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# SOLIDARITY AND SURVIVAL: THE STORY OF SOUTH ASIA

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The full IFJ South Asia Press Freedom Report 2021-22 is available at:

<https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR21-22>

PDFs of country chapters are also available for download from each country page

The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2021 to April 2022.

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**Editor:** Laxmi Murthy

**Executive Editor:** Jane Worthington

**Designed by:** LX9 Design

Special thanks to:

Deepak Acharya  
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Emily Beck  
Ras Bhatti  
Simran Chuges  
Santini Chandimal  
Sangeeta Chakrabarti  
Blanca Chakrabarti  
Sahana Gupta  
Sahana Indori  
Khanzaman Kamal  
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Huzaylah Malikadi  
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Shreya Raman

Malavika Rajkumar  
Abulhadi Rehsid  
Quratulain Reibar  
Adnan Reimat  
Ali Rizkian  
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Lashmita de Silva  
Azeem Ahmad Bassal  
Azeem Rehaman  
Ihtesham Hafeez  
Binay Wangdech  
Frank De Zoysa

SAPFR Editorial Review Panel  
2022:  
Hana Ibrahim  
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Cover Photo: Afghans residing in India protest the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan outside the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) office in New Delhi on August 23, 2021. Access South Asia displays of international solidarity marked a collective denigration of Afghanistan's new regime. CREDIT: SAJJAD HUSSAIN / AFP

Inside cover: In Jammu and Kashmir, clashes between militants and Indian government forces meant journalists reporting in the field faced increased risks of violence, either caught in the crossfire or targeted directly for their work. CREDIT: MUSEEF MUSTAFA / AFP  
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## FOREWORD

Two decades of intensive development and immense financial investment in Afghanistan's democracy seemed to collapse like a house of cards before the world's eyes in August 2021 as the country fell into the hands of the Taliban.

With that calamitous fall, so too crumbled thousands of media careers, the hopes and personal sacrifice of a nation of passionate and committed men and women journalists, media unions and other advocates and activists for freedom of expression.

In the frenzy of those first few days after the Taliban marched into Kabul, and as media support organisations like the IFJ and so many others tried vainly to help support and evacuate a seemingly endless legion of devastated and terrified media workers, came the inevitable thoughts. How could this happen? How can so much work, so much time, suddenly amount to so little?

The steady march of the Taliban across the country in the months preceding, taking out media with it, sending journalists fleeing, was surely a sign of what was to come as soon the US ended its mission? And yet most were unprepared.

With a world weary from the Covid-19 pandemic and of a mission that had become politically unpalatable, stepping away from Afghanistan might have seemed a simple task to some.

But it wasn't. And for the sake of our Afghan media colleagues, it can never be.

The bitter irony is that this tragedy for press freedom unfolded during the 20th year of the IFJ's South Asia Press Freedom Report – a report that launched this organisation's hopes for a new media dawn in that country. Let us never forget that this is an industry that had propelled itself at light speed to become a thriving and vibrant example of the capabilities of journalism to shine light and empower so many.

So, it is fitting then that this year's South Asia Press Freedom Report, *Strength and Solidarity: The Story of South Asia*, documents the challenges of our Afghan colleagues as they faced their professional reckoning. It also tells the story about the importance of solidarity in times of need.

In other countries too, there is fierce resistance. Right now, our

colleagues in Sri Lanka are immersed in the immense political protests against the economic crisis in that country. In Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan and India, our colleagues are standing united to stop aggressive controls and clampdowns on digital media and press freedom – and they are winning important cases against difficult odds.

During this time of pandemic and hypervigilant governance, we've seen more violations against the media – 212 recorded by the IFJ, including 23 journalist lives lost. And we've also witnessed the propensity of governments and the state to pursue journalists into silence through intimidation, interrogation, detentions and arrests. In the period, IFJ recorded 131 cases of journalists detained or jailed in South Asia, a dramatic increase on the 63 arrests recorded this time last year. As we publish, 30 journalists remain behind bars.

This year we look at the big issues for South Asia – the outcomes for journalists in exile, the battle being waged to keep the digital space open and, importantly, the way that media is transforming and growing out of the ravages of the pandemic to find sustainability and new ways of telling the stories of this diverse region.

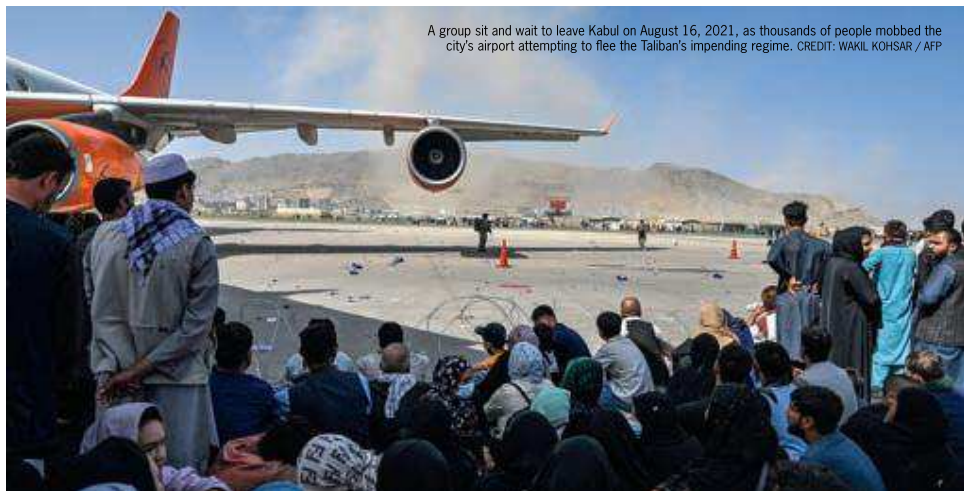
Importantly, across our region, journalists are standing together to fight for survival in uncertain times. Each country report details the specific challenges and the vigorous responses being led by brave journalists.

Nowhere is more uncertain than Afghanistan, where three quarters of media houses have closed, where women have been pushed out of their profession and thousands of media workers rendered jobless, homeless and also stateless. And yet, there remain journalists and their unions prepared to fight on, to stand up and negotiate a future for media.

As media defenders and defenders of our right to free expression, Afghanistan is a critical story of South Asia that we have a responsibility to tell.

**Jane Worthington**

Director, IFJ Asia-Pacific



A group sit and wait to leave Kabul on August 16, 2021, as thousands of people mobbed the city's airport attempting to flee the Taliban's impending regime. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP



As Sri Lanka grapples with its worst economic crisis in memory, demonstrations in Colombo and across the Island have demanded the government's resignation. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

## OVERVIEW

# BEARING WITNESS

South Asia witnessed major political and economic upheaval this past year, even as the region was slowly emerging from the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. While 23 journalists lost their lives and others were subjected to more than 60 attacks by the police, armed militia, vigilante mobs, politicians, local mafia and others, the broader political events continued to impact the security of journalists and their ability to carry out their professional duties.

From the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, to the massive democratic protests against the Sri Lankan government that led the country into its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948, the media in South Asia has borne witness to some watershed moments in history, taking severe beatings but also standing strong to speak truth to power.

Afghanistan endured the grimmest of periods, with the hasty withdrawal of NATO troops in the country after two decades of war, accompanied by the inexorable takeover of the country by the Taliban, province by province, leading up to the eventual capitulation of Kabul on August 15, 2021. While targeted killings of journalists in the country declined, routine harassment, intimidation and even torture of independent media have continued unabated. Unsurprisingly, job losses have been dire. At particular risk are those journalists belonging to minority communities and women, who were swiftly restricted or banned from working. Close to 600 journalists have now reportedly fled the country, hoping to build new lives for themselves and continue to tell the stories of their people.

In December 2021, Bangladesh's landmark 50 years of independence, marking the day that the country's people achieved liberation, was over-shadowed by the ongoing climate of fear that continues to aggressively curtail freedom of expression nationally.

Across South Asia, the stifling of free speech overall and the harsh consequences for those who speak out was an overwhelming reality across the region. With the large youthful populations of India, Pakistan and other countries in the region taking to the digital space, government and corporate control over the sphere has emerged as a critical and serious concern for media sustainability.

In Nepal, parliamentary and provincial elections scheduled for late 2022 are set to determine the government for the next five years and will also shape the future of the legal and regulatory environment for the media. The current trend of media-related laws constricting free speech in Nepal is leading to an environment of self-censorship; one that is being fiercely challenged by Nepal's defiant and robust media collective.

## Virtual control

Controlling the online space was a preoccupation of governments across the region.

Bangladesh saw a stupendous ninefold increase in 2021 over the previous year, in cases filed under its stringent Digital Security Act (DSA) for alleged online criticism of officials, including the prime minister and the country's founder. In the face of criticism of the DSA



Above: Bangladeshi Hindus stage a demonstration in Dhaka on October 18, 2021 to protest against fresh religious violence against Hindus in the country. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

Opposite: India's intense struggle with Covid-19 is evident as pedestrians pass a mural depicting Mexican painter Frida Kahlo wearing a facemask in Mumbai on January 29, 2022. CREDIT: PUNIT PARANJUPE / AFP

## The media in South Asia has borne witness to some watershed moments in history, taking severe beatings but also standing strong to speak truth to power.

and its propensity to criminalise free speech – an admission made by Bangladesh's Law Minister himself – the authorities promised to enact a Data Protection Act. However, the proposed draft contains vague terminology and gives the government arbitrary power to penalise users of the digital space.

Likewise in Sri Lanka, where the parliament in March 2022 passed the Personal Data Protection Bill, concerns have been expressed about the impact of the new law on media reporting and the severe restrictions on the right to information. Critics say the bill could hamper reporting on issues such as corruption, and new provisions on 'official secrecy' could restrict the public's right to information. The provision empowering the concerned minister to appoint any government institution as the Data Protection Authority (DPA), raises concerns about the autonomy of the institution.

In Afghanistan, amidst all the turmoil, journalists and media workers were subjected to severe psychological pressure from the Taliban's Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, with ill-defined provisions that allow arbitrary penalties to be slapped on those deemed to have crossed the line.

