



FreeExpression

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A NEWSLETTER OF FREEDOM FORUM

Threat to media on rise Journalist killed in pro-monarchy protest in Kathmandu

Freedom Forum (FF) was saddened over the death of a journalist in a pro-monarchy protest organized in the federal capital Kathmandu on March 28. The ex-king supporters had organized the demonstration at Tinkune, Kathmandu, chanting slogan for restoration of monarchy and Hindu state. The demonstrators turned rowdy and vandalized media houses and attacked media persons. Suresh Rajak, a photojournalist affiliated to the Avenues Television, lost his life in the fire set on a nearby building at Tinkune where the protest was organized.

As the protestors breached the restricted area, police clashed with them. Police resorted to firing, tear gas shells and water cannons to tame the mob, but the situation took an ugly turn.

They hurled stones at media houses- the Annapurna Post national daily and Kantipur Television at Tinkune area. They also set on fire the office of the Annapurna Post. The window glasses of the buildings were broken in the incident.

According to the fellow reporters on site, reporter Rajak was covering the protest from the building which was set on fire by the protestors. Rajak was found charred to death in the building with his camera near.

Similarly, reporter with the onlinekhabar.com, Dinesh Gautam, was attacked by the protestors, breaking his leg, while he was taking pictures of the protests. Photojournalist at The Himalayan Times national daily, Rajesh Gurung, was also injured by rubber bullets fired by the police to control the mob. The protestors also threw stones on the vehicle of Himalaya Television.



Source: <https://thenepalipost.com/details/42249>

Following these incidents, District Administration Office, Kathmandu clamped curfew in the affected areas till next day.

Such horrible incident reminded the armed insurgency. The burning of journalist in the protest exposed increasing threat to journalists and media houses in Nepal. The protestors and government are blaming each other that they were culpable of this incident.


It has brought to light the bitter reality that Nepali journalists are still unsafe. Whether it is because of security lapses from government side or the media houses' recklessness of reporters' mobilization, the reporters have been butt of attack. Multiple questions emerged after the death of Rajak in the fire caused by protestors- government's handling of protest and security arrangement, capacity and preparedness of journalists for crisis reporting, organizers'



indifference to media rights, media houses' planning and mobilization of reporters in demonstration and clash, among others.

This incident shows a growing challenge of media coverage in political unrest.

FF vehemently condemns the killing of journalist Rajak, attack on other journalists and media houses. Government is strongly urged to conduct a fair probe on the violent incidents and bring to book the unacceptable perpetrators. Such mockery of press freedom unacceptable in a democracy. Adequate safety of journalists for free reporting is imperative. Mere mention of 'press freedom' in law is not enough, but its translation into action.

FF pays tribute to the late journalist Rajak and extends condolences to the bereaved family members. 

Message from Executive Chief

Protect Freedom, Save Democracy

As seen across the world, Nepal witnessed the threats to democracy, freedom of expression, press freedom, right to information, an open and liberal society, and accountable governance with the onset of 2025. The safety to journalists, which had been gradually improving over the past decade, has become a severe concern during this quarter from January to March 2025.



Taranath Dahal

A tragic incident occurred: an on-duty photojournalist Suresh Rajak died while reporting the anti-government protest in the federal capital, Kathmandu on March 28. Despite his death while covering the protest, serious investigation to bring to book the perpetrators is awaited. The protestors broke another journalist's leg on the same day, while attack on media vehicles and offices were reported around the protest site, Tinkune.

Such attack on free press not only paints fragile state of press freedom and safety of media but creates a space to question enforcement of rule of law. Last year in November, an aspiring journalist Suresh Bhul was beaten to death in Sudurpashchim Province. The cause of his murder is yet unknown. After 15 years again, Nepal is listed as a country where journalists are murdered for their profession. These incidents remind a horrible past.

Other unfavourable trends also emerged in the first quarter of this year. In these three months, Nepali film sector faced severe restrictions in terms of artistic expression. The Film Censor Board misused its authority to remove even ordinary scenes from the movies citing defamation of the political leaders. It reflects increasing trend of intolerance and unprofessionalism of state agency.

The National Information Commission, set up to build RTI regime and good governance appeared discouraging in term of enforcement of RTI. It was against the spirit of RTI act. Terming extensive RTI campaigns as 'unnecessary' and 'unjust' hurt the RTI activists struggling for the cause of good governance. NIC's proactive role is required to enable RTI in Nepal.

Hostility towards civic space with limitation of public space for gatherings and peaceful demonstrations draw equal concern. Democratic state and government's double standard on implementation of fundamental rights is inappropriate. Even anti-democratic people have right to live and express freely in a democracy. Moreover, Nepal is known as a country with tolerant and liberal democracy. Freedom Forum is concerned over present government's repressive actions that could tarnish this image.

Furthermore, debates have also emerged on exercise of freedom of expression in the parliament. The members of parliament have much reaches on exercise of freedom of expression. They are free of the House Speaker or any political leaderships' diktat to give speech. Their duty is to represent and express people's voices at the parliament following parliamentary decorum. But, exerting undue influence on lawmakers is against parliamentary values. Besides this, digital freedom is facing attacks and shrinking civic space online.

The social media bill is drafted with restrictive provision. However, the government backtracked from proceeding with problematic bill after Freedom Forum's rigorous advocacy for its correction. Moreover, the government's misuse of ETA to regulate contents has not changed yet. Surveillance in social media is on rise

It is time to forward policy changes aimed at enabling freedom of expression and press freedom, but are stuck in same old status. The further process is still uncertain because political situation is yet to be clear and smooth.

