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Afghan Independent Journalists’ Association
Bangladesh Mass Media Sangbadik Forum
Federation of Nepali Journalists
Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka
Indian Journalists’ Union
Journalists Association of Bhutan
Media Development Forum Maldives
National Union of Journalists, India
National Union of Journalists, Nepal
Nepal Press Union
Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association
SAMSN – Defending rights of journalists and freedom of expression in South Asia. samsn.ifj.org/

The SAMSN Digital Hub – https://samsn.ifj.org/map/ provides a listing of all known cases of media rights violations from 2014.

Cover Photo: Students and activists holding ‘I am Gauri’ placards take part in a rally held in memory of journalist Gauri Lankesh in Bangalore, India, on September 12, 2017. The murder of Gauri Lankesh, a newspaper editor and outspoken critic of the ruling Hindu nationalist party sparked an outpouring of anger and demands for a thorough investigation. CREDIT: MANJUNATH KIRAN / AFP

This spread: Indian journalists take part in a protest on May 23, 2017 after media personnel were injured covering clashes in Kolkata between police and demonstrators who were calling for pricing reforms in the agriculture sector. CREDIT: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

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CONTENTS

1. FOREWORD 4
2. OVERVIEW 6

SPECIAL SECTIONS

3. IMPUNITY 10
4. RURAL JOURNALISTS 18
5. GENDER – #METOO AND THE MEDIA 26
6. INTERNET SHUTDOWNS 32

COUNTRY CHAPTERS

7. AFGHANISTAN 38
8. BANGLADESH 44
9. BHUTAN 48
10. INDIA, WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON KASHMIR 52
11. MALDIVES 62
12. NEPAL 68
13. PAKISTAN 74
14. SRI LANKA 80

VIOLATIONS AND JOURNALIST SAFETY INDICATORS

15. LIST OF MEDIA RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND JOURNALIST SAFETY INDICATORS (JSIS), MAY 2017 TO APRIL 2018

AFGHANISTAN, BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, INDIA, MALDIVES, NEPAL, PAKISTAN, SRI LANKA

16. JAILED AND DETAINED JOURNALISTS IN SOUTH ASIA

May 2018
Afghanistan. In a separate incident, Ahmad Shah, a young journalist for many of the compelling images in this report from across was AFP's chief photographer Shah Marai, who was responsible a reporter at the scene of an initial bomb blast. Among the victims suicide bomb attack in Kabul, where the killer disguised himself as lost their lives in a single deadly day on April 30, 2018 – nine in a告诉记者, where the killer disguised himself as a reporter at the scene of an initial bomb blast. Among the victims suicide bomb attack in Kabul, where the killer disguised himself as a reporter at the scene of an initial bomb blast. Among the victims and their families, and if press freedom can indeed survive. The pervading sentiment emanating through the collective police took over the country and ignited a solidarity that went discourse of media workers in South Asia. It is audible in the collective demonstration and protests of media workers. It is there, between the lines, in journalist union statements and sympathy for every time yet another attack or killing takes target on a journalist. It is evident in the robust defence that plays out on social media against the obscene trolling of women journalists and secular bloggers in the online space. It is heard every time a journalist is jailed or detained on spurious and dubious charges, and in the passionate defence and campaigns delivered by colleagues and family for their release. It is the disturbing undertone in the ongoing discourse on the scourge of fake news that is taking over the online space as well as mainstream media. And it is there in the bleak silence of the many internet shutdowns that are plaguing freedom of expression and human rights in South Asia.

In this vast and diverse region that is increasingly divided by political extremism and suffering under authoritarian regimes, there is little regard for freedom of expression or the public’s right to know, one of the clear things that unites South Asia’s media is the shared experience of challenging clampdowns and control. The juggernaut of ever-evolving economic, social, cultural, political and, now, technological impacts, is putting the profession of journalism under pressure like never before. Legacy media is slowly but surely being dismantled or dismembered, increasingly to push the agendas of media owners or powerful political and business interests. Wages and job permanency have been the casualty of an information revolution, that has left fewer journalists working harder than ever before. The prevailing question is what kind of future will it be for South Asia’s journalists? After the storm, what will this new media landscape reflect? With the current trajectory of clampdowns and increasing controls, one could be forgiven for pessimistically thinking, if there will indeed be one and if press freedom can indeed survive.

As we release this year’s South Asia Press Freedom Report, Clampdowns and Courage, Afghanistan’s media has endured one of its darkest days and is in national mourning after another heinous suicide bombing and deadly targeted attack. At least 10 journalists lost their lives in a single deadly day on April 30, 2018 – nine in a suicide bomb attack in Kabul, where the killer disguised himself as a reporter at the scene of an initial bomb blast. Among the victims is the young journalist and AFP’s chief photographer Shah Marai, who was responsible for many of the compelling images in this report from across Afghanistan. In a separate incident, Ahmad Shah, a young journalist with the BBC’s Pashto service, was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Khost province. Our deepest sympathies go to all our colleagues in Afghanistan who have lost 22 colleagues in this one single year of review. Sadly, this epitomises the brutality of that country’s working environment, where the Taliban and the Daesh frequently target media and journalists while the state remains clearly unable to provide any security to them.

In India, we saw a nation in mourning after the brutal shooting of respected firebrand journalist Gauri Lankesh in the heart of tech-city Bengaluru. In the aftermath, the protests in defence of media took over the country and ignited a solidarity that went beyond India’s borders across the region and epitomises the sentiment of this year’s report. We document the clampdowns, repression and muzzling by legal means and more. But we also pay tribute to the other factor that unites South Asia’s media – and that is courage. And we reveal journalists jailed, detained or disappeared for simply for press freedom to do their job. For these reasons and more, Clampdowns and Courage encapsulates a record of this past year and the work of many. And, most importantly, we hope it will continue to support the South Asia Media Solidarity Network to continue its campaign for justice – because that is what we all deserve.

Jane Worthington
IFJ Asia-Pacific
OVERVIEW

The South Asian region remained vulnerable to the wave of populist authoritarianism evident elsewhere in recent years. The practice of journalism is deeply affected by these trends. Internet-based news platforms and social media continue their rapid growth, pressuring traditional media to evolve new modes of adjustment and accommodation. That new compact remains elusive and if anything, traditional media is pushing back by abandoning older and more valued attributes.

The internal political context in most of the eight South Asian countries, is marked by sharpening political polarisation. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan are scheduled to conduct national general elections later this year, and all these countries pose special challenges for journalists seeking free and fair access to news sites and non-hostile reporting environments.

Highlighting the insecure lives of journalists in war-torn Afghanistan, as many as ten journalists were killed on April 30, 2018. In addition to a journalist being gunned down in Khost in Eastern Afghanistan, nine journalists, including a female journalist, were killed in the line of duty in Kabul when a suicide bomber disguised as a journalist detonated himself among the reporters and camera crew who had rushed to cover an earlier suicide blast. A radical group that originated in the protracted conflict in the Arab world claimed responsibility for the attack, in which more than 50 people were killed. This deadly attack in one of the most fortified areas of the capital city follows a lethal blast at a voter registration centre just a week before which killed more than 50. A radical group that originated in the protracted conflict in the Arab world claimed responsibility for the suicide attack.

Since Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced a policy of negotiations with the Taliban – the country's erstwhile rulers who have re-emerged as a ferocious guerilla army – there were hopes that the politics of reconciliation may triumph over the long running insurgency. Media practitioners who have negotiated their own modes of engaging with the known threats while standing by professional codes, may have had reason to hope for an abatement of the daily hazards they face. The arrival of the alien radical element in Afghanistan and the brutal demonstration of its power to strike at will at the heart of the country's democratic process, considerably raises the level of menace.

Afghanistan's journalists are not entirely aware of the multiple directions from which threats emanate. Armed insurgents have carried out a number of targeted killings, but equally, there are hazards arising from potentially being at the wrong place at the wrong time and getting caught in crossfire or a blast. An official attempt to investigate every such instance since the political transition began in Afghanistan, has been launched with the cooperation of the country's journalists. Progress however, has been slow and an environment of trust between the political establishment and the country's media practitioners is yet to be built. Assaults on journalists by political figures and their associates have been common, typically triggered by some form of critical reporting.

After the last general election to its national parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad, was boycotted by the principal opposition, the authorities, as the industry pushed back strongly. Authorities brought into play certain over broad definitions of criminal activity, such as maligning national institutions and spreading "anarchy and extremism" to target particular journalists and media houses. Incidents of arbitrary detention and torture have been reported. And journalists who suffer the misfortune of being charged under the law, will potentially have to bear that millstone for long years.

Pakistan's electronic media regulator remains prepared to suspend all broadcasts under the slightest duress, as with a street demonstration that threatened to paralyse life in the national capital Islamabad and the adjacent city of Rawalpindi in November. There was in the course of the year, an effort to apply the same regulatory template to the print media, which was hastily withdrawn amid considerable embarrassment for the authorities, as the industry pushed back strongly.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ALIEN RADICAL ELEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE BRUTAL DEMONSTRATION OF ITS POWER TO STRIKE AT WILL AT THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, CONSIDERABLY RAISES THE LEVEL OF MENACE.
Disconnecting the mobile phone and internet services continue being among the first recourses for Pakistan’s federal and state authorities in any context of possible unrest. The national capital region of Islamabad and Rawalpindi has been visited with this manner of a ban five times over the course of the year. In lesser contexts of the apprehension of public disturbances, the social media sites are principal targets. Between the fear of a viral spread of rumour and the possibility of using these channels to quieten a possible contagion, the Pakistani authorities clearly tilt towards the fearful side.

In the vastness of India, there is no time when electoral competition is absent from one corner or the other. Recent years have witnessed the mushrooming of commercially strapped social media houses selling print space and broadcast time to political parties and social movements, to make good a rapid shrinking of advertising revenue. The Election Commission of India has since made it a standard practice to set up watchdog bodies to monitor the media in the context of election campaigns, to detect when unfair means may be in play. So far, only candidates engaging in the practice have been held liable, on charges of disclosing campaign expenses. The media industry has suffered an erosion of credibility and also faces a movement in civil society, to hold it liable under law for this category of abuse.

Recent election campaigns have also been punctuated when the vast and relatively unfettered media industry in India has begun choosing sides with an unaccustomed fervour. There is a suggestion here of journalist autonomy being forced to take a backseat in the interest of the media owner dictates editorial policy. The growing partisanship is also seen as a strategy of gaining traction in the social media space through promoting certain stories with hysteric-pattisan taglines. The emergence of a viable revenue model for the new context of exploding connectivity, is clearly taking an ethical toll. As India goes through a busy schedule of state-level elections through the second half of the year, and moves towards potentially a fiercely contested national general election early in 2019, the media will be under watch, perhaps as much as it is watched or read.

The social media space, inherently so difficult to monitor because of the sheer volume of information transacted through it, is expected to become a major battleground as elections approaches. The last national general election of 2014 witnessed a significant increase in the use of social media, though one party proved to be far ahead of the game than all others. In the years since, these campaign strategies have been developed and to some degree discredited. There is also a more vigorous fact-checking ecosystem that has grown and is quick to challenge patently spurious social media posts. Charges of “fake news” are freely traded, often with the fact-checkers being accused of the very vice that they seek to curb. The issue has been taken on board the regulatory agenda, though not in a manner that inspires great confidence among those worried about the corrosive impact of spurious news and information on the standards of civic and political life.

Social media came under the scanner in Sri Lanka, when the highland town of Kandy erupted in sectarian violence in March. After setbacks that the coalition elected to power in 2015 suffered in provincial and local elections, this outbreak seemed an ominous warning that the post-war reconciliation process was in danger of rupture. Further turbulence seemed to engulf the coalition when the Prime Minister had to face down a no-confidence vote in Parliament.

The Sri Lankan government responded to the violence in Kandy by declaring a state of emergency and imposing a ban on social media, an almost reflexive response among all governments in the region. In Sri Lanka through, civil society organisations seem to have stepped up to challenge this action and to try to bring some degree of nuance to the debate on how social media is best governed. Civil society groups have written to the government of Sri Lanka and also the management of Facebook, seeking a serious engagement with the issue, to find mutually agreeable pathways towards a sane governance policy.

A brief improvement in the media environment in the Maldives ended when the island republic’s democratic transition went off the rails. Ordered by the Supreme Court of the Maldives to release a number of political prisoners, the President of the Republic chose instead to imprison the offending judges and lay siege to parliament. In the course of that extraordinary political turn, a number of media outlets were shut down, particularly those that have been consistently critical of the President. The President’s decision to announce a state of emergency imposed a series of clauses of the law dealing with national security. A series of defamation and libel suits have been lodged to shut down any criticism. The repression it is feared, could only worsen as the country heads towards presidential elections in October this year.

Nepal affords a relatively placid picture through a rocky year for most of South Asia. Since the political transition began in the early part of the century, Nepal has witnessed intense internal politics over ministry formation and the drafting of its republican constitution. Indecisive electoral outcomes and hung parliaments made government formation a story of one briefly lived coalition after another. And disputes over power-sharing between the centre and the provinces and the empowerment of ethnic and linguistic minorities, made the latter an endlessly contentious process.

Constitution writing was finally concluded in 2015 and in multi-level elections held 2017, a seemingly cohesive coalition won convincing majorities, promising a period of relative political stability. As the new constitution takes effect and a host of legal changes begin to exert their influence, the media will also be obliged to change its mode of working.

There may be for instance, a greater migration of media towards the provincial and local levels, unlike now, when it seems clustered rather heavily around the national capital, Kathmandu. Political office holders and certain constitutional functionaries would likewise, have to respond to media coverage with an ability to distinguish between their institutional and individual roles. This aspect was highlighted through the year in contempt proceedings that the country’s Chief Justice launched against a newspaper for reporting certain discrepancies in its official records of his hist.

A confrontation between the media and the police force in a province of Nepal occurred over the publication of the performance appraisals of certain police officers. An avoidable precedent could have emerged from the police demand that the media reveal its sources.

Other stories reporting malfeasance in government agencies and public corporations have attracted threats of retribution. The institutional means of grievance redressal obviously still have a long way to go before they gain general acceptance.

Bhutan will also go to the polls towards the end of the year to elect its third National Assembly since beginning the transition to a constitutional monarchy in 2008. Elections to the twenty seats in the upper house – the National Council – will conclude before that. A new constitution is in place and a number of laws have been enacted with implications for media functioning. There are worries that in the effort to play safe, the laws may tilt towards restraining media freedom.

Bhutan will face a challenge in instituting a culture of competitive and professional journalism in a context where internet based platforms and the social media seem to be taking over the space for information transactions. In that sense, its challenges differ from other countries in South Asia, where traditional media are struggling to cope with the new communication technologies.

Concerns over the “viral effect” that could be engendered through the social media are acute in all South Asian democracies. There is also much worry over the absence of a professional process of curating content posed on social media. In polarised political milieu, journalists who take to social media to insist on adherence to traditional values of the profession, often become targets of abuse. These come frequently with threats of physical violence, a hazard that women especially are prone to. All countries in South Asia face in this sense, a common challenge of overcoming the new spirit of incivility which has fused in social media practice, with traditional patriarchies.
Two days before the UN International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists (IDJI) on November 2, 2017, Kshitij Kumar, a journalist with the online portal The Quint, received a terse ‘apology’ of sorts from the Delhi Police:

“Today was particularly bad because of stone pelting injuries. It was a mix-up, we are sorry.” The journalist had spent over two hours in a police lockup in New Delhi, after having had his footage of a slum demolition forcibly deleted.

This incident was relayed by his colleague Meghnad Bose at a meeting to observe IDJI, hosted by UNESCO in New Delhi. Bose himself was assaulted by the Delhi police in May 2017, while covering student protests. “If this is our fate in India’s capital, what must be happening to journalists in small towns and cities?” he asked.

However, it is not just in small-towns and villages that investigations are tardy. It was only six months after the murder of prominent editor Gauti Lankesh in the heart of tech-city Bengaluru in September 2017, that one of the accused, the suspected supplier of firearms was nabbed. The actual shooters are still at large.

Given this attitude of the law-enforcers, the struggle for justice is a long and painful one for the survivors and for families of those killed, their colleagues and journalists’ organisations. For some, there is no end to the punishing process. For others, the process doesn’t even begin.

When journalists dissent, uncover corruption or record patently illegal acts, they become targets. In India, over the last two decades, more than 30 journalists have been killed as a direct result of their professional work. The rate of conviction continues to be near-zero and the long road to justice is fraught with poor investigation, political pressure that often lets accused abscend or roam scot free and interminable trials that have not secured a single conviction to date. Ultimately, the incidents of crimes against journalists occur with impunity because those in power know they can get away with it.

There is no quick fix. We know impunity is a warning of the breakdown of rule of law and democracy and contributes to the increase in murders and attacks. When journalists are threatened or attacked, the support of their colleagues and their employers will go a long way to combat impunity. We stage protests and release reports offering recommendations for change. We campaign to draw global attention to the weaknesses and failings of governments, courts and state forces in tracking down and prosecuting perpetrators. We follow cases and call on governments and their leaders to bear responsibility for the deathly smear that blights countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

In countries like Nepal and Pakistan, effective media monitoring networks keep tabs on violations as they occur and continue to push for meaningful change. In Pakistan, strengthening the capabilities of journalists to operate with more preparedness about risks is beginning to make impact. Progress is still painfully slow. In Afghanistan, efforts to strengthen the capabilities of journalists to operate with and continue to push for meaningful change.

For some years the movement in Pakistan for enacting a special legal framework on improving safety and security of journalists has intensified. The media stakeholders, particularly journalists and information practitioners, have continued to demand a comprehensive legislation to combat impunity for crimes against journalists. Responding to these demands, the federal government initiated the process to draft a law on journalists’ safety in 2015. Building upon the earlier drafts – one prepared by a Senate Standing Committee, headed by Senator Raja Zafarul Haq, in 2011, and another submitted by Sahibzada Tanjil Ullah and others in National Assembly in 2014 – the government drafted the Journalists Welfare and Protection Bill, 2017. This bill was criticised and rejected by the stakeholders, including the
Pakistan's 20,000 journalists. Others, including the Pakistan
Broadcasting Association (PBA) and All Pakistan
Newspapers Society (APNS) also did not support the bill for various
reasons. Upon an initiative from the Senate in November 2017,
a new alternative draft model law on journalists’ safety
was developed in collaboration with the PFUJ, the media
associations and the government through a subcommittee
of the Senate’s Standing Committee on Information and
Broadcasting in January 2018. The draft, however, failed to be
tabled as three-year Senate elections intervened in March
2018. The new Senate is expected to table this long-awaited
legislative draft and adopt it later in 2018.

SRI LANKA: LETHARGIC INVESTIGATIONS
Progress around ending impunity for media rights
violations, has been slower than expected. The United
Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights pointed
out in his report to the 37th session of the UNHRC that Sri
Lanka’s “authorities have not yet demonstrated the capacity
or willingness to address impunity for gross violations
and abuses of international human rights law and serious
violations of international humanitarian law.” It was noted
that “the High Commissioner remains gravely concerned
that two and a half years into a reconciliation process,
Lanka’s “authorities have not yet demonstrated the capacity
or willingness to address impunity for gross violations
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WE KNOW IMPUNITY IS A WARNING OF THE BREAKDOWN
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He is accused of the abduction and assault of journalist Keith
Noyahr, then defence correspondent of the Nation.
His limbs were broken and he was suffocated with
steal. Meanwhile Sandya Eknaligoda continues the
requesting an investigation in connection to his abduction and
assault. She has been under constant threat of violence
by political opponents and has received death threats.
In June 2017, well-known journalist Poddala Jayantha
was arrested on February 14, 2018 for allegedly instructing his
juniors to block the investigation into Lasantha’s murder and
destroy evidence gathered from the crime scene.

The involvement of military intelligence in the killing has
come to light. Media reported that the then Head of Military
Intelligence, Kapila Hendavitharana, was heading a killer
squad and he reported directly to the then Defense Secretary
Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Several other high-profile arrests
were on the cards, but the investigation appears to have lost
steam.

In another positive development, the former Military
Intelligence Director and Chief of Staff of the Army, Major
General (Retired) Amal Karunasekara was arrested in 2018.

In November 2017, emphasising that justice has not been
delivered for the targeted crimes against journalists in Sri
Lanka, the Free Media Movement urged the President of
Sri Lanka to appoint a Presidential Commission of Inquiry
with a comprehensive mandate for investigations.

On a positive note, during the period under review,
notable progress was reported in the investigation into
the murder of editor Lasantha Wickrematunga, outspoken
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On August 28, 2017, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the head of a religious cult called the Dera Sacha Sauda (Abode of Real Truth) was sentenced by a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court to 20 years imprisonment for the rape of two women. Elaborate, if somewhat bizarre, security arrangements were made for Justice Jagdeep Singh, who, with his staff was flown in from Chandigarh by helicopter to the special court set up in the premises of the district jail in Rohtak, around 66 km from New Delhi. A three-tier security ring with 4,000 personnel guarded the area around the jail where Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh was lodged. The Rohtak deputy commissioner Atul Kumar had earlier declared that shoot-at-sight orders would be issued, such was the influence of the Dera in the area (‘dera’ in Punjabi, which literally means a camp or settlement, in this context refers to a religious cult).

There was good reason for the high security. Three days before, when the court held Ram Rahim guilty of the crime, his followers went on a rampage, ransacking court premises, beating up journalists and setting fire to their outdoor broadcasting vans. Thirty-eight people lost their lives and over 250 others – including journalists – were injured in the violence. In Sirsa town, the headquarters of the Dera Sacha Sauda, curfew was imposed and an atmosphere of fear was heavy in the air.

If the district administration was caught by surprise at the scale of the violence and the savagery of the followers near and was nabbed by the police. The other was later identified as Nirmal Singh. The shooters had, the family later learnt, done quite a few recces and were aware of Chhatrapati’s routine. Anshul recalls: “My father had a routine. He was very particular about proof-reading the entire paper by himself. His column ‘Off the record and on the record’, which he signed with the pen name ‘satsayad’ (truthful) was very popular. He usually went to meet his friends in the market after the newspaper was published. On that day, my brother and sister had told him to return early because our mother was not at home.”

He returned home at around 7.30 pm. A few minutes later, someone called out to him and he stepped into the narrow lane outside the house. He was pumped with five bullets. His children ran out on hearing the shots. There were two gumen. One ran towards a police chowki (outpost) nearby and was nabbed by the police. The other was later caught.

Ram Rahim.

“Is it yet another delaying tactic? Is he genuine? What will happen to our case if his plea is accepted?” wondered Anshul. The case relating to the murder of his journalist father is at the stage of final arguments while arguments have concluded in the Ranjit Singh murder case. If the plea was accepted, the case could be delayed by another four to six months, but if it was dismissed, the order could come in a month. Ifs and Buts. This has been the situation for the last three or four years. At every turn, some delay would push back the progress of the case.

The children rushed their father to the local hospital and from there, moved him to Rohtak in an ambulance where doctors declared him dead. As journalists and socialists in Sirsa gathered in shock and anger. He was conscious and even told the District Commissioner of Sirsa, “DC Saab, just as I told you, they came to get me.”

He clearly and repeatedly named Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the head of the Dera Sacha Sauda, as the perpetrator of the attack on him. But police were reluctant to include the name of the Dera in the statement they recorded.

Ram Chander Chhatrapati, a fighter till the end, died on November 21 in Apollo hospital in Delhi.

VOICE AGAINST INJUSTICE

Mastana Balochistani, who founded the socio-spiritual organisation Dera Sacha Sauda in 1948, functioned out of a small cottage in Sirsa. He was succeeded by his disciple Satnam Singh. In a controversial ouster in 1990, Gurmeet Singh, who came to be known as Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan, took over when he was just 23 years old. Ram Chander Chhatrapati, living and working in Sirsa, the Dera headquarters, saw the transformation of the Dera from 70 acres in 1990 to its present powerful 900 acre-empire of colonies, factories industries, hospitals and educational institutions across the states of Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan.

“My father, as well as other local media, questioned how the Dera could grow so much if it didn’t take donations. The fact is, so many people came under the influence of the Dera and gave up their land. But not all of this was voluntary. Those who dissented were swiftly evicted, repressed and even beaten into silence. And in Sirsa, the ordinary public also kept silent,” Anshul recalled.

But for Ram Chander Chhatrapati, silence was never an option. Passionately interested in journalism even as a student, he joined the Sirsa bar as a lawyer but continued to contribute to national newspapers and started a newspaper called Sirsa Samrat. That folded up, but he started Poona Sach in February 2000. A daily eveninger, its very first editorial carried an oath that its title meant ‘poona’ sach – the ‘whole’ truth and nothing but the truth. “He wrote that he would never compromise, that he believed in promoting a scientific temperament and would never encourage obscurantism,” Anshul recalls.

In his trademark vyangyatmak or satirical style, Ram Chander Chhatrapati wrote about national and international issues, even as he questioned the growth of the cult and critiqued the growing links between the Haryana state government and the Dera. The reports soon began to have an impact. Says Anshul, “His friends used to counsel him not to take up cudgels against these powerful forces, but he refused to listen. He used to say: ‘My writing is truthful, it is correct. I cannot remain silent.’”

In May 2002, another anonymous letter about sexual exploitation in the Dera, reportedly written by a sahivri (woman disciple), addressed to then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee began to do the rounds of media houses. Poona Sach published the letter in full on May 30, 2002, with the headline: ‘Dharm ke naam pe ho rahe hai, sahivri ke jivan baabahat’ (in the name of religion, women’s lives are ruined).