In Nepal, bills sitting at the federal and provincial levels and awaiting determination do not bode well for press freedom. The Information Technology Bill, the Nepal Media Council Bill, and the Public Service Broadcasting Bill, are all in the pipeline despite concerns raised by stakeholders about the potential of these proposed laws to criminalise journalism itself.

In early April 2022, in a win for advocates of free speech and in response to a petition filed by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), the Islamabad High Court declared the problematic amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) null and void.

The collusion between governments and social media conglomerates was exposed in a series of investigative articles by India-based *The Reporters Collective* and *Ad Watch*, and published by Al Jazeera in March 2022. The investigation found that the Facebook advertisement platform "systematically undercut political competition" in India, giving the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) an "unfair advantage" over other political competitors in the elections. The analysis was based on an examination of 500,000 political advertisements placed on Facebook and Instagram between February 2019 and November 2020 — during which India's 2019 General Elections and nine State Assembly elections were held. It also analysed how these unfairly promoted the BJP's campaigns on the platform.

Governments' propensity to monitor and regulate their citizens was a running theme for the region. India was one of 50 countries where citizens were subjected to surveillance by the spyware Pegasus manufactured by the Israeli group NSO and sold only to governments.

The data analysed by *The Wire*, part of the international collaboration between French non-profit Forbidden Stories, Amnesty International and 16 media organisations titled "Pegasus Project" and released in July 2021, showed that most were targeted between 2018 and 2019, in the run-up to general elections in India. At least 40 Indian journalists are said to be among 300 others targeted, including a Supreme Court judge.

Allegations by the Opposition in Sri Lanka also raised concerns about the use of Pegasus to spy on journalists in the country. Digital security concerns have now become intrinsically part of overall safety



and security concerns for journalists in South Asia.

Misinformation and fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic, which admittedly created public health concerns, was often used as a justification for government control of the media. In Bhutan, the government tightly controlled the media narrative, often in a heavy-handed manner, regulating what and when to report, in the guise of fighting misinformation. On some occasions, the seeming conflict between the right to health and collective rights and press freedom swung in favour of censorship and control.

### Dealing with hate speech

What is clear is that the media in South Asia is going through severe trials and tribulations, battling deep economic crises as well as political polarisation, all of which threaten media freedom and media's very existence.

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the online spread of hate and misinformation is a profitable business. When increased attention to certain forms of content results in greater revenue, in accordance with the model of digital capitalism, and algorithms are designed to harvest attention, there is a very real threat of misinformation.

However, in the guise of preventing misinformation, over regulation of content is compromising media freedom. India's Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Rules, 2021, are an example of that overreach. Unfettered powers and misuse by the government were displayed in the blacking out of channels for alleged "security" reasons.

Similar overreach is also feared in Pakistan with the introduction in November 2021 of the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, with the purported aim of providing a defence mechanism for journalists. The controversial Section 6 prohibits journalists from "spreading false information", and producing material that "advocates hatred", or constitutes "incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence". Such vague definitions have the precise potential for the government to excessively regulate online content.

In the Maldives, new hate speech provisions were added in November 2021 to the penal code to criminalise accusations of

apostasy, unless a person explicitly renounces Islam. A section that prohibits "criticism of Islam in a public medium with the intention of causing disregard" was amended to also criminalise publicly insulting or disparaging the Quran, God or Prophet Mohamed. The new provision adds to the 2008 Maldives constitution that outlaws speech that is "contrary to any tenet of Islam".

The country maintains reservations to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' Article 18 on freedom of thought, conscience and religion, while the Communications Authority of Maldives regularly blocks websites with anti-Islamic content upon request by ministries and other agencies. Compounded with that, the ongoing fear and threat of attacks by vigilante groups is continuing to encourage self-censorship on digital platforms.

### Struggle for survival

For the media in South Asia, the year was not only one of maintaining high standards of journalistic content, but also one where the sheer struggle to survive was paramount.

The media in Afghanistan was all but decimated, with more than 300 media outlets shut down, and unable to continue operations due to severe economic unviability and the collapse of much-needed foreign funds after the Taliban claimed control.

Even in relatively peaceful Bhutan, the media has barely managed to survive. Repeated lockdowns during the pandemic brought to the fore the media's over reliance on government advertising which continued to decline due to the overall sluggish economy. Austerity measures adopted by most media houses included cutting down on staff and field reporting. They were forced to rely on government hand-outs, a move that directly impacted media freedom. Many senior and trained professionals left the industry and many newsrooms dwindled to just an editor and two or three reporters.

The lasting effects of the pandemic were seen in the media industry in India where the economic downturn led to loss of advertising revenue. Over-dependence on government advertisements was linked to self-censorship and patterning news content to suit the ruling dispensation. The crisis has seen a shift in the revenue models from advertisement-led to paid content, with more and more legacy media instituting paywalls and subscription-driven models.



Demonstrators clash with police on February 24, 2022, protesting a proposed grant agreement with the United States in Kathmandu. CREDIT: PRAKASH MATHEMA / AFP

The Nepali media, too, staggered. Under the weight of the economic crisis, journalists' job security was one of the focus areas of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), which negotiated with media houses, staged protests and used the courts to assert labour rights, with some success.

Interestingly, the pandemic years saw the growth of niche digital news outlets producing special focus stories and highlighting issues and regions forgotten by the mainstream media. Clearly, the message for media's sustainability is that readers need to pay for independent news and reportage that accurately reflects ground realities in all their complexity. The newer digital platforms also appear to be building newsrooms that are diverse and inclusive, representing marginalised sections beyond mere tokens.

### Away from home

The year 2021 was particularly difficult for journalists in Afghanistan and parts of India such as Jammu and Kashmir. Many reporters were silenced due to pressure from the authorities while many others were forced to leave their homes and even countries due to security reasons.

The starkest example was that of Afghan journalists, many of whom were forced to flee their homes and families overnight. The unplanned and sudden exodus saw many journalists living for months in camps in third countries, uncertain about their futures. Some in their new homes, while adjusting to new cultures and languages, are still awaiting work-permits and outlets for their journalistic output. Several Afghan women journalists, who left after being targeted by the Taliban, hope to continue to raise issues of Afghan women.

The repression in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir over the past year led several Kashmiri journalists to leave the state. Intimidation, harassment and implication in fake cases has become almost routine, hampering the media from doing its job. The arrest of some of the more vocal journalists sent a chilling message to the media community, which has a tough choice between self-censorship and jail.

The political crisis in Myanmar had a spill over effect in neighbouring India, which has long been home to exiled Burmese journalists. In April 2021, three journalists affiliated with multimedia news organisation Mizzima, who had taken refuge in the bordering Indian state of Manipur, were in danger of being sent back to Myanmar where they would face a jail term or worse. In a show of solidarity, the All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) took up advocacy on behalf of the journalists to allow them to remain. An Indian court later granted them sanctuary.

### Hope from the judiciary

With governments in the region trampling upon citizens' rights, the judiciary in many countries stepped in to uphold constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom of speech and expression and freedom of the press.

In landmark cases dealing with defamation and sedition, the Supreme Court of India unwaveringly upheld citizens' right to critique the government. In petitions challenging the government's illegal surveillance, in the wake of the Pegasus investigation in July 2021, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, NV Ramana said, "allegations are serious if the reports are correct...The truth has to come out".

In Pakistan, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) in a landmark ruling in April 2022, struck down criminal defamation in the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, a decisive order in favour of press freedom. The IHC, by converting into petitions letters by the PFUJ regarding illegal terminations, irregular salaries and safety issues, made another positive intervention towards journalists' rights.

In some cases, lower courts pushing for rule of law also came as a welcome step. A local court directed the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) of Pakistan to ensure filing of investigation reports in court regarding 1,200 pending inquiries relating to online harassment, identity theft, pornography and other offences registered in Karachi.

In the Maldives, on January 19, 2022, a criminal court found two men guilty of murdering blogger Yameen Rasheed in 2017 and sentenced them to life imprisonment. The police said that the group

**When increased attention to certain forms of content results in greater revenue, in accordance with the model of digital capitalism, and algorithms are designed to harvest attention, there is a very real threat of misinformation.**

of radicalised young men believed that Yameen deserved to be killed for "insulting Islam". Although the trial was bumpy, witnesses were intimidated and the authorities' professionalism was called into question, that an indictment of the perpetrators was reached is a step forward.

Likewise, the April 13, 2022, verdict of a Dhaka court sentencing to death four of those accused of murdering eminent secular writer Professor Humayun Azad in 2004 provides a hope that the wheels of justice are turning, albeit very slowly.

### UN Special Rapporteurs speak

Even as the situation for journalists declined in many countries, United Nations Special Rapporteurs stepped in to express concern. Highlighting the harassment of journalists in Jammu and Kashmir, the UN Special Rapporteur on promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, and Elina Steinert, the vice-chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in June 3, 2021, urged, "all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations." The report cited examples of jailed journalists and the use of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and other counter-terror laws on journalists.

In March 2022, UN human rights experts including from the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression called upon Bangladesh to "immediately cease reprisals against human rights defenders and relatives of forcibly disappeared persons for their activism and co-operation with international human rights bodies and UN mechanisms." This statement was issued following the threats and intimidation of civil society and human rights defenders after the announcement of sanctions imposed by the United States of America against top Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) officials on December 10, 2021.

### Right to information

Access to information has always been a thorny issue in the region, with most governments refusing to be transparent or accountable. The arrest of Bangladeshi journalist Rozina Islam in April 2021 under the Official Secrets Act was a stark example of how a journalist seeking to investigate suspected corruption in the country's health ministry was not only denied access to information but was also penalised for it.

Even in the Maldives, where its Right to Information Act ranks 16th out of 128 RTI laws in the world, things are not smooth: the country's third Information Commissioner took up his post in September 2021, nearly seven months after the former commissioner resigned.

In Pakistan, a February 2022, amendment to the cybercrimes law, PECA also threatened the right to information. But a progressive ruling by the Islamabad High Court declared the entire ordinance

unconstitutional, thus protecting the Right to Information guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan.

