TRUTH VS MISINFORMATION: THE COLLECTIVE PUSH BACK

SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2018-2019
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VIOLATIONS AND JOURNALIST SAFETY INDICATORS IN SOUTH ASIA

LIST OF MEDIA RIGHTS VIOLATIONS by Journalist Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2018 to April 2019

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

JAILED AND DETAINED JOURNALISTS

26
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FOREWORD

The IFJ Asia-Pacific Director, Jane Worthington, has noted that the region has made a leading role in truth-telling. They have been involved in fighting misinformation and supporting democracy and human rights. The region has also remained under threat by governments or other powerful interests.

South Asia's media workers have regularly stood together to raise the voice of colleagues killed, incarcerated, or under legal threat by governments or other powerful interests. They have been a voice of reason and advocate of peace in the protracted conflict.

In 2018, South Asia was declared by the IFJ as the most deadly region in the world for media workers, which most brutally demonstrates the reality faced by far too many in the industry. Scores of journalists and even ordinary citizens turned out to mourn and shine a light on an important voice extinguished, a key voice of journalism in the region.

In Bangladesh, mass political demonstrations by students over road safety saw another brave advocate of freedom of expression, photojournalist Shahidul Alam targeted. Accused of spreading false and provocative statements in an interview with Al Jazeera, he was jailed for more than 100 days drawing global condemnation on the Bangladeshi government. Alam was one of 21 jailed or detained media workers in the region, on charges such as violation of digital security laws, sedition and even vague criminal determinations.

Right now, Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida is also bravely fighting treason charges in the courts for his coverage of the Pakistani state's patronage of militant groups, while being honoured internationally as a press freedom hero. Meanwhile, Pakistani journalist Asif Sultan currently remains languishing in jail, charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for a story on the second anniversary of the death of a young Kashmiri journalist Aasif Sultan currently remains languishing in jail, charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for a story on the second anniversary of the death of a young Kashmiri journalist.

The horrific targeted assassination of revered journalist and editor Shujaat Bukhari in Kashmir, India, in June 2018 sent shockwaves through the troubled region and beyond. Scores of journalists and even ordinary citizens turned out to mourn and shine a light on an important voice extinguished, a key voice of reason and advocate of peace in the protracted conflict.

Few could debate that South Asia's media is tasked with a mighty job. In serving the public interest of a sizeable share of the global population, journalists not only contend with the broad and butter of truth-telling and the requisite challenges that it brings to their craft. But they do so in a space that is at all once a vibrant, thorny, complex and dangerous mix; where democracy and human rights navigate a path alongside enduring, intertwined and, often competing, religious, cultural, tribal, political and social histories.

The Collective Push Back: Truth vs Misinformation charts the challenges, triumphs and, most importantly, the solidarity of this region's brave and determined media community over the past year.

While battered by the ugly game-changing rise of fake news and the collapse of media's traditional economic model, journalists, media workers and their unions again and again, showed they were defiant, bold and determined to confront a myriad challenges. Together, in their work and in their collectives, they continued to monitor, advocate and shine a light on the controls, intimidation and government efforts that seek to threaten or silence freedom of expression.

Regularly, they stood together to raise the voice of colleagues killed, incarcerated or under legal threat by governments or other powerful interests. This report shows that in spite of war mongering, the damaging impacts of fake news and hate speech, and the politics of control, South Asia's media workers made it very clear that they have a decisive role to play in fighting the scourge of misinformation and supporting democracy and human rights. And most importantly they have a leading role in truth-telling.

The IFJ and its affiliates retain hope. But we must keep pushing.

Jane Worthington
Director
IFJ Asia-Pacific

OVERVIEW

In Bangladesh, mass political demonstrations by students over road safety saw another brave advocate of freedom of expression, photojournalist Shahidul Alam targeted. Accused of spreading false and provocative statements in an interview with Al Jazeera, he was jailed for more than 100 days drawing global condemnation on the Bangladeshi government. Alam was one of 21 jailed or detained media workers in the region, on charges such as violation of digital security laws, sedition and even vague criminal determinations.

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The period from May 2018 to April 2019, saw the mass haemorrhaging of journalist jobs in the region, most acutely in Pakistan. Those silenced by sacking in Pakistan included 700 journalists at Jang, 243 at Century Publications, 350 at Nawa-e-Waqt, 200 at Dunya, 200 at Abb Takk TV and new media entity Bol TV has ceremoniously hired and fired at least 4000. To say this is a body blow to truth is an understatement.

The growing spectre for freedom of expression in South Asia has also seen the increasing frequency of internet shutdowns and
controls on social media in the name of law and order or national security. India not only leads the region for shutdowns, but also the world, with 93 online challenges documented in the period. After a series of high explosive bombs were detonated in and around churches and high-end hotels in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa on Easter Sunday, the government blocked all social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Viber. The reason given was to stop rumours and propagating hate against certain communities in the country. But too often journalists have been the target of that hate. Journalists by the very nature of the profession have always battled misinformation, untruths and outright propaganda – including against themselves. In this war against them and truth, journalists have pushed back, defended and proven their vital role in democracy. In the past year in South Asia, they’ve also proven resilient amidst the turmoil – standing up in protests, in solidarity actions and in calling governments and popular to account – despite a wave of misinformation and threats both online and offline. They played a crucial role in mobilizing the region in the year – in Bhutan, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and, most dramatically, in the Maldives. The purging of autocratic ruler Abdullah Yameen in a landslide victory to his opponents, also brought promise of hope in securing justice for the unresolved deaths and disappearances, including those of the journalists Ahmed Rilwan and Yameen Rasheed.

REGIONAL TRENDS

Media practice continues to encounter strong political headwinds in a region that is home to a fifth of humanity. With it, digital technologies have been the great ineluctable impact on the directions that journalism will take.

THE DIGITAL DISRUPTION

Early optimism that the unregulated space for information exchange through social media would be a force for good, has given way to rising concern about the destabilizing and potentially corrosive role of “fake news” and hate speech. Yet there is very little consensus on the best mode of regulation. Typically, governmental authorities seek to apply a blunt instrument which threatens legitimate exercises of free speech and brings additional jeopardy to established media practices. The success that media and civil society had in India, in striking down some of the more stringent provisions of the Information Technology Act through invoking the writ jurisdiction of the country’s Supreme Court, has been diluted in practice. Observers note that police in different parts of the country are increasingly using sections of the law, struck down by the Supreme Court, to arrest private individuals and activists.

LEGAL NOOSE TIGHTENS

New civil and criminal rules became operative in Nepal over the year, marking an important milestone since its transition from monarchy to republican democracy in 2008. The criminal code, in particular, is seen by Nepal’s journalists to fall seriously short of the constitutional promises on freedom of speech. Some ten problematic provisions have been identified, defining offences that could be punished by up to three years in prison, that directly impinge upon journalistic practice. Draft legislation on the IT sector imposes registration requirements on social media platforms seeking to operate in the country. Draft rules have also been introduced for public servants that prohibit critical comments on social media and restrain most forms of international social media use.

Transparency legislation introduced in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka remains indifferently implemented. Amid much concern, including from India’s Election Commission over the spread of fake news, there is a fresh effort to bring “intermediary liability” onto the policy agenda. Civil society has argued against the move, but there has been little conceptual progress on the matter since it began to be debated actively. There is an ever-present risk that in a context of growing political polarisation, the writ in policy will be actively exploited in a partisan fashion by those wielding official power. In Bangladesh, longstanding worries in the media community over the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act of 2006 remained unassuaged, with several private citizens and journalists being charged under the dreaded Section 57, which creates severe criminal sanctions for those deemed as posting fake, defamatory or obscene content on any electronic platform. And while this hazard remains, the Bangladesh government added a further layer when it enacted the Digital Security Act in September 2018.

Bangladesh’s media community is steadfastly convinced that the law fails foul of constitutional assurances on free speech. As with other such regulatory schemes introduced in recent years, the vise is of overly broad definitions that allow ample room for arbitrary interpretations. In Pakistan, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act performs a similar function; it criminalises in broad fashion that critical posts on social media and the internet are actively threatened.

Afghanistan too has introduced new transparency legislation, designed according to best available templates. But in a situation of institutional weakness, it is not yet clear how effectively the new law will be operationalized. Litigation against the press by political and business actors continues to be a way of silencing critical reporting and commentary. With judicial systems in most countries remaining ponderous and slow-moving, the process of securing discharge in these matters has turned out to be punishment in itself. Where political conditions were unsettled, the toll on journalistic practice was heavy. After its most recent general election, Bangladesh has become effectively a single-party state. Opposition leaders have been imprisoned and the national parliament continues to function with no challenge to the government’s writ.

WOMEN RISE

Across the region, gender equity entered the public discourse with a bang. Women in the entertainment and media industry in India, Pakistan and Nepal dramatically broke the silence on sexual harassment at the workplace and asked their voices to the global #MeToo movement. The media gave much-needed visibility to the spontaneous mobilization of women across several cities in Pakistan in March, denouncing labour rights, workplace safety, reproductive rights and their rights as citizens. Sustaining this upheaval was the steady work of capacity building to strengthen women’s leadership and effective participation in democratic processes.

POLITICAL CHURNING

Journalists in India have found themselves increasingly targeted by bitter partisanship, notably from the ruling party at the centre, whose footprint has expanded significantly over the past five years. With a seemingly well-organized campaign, the ruling party has also seemingly succeeded in driving a social media campaign toward its cause, placing journalists who adopt a critical attitude at great risk of abuse, too often going as far as threats of physical and sexual assault.

Social ferment in Bangladesh occasionally does break out in mass demonstrations, after one such youth-led outbreak during the year, the government chose the time-honoured response of blaming the messenger, imprisoning a photojournalist with a global profile on charges of inciting the demonstrations.
very soon. In an unsettled situation, the challenges are unlikely to fade making an extra noted effort to ensure better conditions. But the issue on global platforms. The government too has been made by media organizations and journalists’ groups to raise expand, despite constant threat of violence. Efforts have been uncertainties. Afghanistan’s media, however, continues to with the main insurgent group continue to create of national elections and the tortuous process of negotiation continues to be beset by violence and strife. The postponement awareness so that alternative and more credible modes of information exchange can be established.

The newly-elected president of the Maldives has promised to respect press freedom and to reverse the kind of institutional disarray that characterized his predecessor’s term. The Maldives in September 2018 ousted a president who ruled since 2013 in an increasingly authoritarian fashion, clamping down on independent media in the process. The newly-elected president of the Maldives has promised to respect press freedom and to reverse the kind of institutional disarray that characterized his predecessor’s term. Yet memories still persist of how the Maldives’s democratic transition of 2008 was set back within a few short years by a growing acrimony between the country’s main political parties. The mood of hope was considerably buoyed by the victory of the Maldives Democratic Party in elections to parliament that followed early in 2019. In the South Asian region, that was perhaps the only unequivocal bright spot. The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan held its third general election in September 2018, bringing in a new party with a liberal platform. The country of less than a million people was best known for its celebration of the idyllic life and relative disregard for the symbols of material progress. But it is today having to reckon with several among the pressing problems of the mundane earthly existence. The media has a very small presence in the country and has been rapidly overtaken by the mobile phone and internet-based platforms as means of information exchange. This has also brought the attendant problem of ensuring the authenticity of news flows. In a country where the urban elite of the capital, Thimpu, is virtually a face-to-face community, this has significant implications for social cohesion. Meanwhile, journalists in Bhutan are working on building media awareness so that alternative and more credible modes of exchange can be established.

Today, growing numbers of social media users exercise increasing influence on all forms of media and public discourse in South Asia.

The English-language media, with its global reach, has generally been more progressive values, while local-language media tended to be more reactionary. However, these generalizations do not accurately reflect the entire picture now. One reason the English language media in Pakistan has in the past been allowed a relatively free rein is its value as window dressing. Allowing a certain amount of freedom to this media shows the world how much press freedom Pakistan has. But in recent years, the English-language media has been the site of the war of narratives particularly online, with organized efforts behind dozens of ‘news and analysis’ websites. About 25 dubious websites related to current affairs in Pakistan use the same font for their logos and masthead, says a journalist who runs his own independent news website. These websites list no contact details or any credible names among their editorial staff. The narrative peddled in these websites is echoed in hundreds if not thousands of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, that engage also in trolling and abusing progressive journalists and analysts. In March 2019, Facebook removed hundreds of pages from India and Pakistan that exhibited “coordinated inauthentic behavior and spam”. Around 200 pages that were pro-BJP (the Bharatiya Janata Party which heads the Indian government) were removed in Facebook’s largest purge in India in early April 2019.

Polarization within and between various forms of media reflects the cleavages within society as well as across borders. The online chatter does not always reflect reality even as it dominates the narrative.

India-Pakistan Polarization and Prospects of Peace

There have never been as many media outlets and forms of media in India or Pakistan as there are today — or as much push for freedom of expression and information, and its counterpoint, various forms of censorship. The addition of digital and web initiatives to the traditional print and broadcast media landscape, and rise of social media platforms, has added to the complexity of the picture.

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Missing from the Mainstream

Journalists have long been aware of the main no-go areas for mainstream media in Pakistan. These include national security and religion. Over the past years, a certain level of critical analysis had increasingly crept into mainstream as well as social media. The backlash from those who control the narrative has been severe. There are red lines which may not be crossed. These lines keep changing.

A case in point is the near total media blackout of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM, or the Movement for the Protection of Pashtuns) that developed from protests against the extrajudicial
murder of a Pashtun youth, Naequebullah Mehsud, in Karachi in January 2018. His and his family were among the 1.5 million Pakistanis internally displaced by military operations against militants in Pakistan’s north-west since 2004. It has not been for social media, Naequebullah Mehsud’s death may well have been just another of the over 3,000 such targeted killings of suspected militants by security forces around the country since 2015. Rights activists have been calling for transparency and accountability around these deaths, but security forces have not allowed any independent verification, including by journalists. When Naequebullah Mehsud’s friends and followers took to social media in outrage against his murder, it became quickly obvious that the youth was an aspiring model and actor, a non-militant.

The injustice sparked a movement that has drawn hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrations throughout the year around the country. Protesters, smartphone users in many hands, are demanding an end to the racial profiling and extrajudicial killings of Pashtuns, stereotyped as ‘Taliban’. The large presence of women at these demonstrations has also broken social taboos against gender segregation.

The PTM’s demands for constitutional rights directly challenge Pakistan’s powerful security establishment. But they have been consistently blocked from the mainstream media. In contrast, in 2018 protests, run up to general elections in July 2018, former cricket hero and politician Imran Khan, widely seen as an establishment favourite, got hours of advertisement-free coverage for his electoral rallies and speeches.

Journalists, blocked from reporting on these matters in their media outlets, took to social media to share information. Without social media, “the movement would not be possible”, acknowledged PTM leaders. The rapid rise of social media in Pakistan (with 17 percent internet penetration, growing fast) and mobile phone subscribers (over 70 percent) makes television coverage (75 percent) less crucial than before. Censorship violates the people’s right to know; as a statement endorsed by over 100 Lack of transparency around security issues, selective broadcast of news, social media and the 24/7 media beat have had dire consequences for peace and democracy in South Asia, particularly between India and Pakistan as war mongering escalated. Family members and villagers carry the coffins of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) trooper Sukhjinder Singh at Gandiwind village on February 16, 2018. (credit: minhaj Mustafa) journalists in April 2018 stressed. “Beginning with a crackdown against select media groups and banning the broadcast of various channels, there now is enhanced pressure on all media houses to refrain from covering certain rights-based movements. Media house managements under pressure are dropping regular op-ed columns and removing online editions of published articles. One media house even asked its anchors to stop live shows. There is growing self-censorship and increasingly, discussions on “given news” rather than real news, violating the citizens’ right to information,” said the statement.

The case of the small but fast-growing digital platform Naya Daur (New Age) illustrated the clampdown on narratives other than the ‘approved’ one, and the obliteration of whatever entity or entities are behind the censorship.

When The Nation dropped weekly columnist Gul Bukhari’s op-ed about PTM she sent it to Naya Daur’s editor, Raza Rumi, who has been based in the US since escaping a murder attempt on his life in 2014. Naya Daur, which was also sharing other PTM-related material, posted Bukhari’s piece on April 16, 2018. The website was subsequently blocked in Pakistan for a week (April 21-28, 2018). The Pakistan Telecom Authority as well as the country’s largest internet provider, the semi-private Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited, denied responsibility. Mobile phone users subscribing to the service provider Warid, as well as_content provider Zong, could also not access the Naya Daur website.

Even after two of PTM’s leaders were elected to Parliament, organized campaigns on social media and television continued to testify the movement’s leaders and supporters as “traitors” and “foreign agents” – a common tool against anyone countering the establishment narrative. Attempts to derail PTM’s demonstrations included police picking up activists and confiscating pamphlets in Lahore and Karachi. Each time, social media reactions contributed to the activists being released.

Curtailing attempts are also visible at educational institutions. In April 2018, an open letter signed by nearly 300 academics and four “separate but related instances of repression” at campuses in various cities between April 12 and April 13, 2018, termed as “part of a wider trend that stifles critical thinking and discussion on uncomfortable topics”.

The result is an overall stilling of dissent and restriction of spaces for free expression.

**WAR-MONGERING POST-PULWAMA**

Lack of transparency around security issues and selective broadcast of news related to such issues allows only certain narratives to reach the public. The 24/7 media beat and social media users tend to cherry pick the most sensational and outrageous comments and hype them up. This has dire consequences for peace and democracy in South Asia, particularly between India and Pakistan. Rights activists have been calling for transparency and accountability around these deaths, but security forces in the country have been largely filled with war mongering, frothing-at-the-mouth television anchors and screaming headlines based on political sentiments supporting a hate-filled rhetoric. This gives the impression that the entire country supports these views. Such elements are visible in the Pakistani media, but the commentary has on the whole been far more temperate for some time now.

The violent narrative that overwhelms public discourse leaves little room for reasonable voices or any nuance or positivity. Yet many on the ground engaged in work that generates positivity continue to do that work, for example in the areas of health, education, peace-building and empowerment of marginalized communities. Their efforts rarely make the news.

The suicide attack on a military convoy in Pulwama in India-administered Kashmir on 14 February 2019 marked a low point in media coverage of the fraught relations between India and Pakistan. Post-Pulwama, public narratives in India and Pakistan were saturated with the same facile narrative. Newspapers, TV channels, websites and social media timelines were filled with glorifying and justifying actions of the ‘home team’ as it were. Those attempting to question these narratives were subjected to a barrage of abuse and accusations of being ‘traitor’.

The lack of transparency on both sides of the border makes it difficult to know what really happened in a conflict situation. When soldiers or civilians are injured or killed in ceasefire violations at the Line of Control in the disputed region of Kashmir, the governments and media of both Pakistan and India only report their own side’s casualties. Both claim “unprovoked” firing from across the border.

**THE POSSIBILITIES OF PEACE**

Trolls and those pushing fascist, violent agendas have taken to social media in an organized way. Recognizing its value, they are also using social media to push their narratives in the public domain. Many are paid to do this. As they do so, they create space for those who agree with their views to come online and publicly say what was unacceptable before.

These paid online armies and their associate volunteers are crowding out the original promise of social media – more space for pluralism, peace, and democracy. But the original dream is still very much alive, even if those upholding it are not as well-organized or paid.

According to Facebook data on how many users formed friendships daily across three conflict zones, 2,604,986 Facebook users from India and Pakistan connected as ‘friends’ on March 4, 2018. The average for India and Pakistan, going by numbers updated daily, was around 2,500,000, pretty much any day. This indicates at least a level of curiosity if not aspirations for peace and friendship across borders, that social media platforms provide space for.

For the first few years, Aman Ki Asha music and literary festivals, economic symposiums and seminars discussing strategic issues, were organized in cities around India and Pakistan. The Jang Group and TOI reported on these events in their newspapers, sometimes even in their television broadcasts; the Jang Group’s Geo TV also broadcast reports about these events. Often other media, however, chose not to cover such events as most publications then would not name or promote any activity support for peace. In Pakistan, the Jang Group also published a weekly Aman Ki Asha page in its English and Urdu papers until 2014. The printed pages were dropped due to commercial and other pressures, but the editor continues to curate, commission, and edit material for the website from where it is shared to the Aman Ki Asha social media platforms today and beyond.

The platform has, since its launch, consistently provided a space for “peacemongers” in the region. Young people often message the platform’s administrators with the hashtag #PeaceMonger and Aman Ki Asha takes up and works with editorially. The content produced for the website and in the social media platforms helps counter the jingoism and war rhetoric played up by the mainstream media.

On April 3, 2019, when actor Bhuwan Ansari released ‘Gawandine, Gawandine’ (Punjab for female neighbour) a music video based on a peace poem by her older sister Neelum Bashir, Neelum asked a young friend in India (who actually started and manages her other actor sister’s fan page) to share it with Aman Ki Asha on Facebook. The video was also posted to its Twitter feed and shared in the AKA group by countless members. The song, performed as a duet between two neighbours separated by an insurmountable wall went viral, forcing the mainstream media to take it up. As well as its popularity in India and in Pakistan cuts through the political rhetoric against each country. This is just one indication of the people’s aspirations for peace and good relations between the two countries, driven by the desire to dominate the airwaves and social media, but still alive and kicking.
even though television has "mainstreamed" fake news. "WhatsApp elections" now, India will be fighting what could be its first full-fledged campaigns. The 1980s changed that to television. In the following famously said, "the medium is the message".

