graduates every year contributes to a glut in fresh entrants working for very low wages just to be able to gain experience and bylines, thus devaluing professional journalism.

Alongside, the growth of new media has not been matched with an understanding of working conditions of online journalists who are expected to be on standby 24x7. Not only do journalists in the electronic media have to broadcast, they also have to write for the website in English and Hindi and also send photographs. All of this for the same salary.

The lack of investment in professional journalism is displayed in the poor salaries paid to field reporters, and minimising expenditure by relying on newspaper vendors and hawkers in the districts to phone in with local updates which are then subbed and packaged as “news” – thus completely bypassing professional journalists. Another phenomenon peculiar to Kashmir is to make use of government employees as sub-editors in the evening. They package again news in the manner required by the publication, for very little payment.

New technologies and mobile telephony are rapidly changing the way news is generated and disseminated. Like in the rest of the country, verification and other tenets of professional journalism are often sacrificed for speed and volume of outreach.

INTIMIDATION AND RISKS

Since the armed conflict erupted in 1990, 21 journalists have lost their lives in targeted killings, or by being caught in the cross-fire. Assaults from all sides – militants, the military and state-sponsored renegades (‘surrendered militants’ or Ikhwanis) had made journalism a hazardous profession during the 1990s. Abduction, parcel bombings and landmines have become more common. The risky balancing act of the Kashmiri media continues even today, and was mentioned in the report of the Press Council of India, ‘Media and Media Scenario of J&K’ released during a visit of the Council to Srinagar in October, 2017. The report noted that there were two narratives – of the Kashmiri media and the “media of the rest of India”. It went on to note that the “journalists in Kashmir have to manage the reality of walking on the tightrope amidst the threats of gun and political arm-twisting”.

Today, while targeted killings are not the norm, journalists continue to be vulnerable while covering the conflict. Reporters from the districts receive more threats and physical assaults from security forces than those based in the capital Srinagar, and there is little recourse, it appears. Regular visits by army personnel and intelligence officers to the homes of journalists and harassment of their families, has become routine enough to be unremarkable – the annoyance and surveillance being borne as a fallout of working and living in a conflict zone. Journalists report being picked up and taken to Military Intelligence (MI) camps and interrogated, sometimes being detained with no charges. Questions about their stories sometimes leads to self-censorship to minimise harassment to families.

In a conflict situation, the identity of Kashmiri journalists is often deliberately blurred by the authorities. Freelance photojournalist Kamran Yousuf was picked up on September 5, 2017 by the counter-terrorism unit, the National Investigation Authority (NIA) and lodged in jail in capital Delhi. The 22-year-old from Pulwama town in South Kashmir was covering protests by civilians who were pelting stones at the security forces, a unique form of resistance in the Kashmir Valley. He was accused of pelting stones himself, and charged with serious crimes like criminal conspiracy, attempting to wage war against India, and sedition. The Kashmir Young Journalists’ Association was the first to stand up publicly and assert that Yousuf is a professional journalist, support for his cause soon gathered force. Though he was released on bail about six months later on March 14, 2018, fighting the court case will be a long and arduous process.

As Yousuf’s experience shows, press photographers are particularly at risk, since they rush to the spot of incidents even as they are unfolding. Except for those who work for national or international media, local press photographers and video journalists do not have protective jackets or helmets. Due to the nature of their work, they are at the frontlines of conflict with no protection. Mr Javid, a journalist in Kupwara was deliberately targeted with pellets in August, blinding him in one eye despite extensive surgeries.

Likewise, photojournalist Zuhair Maqbool, 30, was blinded in one eye by pellets shot at him and his colleague Muzamil Matoo, by the security forces in September 2016. Multiple painful surgeries later, he is yet to fully regain his vision. His cameras costing about Rs 200,000 which he calls his “eyes” were also damaged. Yet, they have no medical, risk or life insurance cover. Funds were raised through a Facebook campaign for their medical expenses. There were more than 1261 incidents of stone pelting in Kashmir in 2017, each of these risky for journalists to cover. Women journalists are few in number, though more women than men graduate from journalism school. There are no female photojournalists and few reporters, the latter having to face additional vulnerabilities covering the volatile political reality that is Kashmir. Most are ghettoised in feature writing or ‘soft’ beats. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are realities for women journalists negotiating the predominantly male world of media in this state.
Online abuse and intimidation are growing problems. Reporters in the electronic media have had to go to the extent of deactivating their social media accounts due to the barrage of abuse within minutes of posting any story. WhatsApp messages from all over the world range from a “friendly nudge” to give a certain angle, to open threats. A reporter with a national channel said that on one occasion, an extremist leader threatened to broadcast a call to burn his house from the local mosque.

The conflict in Kashmir has led to a peculiar inversion of competitive “breaking news” and “exclusives”, particularly in the electronic media. Given the immediate and wide outreach of television, correspondents of national channels say that they are cautious about breaking news, especially about militant groups or human rights violations by the army. Therefore, they share information and newsgathering go out simultaneously on tickers of all channels, thus reducing the risk for individual journalists. The vulnerability of Kashmiri journalists who live in the Valley is much higher than “parachute” journalists from Delhi or international channels who visit for a few days and leave, with no stakes in life in the Valley.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Newsgathering and verification are fraught with challenges in Jammu and Kashmir. From obstacles to physically accessing villages on the contentious Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border with Pakistan, to routine denial of information from official sources, getting the complete story and a quote from all sides is virtually impossible. In a recent case where a ‘suspected militant’ was killed in Uri (a border area), villagers said he was a civilian – a grazer. But it was impossible to verify because journalists were denied access and officials refused to comment.

In some areas, though official permission is obtained, the authorities on the ground do not accept the permissions and passes issued by other authorities. When curfew is imposed, which is routine during military operations, combing, crackdowns or even civil strife, obtaining curfew passes is difficult. Even with passes in hand (issued by the civil authority – the District Magistrate) the military personnel on duty do not permit journalists to enter the spot where incidents have taken place. When the military does grant journalists to specific areas, it is usually in the nature of embedded journalism, and extremely controlled.

Official statements are often too late in coming, making it impossible to include quotes of relevant government and military sources within the schedule demanded by a daily news cycle. This routine stone-walling means that the official version is missing from news stories. Senior journalists say that while there is no direct censorship, circumstances are created to make it difficult to work. There is no system in place to talk to the responsible person in the police or security agencies to get the official version. Another way in which the army controls the flow of information and testimonies from affected populations is to intimidate villagers to the extent that common people are afraid to talk to journalists due to fear of repercussions.

Access to information is severely restricted during shutdowns of the telephone network or the internet. The penetration of the internet and mobile telephony is high. However, during military operations, mass protests and demonstrations, the internet is shutdown or slowed down to a speed that renders it useless. Such blockades are routine after military operations involving armed militants resulting in casualties, and last for least four days till after the funeral rites are completed, with a view to preventing popular mobilisation around the deaths of militants. The internet is also often shut or slowed down on Fridays, when public gatherings around mosques are likely to be volatile and turn violent with stone pelting. According to statistics generated by the Delhi-based Software Freedom Law Centre, India, Kashmir experienced 32 shutdowns in 2017 and 13 in 2018.

The struggle for journalists to get accreditation and the access to information is severely restricted during shutdowns of the telephone network or the internet. The penetration of the internet and mobile telephony is high. However, during military operations, mass protests and demonstrations, the internet is shutdown or slowed down to a speed that renders it useless. Such blockades are routine after military operations involving armed militants resulting in casualties, and last for least four days till after the funeral rites are completed, with a view to preventing popular mobilisation around the deaths of militants. The internet is also often shut or slowed down on Fridays, when public gatherings around mosques are likely to be volatile and turn violent with stone pelting. According to statistics generated by the Delhi-based Software Freedom Law Centre, India, Kashmir experienced 32 shutdowns in 2017 and 13 in 2018.

The struggle for journalists to get accreditation and the strict government control over this process is another method of blocking access to information.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL

Most of the papers published from Kashmir are priced reasonably, although Rs 3, and does not feature sufficient revenue through sales or subscriptions. None of the Srinagar-based newspapers is owned by a business house or corporation. Local business has been hit by the insurgency and corporations to outside the state are loath to spend advertising revenue here. Some Indian corporations have been issued directives not to advertise in J&K.

These papers depend heavily on government advertisements and paid public notices. This source of revenue comes at a price of course. The Central Government Department of Audio Visual Publicity (DAVP), disburses advertisements, but with strings attached. Some publications receive advertisements disproportionate to their circulation (some print a token hundred copies for the record, while raking in large advertisement revenue). The content of these publications is impacted by the dependent relationship between the newspaper industry and the establishment, especially for economic survival.

Pro-government publications are favoured with government accommodation, land, and other ‘privileges’ for propagating the official line. Those who do not play the game, pay a price.

In October 2017 the Home Ministry issued a letter addressed to senior officials of the state government and the Jammu & Kashmir police, saying: “It is understood that some newspapers in J&K are publishing highly radicalised content. This is against the Constitution of India as well as the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir.”

The letter further says, “… publishing of anti-national articles in the newspapers of the state should be strictly dealt with. Such newspapers should also not be given any patronage by way of advertisements by the state government. This may be circulated to all concerned for strict compliance.” The message cannot be clearer. It was seen by editors in Kashmir as a form of censorship and direct control.

Editors say that even when reporting facts, Kashmiri papers are labelled as ‘anti-national’. In 2016, a publication which carried a photo of [militant leader] Burhan Wani on his death anniversary, had its advertisement revenue cut off on grounds that it was ‘promoting militancy’.

Some journalists say that if large crowds are attending the funerals of slain militans in large numbers, this is a reality which they are duty-bound to report. At a meeting with the Director of Information, editors were told “if you take government advertisements, we also expect something.”

Although central government revenue (through the DAVP) has largely been curtailed, state advertising revenue to the tune of about Rs 32 crore was disbursed in the year 2016-2017. However, this was not reflected in the status of salaries or benefits to working journalists, many said. Some journalists felt that the government could exercise control not by censorship of content, but by making minimum standards, salaries and benefits mandatory and deny advertisement revenue to publications that did not comply.

ORGANISING FOR RIGHTS

The journalist community in Kashmir has been organised in various associations: Kashmir Press Photographers Association; Kashmir Journalists Corps; Welfare Association of Journalists; Kashmir Correspondents’ Club; The Kashmir Young Journalists Association founded in 2016 aims to serve the interests of fresh entrants into the profession and the Kashmir Editors Guild was set up in 2016 to lobby for issues related to editors. The Jammu and Kashmir Journalists’ Union, with about 30 members, is active in the Jammu region of the state, but not in the Kashmir Valley. An initiative to re-launch the Kashmir Union of Working Journalists which had been active in the 1980s, as well as a proposed Press Club provides hope for a united journalists movement to confront the challenges ahead.

PRESS PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE PARTICULARLY AT RISK, SINCE THEY RUSH TO THE SPOT OF INCIDENTS EVEN AS THEY ARE UNFOLDING. EXCEPT FOR THOSE WHO WORK FOR NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL MEDIA, LOCAL PRESS PHOTOGRAPHERS AND VIDEO JOURNALISTS DO NOT HAVE PROTECTIVE JACKETS OR HELMETS.
The Maldives has been in the throes of a severe political crisis since early 2018, when President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency on February 5 and embarked on a mission to crack down on any opposition to his authority. The move was a response to the Supreme Court’s February 1, 2018, order to release political prisoners and reinstate 12 Members of Parliament. If the court order had been followed, President Yameen would have found himself in a minority in the Parliament, facing a possible impeachment motion.

