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**Defending Rights of Journalists &  
Freedom of Expression in South Asia**



October 2022

Welcome to the IFJ's monthly media bulletin for South Asia's Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN)



Members of the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) protest plans to move ahead with source disclosure provisions in the Maldivian Evidence Bill. Credit: MJA

## In Focus

**Struggle to amend Maldivian Evidence Act:** On September 25, the Maldives Attorney General declared the government's intention to release a proposal that would amend the nation's controversial Evidence Act (No. 11/2022). The amendment would clarify the circumstances in which journalists and media workers would be required to disclose sources of information. While drafted in consultation with the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA), the Maldivian Editors Guild and other media rights bodies, the continued objections to the newly proposed amendments have brought the government's commitment to dialogue into question. The bill has been subject to protest since its initial announcement on June 30. Local and international media rights organisations, including the MJA and the IFJ, immediately raised concerns that source protection measures were inadequate in ensuring the protection of journalists. Media rights bodies objected to the original language of the law, which would allow courts to require journalists and media outlets to disclose confidential sources in cases relating to the broad charges of "acts of terrorism" and "national security-related matters". The MJA has continued to object to the wording of the act, citing serious concerns at the inclusion of the phrase 'national security' within the law. In a letter sent to the office of the Maldivian Attorney General, the MJA identified a substantial risk that, under the proposed amendment, authorities could order the disclosure of sources before the submission of cases to

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Since then, the MJA [launched](#) an application to join the Maldivian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and [elected](#) a new 2022-2024 Executive Committee. With the support of the IFJ, the MTUC and other media rights organisations, the MJA stand stronger than ever to tackle ongoing threats to the safety of journalists, media practitioners and press freedom.

#### In this bulletin:

- **Digital Security Act threatens to freedom of expression in Bangladesh**
- **Bhutan Media Council calls for increased access to government information**
- **Maldives government to amend controversial evidence law despite criticism**
- **Indian state government introduces provision mandating pre-approval of books**
- **IFJ participates in digital media discussion**

## The Region

Across South Asia, a growing number of journalists and media workers are facing harsh consequences for reporting on matters in the public interest. In Pakistan, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) Secretary General Rana Muhammad Azeem was [targeted](#) in a hit-and-run attack by an unlicensed vehicle while returning home from work. Fortunately, Azeem was not injured in the attack. The PFUJ has labelled the incident a deliberate attempt to silence Azeem, a frequent critic of the government on his live television talk show. In Bangladesh, ATN News journalist, Bulbul Habib, and cameraperson Rubel Islam, were [assaulted](#) on September by Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) staffers while investigating claims that employees of the government ministry were failing to arrive at work on time. According to reports, the ATN News media workers had their equipment damaged, Habib was punched repeatedly and Islam was struck with a blunt weapon. Both journalists were taken to the Rajshahi Medical College for treatment. Habib later [filed](#) a case against seventeen BMDA staff allegedly involved in the assault, of which seven have been arrested. September also saw another attack on journalists and media practitioners in Bangladesh, with the [assault](#) of four journalists, Rajib Noor, Moshahed Mia, Patrika Touhid Mia and Alamgir Reza. The media workers were reporting on the alleged illegal occupation of a historic home in Baniachong Upazila, Habiganj District on September 11. According to [reports](#), the alleged occupier, Waheed Mia, and his family claimed to have purchased the property, although this claim has been [disputed](#) by local government officials. BD News24 special assignment editor Rajib Noor said the altercation began after he photographed the property. Following a verbal disagreement, Mia's son, Walid, and other unidentified assailants then seized Noor's phone and assaulted the journalists with sticks.

