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**Defending Rights of Journalists &
Freedom of Expression in South Asia**

ASIA BULLETIN

May 2024

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



Newly elected members of the Pakistan's Punjab Assembly in Lahore take oaths on February 23, 2024. Credit: Arif Ali / AFP

In Focus

Freedom of expression under attack in Pakistan: The past 30 days have seen new legislation and actions by authorities threaten Pakistani freedom of expression, with reports published in local media claiming further internet restrictions are to come. On June 10, acting Punjab Governor Malik Muhammad Ahmad Khan, in power after the previously acting Governor Malik Ahmad Khan left for Dubai, signed and approved the controversial Punjab Defamation bill into law. On May 20, the Provincial Assembly had ratified the legislation, with protests and condemnations from major political parties, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and more than 80 civil society organisations in the aftermath. The bill has been criticised for its broadly worded provisions that could impose hefty fines and suspend social media accounts or media platforms for content deemed defamatory, with all cases to be tried within 6 months of a complaint. The bill has already been challenged via a petition registered in the Lahore High Court, with Justice Muhammad Amjad Rafiq ordering on June 11 the partial non-enforcement of the bill until a decision on the petition was made. In an unrelated incident, on June 5, Pakistan's Supreme Court issued notices to 34 news channels, with Chief Justice Qazi Faiz Isa seeking a response to the airing of press conferences featuring comments criticising the judiciary. The coincides with directions from the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) asking news outlets to refrain from airing 'irresponsible' coverage of ongoing court cases until a final verdict is reached. Meanwhile, several media outlets have reported plans by authorities to install a national firewall system designed to regulate social media platforms, set to operate through Internet Service Providers who could to control and filter social media data, identify and block possible 'propaganda' and restrict access to prohibited content. Facebook, YouTube and X, which have remained partially banned since the February 8 elections.



In this bulletin:

- IFJ union leadership ToT in Sri Lanka
- Maldives commemorate WPF, launch reports
- IFJ to assemble global youth media group
- Calls for transparency in Maldives killings
- Global unions show Palestinian solidarity



From May 26-30, the IFJ held a ToT in Sri Lanka. Credit: Supplied / IFJ

The Region

Historic Sri Lankan ToT held: From May 26-30, the IFJ brought together 16 leaders, activists, and unionists from the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), Free Media Movement Trade Union (FMMTU), Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association (SLWJA), and the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) for a 5-day Union Leadership and Organising Training of Trainers outside Colombo, the first Training of Trainers held on the island in over a decade. Over the course of the sessions, participants built their skills in building stronger and more effective unions in a collaborative learning environment. Exercises included setting union priorities for leadership around key issues, developing activists and leaders within membership, and implementing leadership and organising practices to ensure that member inputs, concerns, and activism are central to a union future. The training will be followed up by national training sessions run by attendees and their unions, designed to share lessons learnt and best practices. The session builds off training sessions in 2023 in Pakistan and Maldives, with a future training session to occur in late June. The session was funded by the Norsk Journalistlag and the Swedish trade union movement operating as Union To Union.

Gaza Media Update - June 2024

missing, or disabled. On May 21, the Israeli government [seized equipment](#) belonging to the Associated Press, citing a new bill used weeks before to shut down the domestic office of Qatari broadcaster Al-Jazeera. In the West Bank, freelancer Saif Al-Qawasmī and at least 17 other journalists were [injured](#) on June 5 after participants in a right-wing ultra-nationalist rally attacked onlookers, while journalist Amr Manasra was [hit](#) by live bullet shrapnel fired by the Israeli army on May 21. From May 28–30, IFJ Deputy General Secretary Tim Dawson joined a contingent including eight Global Union Federations and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to Ramallah, [conveying](#) a message of support and solidarity to workers and their unions in Palestine. The IFJ and the PJS [published](#) a safety advisory in English and Arabic for journalists and have [opened](#) Media Solidarity Centres across Gaza, 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](#).



A crowd of people at an ultra-nationalist and violent rally attack freelance journalist Saif Al-Qawasmī in the West Bank on June 5. Credit: PJS

National Issues

Afghanistan: On June 6, Taliban officers [stormed](#) the offices of broadcaster Tamadon TV, announcing plans that the news service would be stopped from broadcasting at an unspecified later date. The Ministry of Justice justified the order in a letter to the outlet, that alleges links to a banned political party and that its location was on land the Taliban claims belongs to them. The outlet had previously been [raided](#) in February 2023 for its broadcast of Iranian shows.

Bhutan: From June 9–17, the Bhutan Media Foundation [held](#) the first Bloggers Conference of Bhutan. The conference will bring together 19 content creators and influencers from five countries and seven local content creators to tell the stories of

Bangladesh: Journalists and media workers [boycotted](#) speeches by Bangladesh Bank Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder at a post-budget press conference at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium on June 7. The move is in [response](#) to restrictions on the access of journalists to the Bangladesh Bank, instated following a [directive](#) from Talukder in April, with the governor sitting in silence through the entire session.