However, President Yameen effectively averted a personal crisis by declaring a state of emergency, detaining opposition leaders including members of parliament, dismissing and arresting the Chief Justice and a Supreme Court judge on charges of corruption, coming down heavily on opposition, and silencing all his critics including media.

The media and journalists faced a challenging situation during the emergency with critical and opposition media and journalists facing harassment, and others resorting to self-censorship. During the emergency, journalists were detained and attacked; media was threatened by government agencies with action for their unfavourable reporting, and ruling party leaders publicly called for shutting down opposing media.

The state of emergency—which lasted 45 days—represented an eruption of the deep churning, risks and challenges that the Maldivian media and journalists faced during the year. Waves of restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom continue in the Maldives as its attempts to muzzle critical voices went unabated. State attempts to restrict press freedom resulted in fear among the media and journalists at a scale that critical news was difficult to publish in media operating within the Maldives. Self-censorship—especially in issues critical to the government and anything relating to the opposition—was widespread and apparent in media content in the country.

MEDIA IN EMERGENCY

The state of emergency, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International, was used as a “license for heightened repression” by the Maldivian government. During the emergency, the opposition-aligned Raajje TV was forced to go “off air” for 36 hours owing to the dangers to the media and journalists. On February 9, 2018, the station suspended its regular broadcast due to “increased harassment, threats and intimidation” and what it termed an “unsafe environment for journalists to report freely and independently, and without fear”. The closure came after the ruling party leaders’ public call to shut down the station and the withdrawal of security provided by the Maldives Police.

On February 9, 2018, two journalists working for Agence France-Presse, Indian photographer Money Sharma and British videographer Atish Patel, were asked to leave the country after being picked up by police for doing journalistic activities on tourist visa.

Journalists also faced arrest and detention while covering opposition rallies during the emergency. On February 14, 2018, Mohamed Riyaz, technician with Vmedia, a news outlet owned by opposition leader Qasim Ibrahim, was arrested while assisting the channel’s crew covering the opposition rally. He was later released. Two days later on February 16, Hussain Hassan from Raajje TV and Leevan Ali Nasir from VTV are arrested during a protest rally at Male and were later released. Around 20 other journalists were taken to hospital after being pepper-sprayed by the police. Hassan travelled to Sri Lanka for treatment despite police’s attempt to arrest him at the airport.

On March 16, the police arrested Raajje TV journalists Mohamed Wismah, Mohamed Fazeen, and its Head of Programmes, Amir Saleem. Fazeen was arrested while covering a joint opposition protest for allegedly disobeying a police officer, while Wismah and Amir were taken into custody with a court order on allegations of staging and uploading a fake video of policemen saying they would join opposition rally. Fazeen was released two days later while Wismah and Saleem were put into custody for 11 days before the court ordered their release on March 27 as police failed to present any evidence against them. The police returned their confiscated phones only on April 11, 2018.

The ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) went on an all-out verbal attack on Raajje TV and VTV. Lawmaker Ahmed Nihan alleged in a tweet that the protests had been organised by the media: “We see tonight’s rally being led by journalists from RaajjeTV and VTV.” On February 16, 2018 PPM vice president Abdul Raheem Abdulla demanded action against media outlets that spread discord saying that “RaajjeTV and VTV incited hatred and violence” and that they “work to misinform and put the public into a state of panic”.

Deputy leader of PPM Abdul Raheem Abdulla on March 17 called on the authorities to shut down privately-run Raajje TV in a press conference broadcast live on Public Service Media.

The opposition in the Maldives started holding nightly protests following the Supreme Court ruling on February 7, 2018, freeing political prisoners. Credit: Raajje TV

DURING THE EMERGENCY, JOURNALISTS WERE DETAINED AND ATTACKED; MEDIA WAS THREATENED BY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WITH ACTION FOR THEIR UNFAVOURABLE REPORTING, AND RULING PARTY LEADERS PUBLICLY CALLED FOR SHUTTING DOWN OPPOSING MEDIA.

THREATS FROM STATE AGENCIES

On February 8, 2018, the Ministry of Defence and National Security warned of action on those found to have brought forward content impacting national security without a prior notice. The statement added that live shows and programs on media could “create chaos, confusion in public and create discord within the society”.

On February 17, 2018, the Maldives police in a press release asked journalists to be “more professional”. The police claimed that some journalists had acted like “protesters” a day earlier in a rally and some media outlets had spread misleading information during live coverage. On the same day, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) issued a circular saying that some broadcasters were airing content threatening peace and stability and cautions broadcasters to exercise restraint ‘when bringing live coverage’.

The Maldives Transport Authority also joined in issuing warning to media on February 28. The authority urged the media against spreading unsubstantiated reported regarding Xin Yuan 18 – a vessel with the Maldivian flag that allegedly supplied oil to North Korea. The authority was denying any link to the vessel and warned media against reporting it otherwise.

REPRESSION BUILDS UP

However, the silencing of critical voices started much earlier than the emergency. In fact, on September 12, 2017, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein said the Maldivian government was “increasingly cracking down on critical views” during the meeting of the UN Human Rights Council.

The decisions of the state-controlled MBC strongly indicate censorship and legal harassment of media. The MBC has imposed hefty fines on opposition-aligned Raajje TV thrice – each time immediately after the station paid the earlier fine. Raajje TV receives third defamation fine on October 8 when the MBC fined it MVR500,000 (USD 32,425) for airing
comment made by MP Mohamed Musthafa on Raajje TV on July 28, calling them a “threat to national security”. MP Mohamed Musthafa said he had used an obscenity and defame President Yameen during a live event when he said the present administration has “introduced nothing but theft to the country”, the MBC concluded deciding over the fine. The privately-operated station refused to offer a public apology until it was issued a court order to do so and said it will file a court case against any decision once depositing the fine. The fines were imposed under the controversial Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act 2016 that was heavily criticised by local and international organisations as being restrictive and contrary to international standards. The MBC also slapped a fine of MVR 200,000 (USD12,970) on state-owned Public Service Media over defamatory remarks made by a ruling party lawmaker at a televised press conference. The MBC fined Medianein – the country’s main cable television service provider – MVR 560,000 (USD32,425) on June 17, 2017 for rebroadcasting an Al Jazeera corruption report in June. The police contended that the headline, ‘Adam Azim arrested on charges of trying to topple the government,’ misrepresented the content of the arrest warrant. Azim was accused of speaking in a manner that encouraged the illegal overthrow of the government and of undermining public trust and inciting hatred toward the judiciary. A number of journalists – four from Sangu TV and three from Raajje TV, were arrested and others roughed up during an opposition rally held on the 52nd Independence Day in July. The journalists detained on charges of “obstructing the duties of a law enforcement officer” were Mohamed Naseem, Harshid Abdul Hakeem and videographer Ahmed Mamoofee of Raajje TV, and Adam Janah, Ahmed Rufaath, Mohamed Shanooon, and Abdullah Yamin of Sangu TV. They were later released.

On May 29, 2017, the Maldivian police issued summons on Twitter to three liberal bloggers -Dr Azra Naseem, Muzaffar ‘Maju’ Naeem, and Hani Amir- living abroad to present themselves for prosecution over unspecified charges. The police said they would ask the Prosecutor General’s office to press charges and try them in absentia if they refused. All three bloggers are known for their secular views and critical writing on Maldivian society and politics. The police contented that the headline, ‘Adam Azim arrested on charges of trying to topple the government,’ misrepresented the content of the arrest warrant. Azim was accused of speaking in a manner that encouraged the illegal overthrow of the government and of undermining public trust and inciting hatred toward the judiciary. A number of journalists – four from Sangu TV and three from Raajje TV, were arrested and others roughed up during an opposition rally held on the 52nd Independence Day in July. The journalists detained on charges of “obstructing the duties of a law enforcement officer” were Mohamed Naseem, Harshid Abdul Hakeem and videographer Ahmed Mamoofee of Raajje TV, and Adam Janah, Ahmed Rufaath, Mohamed Shanooon, and Abdullah Yamin of Sangu TV. They were later released.

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or a related field as well as five years’ experience at a ministry-registered media organisation. The guidelines are seen as a way to control media given there are only 483 people with a graduate degree in Maldives, according to 2014 census.

**Building Regional Solidarity**

In September 2017, the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) meeting in Kathmandu focused attention on the Maldives as a zone in need of urgent intervention to protect press freedom and journalists’ rights. While expressing solidarity with Maldivian journalists, SAMSN pointed at the need for strategies for national, regional and international solidarity to enable meaningful interventions in the public sphere, both inside and outside the beleaguered region.

The major issues in the Maldives, often interconnected with the need for urgent intervention to protect press freedom and journalist’s rights including arrests and criminal cases against journalists; new tougher law and regulations on the offering, impunity for perpetrators in the crimes against journalists; and self-censorship by the journalists.

The Election Commission has announced the first round of presidential elections in early September 2018. A second round, should it be necessary, would be held within 21 days from first election day. President Yameen is looking for a new mandate to extend his presidency, while the opposition is looking for an opportunity to oust him. The media, reeling under constant pressure from threats and repression and resorting to self-censorship, will face yet another challenge to cover the election in an independent manner. Although the EC had promised to allow foreign journalists to cover the election, there are already stricter measures for visa issuance in place. With the election looming amidst the political crisis, the media is likely to witness another challenging year where press freedom comes under severe pressure.

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The hardest story I reported on was my colleague Ahmed Rilwan’s disappearance. How do you tell a story objectively when that story concerns a member of your team? As journalists, we think of ourselves or are expected to be objective observers of human history, but we are as susceptible to trauma as the victims of the stories we tell.

In addition to the threats and harassment by the government, as an editor of a small and independent news website, I also frequently worried about funding for our website. The pressure was immense. When I left the Maldives a year ago, I was a mess. I was suspicious of strangers. I jumped at shadows, and I was afraid of the dark. My friend and blogger, Yameen Rashid’s murder in April 2017 prompted a crisis of faith and a cynicism that I have not been able to shake off. Professionally and personally, the past few years have been some of the toughest in my life.

Through all of this, regional and international organisations have been keeping an eye on us, helping to keep global attention on what has been happening in the Maldives. The solidarity has made us feel that we are not alone. Conversations with journalists in Sri Lanka who had reported on the war, were eye openers. They told us, don’t be martyrs, you must live to tell the story another day. That advice has always stuck with me.

Zaheena Rasheed, Al Jazeera Media Network, is also the editor-in-exile of the Maldives Independent. This is an excerpt of a speech delivered on September 8, 2017 at a meeting in Kathmandu organised by the IFJ and SAMSN.
Nepal

Old Issues, New Concerns

After years of instability due to political transition, Nepal is finally on the road to stability after three levels of successful elections - local, provincial and general – held between May and December 2017. The coalition of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist - Centre) won a majority in all three elections and formed the federal government under the premiership of KP Sharma Oli and provincial governments in six out of seven provinces. The alliance of parties based in the Madhes or the southern plains has formed a provincial government. With two major parties of the coalition now working on the unity process, PM Oli looks set to lead the country for a full term, bringing much-needed stability in the country's governance.

The Madhes-based parties, which had previously boycotted the promulgation of the Constitution, vowed to disrupt the elections, but ultimately did not follow through.

The three elections, which transpired without noticeable violence, finally gave a legal validity to the Constitution of Nepal 2015. The participation of all political parties, except a splinter group of the Maoist party, was considered a good sign, since the dissatisfaction of the Madhes-based parties could be addressed in the parliament through a democratic process.

