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Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia



October 2023

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



Media professionals hold a candlelight vigil outside the Mumbai Press Club on October 5 protesting the arrests and raids against former and current NewsClick staff and journalists. Credit: Indranil Mukherjee / AFP

In Focus

Arrests, raids, and seizures from unsubstantiated claims: Independent Indian media outlet NewsClick has been at the centre of a targeted government and police campaign, founded on claims that it had accepted foreign funding to produce 'anti-national' coverage. On October 3, at least 46 journalists, media workers, and outlet staff were questioned by police, with at least 30 homes and the outlet's office raided by law enforcement. Digital devices were seized sans protocol, severely compromising both personal and professional privacy. On October 5, ten journalists were questioned for over five hours. Founder and editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha and administrative officer Amit Chakraborty were both arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act on the evening of October 3, with the pair sent to a ten-day judicial remand on October 10. Notably, police have so far failed to produce the First Information Report (FIR) responsible for their arrest, a violation of Indian law. The case is based on allegations, first published in an August New York Times article, that NewsClick was one of several global publications that had accepted Chinese funding to produce 'anti-national', disruptive, or other false narratives between 2018 and 2021. On October 13, the IFJ joined Human Rights Watch and 10 other international human rights and press freedom groups to condemn the misuse of an abusive counterterrorism law, financial regulations, and other laws to silence journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and critics of the government in India.



In this bulletin:

- **SLWJA petition against controversial bill**
- **First Bhutan press club formally launched**
- **FNJ continue to fight for exploited Kantipur staff**
- **IFJ launch survey of youth for Decent Work day**
- **Arshad Sharif proceedings halted following prosecution failures**

The Region

As the world marked the International Day for Universal Access to Information on September 28, journalists continue to face restrictions, repression, and a growing distance from authorities. A survey by the Afghanistan National Journalists Union (ANJU) reveals a sharp decline in access to information since the suspension of the 2014 Access to Information Law in August 2021, with 97 per cent of journalists feeling it's not treated as civil liberty and 88 per cent dissatisfied with government responses. In Nepal, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) stressed, alongside a panel of experts, that free and uninterrupted access to information should be upheld as an emblem of good governance. Their sentiments were echoed in India, where the Indian Journalists Union (IJU) urged both national and state governments to ensure journalists and media workers can carry out their duties without fear of reprisal, in the wake of increasing crackdowns and a conflict between the right to information and the recently enacted Digital Data Protection Act, 2023. In Sri Lanka, Verité Research found that despite a legal commitment to upholding universal access in its Right To Information Act, over 75 per cent of public officials and authorities failed to disclose information adequately.

National Issues

Afghanistan: In a survey of nearly 400 journalists released on September 28, the Afghan Independent Journalists Union (AIJU) found that nearly 74 per cent of journalists believe access to information has been restricted, with over 44 per cent stating this creates space for propaganda. On the same day, the Afghanistan Journalists Center published an investigative analysis of 13 Taliban directives impacting the fundamental human right, in the context of broadening media legislation, restrictions, and self-censorship.

Bhutan: The Thimphu Press Club was formally inaugurated on October 3, in a ceremony attended by journalists and media workers, Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, German and Austrian lawmakers, and representatives from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for

Bangladesh: Civil society, members of the press, and rights activists in Bangladesh have condemned reports of a possible policy likely to be adopted by United States (US) authorities to impose restrictions on journalists and media workers attempting to attain a US visa. During a televised interview, US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas mentioned possible restrictions against media personnel, in a broader push to restrict immigration for Bangladeshi citizens seen to undermine the democratic election process.

India: India's Supreme Court observed on September 15 that attempting to arrest members of the Editors Guild of India would be 'egregious', following the publication of a First Information Report (FIR) lodged against the Guild

will serve as a professional forum and space for discussion.

Maldives: Opposition candidate Mohamed Muizzu has emerged as the Maldives' president-elect, following the conclusion of run-off polls on September 30. Allegedly committed to press freedom, Muizzu, a mentee of former President Abdulla Yameen, has espoused the importance of restoring Maldivian-Chinese relations. Muizzu will be inaugurated on November 17.