### Gender inequity

The sharp decline in gender equity was nowhere starker than in Afghanistan, where women journalists were denied their right to work and be active in the public sphere. The forced retreat has undone two decades of work in enhancing gender equity in the Afghan media.

The November 2021 regulation issued by the Taliban government with 11 'rules', urging the media to refrain from broadcasting TV programs and dramas which featured women meant that women have almost disappeared from public view, except in roles and attire approved by the Taliban. Women journalists, like all professional Afghan women, were prohibited from driving alone, their mobility tied to the presence of a male family member.

Meanwhile outspoken women journalists in Pakistan faced intense online harassment, including being trolled by even senior government officials who joined the online intimidation and bullying.

In India, the battle to push women out of the online space was unrelenting. Vicious online abuse, trolling, death and rape threats were particularly severe for Dalit and Muslim women who were regularly silenced and abused. In July 2021, an online 'auction' of prominent Muslim women, including journalists called 'Sulli deals' and once more in early 2022 called 'Bulli Bai' ('Sulli' and 'Bulli' are derogatory slang for Muslim women) was launched. The Internet Freedom Foundation called the fake online auction of almost 100 Muslim women a "blatant violation of their data security and privacy rights." These online apps on the GitHub platform, profiling Muslim women activists, journalists, analysts, artists and researchers were taken down after vigorous protests.

The good news is that for every violation of women journalists' rights, there has been an equally strong resistance.

### Way forward

The bleak post-pandemic year has held many lessons for the media in the region. The first is that of sustainability and survival, and the need to diversify and remain relevant. Simultaneously it is also about lobbying for journalists' rights – on the streets, in boardrooms and in courts.

The other is the importance of solidarity and leveraging networks to support media colleagues both within and across borders. The need to speak out and act has never been as important at a time when hyper nationalism is making states fold in unto themselves. In the case of Afghan journalists, for example, there is a need for intervention on several fronts – from financial assistance to capacity building and supporting those in exile. The international media community must continue to train the spotlight on the crisis of the media in Afghanistan and extend long term support and solidarity.

The focus must also remain on Sri Lanka, where the economic crisis is likely to be long drawn out, and media freedoms likely to be compromised as the state attempts to repair the damage. International solidarity at such a time is crucial. •

## SPECIAL REPORT

# MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY: SINK OR SWIM

Caught in the maelstrom of Covid-19, South Asia's media found itself navigating rough waters and was confronted by tough choices. Emerging out of the pandemic, legacy electronic and print media had to reckon with the consequences of relying on advertisement-centric revenue models while new digital media organisations struggled to diversify their revenue. Journalists across the board faced job insecurity, layoffs, furloughs (leave without pay) and, too often, worked without safety gear or medical insurance at the height of the pandemic. Only a few organisations did ensure that workers were not laid off, urged them to work from home and offered varying health benefits.

During this period, the media faced declining trust from audiences with misinformation and fake news taking on a new life during the pandemic. Most governments in South Asia remained touchy and intolerant of negative press over their handling of Covid-19. While legacy print and television outlets maintained their presence, even as many shut down bureaus and arbitrarily fired staff, efforts and innovations by smaller digital media outlets showed what might be required for media to sustain itself in an uncertain future. New digital media outlets appeared more sensitive to diversity and inclusion, both regarding news content and staff profiles. The message for media's sustainability is that users need to pay for news and stories that are independent and accurately reflect multifaceted realities.

The following offers a summary of the situation of media in various South Asian countries through the report period.

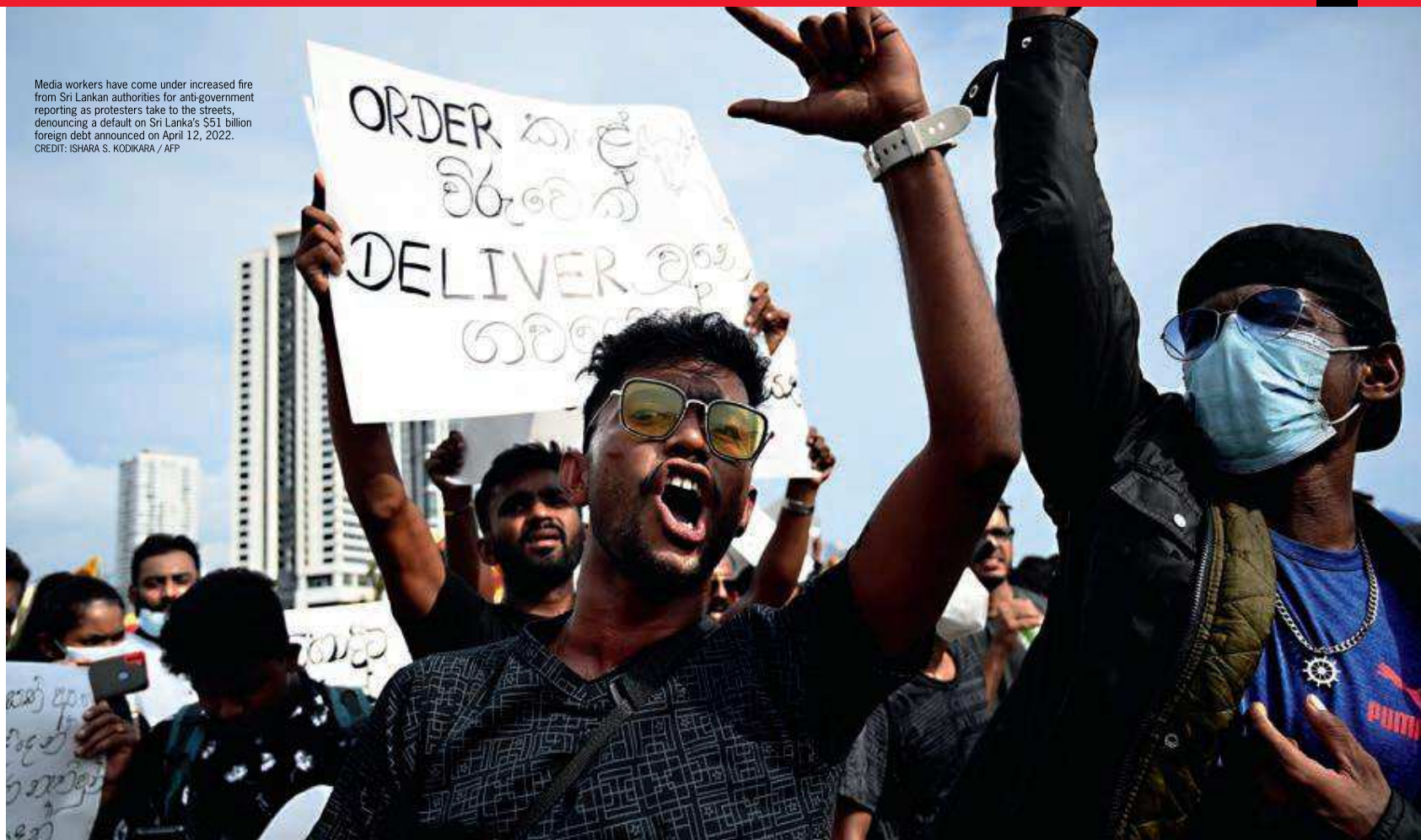
## Afghanistan: Survival at stake

In Afghanistan the challenges were widely different with the media practically decimated by the Taliban takeover in August 2021, which triggered major convulsions in the country. Media in Afghanistan all but collapsed, as did other institutions. Thousands fled the country. More than 300 media outlets shut down and more than 6,400 journalists are estimated to have lost their jobs since the Taliban took control. The actual numbers are possibly higher. Historically, Afghanistan's media drew revenue from a combination of grants from international donors and government advertising. When the Taliban returned to power, these revenue streams dwindled to a trickle.

The environment for journalism was so risky, that hundreds of journalists fled the country. The prospects for Afghanistan's women journalists are particularly worrisome, with the Taliban forcing most of them out of jobs and demanding they stay at home. Reports coming out of the country suggest that fewer than 100 of Kabul's 700 female journalists and a handful of female journalists in other provinces are continuing to work in some way.

"As a journalist who has worked for the country's mainstream media for more than a decade, I do not think the Taliban will allow women to work in the media anytime soon. Afghan women as a whole are still victims of this group's policies," says Ahmad Haris Jamalzada, an Afghan journalist and current affairs manager with 1TV Media.

Media workers have come under increased fire from Sri Lankan authorities for anti-government reporting as protesters take to the streets, denouncing a default on Sri Lanka's \$51 billion foreign debt announced on April 12, 2022. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP



Even though the Taliban takeover forced journalists to flee the country, some journalists are continuing to work abroad in exile but prefer to keep their identities anonymous for fear of retaliation against friends and family still living in Afghanistan. The future appears deeply uncertain for Afghanistan, its people and institutions - including the media. Far from sustainability and viability, Afghanistan journalists and media organisations are desperately clinging on, hoping just to survive.

## Sri Lanka: Skewed pandemic news

Sri Lanka's journalists confronted many difficulties during the pandemic. According to a 2021 report by the International Media Support (IMS), *'Covid-19 and the media: A pandemic of paradoxes'*, which surveyed pandemic-stricken media in various countries, the Rajapaksa brothers in power ordered the police to arrest anyone who criticised or highlighted shortcomings of the government in its response to the pandemic. The country's political fault lines were exacerbated and anti-Muslim hate speech began doing the rounds. The media development organisation observed: "This time

the nationalist media are trying to implicate Muslims... of being 'super-spreaders' of the virus. Racist content and ultra-nationalist editorial positions are found in both Sinhala and Tamil languages, and sometimes also in English. They reflect the stark reality of Sri Lanka's mass media where most media outlets with high audience reach have been captured either politically or ideologically."

However, narratives by legacy media were challenged by digital media start-ups and media monitors which tracked biases, inaccuracies and ethical breaches in high-reach broadcast channels and newspapers. But the reach of digital media has its limits because many Sri Lankans still depend on television and radio for news.