However, implementation of the new federal structure, the new Constitution as well as the new Criminal Code and Civil Code is not expected to be smooth. Both the Criminal Code and Civil Code consist of provisions that could have direct implications for the media. The federal structure is also expected to bring in new challenges, not only in its evolution, but also for press freedom as the provinces and local bodies are entrusted with some responsibility regarding regulation of local media.

It flags tough years to come for journalists as they face unprecedented legal pressures and other harassment, attacks and threats for their reporting of critical issues. Impunity for crimes against journalists is a long-standing issue still awaiting proper redress in the country.

The Media and the Court

During the year, the judiciary of Nepal was at odds with the media on several occasions. However, these cases were not prolonged and were not unfavourable for the media and journalists.

On February 25, 2018, Chief Justice Gopal Parajuli passed an order asking the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) to ban publication of news criticising him in Kantipur daily. The daily had published a series of investigative reports about the Chief Justice. The court ruled that the Chief Justice was forced to resign. The Judicial Council for the hearings before the case was discontinued when the Chief Justice was forced to resign. The Judicial Council determined the Chief Justice should be relieved from his post after gathering official documents to establish his date of birth, which turned out to be the date as claimed by the Chief Justice.

In November 2017, the Patan High Court backed attempts by the police to force editors of several online media platforms to reveal their sources. The Crime Division of the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) registered a case seeking to recover the secret appraisal reports of top police officials that were published following a controversy on the appointment of the Inspector General of Police (IGP).

The online media platforms filed a complaint against the police's request claiming that it infringed press freedom and requested the court's intervention. But the Court ruled that the police action did not violate freedom of the press thereby refusing to issue any order. The police mentioning that the court decision again wrote to the online media pushing for disclosure of the source. After an outcry from journalist unions, including a statement of support from IFJ-affiliated Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the PCN intervened, met with senior police officials and urged them not to proceed with the request. The police were investigating...
ON FEBRUARY 25, 2018, CHIEF JUSTICE GOPAL PARAJULI PASSED
AN ORDER ASKING THE PRESS COUNCIL OF NEPAL (PCN) TO BAN PUBLICATION OF NEWS CRITICISING HIM IN KANTIPUR DAILY.
very high price. Despite the Parliamentary Public Audit Committee's order of an inquiry into the matter, Khadka had claimed that there was no truth in the news. He threatened Paudel that he would end his journalism career adding, “you have also a family, think about it”.

On August 17, Khadka filed a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) as a defamation case against Nagarik daily, claiming NPR 800 million (USD 780,000) in damages with an intention to silence the media house from publishing reports about his alleged corruption. The Kathmandu District Court official served a notice to the daily’s editors Binod Raj Gyawali and Shova Gyawali, editor-in-chief Guna Raj Luitel and correspondent Dilip Paudel on September 1. The media house filed a counter-claim of NPR 1.5 billion (USD 14.2 million). Khadka was later dismissed from office by the government on September 18. The legal case did not progress since Khadka had vacated his post but the case was widely discussed as a significant attempt to silence the media in Nepal. In similar circumstances, Shivahari Ghimire of the Daily Nagarik, a journalist who reported ‘Gravity Currency’ as fraud business and named GP Paudel as the head of that business.

Insecure

There were a number of attacks on journalists; the most concerning on January 15, 2018 when Sudeep Kaini, a correspondent with Kantipur, was attacked by a group of five assailants. While reporting on illegal sand extraction in the Marsyangdi river that was endangering local settlements, he was manhandled by the assailants, his camera and cell phone were snatched and his photos deleted. They also warned him not to reveal the incident. Kaini sustained a neck injury before being rescued by local residents.

Since May 2017, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), has recorded 61 incidents of press freedom violation. Among those, were 27 journalist arrests; 9 attacks; 13 threats; 12 cases of seizure of media equipment and 10 incidents of verbal abuse. The FNJ concluded that although the number of press freedom violations has decreased over the past few years, the trend continues and there has been no improvement in security or mechanisms to protect journalists. As a consequence, impunity and self-censorship remain the main issues of press freedom.

Another press freedom watchdog, the Freedom Forum, in a review of 2017 concluded that the election campaigning and activities failed to show due respect to freedom of expression and press freedom, thereby witnessing a surge in the number of violations.

Awaiting Redress

Longstanding issues of press freedom in Nepal, meanwhile, still await redress. The regulation of online media, and social media, continues to draw attention. The controversial Online Media Directives, issued in February 2017, remain despite hefty criticism from the major media and unions. The directives are restrictive in nature and give arbitrary powers to the Department of Information (DoI) to restrict and harass online media, thus threatening freedom of expression.

Along with the directives, Clause 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act’s (ETA), continue to pose a threat for freedom of expression and are used to harass journalists. The state is using Clause 47 to ensure the implementation of the directives by saying that the media platforms listed with the PCN do not attract the clause whereas any other online publication of content can be charged with the clause criminalising online expression. Further, the Local Government Operation Act has provisions for canceling the license of FM radio stations.

Impunity and self-censorship are two key issues that continue to impede free expression in the Nepali media community. According to the FNJ records, out of 36 journalists killed since 1996, only six cases have gone on to prosecution. The level of threat and harassment of journalists, and the impunity to perpetrators, has led to a situation where journalists, especially those outside Kathmandu in regional areas, find it increasingly difficult to report on critical issues. In Kathmandu, the biggest media market, corporate interests area seen as playing an increasingly influential role in shaping content. However, the biggest challenge for Nepal’s media, journalists and unions is the changes expected to be brought about by the new federal structure. Each of 753 municipal bodies and seven provincial governments are authorised to devise regulations – including those to regulate media, especially local media – and there are already concerns regarding some of draft regulations as they contain provisions that could be misused to curtail freedom of the press. The FNJ has taken the initiative to form a committee to devise model federal regulations relating to media, and having discussions with concerned central authorities to ensure that the proposed regulations do not curtail press freedom and journalists’ rights.

Challenging Times Ahead

While Nepal's constitution is explicit in mentioning press freedom and other related freedoms, many state actors and authorities are yet to wholeheartedly accept it. The rise of social media, fake news and its viral spread online, have raised some issues that some state actors believe can only be controlled by tougher regulations.

The end of the political transition is a welcome phase as it will hopefully bring political as well as policy stability in Nepal. However, Nepal’s Parliament now has hundreds of laws to be drafted and discussed. And alongside municipal and provincial governments, the parliament is also vested with the power to regulate local media. The years ahead will not be easy for Nepal’s independent and critical media.
PAKISTAN

Threats On and Offline

In the new millennium, Pakistan has battled a tide of terrorism and violent extremism that has cost tens of thousands of lives and affected millions. A major victim has been the media. Dozens of online information practitioners, including bloggers and social media activists have also been killed, attacked, injured, harassed or faced legal cases for alleged blasphemy or treason in recent years. Between May 2017 and April 2018, at least five journalists were killed; dozens of others attacked, injured, harassed and intimidated and two kidnapped and remain missing.

According to data from the Freedom Network, of the 117 media practitioners killed in Pakistan since 2000, at least 72 were target-killed for their journalism work while the rest died in the line of duty in terror attacks and bombings. These high levels of violence and victimisation have ensured that Pakistan has consistently been ranked as one of the ten worst countries in which to practice journalism. The country has one of the lowest indicators of freedom of expression and safe access to information over the past decade. An important indicator of Pakistan's poor rankings in categories of freedom of expression, safety of journalists and online information practitioners is the incredibly high level of accountability. The killers of only two (Wali Khan Babar and Daniel Pearl) of the 117 media practitioners killed have been identified, gone to trial and been convicted. This makes Pakistan also one of the worst countries in the world in terms of combating impunity for crimes against journalists and failing to provide them and their families justice, thereby ensuring that journalism and freedom of expression remain threatened.

Ongoing Risks

Pakistan continues to have an environment that in general stifles freedom of expression and makes it difficult for the media and its practitioners, particularly journalists, from doing their job. In the period under review, at least five journalists were killed for their work and dozens of others were attacked, injured, harassed and intimidated into either self-censorship or looking out for themselves in an environment where impunity for crimes against them remains high and neither their employers nor the state offers much assistance.

The list of attacks against media practitioners in the period under review is long and the pool of perpetrators and threat actors grew to include, among others, government functionaries, political parties, security agencies, militant groups, religious factions, feudal and business classes and even the judiciary. No place is safe for journalists and media assistants - attacks happened in capital city Islamabad and in all four provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh as well as in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Gilgit-Baltistan and even Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Crimes against journalists continue to go unpunished, adding to the entrenched impunity.

Media Blackout

During November 2017, federal capital Islamabad and adjacent city Rawalpindi saw a protest sit-in at the main interchange between two cities by a religious group, the Labaik Ya Rasool Allah. In order to remove the sit-in, the government launched a crackdown on the protesters on November 25, 2017. Soon thereafter, the police and paramilitary forces launched a crackdown, and the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), the electronic media watchdog, shut down the transmissions of dozens of online information practitioners, including bloggers and social media activists have also been killed, attacked, injured, harassed or faced legal cases for alleged blasphemy or treason in recent years.
all private news channels, accusing them of violating the code of conduct on live coverage. A total media blackout left people in the dark about what was happening in major cities across the country, triggering all sorts of speculations. Following the media blackout, the country's internet and telecom regulator, the Pakistan Telecom Authority (PTA) ordered blocking of all social media networking websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as well as popular communications apps such as WhatsApp.

In the period under review, people faced shutdowns of cell phone networks and internet 17 times in various parts of the country. Cell phone networks were shut down on five occasions in Islamabad and Rawalpindi alone. In addition to these regular shutdowns, various parts of Balochistan province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have faced cellular and internet shutdowns on different occasions in the period under review.

CENSORSHIP OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In the aftermath of the issue of missing bloggers early in 2017, a petition was filed in February 2017 against the bloggers and their role in alleged online blasphemy in Pakistan. The petitioner Salman Shahid, prayed the court to direct the authorities to block all [allegedly] blasphemous pages on the social media besides taking action against those who had developed this content. Justice Shaukat Siddiqui of the Islamabad High Court, while admitting the petition, directed the authorities to block social media pages posting blasphemous and objectionable content. In March 2017, he ordered the authorities to place names of alleged blasphemers on the Exit Control List, initiate criminal cases against those committing blasphemy and form a joint investigation team (JIT) to look into the matter. The Court also directed Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to set up teams to monitor and scrutinise social media for blasphemous material so that it may be removed. The Court further ordered the Federal Investigation Agency to bring back from abroad bloggers allegedly involved in online blasphemy to initiate proceedings under the law against them. After lengthy proceedings, in August 2017, the Court issued a detailed judgment and exonerated the alleged blasphemers but ordered PTA to identify any NGOs, bloggers and other journalists involved in circulating “blasphemous content” on social media and suggested that the Parliament make the blasphemy law tougher. The court also directed PTA to create a firewall to block unwanted and sacrilegious content in Pakistan.

Pakistan’s official requests to Facebook, Twitter and Google for users’ info, content removal grew in recent times.

Facebook: During the first half of 2017, Pakistan submitted a total of 1,460 requests to Facebook relating to criminal cases for user data, referring to 1,540 Facebook accounts, according to Transparency International. During this period, Pakistan also made 399 ‘accounts data preservation’ requests to Facebook in connection with official criminal investigations. Facebook also received 613 requests from Pakistan related to users/accounts. In the same period, Facebook restricted access to 177 places of content upon requests from the Pakistan Telecom Authority (PTA) and FIA. The content was allegedly in violation of local laws relating to blasphemy and national security.

