

# Free Expression

Issue 59 July-September 2022

A NEWSLETTER OF FREEDOM FORUM

## Int'l Day for Universal Access to Information Uniform understanding must for transparency

**O**n September 27, Freedom Forum in collaboration with the International Budget Partnership (IBP) organized a national-level program 'Access to Fiscal Information and Dissemination of Open Budget Survey-2021 Findings' gathering a wider spectrum of participation from the stakeholders.

Representatives from the concerned government agencies, parliament committee, Supreme Audit Institution, civil society organizations, media, individual champions and International Budget Partnership (IBP) had actively participated in the collaborative event.

Since 2009, FF has been continuously working in partnership with the IBP- an international organization working across the globe on different dimensions of budget accountability.

On the occasion, the findings and recommendations of the OBS-2021 global, South Asian and Nepal's reports were discussed. The biennial survey assesses public access to central government budget information among 120 countries. Three major aspects of open budgets: transparency of how public resources are raised and spent, opportunity for participation in budget policy decisions and oversight by legislatures and audit institutions were discussed.

IBP's OBS Researcher Suad Hasan presented global findings sharing that since 2008 budget transparency scores had increased more than 20 percent. Among the top 10 performers in the 2021 round survey were Georgia, South Africa, Sweden, New Zealand, Mexico, Norway, Brazil, Australia, Dominican Republic and Italy, she highlighted.



"The top improvers in 2019-21 were the Gambia, Nigeria and Azerbaijan in the assessment of budget transparency; Georgia, Chile, Slovakia and Kenya on public participation and Zambia, Tunisia and Sri Lanka on oversight", Suad further noted.

Similarly, OBS Researcher for Nepal Krishna Sapkota shared the OBS 2021 Nepal report at the program. He said that Nepal scored 39 (out of 100) in budget transparency assessment which is below the global average of 45. Likewise, the country obtained 24 (out of 100) on citizen participation in the budget process and gained a composite score of 44 (out of 100) in the assessment of the strength of formal oversight institutions (legislatures and audit institutions), he noted.

With the score, Nepal gained third position in South Asia with Pakistan and Afghanistan securing first and second position with 46 and 43, respectively, Sapkota shared.

Various stakeholders on the occasion highlighted the need for inculcating values of

open budgeting and access to information for systemic changes.

As a keynote speaker, Chief Information Commissioner Mahendra Man Gurung stressed the urgency for a wider level of advocacy on participatory formulation of fiscal policies and their implementations at all three tiers of the government. He urged the civil society organizations and media to further deepen the movement of Right to Information in a way that the grassroots level people can also use the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental right to claim the state-sponsored benefits and entitlements.

"The analysis of sectoral budgets has become a pressing need to show transparency gaps in the budgetary allocations and spending," he said, adding the CSOs can play an effective role in gathering fiscal information and analyzing the trends in an empirical manner.

Gurung also asked the government to assess as to how its obligations on statutory right to information have been fulfilled and seriously own the agenda for better governance.

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## Message from Executive Chief

# Time to augment RTI regime



**T**he right to information (RTI) Act, 2064 is a matter of celebration in Nepal in terms of the struggles made for its introduction and its relevance as a significant tool to build good governance. It has been regarded as an important aspect of Nepali democracy at political and policy levels. For the implementation of RTI law, public authorities are getting used to: appointment of information officer, disclosure of timely information, address to the requests for information, etc.

As one and half decade time passes after the introduction of the RTI Act, it is time to review how successful we have been to implement it effectively. It is true that several positive changes have occurred with the enforcement of the RTI Act. Tens of hundreds of orientation/trainings on RTI are conducted, thousands of youths- both government service and general public- trained, legal and institutional mechanisms set up, civic organizations increasingly advocating and carrying out RTI campaigns, national network of RTI campaigners formed, research and monitoring continued. But, are we up to the mark? It is time to make assess the RTI status and way ahead.

Despite several positive changes we have achieved, there are several hurdles to take ahead the RTI campaigns. There is no consolidated data on RTI requests filed in the last 15 years. Due to lack of the data on how many applications were filed, in which public agencies they were filed, and how many requests got responses, it is difficult to make factual analysis of overall practice. Similarly, there is no definite number of agencies and offices which fall under the definition of the RTI Act. The definition of public agency is not limited to government and state agencies, it covers other agencies as well. Therefore, it has been hard to monitor if information officers have been designated or not, and whether there is practice of periodic proactive disclosure. The concern on non-appointment of the second or third responsible officer after the head of the office as information officer in government authorities is seen in public as well as media report. The duplication of spokesperson and information officer has also worsened the problem. There is also a general tendency among information officer not being able to manage their work effectively.

Moreover, the annual report, 2020/21 of NIC has published a long detail of its recommendations and suggestions given every year but have not been implemented. The report points out that lack of interest in the government to take policy initiatives and other steps to implement the recommendations have added complication for implementation of the right. The report covers such unimplemented suggestions under 25 headings. These suggestions range from reform in Constitution, Act, and Regulation to institutional mechanism, and their wider aspects. These suggestions should be implemented well for the good governance.

In addition to this, the old laws inconsistent with RTI are still in force, while some new laws are framed in a way that it may affect citizens' rights. The laws promulgated at Provincial and Local levels have challenged the exercise of the rights. Overall, province and local levels need to be reviewed and there is need of political willingness to review the law enacted at Provincial and Local levels, as well as initiatives to reform accordingly. In particular, the provisions under security laws, civil service laws, and individual privacy law related Acts, Information Technology, and Statistics and financial administration as well as accountability related Acts have weakened RTI. However there has been no careful monitoring and advocacy during the law making process.

*It is equally important to remind here that despite Nepal's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the Goal No. 16 as a whole, and Goal No. 16 (B) is thereof not included in national target and indicator. National Planning Commission, which is the national body coordinating SDG in Nepal, has not showed any interest to make universal access to information as a national target and indicator. The advocacy and initiatives in this regard have not yet turned meaningful. RTI is ignored at different initiatives of SDG.*

Amidst these challenges, Freedom Forum has continued its advocacy for effective implementation of in all three tiers of governments to ensure good governance and accountability. The campaign for RTI use should be broadened further to realize the public of this Act. As a CSO committed to propel democratic values and system in Nepal, FF has been untiringly taking together the RTI since its introduction and lobbying for RTI Bill and Act to present time. FF is for further collaboration and cooperation to take ahead the RTI regime and good governance so as to prop up democratic system. 

- Tara Nath Dahal

# Solidarity to concerns over Transitional Justice Act's Amendment Bill

**F**reedom Forum was alarmed over the Bill tabled by the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs at the Parliament for amendment of Investigation of Enforced Disappeared Persons; and Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, 2014, on July 12, 2022.