There is wide concern and despair over the global anti-liberal surge, there by putting democracy, human rights, liberalism, and civil liberties at risk. Although direct political impact has not been seen in Nepal, an increasing effect of control and conservatism has been felt within the state institutions and actors. In order to prevent this wave of conservatism from disturbing Nepal's liberal democracy, Freedom Forum is even more vigilant and opts for reform on role of civil society. 🌱

Nepal's social media bill highly problematic: CLD

A Canada-based organization, Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD), released its analysis of Nepal's Social Media Act (Bill) 2081, which was tabled in parliament in late January 2025. According to the analytical report (<https://www.law-democracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Nepal.Social-Media-Act-Note.Feb25.pdf>) published on February 13, the Bill has multiple problems when assessed against the international standards on freedom of expression, including that the extensive regulatory powers in the Bill are all exercised by government actors; that the platforms defined are very broadly; requirement of government license for platform operation; numerous expansive and illegitimate content restrictions are imposed on both users and platforms utterly fails to put in place any systematic approach to addressing the harms caused by online content.

"We understand that this Bill is somehow an attempt to implement the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms," said Toby Mendel, Executive Director of CLD. "If so, it certainly fails in every way to achieve that aim, suggesting the need for more support for and advocacy towards the government."

CLD's main recommendation is that the whole approach taken in the Bill should be reconsidered in favour of one which, instead of focusing almost exclusively on individual pieces of content, addresses the systematic impact of the operations of platforms. The analysis also puts forward numerous more specific recommendations, including the following:

- The definition of "social media platform" should be much narrower in scope as, presently, it would include any website on which user comments were enabled.
- No government-controlled actor should be able to exercise regulatory powers under this law; instead, an independent administrative body should be created for this purpose.
- The whole approach of licensing platforms should be dropped; this is simply not needed to impose regulatory requirements on them.
- If restrictions on individual pieces of content are retained at all, they should be very substantially reworked so as to bring them into line with international standards.
- The many excessive sanctions should be revised and replaced with a regime which allows for proportionate sanctions to be imposed. 🌱

Freedom of Expression Violations

Madhesh Province

THREAT

A. Parsa-based reporter for sidhakura.com Jiyalal Sah received threat of public insult from political cadres for his reporting on January 3.

Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Rajan Singh, reported that Sah received threats and abusive messages from the political cadres through phone calls and social media posts over the news published on January 2. The news was about a political program. In the news, reporter Sah mentioned that those entered in the party as cadres were facing legal charges since December 2022.

Following this, he received abusive posts with his photo on social media. He was threatened of smearing face with soot at any time, according to representative Singh.

B. Pachrauta Municipality in Bara district sought proof of a news report published in a

local daily newspaper, Shubha Arambha, on March 12.

The municipality office issued a letter on its letterhead, asking the media to submit evidence supporting the news published in the daily on February 15 and 16. The news was about alleged involvement of the municipality mayor and a health professional in covering up corruption and forwarding a cybercrime case to suppress opposition's voice.

MISBEHAVIOUR

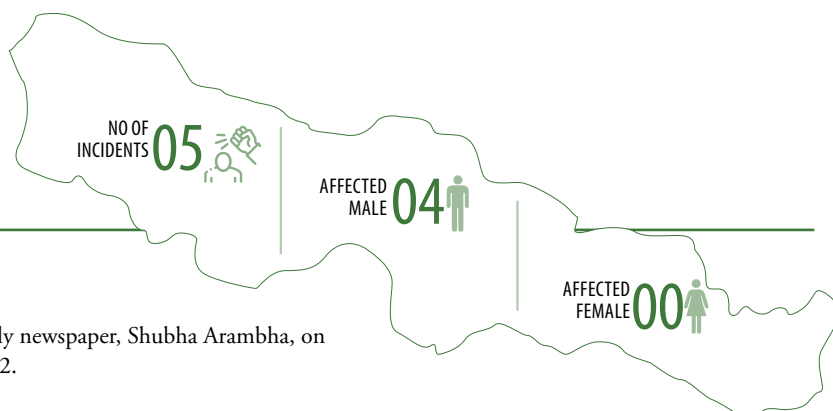
Reporter for the Lahan Today daily, Sital Kumar Yadav, was abused while reporting in Siraha on February 6. Siraha is located in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Rajan Singh, reported that Yadav was

mistreated while covering a story at a local school. Yadav had reached the school after receiving a tip-off that stale food was being distributed to students.

Although Yadav informed the school's management committee about his reporting, the school's principal, Devendra Yadav, shouted at him, saying he could not report in the school and threatened to "show him his place" if he did not stop.

According to Yadav, the school management was distributing stale snacks to students during a festival celebration. 🌿



Bagmati Province

MANHANDLE

Managing Director at dobhanchaurkhabar.com news media, Sagar Bohora, was manhandled for requesting information at Manthali Municipality Office on January 2. The incident occurred in Ramechhap district of Bagmati Province.

Journalist Bohora had requested information on expenses made for travel allowances and others at the municipality office in the previous fiscal year.

Then Ward Chairperson Surendra Bahadur Karki called Bohora at a local restaurant

for a coffee and abused him verbally and manhandled for requesting information.



No incident of press freedom violation was recorded this quarter in Koshi, Gandaki and Lumbini provinces. It is welcome in deed that journalists and media houses did not face any obstruction, threat and intimidation. 🌿

THREAT

A. Reporter with himalkhabar.com news media, Gopal Dahal, received a threat for his reporting on January 22 in Kathmandu. Dahal is an investigative journalist from Sunsari, Koshi Province.

Talking to Freedom Forum, reporter Dahal shared that news about excessive expenses of Nepal Tourism Board in an award handover function organized by a private organization was published on the portal in his byline on January 21. Following its publication, president of the organizing company Satya Kala Tamang called at the media office, referring to the journalist and threatened him of attack.

The news had Tamang's quotes where she had shared details of the award function and incurred expenses.

Reporter Dahal said that Tamang threatened him of physical attack. "I am seeking support from fellow journalists and the media house," he shared.

Earlier on December 4, reporter Dahal was threatened by the Mayor of Dharan Sub-Metropolitan City of ending his career for his investigative reporting.

B. Journalists at mayorsap.com news media received threats to remove news critical to the Mayor of Bharatpur Metropolitan city on February 8.

The story published on the online media in Editor RC Mishra's byline on March 15 was about the alleged connection of Mayor Renu Dahal with operation of illegal crusher industries in Bharatpur. Following its publication, staffs of the Mayor's secretariat

including her press advisor asked the journalists to either delete the news from the portal or edit the news removing Mayor's name.