Another publication Lekha Jhoka (The Chronicle) in neighbouring Fatehabad district, also published the letter. Its offices were ransacked and its news editor had to go underground with his family. Poona Sach wrote about this attack too. It gave extensive coverage to the letter, its implications and the actions of the Dera followers in intimidating people who tried to discuss the revelations.

Ram Chander Chhatrapati began getting death threats and wrote to the then Superintendent of Police, Sirsa, on July 2, 2002, saying that he feared his daily movements were being tracked. But no action was taken on his letter.

In September 2002, the Punjab and Haryana High Court took suo moto notice of the letter and ordered a CBI enquiry. “All of this was reported by my father. Every single development was scaled down,” said Anshul. A month later, Ram Chander Chhatrapati was shot outside his home and succumbed on November 21, 2002.

A 16-YEAR PURSUIT

From the beginning, the identity of the perpetrators was known to the police. The shooters, had the family later learnt, done quite a few recces and were aware of Chhatrapati’s routine. The shooters nabbed by the police, upon interrogation disclosed that he was from the cult and used a licensed revolver that belonged to a Dera employee Kishan Lal. Even the walkie talkie set the duo had used was licensed to the Dera. That this was not identified as Nirmal Singh.

On October 25, Ram Chander Chhatrapati underwent surgery and when he regained consciousness, gave a statement to the police naming Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh as the prime suspect. Anshul Chhatrapati also gave a statement to the police. It was only in November, after performing the last rites connected with his father’s funeral that Anshul realised that the police had compounded their statements in their First Information Report (FIR).

As Anshul recalled, “The Dera and the state government clearly had an understanding. The state government was putting pressure on the police to see that the Dera’s name must not be in the FIR; that the police’s needle of suspicion must be turned away from it.”

The police even tried another Information Report (FIR).

On November 23, 2002, the Chief Minister of Haryana...
come to my house and said that the culprits, however powerful, would be booked. But the exact opposite happened. There was no interrogation of the Dera head, the police didn’t bring in the Dera angle. In Sirsa, a movement led by the media called for a bandh (shutdown). Everyone joined in, citizens, political parties and lawyers,” Anshul said.

Finally, forced to concede by the fierce agitation of local journalists and citizens of Sirsa, the police held a press conference and declared that the Dera was suspected to be behind the shooting. But slowly, the movement became a victim of political pressure and apathy and gradually lost steam.

“So, I took on the mantle of the struggle for justice for my father. I wrote to the CM Haryana and demanded a CBI investigation. Ultimately, I had to knock on the doors of the court. On January 10, 2003, I filed a petition before the Punjab and Haryana High Court to demand a CBI investigation,” Anshul said, adding that it was not easy as the government cracked down on anyone who supported him or spoke against the Dera.

On July 31, 2007, a CBI challan (summons) was filed and the charge-sheet was finally filed in 2008. But for years thereafter, the accused would file applications in court on some pretext or the other. Between 2008 and 2017, the case came up several times and multiple applications were moved to delay the matter and intimidate the witnesses.

Anshul, who was a 21-year-old when his father died, took on the mantle of publishing the newspaper. It was difficult. His younger brother, who was 14 at the time, helped out because he had learnt to operate the computers in his father’s office. The family managed to survive from the income of their ancestral agricultural land but the long drawn out court case took its toll and they were forced to fold up the newspaper in 2014.

The period between 2013 and 2017 marked the growth of the Dera. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh gained immense political clout and amassed a lot of wealth. He began appearing on television, with his own morning show. He adopted blingy and flamboyant costumes and gave advertisements in the newspapers and, in his television programmes, was often dancing and singing with his followers. He even acted in two bi-ops celebrating his cult status.

Throughout, the case meandered along.

COURTING HOPE

The rape cases and the murder cases – of Ranjit Singh and of Ram Chander Chhappattapi – ran in tandem but the Dera managed to stall proceedings at almost every turn. In 2005, Ranjit Singh’s father moved the High Court for a CBI investigation but the police said the two shooters were caught and the weapon recovered so there was no need for a CBI enquiry into his son’s murder. Finally, the court ordered a CBI investigation into all cases in November 2003.

Anshul acknowledges that the fight was possible only because of the support from well-known advocates who refused to charge a pittance. “We couldn’t afford a big lawyer. A supporter, Commodore Baldev Bakshi, got his son Ashwani Bakshi, a lawyer in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, and Lekhraj Dhot from Sirsa, to help us. The senior lawyer, RS Cheema, worked pro bono. A supporter, Comrade Baldev Bakshi, got his son Ashwani Bakshi, a lawyer in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, and Lekhraj Dhot from Sirsa, to help us. The senior lawyer, RS Cheema, worked pro bono. In fact, the Dera people had approached him but he refused their brief. All of them put up the legal fight and stood by us throughout. We salute them.”

The Dera challenged the order of the CBI investigation in the Supreme Court in Delhi. Socialist leader Yogendra Yadav, who was well acquainted with Ram Chander Chhappattapi’s work and had met him in Sirsa barely a week before he was shot, stepped in to secure the offices of the respected former judge, the late Rajinder Sachar. The Dera petition challenging the CBI investigation was dismissed in November 2004.

The otherwise discredited CBI worked earnestly. “Apart from the murder cases, the rape cases were a shot in the dark. There was only an anonymous letter to go by. The CBI interrogated 18 girls. Only two came forward to file complaints. Their bravery must be commended. It is not easy. In one case, the in-laws were followers of the Dera so they threw the girl out. But her husband has stood by her,” said Anshul.

Intimidation, bomb threats and attempted assault followed, even as Gurmeet Ram Rahim was given Z plus security and moved around in a cavalcade of six cars with black window glasses. “Even the atmosphere in the court was so frightening when we used to go for hearings,” Anshul said.

But the CBI investigating officer and its Superintendent of Police, Armandeep Singh, built a watertight case and withheld all the pressure, political and monetary. Regrettably, while the local media stayed away from following up on the case, possibly due to fear, Anshul continued to use the media as much as possible, in the most innovative manner. He continually briefed the media with updates on the case, even small incidents and developments. He would write letters to the High Court, the Supreme Court and to the Prime Minister. When the media in Haryana stayed quiet, he approached the more responsive media in neighbouring Chandigarh. And, when the media was unable to cover the case, he made use of alternate and social media. The electronic channels stayed away. Several channels would approach him for information and he would share it, only to find dead silence. “The channels keep asking, give us something different, something the stories can run with. But tell me, what can be a bigger story than a media worker being murdered?”

Today, Anshul awaits an elusive justice that now seems nearer. “I feel huge regret. Time is a great healer they say, but I don’t think so. My sister and brother were younger, so I had to take on. I took on the challenge. I have to get justice for him.”
THE IGNORED RURAL REPORTER

A majority of the South Asian population lives in rural areas – approximately 81 per cent in Nepal; over 70 per cent in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka and over 60 per cent in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Bhutan. Yet, the urban-centric media in the region is focused on ‘national’ parliamentary politics centred around the capital cities metropolises while the vast countryside is largely neglected.

Grassroots reporters’ stories from small towns and villages get little space in the city press, at best they may feature as briefs on a local news page. Yet, these reporters are the building blocks of the news-generating industry, the primary sources of news. Often with no facilities, and little or no training, they are the first responders in their localities, rushing to the spot, carrying out their work often at great risk to themselves. They face intimidation and direct threats, caught between the various powers at play in the rural areas and small towns, where they also reside.

The open conflict between various communities, vested interests, mining barons, tribal chieftains, land and liquor mafias, puts members of the local media too at risk. They are also forced to fend for themselves. “Go to a press club in any small town and you will meet all kinds of journalists. Many are on the mend, but they could not afford a vehicle of their own. Nor did he get a conveyance allowance. “One morning he was tipped off about a big accident outside the town. He hitched a ride to the spot, on a policeman’s bike. He was especially on the roadside, notebook in hand, when a passing truck ran him down. He was on duty when he died but his pregnant wife got practically no compensation from the newspaper.”

However, there is demand for local news in regional languages within many states and language dailies increasingly have district-level editions and even online local editions. Meerut based Mohammed Ali, a correspondent for Hindustan, points out that Hindi language journalism is flourishing in north India, with rural editions in every district and online versions too. The number of editions depends on the extent of trade and commerce in a district and the size and importance of a town. In Uttar Pradesh’s Meerut district, the leading Hindi daily Danik Jagran has both a rural edition and a town edition. Editions are printed in the bigger towns and consequently, in Meerut town the daily Hindustan has a bureau with 20 staff members.

D. Anjaneyulu, general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Working Journalists Federation, says that the growth of the electronic media has led to a proliferation of journalists in the rural areas of both Andhra Pradesh and the newly-carved out neighbouring state of Telangana. He says his union of 5000 has a majority of rural reporters and stringers. “Every big channel has a reporter for each of the 175 ‘mandals’ (administrative unit) in the state. They operate as journalists cum videographers. They get no honorarium, on the contrary they are expected to feed the channels by raising money for advertisements from businesspersons, sometimes a quota of a minimum of Rs 10,000 (USD 150) per month. Staff reporters also have to pay the costs of running the office by paying for rent, electricity, telephone and petrol.”

“These practices are giving journalists a bad name in rural areas,” complains Anjaneyulu. Journalists are forced to beg or blackmail businesspersons and politicians, he rues. Anjaneyulu says the situation of many rural journalists is pathetic; only a few who have an extra source of income, for instance from owning land, survive while the rest must extract money from wherever they can. “We do get some benefits from the state government, such as a bus pass and a health card for free medical care. The government also pays for risk insurance for hospitalisation and deaths. But, as unions we want the government to implement the labour legislation, so that we can get our entitlements from governments, not government charity.”

W. Chandrakanth, editor of Hans India, concurs, “It’s a miserable life out there for rural journalists. There is a no job security or income security as they fall under the hire and fire category. Low incomes or no direct income from the organisations means that they are left to fend for themselves (read extortion and blackmail). This forces them to compromise on their values and submit to the whims of local strongmen, politicians, officials and the mafia.”

Technology has made reporting easier, but it has also added to the burdens of most journalists. Often a media house owns both a newspaper and a TV channel and the stringer has to work for both: first file a TV report, then write up a news report, provide photographs and tweet news. Of course, salaries do not increase along with the burden of work. Chandrakanth, “All that the stringer gets is the ‘line payment’ as they call it which means that if a cameraman cum stringer cum photographer sends a two-minute long report with bites, and if it is aired for five to ten seconds, he gets paid for only the five to ten second period. Similarly in print, payments are abysmal. For spot news (which means coverage of a press conference of political leaders or officials) you get Rs 150 (USD 2.30). For a story (special or exclusive) you get Rs 250 (USD 3.80). Channels with lesser TRP ratings and less revenues do not pay even much. Another system is also in vogue. If the scroll is for State-level usage, the stringer gets Rs 25 (US 38 cents) for the scroll. If it is used in district level coverage, then one gets Rs 10 (US 15 cents) for such a scroll. Dailes pay by the centimetre or length of the story or pay a few paisa per word.”

Veteran journalist Vijay Chawla from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh also observes that while journalists based in the state capital and big towns are reasonably paid, stringers are left to fend for themselves. “Go to a press club in any small town and you will meet all kinds of journalists. Many are on the
Sandeep Sharma, a journalist in Bhind a small town in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh was mowed down by a dumper truck on March 25, 2018, allegedly at the behest of sand mafia whose illegal mining he had exposed. Sharma had allegedly videotaped a police official taking a bribe.

From above: Members of the right-wing Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) gather for a large-scale congregation in Meerut in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh on March 11, 2018. Over 70,000 RSS volunteers from district groups in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states were to attend the RSS’s ‘Sankshipta Sankalpa Pratosa’ congregation in Meerut. Credit: Sajjad Hussain/AFP

SANDEEP SHARMA, A JOURNALIST IN BHIND A SMALL TOWN IN THE CENTRAL INDIAN STATE OF MADHYA PRADESH WAS MOVED DOWN BY A DUMPER TRUCK

On March 25, 2018, allegedly at the behest of sand mafia whose illegal mining he had exposed. Sharma had allegedly videotaped a police official taking a bribe.

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one holding a camera, go out to interview villagers for the programme. Others have been trained as archivists, editors, and producers. The programme is aired free at markets village or at the district headquarter on a projector or TV set. DVD copies are available for sale. Sadly, experiments like these have limited commercial viability and still depend on external funding from donor agencies.

In Chhattisgarh, the CGNet Swara is a unique mobile phone-based platform set up by former BBC producer Shubramush Coudhary to give the marginalised tribal population a voice. Chhattisgarh is a conflict zone where a Maoist army is fighting the state, and in the interior, forested villages there is no television or newspaper. News about tribal issues and concerns rarely reaches the mainstream media; in some cases, such news is deliberately suppressed by the mainstream where it conflicts with media owners’ business interests, for example, news about protests against mining or land acquisition. Given the adverse political climate, through CGNet Swara is often forced to play it safe and not report controversial news, it nevertheless provides an alternate forum to the tribal people. Using YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms, small town journalists are selling news to different buyers and consumers. During last year’s elections in Uttar Pradesh for instance news organisations such as UPTV, Uttarpradesh.org, Newstrack.com, Diyasandesh.in, and Earlynews.in raced for instance news organisations such as UPTV, Uttarpradesh.org, Newstrack.com, Diyasandesh.in, and Earlynews.in raced for running on parallel tracks. But, journalist Ghulam Rasool Khan who reports on corruption in Chhattisgarh. Reported stories are moderated by journalists and become available for playback online as well as over the phone.

Pakistan: In the Eye of the Storm
Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, where according to the Rural Media Network of Pakistan (RMNP) the majority of journalists killed in the line of duty since 2000 belong to rural areas and small towns. Journalists in rural areas experience the same constraints as their colleagues in the city, but also face serious additional issues because of their location and the social differences in those areas. For journalists in rural areas, corruption, sectarianism, honour killings, gang rape and feudal powers all represent subject matter that is difficult to report on. Armed militancy, religious extremism, sectarian violence and terror attacks are the main problems for rural journalists. They put their lives in danger to cover assignments without insurance, safety equipment or proper safety training.

Off-Limits
Censorship in Pakistan used to be straightforward. Certain topics were simply off limits, today, the situation is more complicated. There are still a large number of topics which are basically deemed no-go subjects for journalists. These include articles critical of the military or government, investigative reports, and any report on the Taliban or other similar groups. Journalists face problems while reporting on certain institutions and areas. They have concerns over their limitations to report on certain subjects in FATA, Balochistan and other restricted areas. Religious extremism continues to spread and there are many sectarian organisations fighting for domination. In addition, the drugs and arms mafia, assassins, ethnic groups and other criminal gangs are also active. Extremist leaders, keen to have their speeches denouncing other sects published in full, threaten journalists who resist. In an incident in July 2012 which is still fresh in public memory, an unidentified man in Chagioth village in Punjab was publicly lynched on suspicion of blasphemy. The angry mob stormed the police station where he was held, set it on fire, and dragged the alleged blasphemer to his gory death. The president of the local Press Club Shahid Bashir was threatened with dire consequences by the head of a banned extremist outfit for not airing the footage of this incident on his TV channel. More recently, Qari Sahail, a member of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi group was hanged to death in March 2016, for his involvement in firing on a military vehicle in FATA and the Faisalabad jail break in 2012 in which 384 Taliban members were freed and two constables shot dead. At Qari Sahail’s funeral in Mauza Bagapur, close to the office of the Rural Media Network of Pakistan, members of the banned organisation chanted slogans and pressured local rural journalists to publish news depicting him as a victim of state machinery rather than as a militant and threatened them with dire consequences if they did not.

Local religious leaders do not understand that correspondents have no control over editorial policy, and journalists receive threatening text messages from militants over news coverage that is decided at city desks. The threats faced by journalists in remote areas of the country, vary from influential figures harassing journalists who report on ‘honour’ killing and gang rape incidents, to targeting by the Taliban, other militants and even security agencies. Authorities often falsely accuse journalists of various crimes, according to journalists in Tehsil Liaquatpur of district Rahim Yar Khan in South Punjab who have tried to report on ‘honour’ killing. In Interior Sindhi, rural journalists faced threats even from law makers and influential persons while reporting their misdeeds and corruption and were sometimes implicated in false cases. To cite just one example, in Bahawalpur district, journalist Ghulam Rasool Khan who reports on corruption of government functionaries is facing several cases registered against him by the authorities. Other important constraints on media freedom which impinge on journalists’ ability to do their job, are the culture of secrecy and bureaucratic restrictions on access to official information. Journalists find it almost impossible to find information related to large government deals or projects, and ministries remain tight-lipped on their activities and finances.

Walking the Tightrope
Historically the development of media in Pakistan has taken place in metropolitan centres and has not filtered down to rural areas. As a result, rural journalists remain neglected, often working in isolation with extremely limited support from media organisations in financial, moral and professional terms. Salaries for journalists in Pakistan are notoriously low, and rural journalists are particularly susceptible to unfair compensation. According to a survey in 2014, only 13 per cent of the rural journalists earned regular salaries, and 60 per cent worked entirely for free. Some rural journalists, also known as district correspondents, are engaged by media organisations for reporting news and views for their TV channels from the rural areas. While a few journalists at district headquarters are paid to some extent, at lower units like the tehsil head quarter, town, and union councils they are unpaid.

However, there is no comprehensive system or hotline to act when a rural journalist is attacked, kidnapped or tortured. There is also a sense of isolation as rural journalists have no contact with journalist bodies active in big cities. Unfortunately, in rural areas journalists are divided into groups, with unions and press clubs also running on parallel tracks. There is a pervasive nationwide distrust of journalists, particularly those serving in rural sectors, due to a history of bribery and blackmail in the profession over the few past
few decades. This sordid past has eroded confidence in journalism as a whole, particularly when it is conducted by small, independent media outlets. There is a mushrooming of rural journalists as businessmen, shopkeepers, hotel owners etc. have now joined the profession just to secure their business. Some pay national newspapers, TV channels and get press cards. So, professional journalists either do other jobs or run small businesses to meet their family expenses. Only two per cent of all journalists in Pakistan are female. In the Bahawalpur (Punjab province) home to 12.5 million people there is not a single female journalist. Rural society in Pakistan is highly segregated and in the grip of feudal lords. Men cannot report about women’s issues due to cultural barriers, so the women’s perspective is missing in news coverage.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

More needs to be done to address the serious problems that journalists in villages and small towns face on a daily basis as they attempt to report on what is happening in rural areas to the wider world. The RMNP has been advocating that media houses should provide safety equipment to all correspondents, irrespective of their location, and reporters, camera crew and other support staff covering dangerous assignments must be provided insurance cover.

No salary policy

Low and irregular salaries and job security are the main problems for journalists in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas. This phenomenon is detrimental to the growth of professionalism and also causing concern about yellow journalism. Professional dignity is being marred by a “no salary culture” for rural journalists, which renders them vulnerable and lacking in security.

In addition to sending news reports, the local correspondents of the dailies have to collect advertisements from local sources, mostly from government offices, and they get a percentage of revenue from the advertisements collected. Journalists working in the districts and upazilas, bartending a few, are involved in dual professions. Many of them are involved in business, while some others are college teachers. They also face physical risks because of their identity as journalists. Every Dhaka-based newspaper has a single correspondent in the respective towns, so it is easy to identify a journalist who has reported any misdeed done by any person or authority. Threats are ever present from the local administration, gangs and political actors. There is a minuscule number of women journalists in rural areas, who face multiple challenges. Indigenous journalists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face special vulnerabilities due to presence of army and insurgent groups.

Though the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) does not have units in all the districts, it is seen to protest major assaults on journalists working in any area of the country. There are many organisations of journalists, but there is no common platform for rural journalists across Bangladesh. However, journalists are seen to protest jointly on various occasions, especially on issues like assaults on journalists, and this solidarity allows them to survive to tell the story.
Women journalists in South Asia are no longer willing to accept sexual harassment at work, we shine the spotlight on media organisations, unions and associations can do and how they can be made to work with vigilant and proactive staff and their redressal mechanisms can only be tackled through different means. Each of these laws provides for redressal mechanisms within the workplace – complaints committees, inquiries and disciplinary action. They also provide for compensation, court fees and trauma leave, in recognition of the toll that sexual harassment can take on a complainant.

Yet, these laws have not necessarily made workplaces less hostile and conducive for women journalists. It is clear that the law and redressal mechanisms can only be made to work with vigilant and proactive staff and their associations and unions. The all-pervasive belittling of women and the resultant hostile workplaces are almost a norm in small towns and the non-English press, where conversations around sexual harassment are yet to be heard, and redressal mechanisms yet to emerge.

Marginalisation in other spheres – caste, class, ethnicity and region – add to the possibilities of being subjected to sexual harassment, with no recourse.

The male entitlement that defines most workplaces pervades even the emerging world of Artificial Intelligence. “I’d blush if I could,” “If you insist!” “Now we’re talking!” are some of the coy and suggestive responses of a female assistant when she is sexually harassed. Except that this is Siri, Apple’s ‘virtual assistant’. Digital personal assistants, including Amazon’s Alexa, Microsoft’s Cortana and Google’s Home replicate feminine stereotypes of subservience or each person to exercise herself. But each time one of us speaks up and owns her personal closure, that’s for each person to figure out by themselves. There’s no winning in a situation so fraught.

It took me a couple of years to understand this: sexual harassment at the workplace is not a battle any one of us is going to win alone. In fact, there’s no winning in a situation so awful - a legal route or official route alone cannot provide personal closure, that’s for each person to exercise herself. But each time one of us speaks up and owns her personal closure, that’s for each person to figure out by themselves. There’s no winning in a situation so fraught.

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Pakistan

**Lubna Jereen Nadi: The Discussion Has Started**

Sometimes a bad thing may open up important discussions that didn’t take place due to social and religious codes. This is what happened in Pakistan recently. Sexual harassment was non-existent in our conversations, and most adults including parents avoided any mention of ‘inappropriate’ discussions. The mega porn scandal in Karachi and rapes and murders of minors made it to the news, followed by an outcry suddenly sexual harassment, rape and other ‘taboos’ were not only reported in main bulletins but a whole movement seemed to erupt.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa especially the media began speaking up against sexual harassment they had faced at the hands of colleagues at work, online and outside work. Men have begun to understand that it is not alright to say and do certain things, to look at a woman in certain ways and to touch.

A couple of years ago I had been invited to speak on sexual harassment on Women’s Day by the provincial government of Sindh. I was sitting down some points and one of my male colleagues inquired what I was doing. When I told him, he laughed and commented that sexual harassment is a ‘figment of women’s imagination’. He said other things that I am sure many working women have heard from people – not only men – around them.

It was infuriating for me to see that many men took sexual harassment so lightly, but working on this for some years has made me aware that this is the type of response you get when you speak about this alien topic – sexual harassment.

Fast forward and now the topics of sexual harassment and rape are openly discussed and many men are seen taking interest in this topic and trying to understand the issue from women’s perspective. Women are also talking about it and discussing their encounters or of someone who has been a victim.

This whole scenario has allowed many women in the media to point out people who have been victimising women over the years and it has been noticed in at least one media house that ‘known’ offenders are being watched and observed by the administration of that organisation. In one case the offender, a senior producer and shift in charge who was known to be a perennial harasser and also spoof about it, was marked by the administration of that organisation. Recently some women made complaints against him and he has been relocated to another department where his interaction with co-workers is restricted. He is under observation and there are indications that strict steps will be taken when and if there is evidence to back the large number of complaints against him.

With many people talking about sexual harassment in the media, among the people media and other places like educational institutions it is hoped that the number of victims reports will increase and the will to look up about it and timely resolution of the issue will take place.

Lubna Jereen Nadi is head of content, social media, Jang/Geo Group, Karachi

**PAKISTAN
Nadia Sabahi: Resilient Path Breaker**

Back in 2002, carrying a camera and reporting for a TV channel was the most difficult thing to do in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan’s north western province. Today, 16 years later as the first woman TV journalist in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa I can safely say that women have a will and a fight in your work you can achieve the most difficult things that seemed not only difficult but impossible.

When the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa saw a woman reporter walking around roads reporting protests and other events in public spaces where all the other journalists and media personnel were men they found it very hard to accept. In Pakistani society it is unenlightened that a woman would pick up a camera and actually go out to report. didn’t she know what she was getting into; didn’t she know how dangerous society was for her. But the same woman reporter ignored the Kate of going into the field. She wanted to prove that a woman could not only work outside in the field, but was capable of doing the job as well as anyone else. She had the talent to not only do the story from behind the desk but also confidently give beeps in front of the camera and analyze stories and situations on the spot. This was also a new thing considering the magnitude of misogyny in society, where the women remain silent and allow men to give opinions.

A woman reporter has to face a lot of criticism about her work and sometimes this can take on sexual nuances that are quite subtle but everyone involved understands the underlying emotion even if it may be hard to prove. The men in the field made sure that the only woman reporter was made aware that her place was not in the field which was a domain reserved for men. At one time the stories in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were the worst the country has seen – every other story was of a bloodbath following an act of terrorism. These were difficult stories for any reporter to cover but like the men, the women too learned on the job about how to cope and carry on.

For a society like ours, men do not even have to say much. Their looks, gestures and words are enough to make women feel insecure. They are usually subtle and can go unnoticed if you don’t look for it, but many men repeat them to make sure the message gets through. And then the physical harassment was another thing all together and quite bad – but it only helped fuel the passion.

Harassment in the relatively conservative society was not very open. But the men made sure to make the woman – the only one among them – feel uneasy because they were uneasy to see her in public spaces. The criticism and harassment may not be openly sexual, but is an attempt to snatch away women’s feeling of achievement. Any award that the women journalist has achieved through sheer hard work is belittled by her male colleagues and looked upon with suspicion. Her own colleagues say that she probably used ‘other means’ to get it because her work was not up to the mark. She is made to feel bad about herself and her work, and a weaker person would probably cave in and quit. But sticking on to go shows that the women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are resilient. Amazingly we have more girls as media students from Peshawar University’s Journalism Department willing to take up the profession and they say that the women who have paved the way before them are their heroes.