FF expressed its solidarity to the dissents and disagreement on the ground that proposed amendment failed to ensure justice for the victims of the armed conflict.

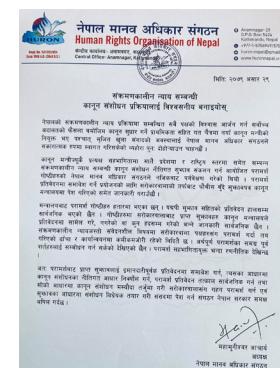
The Bill should include clear provisions ensuring justice to the victims. It also needs to be revised and amended in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Court verdict, recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission, and international standard on transitional justice.

FF reiterates its stand that the cases relating to death and disappeared journalists as well as human rights defenders should be prosecuted and adjudicated in the regular courts. It should not be under the jurisdiction of the transitional justice commissions.

The conflict victims and their families have not received justice yet due to confusions in the process of transitional justice over the years. This gesture of state encourages impunity, which has been an issue of serious concern for us.

The failure to ensure justice to victims and their families of conflict era crimes, and the existing status quo of impunity has been a blot on human rights and press freedom of Nepal.

Hence, FF appeals to the government and the parliament to make required revision on the bill to ensure early justice to end the state of impunity. 



### **Joint Press Statement**

Kathmandu, 20 July 2021

## Rectify the Flaws in the Amendment Bill on Transitional Justice Law.

We the undersigned human rights organizations express full solidarity with the valid and serious concerns expressed by the victims' community on the "Bill for the Amendment of the Investigation

of Enforced Disappeared Persons, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, 2011 (2014) that the Government of Nepal registered in the parliament on 15 July 2022.

We believe that despite positive provisions including reparations, the amendment Bill contains many provisions that violate the victim's right to an effective remedy. Amnesty to those involved in serious violations of human rights and international crimes including murder, torture, rape, and other forms of serious sexual violence, war crimes, and crimes against humanity is not acceptable under national and international law. Thus, the categorization of violations in the Bill is not acceptable. Earliest efforts are required from the Government and the political parties to prevent

acceptance. Each crime is required from the Government and the political party to prevent explicit or implied immunity from criminal accountability for those involved in serious violations of human rights and international crimes.

Therefore, considering the sensitivity of the Bill, we call on 1) the ministry to re-work on the Bill to ensure that the Bill complies with national, international law and the decisions of the Supreme Court of Nepal, and the aspirations expressed by victims during the consultations 2) the sovereign institution of the people's representatives, the Federal Parliament not to pass the Bill as the law without ensuring that the Bill does not violate national and international law and aspiration of

victims 3) political parties of Nepal to play constructive roles helping parliament to pass the law following inclusive process 4) UN and Nepal's international development partners not to legitimatize and support any process that undermines international law and further impunity in Nepal.

# Freedom of Expression Violations

## Madhesh Province

### Attack

A. Reporter at News 24 Television Lalan Kumar Mandal was attacked for reporting news in Mahottari on July 25. Mahottari lies in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

Talking to Freedom Forum, reporter Mandal shared that he had been following activities of Sanjay Rauniyar, an alleged loan-shark. On the day of incident, he reached the incident site as per the information from victims of loan sharking.

Suddenly a clash erupted at the site while he was taking video of victims' protest and then, body guards of Rauniyar attacked the reporter and locals.



"Though I said that I was a reporter they did not stop. I received injury on hands and legs", he said, adding, "Thereafter, I filed a complaint at the local police station. Nepal police has arrested Rauniyar and is searching for other attackers", he informed.

B. Police persons attacked journalists at Siraha based Radio Gangajal Chandradeep Thakur and Arbin Paswan while reporting a protest on August 6. Siraha lies in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

Thakur is news reader and Paswan is correspondent at the radio station.

Journalists duo reached the Shaurya cement industry to report on a protest by the workers of the industry. They were trying to talk to the workers and director of the industry about the protest. Meanwhile, on-duty police persons started attacking workers and the journalists with batons shouting, "Do you want to make news, videos here? I will show you."

The journalists who were wearing t-shirts with name of their media house along with the press cards got bruises on their body and limbs. They had to undergone treatment in the nearby hospital. 

## Election Commission urged not to trample free speech while monitoring social media

Freedom Forum was concerned over the Election Commission's plan to monitor and regulate the social media contents using Nepal Army and Nepal Police. Although spread of misinformation becomes a serious problem in the election, the mobilization of security persons to regulate social media content is misuse of power, which is likely to trample citizen's free speech online.

Nepal is holding the elections to federal parliament and provincial assembly coming November 20.

According to the news reports, the Commission was planning to form a monitoring mechanism involving Nepal Police Cyber Bureau, Nepal Army, Advertisement Board, Press Council Nepal, Nepal Telecommunications Authority, and computer operators. The team will be named as 'Press Office' and will be responsible to monitor the Nepali media and social media contents as directed by the Election code of conduct.

The concept paper approved by the Commission on Press Office provides it the right to

delete any mis/disinformation on digital media and punish anyone who is allegedly found disseminating fake information on the basis of complaints.

Yet again, Freedom Forum reminds the Commission that Press Council Nepal is responsible body to monitor and regulate media contents. So, mobilizing security officials to regulate free speech on social media is wrong decision that may suppress citizen's rights. Seeking consultation and expertise from diverse sectors is positive, but how transparently they work is worth observing. 

## Attack

Editor-In-Chief Narayan Prasad Adhikari and reporter Shalik Bhatta at [www.onlinepana.com](http://www.onlinepana.com) were attacked for reporting news in Sarlahi on September 22. Sarlahi district lies in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

Editor Adhikari shared with Freedom Forum that they had been doing follow up reporting on illegal activities of the Bagmati Municipality. On the day of incident, the journalists

reached the municipality office to interview Mayor on the same issues.

During the interview, the Mayor was unable to answer some questions. "While we were returning after interview, Mayor's brother and few other people attacked us, blocking our way on the highway. We received injuries on head and face in the attack," Adhikari said, adding that he was preparing to file a First Information Report at the District Police Office against the attackers.

**“Editor Adhikari shared with Freedom Forum that they had been doing follow up reporting on illegal activities of the Bagmati Municipality.”**

## Bagmati Province

### Attack

A. Editor-In-Chief at <https://www.kalikadainik.com/>, Shishir Simkhada, was attacked for reporting news in Bharatpur on August 17. Bharatpur lies in the Bagmati Province of Nepal.

Editor Simkhada shared with Freedom Forum that news about Kalika Municipality's former Mayor Khum Narayan Shrestha and his personal assistant Deepak Lamichhane's alleged involvement in a corruption case was published on the news portal on August 16.