Free flow of factual information is a prerequisite. However, in a democracy, it must be ensured that misinformation is not spread. Social media is having an increasing impact on news systems. The fourth pillar - the media - appears shaky.

Mainstreaming 'Fake' News in India

In mid-2019, India will organize and participate in the world’s biggest electoral exercise. About 875 million voters are eligible to cast their votes in the Indian general elections, which is an all-time high. While these are global trends, South Asia has specific features.

Facebook and WhatsApp have an approximate user base of 300 million users. In February 2019, a "fake news race" began on TV channels of businessmen aligned to political parties, is considered to carry a "fake news" label. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit. This time around not only has the medium to its benefit.

Australia's Radio East Queensland's talkback radio host Paul Gow and The Economist after "Fake News". 

The BjP-led Central Government Proposed to Employ a "Social Media Analytical Tool", which would create "Digital Profiles of Social Media Users". In a document released by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the Government admitted to using the "Digital Profiles" to "Neutralize Negative Sentiments about Government Schemes".

Abuse of Journalists Online

In India, social media has accentuated the with-us or against-us narrative, dividing citizens into clear compartments of "patriots" and "anti-nationals". Most dissenters online are bombarded with hate speech. 

Senior Executive Editor of NDTV and prime time anchor, Ravish Kumar publicly shared screenshots of a few foul text messages out of the hundreds he receives. Several groups that call themselves "patriots" and "nation loving" believe that Kumar's journalism is a threat to India's cultural and its bright future. His reports on farmers distress, national security and the right to dissent have all been attacked by right-wing groups.

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Indian journalists Abhisar Sharma and Bartha Dutt and Pakistani journalists Arina Shridhar, Ramaza Nizami, Rashid Kamar (pictured right) and Marvi Sirmed were among those targeted online.

One sender confirms my mobile number being circulated in groups. "DoHiiDee is bring this to your attention." Three days later, Dutt filed a criminal complaint (called the First Information Report or FIR under Indian criminal procedure) against partly identical persons who had been persistently trolling and harassing her. In her complaint, Dutt alleged that she appeared to be "victim of some fake news propaganda". Her number had "been shared on all social media platforms" following which she had been the recipient of grossly morphed pictures and "sexually abusive text messages".

Mid-March, four individuals were arrested on charges of shouting Dutt, physical threats and intimidation under sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Information Technology Act. Three of the four were released on bail a hearing while one was remanded to two weeks in judicial custody.

According to Dutt's tweet, she had registered complaints against ten more persons named in the petition in which she received said messages. It is not yet clear that prosecution of the case involving Dutt will be taken to a stage where it could deter future trolls. Reacting to the arrest, Anurag Deolalikar, president of the IFJ-affiliated Indian Journalists' Union, called for tracing out the "real power" behind the attacks on journalists, since the individuals arrested were most likely "just foot soldiers" of more powerful "persons and organisations".

Journalists in Pakistan face similar threats and abuse online. Women journalists in Pakistan are called "promiscre", "slut", "whore", and "jilafata journalist", which in Urdu refers to journalists who take bribes to serve a political or corporate agenda. While the protest against sacks of journalists is not questioned, she should not have received vile tweets. And in June, BBC Urdu journalist Iram Abbasi faced vitriolic comments online after she interviewed Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif (now in jail on charges of corruption).

Rameza Nizami, publisher at the Naw-e-Waqat group faced online abuse early last year, for taking journalist from her publications. While the protests against sacks of journalists is not questioned, she should not have received vile tweets. And in June, BBC Urdu journalist Iram Abbasi faced vitriolic comments online after she interviewed Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif (now in jail on charges of corruption).

Last year, journalist Ansa Shariq faced vitriolic comments online after she interviewed Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif (now in jail on charges of corruption).

In recent years, India saw an explosion of internet and social media accounts and complained to the Federal Investigation Agency of Pakeda. The agency is yet to take any action.

The situation in Bangladesh is as bad. Journalists and other activists are threatened with arrests and detentions for the comments they make online.

One of the four targeted was Asma Shirazi, a prominent Pakistani women's rights activist. She made her high profile appearance in a recent video on Facebook titled "Women's March" or a "Aurat March" for the rights of women, were threatened with rape and acid attacks. The organizers compiled a list of abusive messages from 22 social media accounts and complained to the Federal Investigation Agency of Pakeda. The agency is yet to take any action.

Women's March was organized by several feminist organizations in Pakistan across seven cities to raise awareness about women's issues. In an irony that is typical to South Asia, organizers and participants of the demonstration for the rights of women, were threatened with rape and acid attacks.

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In June 2018, Daily Times correspondent Marvi Sirmed's house was ransacked and searched when the family was away. Her laptops and smartphones were taken away. A few months later, Facebook posts called for crowd support to kill her.

Facebook took down the posts after many complaints from across the world. It has identified one of the accounts as belonging to a member of the students' wing of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party. On International Women's Day this year, "Aurat March" or a "Women's March was organized by several feminist organizations in Pakistan across seven cities to raise awareness about women's issues. In an irony that is typical to South Asia, organizers and participants of the demonstration for the rights of women, were threatened with rape and acid attacks. The organizers compiled a list of abusive messages from 22 social media accounts and complained to the Federal Investigation Agency of Pakeda. The agency is yet to take any action.

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INTERNET SHUTDOWNS
THE NEW NORMAL

Internet shutdowns are becoming increasingly common in South Asia – especially in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Again, South Asia witnessed the highest number of internet shutdowns globally, with India earning the dubious crown for the country with the highest number of internet shutdowns.

A broad term that includes ‘any intentional disruption of the broadband or mobile internet or internet-based enable apps, internet shutdowns usually come by order of the authorities or under threat of a non-state party, to control communication or online content or slowing down the access to general public.’

But this digital means of control also has a massive economic cost. NetBlocks, which monitors the internet blocks globally, has developed a Cost of Shutdown Tool to estimate the economic impact of an internet disruption, mobile data blackout or app restriction. According to the tool, the economic cost for total internet shutdown for 24 hours for Pakistan is equivalent to USD 65 million, for Bangladesh it is USD 63 million and a whopping USD 1 billion for India.

The blocking of internet or digital communications also impedes the work of journalists and flow of information 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.

As well as being a threat to fundamental human rights, restricting citizens’ rights to express, opine, know and access information, shutdowns or online controls are now becoming a new normal in states across the world, as the digital ‘precautionary security measure’ becomes an excuse to implement blocking citizens’ rights. A recent example is the rapid blocking of social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram immediately after the deadly bomb blasts in churches and high-end hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, that left more than 350 people dead. Authorities said that the block was imposed to curb the spread of inflammatory messages and ‘fake’ news.

During the period under review in this report (May 2018 to April 2019), South Asia experienced at least 106 recorded shutdowns of various magnitudes. India alone shut down its internet – mostly at state or district level – as many as 96 times, while Pakistan had at least six reported instances, and Bangladesh three.

Many shutdowns are either pre-emptive or reactive measures in the face of mass or potentially violent public protests or actions.

The volatile Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir experienced 67 shutdowns. Clamping down on communications generally followed military operations in which militants or civilians were killed.

Most shutdowns last for a day or a few days, except a number which lasted up to two weeks. In Pakistan, mobile internet services have been throttled since February 2017 with 3G/4G mobile internet services frequently suspended in Kech district of Balochistan for ‘security reasons. The flow-on impact is that 900,000 residents of this area have been affected.

Pakistan did not, however, shut down its internet space for its general election on July 25, 2018, despite widespread apprehensions. India too, did not shut down the internet in the early phases of the general elections that began on April 11, 2019.

Despite the 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.

South Asia is at a critical juncture when it comes to freedom of expression online. Many countries in the region have introduced laws or regulations that criminalize expression online or legalize internet shutdowns. India, for example in 2017 introduced rules for the procedures to follow for internet shutdowns, but media reports suggest that most states block services without following the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017.

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A Pakistani Sunni Muslim spits fire during an Ashura procession in Karachi on September 21. The ten-day period of mourning is in remembrance of the seventh-century martyrdom of Prophet Mohammad’s grandson Imam Hussein, killed in the Battle of Karbala in modern-day Iraq, in 680 AD. It was also the subject of a Pakistan government shutdown of mobile internet in the country on September 19. CREDIT: RIZWAN TABASSUM / AFP

AUTHORITIES IN SRI LANKA SAID THAT THE BLOCK WAS IMPOSED TO CURB THE SPREAD OF INFLAMMATORY MESSAGES AND ‘FAKE’ NEWS

A Pakistani Sunni Muslim spits fire during an Ashura procession in Karachi on September 21. The ten-day period of mourning is in remembrance of the seventh-century martyrdom of Prophet Mohammad’s grandson Imam Hussein, killed in the Battle of Karbala in modern-day Iraq, in 680 AD. It was also the subject of a Pakistan government shutdown of mobile internet in the country on September 19. CREDIT: RIZWAN TABASSUM / AFP

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36 Aug 18 India Uttar Pradesh Bulandshahr 1 Mobile internet Information Control, Killing To prevent rumours after the rape and murder of a 12-year-old Dalit girl
37 Aug 21 India Gujarat Mahisagar 1 Mobile internet Killing Funeral of Sadaf Harif Sheikh who died in an encounter during a hostage crisis
38 Aug 23 India Rajasthan Tonk 1 Internet Violence In the wake of violence, internet was suspended along with curfew
39 Aug 24 India Jammu & Kashmir Anantnag 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of a militant
40 Aug 27 India Rajasthan Udhampur 1 Mobile internet Information Control Three hours during the police constable recruitment exams
41 Aug 27 India Uttar Pradesh Saharanpur 1 Mobile internet Clashes Clash between two communities outside a gurudwara
42 Aug 29 India Jammu & Kashmir Anantnag 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
43 Sep 2 India Rajasthan Barsewa and Udaspur 1 Internet Information Control, Killing To prevent misinformation after the murder of a 65-year-old and his two sons in a property dispute
44 Sep 5 India Madhya Pradesh Jabalpur 1 Mobile internet Strikes Strike called by 35 organizations
45 Sep 8 India Jammu & Kashmir Anantnag 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
46 Sep 11 India Jammu & Kashmir Kupwara 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
47 Sep 12 India Jammu & Kashmir Baramulla 1 Internet Killing Killing of two militants
48 Sep 15 India Jammu & Kashmir Kulgam 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of a teacher
49 Sep 21 India Manipur Manipur 5 Mobile internet Protests Massive student protest against arrest of 80 students and 6 professors of Manipur University
50 Sep 27 India Jammu & Kashmir Srinagar, Badgam and Anantnag 2 Mobile internet Clashes, Killings Separate incidents of clashes and killings
51 Oct 6 India Jammu & Kashmir 4 districts 1 Mobile internet Security Local body elections
52 Oct 10 India Jammu & Kashmir Kashmir 1 Mobile internet Security Local body elections
53 Oct 11 India Jammu & Kashmir Kupwara 4 Mobile internet Killing Killing of a scholar-turn-militant Manan Wani in a gunfight with security forces
54 Oct 17 India Jammu & Kashmir Srinagar 1 Mobile internet Violence Gunfight between security and militants
55 Oct 20 India Bihar Sitamarhi 1 Internet Clashes Clash during religious function
56 Oct 21 India Jammu & Kashmir Kulgam 1 Mobile internet Violence Gunfight between security and militants
57 Oct 21 India Jammu & Kashmir Srinagar 1 Internet Violence Distance between security and militants
58 Oct 26 India Jammu & Kashmir Baramulla 1 Internet Killing Killing of six militants, subdued by separatists
59 Nov 1 India Jammu & Kashmir Pulwama 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of a militant
60 Nov 10 India Jammu & Kashmir Pulwama 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
61 Nov 20 India Jammu & Kashmir Shopian 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of four militants and a commando
62 Nov 23 India Jammu & Kashmir Anantnag 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of six militants
63 Nov 27 India Jammu & Kashmir Shopian 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of six militants
64 Nov 28 India Jammu & Kashmir Budgam 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
65 Dec 3 India Jammu & Kashmir Shopian 1 Mobile internet Security Search and cordon operation of the security forces
66 Dec 13 India Jammu & Kashmir Baramulla 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
67 Dec 15 India Jammu & Kashmir 6 districts 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of seven civilians
68 Dec 26 India Jammu & Kashmir Pulwama 1 Mobile internet Security Search and cordon operation of the security forces
69 Jan 1 India Maharashtra June 1 Mobile internet Security 201st anniversary of the battle of Bhima-Koregaon
70 Jan 1 India Jammu & Kashmir Pulwama 1 Mobile internet Security Encounters between security forces and militants
71 Jan 8 India Tripura West Tripura 2 Mobile internet / SMS Violence Six youth injured by bullets during protest
72 Jan 9 India Jammu & Kashmir Pulwama 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of a militant
73 Jan 12 India Jammu & Kashmir Kulgam 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
74 Jan 21 India Jammu & Kashmir Shopian 1 Mobile internet Killing Killing of two militants
75 Jan 22 India Jammu & Kashmir Shopian 1 Mobile internet Violence Gunfight between security and militants
76 Jan 24 India Odisha Kendrapara 1 Internet Violence Violent clash between two groups of youth a day before.
A young Kashmiri villager looks at the remains of a house destroyed during a deadly gun battle between militants and Indian government forces in Tral area of Pulwama district, south of Srinagar, on March 5, 2019. Mobile and internet were shut down at least six times in the region during March as a result of the ongoing conflict. CREDIT: TAUSEEF MUSTAFA / AFP

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS BY COUNTRY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDIA</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAKISTAN</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BANGLADESH</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRI LANKA</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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**INTERNET SHUTDOWNS BY COUNTRY**

**SRI LANKA**

**BANGLADESH**

**PAKISTAN**

**INDIA**

**THE FOUR BIGGEST SHUTDOWNS**

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<th>NO.</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>AREA</th>
<th>SERVICE IMPACTED</th>
<th>JUSTIFICATION</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi</td>
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<td>78</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>Sawai Madhopur</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
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<td>To maintain law and order on the fifth day of agitation over quota in jobs and education</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Manipur</td>
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<td>Protests</td>
<td>Planned protest against Citizenship Amendment Bill</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>Feb 13</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of two army personnel and a militant</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>Feb 13</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Allahabad</td>
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<td>Protests, Violence</td>
<td>Attraction between some students and a TV channel over visit by a lawmaker</td>
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<td>82</td>
<td>Feb 14</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Srinagar</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Suicide attack killing more than 40 security personnel</td>
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<td>83</td>
<td>Feb 18</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of 4 army personnel</td>
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<td>84</td>
<td>Feb 22</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of two militants</td>
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<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Feb 23</td>
<td>India</td>
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<td>Rajouri and Poich</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Unidentified masked men setting fire on two shops and two vehicles</td>
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<td>86</td>
<td>Feb 23</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
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<td>Stabilization of contentious bill on permanent residency</td>
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<td>Mar 3</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kupwara</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of a militant</td>
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<td>88</td>
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<td>Kulgam</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
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<td>Clashes between security forces and militants</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
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<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Clashes</td>
<td>Clashes following the custodial death of a 28-year-old</td>
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<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Mar 20</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Srinagar and Budgam</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Alleged custodial killing of a teacher</td>
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<td>91</td>
<td>Mar 22</td>
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<td>3 districts</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of six militants and a 12-year-old boy</td>
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<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Mar 28</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of three militants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Apr 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>Killing of four militants</td>
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<td>94</td>
<td>Apr 4</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Srinagar</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Security, Violence</td>
<td>Clashes between militants at Srinagar Central jail with the staff members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Apr 7</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Information Control</td>
<td>Prevent rumors about an encounter between militants and security forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Chenab Valley</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Killing, Security</td>
<td>Curfew following the killing of a senior leader and his bodyguard</td>
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</table>

**BANGLADESH**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO.</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Aug 5</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>Prevent mobilization of student protesters demanding road safety</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Dec 27</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Information Control</td>
<td>Testing ability to shutdown mobile internet</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dec 29</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Eve of the parliamentary elections</td>
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**PAKISTAN**

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<td>Punjab</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>Mobile Internet</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>Rally organized by supporters of former PM Nawaz Sharif</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Pishin, Killa Abdullah and Mastung</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
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<td>Major cities</td>
<td>Mobile phone services</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>Rallies to mark birth of Prophet Muhammad</td>
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**SRI LANKA**

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<td>1</td>
<td>Apr 22</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Social media, VPN</td>
<td>Security, Information Control</td>
<td>Following the deadly terrorist attacks on Easter Sunday, April 22</td>
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* In Kech district of Balochistan in Pakistan, the 3G/4G data services shut down in February 2017 remain suspended.

Sources: IFJ, Software Freedom Law Center (India), SEF India, Media Matters for Democracy (Pakistan), and Bytes for All Pakistan.
The past year has seen dramatic campaigns for women's rights in several countries of South Asia. International Women's Day on March 8, 2019 witnessed women in several cities of Pakistan pour onto the streets, demanding an end to honour killings, child marriage and workplace harassment among other issues. Under the banner of 'Hum Auratein' or 'we women', spontaneous mobilization saw a range of different organizations and individuals come together to highlight a single cause. Economic, social and reproductive rights were fore-fronted and the mood of the ‘Aurat March’ or ‘Women’s March’ was militant as well as celebratory. Humour and wit ruled, as confident women spoke out against deeply entrenched misogyny. The counterattack was swift, and many of the organizers were at the receiving end of online abuse, death and rape threats and threats of acid attacks.

Women's rights and sexual harassment at the workplace.

The #MeToo wave

The rampant sexual harassment, gender discrimination and all-pervasive sexism in the media in South Asia has been a well-kept public secret. While regional language media houses witness more blatant forms of sexual harassment, toxic masculinity and a boys-club culture characterize English-language media houses. This despite laws specifically prohibiting sexual harassment at the workplace, in India, Nepal and Pakistan, and a coalition of organizations in Bangladesh putting forth a draft “Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act” in October 2018. Clearly, in-house mechanisms to deal with sexual harassment are inadequate and ineffective, and social media, especially Twitter, emerged as a platform to speak out.

Women journalists in Nepal called out several highly placed men, including a former mayor of Kathmandu who had harassed them while they were interviewing him as part of their duty. The hazards of reporting in the field and the need to strengthen safety while at work emerged as a key issue. In Pakistan, the #MeToo moment remained more or less confined to the world of entertainment and saw only a few celebrities being called out, the murmur of #MaiBhi (Urdu for MeToo) was relatively muted mainly due to the social stigma and victim blaming that prevents women from speaking out. The Indian media however, was rocked by the revelations of sexual harassment. In October 2018, the floodgates opened and a torrent of testimonies poured into the public domain, with prominent actors, comedians, authors, editors and senior journalists in the Indian media being called out for sexual harassment and predatory behaviour. This outpouring was preceded by actors and scriptwriters in Bollywood, the Hindi film industry, sharing their stories of sexual harassment and assault that had occurred decades ago. Emboldened, women in the entertainment, advertising and media industries began speaking out. It was nothing short of a tsunami of anguish, trauma and injustice. Social media was abuzz, and the revelations gathered momentum.

Editors and journalists of leading media houses, Times Group, Hindustan Times, The Wire, The Hindu, Express Group, Business Standard and others were named by multiple women on social media. Graphic accounts of the predatory behaviour of senior journalists were shared on Twitter and Facebook, encouraging women to come out with their own experiences, many with these same men.

One of the most prominent journalists to be outed in India was MJ Akbar, noted author and former editor of the Asian Age, Deccan Chronicle, Telegraph, India Today and the Hindustan Times. The 68-year-old journalist-turned-politician is a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament and in October 2018 was Minister of State for External Affairs, until he had to step down about ten days after he was publicly named, one after another, by 20 women journalists who accused him of inappropriate behaviour, sexual harassment and even rape, from as far back as 23 years ago.

The #MeToo handle trended on Twitter, as more and more women shared their stories and named their harassers. Amidst allegations of going on “witch hunts” “lynch mobs”, adding heat to the voices of women’s journalists was the Editors’ Guild of India which in a statement on October 9, 2019, the Editors Guild of India “unequivocally” condemned predatory conduct and said that it was “worse when the perpetrators also happen to be enjoying senior or supervisory positions in the profession”. The Guild also expressed its “gratitude and solidarity towards women journalists who have displayed the courage to bring these critical issues in public debate.” and
called upon media organizations to hold unbiased inquiries into all reported cases. Some of the accused were asked to quit, inquiry committees were set up as per existing laws, and investigations launched. However, speaking out invited the inevitable backlash. Victim blaming, slut shaming and professional isolation were heaped on women who dared speak out. The majority of men named flatly denied the allegations and deployed legal means to silence the women who dared to speak out by foisting them with criminal defamation cases and civil suits. The criminal defamation suit against Priya Ramani, filed by MJ Akbar was clearly intended to intimidate and silence, but has instead had the opposite effect of rallying support around the complainant and other women who have spoken out.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

Whatever be the outcome of investigation into specific cases, the watershed moment for the Indian media in October 2018 has brought the issue of sexual harassment to the fore in unprecedented ways. Conversations on consent, sexuality and gender equity at the workplace are now taking place with more honesty and openness than ever before. Yet, a lot remains to be done. A survey of media houses by Gender at Work and the Network of Women in Media, India, released in February 2019, revealed that more than a third of women journalists had experienced sexual harassment at work. However, more than half of them did not report the incident, mainly due a lack of faith in systems of redressal.