The good news is that the only woman reporter from permeated from 2002 onwards and was so successful in surviving – even if palpable – the opinion of the men that is why now in 2018 there are more women in the media. 15 is a big number compared to the one in 2002.

Nadia Sabahi is correspondent/product with Geo TV Network in Peshawar

**BANGLADESH
Nadia Sharmeen: Towards Utopia**

In a closed society with rampant victim blaming and entrenched impunity, Bangladeshi media is still struggling even to recognise sexual harassment as a significant problem. So, the MeToo campaign didn’t work here. Only five female journalists and two female producers had the courage to use this hashtag. But none of them had star value or a visible position that could create a big difference. Being in a patriarchal society, Bangladeshi people have a long time to get the judgment, during which time they faced obstacles in their new job for being so outspoken. Often, women lose their jobs. They also face a great social harassment due to victim blaming. Their characters go through a post-mortem or scanning through a male point of view and they judge the woman as a “bad woman”. Little wonder then that hardly any women complain. Nadia Sharmeen is with Ekattor TV, Dhaka

**SRI LANKA
Sharanaya Sekaram: Time to Do Better**

In October 2017, feminism and social media were set aflame with a single hashtag - #MeToo. Most, if not all adult women have experienced harassment, assault, or abuse in some form. We know this. Didn’t we? Doesn’t the media constantly report cases of gang rape from Jaffna to Tissamaharama?

Wasn’t it the media that made us aware that the UNFPA folder of a woman who travelled on public transport in Sri Lanka said they had been sexually harassed? Isn’t it the media who makes sure that we are aware?

This happens in the media too – both to women (and others) who work in media. Female journalists have shared

**This whole scenario has allowed many women in the media to point out people who have been victimising women over the years and it has been noticed in at least one media house that ‘known’ offenders are being watched and observed by the administration of that organisation. In one case the offender, a senior producer and shift in charge who was known to be a perennial harasser and also spoof about it, was marked by the administration of that organisation. Recently some women made complaints against him and he has been relocated to another department where his interaction with co-workers is restricted. He is under observation and there are indications that strict steps will be taken when and if there is evidence to back the large number of complaints against him.**

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Lubna Jereen Nadi is head of content, social media, Jang/Geo Group, Karachi

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This happens in the media too – both to women (and others) who work in media. Female journalists have shared
MARYAM MEHTAR: BREAKING TABOOS

provide cheap entertainment and not much more.
show the world that women are people who deserve
are important allies in helping us combat issues, and
viewed as human beings with dignity and rights. They
should question why we need to publish it at all. The
stories we choose to give attention and space to, and
of young women on ‘gossip’ sites reinforcing victim
a reproductive health clinic; carried articles on rape
piece that ridiculed a woman who accessed services in
same newspaper that regularly accompanies its pieces
harassment thrive. We need to start talking about how
of workplace sexual harassment, and several came from
on my Twitter feed asking women to share their stories
their own #MeToo stories. Earlier this year I posted a status
thought was very enlightened,
me. Upon hearing my questions,
demonstrating women’s talent and ability. However, the
channel, ‘Zan’ (woman), supposed to be aimed at
creativity. Women who do not have a pretty face have no
and appearance and not on the basis of their talent or
media often abuses women. In the electronic media,
women journalists to complain. Despite the fact that
organisations too are male dominated. This
at the workplace. This is because journalists’
opportunities. Their work is often not given its
assigned, and inequality in promotions and
women face immense discrimination at the
workplace, with low wages, discrimination in beats assigned, and inequality in promotions and opportunities. Their work is often not given its
due, and their work is sometimes published under others’ bylines. Women are often forced out of the profession due to harassment that is sometimes intolerable.
This is the story of a journalist we shall call ‘Nabila’. When she was appointed by a certain media house, she was delighted that her dreams were coming true. However, that was the beginning of a nightmare. That night itself, the boss of the new media house called her up. It was only she and men. However, the excitement of social networks does not last too long. If people sometimes try to organise a demonstration, they are suppressed by the government. When the Hazara community took to the streets on July 23, 2016, the government did not take responsibility for securing the rally, and three large bombs exploded, killing hundreds of people. It is evident that the lives of common people do not count for anything in Afghanistan.
Media houses are expected by law to prevent sexual harassment of women in their offices, but many of them do not do so. Gender policies within the media are geared to ensuring that women professionals are
receive justice for all that she had been through.
off on bail. However, in Nabila’s view, she did not
co-workers and influential people encountered in the course of their work. Such harassment makes it difficult for women journalists to carry out their professional duties. As it is,

AFGHANISTAN
MARYAM MEHTAR: BREAKING TABOOS

Two years ago, I decided to report on the issue of sexual harassment of women, but everyone refused to work with me. As I was raising my questions, even a young woman who I had thought was very enlightened, attacked me for thinking she and I were able to talk about such matters. But I have
continued to speak out. In December 2017, I gave a
excerpt: “You’re ugly, Maryam, everyone says so, but I
guess you’re a virgin so when you’re ready to have sex, let me know and I will be glad to…” Her male co-
worker, writing on her Facebook account finished obscenely. It was 10 am on the radio in the life of an
Afghan working woman. The journalist Maryam Mehtar, 24, said she had already that morning been harassed or assaulted at least five times: in the bus to work, on the street and in the workplace. Maryam, who grabbed her butts, by another man who asked how much she charged and by a young boy who said she had a ‘pretty vulva’. Finally, in the relative safety of her own office, she opened her laptop to read the offer from one of her colleagues to deliver her.

Following my interview in The New York Times and Impact Vice about the harassment of journalists and women at the workplace in Afghanistan, the only response was that some re-published the report on social networks and some appreciated my courage to speak about this issue.
The struggle to survive has made it hard for anyone to be sensitive and care for the lives of others, let alone prosecute someone for persecution of women. Dozens of people are killed every day in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, and people are somehow inured to violence of all kinds. It becomes ‘natural’. When there is a problem for a woman or girl, there is someone outside, social media or friends and men. However, the excitement of social networks does not last too long. If people sometimes try to organise a demonstration, they are suppressed by the government. When the Hazara community took to the streets on July 23, 2016, the government did not take responsibility for securing the rally, and three large bombs exploded, killing hundreds of people. It is evident that the lives of common people do not count for anything in Afghanistan.
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BANGLADESH
LALY BEGUM: ORGANISATIONS MUST ENGAGE

There is no policy against sexual harassment in most media houses in Bangladesh. Women journalists are subjected to harassment from various quarters. There are also, co-workers and influential people encountered in the course of their work. Such harassment makes it difficult for women journalists to carry out their professional duties. As it is,

PAKISTAN
SARAH B. HAIDER: SILENCE IS NOT AN OPTION

When I joined one of the largest-circulated dailies in Pakistan in 2012, I was happy to find that some senior editors were also on my list. Not long thereafter, a senior reporter working for the organisation’s sister concern met me in the office, and upon knowing that the boss had advised me not to try my luck in the electronic media. I told him that I was a print journalist and had no interest in switching. But he insisted and said that he knew me by name too. Not long after that, he would be my referee and make ensure that I’d get a better salary package. I hesitatingly exchanged business cards with him, and the very next day he started calling and texting me in the middle of the night. Considering that he was a senior reporter, I answered his texts but also expressed that I wished not to be called or texted outside of office hours. Unfortunately, however, it fell on deaf ears. He continued to text me, and when I wouldn’t reply, he’d call me again and again, sometimes at 4 am. His texts also became lewd in nature – starting with sexual innuendos and growing to more sexually-explicit ones.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I threatened to expose him. He laughed and told me that if I “dared” showing his messages to anyone, he’d assassinate my character and tell everyone that I was the one to hit a married man. “If you are so innocent, why don’t you reply to my texts in the first place? Why did you exchange numbers? Why did you smile at me?” he said.

Since I was very new to the industry, in need of the job, and didn’t want to cause distress to my family, I gave in to his manipulative tactics, stayed silent and brushed the matter under the rug. He didn’t contact me afterward, but for months, I kept regrettting the fact that I exchanged numbers with him, replied to his texts, and tried to be professionally polite with him – I kept blaming myself.

In a country like Pakistan, it’s not easy to openly talk about sexual harassment. It takes a lot of courage to speak up and name and shame the culprit. It’s not that I haven’t had nor will I have in the future. But it’s been a long time since I’ve been subjected to sexual harassment. I have become exceedingly aware of my rights. But even now, I cannot muster the courage to name this person because I have no proof, and secondly, I do not want to fail prey to unnecessary victim blaming. He has risen in his seniority and power and is a well-known journalist in Pakistan. I wish that I hadn’t kept quiet at that time and instead taken action against him, because it was my right, and I was entitled to my safety under the law. But I didn’t, because I got easily daunted by societal norms.

Nonetheless, I am sharing this story now so that other girls should know that if someone (especially someone in a position of power or seniority) tries to harass or intimidate them, they should not stay silent. They should never blame themselves. Now with so many courageous women coming out with their stories, women should not feel alone.

Junior employees too who are bullied should also not remain silent. If they think that they are being disrespectfully treated, their rights as employees are being violated, and they are being discriminated against on the basis of socio-economic background, religion, or gender, they should immediately speak up. Always remember, silence is not an option anymore.

Sarah B. Haider is a freelance journalist.
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

INTERNET BLACKOUTS: THE SOUTH ASIAN SHADOW

Internet shutdowns and deliberate slowdowns are increasing the world over and are now also a barometer on press freedom and freedom of expression controls. South Asia has witnessed the highest number of internet shutdowns globally, with India earning the dubious crown for the country with the highest number of internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns are “any intentional disruption of the broadband or mobile internet or internet-based mobile apps, by an order of the authorities or threat of non-state party, to control communication or online content or slowing down the access to general public.”

As well as causing massive economic losses, they also create adverse social impacts in access to vital information and affect crisis communication by general citizens. Shutdowns also impede the work of journalists in critical ways. When the internet is blocked or slowed, or social media is shut down, a valuable journalism tool is lost, for research, verification and essential communication.

Internet shutdowns prevent journalists from freely accessing information and disseminating news, and also stop citizens from accessing and sharing information. They pose a threat to human rights and block the public’s right to know; and have emerged as a significant tool of censorship by governments which are increasingly utilising shutdowns under the guise of security.

In view of its growing impacts on freedom of expression, journalists and media, the IFJ in 2017 carried out its first major campaign against shutdowns. The #JournoAgainstShutDowns campaign documented instances of internet shutdowns in South Asia, and by effect aimed to raise awareness about its impact on media and journalists, and build solidarity to advocate against the abuse of shutdowns to silence or curb freedom of expression.

During the period covered in this report (May 2017 to April 2018), South Asia experienced at least 97 shutdowns of various magnitude. India alone shut down the internet, mostly at state or district level, as many as 82 times whereas Pakistan had 17 instances, compared to Sri Lanka which had only one over the course of the year. Bangladesh and Afghanistan’s attempts to implement internet shutdowns were largely averted by timely public outcry.

In most cases, the justification given for an internet shutdown is “to maintain law and order”, and many shutdowns are either pre-emptive or reactive measures in the face of mass, or potentially violent public protests.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>STATE/PROVINCE</th>
<th>AREA IMPACTED</th>
<th>DAYS servicio AFFECTED</th>
<th>SERVICES AFFECTED</th>
<th>JUSTIFICATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 17</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Social Media, mobile Internet</td>
<td>Information Control blocked to prevent circulation of videos and photos showing alleged military abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 24</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Saharanpur</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>SMS, mobile internet</td>
<td>Communal clashes Suspended to stop rumour spreading about the violent communal clashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 27</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing Suspended after killing of a militant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 5</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>Nashik</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Protests Suspended during the protests by the farmers</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 6</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>Bhopal, Raipur, Ujjain</td>
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<td>Internet</td>
<td>Protests Suspended during the protests by the farmers</td>
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<td>June 7</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
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<td>Killing</td>
<td>Internet cut-off following the protests over the killing of a civilian by the security forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 8</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Saharanpur</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Arrest Suspended for three days following the arrest of a local politician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 14</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Killing Mobile internet blocked, and fixed broadband slowed after a youth was killed in firing by the security forces</td>
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<td>June 18</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>Darjeeling</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Protests Mobile and broadband internet cut off due to political protests, clashes and strikes</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Protests SMS and mobile internet suspended due to protests by the RJD community</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Violence Suspended due to the fight between militants and security forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 5</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>Bhuban, Bargar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Clashes Suspended due to violent clashes over a Facebook post by a Grade 10 student</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Colony</td>
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<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Killing Mobile and broadband internet disrupted on the first day of the month</td>
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<td>July 10</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Jammu</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Violence Suspended after the terrorists opened fire on a bus full of pilgrims</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Jodhgar</td>
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<td>Internet</td>
<td>Violence Suspended due to clashes between protesters and government forces</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>Karachi, Hyderabad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile Internet, SMS</td>
<td>Information Control Smith Government issued notification banning cellphone services on the 14th anniversary of Mr. Ali Akbar Ali Fattal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Killing Mobile internet shutdown and broadband slowed down after killing of two militants</td>
</tr>
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<td>Aug 5</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Barabara, Bandpora</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing Services disrupted due to killing of three militants in Barabara</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Aug 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Services discontinued after killing of three militants</td>
</tr>
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<td>Aug 11</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mobile internet, Internet</td>
<td>Killing Suspended for 5 days after killing of a militant commander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 13</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing Suspended after killing of two security personnel and three militants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 25</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
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<td>SMS, mobile internet</td>
<td>Information Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 24</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>Patiala</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>SMS, mobile internet</td>
<td>Court cases All mobile internet services and SMS blocked following the court verdict on the rape case against a caller leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 24</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Ganganar</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
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<td>SMS, mobile internet</td>
<td>Court cases All mobile internet services and SMS blocked following the court verdict on the rape case against a caller leader</td>
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<td>Aug 14</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Islamabad</td>
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<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
<td>Information Control</td>
<td>Government suspended mobile services to maintain security situation for flag hoisting ceremony on the Independence Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 14</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Rawalpindi</td>
<td>Rawalpindi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
<td>Information Control</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian and Kulgam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing Suspended after clashes broke out following the killing of a militant</td>
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<td>Sept 4</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Baramulla</td>
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<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing Suspended after two militants were killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 5</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Muzaffarpur, Sapiad, Saharan, Purna, Barh, Khandaghar, and Kathur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Communal clashes Suspended following communal tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 8</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Sirsa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Protests Suspended to prevent rumour mongering and disturbance of public order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Baramulla</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Violence Internet services suspended as a preventive measure after a gunfight between militants and security forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>State/Province</td>
<td>Area Impacted</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>Services Affected</td>
<td>Justification Details of Shutdown, Suspension, Blocking, Disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 4</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>Kolhapur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Protests suspended following protests by Dalit groups during a strike.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Anantnag, Kulgam</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Protests suspended following protests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 10</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Poonch, Anantnag, Kulgam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended after a clash in Pulwama, Shopian, Anantnag and Kulgam while the rest of Jammu &amp; Kashmir’s Internet speeds were reduced to 128 kbps following the death of two militants and a civilian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 20</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Internet services suspended in anticipation of militant activity on Republic Day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 27</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Clashes suspended following violent clashes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 11</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Country-wide</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Information Control suspended following the clashes between two communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 16</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Firozabad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Assault suspended to prevent rumour after an alleged assault on a minority group man and a police officer by political cadres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 21</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>Tonk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security suspended to prevent communal riots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Bandipora</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of a civilian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 3</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Pulwama, Shopian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of a civilian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 7</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Bhagalpur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security suspended following the clashes between two communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 18</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>Tonk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Violence suspended following the stone pelting by miscreants from a mosque.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 20</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Anantnag, Kulgam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of two militants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 24</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>Bhubanik</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security suspended following the killing of two militants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 25</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Rajeev, Shopian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of two militants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 26</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Agra</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security suspended following the clashes between two communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>South Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>Gwalior</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Stikes suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>Jhansi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Security suspended following the killing of seven civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Islamabad</td>
<td>Islamabad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
<td>Stikes suspended following the killing of seven civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 22</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Rawalpindi</td>
<td>Rawalpindi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
<td>Stikes suspended following the killing of seven civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 7</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Allahabad</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter</td>
<td>Government ordered shutdown following communal clashes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>South Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>Gwalior, Mirzapur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Violence suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 3</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Shopian, Pulwama, Anantnag, Qazigund</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 3</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Meerut</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Protest suspended following a communal clash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>Jaipur, Bharatpur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Communal clashes suspended following violent clashes between communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Saharanpur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Communal clashes suspended following violent clashes between communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>Gwalior, Mirzapur, Jhabua</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Communal clashes suspended following violent clashes between communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 11</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Anantnag, Kulgam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Killing suspended following the killing of two people in an encounter with militants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 14</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>Jhabua</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mobile internet, SMS</td>
<td>Security suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 14</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>Meerut</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mobile internet</td>
<td>Security suspended following the killing of two civilians by the security forces.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AFGHANISTAN

ROCKY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

The war-torn country of Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, with an alarmingly high number of killings, attacks and threats as well as a country ridden by suicide bombings and widespread attacks that inevitably capture journalists in their wake.

April 30, 2018 was the deadliest day for journalists in Afghanistan that highlights the precarious situation of journalists in the war-torn country. Ten journalists were killed in a single day. Nine journalists, including a female journalist, lost their lives in the line of duty in capital city Kabul when a suicide bomber disguised as a journalist detonated himself among the reporters and camera crew gathered at a heavily fortified area of the city to cover an earlier suicide attack.

Among those killed was AFP chief photographer Shah Marai. The Islamic State (also known as ISII or ISIL or Daesh) claimed responsibility for the horrific incident in which at least 50 other people were killed. On the same day, Ahmad Shah, a journalist with BBC Pashto service, was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Khost province. Shah, 29, was on his bicycle on his way to home when the gunmen killed him. This terrible day brought into sharp attention the condition of journalists in Afghanistan where the Taliban, and the Daesh frequently target media and journalists, in a situation where the state is unable to provide any security to them.

Since the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces in late 2014, militant groups – including the Taliban and the Islamic State (ISIS) – have become even more active around the country, including in capital Kabul, frequently targeting the media and journalists. The Afghan National Security Forces continued the offensive against militant groups, with clashes intensifying throughout the year.

The National Unity Government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, nevertheless has remained in a stable position since coming to power three-and-half years ago, but the pace of change on media safety has proved a sticking point for the industry.

While the government has repeatedly made promises and expressed its ongoing commitment to improve the security situation for media and investigate cases of murder of journalists to end impunity, it is hard to say there has been any substantial change on the ground. The Afghan National Security Forces continue the offensive against militant groups, with clashes intensifying throughout the year.

Since 2000, 74 journalists and media workers have been killed in Afghanistan. In 2017 and early 2018, the majority of the journalists and media staff killed were victims of attacks on media houses or were among the casualties of large suicide attacks, claimed by the ISIS.

NEW CYBERCRIME LAW

On June 10, 2017, President Ashraf Ghani signed into law a bill targeting online crime and militancy amid concerns it could limit free speech. The Cyber Crime Law criminalises a range of online activities including hacking, spreading ethnic hatred, distribution of online defamatory speech, exposing government secrets and cyber-terrorism. But Media watchdog group Nai has warned that the law could have a detrimental effect on access to information and limit freedom of speech because vague wording could have multiple interpretations.

Access to the internet in Afghanistan has grown in the past decade to reach approximately 12 per cent of the population, a report by Internews in October 2017 stated. Since 2000, 74 journalists and media workers have been killed in Afghanistan. In 2017 and early 2018, the majority of the journalists and media staff killed were victims of attacks on media houses or were among the casualties of large suicide attacks, claimed by the ISIS.

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

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Meanwhile, the revised Access to Information Act was approved by the Cabinet and will be adopted as a legislative decree. One of the major changes is the independence of the Oversight Commission on Access to Information (OCAI). Earlier, this commission had close ties with the Ministry of Information and Culture, but on the basis of the new law, a more independent commission would be set up.

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SITUATION UNDER CONTROL, THE NETWORK WENT BACK ON AIR WITH AN INJURED ANCHOR.

up at the front gate, while the other two attackers entered the main building. It took the security forces more than three hours to end the assault.


On December 28, 2017, Sayed Mehtdi Hosaini, journalist with Jomhor News Agency, was among 40 people killed in the multiple blasts at a Shia cultural centre in Kabul. The blast also left 80 more people injured, including nine journalists - seven from the AWA News Agency and two from Shamshad TV.

On January 21, 2018, two journalists of RTA narrowly escaped an attack by an armed group. A vehicle carrying journalist Baz Shinwary and cameraperson Mohamad Rafiq came under attack in Bakti district of Nangarhar province when the group opened fire on the car. The driver was killed on the spot but the two journalists, who were shot on the upper part of their bodies, survived the attack.

ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

On January 21, 2018, an unidentified armed group burst down Radio Saday-e-Adalat, destroying all equipment as well as the building in capital Firuzkoh of Ghor province. As a result, the station was forced to shut down.

On June 8, 2017, Gadero Ghafar, a journalist with Radio Azadi in Ghor province, was beaten and detained by officers of the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Ghafar was stopped by NDS staff in civilian clothes while he was returning home. The incident occurred after being asked for identification and was then taken to an NDS office in Ghor province and detained for two hours.

Five days later, security personnel of a private construction company assaulted Zair Khan Ya’ad of TOLO News and Sabawoon Sahil of Maiwand TV for their critical reporting on the ongoing road construction in Surkhrud district of Nangarhar. They were also confined in a room for a few hours and harassed while they were on assignment to report

on the delay in construction of the Nangarhar-Kabul road and late payments to the project’s labourers.

On September 23, Dr Molladad Tobakar, a senior public health official in Helmand province, assaulted and abused journalist Sardar Mohammad Sarwari of Shamshad TV while he was working on a report about complaints that a local hospital did not receive its allocated budget. Dr Tobakar refused to provide Sarwari any information regarding the hospital budget and instead threatened him via fake Facebook accounts prior to a physical assault.

THREATS TO JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA

Journalists in Afghanistan live under constant threat to their lives from the militant groups. They are also intimidated and subjected to abuse and harassment by state agencies for their questioning, reporting or attempts to film or report incidents where police or government officials are involved.

On May 25, the provincial governor of Baghlan, Abdul Hai Namati, cut off a television interview in objection to the reporters’ questions. He was being interviewed for a program called ‘Face to Face’ on local Arezo TV. The four journalists for the interview were subsequently threatened and ordered to delete the footage. When they refused, they were blocked from leaving the governor’s office premises. Ahmad Jawad Falash, Javid Sattad, Said Amin Jalali and Salam Faret were held for two hours, only allowed to leave after intervention from media rights organisations.

On October 7, 2017, Ahmadullah Sarkand, the broadcast manager of Radio Killid, and Biomullah Watandust, a journalist with Radio Shyba, were detained by the provincial police, who alleged that their Facebook posts about arrested cricket player Samih Youssif “provoked people against the government and police”.

STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Media rights organisations in Afghanistan, including the IFJ affiliate Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), continue to work to monitor and verify incidents of press freedom violations; mediate dialogues between journalists and other state or non-state actors; negotiate with militant groups in cases of threat and abduction of journalists; and advocate with the government to ensure a safe environment for journalism.

AIJA has been demanding justice for the 73 journalists and media workers killed in Afghanistan since 1994 and an end to impunity for crimes against journalists.

The Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs is currently investigating 172 cases of violation of journalists’ rights after a committee constituted in 2015 to review 700 such cases since 2000 recommended investigation and follow-up of 427 cases. Yet, after two years of investigation, there has been no practical result. The committee noted that among 427 cases of killings, attacks and abductions, in as many as 401 cases, security forces were responsible. AIJA and other media rights groups and unions are concerned that they delay of justice, will only encourage more crimes against the media.
Media watchdog group Nai registered 190 cases of violence against journalists including killing, wounding, abducting, threatening, and intimidation of journalists and media workers in Afghanistan since 1982 as crimes against humanity or war crimes at the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Taliban, the ISIS and the Haqqani Network were named as the major perpetrators. The registered cases include 48 killings, 74 injuries, 15 abductions and 53 threats and harassment of journalists and media personnel.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee in its annual report, said that 2017 was a year of significant decline in the security of journalists and media workers in Afghanistan’s history with a significant increase in the violence against journalists. The Committee documented 169 cases of violence and threats against journalists in 2017, a 67 per cent increase compared to 2016.

Afghanistan is likely to hold parliamentary and district elections on October 20, 2018, after more than a three-year delay due to security threats and disagreement within the government itself. There are still doubts that the elections will be held in the wake of increased violence by the militant groups. The country is also scheduled to hold presidential and provincial council elections in 2019. During the elections, not only are the roles and responsibilities of media and journalists important for democracy, the media become vulnerable to threats and attacks from all sides. Violence against journalists is at a peak, and the media is facing challenges due to financial constraints, and high security threats due to extremism. If the Afghan government fails to effectively tackle the situation, democracy in the country will be endangered due to lack of independent media and critical voices. Unless firm steps are taken, by the government and media themselves, there are still doubts that the elections will be held in the wake of increased violence by the militant groups.

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According to the prosecutor’s report, more than 40 cases, including some cases of murder of journalists, have been completed and submitted to the courts. More than 10 lawsuits have been handed down by courts and criminal sentences have been issued against the perpetrators of cases. Based on the Subcommittee report in 60 cases which mostly were insulting of journalists, they have withdrawn their cases.