"Then, on the day of incident, Lamichhane along with two others hit me in the market with his helmet shouting- you are the one who wrote the news, I will kill you", said Simkhada adding, "However, the public gathered and rescued me. I got injury on my body."

Simkhada also informed that he filed a complaint at the District Police Office, Chitwan on August 17.

The attackers- Former Mayor Shrestha, his personal assistant Lamichhane, along with his brother Dilip Lamichhane, Sameer Sapkota of Padampur and Nikesh Nepal of Ratnanagar-5, Jhuvani, Tarauli were absconding after the incident. District Police Office says search operation was ongoing.

B. Editor at <https://narayanionline.com/> Krishna Acharya was attacked while reporting at electricity office in Chitwan on July 15. Chitwan lies in the Bagmati Province of Nepal.

Editor Acharya was reporting on a party at Bharatpur Electricity Authority office during office hours. Learning that the authority had cut off electric supply in the area reasoning maintenance but the staffs were giving party at the office, Acharya reached the office and took photos and videos of the party.

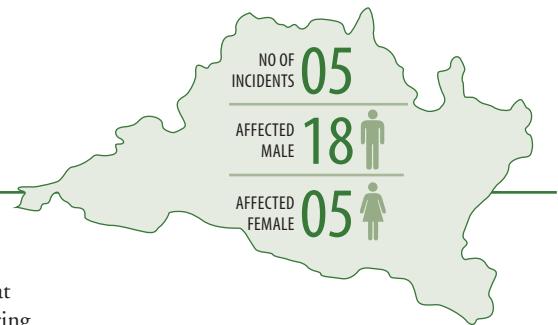
But, the drunk staffs attacked Acharya and seized his mobile phones. His clothes were torn and he was injured. Acharya however escaped any serious injury.

The drunk staffs reasoning the order of their office chief also deleted photos and videos of the party taken by the editor.

On July 16, Nepal police arrested seven officials on the basis of complaint filed at District Police Office Chitwan against the seven officers and their office chief.

C. A gang of hooligans attacked the office of Avenues Television located at Maharajgunj, Kathmandu for the news broadcast in the television on September 11. Kathmandu is the federal capital of Nepal.

Reporter at the television Raju Bhandari shared with Freedom Forum that the television channel was scheduled to broadcast a news about alleged sexual abuse of girls at Ananta Sewa Nepal Children's Home by its owner. The television authority also called the owner to speak in the program.



"But before starting the program, 5 to 6 hooligans forcefully tried to open the gate of the media house and pelted stones at the gate. The hooligans sent by the owner not only attacked the media house but also manhandled me and my fellow reporter Kamal GC and seized the mobile phone of program presenter Sushil Pande", said Bhandari to FF.

He also informed that the owner was in detention at Metropolitan Police Circle, Maharajgunj and the investigation was underway.

### Obstruction

Security officers at the House of Representatives obstructed journalists from entering the media gallery to report on election of deputy speaker on July 15. The incident took place in the federal capital Kathmandu.

Journalist at Gorkhapatra national daily Narayan Kafle, who was also at the site shared with Freedom Forum that they were allowed to report first session of the House but they were not allowed to report the second session even after showing their entry cards.

"When we asked the officers about reason for obstruction, they said it was an order from the higher level. On the other hand, parliamentary secretariat's authority later said that they did not give such order", Kafle informed.

"We were about 15-20 journalists who were asked to stay at the media center to report where audio/ visual system does not even function well", he added.

On FF's question about his observation, Kafle said that the parliamentarians and secretariat officials are yet to trust and respect media and its role. It sometimes also depends upon their interest and the ongoing issues in the House.

## Arrest

On July 25, the police arrested three youth Arjun Poudel, Som Sharma, and Biplab Khadka for shouting slogans against Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba at a program held in Kathmandu. They were released on July 26.

Again on July 28, the cadres of Nepal Communist Party under Biplav's leadership were arrested for waving black flags against a visiting foreign official.

Similarly, in a separate incident, Khadka and Sharma were rearrested from Maitighar Mandala while staging demonstrations against government's initiative to pass Citizenship Amendment Bill. The Bill has been passed by the House of Representatives amid public grievances and was scheduled to be passed by the National Assembly the same day.

Moreover, right to peaceful assembly and protest is an fundamental human right in democracy. The Constitution of Nepal guarantees every individual the right to expression and peaceful assembly. The Local Administration Act, 2028 B.S. and Muluki Criminal Code, 2074 B.S. prohibits use of force over peaceful assembly unless and until it turns violent or there is a perceived threat to peace and security. The arrest and manhandle of protestors sitting with pamphlets within the protests permitted vicinity is a sheer violation of law. These forms of intimidation hinders citizens to express their right to free expression, peaceful assembly and protest.

Moreover, a group of youths were arrested for protesting the ruling government in Kathmandu on August 3. The youths were arrested during protest in front of the Federal Parliament.

The youths were protesting in front of the parliament showing placards against the government's decision to reappoint the finance minister Janardan Sharma amidst allegations for modifying budget illegally.

## Threats

Editor-In-Chief at <https://www.himalpost.com/> Motiram Khanal received numerous

death threats for publishing news on the online portal. The incident took place in the federal capital Kathmandu.

Talking to Freedom Forum, Khanal shared that a news about Mayor of Bagmati Municipality at Salahi district, Bharat Kumar Thapa was published on the online portal on August 11, 2022 along with his quotes. Thereafter, Mayor Bharat Kumar Thapa called editor Khanal in the evening and talked to him about the news in a good manner.

"Again, on August 12, a person calling himself brother of Thapa called me and asked to meet him. During the meeting, the person along with his goons threatened me to edit the news and share details on the news source", Khanal said, adding, "I told them to go to Press Council Nepal if they had any problem and file case over the news but in vain."

He further informed that since then, they had been calling from different numbers and threatening him with abusive words. He informed fellow journalists about the case and was planning to go to police station for safety, Khanal informed.

# Peaceful protestors arrested

The Nepal Police arrested three leaders of Bibeksheel Party for protesting the misuse of authority by Finance Minister Janardhan Sharma in the federal capital Kathmandu on July 5.

The arrested includes Bijay Babu Shiwakoti, spokesperson of the party, Sashibikram Karki, federal committee member, and Laxman Shrestha, campaign and network department head of the party.

The leaders were protesting the misuse of authority by the Minister. The Finance Minister had allegedly changed the tax

rates at the last moment of budget preparation, thereby evading ministry oversight. It has been claimed that Minister Sharma involved an outsider in the midnight to change the tax rates in the budget at midnight.

It courted huge controversy leading to public demand of Minister Sharma's resignation.