## National Issues

**Afghanistan:** Khost-based radio station Rana Ghag has [ended](#) its broadcast after six years, the latest media organisation to succumb to the pressures of operating in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The radio station was dependent on advertising revenue, which has plummeted since the Taliban

**Bangladesh:** Authorities in Bangladesh have [targeted](#) the family members of two prominent United Kingdom-based journalists known for their critical reporting. Police arrested Abdul Muktadir Manu, brother of The Weekly Surma special correspondent Abdur Rab Bhuttow, on September 9

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	<p>Ghag was forced to close after failing to secure extra funding, leaving its twenty staffers unemployed. According to <a href="#">Deutsche Welle Akademie</a>, state repression and financial challenges are two major factors that have contributed to the collapse of Afghanistan's media industry. Local media have <a href="#">reported</a> that journalists have been forced to find alternate employment, working in agriculture, trading food on the street and performing daily wage labour.</p> <p><b>Bhutan:</b> The Journalists Association of Bhutan, in collaboration with editors of Bhutanese media, have <a href="#">submitted</a> a letter to the Media Council of Bhutan expressing concern over recent delays in accessing information from government agencies and constitutional bodies. The Media Council has since sent a letter to the agencies in question demanding that they ensure there is a free flow of information to the media and <a href="#">reminding</a> them that government agencies are obligated to promote and protect free, independent media.</p> <p><b>Maldives:</b> The Maldivian government will <a href="#">propose</a> a series of amendments to the nation's Evidence Bill after concerns were raised by media rights organisations at the potential of the law to restrict press freedom. In a statement on September 25, the office of the Maldivian Attorney General announced it <a href="#">planned</a> to amend Article 136 of the Evidence Act, which requires journalists to reveal their sources to the court. While The IFJ welcomed prior consultations with media rights organisations, including the Maldives Journalists Association, the inclusion of language mandating the revelation of sources around issues of "national security" remains concerning.</p>		
			<p>Chowdhury Pervez on September 13. Police <a href="#">alleged</a> Manu was conspiring with Bhuttow to oust Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and "destroy the image of the state." Pervez was <a href="#">accused</a> of conspiring with Liton to disseminate material designed to foster "confusion and agitation" among citizens.</p> <p><b>India:</b> The state government of Manipur has <a href="#">introduced</a> a new provision requiring all books on the state's history, culture, tradition and geography to be preapproved before publication. While the Manipur government said the decision will help ensure that facts published about the state's history, culture, tradition and geography are accurate, intellectuals and civil society activists warn that the new provision <a href="#">infringes</a> on academic freedom.</p> <p><b>Nepal:</b> Image Television channel management has <a href="#">agreed</a> to deposit the remaining funds to reporters' Provident Fund (PF) and Citizen Investment Trust (CIT) on an instalment basis. The agreement signed between the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) and Image channel management on September 29 stipulates that all the money owed to Image Television media workers' Provident and Citizen Investment Fund accounts will be completed by April 15, 2023. The television channel also agreed to pay an overtime bonus as soon as possible and a Dashain bonus within three months. The agreement also stipulates that the broadcaster conducts an organisation and management survey to improve its performance. The FNJ had <a href="#">staged</a> a sit-in protest in front of the image television on September 4.</p> <p><b>Sri Lanka:</b> The Peoples Tribunal on the Murder of Journalists has found the Sri Lankan state <a href="#">guilty</a> of the murder of</p>

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dismissal of a case against Usman Zulfiqar Khan for expressing his views on social media. The voiding of the case under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is considered to be a 'historic landmark' for freedom of expression in Pakistan. A superstore had filed a case against Khan under the PECA for his post accusing an anonymous superstore of selling products containing pork, an offence in Pakistan.

the Tribunal found that the government of Sri Lanka was responsible for Wickrematunge's assassination in 2009, violating his fundamental human rights to life, freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination. The prosecutor said, "the murder of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge... was part of systematic attacks on journalists during the civil war in Sri Lanka ... the government, under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa as President and Gotabaya Rajapaksa as Secretary of Defence, authorised attacks on journalists including abductions, assaults, torture, and killings."

## Featured Action

**Nepal:** The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) organised a leadership training session in Biratnagar on September 24. The training, supported by the IFJ and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) involved thirty-five young journalists and was facilitated by media expert and former FNJ chair Dr Suresh Prasad Acharya.