In India, the Indian Journalists Union has asked its state unions across the country to ensure that media houses have Complaints Committees as mandated under the law to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace. It is also lobbying for the setting up of separate appellate courts/tribunals to ensure speedy justice for survivors of sexual harassment.

The situation is similar in Pakistan, where an IFJ survey in 2017 revealed that one in two female journalists in the country has experienced gender-based violence in the course of her work. When the number of women journalists is small, making their voice heard is that much more challenging.

**DOUBLE WHAMMY**

Women journalists who were covering the historic opening of the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala in south India to women devotees of all ages were set upon by organized mobs, with several suffering grave injuries. The Sabarimala shrine in southern Kerala has been a male preserve in recent years. In what was seen as a historic verdict in September 2018, the Supreme Court found that keeping women in the reproductive age, was a discriminatory practice, inconsistent with constitutional guarantees on fundamental rights. Yet the aftermath of the decision has been stormy, with the state’s ruling left coalition vowing to ensure its quick implementation while opposition parties and the right-wing have pushed back strongly.

On October 17, when the shrine opened up for the season of pilgrimage, large crowds gathered to prevent access of women of reproductive age were dispersed by police interventions. These regrouped as media teams arrived at the base camp for the trek up to the hill shrine, stopping every vehicle that passed to ensure that it did not carry any young woman, barred by ancient menstrual taboos from entering the shrine. A number of women journalists were pulled out of their vehicles and beaten by mobs while the police looked on. The Sabarimala protests continued over months, but given the targeted violence, many editors took a decision not to assign women to cover the story, thus depriving them of reporting on one of the most significant stories of the year. The picture of Shajila Ali Fathima, cameraperson for Kairali TV in state capital Thrissur, in 2018, went viral. On January 3, 2019, journalists staged rallies to protest against the assaults.

**PUSHING FOR CHANGE**

The need for collective action is apparent, given that membership of journalist unions in the Asia-Pacific region is growing, despite the digital disruption. According to IFJ figures, women’s membership in unions also continues to grow, increasing by 20 percent since 2015 - compared to an overall growth in union membership of 7 percent. Women’s leadership however, still needs a boost up. While women journalists represent 31 percent of all members in journalist unions and media associations in the Asia-Pacific, they occupy just 24 percent of positions on executive committees. The good news is that this is changing.

In Nepal, the Nepal Press Union is increasing its gender quota to 30 percent and the Federation of Nepali Journalists increased its executive, with one female vice president. In order to ensure effective leadership, the IFJ and its affiliate unions have been conducting regular training and capacity building among women journalists.

The Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), has 30 percent quota in executive positions for women journalists in its unions across the country, and the General Secretary is also a woman. In the recent provincial elections in Afghanistan, female journalists were elected as head of gender councils, while in some provinces one of five top leaders are women. There is a total of about 60 women journalists working as members of Kabul and Provincial executive boards. A survey by the Center for Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), AIJA’s sister organization showed that there are around 1696 women in media and 764 of them are professional and semi-professional. The CPAWJ flags verbal harassment and cultural barriers as one of the major challenges for Afghan women to pursue professional journalism.

Clearly, there is a need for systemic change and a transformation of workplace culture so that women media persons can reach their full potential as professionals. The strong voices of women journalists demanding their rights, and ably amplified by the media over the past year gives hope that the media ecosystem can be transformed.
AFGHANISTAN: THE KILLING FIELDS

Sultan Mahmood Khairkhah, a journalist working for Zhman TV network in Khost province, died after he was attacked by unidentified armed men on March 15. He became the fourth journalist to be killed in Afghanistan in 2019, with Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) claiming responsibility for his murder.

Soon after this incident, a group of Afghan journalists from eastern Afghanistan gathered at Nangarhar province to express concerns over their safety and that threats against media workers were increasing.

In March, Nisar Ahmad, another journalist working for a local TV station in Helmand was wounded in a blast caused by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Lashkargah city. In February two local journalists Shafaq Aria and Rahimullah Rahmani, were killed by unknown armed men who attacked their office in the city of Taloqan in northern Takhar province. January also witnessed the first summary execution of a journalist in south-western Afghanistan when local radio host Jawed Noori was singled out and killed by suspected Taliban insurgents. Ironically, 27-year-old Noori, frustrated with the increasing number of civilian deaths had posted an appeal to Afghanistan’s President in November: “Dear Mr President, the land of Farah has no more capacity to build cemeteries for our youth.” Two months later, he became a victim himself.

According to the IFJ report In the Shadow of Violence, Afghanistan was the deadliest country for journalists in the world during 2018. The killings in the first quarter of 2019 show that the country continues to be extremely hazardous for journalists. Bearing witness to the continued loss of journalists across Afghanistan, media outlets and journalists are increasingly worried about a repeat of the 2018 and 2017 levels of violence against the Afghan media community. The deadliest targeted attack was recorded on April 30, 2018 when journalists covering a suicide attack in Police District 9 of Kabul were targeted by a suicide bomber, killing nine and wounding five. This was the first deliberate attack on journalists who were covering the aftermath of an earlier terrorist attack in the same area. This attack changed the nature of threats and risks for the journalist community in Afghanistan, signaling a new trend to target groups of journalists. The same day, two other journalists in southern Kandahar and eastern Khost province were attacked and murdered.

DANGEROUS COUNTRY

Afghanistan’s rank as the most dangerous country for journalists, includes over 250 cases of violence against journalists and media workers recorded during the year. Of the 16 journalists and media workers killed during 2018, the Taliban and IS-K have claimed responsibility for the majority of the deaths.

Beside killings, the Afghan media community faces other forms of violence including injury, physical assault, threats, intimidation, insult and abuse. In 2018 alone, 15 journalists and media workers were injured, 21 cases of physical assault were recorded, 38 reports of threats and intimidation documented and in 23 cases, journalists were insulted or mistreated. There was also a case of the abduction of a journalist.

Kabul and its surrounding provinces with 42 cases of violence topped the list, followed by western Afghanistan with 22 cases. The Southern and South-eastern provinces occupy the third place, with journalists facing 15 cases of violence in each. Terrorist and insurgent groups have been behind the majority of the incidents of violence, murder and intimidation. The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) and the Taliban are responsible for around 50 cases of violence against journalists. Another 44 cases of violence were perpetrated by individuals working with the government. Others, including local warlords, strongmen and unidentified actors were responsible for the rest of the cases of violence against journalists and the media community.

Afghan women journalists, already vulnerable, were also affected adversely. Of the total number of cases of violence recorded, 11 were perpetrated against women journalists.

The increase in violence and bloodshed against journalists has raised concerns among Afghan and international journalists alike. It has affected the work environment, the level of access of journalists to hostile situations and war zones and created uncertainty about the future of professional journalism.

PATCHY ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to information remains one of the markers of a free press and vibrant democracy. This principle has long been neglected in Afghanistan attempts to establish a strong media and civil society.

After years of effort for the right of access to information, in 2014 an access to information law was enacted for the first time. Although now in place, lack of access to information continues to be a major obstacle not only for Afghan citizens but also the media community.

In March 2018, a revised version of the law was endorsed by President Ashraf Ghani through a legislative decree. The newly-amended law is seen by many experts as meeting international standards of the Right to Information (RTI) and was rated among the top laws for access to information in the Global Right to Information Rating by Canada’s Centre for Law and Democracy.

The provision for legal protection for whistleblowers, obliging all government institutions and authorities to abide by the right to access to information and establishing an independent access to information Oversight Commission, as well as other provisions, were among the elements lauded in the rating.

Afghan expert bodies on freedom of speech and RTI, have said the amended access to information law now guarantees the right of every Afghan citizen to access information and removes some of the barriers that were major challenges in the past.

While it is expected that a new law will make it easier for the media community to access information, particularly in terms of investigations, many reports emerged in 2018 about censorship and lack of access to information from government organizations and entities in Kabul and the provinces. A number of challenges still exist including: a lack of a culture of access to information from government authorities; a lack of political and legal support to the Oversight Commission on the access...
According to the IFJ report, in the shadow of violence, Afghanistan was the deadliest country for journalists in the world during 2018.

The scene in Kabul following the deadly suicide blast that killed nine Afghan media workers in late April 2018. Afghanistan was the deadliest country for journalists in the world, according to the IFJ’s report, in the Shadow of Violence, released in January 2019. CREDIT: AUA.

to information law and, in many cases, lack of thorough implementation of the law.

On May 22, 2018, reporters from the southern Ghazni province complained to local authorities about the challenge of accessing information. This issue also surfaced in northeastern Badakhshan province, with complaints by several reporters about RTI access. In the same month, reporters in Daikundi province also criticized the process. Impediments to the right to access information were also documented in Herat, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Balkh and Kabul.

Besides the complaints about the lack of access to information, 24 complaints were reportedly referred to the right to access to information Oversight Commission in 2018 alone. Based on the findings of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC), the majority of cases were regarding the failure of government officials to provide access to information to investigative reporters, or lack of access to information about key projects and contracts. Despite the legal framework in place, there is clearly still a long way to go for absolute openness in access to information in Afghanistan in order to meet the target of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Restive Countryside

While the country’s capital, Kabul, has offered a more open environment for Afghan journalists, the provinces and remote rural areas of the country remain a challenge for the media community. This is particularly so, considering the fact that instability is increasing by the day and that the Taliban now control many areas of rural Afghanistan.

A survey by Pajhwok News Agency in January 2019 in Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman provinces found that the most challenging issue for media was a lack of access to information. Journalists reported frequent failure to receive timely access to information and that information received was too often inaccurate.

In other instances, journalists in rural areas are facing threats or other impacts of the hostile environment which makes it hard for them to report freely and safely. In Herat, which is considered a fairly stable province in western Afghanistan, the director of a local TV station reported in May 2018 that he was threatened with murder due to non-payment of taxes to the Taliban. In Ghazni province, Ahmad Farid Omar, the owner and director of a local TV station openly revealed that the Taliban was constantly threatening to extract a fixed amount of taxation on an annual basis.

In other provinces some journalists shared stories of how government officials mistreat them and ban their access to key government officials and gatherings. In Kandahar, around 12 reporters and photographers of different media outlets revealed that they were not permitted to cover the Afghan president’s visit to the province in June 2018.

Challenging Impunity

Afghanistan has seen some progress in deterring impunity of killers of journalists. However, questions remain about the process of meting out justice and whether or not the processes were fair and transparent.

On April 16, 2019, two persons accused of killing journalist Abdul Manan Arghand were sentenced to death in a closed-door trial. Arghand, a reporter with privately-owned Kabul News was shot to death on April 25, 2018 by unidentified gunmen while on his way to work. The identity of the two convicted perpetrators still remains unknown, though it is believed that they are associated with the Taliban. The Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA) remains unsatisfied that the two sentenced to death are really connected to the killing of Arghand. The process of conviction was not transparent, and information, evidence, documents and recordings were not shared with the AIJA technical team which is a member of the inspection and monitoring team in the Ministry of Interior. Further, since AIJA and other media organizations were kept away from police, attorneys, investigations and court procedures, the lack of transparency does not bode well for the fair pursuit of justice.

Likewise, there are doubts about the real perpetrators of the killing of journalist Ahmad Shah. On January 3, 2019, a special anti-terrorism tribunal handed out a death sentence to one of the accused and imprisonment of 30 years and six years respectively to two of the other accused. Ahmad Shah, reporter with BBC’s Pashto service was killed in Ghazni on April 30, 2018. The motive of the killing was unclear, and the identity of the accused was not made public. The family of Ahmad Shah was not fully satisfied that the real killers had been brought to book. The case is pending in the appeals court.

In an unprecedented initiative in January 2018, local media advocacy and support organization Nai announced that it had taken 190 cases of violence against journalists to the International Criminal Court (ICC). These included 48 cases of murder, 74 cases of injury, 15 cases of abduction and 75 cases of threats which had taken place since 2002.

Along with this initiative, the Afghan government has established the Joint Committee on Safety and Security of Journalists (JCSSJ), comprising government organizations, journalists and media representatives to address the cases of violence against journalists in Afghanistan. Meetings of the JCSSJ with the participation of the international community including the UN, the EU and representatives of embassies in Kabul are being held regularly since April 2018. In August 2018, representatives of the committee stated that, of 170 cases under investigation, 16 cases were referred to the National Directorate of Security (NDS) for further investigation. The spokesperson of the Attorney General’s Office said of the 16 referred cases, six cases were addressed and another ten were under investigation. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior’s Anti-Crimes Director General, Mohammad Farid Ali, said that 69 suspects had been arrested in relation to 33 cases of violence against journalists.

If the Government of Afghanistan is demonstrating some level of accountability towards the Afghan media sector and the journalist community, this has been mainly due to the high level of activism and advocacy built up internationally and nationally. Media activism is a priority for influential organizations actively working to protect the media community, defend the values of freedom of speech and expression and raise a voice against threats faced by the media community.

Shaky Growth

The hazards for the media in Afghanistan notwithstanding, in 2018 the sector added more jobs for journalists across the country. A reported 57 new media outlets were established, though 34 media outlets were also closed down in 2018. Among the newly-launched media outlets were 13 TV channels, 13 radio stations, 25 print media outlets and six online media outlets.

While the establishment of new media during a challenging year is evidence of the deep commitment within Afghanistan for freedom of expression and an independent media, the sustainability of the sector remains a concern. Many media outlets in Afghanistan face issues of viability and journalists are continually at risk of losing their jobs.

The big picture of the media sector in Afghanistan and journalists in particular, is that both face multi-faceted and multi-layered challenges ranging from terrorism, instability and insecurity, to shrinking and unstable media outlets and an overall lack of commitment by the government to support the right to access information. Despite this, a vibrant media community in Afghanistan continues to carry out the duty of informing the public, albeit at great personal risk.
BANGLADESH

PROTEST AND PUSHBACK

In an unprecedented show of solidarity, on October 15, 2018, editors of all the major dailies in Bangladesh formed a human chain in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka. They took to the streets demanding amendments to a now law, the Digital Security Act 2018, which was passed by the parliament on September 19, 2018.

The rare show of unity was triggered by grave apprehensions about a law that has wide-ranging power to gag the media and arbitrarily penalize media workers. These concerns exist along with the real fear of attacks on the lives, dignity and property of media persons.

Impunity for perpetrators of crimes against journalists and slow police investigations into these cases ultimately amount to denial of justice. Moreover, exiling of the immediate past chief justice Surendra Kumar Sinha, the organized filing of hundreds of cases against prominent journalists and politicians from different corners of the country, as well as the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of some people have triggered real fears.

Self-censorship is growing in Bangladesh’s media as a result of the endemic violence against journalists and media houses, coupled with the widespread impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these crimes.

UNREASONABLE RESTRICTIONS

The constitution of Bangladesh provides for freedom of expression, subject to “reasonable restrictions imposed by law.” The country has a vibrant media incorporating more than 1,000 daily newspapers, 45 private satellite television channels and three State-owned TV channels and thousands of online news websites. Yet activists say that people cannot exercise their constitutional right to free expression as the so-called “reasonable restrictions” are most often imposed unreasonably. A number of laws are invoked to restrict journalists’ activities as well as people’s right to know and express opinions.

Defamation remains a criminal offense in Bangladesh. Sedition laws can be applied broadly, and penalties range from fines to life in prison or even the death penalty if the accused is found to have undermined the constitution. One case in point is that of Daily Star editor, Mahfuz Anam, who is facing 62 defamation and 17 sedition lawsuits, most filed in 2016 after he admitted to publishing unsubstantiated information about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, supplied to him by the military intelligence service in 2007 and 2008. While he was not arrested, Anam had to censure the country to appear for court hearings in 50 of Bangladesh’s 64 judicial districts.

In 2006, Bangladesh enacted the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act) intended to provide a safe virtual space. But instead of protecting citizens, the Act has been used to undermine the constitution and creation of an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, which has made journalism and especially investigative journalism virtually impossible and caused “panic among all users of the digital space”.

The minimum penalty for violation of the ICT Act, especially Section 57, it has instead strengthened “policing media operations, censoring content and controlling media freedom and freedom of speech” and that it gave “unlimited power to the police to enter premises; search offices; carry out body searches; seize computers and networks, serve, and everything related to the digital platforms.

Under the ICT Act, the police can arrest anybody on suspicion without warrant and without approval of any other authorities. The Editor’s Council has criticized that the vague language of the act could be “misinterpreted and used against the media” and said it had created an “atmosphere of fear and intimidation, which makes journalism and especially investigative journalism virtually impossible” and caused “panic among all users of the digital space”.

Critics, both domestic and international, say the law is inconsistent with constitutional rights to freedom of speech and expression as per Article 39 and undermines democracy and human rights, which are among the fundamental principles of state policy.

Bangladesh’s commitment under the Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, that obliges the government to promote free flow of information, has also come under the scanner after the enactment of the Digital Security Act. Today in Bangladesh, a person may be subject to two-year jail for publishing defamatory content in a newspaper but will get a 14-year jail term for the same thing posted on a website. This discrepancy points to the fact that the government is trying more seriously to tame digital media because the depth, breadth and influence of the digital media are proving to be greater than that of the print media.

THE YEAR WAS CRUCIAL FOR BOTH POLITICS AND JOURNALISM IN BANGLADESH, WITH THE GENERAL ELECTION HELD ON DECEMBER 30, 2018, FOLLOWING THE CONVICTION AND ARREST OF THE COUNTRY’S MAIN OPPOSITION LEADER KHALEDA ZIA IN TWO CORRUPTION CASES.
opposition leader Khaleda Zia in two corruption cases.

Two massive street demonstrations occupied the country – one in April demanding the reform of the quota system in government jobs and the other in late July and early August for better road safety. The government quelled both movements by force, as well as by giving assurances of fulfilment of the demands of the agitators, most of whom were students. The protests began on July 29, 2018, after the death of two students in Dhaka as a speeding bus ran over them. The massive student protests spiralled into violence after attacks on protesting students and rallies by the law enforcement agencies.

On August 5, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) ordered the shutdown of 3G and 4G internet platforms. A day before the election, it also suspended 4G and 5G internet services. The government also blocked Skype and censored some news sites purportedly to fight fake news and misinformation.

The BTRC ordered the shutdown of 3G and 4G internet services on December 29 and, although the mobile internet was restored for a few hours in the evening of polling day, it was later shut down again until further notice. Services were also cut off on December 27 for 10 hours.

The restrictions and limitations on the internet could not stop the spread of rumour and gossip based on unrehable information circulated via mobile phones, which are ubiquitous in every corner of Bangladesh. There was panic in many places and families in villages were alerting students over the phone about possible trouble and urging them not to take risks by participating in protests. The ruling Awami League emerged as a landslide winner in the general election for its third consecutive term in power amidst repressed allegations of rigged polls.

On polling day, at least 18 people were killed and more than 1000 injured in clashes. At least seven journalists were assaulted in Dhaka and Chattogram, while a number of journalists covering the polls faced obstructions from both activists of political parties and law enforcement agencies.

Private television station Jamuna TV claimed that it was arbitrarily taken off the air by cable operators on the eve of the election.

Prior to the election, on December 24, a group of reporters who were covering the elections campaign were attacked by masked men with hockey sticks and batons. The assailants injured around ten journalists, mainly from Jugantor daily and Jamuna TV in a hotel in Narayanganj, 46km from Dhaka. The attackers also smashed hotel windows and vandalized more than a dozen vehicles belonging to private owners as well as media outlets.

The post-election era began badly for the media. Police on January 1, 2019, picked up Dhaka Tribune's front of the Khuna Press Club. Hedait and Khuna correspondent of Daily Manobhummi, Rashidul Islam then became the first journalists to be accused of violations under the Digital Security Act. Assistant Returning Officer and Upazila Nirbhori Office (UNO or executive magistrate) of Bataghat sub-district of Khuna filed the case on the charge of reporting ‘wrong’ information regarding the election results.

Hedait was put on remand the next day and released on January 3. The District and Sessions Judge’s Court granted him bail and ordered a fresh charge sheet presented by the police to substantiate the authenticity of Hedait’s report. The High Court on January 21 granted anticipatory bail to Rashidul Islam, the other accused who was arrested on December 30.

Abu Zafar, the Keraniganj correspondent of Daily Jugantor and also general secretary of Keraniganj Press Club, was the second journalist to be arrested under the law on February 19. He is one of five journalists accused in a case filed by a local ruling party leader, Md Polash, with Dohar police station. The other accused are Nawabganj correspondent Azharul Islam, Azhulia correspondent Mehedi Hasan Mitu, Dharmat correspondent Shammm Khan and Golapganj correspondent SM Humayun Kabir.

The Bangladesh government earlier claimed that the country’s new digital law would be used as a shield to protect the innocent and to target bad elements. Promises were made at different times that the law would not be used against journalists or to control the voices of the people. But the growing list of charges has proven the contrary.