The arrested leaders said that they were arrested for defying the restricted area for protest at New Baneshwor, Kathmandu.

The arrested were however released after some hours.

The District Administration Office, Kathmandu has restricted different areas in the capital as 'no protest zones' pursuant to section 6(3) of the Local Administration Act (2028 B.S.). The local administration has declared areas near the office of the president, the federal parliament, and Singha Durbar, the official residence of Prime Minister, among other as prohibited zone. In accordance with this, public assemblies of five or more than five people are punishable by a fine of rupees five hundred or one-month imprisonment or both by the Chief District Officer.

# Comedian Singh Arrested

The Kathmandu Metropolitan Police arrested comedian Apoorva Kshitij Singh on August 28, 2022 for his standup comedy. He was arrested for allegedly hurting the sentiment of the Newar community.

Comedian Singh had presented a standup comedy at Comedy Café, the video of which he uploaded on August 26, 2022. Following this, people wrote abusive

comments on the post and few also filed First Information Report at the Metropolitan Police Range, Teku.

In response, Singh removed the video from YouTube and publicly apologized for this comedy video.

The Spokesperson of Metropolitan Police Circle, Dinesh Raj Mainali, informed Freedom Forum that investigation was underway. Singh

was charged under offence of “not to disrupt social rites and rituals” under section 165 of the Muluki Criminal Code, 2017.

Mainali further said Singh was presented in Kathmandu District Administration Office on August 28, 2022. The administration issued an order to keep him in custody for 10 days for investigation. 

# Karnali Province

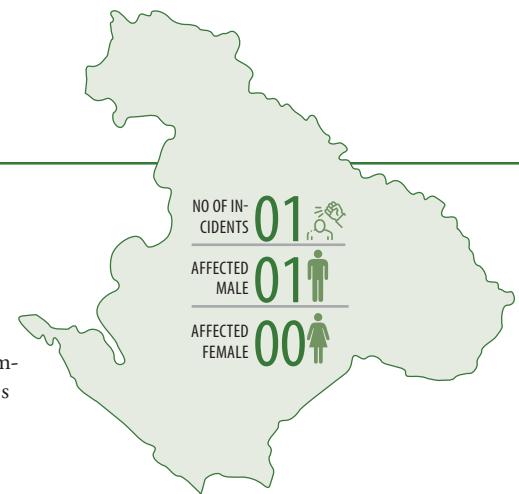
## Death Threat

Kalikot district reporter at Nepal Samacharpara daily, Kali Bahadur Malla, was issued death threat for reporting news on September 4. Kalikot district lies in Karnali Province of Nepal.

Talking to Freedom Forum, reporter Malla shared that he had reported news critical to a

political cadre Dan Bahadur Shahi following which Shahi threatened Malla of slitting his throat.

Though Nepal Police arrested Shahi after complaint filed at the district police office, Shahi's family members were threatening Malla. 



# RTI activist receives death threat

An RTI activist from Jajarkot district Ganesh Baniya was issued death threat for requesting information in line with Right to Information Act on September 13. Jajarkot district is situated in Karnali Province of Nepal.

According to the information shared by activist Baniya, he along with the other activist Bhupesh Kumar Jyoti had requested for information about Jumla road construction at Road Division, Chaurjahari, Rukum West on September 11, applying the RTI Act.

Then, on the day of the incident, Baniya received a call from an unknown number requesting for a meeting. Following the call, Baniya met the person in the Bheri Municipality office. He was a contractor of road construction, Bir Bahadur Singh.

“During the meeting, contractor Singh said that the construction work was affected due to his personal problems and asked me to withdraw the RTI request. Singh also lured me of money or camera or anything I wish in return”, said Baniya, “But I denied his offer, thereafter, he started shouting at me saying I am in debt and if anyone disturbs me I will kill him and go to jail.”

Freedom Forum is concerned over the incident. Threatening the activists for exercising RTI is a sheer violation of citizen's right to information. RTI is a powerful tool to uncover the corruption and irregularities in the public offices and hold them accountable towards citizens. Hence, FF strongly urges the security authority to ensure security to the activists and also the contractor to respect the citizen's fundamental right to information as guaranteed by the Right to Information Act 2007. 

Continued from Page 1

Likewise, Chairperson of Nepal's Federation of Right to Information, Umid Bagchand said transparency of fiscal information was weaker in province and local levels so such initiatives should also be trickled down. "There is no option but to spur information requests to make public agencies accountable to their decisions and actions."

Former Deputy Auditor General Ramu Prasad Dotel highlighted the Office of the Auditor General's approach to enhance citizen participation in the audit process. "A small initiative can build a different image of the country. The Citizen Participation in Audit has enhanced Nepal's good image among the community of practice in the globe".

He further noted that the OBS has shed light on the status of Nepal on budget openness so it should be taken as an empirical evidence to design and deliver reforms in different sectors of the public finance management.

Also on the occasion, Deputy Auditor General Chandrakanta Bhandari stressed the need for implementing the statutory provisions of the laws for continuous reforms in fiscal governance. "We have a strong legal regime but the implementation aspect is withered."

He also underscored the importance of developing the Citizen Budget which is merely a simplified presentation of the executive budget. "It is not a big deal for the government. But the need is will power."

Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Finance, Nirnal Dhakal, underlined the need for overhauling changes in multiple sectors whether that be the state or non-state sectors. "The stakeholders should collaborate for advancing fiscal discipline coupled with value for money aiming at building a just society through budgets."

Rekha Upadhyay from the Finance Committee of the Federal Parliament said the legislative committee would plan and place measures for improving parliamentary oversight score in the next round of budget survey.



FF Executive Chief and Chief Editor of INS media, Taranath Dahal, expressed willingness to collaborate with the PFM stakeholders, including the Ministry of Finance to better Nepal's performance on open budgeting. Access to fiscal information is quite low at all three tiers of the government, he said, adding that taxpayers need to be informed of how their revenues are being collected and spent.

Kuvera Chalise, Chief Editor of Karobar – a national vernacular focused on economic and financial affairs said our country system has developed an understanding that the information should be provided to the requesters or users but still the fiscal information available to the public domain are not in easy-to-use or accessible formats. The government agencies should depart from the mindset that just publishing information through the website or portal is their responsibility, he said, adding they should also be mindful whether the data or information are accessible for the use.

PFM expert Anirudra Neupane called for developing a uniformed understanding between the government and other stakeholders on overall transparency and accountability. The OBS results revealed the status of the budget openness, opportunities for the citizen to engage in budgetary process and strengths of the oversight agencies, he said, adding that it should be used as a tool for improving transparency of fiscal information.

