

View this email in your browser



Defending Rights of Journalists &  
Freedom of Expression in South Asia

ASIA BULLETIN

April 2023

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



Civil rights activists protest against the controversial Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) outside the UN office in Colombo on March 3, 2022. Credit: Ishara S. Kodikara / AFP

## In Focus

**Countering the terror law:** The Sri Lankan government's announcement of the proposed Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) on March 17, designed to replace Sri Lanka's existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), has raised serious concerns among journalists, media rights groups, lawyers, human rights activists and civil society organisations at the potential threats to democracy and freedom of expression in the country. The ATA, expected to be tabled in parliament in late April 2023, has several draconian features that grant excessive powers to law enforcement and the President, such as the ability to detain individuals without meaningful oversight, impose curfew-like orders, proscribe organisations, declare "prohibited places", and even impose the death penalty. The ATA also undermines the ordinary criminal legal system and removes protections granted to suspects, thereby endangering human rights, the rule of law, and democracy in Sri Lanka. The Government of Sri Lanka's intent in proposing the ATA has been deemed disingenuous, as it has failed to address the history of abuses and violations under the PTA enacted in 1979 to address growing Tamil militancy. Instead, it proposes to introduce legislation with even greater potential for human rights violations. Sri Lankans have been calling for the repeal of the PTA for many years, and previous attempts to reform or replace have been viewed as cosmetic efforts without genuine intention to address the massive rights violations accrued under it. The ATA also falls short of international best practices, despite the Sri Lankan government's previous commitment to repeal the PTA and replace it with legislation in line with contemporary international standards. The IFJ joined its Sri Lankan affiliates in the call to withdraw the proposed ATA and safeguard democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Sri Lanka.



#### In this bulletin:

- Fact-checking amidst misinformation in South Asia
- Proposed Nepali law allows for potential tapping of private phone calls
- The Burqa Journalists breaking barriers in Pakistan
- IFJ's consultation session in Islamabad
- IFJ's South Asia Press Freedom Report to be launched

## The Region

**International Fact-Checking Day:** Fact-checking continues to be a critical tool in combating misinformation and disinformation in South Asia, playing a vital role in verifying information, debunking hoaxes, and promoting accurate reporting. On April 2, World Fact-Checking Day, the IFJ took a progressive step in engaging with the growing industry of fact-checking in South Asia with the release of its new report, *Managing the Misinformation Effect - The State of Fact-Checking in Asia*. The report underscores the importance of fact-checking in defending democracy, promoting media literacy, and restoring public trust in independent media, and calls for collaboration between fact-checking groups, media outlets, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of fact-checking efforts. Among the report's recommendations: mainstream media houses must integrate fact-checking into their journalistic protocols and for social media platforms to prioritise the visibility of fact-checks. The report also emphasised the need to protect the safety and well-being of fact-checkers, and for sustainable funding models to ensure the longevity and viability of fact-checking initiatives in the region.



## National Issues

**Afghanistan:** A women-run radio station in Badakhshan *Sada-e-Banowan* (Voice of Women Radio) was shut down by the Taliban on March 31 for 'violating policies' after the de-facto officials claimed the station had played music, banned by the

**Bangladesh:** A court in Dhaka granted bail to journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams on April 3 following his arrest on March 29. Shams was detained after a politician filed a complaint claiming the journalist's article in *Prothom Alo* 'tarnished the

said the station had been 'repeatedly told' that airing music was 'forbidden'. Representatives from the outlet have denied the claims.

**Bhutan:** The Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) appointed a new Executive Director, Passang Norbu, on April 3. At a Tendrel (auspicious ritual) ceremony on the day of his appointment, khatas (scarves) were offered in an hour-long procession led by JAB members. The outgoing director, Namgay Zam, attended her final board meeting in February 2023. Passang Norbu has previously worked as a sports journalist at *Kuensel*.

**Maldives:** Maldives Journalists Association General Secretary Ahmed Naaif and *Dhauru News* Senior Editor Ahmed Zahir received threats on April 8 after publishing an article covering a Singaporean arbitration case featuring Maldivian politician Ahmed Siyam Mohamed. After Siyam called Zahir demanding the retraction of the article, both Naaif and Zahir received a series of texts and phone calls threatening assault and death, with Naaif being warned to leave the country 'within five days'. Police have commenced an investigation into the incident.

**Sri Lanka:** A spokesperson for the UK's Metropolitan Police announced on March 29 that a suspect in the murder of Tamil journalist Mylavaganam Nimalarajan remains under investigation by law enforcement. Nimalarajan, a frequent contributor to the BBC's Tamil and Sinhala services, was murdered at his residence in Jaffna on October 19, 2000. The suspect was released after over a year in detention.

2018, which since has been used to consistently target critics of the government, including journalists, students and activists.

**India:** The Indian government has been criticised after the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology released new amendment rules to the IT Act necessitating information pertaining to the government be fact-checked by a government department on April 6. The Press Information Bureau (PIB) will now be tasked with fact-checking any 'fake, false or misleading' posts, with social media platforms and internet service providers facing revocation of legal immunity from third-party content if they are seen to fail to comply. The mechanism has been labelled as a threat to press freedom for its broad and vague definitions, and potential to stifle free speech.