Al Jazeera’s website in Bangladesh has remained blocked since it ran a report titled ‘Bangladesh top security adviser accused of abduction and torture’ on February 14, 2019. So too, the website of the Daily Jugantor was blocked for more than 18 hours on June 1 following an order from the telecommunications authority in Bangladesh over the publishing of news headlined ‘Murder It Was’ relating to the alleged killing of Teknaf municipal councillor Akramul Haque. On December 10, BTRC unblocked 58 websites including some news portals after access to them was restricted on “national security” grounds ahead of the general election on December 30.

MURDER AND IMPUNITY

Suborna Nodi, 32, the Falmab correspondent for Ananda TV and a journalist for the Daily Jagoroti Bangla newspaper, was hacked to death at the door of her home on August 28. Nodi’s murder was apparently an outcome of a family feud according to the victim’s family members and investigators. A murder case was filed against Nodi’s ex-husband and six others, all of whom have been arrested. The case is still under investigation.

Shahabuddin Bachchu, acting editor of weekly Amarik Bikorkamp, preceded Suborna Nodi to become the victim of a horstic killing in Munshiganj district on June 11, 2018. Bachchu was better known for his free-thinking views and daily critiques against religion on Facebook, rather than for his role as an editor of a weekly. The 55-year-old poet and proprietor of a publishing house, Bishakha Prokashoni, was talking to villagers at a pharmacy near his village of Kakiwald when at least four motor-cycle borne youths wearing hoods arrived and exploded a bomb outside the pharmacy to create panic. The assailants dragged Bachchu outside the shop, shot him point blank in the chest and fled. He died on the spot.

At least 22 journalists have been killed in Bangladesh since 1996. But very few cases of crimes against journalists have been resolved. Among the list of unsolved cases yet to see progress is the killing of journalist couple Sagar-Runi. Meherun Rumi, senior reporter of private TV channel ATN Bangla, and her husband Sagar Sarowar, news editor of Maanarta TV, were murdered on February 11, 2012.

Immediately after the murders, then-home minister Sahara Khanum said the killers would be arrested within 48 hours. Police officials also claimed to have made “significant progress” in the investigation at the time. The elite branch of the police, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which has been probing the case for almost seven years after the detective branch of police failed to make any progress in identifying the perpetrators. Submission of the probe report has been deferred at least 57 times.

While the pace of investigation and rate of concluded investigations have slightly improved in recent years, lengthy investigations that fail to reach the trial stage remain a critical concern.

Of the journalists killed in Bangladesh, judgments have been delivered in just two cases: in June 2013, after eight years, nine people were convicted of the November 2005 murder of journalist Goutam Das, and, in November 2016, eight people were convicted of the murder of journalist Manik Chandra Saha, killed in Sylhet in 2010.

Although the string of murders of bloggers, publishers and other freethinkers by suspected Islamic militants in recent years appears to have reduced due to nationwide drives by law enforcement agencies, victims’ families remain frustrated with the slow progress in the murder cases.

Since the Shahabuddin Bachchu protests in 2013 to demand the trial of
war criminals, at least ten “free thinkers” have been killed by militants across the country after being tagged as “atheists”. Shahjahan Bachchu was the latest victim in the spate of killings.

Most cases are stuck at the investigation level, with a court delivering a verdict in just one case, while another is under trial. Of the ten cases, eight were filed with different police stations in Dhaka. Investigations are yet to be completed in four of the eight pending cases. Four years after the killing of writer-blogger Avijit Roy, police submitted the charge-sheet to the court naming six people as the accused in the case, including a sacked army major Syed Ziaul Haque, who remains at large. Among the accused are members of banned militant outfit Anar al-islam.

The opportunity to get some answers through the legal justice system have been lost forever, with some of the accused in the blogger killings found dead after so called “cross fires” or “gun battles” with law enforcers.

The number of media-listed papers that enjoy government advertising is 434 publications. There are also innumerable irregular magazines of different organizations which are also getting a share.

It is clear that newspapers or digital news media are not a lucrative business in Bangladesh. But it is an undeniable fact that the country is plagued by corruption and irregularities. The volume of black money is much bigger than the formal economy in Bangladesh, and the media industry is not exempt.

Some owners show their media outlets as money guzzling enterprises in their balance sheets, with media enterprises acting as a shield for other profit-making businesses. Secondly, it is also easy to become a proprietor-cum-editor of a newspaper or online news outlet. Some run a media house without obeying rules. Others pay high salaries to employees, or pay less, or even decide to not pay them at all. There is no accountability.

Those that get advertisements from the government by bribing officials can show circulation figures of up to 100,000, yet only 500 copies at best without having a single employee. Ownership yields power. It can push propaganda, influence politics, threaten the corrupt or appease the wealthy, all to get something in return.

Amid all this, there are only half a dozen newspapers in Bangladesh which are left making a profit after paying a proper salary to their employees. These are good quality newspapers, upholding journalistic ethics.

More than two dozen dailies are operating under a ‘low cost, no loss’ policy. Huge salary discrimination persists in radio and television channels, some of which survive on subsidies. Almost all the channels are news based, except four which prioritize entertainment and sport over news.

From March 4, 2019, government imposed a new tax on advertisements by Facebook, Google, YouTube and other global giants in response to demands by media owners in Bangladesh. However, the order is yet to be reviewed independently, as the imposition of taxes may fall upon local online publications as well.
BHUTAN
MINUSCULE MEDIA, CRITICAL CHALLENGES

Bhutan held its third democratic elections in 2018 and a new party promising to support a vibrant Bhutanese media was elected to form the country's third ever government.

The centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) won 30 of the 47 seats in Bhutan’s National Assembly in the September-October election, taken to victory by its leader, 50-year-old urology surgeon Lotay Tshering, on a platform of “nation building”.

The tiny country of 800,000 people, wedged between China and India, is widely known for its Gross National Happiness index, but is today facing more serious battles with inequality, high foreign debt to neighbouring India, as well as youth unemployment, rural poverty and criminal gangs.

2018 also saw the Election Commission of Bhutan tighten regulations for both traditional and social media even as Bhutanese media, especially private entities, continue to be plagued by financial and professional issues.

Bhutanese newspapers are getting younger due to older and more experienced journalists quitting their jobs for professional and financial reasons. Although Bhutan practices a liberal licensing policy for media, quantity-wise, newspaper houses have dwindled from a high of 12 in 2010 to just seven newspapers today. The main reason for the shutdown was and continues to be financial sustainability. Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) launched media literacy and advocacy in 2017, and it was revealed that some journalists feel this is another - a legacy of the first democratically elected government — at

TIGHT REINS

The government of the day, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) has not attempted to control Bhutanese media so far, but the new Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering did make a comment about Bhutanese journalists not asking “good” questions at his government’s first “Meet the Press” event in December 2018. Journalists meet ministers of the government once a month – a legacy of the first democratically elected government — at “Meet the Press.”

The DNT went on to institute a “Friday Meet / Meet the PM” session where journalists meet a selection of cabinet ministers once a week. Some journalists feel this is another version of a press release. This may have begun with good intent on the part of the government, but it is a disconcerting expectation that the intended message from the government be relayed to the people as is. The Prime Minister stated that the main aim of the session would be to “inform the nation on government policy and decisions.”

February 2019 also saw a district court reduce BICMA (Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority)’s highest penalty imposed on a media organization from Nu. 224,625 (USD 3,208) to Nu. 45,000 (USD 643). The Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) was slapped with the fine in December 2016 for reporting on a banned film Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait.

The use of social media is growing exponentially with the increase in mobile phone users. Kuensel reported in October 2018 that social media-related complaints topped the number of complaints to the Election Commission of Bhutan.

2018 also saw the Election Commission of Bhutan tighten regulations for both traditional and social media even as Bhutanese media, especially private entities, continue to be plagued by financial and professional issues.
and Media Officer of the Department of Information and Media. However, the country’s first media council has not met even once since its institution. A Secretariat is supposed to be created for the Media Council, but this is currently still in the works. Only civil servants will be part of the Secretariat. Although there has been criticism about this being largely government-dominated, many journalists feel it will enjoy greater independence than the BICMA due to journalists being part of the council.

ATTACKS AND HARASSMENT

The lower house (National Assembly) elections took place in the latter half of 2018, with the new government being elected in October 2018. The election period was, as usual, rife with reports of anti-campaigning and mudslinging. Unlike other times, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) appointed a media arbitrator responsible for ensuring media coverage and advertising according to Election Commission rules. There were several interventions by the media arbitrator of the ECB of which the harshest was the suspension of a journalist saying that the suit arose from a Facebook post she had made. The journalist had made a post about child abuse after verification, but the stepmother of the child sued her for libel. JAB had a discussion with its board members to discuss intervention, but did not take any action, as the journalist had not appealed to JAB for help. The journalist ended up paying a fine in lieu of a three-month prison sentence.

A former anchor with BBS who contested the elections shared at a public forum that he was harassed and bullied by the management into resigning. He had shared this while campaigning. This was filmed and widely circulated on social media.

BUILDING CAPACITY

JAB has been active in media support and development despite minimal funding in 2018. There were several months last year when the organization did not have the funds to conduct many activities as it wanted, but new avenues of engagement were explored. One example was a series of “Monthly Dialogues” with JAB moderating about 14 panels on education, sexual harassment, etc. The participants included ministers, policy-makers, and people related to the topics being discussed.

JAB also organized a gender safety and equality training supported by the IFJ and the Norsk Journalistlag (NJ). Other activities were supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) including a journalism code of conduct seminar, training in literary journalism, longform narrative and storytelling, and workshops on media literacy in rural parts of Bhutan. The media literacy workshop saw more than 260 community participants involved in the activity. A rural reporting grant, supported by UNDEF, has also been disbursed, while JAB’s Occasional Journal: Bhutan Press Mirror, Vol. 3, has also been published.

JAB’s annual journalism awards will be held on May 3, 2019, coinciding with World Press Freedom Day, to recognize contributions by individual journalists, including freelancers.

LOOKING AHEAD

In order to prevent political interference at BBS, it is vital that it become a public service broadcaster. There have been government-level discussions but nothing has materialized as yet. Media literacy campaigns need to be amplified to counter propaganda, fake news, and sensationalism. A lot has to be done to boost the morale of journalists which is at an all-time low. Anecdotal evidence reveals that many experienced journalists quit their jobs after becoming disillusioned with their management and demotivated at work. Journalists may not have been sent into exile as stated in the World Press Freedom Index 2018, published by Reporters Sans Frontières, a country-ranking that was greeted by intense debate in Bhutan. However, many Bhutanese journalists resigned due to lack of motivation and the feeling that they could not practice “real journalism” in their media houses.

Bhutanese media houses also see very few women in leadership positions. Only Kuensel has a female chief editor. She is the only one till date to assume this role. There are several media houses where female journalists are more qualified and deserving, but aren’t even considered. It will be a priority for JAB to enhance gender equity in media houses.

JAB intends to create a community of journalists that supports and motivates each member over the next few years. A legal support system will also be created for journalists to protect freedom of expression. There appears to be no viable solution at present to address the financial woes of Bhutan’s private media, which remain unsustainable and unreliable.
Political parties are among the largest spenders in the national level elections, as per the data of the Election Commission of India. The data shows that in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the total expenditure of political parties was Rs. 12,754 crore. Of this, over 80% was spent on advertisements, posters, and other materials. The Election Commission has also put in place measures to prevent the use of advertisements and other materials that could influence voters. The measures include the imposition of penalties for non-compliance and the requirement for political parties to file returns of expenditure.
Kashmir, Shujaat Bukhari, rattled Kashmir’s media community and drew massive outrage, nationally and globally. Around 7pm on June 14, the 50-year-old journalist exited his office in Srinagar’s Press Enclave, which houses the majority of newspaper offices including Rising Kashmir. Three gunmen showered bullets on his vehicle, leaving him dead. Two police personnel guarding him were also killed in the brutal attack.

Police held militant group Lashkar-e-Toiba responsible for the murder, and released a list of four suspects including Pakistan-based Saiful Gul, Naveed Jatt, Azad Ahmed Malik, and Muhammad Ahmad as the killers. While Jatt and Malik were killed last year, Bhat is still at large. In the face of police ‘clam’ of solving the case, the Kashmir Edors Guild questioned the unwarranted delay in filing the chargesheet in the murder case.

Bukhari, a peacenik and a regular at Track 2 conferences, was shot dead in a Similarly grave attack on Shujaat’s brother Imran Bukhari, a journalist who had been covering a movement over tribal land rights. He was killed while covering preparations for the up-coming elections in Chhattisgarh. Achyutananda Sahu was killed while covering preparations for upcoming state elections in Chhattisgarh. Babu and K.K. Saji were part of a five-member team assigned to cover floods that were sweeping through the central district of Kottayam. Three members of the team were rescued when their boat capsized, but Babu and Saji perished in the accident.

The action was to fight against what is described as ‘undemocratic attacks’ on independent media and the safety and security of journalists in India. It reiterated the need for strong laws to stave off the menacing growth of attacks and killings of journalists in the country.

On September 1, 2018, following a nationwide protest call by IJU affiliate the Indian Journalists Union (IJU), thousands of journalists held rallies and protests denouncing attacks on freedom of the press and expression. CREDIT: IJU

In notifying the country’s polling schedule, the election commission of India (ECI) made special mention of the menace of fake news and hate speech.

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Like the north-east, the insurgency prone region of Kashmir continues to pose enormous challenges for journalists. The Himalayan region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the main bone of contention between India and Pakistan, has been reeling under a full-blown armed insurgency since 1989. Since the killing of the Laas Koul, director of the Doordarshan station in Srinagar in 1998 by suspected militants, at least 21 journalists in Kashmir have been killed due to their work, according to IFJ statistics, making the region the deadliest in the country in terms of journalist killings alone. In the same time, the national total of killings for India was just over a 120.

Armed conflict as well as civilian unrest pose severe challenges for local journalists targeted by all sides of the conflict. The killing and intimidation continued in Kashmir in 2018 and is the key reason the IFJ continues to give focus to the media situation there.

While the journalism community was still mourning following Shujaat Bukhari’s assassination, a young journalist was jailed under draconian security legislation. In a night raid on August 27, 2018, Jammu and Kashmir police arrested the assistant editor at Kashmir Narrator, Aasif Sultan, from his home in Srinagar’s Batamalo neighbourhood. Sultan was illegally held in police lock-up for four days until being formally arrested on August 31. The announcement followed after Kashmir-based journalists associations questioned his illegal detention.

Police charged the 30-year-old for “harbouring militants” and giving support to a “proscribed” militant organization. Sultan was charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, an anti-terror law which has come under sharp criticism for curtailing freedom of expression. Local and international media organizations have repeatedly urged the state government to withdraw charges or release him on bail.

To date, Sultan continues to languish behind bars some eight months on. It is believed that Sultan was under watch by the police since he featured a story in July on the second anniversary of the death of the young Kashmiri militant Burhan Wani, a killing that sparked off months of strife on the streets.

Kashmir had its share of journalists killed over 25 years, and killings of journalists in the country. It said more than 120 journalists had been killed in the country over 25 years, with 95 percent of cases “still languishing in the labyrinths of pending court cases”. Such attacks and the growing atmosphere of fear amongst working journalists were not only impacting the profession but also the public’s right to information. While journalists in cities face immense challenges, the situation of journalists in small towns and villages is even more precarious.

Hazardous Hinterland

A single day in October highlighted the dangerous reality of journalists reporting in the field. On October 30, video journalist Achyutananda Sahu was killed while covering preparations for upcoming state elections in Chhattisgarh. Sahu was part of a media team from government-run Doordarshan television, embedded with local police. He was killed during crossfire when the group came under attack from a Maoist militant group. The other two Doordarshan media workers with Sahu were uninjured in the attack.

The same day, Chandan Tiwari, reporter for Aaj News in Chhattisgarh was found unconscious in the jungle after having previously lodged two police complaints over threats he had received. Tiwari later died in hospital. Jharkhand witnessed another journalist’s death in early December when the body of Amit Topno, 35, a tribal journalist who had been covering a movement over tribal land rights, was found on the road near state capital Ranchi.

Three journalists covering the up-coming elections were detained in October by the Chhattisgarh Police for eight hours in Narayanpur in Bastar district without any specific charges and released only after their phones were checked and memory cards copied. Following a pattern of ever-rising attacks on journalists by both the state and non-state actors, the EU and the National Union of Journalists India (NUJ) have been demanding enactment of a safety law from the Central Government. The Maharashtra government already has one in place.

Besides the long arm of the state, natural calamities also took a toll. Two journalists in Kerala died while covering the massive floods that swept across the state in July. Bipin Babu and K.K. Saji were part of a five-member team assigned to a leading daily Mathrubhumi to cover floods that were sweeping through the central district of Kottayam. Three members of the team were rescued when their boat capsized, but Babu and Saji perished in the accident.

Reporters in rural Kashmir say they are more vulnerable to being questioned and harassed. On March 25, 2019, two policemen in civilian clothes arrived in the neighbourhood of Greater Kashmir Bureau Chief in south Kashmir, Khalid Gul. They carried with them a summons against him for a report on an attack on a local politician two days earlier, and Gul said a statement was forcibly recorded from him at the police station.

He said police officials in the districts will not accept his calls and describes it as harassment for his reporting. The situation in southern Kashmir, comprising three districts, is especially grim with frequent gunfights and attacks.

“Either I have to greet them every morning and not report anything, then nobody will have a problem with me,” said Owaas Farooq, who is a reporter with Kashmir Reader based in Bandipora in north Kashmir. Besides threats and insecurity, he says the biggest challenge for journalist is to send a story when the internet is suspended. “We have to travel to other districts to file stories or just do it by sending SMS. We travel for kilometres either by foot or if the situation is suitable then by the vehicles in search of internet,” he said.

On September 1, 2018, following a nationwide protest call by the Indian Journalists Union (IJU), thousands of journalists held rallies and protests denouncing attacks on freedom of the press and expression. CREDIT: IJU

Hazards Hinterland

An Indian citizen of Jharkhand enclave shows his ink-marked finger after casting his vote at a polling station in Coimbatore district on April 11, 2019, during the first phase of general election in West Bengal. India’s mammoth general election in West Bengal kicked off April 11, with polling stations in the country’s northeast among the last to open. CREDIT: DIPENDU DUTTA / AFP

Kashmir Reader

In notifying the country’s polling schedule, the election commission of India (ECI) made special mention of the menace of fake news and hate speech.

Besteiged Valley

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responsible for the blinding, killing and traumatizing of civilians permanent loss of eyesight. and often cause lasting physical damage, including potentially, kill. Yet, the injuries it inflicts have proven lethal on occasion and lethal ammunition to enforce crowd control, which caused enforcement repertoire following mass demonstrations in 2010.

high velocity pellets across a wide expanse, were introduced in protesters in the Valley. The pump-action gun which disperses head, and face but thankfully did not lose their vision. She later had to call a top police officer for intervention in order to get approval to move around and do her job.

reporters and photojournalists are restricted from covering events in other non-formal ways. On October 11, 2018, media workers were stopped from covering the funeral of a militant leader Manan Wani in Kupwara, who was formerly a doctoral candidate at Aligarh Muslim University before signing up with the Hizbul Mujahideen. Almost a dozen journalists were stopped by policemen on the road and not allowed to proceed. Similarly, journalists are often stopped by youth who ask them to show their social media timelines or stories before allowing to proceed. Journalists active online in the Kashmir Valley are closely monitored by police and intelligence wings. After sharing photos or information, journalists have been asked to describe the “motive” behind their posts, especially those of killings of civilians during protests and are sometimes asked to take down posts. WhatsApp groups are also closely monitored and documented. “The surveillance is so acute that a reporter immediately gets the screenshots of what he or she has posted on social media from police and intelligence officials,” a journalist noted.

Sustained surveillance by state agencies, especially the police, to monitor the activities of media workers is well underway in the Valley. Social media platforms are on the State’s radar with content being closely monitored. Among those monitoring is also a loose collective of trolls in cabs with state institutions resort to name-calling, smear campaigns and sometimes threats against journalists who question and report facts contrary to the State line. Intentionally, these actions are aimed at criminalizing journalists by default and restricting their access to official. Photojournalists frequently hear the brunt of armed forces and mobs. Four photojournalists were injured after security forces fired pellets on them on October 30, 2016, while covering an anti-militancy operation in south Kashmir’s Shopian. Waseem Andrabi of Himalaya Times, Nazir ul Haq of Rising Kashmir, Junaid Gular of Kashmir Essence and Mir Buhlan of ANI were hit in the eyes, head, and face but thankfully did not lose their vision. Pellets are lethal lead metal balls regularly deployed against militants in Srinagar’s Fateh Kadal neighbourhood. While police physically assaulted the journalists, allegedly in front of other senior officers, and the incident was recorded on camera, no action followed. Separatists frequently issue subtle threats to media outlets and workers for not carrying their press statements and one young reporter was pressured to reveal a source by a separatist group, which also threatened to publicly blacklist and ostracize the journalist until the issue was resolved with separatist leaders. The source was not revealed, but it sheds light on the issue of pressure from non-state actors and a lack of state accountability on media threats. In May 2018, Zakir Rashid Bhat alias Zakir Musa (who claims to head Al-Qaeda affiliated Ansar Ghazwatul-Hind), threatened journalists with dire consequences if they continued taking photos of women participating in funerals of militants. In recent years, vulnerability has grown manifold with journalists in the Valley regularly falling prey to violent mobs. The public aversion to media in the troubled region is little helped by news channels sowing up a nationalist and pro-government stand on the Kashmir issue. In private conversations, journalists narrate sordid accounts of being harassed, attacked and threatened both on the ground and social media.