India: Three journalists working for The Caravan have been [asked](#) to join an investigation against themselves after they had been named in a 2020 First Information Report (FIR), which was launched days after a 2020 assault their own FIR. Journalists Prabhjit Singh, Shahid Tantray, and a female

outlet Kuensel [supported](#) a discussion with prominent blogger Yeshey Dorji at the Thimphu Press Club.

Maldives: On May 17, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) [held](#) commemorations of World Press Freedom Day, or Noosveri Salla, launching the groundbreaking joint IFJ-MJA report '[Media Mirror, Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media](#)', as well as English and Dhivehi translations of the Maldives chapter of the 22nd annual South Asia Press Freedom report.

Pakistan: Journalists have come under fire in Pakistan, with three journalists killed since May 15. On May 16, senior Pakistani journalist Mehar Ashfaq Siyal was [fatally](#) shot by unknown assailants while travelling to Muzaffargarh, Punjab. On May 21, Kamran Dawar, an independent journalist, was [gunned](#) down outside his home in Tappi, North Waziristan district. Sindh journalist Nasrullah Gadani was shot multiple times on May 21 before dying of his injuries on May 24.

communal enmity. Media advocacy groups have accused the move of being retaliatory.

Nepal: On May 26, the Nepali Media Council Bill was [tabled](#) at a National Assembly meeting by the Minister for Communications and Information Technology Rekha Sharma. If passed, the bill would reform the existing Press Council, with Sharma claiming the bill would promote a stronger and autonomous media regulatory body. The Minister said the Bill was required for the development and promotion of fair, independent and accountable journalism through self-regulation.

Sri Lanka: On May 25, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) [held](#) the first in a series of workshops highlighting key techniques and strategies to identify and prevent the spread of disinformation. The session was supported by the Hashtag Generation, and held in the central-western city of Yatiyantota.

IFJ At Work

IFJ to launch world youth group: The IFJ will [close](#) calls for nominations for a formal World Group of Young Media Workers, with nominations from affiliates across the globe to be assessed at the pending meeting of the Federation on June 20-21 in London. The group builds of work by IFJ affiliates in the western Balkans, with this global network to build best practices in engaging young workers and fighting for better conditions, wages, and rights at work.

WMFP hold space on Defamation Law: The Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) [held](#) an online discussion on the 2024 Punjab Defamation Bill on May 31, with speakers stressing the bill's dangers for both journalists and social media users. The experts Fariha Aziz, security expert and trainer, and co-founder and director of [Bolo Bhi](#) and journalist Munazza Siddiqui, journalist with Geo News highlighted the bill's legal risks, and clarified concerns from the audience.



Speakers at a Nepal Press Union seminar on media legislation sit on May 17, 2024. Credit: Facebook

Featured Actions

NPU organise media law amendment discussions: On May 17, the Nepal Press Union (NPU) organised a seminar, with support from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, on the impact of proposed amendments to media legislation on Nepal and how they would impact journalists' working conditions. NPU representatives stressed the distinct risks of new and existing legislation in undermining press freedom, and argued that all three levels of government had enacted policies contrary to press freedom.

PFUJ Protests Impunity in Sindh: The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) issued a call to protest across Sindh on June 8 against the murders of journalists Nasrullah Gadani in Mirpur Mathelo, Ghotki District, Sindh, who was killed in May 2024 and Jan Mohammad Mahar, Sukkur, Sindh who was killed in August 2023.

AIJU advocate for media funding, outreach: On June 1, journalists, media workers, and representatives from the Afghanistan Independent Journalists Union (AIJU) held discussions with the Taliban-led Ministry of Information and Culture in the northern Jowzjan province, and advocated for increased funding for the media. Similar discussions occurred in Badghis, with AIJU calling for greater relations between the Taliban and local media.

From the media

More than half of us globally are now living through a freedom of expression crisis [LINK](#)

UNESCO South Asia Celebrates Journalism in the face of the Environmental Crisis [LINK](#)

AI in investigative journalism: mapping the field [LINK](#)

Over 80 civil society bodies, journalists reject 'draconian and regressive' Punjab Defamation Bill [LINK](#)

Reports on journalists' murder case contain highly sensitive material, will publish redacted reports by month-end: DDCOM [LINK](#)

PODCAST: Are journalists becoming 'lazy' with easy access to information? [LINK](#)

Freedom of expression in 'crisis'? India ranked below war-stricken Palestine, restive Congo at 123: Report [LINK](#)

Doordarshan Kisan unveils first government TV channel with new AI anchors 'Krish' and 'Bhoomi' [LINK](#)

TAKE ACTION

Apply for a [humanitarian grant with Action Against Hunger](#)

Apply for [Executive Director role at the Journalists Association of Bhutan](#)

Apply for the [Asia-Europe Foundation's AI Training Workshop](#)

Apply for the [Earth Journalism Network's Gendered Climate Change Reporting grant](#)

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

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

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