Editor Mishra said that he and his team were also mistreated when they had gone to the municipality office to meet the Mayor for reporting on ongoing development projects. Chairman of the media, Pradip Khadka, also shared with Freedom Forum that the officers also followed journalists to other reporting sites and threatened them to delete the news or face consequences.

C. Editor at ramechhaptimes.com.np news media, Milan Bk, received a threat of attack for covering news on March 16. The online is operated from Ramechhap, Bagmati Province.

Talking to Freedom Forum, editor BK shared that he had published a video interview with Kamala Basnet, an agent of Nepal Life Insurance Company, on the news portal and its Facebook page. In the video, BK questioned Basnet based on complaints received from customers. Following its publication, Basnet called the editor and threatened him of physical assault for sharing the interview.

Then, editor BK reported the incident to the District Police Office. On March 17, during a meeting held at the police office, agent Basnet apologized to the editor, according to BK.

ATTACK

A. Chairperson and executive editor at palikasamaya.com news media, Kamal Bahadur Bohara, was attacked for his reporting on February 3. The incident took place in the federal capital, Kathmandu.

Talking to Freedom Forum, editor Bohara shared that news about encroachment of public spaces by business owners and Mathmandu Metropolitan City Mayor's ignorance on the issue was published on the news website on February 1. Then, on the day of incident, a person calling himself supporter of the Mayor called editor Bohara to meet him and threatened him for writing news about the Mayor.

As editor Bohara was on his way back home, a group of four persons surrounded him and hit him on the chest. He also reported local police stations about the incident.

"Though I am not sure whether the attackers were Mayor's supporters, but I suspect due to their threatening calls after the news publication. So, I am awaiting police response to my complaint", Bohara informed FF.

According to the journalist, the Mayor's personal secretary met him at office of the online portal and expressed sorry over the incident and also ensured that such incident will not occur in future.

B. Reporter to himalkhabar.com, Ajay Hakuju, was attacked while covering a dispute among student unions on March 18 in Patan.

Reporter Hakuju shared with Freedom Forum that he went to the Patan Multiple Campus to cover ongoing disputes among students during the student unions' election. While he was returning after taking few pictures, the agitated students attacked him and ordered him to delete the photos.

"Though I deleted the pictures in front of them, they hit me on my face. I received injury on face. However, I managed to escape major injury", reporter Hakuju added. 🌿

Parliament secretariat suspends press pass

The Federal Parliament Secretariat suspended press passes of journalists Prakash Oli and Kishor Kumar Shrestha for a critical question to the Prime Minister within the parliament premises. A press pass is an official card issued by the secretariat, granting journalists' access to the media center for reporting.

Journalists Oli and Shrestha are associated with online media Sunaulo Nepal and Yuva Man Nepal, which broadcast on YouTube.

Journalists duo were suspended for one month citing the use of inappropriate language while questioning the Prime Minister about cases of corruption discussed during parliamentary

session on February 16. The secretariat instructed the journalists to return their press passes on March 5, stating that their behavior violated parliamentary etiquette.

The journalists received their ID cards on April 7, after 52 days of suspension. 🌿

Karnali Province

THREAT

A. Reporter for the Gorkhapatra national daily from Kalikot, Premraj Simkhada, faced threats over his news reporting.

Freedom Forum's representative for Karnali Province, Laxmi Bhandari, reported that in the last week of December, he was threatened via phone calls and messages after he published news on irregularities at a local municipality.

Representative Bhandari quoted Simkhada, stating that he received threats from relatives of Khadachakra Municipality, Kalikot's Acting Chief Abhiraj Shahi after publishing a report about a controversial appointment in the municipality.

"As soon as the reporter writes about the irregularities in the municipality, Chief's relatives send threatening voice and text messages to him via messenger", Bhandari shared, "He also mentioned that he had faced similar threats in the past when he reported that Acting Chief employed his spouse in the municipality office."

Reporter Simkhada had filed a complaint regarding the threats at Nepal Police Cyber Bureau.

B. Reporter at the Annapurna Post national daily, Bisna Prasad Neupane, received threatening messages for his cover story published on March 25.

According to Laxmi Bhandari, Freedom Forum's representative for the province, the story exposed the misuse of foreign aid and human resources for fulfilling the individual interests and management of a local social organization, Kopila Valley Sewa Samaj. The report was published both online and in print in Neupane's byline.

Following the publication, relatives of the organization's Chairman, Top Bahadur Malla, sent abusive messages and threats through social media platforms.

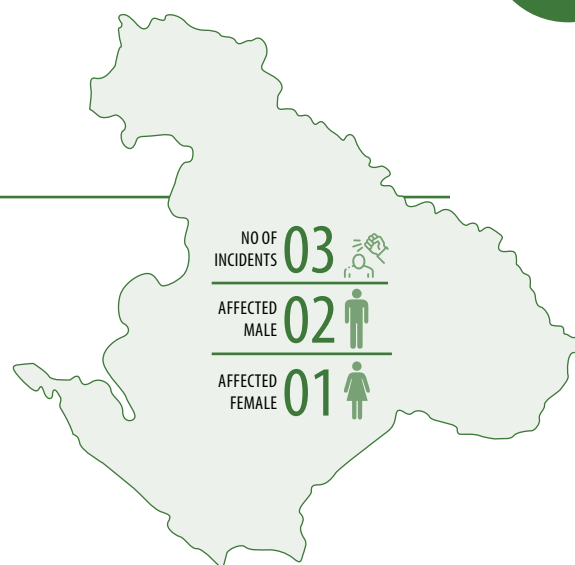
"After the news publication, Chairman Malla's relatives, including Lokjan Singh Thakuri and Prakash Singh, threatened him, and Neupane suspects that his vehicle number was circulated among them. For his safety, he has not gone to his home for a while," said representative Bhandari.

Bhandari added that Neupane filed a complaint at the District Police Office (DPO) in Surkhet on March 26, seeking action against the chairman's relatives and requesting security to ensure his safety.

The case was settled after discussion among both the parties at the police office.