On October 17, about a dozen journalists were beaten while covering a gunfight between security forces and militants in Srinagar’s Fateh Kadal neighbourhood. While police physically assaulted the journalists, allegedly in front of other senior officers, and the incident was recorded on camera, no action followed. Separatists frequently issue subtle threats to media outlets and workers for not carrying their press statements and one young reporter was pressured to reveal a source by a separatist group, which also threatened to publicly blacklist and ostracize the journalist until the issue was resolved with separatist leaders. The source was not revealed, but it sheds light on the issue of pressure from non-state actors and a lack of state accountability on media threats. In May 2018, Zakir Rashid Bhat alias Zakir Musa (who claims to head Al-Qaeda affiliated Ansar Ghazwatul-Hind), threatened journalists with dire consequences if they continued taking photos of women participating in funerals of militants. In recent years, vulnerability has grown manifold with journalists in the Valley regularly falling prey to violent mobs. The public aversion to media in the troubled region is little helped by news channels sowing up a nationalist and pro-government stand on the Kashmir issue. In private conversations, journalists narrate sordid accounts of being harassed, attacked and threatened both on the ground and social media.

Restrictions and control

There is little doubt that the ongoing developments and conflict in the Kashmir Valley have made the region a significant place for news outlets across the globe. But like with other zones of conflict in the country, there remains “restricted” access for foreign journalists working for news organizations outside of India. In 2018, the Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs revived a dormant rule and sent an official dispatch to foreign news bureaus in New Delhi on May 22, asking them to get permission/clearance before travelling to Jammu and Kashmir. This lettered access to foreign journalists and restricted them from reporting. Among them, The Washington Post’s outgoing India bureau chief, Annie Lowrey, was not granted a permit last year by the Indian government. Another foreign journalist, Joanna Slater from Washington Post’s India Bureau highlighted that the permit granted to Kashmir for her story in March limited her to Srinagar and included a condition that she not meet with people engaged in “anti-national activities.” On January 26, India’s Republic Day, the state police’s security wing stopped seven journalists from reporting the event in Srinagar, prompting other journalists to boycott coverage. Though the state government later called for a meeting with official representatives of the journalists associations and assured them of no hindrance in the future, no action was taken against the officers responsible. The journalists, including one who work for international news agencies include Tauseef Mustafa (AFP), Mehraj ud-Din (APTV), Yuvraj Jammel (Asian Age), Habib Naqash (Greater Kashmir), Darshiz Ismaili (Reuters), Umar Mehraj (APTV) and Aman Farooq (Kashmir Uzma). When curfew or restrictions are imposed, curbs are also imposed on the movement of journalists. Senior journalist Faizana Mumtaz reported that uniformed personnel stopped her during curfews/restrictions last year in the city, despite proving her identity. She later had to call a top police officer for intervention in order to get approval to move around and do her job. Reporters and photojournalists are restricted from covering events in other non-formal ways. On October 11, 2018, media workers were stopped from covering the funeral of a militant leader Manan Wani in Kupwara, who was formerly a doctoral candidate at Aligarh Muslim University before signing up with the Hizbul Mujahideen. Almost a dozen journalists were stopped by policemen on the road and not allowed to proceed. Similarly, journalists are often stopped by youth who ask them to show their social media timelines or stories before allowing to proceed. Journalists active online in the Kashmir Valley are closely monitored by police and intelligence wings. After sharing photos or information, journalists have been asked to describe the “motive” behind their posts, especially those of killings of civilians during protests and are sometimes asked to take down posts. WhatsApp groups are also closely monitored and documented. “The surveillance is so acute that a reporter immediately gets the screenshots of what he or she has posted on social media from police and intelligence officials,” a journalist noted.

starving independent media

Valley news outlets remain in economic dire straits due to recurrent shutdowns and ongoing conflict. Without a vibrant corporate sector due to the political uncertainty in the region, the denial of advertisements is aimed at serving a blow to leading newspapers at the forefront of reporting the conflict. Kashmir Reader had previously been banned for three months from October to December 2016 with no official reason given. But the Reader was a leading voice in reporting the conflict, giving extensive reportage of protests and civilian killings in the aftermath of the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani on July 8, 2016. In the weeks following the Pulwama suicide attack, there was a crackdown on the press by restricting advertising revenue. Though there was no official order, state government advertisements were stopped to three leading newspapers, Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Reader and Kashmir Uzma. In an unprecedented move, major newspapers published empty front pages on March 10, 2019 to protest the denial of advertisements. Advertisements from the Directorate of Advertising & Visual Publicity (DAVP), the nodal agency to undertake multi-media advertising and publicity for various ministries and departments of the Government of India had been stopped back in 2010 on grounds that the Kashmir press was partisan. It is worth noting that in a similar case of suspension of advertising by the state government to Rajasthan Patrika, the Supreme Court in September 2016 ordered that advertising be restored, as withholding it amounted to curtailing the freedom of the press.

The pellet gun was introduced on the understanding that it deters, but does not kill. Yet, the injuries it inflicts have proven lethal on occasion. Clashes erupt as the National Investigation Agency launched a raid at the Kashmiri separatist leader Mohammad Yasin Malik’s residence in Srinagar’s Maisuma area on February 26, 2019. Credit: HABIB NAQASH / AFP

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The names of 297 employees mainly in non-editorial positions were sacked with management claiming the posts had been made redundant. JU and NUJ strongly condemned the massive retrenchment of permanent employees in the country’s largest news wire agency. All but 52 of the non-editorial staff at PTI remained. On October 1, the PTI employees union and other journalists organizations held a day-long sit-in in front of PTI centres across the country, including the headquarters on Parliament Street in Delhi, protesting the “illegal” mass retrenchment.

On November 27, the Delhi High Court passed an order halting the mass retrenchments. The order, passed on the petition filed by the Federation of PTI Employees Union said that the “arbitrary policy of the management is unjustified” and that the rules of retrenchment. However, a month later, a double bench of the High Court put this stay in abeyance, a rude shock for the employees who were suddenly out of job. The Federation aims to take on the fight, but it may turn out to be a long battle. A similar battle was that by the 272 employees of the Hindustan Times (HT), who were fired on one single day back in 2014. After 14 long years, in December 2018, a Delhi court finally ordered HT pay over 14 crore to 147 employees as back wages. Sadly, over 20 employees had committed suicide in the interim.

There is little doubt that conventional media continues to be challenged by developments in technology and changes in financial parameters. India remains, according to a recent estimate, the only country where advertising spending in print media continues to increase. But growth in 2018 was weak, a mere 4.4 percent. And despite the expected windfall from campaign advertising, the forecast for 2019 is a modest 5 percent.

Advertising expenditure in television grew 19 percent in 2018 and the current year is expected to be lower, but a nonetheless buoyant increase of 18 percent. The most rapid growth, an estimated 26 percent, has been registered by digital media, with an even higher forecast of 33 percent for 2019. The share of digital advertising in the total is expected to touch 22 percent, still behind TV and print, though rapidly catching up with the latter.

It is yet unclear how this shift in advertising budgets is influencing the content of older media. Print and news channels put tremendous pressure on the reporters to secure advertisements and increase their circulation. They do not have weekly offs or other holidays. Almost all of them are on 24 hour duty without rest or respite. Constant tension, irregular or scant wages is taking a toll on the health of journalists leading to premature death.

In a memorandum to the Telangana state Governor ESL Narasimhan, the union said: “The newspapers and news channels are putting tremendous pressure on the reporters to secure advertisements and increase their circulation. They do not have weekly offs or other holidays. Almost all of them are on 24 hour duty without rest or respite. Constant tension, irregular or scant wages is taking a toll on the health of journalists leading to premature death.”

The TUWJ maintained that working conditions for journalists were creating an environment that is unhealthy. It also claimed that 90 percent of journalists in the state were unpaid, as no newspaper in Telangana had implemented the wage board recommended wages to the working journalists and other newspaper employees.

By the government’s own admission, less than ten percent of newspapers in the country have fully implemented the Wage Board recommended wages to the working journalists and other newspaper employees. JU president, Amar Devulapalli, said the biggest danger to independent journalism in India comes not only from physical attacks, but also non-payment of statutory wages to working journalists. But upholding good standards in the profession was simply not possible under threat to personal safety and on an empty stomach, he added.

Instead, rather than implementing the recommended wages, all major newspapers have “opted out” for contract employment. But upholding good standards in the profession was simply not possible under threat to personal safety and on an empty stomach, he added.

“DEADLY ECONOMIC PRESSURE

On one hand, the rapid transition towards digital platforms has driven a competition for audience and advertisers, making it even more difficult for newspapers to survive and thrive. On the other hand, the haemorrhage of advertising to digital platforms. Podcasts and websites. The city court order applied to most newspapers published in English and the local Kannada language, both national and local TV news channels, YouTube, Google, Yahoo and Facebook, and even WhatsApp. In a welcome move, the High Court of Karnataka on April 13 lifted the gag order.

Aajeev Javed Hakim, a reporter at The Wire, was seized by NIA officials and hasn’t been returned to date. “I am suffering a lot since my all contacts were in the phone,” said Aajeev. Repeated reminders to return his phone have been sent to the authorities but in vain. Journalists’ associations in Kashmir reacted sharply, condemning the “intimidation and harassment.”

A young photojournalist from Pulwama in south Kashmir, Kamran Yousuf was early arrested by the NIA in September 2017. It is widely believed the arrest was for photos and videos taken by the photographer showing stone throwing protests, massive funeral gatherings of militants which went viral on social media. The 23-year-old spent six months behind bars in Delhi and was released on bail on March 14, 2018. He was charged with stone pelting and other “seditious activities” but the NIA could not produce any evidence of “any single seditious activity”. The applicant/accused was indulging in stone pelting activities at any site.

“STINGING QUESTIONS

In May 2018, Cobrapost, a website that specializes in the ethically borderline practice of ‘sting’ journalism, released a number of video recordings that showed top executives of the Indian media industry showing an unsure eagerness to take up the advocacy of a political agenda for assured financial rewards. Operation 136 was, in most part, ignored in mainstream media reporting and editorial introspection. Pratap Bhana Mehta, a columnist who enjoys a certain autonomy, found no reason for similar restraint. Cobrapost, he raged, had laid bare, “the thinnest veneer, the smallest gesture” or pretense of covering the news, amidst which journalists were expected to acknowledge some measure of accountability to “those who allocate capital or use political power”.

A foreign correspondent wrote a few days later about a “potential scandal” that struck at a “key pillar of Indian democracy” and yet was “barely being reported in the Indian media”. And even if the methods used by Cobrapost warranted a degree of “healthy scepticism”, the questions raised were deeply troubling. In their exoneration of the issues raised in the Cobrapost revelations, the mainstream media may have been guilty of overlooking the single ground rule of responsible journalism: that of “compelling, overridingly public interest”.
Congress party workers wear masks of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) and business tycoon Anil Ambani, as they stage a protest in front of a model of a Rafale fighter jet during a protest against the Rafale fighter jet deal, in Mumbai on September 27, 2018. Credit: INDRANIL MUKHERJEE / AFP

The Indian Air Force has signed a deal for the acquisition of Rafale fighter jets for the Indian Air Force from France's Dassault Aviation.

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t was a dramatic year for the Maldives. In the space of 12 months the country endured a cycle of political crises under the autocratic rule of long-running President Abdulla Yameen, only to emerge with a new president, a new governing party and new hope for democracy. Promoted by a rising tide of social discontent and a showdown with the judiciary earlier in the year, the Yameen government which ruled the country with blunt force from 2012, tried at all costs to keep political power in check in the tiny troubled island nation. But the cracks were showing.

Prompted by a rising tide of social discontent and a showdown with the judiciary earlier in the year, Yameen’s usual suspects – political opponents, independent media and activists – remained firmly in the firing line for the 45-day crisis and beyond. Hefty fines were dealt out to media, especially those affiliated with the opposition. Journalists continued to be detained and threatened. Meanwhile, international observers watched on cautiously at the roll out of events through the year.

As the election neared, so too escalated fears of a larger political crisis embroiling overseas business interests, as well as the prospect of western-led political sanctions if all hell broke loose. Despite the political uncertainty and upheavals, the country’s planned presidential election took place on September 23 without any major incidents of violence. In a shock outcome, Yameen was roundly defeated by the opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih whose Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)-led Joint Opposition (JO) formed government. He took oath on November 17, 2018. It was lauded internationally as a win for democracy and the rule of law. Almost immediately reforms were announced, including new investigations of suspected missing and killed cases, and the repeal of the country’s controversial Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act.

Five months on, Solih and his alliance secured a landslide two-thirds majority in the 87-member assembly at the country’s national elections on April 6. The country’s former president Mohammed Nasheed, who had returned from exile after Solih’s win in November, was there by his side and vowed for sweeping reforms and an end to government corruption. Amid a sea of yellow, the colour of the party, he declared the Maldives was headed for a “golden yellow dawn”.

DEMOCRACY DERAILED

The contradiction of the Maldives domestic chaos to its outward public persona cannot be underplayed. This is why this current political reckoning is so critical for this tiny chain of islands southwest of India. Its international image is that of an idyllic luxury tourist destination; popular with honeymooners, cashed-up celebrities, dubious business tycoons and Instagram influencers. Comprised of 1192 islands and 26 coral atolls, an estimated 1.4 million tourist visitors were lured to its white sandy shores and romantic resorts in 2018 alone.

But the Maldives has also witnessed an increasing tide of its own, as climate change and political refugees continued to flee the country. Among them, journalists and political opponents, including the country’s only democratically-elected president, Mohammed Nasheed, who fled to the UK in early 2018.

In its 2018 report, Crushing Dissent in the Maldives, Human Rights Watch documented how the Yameen government continued to use “decrees and broad, vaguely worded laws to silence dissent and intimidate, arbitrarily arrest, and imprison critics”. That echoed findings of the IFJ’s own situation report just two years earlier which documented waves of restrictions and attempts to muzzle the media dating back to 2012. This included heftily defamatory cases to intimidate journalists with the prospect of jail and their media outlets with bankruptcy.

HALF-PARADISE, HALF-HELL

After 30 years of control under former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives 2008 constitution was intended to protect “the right to freedom of the press, and other means of communication including the right to espouse, disseminate and publish news, information, views and ideas”. But it was a case of democracy derailed under Yameen rule. Legislation was manipulated and butcheted to critical and devastating effect, to jail opposition, activists and politicians. Meanwhile the country’s new anti-defamation laws were frequently wielded against the media and social media activists.

Restrictions on assembly continued to prevent peaceful rallies and protests and the formation of unions, including that of journalists and media workers. Too many feared the repercussions. In 2018, journalists suffered at the hands of the State and its cadres. The re-criminalization of defamation was facilitated and enabled by the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), which operated with a fairly clear mandate of legal haranguing and harassment of media workers. For those that chose not to take the safer path of self-censorship in the fractious and volatile space for freedom of expression, the daily reality was brutal. Few could blame journalists for toning down reporting in the tiny media ecosystem that largely operates in the epicentre of the capital, Malé, home to just 142,000 people.

Media outlets seen as being aligned to the opposition were key targets of the 2018 attacks.

CONTROLS AND LEGAL INTIMIDATION

In a long-running pattern of harassment Raajje TV endured another year of physical and legal threat due to its content. On August 8, the MBC fined Raajje TV USD 130,000 for live broadcasting a politician’s speech from an opposition demonstration after it was deemed defamatory to the President Yameen and a threat to national security. Raajje was given 30 days to pay the fine or risk losing its broadcast license. This was the fourth time the station was fined for its content since 2016. In a statement, Raajje TV said the MBC report was filled with inaccuracies and was “a calculated and well-coordinated attack to obstruct efforts to make President Yameen’s government accountable” ahead of the presidential elections.
On August 15, a Civil Court rejected Raajje TV's appeal to suspend the payment of the fine. Less than a month on, President Yameen sought to take action against the station over the press conference footage. Held the previous December by the opposition MDP, speakers had alleged the president’s involvement in illegal oil trade with North Korea. On September 10, with no alternative, Raajje had little option but to settle the fine. That added to previous fines tallied to Raajje totalling over USD 240,000 in five separate incidents.

As well as controls on journalists internally, tensions increased as the election neared with international media. On August 30, the Immigration Department issued a press release stating that the elections would be open to monitor by foreign media, but warned foreign journalists of “punitive measures” if they did not seek appropriate visas. On September 12, the joint opposition issued a statement expressing concerns about police violence against journalists increased sharply during the first half of 2018 but, not surprisingly, was heavily reduced after the presidential elections were rejected.

Police violence against journalists increased sharply during the year. On May 1, the IFJ reported on cadres of a political party offering to up to USD 9,000 to a local gang to stab Raajje TV’s CEO, Hussain Fiyaz Moosa. The station said in a statement that it was one of the “scariest, most dangerous and un-Islamic acts carried out by anyone to undermine the station.” Raajje TV did not name the political party, the politicians or the gang involved due to fears of an escalation of threat.

Islamic extremism in the country’s judiciary system came under question when terror suspects were freed on apparently trivial grounds. The station said in a statement that it was one of the “lowest, scariest, most dangerous and un-Islamic acts carried out by anyone to undermine the station.” Raajje TV did not name the political party, the politicians or the gang involved due to fears of an escalation of threat.

Rising religious extremism has with little doubt been one of the most deadly elements for media operating in the country.

Religious extremists and criminal gangs (many enjoying political protection under Yameen’s rule) assaulted and murdered dissenters with impunity, including journalists. The key targets were those criticising government on social media, seen to be publishing material deemed as offensive to Islam, promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people or supporting non-state aligned causes.

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FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Unperturbed, the fight for justice for journalist attacks continued, led by the family, friends and colleagues of abducted journalist Ahmed Rilwan and murdered blogger Yameen Rasheed.

Police are yet to find Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a journalist who disappeared in August 2014, who was known for his pointed critiques on radical Islam and the government. They have also so far failed to identify his abductors despite a long-running and determined campaign by his family and friends.

On August 2, the Maldives criminal court acquitted two men of terrorism, over the alleged abduction of Rilwan. The judge called the investigating police and prosecution negligent and careless, and said they had failed to conduct a thorough investigation.

During the hearing, Judge Adam Aif noted that, though the prosecution’s witnesses had testified to seeing a man being forced into a red car near Rilwan’s home in the suburb of Hulhu, Male’, neither had they claimed the man was Rilwan nor had they spoken of Aalif Rauf and Mohamed Nooradheen’s involvement.

At a campaign rally on August 7, former President Yameen, who had repeatedly refused to meet with the journalist’s family over the years, bluntly declared that the journalist was dead.

The president’s remarks stirred uproar in the public, since no investigative authority had yet declared his death.

In strong rebuke at the statement, incidentally made on the eve of the anniversary of his disappearance, protesters marched in the streets of the capital city Male on August 8 to mark the four years since his abduction.

On November 3, the Maldives Police Service (MPS) announced its decision to review the case of murdered blogger Yameen Rasheed, and abduction of journalist Ahmed Rilwan. Soon after taking office, Solih also announced a commission to investigate murders and enforced disappearances that occurred between January 1, 2012, and November 17, 2018 in the country.

On March 18, 2019, Hussain Al Suood, President of the Commission on Investigation of Murder and Enforced Disappearances, announced that four high-profile cases assigned to the Commission for investigation were successfully completed. In a discussion with CPJ, Hussain Al Suood did not reveal the name of the group involved but accused the previous Government of being aware of the group as early as 2011, but failing to go after them for political reasons. CPJ said.

The Commission is currently probing a total of 24 such cases, including the four high-profile cases of the murder of Ungoofaru Parliamentarian and religious scholar, Dr. Shabreen Ali on October 1, 2012; the abduction of Ahmed Rilwan, on August 8, 2014; the murder of Yameen Rasheed, on April 23, 2017; and the murder attempt on blogger and human rights activist, Ismail Hilath Rasheed, on June 4, 2012.

All were known as vocal advocates on social issues, human rights, and religion. And all had popular online followings. Sood said the attacks were masterminded by one group and were motivated by religious, militant elements, with gang involvement.

In the case of Yameen Rasheed, who was brutally stabbed to death more than 26 times in the stairwell of his apartment building, seven suspects were arrested and stood trial, though this was initially held in secret. While the trial has been opened up, attendance is limited and there has been little progress.

Rasheed’s case authorities were also accused of negligence, though the civil court threw out a case filed by the family in 2017. One of the biggest challenges ahead and a test of the new government will be the media’s long running fight to secure justice for crimes against these journalists and others.

A Blueprint for Media Reform

There is no doubt that the Maldives media industry has suffered the dire consequences of this period. Great efforts are now needed to rebuild not only media houses, but the representative organizations and advocates that were decimated in this period. Every year, more and more outlets closed as a result of economic losses or political intervention of revocation of licenses. Many others have scaled down operations as a means of survival.
THE MALDIVES HAS ALSO WITNESSED AN INCREASING TIDE OF ITS OWN.

As climate change and political refugees continued to flee the country, among them journalists and political opponents...
Nepal witnessed a stable government under the premiership of KP Sharma Oli, though the same cannot be said for freedom of the press. The government, buoyed by the two-third majority in the parliament, has largely ignored freedom of the press and unnecessarily criticized the media and journalists to tarnish the public image of the media. Alongside that, it has also introduced laws or drafts of laws that could eventually degrade the state of press freedom in the country.

