

Year in review: Ten great articles on Southasian politics of 2023

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A selection of Himal's most-read articles on Southasian politics of the year

From political instability in Pakistan and Bangladesh and the economic crisis still devastating Sri Lanka to months of violence and ethnic conflict in Manipur and much more – 2023 has been yet another turbulent year for Southasia.

We take a look back at some of our top stories on politics through 2023.

In no particular order, here are a few of Himal's most-read political stories of the year:

[Fighting the erasure of anti-Shia violence in Pakistan](#)

The mainstream media in Sunni-dominated Pakistan often obscures violence against marginalised communities, including religious minorities, in the name of maintaining interfaith harmony. The Shia community, which makes up between 15 and 20 percent of Pakistan's population and is one of the primary targets of sectarian violence, has been on the receiving end of violence for decades. Pakistan's media often presents religious minorities and other persecuted populations in a deeply stereotypical manner and remains silent about the violence and marginalisation that they face. As a consequence, the fears and concerns of these groups are largely unheard and overlooked.

Syeda Sana Batool documents how a handful of activists from religious minorities in Pakistan are using social media and building volunteer-run online initiatives that document the brutal violence against their people and [fighting the erasure of anti-Shia violence](#).

[The path to women's political participation in Bhutan](#)

The National Council is the highest legislative and policy-making body in Bhutan. In the last election, in 2018, only two women were elected to the NC, with two additional women appointed by Bhutan's king. In the recent past, there has been a shift in public perception, with Bhutanese citizens increasingly believing that women are capable of taking on leadership responsibilities.

While Bhutan has seen some positive changes in recent years in terms of [representation of women in politics](#) and leadership positions, Yangchen C Rinzin writes that the 2023 election results show that there is still a long way to go to increase women's participation in Bhutan's politics.

[Women's bodies, disinformation and nationalism in Manipur](#)

Home to the Imphal Valley-dwelling Meitei and the predominantly hill-dwelling Kuki-Zo and Naga

tribes, Manipur has with varying intensity witnessed ethnic conflict, armed insurgency, separatist movements and militarisation ever since its merger with the Union of India in 1949. A flashpoint in 2004 and now another in 2023 has drawn global attention to human-rights violations, ethnic hostilities, land conflicts, violence and breakdown of governance in Manipur. At both times, women's bodies have been central to nationalistic projects.

Laxmi Murthy writes on the long and terrible history of [sexual violence in conflict](#) – and how its combination with disinformation and nationalism in Manipur makes for an especially ominous mix.

[Bangladesh's murky games to get Saima Wazed to the WHO](#)

The two candidates in the running to be the next regional director of the World Health Organisation South-East Asia Region were Nepal's nominee, Shambhu Prasad Acharya, a public health veteran with a doctorate in the discipline who has spent three decades holding various posts within the WHO, and Bangladesh's nominee, Saima Wazed, a clinical psychologist and the daughter of the country's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina.

Wazed's candidacy raised uncomfortable questions in the international public health community and sections of the media about potential [nepotism in the WHO's election process](#), which was already under scrutiny for lack of transparency. In her commentary piece, Disha Shetty explores how Sheikh Hasina's push to make her daughter the regional director of the WHO South-East Asia Region bodes ill for Southasia.

[Sri Lanka's exodus of healthcare workers](#)

In Sri Lanka, the economic crisis of 2022 had a severe impact on the country's strained healthcare system, which had already been grappling with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Stock-out of essential medicines, power cuts, fuel shortages and political issues challenged the efficient delivery of health services across the country. Healthcare workers had to endure the brunt of this and were also affected by high inflation, salary cuts, tariff hikes and other austerity measures imposed during this period.

Inosha Alwis writes on how, in this context, an increasing trend of outward migration among [healthcare workers in Sri Lanka](#) comes as no surprise. If policymakers fail to address this issue, the damage to the country's health system will be irreparable, compromising even the comparative strides in health that Sri Lanka has achieved so far.

[Purse-seiners, trawlers, and the epic fight over fishing in Tamil Nadu](#)

In 2020, purse-seine fishing was banned in Tamil Nadu, leaving many fishers fighting for their livelihoods. Nagapattinam district – situated at the northern end of the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka – is the epicentre of the battle over [purse-seine fishing in Tamil Nadu](#).

