STATES OF CONTROL: COVID, CUTS AND IMPUNITY
SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2019-2020

18TH ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2019-2020
This document has been produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSIN).

Afghan Independent Journalists’ Association
Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum
Federation of Nepali Journalists
Free Shield Movement, Sri Lanka
Indian Journalists’ Union
Journalists Association of Bhutan
Maldives Journalists’ Association
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South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSIN)

– Defending rights of journalists and freedom of expression in South Asia.
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The SAMSN Digital Hub – https://samsn.ifj.org/map/ provides a listing of all known cases of media rights violations from 2014 to 2020.

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Cover Photo: AFP photographer Sajjad Hussain works near India Gate during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the Covid-19 in New Delhi on April 9, 2020. The Indian government’s response to Covid-19 has led to controls on media and journalists being denied access to public interest information.

Contents Photo: Journalists in Kashmir use a cramped, makeshift media centre during the internet shutdown to file stories.

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OVERVIEW

The novel coronavirus made a deadly sweep across the globe from the beginning of 2020, governments in South Asia tightened their iron grip over the media and democratic institutions. Even as the viral spread was declared a pandemic, the region saw an equally dangerous spread of fake news, increasing digital controls by governments, restricted access to information, Islamophobia, police high-handedness, amplified surveillance, curbs on movement and detentions. Fundamental freedoms were curbed in the name of a public health crisis, and authoritarian measures implemented, including a clamp down on citizens’ rights during a police-enforced lockdown in India and an official “police curfew” in Sri Lanka.

The media had the task of reporting the growing humanitarian crisis, working in difficult circumstances and amidst unprecedented physical curbs due to lockdowns and restrictions, particularly in containment zones. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated existing fault lines in the precarious freedoms that the South Asian media has fought for and the most vulnerable are suffering.

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The presidential election in Afghanistan, which ended in a fractured outcome was marked by deep divisions and questions about the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The media, rife with competing vested interests from the government to the Taliban, faces a crisis of credibility among the public and a critical survival instinct that leads to wide-ranging self-censorship. High levels of threats, intimidation and attacks on media persons and media houses by the Taliban during and following the protracted peace talks strongly marked the period under review in Afghanistan with some media choosing to quit their jobs than face ongoing serious threats.

MANUFACTURING CONSENT
Intolerance to dissent marked the year in India, with two draconian laws made even more repressive. Amendments to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019 (UAPA) and the National Investigation Agency Act (NIA) have direct implications for the media and can impinge upon freedom of speech and expression. Applied indiscriminately across the country and most recently against two Kashmiri journalists, these strengthened counter-terror legislations in addition to existing public security laws with sweeping powers, contribute to self-censorship and control. Besides these, other criminal laws, including defamation suits were slapped on journalists whose stories displaced those in power.

The ironic misuse of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act in Sri Lanka intended to prohibit incitement of discrimination, hostility or violence on religious grounds was another attack on free speech. Covid-19 also revealed governments’ anxiety about investigative reports and had them resorting to measures to control the narrative. Strict legal action was threatened against media organisations that ‘criticise’, point out ‘minor shortcomings’ or ‘scoop/character’ state officials performing their duties.

In Bangladesh, under fire on social media for its dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the government arrested critics under the draconian Digital Security Act. Widespread criticism over a government move to monitor television channels for “rumours” and “propaganda” regarding Covid-19 resulted in the blockage of access to social media.

In Nepal, where journalists face arrest and detention on flimsy pretexts, the legal environment was in threat of further deterioration with the drafting of two controversial bills, the Information Technology Management Bill which could curb free expression online and the Media Council Bill which proposes regulations supposedly to protect personal data, the government has systematically encroached on digital rights.

DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND WEB CONTROL
South Asia’s thriving digital news media has been spurred as much by increasingly accessible and cheaper technology as well as the ongoing dismantling of legacy media. News-gathering and disseminations have undergone a massive transformation driven by technology as well as changes in readership and revenues. Even as the digital news media scrambles to retain basic tenets of journalism in the emerging scenario, governments resort to newer ways of control. Surveillance, censorship and control over the digital space in South Asia certainly predates the pandemic, and countries across the region were given more rope to tighten existing regulations.

The ghastly Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 in Sri Lanka resulted in the blockage of access to social media to prevent incitement of communal violence, and a month later, dissemination of ‘false news’ that could affect communal harmony or state security was criminalised.

In Pakistan, the government’s move to control the vibrant social media by enacting the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules met with outright rejection from social media companies who threatened to pack up and leave rather than succumb to government control.

India, the leader in digital control saw a surge in “takedown” requests of content on TikTok and Facebook. From heightened regulation of intermediaries, information on government-assisted surveillance and access to citizens’ data to seeking traceability of end-to-end encryption ostensibly to crack down on ‘fake news’, frequent and prolonged internet shutdowns and a proposed legislation supposedly to protect personal data, the government has systematically encroached on digital rights.

The Digital Security Act in Bangladesh continued to be misused to muzzle critical voices, but a recent challenge in the High Court questioning the constitutionality of this draconian law might have significant implications for freedom of expression in the country.

The dubious distinction of the longest running internet shutdown was the shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir, which began on August 4, 2019. Despite the vital role of the internet in containing the Covid-19 pandemic, full access to high speed internet access continues to be blocked for reasons of “security”.

Tiny dents in impunity
The lack of accountability for murders and attacks on journalists across the region is one of the reasons why these assassinations are ongoing.

In Sri Lanka, several landmark cases of murder, disappearance and assaults of journalists and human rights defenders between 2009 to 2015 are pending at various stages of investigation or trial. In a small step forward, in November, indictments were filed against seven army intelligence officers in connection with the abduction of journalist Prageeth Eragala back in 2009.

Another breakthrough was in the case of attempted murder of former editor Upali Tennakoon. Nearly ten years on, an army officer was found to have been involved in the attack.

In Pakistan, the death sentence of British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who had been convicted by an anti-terrorism court for kidnapping and murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 was reversed. The Sindh provincial government promptly filed an appeal in the Supreme Court of Pakistan against the downgrade of Sheikh’s punishment from death to life term and from life-term to acquittal of Sheikh’s co-accused Salman Saqib and Sahad Naqim. Two days later, the High Court re-arrested the accused pending filing of the appeal against the acquittal.

In the 37 cases of murders and disappearances in Nepal since 1997, mostly during the Maoist insurgency, only in five cases of murder has justice been delivered. The long arm of the law finally reached back to the 2007 murder of journalist Birendra Sah and a former Maoist cadre was arrested for his involvement in the murder.

In the Maldives, President Solih’s promise to end impunity, bring perpetrators to book, and introduce safety mechanisms seemed to be borne out by not a single murder, disappearance, abduction or physical assault in his year and a half in office. The government-appointed presidential commission to probe the disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla in 2014 and the 2017 murder of blogger and digital activist Yameen Rasheed found new evidence to suggest that previous president Abdulla Yameen and his deputy Ahmed Adeeb attempted to scuttle the investigation. Even as the probe drags on and political charges are traded, the affected families await closure and hope for justice.

ECONOMIC SIEGE
Already in the grip of a slowdown, South Asia, like the rest of the world is soon going to be in worst crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Governments in South Asia, already reeling under a financial crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have shown little inclination to shore up the collapsing media industry.

Whether it is tiny Bhutan, where dire straits have forced several more newspapers to shut their shutters in 2019, or a mammoth country like India where the media is in frightening freefall, the media in South Asia walks the edge, trying to maintain the fine balance between financial sustainability and unfettered truth telling. Shored up by government advertisements and corporate revenue, few media houses can afford to dispense governments or corporate houses. One fallout of the dependence on government funds is the troubling trend of self-censorship in both state-owned and private media organisations in Sri Lanka.

The media in Pakistan operates in a difficult environment as a routine. The national economy was tanking, media revenues plummeting, and various media had laid off over 3,000 journalists. Various Covid-19 restrictions had made the situation worse. The government, the largest source of revenue for the media, stopped the release of advertisements to newspapers and TV channels, including the daily Dawn and Geo TV and Jang Group, the largest media company that gave space to voices of dissent and opposition.

The domain effect of non-payment of dues was a severe financial crunch which was passed on to journalists and media staff now burdened by mass layoffs, salary delays and cuts. Unemployment rates of media workers due to stress and hopelessness and the deteriorating working conditions of media workers prompted an IFJ mission to the country in an effort to bring both national and internationals on the table. A resolution adopted during the mission emphasised job security and decent wages for working journalists as priorities.

The Indian media is passing through one of the most pressing times in its history, with financial instability being borne by those at the lowest rung. The mass retrenchments have left journalists over 2019-20. The Covid-19 situation has made the media in South Asia walk the edge, trying to maintain the fine balance between financial sustainability and unfettered truth telling. Shored up by government advertisements and corporate revenue, few media houses can afford to dispense governments or corporate houses. One fallout of the dependence on government funds is the troubling trend of self-censorship in both state-owned and private media organisations in Sri Lanka.

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IN SRI LANKA, SEVERAL LANDMARK CASES OF MURDER, DISAPPEARANCE AND ASSAULT OF JOURNALISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS BETWEEN 2009 TO 2015 ARE PENDING AT VARIOUS STAGES OF INVESTIGATION OR TRIAL.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION
Attempts to shape the narrative characterised all governments in the region. Lack of access to information was particularly sharp in Afghanistan, where media outlets united to urge the government to ensure free flow of information, in a scenario where the Taliban too attempted to control the narrative, sometimes in violent ways.

In defence and frustration at the false promises of real access to information, Afghanistan’s media held a protest on February 8 criticising the obstruction of the free flow of information and demanding the government to direct its officials cooperate in information sharing with media.

India’s strong Right to Information law witnessed a dilution which will have repercussions on access to information in the years to come. Courts in India however, came out in support of the right to know, albeit with riders, when the Supreme Court denied the government’s call for prior censorship pf news related to the pandemic but did direct the media to ‘refer and publish official version of developments’.

PROMOTING ETHICS: BRIDGING DIVIDES
Women were at the forefront of the profession in many countries in South Asia – in Bhutan, most newsrooms are staffed by women, and Indian women journalists have won accolades in leadership positions. Sexual harassment and domestic violence continue to impede women’s entry and rise in the profession.

In Afghanistan, the space for women in media remains extremely challenging to the point that social customs and ongoing threats by anti-government elements have ensured that no women journalists now work in at least 12 provinces.

The gaping ‘information’ divide between trendy urban centres and growing poverty and deprivation in rural South Asia is growing, with the media catering to advertisers geared to urban audiences and removed from rural realities. While some niche alternate media focus on the forgotten villages of South Asia, mainstreaming these concerns has been Bhutan’s unique response, with awards, grants and workshops for rural communities to promote rural journalism have been concrete actions: towards bridging the chasm.

Significant steps forward to strengthen ethical journalism were taken by unions and press freedom organisations in Sri Lanka, by adopting a ‘Social Media Declaration’, pledging their commitment to fight any kind of discrimination and avoid content inciting hate or violence. The adoption of a ‘Rights and Responsibilities Charter’ encompassing labour rights, the right to association and organisation and the right to know engender hope that together we can be the change.

While in the media, South Asians grapple with the challenges of reporting on the unprecedented lockdowns that threaten to have a devastating and irreversible impact on the economy, politics and social relations, civil liberties must not be bypassed. It is precisely in times of crisis that democratic rights must be protected, fundamental freedoms valued and press freedom promoted. Questioning, dissent and a robust independent media are vital to check that governments do not use the pandemic to encroach upon hard won freedoms and to ensure that our communities come out of the lockdown with their rights intact.

THE PANDEMIC AND THE PRESS

The lockdowns and physical distancing measures put in place in varying degrees of severity in all countries in South Asia had direct implications for the media. From self-protection and workplace safety, lack of protective equipment and training, and reporting amidst physical barriers, journalists in the region learnt quickly and hit the ground running.

Journalists did a commendable job of exposing the unfolding humanitarian crisis, encroachment on citizens’ rights, policy failures and also stories of touching humanity amidst the crisis. And all this while desperately trying to keep their jobs.

The lockdowns came as a severe blow to the news industry’s financial basics. Global signals of peril had been emerging from the early years of the century, as digital media began claiming a larger share of the advertising pie. But most of South Asia was buffered to some degree by growing newspaper readership – a consequence of both increasing literacy and affluence – and the buoyant growth of advertising spending for close to two decades ending 2008. The virus cracked unambiguously exposed the deep fissures in the media industry, whose lack of sustainability came sharply to the fore.

When advertising first started slowing with rising anxieties over the economic slowdown in China, and then abruptly dried up with the nationwide shutdown, the news industry found itself cut adrift, without any means of negotiating choppier waters. Negotiating the current crisis will involve reversing the course set some three decades back, when the pursuit of profit through maximising advertisement yield became the priority. The obvious solution is to aggressively start pricing online content. Yet, with several local governments decreeing a ban on printed newspaper distribution through the health crisis, this strategy could potentially mean that newspaper titles could drop off audience radars. Several have nonetheless retreated behind paywalls, or announced such intention, while providing free content ostensibly as a public service through the days of lockdown.

The Indian Newspaper Society meanwhile has submitted a memorandum to the Indian government, demanding a number of fresh concessions including import duty exemption for newsprint, a two-year exemption from taxation, and an increase of 50 per cent in the rates paid for government advertisements. Journalists’ unions have underlined that the industry should not be allowed to default on its primary responsibility of safeguarding job security and ensuring regular payment wages through the crisis.

In Pakistan however, the digital media led the way in converting what is a media production and operation crisis into an opportunity. One way they did that was to examine any innovation around what they are doing that often are not, specifically in the context of Covid-19. Mainstream print establishments (facing distribution problems) and even current affairs TV channels which could not generate pre-outbreak levels of field-based content rapidly bailed up their digital operations, reworking their websites and social media accounts to focus on Covid-19 coverage.

On November 14, 2019 journalist Dilrukshi Handunnetti reflects at the site in Colombo where her colleague Lasantha Wickrematunge was murdered in 2009. No memorial marks where the Sri Lankan newspaper editor was murdered, one of dozens of victims of “Gosip squabbles” allegedly linked to a neighbouring in the country’s November 16, 2019, presidential election. CREDIT SIMON STURDEE / AFP

On April 27, India's Supreme Court admitted a writ petition filed by the National Alliance of Journalists (NAL), the Delhi Union of Journalists (DJU) and the Brihanmumbai Union of Journalists (BHU) demanding an end to job losses and salary cuts in the media industry. Notice was issued to the two apex industry organisations – the Indian Newspapers Society (INS) and the News Broadcasters’ Association (NBA) – asking for a response on specific points about job losses and salary cuts. India’s newspaper industry, lured into a sense of security, chose a revenue model in which the subscriber paid little and advertising contributed 65 to 90 per cent to total revenue.

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LOCKDOWN OF RIGHTS

India awoke late to the Covid-19 threat, but then went the maximum distance. The public mood was already fearful and the markets had begun to shed value. Following a day-long nationwide “voluntary” curfew on March 22, the Prime Minister addressed the nation on March 24, to announce a complete lockdown all across the country starting within four hours, at the stroke of midnight.

India’s lockdown was the strictest in scope, amounting to a complete paralysis of normal life. Yet India’s economic stimulus package to deal with the adverse consequences of economic paralysis was among the lowest. Less than one per cent of GDP against 3 per cent or above in most countries threatened by the pandemic.

The steps to safely evacuate migrant workers from cities and other possible human consequences. These reports brought home a story of a rushed decision, careless about possible infection were even more impractical. These reports suggested a rush to the harvest, by then due in some of India’s most productive agricultural regions, would be disrupted. Reports suggested a lack of planning for the lockdown and over the first few days of the lockdown, the central government had no clear idea of the situation dictating that available supplies be reserved for medical personnel. The government to distribute safety kits and ensure medical treatment for journalists.

Développement des restrictions sur les médias

Pandemic too suffered. In Indonesia’s first positive case in the southern Indian state of Kerala, was reported “uncooperative” in providing travel details. Contract tracing was done by accessing the individual's cell phone records. Though the final outcome may have been a benign, there are persistent fears about privacy violations and increased surveillance of citizens, especially under regimes that do not set much store by public trust. The use of “electronic fences” and stipulations that quarantined individuals should provide real-time compliance reports by regularly posting “selfies”, have engendered new fears about privacy violations.

MISINFORMATION

Governments across South Asia have issued directives against fake news through its provincial committees, district chapters and also through media houses in Kathmandu. IFJ has also coordinated with health and humanitarian organizations to provide health professionals for regular health check-ups. A common trend is the empowerment of police authorities across the region – officially in a “Police Curfew” in Sri Lanka which has sharpened an already tense equation between the compulsions of enforcement and the task of extracting and reporting news from beneath the security lockdown. The notice to media organisations issued by the Sri Lanka Police threatening legal action against those who “criticise, point out ‘minor shortcomings/failures’ or ‘cold/chastise’ state officials performing their duties does not bode well for critical reporting.

VIRAL MISINFORMATION

Countries in South Asia face problems though differently manifested according to internet penetration, literacy deficits and relative levels of poverty. India with its proliferation of “smartphones”, faces a potential overload of information. While Pakistan with 35 per internet penetration has the problem – as a digital rights group pointed out that these platforms were used to spread “false narratives”.

The statement issued unspecified threats against the paper for a column reprinted from The Korea Herald by former a former editor-in-chief of The Korea Times, in which he attacked the government to extend a package for media persons affected by Covid-19, from monthly pensions to compensation for families of journalists. Measures were severely hampered.

In Nepal, the media faced an entirely different attack: with the Chinese embassy issuing a statement against Anup Kaphle, the then editor-in-chief of The Kathmandu Post, for alleged persistent bias. The statement unspecified threats against the paper for a column reprinted from The Korea Herald by former a former editor-in-chief of The Korea Times, in which he attacked the government to extend a package for media persons affected by Covid-19, from monthly pensions to compensation for families of journalists. The ministry to distribute safety kits and ensure medical treatment for media workers. By early April, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) negotiated with the Pakistan provincial government to extend a package for media persons affected by Covid-19, from monthly pensions to compensation for families of journalists. Measures were severely hampered.

In Pakistan, most newspapers cut down their pages. For...
**DIGITAL CONTROL**

**PATCHY CONNECTIVITY**

By March 2020, the total number of internet users in the Asia region was estimated at 2,300 billion, which represents around 50 per cent of the world's internet population, covering 55 per cent of the world's total population.

While the figure may seem encouraging, a deep dive into the statistics shows uneven spread, with low penetration and broadband speeds, expensive and unaffordable to a majority of digital have-nots in almost all the countries of South Asia. The rankings for the four countries of South Asia that feature in the 2019 US-based think tank Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* report of internet and digital media freedom around the world are dismal. The report ranks Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka as ‘partly free’ and Pakistan as ‘not free’.

In the rest of South Asia, internet access is uneven, and barely 19 per cent in Afghanistan, given the long years of war and conflict. For the 22 million active mobile subscribers, internet access is highly priced and provided by a government company and four private companies. Internet penetration for the other countries fares better, with Bhutan at 48 per cent, Nepal at 54 per cent and Maldives at a high of 81 per cent.

For those who do have digital access, the stranglehold of draconian digital laws further compounds the precarious state of internet freedom. In all of South Asia, there is widespread censorship, takedowns and blocking of content, persecution of journalists and bloggers, the hounding and arrests of citizens who voice opinions on social media platforms and prolonged internet shutdowns in conflict areas or in times of conflict. India, the largest country of South Asia, is also seeing the internet shutdown capital of the world (see page 16). Across South Asia, repressive measures are receiving legal and even social sanction as governments enact more and more stringent laws and regulate online content in the name of tackling fake news, protecting national security or, most recently, public health as in the ongoing corona virus pandemic.

**CENSORSHIP AND REGULATORY CONTROLS**

In **India**, internet freedom is marred by repeated internet shutdowns, censorship, surveillance and arrests for social media posts. The Indian Government continued to lead in takedown of content from social media networks and internet sites. In January, video sharing site TikTok released its first transparency report and said that India’s takedown requests surpassed those of the United States. Likewise, Facebook’s transparency report said there was a sharp spike in “Emergency Requests For User Information” by the Indian Government in 2019. Twitter and Google reported similar data for user information.

The Indian government has also sought to change its intermediary guidelines, to bring online media under the purview of the Registration of Press and Periodical Bill (2019) and create a regulatory authority for online media sites. It is also set to unleash heightened surveillance and access to citizens’ data on grounds of national security, and more recently for public health concerns. India has sought traceability of end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp messages, ostensibly to track fake news, but internet freedom activists believe it will further aid the government to crack down on dissent.

The Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 with the concomitant Data Protection Authority concentrates power in the hands of the central government. The Bill also amends the Information and Technology Act (2000) to delete the provisions related to compensation payable by companies for failure to protect personal data. It came just a month after shocking news of internet snooping of several writers, journalists, activists and advocates emerged in late October 2019. Although it is not confirmed if the snooping by malware Pegasus has been under the direction of the government, questions raised in parliament to seek clarifications were met with opaque response that the government ‘had the powers to snoop under Section 69 of the IT Act (2000) as well as under Section 5 of the Indian Telegraph Act (1885) to “view message in the case of public emergency or in the interest of public safety.”

In **Bangladesh**, the draconian provisions of the recently passed Digital Security Act 2018 were deployed to arrest of writers and activists in May 2019 and again, in March 2020, with the seizing of Mansa Zamin editor-in-chief Mari-ul-Abidin Chowdhury and 31 others on charges of publishing ‘false’ news and circulating it on social media. The Sampadak Parishad (or Editor’s Council of Bangladesh) has said that the Digital Security Act will profoundly affect investigative journalism.

The act has sweeping provisions, mostly non-bailable offences and very little or no clear definitions for crimes such as ‘engaging in propaganda’ or ‘campaigning against the spirit of the liberation war’ the ‘father of the nation’ or publication or broadcast of any information that ‘hurts religious values or sentiments.’

A writ petition filed by nine persons, including professor of Dhaka University and journalists, is now challenging the Act. In February 2020, the Dhaka High Court issued notice to the government asking why sections 25 and 31 of the Digital Security Act (2018) should not be declared unconstitutional. Bangladesh’s government has installed technology which could enable the government to block any online content, including Facebook pages or an account in just three minutes. The system was installed under the Cyber Threat Detection and Response project of the department of telecommunications launched in July 2017. So far, the government has blocked around 22,000 sites, mostly containing porn and those facilitating gambling.

In **Pakistan**, internet shutdowns and surveillance are constant. Telecom operators use a Web Monitoring System (WMS) to monitor social media, while over 800,000 websites and web pages were blocked for a range of reasons, including for hosting content that was allegedly pornographic, blasphemous or expressing sentiments against the state and military.

Censorship on Facebook was rampant, resulting in the removal of 14,296 URLs from Facebook in the first half of 2019. According to reports, Facebook removed more than 12,000 of them. Half of the websites were said to be in violation of Facebook’s rules, the other half violated “local laws.” The government cracked down on dissidents, including political parties. It was only after objections were lodged before the Election Commission of Pakistan and the Islamabad High Court that the website of the Awami Workers Party’s website, was restored in November 2019 after being temporarily blocked in the lead up to the 2018 general elections.

In July, the hashtag #ArrestAntiPakjournalists called for the arrest of journalists in Pakistan, some even calling for hanging. The hashtag was used or forwarded more than 20,000 times. Many users accompanied it with a composite photograph of prominent journalists and TV anchors, some of whom regularly criticise the governing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.
In February, Pakistan enacted the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules (2020) ostensibly to monitor content on social media and strengthen of online presence of the print media was a "causes hatred among people". The rules, enacted without consultation with stakeholders, give regulators the power to demand the takedown of a wide range of content within 24 hours and the dooms to mass censorship. In response, big internet companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter banded together as the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) wrote to the Pakistan Prime Minister threatening to withdraw completely from the country. This tightening of control has implications not only for freedom of expression but also for the digital economy. In its submission, the AIC expressed "sincere concern" that unless revoked, the rules had the potential to "severely cripple the internet economy." Pakistan risks becoming a global outlier, needlessly isolating and depriving Pakistani users and businesses of the growth potential of the internet economy.