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli heads a government led by the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) a party formed after unification of the erstwhile Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre). The party has a comfortable majority in the parliament, and thereby controls the law-making process at a crucial juncture when the country needs a slew of new laws and regulations. Given the often opaque and non-consultative process that is followed to draft legislation, the new laws or drafts include provisions contrary to global standards of press freedom, freedom of the expression and freedom of the internet.

The federal structure means that the provincial governments are responsible for making provincial laws, and most of the drafts relating to the media put forth in provincial assemblies have restrictive provisions. The provinces and local bodies are entrusted with some responsibilities regarding regulation of local media, which they seem to have interpreted as the right to control the media. For journalists, the year was a continuum of threats and violence. Since May 4, 2018, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) recorded 58 instances of press freedom violations, the majority of them being attacks, threats, misconduct and arrests. These occurred at a time when impunity for crimes against journalists is a long-standing issue.

FEAR OF RESTRICTIONS

Nepal’s new Criminal Codes Act 2017 and Civil Codes Act 2017 became law on August 17, 2018, replacing 15 laws including 55-year-old civil and criminal laws. The new laws aim to amend and consolidate all existing criminal laws and civil laws into one document. Some provisions in the Criminal Codes Act 2017 have been cited for restricting freedom of expression and press freedom. IFJ affiliates FNJ and the Nepal Press Union (NPU), as well as other media stakeholders, expressed concern and demanded amendments to some of the provisions. The FNJ ran a protest campaign, including street protests and demonstrations and succeeded in forming a task force to review the laws. However, the report of the taskforce was ambiguous and did not bring any further action on the laws.

The provisions of the laws relating to privacy and defamation contradict ‘complete press freedom’ and other rights of the citizens guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal. The major concerns over the Criminal Codes Act 2017 are over the ambiguity in provisions that leaves enough scope of misuses. The provisions that were highlighted as problematic are Sections 293 to 308, relating to privacy and defamation. If proven guilty, the accused faces up to three years of imprisonment.

Section 293 prohibits listening to or recording conversations between two or more people without consent or authority. Violations are punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment and/or a fine of Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). Journalists say this provision will kill investigative journalism.

Section 294 prohibits publishing private information of others found during professional works without consent or authority. Violations are punishable by up to one year in prison and/or Rs. 10,000 (USD 100) fine.

Section 295 prohibits taking photographs without consent, and violations are punishable by up to two years in prison.

Section 296 prohibits giving away, selling or publication of photos for commercial purpose without the consent of the subject in the photographs.

Section 298 prohibits receiving or sending unauthORIZED information or messages through an electronic medium and publishing them.

Section 305 prohibits slander; Section 306 prohibits libel, including satire. Section 307 states that slander and libel are punishable by up to two years in prison, and slander and libel through electronic or mass media are punishable by an additional year.

Govinda Acharya, the FNJ president, said: “More than 80 journalists faced criminal cases and harassment due to one provision in the Electronic Transaction Act for their news. The new Act has dozens of such provisions that criminalizes written or spoken expression, and journalists face imprisonment up to three years for merely writing news. This is against international standards and principles of press freedom, as well as the Constitution of Nepal.”

Bikash Karki, the chairman of the Photojournalists’ Club, Nepal says: “The provisions related to photography can be misused to harass photojournalists and media. The threat of misuse of the provisions will not allow photojournalists to work in the way we have worked in the past.”

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MINISTER BASKOTA AND PM OLI, AS WELL AS OTHERS IN THE GOVERNMENT, HAVE REPEATEDLY CLAIMED THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS NO INTENTION TO MUZZLE THE PRESS FREEDOM OR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. BUT EVERY TIME THESE STATEMENTS WERE MADE, THEY HAVE CRITICIZED ‘EVIL’ PRACTICES OF JOURNALISM.

WRATH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A new Information and Technology (IT) Bill that was tabled in the parliament on February 20, 2019, provided a peek into the government’s willingness to control freedom of expression. The draft states that all social networking sites need to be registered in Nepal to be able to operate otherwise the government could potentially block them. The draft also states that an ‘improper’ post – such as defamation or violating the country’s sovereignty – on social media violates a law that carries a punishment of up to five years in jail and a fine of Rs.1.5 million (USD 10,000).

The government has reiterated that such provisions are necessary to ensure protection of advertising on social networks, and to protect data exploitation. However, there is widespread concern as it seems to be an attempt by the government to justify control over the websites. The catch is that if the social media platforms are registered in Nepal, they will be liable to remove content for six types of violations, mostly associated with defamation and privacy.

Earlier on February 11, the government tabled the Federal Civil Service Bill with provisions restricting civil servants from criticizing the government on media and social media. It also restricts them from providing information to the media. Clause 75 of the bill states: “No civil employee shall, on his/her real or pseudo name or anonymity, publish any feature article, provide news to the press, broadcast a speech through radio or television etc, make any public speech or publish any statement concerning or related to MP and ANNFSU chairperson Nabina Lama.

The bill was the continuation of a directive issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The directive issued on October 2018 bars all staff and teachers from criticizing the government and political parties or posting comments or liking posts or sharing posts to that effect on social media. The Social Media and Mobile Phone Use Directive 2018 applies to civil servants under the Ministry and its subordinated departments, school and university teachers both from private and public institutions.

Freedom of expression on the internet is clearly a big issue for the government as PM Oli in multiple instances has asked his cadres to unite to defend the government on social media. The result of this was seen when a popular folk singer, Pashupati Sharma, released a new song that made satirical references to political leaders with words roughly translating to ‘loot whatever you can, since that’s allowed only in Nepal’. The youth wing of the ruling party issued a statement against the song and the singer was forced to pull it down from YouTube.

Student leaders from the ruling party harassed and threatened journalists of online news portal hamraakura.com over a news report about a Member of Parliament (MP) and the chairperson of the students union on June 2018. Seven people led by a central committee member of the All Nepal National Free Students’ Union (ANNFSU), entered the media office on the evening and demanded the removal of the news related to MP and ANNFSU, chairperson Nabina Lama.

Ironically, this came at a time when the government was asking all government offices to harness the power of the social media. In August 2018, the Prime Minister’s Office released the Procedure on Use of Social Networking Sites by Government Agencies to strengthen communication between the authorities and people, share information about government activities and address public grievances. Another bill of concern is the Bill on Management of Advertisement Regulation 2018 which was also tabled in parliament. Some provisions of the bill are ambiguous and can curtail freedom of expression. For instance, clause 5 of the bill prohibits the promotion and encouragement of a product and service prone to obscenity without properly defining what constitutes obscenity. The clause also contains provisions on defamation and contempt of court and other clauses criminalize false advertising.

RESTRICTIVE PROVINCIAL BILLS

Media laws are being drafted in provinces across the country, but all of the drafts are restrictive to press freedom. Some bills have provisions to criminalize media offences including provisions for jailing journalists, some others have provisions contradicting the constitutional guarantee of free press.

Including provisions for jailing journalists, some others have provisions contradicting the constitutional guarantee of free press. Securing the urgency to advocate for press freedom, the FNJ constituted a high-level mission that travelled across the country to meet with provincial governments, advising them not to contravene press freedom. Media policy watchdogs such as the Center for Media Research – Nepal’s Media Policy Hub and Freedom Forum Nepal stated that the common theme is to pull the teeth of provisions to control the media. Such bills include Integrated Communication Bill by Province 2, Media Bill of Province 3, Gandaki Province’s Mass Communication Policy, and Province 5’s Broadcasting Bill.

CRITICISM OF THE PRIVATE PRESS

On November 11, 2019, the government started withholding the decisions of the meetings of the Council of Ministers after some of its decisions were met with public outrage and were challenged in the Supreme Court. The government spokesperson and Minister for Communication and Information Technology Gokul Prasad Baskota on November 11 told the media that “the decisions will be known in due time” and didn’t read out the decisions, thereby breaking a long-standing tradition of addressing the media. The Himalayan Times in its editorial titled ‘why so secretive’ said: “Keeping the Cabinet decisions secret [is] clear indication that the government is moving towards tightening the noose on the media.”

Minister Baskota since then started having a weekly press conference at his office and he has used the platform not only to disclose selected decisions of the Council of Ministers but also to lambast private media issuing threats to them and preaching journalism. For example, on November 30, 2018, he warned media owners and journalists to think about their investment and their jobs while writing news stories that are unfavourable to the government. He said media should not forget that the government is the main source of news as well as advertising revenue.

It is worth noting that Baskota is the minister accused of directing the State-owned Nepal Television (NTV) to stop a long-running talk show by journalist Raju Thapa after Thapa asked him questions in June, 2018. The programme which had been on air for the past 12 years was abruptly cancelled after Minister Baskota’s interview where he was quizzed about his property. Thapa alleged that the programme was cancelled at the direct intervention of the minister, which the latter denied.

Minister Baskota and PM Oli, as well as others in the government, have repeatedly claimed that the government has no intention to muzzle the press freedom or freedom of expression. But every time these statements were made, they have criticized ‘evil’ practices of journalism. For example, PM Oli, during a panel discussion in a session on “Shaping the Future of Democracy” at the 49th meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, said he had a ‘normal’ relationship with the press as in any democracy and claimed that the Nepali press enjoys absolute freedom. However, he also added that people wanted to see a responsible press and said “In the name of press freedom, if somebody gives false news and hurts others and damages another’s family life, prestige and business, then it is not good.”
VIOLENCE ON JOURNALISTS

The FNJ’s press freedom violation database recorded 58 instances since May 4, 2018. A murder and a disappearance of journalist took place, but both incidents were not related to their work. Radio journalist Manohar Dhakal, 42, was found lying dead by the roadside in Makawanpur district on January 9. Four people were arrested in connection with the murder, two of whom have pleaded guilty of murdering Dhakal when he questioned their presence in the secluded area near the forest while they were smoking marijuana.

Another radio journalist Tej Bahadur (Teju) Khadka went missing on August 25, 2018 while returning from a remote pilgrimage site in Rajua district. Teams mobilized by the police, FNJ and local journalist groups failed to locate him and his whereabouts remains unknown.

According to the FNJ database, at least 22 journalists were subjected to misconduct or harassment, 21 journalists were attacked, and 14 others threatened for their work. Five media houses suffered seizure of their assets.

Nepali journalists across the country faced attacks and threats, especially during demonstrations. On July 21, 2018 five journalists were attacked by police officers while they were covering clashes between the police and demonstrators near the parliament in Kathmandu. On July 18, 2018 LB Devkota of Kantipur daily and Prakash Upadhyay of AP1 TV sustained minor injuries after an attack by the police while they were covering the clashes between police and demonstrators in Jumla.

Similarly, journalists Chhibilal Tiwari and Om Prakash Gayal were attacked in Parbat on August 9, 2018, and Radheshyam Biroswarma, Salman Khan and Deepak Chimire were attacked while reporting in Rupandehi on August 5, 2018. A dozen cadres of ruling NCP attacked journalist Lekendra Khanal of Nagorki daily in Ilam district in west Nepal on November 9, 2018 over news reports.

Several journalists were arrested during the period under review, mostly under the Clause 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act 2008.

MISUSE OF CYBER-CRIME LAW

This clause that criminalizes anything published on the internet is increasingly being used to harass journalists.

Examples of such misuse include the arrest of Raju Banstel, the editor of a weekly newspaper and an online portal. The editor-in-chief of Khetkalin weekly was arrested on September 10, 2018 from his home at Godawari Municipality, Lalitpur, in the Kathmandu Valley under a court order reportedly over a news report about pressure being exerted by lawmakers to illegally sell government-owned factory land. The story in question was originally published in another weekly, Dosto, on September 4. Khetkalin.com republished the story under a different headline on September 6. Banstel, who was released after four days, said, “I believe I was detained due to my political beliefs, I strongly believe in democratic ideology. Because they did not take action against the weekly which originally published the news, the complaint was just to harass me. The police did not allow me to talk to the media even after the court asked for my release.”

Another case is that of Gopal Chand, the editor of an online news portal postpali.com, who was arrested on November 27, 2018 by the Central Intelligence Bureau (CIB) of Nepal Police after published a news report that a local resident of Chitwan district attempted to attack former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’, also co-chairman of the ruling NCP. Police accused Chand of spreading false information.

Journalists were also barred from reporting news of programmes organized by the government on various occasions. Nepali journalists from the private media were not allowed to cover the visit of Indian PM Narendra Modi to Mustang in May 2018 or the program in the office of the president in Kathmandu, although Indian and other international press were allowed to cover these events. In November, journalists were also barred from covering the meeting of parliamentary committees during crucial discussions.

One more instance of harassment occurred on April 15, when Arjun Giri, editor of the weekly Tandav and tandavnews.com, was arrested in Pokhara, on charges of publishing news about alleged fraud committed by a businessman, Bipendra Ratas. The latter sought registration information from the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) which officially wrote to him saying that the news portal was not listed as media. Ratas then approached the Central Investigation Bureau of the Nepal Police, which got a court order to arrest Giri. After his arrest, it turned out that the PCN had provided incorrect information and that Giri should not be prosecuted under the law. Giri was released on the first day under FNJ’s protection but was kept handcuffed in custody for two more days until the Kathmandu District Court on April 18 ordered his release on ordinary bail. Some believe that Ratas achieved his objective of harassing Giri, by subjecting him to three days in police custody.

CONTINUING IMPUNITY

Impunity and self-censorship are two issues that continue to impede free expression in the Nepali media community. According to the FNJ records, 10 journalists were killed, 3 journalists were disappeared, 12 journalists were attacked, and 17 journalists were interrogated during 2018. The trend of impunity has not whole-heartedly accepted in Nepal, it is trying to exert control over people’s opinions, especially dissenting ones. They believe tough regulations are required to control criticism, and they seem to be paving the way for such control by enacting a plethora of laws. The end of the political transition and the establishment of a stable government were thought to be stepping stones towards strengthening press freedom in Nepal, but the contrary, press freedom appears to have weakened. FNJ President Govinda Acharya said in a press statement on March 29, 2019: “Though the number of press freedom violations at 16 remains the same. Self-censorship and impunity still reign. The issues of working journalists remain as they were.” Alongside, the parliament is looking to enact laws that aim to control the media. The year ahead will not be easy for independent media, nor for media policy advocacy in the country.
TIGHTENING CONTROL AND ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

The past year saw the Pakistani media dealing with long-standing threats arising from the ‘war on terror’ and armed militants, but also encountering a new war against economic insecurity, undeclared censorship, intimidation, media blackouts, harassment and coercive laws. The current phase the media is passing through has been dubbed by many senior journalists as ‘the worst’, ‘unprecedented’ and not experienced even in earlier dictatorial military regimes.

In July, with the advent of the new government of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan, a fresh phase of bullying and intimidation was unleashed. The new government imposed a ban on releasing payments of billions of rupees to broadcast and print media owners. The billing for advertisement pertained to the outgoing government of Pakistan headed by the Muslim League, the key opponent of the PTI.

The non-payment of dues, which is believed to be an arm-twisting tactic of the government, led to severe financial crisis in the media industry. Media owners then carried out a ruthless retrenchment drive of journalists and non-journalist staff on the pretext of ‘financial crisis’ which ever remain doubtful as financial accounts of the media owners are never made public and thus not auditable.

The only good news came in April when the Wage Board Commission announced interim relief for journalists and media workers, the first financial relief after 17 long years. Significantly, the Commission attached the condition for media organizations’ payment of interim relief with the release of advertisement to complying organizations.

MASS LAY-OFFS

Under recurrent spills of expulsions and closure of newspapers and TV channels, major and minor media houses carried out ‘restructuring’ due to the so-called ‘financial crisis’. Pakistan’s flagship media company – the Jang Group – over a period of time laid off over 700 journalist and non-journalist staff including at Geo TV, the largest news channel in Pakistan. Century Publications, one of the largest media houses in the country, fired 243 employees from its different newspapers and TV channels and slashed salaries up to 15 percent. It shut down 10 of its editions and pooled together all editions at its Lahore and Karachi offices.

Dunya TV, another large news channels fired about 200 employees and trimmed the salaries of the surviving staff from 10 to 20 percent. Dunya TV management also decided to cut down salaries by 10 to 20 percent before it fired some 200 employees all across the country. It also closed down bureaus in many cities and towns in the Sindh and Punjab provinces. Dawn, the largest, the oldest and most prestigious English daily under Herald Publications, made a drastic cut of 40 percent in salaries, lowering the morale of several of the most professional and committed journalists, who have played a vanguard role in the evolution of a liberal and independent press in Pakistan. The organization also fired some 35 employees, which it hired through ‘third party contract’, a problematic phenomenon for the journalist community.

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made in February 2019 by the management on the orders of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The apex court order has benefited 148 employees so far. Delayed salaries are the hallmark of the channel and about six months’ salaries of the staff were due to be paid.

Noo TV did not fire any of its staff but the management got the employees to agree to a salary cut of four days’ salary every month.

Another menace that flourished in the past year was delayed payments of salaries by almost all the major and minor television channels and newspapers. Many organizations delayed pay for four months, some even up to six months, for television channels and newspapers. Many organizations made payments of salaries by almost all the major and minor colleagues believed that he was under immense pressure current affairs director at Geo TV died of heart failure. His colleagues believed that he was under immense pressure. The right of collective bargaining largely remains out of the reach of the media. The severe job security saw the polarized unions of the legacy of the good old times have CBAs. However, many employees of these organizations believe that most of their elected union leaders were more sympathetic to the owners/employees of these organizations. The key issue is that only few newspapers implement the wage board salaries. The arrears of the sixth wage board were overdue, posing a question on the government's will to address the plight of journalists. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) set up a fact-finding mission on the freedom of press in 2018 and observed that there was a massive intrusion by the State apparatus into the distribution of newspapers and broadcast of television channels. Many interviewees requested anonymity and related their experiences of pressure by State and intelligence agencies. An unofficial ban was witnessed on daily Dawn, The News, Jang and Nawa-e-Waqt before the July 2018 general elections of the country. Their distribution was severely hampered in different parts of the country. The distribution of Dawn came to halt at various towns and cities after it published an interview of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who raised questions about the militant groups’raison d’etre in the country. Vendors, distributors and cable operators endured threats, physical assault and harassment over supplying copies of Dawn in their respective areas or transmission of Geo TV on prime channels. In the Gilgit-Baltistan province, a chief of a cable operating company was repeatedly harassed and told to bring Geo TV broadcast at the lowest level and was ultimately told to take the channel off air. Discussing the issues of Balochistan, where insurgents defy the State went fighting for their rights, is unofficially banned.

The ‘economic collapse’ of the media has had a deep impact on working journalists in Pakistan. In addition, top news managers too faced tremendous pressure, dealing with the fall out on their field staff.

Deteriorating Working Conditions

The ‘economic collapse’ of the media has had a deep impact on working journalists in Pakistan. In addition, top news managers too faced tremendous pressure, dealing with the fall out on their field staff.

In late 2018 Ijaz Naqvi, who was serving as news and current affairs director at Geo TV died of heart failure. His colleagues believed that he was under immense pressure because of his own difficult work conditions and those of his colleagues.

The managing director of one of the country’s largest television channels survived an anxiety-related heart attack, related to the stress of his inability to clear salaries of his staff, who were looking up to him for resolving their problems.

Those who were fired have been frantically looking for jobs in the saturated market, but those whose salaries were slashed are faced with the dilemma of downsizing their lifestyles. A journalist who was drawing a decent salary and got one of his sons enrolled in an elite cadet college had to withdraw his son from the college due to uncertainty of salaries. Another journalist likened the dire situation to the dark ages when feudal lords would engage ‘bonded labour’, in their fields.

The right of collective bargaining largely remains out of the question as very few organizations have Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). Jang, Nawa-e-Waqt and Dawn newspapers, the legacy of the good old times have CBAs. However, many employees of these organizations believe that most of their elected union leaders were more sympathetic to the owners/management than the employees.

Explosive working conditions in the absence of CBAs continues unabated. Contractual employment or third-party contractors form a larger part of the employment at media houses. Contractual employment is illegal but the employees, fearful of a protracted legal course, avoid approaching the courts.

Drastic pay cuts were also made by prominent media organizations, demonizing working journalists, who were braving the hanging sword of retrenchment by their respective organizations.

The severe job security saw the polarized unions of journalists, which had undergone several splits in the past, come together to resist lay-offs and pay cuts which were hampering free media voices. Journalist unions in collaboration with other labour unions launched a spate of sit-ins and protests, but there was no respite.

After a nerve wracking 15 years, on April 10, 2019, the 8th Wage Board Commission announced an interim relief in three slabs ranging from Rs 5000 (USD 35) to Rs 8500 (USD 66) for journalists and other newspapers employees. The last wage commission was announced in 2000 and in 2004. Ever since, journalists were working on salaries fixed on the basis of parameters of inflation set as long back as 2000.

However, amid the dismal scenario of salary cuts and job losses, even this meagre interim raise was good news for working journalists. The Commission has also made it mandatory for the newspapers to pay the interim relief since January else the government advertisement would not be issued to the violating organization.