Chairperson of National Campaign for Sustainable Development (NACASUD) Dayasagar Shrestha highlighted the need to open the allocation and spending data in a disaggregated manner focusing the underrepresented and vulnerable beneficiaries, such as people living with disability.

Again, on September 28, the Right to Information support center was established at FF to encourage the activists to request as many RTI applications as they can to hold public bodies accountable and make public service delivery effective.

Similarly, a discussion paper written by Executive Chief Taranath Dahal- Right to Information in Nepal: Status, Challenges and Way Forward- was also published in both English and Nepali languages. The paper was widely disseminated through FF's website, social media pages and emails. In addition to the minute analyses on current status of RTI implementation, the paper also recommends National Information Commission and other concerned



authorities to end impunity and address the current challenges activists face while exercising their right to information.

A podcast based on the discussion paper was also released on the same day. In the podcast, Executive Chief Dahal sheds light upon importance of the day and activists Aditya Dahal and Suraj Ray discuss on the status of RTI implementation in the country.

Similarly, FF's policy advisor Krishna Sapkota took part in a street-based information dissemination programme hosted by RTI Federation on September 28 at New Baneshwor, Kathmandu. The program was organized to remind the public agencies about their obligations and citizens to demand information of their need in implementing the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental right. During the program, activists displayed placards and banners with informative messages on Access to Information.

Moreover, Executive Chief Dahal also presented a paper on 'Access to information, e-Governance and AI' in the national seminar organized by the National Information Commission on the same day. At the program, Dahal shared the evolution and expansion of freedom of information and RTI worldwide as well as the essence of international instruments on universal access to information. Highlighting that Right to Information is a foundation of digital democracy and e-governance, Dahal stressed on the need to reform the existing RTI Act in accordance with the technological development in Nepal.

FF's publication of the first national seminar on RTI - Towards Open government in Nepal was also distributed among 100 participants at the program. The book contains fourteen thematic papers and proceedings along with 48-point Kathmandu Declaration adopted by the first National Conference on Right to Information organized by FF in collaboration with the World Bank in Nepal on March 28-29, 2011.

## IMPUNITY UPDATE

# Life imprisonment to murderer of media entrepreneur

Freedom Forum welcomes Janakpurdham High Court's verdict of life imprisonment to the murder convict of media entrepreneur Arun Singhaniya. The Court issued the verdict on September 21, 2022.

Singhaniya, the then chairman of Janakpur Today Media Group was shot dead at a local Shiva Chowk of Janakpur on March 1, 2010. Janakpurdham lies in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

The High Court sentenced life imprisonment to the suspended lawmaker and former Minister of State Sanjay Kumar Saha who was declared the mastermind of the murder.

According to FF's reports, Shinghaniya's son Rahul had filed a complaint at the District Police Office, Dhanusha on April 9, 2010. In

the complaint, he accused Chandra Dip Yadav from Bharatpur Ward No 8 of Dhanusha, Bijay Kushiyat and Dipendra Kushiyat from Ward No 1 of same place, Ram Binod Yadav from Kakanpatti Ward No 1, Pavan Lama from Bharatpur Ward No 8, Manak Lama from Uma Prempur Ward No 2, Yogendra Sahani from Yagyabhumi Ward No 5, Anshi Rai from Bharatpur Ward No 9 and four others with names unidentified of involving in his father's murder.

Among others, Manak Lama, Chandra Dip Yadav, Mukesh Chaudhary, Eklal Sahani and Anshi Rai have been serving their jail term. Suspended Lawmaker Saha was also serving jail term for his involvement in a bomb blast at Rammanand Chowk, Janakpur on April 30, 2012.

FF is happy to share the story as it would contribute to reducing impunity for crimes against



Slain media entrepreneur Singhaniya

journalists. Though late, the long pending impunity case has been addressed providing justice to the victim's family. FF further urges the concerned authority to continue investigations and address remaining cases of impunity relating to crimes against journalists. The present court verdict has upheld the morale of working journalist, media fraternity and FoE advocates. 

## POLICY WATCH

# Govt order on establishment of powerful IT Commission in a non-transparent manner

Freedom Forum has been alarmed over the government order to establish and run a powerful commission on information technology (IT) to regulate IT sector and electronic good governance, but without making any law (Act) on it.

The government order came by reflecting the status of an Act at a time when the parliament, the legitimate place to produce bills and laws with necessary deliberation, is running, and the IT Bill to be developed as an umbrella Act of IT sector has been pending in the parliament for nearly four years.

The government published the information on the order in its gazette on September 1. It is mentioned as 'Electronic Good Governance Commission (Formation and Operation) Order, 2079'. This notice is issued on behalf of Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers.

Worryingly, there is no information on the Act which is based to issue this order. The preamble of the order mentions that it was brought to promote electronic system in government activities, and formulate and implement the policy on cyber security.

As stated in the gazette, the order has proposed a structure having Prime Minister as its Chair, and six members, including Minister for Communications and Information Technology as Co-Chair, and Chief Secretary, Secretary at Prime Minister's Office, and Secretary at Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. Similarly, the government will appoint two members, among which, one must be a woman. Such structure is like that of the National Planning Commission.

Moreover, there will be a Chief Executive Officer to run economic, administrative and

daily activities. With the issuance of the order, it is learnt that process to appoint CEO was begun.

The non-transparent measure taken by the government to form such a significant body warrants serious concern. It has shown government's arbitrariness and intention to

suppress issues surrounding IT sector. It seems the order has aimed at directly regulating the sensitive issues of IT, which is gross reminder of the previous government led by communist leader KP Sharma Oli.

Multifarious issues as storage of government data and safety of devices and networks,

establishment of integrated data centre and operation standard, creation of standard for electronic transaction, review and reform of the acts and laws on IT, formulation of cyber security strategy and its implementation have been mandated to be dealt by the IT Commission.

# Province Assembly members, media keen to whet knowledge on human rights on cyberspace

Freedom Forum conducted a brief orientation program for journalists in Hetauda on September 9, 2022. During the orientation, journalists were made aware on the importance of digital safety and use of safety tools along with protection and promotion of free speech on cyber space. They were shared that legislative efforts surrounding information technology and cyber could have the provisions that breach free speech on cyber and digital space. References of the Information Technology Bill brought by the federal government were given on the occasion. The policy brief prepared by FF on the IT Bill was distributed among the participants and civil society members as part of the knowledge building on the above mentioned issues.

Similarly, FF's recent publications on digital safety- Urgency of digital safety and Digital safety toolkit for journalists were also distributed among the journalists. The participants include local journalists and members of Federation of Nepali Journalists, Bagmati Province Chapter.