Pakistan: An Islamabad district and sessions court has stopped proceedings in the investigation of the killing of news anchor and journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya in 2020, following a 'lack of interest' from the prosecution. Following the March 16 launch of the proceedings, witnesses were first directed to appear in April. The court approved ultimately unsuccessful non-bailable warrants against the slain journalist's wife and producer in September. In a written decision, Judicial Magistrate Abbas Shah has filed the murder case to a record room, citing over 15 opportunities given to the prosecution to produce their witnesses.

Justice of India, DY Chandrachud, extended protection from arrest to the journalists named in the FIR, questioning claims that a report produced by the Guild promoted enmity between communities.

Nepal: Nepali Minister for Communications and Information Technology Rekha Sharma announced in an October 9 press conference government plans to introduce further social media regulations. At a media training event, Sharma called on journalists to refrain from publishing any material capable of impacting social harmony or cohesion.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka's Public Security Minister Tiran Alles has agreed to hold broader consultation with media organisations, opposition political parties, and rights activists following the controversial October 2 tabling of the proposed Online Safety Bill. The IFJ, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the Free Media Movement, and the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions condemned the legislation's potential to impact freedom of expression and called for an immediate review.



Participants take part in an IFJ-supported training session addressing the professional rights of women in Pakistani media in Islamabad on October 11. Credit: Twitter

IFJ At Work

WMFP discuss daycare in media: The Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) held a discussion on October 8 highlighting the importance of gender-focused workplace benefits

workplace, and the importance of advocacy in achieving gender equality in press clubs, unions and media outlets.

IFJ launch youth survey for decent work: Commemorating World Day for Decent Work, the IFJ [launched](#) a global survey on October 7, designed to address the needs of young media workers in its affiliates and beyond. The survey is [available](#) in English, French, and Spanish, and is open to all journalists and media professionals under the age of 35.

Pakistan partner holds gender & labour rights training session: IFJ Pakistan project partner Individualland [held](#) a training session in Islamabad on October 11, focusing on the professional rights of women in Pakistan's media industry. The session, titled 'Labour Rights of Women in Media' and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy under the IFJ's Pakistan program, focused on issues of harassment, maternity benefits, and gaps in existing labour legislation in a participatory learning environment.

IFJ Blog

Widespread protests in 2022 have had a galvanising effect on Sri Lanka's political landscape, with journalists continuing to face violence, state repression and threats to fundamental freedoms seen at the height of unrest. Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) Executive Committee member Amandika Cooray shares her experience of protest, struggle, and unionism., [writes](#) Amandika Cooray



Participants attend a workshop at the FMETU's offices in Colombo on October 9, designed a National Action Plan for implementation in 2024-25. Credit: Facebook

Featured Actions

SLWJA petition Supreme Court on controversial bill: The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), Chair Duminda Sampath, former president Lasantha Ruhunage and current treasurer [filed](#) a Fundamental Rights Petition in the Supreme Court on October 3, challenging the recently tabled Online Safety Bill on grounds of risks to constitutional rights. The petition [cites](#) the legislation's disproportionate punishments, overly broad powers, ill-defined language, and establishment of a partial regulatory authority as potential dangers to press freedom and freedom of expression.

FMETU hold workshop under global IFJ project: On October 9, the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), [conducted](#) a full-day workshop to design their national

increase union benefits, create better representation among marginalised groups, and increase online advocacy.

FNJ host discussion with fired Kantipur workers: The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) hosted a discussion with journalists and media workers employed at the Kantipur Media Group after several employees were illegally fired from the media outlet. The FNJ reports that at least 68 journalists, all without formal letters of employment, had their contracts terminated on the eve of national holidays Dashain and Tihar. The journalists and media workers have demanded that all unjustly terminated employees be reinstated and that overdue wages be paid.

From the media

Social media urged to act on violent content after Hamas attack - [The Guardian](#)

The role of the press council in the digital age – [The ANNAPURNA express](#)

Navigating biases, power dynamics and media integrity – [The Daily Star](#)

India's war on journalism on 'POV' – [The Republic](#)

Media self-regulation crucial for sustainable journalism – [The Business Standard](#)

AI and journalism: What's next? – [Reuters Institute](#)

Why DDoS attacks are a serious threat to media freedom – [DW](#)

Data illiteracy, skills poverty, no access to info main obstacles to investigative journalism - [NewAge](#)

Zainab Abbas not deported, left India for personal reasons: ICC – [Dawn](#)

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