

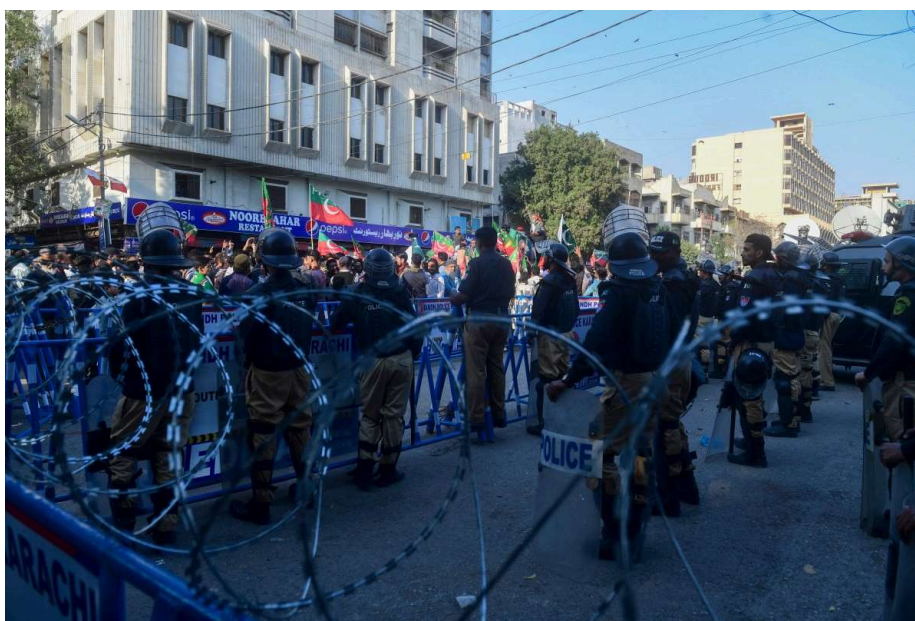
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Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia

SOUTH ASIA BULLETIN

February 2024

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



Political activists associated with the Pakistan- Tehreek-e-Insaf party demonstrate in Karachi on February 12, 2024, protesting perceived election fraud. Credit: Asif Hassan / AFP

In Focus

Media freedoms under attack during Pakistan election: Pakistan's recent elections have presented challenges to freedom of information and seen violence and legal threats directed towards journalists, with attacks by terror groups killing dozens. Electoral violence before the polls was seen in Karachi, with a PTI rally on January 28 seeing clashes between activists and police, during which EK News journalist Mohammad Salman, Geo News media worker Altaf Hussain, ARY News reporter Afzal Pervez were assaulted, while Suno News cameraperson Ahmar Abbas was attacked, and had his camera was damaged. In Balochistan, police registered a First Information Report against Daily Azadi correspondent Masood Ahmed Lehri on January 21 for his coverage of a political rally in Khuzdar. Prior to the opening of the polls, ensorship concerns rose following directions, reportedly from representatives from Pakistan's armed forces, to avoid displaying any Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party logos or flags next to independent candidates, after they were banned in December. Access to investigative digital news outlet FactFocus was restricted on February 3, allegedly for its circulations of 'anti-national' or enmity-provoking sentiments. When the polls did open on February 8, a government order restricted all telecommunications and mobile internet services nationally, with restrictions in Balochistan beginning from February 5. The closures occurred despite claims by caretaker Information Minister Murtaza Solangi on February 5 that service would not be compromised, and the Sindh High Court order directing the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) to ensure uninterrupted internet access. Previous nationwide disruptions on December 17, January 7, and January 20, had been criticised as coinciding with PTI events.