Sri Lanka also witnessed a surge in surveillance, online threats and harassment particularly in the run up to the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in November 2019. The same threats and harassment particularly in the run up to the election became a global outlier, needlessly isolating and depriving Pakistani users and businesses of the growth potential of the internet economy. As no other country has announced such a sweeping set of rules, Pakistan risks becoming a global outlier, needlessly isolating and depriving Pakistani users and businesses of the growth potential of the internet economy.

In February, the Taliban accused the Khurasani of espionage and intending to "confound people's mind" and "propaganda by foreign mercenaries". Continued intimidation led to most of the staff quitting their jobs. In November 2019, the UNAMA deleted from its social media platforms ten posts deemed to be offensive, a charge that Facebook account holders contested.

Denial of access to information by official sources was a major problem, prompting over 30 media outlets to issue a statement on February 4 blaming the "carelessness" of the government for endangering media freedom in recent years. Barely 12 days later, complaints were lodged against at least 40 social media users before the Attorney General. The complaints were lodged by Afghanistan Green Trend (AGT), a social and youth empowerment organisation led by Amrullah Saleh, the first running mate to President Ashraf Ghani, as the attempted murder of blogger Ismail Khilath Rasheed in June 2012, the assassination of lawmaker Dr Afrasheem Ali in October 2012 and the murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed in October 2013. These attacks were linked to al-Qaeda. The fuelling of hate on online media was seen as a major factor.

In a press conference, the chair of the commission Husni Suood said that "the roots of Rilwan’s abduction – as well as the attempted murder of blogger Ismail Khilath Rashied in June 2012, the assassination of lawmaker Dr Afrasheem Ali in October 2012 and the murder of blogger Tameen Rashied in April 2017, were all "connected" and carried out by the same extremist group – could be traced to an "ideological dispute" that started between Maldivian freethinkers and extremists on social media in 2010."

Concerns about control are now heightened, and the Alliance of Independent Professionals said that "the government has now taken full control of media, including private media, to popularise the political agenda of the government and strategic direction of a Sinhala Buddhist state. The calculated move is visible through an organised social media strategy of the government politicians as well as control of the dissemination of information.

In Afghanistan, tensions ran high, given the imminent withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban. The press and internet users are subject to censorship and attacks from three principal agencies: the government, the Taliban and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). In February, the Taliban accused the Khurasani of espionage and intending to "confound people's mind" and "propaganda by foreign mercenaries". Continued intimidation led to most of the staff quitting their jobs. In November 2019, the UNAMA deleted from its social media platforms ten posts deemed to be offensive, a charge that Facebook account holders contested.

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Nepal, which boasts of 60 per cent internet penetration and 100 per cent mobile penetration, added at least 250 new internet users every hour and government reports say that it comes second only to Bhutan in social media penetration in South Asia. However, Nepal’s Electronic Transactions Act (2006), has been used to censor online content and many of its provisions, including Section 47, prohibit publication of a range of material which may be contrary to the public morality or decent behaviour or any types of materials which may spread hate or jealousy against anyone or which may jeopardize the harmonious relations subsisting among the peoples of various castes, tribes and communities. Other laws are equally restrictive. The Criminal Code, which came into effect from August 2018, makes it illegal to record and listen to conversations between two or more people without the consent of the persons involved and bans photographers from photographing persons "outside of a public space without consent", restricting their work and hampering investigative journalism. The latest attack on Nepal’s online media was the March 22 decision of the Press Council Nepal to write to the government to restrict access to five online portals for allegedly spreading fake news on Covid-19. The council, which is a media regulatory authority, in a move that could promote censorship, also wrote to the Nepal Telecommunication Authority about two more online portals for publishing fake news. Journalists also bore the brunt of the misuse of the ECA. Journalist Gaurav Khanal, sub-editor of onlineaaj.com, was accused of cybercrime for allegedly publishing fake news in association with a website with a similar name.

The world over, history has shown that governments have not lost any opportunity during situations of conflict and social turmoil, to put in place repressive measures to regulate and control people, including online freedom of expression. Constant vigilance and checks and balance on government overreach that impedes citizens’ digital freedoms is a vital need, especially in times of the global pandemic.
Internet shutdown — or deliberate disruption of any kind of internet or internet-based communication by state or non-state party to control communication or content — has sadly become an increasing trend in South Asia, representing a barometer on how power and the party to control communication or content — has sadly became an increasing trend in South Asia, representing a barometer on how power and the country, but later changed its stand after severe criticism. The most notorious shutdown of all is in India-administered Kashmir which has now witnessed the world’s longest communication shutdown in a democracy. The Indian government imposed the internet shutdown on August 4, 2019, a day before revoking Article 370 of the Constitution of India. The shutdown, though somewhat eased, still continues to stifle life and the work of journalists currently battling the Covid-19 pandemic. In a testament to the fact that internet shutdowns are a disproportionate deprivation of freedom of expression, the direct impact of which is felt by the media, the parties which approached the Supreme Court to challenge the communications shutdown in Kashmir were principally all media houses such as the Kashmir Times or journalists unions such as the Indian Journalists’ Union (IJU) which implored in the case. Ironically, the Press Council of India, the body mandated to protect freedom of the press, seeking to intervene in the same case, backed the internet ban citing “national interest and sovereignty” of the country, but later changed its stand after severe criticism. India also ordered another long internet shutdown in Kargil district of Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir. According to the Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC India), Kargil faced a shutdown of 145 days which was imposed from August 4 until December 27. India’s Supreme Court ordered the government to review all restrictions in Kashmir within a week in January 2020, saying the indefinite suspension of people’s rights amounted to an abuse of power. While some communications have been gradually restored, the block on high speed mobile 4G internet in the Kashmir Valley still remains intact. India also imposed internet shutdowns during protests across the country against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In December, almost 20 districts in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, witnessed prolonged shutdowns. Around the same time, Delhi, and the North-eastern states of Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya also faced internet shutdowns purportedly to contain violent protests against the CAA. The southern Indian state of Karnataka saw its first-ever shutdown in December when a complete ban on the internet was imposed in two districts following violence during protests against the CAA. India is not the only country in the region shutting down the internet, as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have also implemented internet shutdowns. The NGO Bytes for All in Pakistan recorded at least seven incidents of internet shutdowns since May 2019, whereas Bangladesh recorded at least three and Sri Lanka recorded at least two incidents. Internet shutdowns impede the work of journalists in critical ways. When the internet is shutdown or slowed, or when social media access is blocked, a valuable tool of journalism is lost, and research, verification and essential communication is impeded. Internet shutdowns prevent journalists from accessing and sharing information. Shutdowns pose a threat to human rights and block the public’s right to know and have emerged as a significant tool of censorship by governments which are increasingly utilising shutdowns in the guise of maintaining security. Internet shutdowns are being flagged as a major issue in the region and freedom of expression is the casualty. There is an urgent need for journalists, journalist unions and media rights organisations in South Asia to join the growing advocacy against internet shutdowns in order to defend the rights of journalists and protect freedom of expression.
KASHMIR: ACCESS DENIED

On August 4, 2019, rumours flew thick and fast in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) triggering widespread anxiety and speculation, ranging from possibilities of war to an offensive against militants in the conflict-torn Indian-administered Kashmir Valley. At midnight struck, an ominous silence descended. The next day, the Indian parliament abrogated Section 370 of the Constitution of India that had given special status and semi-autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, and also downgraded the state into two union territories. Anticipating an upsurge in volatile J&K, the government imposed a complete communications ban, shutting down landlines, mobile phones, broadband and mobile internet.

From August 5 onwards, thousands of armed forces clutching assault rifles paraded through streets of Srinagar, crossed with barricades and razor wires. Shops were shuttered, markets were closed and transport was off the roads, except for armoured vehicles cruising round the clock. Newsrooms were empty, bereft of reporters and editors as stringent restrictions prevented them from venturing out. A few who were able to reach their offices watched news channels and listened to the radio and transcribed the bulletins for the next day's truncated edition of just four pages. Many newspapers did not publish and the shutdown took digital portals several years back. Finances, revenue, advertisements and audiences have taken a beating, as have search engine rankings.

The ban dealt a crippling blow to the entire media community as there was no access to information, news gathering, verifying, research or content creation. The heavy deployment of troops, mass arrests of more than 5,000 civilians including three former chief ministers and dozens of legislators, politicians and lawyers caused a sense of foreboding among journalists. This was the beginning of the clampdown on the media by denying access to ground reporting. Mobile Internet was banned in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, and was restored in phases. Mobile phone 2G internet was restored in five districts of Jammu and broadband for essential services such as hospitals, banks and government offices. Initially, the government ‘whitelisted’ only 153 websites for access and gradually extended it to 1,400 websites till internet was restored on March 4, 2020.

Media organisations and journalists were not included in the priority list for allowing internet access. Later, they were made to sign an undertaking agreeing to six points: there will be no social networking, proxies, VPNs and WiFi from the permitted IP; no encrypted file containing any sort of video/photo will be uploaded; MAC binding in place to restrict Internet access to registered devices through single FC; all USB ports will be disabled; no USB drivers will be allowed for any brand and misuse of Internet; the company will provide complete access to all its content and infrastructure and as when requested by the security agencies.

The restoration of broadband internet notwithstanding, challenges and risks for the media continue. Journalists are continuing and putting up a resistance despite the pressures and are continuing to campaign for the restoration of high-speed mobile internet as a basic professional right.

VOICES OF COURAGE

The IFJ and SAMSN launched a campaign called ‘Postcards from Kashmir’ to highlight the difficulties faced by journalists in Kashmir in their professional work and daily lives. These are some of the voices of courage from Kashmir, telling the story in the face of immense difficulties.

ANURADHA BHASIN EXECUTIVE EDITOR, KASHMIR TIMES

We have faced internet, mobile phone and SMS bans earlier, but this time it has been a complete blackout. A majority of the population has been pushed behind iron walls. The communication blockade has put the media in a state of freeze as it has had no access to information. It neither had access to officials, nor could it hear the voices of ordinary people. Its only job was reduced to that of publishing official handouts.

HILAL MIR SENIOR JOURNALIST

Kashmir did a remarkable job of getting stories when it was near impossible. I would like to think, however, that was flexing its muscles on a hapless administration that was flexing its muscles on a hapless state. 10 days and once my brother visited New Delhi after August 5 but not to local newspapers too could not publish their reports.

Jehangir Aziz Bhat SENIOR VIDEO JOURNALIST

There were restrictions on our professional work. We were not allowed to take shots of Srinagar's historic Jamia Masjid, which the government had closed for more than four months. Even curvature videos were issued first to journalists from New Delhi after August 5 but not to local journalists. Journalists accredited by the J&K government too were issued passes only after a week. I had to stay in my office for 10 days and once my brother visited me at night to see if I was okay.

Soldiers patrolling Srinagar enforcing restrictions after August 5, 2019 when the crippling shutdown began.

Gowhar Geelani SENIOR JOURNALIST/ POLITICAL COMMENTATOR

When eight million inhabitants of the Kashmir Valley were cut off from the rest of the world in the absence of all tools of modern communication, the newspaper chose to write editorials on apricots and cucumbers, op-eds were written on Cambridge Goat II and internet was banned in Kashmir. The media became government stenographers, with hardly anyone trying to inform the administration and authorities. How can a journalist work without being able to communicate, talk to sources, talk to the people to know their perspectives? The news gathering process is made impossible. As a journalist you suffer in myriad ways.

Nusrat Siddiqui REPORTER

When the press was not allowed to do its work amid the government’s claims of normalcy. We had to travel in the freezing cold to media centre every day and wait for hours to access internet. One day in November, the internet in the media centre got suspended due to heavy snow. Despite coming braving cold and snow to reach media centre, we could not send photos. Similarly, local newspapers too could not publish their reports. Thereafter, this lasted for two months of lockdown and communications shutdown. Though there were stories but I had no means to travel and reach office. In my area, protests were occurring almost everyday but I was not able to report them.

During these months, rumours were everywhere but there was no way to verify or confirm things. And I had no choice but believe them to be true.
AFGHANISTAN

NO PEACE FOR THE MEDIA

Since the launch of peace talks between the Taliban and the United States in Doha in October 2018 and the subsequent collapse of negotiations in September 2019, the media and journalists in Afghanistan have continued to come under increasing pressure. With it, there has been a rise in threats and intimidation emanating not just from the emboldened Taliban or the Afghan government, but also from other terrorist groups, warlords and powerbrokers.

The Taliban, well-known for their disdain of press freedom, has attempted to control the country’s media even in times of apparent peace. Besieged media houses and reporters have been given clear warnings, as the Taliban openly intimidated journalists. In June 2019, the Taliban threatened Afghan media organisations, warning them to stop spreading “anti-jihad and Taliban sentiments” or be targeted as enemies.

Afghanistan remains one of the world’s most deadly countries for media workers, leading the IFJ’s global death tally with 16 killings in 2018. In 2019, while the numbers killed dropped to five, the country remained in second place on the global death toll, equally with Syria and Tanzania.

Heightened violence against journalists has severely eroded any gains in press freedom. Media workers and advocates fear that safeguards to protect media freedoms are falling through the cracks of Afghanistan’s fragile peace process and its fractured leadership.

After a series of threats to the country’s independent media, the Taliban issued an official statement against the media portal khabarial.com signed by the spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid on February 9. “For a while now a web-based page named Khabarial has launched propaganda against known leaders of Islamic Emirate. The webpage is trying to blur public’s opinion about the leaders…. We consider these actions of the webpage personal attacks, an intelligence agency project and against all journalistic values and principles. We assure all our compatriots that safeguards to protect media freedoms are falling through the cracks of Afghanistan’s fragile peace process and its fractured leadership.”

The disunity that dominated Afghanistan’s election was also reflected in the media community. Vested interests took advantage of divisions and anti-government elements called the media a puppet, accusing them of undermining the customs and traditions of Afghanistan. The wake of the divisive elections, the Taliban openly threatened media workers. The government also manipulated reporters to its advantage, which in turn caused sections of the media to lose their credibility among the general public.

The increased availability of mobile phones, the internet and social media has exposed Afghans to diverse news. Despite positive developments in media freedom, Freedom House’s 2019 study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide, still ranks Afghanistan “not free” in its global freedom scores. “Journalists face the threat of harassment and attack by the Islamic State (IS) militant group, the Taliban, and government-related figures attempting to influence how they are covered in the news. Restrictions on freedom of expression have been justified in the name of avoiding incitement to or support of terrorism,” said its report.

Zia Bumiya, head of the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in Afghanistan, says that the Taliban has taken advantage of disunity to keep the Afghan media under pressure. He also believes that the Afghan government is not truly committed to freedom of the press and imposes laws that threaten or restrict freedom of expression and access to information. The government seems intent on controlling media, for example instructing agencies not to share information with reporters without confirmation from the central government, he said.

Self-censorship is ongoing in what Human Rights Watch has referred to as a “survival issue” for most reporters. The survival instinct is particularly acute for journalists working in remote areas where they are cautious reporting on issues of corruption, land grabbing or violence against women, in fear of retribution.

A man walks past a wall painted with an image of US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul on April 5, 2020. (Photo by WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP)

IN JUNE 2019, THE TALIBAN THREATENED AFGHAN MEDIA ORGANISATIONS, WARNING THEM TO STOP SPREADING “ANTI-JIHAD AND TALIBAN SENTIMENTS” OR BE TARGETED AS ENEMIES.
of the press. "If the Taliban or anyone within the government is obstructing the freedom of the media, I will stand against them, and I will support the media of any restrictions," he said.

However, the government does not speak in one voice, and other government officials do not necessarily agree with Shaq.

Attempts to censor the hugely popular satirical television programs continued in the year under review. Letters requesting media outlets not to produce satirical programs were sent to a number of television stations by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Hard-hitting satire about government officials and policies was discouraged. Though the government’s request was addressed to officials in the television channels, the confidential advisory became public and was sharply condemned.

In early 2020, it seemed that some government officials consciously tried to exert pressure on the media, mostly by restricting or withholding information meant to reach the public. Responding to these restrictions, Afghan media outlets at a protest meeting on February 8, blamed the government for obstructing the free flow of information. Media outlets issued a signed statement urging the government to allow media access to information and requested the government to direct its spokespeople and officials to cooperate in sharing information.

Mujeeb Khalvatgar, executive director of Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, said that not sharing information poses a severe threat to the media in Afghanistan, and impacts the independence of the media. According to Nai data, during the six days in the second week of March, there were ten complaints filed about state officials who had not shared information with journalists, and there were also some cases where journalists were pressured while on duty. Some other reporters and social media workers were summoned to the Attorney Office for imposing restrictions on the media.

In a display of irony, the Taliban too deny that they impose restrictions on the media. Sohail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Talibans’ political office in Qatar, said that the Taliban does not want to impose restrictions on the media, but if the media is broadcasting "inappropriate" material, it has to "change the direction" of its broadcasts.

"We ask the media to spread the truth instead of rumours. We will try to reform the media that broadcasts based on the projects (implementing other countries’ policy)," said Shaheen, who meets the idea of creating a framework within which the media must work.

It seems as though the Afghan government also agrees with Shaheen in this regard. The officials say that the media is the fourth pillar of the government, with full freedom, and they do not want the media to be restricted. But officials also say that in some exceptional cases, it would be better for the media to change its stance.

A spokesman for the Afghan president, Dawo Khan Minapal, said that the president and the current system is committed to media freedom and that they would not allow anyone to impose restrictions on the media. To illustrate his point, he referred to social media users in Kabul who are critics of the government but continue to live freely without any government interference.

However, this ‘freedom’ may be because the government is not monitoring social media platforms and is therefore in no position to control them. In some cases a number of local commanders, militants and other officials including governors issue threats and arrest social media users because of what they share. Most Afghan officials use social media for propaganda purposes. They also largely tolerate no criticism so any user making negative comments against them can face the prospect of being beaten or jailed.

A case in point was the first vice-president of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh who filed a case on February 23 against...
least three journalists. AIJA fielded at least ten complaints by journalists regarding access to information, access to voting sites and telecommunications shutdowns.

Among a string of other attacks, AIJA also documented a bomb attack that seriously injured a reporter travelling in a military convoy on November 30, 2019.

The Taliban and ISIS are responsible for most of these violations. Also, high-ranking government officials, police, powerbrokers, arbitrary commanders and warlords have also been among the perpetrators of media violations.

Sayed Shah Saqim, the Independent Local Government Bureau spokesman, said it was working to deal effectively with the problems of journalists in the provinces, adding that governors, deputy governors and district governors had been instructed to respond to journalists’ questions in a timely manner and handle their problems at monthly journalist committee meetings.

Jamshid Rasouli, a spokesman of Supreme Prosecutor’s Office, emphasised that the government’s commitment to handling cases of violence against journalists was solid and that as a result of the joint efforts of the government and media committee, no cases of violence against journalists were left unanswered.

According to the Attorney General’s Office, 38 people have been arrested in the course of investigating the killings of journalists, of whom over 26 have been sentenced to short prison terms and up to 12 were under investigation and trial.

Farida Nekzad, head of the Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), says; insecurity, psychological prison terms and up to 12 were under investigation and trial. Journalists, of whom over 26 have been sentenced to short prison terms and up to 12 were under investigation and trial.

With the exception of Moby Group and Ariana Television in Afghanistan, the rest of the national media do not provide pension entitlements to their employees; neither do their employees have insurance, nor do they provide vocational education. The government has created a pension regulation mechanism for private and non-government organisations. From 2021 it will be mandatory for all media outlets to pay their employees pensions after their retirement.

Collaborative work towards press freedom and journalists’ rights continues under the banner of the ‘Federation of Journalists’ Associations and Media’ which was launched in 2013 after a four-year long process of bringing together diverse organisations. Members of the Federation include the Association of Independent Journalists of Afghanistan; National Union of Journalists of Afghanistan; National Union of Journalists and Reporters of Afghanistan; South Asia Free Media Association; South Asian Journalists’ Independent Association; Afghan Journalists’ Defending Committee; Afghanistan Journalists’ Protection Committee and NAJ the supporter of independent news agencies in Afghanistan; GAHEEZ Cultural and Media Centre; Media Marker, Kabul Press Club and Women Journalists’ Support Centre.

Interventions were made in the process of law reform, as well as pushing for investigations in cases of violence against journalists and aligning regulations governing the safety and security of journalists with international standards.

VIRAL MISINFORMATION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the media in various ways, from working hours to safety concerns. For instance, Tolo News and the Moby group have rejigged working hours to three-five-hour shifts in order to prevent overcrowding inside the building. Facilities have been provided for protection of staff who do work on site, while 40 per cent of the employees work from home. The reduction in news staff due to Covid-19 has reduced the 30 daily news bulletins at Tolo to 20 per day, and the duration too has been reduced. In terms of format, televised debates, interviews and talk shows in studios have been stopped, while for current affairs programs, guests in studios are restricted in number, while Skype interviews have increased.

Advertising too has taken a beating during the pandemic, and the financial situation is grave. However, there are no job losses as yet due to the pandemic.

In the first few months of 2020, access to information remains a serious issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government has been accused of hiding facts about the numbers and spread of the coronavirus, and incorrect data has been shared with the media. Infection rates in the areas under the control of the Taliban have been totally ignored and there is no awareness program to inform people about how to protect themselves against Covid-19.

Even during the health crisis, the country’s leadership is divided, resulting in a dysfunctional response to the pandemic. The government has failed to provide clear and accurate information, and skirts questions on the severity of the crisis. At the same time, reporters are told to toe the government line, undermining their ability to present timely and accurate information.

As hard-earned media freedoms are curtailed by ongoing violence and intimidation, a flawed electoral system, censorship, a faltering peace process and the challenge of living through and reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists in Afghanistan face a bleak future.
BANGLADESH

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

The fragility of the right to freedom of expression in Bangladesh can be well illustrated through the case of Shahiful Islam Kajol, a photographer and editor of the Bangla daily Pokhokol, who has been missing since March 10, 2020. Kajol is feared to be another name to a growing list of enforced disappearances in the country. Journalists, along with his friends and family in Dhaka went on to stage a series of demonstrations demanding information on his whereabouts and action for an investigation. Kajol’s disappearance came just a day after ruling party lawmaker Saffuzzaman Shikhor filed a case against him, along with Mutarr Rahman Chowdhury, editor-in-chief of daily Manab Zamir, and 30 others under the draconian Digital Security Act on charges of publishing “false information” and circulating it on social media. On March 21, Amnesty International shared CCTV footage recorded the last day Shahiful was last seen that showed unidentified people approaching his motorbike and appearing to tamper with it. Another Bangladeshi journalist, Ijan Ibn Reza Fagun, was also killed in the period under review. Local human rights organisation Ain Odishar Kendra reported a total of 140 cases of harassment against journalists in the ten months from May 2019 to February 2020. Many of the incidents of torture, harassment and threat were committed by ruling party members and law enforcement agencies. The rights body also recorded 18 cases of death threats by government officials, drug dealers, terrorists and anonymous persons over the phone. Additionally, seven journalists became victims of attacks and violence during the Dhaka City Corporation election.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Despite the Bangladesh government’s ongoing denial of allegations of enforced disappearances, human rights organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about the practice of unacknowledged detention and enforced disappearances. Last year, local human rights organisation Odhikar documented at least 34 incidents of suspected enforced disappearance. Eight of those “disappeared” were later found dead. 17 were shown as being arrested while the fate and whereabouts of the other nine remain unknown. The security forces are suspected to have forcibly disappeared over 550 people including many rights activists over the past decade, Odhikar says.

