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Defending Rights of Journalists &  
Freedom of Expression in South Asia



June 2023

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



Afghan women walk past Taliban security personnel along a street in Jalalabad on April 30, 2023. Credit: Shafiullah Kakar / AFP

## In Focus

**Afghanistan Media Woes Continue:** August will mark two years since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the imposition of numerous wide-ranging restrictions on the media. The IFJ's [South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-2023](#) documented 25 journalists arrested or detained between May 1, 2022, and April 30, 2023, with many still in custody. Press freedom advocates and colleagues from the French media have [continued](#) to raise concerns over the five-month detention of French-Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi, who was arrested in January on charges of alleged espionage. The [release](#) in early May of 23-year-old sports journalist Khairullah Parhar was welcome, however, the reasons for his arrest remain unclear. This month, concerns arose regarding Afghan-American journalist Ali Latifi, who has been unreachable since his May 18 detention in Kabul. He was reportedly [released](#) two days after his arrest. Women have continued to face gendered repression, as the Taliban's fundamentalist regime solidifies power. According to research from IFJ affiliate, the Afghanistan National Journalists Union, the financial woes faced by the nation's media sector have struck particularly hard across gendered lines, with over 80 per cent of women journalists losing their jobs, and a vast majority in need of financial support. Threats and intimidation of women journalists contribute to silencing their voices. Beyond the financial collapse of Afghanistan's media industry, the right to information has also taken a back seat. Subject to surveillance, harassment, and violence, many journalists [struggle](#) to operate. Self-censorship is rife, with many prospective interviewees scared to speak to journalists.



#### In this bulletin:

- Taliban rule sparks news shortage in Khost
- Developments for media laws across the region
- Misinformation research from JAB
- WMFP hold Twitter discussion on stress
- Al Jazeera reporter struck by water cannon in Sri Lanka
- IFJ-UTU project activities commence

## The Region

**Legislation and Lawfare:** Journalists across South Asia face a variety of legislative struggles, with new and existing laws threatening to undermine press freedom in a variety of contexts. This month, the IFJ recorded several developments across the region that may threaten freedom of expression if left unchecked. In May, a report by the Law Commission of India recommended retaining the provision for sedition under the nation's penal code, proposing the punishment be increased to life imprisonment, or seven years imprisonment and a fine. Despite government confirmation that the recommendations were only part of a broader government consultative legal process, the move has prompted concern from media stakeholders and freedom of speech advocates. In Sri Lanka, opposition political voices have expressed disapproval of the proposed Broadcasting Regulatory Commission Act, with discussions over legal action brewing. The new law would allow the establishment of a Broadcasting Regulatory Commission, with ex-officio and committee members directly appointed by the government. This new body would be responsible for issuing broadcasting licenses or investigating broadcasters suspected of promoting racist conflict or threatening national security, with powers to issue fines, search broadcasting premises, and cancel or suspend broadcasting licenses.

Bangladesh's long-criticised Digital Security Act (DSA) may see some change, with Law Minister Anisul Huq announcing on May 21 that some amendments will be brought to the act following a review, with the intention of minimising misuse of the bill and facilitating freedom of expression. At a discussion meeting at BRAC University in Dhaka, the minister said the Bangladeshi government was working with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reviewing its inputs to amend the DSA. Pakistan's National Assembly, on May 15, approved a Contempt of Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) Bill, 2023, in the face of opposition by the media and other stakeholders who contend that the proposed law threatens to constrict freedom of expression, especially from opponents of the government. The Bill, which awaits Senate approval to be enacted into law, prescribes six months' imprisonment, a fine of PKR 1 million or both, for anyone found guilty of "insulting the parliament".



Trainers and participants attend a gender-focused digital training session in Malé on June 11. Credit: Twitter

## National Issues

**Afghanistan:** Journalists in the southeastern province of Khost have raised concerns over content shortages amidst Taliban media restrictions. Several leaders for various news organisations in the province came forward urging the government to loosen its grip on media in Khost to promote easier access to information

**Bhutan:** Facebook is the main source of disinformation on social media in Bhutan, according to a survey conducted by the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB). More than 50 per cent of respondents to the survey said they also encountered disinformation on WeChat, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram and social media influencers.

**Maldives:** On June 8, the Maldives Journalist Association, with other organisations, held a digital safety training session, providing technical tips and tools for journalists to protect themselves online from cyber-attacks, bullying, harassment and silencing campaigns. The session was run by veteran Lebanese journalist and gender expert Myra Abdallah, and featured lectures and idea-sharing opportunities.

**Pakistan:** Law enforcement ordered more than 100 Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

**Bangladesh:** On May 17, at least 30 journalists were held in confinement for photographing and reporting on a clash between the Awami League and Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) in Barishal. A cameraperson involved in the incident said BCL supporters "hit our camera" before he and several other journalists were "locked in a room".