The 2021 IMS report also highlighted job losses in several countries, including in Sri Lanka: "We had to let six members of staff go," Hana Ibrahim, the founding editor of Sri Lanka's *Ceylon Today* and now editor of the *Daily Express* was quoted. "I've only got five staff left, three on contracts and two freelancers. Every time there was a lockdown, we had to cancel our print edition as it could not be delivered and this hit our advertising revenues very hard. We now have a greater digital presence."

**Tribal News Network, Pakistan produced news on the impact of Covid-19 on women, children, trans and sick persons who couldn't get the vaccine, hiring a mentor to identify areas and topics with a special focus on remote areas that are far away from mainstream media.**



Journalists and media workers had to deal with issues such as pay cuts, health issues, and the loss of access to proper health care. The Free Media Movement Sri Lanka (FMM) observed that there is no evidence that any media outlet in the country has implemented a well-established Covid-19 response plan to protect its employees.

### Pakistan: Unheard voices

The Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, in its 2021 report on Pakistan's media freedoms, noted that the year was an extremely difficult one for journalists, media workers and media organisations. Journalists lost their lives due to the pandemic, some died by suicide because of unemployment woes, several were killed in the line of duty, including Karachi-based social media activist and community journalist Nazim Jokhio, who was abducted and killed. His body was found at the farmhouse of a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) lawmaker in Malir, after he'd published a video of a foreign guest poaching an endangered species.

The financial woes of the big media houses which preceded the pandemic were further aggravated during the crisis. For digital media too, the going was far from smooth. Journalists were reluctant to go out for field work and risk contracting Covid-19, since protective gear, medical insurance and life insurance were not assured.

Coverage of the pandemic naturally dominated, often at the cost of other critical issues. Organisations wanting to report on non-pandemic issues struggled to do so. "Most funders were interested in funding only Covid-19 associated projects. But we stuck to our basic niche of focusing on human rights," Xari Jalil, co-founder and journalist at Voicepk.net, said.

Tribal News Network, based in the Pashtun belt of north-

**Emerging out of the pandemic, legacy electronic and print media had to reckon with the consequences of relying on advertisement-centric revenue models while new digital media organisations struggled to diversify their revenue.**

western Pakistan, tried to diversify its funding through fellowships with Facebook and Google, investing in the local FM channel, monetising their Facebook and YouTube pages and government contracts. The network also covers news from diverse communities. "The evidence is that we produced news on the impact of Covid-19 on women, children, trans and sick persons who couldn't get the vaccine. We hired a mentor who identifies areas and topics with a special focus on far flung areas that are far away from mainstream media," said Taryeb Afridi, the network's co-founder and managing editor.

Small digital media organisations like Balochistan Voices have had an even tougher ride. Founder and editor, Adnan Aamir, put his personal earnings from writing for various publications into



the organisation, especially after the Pakistan government cracked down on foreign funding. Aamir is now exploring a membership-based model for revenue where members or readers pay a nominal amount each month. The lack of Baloch representation in Pakistani mainstream media is where the organisation is trying to make a difference.

But practicing journalism in Balochistan is itself a thorny task, fraught with danger and inevitable self-censorship. In Pakistan, the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) has become a tool for repressing freedom of expression of not just journalists, but also ordinary citizens using social media and internet. The government is also trying to impose what is being called centralised censorship and regulation of all forms of media.

Pakistani journalist and analyst Adnan Rehmat observed that, on the brighter side, a group of online news platforms are coming together under the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) and are telling stories from Pakistan's mainstream and margins, highlighting voices and perspectives from women, minorities and segments of the rural heartland that are often ignored or unheard of in TV and print.

### Bangladesh: Freedom of praise but not press

Newspapers in Bangladesh saw revenue from advertisements fall sharply during the pandemic as circulation dwindled in the early stages of the Covid-19 onslaught. Employees, including journalists, at some newspapers were forced to bear the brunt in terms of salary cuts, unpaid leave and terminations.

A 2021 report by the Dhaka-based Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) and Fojo Media Institute at the

Opposite: A Taliban member threatens journalists amid a crackdown on coverage of a women's rights protest in Kabul on October 21, 2021, where several media workers were beaten. CREDIT: BULENT KILIC / AFP

Police escort investigative journalist Rozina Islam to court in Dhaka on May 18, 2021, a day after she was arrested for her reporting on Covid-19 at Bangladesh's health ministry. Islam was jailed for seven days amid widespread protests. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

Linnaeus University said: "Precarious business results of most print and TV newsrooms have existed in Bangladesh from before the coronavirus outbreak. TV channels have reduced or ended their news programming, leaving journalists unemployed. Newspapers often reduce wages, delay salary payments and limit support for journalists on assignment. Journalists are often left covering their travel expenses and during the Covid-19 coverage, many journalists were left to find their own personal protective equipment."

Digital media in Bangladesh mostly relies on advertising to support operations. "Subscription, as a source of revenue for news websites, has yet to gain currency in Bangladesh," the MRDI report stated.

While media houses like the *Dhaka Tribune* tried to help their employees during the pandemic, its editor Zafar Sobhan fears that often, it isn't enough in tough times like these. "We already had health insurance and pension benefits prior to the pandemic. We were very liberal allowing work from home and subsidized our staff to the extent possible."

In terms of future viability of Bangladesh media, Sobhan says: "I think the only viable model for the future is to have a small, very highly efficient team and focus on doing a few things well. The days





Protestors hold placards during a demonstration against anti-Muslim violence and hate crimes in New Delhi on April 16, 2022. CREDIT: SAJJAD HUSSAIN / AFP

**The News Minute, India, has proactively hired Dalit, Muslim, Christian and queer staff in order to build a space that has diverse voices with lived experiences leading and shaping the discourse.**

when we could afford to have dozens of reporters and aspire to cover everything are no longer feasible from a financial viewpoint. It is going to have to be quality, not quantity.” Sobhan also thinks that the pandemic accelerated many trends that were already in place, such as decentralised newsrooms and digital transformation.

A disturbing trend that became evident during the pandemic was the government’s use of the Digital Security Act (DSA) to arrest critics, especially those speaking up against the government’s treatment of the pandemic. “In Bangladesh, one has freedom of praise, but not of press,” Toufique Imrose Khalidi, editor-in-chief of bdnews24.com said. While bdnews24.com has received a spate of legal notices for its reports about the dealings of an influential family, the defamation charge against Khalidi was dismissed by a Khulna court.

### India: Future tense

In India, which is home to some of South Asia’s biggest media brands, the situation remained grim. Media organisations had already set in motion a series of retrenchments, wage cuts, delays in salary payments, enforced furloughs (leave without pay) and closures. Though the pandemic served to intensify media layoffs, it was already a trend which preceded it.

In shocking instances, some organisations forced employees to report for work even at the height of the deadly second wave

of Covid-19. When employees were allowed to work from home, some media companies imposed 10-30 per cent pay cuts. Indian newspapers which grew on the back of advertising, a model which had become increasingly problematic, faced a disastrous situation through the pandemic.

New media start-ups, many of which mushroomed in the past decade, tried to innovate to the needs of the pandemic, while balancing precarious finances. Podcasting platform Suno India launched two-minute daily audio bulletins on Covid-19 developments, rules and regulations over communication platforms WhatsApp and Instagram. “We used technology to the hilt to get good reported stories out, such as recordings over WhatsApp” Suno India co-founder DVL Padma Priya said.

At a time when public trust in media declined as a whole, The News Minute co-founder, Dhanya Rajendran, said the pandemic was an opportunity for the outlet to help build public credibility.

Rajendran has a strong message for editorial independence and sustainability: “Don’t depend fully on advertising because you never know when that stream will dry up. Never accept money from the government, even if it’s for a ‘good cause’ — government funding is a slippery slope.” The way forward then, is to depend on audiences to run independent media organisations. The News Minute, which suffered an advertising revenue hit, started an ‘audience revenue programme’ in the form of a membership drive in April 2020.

The organisation has proactively hired Dalit, Muslim, Christian and queer staff. “We want to build a space that has diverse voices with lived experiences leading and shaping the discourse,” Rajendran says.

So too, the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI) has made efforts to improve representation in the media. The organisation supports and generates journalism by and from Dalits, Adivasis, poor women, and other marginalised groups. Dalits and Adivasis are represented in PARI fellowships, and more than half its fellows are women.

PARI which does not accept advertisements, felt challenged to keep its content free during the pandemic and experienced difficulties with building a corpus. As a charitable trust, without a registration under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, PARI cannot accept overseas funds. It relies on volunteer labour, public donations, socially oriented foundations, a few high-net-worth individuals, trustees’ own contributions, and donations of material (cameras, laptops, software, and other hardware). PARI did not “sack a single journalist, actually recruited new people and gave every staffer, barring the top three, salary raises for their performance in covering the pandemic,” said P. Sainath, PARI’s founder and editor.

According to Prabir Purkayastha of DIGIPUB, a grouping of Indian digital news organisations, a significant problem ahead is the domination of news platforms by big tech companies like Facebook and YouTube. “We are dependent on them for views. But big tech is not neutral, and their algorithms can end up censoring certain kind of news. There are very few instruments available to combat them. This will be a major problem going forward, in addition to monetary sustenance and an oppressive government.”

### Nepal: Pressures across the spectrum

Like other countries, Nepali media was also hit hard by the pandemic. According to the Advertising Association of Nepal, approximately 80 per cent of revenue was lost in print media, 70 per cent in radio and television, and 45 per cent in online news portals.

“At least 18 broadsheet newspapers published from Kathmandu suspended their print publications and resumed after weeks and months with limited coverage and circulation. Some shifted to a digital-only format and some others were closed forever. Several radio and television channels slashed their production and broadcasts owing to the increased restrictions on the mobility of journalists and a hostile working environment in the newsroom,” Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, a research scholar on media ethics and communication policy, wrote in the *Kathmandu Post*.

An assessment by Freedom Forum Nepal showed that 3,190 journalists across the country lost their jobs, and thousands worked at a lower wage or without pay. Journalists affiliated to local and regional media houses in different districts fared even worse.