The Subcommittee’s investigations showed that of the 172 cases, perpetrators in 24 cases are from the NDS, in nine cases are governors’ guards, in seven cases MPs; in three cases are presidential guards; in six cases judges and prosecutors and nine cases of foreign forces. There are also three cases of Afghan journalists killed outside the country. All these cases were sent by Joint Committee of Media and Government to the military headquarters for further investigations.

Of the 172 cases, only one case was not completed due to lack of sufficient documents. Since the creation of the Joint Committee in summer 2016 to December 2017, more than 50 cases of violence have been registered with the Committee, of which 29 cases have been examined by the Subcommittee and have been submitted to justice institutions. Seventeen of these cases were completed and submitted to courts and others were under prosecution. Another 21 cases were resolved by traditional means.

The only cases of violence against journalists and media workers that still need to be tracked are cases that have occurred since the formation of the National Unity Government in 2014 until the creation of the Joint Committee in the summer of 2016.

According to the report of the Subcommittee, these cases currently number more than 160 and investigations have recently begun.

**Enhancing Safety, Reducing Impunity**

By mid-2016, these structures were in place and the activities undertaken by a sub-committee included follow up of cases of attacks on journalists, from 2001 onwards. The latest subcommittee report shows that they have reviewed around 700 cases out of which 172 cases were considered to be prosecuted. Of these, 56 cases have been completed and sent to the prosecutor’s office. According to the prosecutor’s report, more than 40 cases, including some cases of murder of journalists, have been completed and submitted to the courts. More than 10 lawsuits have been handed down by courts and criminal sentences have been issued against the perpetrators of cases. Based on the Subcommittee report in 60 cases which mostly were insulting of journalists, they have withdrawn their cases.

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**Journalist Protection**

Given the increasing threats against journalists and the media, one of the major efforts of the Joint Committee has been to provide security and immunity to journalists and media that face direct and indirect threats. The NDS and the Interior Ministry have taken special security arrangements to at least 10 media outlets under serious threat. Licensees had been issued for the handling and use of weapons to a number of media outlets, media directors and managers, journalists and support institutions for journalists and the media.

The Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Directorate of Security, in cases where journalists and media workers have been exposed to dangers in insecure provinces, moved journalists to safe areas, or even neighbouring provinces and Kabul, to temporarily protect them until they returned to normal or serious risks were at least minimised. These cases included the fall of Kunduz province at the hands of the Taliban in the northeast and the Taliban’s predictions of invasion and Helmand province in the south, both in 2016.

Occasional conflicts between journalists and security forces during times of coverage of war and incidents of terror often results in violence against journalists. To overcome this problem, a subcommittee has worked on creating guidelines for coverage of terrorist incidents and warfare. The guide’s purpose is to ensure that journalists and security forces consider their competencies and responsibilities in the course of violent incidents and war fronts, and that one side does not disrupt the other’s task. This is an effort in effect to prevent both sides from engaging direct action and, ultimately, to reduce the possibility of the use of violence by security forces against journalists.

**Financial Problems**

Several media outlets have financial debts to government-related institutions. Some media have not paid their taxes, a number of media have delayed them and face a tax penalty. A mechanism has been worked out in order to wave some of the arrears and also allow media outlets to pay pending taxes in instalments. In August, 2017, President Ashraf Ghani issued a presidential order to waive penalties on taxes to be paid by the media; and payment of due taxes in monthly instalments but this had addressed just a part of media outlets.

In a meeting with president all other financial debts of media such electricity bills and fees for use of frequency and taxes of other media outlets were discussed. President ordered a subcommittee to review all these problems and come up with a package of suggestions to deal with. According to reports from the subcommittee, media outlets owe more than 600 million Afghans (USD $7 million).

**Journalist Support Fund**

About seven years ago, a structure was established under the name of the Financial Fund for Journalists, which, in order to achieve its goals, gained some financial assistance from a number of political and capital personalities, and provided part of this money as a contribution to several journalists are in need. With more journalists and media workers having lost their lives or been injured, following discussions, the Joint Committee made it possible to make procedures for using the fund more accessible and effective in order to help media workers genuinely in need. In a meeting with president he promised to help the Federation with fundraising. Now it is seeking another meeting with president to provide all prepared documents to ensure the prosperity of the fund activities and to commence fundraising.
BANGLADESH

LONG ARM OF THE LAW

Journalists and the media of Bangladesh are facing diverse challenges and pressures that include muzzling by legal means, loss of business, physical assault, threats and abduction. The growth in the number of media outlets in the country is somewhat matched by their independence, in that newspapers are seen to publish news involving corruption in influential quarters while television channels also broadcast news and live talk-shows criticizing the powerful. However, there exists a palpable veil of silence.

Said Mahtuf Anam, editor, Daily Star, “I think twice before writing anything. I need to consider its political and social implications, and wonder who may interpret my writing in what way, and whether one would fall into a legal trap. A negative environment for press freedom exists. We are under pressure from various sides and influential persons are using draconian laws against journalists.”

Says Taufiq Imroze Khalidi, editor, Bdnews24.com, “In Bangladesh, freedom depends on ownership as well as editorial leadership. Theoretically we are free, but whether or not we can exercise that freedom is the question. In most cases, owners, most of whom are rogue businessmen or businessmen with questionable records, create problems when it comes to stories that go against powerful people in the political establishment. At times, weak editorial leaders fail to stand up to various pressures. Our experience is that you can exercise freedom and publish any story that meets professional standards. The problem is that if you have skeletons in your cupboard, you cannot do your journalism, or exercise your freedom.

Politicians in Bangladesh have ensured that media ownership, barring a few instances, remains with the people loyal to them. The nexus between owners and the political establishment is the reason behind media organisations ignoring bloggers’ rights and journalists’ rights in general. No one wants to be seen in opposition when the government is appealing right-wing radicals.

FAR FROM REALITY

According to available statistics, Bangladesh has a vibrant media industry registering a total of 3025 newspapers and 2331 magazines circulating news and critical views from every corner of the country. There are 45 government-approved private television channels and around 434, including the leading national dailies, enjoy incentives from the government in the form of advertisements and tax waivers or low tax facilities.

But does Bangladesh really have a robust media industry? It is apparent that those with the financial heft can easily become editors of national dailies, even without becoming journalists. An owner of a registered daily newspaper need not appoint a single journalist or publish the paper regularly. It need be published only when an advertisement is arranged – by threat or bribe – through the government agencies. The practice of pocketing a percentage by publishing special advertisements in unknown dailies is rampant, even among reputed companies and agencies.

Finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhith on August 8, 2017 instructed the government’s service rules to be adapted to ensure a professional editors. The practice of becoming an owner of a media house without any accountability to pay the journalists or other employees is a threat to press freedom in Bangladesh, say activists. “Corrupt practices are weakening the media, leaving professionals vulnerable. Other forms of corruption are arising out of these practices. In reality, press freedom in Bangladesh is only freedom for owners to do as they please. External pressures hamper press freedom less than the inherent weakness in the media industry,” said Omar Fanaque, Secretary General of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists.

“I IN BANGLADESH, FREEDOM DEPENDS ON OWNERSHIP AS WELL AS EDITORIAL LEADERSHIP. THEORETICALLY WE ARE FREE, BUT WHETHER OR NOT WE CAN EXERCISE THAT FREEDOM IS THE QUESTION.”
There are pressures from the government, opposition parties and also other powerful groups. The ownership pattern of the electronic media is the main problem, since the government issues licenses on political considerations. The professional editor as an institution is not robust, and editors fear taking independent decisions.

**ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE**

Agitating journalists of Bangladesh breathed a sigh of relief when missing journalist Utpal Das was found on December 20, 2017, more than two months after his abduction on October 10. The cheers of the journalists, who observed continuous protest programs demanding the rescue of Utpal Das, however, hides the shadow of fear, because the mystery behind his disappearance remains. It is not clear whether the abduction was work related, and the perpetrators are also yet to be identified.

Razu Ahmed, former general secretary of the Dhaka Reporters Unity, who spearheaded the journalists’ campaign to rescue Utpal, said, “The fear will persist unless police identifies the perpetrator responsible for the abduction.”

Utpal Das, reporter with online news outlet Poropoksibumd, is one of about a dozen people in Bangladesh who vanished under mysterious circumstances in 2017, but he is one of the few victims of suspected abductions who resurfaced. Das narrated: “I was standing outside the Star Kabab (A restaurant in Dhanmondi residential area in Dhaka) and talking to a friend on my mobile phone. Before I knew it, four to five people came out of a microbus and dragged me inside and blindfolded me. The microbus drove around for about four hours. Then they confined me at a tin-shed microbus and dragged me inside and blindfolded me. The microbus drove around for about four hours. Then they confined me at a tin-shed microbus and dragged me inside and blindfolded me. The microbus drove around for about four hours. Then they confined me at a tin-shed microbus. They did not let me eat any of the masked men other than their eyes.”

Like some other abductors, who returned, Utpal Das also does not want to pursue a legal case. “I have a new lease of life. I am grateful to the journalist leaders, my colleagues and others. I will be grateful all my life. Possibly, I survived because of the voices in the street,” Das said.

But journalist leader Razu Ahmed and others think it is important to “unmask the masked men”. “The law enforcing agencies cannot remain idle, even if the victim or his family members are reluctant to file a case. It is the responsibility of the state to guarantee the safety of its citizens against those who are trying to challenge the state through spreading fear.”

Bangladesh police have said that they have been investigating all the cases, but others suspect that some of the abductions may have been so-called enforced disappearances – cases in which people vanish at the hands of local authorities. The government has denied such allegations.

**LEGAL MUZZLE**

Kamrunnahar Shova, a senior reporter of the English daily Financial Express, is the most recent journalist to have been sued under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2007. A case was filed against Shova and two other persons in Jodhpur thana in Gauhati over a Facebook post on March 26, 2018.

Since August 2017, Section 57 of ICT Act functions almost like an instrument reserved for the influential persons and the authorities, who have the ability to get approval from the police headquarters before suing anybody under the draconian law. The Inspector General of Police on August 2, 2017 issued an order directing police units across Bangladesh to take approval from the headquarters before recording any case under the said section.

Section 57 criminalises criticism or revealing any information, which may be defamatory to any person or institution or may go against any faith. At least 713 cases filed under Section 57 are currently pending with the Ilocane cyber tribunal of the country. Of the accused, 25 are journalists who were sued either for publishing news items on their websites or on Facebook.

Meanwhile, the government made a commitment to dissolve the harsh law, but it is being replaced by a draft cyber security act, which, according to critics, is even harsher. Rights activists and journalists raised a voice against the draft Data Security Act 2018, already approved by the cabinet on January 29 and awaiting approval by the parliament.

The European Union and 10 countries including the US also expressed concern over several sections of the proposed law saying, it would “suppress freedom of expression in multiple ways”.

The jolt also prompted Law Minister Anisul Haq at his secretariat in Dhaka on March 25, 2018 and expressed their concerns. “The new act would suppress freedom of expression in multiple ways. We are particularly alarmed about the threat of severe punishment for merely expressing a belief or opinion, and also about the imprecise terminology which could lead to misinterpretation of law; non-availability of bail for certain offences and the empowerment of the security agency to detain a citizen without warrant by court,” German Ambassador Thomas Prinz told journalists.

The draft of Digital Security Act, 2018 splits matters of Section 57 into four separate sections (25, 26, 28 and 29) with punishment ranging from three to 10 years’ jail term. Section 20 of the proposed law holds expression of any criticism or wrong information or explanation about the country’s founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman or the liberation war, as an offence.

The law proposes up to 14 years’ jail for committing such a crime for the first time and life imprisonment for a repeat offender.

Section 25 of the proposed law stipulates maximum three years jail term for publishing or broadcasting ‘false’ or ‘distorted’ information tarnishing the image of the state or any person. The punishment will be five years jail for a second or subsequent offence.

A maximum seven years jail has been stipulated for ‘hurting religious sentiment’ under Section 28 of the draft law. The punishment will be ten years in jail for committing the offence for the second time.

Shooting of photos or videos, recording something or gathering information with the uses electronic devices secretly from the offices have been dubbed as a spying offence under Section 32 of the law. Responsible persons will face maximum 14 years jail on the charge. Life imprisonment may be the fate for committing the same act for the second time.

In an already restrictive atmosphere, the new law can only increase constraints. Says Mahfuza Anam, “The law is totally against freedom of expression. The police are registering cases and judges are also taking the allegations into cognizance, even though there is an instruction to be prudent in receiving such cases against the media. Bangladesh needs a very vibrant, free media. It does not need restrictive laws like the proposed Digital Security Act.”

**UNSOLVED KILLINGS**

On the morning of February 11, 2012, Sagar Sarwar, the news editor of the Maastanga TV station, and his wife Mehrun Rumi, a senior correspondent at TV station ATN Bangla, were found dead inside their fourth floor apartment in the West Rajabazar neighbourhood of Dhaka.

Law enforcers still have not revealed a motive or released an investigation report into the killings although six suspects have been in custody for about six years without charges filed against them in the case.

Judges have extended the deadline 54 times for submitting an investigation report. The couple is among 24 journalists killed in Bangladesh since 1996. The mystery of at least 21 murders remains still unsolved for over two decades, as the local press demands answers and justice for their slain colleagues.


In March 2017, a court in Dhaka convicted six accused in the murder of photographerjalist Aftab Ahmed in 2013.

A Kutilus Court on November 30, 2016 sentenced nine persons to life imprisonment for killing Manik Saha. Nine persons on June 23, 2013 were awarded a life term for killing Gautam Das. These three cases are now pending with the High Court as the convicts have appealed against their sentences.

No other cases of killings have received judgments, showing the prevalence of impunity for killing journalists.

Fortunately, no journalists have been killed in the line of duty since February 2017. This provides a slight ray of hope amidst the clouds of despair in Bangladesh.
BHUTAN

EMERGING CONTROLS

Bhutan, the small Himalayan Kingdom, rarely makes global news. In 2017, however, the standoff between India and China regarding the Doklam plateau, at the border of China and Bhutan, but strategically important for India, made headlines. Bhutan chose to remain largely silent, and the year was politically calm, with the general election planned for November 2018.

The forthcoming election has brought to the fore issues relating to freedom of expression, especially on the internet, and media rights while covering elections. A new law, which the government claims will strengthen the independence of the media and promote a free and vibrant media industry, is, however, a matter of concern for the media in Bhutan. The small media community, largely dominated by state-owned print, radio and television; and dependent on government advertising, faces multiple challenges to truly become independent and vibrant.

The media has evolved over the past few years and the biggest challenge for Bhutanese media is sustainability and reach as most of the media are confined to the capital Thimphu. Skilled human resources and accessibility of information are other challenges that the Bhutanese media face.

NEW RESTRICTIONS

On December 5, 2017, the National Assembly unanimously passed the Bhutan Information Communications and Media Bill 2017. The Act repealed the Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act 2006. Information and communications minister, DN Dhungyel, said that the new law would strengthen the independence of the media and promote a free and vibrant media industry. It is envisioned that the establishment of a Media Council would help “to promote and protect freedom and independence of the media” and to “serve as a standard-setting body, and regulate or curtail harmful, offensive, illegal or antithetical content on the Internet and other ICT and media services”. The Council also has the right to hear complaints and settle disputes in relation to offences related to media content that is not criminal in nature.

The new Act aims to address the rapid changes in the internet and media landscape. However, there is a danger that it could be used to curtail free speech as members of the Council will be government appointees and only one among five members represents the private media sector.

THE ELECTION AND THE MEDIA

On April 20, 2018, the country elected 20 members of the 25-member National Council, the upper house of the bicameral parliament. The King, known as Druk Gyalpo (‘Dragon King’), as the head of state nominated the five remaining members of the Council.

In view of the National Council election, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) brought into effect the Media Coverage of Elections Rules and Regulations of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2018, and appointed a media arbitrator responsible for media coverage and advertising as per the election rules. Although the ECB claimed that media houses were consulted during the drafting of the regulations, media professionals, claimed that they were not consulted and did not receive any request for feedback.

The ECB, as early as February 2018, notified all media houses to refrain from publishing content on candidates until the “Application for Election Campaign Fund” was released on March 20 following the scrutiny of nominations of candidates.

On March 4, The Journalist, an English-language weekly, published a profile of a candidate inviting an investigation by the media arbitrator. The private newspaper later apologised for the story and on March 12 suspended its managing editor, Sonam Tashi, for a month after the office of the media arbitrator asked it to take action against a reporter and the editor for the story. The newspaper also withdrew the unsold copies of the newspaper.

The ECB spokesperson denied any pressure by the media arbitrator on The Journalist and said the newspaper realized the mistake and took action after the media arbitrator asked for a clarification.

The Journalist’s chief editor, Ugyen Terenz, in a report published in Kuensel daily said the newspaper accepts that it contravened the Election Act and the managing editor was reprimanded and severe administrative action taken against him. The Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB), an IFJ affiliate, said the role and powers of the office of the media arbitrator needs clarity; and also said that the association discourages professional misconduct among members as well as arbitrary decisions against journalists.

The ECB has also asked media houses to submit a report of their coverage of the elections, thus introducing new bureaucratic controls.

The level of pressure that the ECB and the media arbitrator exerted on the media is exemplified by an editorial in Kuensel, the state-owned daily, published on March 15, 2018. It said: “Heavy-handed policing of media by some constitutional offices that overstep their mandate is making election reporting difficult. This is not healthy for the nation. A pity.”

The editorial further said: “In a democratic society, media’s role is critically important. Without responsible and fearless media, there will not be robust system of checks and balances. When newsrooms are kept on a tight leash, it either means we have dirty secrets to hide or ugly intrigues laid out for the future.”

While calling media to be more professional and responsible, the editorial further stated: “Today, media as the voice of the people is being threatened by public offices with this mandate and that, overstepping each other. The least these overbearing offices can do is recognise their own mandate and let media do their job... Otherwise, the tussle between media and the powerful offices will continue and the biggest loser will be the nation and her people.”
New York September 22, 2017. Credit: Timothy A. Clary/AFP

Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of Bhutan speaks during the druk gewog conferen...
REGULATING DISSENT

Late March this year, Mahesh Hegde, owner of the Postcard News website, was arrested in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, on charges of causing ill-will on religious grounds. A monk of the Jain faith had a few days before, suffered serious injuries in a road accident. Hedge picked up one among many images of the monk circulating over the internet and pushed it along on his website with the embellishment that his injuries had been inflicted by a violent mob of Islamic radicals. Hegde added the legend that nobody was safe in Karnataka as long as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah rules. It just so happens that Siddaramaiah is from the main party in opposition to India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Hegde’s twisting of fact was clearly part of the build up to the campaign for elections to the state legislative assembly due mid-May in Karnataka. Postcard News is one among a growing ecosystem of websites that style themselves in a new idiom of nationalism, as articulating a supposedly long-suppressed majority voice in India. This idiom of majoritarian nationalism flourishes on antagonism – often confected in deliberately misreported facts – about the country’s principal religious minority. It used to be referred to as ‘hate speech’ at one time, a very poorly defined category of offences in most parts of the world. In India, the harsh reality is that even with a surfeit of laws in place, the actual record of applying legal sanctions on hate speech has been indifferently.

A recent review of press freedom in India concluded that ultra-nationalist elements seeking to “purge” all traces of what they deem “anti-national” thinking from the public domain, have created an aura of fear among journalists and social media users. “Online smear campaigns” have been frequent, suffused with crass insults and threats of physical violence, that especially target female media practitioners. Journalists willing to run the risks have uncovered what seem to be organised efforts to capitalise on the vast scope of viral multiplication that the social media “hashtag” affords, to intimidate reporters who hold the misdeeds of elected politicians to the light.

This problem was clearly not on the minds of the official information agency of the Indian government on April 2, when it announced fresh guidelines on the accreditation of journalists, ostensibly to check the menace of “fake news”. Media accreditation is granted to journalists after a specified number of years in the profession. If anything, this waiting period is sufficient assurance that professionals granted accreditation to access the official corridors in the national capital, will be immune to the temptations of fake news. The April 2 notification put journalists on notice of a “three strikes and out” policy. Any accredited media person found to have propagated ‘fake news’ would be put on notice and issued a formal warning after a second offence. A third transgression would lead to termination of privileges.

Following strong protests from the media community, the notice was withdrawn, with the stricture ostensibly issued from the highest political authority – the office of the Prime Minister of India – that the information agency had gone beyond its jurisdiction. Guidelines on accreditation and their revision, the Prime Minister’s Office said, were within the jurisdiction of the Press Council of India (PCI) and that was the appropriate forum for debating the issue.

It was not a source of comfort for journalists that the Chairman of the PCI, Justice C.K. Prasad, a retired judge of the Supreme Court of India, was already on record that he found little objectionable in the April 2 notification, since the problem it addressed was real and serious.

It so happened that Justice Prasad had at the same time, convened a meeting of the PCI to which few of the representatives of the journalists’ unions and professional bodies were called. The reason given for the move was supposedly, the ongoing reconstitution of the PCI. Eight professional bodies – including IFJ affiliates, the Indian Journalists’ Union and the National Union of Journalists of India – wrote on the eve of the proposed meeting to the Prime Minister, urging that the reconstitution of the PCI be placed on hold since it was not in accordance with fair and democratic procedure.

This was one among a series of rather questionable decisions with a bearing on the media regulatory framework, where efforts to bring a semblance of order to a scenario of rapid flux continue to flounder. Little in the official response seems to indicate a genuine urge to get the best of the new modes of information sharing and communication, while safeguarding against hazards such as fake news. A day had not passed since...
the Office of the Indian Prime Minister ordered that the ‘fake news’ circular issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting be held in abeyance, before it announced the formation of a committee that will frame regulatory rules for news portals and media websites.

Five among the ten members of the committee were to be the secretaries of various ministries: civil servants who begin their careers administering a district and then serve various functional ministries in the states and the Indian union. Others were to be the representatives of the PCI, and various associations of the news broadcast and entertainment industries. Missing entirely were natives of the digital domain, of which a good number exist in India, that manage to set new standards on fact-checking both official claims made by the current regime, as well as their noisy cohorts of online propagandists.

The basic premise of the order constituting this committee to frame rules has been called out as false. The order claims, for instance, that all other media – print and electronic included – are free, while the online media functions in a regulatory vacuum. Critics of the move point out that India’s Information Technology Act, as adopted in 2000, incorporates Section 69, which provides for the interception, monitoring or decryption of any information stored in any computer resource, if a public authority or national defence, and a number of other criteria, to order the blocking of public access to any information through a computer resource.

In a significant development in 2015, India’s Supreme Court struck down Section 66 of the IT Act which allowed for the criminal prosecution of certain kinds of messages posted on social media. After a stand since its language was construed, under this provision of law, outrage built up to a sufficient degree for an individual to mount a legal challenge. The Supreme Court agreed with the challenge since it held the definition of an offence under Section 66 to be too broad and vague, enabling excessive latitude for arbitrary actions by the law enforcement authorities.

In the same judgment, the Supreme Court allowed Section 69A of the IT Act to stand since its language was consistent with the provision of the Indian Constitution that provides for “reasonable restrictions” on the right to free speech. It is another matter of course, that these “reasonable restrictions” have never been systematically codified and continue to be arbitrarily interpreted by law enforcement authorities, which can silence critical voices through the mere imposition of the tortuous and unending legal process.

DEADLY RUMOUR MONGERING

For the great social media firms and other online platforms driven by advertising revenue, the commercial calculation has proved decisive. YouTube, Google, Facebook and Twitter are known to have complied with demands from official quarters to remove certain kinds of content from their sites, simply because they all have operations in India and could potentially be subject to local liability laws. The Indian market though is of such convenience and promise that none of them would like to defy the official censor and risk being blocked.

It is a curiosity of the current state of the media in India, that the various excesses that are instigated through the heightened conditioning that social media enables, have never seriously attracted sanction or prosecution, or even an official reprimand. There was in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, a particularly gruesome incident in May 2017, when several people were burnt alive, while they were thrashed on suspicion of running a child trafficking racket. Four of the victims were cattle-traders who happened to be passing through the district at the time. They belonged to a religious faith – the largest minority in India – that has been long stigmatised for its ostensible disregard for the cow, sacrilised as an object of veneration by some within the majority faith. Rumours of the child trafficking ring had circulated over WhatsApp and other social media for a month and may have fuelled with a heightened vigilism against people of the stigmatised faith, to provoke the hideous act of violence.

Photographs and videos of the lynching were widely circulated through WhatsApp and other social media soon afterwards. There was nothing to suggest that the baleful mood had abated since, though few seemed prepared for the crime of December 6 in a hamlet named Rathsang of Jharkhand, when a young man was randomly picked up a migrant worker in his neighbourhood, hacked him savagely and after failing to decapitate him, set him alight. Shot on mobile phone by the man’s 14-year old nephew, the crime was soon circulating in vivid and gruesome detail on social media, gaining a nationwide audience.

In an unhinged rant delivered to the camera after completing his heinous act, the murderer spoke of his determination to average the hideous act of violence. Social media had meanwhile exploded with posts in support of the killer, with the video recording of the murder being shared using a variety of user identities. Within days, an effort at funds mobilisation had helped gather a reported three hundred thousand rupees for his wife.

Social media and the legacy outlets – print and TV – have a mutual relationship that is not yet clearly understood. But it is a likely hypothesis that excess on one side could be dampened by sobriety and responsibility on the other. In junctures of inflamed sensitivities and heightened vulnerability to violence, legacy media could conceivably play a role to lessen probabilities of contagion. Yet a close audit of media content that day and the next by the fact-checking website Altnews.in, showed that “the gut wrenching news from Rajasthan was largely ignored on prime time”.

