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



January 2023

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



Tolo News presenter Sonia Niazi covers her face during a live broadcast in Kabul on May 22, 2022. Women presenters on Afghanistan's leading news channels went on air May 22 with their faces covered, a day after defying a Taliban order to conceal their appearance on television. Credit: Wakil Kohsar / AFP

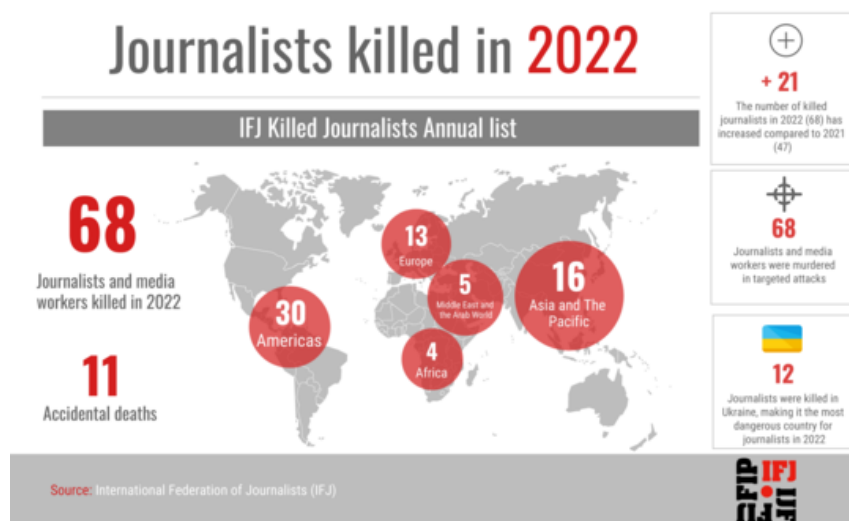
In Focus

Freedom of expression under pressure in South Asia: Throughout 2022, legal restrictions were used across South Asia to impede freedom of expression and obstruct the vital work of journalists and media workers. The year saw increasing pressure on social media organisations from the Indian government. Indian internet regulations, including the controversial Information Technology Act, went beyond internationally accepted standards, threatening to limit freedom of expression online. Bangladesh's Digital Security received similar condemnations for lacking specificity and allowing the effective criminalisation of online dissent. In Sri Lanka, the artificially prolonged state of emergency greatly disrupted fundamental human rights on the island, with the banning of social media platforms in April, and violence against media workers committed by police and military forces. Repressive legislation, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), severely limit freedom of expression even outside of crisis. Nepali authorities instituted various media policies, granting the government power to undermine press freedom at all levels. This was particularly present through Nepal's recent election, wherein government institutions attempted to stifle freedom of expression across traditional and social media. Journalists in Pakistan faced increasing pressure from government institutions, including the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority's temporary suspension of Ary News and Bol News in

than in Afghanistan. 2022 saw the [blocking](#) of multiple foreign media outlets, the institution of repressive [restrictions](#) for women in media mandating the use of head coverings, and the [altering](#) of Afghanistan's journalism curriculum to not offend the Taliban and its interpretation of Islamic values.

In this bulletin:

- **11 journalists killed in line of duty in South Asia**
- **Bangladesh police investigate alleged 'suicide' of Shabnam Sharmin**
- **Kashmiri photojournalist Mohammad Manan Dar finally released**
- **Sri Lankan journalists remember slain journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge**
- **Federation of Nepali Journalists release Surkhet Declaration**
- **IFJ and MJA to produce report on status of fact-checking in Asia**



The Region

The release of the IFJ's annual Killed and Jailed List once again underscored the continued violence faced by journalists and media workers across South Asia. In 2022, 11 journalists were [killed](#) in relation to their work, a decline from the 17 incidents recorded in 2021. Of these killings, five [were](#) from Pakistan, four were from Bangladesh and two were from India. Afghanistan saw a significant reduction in killings of media workers. In 2021, nine journalists and media workers were killed in line of duty while no incidents were recorded in 2022. Since its takeover in August 2021, the Taliban has been [condemned](#) for its widespread human rights violations and its attacks against freedom of expression. While the killings of journalists and media workers may have declined in 2022, the Taliban's repression of the media continues relentlessly. However, Bangladesh and Pakistan both had a significant rise in killings, increasing from one to four and three to six respectively. Although the region saw a reduction in fatalities, impunity in crimes against journalists remains a significant issue.

National Issues

Afghanistan: In a new move to further restrict freedom of expression, the Taliban has [threatened](#) to prosecute Afghan media organisations operating overseas. Abdu Haq Hemad, the Taliban director of Media Assessment,

Bangladesh: Bangladesh police are investigating the alleged 'suicide' of journalist Shabnam Sharmin after a member of her family filed a case against her husband. Bangladesh police [recovered](#) Shabnam Sharmin's

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Taliban regime, stating that Afghanistan's Taliban-controlled courts will soon announce further details on their effective criminalisation of independent journalism.

Bhutan: State-owned newspaper Kuensel [released](#) an article describing the dire state of the nation's media industry on January 2. The research describes how inadequate pay, insecure working conditions and excessive workloads have emerged as significant factors in a nationwide exodus from the profession. Attrition rates for new hires are high, with many journalists leaving the media industry and/or the country to pursue education and more lucrative career opportunities.