The digital transition of Nepal’s newspapers, such as those at

**With regular sources of funding becoming scarce, alternative media and new digital outlets have tried to adopt creative ways to raise funds without compromising on editorial independence.**

Kantipur Publications, intensified during the pandemic, in what has been labelled as ‘uncertainty-driven innovation’.

Online media organisations like Deshsanchar.com and others faced considerable financial crisis when advertising revenue drastically declined. “We had made up our mind that there would be no staff retrenchment and wage-cuts. Survival was the big question. We were determined that we would not fire our staff who struggled to give the organisation a credible existence,” Yubaraj Ghimire, Editor of deshsanchar.com said.

Nepali media were subject to various kinds of political pressures during the pandemic, which set the tone of control and regulation in the coming year. In early 2020, *Kathmandu Post* re-published an article raising questions about China’s secrecy about the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The Chinese embassy in Kathmandu released a statement criticising the article.

### Uncertain future

What is clear and evident from the country assessments is that the pandemic has struck a devastating blow to media across South Asia. Legacy media houses heavily dependent on government and corporate advertising were affected as these revenues dried up in the initial months of the pandemic. Employees bore the brunt with many laid off arbitrarily or forced to work without adequate protection. Some media outlets did, however, ensure that their employees were not laid off and were also given the option to work from home. A few even helped with medical expenses of treating Covid-19, especially where hospitalisation was required.

With regular sources of funding becoming scarce, alternative media and new digital outlets have tried to adopt creative ways to raise funds without compromising on editorial independence. While some managed to ride out Covid-related difficulties, not all survived. Many witnessed shutdowns – some permanently. Governments, on their part, too often adopted an aggressive approach when criticised by the media for their handling of the pandemic.

The future for media in South Asia is likely to continue to be rocky and uncertain. Governments are expected to subject media and journalists to greater control and monitoring. Media struggling to maintain editorial independence from not only governments and corporations, must also navigate the complications resulting from dependence on big tech platforms like YouTube and Facebook for views and circulation.

Meanwhile, trust in the media has plunged to an all-time low as job insecurity continues to bog down affected journalists and employees. On the positive side, a handful of digital media outlets across the region operating with small budgets and teams including freelancers are endeavouring to show the way forward for media freedom, credibility and sustainability. •

## SPECIAL REPORT

## AWAY FROM HOME: JOURNALISM IN EXILE

Journalists in South Asia are walking the razor's edge. The year was particularly difficult for media workers in Afghanistan and parts of India such as Jammu and Kashmir, where political developments created a hostile and unforgiving atmosphere for local journalists and sparked an exodus of reporters. Others from neighbouring countries like Myanmar, have instead found safe haven inside South Asian countries, including India.

In the period in review, too many critical voices fell silent due to pressure from the authorities and countless more were forced to flee homes and even their homelands due to escalating safety concerns and political turmoil. This is their story.

## AFGHANISTAN: The Taliban take-over

Even before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the steady slide of the country into chaos ahead of the US withdrawal was an ominous sign of what was to come. Countless media houses in remote and regional areas were forced to close and media staff fled to Kabul and elsewhere out of the way of advancing Taliban fighters.

Since the collapse of Kabul into Taliban hands, the country's media and its journalists have endured the fear and trauma of livelihoods destroyed and witnessed their once thriving industry decimated virtually overnight. From censorship and closure of media outlets to beatings, intimidation and torture for those that don't toe the Taliban line, the biggest issues journalists now face are to stay safe and to survive. The situation has been most dire for women journalists after the Taliban passed diktats against women working in the media and began intimidating them and their family members. Many journalists fled for their lives.

According to the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), almost 30-35 per cent of Afghanistan's journalists have left the country since the Taliban takeover. Many are now living in exile in countries including Pakistan, Turkey, Canada, Europe, France and the United States or awaiting uncertain futures in temporary transit countries including Qatar, India and Mexico.

In August 2021, the Pakistan government issued a statement announcing relaxations to its visa policy in consideration of the safety of media personnel working in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Mansoor Ahmad Khan, said visas for

Afghan journalists and their families were being specially facilitated in "this period of uncertainty".

The exodus of journalists from Afghanistan in August 2021 was dominated by those with connections to international media and publications, while those working in local media were left with little recourse or hope but to fend for themselves as best they could.

The journalists and media workers evacuated by international agencies and media outlets in different Western countries were skilled, well networked and multilingual, with a capacity to inform the world about the happenings in Afghanistan. With such voices gone, there remains a major void in reporting that has a capability to reach international outlets and audiences.

## Telling stories of their land

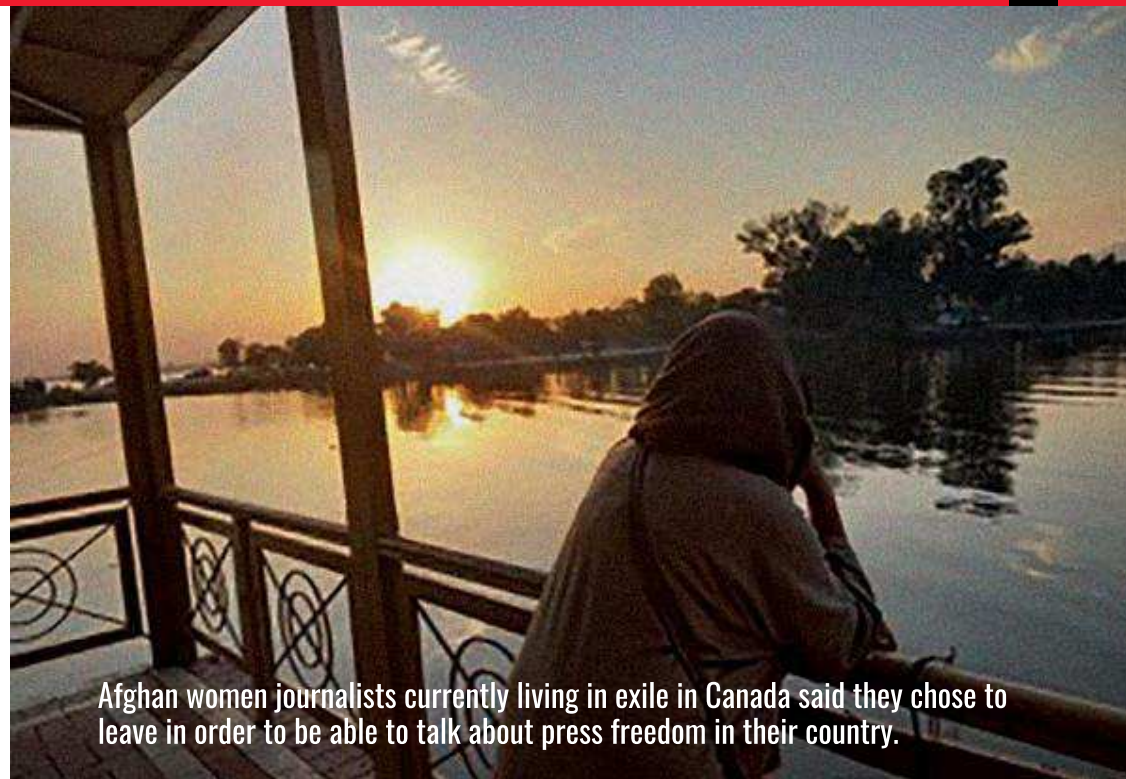
Afghan women journalists currently living in exile in Canada said they chose to leave in order to be able to talk about press freedom in their country.

Farida Nekzad, the director of the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), is currently a journalist-in-residence at Carleton University in Ottawa and said she has started an evacuation program for her colleagues with the help of international press freedom bodies. The former managing editor at Pajhwok Afghan News fled the country with her young daughter and brother-in-law in August 2021, making a hard choice to leave the rest of her family behind.

Hundreds of journalists and media professionals, especially women, lost their jobs as many media organisations shuttered after the fall of Kabul and as intimidation and harassment grew under the newly-installed Taliban regime. A survey conducted by IFJ-affiliate Afghanistan's National Journalists Union (ANJU) across 33 provinces, indicates that as many as 318 media outlets have closed since August 15, 2021. Just 305 of the 623 media houses active before the Taliban took control are still understood to be functioning, albeit under threats, new and strict media laws and dire economic conditions.

For female journalists, the future is beyond bleak since most of them have been rendered jobless. According to the CPAWJ, more than 90 per cent of women journalists lost their jobs, the highest

**The year was particularly difficult for media workers in Afghanistan and parts of India such as Jammu and Kashmir, where political developments created a hostile and unforgiving atmosphere for local journalists and sparked an exodus of reporters.**



Afghan women journalists currently living in exile in Canada said they chose to leave in order to be able to talk about press freedom in their country.

Above: Makia, an Afghan woman journalist who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover, crossed the border Pakistan before resettling in Canada. CREDIT: MAKIA MONIR

Opposite: A lock hangs at the gate of the closed Kashmir Press Club building in Srinagar on January 18, 2022, after it was forcibly shutdown following a raid by armed police. CREDIT: TAUSEEF MUSTAFA / AFP

ratio in South Asia. The few who remain in the country are working under severe restrictions, including on their dress and mobility.

Fatima (name changed) a woman journalist with a decade of experience in journalism is still waiting for her children's passports to be issued in order to be able to leave Kabul. Leaving, she believes, is a choice she had to make in the interests of her and her family's safety. After losing her job, her life became hard and she had to leave her hometown in a northern province. She is currently living a precarious life in Kabul with no job or income. Her husband, who worked in a private university, also had to leave his job. Due to her extreme financial challenges in supporting her family, Fatima recently sold her furniture to ensure care for her toddlers' needs.

## Solidarity and support

In the wake of the fall of the country to the Taliban in August 2021, journalists, NGOs, media watchdogs launched campaigns to support Afghanistan's media and are working together to help journalists at imminent threat. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) was among those to launch an international solidarity campaign with Afghan journalists in August 2021 and established a specific Afghanistan Safety Fund.

