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Defending Rights of Journalists & Freedom of Expression in South Asia



May 2023

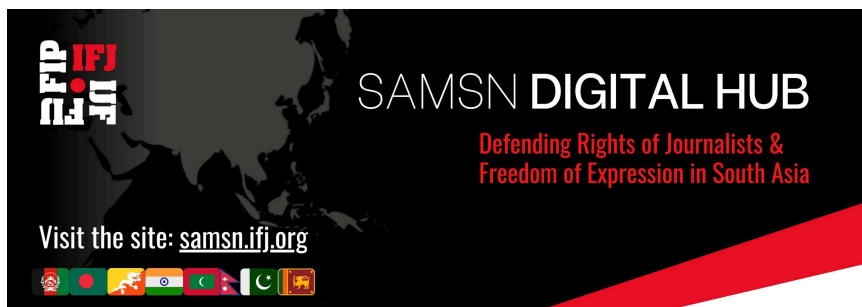
Welcome to the IFJ's monthly media bulletin for South Asia's Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN)



IFJ affiliates across the Asia-Pacific region mark World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2023, including events in the Maldives (MJA), Nepal (FNJ), Pakistan (PFUJ), Cambodia (CamboJA), and the Philippines (NUJP). Credit: Various

IN FOCUS

World Press Freedom Day: On World Press Freedom Day (WPF) on May 3, media unions, journalists, and media workers in South Asia, marked an important opportunity to reflect on the shifts to diverse media landscapes across the region, organise against attacks on media professionals and campaign for press freedom. On the day, the IFJ launched its 21st annual South Asia Press Freedom Report, documenting and analysing freedom of expression for media workers in the region. Several IFJ affiliates also released their own reports, including the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), which released its annual press freedom report highlighting 55 media rights violations recorded across the country, and obstructions to press freedom which emerged across Nepal's provincial and national elections in 2022. The Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association (SLWJA) reiterated calls for justice for the killings and disappearances of journalists across the island, presenting a research report to Sri Lanka's Inspector General of Police covering the significant challenges faced by journalists during the 2022 Galle Face Protests. The report emphasised the need for greater collaboration between law enforcement and the media. Other actions across the region included a protest by the Maldives Journalist Association (MJA), demanding stronger measures to ensure safety and security for journalists and an FNJ rally in Kathmandu, with a showing from the Honourable Rekha Sharma, Minister for Communication and Information Technology, who reaffirmed her commitment to a media-friendly legislative environment in Nepal. In Pakistan, affiliate unions of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) commemorated WPF with solidarity demonstrated between journalists, unions, and press clubs across the country. Events were held in Karachi, Islamabad, and other cities with journalists demanding safety amid rising media rights violations, improved working conditions, and security for journalists across Pakistan.



In this bulletin:

- **IFJ launches South Asia Press Freedom Report**
- **The nation-wide fight against India's media laws**
- **An independent commission for freedom of expression in Sri Lanka**
- **May Day rally in the Maldives**
- **IFJ evaluation consultation on NED Pakistan Project**
- **WMFP webinar for WPF**

The Region

IFJ releases South Asia Press Freedom Report: To mark World Press Freedom Day on May 3, the IFJ, on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSUN), released its 21st annual South Asia Press Freedom Report entitled *Pressure & Polarisation: Powering Media Resistance in South Asia*. The report explores the complex interface between power and the fundamental human rights of press freedom and freedom of expression across South Asia. According to IFJ monitoring in the period from May 1, 2022, to April 30, 2023, 257 media rights violations were recorded, including the targeting killings of 13 journalists and media workers. As many as 76 media professionals were jailed or detained, and at least 10 journalists remain behind bars. More than 163 journalists were assaulted, intimidated, and harassed, often by law enforcement. The SAPFR 22-23 analyses the impact of the collapse of traditional media and mass journalist layoffs in the region, demonstrating how media organisations and platforms have evolved to build sustainable media practices and deliver stories to a multi-faceted, diverse and increasingly digital audience. [Read the full report here.](#)



National Issues

Afghanistan: Freelance sports reporter Khairullah Parhar was released from prison on May 4, after being detained by Taliban authorities for four months. The journalist was arrested on January 9 by the General Directorate of Intelligence in Kabul. There has been no confirmation of the reason for Parhar's arrest and detention.

Bhutan: Rinzin Wangchuk, the President of the IFJ's affiliate, the Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB), said access to information for journalists in Bhutan has never been more difficult, which is why Bhutan's media freedom ranking has dropped so significantly: "When there is no access to information, there will be no media freedom."

Maldives: The proposed amendments to the Evidence Act regarding source disclosure provision disclosure were passed by the Judiciary Committee of the Maldives Parliament on April 21. The Maldives Journalists Association pushed for the Judiciary Committee to amend the law, so the High Court will refer to the Prosecutor General's Office's standards on deciding whether terrorism and national security-related cases are "proved on civil grounds". Prior to the amendment, courts had the power to compel journalists to disclose their sources in cases related to terrorism and national security.