Maldives: The Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) has [expressed](#) grave concerns at the election of Ahmed Musthafa to the presidency of the Maldives Media Council (MMC). The MJA objected to the participation of public officials in council leadership, expressing concerns that the self-regulatory functions performed by the MMC may unduly reflect government concerns. Asthafa, the Technical Operations Manager of the state-run Public Service Media, will serve as president of the MMC for the next two years.

Pakistan: On January 8, Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mairiyum Aurangzeb, [affirmed](#) the commitment of the ruling Pakistan Democratic Movement coalition government to protect journalists and freedom of expression in Pakistan. In her congratulatory message to the newly elected Lahore Press Club executive, Aurangzeb claimed her government was taking concrete steps

Dhaka. The police's investigation into the case is [directed](#) at Shabnam's husband Saidul Islam following a case filed by Omar Rashid, Shabnam's younger brother, accusing Islam of [inciting](#) Shabnam to commit suicide.

India: Kashmiri photojournalist [Mohammad Manan Dar](#) was released on bail following a Delhi court order on January 3. Dar was arrested in October 2021 by National Investigation Agency officers, who accused him of involvement in a conspiracy to undertake violent terrorist actions throughout India. The Delhi court found the prosecution's evidence to be circumstantial and insufficient in proving his involvement in any terrorist activity.

Nepal: Over four new reports released on December 29, the Center for Media Research Nepal have concluded several Nepali laws and provisions work to restrict press freedom and civil society. The report finds that all three levels of government have the power to restrict freedom of expression and press freedom through existing legislation. The report also concluded that most laws regarding the press and civil society have been written without adequate consultation with relevant stakeholders.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan journalists [commemorated](#) the 14th anniversary of Lasantha Wickrematunge's killing on January 9, with members from journalists' organisations across Sri Lanka organising a memorial program in Gandhi Park, Batticaloa. Wickrematunge, the editor of *Sunday Leader* and critic of the former Rajapaksa regime was killed on January 8, 2009, on his way to work.



Members of the media community and family of slain Sri Lankan journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge hold a memorial in his honour on January 8, 2023. Credit: Twitter

Featured Action

Nepal: The Federation of Nepali Journalists has launched the 15-point Surkhet Declaration following its general assembly on December 23-24. The declaration urges all levels of the Nepali government to protect press freedom and freedom of expression, review outdated and restrictive media regulations and provide support for the media industry. Journalists and media organisations have also been urged to center diversity and inclusivity in their reporting and operations, among other concerns.

Maldives: The Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) held a meeting with the Maldives Media Council (MMC) on December 18 to review the current status, challenges and future of the media in the Maldives. The MJA and the MMC discussed possible future training programs concerning journalistic ethics as part of future, broader collaborations addressing media issues and increasing professionalism in the industry.

Afghanistan: In December, the Afghanistan National Journalists Union (ANJU) conducted a meeting with the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture to discuss the rights of journalists and ongoing violations against the media. ANJU invited media representatives and journalists' organisations to share their concerns about journalists' safety and the future of freedom of expression in Afghanistan.

Sri Lanka: The Free Media Movement (FMM), on December 23, organised a program during which members unanimously agreed to take the necessary actions needed to convert FMM into a trade union. Through group discussion members reached the consensus, which includes necessary amendments to the FMM's constitution. The program was supported by the IFJ and Union To Union under its global union strengthening project.

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gender equality. In achieving this goal, the PFUJ has engaged legal counsel for an evaluation of workers' rights and press freedom legislation, existing challenges for workers and recommendations for legislative change. The PFUJ will to present the findings, supported by the IFJ and the National Endowment for Democracy, to parliamentarians seeking amendments to media laws.

IFJ Blog

Through economic and political collapse, the fundamental human rights the Sri Lankan government claims to uphold are frequently disrespected or ignored. In achieving legitimate democratic governance in Sri Lanka, the voice of protestors must be heard, [writes](#) Gayathri Nawarathne.

IFJ At Work:

IFJ and MJA to release regional fact-checking status report: The IFJ and the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) will release a report on fact-checking across Asia in late January. Featuring authors from Nepal, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, the report will focus on country-specific approaches and concerns, best practices and lessons learnt. Results from the report will be presented at a regional fact-checking conference, with further details to be announced.

From the media

How social media Tried To Murder a Newspaper - from [Pratidin Time](#)

What journalists need to know to combat information disorder - from [IJNet](#)

Surabhi Dahiya's 'Indian Media Giants' offers glimpses into how the Indian media has evolved since Independence - from [The Indian Express](#)

2022: A year like no other - from [the Sunday Times](#)

Online defamation: Cyber laws and the dark side of social media - from [Pakistan Today](#)

Farewell to 2022, a deadly year for scribes - from [EastMojo](#)

Rising online crackdowns across Asia target citizens, Big Tech - from [Reuters](#)

Press Freedom in Pakistan 2022: A flurry of cases, a high-profile murder and political rhetoric targeting the media - from [Pakistan Press Foundation](#)

Summary: Parliament Panel Report On Big Tech's Unfair Practices In Digital Markets - from [MEDIANAMA](#)

Journalists' Safety - from [DAWN](#)

Improved but unstable - from [The Kathmandu Post](#)

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