ATTACK

A journalist with hahilajagaran.com, Dilmaya Shahi, was attacked for her reporting in Jumla on March



11. Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Laxmi Bhandari, shared that reporter Shahi was attacked while walking in the market. A local woman named Pramila Shahi attacked her. Reporter Shahi fell on the ground. However, other women took her to the hospital.

Representative Bhandari stated that reporter Shahi had been covering stories about the rape of a young girl. Recently, Shahi had published a report that led to the imprisonment of around 50 perpetrators. Following the court's decision, the woman attacked reporter Shahi, informed Bhandari. According to Shahi, the woman was mobilized and other individuals were involved in the attack.

Shahi tried to file a case against the attacker, but the police refused to register the case. "However, she wants to fight against those who attacked her," said representative Bhandari, quoting reporter Shahi.

Thereafter, she registered a public offense case at the District Court on March 19. The police arrested the attacker and released her after.

May the New Year 2082 BS inspire everyone to create atmosphere for unobstructed exercise of human rights including freedom of expression and information to pave way to better democracy.

Happy New Year 2082

Freedom Forum

Sudurpaschim Province

THREAT

A. Chief District Officer (CDO) of Dadeldhura issued a written threat over publication of a news article on January 1. The CDO used a letterhead of his office to ask simananews.com to take down the news and issue regret over the news publication.

The online media had published news about CDO's involvement in an illegal collection of money from local offices and municipalities in the province in the name of a minister in province. News was published on December 31, 2024.

B. Chairperson and Chief editor at Paschim Today's print and online edition, Dirgharaj Upadhyaya, received threats for articles published in the media.

Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Min Bam, reported that journalist Upadhyay had published three articles on February 17 and February 18 on the news portal. He had raised concerns of locals in his articles- "Dhangadhi's Brightness: Illusion and Reality – Part 1 and 2" and "The Mayor left us helpless", say displaced people, "It's hard to survive."

The articles are about Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City's Mayor Gopi Hamal's arbitrariness in the road expansion and other development projects which left citizens displaced. Journalist Upadhyay highlighted the plight of displaced people and their grievances in the articles.

Following their publication, Upadhyay received multiple threats from Mayor Hamal's supporters both on social media and personally.

Representative Bam shared that the supporters had been threatening Upadhyay and his family members from fake social media accounts and causing him mental distress. Again on February 23, Mayor Hamal shared his video on social media stating that he would answer the journalist's allegations in a right time.

Following this, Upadhyay along with fellow journalists submitted an application to Chief District Officer (CDO) in Kailali, Gogan Hamal, demanding safety.

According to representative Bam, CDO Hamal said, "Threatening and mentally harassing journalists over news reports is against the law, thus, this case will be prosecuted under cyber law."

Following this, the Mayor verbally apologized at a meeting among representatives of FNJ Dhangadhi, journalist Upadhyaya and police person and assured that his supporters will not abuse him.

ATTACK

A. Bajhang based reporter to the Nepal Samacharpatra national daily Lalit Bahadur Singh was attacked on February 10 in Bajhang.

Reporter Singh is also the President of Federation of Nepali Journalists, Bajhang chapter.

According to Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Min Bam, journalist Singh was attacked at night- around 11:30 pm- in a local hotel. Representative Bam informed that a local Binod Kathayat's group called Singh in the hotel and attacked him with a knife.

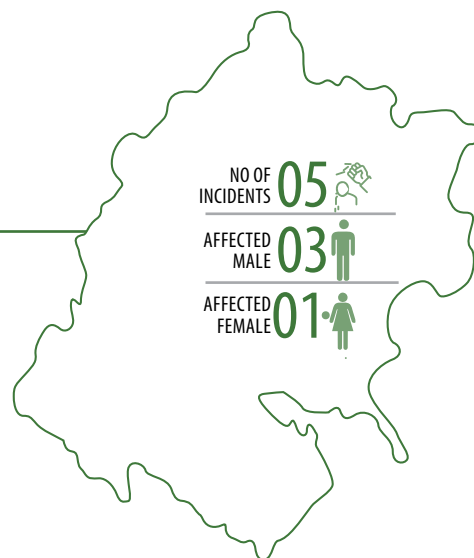
Journalist Singh sustained a serious injury in his forehead in the incident. He was then taken to the District Hospital Bajhang for treatment.

Bam further informed that the police had arrested three people and search for other attackers was continued. As the case is under investigation, motive of the attack was yet unknown, said representative Bam.

Reporter Singh filed a complaint at District Police Office, Bajhang on February 11.

B. A journalist with the Anumodan daily, Prakash Mishra, was attacked for his reporting on March 20 in Dhangadhi.

According to Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Min Bam, reporter Mishra was attacked over a news story. On March 17, news titled, "Mysterious Gathering of Foreign



Nationals in Simli Jungle of Kailali", was published in the daily in Mishra's byline.

Following this, business owners Dabal Bahadur Shah and Chet Bahadur Singh attacked reporter Mishra. Reporter Mishra received injuries in his hands.

According to representative Bam, Dabal Shah was arrested and police began searching for Chet Bahadur Singh.

MANHANDLE

Police persons manhandled Arju Hamal, news coordinator at dineshkhbar.com news media, while she was reporting in Dhangadhi on March 9.

Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Min Bam, reported that the police barred journalist Hamal from covering an event.

In a video shared by the journalist on a social media platform, Facebook, the police attempted to stop her from approaching the event site, citing security concerns. As she tried to enter the site to take photo and video of the program, the police officers manhandled her. Police officers on-duty also said that she was not allowed to take photos.

Journalist Hamal admitted in the video that she had not carried her press identity card while reporting. However, there should also be a female police officer, according to her.

Hamal later filed a complaint at the National Human Rights Commission, Dhangadhi, alleging police mistreatment on March 10. The Commission facilitated reconciliation among police persons and journalist.

IFEX calls on Nepal government to Revise punitive new Media Council and Social Media bills

The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) and its member organizations stand in solidarity with Freedom Forum, expressing concerns over the Media Council Bill and the Social Media Bill.

