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

**ASIA BULLETIN**

March 2023

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



Supporters of Prime Minister Imran Khan gather outside his house to prevent police officers arresting him in Lahore on March 14, 2023. Credit: Arif Ali / AFP

## In Focus

**Press freedom under threat in Pakistan:** On March 15, supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan clashed with police outside his home, as Pakistani authorities attempted to exercise a court order for his arrest. This moment in Pakistan's recent political instability is emblematic of the conditions faced by journalists and media workers. Journalists Abbas Bashir and Saqib Bashir were assaulted by police on February 28 while covering an appearance by Khan at the Islamabad High Court. According to reports, a large number of PTI supporters had congregated outside the complex, with the 'manhandling' of the journalists explained as 'police performing their duties' in dispersing the crowd. Outlets seen to be supportive of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party have faced shutdowns, restrictions and raids this month. On March 5, ARY News was suspended by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) for broadcasting a speech by Khan. The PTI Chair's speeches were banned twice in 2022; PEMRA's decision on this occasion derived from Khan's alleged spread of hate speech and baseless allegations in his criticism of former army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa. In this environment, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and other media stakeholders strongly condemned the arrest of Bol News Co-Chairman Shoib Shaikh and the subsequent raid of the BOL News office by the Directorate of Customs Intelligence and Investigation Karachi. Shaikh, who has previously been investigated, convicted and has successfully appealed criminal charges for his role as the CEO of an alleged diploma mill, has claimed his latest arrest by Federal Investigation Agency officers is a direct attack on press freedom.



### In this bulletin:

- Challenges continue for South Asian women journalists
- Criticism of proposed amendment to Maldivian General Elections Act
- PFUJ launches safety protocols for women journalists in conflict zones
- Impunity rampant for violence against women in Nepal's media
- IFJ holds gender equality and safety training in the Maldives

## The Region

**International Women's Day:** Women journalists in South Asia continue to face extreme challenges while reporting on the ground, from military attacks and threats to police intimidation, surveillance, and systematic gender-based violence. On International Women's Day (IWD) on March 8, the IFJ and its Gender Council spotlighted women journalists working in conflict zones, covering everything from wars to protest movements and taking immense risks in the name of freedom of information. Women in media in South Asia face particular challenges with access to information and the internet, with a report published on IWD finding that South Asian women are 36 per cent less likely than men to use the internet, with a similar gap existing in mobile internet usage. Political and economic unrest, particularly in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, has regularly put the safety of women journalists working in the field at risk, and many have developed their own tactics to stay safe. Talking with the IFJ, veteran journalist Farzana Ali, based in Peshawar, Pakistan, said that the opinions of women reporters are often not taken seriously, with women also deterred from joining the media due to the threat of defamation charges.



## National Issues

**Afghanistan:** Press freedom and human rights NGOs and other media stakeholders have questioned the failure of UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman to provide the latest criteria for a resettlement programme for Afghan Journalists. Critics have identified the lack of action in the Afghan Citizen's Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), with a long-awaited third 'pathway' largely speculated to aid journalists in Afghanistan or neighbouring Pakistan and

**Bangladesh:** The Bangladesh Press Council (BPC) has rejected an appeal made by Dainik Dinkal, a newspaper associated with the country's opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The Bengali-language newspaper was initially issued a suspension order in December 2022, before being ordered to shut down on February 19, 2023. Press freedom advocates and media organisations have criticised the move.

**Bhutan:** The Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) has launched two new books, titled Bhutan Press Mirror, and Rural Reporting Grant respectively. The books, supported by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, were launched by JAB representatives and the CEO of Kuensel Online, Ugyen Penjore.

**Maldives:** Lawmakers in the Maldives have criticised the government's proposed amendment to the country's General Elections Act, which would restrict the monitoring of elections to registered journalists. The law would exclude international journalists and domestic freelancers from monitoring an area before polling, in polling booths or in counting places. The proposed amendment has been criticised as needlessly restrictive, and averse to press freedom.