These skewed priorities were not confined to the news channels: a comparison of the Delhi editions of various newspapers underlined that it was shared in print too. “It is no longer surprising”, the altnews.in study concluded, “to see sections of mainstream media gloss over news that could put the establishment in the dock for its ineptness if not subtle encouragement to elements who are out to destroy the social fabric.”

SMART PHONES, FAKE NEWS

These phenomena remain to be studied and India offers a rich laboratory with its mix of media, all of which show continuing signs of growth, though some sectors are clearly failing to get their revenue calculations right. Statistics may often have no more than a brief utility in the rapidly changing scenario of the modern media, but they could be used provisionally to gauge which way the winds are blowing. In 2011, as Robin Jeffrey – the renowned media scholar who has written celebrated accounts of how the newspaper has transformed India – set out to research the revolutionary impact of the cell phone, India had 100 million newspaper copies coming to market every day, and an estimated 600 million cell phones in use. In his book co-authored with Anu Datar and published in 2013 under the title The Great Indian Phone Book, the authors saw these figures as portending momentous change, though the future relevance of the newspaper seemed assured.

By 2017, the figures had not changed very much in respect of newspaper numbers, though there were growing doubts over how much of it was mere artefact to keep advertisers interested. Cell phone users – or at least the number of active SIM cards, which is its closest proxy – had topped one billion by then. Though these numbers tell their own story, it would remain incomplete without an understanding of how the vast population of cell phones is being used.

In September 2016 a new entity came into India’s universe of information transactions, with a splashy celebrity launch in the western metropolis of Mumbai. Promoted by India’s largest business conglomerate, Reliance Industries, under the brand-name Jio, the new entrant into the cell phone services market promised free data traffic over its “fourth generation” or 4G network (alternately called “long-term evolution” or LTE). Already vulnerable to mounting debt servicing obligations, other telecom and internet service providers were rattled. Their protests to the regulatory authority though, went unheeded. In its June 2017 edition, the Ericsson Mobility Report which has become something of a standard reference source for trends in the telecom and internet domains, observed that total global “traffic in mobile networks increased by 70 percent” between the end of the first quarter of 2017 and the corresponding point the earlier year. “Part of this increase”, it said, “was due to one Indian operator’s introductory LTE offer that included free data traffic”. Mobile subscriptions had registered a 4 per cent growth over the year. In terms of the net additions during the relevant quarter of 2017, India had the largest number at 43 million, with China second at 24 million. “The strong subscription growth in India”, the report concluded, “was mainly due to an attractive LTE ‘welcome offer’ by one operator, with free voice and data”.

Globally, smartphones accounted for 80 per cent of the total number of new mobile connections in the quarter, a figure expected to increase rapidly. Data traffic over mobile networks in 2017 grew 70 per cent globally, with video signals accounting for over 50 per cent of total traffic. Jio’s entry in India had contributed to a dramatic growth in data traffic. Though its report uses a broader geographic category (India, Nepal and Bhutan), the vast part of the increase in data

EIGHT PROFESSIONAL BODIES – INCLUDING IFJ AFFILIATES, THE INDIAN JOURNALISTS’ UNION AND THE NATIONAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS OF INDIA – WROTE ON THE EVE OF THE PROPOSED MEETING TO THE PRIME MINISTER, URGING THAT THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE PCI BE PLACED ON HOLD SINCE IT WAS NOT IN ACCORDANCE WITH FAIR AND DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURE.
traffic in this region between 2016 to 2017 – 0.3 exabytes per month to 1.0 – could be attributed to India. Data usage per smartphone within this geographic region increased from 1.5 to 4.1 gigabytes per month over the region.

India’s trajectory is a few steps behind the global trend in some respects, though the magnitude of the transition, because of the sheer size of the country, has attracted global attention. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISI) has since 2011 been carrying out an annual survey of the digital media with substantial samples drawn from a large number of countries. While India is yet to figure in this annual survey, the global trends it highlights are clearly applicable in India and the evidence comes both anecdotaly and from evidence from diverse sources.

In its survey published in October 2017, the RISI identified a number of distinct trends. There was firstly, an increasing dependence on the smart phone for accessing news and information. “Distributed discovery” was becoming more important, with particular news sources less likely to be remembered than the platforms they were discovered on. Beyond these platforms, the growth of “private” messaging apps such asWhatsapp in news discovery was growing. And with all these multitudes of sources and choices, the vital attribute of “trust” was eroding in both social media and news.

**Sensationalism reigns**

In a scenario of great uncertainty, traditional media have been trying to gain some leverage through the online space, driving traffic to their sites using the hashtag as bait. The hashtag strategy perhaps goes along with an editorial policy of soft-peddling the criticism of established authority, since the largest number of mouse-clicks today seem to be reserved for news items – fake or otherwise – that play up the trivial and the sensational.

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**Mouse-clicks today seem to be reserved for news items – fake or otherwise – that embellish the image of the ruling party and its top leadership.**

Reporting that takes on and explains the full implications of policychoices the government has committed itself to, could be hazardous. In February 2018, The Tribune, headquartered in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh, ran a series of stories on the security vulnerabilities of an ambitious national database of Indian citizens. The reporters assigned to the story were able to obtain biometric and other information about registered Indian citizens through the mere payment of five hundred rupees (about USD 8). In response, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which runs the project, filed a criminal complaint against the reporter, the newspaper and its editor.

**That embellish the image of the ruling party and its top leadership.**

This manner of “strategic litigation” to stop critical reporting was in evidence in a story carried by The Wire, a news portal that has earned a substantial readership with its energetic fact-checking of official statements and claims. In October, the news portal ran a story documenting how a company owned by Jay Amit Shah, son of the ruling party president, had increased its annual revenue an astounding 16,000 times in just a year. It was subsequently learnt that Shah had contacted the legal officers of the Government of India for advice even before the story was published, after getting a sense of what was coming from the news portal’s outreach effort to verify facts. Once the story appeared, Shah filed a criminal defamation suit for no less than a billion rupees (USD 15 million) that had all the hallmarks of an official censorship attempt through the endless harassment of court summons and adjournments.

Two senior journalists from Vice India, the local arm of a global website – quit when pressured to kill a story about an activist of the ruling party’s youth wing, who was with full and informed consent, willing to render a candid account of his activities as a journalist within an intolerant political milieu. In a phone call to the reporters, the chief executive of Vice India cautioned that a phone call from the ruling party president was the last thing they wanted to receive.

Police raids in June 2017 on the offices and other premises of New Delhi Television (NDTV), on unsubstantiated allegations of money laundering, led to worries that one of the few news channels willing to give critical voices some space, was under threat. In Kashmir, always a challenging terrain to report from, a journalist was shot dead in November, within the base of an armed police force specialising in anti-insurgency operations. He had in the weeks prior, published a series of reports on corruption within the top command of the force.

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For more than three decades, journalists in Kashmir have been braving the challenges of living and reporting in a conflict zone. While the territorial dispute and internal strife are decades old, since the 1990s, Kashmir has been in the throes of an armed insurgency, and intense militarisation and arbitrary use of draconian laws. The media has had to balance pressures from all sides: the government, security forces, militants, and the Kashmiri public. Journalists perform the difficult task of informing the public while risking life and limb, facing headlong into dangerous volatile situations with no protective gear or safety training. Precarious working conditions – low wages, no job security, benefits, medical, life or risk insurance exacerbate the risks for journalists in Kashmir.

From 2016 onwards, the spike in unrest and mass uprisings of ordinary Kashmiris – especially young – following the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani by security forces in the Valley, and also by the armed militants.

EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

When the armed insurgency erupted in 1990 following the assassination of the ‘Gawakadal massacre’, when paramilitary forces opened fire, killing about 50 unarmed protesters, there were only five or six Urdu newspapers being published from Srinagar. The international press was ejected from the Valley, and until 1995, there was no English dailies published in Kashmir (national dailies published from Delhi were distributed in the Valley). Now, there are about 61 registered Urdu newspapers, the prominent ones being: Al Safa Aftab, Srinagar Times, Kashmir Uzma, Nida-e-Mashaq, Uqab and Azaq. The main English dailies out of Kashmir: Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Images, Kashmir Observer, Kashmir Mirror, Kashmir Life, Kashmir Times and Kashmir Reader. These newspapers took on the challenging task of reporting the militancy and its impact on common Kashmiris, the might of the Indian state and human rights violations committed by the security forces and also by the armed militants.

There are no television channels based in the state other than cable TV and national channels broadcast in J&K, which are sometimes blocked by cable operators under directions of the state government.

Journalism as a profession is not yet institutionalised in Kashmir. Structures of recruitment, wages, promotions and benefits are not uniform in any media house. For most media houses, the small scale of operations and lack of standard protocolsdraws journalists and media staff vulnerable and their jobs insecure. Precarious working conditions are exacerbated by the conflict. Salaries are poor, with journalists working for as little as Rs 3500 (USD 80) per month. Interns often carry out major tasks, sometimes with no salary for up to six months. In such a scenario, there are no appointment letters, medical benefits, insurance or provident funds. Written contracts are not drawn up and jobs and work assignments go according to oral agreements which are not binding. Reporters who travel for stories have to pay for conveyance themselves, unless they are lucky enough to hitch a ride with their colleagues from the national or international media. Photojournalists buy their own equipment, having to bear the cost of repairs and upgrades themselves. Phone bills are also borne by reporters. In addition, saturation of the job market, with newly established journalism schools in Baramulla and Anantnag producing 120 graduates every year contributes to a glut in fresh entrants working for very low wages just to be able to gain experience and bylines, thus devaluing professional journalism.

Alongside, the growth of new media has not been matched with an understanding of working conditions of online journalists who are expected to be on standby 24x7. Not only do journalists in the electronic media have to broadcast, they also have to write for the website in English and Hindi and also send photographs. All of this for the same salary.

The lack of investment in professional journalism is displayed in the poor salaries paid to field reporters, and minimising expenditure by relying on newspaper vendors and hawkers in the districts to phone in with local updates which are then subbed and packaged as “news” – thus completely bypassing professional journalists. Another phenomenon peculiar to Kashmir is to make use of government employees as sub-editors in the evening. They package news in the manner required by the publication, for very little payment.

New technologies and mobile telephony are rapidly changing the way news is generated and disseminated. Like in all parts of the country, verification and other tenets of professional journalism are often sacrificed for speed and volume of outreach.

INTIMIDATION AND RISKS

Since the armed conflict erupted in 1990, 21 journalists have lost their lives in targeted killings, or caught in the cross-fire. Assaults from all sides: militants, the military and state-sponsored renegades (‘surrendered militants’ or likhwas) had made journalism a hazardous profession during the 1990s. Abduction, parcel bombs and intimidation have become routine. The risky balancing act of the Kashmir media continues even today, and was mentioned in the report of the Press Council of India, ‘Media and Media Scenario of J&K,’ released during a visit of the Council to Srinagar in October, 2017. The report noted that there were two narratives – of the Kashmiri media and the “media of the rest of India”. It went on to note that “the journalists in Kashmir have to manage the reality of walking on the tightrope amidst the threats of gun and political arm twisting.”

Today, while targeted killings are not the norm, journalists continue to be vulnerable while covering the conflict. Reporters from the districts receive more threats and physical assaults from security forces than those based in the capital Srinagar, and there is little recourse, it appears. Regular visits by army personnel and intelligence officers to the homes of journalists and harassment of their families, has become routine enough to be unremarkable – the annoyance and surveillance being borne as a fallout of working and living in a conflict zone. Journalists report being picked up and taken to Military Intelligence (MI) camps and interrogated, sometimes being detained with no charges. Questions about their stories sometimes lead to self-censorship to minimise harassment to families. In a conflict situation, the identity of Kashmiri journalists is often deliberately blurred by the authorities.

Freelance photojournalist Kamran Yousuf was picked up on September 5, 2017 by the counter-terrorism unit, the National Investigation Authority (NIA) and lodged in Tihar jail in capital Delhi. The 20-year-old from Pulwama town in South Kashmir was covering protests by civilians who were pelting stones at the security forces, a unique form of resistance in the Kashmir Valley. He was accused of pelting stones himself, and charged with serious crimes like criminal conspiracy, attempting to wage war against India, and sedition. The Kashmir Young Journalists’ Association was the first to stand up publicly and assert that Yousuf is a professional journalist, support for his cause soon gathered force. Though he was released on bail after six months later on March 14, 2018, fighting the court case will be a long and arduous process.

As Yousuf’s experience shows, press photographers are particularly at risk, since they rush to the spot of incidents even as they are unfolding. Except for those who work for national or international media, local press photographers do not have protective jackets or helmets. Due to the nature of their work, they are at the frontlines of conflict with no protection. Mir Javid, a journalist in Kupwara was deliberately targeted with pellets in August, blinding him in one eye despite extensive surgeries.

Likewise, photojournalist Zuhair Maqbool, 30, blinded in one eye by pellets aimed at him and his colleague Musaam Matoo, by the security forces in September 2016. Multiple painful surgeries later, he is yet to fully regain his vision. His cameras costing about Rs 200,000 which he calls his “eyes” were also damaged. Yet, they have no medical, risk or life insurance cover. Funds were raised through a Facebook campaign for their medical expenses. There were more than 1261 incidents of stone pelting in Kashmir in 2017, each of them costing around Rs 200,000.

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Online abuse and intimidation are growing problems. Reporters in the electronic media had had to go to the extent of deactivate their social media accounts due to the barrage of abuse within minutes of posting any story. WhatsApp messages from all over the world range from a "friendly nudge" to give a certain angle, to open threats. A reporter with a national channel said that on one occasion, an extremist leader threatened to broadcast a call to burn reporter with a national channel said that on one occasion, the barrage of abuse within minutes of posting any story. Reporters in the electronic media had had to go to the extent of deactivate their social media accounts due to the barrage of abuse within minutes of posting any story. Senior journalists say that while there is no direct censorship, circumstances are created to make it difficult to work. There is no system in place to talk to the responsible person in the police or security agencies to get the official version. Another way in which the army controls the flow of information and testimonies from affected populations is to intimidate villagers to the extent that common people are afraid to talk to journalists due to fear of repercussions.

Access to information

Newsgathering and verification are fraught with challenges in Kashmir. From obstacles to physically accessing villages on the contentious Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border with Pakistan, to routine denial of information from official sources, getting the complete story and a quote from all sides is virtually impossible. In a recent case where a ‘suspected militant’ was killed in Uri (a border area), villagers said he was a civilian – a gazer. But it was impossible to verify because journalists were denied access and officials refused to comment.

In some areas, though official permission is obtained, the authorities on the ground do not accept the permissions and passes issued by other authorities. When curfew is imposed, which is routine during military operations, combing, crackdowns or even civil strife, obtaining curfew passes is difficult. Even with passes in hand issued by the civil authority – the District Magistrate) the military personnel on duty do not permit journalists to enter the spot where incidents have taken place. When the military does take journalists to specific areas, it is usually in the nature of embedded journalism, and extremely controlled.

Official statements are often too late in coming, making it impossible to include quotes of relevant government and military sources within the schedule demanded by a daily news cycle. This routine stone-throwing means that the official version is missing from news stories. Senior journalists say that while there is no direct censorship, circumstances are created to make it difficult to work. There is no system in place to talk to the responsible person in the police or security agencies to get the official version.

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Access to information is severely restricted during shutdowns of the telephone network or the internet. The penetration of the internet and mobile telephone is high. However, during military operations, mass protests and demonstrations, the internet is shut down or slowed down to a speed that renders it useless. Such blockades are routine after military operations involving armed militants resulting in casualties, and last for least four days till after the funeral rites are completed, with a view to preventing popular mobilisation around the deaths of militants. The internet is also often shut or slowed down on Fridays, when public gatherings around mosques are likely to be volatile and turn violent with stone pelting. According to statistics generated by the Delhi-based the Software Freedom Law Centre, India, Kashmir experienced 32 shutdowns in 2017 and 13 in 2018.

The struggle for journalists to get accreditation and the strict government control over this process is another method of blocking access to information.

Government control

Most of the papers published from Kashmir are priced nationally, although Rs 3, and do not earn sufficient revenue. Some publications receive advertisements disproportionate to their circulation (some print a token hundred copies for the record, while raking in large advertisement revenue). The content of these publications is impacted by the dependent relationship between the newspaper industry and the establishment, especially for economic survival. Pro-government publications are favoured with government accommodation, land, and other ‘privileges’ for propagating the official line. Those who do not play the game, pay a price.

In October 2017 the Home Ministry issued a letter addressed to senior officials of the state government and the Jammu & Kashmir police, saying: “It is understood that some newspapers in J&K are publishing highly radicalised content. This is against the Constitution of India as well as the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir.” The letter further says, “publishing of anti-national articles in the newspapers of the state should be strictly dealt with. Such newspapers should also not be given any patronage by way of advertisements by the state government. This may be circulated to all concerned for strict compliance.”

Visual Publicity (DAVP), disburses advertisements, but with strings attached. Some publications receive advertisements disproportionate to their circulation (some print a token hundred copies for the record, while raking in large advertisement revenue). The content of these publications is impacted by the dependent relationship between the newspaper industry and the establishment, especially for economic survival. Pro-government publications are favoured with government accommodation, land, and other ‘privileges’ for propagating the official line. Those who do not play the game, pay a price.

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Organising for rights

The journalist community in Kashmir has been organised in various associations: Kashmir Press Photographers Association; Kashmir Journalists Corps; Welfare Association of Journalists; Kashmir Correspondents’ Club. The Kashmir Young Journalists Association founded in 2016 aims to serve the interests of fresh entrants into the profession and the Kashmir Editors Guild was set up in 2016 to lobby for issues related to editors. The Jammu and Kashmir Journalists’ Union, with about 30 members, is active in the Jammu region of the state, but not in the Kashmir Valley. An initiative to re-launch the Kashmir Union of Working Journalists which had been active in the 1980s, as well as a proposed Press Club provides hope for a united journalists movement to confront the challenges ahead.
**THE MALDIVES**

**SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE**

The Maldives has been in the throes of a severe political crisis since early 2018, when President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency on February 5 and embarked on a mission to crack down on any opposition to his authority. The move was a response to the Supreme Court’s February 1, 2018, order to release political prisoners and reinstate 12 Members of Parliament. If the court order had been followed, President Yameen would have found himself in a minority in the Parliament, facing a possible impeachment motion.

However, President Yameen effectively averted a personal crisis by declaring a state of emergency, detaining opposition leaders including members of parliament, dismissing and arresting the Chief Justice and a Supreme Court judge on charges of corruption, coming down heavily on opposition, and silencing all his critics including media.

The media and journalists faced a challenging situation during the emergency with critical and opposition media and journalists facing harassment, and others resorting to self-censorship. During the emergency, journalists were detained and attacked; media was threatened by government agencies with action for their unfavourable reporting, and ruling party leaders publicly called for shutting down opposing media.

The state of emergency — which lasted 45 days — represented an eruption of the deep churning, risks and challenges that the Maldivian media and journalists faced during the year. Waves of restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom continue in the Maldives as its attempts to muzzle critical voices went unabated. State attempts to restrict press freedom resulted in fear among the media and journalists at a scale that critical news was difficult to publish in media operated within the Maldives. Self-censorship — especially in issues critical to the government and anything relating to the opposition — was widespread and apparent in media content in the country.

**MEDIA IN EMERGENCY**

The state of emergency, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International, was used as a “license for heightened repression” by the Maldivian government. During the emergency, the opposition-aligned Raajje TV was forced to go “off air” for 56 hours owing to the dangers to the media and journalists. On February 9, 2018, the station suspended its activity for 56 hours owing to the dangers to the media and journalists. On February 16, 2018, the station suspended its activity for 56 hours owing to the dangers to the media and journalists. During the emergency, journalists were detained and attacked; media was threatened by government agencies with action for their unfavourable reporting, and ruling party leaders publicly called for shutting down opposing media.

The ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) went on an all-out verbal attack on Raajje TV and VTV. Lawmaker Ahmed Nihan alleged in a tweet that the protests had been organised by the media: “We see tonight’s rally being led by journalists from RaajjeTV and VTV.” On February 16, 2018, PPM vice president Abdul Raheem Abdulla demanded action against media outlets that spread discord saying that “RaajjeTV and VTV incited hatred and violence” and that they “work to misinform and put the public into a state of panic”.

Deputy leader of PPM Abdul Raheem Abdulla on March 17 called on the authorities to shut down privately-run Raajje TV in a press conference broadcast live on Public Service Media.

**THREATS FROM STATE AGENCIES**

On February 8, 2018, the Ministry of Defence and National Security warned of action on those found to have brought forward content impacting national security without a prior notice. The statement added that live shows and programs on media could “create chaos, confusion in public and create discord within the society”.

On February 17, 2018, the Maldives police in a press release asked journalists to be “more professional”. The police claimed that some journalists had acted like “protestors” a day earlier in a rally and some media outlets had spread misleading information during live coverage. On the same day, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) issued a circular saying that some broadcasters were airing content threatening peace and stability and cautions broadcasters to exercise restraint ‘when bringing live coverage’.

The Maldives Transport Authority also joined in issuing warning to media on February 28. The authority urged the media against spreading unsubstantiated reported regarding Xin Yuan 18 – a vessel with the Maldivian flag that allegedly supplied oil to North Korea. The authority was denying any link to the vessel and warned media against reporting it otherwise.

**DURING THE EMERGENCY, JOURNALISTS WERE DETAINED AND ATTACKED; MEDIA WAS THREATENED BY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WITH ACTION FOR THEIR UNFAVOURABLE REPORTING, AND RULING PARTY LEADERS PUBLICLY CALLED FOR SHUTTING DOWN OPPOSING MEDIA.**

**MEDIA REGULATORS STRONGLY SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT’S REPRESSIVE MEASURES**

During the emergency, the state-controlled MBC strongly indicated censorship and legal harassment of media. The MBC has imposed hefty fines on opposition-aligned Raajje TV thrice — each time immediately after the station paid the earlier fine. Raajje TV receives third defamation fine on October 8 when the MBC fined it MVR500,000 (USD 34,425) for airing
Airing a slogan chanted during an opposition rally in a live broadcast on July 28, calling them a “threat to national security”. MP Mohamed Musthafa was not fined for defamation. It should also be noted that the television network has also been fined for airing a slogan during an opposition rally in a live broadcast on July 28, calling them a “threat to national security”. MP Mohamed Musthafa was said to have used an obscenity and defame President Yameen during a live event when he said the present administration has “introduced nothing but theft to the country”, the MBC concluded deciding over the fine. The privately-operated station refused to offer a public apology until it was issued a court order to do so and said it will file a court case against any decision once depositing the fine. The fines were imposed under the controversial Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act 2016 that was heavily criticised by local and international organisations as being restrictive and contrary to international standards. The MBC also slapped a fine of MVR 200,000 (USD12,970) on state-owned Public Service Media over defamatory remarks made by a ruling party lawmaker at a televised press conference. The MBC fined Medianet – the country’s main cable television service provider – MVR 580,000 (USD32,425) on June 17, 2017 for rebroadcasting an Al Jazeera corruption exposé in September. The documentary, which exposed systemic corruption, abuse of power and criminal activity at the highest level of government, was deemed to pose a threat to national security and the Maldivers government blacked out the documentary in the Maldives. After Al Jazeera announced the release of the documentary, the ministers and ruling party lawmakers threatened to take action against all of the film’s Maldivian contributors. The government also launched a media offensive against the documentary, even before it aired, accusing Al Jazeera of a conspiracy to topple the government as well as economic sabotage. A prominent editor appearing in the documentary – Zahaan Rasheed of the Maldives Independent, left the country because of the threat and currently still lives in exile. The Maldives’ Majlis (Parliament) has been a bitter ground for dispute among ruling and opposition lawmakers with ugly scenes such as eviction of lawmakers, presence of high number of security personal and scenes of fist fights between the lawmakers. However, the MBC denied the Maldivian peoples their right to know what is happening in their parliament by warning TV stations against broadcasting footage live-streamed on social media by MPs who are inside the parliament chamber saying such videos contained “obscene language and content contrary to standards of public decency”. It advised broadcasters to “ensure that scenes like this are broadcasted in line with the Broadcasting Act, regulations under the Act, the Broadcasting Code of Practice, and the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act”. Legal action would be taken against those who violate broadcasting laws, the commission warned. **HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS** As journalists are arrested, detained and questioned over content found ‘objectionable’ could lead to huge arbitrary fines, the threat to the media and journalists is high and there is widespread self-censorship due to an atmosphere of fear. Journalists in the Maldives are questioned over news content and legally harassed over their coverage of any programs organised by opposition political parties. Police questioned journalists at the news websites Avas and Mihaaru on February 1, 2018, after the sites published a statement issued by the jailed former vice president of the Maldives, Ahmed Adeeb. Police went to their office without prior notice and officers asked how the statement was obtained. In June 10, 2017, Vnews senior editor Ahmed Rifau was summoned for questioning at the police headquarters over a headline about the arrest of a senior opposition figure in June. The police contended that the headline, ‘Adam Azim arrested on charges of trying to topple the government,’ misrepresented the content of the arrest warrant. Azim was accused of speaking in a manner that encouraged the illegal overthrow of the government and of undermining public trust and inciting hatred toward the judiciary. A number of journalists – four from Sangu TV and three from Raajje TV, were arrested and others roughed up during an opposition rally held on the 52nd Independence Day in July. The journalists detained on charges of “obstructing the duties of a law enforcement officer” were Mohamed Wisam, Haribeli Abdul Hakeem and videographer Ahmed Mamdhoof of Raajje TV, and Adam Janah, Ahmed Rufath, Mohamed Shanoon, and Abdullah Yamin of Sangu TV. They were later released. On May 29, 2017, the Maldivian police issued summons on Twitter to three liberal bloggers -Dr Azra Naseem, Muzaffar ‘Maju’ Naeem, and Hani Amir- living abroad to present themselves for prosecution over unspecified charges. The police said they would ask the Prosecutor General’s office to press charges and try them in absentia if they refused. All three bloggers are known for their secular views and critical writing on Maldivian society and politics. **FURTHER CLAMPDOWN AFLOAT** Further media restrictions are likely to be imposed as the government-sponsored bill for the ‘Maldives Media Commission’ was tabled in the Parliament. Proposed by ruling party lawmaker Jafar Dawood for the creation of a new media regulatory body after dissolving the broadcasting commission and media council, the proposed regulator can impose hefty fines and temporarily shut down newspapers and TV stations. After investigating breaches of a new code of ethics, the Maldives Media Commission can order print and online outlets to make corrections, issue warnings, and impose fines of up to MVR100,000 (USD6,485) for repeated violations. If written or broadcast content is deemed to pose a danger to Islam, national security, public order or public health, the Commission can ask the police to stop publication or broadcast. The Commission can also seek court judgments to cancel the registration or broadcasting license of newspapers and TV stations. Journalists believe that the new bill, once passed, will target the print and online media. The current MBC can only target televisions and radios and the new Bill has been conceived so as to ensure that the print and online media come within the jurisdiction of the state-controlled authority. International non-profit Transparency International Maldives condemned the government for proposing a bill that would merge two existing media watchdogs and “expand its sphere of state control on print and social media as well”. There was no progress on the Bill due to the political crisis and the state of emergency, but it is likely to be revived once the situation is normal. Similarly, the Maldives government also issued new guidelines on the qualification for journalists and asked all media outlets to meet the guidelines within 18 months. A Home Ministry regulation gazetted in January, 2018 imposes new criteria for editors at registered media outlets. According to the guidelines, editors need to be a Maldivian, aged 25 and above, have a degree in journalism
Act 2016 to penalize critical voices; the threat to critical use of the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression were broadly related to arbitrary and repeated (mis)usure, both inside and outside the beleaguered region.