Both bills are currently under discussion in parliament. The Media Council Bill, which was approved by the National Assembly on February 10, was registered in the House of Representatives on February 11. It entered theoretical discussion among parliamentarians on February 25, leading to a decision allowing lawmakers to submit amendment proposals. Following this, 19 amendment proposals were submitted in the House. Freedom Forum asserts that the bill fails to replace the existing Press Council Nepal with a reliable and independent Media Council.

The Social Media Bill was tabled in the Upper House as the 'Social Network Bill, 2081' on January 28. It was later presented by Minister for Communication and Information Technology Prithvi Subba Gurung in the assembly on February 9. The assembly has decided to continue theoretical discussions on the bill.

Freedom Forum, along with national and international organizations, has been advocating for reforms in the bill, stating that it is more controlling than regulatory.

Full Joint Statement :

Signatories urge the government of Nepal and Parliament to refrain from developing and implementing legislation that empowers government with overreaching powers, including through overbroad and vague provisions that could be misused and abused to target activists, journalists, critics and other perceived opponents.

The alarming provisions in the proposed "Bill related to Operation, Use and Regulation of Social Media Nepal" (Social Media Bill) and the recently passed Media Council Bill in Nepal threaten to severely restrict the rights to

freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. Both bills must be immediately revised in consultation with civil society and other stakeholders to bring them in line with national and international human rights standards.

The registration of the Social Media Bill and passing of the Media Council Bill by parliament within weeks of each other raises serious concerns about the government's move to exert control over freedom of expression and access to information by imposing excessive regulations on social media platforms and the media. For example, the Social Media Bill's mandated registration and increased barriers to operations, as well as ordering a ban on companies that fail to comply, prevents users from engaging online thereby restricting the plurality and diversity of voices. These provisions have also been interpreted as an attempt to compel companies to share users' personal data, putting privacy rights at risk. These concerns are heightened by an objective in the bill to establish a government body to oversee and manage autonomous institutions, such as the Nepal Telecom Authority, mimicking what the Media Council Bill has sought to do.

The new Media Council Bill replaces the existing Press Council responsible for upholding the standards of free press with the Media Council, a new regulatory body to monitor conduct, advise on policy, and ensure compliance with ethics in Nepal's media. This could threaten journalistic freedom as a provision in the bill for a government-appointed chairperson to lead the council has exacerbated concerns about government influence over independent media. Given the Social Media Bill could also restrict channels used by the press to express and share information in a quick and accessible way, this will have broader consequences for media freedom writ large.

Additionally, the Media Council Bill aims to make "digital, online and print journalism

more decent, accountable and credible", sparking worries that independent media could be curtailed and journalists put at risk of being targeted through vague and subjective terms. Similarly, there are concerns around the Social Media Bill regarding lack of clarity in defining social media; overbroad definitions of terms, such as "cyberbullying"; and ambiguous language, such as "sovereignty" and "national security". The bill could lead to broad and subjective interpretations of the law that excessively criminalises sharing or reposting content if it is deemed to be offensive. Harsh penalties include jail terms of up to five years and fines up to 1.5 million Nepalese rupees (approx. US \$10,500). A healthy democracy requires the freedom to express dissent and by targeting critical voices, both bills risk instilling a culture of fear and self-censorship among users – with grave implications for civic space and media freedom in the country.

Provisions in the Social Media Bill that have reportedly drawn on restrictive digital laws from neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh and India, reflects the larger, burgeoning trend among States to develop overbroad and harsh legislation targeting freedom of expression – often without open and public consultation. The lack of public consultation with stakeholders on the Social Media Bill, including civil society and press federations, raises alarms that it could be used to target activists, journalists, critics, and others exercising their rights to free expression online and violating their rights to privacy. In contrast, stakeholder interactions held on the Media Council Bill were critical to repealing harsher provisions such as mandatory licensing and licensing examinations for journalists, and penalties of up to one million Nepalese rupees (approx. US \$7,000) in fines and up to 15 years' imprisonment for publishing offensive content or content considered to be undermining the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and nationality of Nepal. While improvements to the Media Council Bill are still needed, there is clear value to including civil society and other stakeholders. Without a broad and transparent consultative process with diverse stakeholders, including those from vulnerable

and marginalised groups, the bill could become yet another tool that contributes to an already challenging global environment for freedom of expression, media freedom and civic space.

The above-mentioned provisions of both bills contravene obligations in the Constitution of Nepal, which guarantee freedom of opinion and expression under Article 17(2)(a); the right to communication, including the freedom of various means of communication and prohibition of censorship on published, broadcasted, and disseminated materials under Article 19; the right to information, and to not be compelled to provide confidential information, under Article 27; and the right to privacy of a person, including their data, under Article 28. It would also violate Nepal's international obligations to uphold Article 17 on the right to privacy and Article 19 on freedom of opinion and expression of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. During its third Universal Periodic Review (A/HRC/47/10) in 2021, Nepal accepted recommendations (A/HRC/47/10/Add.1) to revise local legislation on media and information technology (159.73) and to uphold respect for freedom of expression and the right to privacy, including in draft legislation regulating information technology, media and mass communications (159.104). In revising the bills, it is critical the government of Nepal adheres to their obligations and implements the recommendations to ensure a healthy democracy that protects and promotes the rights to free expression, information, and privacy, among other fundamental human rights.