**Sri Lanka:** The Sri Lanka College of Journalism, alongside civil society organisations, held a residential workshop aimed to harness the power of narrative in building identities and fostering community connection. The workshop emphasised the important role storytelling can tell in promoting reconciliation and linking diverse groups of people from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds.

marginalised groups in India. The new outlet, The Mooknayak, or the voice for the voiceless, aims to represent the perspectives, stories and challenges facing Dalits in India and abroad. Informed by her own experience of caste discrimination, Kotwal has vowed to create fair coverage of underrepresented understandings.

**Nepal:** Commemorating International Women's Day on March 8, journalist and human rights activist Sangeeta Lama described a culture of impunity and inaction in cases of violence against women in Nepal, highlighting the need for greater action regarding women's rights from media and non-media alike. Lama, in interviewing Reena Moktan, identified instances in journalists' and media organisations wherein sexual assault and rape were not effectively challenged, and their victims and whistle-blowers received inadequate support.

**Pakistan:** Minister for Law and Justice Azam Nazeer Tarar vowed to act against law enforcement officers for their role in the assault of two journalists at the Islamabad High Court on February 28. Speaking at the election ceremony of the Islamabad High Court Journalists Association (IHCJA), Tarar apologised for the action of the police officers and vowed to speak with Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah.

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## Featured Action

**Pakistan:** On International Women's Day, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) launched its "Safety Protocols and Guidelines for Women Journalists in Conflict Zones". These guidelines encourage women journalists to take proper precautions before entering combat zones and urge media organisations to consider the safety of journalists in volatile areas, including organising training workshops and providing appropriate protective gear.

**Afghanistan:** The Afghanistan Independent Journalists' Union (AIJU) has held a series of meetings through March in support of journalists and media workers in Afghanistan. AIJU has signed a memorandum of cooperation with a health institute in Balkh and advocated for journalists' rights and safety considerations with government agency officials in Parvan.

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on human rights, militarisation and terrorism-related issues and shares with us her daily challenges in the field, her resilience and courage in times of danger and how she has responded to psychological traumas. Read the full interview [here](#).



Participants of the IFJ Gender Equality, Safety and Leadership two-day training with Maldivian journalists, students and civil society partners in February. Credit: MJA

## IFJ At Work:

**WMFP hold Twitter Space events:** The Women’s Media Forum Pakistan has conducted two Twitter Spaces commemorating International Women’s Day 2023., with the themes “Digital: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality” on March 3, and “Success Stories of Women Journalists in Digital Media” on March 8. The sessions were hosted by WMFP regional coordinators Rashida Shoaib and Sheema Siddiqui, with other coordinators providing technical support. The space featured speakers and attendees from across Pakistan, who spoke of their successes despite industry hurdles.

**IFJ mission to the Maldives:** From February 16, the IFJ conducted a successful mission to the Maldives under its project, Protecting Freedom of Expression in the Maldives, supported by Internews Europe and the European Commission. The IFJ met with the executive of the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) and other media stakeholders and conducted a two-day Gender Equality, Safety and Leadership training with Maldivian journalists, students and civil society partners on February 17-18, in collaboration with the MJA, Internews and Alinea International.

**Roundtable discussions to be held in Pakistan:** As work commences under the IFJ’s new project in Pakistan with the National Endowment for Democracy for 2023-24, the IFJ has organised a series of three roundtable discussions across the country, aiming to increase media workers’ understanding of their labour rights, and demonstrate the role of labour standards and unions in building a sustainable Pakistani media. The first session is planned for March 2023 and will be held in Islamabad.

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## From the media

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Exiled Pakistani journalist turns comic book artist - from [Dawn](#)

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Violence against journalists must stop - from [New Age](#)

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Forget Yellow Journalism, India Is Now Fertile Ground for Saffron Journalism – from [The Wire](#)

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[Rights activists voice concern over DSA – from New Age BD](#)

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[Indian journalists say BBC raid part of drive to intimidate media – The Guardian](#)

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[Why media should have the access to court proceedings - from Nepal Live Today](#)

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[Violence against journalists must stop - from New Age](#)

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## TAKE ACTION!

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[Watch the Knight Media Forum](#)

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[Register for the International Symposium on Online Journalism](#)

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[Read and Share The IFJ's International Women's Day campaign #WomenReportingConflicts](#)

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