Twitter: During the first half of 2017, Pakistan submitted seven information requests to Twitter concerning 60 Twitter accounts according to Transparency International. The authorities in Pakistan also submitted 24 content/account removal requests to Twitter during this period. The government of Pakistan also made two emergency disclosure requests to Twitter.

Google: Pakistani authorities submitted eight user data requests to Google, according to the Google Transparency Report 2017. Pakistan also made 12 user/account requests to Google. Under these requests, the authorities may seek information about multiple accounts. Since 2009, Google received a total of 69 content removal requests, concerning 896 items, from Pakistan. Out of these 69 requests, 14 were submitted to Google during the first six months of 2017. Through these 14 requests, Pakistan asked for the removal of 96 items. Ten out of 14 requests related to items of ‘religious offence’, two were about hate speech and one each about defamation and violence.

ONLINE POLICING

In the past year, Pakistani authorities increasingly invoked the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, to restrict freedom of expression and dissent online by criminalising dissent. There were at least three occasions when the PECA was invoked against journalists, the first time since its inception. In June 2017, Zafarullah Achakzai, reporter at Qudrat Urdu daily, was arrested in Balochistan province by the paramilitary Frontier Corps under PECA and handed over to the FIA in Quetta for criticising the military, the provincial chief and intelligence agencies for the poor law and order situation. He was released later but still faces criminal charges. In July 2017, Abdullah Zafar, a reporter for
Pakistani journalists and civil society activists hold protests against the attacks on journalists. Noorani, a senior journalist of a local newspaper who was beaten by unknown attackers a couple of weeks before, said he was targeting a local newspaper owner and editor. He said the attack was in response to an article in the newspaper that was critical of the government’s policies.

Meanwhile, the interior minister announced a plan “to formulate a framework to monitor social media in order to prevent it from being used as a tool to malign national institutions and spread anarchy or extremism in the country.” The announcement said that social media was being “used as a deadly weapon to discredit and destroy leaderships and state institutions and promote conflicts through fake news,” and stressed that the armed forces and the judiciary, the parliament was also a national institution. The interior minister stressed a need for the parliament to enact laws to combat impunity and provide special mechanisms for safety of journalists.

According to news reports in September 2017, the federal Ministry of Interior announced a plan to formulate a framework to monitor social media in order to prevent it from being used as a tool to malign national institutions and spread anarchy or extremism in the country. The announcement said that social media was being “used as a deadly weapon to discredit and destroy leaderships and state institutions and promote conflicts through fake news,” and stressed that the armed forces and the judiciary, the parliament was also a national institution. The interior minister stressed a need for the parliament to enact laws to combat impunity and provide special mechanisms for safety of journalists.

In the context of indicator 16.10.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months), there is no dedicated policy in place or any specific procedural, legislative or structural/institutional mechanism at either the federal level or anywhere in the provinces that addresses the issue of combating impunity for crimes against journalists in Pakistan. However, commitment exists. In 2012, the United Nations developed the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and Issues of Impunity aimed at helping states improve an enabling and safer environment for journalists and journalism. Pakistan was selected as one of the five pilot countries for its implementation. Pakistan endorsed the Plan in 2013 and committed itself to, among other things, legislate for the safety of journalists and other information practitioners and improve the state’s capacity to combat impunity and provide special mechanisms for safety of journalists.

While provincial governments, legislatures and political parties have, in general, expressed commitments to enacting special laws on safety of journalists and to, therein, provide effective and responsive mechanisms to combat impunity of crimes against journalists and other information practitioners, a critical mass or a demand for a special provincial law on safety of journalists and information practitioners is missing. Detailed and comprehensive empirical data and analysis on the scale of threats and attacks against journalists, particularly in the context of tracking impunity in the justice system is missing, as is adequate documentation on the process of access to justice for key cases of attacks against journalists and information practitioners in the provinces. Data collected against representative cases on the issue of impunity – with the help, perhaps, of a specialised impunity index – can help provide a gap analysis of the justice system for attacks against media practitioners. This empirical-based analysis can hugely facilitate increased accountability in Pakistan and help protect freedom of expression in the provinces.

According to news reports in September 2017, the Sindh provincial government had prepared a draft law to regulate registration of papers, printing presses, news agencies and books in the province. The Sindh government had reportedly prepared the draft in the wake of the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment. The draft law, as reported, was aimed at ensuring that every book or paper printed in the province would clearly mention the name of the printer and place of publication, along with the date. The proposed law required every publisher or owner of a newspaper to apply for a declaration [regulated prior permission] and submit an affidavit saying that he will pay salaries to employees as per the Wage Board Award. No further development has been reported.
ON THE BRINK
Sri Lanka is at crossroads. With growing crises in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, the country faces looming uncertainty. The situation that was deteriorating during 2017, has now reached a climax. In the period between May 2017 to April 2018, Sri Lanka has witnessed a number of developments with far-reaching consequences.

The post-Rajapaksa expectations of respect for human rights and enhanced democratic governance in Sri Lanka following the regime change in January 2015, were based on bi-partisan politics in the South, willingness of the Tamil polity to find a negotiated political solution, and a strong civil society. The factors that propelled change have now come under threat due to the emerging political instability.

On the one hand, former president Rajapaksa, who maintained an authoritarian family oligarchy, threatens to come back to power using war triumphalist nationalism as his political platform. Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism provides the foundation for his politics. On the other hand, the ruling coalition which came to power on the promise of democratisation, justice, and accountability has almost disintegrated. The two coalition partners, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by President Sirisena and the United National Party (UNP) headed by Prime Minister Wickremasinghe, have taken up contradictory positions on political, economic, social, and cultural issues. The year 2017 was marked by deep political and social polarisation of the country.

The recent anti-Muslim violence that sent shock waves throughout the country is an indication of the increasingly widening ethnic polarisation. Xenophobia, fuelled by ‘fake news’ on social media, remains disturbingly widespread. In the wake of anti-Muslim riots in early March, the government blocked all social media platforms blaming social media for inciting violence and mobilising rioters. Now, the government plans to bring in mechanisms to monitor and control social media.

The section of civil society that could have played a role in providing an alternative narrative has been partly co-opted by the government, while the rest of civil society remains fragmented on ethnic, political, and social lines. For a variety of reasons including the absence of a united approach, the once vibrant media rights organisations have become weak.

Since January 2015, post-Rajapaksa Sri Lanka made a paradigm shift in its relations with the international human rights community, coordinating positively with United Nations human rights mechanisms and opening up the country for international scrutiny. A number of UN working groups and Special Rapporteurs as well as international human rights organisations visited the country and produced critical reports, while commending the positive developments.

The Right to Information Act has been in force since February 3, 2017. The Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka which maintains a trilingual website, has so far been proactive on access to information and demonstrated a remarkable independence.

The National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP) for the period 2017–2021 was made public on November 1 and approved by the Cabinet in January 2017. The Action Plan has a number of goals related to freedom of expression. However, there has been no public discussion on the Action Plan, either before or after it was published.

XENOPHOBIA, FUELLED BY ‘FAKE NEWS’ ON SOCIAL MEDIA, REMAINS DISTURBINtLY WIDESPREAD. IN THE WAKE OF ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS IN EARLY MARCH, THE GOVERNMENT BLOCKED ALL SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS BLAMING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INCITING VIOLENCE AND MOBILISING RIOTERS. NOW, THE GOVERNMENT PLANS TO BRING IN MECHANISMS TO MONITOR AND CONTROL SOCIAL MEDIA.
During the period under review, open space for critical opinions and the right to dissent remained intact in general. However, this period saw multiple incidents of censorship as well as assaults and harassment of media personnel. The Censor Board refused permission to perform a theatrical performance on abortion which was part of V-Day Patriarchy. Since November 2017, the popular website Lankanews remains banned in Sri Lanka.

Impunity for serious violations of human rights, including killings of journalists, continues to be one of the key concerns. Despite advocacy by media rights organisations, no media rights violator has been brought to book so far.

The government’s failure to deliver on its promise of political, social, and economic justice and the inflating between the ruling coalition have provided fertile ground for the nationalist forces in the North as well as the South. The developments that took place during 2017 hint at the possibility of the repressive Rajapaksa family oligarchy returning to power, overturning democratic gains achieved after 2015.

In this context that Sri Lanka needs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the global 2030 agenda. While the SDG 16 speaks of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, target 16.10 is directly related to freedom of information and expression: “ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements”.

Conceptually, the aspect of public access to information refers to the presence of a robust system through which information is made available to citizens. Such a system represents a combination of intellectual, physical, and social elements that affect the availability of information to individuals. Further, viewing public access to information as a matter of human rights reinforces the aspect of protecting fundamental freedoms.

To achieve these standards Sri Lanka needs democratic governance that facilitates and encourages citizens’ participation, but the developments in the country in the preceding year do not appear favourable for SDG 16.10.

At the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Sri Lanka held in November 2017, the Government of Sri Lanka accepted recommendations to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of civil society actors, and journalists and to investigate cases of threats and attacks against them, and to take measures to adequately protect human rights defenders, to ensure proper investigation into alleged attacks and to prosecute those found responsible.

FACING THE BRUNT

No journalists or media workers were killed, kidnapped or made to disappear in Sri Lanka during the period under review. Fortunately, the murderous culture of death squads and abductions (that were used for abductions) has passed. However, journalists continued to face the brunt of violations by the police and other authorities.

Susanthi Bandara Kanaraththini, a journalist working for the Sunday Apple newspaper, was tortured by the Assistant Superintendent of Police Tangalle, I. T. Dahamaththa.

During 2017, Sri Lanka’s ruling alliance was hounded in local elections as a result of its leadership and the family of ex-president Mahinda Rajapaksa was on track for a shock landslide victory. Credit: Laxman Wanniarachchi/AFP

During 2017, the government introduced the much-awaited National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRA). The Action Plan consists of numerous goals and corresponding objectives, among which are enhancing investigatory
any of these objectives. Transparency in the law making process. However, during the Fundamental Rights Chapter of the Constitution and fulfilling the right to information, enhancing enforced disappearances, ensuring constitutional procedures regarding extrajudicial killings, criminalising human rights and ending detention without charge.

The Action Plan notes that apart from recognising constitutional and international obligations to guarantee civil and political rights, Sri Lanka has enacted legislation to substantiate certain core civil and political rights, including the ICCPR Act, No. 56 of 2007, right to Information Act, No. 12 of 2016, and Office on Missing Persons Act, No. 14 of 2016. NHRAP includes the short-term goal (4.1.1) of replacing the current counterterrorism law, Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), with a law that is compliant with constitutional provisions and international human rights law. PTA, which was used to suppress media workers during the previous regime, directly affects freedom of expression along with other human rights. It was under this law that journalist J. S. Tissainayagam was convicted by the Colombo High Court and sentenced to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment, though he was pardoned by then President Rajapaksa in 2010.

One of the medium-term goals of the NHRAP is to enhance awareness of the law pertaining to hate speech. To achieve this goal, it is planned to conduct a public awareness campaign on the provisions of the ICCPR Act, No. 56 of 2007 pertaining to the prohibition of hate speech and to conduct an awareness campaign at the secondary school level. Of late, hate speech has become a pressing concern in the country. While substantive action is hardly taken against hate speech in Sri Lanka, in early March the government blocked access to social media platforms in the guise of fighting hate speech during the outbreak of communal violence. No action has been taken so far to effectively address widespread hate speech which remains a major issue related to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka.