Bangladesh: On April 26, the High Court granted a four-week interim bail to United News of Bangladesh special correspondent Jahangir Alam. The Hatirjheel police sub-inspector Al Amin filed a case against Jahangir and 20 other media workers under the Digital Security Act, accusing them of making derogatory comments against Bangladeshi politicians and authority figures, including founding president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

India: The first three months of 2023 saw an 18 per cent increase in cyberattacks since 2023, according to a Check Point report released on Friday 5 May. On average, there were 2,108 weekly attacks faced by organisations in India, where criminals were using AI tools, including ChatGPT, for code generation. The number of cyberattacks in India during this period was almost twice as much as the global number, which rose by 7 per cent since 2023 with an average of 1,248 attacks occurring per week.

Nepal: The participation of women journalists covering foreign affairs and security in Nepal is significantly low, a new report from Media Advocacy Group has found. The Study on the Status of Nepali Women Journalists Covering Foreign Affairs showed that just 13.3 per cent of women journalists cover political stories, and only 6.6 per cent report on foreign affairs and national security stories.

following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 9. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were ordered to be indefinitely blocked in various parts of the country. On May 10, Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) demonstrators [stormed the building](#) of state-owned Radio Pakistan in Peshawar and later set it on fire, resulting in the destruction of equipment, vehicles and archival recordings.

an Electronic Broadcasting Authority for radio and TV channels in a move to regulate the issuance of licences and increase the transparency of Sri Lankan broadcast media. Sri Lankan MP Dr. Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe said media institutions and other MPs will have the opportunity to review the Bill, affecting the 25 TV channels and 51 radio channels currently registered in the country.

Featured Action

The nation-wide fight against India's media laws: The National Union of Journalists, India (NUJI) [joined](#) seven organisations at the National Media Conference in Chandigarh on April 25. During the two-day event, the organisations and journalists joined forces to demand an amendment to India's Information Technology Act and the creation of the Journalists Protection Act in a nationwide movement. NUJI President Ras Bihari said he was happy to get the support of the Confederation to demand the enactment of a journalist protection law.

An independent commission for freedom of expression in Sri Lanka: After launching its report on the 2022 Galle Face protests, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) has [recommended](#) establishing an independent commission for the safeguarding of freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Media workers faced violence, harassment from law enforcement, and several challenges in relaying accurate and relevant information to the citizens during the protests in 2022. The Independent Commission recommended by the SLWJA would work to issue licences to media stations, register news publications and investigate media rights violations, among other functions.

May Day rally in the Maldives: The Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) joined teachers, health and tourism workers in a [protest](#) on May 2, calling for the implementation of an industrial rights framework in the Maldives. Journalists that took part in the May Day protest called for the "same protection under labour laws as other workers" in the country.

IFJ Blog

Freedom, Justice, Rights. These were the calls made by the IFJ and its Asia-Pacific affiliates on May 3, [World Press Freedom Day \(WPFJ\) 2023](#). Across the region, journalists and their representative bodies arranged a wide array of activities, calling on governments and media stakeholders to work to improve and support press freedom. [Read more here](#).



Members of the PFUJ participate in a rally on World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2023. Credit: PFUJ

IFJ At Work:

IFJ launches the Pakistan Media Labour Rights Bulletin: On April 20, the IFJ Asia-Pacific released its first [Pakistan Media Labour Rights Bulletin](#) for 2023. Supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the bulletin aims to highlight key cases and success stories, communicate industry developments and review progress on labour rights reform action.

IFJ evaluation consultation on NED Pakistan Project: On May 2, 2023, the IFJ's second evaluation consultation with participants from six partners was held at Hotel Mehran Karachi, to review and evaluate the progress of the IFJ's NED Pakistan project. Representatives from the IFJ, partner organisations such as Global Neighborhood for Media Innovation (GNMI), Women's Media Centre (WMC), Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), and Women's Media Forum, Pakistan (WMFP) attended the consultation. The event was a valuable opportunity to allow partners to reflect on the project's progress and identify areas for improvement.

WMFP webinar for WPFDD: On May 4, 2023, the WMFP held a webinar for World Press Freedom Day, focused on the inefficacy of labour laws in Pakistan and their effect on media workers, despite constitutional and legal frameworks. Speakers included Farhat Perveen, Executive Director of NOWCommunities and human rights defender and labour rights activist, Bushra Arain, President of All Lady Health Worker's Programme Union, and Sheher Bano, journalist and Vice President of the PFUJ. Participants asked the speakers important questions relating to the financial crisis in the media and the layoffs in the media industry in Pakistan.

From the media

Australian high commissioner to Bangladesh expresses support for strong media sector – [New Age Bangladesh](#)

Journalist arrested by Punjab cops after road accident gets bail – [NDTV](#)

Chief Minister condemns the arrest of journalist and cameraman in Punjab – [Times of India](#)

Journalist Sakshi Joshi alleges cops manhandled, tore her clothes at wrestlers' protest – [The News Minute](#)

'No journalist practicing fair journalism should be treated like this': Smriti Irani – [Times Now News](#)

Bangladesh's Digital Security Act was legislated ignoring journalists – [Asia News Network](#)

Stopping online misinformation on social media in Bangladesh – [Dhaka Tribune](#)