Journalists in Dhaka were alarmed when Mushfiqur Rahman, a reporter of private television channel Mohona TV, went missing on August 3, two weeks after filing a complaint with Pallabi police station in Dhaka over a death threat. Three days later, Mushfiqur was seen in the early hours of the morning, running and crying out for help along the Sylhet-Sunamganj highway near Govindpur village. Mushfiqur later said he was abducted when he was returning to his Mirpur residence by bus. He said some people sprayed a liquid on his face, rendering him unconscious. When he came to his senses, he was beaten severely by his abductors. At one point, they also threatened to shoot him. The identity of the abductors as well as the motive severely by his abductors. At one point, they also threatened to shoot him unconscious. When he came to his senses, he was beaten severely by his abductors. At one point, they also threatened to shoot him unconscious. When he came to his senses, he was beaten severely by his abductors.

One of the more prominent cases is the Sagor Sarwar and Meherun Rumi murders, which never got beyond the investigation stage. The court has postponed the date to submit the investigation report into the murder of the journalist couple more than 66 times. While the names of Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Rumi are today the subject of common household talk in the country, few know that Syed Farroque Ahmed of Screemangal suffered a similar fate. Farroque Ahmed, the editor of Pahulibarr - a local publication in Screemangal - went missing in June 2002. On August 3, 2002, his mutilated body was found on the rail tracks. His case, like too many others, died along with the journalist.

MURDER AND IMPUNITY

The body of online journalist Ijan Ibn Reza Fagun was found near the railway track in Jamalpur on May 22, 2019. Fagun, 22, worked with the online portal priyo.com as a sub-editor in the English section and was set to join another news portal jagonews.com in June. He was the son of satellite television NTV’s journalist Kakon Reza in Shpur and lived in Dhaka where he was studying alongside his job.

Fagun was travelling by train to his home in the bordering district of Shpurg. His body bore marks of injury in the back of his head, throat and eyes. Ten months on, the police are yet to find any clue or motivation behind his murder. Since 1991, there have been at least 32 killings of journalists, bloggers and freethinkers in Bangladesh. But the victims in most of these cases are yet to get justice.

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Despite the Bangladesh government’s ongoing denial of allegations of enforced disappearances, human rights organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about the practice of unacknowledged detention and enforced disappearances.
and the country’s laws which criminalise expressing opinions including government and militants, as well as by the society. Secular bloggers and critics of Islam face risks from all quarters. A number of atheist bloggers have fled Bangladesh, seeking refuge in so-called ‘crossfire’ with law enforcement agencies, and the Khulna in 2004. It is worth noting that in some cases, the accused were killed after being held under the DSA. Popular folk singer Shariat Boyati was arrested on January 11, 2020, and is facing indefinite detention for stating that music is not forbidden in the Qur’an. He is accused of “hurting religious sentiments” under the DSA.

Physical Attacks

Several journalists were attacked, threatened, or had equipment snatched while covering elections in two city corporations in capital Dhaka on February 1, 2020. In an ominous sign that doesn’t bode well for press freedom or democracy, the government tried its best to keep people, especially journalists, away from the city’s polling centres. Activists and supporters of the ruling Awami League guarded most of the polling stations and booths and also threatened and attacked journalists in many places. It appeared almost as though police were assigned to help protect the ruling party cadre. Even though journalists were attacked in the presence of the police, no one was arrested. Indeed, display of the special identity cards issued by the Election Commission for journalists, to be used during the

Draconian Law

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More than 1,000 cases, mostly against Facebook users, have been filed under the Digital Security Act (DSA) since 2018, and the cybercrime tribunal has dismissed more than 200 cases for lack of sufficient evidence into the allegations. Secular bloggers and critics of Islam face risks from all quarters including government and militants, as well as by the society and the country’s laws which criminalise expressing opinions that “hurt religious sentiment”.

Then on January 30, 2020, the High Court upheld the life imprisonment of five convicts and acquitted four others in the 2005 Gautam Das murder case. On November 17, 2005, Gautam Das, then bureau chief of the Bangladesh Daily Samakal, was killed by assailants in his office in Faridpur district. The Das verdict is only the third verdict delivered since 2006. It has now emerged as the menace to freedom of speech and independent journalism in Bangladesh. “It also contributes towards a growing animosity towards journalists across the country,” said Mahbub Anam, editor of the Daily Star, the largest circulated English daily in Bangladesh. The DSA law gives security agencies the power to hold individuals indefinitely in pretrial detention. If convicted, they could each face five years to life imprisonment.

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Local workers of a project under the Khulna Water Supply correspondent. 26, 2019 assault on Mustafa Monju, testify against them as a witness in a case related to the May on a regular evening walk on the banks of the Brahmaputra religious affairs, attacked Akondo with metal bars while he was led by Rakib Khan, the district Chhatra League secretary of Bangladesh Bazar Patrika Daily Polly Kontho Protidin came under attack. Shelu Akondo, a correspondent with daily Riyad from the post of vice-president (Dhaka South Unit). He wing of the ruling party, suspended one of the attackers named of the perpetrators. Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student demonstrations condemning the attacks, demanding the arrest of Islam, a camera operator for Maasranga Television. Hasnayan Tanvir, a reporter for Maasranga Television, and Saiful Zisad Ikbal, a correspondent of the Press Bangla Agency, Foisal Kalera Kantha, the head, suffering severe injuries. A police complaint was filed by an attacker against three reporters, who sustained injuries. Others were attacked or barred from reporting. These included Sheikh Hasan, chief photographer for Bangla daily Kaler Kantha, Ziaad Ikal, a correspondent of the Press Bangla Agency, Fouial Ahmed, a reporter with the Daily Star, Mahabub Momtaj, a staff reporter at the Bangla daily Bangladesh Pratidin, and Nurul Amin, a reporter for the newspaper The Business Standard. Hasnayan Tanvir, a reporter for Maastanga Television, and Saiful Islam, a camera operator for Maastanga Television. In retaliation, journalists in Dhaka staged a series of demonstrations condemning the attacks, demanding the arrest of the perpetrators. Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party, suspended one of the attackers named Riyad from the post of vice-president (Dhaka South Unit). He was later arrested. The elections weren’t the only time media in Bangladesh came under attack. Shelu Akondo, a correspondent with daily Bangla Bazar Patrika and journalist of Daily Polly Kontho Protidin, was severely beaten and left for dead by a local leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, in Northern Jamalpur district on December 18, 2019. Media rights advocates visited Akanda in a local Hospital in Dhaka in February 2020. ABOVE from left: Shelu Akondo, a correspondent with daily Bangla Bazar Patrika and journalist of Daily Polly Kontho Protidin, was severely beaten and left for dead by a local leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, in Northern Jamalpur district on December 18, 2019. Media rights advocates visiting Akanda in a local Hospital in Dhaka in February 2020. Credit: BMSF. According to the victim’s statement, at least five or six people were led by Rakib Khan, the district Chhatra League secretary of religious affairs, attacked Akondo with metal bars while he was on a regular evening walk on the banks of the Brahmaputra River. They broke both his legs and fed. Akondo was due to testify against them as a witness in a case related to the May 26, 2019 assault on Mustafa Monju, Kaler Kantha’s Jamalpur correspondent. On January 26, two unidentified foreigners and about four local workers of a project under the Khulna Water Supply and Seworage Authority (KWUEA) beat 71 TV Khulna bureau chief Rakib Uddin Panni and his cameraperson. At the time, they were filming KWASA development work, focusing on irregularities, according to the statement filed by Rakib to Dhaka police station. On the instruction of an unidentified KWASA official, the attackers tortured Rakib, vandalised his camera and snatched his mobile phone. Traffic inspector Rezaul Bashar is alleged to have joined the attackers and handcuffed him. Rakib was freed after local journalists staged a strong protest against the incident by blocking the Khulna-Jashore road for half an hour. OVERREACH OF LAW In an unprecedented incident, a mobile court under a taskforce of Kutigram district administration ordered the raid on the home of journalist Atiful Islam at midnight on March 14, 2020. Ordered by Magistrate Nazim Uddin, the members of Ansar, a para-police force, allegedly blindfolded him and tied up his hands and feet before showing him into a car. They tortured Atif, who is a correspondent with online newspaper Bangla Tribune. He was then sentenced to one-year imprisonment on charges of possessing narcotics and sent to jail around 1:30 am. Narrating his experience, Atiful says, “They proceeded to take me to an isolated place and the magistrate kept saying ‘Say your prayers now, you are about to meet your maker’. I begged them to spare my life.” The incident triggered outrage on social media with journalists holding demonstrations across Bangladesh, prompting the government to launch an immediate inquiry and the withdrawal of the concerned magistrate and the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Kutgram Sourin Pervin, who ordered formation of the mobile court. It is understood that the DC was displeased with Atif after he wrote several reports on alleged irregularities by the district administration. On January 17, 2020, a court in Dhaka issued an arrest warrant for Motiur Rahman, editor of the daily Prothom Alo, considered to be an outspoken champion of freedom of expression. He and nine others were charged with causing death by negligence after a 14-year-old boy was fatally electrocuted in November at an event organised by a magazine published by Prothom Alo’s owner. Annuul Hoque, a leading novelist and associate editor of the Bengali-language newspaper was among those charged. The High Court granted them bail after a few days. Rahman, 76, already faces at least 55 cases for defamation and hurting religious sentiments but this was the first time he was ever issued an arrest warrant. Part of a larger, organised assault on independent media in Bangladesh, has seen major advertisers including multinational companies allegedly ordered by a security agency not to place advertisements in Prothom Alo, resulting in major revenue losses of up tens of millions of dollars. DEPUTY CHIEF OFFICER OF THE KUTIĞRAM DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION, who ordered formation of the mobile court. It is understood that the DC was displeased with Atif after he wrote several reports on alleged irregularities by the district administration. On January 17, 2020, a court in Dhaka issued an arrest warrant for Motiur Rahman, editor of the daily Prothom Alo, considered to be an outspoken champion of freedom of expression. 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WEBSITES BLOCKED Beginning on April 2, the government blocked domestic connections to BenarNews, an online affiliate of Radio Free Asia, a US government-funded outlet providing news and information to audiences in Asia. The move is an apparent attempt to silence critical reporting of Bangladesh’s policies around the country’s fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar confirmed that a number of sites were blocked by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), which his ministry oversees. Earlier, on December 28, 2019, the authorities blocked access to a Sweden-based investigative journalism website after it published a report alleging corruption by an influential Bangladeshi minister. Access to Portoborton.com and Bangla report were blocked on May 19, 2019 by the government without any explanation.

WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED IN JUST 16 PER CENT CONTENT OF NEWS COVERAGE IN BANGLADEshi MEDIA, THOUGH FEMALES ARE REPRESENTED IN INCREASING NUMBERS IN THE FORMAL WORKFORCE, SAID DR. GITIARA NASREEN, A PROFESSOR OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY.
to comply with Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act (DSA) and share information with law enforcers, according to the minister, but compliance remains patchy.

After failing to force the global social media giants to set up representative offices or appoint agents in line with VAT laws, the authorities now plan to allow the digital platforms to secure direct VAT registration without opening local offices as part of its move to bring them under the tax net.

VIRAL ARRESTS

The government faced criticism on social media for its lax policy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when there were numerous rumors circulating about the virus. In response, the government arrested some of the critics or “wrong propagators” and sued them under DSA. Since mid-March 2020, the authorities have arrested at least a dozen people, including a doctor, opposition activists and students, for their comments about the coronavirus.

On March 25, the government issued a circular assigning 15 officials to monitor each television channel for “rumours” and “propaganda” regarding Covid-19. The next day, the order was withdrawn amidst criticism.

Access to the BenaNews website was blocked after it published a report on a leaked interagency United Nations memo on Bangladesh’s Country Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, which estimates that up to two million people could die from the disease in Bangladesh if immediate steps were not taken to contain the spread of the virus.

CHALLENGES AMID CORONAVIRUS

The novel Coronavirus poses new challenges for journalism, as unprotected reporters and photographers come face to face with affected people and continue to report from large gatherings. Few media houses have facilitated even limited personal protective equipment (PPEs).

Internet-based media outlets have now introduced virtual office systems. One mainstream newspaper, the Manush Zamin, has stopped its printed versions and most of the less circulated newspapers have stopped their publications indefinitely. The country’s prominent newspapers are yet to decide whether to continue their printed versions.

The Newspapers Association of Bangladesh (NOAB), the platform of media owners, issued a statement saying “Coronavirus cannot be inflicted by papers,” a claim which is yet to be proved scientifically. All the newspapers published the NOAB statement, printed mainly in a bid to keep their circulation intact. Newspaper hawkers are also in trouble amidst a lockdown situation, with many people not buying papers for fear of getting infected.

Amidst this situation, SA TV, terminated 32 journalists on March 22, prompting the journalists to take the additional risk of staging protests in front of its office.

On April 2, the owner of the Bangla language newspaper Absboti Bangladesh also took the coronavirus situation as an opportunity to declare the closure of its outlet without resolving long-standing disputes with its employees. All the journalists and employees of the newspaper gathered in front of the residence of the employer at Dhanmondi in Dhaka to demonstrate, defying coronavirus distancing norms.

LIVELIHOODS AT RISK

The main challenge for journalists in Bangladesh in upholding freedom of the press continues to be their livelihoods.

Many journalists live in constant fear that they will find soon themselves out of a job.

In 2020, the situation deteriorated even further, with many media outlets reducing journalists’ employment to cut costs. At least 25 employees of the country’s leading daily newspaper Prothom Alo, one of the few financially solvent print media houses in Bangladesh, reported being terminated.

So, too, journalists from Daily Janakanta, a decade-old print publication, demonstrated in the streets to demand regular wages.

Channel 9, one of 33 television channels in Bangladesh, decided to stop broadcasting news content and instead turned into an entertainment-based channel. The implementation of the plan left around 200 employees in the news production process unemployed. One of Bangladesh’s oldest satellite television channel ATN Bangla let go 14 journalists and 35 employees. At least 25 employees were forced to quit their jobs at Maaanet Television, run by a leading business group in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s media industry is dominated by the private sector, with more than 1,000 newspapers, 195 television stations, and 25 FM Radio stations. Around 10 television stations are currently waiting to enter the market. But less than 10 per cent of current newspaper and government-declared wage structure in paying their employees.

WOMEN IN MEDIA

In 1987, Bangladesh had 34 women journalists compared to 900 men working in 242 newspapers, according to a survey by Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB). Leading online newspaper Benarnews.com reported in July 2018 that about 40 per cent of the male journalists rose to 2,432 while the number of female journalists rose to 310 working in 3,263 media houses in Dhaka. With women still making up only 13 per cent of all journalists, the situation has not changed significantly in over three decades. The situation is almost unchanged in 2020.

There are some female reporters in the district levels also but participation of women in the profession is still negligible.

Many women start out in journalism with courage, taking the challenging profession by choice. But not all are able to stay and drop out for various reasons. These include a lack of women-friendly work environments, pressure from family, maternity and childcare issues, gender and wages discrimination, sexual harassment and transport problems.

Women often face the tough choice of choosing between childcare and professional duties.

BD News quoted prominent Ekattor TV reporter Farzana Rupa as saying, “In fact, the character of newsroom is not women friendly. Starting the day at eight is worked throughout the day and will back home at around 1.30 am or 2 am. Under this circumstance day care centre, an arrangement to organise, a clean washroom and a breastfeeding corner are the facilities that women in media require, but the newsrooms have none.”

More than 11 years after the High Court on May 15, 2009, issued directives including formation of a complaint cell comprising five members in all academic institutions and offices to stop sexual harassment, not a single media house has followed the order.

Women are represented in just 16 per cent content of news coverage in Bangladesh media, though female reporters are represented in increasing numbers in the formal workforce, said Dr. Giiatara Nareen, a professor of mass communication and journalism at Dhaka University.

Another study by Plan International Bangladesh and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) released in March 2020, finds news items related to women’s affairs get very little space in newspapers but photographs get a lot more prominence. Only seven per cent of news items are about women but photographs get twice the space. News items related to women chiefly related to crime, abuse or torture, lawsuits and entertainment.

The study found that photographs about women’s issues get 14-18 per cent space of all photographs. Magazines publish news on arts, cinema, lifestyle and crimes. But news or photographs on women leadership, their success stories, reproductive health and education and other aspects of their life did not get prominent. On the other hand, men were presented as politicians and development activists in the community level. It is clear there is far to go before achieving gender balance in representation in the media.

FACING FEAR

Bangladesh continues to suffer the multidimensional crisis now. There are a number of interrelated factors that are pushing the country’s media into this state, including both political and economic influences.

In a report, the European Journalism Center said the Bangladesh media industry, especially the television sector, is organised, a clean washroom and a breastfeeding corner are the facilities that women in media require, but the newsrooms have none. The rise of radicalism in the country also remains a bar to free press with journalists practicing self-censorship regarding religious issues while propagation of faith has special privilege.

The media, however, is less handicapped in criticising faiths other than Islam.

High Court Judge Justice Sheikh Hasan Arif recently questioned whether the media in the country enjoyed full freedom and whether fear was at play among journalists. The judge was partially right when he observed: “Journalists report and can report only when there is an outbreak ... when it holds in front of our eyes nakedly.”

However, Bangladesh’s journalists also dare to uncover sensational hidden facts. But his rhetorical questions have a resonating ring of truth. “Then, is there full press freedom in our country? Does it mean fear is at play among journalists? If I do a report I will run into trouble or my editor may face a problem.”

Confronting these truths without fear or favour or loss of livelihood is a true test of press freedom but, at this juncture, the country may fall short of fulfilling these promises.
BHUTAN

INFORMATION DIVIDE

Bhutan’s news media industry is at a crossroads. Other than the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, which is fully subsidised by the government, and Kuensel, where 51 per cent shares are owned by the government, all private entities are struggling to find a firm financial footing. After seeing a brief heyday following the privatisation of the media in 2007, the Bhutanese media has been on the decline. Of the 12 newspapers, five radio stations, and one TV station, most have closed down or are on the verge of doing so. The number of newspapers was down from 12 in 2012 to seven in 2019. Several magazines and radio stations have shut down since then.

The last newspaper to fold in early 2019 was Druk Niyog, a private Dzongkha language weekly newspaper. In the same year, Gyashit Sanghö, another private Dzongkha weekly, suspended its publication for several months. “The surviving private newspapers are shadows of their former selves,” Bhutan Media Foundation’s executive director, Neendup Zango lamented.

Media analysts say that Bhutan has too many media houses for its tiny population. So, the only hope for a vibrant media is the death of more media houses so that the advertising base can support the remaining ones.

Unless this trend is somehow reversed, the impact will be dire for a country that has just begun to experiment with western-style democracy. Specifically, what is at stake is public accountability, transparency, a platform for debate and discourse, and disseminating and sharing knowledge and information.

In 1999, Bhutan introduced the internet. Seven years later, the popularity of internet usage picked up so much that the traditional news media began to lose their market, both in terms of readership and advertising revenue. Social and online media, like in other parts of the world, took over and overnight the very concept of information gathering, processing and dissemination changed. The role of journalism has been taken over by the social media. The traditional mainstream media thus found itself on the fringe, without a clue as to how to negotiate the transition.

Media analysts also say that the sustainability of the Bhutanese media and other attendant problems need to be addressed urgently because the future of Bhutanese democracy itself is at stake. Without an independent, pluralistic and self-sustaining news media industry a vital platform for debate and discussion, critical to foster a transparent and accountable society, would perish.

Prior to 2010, when Bhutan’s first democratic government was sworn in with a mere two-member opposition in the 47-member lower house of parliament, the media acted as the key critic of the government. It kept the government and politicians literarily on their toes while the people in general were provided ample space to express themselves. This shows that Bhutan’s experiment with democracy can succeed only by reviving or strengthening the news media.

We are also seeing the tell-tale signs of an ominous ‘information divide’ between rural and urban Bhutan. As media houses were in financial doldrums, the overall quality of journalism suffered. The Bhutanese media has lost some of its finest reporters and editors. To fill the gap, news organisations began hiring inexperienced young university graduates but, as expected, the quality of reporting went downhill as did overall news content. Today, the industry lies in tatters, and no one has any idea how to resuscitate it.

Those who have remained in the industry continue to work under difficult circumstances. The Journalists’ Association of Bhutan (JAB) has been receiving reports of journalists not paying them for months. In 2019, the last newspaper to fold was Druk Niyog, leaving only seven newspapers operating today.

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transparency, accountability and efficiency of the government and Media Impact Study 2017 conducted by the Department of Independence and professional maturity. Bhutan Information Society cannot find ways to build an enabling environment for the growth of a pluralistic, independent and vibrant news media.

Another challenge related to sustainability and revenue is the fact that media houses are dependent on the government for up to 80 per cent of their revenue. Meanwhile, journalists lack resources to carry out in-depth reporting and investigative stories and are often caught in the dilemma of being critical of the government at the cost of advertising revenue, forcing a choice between survival and playing a watchdog role.

In 2008, Bhutan adopted a Constitution, which categorically spells out “freedom of print, broadcast and online media” under “Fundamental Rights”. These specific clauses are designed to instill a healthy growth of the media: freedom of speech, opinion, and expression, freedom of the media, and the right to information.

These clauses, however, would remain unfulfilled if Bhutanese society cannot find ways to build an enabling environment for the growth of a pluralistic, independent and vibrant news media. Members of the public generally think that the media lacks independence and professional maturity. Bhutan Information and Media Impact Study 2017 conducted by the Department of Information and Media had found that the media users reported “severe lack of media independence” although around 81 per cent of households reported that media had enhanced transparency, accountability and efficiency of the government compared to before.

**ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Access to information is still seen as a stumbling block for journalism in Bhutan. It has more to do with political sensitivity, which the bureaucrats handle with care. Journalists find it hard to get public information from the bureaucracy. In doing so, all critical information becomes “off-the-record.”

The government machinery still does not have a robust system of information dissemination. For example, there are information and media officers who do not have the authority to talk to the media even as their bosses remain mostly away. The elected government, however, has been supportive of media development and to ensure that media is effectively involved in governance. The government is committed to give more access to media in its day-to-day activity.

In what was seen as a positive development and the government’s recommitment of the “media as the fourth estate and its role in a fledging democracy” was the “meet the press” initiative launched by the first democratically elected government in 2008. Since then the meet-the-press has been an established forum for the media and government as a part of a democratic exercise.

It is an unprecedented and unique move, the cabinet of the ruling government makes itself available to the press every month to answer questions and clarity doubts about actions and omissions of the government. Such an interaction goes to show that greater transparency benefits all players involved.

The government gets a chance to make itself heard and clarify doubts that might be lingering in the minds of the public and journalists, and journalists and the public, in turn, get a clearer picture of what is going on, resulting in more accurate reporting.

Politicians, including the prime minister, are accessible to almost every journalist through phone, e-mail or any other communication channel. This is one of the reasons why Bhutan ranks high on international press freedom indices. In 2019, Bhutan climbed 14 points on the World Press Freedom Index to 80 from 94 in 2018.

The improvement in ranking should encourage those in the media to continue carrying out their primary duty of informing the people. The improved ranking will also encourage policymakers to appreciate the role, no matter how small, the Bhutanese media is playing and allow its press to function freely and responsibly.

However, although access to information has improved over the years, there is much to be desired to achieve the kind of freedom of press that will shoulder responsibilities without fear and favour for the benefit of the country and its people.

The Bhutanese media still faces some serious challenges when it comes to the free flow of information which is sometimes thwarted by bureaucratic norms. The fear of reprisal from senior bureaucrats or bosses, has caused an excessively tight-lipped culture among Bhutanese bureaucracy.

Government had earlier made an attempt to appoint media focal persons for all ministries and autonomous agencies to make information widely available. This move however was unsuccessful.

The appointment of spokespersons had only proven to be a barricade, making things more difficult for reporters, disallowing them from contacting officials directly.

Journalists were made to submit questions and the response depended on the gravity of the questions. The advantage of being a small and close-knit society and Bhutanese journalists having friends and relatives to rely on for tip offs is also backfiring, as ‘authorities’ try to hunt down officials with relatives working in the media.

**THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A SMALL AND CLOSE-KNIT SOCIETY AND BHUTANESE JOURNALISTS HAVING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES TO RELY ON FOR TIP OFFS IS ALSO BACKFIRING, AS ‘AUTHORITIES’ TRY TO HUNT DOWN OFFICIALS WITH RELATIVES WORKING IN THE MEDIA.**

The self-censorship for the greater social good. They claim a fear of embarrassment or potential career damage as a factor for avoiding newsworthy stories like corruption involving high-profile public officials.

With its small population, all these pressures are heightened in Bhutan. The media’s tensions with politicians, senior bureaucrats, and business houses are emerging although, in the context of a young democracy, it might be described as creative tensions.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

The government is providing a two-year printing subsidy for private newspapers which meets 50 per cent of the printing cost. This is a temporary measure to support media houses to stay afloat until long-term measures are in place. One long-term measure for sustainability could be transitioning online.

The world of online possibilities is virtually unexplored by the Bhutanese media. While media houses everywhere are adopting or adapting to technologies to stay afloat, Bhutanese media houses are mostly in the traditional mode. Only a few newspapers have a website and take advantage of social media. None of them has any plan to monetise online content.

In order to maximise social media outreach, community media forums set up by JAB used chat platforms for rapid communication from community members to journalists. Training in community radio has also went hand in hand with training on optimising social media tools for effective communication and dissemination.

In terms of institutional set-up, the Bhutanese media is well-placed, with institutions such as the Department of Information and Media, Bhutan Media Foundation, Journalists’ Association of Bhutan, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy and the Bhutan Media and Communication Centre. They are all dedicated to the development of the media and if they join forces, collaboration could provide an opportunity for substantial support to help haul the media out of its current precarious state.

Most rural Bhutanese people are semi-literate and are mostly untouched by mainstream media and government agencies. The Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB) conducted a series of community media workshops aimed at enhancing media knowledge for rural people, who comprise 70 per cent of the population.

The Bhutanese media and government as a part of a democratic exercise.

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The amendment to the UAPA can be used to infringe upon which weakens the devolution of powers in the federal structure. It empowers it to take over cases within the purview of states, powers on the central government while the hawkish NIA for the media. The amendment to the UAPA conferred greater voices, or indeed anyone who questioned the government a polarising narrative that had begun to take form since the BJP-Democratic Alliance (NDA) for a second term with a victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. The first term of the BJP-led government had started solidified. Descriptive terms—‘sickular’, ‘libard’, ‘newstrader’, ‘prstitute’—for liberal or secular voices, or indeed anyone who questioned the government began to dominate social media and even mainstream news channels. This vilification included journalists and media houses considered to be “anti-government”.

Soon after coming to power in May 2019, the government amended two repressive laws - the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019 (UAPA) and National Investigation Agency Act (NIA) - that have direct implications for the media. The amendment to the UAPA conferred greater powers on the central government while the hawka NIA empowerment it to take over cases within the purview of states, which weakens the devolution of powers in the federal structure. The amendment to the UAPA can be used to infringe upon freedom of speech and expression and has contributed to a high level of self-censorship in the country.

On April 18, Kashmiri photojournalist Masrat Zahra and a few days later, journalist and author Gowhar Geelani were dapped with the UAPA for posting work on Facebook, while down south in Telangana state, N Venugopal, a senior journalist and editor of Telugu monthly journal Veekshanam was implicated under the UAPA for his alleged support to the banned Communist Party of India ( Maoist) party. Dealing a body blow to an empowering tool for journalists was an amendment in July 2019 to the Right to Information Act, 2005. The RTI (Amendment) Bill 2019 dilutes the power and autonomy of the Central Information Commissioner and the State Information Commissioner by amending the salaries and tenures of the information commissioners. Journalists have produced several landmark investigative stories by accessing information under RTI and weakening the Act could directly impact the power of such exposures in future.

A major legal amendment in keeping with the BJP’s political mandate was the scrapping of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and the passing of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act which split the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories (UT of J&K and UT of Ladakh) and was preceded by a complete communication shutdown. (See page 16)

Another controversial piece of legislation passed on December 12 was the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that fast tracks citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The persecuted communities include Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and Buddhist, but the Act excludes Muslims. The passage of the CAA unleashed a string of protests by students and common citizens across the country against its violation of the provision of a secular Constitution.

Covering Protests

Hard clampdowns on protests against the CAA left several students injured in Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. Over two violent days, ten journalists and photographers covering the student protests were beaten by the police despite identifying themselves as press, and many had their phones and cameras damaged. Shaheen Abdulla, associate creative editor of Delhi-based digital news platform Mебthoo was ‘mercilessly beaten by a group of ten policemen, he was not spared despite showing his press card. Channel news program, was beaten when he refused to hand over his phone. Younous said he had police permission to report but as he stepped out, police asked for his phone, and when refused he was beaten. The phone was smashed and his press card taken away.

Ujwal Roy and Sarabjeet Singh, from Asia News International (ANI), were also assaulted by police for covering the same protest. Zee News camera person Jaiseep was assaulted and his camera damaged. Asianet News reporter Dinesh R and video journalist Waisim Sayeed were also attacked for covering the students’ protest. Mathrubhumi News reporter Arun Shankar and cameraperson Vaishakh Jayapalan were attacked as they covered police attacking students. The police also destroyed their video camera.

The December attacks against journalists were still being taken stock of, when Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi came under brutal attack allegedly by the student wing of the BJP in early January 2020. Over a dozen journalists from prominent media houses covering the event were harassed and heckled by mobs and even detained by the police.

The brutal violence in North-East Delhi which continued for 72 hours, included arson, loot and attacks which left 53 persons dead and over 200 injured.
two hours before being released by Uttar Pradesh police after his editors intervened. His Kashmiri identity became suspect with the police, who repeatedly asked him where his Kashmiris were hiding and threatened that they would tear off his beard and blind him. Several journalists of major Malayalam channels were detained by the Karnataka police as they came to Mangalore city to cover the news of death of two anti-CAA protestors. The area was being shut down and curfew was imposed, making it impossible for the journalists to work.

Sharma narrates how the mob gathered in a place near his residence and started abusing him and demanding to delete the footage he had recorded. Suddenly, a man, dressed in black and wearing a helmet, came out of the crowd and ran towards him. He tackled Sharma and, with three other men, threatened to thrash him. Sharma says he was very scared because he has been working independently for the past seven years and had never faced such a violent attack. The mob also threatened to thrash Anvit Srivastav, a reporter covering the riots for Scroll.in, and Sreya Chatterjee, a correspondent for Times Now in Delhi. The police were called, but the mob continued to abuse them and threatened to thrash them if they did not delete the footage. Finally, the police arrived and arrested one of the mob leaders, who was identified as a Hindu, and took him away. But the mob continued to abuse Sharma and demanded to delete the footage he had recorded.

The journalists were made to sit inside a police vehicle, some on the floor, for over four hours. Their phones and cameras were also confiscated and they were allowed to leave only after being detained for seven hours.

MAYHEM IN THE CAPITAL

As the date for the hotly-contested election in the state capital, Delhi, scheduled for February 8 neared, the city witnessed a vicious and polarised campaign between those protesting against the CAA and those in favour of it. After the Aam Aadmi Party swept back into power, the polarisation intensified. What started off as protests against a citizenship law, which made Muslims unable to get citizenship, turned into communal lines. The brutal violence in north-east Delhi which continued for 72 hours, included arson, loot and attacks which left 53 persons dead and over 200 injured. Journalists reporting and threatened to beat all reporters she was with as “traitors” and forced to sit on the floor, for over four hours. Their phones and cameras were confiscated and they were allowed to leave only after being detained for seven hours.

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In Guwahati, Assam police personnel entered the office of a private TV news channel, Prag News, and beat up its staff without provocation.

In November, authorities barricaded entry routes toward one of the Valley's renowned shrines Hazrat Nazamuddin Sabir in Srinagar's downtown area and denied permission to devotees to offer annual traditional mass prayer (KhojooDigar) there. When journalists reached the location, the police official held freelance photojournalist Muzamil Mattoo by his neck and assaulted him. Srinagar-based journalists Anees Zargar and Azaan Javaid were roughed up by the police on December 7 when they went to a neighbourhood in Srinagar to cover stone-throwing protests. Police and paramilitary forces were deployed around the protest site and as the reporters were leaving, police snatched their phones and beat them up. The police ordered an inquiry into the assault and the reporters submitted their testimonies, but action is yet to follow. Javaid was berated by senior police officers when he went to collect his phone and was removed from a police Whatsapp group, formed by the police to keep journalists posted as means to deprive him of access to news.

On March 4, two video journalists Qayoom Khan and Qasir Mir were stopped from carrying out their professional duties in south Kashmir's Pulwama. Their camera and mobile phones were confiscated by a police official and returned after five hours. The journalists said work stored on their equipment was erased by police. Besides losing the footage, the authorities in Kashmir also used other forms of harassment and intimidation. Senior journalist Peerzada Ashiq who reports from Kashmir for The Hindu was summoned by the Jammu and Kashmir police on September 1 to Srinagar's Kotibagh police station. There he was questioned and pressured to reveal the source of a story about mass arrests in the valley. Quoting official documents, he had reported that a total of 1,200 persons, including 1,500 youth, were arrested in the first three weeks of August 2019. He was once again summoned and questioned over a news report, which the police termed as “fake news” and filed a first information report (FIR) against him on April 20, 2020.

Bereaved by the police on February 8 near the site of the protest where at least 30 persons were killed.

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Harassment and Attacks
In addition to the attacks on close to 40 journalists from December 2019 to February 2020 in Delhi alone, other attacks took place across the country during the period.

Alarmingl the, perpetrators in several cases were allegedly police personnel themselves. Amit Sharma, a journalist with News 24, was brutally beaten and abused by railway police when covering news of train derailment in June 2019 in Dhanapur, Uttar Pradesh. “I was locked up, stripped and they urinated upon right into my mouth,” Sharma had said. Sharma was subsequently released after several journalists protested at the police station.

Similarly, Gopal Chatterjee, a correspondent with Republic in Peril, a report by the Committee Against Assault on Journalists, chronicles 18 journalists attacked as they were covering the riots that erupted in February. The journalists came to Mangalore city to cover the news of death of two anti-CAA protestors. Their live reporting from the scene was put off her camera before pushing her away. Sreya Chatterjee, of Times Now, faced a hostile situation when a mob stopped her from putting a tilak (vermillion mark of an upper caste Hindu) on his motorcycle set ablaze by a mob. Another group cornered him after they stripped him to identify he was a Hindu, forced him to chant Hindu hymns and beat him with rods. Hindustan Times photographer, Sandesh Sharma, covering riots at Karawal, saw his motorcyle set ablaze by a mob. Another group cornered him and deleted the pictures he had taken of the violence.

Women journalists were also targeted. “I cannot catch and harass me for being a journalist, molest me for being a girl, and lynch me for being a Muslim if they found out my identity.” Tanushree Pandey from India Today was held by her waist and shoulders by a crown of ten men who demanded that she delete her camera before pushing her away. Sreya Chatterjee, a correspondent with News X, faced a hostile situation when a mob stopped her from putting a tilak (vermillion mark of an upper caste Hindu) on his motorcycle set ablaze by a mob. Another group cornered him after they stripped him to identify he was a Hindu, forced him to chant Hindu hymns and beat him with rods. Hindustan Times photographer, Sandesh Sharma, covering riots at Karawal, saw his motorcyle set ablaze by a mob. Another group cornered him and deleted the pictures he had taken of the violence.

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of the press especially during the government-imposed Covid-19, narrowly escaped when shot at by two miscreants. The harassment in April 2020 was unrelenting. Rina earlier faced a murderous attack in 2012, when she was shot in the locality after a boiler burst in the factory leading to sickness amongst children and elders. Supporters of self-styled god woman, Radhe Maa, kidnapped and attacked local journalist Jitendra Sharma for asking some questions in a press meet he held in Panipat, Haryana.

Three journalists from Andhra Pradesh, Nagajyot Singh, Arula Manohar of Mahaa News and N Dolendra Prasad, editor of Tehugu weekly Zamirnyan, were attacked in three separate incidents. The government in some cases brought in the legislative assembly (MLA) and their supporters for wasting on their corrupt practices.

On March 5, M Karthi, a reporter with Tamil magazine Kumanam, was attacked by supporters of the state politicians, against whom the reporter had published reports. The Indian Journalist Union (IJU) condemned the assault and said that it “...reveals the growing intolerance by the political establishment against critical reporting”. In Arunachal Pradesh, Tongsam Rina, associate editor of the Arnachal Times, was trolled for an article she wrote on the alleged rise in wildlife hunting in the State during the lockdown. From threats over the telephone to morphed photographs in Facebook, the harassment in April 2020 was unrelenting. Rina earlier faced a murderous attack in 2012, when she was shot in her office by mask-based gunmen. In a step back in the struggle for protection of law. In several cases, arrests have been made, especially of attacks by mafia and goons. However, complaints of assault by state machinery and the police has been left to linger with the threats unleashed by the newly-formed government in the state suggests a direct link to his profession. Six suspects were arrested but were released on bail within the month. The MLA’s name, which was included in the FIR, has been removed by the police. The Press Council of India dropped the proceeding after a report from State Chief Secretary and Director General of Police. A went to initiate a probe with the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has been filed by Satyanarayana’s brother ‘as he has no faith of a fair investigation’ by the state government. Another journalist from Madhya Pradesh, Chakresh Jain was doused with petrol and killed by local Janpad Panchayat administration, Manoj Choudhary and two accomplices. IJU condemned the brutal attack and sought a thorough investigation into the killing and justice for the family. Kerala journalist K Mohammed Basheer died after being allegedly run over by a car driven by a senior administrative officer in an inebriated condition. As the investigation is still dragging its feet, the suspended police personnel were recommended as joint secretary in the health department by the Kerala government.

JOURNALISTS KILLED

During the year, several journalists met an untimely death, but it has not always been possible to conclusively link their deaths to their profession. In some cases however, it emerges that the deceased journalists paid the ultimate price for journalism. The deceased journalists were Hamas Media Trust – formed in the name of journalist Gauri Lankesh who was murdered in 2017— was arrested on charges filed against him in 1994 accusing him of being a ‘Naxalite’. Revathi P, chief executive officer of Mojo TV in Telangana, was arrested on a six-month-old case which seemed to have been ramped up to stop her from protesting against the hostile take-over of her channel by people close to the ruling political party in Telangana State. Mojo TV was reportedly resigned by the Chief Minister for airing controversial programmes and was even efforts over the preceding six months to curb editorial independence. In a similar move, Ravi Prakash, CEO of news channel TV9 and founder of the online Telugu News, was arrested in a case of financial fraud. However, staff of Telugu News say that the arrest was a consequence of his refusal to take down two controversial interviews.

Four journalists including a woman, Radhe Maa, kidnapped and attacked local journalist Jitendra Sharma for asking some questions in a press meet she held in Panipat, Haryana.

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the request in April 2020 as the matter was settled several years back. However, two days later the Union Finance Minister slapped a fresh notice of tax reassessment under specific clause dealing with foreign assets. The battle against persecution for the channel’s fearless reporting will be a long drawn out.

Controlling the narrative in the Kashmir Valley preceded the abbreviation of Article 370 and the communications blockade. The prominence on media was international, local owners and a publisher of prominent publications (Fayaz Kaloo, of Greater Kashmir and Kashmir Ume; Hajj Mohammad Hayat Bhat, of Kashmir Reader; and Rashid Malik) and of Greater Kashmir were summoned by India’s counter-terce National Investigation Agency (NIA) to its headquarters in New Delhi in July where they were questioned for a week. This was preceded by the arrest on June 24, of the 62-year-old editor of the Urdu daily Afzaf, Gulshan Jeelani Qadri, in a 28-year-old case registered under Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. He was granted bail by the court. Likewise, pending cases against editors and owners of publications were excavated post August apparently aimed at sustaining pressure on media.

INTERNATIONAL IMAGE MANAGEMENT

The past year witnessed heavy-handed steps by the government to manage its international image, characterized by brokering no criticism. Aatish Taseer, an Indian born foreign correspondent for Time magazine, was stripped of his Overseas Indian Citizenship (OIC) 90 days after a scathing cover story called Divider-in-Chief on the Prime Minister. Taseer was stripped of his citizenship for allegedly concealing the fact that his father was of Pakistan origin, an allegation denied by Taseer as his father Pakistan origin is clearly stated in all his official documents. In a more recent incident, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) received a complaint from a private individual asking for the immediate deportation of Wall Street Journal South Asia bureau chief, Eric Bellman, for alleged “misreporting on Indian riots, particularly in the matter of the killing of Intelligence Bureau officer Ankit Sharma.” However, no action was taken on this request.

In January, Aamir Khan, chief executive officer and president, Jeet Bez, returned after a three-day visit in India with not a single government official engaging with him. His request for a meeting with the prime minister was turned down. The ‘perceived’ snub was apparently due to the Bez owned Marico’s decision, a local competitor of several of the Modi government’s policy decisions, especially on the recent developments in Jammu and Kashmir.

JOBS LOSSES, PAY CUTS

As news media sought to stay alive amidst government crackdown, several media outlets downsized their shutters for lack of resources and changing readership behaviour. Daily News and Analysis (DNA) announced closure on its print editions in Mumbai and Ahmedabad promising to set up its digital venture. Similarly, Deccan Chronicle shut down five editions in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad – reduced from 100 to less than five – was reportedly not paid for six months. Six months into its existence, Tiranga TV, a channel owned by congress leader Kapil Sibal and his wife closed shop in July. Nearly 200 employees were abandoned without six-months’ worth of salary. Senior journalist, Barkha Dutt has sued the company for the arbitrary closure seeking compensation. Digital news portal Scroll.in, retrenched 16 of its staff soon after the elections in Jammu & Kashmir. Two months’ pay was offered as severance before seeking their resignations.

On the regional front, Gaunery News closed down in Tamil Nadu in October. No prior notice of retrenchment was given to the 146 employees. Instead, one month’s salary was promised citing financial difficulties and the promise that the operation would go digital. Staff at Greater Kashmir were summoned by the police and went on a week-long strike until the management promised to pay salaries and hold talks. It is still unverified whether all the employees were honoured with due wages.

Following the internet shutdown in J&K in August, fledging news websites functioning out of Kashmir were forced to suspend their operations. This led to a loss of revenue and drastically dipped their online rankings. Many journalists, especially those working in digital portals of newspapers lost their jobs and salaries were cut. Greater Kashmir, Rising Kashmir and Kashmir Reader were among the prominent local papers which laid off staff and reduced salaries of journalists. It is a frustrating situation. Salary cuts ranging from 20 to 40 per cent were arbitrarily made across the board.

Jobs with media houses have not only become unpredictable, journalists laid off rarely challenge their retrenchment in court. Added to this are changes in labour laws governing journalists that will further deter them from approaching the court. Amidst severe criticism from trade unions, the government on August 8 passed the Code on Wages and introduced the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Bill (2019) (OSHVC), which together merged 44 labour laws. While the amalgamation of various acts under the two codes has been criticised to have been drawn favouring companies rather than the labour force, it is equally damaging for working journalists. Two laws enacted to protect working journalists - the Working Journalists (Protection of Sources) Act 2011 and Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Employment and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2016 - were replaced by the new code. As a result, protections against arbitrary retrenchment, a recurring phenomenon in media houses.

The IFJ joined the nation-wide protests and together with the Confederation of Newspapers and News Agencies Employees Unions and met the Labour Minister and made a submission before the Standing Committee of Parliament. The recent lockdown put in force from March 24 to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak in India has hit media houses already reeling from financial crises. Soon after the announcement, people across the country stayed home by practising social distancing, leading to an uninterrupted operation of print and electronic media, the Maharashtra government announced suspension of newspaper services until March 31. Printing and distribution were resumed from April 1. But the damage was done. As circulation dipped, loss in advertising revenues followed closely, leading to layoffs and salary cuts.

Sakal Media Group, Maharashtra’s leading media group laid off 15 senior employees, mostly from the editorial division. This, despite an order from the Maharashtra government asking employers not to lay off workers or cut their wages during the lockdown. A public interest litigation against the job losses and pay cuts was filed in the Supreme Court on April 16 by the National Alliance of Journalists and others.

Another large media house, The Indian Express, sought ‘sacrifices’ from the staff of a ‘temporary’ salary cut of up to 30 per cent. Alongside, predicting enhanced news viewership, ‘sacrifices’ from the staff of a ‘temporary’ salary cut of up to 30 per cent. Alongside, predicting enhanced news viewership, Arnab Goswami, the editor of Republic TV and president of the News Broadcasters Federation, has appealed to the advertising fraternity to stand by them. The Indian Newspaper Society has asked the government for an urgent stimulus package for print industry. The coronavirus outbreak and the consequent lockdown will deeply impact an already battered economy and this certainly does not augur well for the media given the impending revenue losses through advertisements.

STICKY FLOORS AND GLASS CEILINGS

The extent of job losses among women journalists and media personnel is not available but given existing biases the picture might not be pretty.

A 2019 quantitative study by Newslahdi in partnership with UN Women, Gender frequency in Indian Media showed gender representation in leadership positions. The study also notes that in print media there are fewer articles published by women writers and coverage of gender issues continues to stagger. However, digital media records better presence of women (35 per cent) as compared to print media (English: 25 per cent and Hindi: 17 per cent). This has direct impact on women’s bylines. Digital media has 40 per cent compared to English newspapers with 27 per cent and Hindi newspapers with 5 per cent. According to the study, television news channels have a low appearance of women (16 per cent in English; 8 per cent in Hindi). In the face of adversities and insecurities with online threats and trolling, 2019 also saw remarkable quality in the reporting by women journalists, many of whom are independent journalists.

Low representation of women in the media workforce could be a reflection of the respect they receive in publishing/ media houses. The #MeToo movement that took the entire nation by storm was joined by senior journalists exposing an unsafe environment. The lack of institutional mechanisms of redress for survivors of sexual harassment at the workplace was revealed in a report, released on March 8 by the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) and Gender at Work. The survey of 456 media women working in print, electronic, radio and online media found that over a third (36 per cent) of all respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment at their workplaces. Of the respondents who experienced sexual harassment at work, more than half (53 per cent) did not report it to anyone. Of those who approached the internal committee with a complaint, 70 per cent were not “completely satisfied” with the outcome. The study also highlighted the importance of awareness in prevention of sexual harassment. Respondents who said their organisation did not have a mechanism to deal with sexual harassment, almost half (47 per cent) had faced sexual harassment. Given the lack of faith institutional mechanisms, it is no surprise that women took to social media to make disclosures about sexual harassment.

SILENCE AFTER THE STORM

The wave of disclosures of sexual harassment in the media and entertainment industry in India in September and October 2018 was met with fierce push-back from men who had been named. The year saw defamation – both criminal and civil – being used against journalists to silence them. Many of the women who called out their harassers using the hashtag #MeToo were emboldened in lengthy and costly legal cases. The most high-profile was the case of criminal defamation filed by journalist...
sexual harassment continued through the year. Out and naming their harassers. Reports based on a private notice by the plaintiff, Subodh Gupta. Public figures merely because the source of the information is public domain and in the media, without threat of litigation that threatens speech. The Indian Journalists Union had filed an application was filed by an artist Subodh Gupta against an anonymous victimisation by powerful perpetrators is not unfounded, since molestation made against lawyer Soumya Dasgupta, son of the UP government that came to power after the May 2019 state elections, issued a government order (GO) in October. The order empowers departmental secretaries to ‘lodge complaint and file defamation cases’ against publishers and editors. The order notes that it is to deter pecker print, electronic and social media from ‘tarnishing the image of government and government officials by spreading false, baseless and defamatory news with malafide intent’.