The key issue is that only few newspapers implement the wage board salaries. The arrears of the sixth wage board were still pending and some 300 to 350 employees were awaiting 19-year old dues. Meanwhile, 9th and 10th wage boards are overdue, posing a question on the government’s will to address the plight of journalists.

Massive State Intrusion

Undeclared censorship has been in vogue and created an environment of fear. As a result, self-censorship by television anchors and journalists is rife. TV anchors complained about receiving advisories from security officials on a daily basis. A prominent TV anchor said that 90 percent of the anchors get advisories and merely 10 percent dare to conduct their TV current affairs shows independently.

There were attempts to control content on two prime television channels Geo TV and Dawn which practice relatively independent journalism with regard to current affairs and politics. These channels on occasion deviate from the official narratives not in accordance with the line of the powerful security establishment of the country.

Talat Hussain, a seasoned journalist who was the host of a current affair programme at Geo TV was fired for being a staunch critic of the civil-military imbalance in the country. Matiullah Jan, like Hussain, was shown the exit door by his organization Waqt TV for expressing anti-establishment views.

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Discussing the issues of Balochistan, where insurgents defy the State went fighting for their rights, is unofficially banned.
At least three journalists were picked up by security officials, was widely available online. CREDITS: AMIR QURESHI / AFP

Similarly, the rallies and activities of Pashtun nationalists represented by Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) are not shown or covered in the print media.

Likewise, protests of journalists for their rights are completely boycotted by the media save for a few organizations. KILLINGS, ATTACKS AND ABDUCTION

Noor al Hassan from Royal News TV was killed and cameraman Sabir was injured on December 3, 2018 in Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, northwest Pakistan. Unidentified gunmen fired shots at Express News TV anchor Imran Khan’s house in Lahore, the capital of Punjab Province in north-eastern Pakistan on August 1. Journalist Muhammad Sabir died on August 23 as a result of the injuries he received during the attack on him a day earlier in Borewala Tehsil in Punjab province. Violent incidents against journalists within a few hours of each other in Lahore highlighted the tough situation for the media ahead of the parliamentary elections. Journalist Asad Khalar was attacked by armed masked men, and Gul Bakhsh was abducted and briefly detained by unidentified men in two separate incidents on June 5 night. Journalist Kadi Farman’s of Norway’s TV 2 was arrested and beaten by police while covering a political rally on July 13 in Jacobabad city of Punjab province despite informing the police that the Haroon Rustam was beaten by police while covering a political rally on July 13 in Jacobabad city of Punjab province despite informing the police that he was a journalist. He was released on bail on July 16 but faces criminal charges including attempted murder, tearing a police uniform, stealing four mobile telephones from the police, and interference in government function. The Lahore High Court issued a non-bailable arrest warrant for journalist Cyril Almeida over an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He is required to appear at the next hearing of a case seeking action against the former PM on charges of treason.

In the backdrop of entrenched impunity, journalists’ safety and security are under threat, as crimes against journalists continue unabated in Pakistan, mostly of them keep themselves distant from assignments that could cause them trouble. Investigative journalism has thus become the biggest victim of impunity.

In the backdrop of entrenched impunity, journalists’ safety programmes, insurance, training and welfare concepts have been completely boycotted by the media save for a few organizations. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) have boycotted the media industry, though some non-profit programmes, insurance, training and welfare concepts have been introduced in the media industry, though some non-profit organizations are trying to highlight the issue.

TIGHTENING REGULATION

While journalists remained distressed by the economic squeeze and mass unemployment, they also had to face the brunt of laws regulating media freedom. The draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) passed in 2016, restricts press freedom and needs to be completely revamped, this time after extensive consultations. The controversial law was approved without taking on board the journalist community and other stake holders. Among other things, the Act penalizes the spoken or written word that supposedly poses a danger to the security of Pakistan, to public order or to the maintenance of friendly relations of Pakistan with foreign states.

The government has also proposed a new Act to tighten regulation of the media. The government in February 2019 proposed the creation of a new regulatory body, the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA). Under the proposed law all media including print, electronic, and social media would be monitored and regulated by this new body. After reviewing the role of existing regulatory bodies, the government decided to replace them in favour of a single regulatory body, the PMRA. The proposed body would replace the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), Newspapers Employees Act (1973), that largely governs the print media and guarantees minimum wages and service conditions, as well as the Pakistan Press Council (PPC).

The proposed law is a matter of much concern for journalists, as it might heighten their vulnerability to the ever-present intimidation by the government and state institutions. The PFUJ and Karachi Union of Journalists rejected the PMRA, calling it a brazen attack on the freedom of press, speech and expression. The media in Pakistan is growing by leaps and bounds, providing a variety of news, social and entertainment to diverse audiences. However, this mushrooming growth will remain meaningless if regulatory laws are framed with a focus on curbing free access to information and freedom of expression.
SRI LANKA
RESILIENCE AMIDST TURMOIL

With growing crises in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, Sri Lanka is at a critical juncture.

From April 2018 to March 2019, Sri Lanka has witnessed several developments with far-reaching consequences with regard to the state of press freedom.

With ownership of at least 30 media outlets, the State remains the largest player across print, television, radio, and online media in Sri Lanka. In the media space, the State’s dual role as both owner and regulator results in a serious conflict of interest. Though the general objective of State-owned media is to communicate with and inform the public, to a great extent this is limited to conveying information about the actions of the government and its elected representatives. Through employing a narrative which always reflects the government’s position on particular issues, State-owned media is used to amplify its own message and to suppress critics.

A COUP AND AFTER

The political developments in late 2018 were the harbinger of the political tumult that awaits 2019, an election year. On October 26, 2018, in violation of the Constitution, President Maithripala Sirisena removed from office Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, who continued to enjoy the support of the majority of the Parliament. In his place, he appointed as prime minister, the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the seven weeks following the constitutional coup, Sri Lanka witnessed its worst uncertainty and instability since the end of the civil war almost a decade earlier.

Immediately after the appointment of Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister, State-controlled media institutions were forcibly taken over. Either the editors were asked to step down or gangs invaded editorial offices. A new set of editors and managers was soon installed. With no delay, they started rolling out engineered stories supporting the coup, which they proceeded to portray as a patriotic act of the parties involved. The unfortunate irony was that some of the newly-installed editors were press freedom champions of yore.

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna or the Sri Lanka People’s Front (SLPP) loyalists took control of most State media institutions after the Swearing in of Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister. Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), Independent Television Network (ITN) and the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), issued directives even as previously appointed staff members in senior positions kept away from work.

Some media institutions refused to accept this statement and immediately after the appointment of Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister, State-controlled media institutions were forcibly taken over. Either the editors were asked to step down or gangs invaded editorial offices. A new set of editors and managers was soon installed. With no delay, they started rolling out engineered stories supporting the coup, which they proceeded to portray as a patriotic act of the parties involved. The unfortunate irony was that some of the newly-installed editors were press freedom champions of yore.

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In the days that followed, the unconstitutionally appointed PM swiftly filled all media-related government institutions with his political appointees. The live broadcast of parliamentary proceedings was taken off air when the new PM could not show majority in the Parliament and the Speaker was violently obstructed from addressing the Parliament. The President postponed the Parliament for two weeks when it became clear that his new PM did not have parliamentary majority.

During the coup, the majority of the 225-member Parliament voted against Rajapaksa. Fourteen opposition-confidence motions were passed. On November 23, the 122 MPs filed a Writ Qao Warrant in the Court of Appeal challenging the constitution of the new government in office. An interim order was issued by the Court of Appeal restraining Rajapaksa and his ministers from functioning in their respective offices. This decision was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court on December 14, in an outstanding show of independence of the judiciary. A day later, Rajapaksa ‘resigned’ from the office of the PM.

The coup was short lived, but it did not mean political stability for Sri Lanka. On the contrary, many of the factors that had destabilized Sri Lankan politics in recent years remain unresolved. Primary being the personal animosity as well as ideological disagreements between President Sirisena and PM Wickremesinghe which were central to the coup. Despite pre-election pledges ensuring transitional justice, the President has adopted a Sinhala nationalist stance in recent years, declaring that he would “not allow war heroes to be hauled before courts”.

ROLE THE MAINSTREAM PRIVATE MEDIA PLAYED

During the political crisis, the revival of civil society activism was remarkable. Daily protests were held in Colombo, organized by independent civil society groups. However, their activism was not reflected by the largely pliant and problematic role of the mainstream media.

While State media was ‘taken over’ as part of the coup, the role of the mainstream private media played was also questionable.

Some mainstream Sinhala news channels welcomed Rajapaksa as a patriotic leader and glorified the coup. These media groups also launched personalized attacks against civil society activists as they protested against the coup and rejected the biased point of view of these channels. The absence of independent media emerged as a key cause for concern around freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Civil society groups demonstrated unprecedented creativity in protecting the political crisis and amplified the continued resistance against the coup. Calls to transform State-controlled media to genuine public service media became stronger and more pervasive. While social media became the sphere of resistance that provided many a space to voice their opinions as well as mobilize, an interrogated conversation on the role of media came to life.

When the coup ended, the democratically elected government was reinstated. They labelled the privately-owned media which became rolling partners of unconstitutional coup ‘Black Media’. In January 2019, a campaign against biased reporting by the majority of the mainstream media during the coup emerged as a citizens’ response. Protesters clad in black, with their faces masked, handed over a statement to media institutions. It has fallen upon us to remind you of media integrity and values once again, due to the non-constitutional and undemocratic conspiracy that happened on 26th October last year in which you actively played a part.

The mainstream private media played was also questionable. Some mainstream Sinhala news channels welcomed Rajapaksa as a patriotic leader and glorified the coup. These media groups also launched personalized attacks against civil society activists as they protested against the coup and rejected the biased point of view of these channels. The absence of independent media emerged as a key cause for concern around freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Civil society groups demonstrated unprecedented creativity in protecting the political crisis and amplified the continued resistance against the coup. Calls to transform State-controlled media to genuine public service media became stronger and more pervasive. While social media became the sphere of resistance that provided many a space to voice their opinions as well as mobilize, an interrogated conversation on the role of media came to life.

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We consider that incidental clearly as a deterioration of media values, which were disregarded when reporting on the coup’s events.

Some media institutions refused to accept this statement and launched a virulent attack on the peaceful campaigns that lasted for days. A number of politicians across the political spectrum condemned the citizen’s campaign, demonstrating the level of influence TV channels have over politicians.

Civil society groups held a number of discussions on the role of the media, some of which focused on transforming State-owned media into public service media. On this particular matter, there was a considerable interest among the concerned groups. Unfortunately, the discussions were not systematically organized in a way that could lead to a collective articulation and expression of the shared sentiment, and the conversation slowly died down.

PARTISAN APPOINTMENTS

On the issue on January 11, 2019, the then-Minister for Media and Information, Mangala Samaraweera, appointed a seven-member committee to come up with a report on how State media is to be transformed into public service media. No consultations were held with media rights organizations who have campaigned on the same issue for years. Although there are a number of comprehensive reports that have been produced by local rights groups in collaboration with international media rights organizations, there was no mention of these reports. The appointments were made ad hoc, the mandate of the committee was unclear, and the committee was expected to produce a report within six weeks. The majority of members of the said committee soon resigned with no reasons given. So far, there has been no report.

In another peculiar development, in a cabinet reshuffle MP Ruwan Wijewardena was appointed the State Minister for media. It cannot be a coincidence that MP Wijewardena comes from the
Rights is yet to visit Sri Lanka. to the country during the last four years and this has resulted (of Special Rapporteurs, independent experts or Working Groups) a single perpetrator has been brought to justice. ending impunity is crucial for truth and justice to prevail. Dozens the war. Since 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council violations of human rights that took place in the last phase of the Wijewardena family, who owns the largest private print media institution, The Times Group. This presents a clear case of conflict of interest. IMPURITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY Since the end of the war in 2009, Sri Lanka has been carrying deficit of accountability for crimes against humanity and serious violations of human rights that took place in the last phase of the war. Since 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council based in Geneva, has adopted a number of Resolutions with the view of enhancing the status of human rights, reconciliation, and accountability in Sri Lanka. These Resolutions and the related interactive dialogues within the Council have emphasized that ending impunity is crucial for truth and justice to prevail. Dozens of journalists were killed during the war in Sri Lanka but not a single perpetrator has been brought to justice. Since the change of government in January 2015, Sri Lanka has considerably improved its engagement with the UNHRC. The State has invited eight UN special procedures (which are made up of Special Rapporteurs, independent experts or Working Groups) to the country during the last four years and this has resulted in the production of significant reports on human rights issues. However, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression Rights is yet to visit Sri Lanka. On March 21, 2019, at the 40th session of the UNHRC, the Council adopted another Resolution unanimously extending the time period granted to the government to deliver on its undertakings under Resolution 30/1 on Promoting Human Rights, Reconciliation and Accountability in Sri Lanka, which was co-sponsored by the Sri Lankan government in 2015. The extension was renewed by the Council on December 7, 2018. President Maithripala Sirisena plunged the country into crisis on October 26 when he fired the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe. "I have no confidence in the prime minister's ability to lead the government and the country," he said in a televised address in Colombo on December 7, 2018. President Sirisena said that Wickremesinghe was failing to control the country amid escalating political tensions. Wickremesinghe was named a suspect. In February 2019, journalist Nadarajah Kularatna was questioned by the police in Colombo on an ongoing case relating to prison riots, upon which he published earlier reports.

PROPOSED COUNTER TERRORISM ACT Abolishing the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been on the democratization agenda for years. When the current government came to power in 2015, it promised to replace PTA with a new Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) in line with international best practices. The coalition PTA, in operation since 1979, has been used as a weapon against media and journalists. The cabinet recently approved the draft Counter Terrorism Bill which is being discussed at the Parliamentary Oversight Committee. The draft Bill contains clauses that could be used to suppress dissent and ban organizations without an investigation or reasons given. Its definition of terrorism is much wider than those possessed by its predecessor. In contrast to the PTA, which limited arrest powers to the police, members of the armed forces or the Coast Guard may also make such arrests under the proposed Act. Considering the fact that outside of an armed conflict situation, armed forces do not have law enforcement training, permitting them to carry out arrests facilitates arbitrary arrests and mistreatment in custody, effectively undermining counterterrorism efforts.

For the media in particular, there are palpable risks at hand. Clause 19(g) of the Bill summons chilling recollections of the harm caused by similar provisions in the past. That Clause defines aiding terrorism as ‘intentionally and unlawfully distributing or otherwise making available any information to the public having intent to incite the commission of the offence of terrorism or other offence under this Act and to cause the fear of such offence being committed.' Read together with the primary offence of terrorism with its vague wording of ‘wrongfully compelling the Government to do or omit to do anything through explicit or implicit orders.’ It is not only, but also, problematic to expect a
online harassment and hate speech

Hate speech on social media platforms has become common in Sri Lanka. Extreme nationalist ideology plays a central role in propagating hate online.

Sandy Eknaligoda, who has been fighting for justice for her abducted (and murdered) journalist husband Prageeth Eknaligoda faced an unprecedented level of online harassment. A coordinated and relentless online hate campaign was unleashed against her after a leading extremist Sinhala Buddhist monk was sentenced to six years in prison in a contempt of court case related to the Eknaligoda abduction case. “The threats against Sandy Eknaligoda are extremely worrying. The Sri Lankan authorities must urgently and effectively take appropriate action against those who seek to cause her harm,” said Dimitria Dinnakaran, Deputy South Asia Director for Amnesty International in July 2018. Sandy Eknaligoda was subject to a barrage of hate, abuse, intimidation, harassment, and death threats against social media.

In the aftermath of anti-Muslim violence in Kandy in March 2018, Sri Lanka’s civil society organizations wrote an open letter to Facebook requesting the social media platform to enforce its own community standards. The riot was fueled, and to a certain extent, organized, through Facebook. The open letter noted that Facebook chose to primarily respond to representatives from the government only after Facebook was blocked, and even after this, Facebook chose not to meaningfully commit to working with civil society to address the issues raised and provide clear information on measures taken to address these issues including information related to technical or human resource investments, clear reporting guidelines in local languages, precise response times, and independently verifiable key performance indicators.

In a positive example, Facebook recently took down an offensive post by one Chapa Bandara, a news anchor working for Sri Lanka’s Derana TV, and deleted several equally offensive posts indirectly justifying the recent massacre of Muslims in New Zealand. Bandara’s colleague indirectly endorsed him on Facebook when she equated the massacre to what she called posts indirectly justifying the recent massacre of Muslims in Sri Lanka, it remains the number one social media platform to spread hate speech in the country. Paradoxically, social media can be useful for the sharing of information and mobilizing. However, social media also proliferate hate speech in the country. Democratic space for the sharing of information and mobilizing can invite jail terms and death threats on social media.

CRITICAL YEAR AHEAD

In the period under review, democratic space for freedom of expression remained constrained amidst political turmoil. A majority of the private media institutions demonstrated poor ethics in reporting the constitutional coup and later became the mouthpiece of the military dictatorship that overthrew the coup. Some of the media institutions went to the extent of disseminating manipulated attacks against the government.

In the meanwhile, state-owned media is plagued with biased reporting, leading to renewed calls for the transformation of state-owned media into public service media.

Media rights organizations stood strong, demanding accountability for crimes against journalists. In the absence of impartial mainstream media, social media emerged as a critical space for the sharing of information and mobilizing. Paradoxically, while Facebook provides unfiltered space for citizens’ voices in Sri Lanka, it remains the number one social media platform to proliferate hate speech in the country. The year 2019 is going to be crucial not only for freedom of expression but also for all other human rights. With the growing disinformation and the continuing confluence of hate speech, the regime is at risk of violating the right to freedom of opinion and expression. If the issue of media freedom is not taken seriously and addressed, the country risks losing its democratic transition in the post 2015 era. According to a report by the National Human Rights Commission, the government has not held any public sittings and the hearing of appeals in Sri Lanka’s Communication Commission.

SRI LANKA MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS JOINED HANDS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS TO STRENGTHEN SOLIDARITY AMONG THEM

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BLOW TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious country and ensuring religious freedom is of utmost importance for building peace and reconciliation in the context of decades of ethnic violence. However, religious freedom of the minority communities have come under increasing pressure from the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist ideology and extremist Sinhala Buddhist groups. Sri Lanka has been ruled by Sinhala majoritarian governments since independence, and since the end of the war Sinhala majoritarian governments with extremist ideologies started to target the Muslim community as an enemy. Impunity against the crimes against minority communities and their rights is the norm in the Sri Lanka majoritarian governance.

A huge blow to religious freedom of the Sri Lankan Christian community was struck on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019. High explosive bombs were detonated around the same time in three major churches in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, targeting devotees attending the Easter Mass. All together nine explosions took place, three of them at high-end hotels in Colombo. The death toll was 253, while hundreds were injured. The Islamic State or its ‘official’ al-Abad news agency claimed responsibility for the bombings.

In the wake of the attacks, government blocked all social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Vine. The reason given was to stop rumours and propagating hate against certain communities in the country. Some TV stations were criticized by a government Minister for showing body parts and dead bodies of victims. Emergency regulations which empower the security forces to enforce strict national security measures, including powers to detain and interrogate suspects without warrants and court orders, went into effect on the midnight of April 22, along with a social media curfew.

Freedom of the press could be seriously impacted by Emergency Regulation 15 according to which a ‘Competent Authority’ is given the power to restrict the publication (in Sri Lanka) or transmission (to a place outside Sri Lanka) of something that might be “prejudicial to national security”. Prior censorship is also permitted, with the news reports, editorials, articles and cartoons that are blocked, and even after this, Facebook chose not to meaningfully commit to working with civil society to address the issues raised and provide clear information on measures taken to address these issues including information related to technical or human resource investments, clear reporting guidelines in local languages, precise response times, and independently verifiable key performance indicators.

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CRITICAL YEAR AHEAD

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LIST OF MEDIA RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY JOURNALIST SAFETY INDICATES (JSIS), MAY 2018 TO APRIL 2019

The media violations are categorised by the Journalist Safety Indicators. Other notable incidents are media violations recorded by the IFJ. These violations that fall outside the JSIs and are included in IFJ reporting.

AFGHANISTAN

JOURNALIST KILLINGS: 12 (Journalists: 9, Media staff: 3)

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: 3

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS: None recorded.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS: 61 (Journalists: 49, Media staff: 12)

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS*: 26

JOURNALIST KILLINGS

June 4, 2018: Helmand

Unknown gunmen attacked the Helmand National Television and killed its security guard.

July 22, 2018: Kabul

Mohammad Ali Ahmadi, 31, a driver for Agence France Presse, was on his way to work when he was killed in a suicide bombing near Hamid Karzai International Airport. The attack targeted supporters of Afghan Vice President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, then to withdraw in fear of the Taliban’s return from exile. In total, 25 people died in the attack which was claimed by the Islamic State.

August 10, 2018: Ghazni

Muhammad Daud Aliwazir, a technician at State-run broadcaster Radio Television Afghanistan, was killed in a Taliban attack in the provincial capital of Ghazni, about 150 km from Kabul. Fierce fighting for four days left about 100 policemen and 20 civilians dead. About 200 insurgents were also killed in the battle.

September 5, 2018: Kabul

Reporter Samim Farzana and cameraman Ramin Ahmadzai, of TOLO TV, were killed while reporting at the scene of an earlier suicide attack. The second blast was believed to have been triggered by a landmine set by the Taliban.

