

India: Ensure Press Freedom and Independence of Media

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 15 August 2018) – The recent resignation of two senior journalists from ABP News, due to overt political pressure raises an alarming situation of the independence of media and press freedom in India. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the increasing threats and harassment of the Indian media and journalists who are critical of the Government and powerful interest groups in the country.

Punya Prasun Bajpai, the former ABP News anchor resigned due to continuous political pressure to avoid references to the Prime Minister and government policies on the show ‘Masterstroke’. In an interview to *The Wire*, Bajpai revealed that pressure had been mounting after his team did a story on a woman being tutored to make false claim in a live conference call with the Prime Minister.¹ Since then the show has faced technical disruptions on several occasions, and so have other television programmes seen to be critical of the Government.²

Bajpai is among the few journalists who have come out in open to assert the increasing threats and attempts at silencing media and journalists in India. Following the resignations, on 8 August, the Editors Guild of India decried all attempts of the Indian Government and other forces that interfered the free and independent functioning of journalists by either direct pressure or through the proprietors. The Guild also highlighted the tendency of authorities and the political class in general to selectively refrain journalists from asking questions to those in official positions, which is a democratic right and duty of journalists.³

Free and independent media, and the safety of journalists has now become a serious concern in India. In the last three years, three journalists have been killed for upsetting political dispensation: Jagendra Singh in 2015; Rajdev Rajnan in 2016; and Gauri Lankesh in 2017. According to the Committee for Protection of Journalists (CPJ), 78 journalists (and media workers) have been killed in India since 1992, and 51 of the cases were with confirmed motives.⁴ FORUM-ASIA’s Human Rights Defenders Programme recorded killing of 16 journalists in the last two years.⁵

Journalists and media houses are also harassed in the garb of defamatory lawsuits and false charges. On 9 August, a television journalist from Manipur, Kishorechandra Wangkhem, was arrested on accusation of sharing an inflammatory Facebook post.⁶

¹<https://thewire.in/media/punya-prasun-bajpai-abp-news-narendra-modi>

²<https://scroll.in/article/889026/resignations-of-two-journalists-at-abp-news-cause-disquiet-in-newsrooms-and-far-beyond>

³<https://theprint.in/governance/editors-guild-of-india-decries-political-pressures-on-journalists-blocking-of-tv-signals/95227/>

⁴https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/india/?status=Killed&cc_fips%5B%5D=IN&start_year=1992&end_year=2018&group_by=year

⁵<https://asianhrds.forum-asia.org/>

⁶<https://www.newslandry.com/2018/08/13/journalist-arrested-in-manipur-for-facebook-posts-media-fraternity-slams-arbitrary-arrest>



FORUM-ASIA unequivocally condemns any attempt, overt or covert, to threaten, humiliate and harass the freedom of press, and firmly stands in support of the journalists resisting the backlash and repression. Being extremely worried about the alarming situation of press freedom in India, FORUM-ASIA urges the Indian Government to stop intimidating journalists, and create an enabling environment for free and independent journalism in the country. The Government of India should note that press freedom is central to democracy, and it cannot be silenced to appease vested interests.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratization.

For further information, please contact:

- South Asia Programme, sasia@forum-asia.org