There was a hue and cry from journalists union and the Press Council of India took suo moto notice of it. The order stands deferred as the Andhra High Court, which passed the challenge, had sent it back to the PCI to adjudicate. On a similar note, the Rajasthan government also passed a law – Rajasthan Protection of Journalism (Amendment) Bill (2020) by voice vote in March, purportedly to make it affordable to move the court for defamation. While members of opposition parties called the law unnecessary as it would only overburden courts, journalists feared this could be easily used to ‘refer and publish official version of developments’. One of the most overwhelming impacts of the coronavirus was the plight of migrant labourers, who were abandoned by their labour contractors without any support. A 21-day lockdown was announced by the prime minister with a mere four-hour window. This sent everyone in a tizzy of shopping and hoarding essentials for three weeks, and trying to reach their homes. In its submission to a public interest litigation the union government confirmed that the party among the migrant labourers was due to spread of “fake news” and sought the court’s direction that “no electronic/print media/web portal or social media platform, including SMS, should be used to spread such fabricated news (section 505(2) statements creating or promoting enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes) and section 66D (cheating by personation by using computer resource) of the IT Act of the Indian Penal Code against Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of news portal The Wire. The objection was to an article published on March 31 which referred to the chief minister holding a religious ceremony despite the call for lockdown. The Editors Guild of India commented that such cases filed against the media are ‘acts of intimidation’. A protest statement signed by more than 3,500 journalists, academics and human rights activists, expressed shock at the action of the UP government and police in filing criminal charges for an ‘entirely fictional candidate. Individuals filing defamation charges against journalists and other media, even though jurisdictional, but when governments issue gag orders, the matter is more serious. In Andhra Pradesh, the government that came to power after the May 2019 state elections, issued a government order (GO) in October. The order empowers departmental secretaries to ‘lodge complaint and file defamation cases’ against publishers and editors. The order notes that it is to deter pecker print, electronic and social media from ‘tarnishing the image of government and government officials by spreading false, baseless and defamatory news with malafide intent’.

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The FIR followed a report published against Nihal Kumaraswamy, a film star as well as son of then Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, who lost elections to an independent woman candidate. Anup Jaiswal had shot a video showing children sitting on the floor and eating rotis with salt at a primary government school in Mitzapur. After the video the lid over the UP government’s mid-day meal scheme, the Block Education Officer filed a complaint against, Pawan, and two others, including a representative of the local village head accusing them of “criminal conspiracy to defame the UP government.” In similar outrage over the government’s image, police in Uklana district of Haryana police filed an FIR against Anup Kundra of SVD Haryana News, showing a video of a man lying in the open at the centre of the Food & Supplies Department. The FIR followed a complaint registered by a departmental official claiming the news to be “false” and accusing Kundra of “spoiling the image of the department and the official.” One more instance of overreach was the FIR filed against Vishnuvardhan Bhat, the editor-in-chief of Vishwavani. This pertained to a report published against Nihal Kumaraswamy, a film star as well as son of then Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, who lost elections to an independent woman candidate. Anup Jaiswal had shot a video showing children sitting on the floor and eating rotis with salt at a primary government school in Mitzapur. After the video the lid over the UP government’s mid-day meal scheme, the Block Education Officer filed a complaint against, Pawan, and two others, including a representative of the local village head accusing them of “criminal conspiracy to defame the UP government.” In similar outrage over the government’s image, police in Uklana district of Haryana police filed an FIR against Anup Kundra of SVD Haryana News, showing a video of a man lying in the open at the centre of the Food & Supplies Department. The FIR followed a complaint registered by a departmental official claiming the news to be “false” and accusing Kundra of “spoiling the image of the department and the official.”
THE MALDIVES
PROMISES TO KEEP

The glittering string of more than a thousand coral islands that dot the Indian Ocean with their unparalleled beauty belies a history of stringent curbs and controls over free expression and association. A country with a population of just 400,000 and having an impressive per capita income of USD 8,049, high-end tourism-reliant Maldives appears as paradise to the world outside. For so long, the undisturbed image of emerald isles had offered mechanisms to compensate victim families. The media – in terms of both ownership and content – was long kept under the iron fist of founding president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Apart from the brief democratic window when Mohamed Nasheed briefly served as president (2008 to 2012), there was once again a significant decline under Abdulla Yameen (2013 to 2018). The Maldivian media – barring a few exceptions – has not had the opportunity to practice public-spirited literacy and professionalism. To break free from the past in a decisive manner, the government must urgently invest in the industry and demonstrate a genuine commitment to build capacities.

DIFFERENT STEPS, DIFFICULT STEPS

Authoritarian regimes have left a lasting legacy of deeply entrenched political divisions, with Yameen's regime being remembered for unprecedented violence targeting human rights defenders and the use of draconian laws to silence independent voices. Despite the sense of freedom under the new dispensation and increased engagement and expression of dissent, journalists continue to practice self-censorship and skirt around religion for fear of reprisals from the state and religious fundamentalists. While there is a marked improvement in the media climate, secularism is still an uncomfortable topic for the majority of media practitioners, with the memory of Rilwan and Rasheed serving as powerful reminders of the possible repercussions if they dare to publicly discuss matters of faith.

Additionally, there are still apprehensions of curbs through existing mechanisms such as the Maldives Media Council, the state agency entrusted with the task of guaranteeing the existing mechanisms such as the Maldives Media Council, to remain accountable and fair in the exercise of authority and termed as “unjust” the removal of two articles published on the local site Dhivehis.

The 2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the US Department of State meanwhile, has claimed that the
A SUSTAINED LEGACY OF IMPUNITY

Solih’s 15 months in office have not recorded a single murder, abduction or physical assault of human rights defenders while the government-appointed presidential commission to probe the disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla in 2014 and the 2017 murder of blogger and digital activist Yameen Rasheed’s was expected to conclude in February. In Rilwan’s case, no persons were charged on account of the probe that only identified a local Islamic militant outfit responsible for his abduction and murder.

In August 2018, just three months before the ousting of Yameen, a criminal court acquitted two suspects charged with the forced disappearance of Ahmed Rilwan, on the purported basis that the police and prosecution had conducted an incomplete investigation. The trial of alleged religious extremists linked to the 2017 murder of Yameen Rasheed was expected to conclude in February. In Rilwan’s case, no persons were charged on account of the probe that only identified a local Islamic militant outfit responsible for his abduction and murder.

On July 11, the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) urged the Criminal Court of Maldives to uphold its obligation to conduct a fair and transparent hearing in line with the Maldivian Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). MDN representatives were denied entry as observers at the eighth hearing of Rasheed’s case. At the next hearing on July 31, a secret witness for the prosecution informed the court that the plan to kill Rasheed was hatched in November 2016, with the suspects accusing him of “insulting Islam and therefore [he] deserved death.” During the hearing, the same witness purportedly identified the three defendants as the men he saw at the crime scene: Ismail Haisham Rasheed and Ahmed Zihan Ismail, the two men who were seen coming out of Rasheed’s home while a third person acted as a lookout, perched on a motorbike outside Yameen’s house.

Maldives’s former president Abdulla Yameen arrives at a criminal court on November 28, 2019. Yameen was sentenced to five years in prison for money laundering after a corruption case

Maldive’s former president Abdulla Yameen arrives at a criminal court on November 28, 2019. Yameen was sentenced to five years in prison for money laundering after a corruption case

A MALDIVIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER TALKING TO REPORTERS WITH CREDIT: MDN

According to Husnu Al Suood, chairperson of the Commission on Disappearances and Deaths, the commission’s nine-month investigation found that then-president Abdulla Yameen tried to “divert the focus” of the police investigation, while his former deputy, Ahmed Adeeb, attempted to obstruct justice. The commission also concluded that the gang had a “hit list” which included other activists and government critics. Despite the probe, there is no closure in sight for the families of the murdered. Rilwan’s family has been making repeated calls to punish the criminals, but the probe has not led to charging the culprits.

RELIGION SETS THE AGENDA

Though instances of physical intimidation were absent, promotion of secularism appears to draw extreme responses, from the authorities as well as radical elements. Reports have emerged on how those promoting religious freedom and secularism were being brought under severe pressure, with several human rights defenders receiving death threats online, a form of violence that goes unmonitored in the Maldives.

In January this year, Maldives Independent, formerly Minivan News suspended operations. The online platform was an influential voice promoting democracy and human rights in the country since 2004. In its wake, Minivan Radio, once anchored from Colombo by exiled journalists, also closed operations because the premises had to be vacated, but local associates said that political pressure had been exerted to shut the station down. Historically, the democratisation of the Maldivian media landscape has taken shape in the digital space where young bloggers and online activists grew in influence, in defiance of both the state and the traditional media. Both Rilwan and Rasheed were two social media influencers who provided leadership to powerful online engagements promoting religious freedom and secularism. If it was hard then, it remains hard still, to discuss religion and not have to pay a price. A Maldivian human rights defender speaking on the basis of anonymity said religious extremism was becoming a convenient excuse to explain violence and convince society that voices against Islam won’t be tolerated. “At the risk of commenting on a matter before court, I wish to say that while Rilwan and Yameen may have indeed been murdered by religious fanatics, they [the fanatics] also would have enjoyed political patronage. The links were too strong to not acknowledge, legally. If someone is harmed by fundamentalists for promoting secularism, the incumbent government too would use religion as the excuse; as if the state has no obligation to protect people from coming to harm for their belief in secularism.”

ARCHAIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of the Republic of Maldives (2008), guarantees freedom of expression, as long as it is exercised in a manner that is “not contrary to any tenet of Islam,” a vague condition that encourages self-censorship in the media. Set up under the Maldives Media Council Act of 2008, the Maldivian Media Council (MMC) is the main agency tasked to give effect to the constitutionally guaranteed right of free expression. The main purpose of the MMC is to uphold and encourage freedom of the media in the country and to monitor any restrictions placed on this fundamental right.

The Broadcasting Act (2010) upholds freedom of expression and contains provisions about the regulatory aspects of complaints against broadcasters, though how these rights are guaranteed and effectively monitored remain grey areas.

The Communications Authority of Maldives (CAM) functions as the ICT regulator and holds sole authority to regulate online content and is mandated to impose necessary restrictions on internet content on local sites and block access to websites hosted outside of Maldives.
that at least 15 human rights defenders, including journalists, threats to human rights defenders. Torture (OMCT), wrote an open letter to President Solih, Rights Defenders, a partnership of the International Federation from a public book fair for “content that violated principles of Islam or challenges the government’s religious position that continue to receive death threats.

ONLINE THREATS
Maldives applies stringent controls over reporting on religion while content that is considered anti-Islamic continues to face strong resistance, a practice continued by the new government.

With many new entrants to the field, the country’s media sector’s evolution has largely taken place in the digital space, with the emergence of influential bloggers breaking barriers. Soon after the election of Solih, in June 2019, UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Katrina Bennoune, visited the Maldives and voiced concerns over “extremist positions being advocated, including online and by teachers, and people being harassed and threatened by those who are motivated by fundamentalist ideology.” She noted that such intimidation shrunk the space for freedom of expression and that those who spoke out “were often ridiculed, bullied, and sometimes even threatened with violence.” In addition, she stated, the Maldives applied stringent controls over reporting on religion.

Shrinking Space
The new government’s populattory took a beating when it banned a reputed human rights organisation, Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), in November over a human rights report produced by them in 2015 that delved into the radicalisation of Maldivian society. The closure came against the backdrop of threats to the MDN’s staff, including its director, Shakhinda Ismail, from religious hardliners. Amnesty International said in a media release.

A month later, on November 5, the Maldivian Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment – which regulates the activities of NGOs – announced the decision to shut down the group. The decision was linked to a 2015 report published by the NGO looking at radicalisation in the Maldives. “The new Maldivian government was supposed to engage with the island nation’s repressive past. The decision to shut down the MDN’s operations, however, shows that time-worn tactics to intimidate human rights defenders and shrink space for civil society remain a threat,” Amnesty International said.

Significantly, the current government includes former prisoners of conscience whose release Amnesty International and MDN had campaigned for, it further noted.

MISSING THE GLASS CEILING
Among the key weaknesses in the Maldivian media sector is the absence of prominent women journalists, mechanisms to mainstream gender or women journalists’ collectives able to advance the gender agenda.

While there are more and more women entering journalism in the Maldives, there are hardly any women who lead organisations or hold leadership positions. Most women remain at the entry and mid-level, where they invariably encounter a glass ceiling and fail to advance their careers beyond a point. In 2019, a baseline study on building a gendered media in the Maldives by Addu Women’s Association (AWA), conducted in collaboration with UNESCO and South Asia Women’s Network (SAWN) was released to the public. The first of its kind in the Maldives, it identified critical areas that required several important interventions.

Lauding the report, Male’ at the Maldives Press Freedom Day 2019 celebrations, AWA’s co-founder Dr Mariyam Shaakea said: “Very few women occupy decision-making positions in the country’s media as well as advertising agencies, though they carried much weight, especially in mid-level administrative positions.” She added that a lack of data and research meant the existing gender biases and there were institutional and structural disadvantages for women’s success in media.

While wage disparities and common entry level concerns were not recorded, the study recognised several constraints for women’s advancement in the industry and to influence content. In recent years, there had been attempts by women journalists to form themselves into a formal association, but going forward, women journalists say that there needs to be an understanding of concrete steps that can help their growth and an agenda to mainstream women’s voices and help develop their careers.

“The key to achieving success as effective networks is institutional support and coordination from media organizations and the private sector,” one of the report’s key researchers said. “We need to ensure representation of women at all levels of decision-making processes and ensure transparency in ownership, introduce measures to depoliticise the political entities and reflecting those political ideologies.”

In the aftermath of reintroducing democracy to the Maldives, the Solih administration has taken important steps towards transparency in ownership, introduce measures to depoliticise media outlets and to lay long-term plans to foster a truly independent media culture complete with media literacy.
NEPAL

CREEPING CONTROL

For more than two decades, Nepal’s political arena was in turmoil, and this instability was thought to be the key cause of the precarious state of press freedom and violation of journalist’s rights. In the last two years, as transitional politics seemingly settled, the media community realised that this was not the case, and that their struggle for the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and journalist’s rights is perennial.

In the last two years, the government led by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli is stable, with a near two-third majority in parliament. Yet, the government has not been up to the mark in upholding principles of democracy in the interests of the media and journalists. The ‘shrinking civic space’ is a term that is increasingly being used after the government introduced bills with provisions restricting civil liberties, made repeated criticism of the press and civil society, and also demonstrated an utter lack of commitment in addressing long standing issues such as impunity for crimes against journalists.

Nepal’s policy-making process can best be described as opaque and non-consultative. Members of parliament most often vote in the interests of their parties rather than on the merits of issues. This makes it easier for the government to introduce bills that include provisions contrary to global standards of press freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of the internet. The Media Council Bill and the Information Technology Management Bill are two such examples of increased state control. The new federal structure means that the provincial as well as local governments are making provincial and local laws, and most of them have restrictive provisions.

From May 2019 to April 2020, available data shows that violations of press freedom continued unabated; there was very little progress in ensuring journalists’ rights. According to the IFJ-affiliate Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the government did not make sufficient effort to protect the safety and independence of the media and rarely prosecuted individuals who attacked journalists across the country.

There was also little or no progress in addressing long standing issues such as justice for slain journalists, self-censorship, online freedom and the implementation of the Working Journalists Act.

SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

“The year wasn’t a happy one for the journalism sector,” begins the press statement of the FNJ’s annual review of 2019. The umbrella organisation of journalists noted that although there was a slight decrease in the number of press freedom violations compared to the previous year, the disturbing trend of undermining press freedom and journalists’ rights continued from both state and non-state actors. This resulted in a challenging environment for media and for journalists to freely and fearlessly exercise their constitutionally guaranteed right to press freedom.

Since May 2019, Nepal witnessed 45 verified incidents of press freedom violations. Significant violations included arrests (22 incidents), misconduct towards journalists on duty (18 incidents), attacks (17 incidents) and threats (10 incidents). These incidents led to a situation where journalists had to carry out their professional duties with some level of self-censorship.

An example of the pressure that a journalist in Nepal had to endure for critical reporting is the case of Ajaya Babu Shiwakoti, the editor of hamrohina.com and the general secretary of Nepal Press Union (NPU). Shiwakoti had to live in fear of his life for more than three months in jail before he was released by the then Speaker of the Parliament Krishna Bahadur Mahara.

Press Union (NPU). Shiwakoti had to live in fear of his life for more than three months in jail before he was released by the then Speaker of the Parliament Krishna Bahadur Mahara. In September 2019, Shiwakoti interviewed the survivor – an employee at the federal parliament – immediately after the alleged rape attempt. The Speaker was forced to resign and spend more than three months in jail before he was released by the district court due to lack of evidence.

The journalist received threats from various unknown numbers and he was informed that some groups were ‘tracking his movement’ and ‘planning to vandalise his office and assault him’. Shiwakoti, however, continued his mission to tell truth to power. He was also later involved in reporting a bribery scandal involving Nepal’s minister of communications and information technology in March 2020. Minister Gokul Prasad Baskota, a former journalist who, ironically, as a government spokesperson had criticised critical coverage of the government on various occasions, resigned. However, unidentified people had put the journalist’s residence and his activities under surveillance and he received threats on social media.

An incident of how media and journalists are devalued in Nepal involved the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu after the Kathmandu Post daily on February 18, 2020 published a syndicated column arguing that the Chinese system of governance exacerbated the Covid-19 outbreak with an illustration of a 100 yuan note altered to show communist governance exacerbated the Covid-19 outbreak with an illustration of a 100 yuan note altered to show communist

THE GOVERNMENT DID NOT MAKE SUFFICIENT EFFORT TO PROTECT THE SAFETY AND INDEPENDENCE OF THE MEDIA AND RARELY PROSECuted INDIVIDUALS WHO ATTACKED JOURNALISTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.
THE MEDIA COUNCIL BILL AND THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT BILL ARE TWO SUCH EXAMPLES OF INCREASED STATE CONTROL.

registering its dissatisfaction over the content but went on to cross the diplomatic line to personally attack the then editor-in-chief Anup Kaphle. The statement added: “The Chinese Embassy in Nepal has made solemn representations to the newspaper and himself and reserves the right of further action.” This enraged civil society and the media community and editors all stood by Kaphle to condemn the Chinese Embassy’s statement. Journalist Om Hamal, editor of online news portal Janasamchar.com, was arrested on August 23, 2019 from Pokhara for his alleged connection with a political outfit that was declared illegal by the state. On September 4, the Supreme Court ordered his release, but the police re-arrested him outside the gate of the Supreme Court raising questions about the rule of law. Following protests, he was released after a few days in custody.

On December 10, 2019, the police marked International Human Rights Day by baton-charging a journalist who was capturing police brutality on football fans. It was the last day of the South Asia Games 2019 hosted by Nepal, and fans were trying to enter the main stadium for the final match between Nepal and India. A witness to the incident was taking photographs when he was beaten by the police. He needed a visit to a nearby hospital, and despite the police agreeing to look into the incident following protests from the FNJ-affiliated Nepal Sports Journalists Forum and Photographers’ Club, there has been no news of an investigation.

TINY STEPS TOWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY

Impunity still reigns in Nepal as in the cases where victims get justice are rare – especially in the cases of violations of journalists’ rights. The FNJ says in many cases the state has failed to implement legal procedures despite identification of perpetrators involved in killing of journalists, which demonstrates a lack of seriousness to end impunity in crimes against journalists. Nepal has witnessed the murder of 17 journalists and disappearances of five since 1997, mostly during the Maoist insurgency. FNJ records show that in only five cases of murder, justice has been delivered whereas another five cases are still under judicial procedure. A positive development in 2020 was the arrest of one of the murderers of journalist Birendra Sah 12 years after the crime. Narendra Phaujdar aka Kundan Phaujdar, a former Maoist cadre was arrested for his involvement in the 2007 murder of Sah. The journalist was kidnapped by an unidentified group on October 7, 2007 and his body was found 34 days later. Among five individuals involved in the murder, one has completed the jail term, another is serving his sentence and two are still at large.

NEW MEDIA, OLD CONTROLS

The internet has become a new and powerful avenue of citizen’s voices, and social media is often setting the agenda for mainstream media and ensuring accountability from government and its agencies. The government has a confusing policy regarding use of social media while it wants to reach more and more of the public using social media to disseminate information and create a platform for citizens to engage with governments to acquire services, it also wants to control opinions on social media. The government has not only issued notices to the government-employed teachers and civil servants to refrain from criticising the government in social media, but ministers, and also the prime minister, have repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with opinions being expressed on social media. With regard to control, Nepal has blocked pornographic sites, but it has also formulated laws that allows it to block sites and content, without requiring court orders.

STILL INVISIBLE

There is still a long road to travel for women journalists in Nepal. A report by Freedom Forum Nepal, which analysed 21 provincial newspapers for inclusion of women in their content from July to September 2019 found that women are almost invisible in the newspapers. The report recorded only five per cent of women have news bylines and only 12 per cent are news sources. Clearly, a lot remains to be done to increase the representation of women in the Nepali media. The issue of online harassment, especially of women journalists, and trolling to silence critical voices on social media is an emerging issue. Nitu Pandit, the chairperson of Sancharika Samuh, women journalists’ union, says, “On the internet, personal comments are overshadowing opinions on gender, especially those by actresses, women journalists and activists. The comments questioning personal character amount to censoring women’s opinions.”

WAGE STRUGGLES ABOUND

On January 30, 2020, journalists working for Nagarkot and Republica dailies, including associate editor Tikal Pathak, submitted a memorandum to publishers urging the payment of salaries. The letter, which was leaked to the social media stated that they hadn’t received their salaries for three months, and some district correspondents hadn’t received salaries for up to 10 months. They threatened to stop working if they were not paid within 10 days. January 30 was also the deadline given by the journalists at Kambar daily to the management to meaningfully conclude talks with their union regarding their salaries and benefits. These two cases are not new in Nepal’s media industry. The crisis was averted as the journalists did not go on strike in either of the publications houses, but the incidents show the difficult situation for journalists in Nepal.

The state-owned Radio Nepal sacked three journalists in October 2018, the government decided to ‘force the media houses to submit the list of employed journalists to the state authorities’. The union leaders who held a demonstration demanding the reinstatement of the journalists’ jobs were arrested and detained for three hours.

Journalists’ rights are determined by the Working Journalists’ Act and its regulations. However, the media industry has always ignored the provisions in such a way that the FNJ has had to raise the issue of the implementation of the Act on every occasion. In 2019, the FNJ decided to ‘force the media houses to submit the list of employed journalists to the state authorities’ by public shaming. In October 2018, the government decided to increase the journalists’ salary by 25 per cent, which many private media houses have not implemented, and have instead refrained from putting on government records the number of journalists in their employment and their respective salaries.

On March 28, 2020, FNJ chair Govinda Acharya issued a statement to mark the federation’s establishment day in which he stated that the FNJ would continue to put pressure on the government for the complete implementation of the Working Journalists’ Act.
THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The key area of concern in Nepal is the legal environment, especially the one the state is trying to create through new proposed laws. Despite the government’s expressed commitment to press freedom and its “willingness to amend any anti-press freedom provisions” to end FNJ-led protests on two controversial laws in 2018, the government showed no backtracking as it introduced, one after another, laws that undermined the freedom of the press, freedom of expression as well as internet freedom.

The restrictive provisions in proposed laws has drawn flak from not only IFJ-affiliated FNJ and NPU but also from other media rights organisations, civil society organisations and international agencies.

The UNESCO urged Nepali policymakers to adopt policies to provide a conducive environment for media freedom. In a statement on World Radio Day on February 13, 2020, the UNESCO Office in Kathmandu said that ‘it is necessary for people to be able to express themselves without fear.’

The US Department of State, in its annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2020, stated that the constitution and existing laws guarantee freedom of speech and press in Nepal, but the government tried to restrict media freedom by threatening journalists and news organisations that criticised the authorities.