**India:** A Special Investigation Team (SIT) has found that land broker Pandharinath Amberkar deliberately killed journalist Shashikant Warishe. The journalist, known for his environmental journalism, had previously covered local opposition to a controversial oil refinery, and in one article had named Amberkar's role within the deal. Texts from Ambedkar to an agency staffer revealed that the broker had been deeply affected by the news reports and was conspiring to 'finish off someone' the day the article was published.

**Nepal:** Police detained two journalists on May 17 as they were reporting on a clash between police personnel and locals regarding the cross-border transport of goods. The journalists had their belongings confiscated and were held by police for two hours, before being released.

**Sri Lanka:** Al Jazeera reporter Minelle

to media reports, the Prevention of Violent Extremism Unit of the Counterterrorism Department blocked these accounts on May 31 and recommended an additional 97 accounts to be blocked for their involvement in “illegal activities, including sectarianism, anti-state, terrorism and anti-Islam.”

security personnel while covering a protest in Colombo on June 7. Protestors were demanding the release of people arrested during last year's protests. Fernandez and the media worker were uninjured and continued to report on the protests.

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## Featured Action

**FNJ pressures government to increase journalist minimum wage:** After years of advocacy by the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the Minimum Wages Fixation Committee (MWFC), established under the Working Journalists Act, has joined the organisation in urging the Nepali government to increase the minimum wage for journalists by 40 per cent, with immediate support from government ministers. On May 21, the Minimum Wages Fixation Committee (MWFC), including board member and FNJ President Bipul Pokharel, met with the Minister for Communication and Information Technology, Rekha Sharma, to discuss a report calling for a minimum wage increase for Nepali journalists.

**JAB host fact-checking workshops:** The Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) held a workshop on fact-checking on June 6, working with students from four different institutions in Bhutan. The workshop aimed to educate students on the importance of fact verification in an age of misinformation and disinformation.

**SLWJA present report on journalist safety to national authorities:** On June 5, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) launched a research report focusing on journalists' safety in Sri Lanka. The union delivered the report to the Ministry of Defence, the Sri Lanka Army, the Sri Lanka Navy and the Sri Lanka Air Force. The report primarily concentrated on the challenges that journalists faced during the 2022 Galleface Protests between March 30 and August 31.



Members of the SLWJA deliver a Report on Journalist Safety to representatives from Sri Lankan security and defense officials at the Ministry of Defense on June 5, 2023. Credit: SLWJA.

## IFJ Blog

Journalists and media workers in Pakistan continue to be silenced, harassed, and detained through several legal provisions. The historical and legal contexts behind these laws, however,

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## IFJ At Work:

**WMFP hold Twitter Space on Stress:** On June 10, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) held a Twitter Space discussion addressing issues around stress for journalists and media workers, with expert input from Karachi School of Business and Leadership lecturer and psychologist Falak Zehra Mohsin. During this 90-minute space, participants shared personal experiences and strategies, with Falak providing guidance on stress management techniques and concepts.

**IFJ and MJA to launch Trust in Media report:** The IFJ and the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) will this month launch a report detailing public opinion of the media. The report, titled 'Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in Maldivian Media', combines survey and media-stakeholder interview data to provide a comprehensive analysis of public perceptions of the media, including its reliability, consumption patterns, and its relation to Maldivian democracy, among other considerations.

**UTU work to commence:** The first stages of work have begun in the Asia-Pacific region under the IFJ's global Union to Union (UTU) program for 2023-2025, strengthening journalists' trade unions worldwide to improve the labour and professional rights of media workers and promote media freedom. The program is narrowing its focus in 2023, working with selected IFJ affiliates in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines in a multi-stage process to foster strong, independent, democratic unions that have a sustainable institutional capacity as well as being effective in organising, bargaining collectively, and campaigning.

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## From the media

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The Difficulties of a Woman Journalist's Work Under Taliban – [Women's ENews](#)

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Prothom Alo receives two prizes at the Global Media Awards – [Prothom Alo](#)

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Meet Kashmiri journalist Yasmeen Khan who is inspiring change in Indian society – [ANI News](#)

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Technology facilitated gender-based violence and journalists in India – [Feminism in India](#)

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India is the world's largest democracy, but it isn't a healthy one, journalist Rana Ayyub argues – [WBUR](#)

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Will AI replace the human insight of journalism? – [First India](#)

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Data protection bill to drive deep behavioural changes for platforms exploiting data: Rajeev Chandrasekhar – [Economic Times](#)

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Hey Bot! Give me a headline – [Dawn](#)

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TikTok: The new frontier for political info-wars – [Dawn](#)

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Sri Lanka trying new ways to suppress media? – [News First](#)

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**International Federation of Journalists  
Asia-Pacific Regional Office (APRO)**  
245 Chalmers Street  
Redfern, NSW, 2016  
Australia

Contact IFJ Asia-Pacific:  
[www.ifj.org/regions/asia-pacific](http://www.ifj.org/regions/asia-pacific)

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