In India, the Network of Women in Media, also in solidarity started a fundraiser in support of Afghan women journalists in collaboration with Australia's Media Safety and Solidarity Fund

(MSSF). The Coalition for Women in Journalism assisted journalists who sought refuge. The Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) was another that facilitated visas of journalists and media personnel from Afghanistan, as did the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), which is continuing to offer safe house and visas support for those that make the dangerous crossing over the land border or by air into the country. The union also worked with the Pakistan Information Ministry for the expedited approval of Pakistani Visas for Afghan Journalists, and as many as 50 journalists were assisted with their applications, it said. Three families, comprising over fifteen people, are currently staying at the PFUJ facility in Islamabad.

The IFJ is assisting with as many cases as possible, lobbying international governments to increase their humanitarian efforts and fast track the applications of media workers fleeing. One such case is that of Mursal<sup>1</sup>, a prominent journalist and activist, who worked with both national and international media organisations in Afghanistan. After initially fleeing to Pakistan, Mursal only had limited time on a temporary visa before she would have been forced to return to Afghanistan which would have posed a significant danger to her safety.

With lobbying from the IFJ Asia Pacific, Mursal was able to secure a New Zealand visa under the country's humanitarian intake for human rights defenders. After nearly three months of coordination between the IFJ and Immigration New Zealand, she safely arrived in Auckland in February 2022, with her two siblings, both former lawyers in Afghanistan.

The New Zealand government has focused on bringing out people who were linked to its work in Afghanistan, particularly those who helped the New Zealand army in Bamyan province. In total about 1,450 people have so far come to New Zealand from Afghanistan.





Above: Afghan nationals residing in India and supporters of the Afghan Refugee Women's Association demand better rights for women in Afghanistan in New Delhi on October 30, 2021. CREDIT: SAJJAD HUSSAIN / AFP

Opposite: Sri Lankan media activist Sunanda Deshapriya is seen through the viewfinder of a video camera as he addresses a press conference in Colombo. Deshapriya, who left the country in 2009 and is currently in exile in Europe, said journalists who report the truth are labelled as 'traitors' in Sri Lanka. CREDIT: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI / AFP

As well as helping those who worked for the New Zealand military Associate Immigration Minister Phil Twyford also set up 200 visas for human rights defenders. They include women judges, human rights workers and journalists.

Unfortunately, the rush of international support has slowed to a trickle even as Afghan journalists continue to struggle for survival – both within and outside their homeland. Getting funds into the country remains highly problematic with the collapse of banking and financial systems. Meanwhile, hundreds and even thousands of journalists continue to try every means possible to flee, at the greatest risks.

Makia Monir is one of the few women journalists who made an escape and is now starting life anew in Canada. She says she never wanted to leave her homeland but was left with little to no option. Even though she can no longer do ground reporting on Afghanistan, Monir continues her engagement through social media, amplifying issues faced by people back in her homeland.

The Communications Workers of America - Canada (CWA Canada) has been very active in helping Afghan journalists and pushing the Canadian authorities to issue humanitarian visas to Afghan media workers at risk. The biggest challenge has always been the difficulty getting visas. Currently it said there were still 61 people in limbo in Pakistan because they cannot get visas to Canada or other countries.

Many journalists who applied to Canada as far back as August have still heard nothing and have not received a file/case number. Every day they are in Afghanistan leaves them in grave danger.

### SRI LANKA: The long wait

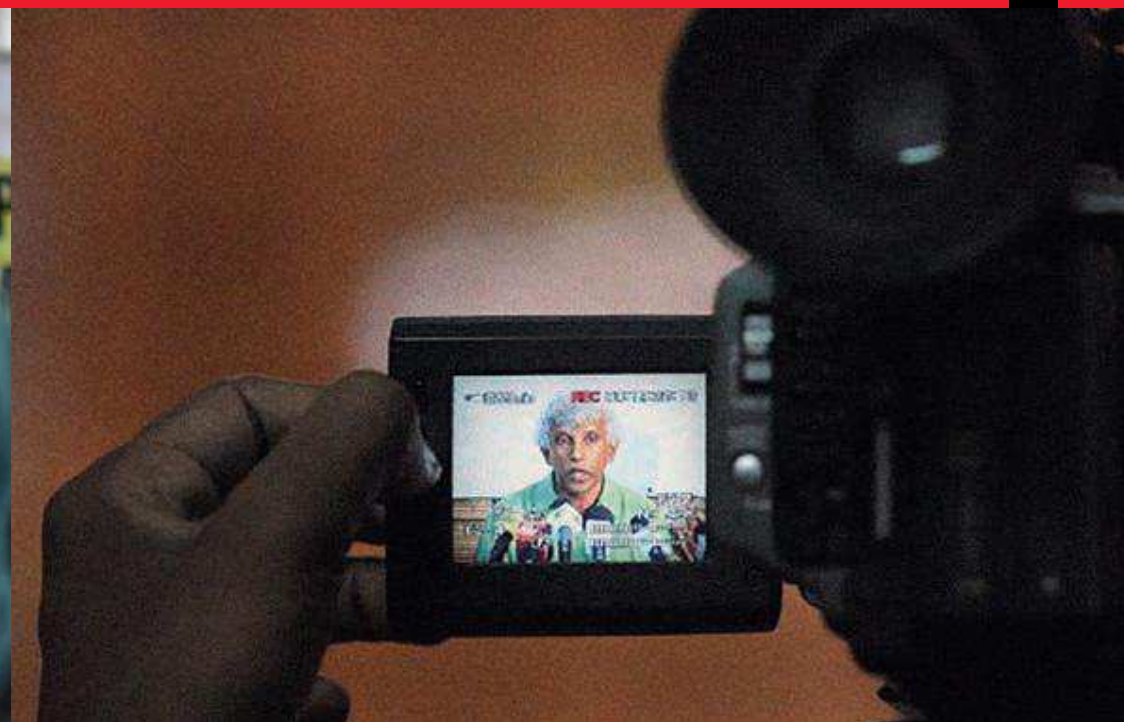
Sri Lankan journalists faced repression and violation of their rights during one of South Asia's longest civil wars, over 25 years to its dramatic and hellish conclusion in 2009. As many as 19 journalists were killed in the period from 1992. Since 2019, the Rajapaksa government has gone on to wage a new campaign of intimidation

against journalists, human rights activists and lawyers, according to Human Rights Watch.

Silencing of media is widespread, with journalists routinely targeted under criminal or terrorism charges. Reporting on important stories related to corruption, or human rights violations is also fraught with risk. Journalists from ethnic minorities like Tamil journalists have often resorted to self-censorship after repeated interrogations and threats. At least two journalists have gone into exile since the 2019 November election and at least one journalist has been abducted. But this is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka and journalists in the country have adapted and survived both inside and outside the country – and continue to find ways to shine a light and hold the powerful to account. The recent national protests over the country's economic crisis are no exception.

Leading journalists and media activists have been forced to go into exile from Sri Lanka for over a decade now. In a 2009 report, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said at least 11 Sri Lankan journalists were driven into exile amid an intensive government crackdown on critical reporters and editors. Sri Lanka at the time was one of the deadliest countries for journalists.

Senior journalist Sunanda Deshapriya, who is currently in exile in Europe, said that journalists who wanted to report the truth were branded as 'traitors' to defame them and their work. He said dozens



**For journalists who live in exile, integration with an alien culture is often difficult, and they often struggle with new places and languages. Lack of work permits is a barrier that exiles have to surmount in order to build their professional identities in the new land.**

of journalists were forced to leave Sri Lanka over the period. Some had no choice but to self-censor themselves to stay in journalism. Deshapriya, a vocal advocate for press freedom left the country in 2009. Following his speech in front of the UNHRC, a hate campaign was launched against him which eventually forced him to stay outside his homeland for security. Deshapriya has visited home a couple of times but feels it is hard to live and work in Sri Lanka under the current regime.

The impunity of authorities in Sri Lanka remains a major issue. The killing of Lasantha Wickrematunge in 2009 is a powerful example, with the case coming up at the People's Tribunal in Hague only in mid-2022, 13 long years after his assassination. The lack of justice in this high-profile case does not instil confidence in exiled journalists about their safety should they decide to return to Sri Lanka.

In 2015, the Sri Lankan government called on journalists to return to the country, declaring that it was safe to do so. But most of those in exile did not wish to return after experiences of intimidation and threats. When exiled Tamil journalist, Punniyamorthy Sasikaran returned to Sri Lanka in 2016 at the government's invitation, he was arrested immediately upon his arrival. He had earlier fled to Australia in 2012 due to threats to his life, but his return was not easy nor was life abroad. When he fled, he had to leave his family behind. He struggled in Australia, surviving on a small stipend, but was denied a resident's permit or visa. He started working in a radio station, at very low wages.

Life has been hard after his return to Sri Lanka. Sasikaran said that he regularly faces intimidation and summons from the authorities since his return. Sasikaran, who has been telling stories of his community, the Tamils, knows that his work has made life risky. Facing repeated raids and summons, Sasikaran said he might be left with no choice but to leave the country again.

Another senior Sri Lankan journalist who chose not to be named said that no government had genuinely tried to facilitate the return of journalists in exile. For many, returning and practicing journalism is often tough. Another journalist, Bashana Abeywardane, who went into exile in 2006, told VICE News that at least 70 journalists had fled the country between 2006 and 2011.

For journalists who live in exile, integration with an alien culture is difficult, and they often struggle with new places and languages. Lack of work permits is a barrier that exiles have to surmount in order to build their professional identities in the new land.

### MYANMAR: Neighbours in need

After the military takeover in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, journalism in the South East Asian country has been all but criminalised, with press freedom and journalists' rights plummeting to new depths. The flow-on effect of displaced media from that coup

Senior journalists say that the manner in which the media in Kashmir is being silenced is unprecedented, and not experienced even during the height of militancy on the 1990s when journalism was an extremely hazardous job.

same many journalists make their way into bordering South Asia.

The killings, arrests and prosecutions of journalists have had a severe chilling effect on independent journalism in Myanmar and the region – countless media remain in hiding inside the country, on its borders and in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and India. Military officials claim that they are not suppressing press freedom but have put limitations on publishing information to prevent violence and disorder. The easiest option for many is to stay in neighbouring countries like India and Thailand. Many journalists are continuing to work in India. Their stories now become another story of the region as exiled and escaping journalists try to establish a new life.