Last year, two controversial bills were heavily criticised by the media rights organisations. One of the bills, the Information Technology Management Bill – passed by the Development and Technology Committee of House of Representatives (HoR) on December 29, 2019 – threatens freedom of speech online. Among the key concerns around the Information Technology Management Bill includes provisions to impose fines of up to NRs 1.5 million (approximately USD 12,500) or jail terms up to five years for posting content on social media that in the eyes of the government may pose a threat to the “country’s sovereignty, security, unity or harmony”. The bill also includes mandatory provisions for social media companies to be registered in Nepal. If not, the use of their services will be banned.

The bill replaces the existing Electronic Transaction Act (ETA) which had been widely misused to arrest and harass citizens over their social media posts. This apart, the bill provides for far tougher punishments for committing the same offense on the internet as compared to committing the crime in person.

The bill passed through the committee despite the main opposition party’s disagreement and will now be presented to the full house for approval. Since the ruling party has a nearly two-third majority in the parliament, it is likely to be passed without further changes.

The Media Council Bill was equally problematic. Among the controversial provisions, the provision to conducting licensing examination for journalists by the Council and up to Rs 1 million (USD 8,300) fine against journalists, editors and publishers if they breached the code of conduct was removed when the bill passed through the Upper House. These provisions were dropped at the last minute after prolonged opposition by the FNJ and NPU as well as other civil society organisations and the opposition party.

However, the bill which now needs to be endorsed by the lower house, proposes a Media Council in which the majority of members will be government appointed thereby undermining its role as an autonomous body to support journalism in the country. The media stakeholders view the Media Council more as a government agency to control them rather than a body to ensure responsible journalism.

BACKDOOR CENSORSHIP

During the Covid-19 lockdown, an unprecedented case of violation of press freedom surfaced, throwing the spotlight on backdoor censorship that becomes possible when the state puts pressure on private technology companies.

On April 1, 2020, kathmandupress – a news portal on social media claimed that news had disappeared from the website without its knowledge. The ‘disappeared’ news alleged that the Prime Minister’s IT consultant Ali Aqar, and sons of his chief adviser and deputy PM were involved in a corruption scandal in the procurement of health equipment. It was later revealed that Shihan Technologies, which developed and hosted the news portal, used backdoor access to delete the news. The company apologised, citing a communication error after FNJ, NPU and a group of editors issued statements denouncing the company and demanding an investigation. The publication also said that it was denied access to the site for a few hours and was given access only after threatening of legal action. The company is a subsidiary of a bigger company co-owned by Aqar, and kathmandupress claimed that the news was deleted deliberately on his instructions.

CONDITIONAL FREEDOM

After Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli publicly criticised editors, he invited many of them to his residence for a meeting. During the meeting he expressed commitment to “uphold press freedom and all civilian rights,” adding, “the press, which has a habit of criticising everyone, should also learn to face criticism, as it sometimes crosses the limit”. The government, Oli said, wanted everyone to “practice freedom responsibly” in order to create a “civilised society”.

The statement is a testimony of the government’s approach to media. Whereas there is spoken commitment towards media freedom and freedom of expression, between the lines, there is dissatisfaction over critical content and people’s opinions.

The coming year will witness a struggle for press freedom as the government will continue to attempt to control the Nepali media, particularly social media.
Pakistan's media in 2019 reeled under an unrelenting clampdown, enduring repression which can be likened to ‘waterboarding’, or a form of slow torture as journalists struggled to survive physical attacks and threats to their livelihoods. Journalists, the basic source of news and information, remain as vulnerable as ever frequently targeted, harassed and even murdered. While raising public awareness on national and international issues, there is no effective law governing the security and safety of journalists in Pakistan.

Many believe that the recent censorship, intimidation and arm twisting of journalists and media has been worse than the decade under the dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul Haq in 1977.

MURDERS AND ATTACKS, WITH IMPUNITY

The rising number of cases of harassment has substituted the taping off of murders in the recent years. Killings however, still pose a grave challenge for journalists, especially when almost all of the perpetrators have gotten away with impunity. Several journalists paid the ultimate price for their reporting.

A recent murder was that of Arif Memon, a 36-year-old journalist in Naushahro Feroze in Sindh province. Tragically, his frantic appeals on social media for safety could not save his life. Memon’s body was found floating in a canal on February 16, 2020. According to witnesses who saw his body, Memon had been strangled with a wire before being drowned in the canal. However, the official autopsy report confirmed that he was murdered.

Weeks before his murder, Memon who worked with the Sindhi language channel KTN News and Sindhi-language Daily Kawish had fled to capital Islamabad, from Mehrabpur, his hometown. In a video message from Islamabad, Memon claimed that police were threatening him at the behest of a local politician of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP). He alleged that death threats were being hurled at him because of a story he broke on the KTN TV channel that showed the politician in bad light. Days later, his murder irrefutably validated his allegations.

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) strongly protested Memon’s murder and staged a sit-in across the province demanding an impartial and fair investigation into his murder. The protests yielded results and the government constituted a joint investigation team, and even dropped the officer who had shown partiality in the case.

In yet another gory murder, Javedullah Khan, bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal was working on a story on terrorism when he was kidnapped in Karachi and weeks later a video release shown him beheaded in custody of Islamic militants. Khan was a member of the government-formed Peace Committee in Swat to forge peace in the valley after the Taliban ousted from there following a military operation. It is believed that Khan’s murder was pre-planned.

Zafar Abbas, a journalist associated with 7 News was murdered after being kidnapped and kept in captivity for five days. Police did not heed complaints of his kidnapping and swung into action only after Abbas’ body was found dumped inside a dry well on September 16, 2019. Ali Sher Raigar, 36, working for Sindhi language daily Jovami Awaz, was shot dead on May 4, 2019 outsidePadidan Press Club, in southern Sindh province. Investigations revealed animosity towards Raigar, who was a bold and vocal journalist. The perpetrator was arrested.

Mina Waseem Baig, a reporter with 92 TV channel was shot dead outside his home on August 30, 2019. He was covering a local criminal gang involved in extortion in Sarai Alamgir, a bustling town in eastern Punjab province.

Muhammad Bilal Khan, a 23-year-old blogger and freelance journalist, known for his critical stances on Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) and the military establishment, and murdered in Islamabad on June 25, 2019. He received an anonymous phone call and was asked to come to the nearby woods where unknown assailants fatally slew him with a dagger.

Urooj Iqbal, a female journalist was murdered by her husband in Lahore on November 25, 2019, after he demanded that she quit her job.

Impunity for the murders of journalists, arrests and threats continued in the year under review with blatant fudging of evidence in which the police were suspected to have a role.

Police submitted a forged medical report trying to present the murder of journalist Arz Memon as a natural death.

In a shocking judgement on April 2, 2020, provincial Sindh High Court overturned the death sentence of British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who had been convicted by an anti-terrorism court for kidnapping and murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. Pearl, the South Asia bureau chief of Wall Street Journal was working on a story on terrorism when he was kidnapped in Karachi and weeks later a video release shown him beheaded in custody of Islamic militants.

Omar along with three other accomplices, was arrested and sentenced to death by hanging while the other three were awarded life imprisonment. The convicts filed an appeal in the high court that remained pending for 18 years. Expressing serious concern over the verdict of the High Court, the PFUJ also expressed hope that justice would be done. On April 4, the four accused in the case were re-arrested and detained for a period of three months, pending filing of the appeal against the acquittal.

BRAZEN ATTACKS

Journalists also encountered physical assaults and abuse during the year.

Mansoor Ali Sialy, an office bearer of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) roughed up Imtiaz Khan Faran, the president of the Karachi Press Club during a live broadcast on June 28, 2019. The incident angered the journalist community which then staged a series of protests against the incident.
However, no legal action was taken against the politician. The lack of accountability reinforced an atmosphere of impunity and in January 2020, Fawad Chaudhry, minister of the Khan cabinet slapped Mubashir Luqman, a TV anchor, for his comments on a political issue.

In July, 2019 so-called paid platoons of social media “warriors” launched a vicious hashtag campaign “ArrestAntiPakistanJournalists,” after two broadcast journalists Hamid Mir and Asma Shirazi made critical comments about Prime Minister Khan's policies.

Besides day to day instructions, certain issues were deemed to be off-limits for the media. There has been a permanent ban on covering rallies and activities of the Pakhtun Tahafuz (protection) Movement (PTM), a group of ethnic Pakhtuns that emerged in recent years to protect basic rights and stop the high-handedness of the security forces in the North Western region of Pakistan. Having complete control on the local media, the military establishment has reportedly been pressurising the Inter Services Public Relations wing.

In another form of censorship, Geo TV transmissions were taken off air in vast swathes of the cantonment residential areas, which administration is run by the retired or serving military personnel. Hawks were also barred from distributing Dawn newspapers in many parts of the country.

In Karachi, on January 9, 2020, plain-clothed personnel raided a publishing house, Maktaba-e-Daryal, and confiscated all the copies of Urdu translation of the award-winning English novel ‘A Case of Exploding Mangoes.’ Mohammad Hanif, a senior journalist and writer, had authored the satirical book about military dictator Zia-ul Haq, who was killed in an air crash in 1988, which the book attributed to explosives planted in the mango boxes aboard. Those conducting the raid identified themselves as EI personnel and took away all the copies of the book. The raid left Hanif feeling “anxious, angry and above all helpless,” as he was quoted in the media.

In another glaring example of censorship, an interview of former Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari was taken off air on July 5, 2019, at the eleventh hour. Hamid Mir, the veteran journalist who interviewed Zardari for Geo TV was later invited to ‘Zara Hat Ka,’ a Dawn TV current affair programme to explain the circumstances led to the interview ban but the hosts of ‘Zara Hat Ka’ were also told not to interview Mir.

On July 6, several TV channels were taken off air after they broadcast the live speech of Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the daughter of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and leader of Pakistan Muslim League, the main opposition party of the country.

In the same month Geo TV transmissions were taken off air in many parts of the country and the number of transmissions were reduced during prime minister Imran Khan visit to the US.

In November, PEMRA issued notifications to all the TV channels ordering them to ban their current affair programs and anchors from making critical comments or expressing their views.

In what was believed to be an attempt to clamp down on media, Nasrullah Chaudhry, a local journalist, was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment under the Anti-terrorist Act. Chaudhry was arrested in November 2019 following a raid of his house by the security forces. The prosecution charged him with possessing prohibited jihadi literature. The IFJ demanded that the government refrain from using court processes to silence independent media. On April 9, 2020, the Sindh High Court acquitted Nasrullah Chaudhry and ordered his immediate release from jail.

While the government of Imran Khan has been taking every opportunity to curb the media under the existing legal framework, it has been actively engaged in forging new media laws that could further tighten its grip on the media.
public its intention to set up speedy media courts and replace the existing regulatory bodies by a single body named the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority. The journalist community fiercely opposed the proposal. The draft of the law was directly submitted to the cabinet without circulating it among stakeholders, including journalists. The cabinet report included more stringent clauses aimed at curtailing free expression and controlling social media. Besides PFUJ, civil society and rights groups also opposed the idea. The draft seems to have been put on the back burner but not totally shelved.

In February the cabinet of the government approved a law to curb the vibrant social media in the country. The Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules required all the social media companies including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to necessarily register their offices in Islamabad within three months. Key clauses of the proposed law included:

a. Establishment of a new regulatory coordinator responsible for content, regulation, advising the government and engaging with the social media companies.

b. Social media platforms were made liable for any unlawful content pointed out to them in writing or electronically, within 24 hours and in emergency cases within six hours.

c. If the company fails to abide by the provision, all platforms, applications and services run by the company may be blocked or face penalty of five million rupees (USD 32,000).

d. The companies would be bound to provide to the regulator the decrypted, readable content and any other information about the user on the demand of the authorities.

e. Social media companies will have to establish their registered offices in Islamabad.

The government had to retreat on the implementation. However, it has constituted a committee in March that would look into the implementation of these laws. The journalist community has failed to pay salaries to the employees. The PFUJ also rejected the new law, denouncing the government action through statements and protest actions. In yet another attack, the government made Pakistani Media Council dysfunctional by sacking dozens of its employees in early March. The Council, having a fair representation of the journalist community and members of civil society and government functionaries, although toothless, did provide some support for journalists in protecting their rights.

**Growing Economic Crisis**

An economic siege of the media was conducted by the government – the largest revenue source for both the electronic and print media - by stopping the release of advertisements to newspapers and TV channels. Dawn newspaper, Pakistan’s most prestigious and independent English daily was denied government advertisements, which deprived the newspaper of a large part of its revenue, inflicting serious financial hardships on journalists and media workers. The economic squeeze followed after the government shut down its powerful military establishment’s role in imparting diktats to the civilian government.

So it was with Geo TV and Jang Group of newspapers, the largest media company that managed to give space to voices of dissent and opposition, thus displeasing the government and military establishment.

In retaliation, the government held back payment of about 5.6 billion rupees (USD 33 million) which it owed to the newspapers and TV channels. Non-payment of dues created a severe cash flow problem for media organisations which they could not bear. Pakistan’s largest newspaper, the Dawn, was forced to lay off hundreds of journalists. The number of the fired journalists and media employees through lay-offs and pay cuts continued this year as many media houses and newspapers fired journalists, senior editors and media staff were struggling to get justice from the courts of law but in vain. PFUJ staged several protests in solidarity with the employees, many of whom were in a very bad financial condition.

The comparatively new company Bol TV, laid off more than 8000 employees. Bol TV management went to the extent of filing cases against the protesting employees under the Anti-Terrorism Act of Pakistan. All of them were denied their dues but the management had to pay the dues to about half of the employees on the intervention of the court.

Express Media Group, ARY Group and several other organisations also followed the course and terminated the services of many dozens of employees.

Unmarried, an Urdu daily has been failing to pay salaries to its employees for around a year. The beleaguered staff of the deadliest media organisations too often choose not to pursue action in court for fear of losing their jobs altogether. They also refrain from joining protest calls from unions for the same reason.

To add to the mounting wage problems, most working journalists have been denied their rights of forming their union to elect combined bargaining agent (CBA). Among hundreds of newspapers and media houses only two CBAs exist in Jang Group and Dawn Newspapers. Absence and weakening of existing unions has created an environment that has left journalists in the hands of powerful media owners, who largely dictate their terms of employment.

PFUJ and its affiliate regional unions in the big cities try to fill in the gap of CBAs. The union fought for more than a decade for the revision of wages under the constitutional Wage Award Commission. After a laborious and protracted struggle, the notification regarding new wages under the Wage Award Commission was issued in February 2020.

In light of the deteriorating working conditions of media workers in the country, “Mission Pakistan 2020”, IFJ deputy secretary general Jeremy Dear made a visit to Lahore and Karachi in February to gain first-hand knowledge of the issues of working journalists and media workers.

Unpaid salaries, unlawful downsizing, security and impunity were the focus of the IFJ’s five-day mission. In meetings with provincial government ministers, regional governors, editors, officials of the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) officials and senior journalists and journalists’ union representatives from more than 20 cities, the IFJ reiterated PFUJ’s demands for urgent action to resolve the pay crisis and to stop thousands of ‘unlawful’ jobs cut in media houses.

A resolution adopted during the IFJ mission emphasised the right to freedom of expression; ending impunity for killings and attacks of journalists; and the all-important issue of job security; and decent wages for working journalists. The possibility of taking up the issue of international agencies such as the UN and ILO was also discussed. Overall, the Mission served to strengthen international solidarity with working journalists and media workers of Pakistan.
The formation of a Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals (CPJMP) has also been suggested, comprising a judge of the Supreme Court as chairman; four members nominated by the PFUJ, a representative of the National Press Club Islamabad and an ex officio representative from the Human Rights Ministry.

Too often Pakistan’s media houses did not give concern to imparting hostile environment training to journalists working in difficult areas. They continued to deploy journalists covering the most sensitive stories of Covid-19 in early 2020, with at least three journalists reported as being infected with the coronavirus in March and one death by April.

A random telephone survey revealed that media organisations had left staff with minimal protective measures, which rendered journalists vulnerable to the pandemic. In the office of the Centuries Publication, owner of Express TV and newspaper, arrangements were made for screening entrants for any fever, while sanitising liquids and surgical masks were placed in the premises. The masks were not meant to rely on official version alone, without sufficient scope for verification in an opaque system of governance. For instance, there are thousands of members of the missionary group Tabligh Jamaat, who had gathered in mid-March at Rahwind, the main congregation facility and headquarters of the Jamaat in Punjab province. They then dispersed all over the country. The numbers of those involved is said to be around 25,000, but in the initial days of the pandemic, there was no clear picture or official information about the whereabouts of all those who attended the gathering in Rahwind.

The prevailing hostile circumstances pose a very serious question to the future of the free media in the country. The media in Pakistan has remained vibrant since independence in 1947 from the British Raj. The media has bravely faced three military dictatorships and imposition of emergencies by civilised governments. Nevertheless, the present years have been considered the most hostile for the free media in the country.

The global coronavirus pandemic has brought fresh challenges to the media in Pakistan. There is built-in censorship amid the mandatory social distancing norms and physical lockdown during which journalists have restricted mobility and must be working from their homes. Reporters are forced to rely on official version alone, without sufficient scope for verification in an opaque system of governance. For instance, there are thousands of members of the missionary group Tabligh Jamaat, who had gathered in mid-March in Rahwind, the main congregation facility and headquarters of the Jamaat in Punjab province. They then dispersed all over the country. The numbers of those involved is said to be around 25,000, but in the initial days of the pandemic, there was no clear picture or official information about the whereabouts of all those who attended the gathering in Rahwind.

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**SRI LANKA DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT**

The year 2019 was marred by the Easter Sunday Attacks. On April 21, the jihadist group National Thowheeth Jama'ath set off suicide bombs in three churches as well as hotels in Sri Lanka killing over 240 Christian worshippers. Following these bombings, large-scale retaliatory violence was unleashed against the Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. Organised violent mobs destroyed businesses, vehicles and homes, and took one life. The bombings and the mob violence that followed had lasting implications on human rights. Calls for strengthening national security returned. The new and amplified wave of nationalism established Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy and Islamophobia as decisive political factors.

National security and political stability were the key pledges made by retired Lieutenant Colonel Gotabaya Rajapaksa who contested the presidential election in November 2019. Having secured 52 per cent of the votes, President Rajapaksa was elected as the sixth executive president of the country. His campaign appealed largely to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority, and he secured over 60 per cent of the Sinhalese vote. Only 20 per cent of the Tamil and Muslim electorate voted for President Rajapaksa, pointing to the continued division based on identity and the unresolved conflict along ethnic lines.

During his election campaign, President Rajapaksa spoke of national security, a disciplined society and economic development. Strengthening democracy, human rights and reconciliation did not feature in his electoral mandate. Justice for the serious human rights violations committed during the last phase of the war was displaced from the political agenda. It became uncertain whether even the slow progress achieved in the transitional justice process would continue. In February 2020, Sri Lanka Government (GoSL) withdrew its co-sponsorship from Resolutions 30/1, 34/1, & 40/1 on Human Rights, Reconciliation, and Accountability in Sri Lanka at the 43rd session of the UNHRC.

Democratic spaces in Sri Lanka began to shrink in Sri Lanka after November 2019. Investigations into serious human rights violations— including the killings, abductions, and assaults of journalists - came to a halt. In some cases, officers who had been investigating the crimes were demoted or transferred.

Barring a few exceptions, Sinhala media is dominated by Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist ideology and is openly and aggressively pro-government. With the rise of militarisation of civilian life, the military and Sinhala Buddhist groups have come to wield enormous power in Sri Lanka. Journalists, local media organisations and human rights organisations anticipate drastic changes following the general election of 2020. The president has called for a two-thirds support in the parliament in order to abolish the 19th Amendment to the Constitution which placed checks and balances on the powers of the executive president and established independent commissions integral for democratic governance. A paper published by the Centre for Policy Alternatives in March 2020 summed up the situation. The prospects for democracy and reconciliation in the immediate future are bleak but the multiple challenges may also galvanise democratic forces to come together to counter and challenge. Post-independence Sri Lanka has witnessed the resilience of civil society, judiciary, media and others, sometimes under extremely trying circumstances.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

A key concern in Sri Lanka is ownership of media, which has always been controlled by the government and by private owners who are politically connected. Political control over state media continues and it operates as a tool to propagate state ideology. At the same time, privately-owned media remains biased on political lines.

As part of a long-standing demand, the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU) recommended the conversion of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon (Lakehouse) into a public service journalism institution. This could proceed on the basis of the recommendations of the Sidath Sri Nandalochana Committee appointed by the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga government of 1994 or a new committee as per the provisions of the ANCL (Special Provisions) Law No of 1973 which has been bypassed for nearly five decades by successive governments. An allied recommendation was the appointment of a Public Service Broadcasting and Television Independent Commission to take actions necessary to ensure that the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and the Independent Television Network promote genuine public service journalism.

Polarisation of the media in Sri Lanka along ethnic and language lines continued. In addition, biased election reporting by media became a highly contentious issue during the presidential election. The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) observed that while the presidential election was largely peaceful and orderly, media was partisan: “...media in Sri Lanka now has a more conductive atmosphere in relation to press freedom compared with ten years ago. But at the same time, the perception of ANFREL observers is that the media has been blatantly biased in many instances, more particularly with private media.”

During the period covered by this report there were no instances of official media censorship in the country. Media personnel, including foreign journalists officially had access to all parts of the country. However, reports reveal that self-censorship is being practiced by media organisations in Sri Lanka. State media as well as privately owned media go to great lengths to...
ensure that their journalists conform to the interests of the owners, including their commercial interests.

In a case that reveals the politicisation of the industry and the resultant pressures on journalists in the country, senior Tamil language journalist KM Rasool working with Capital FM was suspended on October 16, 2019 for ‘alleged insubordination’. He was suspended at a time when the new management, which took over the station at the beginning of the year, launched an operation to cull out so-called ‘unwanted content’.

Social media in the country is dominated by Facebook. According to a report published by the Centre for Social Research, Facebook held 76 per cent of the total social media landscape (compared to Twitter’s 9 per cent, YouTube’s 6 per cent, and Instagram’s 4 per cent).

Facebook has been repeatedly accused of inaction over incitement of communal tensions in Sri Lanka, but there have been no significant concrete steps taken to address this concern. Following the Easter Sunday attacks, social media platforms, including Facebook, were blocked for a week in an attempt to curb the spread of fake news and communal tensions.

Notwithstanding the opportunity it provides for informed discussions and challenging the dominant narrative, social media in Sri Lanka, particularly in local languages, has become a platform for hate speech and misinformation.

**SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OUTLETS**

No killings or disappearances of journalists were reported from Sri Lanka in the period under review. However, there were numerous incidents of interrogation, intimidation, and arrest of journalists, harassment, and threats, reported from on reporting on at least two occasions.

In July 2019, a Muslim journalist was denied entry to a temple in Kandy. Journalist MN Aminullah, working for the state-owned media house Lake House attended the temple meeting to provide media coverage based on an invitation from the Sri Lanka Air Force. A foreign journalist who was denied access to the temple was assaulted.

In September, the Human Rights Commission of the Sri Lanka (HRCSL), in a letter addressed to the acting inspector general of the police, observed that the ICCPR Act had not been enforced in a ‘consistent and an even-handed manner’. The letter was accompanied by a legal analysis of Section 3 of the Act in light of relevant international jurisprudence and the recommendations of the HRCSL.

**MISUSE OF THE ICCPR ACT**

Misuse of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to curb free speech emerged as a key challenge to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Section 3 of the ICCPR Act, 2007 prohibits incitement of discrimination, hostility or violence through advocating national, racial or religious hatred.