In this bulletin:

- **Legislation threatens media across South Asia**
- **Hate monitors restricted in India**
- **IFJ Pakistan project continued**
- **FNJ hold central committee meeting**
- **Global unions call for action on Gaza**

The Region

Across the region, proposed legislation affecting the digital and traditional media spheres continues to inspire deep concern for the future of South Asian media. In India, the draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023, designed to regulate online content, has been criticised for its overly broad wording in its crackdown on, potential to encourage a monopolised media, and for the broad powers given to the central government and government appointed-regulators. AccessNow has identified the bill's potential to encourage self-censorship, with submissions open from December 2023. A Bombay High Court challenge to the controversial 2023 amendments to the Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Rules, 2021 resulted in a split verdict on January 31, with critics identifying the law and its government-centred fact-checking as contrary to press freedom. The bill will be subject to the ruling of a third Judge for adjudication. In Sri Lanka, the widely-criticised online safety bill passed on January 24, with the bill allowing a five-person, government-appointed commission to decide on the illegality of online content, with hefty punishments for posters and platform owners. The bill fails to meet widely-held human rights standards, is highly susceptible to arbitrary and subjective definitions of offences, is vulnerable to abuse, and was not crafted with consultation from unions or media stakeholders. As of February 13, Sri Lankan authorities have claimed to intend to amend the bill. In Nepal, a new bill would abolish public welfare advertisements if passed, with over NPR 317,000,000, or USD 2,356,147, at risk across both digital and print media.



Gaza Media Update - November 2023

Since January 15, five journalists and media workers have been killed by Israeli airstrikes, bombardments, and snipers, bringing the total number of slain journalists to 95 since October 7. This month, the IFJ, alongside global unions signed a joint letter calling on the international community to ensure the landmark International Court of Justice (ICJ)'s ruling on January 26 is upheld. On February 6, members of the IFJ, National Union of Journalists, and Palestinian Journalists' Syndicates held a protest in Brussels, asking EU institutions to take action against the killing of journalists and media workers in Gaza. The IFJ has been working closely with its affiliate, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), to provide material assistance to journalists in Gaza. The IFJ and the PJS published a safety advisory in English and Arabic for journalists, while the IFJ's Safety Fund has paid for medical kits, equipment battery packs, and direct financial assistance. Donate to the IFJ safety fund here.

National Issues

Afghanistan: Ehsanullah Akbari, the assistant bureau chief of the Japan-based media outlet the Kyodo News Outlet Akbari was arrested by members of the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) on January 17 before his release on January 25, with his equipment seized. In a separate incident, Garhdesht Ettalaat News Agency director Abdulhaq Hamidi and owner Admad Javad Rasouli were summoned, then detained by the GDI on January 18.

Bhutan: Research by the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) has sparked calls for greater media literacy initiatives after a new study revealed that social media usage in the Himalayan country has risen to nearly three hours daily, higher than the global average. In an interview with multiple civil society organisations, including the BMF, the growing impact of generative Artificial Intelligence, rising mis/disinformation, and a lack of existing capacity were identified as barriers to media literacy.

Maldives: On January 22, the Human Rights Council of the Maldives and the Maldives Media Council held a meeting to analyse the context behind the recent Presidential elections and share recommendations for gaps identified through the recent electoral process. A recent European Union report found that the ruling People's National Congress had

Bangladesh: Bangladeshi officials have claimed to develop an online advertising policy that may allow government advertising for digital media outlets. The move comes following a meeting between Bangladeshi information, broadcasting, and publications officials on February 6. State Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mohammad Ali Arafat stressed the importance of an established policy outlining advertising online government rates.

India: Hate speech monitors 'Hindutva Watch' and 'India Hate Lab' have been made inaccessible online in India, following communications from Indian telecommunications officials under the controversial Information Technology (IT) Act from January 29. The platforms, founded by United States-based Kashmiri journalist Raqib Hameed Naik, come two weeks after Indian authorities ordered X to limit the projects' accounts accessibility in the Union, and months before parliamentary elections in 2024.