To achieve the objective of removing unlawful impediments to freedom of religion, the NHRAP seeks to take proactive measures to prevent attacks on places of worship, firstly, by investigating, prosecuting and upon conviction, punishing perpetrators of religion-based violence under appropriate laws, secondly by providing additional training to law enforcement actors and judicial officers, thirdly by taking disciplinary action in instances of failure by local police to prevent attacks on religious communities, and fourthly, by establishing mechanisms at community level in consultation with inter-faith groups. Attacks on religious places belonging to Muslims and Evangelical Christians have taken place regularly during the period under review. However, no effective action has been taken to protect religious freedom.

The Islamic Council of Sri Lanka, an umbrella organisation for civil society groups, has recorded 25 attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned establishments since April 2017 to July 2017, and the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka has reported over 40 incidents in 2017. The controversial Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara Thero surrendered in late June 2017, after evading arrest for a month following charges of hate crimes against Muslims. He was arrested in court and granted bail soon after. The significant influence that Sri Lanka’s Buddhist clergy wields on the country’s political affairs, brings in to question whether tackling religious intolerance in Sri Lanka is a legal challenge or a political one. Following violent incidents against Muslims in Gintota in Galle district in November, in Ampara, in the Eastern Province, in February 2018, major anti-Muslim violence in Kandy during early March 2018 prompted the declaration of a state of emergency, imposition of curfew and ban on social media.

A prominent lawyer and human rights activist, Lakshan Dias was publicly threatened with disbarment by the then Minister of Justice, Dr. Wijedasa Rajapaks, for providing figures on the number of such attacks in a television debate in May 2017. He was named and shame by nationalist media causing him to leave the country for a short period.

The fourth goal of the National Human Rights Action Plan aims at protecting and promoting the freedom of speech and expression including the right to information. The blocking of the popular and critical web site Lankaneed.com within Sri Lanka is a notable regression of government performance promises. All local internet providers have blocked access to Lankaneed on the orders of Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (TRC) of Sri Lanka. So far, all inquires to find out the reasons for blocking the website have been unsuccessful. The TRC has turned down an RTI request regarding the ban on Lankaneed, stating that the disclosure of information pertaining to the ban is a threat to national security. The RTI request was filed by Groundviews.org.

Although the request on Lankaneeds ban was rejected, TRC released information revealing that it had blocked 13 websites in Sri Lanka since 2015. The websites blocked include a number publishing political news and a few publishing pornographic material. The reasons given for blocking four websites: vissagospublish.blogspot.com, kukusa.org, andlankanewsweb.today, and Lankaneeds, was “publishing incorrect information and damaging the President’s reputation”. Two, lankanewsweb.today and sinhala.lktoday, were blocked for “publishing false information”.

The information that was initially denied to Groundviews on national security grounds, was released later following an appeal to the RTI Commission. It was confirmed that the website Lankaneed was blocked following a complaint from the Office of the President in November 2017. Experts opine that the TRC has no power to block a transmission without invoking judicial proceedings or obtaining an order from the Minister in charge, thus rendering the Lankaneed ban not only politically, but also legally wrong.

The government seems to have abandoned its project of media regulation, which was initiated by then Director General of the Government Information Department in early 2017. The first draft of the proposed press law, titled “Independent Council for News Media Standards (ICNMS)” envisaged a fine of LKR 1 million (USD 6400) for any media institution determined as operating in contempt of an ICNMS decision”. The amended draft that emerged in July 2017, provides for a fine of Rs 100,000 (USD40) and a three-month ban on the site which obstruct the work of media outlets, and also for those found guilty of contempt of decisions of the ICNMS. The revised draft has not yet been widely discussed among all stakeholders.

Meanwhile, political control of large state media networks continues unabated, making state-controlled media the most prevalent propagandist force.

The social media ban that was imposed in the wake of anti-Muslim riots in Kandy, was another alarming instance of media censorship. The anti-Muslim gangs mobilised themselves on social media, particularly Facebook, and anti-Muslim rhetoric was widely shared.

The social media ban that was imposed in the wake of anti-Muslim riots in Kandy, was another alarming instance of media censorship. The anti-Muslim gangs mobilised themselves on social media, particularly Facebook, and anti-Muslim rhetoric was widely shared. The Sri Lankan Facebook community is over five million strong and the overwhelming majority use mobile connections to read, share and post on Facebook. Vidhanasingha Wijaratne, a writer and a data scientist concluded that contrary to the government’s expectation, the ban on social media merely brought Facebook activity to January-February levels (on average, a roughly 50 per cent drop from the three days before the riots). By being uncoordinated and by deploying draconian tactics of the sort that one would have expected from the Rajapaks regime, the government has lost a great deal of credibility”, he observed.

The irony is that while the ban was in force, both the President and the Prime Minister kept posting on their Facebook pages. The coincidental release of a statement regarding the government’s power to control media and information. As most users turned to Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to access Facebook, at the later stages of the state of emergency and social media ban, the government started to block VPNs as well.
The government is now discussing the setting up of an institution to monitor social media usage as a measure aimed at preventing provocation of hate against any community or religion. “The government will not block social media such as Facebook but there will be strict monitoring, which will be aimed at preventing postings which provoke hate among communities and religions. This monitoring may result in barring those who upload hate speech on social media,” stated the Minister of Digital Infrastructure Technology. Many Sri Lankan rights activists have raised the issue of not being able to report hate filled and abusive posts on Facebook in local languages. The government invited Facebook officials to the country within weeks of anti-Muslim violence to discuss the issue.

Writing an open letter to Facebook, Colombo-based think tank the Centre for Policy Alternatives expressed that, “The role of social media platforms like Facebook in amplifying messages of violence has not been adequately examined. A delegation from Facebook met with the Government of Sri Lanka and committed to together to combat hate speech. However, the contents of that discussion are not in the public domain. It is not clear to what extent Facebook will be willing to work with representatives of civil society, some of whom have been flagging content on Facebook that violates its own Community Standards, for years. The lack of unbiased Sinhala-language moderation is regularly cited as one of the root causes why pages regularly posting abusive content along these themes are allowed to thrive online, despite sustained reporting from concerned users”. Thirteen civil society organisations in a letter addressed to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, urged that, “At the very least, the company should make clear the number of moderators assigned to deal with user generated reports around content in Sinhala, in which Facebook office or time zone they are located in, as well as their gender. There should also be a clear commitment to look into and resolve user generated reports within a specific time period, which during heightened violence, must be further reduced”.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA
The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) has shown a high level of independence and proactively intervened in protecting and promoting human rights and the rights of journalists in Sri Lanka.

For instance, in March 2018 HRCSL Vavuniya regional office was able to obtain press for accountability of the office was able to obtain press for accountability of the military officers in charge of the camp that journalists covering a protest over land in Mullathivu in the Northern province in late February 2018. Upon his complaint, the HRCSL was able to obtain a guarantee from the military officer in charge of the camp that journalists covering protests would not be harassed in the future.

The HRCSL also weighed in on the social media ban. Chairperson of the Commission Dr. Dewanka Udagama stated that “the Commission recognizes the critical necessity to protect freedom of expression and the right to information as guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka’s international human rights obligations… In doing so, we recognize the need to strike the necessary balance between those rights and maintenance of public order and the protection of the rights of all.”

RIGHT TO ASSOCIATION UNDER THREAT
In February 2018, the Cabinet decided to publish in the Gazette the repressive Draft Act to Amend the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act no. 31 of 1980 and present it to Parliament for approval. The drafting of this Bill took place in secrecy with no consultations. The Bill, the purpose of which is to “regulate, supervise and inspect” NGOs through a ‘National Secretariat for NGOs’, gives significant investigative powers to the Secretariat which assumes and duplicates functions of the police. The extraordinary and excessive power given to the Secretariat infringes on freedom of association, freedom of expression, as well as the right to privacy. It must be noted that the draft legislation, prepared in 2011 when the National NGO Secretariat was under the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Secretary was Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, was aimed at controlling civil society.

Activists came down heavily on the proposed law. “The draft Act creates a range of ‘offences under the Act’, some of which are broadly and vaguely defined and leave room for abuse. Offences includes non-registration, which violates Freedom of Association and the principle of “Voluntary Notification”. Even a simple request for information if deemed inadequately responded to may attract a Rs. 250,000 fine or one-year imprisonment and thus, is likely to create a fear psychosis”, opined Ruki Fernando.

Sri Lanka’s media watch dog Free Media Movement noted that under the proposed amendment, “enjoyment of fundamental democratic values such as freedom association and freedom of peaceful assembly will be challenged. It is evident that the underlying aim of these amendments is to control the activities of civil society organisations and community organisations.” According to the Draft Act, all voluntary civil associations, have to register themselves with the National NGO Secretariat. The proposed amendment seeks to empower National NGO Secretariat to launch investigations into activities of civil society organisations without any judicial oversight. Significantly, no major political party opposed this amendment. In the face of mounting opposition from civil society, however, the government decided to postpone the amendment, leaving the question as to what motivates a government committed to good governance to approve a suppressive Act that seeks to control civil society. In times of crisis, a robust civil society and a professional independent media are the bulwarks against the creeping tide of authoritarianism.
LIST OF MEDIA RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY JOURNALIST SAFETY INDICATORS (JSIS), MAY 2017 TO APRIL 2018

AFGHANISTAN

KILLINGS OF JOURNALISTS

December 28, 2017: Kabul Sayed Mehdi Hosaini, a journalist who worked for Jirzar TV News Agency, was among those killed in multiple blasts at a Shia cultural centre in Kabul. According to Afghan media reports, the blast claimed the lives of at least 40 people and left over 80 injured. The so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack.

January 21, 2018: Nangarhar A vehicle carrying a team from Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) was attacked in Bakti district of Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan. The driver was killed while journalist Baz Shirwany and cameraman Mohamad Rafiq were seriously injured when an armed group opened fire on their car. The driver received several bullets and died on the spot.

April 25, 2018: Kandahar Two unknown gunmen shot dead Kabul News TV journalist Abdul Manan Arghand, 31, at a market in the outskirts of Kandahar city, Afghanistan. Arghand, who had worked as a journalist for 11 years, was driving to work when the gunmen on a motorcycle intercepted his car and opened fire, killing him on the spot.

April 30, 2018: Kabul Nine journalists, including a female journalist, were killed in back-to-back shooting attacks. The journalists were killed when the attacker disguised as a journalist detonated himself amidst journalists gathered to cover an earlier suicide attack. Those killed were senior photojournalist Shah Marai of AFP; Tolo News cameraman Yar Mohammad Tokhi, Radio Azadi journalists Aaballah Hamzazai, Mohamad Durrani and Sabawoon Tokhi, 11 TV reporter Ghazi Rasooli and cameraman Nowzir Ali Rajabi, Mashal TV reporters Salim Talash and cameraman Ali Saimi.

May 31, 2017: Kabul TOLO TV staff member Azez Naeem, Press TV reporter Habibullah Hasanzada, Mohamad Omar Urzugi who worked for National Radio Television and BBC Afghanistan driver in Kabul Mohammad Omer Uruzgani who worked for National Radio Television and BBC Press TV reporter Habibullah Hassanzada, TOLO TV staff member Aziz Naween, Mohammad Nazir were among victims of the explosion in a suicide attack on the RTA. 17 other staff members were injured in the attack. Media reports said that four attackers forced their way into the RTA headquarters and opened fire from 9:30 AM to 12 PM. Two suicide bombers blew themselves up at the front gate and outside the main building while two other attackers entered the main building. It took the security forces more than three hours to end the assault.