In June, the Organised Crime Division attempted to take action against journalist Kusal Perera under the ICCPR Act over an article in the Daily Mirror titled ‘From Islamic terrorism to marauding Sinhala Buddhist violence’. However, the immediate impact of the act was that Perera, who had been accused of publishing inflammatory material, was subjected to online hate speech against minorities. Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, in his End of Mission Statement in July raised concern that Section 3 of the ICCPR Act is being used “to target minority communities, while highly publicised instances of hate speech within the majority community have remained largely unprosecuted”.

**INTERROGATION, INTIMIDATION AND ARRESTS**

The months before the presidential election witnessed several arrests. A journalist from the Thihinakar newspaper was arrested on May 9 for being in possession of newspaper cuttings featuring the leader of National Thowheeth Jama’ah (NTJ) who was responsible for the Easter Sunday attacks. A few days later, on
CHANGES IN THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT
Immediately following the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019, the Sri Lankan government blocked access to social media to prevent incitement of communal violence. The government warned that laws under emergency regulations would be strictly enforced against persons and groups using any media to spread rumour, false propaganda or misinformation.

In late May, the cabinet approved amendments to the penal code and criminal procedure code, criminalising the dissemination of ‘false news’ if it was deemed to affect ‘communal harmony’ or ‘state security’. The amendment used broad and vague terminology and carried a fine of LKR 1,000,000 (USD 5,000) and/or a five-year prison sentence for offenders. In the backdrop of the police misusing the ICCPR and land rights, as well as to minimise the setting up and operations of non-governmental organisations in Sri Lanka including IFJ affiliates came towards media reform.

Hindrances to the right of media workers to organize and form unions continue in private media organisations. Provincial journalists who play a primary role in print and electronic media are still not entitled to labour rights.

TOWARDS MEDIA REFORM
The year witnessed several joint initiatives. Journalists’ organisations in Sri Lanka including IFJ affiliates came together to commemorate ‘Black January’ on January 28. They called on the new president to end impunity and secure justice for outstanding unsolved cases of assault, murder, and disappearance of journalists and media workers.
Fulfilling a long overdue demand by organisations working on press freedom, the government decided to open the Committee on Public Enterprises (CoPE) to media on August 9. Appreciating this historical step, the FMM recalled that from the inception it had been advocating for transparency. In order to strengthen freedom of expression in Sri Lanka and promote media reform, the FMM set up a website containing primary documents related to media reform in Sri Lanka from 1948.

In a significant move towards strengthening journalists’ rights as well as ethical and professional journalism, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), the Free Media Movement (FMM), the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA), Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF) and Young Journalists Association (YJA) together drew up and adopted a ‘Rights and Responsibilities Charter’. Adopted on September 8, the charter lays down ten rights including labour rights, the right to association and organisation and the right to know. The ten responsibilities include adherence to journalistic tenets of fairness, accuracy, balance in accordance with ethical codes laid out by the IFJ and the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission.


On March 21, in a joint statement, six media organisations engaged in a long struggle for justice for her husband. She has engaged family members of victimised journalists. Just two weeks before of the presidential election on November 7, Cabinet of Ministers approved a proposal to compensate 78 journalists subjected to harassment and persecution during 2005-2015, with amounts ranging from Rs 200,000 to Rs 1.2 million (US$1,000 - $1,257,700). There was no time to implement this cabinet decision.

Ahimsa Wickrematunge, daughter of slain journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge, filed a lawsuit in the US against the former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa in April 2019. The lawsuit was filed seeking damages from Rajapaksa for instigating and authorising the extrajudicial killing of Lasantha Wickrematunge, former editor of the Sunday Leader, killed in January 2009 while he was on his way to office.

Although her case was dismissed by a district judge, a Federal Appeals Court in San Francisco later allowed her appeal against the decision of the district judge. In a brief order, the three-judge panel granted the daughter’s request to dismiss her case as moot, because Gotabaya Rajapaksa is now president, but dismissed the case ‘without prejudice’, meaning the case can be brought back later.

Carrying on her campaign for justice for her father, Ahimsa Wickrematunge filed a complaint on May 21 against Senior Superintendent of Police, W Thilakaratne, for attempting to aid Udayanga Weeratunga to escape arrest at the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption (CIABOC).

["This plea is consistent with my previous pleading in a civil matter in another jurisdiction that I firmly believe that my father’s murderer stems from his efforts to investigate the crimes [with] which Mr Weeratunga is charged. The CID has revealed, since 2015, that at least three additional people were killed in an attempt to ‘cover up’ my father’s murder, she stated.

Just as Ahimsa Wickrematunge has become a crucial force in the struggle to obtain justice for her father, Sondya Eknaligoda, the wife of disappeared journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda has been engaged in a long struggle for justice for her husband. She has built a worldwide campaign for justice and accountability.

On November 7, the Attorney General filed indictments in the High Court against seven army intelligence officers in connection with the abduction of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda. By this time, the AG had already filed indictments in the Homagama High Court against seven army intelligence officers attached to the Gintala Army camp. The charges were filed under section 102, 113(A), 356 of the Penal Code in respect of conspiracy and abduction of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda on or around August 27, 2009.

A major breakthrough was made in the probe into the assault on former editor Upali Tennakoon in early July 2019. Fingerprints found on Tennakoon’s vehicle on the day of the assault were linked to an army officer accused of being involved in the attack. Upali Tennakoon was assaulted on January 25, 2009, in an apparent attempt to kill him by assailants on motor bikes. Both Tennakoon and his wife were injured during the attack.

CRUCIAL CROSSROAD

Sri Lanka itself, as well as the democratic rights of the people, are at a critical crossroad. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. Media and journalists are faced with new challenges of reporting the epidemic in a balanced way, communicating facts and health advisories without giving in to fear mongering and discrimination.

As expected, the government has responded to the pandemic with increased authoritarianism, and the country has been under an unofficial health emergency since mid-March 2020. The declaration of a State of Emergency needs to be endorsed by the parliament within a month, but parliament is being dissolved and elections postponed. Hence the government has declared a “Police Cutout” to maintain peace, law and order under the Police Ordinance.

Sinhala nationalist media including a majority of social media users launched anti-minority rhetoric by blaming a particular community for the epidemic. In this context the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services issued guidelines for reporting Covid-19, requesting the media not to mention race or religion of infected persons or of those who die of it, not to publish photographs or show videos of infected persons without their permission and not to report in a manner that causes hatred among people.

On April 1, the media division of the Sri Lanka’s Police, upon the instructions of the Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP), issued a notice addressed to all media organisations that strict legal action will be taken against those who ‘criticise’, point out ‘minor shortcomings/failures’ or ‘scoff/chastise’ state officials performing their duties.

In a statement, seven journalists’ organisations expressed their concern about the IGP’s directive and said that it should not be enforced online. Civil society too reacted sharply and said that the move “adversely impacts on the freedom of expression, in particular the expression of dissent. This constitutionally guaranteed freedom is key to holding the state to account for its actions, and questioning the action or inaction of state officials is the civic duty of every citizen, and is fundamental to ensuring a healthy and functioning democracy. Moreover, there is no provision in law that authorizes the arrest of those ‘criticising’ the state. Hence, we are deeply perturbed by your instructions to the DIG of CID and all island OICs to ‘strictly use the law’ against such persons, to arrest them, produce them in court, and to take further legal action, as it could constitute extra-legal action that results in arbitrary arrest and detention.”

The signatories called upon the Acting IGP to “revoke the said directive and call upon the DIG of CID to ‘strictly use the law’ against such persons, to arrest them, produce them in court, and to take further legal action, as it could constitute extra-legal action that results in arbitrary arrest and detention.”

Ahimsa Wickrematunge, daughter of slain journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge, attacked on November 14 by a group of unidentified armed men who stormed into her house in Habarawathuwa in the wee hours of the morning. Wickrematunge was slashed with a sharp weapon, threatened and beaten. Before the incident, Wickrematunge had released a book on corruption which allegedly criticized Gotabaya Rajapaksa, one of the front-runners of the presidential race.

A municipal worker sprays disinfectant solution on AFP photographer Lakruwan Wanniarachchi, in Colombo on March 31, in efforts to prevent the spread of Covid-19. CRDP AFP

From far left: Freelance journalist Lasantha Wijeratne was attacked on November 14 by a group of unidentified armed men who stormed into his house in Habarawathuwa in the wee hours of the morning. Wijeratne was slashed with a sharp weapon, threatened and beaten. Before the incident, Wijeratne had released a book on corruption which allegedly criticized Gotabaya Rajapaksa, one of the front-runners of the presidential race.

A municipal worker sprays disinfectant solution on AFP photographer Lakruwan Wanniarachchi, in Colombo on March 31, in efforts to prevent the spread of Covid-19. CRDP AFP
MEDIA RIGHTS MONITORING: BACKBONE OF PRESS FREEDOM ADVOCACY IN SOUTH ASIA

The release of Nepali journalist Jitendra Maharjan from detention on April 9, 2019 was a happy outcome based on years of campaigning for journalists’ rights, built on a solid foundation of media rights monitoring in Nepal. The editor of the weekly Mithra Pratishtha, published from Kirtipur, Kathmandu had been arrested on April 9, 2019, on allegations of involvement in organised crime and proximity to a banned political outfit. Released after a Nepalese Court ordered on April 21, his freedom was short-lived as he was re-arrested the same day on similar charges. It was not the first time that Maharjan had been targeted, having gone through a similar experience in 2017. Through his ordeal, Maharjan was supported by the Federation of Nepal Journalists (FNM), which had a habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court on his behalf. The Federation, which represents journalists across Nepal, played an instrumental role in supporting him after being informed of his arrest by Maharjan’s friends and colleagues. After conducting an independent inquiry, the FNM released a statement on Maharjan’s plight, lobbied for his release and also approached the courts. “We realised that filing a case in the Supreme Court was the only option,” says Jamnadav Jaishi, the FNM’s central committee member assigned to take the case forward. The success in Maharjan’s case represents the potential of media rights monitoring and advocacy in Nepal, in particular, and South Asia in general. With 52 journalists jailed and detained in the past year in South Asia and human rights threatened, a robust monitoring system to defend and protect journalists from being targeted for their work, harassed or intimidated is crucial. Recognising this vital need, the IFJ launched training on media rights monitoring since the mid-2000s. In the years since, journalists and their unions in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India have undergone training to enhance knowledge of their rights and to better equip them in the fight to defend themselves, both individually and collectively. The IFJ, working through its affiliates in South Asia, developed modules for media rights training, conducted training and helped establish locally-ledled media rights monitoring and response systems for recording violations and encouraged the creation of in-country databases. The FNM, with donor support, has been able to develop one of the strongest media rights monitoring systems in the region with website tracking and data collection as well as decentralised district chapters tasked with rapid response and journalist protection. A decade and a half after the launch of its media rights monitoring programs, IFJ research (supported by UNESCO) in 2019-20 has begun to review how media rights can be defended and protected in a changed media environment in Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and Maldives, highlighting common threads and issues as well as unique features in each country. THE LEGAL FOUNDATION

Most South Asian countries except Bhutan have guaranteed media freedom by being party to International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the ICCPR recognises the right to freedom of expression. In addition, all eight countries’ reading Bhutan have expressly guaranteed freedom of speech and expression in their constitutions and in some cases, specific laws. The UNESCO has also introduced the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists which has focused efforts in countries including Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These international and intergovernmental frameworks provide a basis for strong media rights monitoring mechanisms and advocacy to protect and promote the rights of journalists and media workers. The first stage of country research conducted in early 2020 suggests that there is still direct involvement of politicians and the local administration in violation of media rights in all four target countries of the IFJ’s research. Journalists are also targeted based on their religious, ethnic or gender identity.

Recent, during coverage of the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India, journalists were frequently attacked based on their religious identity. In Sri Lanka, journalists from Tamil communities continue to face more violence than other journalists, while provincial journalists are some of the more vulnerable to violations by the police, military and political players with direct or indirect connections with the government. They are also more likely to be killed as a result of their work. Another dangerous trend in South Asia is the use of criminal gangs to intimidate journalists and media houses, for example in the Maldives. “Even with strong local advocacy, the Maldives has failed to bring a single perpetrator to justice,” observes IIF Maldives researcher Isham Niyaz.

CURRENT STATUS OF MEDIA RIGHTS MONITORING

(A) NON-GOVERNMENTAL MEDIA MONITORS

Media rights monitoring in South Asia is largely carried out by journalists’ trade unions, media associations, NGOs and other independent bodies. Even in countries where government bodies are mandated to conduct media rights monitoring, they have not always done so. For instance, although the Maldives Media Council is mandated by law to monitor any restrictions/limitations placed on freedom of expression, the IFJ field research revealed it has yet to deliver on this. Journalists’ trade unions and organisations have largely been able to take a leading role in media monitoring in Sri Lanka, Nepal and India – due to the strong direct connections to working journalists as members of organisations. The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), the Free Media Movement (FMM), and the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions in Sri Lanka (FME) have organisations that have monitored the situation for media closely in Sri Lanka over a sustained period, including during the country’s long-running conflict. Other organisations conducting monitoring and advocacy include the Young Journalists Association (YJA), Journalists for Democracy (JFD), the Tawil Media Alliance, the Muslim Media Forum and South Asian Women in Media although their focus is more sector specific. This apart, Internet Media Action Nepal, the Jaffna Press Club, Vanavaya Press Club, Batticaloa Press Club, and Journalists of Mathara monitor media rights violations. In Nepal, the Federation of Nepal Journalists, Nepal Press Union and Freedom Forum are the key monitors for media and rights violations. Additionally, the Working Women Journalists (WWJ), the Federation of Nepal Indigenous Nationalities Journalists (FNIJ), the Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), Media Action Nepal, the Sanchatuka Samuh, and Jagaran Media Center (JMC) also monitor. Sanchatuka Samuh has been one of the strongest organisations running media rights in the region for many years. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and Nepal Bar Association (NBA) also regularly raise concerns.

In India, the Indian Journalists Union, the National Union of Journalists and other media trade unions conduct media rights monitoring. In addition, the Forum for Media Professionals, Editors Guild, Free Speech Collective, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative also monitor violations. Press clubs located in different parts of the country issue releases. The Press Council of India, empowered to take suo moto notice of violations of journalists’ rights, has seldom stepped up on the side of the powerless. An important regional platform is the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN), established jointly by IFJ member unions in South Asia over nearly two decades ago and a driver on the creation of media rights monitoring training programs together with IFJ. Since 2014, the IFJ and SAMSN have jointly run the SAMSN Digital Hub for campaigns, statements and media alerts by members of the network in different languages, functioning as a effective clearing house on media rights for the region. Among its key features, is a media rights violation map which documents violations across the region by year, type and date. In addition, other international media rights monitoring platforms in addition to the IFJ that monitor the region include Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF).

(B) DECISION-MAKING RESPONSES TO MEDIA RIGHTS MONITORING

Decision-making practice on the media rights monitoring differs per organisation, but most practice a decentralised approach and engage in collective decision-making. For example, the IFJ after receiving information from its district chapters, verifies information and tables the issue at the central committee meeting where decisions are taken about issuing releases and pursuing advocacy initiatives. It is important to note that the FNJ’s district chapters are heavily involved in this collective process and have also been trained to work collaboratively. Case resolutions through trainings held over almost two decades. De-centralised data collection has been possible due to strong district chapters and their emphasis on both media rights monitoring.

Although the information collection process is the same in the Nepal Press Union which also has a strong presence at the district level, lev exemptions regarding the release of statements and further action are made by the president and general secretary. Similarly, FNM and SLWJA prepare drafts which are passed through the executive committee before release. FMETU also issues statements after consent of office bearers. This is the case in IFJ and NUJ as well.

(C) INADEQUATE FOLLOW-UP

Respondents from some monitoring bodies in all four countries have opined that that they regularly encounter problems with follow-up. This is largely due to heavy workloads and inadequate resources. Some monitors opined that victims of media rights violation sometimes do not wish to take their cases forward due to potential negative consequences such as dismissal from the job, negative portrait among co-workers. “These cases include issues such as misconduct by media owners and seniors, sexual abuse and harassment. Even if they are reported, I have never seen a case where they had to take the case forward,” observe Nepal researchers Tika Ram Pradhan and Yam Birahi of the Nepali context.

The degree and length of follow up also depend on the seriousness of the violation. In cases of serious rights violations such as murder, grievous attacks, legal and political control, most of the MBM organisations do follow up.
MRM training and material from the LGBTQI community and incorporate such vision into mechanisms as well as in press releases and advocacy efforts. Women also are generally not engaged in media rights monitoring, decision-making, in follow-up and advocacy events. Women for monitoring and are often excluded while collecting data, strategies and policies, too often these remain a low priority role in addressing these issues. While the IFJ has gender equity environment is still a big question. I have found many female journalists sexually and emotionally abused.

Local media monitoring organisations can play a much greater role in addressing these issues. While the IFJ has gender equity strategies and policies, too often these remain a low priority for monitoring and while collecting data, decision-making, in follow-up and advocacy events. Women also are generally not engaged in media rights monitoring, which contributes to the perception in the recording and documenting of violations and tailored response mechanisms as well as in press releases and advocacy efforts. Currently, the focus on gender and gender-based monitoring remains confined to women and women journalist networks. There is also a need to specifically address issues of journalists from the LGBTQI community and incorporate such vision into MRM training and material.

(3) RESPONSE AND IMPACT OF STATEMENTS

Issuance of statements or media releases can turn the spotlight on violations of media rights, which can draw the attention of civil society and government agencies. However, the degree of the attention by media, civil society and the government sadly depends largely upon the nature and influence of the organisation that is releasing the statement. For example, press releases issued by the FNJ and NPU are taken seriously by media officials bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal and the Nepalese Police often commence investigations based on these press statements. This is due to the membership density and, therefore, power of FNJ and its journalist members in Nepal. Similarly, according to Vitanjana Herath, IFJ’s Sri Lanka field researcher, former press releases by FMM and FEMU on an attack against Thustina Kumaru de Silva in late 2019, a provincial journalist from Kahutara, a process was promptly set in motion which led to the perpetrators being arrested soon after.

The issuance of a press release alone can provide great relief to a journalist and an immediate sense of solidarity and support. For example, Mohammed Rizvi, a Sri Lankan television journalist arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, felt that the statement issued in his support helped him recover his damaged reputation. He was released without charge.

However, this is not the case across the board. For example, IFJ’s India researcher Bedabrata Lahkar observes that governments in India do not consider themselves under any obligation or pressure to respond unless the case is ‘high profile’. According to him, violations of media rights get lower attention in the Northeast region of India.

BEYOND PRESS STATEMENTS

Issuing a press statement is the first stage of advocacy. Next, unions and associations can launch protest programs and campaigns, which can include filing cases in the court. Collaborating with other organisations and networks often strengthens advocacy efforts. For example, the IFJ issued a number of protest statements and meetings with the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) and campaigned for the release of Khishorechandra Wangkhemcha, a TV journalist with IFTV, Manipur. He was arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) on November 27, 2018 for a video he uploaded on social media and was subsequently jailed for 133 days.

Another example of advocacy-based media rights monitoring was the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) negotiating a Covid-19 relief package in Pakistan, which includes a monthly pension, compensation to the family in case of a Covid-19-related death and personal protective equipment (PPE) for journalists. "Our regular monitoring found that journalists reporting on Covid-19 were working in risky situations, so we lobbied with the government for PPE and a relief package for journalists," says Rihmat-ul-Haq, PFUJ Information Secretary.

JOINT ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

A good practice noted is where there are joint advocacy initiatives of MRM organisations within conventional and more broadly in South Asia. For example, Sri Lankan organisations jointly conduct a campaign against impunity in January each year calling on the Sri Lankan government to end impunity and secure justice for outstanding unsolved cases of media personnel who died, were disappeared or injured between 2005-2015 during the tenure of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

In Nepal, the FBI, NPU and National Union of Journalists-Nepal came together in early 2020 to jointly advocate against the controversial media council bill and information technology bill and also pending salaries for journalists. In a show of solidarity, media members initiated a joint campaign launched a social media campaign to highlight Kashmiri’s ongoing internet controls under a government-imposed communications shutdown, on August 5, 2019, and continues to impact 4G mobile internet amid Kashmir’s ongoing internet controls under a government-imposed communications shutdown. Another example of advocacy-based media rights monitoring was the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) negotiating a Covid-19 relief package in Pakistan, which includes a monthly pension, compensation to the family in case of a Covid-19-related death and personal protective equipment (PPE) for journalists. “Our regular monitoring found that journalists reporting on Covid-19 were working in risky situations, so we lobbied with the government for PPE and a relief package for journalists,” says Rihmat-ul-Haq, PFUJ Information Secretary.

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CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Digitalisation has led to the emergence of new forms of violations and therefore new challenges for MRM as well. News generation by citizens, bloggers and vloggers have also broadened the field dramatically. MRM organisations are finding it hard to keep up with the pace of media rights violations and respond to violations such as trolling, hacking, doxing, identity theft etc.

WAY FORWARD

How can under-resourced member organisations strengthen the backbone of campaign and advocacy work? This can be done by building capacities, enhancing skills, sourcing sustainable funding and energising networks in the following ways:

• Manage sustainable funding sources
• Establish a separate MRM desk with trained monitors
• Develop cost-effective training techniques
• Maintain efficient databases with easily retrievable location and violation-based data
• Develop and periodically review and evaluate MRM guidelines and formats
• Strengthen the sensitivity and meaningful participation of women in MRM monitoring and advocacy efforts
• Strengthen skills of media monitors through regular training
• Engage digital media, experts and technologies to maximise new technologies and social media for advocacy
• Share national experience and good practices

Research by:
Inda: Ras Bihari and Bedabrata Lahkar in India
Maldive: Ilham Niyaz
Malal: Taka Pridhan and Yam Birahi
Sri Lanka: Vitanjana Herath.
IFJ research co-ordinator: Umesh Pokhare

The IFJ will continue its IPDC media rights monitoring project in 2020 in India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. National research reports will now go into developing revised training modules with assessment and inputs by experts in the region.
JOURNALISTS DETAINED IN SOUTH ASIA

(MAY 1, 2019 – APRIL 30, 2020)

T he IFJ documented cases of 50 journalists detained or jailed in South Asia from May 2019 to April 2020. In Afghanistan, ten journalists were arrested or detained for short periods for crimes such as criticism of government or alleged links to the Taliban but most were released within hours after the intervention of media advocacy groups, unions and the joint committee on government and media. In the period, 29 journalists were detained for 24 hours or less, highlighting issues of threat and intimidation to silence journalists reporting in the region.

India again was the region’s leader in detention and incarceration of journalists for longer periods, with ten journalists detained or jailed in the year, compared to about four in the previous year, including the ongoing incarceration of Asif Sultan from 2018. Concerningly, a large number of journalists continued to be charged for sharing content on social media platforms, with an overwhelming majority of cases relating to politicians or political media coverage.

Four journalists currently remain behind bars in the region; two in Bangladesh, one in India and one in Pakistan. The case of Pakistan’s Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman remained in news headlines in March and April 2020. The editor-in-chief of the Jang and Geo Media Group was arrested on March 12 on a case dating back 14 years.

Bangladesh still sits on a critical watch list for the IFJ with six journalists detained or in continuing incarceration in the period.

Detainment and arrests increased drastically in Nepal, from four in the year prior to 24 in the current period. This was largely a result of police propensity to swap up and detain journalists at pretexts.

Of the 50 detained, at least 10 journalists were released on bail.

Nasrullah Chaudhry, who was arrested in Karachi on allegations of carrying journalist Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman and the Pakistan Taliban on December 11, 2019, was acquitted by the Sindh High Court on April 9, 2020.

JOURNALISTS DETAINED IN SOUTH ASIA

(MAY 1, 2019 – APRIL 30, 2020)

Asif Sultan

Gender: Male

Detained: August 23, 2019

Job: Freelance journalist

Location: Andarban, India

Accusation: Freelance journalist, Asif Sultan was arrested and taken to Aberdeen police station for his tweet asking why a family has been put under quarantine for a phone call with Covid-19 quarantine patients. Police charged Sultan under the Disaster Management Act for obstruction, disobedience and the publishing of false statements that may cause alarm to the public.