Nepal: The Nepal Press Union (NPU) has called on Nepali authorities to take definitive action to raise the salary of working journalists. Following NPU meetings with Nepali communications authorities in early February, President Shiv Lamsal has reiterated the needs of working journalists, and criticised the failure of authorities to include public

influenced the electoral process.

Pakistan: A new study by the nongovernmental organisation Freedom Network and a civil society, academic, and digital media consortium, the Coalition Against Disinformation, has revealed high rates of perceived disinformation targeting university students. In a study of over 1,000 students across Pakistan, over 60% of respondents felt they encountered online disinformation daily, with 80% of respondents thinking that social media was its most common source.

Sri Lanka: The Sri Lankan Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), and the Free Media Movement (FMM), alongside four other media collectives, released a joint statement on February 9 condemning recent comments made by Member of Parliament D. Weerasinghe made regarding a January 28 Sunday Lankadeepa article. Weerasinghe claimed the article, which reported on opposition criticism of the controversial Online Safety Bill, had 'violated' parliamentary privilege.



Participants and trainers from the IFJ's leadership training program in Islamabad, Multan, and Quetta. Credit: IFJ

IFJ At Work

IFJ continue Pakistan Labour Rights program: The IFJ has been granted a new project in Pakistan, 'Promoting Labour Rights, Gender Equality and Freedom of Association in Pakistan's Media', supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. The program will run through 2024-2025. The project will continue the IFJ's campaign for labour rights in Pakistan's media, gender equality, and press freedom, granting greater attention to the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) gender collective, union institutional strengthening and industrial support.

WMFP shares election stories, reporting guidelines: On February 3, over 130 participants took part in a Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) X space discussion, days before the commencement of Pakistan's national presidential elections. A discussion hosted by the WMFP regional and national coordinators, provided insight on reporting tips, issues to look out for, and safety considerations for journalists, with a specific emphasis on gendered experiences of violence and safety risks.

IFJ Blog

The horrific death toll among Gaza's journalists has become a familiar headline. Ten per cent of the enclave's media workers have been killed since 7 October – a mortality rate significantly in excess of combat soldiers in most wars. Less well-known are the privations of those of Gaza's journalists who continue to work, and – since the exclusion of international reporters from the enclave – are the only source of news from Gaza. Read the full blog [here](#).

~~The Central Committee meeting held~~ **held** a Central Committee meeting at the Federation's office, commencing preparations for the FNJ's 27th congress later this year. At the meeting, union representatives called on government officials to increase the consultation process for media-related bills and adopt greater support measures for the media industry, as well as criticising the Kantipur Media Group for their failure to abide by an earlier agreement.

AIJU launches regional survey: The Afghanistan Independent Journalists Union (AIJU) was launched a survey, with assistance from the United National Education, Science and Cultural Office (UNESCO), gathering information on the nation's embattled media industry. The survey was launched following an online training session, wherein provincial AIJU leaders and representatives were trained on research and surveying best practices.

From the media

TikTok in commitment letter to Nepal, says ready to follow Nepal's laws - [OnlineKhabar](#)

Helpline launched for redressal of journalists' complaints – [The Nation](#)

Sri Lanka's online regulations highlight restrictions sweeping South Asia – [Nikkei Asia](#)

Media Matters for Democracy launches 'Factor' – [MediaMatters](#)

Pakistan's Network Of Women Journalists For Digital Rights Demand Accountability – [Friday Times](#)

100 Journalists Sign Agenda For Inclusion Of Media, Digital Rights In Party Manifesto – [Voice PK](#)

The Vitalisation of Hindu Nationalism in Nepal and Social Media as a Tool of Pro-Hindutva Propaganda Overseas – [Global Network on Extremism and Technology](#)

India to replace troops in Maldives with civilians by May - [Reuters](#)

TAKE ACTION

Read UNESCO's [AI Policy Brief](#)

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Register for the [East-West Center's International Media Conference](#)

Sign up for the Advocacy Assembly's [Shutdown Academy](#).

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