Organisations like *Myanmar Now*, *The Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima*, are continuing their vital journalism work from exile. In April 2021, three journalists who worked with *Mizzima*, a multimedia news organisation took shelter in the border town Moreh in Manipur state of India. The All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) appealed to the Indian government to not send back the journalists and also issued a statement in their support.

In May 2021, an Indian court granted them sanctuary a month after they escaped across the border into India. They had been lying low in Tengnoupal district of Manipur state in India, after an arrest warrant was issued against them in Myanmar.

Solidarity actions in support of exiled journalists from Myanmar have been a long tradition in India. *Mizzima News*, first established in exile in Delhi in 1998 under the editorship of Soe Myint, won the International Press Institute's Free Media Pioneer Award in 2007.

After decades of persecution in Myanmar, thousands of Rohingya Muslims are now living as refugees in different countries. Many of them have resettled in India but face deplorable living conditions in overcrowded camps and have to battle rising Islamophobia in the country.

To make their voices heard, a few Rohingya citizen journalists and journalism students have started contributing to Indian and foreign publications while they are in exile and living in cities like New Delhi. A young journalist based in Delhi, who spoke to IFJ said that he often, with the help of his community, gets to report for different platforms like Quint, Aljazeera, BBC and the VOA, to tell their stories to the world.

## INDIA: Out of the Valley

It has never been easy for journalists to operate in Indian-administered Kashmir. But the situation acutely worsened from 2019, when the central government unilaterally revoked the limited autonomy of the region. A communications shutdown followed for several months. Reporting on the ground became an extraordinary challenge amid the harsh blackout and physical restrictions. Since then, the environment for the media has plummeted — with an increase in cases of journalists jailed, threats, arbitrary police summons, intimidation and raids at the homes of some media workers.

Asif Sultan, who was working with a Srinagar-based magazine *Kashmir Narrator*, has already served three years in jail and is being denied a proper trial or bail. In early 2022, he was finally

released, only to be taken back into custody the same day. With the crackdown on the press — especially with the recent arrest of journalists Sajad Gul and Fahad Shah — a deafening silence has been enforced and journalists are censoring themselves like never before.

Journalists say the situation is scary and unprecedented in many ways, even worse than the times when the violence was at its peak. The increased pressure from authorities is a key concern for Kashmiri journalists as it is having a huge impact; most ground reporting from the region has ceased to appear.

The crackdown has led to a situation where only the government and army versions of stories are being reported in the local press, the editors of which have long been complaining how government advertisements — their major source of revenue — is being choked over the slightest critical reportage. Online publications suffering from police intimidation have stopped doing critical reportage. Some journalists, including women journalists working in local media, have not been paid for months.

## Precarious profession

Freelance journalists working in the Kashmir Valley appear to be the only ones now left to tell the story of this conflict zone. Their consistent work over the last few years has added significance. However, the journalists say that authorities regularly harass them. This includes subjecting them to surveillance, summoning them to police stations and threatening them. Authorities have also been collecting their personal details in the name of 'background checks', and not sparing even their families.

The 2020 media policy has taken away the most basic principles of a free press in Jammu and Kashmir and become a nightmare for most freelancers who often lack support when they face questioning or intimidation.

Since 2016, authorities have registered 49 cases against the media persons, including eight cases under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), a counter-terrorism law increasingly been used to detain those deemed critical of the government.

The arm twisting by the authorities is having a chilling effect and local newspapers have not only stopped critical coverage, but are deleting their previous work from their websites out of fear. A precious archive is forever lost. This erasure of past critical reporting to avoid repercussions from the authorities is another fall out of the current wave of repression.

## Closing of space

Welfare bodies, journalists say, are also being closed down. The stark example of this is the closure of the Kashmir Press Club in a government aided coup. The move left independent journalists without any institutional support. Journalists' unions have stopped issuing any statements regarding arrests and harassment of journalists. Freelance journalists say that with the recent developments they are left on their own if they are booked or summoned by the state and its agencies.

The situation has pushed the few Kashmiri women journalists further to the wall. For too many, it is extremely difficult, if



Demonstrators protest the withdrawal of troops and the resumption of power by the Taliban in Kabul opposite the Houses of Parliament in London on August 18, 2021. International governments have been largely ineffective in providing additional resettlement for Afghan refugees. CREDIT: GLYN KIRK / AFP

not impossible, to operate in this kind of atmosphere. Women journalists, who are already dealing with umpteen social barriers and online harassment, are being further cowed down and pushed away from journalism.

There has been little communication between journalists since the takeover of the Press Club. A crucial space for mobilisation and collaboration has been snatched away.

## Mobility at risk

In September 2021, the Jammu and Kashmir police raided the residences of four journalists and also checked the electronic devices of their family members and seized their passports. The journalists said that they usually fear such kind of intimidation of their families whenever they are being questioned.

In September and October 2021, some Kashmiri journalists and their families received calls from local police stations purportedly for "verification". In these tough times, the lives of their families are also at risk.

In a report on Kashmiri journalists being monitored, *The Wire* reported that there were at least 22 journalists who are not allowed to travel abroad following an "adverse report" from different agencies.

The chilling effect is increasingly impacting young journalists and many of them are either thinking of not pursuing journalism or relocating to other places. Following recent arrests, a number of journalists say that they moved to other Indian cities to avoid intimidation from the administration and police. Some are now afraid to return home. Although previously in the 1990s, Kashmiri

journalists faced threats, the kind of harassment felt now is different.

Some journalists who fled to Delhi, Bangalore or other parts of the country are freelancers who have been telling important on the ground stories that local media would avoid because of the prevailing pressures and fear of losing government advertisements.

A journalist (who did not want to be named) said he could not tell his parents why he had left because they would have panicked. Instead, he manufactured the pretext of an out-station reporting gig, to avoid intimidation from the authorities to him or his family left behind.

Some of these journalists are not able to write stories or share tweets on social media at all and are being financially supported by their families.

This is perhaps the first time that Kashmiri journalists are leaving the Valley and looking for opportunities in other parts of India. Senior journalists say that the manner in which the media is being silenced is unprecedented, and not experienced even during the height of militancy on the 1990s when journalism was an extremely hazardous job. That was also a period that saw targeted killings by militants of the Hindu Kashmiri Pandit minority in the Kashmir Valley, and their subsequent exodus to other parts of India and the world. A few high-profile Kashmiri Pandit journalists continue to report on Jammu and Kashmir from outside, with regular visits to the Valley.

With increasing challenges and unprecedented impunity, it is clear the most troubled areas in South Asia are facing a crisis. Journalists are unable to report the situation on the ground and have fading hopes on the justice system. This has created an information void. Apart from the trauma to the journalists impacted and their families, exile causes a loss of genuine, field-based reporting and creates a vacuum in information, which is not in the larger public interest. •

## SPECIAL REPORT

## THE BATTLE FOR SOUTH ASIA'S CYBER SPACE

The changing digital landscape for media poses a direct threat to journalistic freedoms, with the states of South Asia tightening control over media output and practices. Even as the past decade brought in increasing control over the media by governments globally, the pandemic clearly exposed the unique censorship efforts by various South Asian governments. In an era of misinformation and journalistic censorship, the media – particularly digital media – is facing its biggest challenge yet, with egregious state control over news and other content.

In this digital economy, propagation of hate and misinformation online is a business model in and of itself. Digital capitalism thrives on the 'attention' and data analysis of its users and, with the increased platform virality, the growing threat of misinformation cannot be underestimated.

Journalists are bearing the brunt of some of the most egregious practices and, as a result, many self-censor in order to protect fragile livelihoods. Adding to the malaise, governments, intent on preventing misinformation, have also implemented broad laws with vague provisions. These laws not only violate the fundamental rights of their citizens, but further misuse discretionary surveillance powers to unlawfully secure prosecution against journalists and media outlets attempting to fulfil their journalistic duties.

It is an all too evident reality that journalists, especially those belonging to marginalised identities, women and religious or gender minorities directly face violence from anonymous persons through technology. The ease with which any person or community can be abused online comes with attackers taking the benefit of anonymity in cyberspace, and the lack of legal protections afforded to journalists in many countries. The Asia-Pacific region holds a notorious record in terms of press freedoms, with its prisons particularly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, containing some of the world's highest numbers of incarcerated journalists and bloggers. Media freedoms, including online digital media freedoms, directly correlate with the nature and profile of governments and are worst under totalitarian regimes.

## Regulations and restrictions

Control exerted over the flow of information is also a result of internet exploitation by government administrations. Monitoring and controlling online journalistic behaviour are a priority for many governments and a surveillance infrastructure is tightly regulated, especially regarding digital news.

A case in point is India, which has taken steps to tightly regulate all "digital news publishers" and "OTT platforms" (referred to as 'publishers'), that have a physical presence in the country, or conduct systematic business activity to make content available in India. Part III of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 [IT Rules] grant overreaching powers to India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting [IB Ministry], to regulate digital news media spaces. However, the 'Code of Ethics' in Part III, of the Rules which sets out to regulate digital media content - is facing strong resistance from multiple media agencies and remains as pending cases in courts. These unfettered powers and misuse by the IB Ministry are illustrated with an incident involving the unjustified

blackout of Malayalam TV Channel Media One in 2022 - allegedly for "security reasons". The channel was later allowed to operate by an intervention by India's Supreme Court.

In India, sedition as well as counter-terror laws such as the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, are used to stamp out free speech and the critical analysis of government policies, evidenced by the arrest of lawyers and journalists - even for social media posts.

In Sri Lanka, after January 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers proposed to amend the Press Council Law to include electronic and new media and approved a proposal to 'structurally reform and reorganize' the Press Council to cover electronic and new media. The Free Media Movement (FMM) has long been advocating for the abolition of the Press Council Law for its overregulation of media.