Status: Released on bail on April 28, 2020.

India

Nasrullah Chaudhry

Gender: Male

Detained: April 9, 2019

Job: Editor, Minhaj-Jiphool

Location: Kathmandu, Nepal

Accusation: Police arrested Thapa Thapaliya, an editor for alleged violation in the outlawed Chand-led Communist Party of Nepal. The party was declared a criminal outfit by the government in March 2020.

Status: Released on bail on April 30, 2019.

Pakistan

Akhil Alvi

Gender: Male

Detained: March 4, 2020

Job: News writer

Location: Karachi, Pakistan

Accusation: Alvi was arrested following an investigation by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) into allegations that a property he purchased 34 years prior had been illegally bought. Jang & Geo Media Group is one of the largest media groups in Pakistan and is famous for its critical investigations of Pakistani politicians.

Status: In solitary confinement in a jail facility. Yet to be formally charged.

JOURNALISTS DETAINED FOR MORE THAN ONE WEEK

Bangladesh

Mohammad Abdul Kaum, District:

Detained: May 12, 2019

Job: Editor, Myazamilive

Location: Myaminigon District, Bangladesh

Accusation: Kaum, a journalist and IT professional, was arrested for illegally carrying US dollars and dealing in currency exchange. He was detained after he was held in police custody for one year in a prison and a fine of BDT 50,000 (USD 560).

Status: Currently in jail.

India

Male

Detained: August 23, 2019

Job: Editor, Janasangchar

Location: Pohkara, Nepal

Accusation: Chaudhry was arrested for sharing a video that was said to be taken by Pakistan television journalist Imran Ali, which was deemed to defame the Chinese government. The journalist had accessed the video when the prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, announced that Pakistan has cultured the state of war.

Status: Acquitted by the Sindh High Court on April 9, 2020.
**AFGHANISTAN**

1. THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF MEDIA PERSONNEL: 4

2. OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS — 19

3. NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS — 25

4. KILLINGS OF JOURNALISTS — 6

5. THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS — 5

6. ASSAULTS ON MEDIA PERSONNEL — 4

TOTAL: 66 VIOLATIONS RECORDED

** IFJ INDICATORS:

- A. ARRESTS/JAILING: 52
- B. ATTACKS/THREATS AGAINST FREELANCERS: 2
- C. ATTACKS/THREATS ON RURAL, REGIONAL OR MINORITY JOURNALISTS: 81
- D. DEPORTATION/CASE/CASE: 4
- E. DESAPARECIDOS: 4
- F. GENDER-BASED ATTACKS: 8
- G. LEGAL CASES: 8
- H. LEGISLATION/GOVERNMENT CONTROL: 8
- I. ONLINE ATTACKS INTERNET SHUTDOWNS: 9

News about the purpose of monitoring are recorded as an attack on the media. Journalists and management are considered as threats to journalists. The shutterdowns refer to these places where IFJ has issued statement.

A more detailed list of shutdowns is recorded on the IFJ Shutdown Listing.

Arrests and jailing are determined according to the IFJ Shutdown Listing. Arrests and jailing are falsely arrested or could be a guarantor of the Facebook page.

A freelance journalist is directly insulted by the police.

Reports in the province are insulted by members of the local government.

A police officer beats and insults five journalists in Kabul.

A group of journalists from Shamsheed TV, headed by Deelou Safi, are abducted by anti-government militants.

A group of journalists from Shamsheed TV, headed by Deelou Safi, are abducted by anti-government militants.

Female journalists lodge a complaint against lack of security and gender discrimination in a letter to the Afghanistan Federation of Journalists. An inquiry is initiated.

A freelance journalist is directly insulted by the police.

A police officer beats and insults five journalists in Kabul.

A group of journalists from Shamsheed TV, headed by Deelou Safi, are abducted by anti-government militants.

A group of journalists from Shamsheed TV, headed by Deelou Safi, are abducted by anti-government militants.
statement against the media portal Khabrainal.com, which was signed by the spokesperson Zahzullah Jugahed. After the Taliban’s statement, 80 percent of Khabrainal.com staff quit their jobs because of the ongoing punitive Taliban threats.

BANGLADESH

1. THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS – 6
2. OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS – 6
3. NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS – 7
4. KILLINGS OF JOURNALISTS – 1
5. THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS – 5
6. ATTACKS ON MEDIA INSTITUTIONS – TOTAL: 20 VIOLATIONS RECORDED
   A. INDICATORS:
   A. ARRESTS/JAILING: 5
   B. ATTACKS/THREATS AGAINST RURAL, REGIONAL OR MINORITY JOURNALISTS: 5
   C. DISAPPEARANCES: 2
   D. LEGISLATION: 1
   E. GOVERNMENT/GOVERNMENT CONTROLS: 2
   F. ONLINE ATTACKS/INTERNET SHUTDOWN: 3

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS

May 26, 2019: Jamalpur
A correspondent for SA Television is beaten by men wielding batons while collection information at the office of Amirganj Union Parishad chairman Nasiruddin Ahmed Chowdhury, the editor-in-chief of the Bangla Tribune, is arrested in the railway track in Jamalpur. It is reported that unknown persons beat the journalist to death and dumped his body. The motive for the killing is unknown.

THREATS AGAINST MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

May 19, 2019: Dhaka
On August 21, 2019, a 12-year-old female journalist, Shelu Akondo, a correspondent for Bangla Bazar Patrika and Polly Khorshid Politic is severely beaten and his legs broken by a leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of ruling party, is attacked with metal bars while he is on his regular evening walk near the Brahmaputra river.

February 10, 2020: Dhaka
At least nine cases of attacks on journalists and obstruction to reporting are documented during the Dhaka North and South city elections. Media workers across Dhaka from Agami News, Bangla Daily, The Star, Bangabandhu TV, Press Australia, Bangladesh Partnership, Bangladesh Chakri and Pannor.com, Jagantor Daily, Daily Nagoripost and Daily Inqilab are assaulted at polling booths. Some journalists are detained entry into polling stations. Dipon Dewan, of Bangladesh Television, is barred from entering polling booths at Uttara High School.

March 10, 2020: Dhaka
Shafiqul Islam Kajali, a photographer and editor of PakkaShafiqul, goes missing after being accused by the ruling Awami League of disseminating false information. A day before his disappearance, Kajali is accused of publishing false information under the Digital Security Act, along with his boss, Awami League chief whip Nazrul Chowdhury, the editor-in-chief of the Daily Maina Bangladesh.

March 15, 2020: Kurigram (A)
Aftab Islam, kurigram-based journalist at Bangla Tribune, is arrested for alleged possession of 450 ml of liquor and 150 g of charas and sentenced to 18 months in jail. He is released after spending one night in custody.

March 9, 2020: Dhaka
Shahzaman Shawl, editor of a local newspaper, is arrested by the mobile commissioner's office for “fake propaganda'. The journalist had “spread fake news and spread disinformation among the people”. He is later released on bail.

April 22, 2020: Bagera (A)
Shahjahan Ali Babu and Mazad Rahman, district correspondents for Dailitor and Sonjoy Newspapers are harassed and detained by a police officer.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

May 12, 2019: Mymensingh
Mohammad Abdul Kalam, the editor of news portal Momeningshikho is arrested and allegedly tortured in custody. He is released on bail on July 4.

August 3, 2019: Dhaka
Mujibur Rahman, a senior reporter of Mirona Daily, is beaten up after boarding a Mirpur-bound bus from Gulshan. The abductors were said to spray a liquid substance on his face and beat him severely. His family and earlier received threats for his news coverage.

December 18, 2019: Jamalpur
Shehu Akondo, a correspondent for Bangla Bazar Patrika and Polly Khorshid Politic, is severely beaten and his legs broken by a leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of ruling party, is attacked with metal bars while he is on his regular evening walk near the Brahmaputra river.

February 22, 2019: Jamalpur
The body of Ishan Ibn Reza Fagun, the sub-editor of the online news portal Priyo.com is found near the railway track in Jamalpur. It is reported that unknown persons beat the journalist to death and dumped his body. The motive for the killing is unknown.

KILLING OF JOURNALISTS

May 22, 2019: Janjaper
The body of Shahnur Bin Rashed Sagar is found near the railway track in Jamalpur. It is reported that unknown persons beat the journalist to death and dumped his body. The motive for the killing is unknown.

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS

May 2, 2019: Leh (D)
Two BPF leaders attempt to bribe journalists for favourable poll coverage and then threaten them with a détente for “fake propaganda”. The two journalists are not identified.

June 8, 2019: Uttar Pradesh (A) (B) (D)
Three journalists - freelance journalist Prashant Katiyar and Nitaan Lee journalists Arun Shukla and Ishita Singh - are arrested for sharing a video deemed as ‘blasphemous' of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

July 24, 2019: Jammu & Kashmir (A)
Ghulam Jeelani Qadri, editor of Daily Attoq, is arrested in late night raid over a 27-year-old terrorism case. He is later released on bail by the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Gowhar Majed, when police are unable to provide any clear details and specific justification for his arrest.

July 25, 2019: Jammu & Kashmir (A)
A journalist leader is arrested after broadcasting a news item about the dismissal of a parliamentarian who allegedly leaked crucial details about imminent troop movements in Jammu and Kashmir. He is charged under the Public Safety Act.

August 14, 2019: Jammu & Kashmir (A)
Iftikhar Malaie, of Greater Kashmir, is picked from his residence in Tral in south Kashmir at midnight. He is released after spending one night in custody.

September 6, 2019: Uttar Pradesh (A) (C)
Journalist Santosh Jaiswal working with Jansandesh Times is arrested after tweeting an official order regarding the deployment of paramilitary troops that allegedly leaked crucial details about imminent troop movements in Jammu and Kashmir. He is charged under the Public Safety Act.

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Police in Singhara charge photojournalist Masrat Zahra under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Zahra for social media posts allegedly promoting “anti-national posts with criminal intention to induce the youth and promote offences against tranquility”. She is summoned to the police station for questioning.

Police assault at least four journalists as India enters a second month of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Police in Uttar Pradesh file a First Information Report (FIR) against special correspondent for The Hindu Pradeep, accused of alleged insubordination when he asked police to allow him through a protest. He is summarily dismissed and。“The FIR are also reports of mob members checking the religious identities of journalists covering the protests.

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Journalist and activist Gnaniyar Geelani is booked under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) in connection with an article about a pro-Pakistan freedom leader in Kashmir. It is later taken by police van to the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Srinagar.

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Kills of Journalists

June 19, 2020: Madhya Pradesh (G)

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Kills of Journalists

June 19, 2020: Madhya Pradesh (G)

\[equation\]
to state and organised crime. He is alleged to have close relations with Neeru Bikram Chand- lee Communist Party of Nepal.

May 22, 2019: Sunsari (C) Mayor of Itahari in the Itahari Municipality, Dwarika Lal Chaudhary, verbally abuses journalists after being questioned on his involvement in the physical assault of a printer employee.

June 4, 2019: Sunsari (C) Mayor of Itahari in the Itahari Municipality, Dwarika Lal Chaudhary, threatens journalist Bijaya Mudra after being questioned on why the mayor posted derogatory statements about a journalist on his Facebook page.

June 12, 2019: Dhanusha (A) Police arrested nine journalists who were demanding the refund of funds by Dhanusha after it deducted 40 per cent to 100 per cent of the distribution of funds in public service advertisement. Journalists arrested were R N Biswas (Kantipur TV), Shyam Sundar Yadav (Nepal TV), Baidnyath Yadav (Avenues TV), Nabin Kumar Gupta (ABC TV), Bhussan Kumar Singh (Radio CPM), Bindu Yadav (Local Punya Radio Daily), Dharmaal Rai (Rajpuri Today), Gyaljung Gupta (Jwala weekly) and Parks Karna (Ganeet Madhoz daily). Later they were released after an hour of detention.

July 26, 2019: Tanahu Deputy mayor of the Sukhdi Gandaki Municipality in Tanahun verbally abuses journalists Samadur Paudel and Dambar Adhikari, editors of Khaphatipati Saptakri, for a new每天 published website in the construction of a playground.

August 10, 2019: Kathmandu (A) Police arrested and journalist Abhand Kumar Jha for his alleged involvement in the outlawed Chandi-led Nepal Communist Party.

August 23, 2019: Kaski (A) Journalist and political activist Om Hatham is arrested in the Kaski district. Journalist Hatham, the editor of janashakti.org, is arrested by security personnel for his alleged association with the Biplob-led Maoist group. Hatham is also known for his anti-corporate investigative reports in the Kaski district.

August 15, 2019: Chitwan (A) Police arrested two journalists, Rabil Lamichhane and Yuvak Kandel, in connection with the suspicious death of a man in the village of Lamjung Paudahi. The arrest came nine days after journalist Shikiram Paudahi died after posting a suicide video message blaming the journalists for driving him to take his own life.

September 16, 2019: Kathmandu Nine Nepali journalists have been arrested for protesting against the arbitrary sacksing of three journalists at Radio Nepal. The journalists arrested were including Ayaba Babu Shiwakoti, Ram Prasad Dahal, Jayavand Jaisi, Yam Birahi, Min Bam, Dilli Babai, Mahendra Singh Thakuri, Yuvak Kandel and Prakash Bam.

October 4, 2019: Kathmandu (F) Nepali journalist Sangeen Lamaigun is seriously injured in a physical assault by two unidentified assailants.

October 20, 2019: Achham (I) Kantipur Daily journalist Manika Dhungana is subjected to online harassment on social media sites after publishing a story on the tender process for the construction of two schools.

November 2, 2019: Kathmandu (F) Shikram Lama, news chief at Yatoh Television, is threatened after broadcasting a story on a scandal regarding a man who died at Blue Cross Hospital in Kathmandu. Lama is threatened on social media by the hospital’s administrative representatives, Raji Shrestha.

November 27, 2019: Chitwan Cadres of ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) abuse journalists, Raju Sapkota, Mahendra Shrestha and Krishna Sunuwar, and delete footage recorded while covering the by-election in Bhanuhat.

December 4, 2019: Saptari Police raid the house of journalist Abadish Kumar Jha from the Kantipur Daily in Tilati Koldi village, Saptari.

December 4, 2019: Siraha A customs officer officials in Jatath threats journalist Sambit Baral Shuvendra Das, confiscates their cameras and verbally abuses them after they filmed the officer taking bribes.

February 26, 2020: Kathmandu Journalist Ajaya Babu Shiwakoti is threatened for publishing several corruption cases involving cabinet members. Shiwakoti, the editor of harakumar.com, is threatened by unknown men following a story about Rs 775 million in commission sought by the sitting minister for communication and information technology Gokul Basnetkara, for the procurement of printing.

March 26, 2020: Rarahi Journalist Ragesh Raiwah, of Aesma Television, is verbally abused by Dalit Lal Chaudhary, the mayor of Itahari sub-metropolitan city, after inquiring about the city’s preparedness to handle the coronavirus pandemic.

May 7, 2020: Kathmandu (F) Journalist Sambit Baral Chandra Dahal is attacked by an unknown group in Bagbazar, Kathmandu. Dahal, who works online portal sancharkhabar.com, is attacked by a group of four individuals in the Dharahara area.

September 27, 2020: Banka Journalist Lijay Ahi is attacked by an unidentified group of people on his way home. The assailants assaulted physically the reporter and seized his mobile phone before fleeing.

July 3, 2020: Kathmandu Nepal Republic Media, Avadea Television, Rajdhani daily and Amaniprakash Group fail to pay outstanding journalist salaries dating back several months. Kantipur Media Group (KMG) requests journalists to take unpaid leave but later revokes the decision.

July 27, 2020: Chitwan Police detained Bimbobu Raijul, the editor of Kayakshri Daily, and Arjun Adhikari, of Radio Triveni, for breach of Nepal’s lockdown. They are taken to the quarantine and their photos and videos deleted.

May 9, 2020: Kathmandu A Bill to Amend and Integrate the Media Council Act is registered by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology with a provision of fine up to NPR 1,000,000 (USD 8,850) for publishing false information on the media code of ethics. Section 18 of the bill provides that publishers, editors and journalists can be fined for publishing content found to be distorting the dignity or reputation of any individual.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

May 5, 2019: Kailali (C) Janak Bista, from Dinex FM 98.3 in Dhangadi, is threatened after publishing a story in which he reported on embezzlement on distribution of relief materials.

February 26, 2020: Kathmandu Journalist Prakash Chandra Dahal is attacked by an unknown group in Bagbazar, Kathmandu. Dahal, who works online portal sancharkhabar.com, is attacked by a group of four individuals in the Dharahara area.

September 27, 2020: Banka Journalist Lijay Ahi is attacked by an unidentified group of people on his way home. The assailants assaulted physically the reporter and seized his mobile phone before fleeing.

March 5, 2019: Parsa News files against Sanjib Khan Faran regarding the city’s preparedness to handle the coronavirus pandemic.

December 10, 2019: Kathmandu Suman Chagpani, a journalist with the Nangarik Daily, is physically and verbally abused by plain clothes police officers under orders from the Kaski District Police Chief Dan Bahadur Karki after Adhikari reported on police corruption in a gambling operation in Pokhara.

March 31, 2020: Kathmandu The prime minister’s IT consultant, Asgar Ali, allegedly hacks into online portal kantipurnews.com and deletes a news item about corruption in the health ministry.

March 3, 2020: Stockholm (E) Pakistani journalist Sajid Hussain is reported missing in Sweden. Hussain, who fled the country in 2012 to escape death threats, was granted political asylum in the Swedish High Court that the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) had acted in violation of the law and even their own set of rules.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

June 24, 2019: Karachi Inspector Dunya Bibi, resident of Karachi Press Club, is punched and pushed off a chair by a rival journalist. Bibi was interviewing a Pakistani police officer in a TV broadcast on K21 News.

July 8, 2019: Sargodha (C) A gang of around 100 men are operating in the city, targeting journalists working for Sarghoda Reporters in Sargodha city, 185 km from Islamabad. They are stopped by a local patrol grabbing mafia.
July 1, 2019, Islamabad (H) 
An interview with Aalif Ali Zardari, Pakistan’s lawyer for the lawyer from Sindh Province and former president, is taken off air within minutes of commencing broadcast on Geo News. The Pakistani Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) orders a halt to the broadcast due to an ongoing investigation by the National Accountability Bureau.

July 6, 2019, Karachi 
Television stations, Abu Talk, 24 News HD and Capital TV are taken off air after broadcasting an “uninhibited live telecast” of an assassination politician. The channels are suspended from cable networks following the broadcast of the speech by the vice president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Maryam Nawaz, recorded at a press conference.

July 21, 2019, Pakistan (H) 
Private broadcaster Geo News is forced off air and its channel frequency abruptly changed in many parts of the country during Pakistan’s list of channels. The Ministry of Information decided to close the spectrum after refusing to agree to its terms. The Ministry of Information decided to close the spectrum.

September 17, 2019, Pakistan (G) (H) 
The Pakistan government announces a plan to introduce media courts to regulate the press. The Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Information, Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan, announces the plan for a special tribunal to regulate media contents.

October 27, 2019, Pakistan (H) Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) bars television anchors from giving opinions during the talk shows. The also directive instructs media houses to select the guests in talk shows with utmost care.

November 1, 2019, Colombo 
A journalist who worked for 7-News, was on his way home from work, was found dead by his husband.

November 25, 2019, Lahore (F) 
Bashir Malik, a local journalist with 24 News, was missing since September 7, is found dead.

September 12, 2019: Punjab 
Journalist Zahir Abbas, who had been missing since September 7, is found dead. Abbas, who worked for 7-News, was on his way home from work, was taken off air by the authorities.

December 10, 2019: Colombo 
Maduka Thakshala Fernando, former editor of the Digital and Net Media (Lake House) and founder of popular social media page ‘Mavawadiya’ is attacked and threatened with death by the state. The journalist was deported from his country.

January 19, 2020: Jaffna (C) 
The house of journalist Rajakantham, of Tamil newspaper Vaiyarapam, is ambushed and vandalised by a group of unidentified men in Manniyap.

March 2, 2020: Vavuniya (C) (H) 
The police officer turned the media to Niranjan refuses to reveal her source of threat.

May 9, 2020, Colombo (A) 
A journalist from Thinakkarai newspaper is detained for carrying newspaper cuttings that featured the leader of the National Thawheed Jamath (NTJ), the terrorist group accused of having carried out the Easter Sunday attacks in which 258 people were killed.

May 13, 2019, Colombo (A) 
Journalist Mohammad Rizvi Maharoof, a freelance journalist with Lankadeepa, is threatened with in a case involving his coverage of the Easter Sunday attacks.

June 16, 2019, Colombo (C) 
A journalist was arrested with a camera as he was commenting on the development of religious violences after the April 21 Easter Sunday attacks. The police were investigating the case.

March 2, 2020, Vavuniya (C) 
A police officer in charge of the Kokkilai police station is threatened with violence after he took photographs of the repainting and removal of CTTF graffiti in a temple. The officer checked his camera, deleted photographs and physically assaulted the journalist who was covering a dispute at the temple.

August 12, 2019: Gampaha (P) 
Sri Rukoppu, a correspondent with Sinhala language daily Diviyansaya is threatened with death by three local politicians after reporting a clash between politicians over their business dealings.

December 10, 2019: Colombo 
Maduka Thakshala Fernando, former editor of the Digital and Net Media (Lake House) and founder of popular social media page ‘Mavawadiya’ is attacked and threatened with death by the state. The journalist was deported from his country.

January 19, 2020: Jaffna (C) 
The house of journalist Rajakantham, of Tamil newspaper Vaiyarapam, is ambushed and vandalised by a group of unidentified men in Manniyap.

January 2, 2020: Batticaloa (C) 
A local journalist is threatened with death by his colleagues.

January 5, 2020: Batticaloa (C) 
Journalist W G Roshan Kumara is threatened with death by his colleagues.

January 10, 2020: Batticaloa 
A journalist at the Batticaloa Press Club is taken off air within minutes of his entry.

January 23, 2020: Batticaloa 
Leaffits threatening to kill seven Tamil journalists are left at the Batticaloa Press Club and a nearby bus stop in Batticalo.

November 1, 2019, Kathankudy (C) 
The police officer in charge of the Kokkilai police station is attacked while photographing a protest by Tamil journalists.

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The police officer in charge of the Kokkilai police station is attacked while photographing a protest by Tamil journalists.

December 14, 2019 (G) 
Two journalists are threatened with violence after they carried out an operation.

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### Internet Shutdowns Recorded in South Asia

**May 1, 2019 – April 30, 2020**

#### The Three Biggest Shutdowns in South Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Service Impacted</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mobile and broadband</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Resumption of Kashmir’s semi-autonomous status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>South Kashmir</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mobile and broadband</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Killing of militant in an encounter between government forces and militants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7 May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Bandipora</td>
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<td>Mobile and broadband</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 May</td>
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<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Precautionary measure to prevent spread of rumors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Anantnag</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 May</td>
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<tr>
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#### Total Internet Shutdowns or Online Controls Recorded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>AREA</th>
<th>DAYS</th>
<th>SERVICE IMPACTED</th>
<th>REASON</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-18</td>
<td>3-May</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Controls imposed because of terrorist attacks</td>
<td>Terrorist bombings of churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-19</td>
<td>3-May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Controls imposed because of terrorist attacks</td>
<td>Terrorist bombings of churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>8-May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Controls imposed because of terrorist attacks</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

#### Internet Shutdowns by Country

#### India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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<th>AREA</th>
<th>DAYS</th>
<th>SERVICE IMPACTED</th>
<th>REASON</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-May</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>South Kashmir</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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#### Pakistan

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<tr>
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<th>REASON</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
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<td>Shopian</td>
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</tbody>
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<th>DETAILS</th>
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#### Sri Lanka

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<td>3</td>
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**Note:** The information provided is based on the data collected and verified until the specified dates.