Thus, we urge the Government of Nepal and Parliament to:

1. Withdraw and revise the “Bill related to Operation, Use and Regulation of Social Media Nepal” in line with human rights standards,

and conduct a meaningful, participatory, and transparent consultative process with civil society and other relevant stakeholders, including those from vulnerable and marginalised groups;

2. Amend the Media Council Bill to ensure it has a balanced structure by including a Chairperson with a judicial background, experts and representatives from the media sector, and representatives from media consumers as members;

3. Ensure provisions in the Social Media Bill are necessary and proportionate by establishing reasonable regulations for social media platforms that protect citizens while safeguarding the rights to freedom of expression and privacy;

4. Refrain from developing and implementing legislation that empowers government with overreaching powers, including through overbroad and vague provisions that could be misused and abused to target activists, journalists, critics and other perceived opponents for exercising their rights to free expression and information online and offline; and

5. Uphold Nepal's international human rights obligations to protect and promote the rights to privacy under Article 17 and freedom of expression and information under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Resources on Media Council Bill:

<https://freedomforum.org.np/amend-media-council-bill/>
<https://freedomforum.org.np/concerns-on-media-council-bill/>
<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/04/28/government-retains-disputed-provisions-in-new-media-council-bill>

<https://rsf.org/en/nepal-rsf-s-recommendations-amend-controversial-media-council-bill>

Signatories

- Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC)
- Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)
- Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS)
- Association of Caribbean Media Workers
- Belarusian Association of Journalists
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
- Cartoonists Rights
- Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR)
- Centre for Media and Society (CEMESO)
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- Freedom Forum
- Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI)
- Globe International Center
- IFoX / Initiative for Freedom of Expression- Turkey
- Index on Censorship
- International Press Centre (IPC)
- International Press Institute (IPI)
- Mediacentar Sarajevo
- Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)
- Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA)
- Media Watch
- Mizzima News
- OpenMedia
- Pakistan Press Foundation
- Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM)
- South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO)

Source: <https://ifex.org/nepalese-government-called-on-to-revise-punitive-new-media-council-and-social-media-bills/>

Arrest over symbolic protest, release after concern



Nepal police arrested Nirajan Bam, leader of a youth wing of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, for torching a political leader's photo on March 16. Bam torched a portrait of CPN-Maoist Chairperson Pushpa Kamal Dahal during the district convention of the organization in Hetauda on March 15. He set the portrait on fire as a symbolic protest against Dahal's recent statement. The police arrested Bam from Chitwan and brought to Hetauda.

Freedom Forum's representative for the province Ram Mani Dahal informed that Bam was released following a discussion among police persons and district administration authority in the presence of Chief District Officer, Scheme Shrestha.

Freedom Forum is concerned over the incident. “Bam's act was a form of symbolic protest. His arrest violates the citizens' right to peaceful protest,” argued FF's Chief Executive, Taranath Dahal.

FF concern on AI Policy draft

Freedom Forum welcomed the National Artificial Intelligence Policy (draft), 2025 unveiled by the government. Releasing the policy draft, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (https://giwmscdnone.gov.np/media/pdf_upload/National%20AI%20Policy%20Draft_xndq2m.pdf) had sought suggestions and comments from the public on the policy draft, giving only a week's time from February 4, 2025.

The 18-page policy draft had 17 points including the past initiatives on IT and digital development to the present needs, challenges, and potentials surrounding IT and AI.

In the section 'Need of AI Policy (2.4),' it had stated, "AI would be applied in various sectors to augment research and development, improve governance

and public service, create new commercial opportunities, promote innovation, and minimize the risks associated with AI by its regulation."

Similarly, in its Goal, the policy document stated: "To increase AI's contribution to the gross domestic products, innovation and industrial promotion, and strengthening of existing mechanisms through sectoral coordination and cooperation."

FF believed the policy- the first of its kind- brought by the government would be helpful to lay foundation for modern technological development and create opportunity to reap benefit from AI.

FF Executive Chief Taranath Dahal observed, "AI governing mechanism should be wider, rather than limiting it to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology as it is a multi-stakeholder issue, requiring

diverse expertise and cooperation. Similarly, transparent, ethical and responsible use of AI is essential to ensure human rights friendly-AI."

He also stressed the need for adequate discussions on the document to find additional issues so that it would be more comprehensive and acceptable.

With this, FF had requested the government to extend the deadline of a week for feedback submission because it was very short to study and make proper suggestions for correction. FF asked the government for at least a month for it.

Also, the civil society, science and education community, academia, technologists, media, and stakeholders were requested to provide feedback on the document to make it more comprehensive. 🌱

Artistic freedom violated

The Central Board of Film Censor restricted the use of a content in the movie Rajaganj before its release. The board granted the movie a permission certificate after removing the scenes that contained statements by a political leader- now the head of the government. The film was officially released on March 14.

On March 10, the board issued a notice stating that scenes and dialogues involving the Prime Minister must be removed in order to obtain a release certificate. The scene featured a ten seconds long speech of PM given ten years ago. The board also ordered the film team to remove the words "Prime Minister," "India," and "Bharat" from the dialogues in the film.

According to the director of the film, Deepak Rauniyar, many scenes were removed and left blank. However,



the film's duration is not shortened. Some dialogues are muted, so the audience will understand that those scenes have been censored. He added that the board even asked the team to get permission from the Prime Minister's office to play those scenes.

The video of PM is however publicly available on the internet and was used in the film without edits.

Earlier on February 19, the board censored few scenes of film 'Tandavam', citing violent scenes before its release. The film was then, released after removing those scenes on February 21.

"This move by the censor board is an absolute violation of free expression and artistic freedom. Authorities should understand that the films are fictional stories reflecting the issues of society we live in," said Taranath Dahal, Executive Chief of Freedom Forum. 🌱

Orientation on FoE mechanisms in provinces

The members of province mechanisms for protection and promotion of Freedom of Expression (FoE) and Journalists' Safety were provided orientations on FoE and roles and responsibilities of the mechanism as part of the capacity building.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) conducted orientations to the mechanisms in Madhesh, Bagmati, Gandaki and Lumbini Provinces. The orientations were jointly held for the mechanisms of Gandaki and Lumbini Provinces in the Pokhara city and for mechanisms of Madhesh and Bagmati Provinces in the Hetauda city.

On March 21, NHRC Gandaki and Lumbini province offices jointly held the orientation in Pokhara. In the program chaired by NHRC Secretary Murari Prasad Kharel, NHRC Gandaki Province Chief Nitu Gartaula gave a welcome remark.

Similarly, on March 23, NHRC Madhesh and Bagmati province offices jointly conducted orientation to the mechanisms in respective provinces in Hetauda. NHRC Bagmati Province Chief Pawan Bhatta delivered his welcome remarks in Hetauda.