Solidarity to enable meaningful interventions in the public sphere, both inside and outside the beleaguered region.

or a related field as well as five years’ experience at a ministry-registered media organisation. The guidelines are seen as a way to control media given there are only 483 people with a graduate degree in Maldives, according to 2014 census.

Building Regional Solidarity
In September 2017, the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) meeting in Kathmandu focused attention on the Maldivians as a zone in need of urgent intervention to protect press freedom and journalists’ rights. While expressing solidarity with Maldivian journalists, SAMSN pointed at the need for strategies for national, regional and international solidarity to enable meaningful interventions in the public sphere, both inside and outside the beleaguered region.

The major issues in the Maldives, often interconnected were broadly related to arbitrary and repeated (mis)use of the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act 2016 to penalize critical voices; the threat to critical voice; the state censorship of media content; violation of press freedom and journalist’s rights including arrests and criminal cases against journalists; new tougher law and regulations on the offering; impunity for perpetrators in the crimes against journalists; and self-censorship by the journalists.

The Election Commission has announced the first round of presidential elections in early September 2018. A second round, should it be necessary, would be held within 21 days from first election day. President Yameen is looking for a new mandate to extend his presidency, while the opposition is looking for an opportunity to oust him. The media, reeling under constant pressure from threats and repression and resorting to self-censorship, will face yet another challenge to cover the election in an independent manner. Although the EC had promised to allow foreign journalists to cover the election, there are already stricter measures for visa issuance for journalists in place.

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With the election looming amidst the political crisis, the media is likely to witness another challenging year where press freedom comes under severe pressure.

In August 31, 2016, I packed a small suitcase and reluctantly left the Maldives, thinking I was only leaving for a week. I told my parents I’d be back as soon as the furor over a documentary I had worked on had died. I didn’t want to leave - it felt like giving in. It will soon be two years, but the situation has only gotten worse.

The documentary by Al Jazeera, titled , exposed corruption and abuse of power at the highest levels of government, including a conspiracy to launder up to USD 1.5 billion through the central bank. Weeks before the film aired, the government, pushed through a new law criminalizing defamation. It allows journalists to be fined up to USD 30,000, and sets a six-month jail term if they are not able to pay the fine. The law also grants the government authority to impose fines and shut down publications.

The assault on the press has taken many forms in Malé, from threats and attacks to co-option. Ministers offered money to the best journalists in newsrooms to set up alternative outlets. Sometimes, half of newsrooms were poached to set up new websites or TV stations that were often pro-government in their coverage.

An oft-ignored topic is mental health. As journalists in the Maldives, we bore daily witness to grave injustices. Mass corruption and the squandering of public funds, police brutality and mass arrests, and the jailing and banishment of nearly all opposition leaders. Covering court hearings which went late into the night, I would leave the court house shocked by the blatant injustice I had just witnessed.

Ahmed Rilwan’s disappearance. How do you tell a story objectively when that story concerns a member of your team? As journalists, we think of ourselves or are expected to be objective observers of human history, but we are as susceptible to trauma as the victims of the stories we tell.

In addition to the threats and harassment by the government, as an editor of a small and independent news website, I also frequently worried about funding for our website. The pressure was immense. When I left the Maldives a year ago, I was a mess. I was suspicious of strangers. I jumped at shadows, and I was afraid of the dark. My friend and blogger, Yameen Rashid’s murder in April 2017 prompted a crisis of faith and a cynicism that I have not been able to shake off. Professionally and personally, the past few years have been some of the toughest in my life.

Through all of this, regional and international organisations have been keeping an eye on us, helping to keep global attention on what has been happening in the Maldives. The solidarity has made us feel that we are not alone. Conversations with journalists in Sri Lanka who had reported on the war, were eye openers. They told us, don’t be martyrs, you must live to tell the story another day. That advice has always stuck with me.

The hardest story I reported on was my colleague Ahmed Rilwan’s disappearance. How do you tell a story objectively when that story concerns a member of your team? As journalists, we think of ourselves or are expected to be objective observers of human history, but we are as susceptible to trauma as the victims of the stories we tell.

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Zaheena Rasheed, Al Jazeera Media Network, is also the editor-in-exile of the Maldives Independent. This is an excerpt of a speech delivered on September 8, 2017 at a meeting in Kathmandu organised by the IFJ and SAMSN.
Nepal

OLD ISSUES, NEW CONCERNS

After years of instability due to political transition, Nepal is finally on the road to stability after three levels of successful elections—local, provincial, and general—held between May and December 2017. The coalition of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist - Centre) won a majority in all three elections and formed the federal government under the premiership of KP Sharma Oli and provincial governments in six out of seven provinces. The alliance of parties based in the Madhes or the southern plains has formed a provincial government. With two major parties of the coalition now working on the unity process, PM Oli looks set to lead the country for a full term, bringing much-needed stability in the country’s governance.

The Madhes-based parties, which had previously boycotted the promulgation of the Constitution, vowed to disrupt the elections, but ultimately did not follow through. The three elections, which transpired without noticeable violence, finally gave a legal validity to the Constitution of Nepal 2015. The participation of all political parties, except a splinter group of the Maoist party, was considered a good sign, since the dissatisfaction of the Madhes-based parties could be addressed in the parliament through a democratic process.

However, implementation of the new federal structure, the new Constitution as well as the new Criminal Code and Civil Code is not expected to be smooth. Both the Criminal Code and Civil Code consist of provisions that could have direct implications for the media. The federal structure is also expected to bring in new challenges, not only in its evolution, but also for press freedom as the provinces and local bodies are entrusted with some responsibility regarding regulation of local media.

It flags tough years to come for journalists as they face unprecedented legal pressures and other harassment, attacks and threats for their reporting of critical issues. Impunity for crimes against journalists is a long-standing issue still awaiting proper redress in the country.

THE MEDIA AND THE COURT

During the year, the judiciary of Nepal was at odds with the media on several occasions. However, these cases were not prolonged and were not unfavourable for the media and journalists.

On February 25, 2018, Chief Justice Gopal Parajuli passed an order asking the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) to ban publication of news criticising him in Kantipur daily. The daily had published a series of investigative reports about the Chief Justice’s conduct and to ensure that no news criticising the Chief Justice was published again. Journalist Krishna Gyawali, editor Sudheer Sharma, and publisher Kailash Sirohiya appeared in the Supreme Court for the hearings before the case was discontinued when the Chief Justice was forced to resign. The Judicial Council determined the Chief Justice should be relieved from the post after gathering official documents to establish his date of birth, which turned out to be the date as claimed by the police.

The police were investigating whether they violated the journalists’ code of conduct and to ensure that no news criticising the Chief Justice was published again. Metropolitan Police Office in Kathmandu wrote to several online media platforms asking them to disclose the source of secret appraisal reports of top police officials that were published following a controversy on the appointment of the Inspector General of Police (IGP).

In November 2017, the Patan High Court backed attempts by the police to force editors of several online media platforms to reveal their sources. The Crime Division of the

THE FEDERAL STRUCTURE IS ALSO EXPECTED TO BRING IN NEW CHALLENGES, NOT ONLY IN ITS EVOLUTION, BUT ALSO FOR PRESS FREEDOM AS THE PROVINCES AND LOCAL BODIES ARE ENTRUSTED WITH SOME RESPONSIBILITY REGARDING REGULATION OF LOCAL MEDIA.

heard the case – despite the issue being about him – and issued an interim order, also calling on the PCN to probe the news reports in question. The order asked the PCN to investigate whether they violated the journalists’ code of conduct and to ensure that no news criticising the Chief Justice was published again. Journalist Krishna Gyawali, editor Sudheer Sharma, and publisher Kailash Sirohiya appeared in the Supreme Court for the hearings before the case was discontinued when the Chief Justice was forced to resign. The Judicial Council determined the Chief Justice should be relieved from the post after gathering official documents to establish his date of birth, which turned out to be the date as claimed by the newspapers.

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that the police action did not violate freedom of the press thereby refusing to issue any order. The police mentioning the court decision again wrote to the online media pushing for disclosure of the source. After an outcry from journalist unions, including a statement of support from IFJ-affiliated Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), the PCN intervened, met with senior police officials and urged them not to proceed with the request. The police were investigating
Court official served a notice to the daily’s directors Binod Raj Gyawali and (USD 780,000) in damages on August 17, 2017. The Kathmandu District daily, claiming Rs 800 million (NOC) filed a defamation case against Gopal Khadka, the Managing Director of state-owned Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) after a determination against Nagarik daily, claiming Rs 802 million (USD 790,000) in damages on August 17, 2017. The Kathmandu District Court official served a notice to the daily’s directors Binod Raj Gyawali and Shrawan Paudel, editor-in-chief Guna Raj Luintel and correspondent Dilip Paudel on September 1. Credit: Nagarik daily

POLICING THE MEDIA

The Nepal Police, on at least two occasions in 2017, tried to slap fabricated charges on journalists as a means to silence them.

On June 17, 2017, police arrested editor Khem Bhandari and executive editor Ganesh Bhatt of Manaskhanda daily and charged them under the Public Crime and Punishment Act in Kanchanpur district, western Nepal. It followed a news report that claimed that two women arrested by the police were innocent. After a strong protest by journalists and unions, the police released Bhandari and Bhatt after 28 hours.

Police also arrested more than a dozen journalists, especially those considered to be close to the Maoist group calling for boycott ahead of the elections, as ‘pre-emptive measures for security’. Between May 2 to 11, 2017, half a dozen journalists from various districts were arrested by police. Most were kept in detention without charge until the conclusion of the local elections. However, Pustaman Gharti, a provincial delegate of FNJ charged with causing unlawful access to the files and the alleged tampering with confidential appraisal reports.

PUBLIC CRITICISING HIM IN KANTIPUR DAILY.

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On April 1, 2018, the District Court in Bajura cleared four municipal officials who allegedly beat him up on July 13. He alleged the four municipal officials attacked him near the district headquarters and sustained injuries. The police had later framed a rape charge against him and kept him in custody for more than eight months.

Prakash Dhakal, a journalist with Adarsha Samaj daily, was attacked by police as he was reporting on a demonstration by students of the Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara, western Nepal. During the police’s attempt to disperse the demonstrators, the police charged on Dhakal despite him showing his press ID card. Dhakal received a minor injury on his leg.

Similarly, at least eight journalists were arrested from various districts in November 2017 ahead of the general election. Again, these journalists were kept in detention without any charges until the conclusion of the election.

Although the election proceeded without major violence, there were some incidents of harassment and mistreatment of journalists including an attack on Dinesh Thapa, correspondent of OnlineKhabar.com, at his home by political cadres on November 25, a day before the first phase of the general election.

On July 31, 2017, the Election Commission (EC) issued a circular to the PCN ‘to present the chief editor of the Deeshantar weekly before the EC within three days’ for clarification on two news items that the constitutional body claimed to be ‘false’ and ‘baseless’. The news items in question were published on July 23 and 30 accusing the EC of financial misconduct. The EC also directed PCN to take action against the chief editor Kabir Rana. However, the PCN took no action.

CONTINUED THREATS

One of the biggest investigative news stories of the year in the country was about the state-owned Nepal Oil Corporation and the financial misconduct by its Managing Director Gopal Khadka. However, the publication of a series of news reports about the misappropriation of funds and misuse of authority by the government-appointed civil servant also saw attempts to silence the media.

On August 4, 2017, Khadka threatened journalist Dilip Paudel of Nagarik daily on the premises of the Ministry of Supplies, where Paudel was on a reporting assignment. Paudel had first reported misappropriation of funds by Khadka while buying various pieces of land for NOC at a ‘public offences’ was kept in custody for 55 days before he was finally released. A Supreme Court case filed by executive committee member Jarmadav Juri on behalf of the FNJ was ultimately instrumental in securing the release of the journalists.
is one of the two journalists who reported ‘Gravity by businessman GP Paudel, on September 11, 2017, daily, was also threatened via phone with and an official at the District Forest Office in Lalitpur Saraswati Community Forest Conservation Committee deforestation on May 6, 2017. The president of the daily had vacated his post but the case was widely discussed as a significant attempt to silence the media in Nepal. Khadka Paudel on September 1. The media house filed a counter-editor-in-chief Guna Raj Luitel and correspondent Dilip daily’s directors Binod Raj Gyawali and Shova Gyawali, Kathmandu District Court official served a notice to the from publishing reports about his alleged corruption. The，《Nagarik》daily, claiming NPR 800 million (USD 780,000) in damages with an intention to silence the media house from publishing reports about his alleged corruption. The Kathmandu District Court official served a notice to the daily’s directors Binod Raj Gyawali and Shova Gyawali, editor-in-chief Guna Raj Luitel and correspondent Dilip Paudel on September 1. The media house filed a counter-claim of NPR 1.5 billion (USD 14.2 million). Khadka was later dismissed from office by the government on September 18. The legal case did not progress since Khadka had vacated his post but the case was widely discussed as a significant attempt to silence the media in Nepal. In similar circumstances, Shivahari Ghimire of the daily Nagraik received a threat over news of illegal deforestation on May 6, 2017. The president of the Saraswati Community Forest Conservation Committee and an official at the District Forest Office in Lalitpur threatened Ghimire over the phone after news of deforestation was published. Unmesh Paudel, a journalist with Naya Patrika daily, was also threatened via phone by businessman GP Paudel, on September 11, 2017, regarding news on a crypto-currency business. Paudel is one of the two journalists who reported ‘Gravity very high price. Despite the Parliamentary Public Audit Committee’s order of an inquiry into the matter, Khadka had claimed that there was no truth in the news. He threatened Paudel that he would end his journalism career adding, “you have also a family, think about it”. On August 17, Khadka filed a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) as a defamation case against Nagarik daily, claiming NPR 800 million (USD 780,000) in damages with an intention to silence the media house from publishing reports about his alleged corruption. The Kathmandu District Court official served a notice to the daily’s directors Binod Raj Gyawali and Shova Gyawali, editor-in-chief Guna Raj Luitel and correspondent Dilip Paudel on September 1. 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PHYSICAL INSECURITY There were a number of attacks on journalists; the most concerning on January 15, 2018 when Sudeep Kain, a correspondent with Kantipur, was attacked by a group of five assailants. While reporting on illegal sand extraction in the Marsyangdi river that was endangering local settlements, he was manhandled by the assailants, his camera and cell phone were snatched and his photos deleted. They also warned him not to reveal the incident. Kain sustained a neck injury before being rescued by local residents. Since May 2017, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), has recorded 61 incidents of press freedom violation. Among those, were 27 journalist arrests; 9 attacks; 13 threats; 12 cases of seizure of media equipment and 10 incidents of verbal abuse. The FNJ concluded that although the number of press freedom violations has decreased over the past few years, the trend continues and there has not been any improvement in security or mechanisms to protect journalists. As a consequence, impunity and self-censorship remain the main issues of press freedom. Another press freedom watchdog, the Freedom Forum, in a review of 2017 concluded that the election campaigning and activities failed to show due respect to freedom of expression and press freedom, thereby witnessing a surge in the number of violations. AWAITING REDRESS Longstanding issues of press freedom in Nepal, meanwhile, still await redress. The regulation of online media, and social media, continues to draw attention. The controversial Online Media Directives, issued in February 2017, remain despite hefty criticism from the major media and unions. The directives are restrictive in nature and give arbitrary powers to the Department of Information (DOI) to restrict and harass online media, thus threatening freedom of expression. Along with the directives, Clause 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act’s (ETA), continue to pose a threat for freedom of expression and are used to harass journalists. The state is using Clause 47 to ensure the implementation of the directives by saying that the media platforms listed with the PCN do not attract the clause whereas any other online publication of content can be charged with the clause criminalising online expression. Further, the Local Government Operation Act has provisions for canceling the license of FM radio stations. Impunity and self-censorship are two key issues that continue to impede free expression in the Nepali media community. According to the FNJ records, out of 36 journalists killed since 1996, only six cases have gone on to prosecution. The level of threat and harassment of journalists, and the impunity to perpetrators, has led to a situation where journalists, especially those outside Kathmandu in regional areas, find it increasingly difficult to report on critical issues. In Kathmandu, the biggest media market, corporate interests are seen as playing an increasingly influential role in shaping content. However, the biggest challenge for Nepal’s media, journalists and unions is the changes expected to be brought about by the new federal structure. Each of 753 municipal bodies and seven provincial governments are authorised to devise regulations – including those to regulate media, especially local media – and there are already concerns regarding some of draft regulations as they contain provisions that could be misused to curtail freedom of the press. The FNJ has taken the initiative to form a committee to devise model federal regulations relating to media, and having discussions with concerned central authorities to ensure that the proposed regulations do not curtail press freedom and journalists’ rights.

CHALLENGING TIMES AHEAD

While Nepal’s constitution is explicit in mentioning press freedom and other related freedoms, many state actors and authorities are yet to whole heartedly accept it. The rise of social media, fake news and its viral spread online, have raised some issues that some state actors believe can only be controlled by tougher regulations. The end of the political transition is a welcome phase as it will hopefully bring political as well as policy stability in Nepal. However, Nepal’s Parliament now has hundreds of laws to be drafted and discussed. And alongside municipal and provincial governments, the parliament is also vested with the power to regulate local media. The years ahead will not be easy for Nepal’s independent and critical media.
PAKISTAN

THREATS ON AND OFFLINE

In the new millennium, Pakistan has battled a tide of terrorism and violent extremism that has cost tens of thousands of lives and affected millions. A major victim has been the media. Dozens of online information practitioners, including bloggers and social media activists have also been killed, attacked, injured, harassed or faced legal cases for alleged blasphemy or treason in recent years. Between May 2017 and April 2018, at least five journalists were killed; dozens of others attacked, injured, harassed and intimidated and two kidnapped and remain missing.

According to data from the Freedom Network, of the 117 media practitioners killed in Pakistan since 2000, at least 72 were targeted for their journalism work while the rest died in the line of duty in terror attacks and bombings. These high levels of violence and victimisation have ensured that Pakistan has consistently been ranked as one of the ten worst countries in which to practice journalism. The country has one of the lowest indicators of freedom of expression and safe access to information over the past decade. An important indicator of Pakistan’s poor rankings in categories of freedom of expression, safety of journalists and online information practitioners is the incredibly high level of accountability. The killers of only two (Wali Khan Babar and Daniel Pearl) of the 117 media practitioners killed have been identified, gone to trial and been convicted. This makes Pakistan also one of the worst countries in the world in terms of combating impunity for crimes against journalists and failing to provide them and their families justice, thereby ensuring that journalism and freedom of expression remain threatened.

ONGOING RISKS

Pakistan continues to have an environment that in general stifles freedom of expression and makes it difficult for the media and its practitioners, particularly journalists, from doing their job. In the period under review, at least five journalists were killed for their work and dozens of others were attacked, injured, harassed and intimidated into either self-censorship or looking out for themselves in an environment where impunity for crimes against them remains high and neither their employers nor the state offers much assistance.

The list of attacks against media practitioners in the period under review is long and the pool of perpetrators and threat actors grew to include, among others, government functionaries, political parties, judiciary, militant groups, religious factions, feudal and business classes and even the judiciary. No place is safe for journalists and media assistants – attacks happened in capital city Islamabad and in all four provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh as well as in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Gilgit-Baltistan and even Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Crimes against journalists continue to go unpunished, adding to the entrenched impunity.

MEDIA BLACKOUT

During November 2017, federal capital Islamabad and adjacent city Rawalpindi saw a protest sit-in at the main interchange between two cities by a religious group, the Labaik Ya Rasool Allah. In order to remove the sit-in, the government launched a crackdown on the protesters on November 25, 2017. Soon thereafter, the police and paramilitary forces launched a crackdown, and the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), the electronic media watchdog, shut down the transmissions of dozens of online information practitioners, including bloggers and social media activists have also been killed, attacked, injured, harassed or faced legal cases for alleged blasphemy or treason in recent years.
in the period under review, people faced shutdowns of cell phone networks and internet 17 times in various parts of the country. Cell phone networks were shut down on five occasions in Islamabad and Rawalpindi alone. In addition to these regular shutdowns, various parts of Balochistan province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have faced cellular and internet shutdowns on different occasions in the period under review.

Censorship of Social Media
In the aftermath of the issue of missing bloggers early in 2017, a petition was filed in February 2017 against the bloggers and their role in alleged online blasphemy in Pakistan. The petitioner Salman Shahid, prayed the court to direct the authorities to block all [allegedly] blasphemous pages on the social media besides taking action against those who had developed this content. Justice Shaukat Siddiqui of the Islamabad High Court, while admitting the petition, directed the authorities to block social media pages posting blasphemous and objectionable content. In March 2017, he ordered the authorities to place names of alleged blasphemers on the Exit Control List, initiate criminal cases against those committing blasphemy and form a joint investigation team (JIT) to look into the matter. The court also directed Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to set up teams to monitor and scrutinise social media for blasphemous material so that it may be removed. The court further ordered the Federal Investigation Agency to bring back from abroad bloggers allegedly involved in online blasphemy to initiate proceedings under the law against them. After lengthy proceedings, in August 2017, the court issued a detailed judgment and exonerated the alleged blasphemers but ordered PTA to identify any NGOs, bloggers and other journalists involved in circulating "blasphemous content" on social media and suggested that the Parliament make the blasphemy law tougher. The court also directed PTA to create a database to block unwanted and seditious content in Pakistan.

Pakistan's official requests to Facebook, Twitter and Google for users' info, content removal grew in recent times.

Facebook: During the first half of 2017, Pakistan submitted a total of 1,050 requests to Facebook relating to criminal cases for user data, referring to 1,540 Facebook accounts, according to Transparency International. During this period, Pakistan also made 399 "accounts data preservation" requests to Facebook in connection with official criminal investigations. Facebook also received 613 requests from Pakistan related to users/accounts. In the same period, Facebook restricted access to 177 places of content upon requests from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and FIA. The content was allegedly in violation of local laws relating to blasphemy and national security.

Twitter: During the first half of 2017, Pakistan submitted seven information requests to Twitter concerning 60 Twitter accounts according to Transparency International. The authorities in Pakistan also submitted 24 content/account removal requests to Twitter during this period. The government of Pakistan also made two emergency disclosure requests to Twitter.

Google: Pakistani authorities submitted eight user data requests to Google, according to the Google Transparency Report 2017. Pakistan also made 12 user/account requests to Google. Under these requests, the authorities may seek information about multiple accounts. Since 2009, Google received a total of 69 content removal requests, concerning 896 items, from Pakistan. Out of these 69 requests, 14 were submitted to Google during the first six months of 2017. Through these 14 requests, Pakistan asked for the removal of 96 items. Ten out of 14 requests related to items of "religious offence", two were about hate speech and one each about defamation and violence.

Online Policing
In the past year, Pakistani authorities increasingly invoked the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, to restrict freedom of expression and dissent online by criminalising dissent. There were at least three occasions when the PECA was invoked against journalists, the first time since its inception. In June 2017, Zahid Raahat, a reporter at Qudrat Urdu daily, was arrested in Balochistan province by the paramilitary Frontier Corps under PECA and handed over to the FIA in Quetta for criticising the military, the provincial chief and intelligence agencies for the poor law and order situation. He was released later but still faces criminal charges. In July 2017, Abdullah Zafar, a reporter for
Pakistan’s journalists and civil society activists hold protests against the attacks on Ahmad Noorani, a senior journalist of the Dawn newspaper, who was torture and detained by unknown assailants on the morning of October 26, 2017, during a protest in Karachi on motorbikes on October 26, 2017. Noorani, a senior journalist of a local newspaper who was a vocal critic of the authorities, was kidnapped and interrogated about his social media posts on “missing persons”. He was also formally booked under the FECA law. In August 2017, Jabbar Umrani, a correspondent for Waqt News channel, was booked in Quetta, Balochistan under the FECA law for violating its statutes banning criticism of security policies online. The FIA registered a case and is investigating Umrani’s social media comments that the security forces were investigating him. He was also formally booked under the PECA law. In August 2017, after 20 hours in captivity and said that he was tortured and interrogated about his social media posts on “missing persons”. He was also formally booked under the FECA law.