June 17, 2017: Kabul Haji Abdul Ali Namati, provincial governor of Baghlan, cut off a television interview saying that he didn’t like the questions. He was being interviewed for a program called ‘Face to Face’ on Arezo TV. There were four journalists present at the interview, who were dealing extensively threatened and asked to delete the footage. Ahmad Faraw Talash, Davood Jalili and Salam Shirzai were held for two hours and were only allowed to leave after intervention from media rights organisations.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

June 8, 2018: Ghor Four journalists were injured when a producer at the RTA were killed and 17 others injured when four attackers, including two suicide bombers, forced their way into the RTA station at around 9:30 AM. The two suicide bombers blew themselves up at the front gate and outside the main building while other attackers entered the main building. It took the security forces more than three hours to end the assault. It was not immediately clear if RTA journalists and staff were among those injured, but many of the journalists were hiding inside the building during the attack. The station building was partly damaged in the attack.

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 6

Threats against media institutions: 0

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

November 15, 2017: Afghanistan The Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority directed internet service providers to block Telegram and WhatsApp services. It was not fully implemented.

BANGLADESH

KILLINGS of journalists: 0

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 6

Other threats to journalists: 0

Attacks on media institutions: 0

OTHER THREATS AGAINST LIVES OF JOURNALISTS

December 23, 2017: Dhaka Shyamal Dutta, editor of Bangladesh-language daily ‘Bhorer Kagoj’, faced threats of violence from religious fundamentalists who publicly called for his hanging over a news report on a book published by the state-owned Munshi Publications on December 23, in a demonstration in front of the Press Club in Dhaka demanded punishment for Dutta and the reporter concerned. Defamation cases have also been filed against the editor and an arrest warrant was issued. Dutta was also subjected to threats and derogatory comments on social media.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

November 30, 2017: Rajshahi Four journalists – Saikat Atto, 35, of Somy TV, Ravi Joy and Milon Haosen, 25, of ATN News, and Partho Hasan of CBC News – were attacked in Patna of Rajshahi Division. A group of 25 to 30 people carrying sticks and iron rods attacked them on instructions from Shihat Shresth Tomal, the son of Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Shert. The journalists were recording footage of people damaging banners and posters welcoming the PM Hung by Tomal’s rival groups. Tomal later surrendered to the police.

July 10, 2017: Kabul Ahmadullah Sarkad, broadcast manager of Radio Shyba, was beaten and detained at his office in the Phulchal area of Ghazni province, central Afghanistan. The so-called Islamic State claimed the lives of 19 people including its leader of Baghlan, cut off a television interview stating that he didn’t like the questions. He was being interviewed for a program called ‘Face to Face’ on Arezo TV. There were four journalists present at the interview, who were dealing extensively threatened and asked to delete the footage. Ahmad Faraw Talash, Davood Jalili and Salam Shirzai were held for two hours and were only allowed to leave after intervention from media rights organisations.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNs

November 1, 2017: Afghanistan The Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority directed internet service providers to block Telegram and WhatsApp services. It was not fully implemented.

OTHER THREATS AGAINST LIVES OF JOURNALISTS

August 1, 2017: Khulna The police arrested Abdul Latif Morol, a correspondent for Bangla-language Daily Prothom Alo in Khulna, about 200 km south of capital Dhaka. The police were acting on a criminal complaint lodged by Subrata Fayzur, the Dumaria correspondent with a rival newspaper Daily Span, and a supporter of the ruling party. The complaint alleged that Morol’s Facebook post amounted to defaming Minister for Fisheries and Livestock, Nayan Chandra Chanda.

November 1, 2017: Rajshahi Anisur Rahman, journalist with Daily Sangbad Pratidin, a newspaper published in northern Bangladesh was arrested under the
controversial Section 57 of the ICT Act. He was charged with taking a screenshot of a Facebook post involving the president and prime minister and for showing it to the local people.

November 21, 2017, Mymensingh
The police arrested two online journalists -- MS Maryam, a student of Dhaka University, and Trishal In, Mymensingh district in northern Bangladesh on charges of publishing ‘false and distorted news’ involving the Bangladesh Army and former chief justice. The news was published in the news portal Chittagong Times.

December 26, 2017, Dhaka
Blogger Asaduzzaman Noon (aka Asad Noon) was arrested at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka as he was about to leave the country on a flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. The head of an Islamic seminary had initiated criminal action against Noon, accusing him of creating content on social media that “hurt religious feeling by mocking Prophet Muhammad” and making negative comments toward Islam. Police charged Noon on January 11, 2018, with defamation of religion under the ICT Act.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE
October 10, 2017, Dhaka
Utpal Das, 29-year-old senior reporter for purashucharim.com went missing after leaving his office in Motijheel. His phone was immediately turned off. On October 22 his family filed a general diary at the Motijheel police station, which was followed on October 23 by purbarofollowing.
On October 23 his family held a press conference demanding an investigation and on December 16, his family held a sit-in protest demanding an investigation. However, journalists and rights activists believe that the new draft is draconian and for a separate state, and the Ganamukti movement holds a strong majority, and it is expected to pass. The draft act seeks to repeal controversial Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act that deals with defamation or distribution of documents online which had been used to silence critics and journalists. However, journalists and rights activists believe that the new draft is draconian and gag freedom of expression.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS
February 11, 2018, Bangladesh
The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission instructed all internet service providers to shut off mobile internet and reduce broadband speeds to 25 kbps from 8:00am-10:30am on exam days for the rest of February. On February 12, 2018, the government backtracked and ordered ISPs to ensure uninterrupted internet service.

BHUTAN
Killings of journalists: 0
Non recorded

Threats against the lives of journalists: 0
Non recorded

Other threats to journalists: 0
Non recorded

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 0
Non recorded

Attacks on media institutions: 0
Non recorded

NOTABLE OTHER INCIDENTS / DEPLOYMENT
August 17, 2017, Tirurang
Vimala Pothier, a local journalist in Tirurang working for Kuenjir, faces Libel charges by a woman for making a post on Facebook that the latter battered and mistreated her stepdaughter in a room below a-tahali. The woman said that when she worked as a nurse in a hospital, when her child was stopped by two assailants on motorcycles. They asked him to wind down his window, sit his threat and fled the scene. A passer-by saw Sharma bleeding heavily and rushed him to a hospital near state capital Agartala. Bhowmik had been covering a protest by the All Rabha Students’ Union in Athaibari, and the paramilitary Tripura State Rifles (TSR), who have received similar messages on WhatsApp. The calls and messages warned that anyone critical of the government, and the ruling Bhandariya Janata Party would meet the same fate as journalist Gauri Lankesh. Mohammad Ali, a reporter with the Hindi daily, chief reporter of Firstpost. Dhevat Bhuiyan, and Saivar Karpal of NDTV were among more than a dozen journalists who have received similar messages on WhatsApp. Rash Kuman of NDTV has also received death threats on WhatsApp.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS
May 1, 2017, New Delhi
New Delhi police beat up journalist Meghna Bose, of The Quint, while he was recording a Facebook live video. Bose was multiple times recorded and detained inside a police van for more than 30 minutes before being driven to the police station.

May 3, Andhra Pradesh
Four unidentified people beat up Telugu TV channel reporter Nallamalluri Rama Reddy, at Pittala Vemavaram village in Andhra Pradesh. Reddy, who had recently filed two stories critical of police.

May 5, Kashmir
Police beat up journalists covering protests after the Friday prayers in Sopore. The Kashmir House Officer (KHO) of Sopore, Mushtaq Ganie reportedly led the police attack, in which one of the photojournalists, Eesah Peer and Moideen Younis, were injured.

May 16, West Bengal
Police attacked several photographers and cameramen who were covering a fire in the Kolkhuran building on the well-known Park Street in Kolkata.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENT
August 23, 2017, Kerela
Biju Mathurah, a TV journalist in Kerala received death threats after his interview aired. The threats were directed at Thendugaliyai Dairam or ‘God of Beggars’. The journalist had interviewed a temple that shelters the aged and destitute.

September 24, 2017, Kerala
Biju Mathurah, a TV journalist in Kerala received death threats after his interview aired. The threats were directed at Thendugaliyai Dairam or ‘God of Beggars’. The journalist had interviewed a temple that shelters the aged and destitute.

May 22, 2017, West Bengal
At least 50 media workers were attacked and 12 were injured in an attack by the police, leaders of the Rapid Action Force (RAF) as they covered a protest march organised by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) in the Esplanade in Kolkata. The attack was led at least a dozen journalists and media workers were injured.

June 9, 2017, Delhi
Blogger Basit Malik was investigating the alleged demolition of a mosque in Sonia Vihar. Malik said when a mob he was speaking to became violent and assaulted him for almost two hours after learning that he had a Muslim name “While I was speaking, the mob kept jostling me around, and several people continued to hit me. I was unable to ascertain the identity of the attackers, and kept reassuring that I was a journalist. Then, the mob dragged me from the lawn and made me stand with my back to a wall that appeared to be a part of the haveli. The men surrounded me, and pointed their phones at me, recording videos… The mob kicked me, punched me, and slapped me. Then they continued to take videos of this assault.”

August 7, 2017, Odisha
Ramesh Rath, a Balipatia based journalist working for Pragatiavani, was reported to have been beaten up on May 22, 2017, was shot dead in Bilhaur, a residential town below Damphu, Tsirang. However, none recorded.

NIRMALA POKHREL, a local journalist in Tsirang who had received threats via WhatsApp. The calls and messages warned that anyone critical of the government, and the ruling Bhandariya Janata Party would meet the same fate as journalist Gauri Lankesh. Mohammad Ali, a reporter with the Hindi daily, chief reporter of Firstpost. Dhevat Bhuiyan, and Saivar Karpal of NDTV were among more than a dozen journalists who have received similar messages on WhatsApp. Rash Kuman of NDTV has also received death threats on WhatsApp.

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March 10, 2018: Assam
Police in the state of Assam in Northeast, India, beat up and detained six journalists, including News18 TV journalist Emmy C Lalwior while on assignment covering a protest against new citizenship laws. Lalwior and other journalists were at the Assam-Mizoram state border on assignment when a mob came out and started attacking the Assam administration issued prohibitory orders. Lalwior said he was not aware of the mob and when he was stopped, the students, Lalwior and other journalists were chased and beaten.

March 26, 2018: Delhi
Delhi police on March 26 detained two journalists and snatched away the camera of one while they were covering a protest organized by students and teachers of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, in India, on March 23. One male journalist was also beaten up and sustained injuries. Anusheel Fadnavis, a photographer with the Hindustan Times daily, was roughed up and her camera was snatched away by policemen “I was clicking photographs of a student being dragged when the police targeted me,” Fadnavis said. “They were taking away my phone and then breaking my camera. I kept pleading with them to spare my camera.”

April 9, 2018: West Bengal
Photographer Biplob Mondal of The Times of India daily was forcibly stripped off his camera and his clothes and beaten while he was-covered an anti-CAA protest in Alipur, Kolkata, West Bengal. On April 9, 2018 while they were covering the debate over citizenship laws for the polls to the local bodies (panchayati).

September 20, 2017: Kerala
Asianet News regional offices in Kerala were attacked, reportedly for publishing reports about the alleged involvement of the state minister enroaching on land for his plush resort.

OtEr noTABLE inciDentS

March 10, 2018: Assam
A police officer on duty also roughed up and grabbed another journalist by her breasts. The two journalists were on assignment covering incidents of police assaulted the police of accusing of polishing and molesters at the site of the JNU protest.

April 9, 2018: West Bengal
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September 20, 2017: Kerala
Asianet News regional offices in Kerala were attacked, reportedly for publishing reports about the alleged involvement of the state minister enroaching on land for his plush resort.