Following welcome remarks in both events, Joint Secretary at NHRC central office and coordinator of the mechanisms Yagya Prasad

Adhikari described why and how the mechanism was formed and what were its challenges. He also shared international practices in Mexico and Columbia about the formation and operation of similar mechanisms.

"As journalists are the frontline human rights defenders and practitioners of free expression, they face various threats and thus, safety mechanism is focused on their protection in addition to the citizens", Joint Secretary Adhikari underscored, "The mechanism is formed based on the 'Directive for Formation and Work Procedure for Safety Mechanism on Protection of FoE, 2019' which was first amended in 2024 provisioning provincial level mechanisms/task force." He further highlighted that the Directive aligned with the features of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)'s Article 17 and 19. However, the NHRC is facing financial constraints to smoothly operate the committee and mechanisms. He also acknowledged Freedom Forum's support to the operationalization of mechanism and activities.

"Though the mechanism has not been allocated a separate budget, the NHRC looks forward to suggestions and support from the stakeholders for its smooth functioning and formation of the district networks as well", Joint Secretary Adhikari shared.

Seconding Joint Secretary Adhikari, Freedom Forum's Executive Chief Taranath Dahal stated that with the realization of the need for collaborative action for journalists' rights and safety, this mechanism was mulled especially after the end of conflict in Nepal. He referenced the UNESCO's UN Plan of Action for safety of journalists as a guiding principle for this initiative. Freedom Forum has been providing FoE violation data to the NHRC. In the previous years, physical attacks were more, but cyber attacks are on the rise nowadays. There are challenges to FoE from policy to practice.

Vagueness of digital sphere is creating trouble, requiring much media/ digital literacy. Thus, the state should own up this instrument and internal capacity building of the mechanism and human rights defenders is equally important, Executive Chief Dahal marked.

Thereafter, NHRC Lumbini Province Chief Hari Parasad Gyawali shared his presentation about the meetings held by the province mechanism and challenges faced for its continuation. Major challenges were:

- Scattered and distant locations of member organizations, financial difficulties, etc.
- No separate budget allocated for functioning of the mechanism
- Transfer of the members of mechanism to different offices/ ministries, thereby affecting institutionalization of the mechanism's activities



For its sustainability, he stressed regular meetings; regular monitoring; periodic orientation to the members and other concerned stakeholders; preparation and issuance of public quarterly report of the mechanism works.

Seconding Gyawali, Gandaki Province Chief Nitu Gartaula presented on Gandaki Province mechanism's activities. She pointed out major problems in smooth functioning of the mechanism at the province.

According to her, collaborative working modality among members especially in monitoring/ issuing press release on violation of press freedom should be redefined. In some cases, journalists should also follow the code of conduct to avoid conflict. Investigation power of NHRC must not be duplicated and displaced by investigation mechanism under the Directive. She also expressed concern over budget constraint for efficient operation of mechanism.

Further, Bagmati Province Chief Pawan Bhatta shared his presentation on status of FoE in the province and way forward for its protection and promotion. Chief Bhatta described the noted incidents of FoE violation in the province and said that in some cases violations go unnoticed and some end with reconciliation.

According to Bhatta and members, challenges in functioning of mechanism Bagmati Province are: lack of clear understanding about the directive and mechanism among members; difficulty in cooperation and coordination due to frequent transfer of the members and financial challenges to continue meetings and field visits.

He suggested to have a member secretary to the mechanism's for efficient functioning; periodic orientation and training to the members on

their duties and responsibilities; no duplication with other existing mechanisms in the NHRC.

Moreover, Media Monitoring Officer at Freedom Forum (FF), Nanu Maiya Khadka, presented on how FoE and journalists rights were monitored and verified by FF, what were the challenges and way forward for effective monitoring which would support the NHRC mechanism.

She also shared data for violation of press freedom and FoE recorded at FF and the mechanism's contribution to ensure justice to victims in the violation cases. She emphasized that investigative journalists were targeted in most cases, and censorship on digital platforms was the biggest challenge for FoE in coming days.

Members of the mechanisms and concerned stakeholders expressed their commitment to actively participate in the meetings and cooperate among themselves to protect FoE in their respective provinces.

Participants from both the provinces discussed:

- Proper resource mobilization is important for sustainability of the mechanisms,
- Present challenge in FoE is major political parties targeting media, public distrust in media,
- Journalists violating professional ethics,
- Growing censorship and syndicate in journalism leading to the missing out of anti-press incidents from the sight of mechanism, so expansion of taskforce at district level is imperative.
- Nepal Police's commitment to FoE, Right to Information and human rights.
- The High Court Bar's cooperation with lawyers to plead for journalists for free of cost in case of need.
- Mechanism members' institutional memory sought to facilitate knowledge transfer after their transfer or appointment,

- Journalists' and citizen's rights are at stake when there is political instability, so active functioning and visibility of mechanism is essential

Joint Secretary Adhikari addressed the concerns of the participants and said that the mechanism was at initial phase of operation so suggestion from all was expected. "Regarding financial challenges, we can adopt a cost effective method while enforcing activities under the Directive such as conducting meetings through online medium, swift communication among members through messaging applications and NHRC province Offices' active role in coordination among members," he reminded.

In the concluding session of the programs, NHRC's Secretary Murari Prasad Kharel said that the concept of mechanism is a value add to NHRC's work. "Security of information, security of media equipment and employment are also important to ensure FoE and journalists' safety. Collective ownership from all sectors is needed for effective functioning of the mechanisms at all levels," he stressed.

He suggested that the mechanism should work not only in a reactive way but also in a proactive way so that it can function as a watchdog, for instance- review of the policies, regular monitoring of FoE and journalists' safety in provinces can also be mulled by it. Secretary Kharel called upon all the participants to actively participate in regular meetings, even utilizing digital medium if required. The members should clearly understand the provisions in the Directive and jurisdiction of the mechanism.