The federal Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and National Heritage tasked the Press Council of Pakistan (PCP) in March 2017 to prepare a draft of the bill. Media stakeholders, particularly media owners and journalists, strongly reacted to the reported bill, but the State Minister for Information, Broadcasting and Cultural Heritage expressed her ignorance about the preparation of the bill. She ordered an inquiry and immediately suspended an assistant director in her ministry. The committee held Nusr Jamal, the director general of the Internal Publicity Wing of the ministry, responsible for the preparation of the draft bill apparently without the minister’s permission. Later, the government dropped the idea of bringing in the new print media law altogether.

According to news reports in September 2017, the Sindh provincial government had prepared a draft law to regulate registration of papers, printing presses, news agencies and books in the province. The Sindh government had reportedly prepared the draft in the wake of the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment. The draft law, as reported, was aimed at ensuring that every book or paper printed in the province would clearly mention the name of the printer and place of publication, along with the date. The proposed law required every publisher or owner of a newspaper to apply for a declaration [regulated prior permission] and submit an affidavit saying that he will pay salaries to employees as per the Wage Board Award. No further development has been reported.

In the context of indicators 16.10.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months), there is no dedicated policy in place or any specific procedural, legislative or structural/institutional mechanism at either the federal level or anywhere in the provinces that addresses the issue of combating impunity for crimes against journalists and other information practitioners. A critical mass or a demand for a special law on safety of journalists and information practitioners is missing. Detailed and comprehensive empirical data and analysis on the scale of threats and attacks against journalists, particularly in the context of tracking impunity in the justice system is missing, as is adequate documentation on the process of access to justice for key cases of attacks against journalists and information practitioners in the provinces. Data collected against representative cases on the issue of impunity – with the help, perhaps, of a specialised impunity index – can help provide a gap analysis of the justice system for attacks against media practitioners. This empirical-based analysis can hugely facilitate increased accountability in Pakistan and help protect freedom of expression in the provinces.
ON THE BRINK

Sri Lanka is at crossroads. With growing crises in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, the country faces looming uncertainty. The situation that was deteriorating during 2017, has now reached a climax. In the period between May 2017 to April 2018, Sri Lanka has witnessed a number of developments with far-reaching consequences.

The post-Rajapaksa expectations of respect for human rights and enhanced democratic governance in Sri Lanka following the regime change in January 2015, were based on bi-partisan politics in the South, willingness of the Tamil polity to find a negotiated political solution, and a strong civil society. The factors that propelled change have now come under threat due to the emerging political instability.

On the one hand, former president Rajapaksa, who maintained an authoritarian family oligarchy, threatens to come back to power using war triumphalist nationalism as his political platform. Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism provides the foundation for his politics. On the other hand, the ruling coalition which came to power on the promise of democratisation, justice, and accountability has almost disintegrated. The two coalition partners, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by President Sirisena and the United National Party (UNP) headed by Prime Minister Wickremasinghe, have taken up contradictory positions on political, economic, social, and cultural issues. The year 2017 was marked by deep political and social polarisation of the country.

The recent anti-Muslim violence that sent shock waves throughout the country is an indication of the increasingly widening ethnic polarisation. Xenophobia, fuelled by ‘fake news’ on social media, remains disturbingly widespread. In the wake of anti-Muslim riots in early March, the government blocked all social media platforms blaming social media for inciting violence and mobilising rioters. Now, the government plans to bring in mechanisms to monitor and control social media.

The section of civil society that could have played a role in providing an alternative narrative has been partly co-opted by the government, while the rest of civil society remains fragmented on ethnic, political, and social lines. For a variety of reasons including the absence of a united approach, the once vibrant media rights organisations have become weak.

The Right to Information Act has been in force since February 3, 2017. The Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka which maintains a trilingual website, has so far been proactive on access to information and demonstrated a remarkable independence.

The National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP) for the period 2017–2021 was made public on November 1 and approved by the Cabinet in January 2017. The Action Plan has a number of goals related to freedom of expression. However, there has been no public discussion on the Action Plan, either before or after it was published.
During the period under review, open space for critical opinions and the right to dissent remained intact in general. However, this period saw multiple incidents of censorship as well as assaults and harassment of media personal. The Censor Board refused permission to perform a theatrical performance on abortion which was part of V-Day Patriarchy. Since November 2017, the popular website LankaNews remains banned in Sri Lanka. Impunity for serious violations of human rights, including killings of journalists, continues to be one of the key concerns. Despite advocacy by media rights organisations, no media rights violator has been brought to book so far. The government’s failure to deliver on its promise of impunity for serious violations by the police and other authorities. The developments that took place during 2017 hint at the possibility of the repressive Rajapaksa family oligarchy returning to power, overturning democratic gains achieved after 2015.

FACING THE BRUNT

No journalists or media workers were killed, kidnapped or made to disappear in Sri Lanka during the period under review. Fortunately, the murderous culture of death squads and disappeared persons (that were used for abductions) has passed. However, journalists continued to face the brunt of violations by the police and other authorities.

Susanthi Bandara Kanaraththara, a journalist working for the Sunday Apple newspaper, was tortured by the Assistant Superintendent of Police Tangalle, I. T. Daluwaththa. She was engaged in his duties as a journalist, covering a peaceful protest in Habantota Town on October 6, 2017 when he was illegally arrested, detained, tortured, and denied urgently needed medical treatment. The Asian Human Rights Commission called on the Attorney General to direct the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to initiate a full-scale investigation and to indict and prosecute the Police Officers under the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment Act No. 22 of 1994.

A JOURNALIST’S QUEST FOR INFORMATION

On December 12, 2017, the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs listed the names and contact details of two persons to be contacted regarding Right to Information. An email was sent to the information officer of the Foreign Ministry, requesting information regarding a high-profile person in Sri Lanka and on December 15, 2017 a response was received: “We will inform you of our decision on your request within 14 days.” A reminder was sent by the writer to the information officer after 14 days and on January 2, 2018, an official letter was sent on email which stated, “Even though we decided to provide the information requested by you through application dated 12/12/2017, we regret that we cannot provide the information within the 14 days stipulated in our initial decision letter due to the reasons given below…” We are therefore extending the time period to provide the information until the January 12, 2018”. It was further stated that the Ministry needed “more time to collect accurate statistics as requested”. The letter provided the name and email address of an Additional Secretary, to appeal to if the writer was dissatisfied with the extension. However, emails addressed to the Additional Secretary bounced back twice. (Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, Ceylon Today).

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTION PLAN 2017-2021

In 2017 the government introduced the much-awaited National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP). The Action Plan consists of numerous goals and corresponding objectives, among which are enhancing investigatory
One of the medium-term goals of the NHRAP is to enhance awareness of the law pertaining to hate speech. To achieve this goal, it is planned to conduct a public awareness campaign on the provisions of the ICCPR, Act No. 56 of 2007 pertaining to the prohibition of hate speech and to conduct an awareness campaign at the secondary school level. Of late, hate speech has become a pressing concern in the country. While substantive action is hardly taken against hate speech in Sri Lanka, in early March the government blocked access to social media platforms in the guise of fighting hate speech during the outbreak of communal violence. No action has been taken so far to effectively address widespread hate speech which remains a major issue related to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka.

To achieve the objective of removing unlawful impediments to freedom of religion, the NHRAP seeks to take proactive measures to prevent attacks on places of worship, firstly, by investigating, prosecuting and upon conviction, punishing perpetrators of religion-based violence under appropriate laws, secondly by providing additional training to law enforcement officers and judicial officers, thirdly by taking disciplinary action in instances of failure by local police to prevent attacks on religious communities, and fourthly, by establishing mechanisms at community level in consultation with inter-faith groups. Attacks on religious places belonging to Muslims and Evangelical Christians have taken place regularly during the period under review. However, no effective action has been taken to protect religious freedom.

The Muslims Council of Sri Lanka, an umbrella organisation for civil society groups, has recorded 25 attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned establishments since April 2017 to July 2017, and the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka has reported over 40 incidents in 2017.

The controversial Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara Thero surrendered in late June 2017, after evading arrest for a month, following charges of hate crimes against Muslims. He was arrested in court and granted bail soon after. The significant influence that Sri Lanka’s Buddhist clergy wields on the country’s political affairs, brings in to question whether tackling religious intolerance in Sri Lanka is a legal challenge or a political one.

Following violent incidents against Muslims in Gintota in Galle district in November, in Ampara, in the Eastern Province, in February 2018, major anti-Muslim violence in Kandy district in early March 2018 prompted the declaration of a state of emergency, imposition of curfew and ban on social media.

A prominent lawyer and human rights activist, Lakshan Dias was publicly threatened with disbarment by the then Minister of Justice, Dr. Wijedasa Rajapaksa, for providing legal representation of such attacks in a television debate in May 2017. He was named and shamed by nationalist media causing him to leave the country for a short period.

The fourth goal of the National Human Rights Action Plan aims at protecting and promoting the freedom of speech and expression including the right to information. The blocking of the popular social media platform Facebook,给自己 website LankaeNews was blocked following a complaint from the Rajapakse regime, the government has lost a great deal of credibility, it was observed. The irony is that while the ban was in force, both the President and the Prime Minister kept posting on their Facebook pages. The censorship sent a clear message that the government has abandoned its project of media regulation, which was initiated by then Director General of the Government Information Department in early 2017. The proposed press law, titled Independent Council for News Media Standards (ICNMS) envisaged a fine of LKR 1 million (USD 640) for any media institution which does not subscribe to the ICNMS’ proposed laws and a fine of Rs. 100,000 (USD 640) and imprisonment of the journalist found guilty of publishing ‘false news’.

Meanwhile, the political and social media censorship continues unabated, making state-controlled media the most prevalent propagandist force.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA BAN THAT WAS IMPOSED IN THE WAKE OF ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS IN KANDY WAS ANOTHER ALARMING INSTANCE OF MEDIA CENSORSHIP. THE ANTI-MUSLIM Gangs MOBILISED THEMSELVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA, PARTICULARLY FACEBOOK, AND ANTI-MUSLIM RHETORIC WAS WIDELY SHARED.
The government is now discussing the setting up of an institution to monitor social media usage as a measure aimed at preventing provocation of hate against any community or religion. “The government will not block social media such as Facebook but there will be strict monitoring, which will be aimed at preventing postings which provoke hate among communities and religions. This monitoring may result in barring those who upload hate speech on social media,” stated the Minister of Digital Infrastructure Technology.

Many Sri Lankan rights activists have raised the issue of not being able to report hate filled and abusive posts on Facebook in local languages. The government invited Facebook officials to the country within weeks of anti-Muslim violence to discuss the issue.

Writing an open letter to Facebook, Colombo-based think tank the Centre for Policy Alternatives expressed that, “The role of social media platforms like Facebook in amplifying messages of violence has not been adequately examined. A delegation from Facebook met with the Government of Sri Lanka and committed to together to combat hate speech. However, the contents of that discussion are not in the public domain. It is not clear to what extent Facebook will be willing to work with representatives of civil society, some of whom have been flagging content on Facebook that violates its own Community Standards, for years. The lack of unbiased Sinhala-language moderation is regularly cited as one of the root causes why pages regularly posting abusive content along these themes are allowed to thrive online, despite sustained reporting from concerned users”.

Thirteen civil society organisations in a letter addressed to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, urged that, “At the very least, the company should make clear the number of moderators assigned to deal with user generated reports around content in Sinhala, in which Facebook office or time zone they are located in, as well as their gender. There should also be a clear commitment to look into and resolve user generated reports within a specific time period, which during heightened violence, must be further reduced”.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) has shown a high level of independence and proactively intervened in protecting and promoting human rights and the rights of journalists in Sri Lanka.

For instance, in March 2018 HRCSL Vavuniya regional office was able to obtain press for accountability of the military. A Tamil journalist Shanmugam Thavaseelan was officer in charge of the camp that journalists covering a protest over land in Mullathivu in the Northern zone was able to obtain press for accountability of the military. A Tamil journalist Shanmugum Thavaseelan was officer in charge of the camp that journalists covering an anti-government protest would not be harassed in the future.

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The HRCSL also weighed in on the social media ban. Chairperson of the Commission Dr. Deepika Udagama stated that “the Commission recognizes the critical necessity to protect freedom of expression and the right to information as guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka’s international human rights obligations. In doing so, we recognize the need to strike the necessary balance between those rights and maintenance of public order and the protection of the rights of all.”

RIGHT TO ASSOCIATION UNDER THREAT

In February 2018, the Cabinet decided to publish in the Gazette the repressive Draft Act to Amend the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act no. 31 of 1980 and present it to Parliament for approval. The drafting of this Bill took place in secrecy with no consultations. The Bill, the purpose of which is to “regulate, supervise and inspect” NGOs through a “National Secretariat for NGOs”, gives significant investigatory powers to the Secretariat which assumes and duplicates functions of the police. The extraordinary and excessive power given to the Secretariat infringes on freedom of association, freedom of expression, as well as the right to privacy. It must be noted that the draft legislation, prepared in 2011 when the National NGO Secretariat was under the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Secretary was Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, was aimed at controlling civil society.

Activists came down heavily on the proposed law. “The draft Act creates a range of ‘offences under the Act’, some of which are broadly and vaguely defined and leave room for abuse. Offences includes non-registration, which violates Freedom of Association and the principle of ‘Voluntary Notification’.” Even a simple request for information if deemed inadequately responded to may attract a Rs. 250,000 fine or one-year imprisonment and thus, is likely to create a fear psychosis”, opined Ruki Fernando.

Sri Lanka’s media watch dog Free Media Movement noted that under the proposed amendment, “enjoyment of fundamental democratic values such as freedom association and freedom of peaceful assembly will be challenged. It is evident that the underlying aim of these amendments is to control the activities of civil society organisations and community organisations.”

According to the Draft Act, all voluntary civil associations, have to register themselves with the National NGO Secretariat. The proposed amendment seeks to empower National NGO Secretariat to launch investigations into activities of civil society organisations without any judicial oversight.

Significantly, no major political party opposed this amendment. In the face of mounting opposition from civil society, however, the government decided to postpone the amendment, leaving the question as to what motivates a government committed to good governance to approve a suppressive Act that seeks to control civil society. In times of crisis, a robust civil society and a professional independent media are the bulwarks against the creeping tide of authoritarianism.
AFGHANISTAN

Killed in a suicide attack on the RTA, 17 other staff members were injured in the attack. Media reports said that four attackers forced their way into the RTA station at around 9:30 am and stayed there for three hours. The channel's live broadcasting resumed two hours later with presenters with injured hand describing the attack. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as IS, reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack.

January 21, 2018: Baghlan

A vehicle carrying a team from Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) was attacked in Balkh district of Balkh province in eastern Afghanistan. The driver was killed while journalist Baz Shinwary and cameraman Mohammad Rafiq were seriously injured when an armed group opened fire on their car. The driver received several bullets and died on the spot.

April 25, 2018: Kandahar

Two unknown gunmen shot dead Kabul News Journalist Abdul Manan Arghand, 31, at a market in the outskirts of Kandahar city, Afghanistan. Arghand, who worked as a journalist for 11 years, was driving to work when the gunmen on a motorcycle intercepted his car and opened fire, killing him on the spot.

April 30, 2018: Kabul

Nine journalists, including a female journalist, were killed in back-to-back suicide attacks. The journalists were killed when the attacker disguised as a journalist detonated himself amidst journalists gathered to cover an earlier suicide attack. Those killed were senior photojournalist Shah Marai of AFP, Tol News cameraman Yar Mohammad Tokhi, Radio Azadi journalists Abadullah Hamzai, Moharram Durani and Sabawoon Kazik, 11 TVV reporter Ghazi Rasooli and cameraman Nower Ali Rajabi, Mashal TV reporter Salim Tahal and cameraman Ali Salmi.

March 7, 2017: Kabul

Security guards of Shamshad TV were killed when gunmen stormed the building.

September 23, 2017: Helmand

Shah Marai, senior photojournalist of AFP, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen near his residence in Helmand, capital of Helmand province, in eastern Afghanistan. Shah Marai’s guard, Amanullah Khair, was killed in the attack while Shah Marai sustained injuries on his face and body.

Other threats to journalists: 25

May 27, 2015:Baghlan

A journalist with Radio Shyba, were detained for three hours and harassed. The journalists were also confined in a room for a few hours and harassed. The journalists were also confined in a room for a few hours. The journalists were also confined in a room for a few hours and harassed.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

November 1, 2017: Afghanistan

The Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority directed internet service providers to block Telegram and WhatsApp services. It was not fully implemented.

BANGLADESH

Killed journalists: 0

None recorded

Other threats to journalists: 0

None recorded

Attacks on media institutions: 0

None recorded

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

August 11, 2017: Khulna

The police arrested Abdul Matin Morol, a correspondent for Bangla-language Daily Protidin, who wasamburgered by subordinates Fajur, the Durmata correspondent with a rival newspaper Daily Spanand, and a supporter of the ruling party. The complaint alleged that Morol’s Facebook post amounted to defaming Minister for Fisheries and Livestock, Navyn Chandra Chanda.

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Anisur Rahman, journalist with Daily Sangsad, who was beaten to death by four assailants near his house in Rangpur district in northern Bangladesh was arrested under the

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January 29, 2018: Dhaka
Bangladesh’s Council of Ministers met on January 29 and approved the draft of Digital Security Act 2018, designed to combat “growing cybercrimes that are affecting many public and private organisations”. The draft will now be presented to President Abdul Hamid. Sangsad – the unicameral parliament for Bangladesh, where the ruling Awami League party holds a strong majority, and it is expected to pass. The draft acts to repeal controversial Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act that deals with defamation or discriminatory hate speech on which being silenced by critics and journalists.

July 6, 2018: Thimphu
The Bhutan Information Communication and Media Authority (BICMA) cancelled the licence of a weekly Dzongkha language newspaper, Drupkey, for failing to meet circulation requirements.

October 1, 2017: Dhaka
Two online journalists were immediately turned off. On October 1, 2017: Dhaka
Ifj Press Freedom Report 2017–2018

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 0

September 17, 2017: Tripura
Shyam Sharma, journalist with the Indian Daily, was shot dead in Bilhaur, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Sharma had recently done public service reporting on police corruption.

November 30, 2017: Uttar Pradesh
Varmul Post police attack, in which channel reporter Nallamilli Rama Reddy, a TV journalist in Kerala, was hospitalised after an attack by police officials. The police also damaged their cameras and other equipment.

August 17, 2017: Thiruvananthapuram
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August 7, 2017: Odisha
Ramesh Rath, a Balipatna based journalist working for Pragatisheel, was injured in a mob attack. A two-bike borne official was attacked in mobile daily was attacked by two-bike borne assailants with a mezara weapon in Odisha. Rath sustained a deep cut on his back.

September 23, 2017: Uttar Pradesh
Several journalists were attacked by police ‘baton charged’ the group as they were among more than a dozen journalists who have received similar messages on WhatsApp.

March 25, 2018: Bihar
Naveen Shishchal from Dinak Bhaskar and journalist from Dinak, were killed when their motorbike was hit by a car near Garihar on the Ranchi-Saharam highway. The car was driven by a former village head, who has several criminal cases against him. Naveen’s family says that he had received threats in the days preceding his death.

May 26, 2018: Madhya Pradesh
Sandeep Sharma, an investigative journalist, was shot dead in front of his house in Madhya Pradesh. He was shot by a group who appeared to be a part of the haveli. The men made me stand with my back to a wall that the mob dragged me from the lawn and beat me. I was unable to ascertain the identity of the attackers, and kept retreating that I was a journalist. Then, the mob dragged me from the lawn and made me stand with my back to a wall that I was a journalist. The men surrounded me, and pointed their phones at me, recording videos. The mob kicked me, punched me, and slapped me.

May 22, 2017: West Bengal
At least five media workers were attacked and injured in West Bengal on June 9, 2017: Delhi
Police ‘baton charged’ the group as they continued to take videos of this assault.

August 7, 2017: Odisha
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May 5, 2017: Kashmir
Police beat up journalists covering protests after the Friday prayers in Sopore. The Kashmir Press Officers (KO) of Sopore Musaerd Geelani reportedly led the police attack, in which he beat up and seriously injured two photojournalists Eeshan Peer and Mohd. Yousuf, were injured.

June 16, 2017: West Bengal
Police attacked several photojournalists and cameramen who were covering a fire in the Kohinoor building on the well-known Park Street in Kolkata. Police attacked the media workers, accusing them of obstructing the fire department. The driver of a police van kicked and pushed several photographers while in front of police officers who took no action.

January 23, 2018: Meghalaya
Freelance photojournalist Shanta D’Souza, who regularly contributes to The Assam Tribune and Miss Meghalaya Guinness, was assaulted by a group suspected to be members of the All Rabha Students’ Union in Nalbari, Assam.

January 24, 2018: Meghalaya
Shanta D’Souza, a freelance photojournalist who regularly contributes to The Assam Tribune and Miss Meghalaya Guinness, was assaulted by a group suspected to be members of the All Rabha Students’ Union in Nalbari, Assam.
March 10, 2018: Assam

The police in state of Assam in Northeast, India, have filed a case against six journalists, including News18 TV journalist Emmy C Lawbei while on assignment covering anti-CAA protests. Lawbei and other journalists were at the Assam-Mizoram state border on assignment when they were attacked by a mob who were protesting against the Assam administration issued prohibitory orders. The police have filed a case against the six journalists, Lawbei and other journalists were also chased and beaten.

March 26, 2018: Delhi

Delhi police on Friday arrested two photographers and snatched away the camera of one while they were covering the demonstion organised by students and teachers of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India, on March 23. One male journalist was also beaten up and sustained injuries. Anush Adhikari, a photographer with the Hindustan Times daily, was roughed up and her camera was snatched away by police officers “I was clicking photographs of a student being dragged when the police targeted me,” said Adhikari. They were taking away my camera, they were shaking my camera. I kept pleading with them to spare us cameras, so police officers on duty also roughed up and grabbed another woman journalist by her breasts. The two journalists, who have regularly contributed to local and national media, accused the police of assaulting and molesting reporters at the site of JNU protest.

April 9, 2018: West Bengal

Photojournalist Biplob Mondal of The Times of India daily was severely beaten and his camera was snatched away and beaten while other journalists and media persons were also beaten and assaulted by Alipore police at Alipore, Kolkata, West Bengal on April 9, 2018 while they were covering the filing of nomination papers for the polls to local bodies (panchayati). The attackers, allegedly affiliated to the ruling TMC, confronted Mondal and beat him when he refused to cooperate. Mondal was also taken to Kaliachak police station and kept in custody for a couple of hours. The police also impounded Mondal’s camera and other equipment belonging to him. The police later released Mondal after a few hours and returned his camera.

September 20, 2017: Kerala

Keralan police also stopped a video journalist in the state from entering the temple town of Sabarimala during the temple’s opening. The police were blocking the entrance to the temple on the ground of maintaining law and order.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENTS

JUNE 21, 2017: KARNATAKA

The Speaker of Karnataka legislative assembly K B Birwal authorised the one-year imprisonment and a fine of Rs 10,000 (USD 200) of Ravil Belagere, editor of local tabloid Hae Bangalore, and Anil Raj, editor of local tabloid Vishwanath. Belagere was punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs) of the ruling party. The MLA’s were punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs). Belagere was punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs) of the ruling party. The MLA’s were punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs). Belagere was punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs). Belagere was punished for publishing reports criticising the members of legislative assembly (MLAs).

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENTS

JULY 22, 2017: WEST BENGAL

The police raided the office of Nepal-language satellite TV channel ABN, after an employee was asked about a comment against the chief minister of the state of Assam by her breasts.

CENSUS

JULY 26, 2017: WEST BENGAL

The police raided the office of Nepal-language satellite TV channel ABN, after an employee was asked about a comment against the chief minister of the state of Assam by her breasts.
other evidence while the videos showed that police used excessive and unnecessary force against the journalists reporting the rally organised on the 171st BRICS Day of the Maldives. The arrested journalists were later released. They were Mohamed Wisam, Ihsanudheen, and Aiham. The police also searched the homes of Dhir Ahmed Mamdhooh of Raajje TV, and Adam Janah, Ahmed Riffat, Mohamed Shabnun, and Ahmed Ismail of TV Su'a.

February 16, 2018: Male’

Hussain Hassan from RaajjeTV and Leenan Ali Nasir from TVF were arrested during a protest rally at Male’. The journalists’ clothes were taken to hospital after being pepper-sprayed.

March 16, 2018: Male’

The police arrested Raajje TV journalists Mohamed Wisam, Mohamed Fazen, and Head of Programmes Amir Saleem were arrested. They were arrested on March 16. Fazen was arrested while covering the protest by the Joint Opposition for allegedly disobeying a police officer, while Wisam and Amir were taken into custody with a court order. Amir was arrested outside the Raajje TV station. Fazen was released after a day while two others were charged with criminal offences relating to theft. Wisam and Amir were released later.

HARASSMENT

May 29, 2017: Male’

The Maldivian police issued summons to three liberal bloggers living abroad – Dr. Azaa Naeem, Mazufr Niaa Naeem, and Hani Amir – posting separate statements on Twitter. The statement added that the bloggers were asked to present themselves to speak in their defence against unspecified allegations. The police warned that they would ask a foreign correspondent’s office to press charges and try them in absentia if they refused.