During the program, the journalists also shared the challenges they face while reporting news online. Senior journalist in Hetauda, Ramma-ni Dahal, said though digital journalism was growing in the province as well, there is little knowledge among the people and journalists on how the free speech could be protected on digital/cyber spaces. They believed the publication of FF would help build knowledge on this issue so that they could prod the policy makers and lawmakers on ensuring human rights on cyber space.

Similarly on the same day, a discussion program was conducted in Janakpurdham, Madhesh Province. In the program, Mayor of Janakpur



Sub-Metropolitan City, Provincial lawmakers, different political party representatives, policy makers and journalists discussed problematic provisions on the proposed IT Bill and worried that the bill should not target towards curtailing human rights on the online space.

The discussion was based on FF's review on the bill in line with Nepal's constitution, existing laws, international instruments on human rights, especially the UDHR, and ICCPR, and the Budapest Convention. The attendees were also made aware about the safety of journalists online and offline.

Earlier, Chief Executive Taranath Dahal participated in different discussion programs in Biratnagar (Province 1), Pokhara (Gandaki Province) and Butwal (Lumbini Province) in July 2022.

On July 3, Dahal held discussion among province policy makers, ministers, civil society representatives and journalists how human rights issues could be addressed while formulating information technology bill/ policy at the province level. They were also made aware and informed about international practices and Freedom Forum's policy analysis paper. FF's publications cyber on security strategy and

policy discussion paper were also distributed among total 36 participants.

On July 6, Dahal discussed about FF's recent review on Information Technology Bill and cyber security strategy among 10 Province Assembly Members, 10 ministry secretaries and employees combined, Secretary at Office of the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, Provincial Assembly Secretariat employees, Chief District Officer of Kaski, media persons, civil society representatives, 7 information officers and 8 political party representatives in Pokhara, Gandaki Province.

Similarly, on July 8, Executive Chief Dahal shared FF's publications among Speaker of Province Assembly, 7 Province Assembly members, 5 employees at Province Assembly, Chief Secretary of Province Government, information officers and other concerned stakeholders in Lumbini Province.

While sharing the efforts at federal level on IT Bill and other issues surrounding human rights on cyber/space, the province lawmakers were keen to know more on cyber-related issues so that they could build knowledge and formulate necessary policies and laws to make people aware on digital literacy, ensuring their human rights like free expression at the same time.

# Effective Implementation of RTI to achieve SDGs

Freedom Forum conducted one of the important sessions of the Nepal Peoples Forum 2022 on SDG 16+ – ‘Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms’ in Kathmandu on August 5, 2022. It was a hybrid event- both in-person and virtual with zoom platform.

Total 44 participants, including National Information Commissioner, representatives from nationwide networks of Right to Information, civil society, media and SDG network participated in the session and shared their views on current status of the implementation of RTI.

Highlighting the objectives, Freedom Forum Policy Advisor Mr Krishna Sapkota said the event was organized to review the progress on the implementation of SDG Goal 16 (10.2.) i.e. access to information, to discuss the key issues and challenges and find out possible ways to achieve national targets. He also highlighted a brief global update on progress on SDG 16.10 relating to the RTI in the last year citing reference of the Article 19- a global organization working to defend the freedom of expression.

According to the report, three countries adopted the RTI laws for first time – Andorra, Gambia, and Venezuela; around 36 countries had pending legal initiatives or bills; 96 countries also have a specific constitutional right to information, and in total, 25 countries adopted RTI laws and 4 adopted decrees/regulations since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015.

As shared, 126/193 UN member states now have laws, another 7 have official decrees/regulations requiring the disclosure of information, covering around 91% of world population.

Similarly, delivering opening remarks, SDG National Network Coordinator Mr Daya Sagar Shrestha called for the session to focus on critical review of the freedom of expression as efforts were taking place of late to encroach upon fundamental freedoms, including civic and political freedoms of the citizens in the name of law-making.

Freedom Forum Executive Chief Taranath Dahal presented major highlights of a study report on “National Status of RTI in Nepal: Status, Challenges and Way Forward”. He said SDG Goal 16 was designed as a unique feature to achieve other goals through governance reforms, accountability improvement and citizen engagement. “Universal access to information has been made an integral part of peace, justice and accountability. Without right to information guarantee, citizens cannot engage in governance process including oversight” Mr Dahal emphasized.

He highlighted that the new Constitution had enshrined good provisions ensuring fundamental freedoms in different domains, including right to freedom, right to live with dignity, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association and assembly and right to information to strengthen the open and democratic regime but their implementation aspect is withered. “The Constitution has provided wider space and assurance but things are not getting translated into actions. Law and practice are two important things. The role of the State is crucial to put commitment into actions. CSOs role to provide effective watchdog is also equally spectacular”, he noted.

“Nepal is the 8th country wherein constitution guarantees the RTI and has the opportunity to showcase glaring examples of practice to the globe. But, efforts are not being made to that direction”, he said, RTI movement has seen several challenges in the span of 14 years since the law was enacted in Nepal.

Mr Dahal called for the State agencies to ensure access to internet to improve access to information in the present digital age. “If the internet and digital access are poor it would resultantly widen discrimination; it would be a challenge for the globe including Nepal to achieve SDGs”.

The National Information Commission (NIC) is urged to develop national plan with targets and indicators to effectively implement the RTI and ensure access to information for governance reforms.



Delivering his key note speech, NIC Chief Commissioner Mr Mahendra Man Gurung asked CSOs to help the NIC to end impunity on right to information. He underlined the need of equal access to information so as to develop our citizenry to engage in promoting accountability and checking corruption.

Mr Gurung expressed commitment to develop a national plan to implement right to information. “NIC has developed a software to track the RTI request. We are also mooted to develop a mechanism to monitor the implementation across the country”.

Chief of the National Network of RTI Mr Umid Bagchand expressed worry that though discussion on RTI among stakeholders is continuous, its proper implementation at local level is very poor. Many incidents of information seekers being attacked, threatened and harassed for using RTI at the local levels are worrying updates these days. Hence, wider awareness of the supply side is essential. This can be achieved when the nation changes its perspective towards implementation of RTI Act and brings effective plans and programs in favor of RTI practitioners.

Concluding the session, Chairperson at FF, Mr Hari Binod Adhikari called upon the supply side to be honest and aware of the RTI Act and citizen’s right to free access to information. They should also ensure free flow of public information and safety of the RTI activists which in turn, boosts RTI regime in the country.

# With digitalization, women are more vulnerable to digital threats

Freedom Forum conducted a multi-stakeholder discussion on Digital threat to Nepali Journalists in Kathmandu on July 8. The discussion was organized to discuss various threats and challenges media and journalists face while working in online space.