Lastly, Secretary Kharel vowed to make the mechanism effective because, he argued, it was an example of the integrated approach of FoE protection and journalists' safety. 🌿



Performance audit Survey on waste management in industrial area

Freedom Forum (FF) conducted performance audit survey on waste management in the industrial areas and handed over the findings and survey reports to the Performance Audit Directorate of the Office of the Auditor General Nepal (OAGN) on March 5. This is a part of the Citizen Participation in Audit (CPA) initiative of the OAGN. The survey was conducted based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between FF and OAGN on December 29, 2023, for participation in the performance audit for the fiscal year 2081/82 BS.

FF's surveyors were engaged in data collection for the survey titled "Waste Management of Industrial Areas in Nepal." This round of CPA focused on Bhaktapur and Lalitpur industrial areas in the Kathmandu Valley. Using

a questionnaire provided by the Office of the Auditor General, responses were gathered from both the Industrial Area Management offices and industries operating within the designated industrial zones.

The survey covered the entire process from waste production to management and disposal, examining the roles of various stakeholders responsible for waste management. It documented both the findings and the concerns raised by industries and management offices. Additional observations beyond the questionnaire were compiled in a separate report, which was also submitted to OAGN.

Four surveyors—Subash Dahal, Nanu Maiya Khadka, Aruna Adhikari, and Manju Dahal—

from Freedom Forum participated in this audit, engaging in field surveys, discussions, and evidence collection.

FF is a leading civil society organization (CSO) promoting the CPA initiative and has collaborated with OAGN on performance audits for the past five years. The organization has trained over 95 citizen auditors across Nepal and established a national network of Citizen Auditors.

As in previous years, four surveyors also represented Freedom Forum in last year's performance audit under a similar survey on government's health insurance program. FF continues to actively support OAGN's CPA initiative and remains committed to advocating for greater citizen participation in audits. 🌱



Photo: Onlinekhabar.com

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	Taranath Dahal: Executive Chief, coordinates overall organizational and administrative affairs		
	Aruna Adhikari: Finance and Administration Officer, looks after accounting and administrative affairs and performs responsibilities as the Information Officer.		
	Nanu Maiya Khadka: Media Monitoring Officer, responsible for monitoring updates on freedom of expression, media rights and right to information		
	Aditya Dahal: RTI App and website operator		
	Manju Dahal: Front Desk Assistant, Ganga Kumari Gurung: Office Assistant		
Roster of Consultants/ Researchers	Krishna Sapkota, Narayan Ghimire, Subash Dahal		
Ongoing Project Information	Project Name	Supporting Agency	Date of start of project
	COAB Initiative (Collaboration for Open and Accountable Budgeting)	International Budget Partnership	21 st April 2024
	Enabling Safety of Journalist (ESAJ)	UNESCO (Global Media Defense Fund)	7 th May 2024
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	Chairperson: Hari Binod Adhikari, Executive Chief: Tara Nath Dahal		
Decision Making Process	General Assembly: Making policies, rules and regulations of organization Executive committee: Formulation of action plans as per constitution of organization, rules and regulation Management team: Running projects and daily operational affairs and reporting timely to the Executive Committee.		
Past/Current Activities	Please follow the link: http://freedomforum.org.np/content/category/activities/		
Information Officer	Aruna Adhikari		
Financial Information	Freedom Forum received grants announcing Rs. 14,60,913 (January to March 2025)		
Official Website	www.freedomforum.org.np		
Publications of Freedom Forum	Freedom Forum has over 50 Publications (printed) Please Follow the Link: http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/		
Annual Report	http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/reports/annual-reports/		
Information Dissemination	Websites- http://www.freedomforum.org.np/ ; www.nepalpressfreedom.org , and Newsletter-Free Expression		

Situational awareness: A guide for journalists

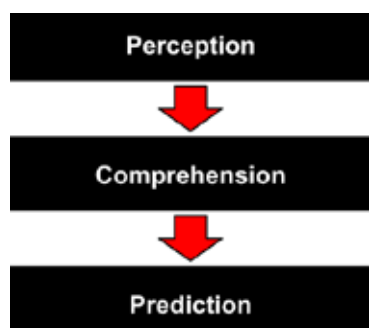
When talking about journalist safety, security measures such as filling out a risk assessment, completing hostile environment awareness training (HEFAT), or using personal protective equipment (PPE) are often the first things to come to mind. However, one of the most important security measures in a journalist's toolbox is the ability to maintain situational awareness and to remove yourself from harm's way in advance of a threat.

Global
Watch

This guide is intended for journalists and editors to refer to while planning assignments and reporting. Read on to understand more about what situational awareness is, why it's important, and how situational awareness can be best used while reporting. For additional information on how to safely cover protests, please see CPJ's safety videos.

What is situational awareness and why is it important?

Situational awareness means being conscious of what is happening around you, how this does or could impact you, and what is likely to happen next.



A camera operator films a demonstration denouncing the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in Ankara, Turkey, on May 15, 2018. (Photo by Adem Altan / AFP)

Attention to your surroundings is the foundation for any effective decision-making. It enables you to recognize patterns and take the correct actions toward an intended outcome, or preventative actions to avoid negative consequences.

For example, if you are covering a demonstration, your risk assessment should identify where a threat could come from and what your exit strategy is. However, as you become immersed in reporting, recording, or filming, it is easy to miss or fail to notice potential dangers as they become a reality.

If you see signs of a demonstration turning violent and you know that the police are likely to use tear gas as a crowd control measure, be conscious about the direction of the wind and reposition yourself as necessary. Similarly, if you are going to be reporting in an area with

a history of anti-press sentiment or behavior by local militias, your risk assessment should cover who these actors are, their capabilities and mode of conduct, and how to identify them, as well as an understanding of local gun restrictions and laws. Once on the ground, be vigilant of your surroundings and how people are reacting to your presence. Keep an eye out for any signs of physical surveillance such as being followed, people looking at you when using their mobile phone (they could be talking about you and reporting on your activities), or people in general taking an unusual interest in you. Contact law enforcement if you feel unsafe or believe you are in immediate danger.

Intentionally acknowledging and reacting to risk is easier said than done. 🌱

Source: <https://cpj.org/2023/07/situational-awareness-a-guide-for-journalists/>

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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