**Maldives:** On September 29, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) held several programs to mark International Day for Universal Access to Information, to promote government transparency and accountability. MJA General Secretary Naif Ahmed participated in a panel discussion organised by the office of the Maldivian Information Commissioner. Ahmed stressed the importance of the voluntary disclosure of information through the government's e-portal.

**Bhutan:** On October 4, the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) conducted a discussion with rural women, aiming to bring marginalised perspectives into the mainstream media landscape. The exercise was conducted in four rural areas of Bhutan, with OxMedia journalists Nidup Gyeltshen and Tshering Dorji talking to the participants about the value of their voices in media and the importance of media literacy.

**Pakistan:** On September 30, a joint PFUJ and Center for Democracy and Climate Studies (CDCS) seminar in Punjab highlighted the importance of the PFUJ in ensuring press freedom is respected, new media laws are conducive to better working conditions for media workers, and that disinformation and fake news are challenged in journalistic practice.

## IFJ Blog

Lubna Jerar Naqvi describes her experience meeting with sixty fellow journalists from Pakistan and India during a workshop on cross-border reporting in Kathmandu. Read the full piece here.



A joint PFUJ and Center for Democracy and Climate Studies (CDCS) seminar in Punjab takes place on September 30. Credit: PFUJ

## IFJ At Work:

**IFJ to hold Digital Organising Bootcamp:** With support from Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), the IFJ will host a Digital Organising Bootcamp in Nepal in early November. The training will bring together young union leaders from Nepal, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Indonesia and the Philippines, and provide them with the valuable knowledge and skills needed to revitalise the union struggle for media workers. The bootcamp represents part of a post-Covid-19 effort to boost union membership, enthusiasm and organising capacity for digital workers.

**International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists:** The IFJ will mark the United Nations International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists on November 2. In South Asia, the IFJ and its South Asian affiliates have organised protests and other activities to demand governments ensure the safety of journalists and end impunity for crimes against journalists. Internationally, journalists are subject to attacks, harassment, assault, detainment, and murder while performing their duties, with a high rate of incidents reported in South Asia.

**IFJ supports Gender Disparity Report Launch:** The IFJ, in collaboration with Individualland and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), will launch a Gender Disparity Report in late October, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy. The report has been developed after extensive research of digital and legacy media organisations and aims to explore the contours of women journalists working in Pakistan.

**IFJ joins ITUC in marking World Day for Decent Work:** On October 7, the IFJ joined the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in the fight for wage justice while marking the World Day for Decent Work. The IFJ identified the weakening of labour laws, job insecurity, precarious working conditions, degradation of collective bargaining

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IFJ has been able to celebrate union victories through membership growth, and the achievement of negotiation rights, improved pay and better working conditions across many unions.

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## From the media

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Punishing the media? - [Daily Times](#)

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The truth takes a slap in the face - [Dhaka Tribune](#)

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Arrests in Kashmir - [The Express Tribune](#)

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Sri Lankan Government Found Guilty of Lasantha's Murder - [Ground Views](#)

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Trolling being used as weapon on social media - [The News](#)

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Gagging the Bhutanese media? - [Kuensel](#)

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## TAKE ACTION!

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Apply for [Science writing fellowship](#)

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Apply for [New York Times Asia reporter](#)

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Submit entry to [She Shapes Biodiversity photo contest](#)

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Apply for ENGAGE-Asia programme 2023 [for trade unionists and labour activists](#)

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Register for the [UNRISD #CrisesofInequality Media Contest](#)

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Read the IFJ's South Asia Press Freedom Report 2021-22 – [Solidarity and Survival: The Story of South Asia](#)

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Donate to the [IFJ Safety Fund](#)

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Attend Global Investigative Journalism Network Workshop - [Search Tips for LinkedIn – How to Track People and Companies](#)

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Participate in the Global Reporting Centre and Committee to Protect Journalists survey on [disinformation and harassment targeting journalists](#).

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Join the Australian Trade Union Institute's online training on [Leading for High Performance](#)

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IFJ Asia-Pacific**

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