March 15, 2019: Khost

Sultan Malmood Khairkhwal, a journalist working for Zan TV in Khost province, died after sustaining lethal injuries in an attack by unidentified armed men. Islamic State Khalistan claimed responsibility for the killing.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

May 6, 2018: Kabul

Independent investigative reporter Naimatuallah Taneen was attacked by an unknown group for his new reports about corruption.

May 12, 2018: Nangarhar

Safiolah Osmani, Islamic Programs Operator for Ettham TV, was injured in a shelling fire early in the morning as he was going to the mosque in the Teachers town area.

May 18, 2018: Nangarhar

Safia Radio Director, Garar Azizi, was injured in a mine blast in a cricket field in Jalalabad. Mobariz Atai, a technician and reporter for Safia Radio was also injured.

June 3, 2018: Kabul

Mirza Mekat, photographer for Woleesi Jeeva TV, was attacked by an armed group in Woleesi Jeeva TV..

Sayed Ali Iza Zafere, political program operator on Woleesi Jeeva TV, was returned to the cross-fire.

December 4, 2018: Nangarhar

Engineer Zalmai, director and owner of Enkais radio and TV stations was kidnapped at 5pm during a shopping trip. He was taken by armed men who arrived in an armoured vehicle, shot driver and taken to hospital where he died later. Zalmai was later released on April 10, 2019. No group claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and killing of the driver.

January 5, 2019: Farah

Jawed Noori, 27, a local radio host was executed by suspected Taliban insurgents in an attack in Nandadrist district of Farah province in south-western Afghanistan. Noori was travelling in a car with relatives that was stopped at a check point. After being identified as a journalist, he was taken and killed.

February 6, 2019: Takhar

Shafis Aria, and Rahimullah Rahimi, both in their 20s, were killed by unknown armed men in the office of Radio Hamshah in the northern Takhar province city of Talukan. Two unidentified gunmen entered the office building on false pretenses and shot and killed the two journalists. Four arrests were made in connection with the murders.

March 15, 2019: Kohat

Sultan Malmood Khairkhwal, a journalist working for Zan TV in Kohat district, died after sustaining lethal injuries in an attack by unidentified armed men. Islamic State Khalistan claimed responsibility for the killing.

July 2, 2018: Ghazni

Farzad Naeem, a TV reporter, and Jamshid Ahmadzai, a Bakhtar News Agency reporter, were beaten to death by National Security Staff while they arrived to report at the Public Health Directates.

July 3, 2018: Baghlan

Noorغل نورغل, a reporter with Pasabon TV, was threatened by a Baghlan official for publishing a report.

July 10, 2018: Herat

Farhad Joia, a reporter with 1 TV, was confronted by unidentified gunmen who allegedly planned to shoot and attack the reporter.

July 10, 2018: Paktiya

Hekmat Niazi, reporter with Shamshad TV, was threatened with murder due to non-payment of taxes to the Taliban.

October 20, 2018: Kandahar

Samiullah Patman, a reporter with Eklia Turkiye News Agency, was仿真 from an interview on the way to the office when he was beaten up by unidentified gunmen.

October 20, 2018: Balkh

Commissar, a local photographer, of Ettham TV was attacked and killed after publishing a report on a death by two ethnic groups.

July 11, 2018: Ghazni

Rahmatullah Nikzad, a reporter with Aj Jazeera, was麂e assaulted by secret police personal in Ghazni.

July 11, 2018: Kabul

Redzan Zainab, a political program announcer on Noor TV, was killed after publishing a report and sustained injuries in the attack.

July 26, 2018: Kabul

While in the area of an explosion, National security forces forced access to Pathwak News Agency reporters Zainab multani and Jawed Jamil and beat the pair up.

August 1, 2018: Kabul

Abdul Mohid Kohistani, reporter for Mann TV, was beaten by hospital security guards while writing a report.

August 11, 2018: Ghazni

During a Taliban offensive, ten reporters from various media outlets were threatened. This included Fari Omari, director of Ghaznavi TV.

September 3, 2018: Balkh

Musab Farhang, a director of Meher TV, was beaten up by an unknown group.

September 5, 2018: Kabul

Reporters Hussain Rastan Manesh and Ahmad Karim Nikzad, both ethnic Hazara who were victims for the Khorshid TV were suffered in a suicide attack in Western Kabul. Ahmad Farhang, reporter with Khorshid TV, was killed while Malwai TV were also injured. The attack was targeting media and emergency services responding to an initial attack.

September 27, 2018: Faryab

Ayobi Amiri, reporter with Arena TV, was beaten national security officials.

September 30, 2018: Balkh

Bakhtr director of News Agency, Laal Mohamma, was verbally assaulted by police and denied access to the Bakhtr governor’s office.

October 10, 2018: Balkh

Ehmadaddin Ehtam, director of Haqeqat Radio, was threatened with murder after a public protest in front of the Pakistani embassy.

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**BANGLADESH**

**JOURNALIST KILLINGS**

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<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>TV journalists Astik Chatterjee, of ABP Ananda, and Maushumi Singh, of India Today, were attacked.</td>
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<td>October 13, 2018</td>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>TV journalist Shadab Ali, of BAN, was injured during clashes between protesters and security forces.</td>
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**THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS**

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**NEWS CODE**

A group of journalists were attacked while covering a protest in Dhaka. They had been given permission to cover the protest, but when their equipment was confiscated and their cameras were broken, they were detained for a period of time. The journalists were beaten and kicked, and their equipment was damaged.

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michel Forst, has expressed concern over the arrests of journalists in Bangladesh. He has noted that journalists are often targeted for reporting on issues such as corruption and political violence.

**IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2018–2019**

Bangladesh is one of the countries where journalists are most at risk of imprisonment or worse. In the past year, at least 14 journalists were killed and more than 1,000 were arrested for their work.

**INDIA**

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<td>April 18, 2019</td>
<td>Jammu and Kashmir</td>
<td>Two journalists for News18 TV were attacked by a mob and their equipment was damaged.</td>
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**NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS**

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**NEWS CODE**

A group of journalists were attacked while covering a protest in Jharkhand. They had been given permission to cover the protest, but when their equipment was confiscated and their cameras were broken, they were detained for a period of time. The journalists were beaten and kicked, and their equipment was damaged.

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michel Forst, has expressed concern over the arrests of journalists in India. He has noted that journalists are often targeted for reporting on issues such as corruption and political violence.

**IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2018–2019**

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<th>Location</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 7, 2019</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
<td>TV journalist Shafqat Hussain was attacked by a mob while covering a protest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**JOURNALIST KILLINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 7, 2018</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>Photojournalist Abhijit Mukherjee was killed. He had published material on the 2018 elections.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 21, 2019</td>
<td>Jammu and Kashmir</td>
<td>Three journalists were attacked by a mob while covering a protest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NEWS CODE**

A group of journalists were attacked while covering a protest in Jharkhand. They had been given permission to cover the protest, but when their equipment was confiscated and their cameras were broken, they were detained for a period of time. The journalists were beaten and kicked, and their equipment was damaged.

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michel Forst, has expressed concern over the arrests of journalists in India. He has noted that journalists are often targeted for reporting on issues such as corruption and political violence.

**IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2018–2019**

India is one of the countries where journalists are most at risk of imprisonment or worse. In the past year, at least 14 journalists were killed and more than 1,000 were arrested for their work.
parliamentary constituency. Polling agents and supporters of a particular party grabbed Bazaz by the collar and attempted to thrash him up after they suspected him of recording the incident of intimidation and threats to election staff. He was rescued from the mob by security forces.

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS
March 11, 2019: Meghalaya
The Meghalaya High Court held the editor, Patricia Mukhim, and publisher, Shobha Ch haunted, to withdraw from the court after they were found guilty of contempt of court for a report on the judgement of the court regarding retirement facilities for Dalit staff. They were imposed a fine of Rs 20000 each with the fine to be paid in a week. If not paid, they were liable for imprisonment.

August 29, 2019: New Delhi
As many as 297 workers from the Press Trust of India (PTI) were terminated. According to reports, at all but 22 of the group’s non-journalist staff were terminated. PTI management claimed that maintaining financial viability was the motive behind the decision. On October 1, employees and union held sit-in protests at PTI centres across the country. On November 27, the retrenchments were halted by the Delhi High Court on the grounds that the move did not follow the required rules of retrenchment. The decision was a result of a petition filed by the Federation of PTI Employees’ Union.

October 3, 2018: Tripura
Daisy Debs Khetra, the second largest circulated daily in Tripura it had to register cancellation due to a change in leadership. The newspaper termed it as undue political influence. On October 1, employees and union held sit-in protests at PTI centres across the country. On November 27, the retrenchments were halted by the Delhi High Court on the grounds that the move did not follow the required rules of retrenchment. The decision was a result of a petition filed by the Federation of PTI Employees’ Union.

OTHER NOTICEABLE INCIDENTS
August 7, 2018: Jammu & Kashmir
Three journalists were detained by the Chhattisgarh Police for eight hours in Hanupara in Bastar district without any specific charges. Siddharthkumar Roy, with the Diplomat, freelance journalist Kamal Shukla, and video journalist Bhushan Choudhary were covering the run-up to the state Assembly elections slated for November 12. They claimed that despite showing the police their identity documents, they were hauled off to the local police station, made to switch off their phones and not allowed to speak to anyone. Their equipment was confiscated and the police copied their camera’s memory card before returning it. The police claimed that they had taken the journalists to the station as part of a “regular check-up” ahead of the elections and held that their release did not qualify as detention.

October 21, 2018: Chhattisgarh
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November 29, 2018: Tamil Nadu
Two French journalists, Arthur Rinaldi Rene and Julien Lepine, were questioned by India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA) regarding an alleged connection to the banned Islamic State. The journalists were prevented from entering the stadium despite carrying passes issued by the Information and Public Relations Department.

Nepal
JOURNALIST KILLINGS: 0
THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS: 0
OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS: 0
NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS: 0
THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: 0
OTHER NOTICEABLE INCIDENTS: 0

NEPAL
July 22, 2018: Udaiapur
Bishik Baburam, a journalist with the Swastikam newspaper was arrested by the anti-terrorism police at his home on May 24. He was later released on May 28 after showing his press identity card. Baburam is married to a female journalist. Baburam’s wife told the press that Baburam was arrested for posting a video on Facebook that showed him giving a speech critical of the police and comparing them to fascists.

August 8, 2018: Kathmandu
Three journalists were attacked by a mob of students organzing a protest over the death of a fellow student at the Universal College of Medical Sciences. The dipsas also included the vice-chairman of the medical college and vice-mayor of Triyga Municipality as well as a Provincial Assembly member regarding a report.

September 29, 2018: Pokhara
Journalist Jamsen Paudel Athak was threatened regarding news about fraud. Paudel received threatening phone calls from an anonymous caller.

Nepalese journalists and photojournalists holding a candlelight vigil condemning the killing of journalists in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s slain journalists were remembered on World Press Freedom Day on May 3, days after the brutal attack on the country’s media since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. (DESiR BAkHAR/AFP)
PUBLIC BACKLASH AND LEGAL CHALLENGES FROM THE SUPREME COURT.

LEGISLATION

August 17, 2018: Kathmandu

Nepal's Criminal Code Act 2018 replaced 15 laws, including 55-year-old civil and criminal laws. Some provisions of the Act were noted as being restrictive to the press freedom and criminalizing expression. Section 293 of the Act prohibits listing or recording conversations without consent; Section 294 prohibits publishing private information without consent; Section 295 prohibits taking photos without consent; Section 296 prohibits selling or publishing unauthorized information on an electronic medium; Section 305 prohibits slander; and Section 306 prohibits libel, including those in satirical ways.

MALDIVES

JOURNALIST KILLINGS: 0

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS: 0

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: 0

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS*: 1

ATTACKS ON INSTITUTIONS

August 8, 2018: Male

Maldives Broadcasting Commission fined Raajje TV for $2 million MVR (130,000 USD) for broadcasting an opposition demonstration. The speech was deemed defamatory toward the Maldivian President and a threat to national security. The MBC didn't specify which speech during the broadcast had violated the law. Raajje TV had to pay the fine within 30 days or risk losing its broadcast license; could only appeal the decision once the fine is paid. Raajje TV viewed the move as an obstetrician attack on its broadcasting.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS* CENSORSHIP

September 12, 2018: Male

The joint opposition issued a statement expressing concerns over reports that several international journalists had visa applications to cover the presidential elections rejected. The Election Commission responded stating that 11 out of 37 applications for visas by foreign journalists had been rejected on account of insufficient documentation. Strict requirements were then set for foreign journalists wanting to cover the presidential elections including deadlines, application for business visas with a Maldivian sponsor, completion of a ‘vetting form’ including details of employment, travel history and qualifications, as well as a police certificate. In August 2018, the Immigration Department issued a press release stating that the elections were open to monitoring by foreign media but warned that foreign journalists would be subjected to “punitive measures” should they report on the elections without the appropriate visa.

PAKISTAN

JOURNALIST KILLINGS: 4 (Journalist: 4; Media staff: 0; Male: 1; Female: 0)

THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS: 0

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS: 3

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS: 3

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: 0

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS*: 3

JOURNALIST KILLINGS

April 30, 2019: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

An unidentified journalist, a senior Pakistani journalist, was killed by unknown hackers who opened fire on him in the jurisdiction of University Police Station near Linda Sharif.

August 23, 2018: Punjab

Muhammad Aizk, a journalist with Daily Saeem, died after being attacked by two men. Tahir Haassan and Muhammad Imran targeted Aizk for exposing their alleged involvement in drug trafficking. Aizk sustained serious head injuries as a result of the attack and later died in hospital.

October 16, 2018: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

After breaking a story on a local drug cartel, journalist Sohail Khan was shot dead. Khan had just left the District Police Office after filing a complaint. He was driving car carrying the journalists to Hassan's hometown of Nowhera. The journalists were taken to a nearby hospital where Haassan died. Police investigated the incident as a targeted killing.

December 3, 2018: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Noor ul Hassan, of Royal News TV, was killed and cameraman Sabir was injured in an attack in Peshawar. Two gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire on the vehicle carrying the journalists to Hassan's hometown of Nowhera. The journalists were taken to a nearby hospital where Haassan died. Police investigated the incident as a targeted killing.

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS

June 5, 2018: Pakistan

Major General Asif Khakhi, a spokesperson for Pakistan's military intelligence agencies, accused journalists Armar Massood, Fakhar Durrani, Umar Cheema, Aziz Spied and Matullah Jan of sharing anti-state remarks on social media at a press conference. Khakhi stated that the Inter-Services Intelligence agency was monitoring anti-state and anti-military “internet trolls” and those who engaged with them, including journalists.

June 21, 2018: Lahore

The home of Manir Sirmir, a journalist and correspondent for Daily Times, was ransacked while she and her family were away. Two lacchis, a smartphone and passports were taken among other travel documents. This was part of a broader campaign to intimidate journalists as well as influence reporting in the lead-up to the 2018 Pakistani election.

June 27, 2018: Pakistan

Dawn published an editorial lamenting the government’s campaign of censorship against Pakistani media beginning in late 2016. The editorial claimed that the attacks on Dawn had escalated since May 2018, including actions such as distribution of the paper being halted in multiple areas. Dawn’s editorial characterized these actions as a reprisal against the print media's refusal to print criticism of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in which it criticized the military.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

June 5, 2018: Lahore

British-Pakistani journalist Gul Bakhshi's vehicle was interrupted in a military-controlled area, whilst on her way to Waqt TV studio. She was abducted by unidentified men in plainclothes. She was held for two hours and later able to return home safely. Bakhshi is a vocal critic of the military.

June 6, 2018: Lahore

A senior journalist for BOL TV network Asad Khan was driving home when he was intercepted by masked assailants, dragged out of his car and assaulted. He went to hospital for treatment but his head and legs were injured.

August 1, 2018: Lahore

Unidentified gunmen fired shots at the house of Inam Khan, a TV anchor at Express News TV in Lahore.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS*

ARREST/DETENTION

July 13, 2018: Punjab

Kharti Radio presenter for Norwegian station TV 2, was arrested and beaten by police while covering a public rally. He was released three days later but faced multiple criminal charges ranging from attempted murder to tearing a stamp.

September 24, 2018: Lahore

The Lahore High Court issued a non-bailable arrest warrant for Cyril Alfreda, an assistant editor of Dawn, regarding an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in relation to an ongoing trial against him for treason. Alfreda was required to attend the next hearing on the treason case and was barred from international travel.

December 16, 2018: Pakistan

2018’s Singapore Media Prize for the Group of Newspapers were fined without warning after the paper unexpectedly shut down five newspapers across Pakistan. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFFU) estimated total job losses to be around 2500.

SRI LANKA

JOURNALIST KILLINGS: 0

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS: 3

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS: 0

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: 0

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS*: 2

THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS

July 25, 2018: Colombo

The Minister for Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, Sarath Wijegunaratne, died after being shot three times. He was shot dead by suspects who were holed up at his house. Wijegunaratne had earlier been shot dead after filing a complaint.

October 16, 2018: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

A journalists working for news channel Dunya News was shot by unidentified men after filing a complaint against the police for the murder of his mother. The journalist was killed near his house.

November 20, 2018: Sri Lanka

Since the beginning of the constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka, dozens of journalists were killed. Several journalists were killed while attempting to cover the court appearance of Chief of Defence staff Ravindra Wijegunaratne. Photographers and cameramen were attacked by several men who gathered outside the mansion and threatened them not to take photographs of Wijegunaratne as he left court. Wijegunaratne’s security detail assaulted Indika Hendawila, a photographer for the Sunday Morning newspaper. As he attempted to take a photograph of the accused, an officer was then detained by police. Wijegunaratne is accused of protecting a naval intelligence officer who allegedly murdered 11 young men in 2009. Wijegunaratne had personally assaulted a reporter over a news report in 2016.

February 19, 2019: Jaffna

Nadarajah Kugaraj, of DAN TV, was assaulted over a news report in 2016.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS* CENSORSHIP

August 28, 2018: Colombo

A novel, radio drama and stage play came under attack for allegedly containing anti-Buddhist remarks and “offensive” language. The Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) headed by former president, Chandrika Bandaranike Kumaratunga, was forced to amend the titles of several episodes of a radio drama after monks and other religious organizations labelled some episodes as anti-Buddhist and an insult to the religion. The performance certificate of the play Maara Ako Sinhala, directed by Aanka Sayakara, was also revoked by the Public Performance Board and was only allowed to be reinstated after some of its ‘anti-Buddhist’ dialogues were changed.

October 5, 2018: Jaffna

Demon in Paradise, a film by Jude Ratnam exploring the violence of the Sri Lankan Civil War, was cut from a Jaffna film festival by organisers after pressure from a sectarian group known as the ‘Community’. The film won Best Film award at the Film South Asia 2017 festival in Kathmandu.

Pakistan police baton journalist during daily rally, World Press Freedom Day in Islamabad on May 3, 2018;Image from News Iskandar Khan, Aljazeera; IFJ PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2018–2019
The IFJ has documented cases of 24 journalists detained in South Asia in the period from May 2018 to April 2019. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists arrested compared to 2017-18. India bucked this regional trend, however, with more journalists jailed in the period. India has seen an increasing number of journalists arrested over their use of social media, raising serious concerns about freedom of expression in the online space. Journalists in Jammu and Kashmir were targeted, most evident in the illegal detention and arrest of Aasif Sultan in August.

The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for 24 hours or less, which is a positive shift away from the intimidatory practice. Nepal’s previous high number of arrests and detentions around the country’s election schedule dropped in the period from 19 in 2017-18 to 4 in 2018-19. The arrest of Shahidul Alam in Bangladesh in August under the draconian ICT Act captivated the region and the world. The first arrest was made on November 27, 2018, under sections 505(2) and 506 of the IPC related to disturbing communal harmony. After he was charged under the draconian sedition law, he was arrested on November 21, but was granted bail on November 26, 2018. He was remanded to preventive detention for one year under the draconian National Security Act on November 27.

According to the IFJ’s Press Freedom Report 2018-2019, Pakistan has seen a decrease in arrests compared to 2017-18. The declines in the number of arrests compared to 2017-18 in the Maldives which recorded 11 arrests in 2017-18 and none in 2018-19. This is largely linked to the shifting political climate in the Maldives which saw the exit of the previous government. Pakistan and Nepal also saw sharp declines in the number of arrests compared to 2017-18.

The table below provides a breakdown of the number of journalists detained in each country in the period from May 2018 to April 2019:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Journalists Detained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table also shows the number of journalists detained by country in South Asia:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Country</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for more than one week, with 11 of those cases involving journalists in Bangladesh. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for less than one week, with 9 of those cases involving journalists in Pakistan. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for more than one week, with 11 of those cases involving journalists in Bangladesh. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for less than one week, with 9 of those cases involving journalists in Pakistan. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for more than one week, with 11 of those cases involving journalists in Bangladesh. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists detained for less than one week, with 9 of those cases involving journalists in Pakistan.

India has seen an increasing number of journalists arrested over their use of social media, raising serious concerns about freedom of expression in the online space. The sharpest decline was in the number of journalists arrested compared to 2017-18. India bucked this regional trend, however, with more journalists jailed in the period. India has seen an increasing number of journalists arrested over their use of social media, raising serious concerns about freedom of expression in the online space.