OThEr noTABLE inciDentS

ARREST/DETENTION

June 21, 2017: Karnataka
The Speaker of Karnataka legislative assembly K B Koliwad authorised the one-year imprisonment and a fine of Rs 10,000 (USD 150) of Ravi Belagere, editor of the local tabloid Hai Bangalore, and Anjil Raj, editor of India TV News, for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs). Belagere was punished for an article published in the tabloid Hai Bangalore. The lawmaker threatened the newspaper employees of the media house shared news about the ongoing demonstrations on social media, in an attempt to instigating agitators to turn more violent.

August 24, 2017: Kashmir
Kashmiri users and activists received official notices from Twitter, warning that their online identity was under threat. This came after Twitter received a complaint from the government, asking to block all over accounts and tweets that have been “propagating objectionable content”. Most of the accounts were for “vocal for local” and “pro-independence” groups. The government banned the accounts for “involve Kashmir and Kashmiri issues. It is unclear how many accounts or tweets Twitter has officially blocked.”

49. Anushree Fadnavis, a photojournalist with the Hindustan Times daily, was roughed up and her camera was snatched away by policemen “I was clicking photographs of a student being dragged when the police targeted me,” Fadnavis said. “They were taking away my phone and then breaking my camera. I kept pleading with them to spare my camera.”

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50. Fadnavis said she was not aware of the mob and when he was stopped, the students, Lalwior and other journalists were chased and beaten.

51. Lalwior and other journalists were at the Assam-Mizoram state border on assignment when a mob came out and started attacking the Assam administration issued prohibitory orders. Lalwior said he was not aware of the mob and when he was stopped, the students, Lalwior and other journalists were chased and beaten.

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**NEPAL**

**Kilings of journalists:** 0

**Threats against the lives of journalists:** 0

**Other threats against media institutions:** 0

**Attacks on media institutions:** 0

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**OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS**

**May 6, 2017: Kathmandu**

Anjan Dahal, a journalist of online portal Filmykhabar was threatened over news an unidentified person on May 6. The caller expressed dissatisfaction over news written by Dahal and threatened him with action if the news was not removed.

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**August 4, 2017: Kathmandu**

Gopal Khadka, the Managing Director of the Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC), threatened journalist Dilip Paudel of Nangrik daily in the premises of the Ministry of Supplies, where Paudel was on a reporting assignment. Paudel had first reported funding from funds by Khadka while buying land for NOC.

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**May 2, 2017: Rukum**

Jayashwor Acharya, was threatened with arrest in his newsroom.

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**October 6, 2017: Kalikot**

Kailash Adhikari, editor of weekly, was threatened with arrest in the premises of the Ministry of Supplies.

**May 10, 2017: Kathmandu**

Thakuri, executive editor of publication Sambrial, was threatened against the publication of their story about the daily's sister publication Republica registered on the parliamentary panel committee. The media house filed a counter-claim of Rs 1.5 billion.

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**REGULATIONS**

**July 31, 2017: Kathmandu**

The Election Commission issued a circular to the Press Council of Nepal to present the chief editor of the Deshantar weekly before the EC within three days for clarification on two news items that the constitutional body claimed to be ‘false’ and ‘baseless’. The news items in question were published on July 23 and 30 accusing the EC of financial misconduct. The EC also directed PDN to take action against the Chief Editor Kabir Rana.

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**November 21, 2017: Kathmandu**

A ruling of Patan High Court in Nepal backed attempts by police to force editors of online media to reveal their sources. The Crime Division of the Metropolitan Police Office in Kathmandu wrote to several online media platforms asking them to disclose the source of the sensational reports published by top police officials, following a controversy about the appointment of the Inspector General of Police (IGP). The online media agencies filed a complaint against the police request claiming that it infringed press freedom. The Court of First Instance overturned the police decision and ruled that the media houses must provide them the information and this decision is under appeal.

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**November 26, 2017: Various**

At least eight journalists including Khem Thakuri of Jadal and Jitendra Prabodh of Madhyanha weekly, were arrested from different parts of the country in November in connection with the election security.

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**February 25, 2018: Kathmandu**

The Nepali Supreme Court ordered the country's Press Council to ban the publication of news criticising the chief justice. The court had published a series of articles about discrepancies in the date of birth of Nepal's Chief Justice Gopal Prasad. The court alleged that he might be close to retirement age. Chief Justice Prajapati heard the case – despite the issue being about – and entered an interim order, calling on the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) to probe news reports published by Kantipur mentioning discrepancies about his birth date in official documents. The order asked the PCN to investigate if the news violated journalists’ code of conduct and to ensure that no news is published criticising the Chief Justice is published again.

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**PAKISTAN**

**Killing of journalists:** 5 (Male, 5: Female: 0)

**Other threats to journalists:** 0 – None recorded

**Non-fatal attacks on journalists:** 53 (Male: 52, Female: 1)

**Threats against media institutions:** 1

**Attacks on media institutions:** 0 – None recorded

**KILLINGS OF JOURNALISTS**

**May 17, 2017: Punjab**

Armed robbers gunned down Abdul Razzaq, a Chiru correspondent of ARY News, television in an attempted robbery in Pattioki, Kasur in Punjab. Razzaq was killed when assailants opened fire on him and Musquetor Hassan after stopping their car. Hassan was taken to hospital and survived but Razzaq died at the scene.

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**June 11, 2017: Khyber Paktunkhwa**

Bashkhi Elahi, the Bureau Chief of K-2 Times, an Urdu daily newspaper in Haripur, was shot dead by unknown motorcycle-borne gunmen near his home at Lora Chowk, Haripur, which is near Khyber Paktunkhwa. The gunman fled the scene after firing five shots at Elahi, one of which hit him in the head and other shots hit him in the right leg.

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**October 12, 2017: Khyber Paktunkhwa**

Haroon Khan, journalist with Sach TV and a stringer for Mashriq TV channel, was gunned down outside his home by unidentified assailants in an apparently targeted killing. Khan had returned home when his killers opened fire on him several times before fleeing the scene, according to police sources. At least ten newspapers were banned and Khan died in hospital.

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**March 1, 2018: Punjab**

Anjam Muneer Raja, 40, sub-editor with Islamabad-based Urdu daily Goomi Pukaar was shot dead just before midnight on Bank Road, the high security area near the Pakistan Army’s national headquarters, in Rawalpindi. Pakistan while he was returning home after work. The motorcycle-borne assailants interrupted Raja’s motorcycle and fired six bullets, killing him on the spot.

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**March 27, 2018: Punjab**

Zeeshan Ashraf Butt 29, with Urdu daily Nawai-i-Majlis and former chairperson of the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by Irmar Cheema, chair of the Begwala Union Council in Begwala, when the journalist was inquired about taxes levied on shop owners. After Cheema was released from the Jail, District Council chairperson to complain and Cheema shot him during the telephone call.
January 10, 2018: Islamabad  
Zubair Ashraf, reporter at Express Tribune daily, who was riding a motorcycle, was attacked in Sind and injured by the guards of a religious group and the security agencies. The attackers, according to channel’s bureau chief Safdar Ali, were armed with sticks and stones. The supporters also damaged the car in which Ashraf was sitting. The incident was reported to the police.

January 11, 2017: Karachi  
Achta Ahmad, cameraman for Dunya News channel was attacked in Balochistan, when he was filming a documentary on the escape of a terrorist from the prison in Quetta. He was taken to the hospital, where he was treated for his injuries.

February 24, 2017: Islamabad  
Mahbub Alam, newswriter for News-i-Waqt daily, was attacked by unknown persons with a plier, when he hurled at his car as he was travelling home in Islamabad.

November 26, 2017: Islamabad  
Reporter Arif Saeed Abbasi of Dunya News channel, who was covering a protest in Dera Ismail Khan, was attacked and injured by the staff of the National Database and Reference Authority (NADRA) after the protesters started damaging the NADRA office. The news crew was forced to abandon their equipment.

July 11, 2017: Lahore  
Dr Sheikh Wali, the editor of daily Jahan-e-Pakistan, was attacked in Lahore for hate media comments that the authorities find disparaging. The FIA registered a case against him.

August 5, 2017: Balochistan  
Shahzad Ahmad, reporter of Geo News channel, was booked in Quetta, for disparaging the security forces online. The FIA registered a case under the Prevention of Electronic Crime Act, against him.

October 27, 2017: Islamabad  
Zulfi and Sultan Shah of Daily Sun, were attacked and injured by security personnel in the observance of Ramazan in Pakistan, in Islamabad. He was taking shots depicting the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) workers of Labaik Ya Rasool Allah, which had been blocking some sustaining rubber bullet and baton attack from unidentified masked men who fired several rounds of gunfire at his residence in Multan.

December 23, 2017: Multan  
The house of Inam Chaudhry, the reporter for Geo News channel, in Multan came under attack from unidentified masked men who fired several rounds of gunfire at his residence.
personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and kept incommunicado for over 24. After being freed they said they had been interrogated for alleged links with an ‘anti-military’ online newspaper, denying any such links.

November 5, 2017: Islamabad Hamid Mir, senior journalist for Geo News channel and Jung newspaper, was under orders of the Islamabad High Court, closed for alleged conspiracy to kill a former intelligence officer Hassan Nawaz Sharif, who was killed in April 2010 in the tribal areas by allegedly the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan group. The widow of Kawais moved the court to seek the arrest of Mir for her husband’s kidnapping and subsequent execution. Earlier, the Lahore High Court had declared Mir innocent in the case.

November 24, 2017: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Paramilitary forces detained five tribal journalists and a press club executive after a magnetic bomb was discovered beneath the car they were riding in Landi Kotal district in Khyber district bordering Peshawar. Four journalists were freed after 12 hours while the owner of the car – Khalid Afridi – was still detained and grilled, according to the Freedom Network Pakistan. The detained journalists were Khalid Afridi of Khyber News channel, Farhad Shirmat of Mashal Radio, Mehdi Shah Afridi of Tribal News Network. Umar Shirmat of Pakistan Television and Imran Khattali of Khabrain newspaper.

December 19, 2017: Karachi Shabbir Usmani, reporter for Express News newspaper, was booked for harassment by the Karachi police in Sindh on the complaint of a local religious seminary. The police registration was preceded by several threats that Usmani said he received from the seminary.

January 5, 2018: Karachi Reporter Fawad Hasan, reporter for Express Tribune newspaper, was picked up in Sindh by paramilitary Rangers personnel while covering conflict between the police and Shiites in Karachi. Fawad’s house in Karachi was searched and Reporting was detained for 24 hours.

February 15, 2018: Tando Bago Fawad Hasan, reporter for Express Tribune newspaper, was picked up in Sindh by paramilitary Rangers personnel while covering conflict between the police and Shiites in Karachi. Fawad’s house in Karachi was searched and Reporting was detained for 24 hours.

November 2, 2017: Orakzai office in the Tribal Frontier Corps officials in Orakzai tribal district in FATA imposed a ban on local journalists to report on official matters.

November 25, 2017: Islamabad The Pakistani authorities ordered the take-down of all television news channels and blocked access to some social media platforms following a political demonstration in Islamabad. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) issued a directive prohibiting live coverage of the operation to end the Faizabad sit-in protest. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) also directed the blocking of Facebook, YouTube, DailyMotion, Twitter and Instagram in some parts of the country on the Interior Ministry’s orders. Internet services in Faizabad, Rawalpindi where the protests were happening, were also suspended. The directives stood for nearly 24 hours until they were withdrawn.

January 19, 2018: Islamabad The federal government forcibly shut down operations of Europe-managed international broadcaster Radio Mashaal in Pakistan. A notification issued by the Ministry of Interior alleged that as an intelligence report, the radio was airing programs “found against the interests of Pakistan” and in line with hostile intelligence agency’s agenda.” The Prague-based broadcaster denied the allegations.