When purse-seiners' appeal against the ban came up before the Supreme Court in February 2022, the Tamil Nadu government argued that purse-seine fishing was a "pernicious", non-selective fishing technology used by affluent fishers and beyond the reach of ordinary fishers. But a report by a Supreme Court-appointed expert committee stated that purse-seine fishing has not resulted in any

serious resource depletion, and therefore suggested that a ban on it was not justified. The committee asked for purse-seine fishing to be allowed, subject to certain conditions, in India's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone. Purse-seiners have now resolved to file a contempt-of-court petition in the Supreme Court.

Jeff Joseph, in his long-form reported piece supported by the Pulitzer Centre, writes on how fishers in Tamil Nadu are refusing to give up purse-seine fishing without a fight.

[Making Prothom Alo "the enemy" in Bangladesh](#)

"It's a rare thing that a country's parliament is told by none other than the prime minister that its top newspaper is the enemy of the people," Kamal Ahmed writes, after Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's prime minister and head of the ruling Awami League, told parliament in April this year that "the daily Prothom Alo is the enemy of the Awami League, democracy, and the people of the country. I am saying with regret that they never want to permit any stability in this country."

Many fear that Hasina's branding of [Prothom Alo as the enemy](#) of her party and the people will have a further chilling effect on Bangladesh's media industry, already cowed and constrained by her government. Kamal writes that, when it comes to media freedom, *Prothom Alo* is the last one standing among Bangladesh's mass media institutions. For Hasina, especially with a general election approaching in 2024, it is the ultimate target.

[Kashmir's religious institutions are the Modi government's latest battlefield](#)

Mosques, shires and madrassas have long been monitored in Kashmir, and certainly since the BJP government arrived. Their managing bodies, called waqf committees, usually comprise neighbourhood elders and senior citizens. However, security agencies have increasingly grown suspicious of these bodies' functioning. Today, the [Bharatiya Janata Party's strategy for Kashmir's religious institutions](#) is neither limited to surveillance nor does it go so far as shutting them down completely. It is rather a long-drawn-out plan to install its own people in the waqf committees, centralise the management and to strengthen its socio-political control of the territory.

This attempt to take institutional control of mosques and madrassas and crackdown on clerics was the first step towards the Modi administration's takeover-and-transform strategy. Maknoon Wani explores how this is ultimately aimed at changing the very nature of Kashmir's Muslim religious institutions in order to create an absolute power structure that serves the government's political and ideological interests.

[Sri Lanka's political monks rage against reduced clout](#)

Sri Lanka's monks have for decades been deeply enmeshed in its politics. The Buddhist clergy was the most vocal and committed component of the Rajapaksa support base. Monks worked tirelessly for the victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the 2019 presidential election, and for Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna in the 2020 parliamentary election.

Then, after the Rajapaksas' misrule sank Sri Lanka into an economic crisis, and the massive people's

protests of 2022 forced the brothers out of power, political monks began to distance themselves from the Rajapaksa family. Some lapsed into silence; others remade themselves as virulent Rajapaksa critics.

Tisarane Gunasekara explores how [Sri Lankan monks are now politically adrift and looking to project new threats](#). After backing off (perhaps temporarily) from fanning anti-Muslim sentiment in recent years, political monks are setting Christians up as the enemy again.

“Is this the way they see back to relevance?” Tisarane asks.

[Pakistan brings down the axe on Afghan migrants](#)

After more than four decades of hosting Afghan migrants and refugees, Pakistan turned to one of the largest episodes of mass deportation in its history. The Pakistan government’s deadline for undocumented migrants to leave the country voluntarily or face detention and deportation passed on 31 October, and now thousands are reportedly leaving for Afghanistan every day in the face of impending arrests and deportations.

The consul in Karachi for the Taliban, which heads the Afghan government, said that nearly 400,000 have returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the last two months. Before the deportation drive, Pakistan hosted roughly 4 million Afghan refugees, with some 1.7 million of them thought to be undocumented. Between 600,000 and 800,000 are thought to have fled to Pakistan after the fall of republican rule in Afghanistan and the return of Taliban power in August 2021.

Manzoor Ali documents how the [crackdown on undocumented migrants](#) is forcing thousands back to uncertain fates in Afghanistan, and ratcheting up tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

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