The program supported by International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) network gathered 43 participants (20 female) including representatives from National Women's Commission (NWC), National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Nepal police, Press Council Nepal (PCN), Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), academia, media, civil society organizations, and researchers and law professionals.

Initiating the program, FoE Monitor Mr Narayan Ghimire greeted the participants and highlighted the objective of program. Then, researchers Ms Nanu Maiya Khadka and Mr Suraj Ray presented findings of a survey report- 'Urgency of digital safety to Nepali journalists'. The survey was done among 100 journalists around Nepal. The report states that among every ten journalists, seven have faced some form of harassment online. Female journalists are more vulnerable to sexual harassment on digital spaces.

The researchers also pointed out that no action was taken in most of the cases related to digital threat in the report which is an important factor to fuel crime and increase self-censorship. FF's recently published toolkit on digital safety for journalists was also distributed among the participants.

Opening the discussion session, Chairperson at National News Agency Mr Dharmendra Jha said threats on digital devices and platforms are different. Journalists are unsafe more in digital platforms. These days, new mode of journalism- mobile journalism-has evolved in addition to digital media but majority journalists specially at local levels lack digital literacy and skills. The news media has also been discredited time and again. Hence, along with digital threats to journalists, threats to media as a whole should also be discussed, Jha underscored.

Echoing Jha's statement, researcher at Martin Chautari, Harsha Man Maharjan, notified about audience's role in media accountability. He added that the journalists should be aware why, how and for what deeds they are facing threat.

Editor at an online news portal, Shiva Satyal, shared his experience of facing lawsuit for publishing a news on his online portal. He also said that the problem is not about media credibility. Major problem lies in dual accountability from audience.

Following this, Chairperson at Media Action Nepal, Laxman Datt Pant, defined digital threat in two ways- technology-induced and technology controlled. Journalists have been facing digital threat due to lack of digital literacy. He also added to the report's finding as women are more prone to sexual harassment online but they are reluctant towards adopting legal measures.

Program coordinator at Body and Data, Kabita Bahing, recommended the researchers to dive deeper into the intensity, types of threats and focus more on security discussions, such as digital security, physical security, psychosocial security and financial security.

Chairperson at Online TV Journalists Association Nepal, Jeevan Bhandari, said that online journalism by its nature of rapid spread bring more threats to journalists. The regulating authority should be more alert and play its role effectively.

Editor at Image Channel, Rajan Kuikel, stressed that while threats on the digital space are transboundary issues, media and journalists should be made capable to tackle the challenges.

Lawyer Dipesh Dhakal added that due diligence of law enforcing authority is important



and journalists themselves should understand their limitation on free speech and right to privacy.

Senior journalist and columnist at the Rising Nepal national daily, Namrata Sharma, mentioned that investigative journalists are the most targeted in both print and online media. Thus, we journalists should also be alert and adopt preventive measures to counter those threats as mentioned in the toolkit distributed today, she underscored.

Chairperson at Media Advocacy Group, Anita Bindu, also stressed on the need to use the toolkit for self-protection of journalists. Media house should also be responsible for journalists' online and offline safety. She also called upon media houses, government and civil society actors to collaborate for journalists' safety.

Similarly, former chairperson at Working Women Journalists, Amika Rajthala, noted that digital medium had added threats for journalists to the preexisting newsroom threats and challenges.

Superintendent of Nepal Police, Ranju Sigdel, urged the media organizations to enhance capacity of journalists and suggested the journalists to collect evidence and inform the police for investigation.

Policy advisor at FF, Krishna Sapkota, recommended media houses to develop a com-

prehensive safety strategy for journalists and regularly monitor its implementation.

Chief Administration Officer at Press Council Nepal, Jhabindra Bhusal, admitted that the report has brought the findings similar to PCN's experience.

Representative from NHRC, informed that the commission has lobbied to draft human rights defenders' bill urging the state to guarantee safety and security of every citizen. The commission also has freedom of expression committee in place. He also asked the affected journalists to inform the commission about any violation incident.

Chief guest at the program, Chairperson at National Women's Commission, Kamala Parajuli, said that though development of technology has both threats and opportunities, digital threat has been a serious challenge these days.

Concluding the program, FF Chairperson Hari Binod Adhikari stated that FF is always committed towards journalists' safety online and offline. Media houses should also advocate for journalists safety and impede self-censorship, he marked.



# Workshops on debunking disinformation

## Five pillars of verification: provenance, source, date, location and motivation.

Freedom Forum successfully conducted the two-phase workshop on 'How to combat false information online: Be a verification Ninja' in Hetauda on 8-9 September 2022. The first phase of the workshop was conducted in Kathmandu on 5-6 September.

The workshop hosted by Freedom Forum and led by Fulbright specialist Ms. Linda Austin was conducted in collaboration with the Fulbright Commission Nepal. The workshop was conducted in five sessions. The first session deals with the identification of seven different types of misinformation and disinformation and the importance of journalism in addressing those issues.

In the second session, participants were busy searching trends of false information on the internet and monitoring efficiency of passive search tools like Google, Facebook, etc.

Following this, the participants were acquainted with five pillars of verification: provenance, source, date, location and motivation. Similarly, on the second day and fourth session of the workshop, Austin guided the participants on the use of other skills such as reverse-image search, EXIF data, Google maps, etc. In the final session, the participants were taught why and how to debunk false information through their reporting.

"The workshop was very useful to learn how to use the fact checking tools. This type of training should be provided to all working journalists as well as news chiefs and editors", said Editor-In-Chief at <https://www.praharkhabar.com/>, Bhanubhakta Acharya.

Similarly, Freedom Forum's Executive Chief Taranath Dahal maintained, "The workshop was a good opportunity for local journalists to learn about important verification tools which are extremely useful for reporting and debunking false information. It helps build right information

ecosystem and reduce discrediting to journalists."

He also thanked the Fulbright Commission and Fulbright specialist Linda Austin for providing this opportunity to FF as a host institution.

"The journalists in Hetauda were a joy to work with! They engaged fully in the classwork and asked good questions. Clearly, they recognize the danger that false information poses to democracies everywhere and are eager to learn more on how it can be combatted. I am grateful to the Freedom Forum and the Fulbright Commission in Nepal for hosting me to help them achieve their goals", marked the specialist Austin.

Similarly, online news coordinator at The Rising Nepal, Nanda Lal Tiwari, observed after the Kathmandu workshop, "This workshop has been very useful. Verification skill is something every journalist should know, and this workshop training meets that objective."

Total 20 journalists and fact checkers actively participated in the workshop. They were also enthusiastic about new skills they learnt during the workshop.