April 16, 2018: Lahore A full-bench of the Lahore High Court in Punjab ordered the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to order all TV channels in the country to ban all criticism of the country’s judiciary by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, his daughter Maryam Nawaz and all ministers of their ruling Pakistan Muslim League-N party. Several of the ministers are facing contempt of court charges for criticising various recent controversial judgments of the country’s superior judiciary which have seen Sharif sacked as prime minister, unseated as president of his party and barred from politics for life. In July 2017, the Lahore High Court had banned all TV channels in the country from airing the views of self-exiled Pakistani politician Altaf Hussain. The censorship still stands.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

August 5, 2017: Jamshoro Ghulam Rassali Burfat, reporter for Sindhi Express daily, was kidnapped from outside his residence in Sindh. Police has since been unable to track Burfat or be able to identify and prosecute his abductors.

August 9, 2017: Jamshoro Badal Nohani, the secretary-general of Jamshoro Press Club, was abducted in Sindhi from the press club premises by masked people who arrived in some vehicles. Police has since been unable to track Nohani or identify and prosecute his abductors.

HARASSMENT

July 12, 2017: Islamabad Raja Mudassar, photographer for Express daily, was abducted and prevented entry to the residence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan in Islamabad by his guards as he arrived to cover his press conference.

July 12, 2017: Islamabad Shahid Mattia, reporter for ARY News channel, was abducted and insulted by Muhammad Salfar, the son-in-law of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. He filed him at the Federal Judicial Academy in Islamabad where he had appeared for a hearing.

REGULATIONS

January 19, 2018: Islamabad Pakistan’s Interior Ministry ordered the shutdown of the office and the operations of Radio Mashaal, a Pashto language radio channel linked to the US-funded Radio Free Europe (RFE), on recommendations of the electronic services intelligence. The ministry said that as an ISI report, the radio airs programs “against the interests of Pakistan” in line with hostile intelligence agency’s agenda”.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

September 29, 2017: Pakistan Between September 29 to October 1, most cities in Pakistan remained without mobile and internet services as a part of the security measures for Ashura, during which there are major religious processions across Pakistan. The Interior Ministry issued a formal notification of network disconnection across eight cities including Karachi while mobile and internet services were reported suspended in Punjab including Faizabad, Baulkis including Quetta and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including Peshawar without formal notice. The suspension notification by the Government of Sindh’s, Home Department stated that the suspension was being carried out on request of law enforcement agencies as there are apprehensions of coordination of criminal activity by miscreants/criminals through the use of non-officialal phones/internet.

Several regions in Pakistan suffered intermittent shut downs. For a full listing, see chapter on Internet Shutdowns.

SRI LANKA

Killing of journalists: 0 – None recorded. Threats against the lives of journalists: 1 (Male: 1, Female: 0) Other threats to journalists: 5 (Male: 5, Female: 0) Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 1 (Male: 1, Female: 0) Threats against media institutions: 1 Attacks on media institutions: 0 – None recorded

THREAT AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS

February 8, 2018: Western Province Sirasa Kumara Kuruppusanarachchi provincial journalist Mabodama daily was returning home after covering a local government election meeting in Katunayaka, Gampaha District, around 8:00 pm along the Gampaha Minuwangoda road near the ‘Black Bridge’ unidentified person threatened him with a weapon and told him not to engage in anti-government politics. He complained about the incident to the local police.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

December 10, 2017: Southern Province Provincial journalist Rohan Pradeep Kumara, who works for Hiru TV and Divinara newspaper, was assaulted by the Navy Commander Admiral Rawinda Wijunaratne at the Hamptonata port while covering the military intervention on the protest by the port workers.

ATTACKS ON MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

April 4, 2018: Colombo Unidentified mob exploded large amounts of fire crackers outside the gates of the Sirasa News First office after three evening fireworks at the closed gates and premises and boundary walls of the news group.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENTS

September 2017: Colombo Lanka e-News a UK-based website that often publishes reports critical of the Sri Lankan government was inaccessible in Sri Lanka. The site was blocked after it published a report alleging长老 court’s conclusion of the Presidency of the Office in a deal relating to the purchase of a warship. The website said that ‘The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRC) which is under the President had ordered ISPs to block people in Sri Lanka accessing our website’.

HARASSMENT

July 30, 2017: Central Province Paani Dias, Thimir, Minister of Infrastructure and Community Development allegedly ordered the mobile phone of Sirasa Media correspondent Indika Rosihan Kauarachchi to be removed from the podium where he was speaking in Hatton, Central Sri Lanka on Sunday, July 30. Kauarachchi was reporting the event at the invitation of the Government Information Department. Footage from television recordings shows evidence that the Sirasa microphone had been removed from the podium. Since the incident, supporters of the Minister have continued to threaten Indika.

IFJ violations monitoring is undertaken by the IFJ Asia-Pacific together with affiliates of the the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) and updated regularly via the SAMSN Digital Hub. IFJ violations mapping provides specific, contextual sit-in of violations on journalists across the region as well as geographic mapping detail.

To provide further updates to the 2017-2018 IFJ figures, please contact IFJ South Asia Project Coordinator, Ujwal Acharya (ujwal.acharya@gmail.com)

SAMSON MEDIA VIOLATIONS (MAY 2017 - APRIL 2018)

AFGHANISTAN 1 0 0 0 1
BANGLADESH 7 5 1 1 1
BHUTAN 1
BHARYA 1
INDIA 3 12 2 4 2 2 4
NEPAL 8 5 1
PAKISTAN 1 2 3 4
SRI LANKA 3 1 7 0 3 3
TOTAL: 20 – 10 27 3 13 15
The IFJ has documented cases of 68 journalists detained in South Asia in the current report period, from May 2017 to April 18.

Pakistan leads in the recorded cases of South Asian countries detained or jailing journalists, with 21 journalists incarcerated in the period. Bang-e-Sahar editor, Daulat Jan Mathal, has been incarcerated since 2016, despite a bail order issued by an Islamabad court in October 2016. The country’s anti-terrorism court continues to revoke any right to bail. Another three journalists also remain in jail including editors Akhlaq Jokhi and Qurban Gadehi who have been in detention since January 2017 and are currently serving five years for defamation against a property developer Rafiul Az Sri Lanka: 0

Maldives: 11

Nepal: 19

Bangladesh: 0

Bhutan: 0

Afghanistan: 1

BY COUNTRY IN SOUTH ASIA:

Maldives: 11

Bajaur: 0

Nepal: 19

Pakistan: 21

Sri Lanka: 0

detained. In the Maldives, eight journalists were held for less than 24 hours and another for less than a week in a round-up of journalists. Another two were released on bail. India had two journalists jailed for more than a week, both were released on bail. Kashmiri freelance photojournalist Kamran Yusuf was held for six months for alleged terrorism and instigating stone pelting at security personnel. He was released on bail March 12, 2018. Freelancer Vinod Verma was held for two months for allegedly blackmailing a Chhattisgarh Minister with a sex video involving the minister before being released on bail on December 28, 2017. In many of the cases listed below, charges were likely fabricated with an intention to silence or punish journalists for their work. Beyond the issue of arrest and detention, lengthy court cases also serve to send a message to other media workers to toe the line or self-censor.

In Nepal, 19 were jailed or detained, with 14 journalists charged under the vaguely worded ‘Some Public (Crimes and with 14 journalists charged under the Penal Code for intentionally writing distortions and damaging materials for articles written about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Originally detained in 2003, he was later released on bail, but was incarcerated again in January 2014, to serve seven years. Another two journalists were detained in Pakistan and released on bail. Yet, one of them, Hafiz Hussain Raza, was released only to be re-arrested by police on other charges. He was again released on bail in March 2018.

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India had two journalists jailed for more than a week, both were released on bail. Kashmiri freelance photojournalist Kamran Yusuf was held for six months for alleged terrorism and instigating stone pelting at security personnel. He was released on bail March 12, 2018. Freelancer Vinod Verma was held for two months for allegedly blackmailing a Chhattisgarh Minister with a sex video involving the minister before being released on bail on December 28, 2017. In many of the cases listed below, charges were likely fabricated with an intention to silence or punish journalists for their work. Beyond the issue of arrest and detention, lengthy court cases also serve to send a message to other media workers to toe the line or self-censor.

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Detained: July 19, 2017  
Job: Correspondent, Image Channel TV  
Location: Bajura, Nepal  
Accusation: Attempted rape  
Status: Released on bail after a week, cleared of all charges on April 1, 2018, by the District Court due to lack of evidence. Political motivation is suspected as charges were laid on Chakka Bahadur Maia after police arrested four municipal officials as he registered a complaint against them for attacking him on July 14.

24. Name: Kali Bahadur Maia  
Gender: Male  
Detained: November 17, 2017  
Job: Janaprabhat weekly  
Location: Kalikot, Nepal  
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970  
Status: Released on bail after 24 days in detention

JOURNALISTS DETAINED FOR LESS THAN ONE WEEK

27. Ahmadullah Sarkandi, Afghanistan, October 25, 2017
28. Bismullah Watanust, Afghanistan, October 25, 2017
29. Golam Mostafa Rafiq, Bangladesh, June 12, 2017
30. Abdul Latif Moni, Bangladesh, August 1, 2017
31. Aniru Rahman, Bangladesh, November 1, 2017
32. Md Layes Mondol, Bangladesh, November 21, 2017
33. Md Sabid, Bangladesh, November 21, 2017
34. G Balakrishna (Balu), India, November 10, 2017
35. Paul Comili, India, December 10, 2017
36. Mohamed Fazeen, Maldives, March 16, 2018
37. Thakur Prasad Timilsyna, Nepal, May 10, 2017
38. Khem Bhandari, Nepal, June 17, 2017
39. Ganeesh Bhatt, Nepal, June 17, 2017
40. Sangarshashil Larmij, Nepal, February 20, 2018
41. Jamuna Shrestha, Nepal, February 20 (female)
42. Mina Tamsuwa, Nepal, February 20 (female)
43. Zafar Ulhan Achakzai, Pakistan, June 30, 2017
44. Shah Nawaz Tarakai, Pakistan, October 15, 2017
45. Islam Gul, Pakistan, October 15, 2017
46. Dr Shahid Wali, Pakistan, July 11, 2017

JOURNALISTS DETAINED FOR MORE THAN 24 HOURS OR LESS

47. Afsan Chowdhury, Bangladesh, June 7, 2017
48. Mohamed Wisaam, Maldives, June 26
49. Murshid Abdul Hakeem, Maldives, June 26, 2017
50. Ahmad Mammadho, Maldives, June 26, 2017
51. Adam Janah, Maldives, June 26, 2017
52. Ahmed Rithif, Maldives, June 26, 2017
53. Mohamed Shanoon, Maldives, June 26, 2017
54. Abulqar Yamin, Maldives, June 26, 2017
55. Hussan Hassan, Maldives, February 16, 2018
56. Ali Naez, Maldives, February 16, 2018
57. Jabar Urinni, Pakistan, August 5, 2017
58. Ashraf Nankani, Pakistan, September 17, 2017
59. Mohammad Mohsin, Pakistan, September 17, 2017
60. Shabbir Seham, Pakistan, October 7, 2017
61. Harid Mir, Pakistan, November 5, 2017
62. Khalid Afri, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
63. Farhad Shiwani, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
64. Mehdi Shah Afri, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
65. Umar Shiwani, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
66. Imran Khattak, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
67. Shabbir Usmani, Pakistan, December 19, 2017
68. Fawad Hassan, Pakistan, January 5, 2018