

Press Freedom at Receiving End of Political Instability

Compared to the last year, this year (1 May 2012- April 30, 2013) witnessed an upsurge in press freedom violations and incidents against freedom of expression. Freedom Forum has recorded a total of 131 press freedom violation during this monitoring period.

As was in the past, journalists and media outlets were at the receiving end *vis a vis* political turmoil. Significant this time was- tumultuous beginning (May 2012) and the same in the beginning of New Year (January 2013) in Nepali media. Broadly speaking, these two times- the eve of the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (May 27, 2012) and the arrest of the murder-accused of journalist Dekendra Thapa (January 2013) were dominant in media landscape.

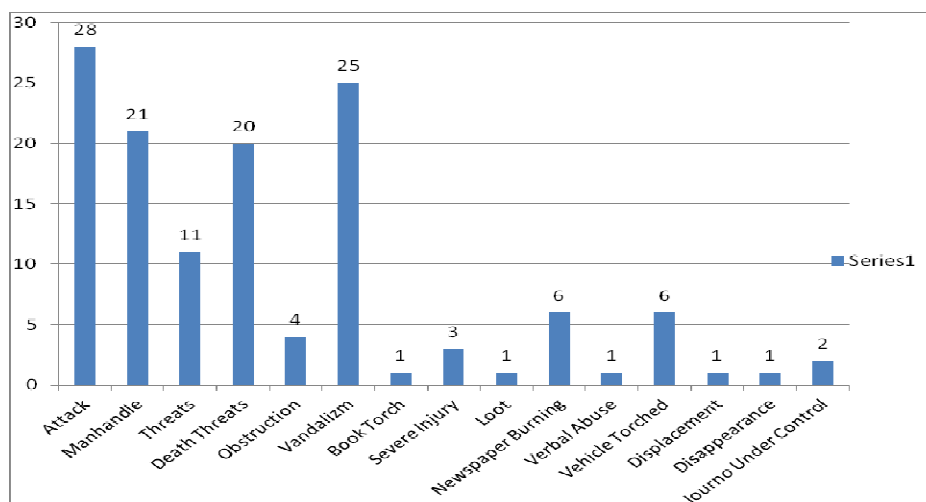
The ruling Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) took centre stage by suppressing citizen's right to information and freedom of expression thereby befouling free and fair atmosphere for the journalists to make news.

In different places, with the misuse of political power, media persons were badly assaulted by the Maoist party cadres leaving them seriously injured.

Whether with a lure by providing assistance to media persons and media outlets and association loyal to the ruling parties, or trying to revise media policy or with strong objection to media reports, the government led by the UCPN-Maoist made utmost efforts to control media.

Besides political parties, security person, government officials, businessmen, ethnic community and leaders, cine artist, unknown gang were others intimidating to Nepali media with frequent attack, threat, death threats, manhandle, vandalism, newspaper burning.

Press Freedom Violation during this year (May 2012-April 2013)



Some important incidents of this year:

- A. Unprecedented Attack on Media:** In the two weeks from May 8 to 24, 2012, Nepali media faced unprecedented attack. During the two weeks, a total of 88 press violation occurred in the country. It was because of the eve to the dissolution of Constituent Assembly. May 20-22 were really black days in media. Journalists received flurry of threats and attacks during these days. Two journalists were severely injured during the demonstrations of different ethnic groups and associations organized in this period in the capital city.
- B. Mass Displacement of Journalists:** On January 24, 2013, as many as 22 journalists left Dailekh, a far western district, for Surkhet, reasoning they were facing constant threats to life by the Maoist party cadres after they reported on the investigation over the murderers of journalist Dekendra Thapa in the district.
- C. Disappearance, whereabouts still unknown:** Madan Poudel, a radio journalist from Kanchanja, a mountainous district in the northern east of Nepal has been missing since September 16, 2012 while attending a program for reporting. The whereabouts is still unknown.
- D. Maoist Party Cadres Assault Journalists before PM:** The cadres of ruling UCPN-Maoist assaulted a dozen of journalists at its program attended by party Vice-Chairman and then Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai in Kavre, a neighbouring district of the capital city, on 28 January 2013.

F. Impunity Watch- Welcome deeds: The punishments meted out as per the law on the perpetrators are the welcome deed in Nepali media. During the monitoring over a year, the perpetrators involved in serious violation of press freedom- killing journalists- were brought to book and awarded imprisonment.

- i. On April 22, 2013, the District Court Morang sentenced Manoj Rai to five years in prison while Rohit Koirala to six months for assaulting Khilnath Dhakal, reporter with the Nagarik daily, from Biratnagar. The duo had mercilessly attacked Dhakal on June 5, 2011, over a news report by him.
- ii. Similarly, Jhapa District Court on February 25, 2013 delivered a verdict awarding life imprisonment with confiscation of all properties to Yuvraj Giri, the main accused behind the murder of journalist Yadav Poudel, reporter with the Rajdhani daily and the Avenues Television. Other accomplices as Phul Maya Karki (Manju) were slapped three-year imprisonment while her husband Somnath Dhakal one year and Madan Rai six months.
- iii. Finally, the district attorney of Dailekha on January 28, 2013 filed a murder case against nine district cadres and leaders of the Maoists parties (ruling UCPN-Maoist, and breakaway faction CPN-Maoist) in the district court Dailekh following the due investigation and establishing proofs on their involvement in the murder of journalist Dekendra Thapa. Those filed cases against are- Lachhiram Ghartimagar,

45, of Dwari-1, Nirak Bahadur Ghartimagar,41, of Baluwatar-9, Bir Bahadur KC,42, of Baluwatar-4, Hari Lal Punmagar,49, of Dwari-3, Jay Bahadur Shahi of Raniban-1, Bam Bahadur Khadka Arun and Keshav Khadka of Chhiudipusakot-1, Bam Bahadur Khadka Mukti of Katti-1 and Baktiram Lamichhane of Dwari-1.

In addition to this, government led by the Maoist party frequently made attempts to suppress the freedom of expression sometime by appointing party favourites and sometime appointing ineligible person in different information and media related bodies.

No new policies in favour of press freedom were introduced this year.

As about the **new trends** this year in Nepal media, the emergence of associations and groups advocating merely for some indigenous people or particular ethnic community was really threatening to media freedom. It was witnessed well on the eve of dissolution of the CA. Next, even the cine artists have emerged intimidating media Cinema, despite being one of the medium of free expression, created hostility to another medium of express-media. It is a matter to know the reality about. Similarly, bigger political crisis was another condition that put the media freedom to corner. The rising number of press freedom violation (there were only 96 incidents of press freedom violation during the same monitoring period) is the proof of this.

Analyzing these incidents and events over this monitoring period, it is fair to say the situation of press freedom was dissatisfying.