# Self disclosure update

Type and Nature of Organization	NGO working for Democracy, Right to Information, Freedom of Expression, Fiscal Transparency and Open Data, Media Policy and Law, Internet Freedom	
Legal Status	Registered at District Administration Office Kathmandu. DAO Registration Number: 127/062/63, SWC Affiliation Number: 18518	
Location	Adarsa Marga, Prasuti Griha Road, Thapathali, Kathmandu	
Staffs and Roles	<b>Taranath Dahal:</b> Executive Chief, coordinates overall organizational and administrative affairs	
	<b>Aruna Adhikari:</b> Finance and Administration Officer, looks after accounting and administrative affairs and performs responsibilities as the Information Officer.	
	<b>Nanu Maiya Khadka:</b> Gender Monitoring Officer, responsible for monitoring media content on gender perspectives	
	<b>Aditya Dahal:</b> RTI App and website operator	
	<b>Manju Ojha:</b> Front Desk Assistant, <b>Ganga Kumari Gurung:</b> Office Assistant	
Projects	<b>Krishna Sapkota</b> - Driving Audit Accountability (Consultant/ OBS Researcher), <b>Narayan Ghimire</b> - MAINSTREAMING HUMAN RIGHTS IN CYBERSECURITY AND CYBERCRIME POLICY (CONSULTANT), <b>Subash Dahal</b> - DAA	
Project Information	<b>Project Name</b>	<b>Supporting Agency</b>
	Contributing to create atmosphere for free expression and reduction of impunity on crimes against journalists	IFEX
	Driving Audit Accountability : Audit Reports for Collective Action to Strengthen Government Responsiveness (DAA)	IPB
	Mainstreaming Human Rights in Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Policy	Global Partners Digital
	Open Budget Survey, Support to IPB in Developing Capacity Building Materials for civil Society Organizations	IPB
Services and Activities	Research, capacity development and policy advocacy including media monitoring, trainings on RTI and journalism, meetings, workshops, seminars and other campaigns to promote issues of democracy, RTI, FoE, fiscal transparency, human rights, local governance. It also provides legal aid to journalists, media and information seekers.	
Responsible Authority	<b>Chairperson:</b> Hari Binod Adhikari, <b>Executive Chief:</b> Tara Nath Dahal	
Decision Making Process	<b>General Assembly:</b> Making policies, rules and regulations of organization <b>Executive committee:</b> Formulation of action plans as per constitution of organization, rules and regulation <b>Management team:</b> Running projects and daily operational affairs and reporting timely to the Executive Committee.	
Past/Current Activities	Please follow the link: <a href="http://freedomforum.org.np/content/category/activities/">http://freedomforum.org.np/content/category/activities/</a>	
Information Officer	Aruna Adhikari	
Financial Information	Freedom Forum received grants announcing Rs. 3,087,612.36 (July to September 2022).	
Official Website	<a href="http://www.freedomforum.org.np">www.freedomforum.org.np</a>	
Publications of Freedom Forum	Freedom Forum has over 50 Publications (printed) Please Follow the Link: <a href="http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/">http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/</a>	
Annual Report	<a href="http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/reports/annual-reports/">http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/reports/annual-reports/</a>	
Information Dissemination	Websites- <a href="http://www.freedomforum.org.np/">http://www.freedomforum.org.np/</a> ; <a href="http://www.nepalpressfreedom.org">www.nepalpressfreedom.org</a> , and Newsletter-Free Expression	

# Can democracy survive Brazil's upcoming elections?

Annie Game, 29 September 2022

Civil society has for long faced this long-standing threat. Maybe that is why Latin America is one of the regions in the world where the highest number of killings of journalists and human rights defenders has been reported. During January 2022 alone, 20 human rights defenders and four journalists were killed across the region. The numbers today are much higher.

It is in the midst of this regional and global context that, on October 2, Brazil elections will take place. The polls follow a fierce campaign that has had polarization at its center. Polarization has been fomented and augmented by tactics and techniques that build on the abusive use of new and emerging technology, but which weaponizes old narratives rooted in prejudice, racism, misogyny and a total non-acceptance of 'the other'. Values like diversity and plurality have been attacked, along with those who defend them.

The signs are clear – Brazil has been seeing a dramatic decline in civil liberties in the last years. During his current campaign, Bolsonaro is attacking institutions, discrediting the electoral process and fiercely promoting weaponization and guns. There is no doubt that the future of democracy in Brazil will be decided in early October.

Brazil, as Latin America's largest economy and the fourth-largest democracy in the world, is the canary in the coal mine, and one could argue that it is the future of global democracy that is at stake in the upcoming polls. Not

only of democracy, but of human rights and environmental sustainability.

## So, what's next for Brazil?

There is no simple answer to that question. Even if Bolsonaro is not re-elected, the challenges ahead are gigantic. But if he wins, the authoritarian project wins. And Brazil will become another pin in the map, an additional territory where the roots of authoritarianism grow deeper and more entrenched.

Brazilian civic space needs to be protected to ensure that journalists, activists and human rights defenders don't become an endangered species. We need to defend democracy by promoting freedom of expression and strengthening civil society.

Civil society groups and journalists have a critical role to play – they have been exposing and correcting weaponized disinformation that aims to mislead voters and suppress voting during elections in every region of the world.

In Brazil, IFEX members – the Brazilian Association for Investigative Journalism and Artigo19 – have been working to ensure the safety of journalists, the right to protest, the right to information and the right to participation. They have, for example, requested presidential candidates' commitment to freedom of expression; they have been promoting fact-checking initiatives; have worked to incentive participation and information about the electoral



process amongst the youth; and have promoted debate and discussion about issues central to our current democratic struggles, such as disinformation, hate speech, transparency, political violence and social media.

What they need now is our attention and support. They need to know they are not alone and that we will be watching the polls and their aftermath in early October. IFEX members throughout the region and beyond have shown their solidarity through a concerted social media campaign that calls to: #DefendJournalism #ProtectCivicSpace in Brazil. If not, the authoritarianism playbook will continue to proliferate across the map.

Don't be silent. Let's keep our eyes on Brazil and support the frontline work of those defending democracy. Join us in this call! 🌱

(Source: <https://ifex.org/can-democracy-survive-brazils-upcoming-elections/> )

Freedom Forum is an independent, non-governmental and not-for-profit civil society organization working for the cause of social accountability, democracy and human rights focused on press freedom, freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. Incepted in 2005, Freedom Forum has emerged as a prominent national organization in promoting access to information and freedom of expression through dialogue, research, training, public advocacy and campaign and programme implementation. Currently, the organization is working on the issues of public finance management, budget transparency, open data and aid governance, political and parliamentary accountability, freedom of expression online and open government partnership (OGP) based on its on-hand experience and learning.

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Design and Processed by: Spandan Design Communication, 5435884



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