**Nepal:** A proposed amendment to Nepal's Telecommunications Act has been criticised for its potential to tap private phone calls without prior approval. Media groups and freedom of expression advocates, including the Nepal Press Union, have expressed their deep concerns with the bill's potential. If passed, the bill would also dramatically reduce the licensing and license renewal fees for companies in the telecommunications sector.

**Pakistan:** In a ruling with significant ramifications, the Lahore High Court on March 30 struck –the colonial era-origin Section 124-A of the Pakistan Penal Code, more commonly known as the "sedition law." The move was widely hailed by media, political, rights and legal circles as a major step in the direction of loosening the state's coercive grip on the limits of political and journalistic freedom of expression.

---

## Featured Action

**FNJ meet with US Ambassador:** In a meeting held on March 20, senior Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) leaders and members met with Dean Thompson, the current ambassador to Nepal from the United States of America. FNJ representatives discussed the current issues facing the Nepali

**IJU and NPU sign agreement for regional cooperation:** On April 5, representatives of the Indian Journalists Union (IJU) and the Nepal Press Union (NPU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing to cooperation and friendship between the two unions. The agreement details future work the two unions hope to achieve, including the promotion of press freedom across the two countries, improving international relations between India and Nepal, and facilitating access to medical assistance and safety mechanisms for journalists.

**SLWJA calls for international action on press freedom:** Duminda Sampath, the president of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), announced at a press conference on March 21 the intention of the organisation to invoke international advocacy networks to combat attacks on press freedom. The press conference was attended by press freedom groups and other journalist organisations, attracting national media coverage.

---

## IFJ Blog

The conservative city of Dera Ismail Khan in north-western Pakistan might have stopped other woman journalists - but not Sabeha Sheikh, freelance journalist co-founder of Burqa Journalists Facebook page. Throughout her career, she has resisted restrictive traditions and barriers as one of the few woman journalists in the region, writes Lubna Jerar Naqvi.



Participants of the IFJ's project evaluation consultation in Islamabad, Pakistan, on March 18. Credit: IFJ

## IFJ At Work:

**IFJ holds consultation session in Islamabad:** On March 18, the IFJ held an evaluation and assessment project consultation session in Islamabad, designed to guide and develop the IFJ's ongoing work in Pakistan. The session highlighted the need for an increased emphasis on rural and underrepresented communities, further work addressing issues of gender equality in reporting and media houses, and capacity-building efforts to build knowledge of labour rights in the media sector, among others. The activity was held under the IFJ's ongoing Pakistan project, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

**IFJ launches Fact-Checking report:** On March 31, the IFJ launched a new report, titled *'Managing the Misinformation Effect: The State of Fact-Checking in Asia'*. Through five country reports on India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, the report highlights existing fact-checking initiatives, and individual media contexts, and provides key recommendations for journalists, governments, civil society organisations, and NGOs.

launch of its annual South Asia Press Freedom Report on World Press Freedom Day on May 3. The report will be [launched](#) on the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN) Digital Hub and has been developed with the support of UNESCO, Norsk Journalistlag, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the European Commission. Besides country-specific chapters highlighting the key issues of press freedom and journalists' rights, the report will also examine the sustainability of the media as the region emerges from the devastating Covid-19 pandemic.

---

## From the media

---

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

---

India court seeks gov't response on comic's challenge to IT rules – [Al Jazeera](#)

---

Police investigate death threats against Dhauru editors – [The Edition](#)

---

Race to the bottom: On the tit-for-tat moves by China and India on media visas – [The Hindu](#)

---

DSA one of world's most draconian laws against journalists: US – [New Age](#)

---

Twitter accused of censorship in India as it blocks Modi critics – [The Guardian](#)

---

Afghan journalists in Pakistan faced with a host of problems - [Pajhwok](#)

---

Freedom of expression in Nepal: The false prototype – [The Himalayan Times](#)

---

Bangladeshi journalist arrested under disputed digital law – [ABC News](#)

---

Authorities must immediately release Kashmiri journalist Irfan Mehraj – [Amnesty International](#)

---

Federation of Nepali Journalists objects to remark by Speaker Ghimire – [The Kathmandu Post](#)

---

## TAKE ACTION!

---

Submit your entry for [SEJ's 22nd annual Awards for Reporting on the Environment](#)

---

Watch the [Knight Media Forum](#)

---

Enrol in [Poynter's Urdu Fact-checking Course](#)

---

Apply for the [Global Youth and News Media Prize](#)

---

Subscribe to the IFJ and its weekly [newsletter](#)

---

Watch the [SLWJA's Press Conference](#)

---

Read the [Managing the Misinformation Effect: The State of Fact-Checking in Asia](#)

---

Subscribe to the IFJ and its weekly [newsletter](#)

---

Browse and share the [IFJ's campaign to free Julian Assange](#)

---

Donate to the [IFJ Safety Fund](#)

---

Browse [Journalists and the China Story - IFJ's China Portal](#)

---