January 12, 2018: Male’

Shahnaaz Zannier, a photographer, lodged a defamation case against five journalists of Mihaaru daily and the media group V/Me as defamatory reports. The stories referred to the photographer’s arrest for illegally sending four balls of local diesel to Saudi Arabia in November 2017. The five reporters from Mihaaru and V/Me were summoned to court for a dispute resolution hearing on defamation charges. The photographer later withdrew the case.

REGULATIONS

March 1, 2018: Male’

The opposition aligned VTV was fined 400,000 rupees (USD 6485) for alleged defamation of the President.

March 29, 2018: Male’

Private TV Sunsu was fined with 100,000 rupees (USD 1620) for alleged defamation of the President.

Nepal

Kilings of journalists: 0

Threats against the lives of journalists: 0

Other threats to media institutions: 0

Attacks on media institutions: 0

OTHER THREATS TO JOURNALISTS

May 6, 2017: Kathmandu

Anjan Prasad Bhattarai was attacked by three people while he was playing a game of carom in Mahendrakhait. The district headquarters house the police, courts, and administration, and is a source of concern for the news journalists.

October 16, 2017: Achham

Yaje Raj Dhungana, the consulting editor of Radio Achham, was attacked by the police while he was participating in an advocacy against corruption in police.

November 26, 2017: Sindhupalchowk

A gang led by a cadre of a political group on the eve of the first phase of the general election, attacked Dinesh Thapa, correspondent of OnlineKhuba at his home in Sindupalchowk. Thapa sustained injuries on his chest and back.

January 15, 2018: Gorkha

A group of five assailants attacked Sudip Kani, a correspondent of Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post daily at Abu Khareeri while he was reporting on the illegal sand extraction in the Manangdary river that ended localised settlements. The assailants manhandled the reporter, snatched away his camera and cell phone, and deleted photos threatening him not to reveal the incident. Kani sustained a neck injury and was rescued by local residents.

February 6, 2018: Kaski

Prakash Dhakal, a journalist with Adabarta Samaj daily, was attacked by the police when he was reporting on the demonstration by the Pitthi Narayan Campbell in Patan of eastern Nepal. During the police’s attempt to disperse the demonstrators, the police charged on Dhakal despite showing his Press ID card. Dhakal received minor injuries on his leg.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENTS

ARREST / DETENTION

May 2, 2017: Rukum

Harish Pratap Singh, editor of Sikhya Sanjal weekly, was arrested in Rukum district ahead of the local elections.

May 4, 2017: Parbat

Parbat Matam Singh, a local journalist who was elected as a member of the National Press Council (NPC), was arrested in Parbat district ahead of local elections and charged with public order offens. He was freed after 56 days.

May 10, 2017: Kathmandu

Thakur Singh Bhattarai was fine of 20,000 rupees (USD 310) for publishing an article in the daily’s sister publication Republica regarded on parliament’s party cut money. The media house filed a counter-claim of Rs 1.5 billion.

REGULATIONS

July 31, 2017: Kathmandu

The Election Commission issued a circular to the Press Council of Nepal ‘to present the chief editor of the Deshantar weekly before the EC within three days’ for clarification on two news items that the constitutional body claimed to be ‘false’ and ‘baseless’. The news items in question were published on July 23 and 30 accusing the EC of financial misconduct. The EC also directed PNDC to take action against the Chief Editor Kabir Rana.

November 21, 2017: Kathmandu

A ruling of Patan High Court in Nepal backed attempts by police to force editors of online media to reveal their sources. The Crime Division of the Metropolitan Police Office in Kathmandu wrote to several online media platforms asking them to disclose the source of the alleged smear reports of top police officials, following a controversy about the appointment of the Inspector General of Police (IGP). The online media agencies filed a complaint against the police request claiming that it infringed press freedom. But the Court ruled in favour of the police and ruled that the police could violate freedom of the press. The police are investigating the unlawful access to the files and the alleged tampering with the secret appraisal reports.

February 25, 2018: Kathmandu

The Nepali Supreme Court ordered the country’s Press Council to ban the publication of news criticising the chief justice. The Court’s order was published as a series of articles about discrepancies in the date of birth of Nepal’s Chief Justice Gajal Parajuli. The articles alleged that he might be close to retirement age. Chief Justice Parajuli heard the case – despite the issue being about him – and entered an interim order, calling on the Press Council of Nepal (PCN) to probe news reports published by Kantipur mentioning discrepancies about his birth date in official documents. The order asked the PCN to investigate if the news violated journalists’ code of conduct and to ensure that no news violating the Chief Justice is published again.

Pakistan

Kilings of journalists: 5 (Male: 5, Female: 0)

Other threats to journalists: 0 – None recorded

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 53 (Male: 52, Female: 1)

Threats against media institutions: 1

ATTACKS ON MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

Pakistan

May 17, 2017: Punjab

Armed robbers gunned down Abdul Razzaq, a Chiasn correspondent of ARY News television in an attempted robbery in Patti, Kasur in Punjab. Razzaq was killed when assailants opened fire on him and Musafir Hussain after stopping their car. Hussan was taken to hospital and survived but Razzaq died at the scene.

June 11, 2017: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Bashkash Elahi, the Bureau Chief of K-2 Times, an Urdu daily newspaper in Haripur, was shot dead by unknown motorcycle-borne gunmen near his home at Lora Chowk, Haripur, near city of Khyber Pakhtunkwaha. The gunmen fled the scene after firing five shots at Elahi, one of which hit him in the head and others in the chest.

October 12, 2017: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Haroon Khan, journalist with Sach TV and a stringer for Mashriq TV channel, was gunned down outside his home by unidentified assailants in a apparently targeted killing. Khan had returned home when his killers opened fire on him several times before fleeing the scene, according to police sources.

March 1, 2018: Punjab

Anjum Muneer Raja, 40, sub-editor with Islamabad-based Urdu daily Qumri Pukka was shot dead just before midnight on Bank Road, the high-security area near the Pakistan Army’s national headquarters, in Islamabad-based Urdu daily Morning Times. Raja was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club, was shot dead by unidentified assailants near the Sambrial Press Club.
January 10, 2018: Islamabad
Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, was taken into custody by the military personnel in Islamabad on the day of the oath ceremony of the National Assembly. He was later transferred to the Kot Lakhpat Judicial Complex. In response, a nationwide strike was called by all political parties and the media.

June 9, 2017: Islamabad
Three journalists, Affan Ali, Waqar Waqar, and Sajid Kausar, were taken into custody by a plain clothes police officer in Islamabad for一顿饭. The police officer accused them of taking photos of a government building without permission. The journalists were later released on bail.

June 9, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Zainab Anjum, a reporter for DunyaNews, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. She was later released on bail.

June 9, 2017: Islamabad
A group of journalists were taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. They were later released on bail.

October 24, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Shahzad Ahmed, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

September 26, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Usama Talaat, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

September 26, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Afzal Hussain, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

September 26, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Yaseen Zafar, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

September 12, 2017: Islamabad
A journalist, Matiullah Jan, was taken into custody by the police in Islamabad for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

August 10, 2017: Rawalpindi
A journalist, Zulfiqar Ali, was taken into custody by the police in Rawalpindi for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

July 27, 2017: Karachi
A journalist, Shafqat Achakzai, was taken into custody by the police in Karachi for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

July 13, 2017: Karachi
A journalist, Arif Sohail, was taken into custody by the police in Karachi for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

July 12, 2017: Lahore
A journalist, Shoaib Afzal, was taken into custody by the police in Lahore for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. He was later released on bail.

July 10, 2017: Multan
A journalist, Zainab Anjum, was taken into custody by the police in Multan for reporting on a government official facing corruption charges. She was later released on bail.
personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and kept inconsequential for over 24. After being freed they said they had been interrogated for alleged links with an ‘anti-military’ online newspaper, denying any such links.

November 5, 2017: Islamabad Hamid Mir, senior journalist for Geo News channel and Jang newspaper, was, under orders of the Islamabad High Court, booked for alleged conspiracy to kill a former intelligence officer, Colonel Muhammad Chawda, who was killed in April 2010 in the tribal areas by alleged the banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan group. The widow of Chawda moved the court to seek the arrest of Mir for her husband's kidnapping and subsequent execution. Earlier, the Lahore High Court had declared Mir innocent in the case.

November 24, 2017: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Paramilitary forces detained five tribal journalists and a press club employee after a magnetic bomb was discovered beneath the car they were riding in Landi Kotal district in Khyber district bordering Peshawar. Four journalists were freed after 12 hours while the owner of the car – Khalid Aliti – was still detained and grilled, according to the Freedom Network Pakistan. The detained journalists were Khalid Shabbir, reporter for Express News channel, Farhad Shrinaw of Masshaal Radio, Mehtab Shah Ofi of Tribal News Network and Umair Shrinaw of Pakistan Television and Imran Khattal of Khanjar newspaper.

December 19, 2017: Karachi Shabbir Usmani, reporter for Express News channel, was booked for harassment by the Karachi police in Sindh on the complaint of a local religious seminary. The police registration was preceded by several threats that Usmani said he received from the seminary.

January 5, 2018: Karachi Reporter Farhad Hasan, reporter for Express Tribune newspaper, was picked up in Sindh by paramilitary Rangers personnel while covering conditions in the tribal areas. Farhad Hasan Zafar, a leader of the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) London, at the Karachi University. Hasan was interrogated about his interview of MQM leader Altaf Hussain whose speeches are considered objectionable and banned in Pakistan media by the Lahore High Court. Hasan was freed after a few hours.

February 15, 2018: Tando Bazo Rafiqul Ali Janwar, reporter for daily Koshish, was arrested and jailed by police in Sindh and booked for alleged terrorism and robbery. Deputy Inspector General Hyderabad Police, Javed Alam later alleged at a press conference that the police had busted ‘a gang of Indian agents’, which allegedly included Rafiqul.

Nasrullah Jarwar, the brother of Rafiqul, alleged that the police arrested his brother to “teach me a lesson” for writing stories on an allegedly umily ‘supercare nexus’ between local sugar mill owners and politicians.  

CENSORSHIP

November 2, 2017: Orakzai Tribal Frontier Corps officials in Orakzai tribal district in FATA imposed a ban on local journalists to report on official matters.

November 25, 2017: Islamabad The Pakistani authorities ordered the take-down of all television news channels and blocked access to some social media platforms following a political demonstration in Islamabad. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) issued a directive prohibiting live coverage of the operation and to end the Federal Capital sit-in protest. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) also directed the blocking of Facebook, YouTube, DailyMotion, Twitter and Instagram in some parts of the country on the Interior Ministry's orders. Internet services in Faizabad, Rawalpindi where the protests were happening, were also suspended. The directives stood for nearly 24 hours until they were withdrawn.

January 19, 2018: Islamabad The federal government forcibly shut down operations of Europe-managed international broadcaster Radio Mashaal in Pakistan. A notification issued by the Ministry of Interior alleged that as an intelligence report, the radio was airing programs “found against the interests of Pakistan and in line with hostile intelligence agency’s agenda.” The Prague-based broadcaster denied the allegations.

April 16, 2018: Lahore A full-bench of the Lahore High Court in Punjab ordered the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to order all TV channels in the country to ban all criticism of the country’s judiciary by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, his daughter Maryam Nawaz and all ministers of their ruling Pakistan Muslim League-N party. Several of the ministers are facing contempt of court charges for criticising various recent controversial judgments of the country’s superior judiciary which have been seen Sharif sacked as prime minister, unseated as president of his party and banned from politics for life. In July 2017, the Lahore High Court had banned all TV channels in the country from airing the views of self-exiled Pakistani politician Altaf Hussain. The censorship still stands.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

August 5, 2017: Jamshoro Ghulam Rasool Burfat, reporter for Sindh Express daily, was kidnapped from inside his residence in Sindh. Police has since been unable to track Burfat to see if he can identify and prosecute his abductors.

August 9, 2017: Jamshoro Badal Nohani, the secretary-general of Jamshoro Press Club, was abducted in Sindh from the press club premises by masked people who arrived in some vehicles. Police has since been unable to track Burfat to see if he can identify and prosecute his abductors.

HARASSEMENT

July 12, 2017: Islamabad Raja Mudassar, photographer for Express daily, was abused and prevented entry to the residence of Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan in Islamabad by his guards as he arrived to cover his press conference.

July 12, 2017: Islamabad Shahid Mattia, reporter for ARY News channel, was abused and insulted by Muhammad Safdar, the son-in-law of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. He filmed him at the Federal Judicial Academy in Islamabad where he had appeared for a hearing.

REGULATIONS

January 19, 2018: Islamabad Pakistan’s Interior Ministry ordered the shutdown of the office and the operations of Radio Mashaal, a Pashto language radio channel linked to the US-funded Radio Free Europe (RFE), on recommendations of the Intelligence Services Intelligence. The ministry said that as an ISI report, the radio airs programs “against the interests of Pakistan and in line with hostile intelligence agency’s agenda.”

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

September 29, 2017: Pakistan Between September 29 to October 1, most cities in Pakistan remained without mobile internet and internet services as a part of the security measures for Ashura, during which there are major religious processions across Pakistan. The Sindh Information Department issued a formal notification of network disconnection across eight cities including Karachi while mobile and internet services were reported suspended in Punjab including Faizabad, Baluchistan including Quetta and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including Peshawar without formal notice. The suspension notification by the Government of Sindh’s, Home Department stated that the suspension was being carried out on request of law enforcement agencies who claimed there were apprehensions of coordination of criminal activity by miscreants/criminals through the use of Nourozallah phones/internet.

Several regions in Pakistan saw shutdowns of services. For full listing, see chapter on Internet Shutdowns.

SRI LANKA

Killing of journalists: 0 – None recorded

Threats against lives of journalists: 1

(Male: 1, Female: 0)

Other threats to journalists: 5

(Male: 5, Female: 0)

Non-fatal attacks on journalists: 1

(Male: 1, Female: 0)

Attacks against media institutions: 0

Attacks against journalists: 0 – None recorded

THREAT AGAINST THE LIVES OF JOURNALISTS

February 8, 2018: Western Province Sisira Kumara Kuruppuarachchi provincial journalist Manobama daily was returning home after covering a local government election meeting in Katunayaka, Gampaha District, around 8:00 pm along the Gampaha-Minuwangoda road near the ‘Black Bridge’ unidentified person threatened him with a weapon and told him not to engage in anti-government politics. He complained about the incident to the local police.

ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

June 8, 2017: Colombo John Amarangana, Minister of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, threatened journalists when he was asked about his political activities and refrain from his professional duties and boundary walls of the news group.

June 8, 2017: Colombo Ka Suresh Wijayarangana, the deputy minister of Development allegedly ordered the microphones of Sirasa News correspondent Nimal Siripala De Silva as they were covering the election rally of United National Party in Gampaha. The minister said that as per an ISI report, the broadcaster linked to the US-funded Radio Mashaal was killed in April 2010 in the tribal areas intelligence operative Khalid Khawaja, who was killed in the tribal areas. The cable was threatened on telephone by deputy minister Palitha Thewarapperuma after an investigation report alleged him as the death of the deputy minister said, “You will learn a lesson.”

March 28, 2018: Northern Province Sri Lanka military appointed a Colombo Journalist Sharmagam Thawaseen attached to the ABC Media Net Work to report on the protest in his professional roles and threatened to fire him from his professional duties.

NON-FATAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

December 10, 2017: Southern Province Provincial journalist Rohan Pradeep Kumar, who works for Hiru TV and Divanira newspaper, was assaulted by the Navy Commander Admiral Ravinda Wijegunarathne at the Hambantota port while covering the situation there. The Navy Commander tried to intervene on the presence by the port workers.

ATTACKS ON MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

April 4, 2018: Colombo Unidentified mob exploded large amounts of fire crackers outside the gates of the Sirasa News First Colombo office three evening fireworks at the closed gates and premises and boundary walls of the news group.

OTHER NOTABLE INCIDENTS / DEVELOPMENTS

CENSORSHIP

November 8, 2017: Colombo Lanka e-News a UK-based website that often publishes reports critical of the Sri Lankan government was inaccessible in Sri Lanka. The site was blocked after it published a report alleging online corruption by the Office of the President in a deal relating to the purchase of a warship. The website also published that ‘The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCC) which is under the President has ordered ISPs to block people in Sri Lanka accessing our website’. 

HARASSEMENT

July 30, 2017: Central Province Pani Udga-Thum, Chairman of Information Department allegedly ordered the mobile phone of Sirasa News correspondent Indika Rosan Kauarachchi to be removed from the portable where he was speaking in Hatton, Central Sri Lanka on Sunday. July 30, Kauarachchi was reporting the event at the invitation of the Government Information Department. Footage from television recordings shows evidence that the Sirasa microphone had been removed from the portable. Since the incident, supporters of the Minister have continued to threaten Indika.

IFJ violations monitoring is undertaken by the IFJ Asia-Pacific together with affiliates of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) and updated regularly via the SAMSN Digital Hub. IFJ violations mapping provides specific data on violations of journalists on across the region as well as geographic mapping detail.

To provide further updates to the 2017-2018 IFJ Asia-Pacific Country Report, Project Coordinator, Ujjwal Acharya (ujjwal.acarya@gmail.com)
In the Maldives, eight journalists were held for less than 24 hours and another for less than a week in a round-up of journalists. Another two were released on bail.

India had two journalists jailed for more than a week, both were released on bail. Kashmir freelance photojournalist Kamran Yusuf was held for six months for alleged conspiracy and instigating stone pelting at security personnel. He was released on bail March 12, 2018. Freelancer Vinod Verma was held for two months for allegedly blackmailing a Chhattisgarh Minister with a sex video involving the minister before being released on bail on December 28, 2017.

In many of the cases listed below, charges were likely fabricated with an intention to silence or punish journalists for their work. Beyond the issue of arrest and detention, lengthy court cases also serve to send a message to other media workers to toe the line or censor.

Note: journalists are ordered by category and alphabetically by country.

**JOURNALISTS DETAINED FOR MORE THAN ONE WEEK RELEASED ON BAIL**

**BANGLADESH:**
1. Name: Abub Salam Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Chittagong
   Detained: March 16, 2018
   Alleged: Staging and uploading a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

2. Name: Kamran Yusuf Gender: Male
   Job: Freelance photographer
   Location: Kashmir, India
   Detained: September 4, 2017
   Alleged: Conspiracy and instigating stone pelting at security personnel
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

3. Name: Amir Saleem Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Multan, Pakistan
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Making a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail after 56 days in detention

**NEPAL:**
1. Name: Pratik Chhetri Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Kathmandu
   Detained: October 20, 2017
   Alleged: Blackmailing a Chhattisgarh Minister with a sex video involving the minister.
   Status: Released on bail on December 28, 2017

**MALDIVES:**
1. Name: Mohamed Wisam Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Male, Maldives
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Staging and uploading a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

2. Name: Nafis Mohamed Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Malé, Maldives
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Making a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

3. Name: Imran Mohamed Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Malé, Maldives
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Making a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

4. Name: Noor Mohamed Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Malé, Maldives
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Making a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

5. Name: Imran Mohamed Gender: Male
   Job: Journalist / media staff
   Location: Malé, Maldives
   Detained: March 18, 2018
   Accomplished: Making a ‘fake’ video of masked policemen speaking against the government and supporting the opposition.
   Status: Released on bail on March 27, 2018

**TOTAL JAILED OR DETAINED:**
- Currently in jail: 68
- Detained for more than one week: 15
- Detained for less than a week: 20
- Detained for one day or less: 22
- Woman jailed: 2
Detained: July 19, 2017
Job: Correspondent, Image Channel TV
Location: Bajura, Nepal
Accusation: Attempted rape
Status: Released on bail after a week, cleared of all charges on April 1, 2018, by the District Court due to lack of evidence. Political motivation is suspected as charges were laid on Chakka Bahadur Mali after police arrested four municipal officials as he registered a complaint against them for attacking him on July 14.

18. Name: Padam Prasad Pokharel
Detained: November 11, 2017
Job: Pyuthan Vision monthly
Location: Pyuthan, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after 29 days in detention

19. Name: Jayeshwor Acharya
Gender: Male
Detained: November 13, 2017
Job: Reporter, Nihigu Jwajalapa
Location: Butwal, Rupendehi, Nepal
Accusation: Possession of illegal weapon and extortion
Status: Released on bail after 28 days in detention

20. Name: Jitendra Maharjan
Gender: Male
Detained: November 13, 2017
Job: Reporter, Nihigu Jwajalapa
Location: Kathmandu, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after three weeks in detention

21. Name: Kali Bahadur Mahatara
Gender: Male
Detained: November 15, 2017
Job: Janaprabhat weekly
Location: Kailo, Jhapa, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after 24 days in detention

22. Name: Khem Thapaliya
Gender: Male
Detained: November 17, 2017
Job: Jajalha monthly
Location: Some Public, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after 22 days in detention

23. Name: Dipesh Shakti
Gender: Male
Detained: November 19, 2017
Job: Reporter, Madhyanka daily
Location: Kathmandu, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after 22 days in detention

24. Name: Jagdish Nath Yogi
Gender: Male
Detained: November 20, 2017
Job: Janaprabhat weekly
Location: Kaliket, Nepal
Accusation: Booked under Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970
Status: Released on bail after 24 days in detention

25. Name: Prakash Dhumre
Gender: Male
Detained: November 21, 2017
Job: Reporter, Garjan Post weekly
Location: Butwal, Rupendehi, Nepal
Accusation: Possession of illegal weapon and extortion
Status: Released on bail after 28 days in detention

26. Name: Hafiz Husnain Raza
Gender: Male
Detained: April 25, 2016
Job: Reporter, Nawa-i-Waqt daily
Location: Okara, Punjab, Pakistan
Accusation: Disturbing public peace and tranquillity and instigating people to terrorism for reporting seen to be favouring local farmers in a land dispute with the military
Status: Released on bail after 22 days in detention

27. Ahmadullah Sarkandi, Afghanistan, October 25, 2017
28. Burhanul Watanuddin, Afghanistan, October 25, 2017
29. Gulum Mostafa Rafiq, Bangladesh, June 12, 2017
30. Abdul Latif Moeni, Bangladesh, August 1, 2017
31. Anisur Raheman, Bangladesh, November 1, 2017
32. Md Layes Mondol, Bangladesh, November 21, 2017
33. Md Sabir, Bangladesh, November 21, 2017
34. G Balakrishnan (Bala), India, November 10, 2017
35. Paul Cometi, India, December 10, 2017
36. Mohamed Faqeen, Maldives, March 16, 2018
37. Thakur Prasad Tiimsina, Nepal, May 10, 2017
38. Khem Bhandari, Nepal, June 17, 2017
39. Ganeesh Bhatt, Nepal, June 17, 2017
40. Sangrashshil Hairaj, Nepal, February 20, 2018
41. Jamuna Shrestha, Nepal, February 20 (female)
42. Mina Tmanyawa, Nepal, February 20, 2018 (female)
43. Zafar Uthman Achakzai, Pakistan, June 30, 2017
44. Shah Nawaz Tarakai, Pakistan, October 15, 2017
45. Islam Gui, Pakistan, October 15, 2017
46. Dr Shaheen Wali, Pakistan, July 11, 2017

28 days in detention

47. Alun Chowdhury, Bangladesh, June 7, 2017
48. Mohammed Wisam, Maldives, June 26, 2017
49. Munsid Abdul Hakem, Maldives, June 26, 2017
50. Ahmed Mammadhoo, Maldives, June 26, 2017
51. Adam Janah, Maldives, June 27, 2016
52. Ahmed Rifaat, Maldives, June 27, 2016
53. Mohamed Shanoon, Maldives, June 27, 2016
54. Abdul Jan, Maldives, June 26, 2016
55. Hussen Hassan, Maldives, February 16, 2018
56. Ali Naeem, Maldives, February 16, 2018
57. Jaboob Umran, Pakistan, August 5, 2017
58. Ashraf Nankani, Pakistan, September 15, 2018
59. Mohammad Mohran, Pakistan, September 17, 2017
60. Shabbir Sehram, Pakistan, October 7, 2017
61. Hamid Mir, Pakistan, November 5, 2017
62. Khali Ahmad, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
63. Farhad Shirwani, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
64. Mehrab Shah Afridi, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
65. Umar Shirwani, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
66. Imran Karthak, Pakistan, November 24, 2017
67. Shabbir Usmani, Pakistan, December 19, 2017
68. Fahad Hasan, Pakistan, January 5, 2018

Above: An Indian protestor holds a placard saying “Hitler Follows Bin Laden” during a “Not in my name” silent protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on June 28, 2017, following a series of anti-Muslim attacks. A mob stoned a Muslim teenager named Khan, 15, who was travelling from New Delhi on June 24 with three of his brothers when a mob engaged with them.

Below: Bangladesh secular activists hold placards and a banner during a protest against the “The Digital Security Act 2018” in Dhaka on February 2, 2018. The Digital Security Act 2018 approved by the cabinet this week would mean a journalist could be convicted of espionage for entering a government office and gathering information secretly using an electronic device, an offence that would carry a 14-year jail sentence. Credit: Money Sharma/AFP

The Some Public (Crime and Punishment) Act 1970 is the law most commonly used by police in Nepal to detain journalists because of its vagueness and wide scope. Its scope includes breaking public peace, trespass, undue behaviour in a public place and obstruction among its list of punishable offences. It also allows police to arrest anyone without warrant, giving them a further seven days to file a case. Nepali journalists arrested in 2017-18 were largely targeted because of alleged connections with the Maoist faction which boycotted the polls and threatened to disrupt the election. In the scope of pre-emptive security action around Nepal’s 2017 elections, many journalists were swept up in rounds of police arrests.