**In the digital economy, propagation of hate and misinformation digitally is a business model in itself. Digital capitalism thrives on the 'attention' and data analysis of its users, and with the increased platform virality, the growing threat of misinformation cannot be underestimated.**

In November 2021, Pakistan introduced the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021, with the aim of providing a defence mechanism for journalists who feel threatened. The country regularly sits in the top 10 of countries for journalists killed. The most contentious issue in this law is Section 6, which prohibits journalists and media professionals from "spreading false information", and producing material that "advocates hatred", or constitutes "incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence". Using this law, the Pakistan government has placed several excessive restrictions on journalistic freedoms with vague and discretionary powers, to criminally prosecute those who do not comply with the dictates of the ruling dispensation.

Additionally, several new amendments were made in 2022 to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to further stifle dissent. The law penalises posting "fake news" with no substantive definition of the phrase and is being used to oppress the media and all forms of democratic online expression. A report in November 2021 by Freedom Network notes that over half the journalists targeted by the PECA, worked for digital media platforms.

In a judgement with far reaching implications, the Islamabad



High Court on April 8, 2022, deemed as unconstitutional the PECA Ordinance, issued in February 2022. The ruling said, "The criminalisation of defamation, protection of individual reputations through arrest and imprisonment and the resultant chilling effect violates the letter of the Constitution and the invalidity thereof is beyond a reasonable doubt."

In Bangladesh, the Digital Security Act, 2018, has faced socio-legal resistance and debates involving human rights advocates, students, civilians and the international community, with the critique centred on discretionary and overreaching censorship powers available to the state. In December 2021, Bangladesh's Law Minister, Anisul Haq, admitted to the misuse of the law following the tragic custodial death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in February 2021. Ahmed was kept incarcerated for ten months and repeatedly denied bail, before his tragic demise.

In Nepal, media rights organisations including the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) and the Nepal Press Union (NPU), have criticised and called for the repeal of the Media Bill for several years now. The excessive penal provisions prescribed in the law for posting content on social media which may pose a threat to the "country's sovereignty, security, unity or harmony" end up

restricting freedom of expression among the media. This includes either a fine up to 1.5 million Nepali Rupees (approx. USD 12,500), or up to five years in prison.

In the Maldives, the implementation of the draconian Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression law since 2016, prescribes heavy fines for content or speech that disrupts "religious unity", endangers "national security" or violates "social order". Since 2018, there has been a glimmer of hope with the institution of successful government investigation mechanisms like the Presidential Commission on Investigation of Murders and Enforced Disappearances, ratification of two core international human rights treaties (Optional Protocol to the ICESCR as well as the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearances) as well as the repeal of the much criticised Anti-Defamation law, with the ruling dispensation post of 2018 breaking away from a repressive past of state censorship in the atoll.

## Switched off

In this era, South Asia's governments tactically use internet shutdowns across large areas to disrupt communications in sensitive and militarised zones on grounds of national security. For instance, in Bangladesh, the government blocked the website of Benar News, an online affiliate of Radio Free Asia, in April 2020. This transpired due to the media outlet reporting on news of a leaked UN memo, warning that as many as two million Bangladeshis could die from Covid-19 without appropriate government measures. In India, between January 2021-April 2021, the country experienced 18 internet shutdowns, including two in the country's capital, New Delhi, which were aimed at curbing the large spate of farmers protests taking place at the time.

**A report in November 2021 by Freedom Network, Pakistan, notes that over half the journalists targeted by Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, worked for digital media platforms.**



Activists protest against the Digital Security Act (DSA) in Dhaka, following the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in jail months after his arrest under the DSA. CREDIT: AFP

## Virtual violence

To guarantee freedom of expression and access to information of all citizens, collective action is essential to end impunity for crimes against journalists, especially regarding violence mediated through the use of technology. The escalation of online violence, specifically based on gender is a great source of consternation on a global scale today. Evidence of the complicity of tech companies like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, in hosting violent content on their platforms, including the circulation of rape videos and revenge porn, has existed from as early as 2014.

Women journalists working in the public sphere, with large public followings and engagement on the online space, or those who have come out in the public sphere to recount their experiences, have been routinely targeted and victimised more severely in cyberspace.

In India, the Editors Guild of India condemned the continued online harassment and organised trolling of women journalists by anonymous entities. The Guild demanded “increased government action to dismantle the growing anonymous misogynistic and abusive trolls forming part of digital ecosystems targeting women journalists”. Journalists - especially women who are openly critical of the government - face fierce online trolling and threats from anonymous persons.

As per its August 2021 gender disparity study in the Maldives, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) found women journalists experience gender-specific threats as well as severe forms of online violence including physical threats, intimidation and harassment as well as hacking and phishing.

## In December 2021, Bangladesh’s Law Minister Anisul Haq admitted to the misuse of the law following the tragic custodial death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in February 2021.

Studies including the BBC Panorama Study, Equality Labs, and Amnesty’s *Toxic Twitter* report have also shown that women in the public space like journalists, face a higher volume of hate and violence on social media platforms, including threats of sexual assault, physical violence, abusive language, harassing private messages, threats to damage their professional or personal reputations, digital security attacks, misrepresentation via manipulated images and financial threats.

It is important to note the ethical responsibilities of social media platforms as prominent spaces to access journalistic outputs. Censorship practices by these platforms, in complicity with South Asian states, displaces women from spaces of knowledge production and sharing, thereby restricting their free use of online platforms. Women are excluded from rightful and legal access to free speech due to disproportionate “moderation” and regulation of content created by women.

Persons with multiple intersectionalities (LBTQI+ community, Dalit, ethnic minority, indigenous) are often targeted online through discrimination and hate speech. As a result, they tend to self-censor and withdraw from debates and online discussions.

Meena Kotwal, a prominent Indian journalist, was attacked with caste-based slurs and violent death threats on social media. This was not an isolated incident, as such intersectional violence is rampant on social media in the region. A December 2021 study by the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet and Society, which mapped online caste-based violence on social media, identified a wide prevalence of casteist abuse intersecting with gender abuse - rape threats and gendered hate speech towards women.

Platforms often play a large role in enabling such violence through censorship cultures and a lack of accountability, which is further worsened by the lack of a nuanced understanding in tackling online violence. In India, the Supreme Court in *Ajit Mohan v. Legislative Assembly, NCT & Ors* (2020) recognised the power and potential of multinational digital corporations and how their influence extends over populations. In Bangladesh, the 2021 communal riots that erupted at Cumilla were a consequence of social media posts on Facebook and YouTube videos perpetrating hate speech. During this incident, the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) was also used to arrest two journalists for allegedly promoting communal unrest in different parts of the country. Riots in early 2018 as well as the Easter Sunday 2019 bombings in Sri Lanka, are examples of how the government has tightly regulated and used internet shutdowns as a measure to disrupt any communal or other forms of violence. Following the impact of these incidents, a study conducted in 2020, noted how even though it initially limited journalistic independence of reporting and story verifications, journalists were finding new ways to use social media and continue the flow of information through the increased usage of VPNs.

In July 2021, the Sri Lankan government also backtracked on its promise to investigate reports made on social media regarding sexual abuse in Sri Lankan newsrooms stating that the government would not recognise complaints made on social media. Across South Asia, there is a visible threat to journalists from social media toxicity and hate in the digital landscape and one which requires more than tokenistic safety features.

## Closures and labour disruptions

Marking the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the media and news sector faced several labour repercussions which continue even now. Even though Covid-19 itself played a role in disrupting many businesses, government control over the media was a key and constant factor leading to the closure of media houses, loss of journalist jobs and pay cuts.

In Pakistan, as noted by the IFJ Pakistan country report in 2021, many institutions underwent extreme financial turmoil with the closure of media houses, layoffs and delays in payments of salaries, which also resulted in extreme economic difficulties for journalists, in some cases leading to suicides. In India, the spill-over effect of the government’s action to restrict foreign direct investment in digital media to 26 per cent, has been visible. The FDI policy which caps investments has played a major role in restricting the businesses of digital news media. A result of the 2020 policy can be seen with the closure of several news and content websites such as HuffPost India and Verizon media which owns Yahoo News, Yahoo Finance and Yahoo Cricket.

## Collective action

Journalists have put up stiff resistance to the onslaught on media rights across all South Asia. The struggle for a level playing field for the media can be seen from the rising debates and resistance in multiple on ground and online movements. Media driven

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mobilisations and uprisings are the core of a democracy and have a large influence in patterns of public participation, organisational configurations and resistance movements.

In India, 11 digital media organisations came together in October 2020 to launch the DIGIPUB News India Foundation. Together, they challenged the restrictive Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 in court, as an infringement of freedom of expression. However, despite their efforts, including a letter to the Union Ministers, there has been no notable outcome.

Internationally, UN Special Rapporteurs, including Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, have written to the Government of India expressing concern over the new IT Rules, noting that the problematic provisions relating to traceability of first originator, intermediary liability and executive oversight of digital media content violate the rights to privacy and freedom of speech and expression enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In December 2021, the Madras High Court restrained the central government from taking any coercive action under the 2021 Rules, against digital media platforms that are members of the Indian Broadcasting and Digital Foundation, including Sun TV Network. The pushback on the new IT rules has been evident with over 23 petitions filed across High Courts in India, several by news media outlets.

In Pakistan, the Women Journalists Association in March 2021, demanded a special desk to address cyber violence against women. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) of Pakistan was directed by a local court in 2022 to ensure filing of investigation reports in court regarding 1,200 pending inquiries relating to online harassment, identity theft, pornography and other offences registered in Karachi.

In Nepal, the vague provisions of laws, enabling censorship powers of the government have been constantly resisted through media movements. In January 2022, the FNJ submitted a letter to the authorities in Karnali province, seeking an amendment to the Information Technology and Mass Communications Bill for multiple reasons including its restriction on the free usage of social media as it criminalises content on social media which can have a detrimental effect on Nepal’s “national unity”.

Worryingly, the downward spiral of media freedom is visible even more today. Threats to the press deprive journalists of democratic liberties, including access to honest and fact-based journalism, which is the pillar of media independence. Progress in bolstering media autonomy may prove in time to be an effective counterweight to the growing threats facing journalists both on and off the digital media landscape. •



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