

Media at Receiving End of Political Protest

BACKGROUND

Freedom Forum has repeatedly made the projections in its media reports that the growing protests and demonstrations triggered by political parties and their activities/decisions results in growing attacks on media and journalists. It was so in case of the Far West Province of Nepal. When the Far West Province declared its capital to be placed at Godawari municipality, it created immediate uproar. Many commoners and environment conservationists stood against government's decision to place the province capital at Godawari, arguing that it was not wise to locate province capital at Godawari because it would destroy huge stretch of forest. It was the matter carried by media. Another context is more harrowing- a teenage girl was raped and killed in Kanchanpur, a district in the province, but the crime remained in mystery for long questioning police and administration's various levels of investigations. It created huge confusion and uncertainty among journalists. Difficulty to reach credible source of news on the one hand and the suppression of public protest against the murder of teenage girl and subsequent attack on media persons on the other left journalists in chaos. National level newspapers were burnt and their circulation obstructed. Media persons braved baton charge of police persons. Self-censorship mounted. In view of the hostile situation, FF had suggested the stingers and media persons how they could remain safe during protest.

With this in the background, FF conducted the second round of five-day media mission for this year from October 26 to October 31.

During the mission, the members met with wider stakeholders- media organizations and officials, human rights activists, security persons and commoners and sought their views on the current media landscape in the province. The issues as journalists' rights and impunity relating to crimes against journalists were focused during the interaction.

Kailali district

There are some two dozens of FM radios, 20 dailies and 10 weeklies. Some of these though registered were not regularly operative.

An active journalist said there are some 500 journalists in the district but all are not affiliated to the Federation of Nepali Journalists.

INTERACTION

The interaction for the media mission was held with prominent figures of Far-west who are actively working in the field of human right and democracy in that region. Their views are presented here in this report that tries to reflect a clear scenario of Freedom of expression in Province 7 of Nepal.

1. Jhanka Bahadur Rawal, Chief, National Human Rights Commission, Regional Office

We are also monitoring the press freedom. It was sheer violation of press freedom that newspapers were burnt, but the government failed to take action against the assailants. Not allowing journalists to take photo was also the press freedom violation. Journalists' access to news source was denied during the rape and murder of Nirmala Panta.

But it is worrying that journalists are divided to political fronts that obviously hampers professionalism and creates self-censorship.

NHTV is also holding interaction with security person on who the journalists could be safe.

When the local levels and provincial government formulate laws and policies, they must not breach the freedom of expression and information.

"It is worrying that journalists are divided to political fronts that obviously hampers professionalism and creates self-censorship"

2. Nabaraj Paneru, Station Manager, Dinesh FM, Dhangadhi

Currently, journalists are facing hard times to carry on their works. They are suffering from fear and threat. Independent journalism is therefore challenged. Journalist at Dines FM, Nabaraj Dhanuk, was manhandled for airing a program named 'hot debate'. The persons manhandling Dhanuk are not censured.

Journalists faced tough time, were plagued with fear while collecting news on Nirmala's rape and murder case.

Media organizations as Federation of Nepali Journalists must be aware to protect journalists' rights.

3. Umid Bagchanda, senior journalist, former vice-chair, FNJ Center

Practicing journalism in the far west of Nepal has been a risky job. Although we've asked provincial and local governments to prepare media guideline, they have not prepared yet. In the guideline, they can mention how they could behave with journalists and ensure them safety. But, the governments have not made any efforts to this regard.

Suspicion is rife that the media professionalism was getting deteriorated as the journalists have begun working as advisors at various levels of government. It has signaled that government would control the media by using it for publicity and suppressing in

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case of irregularities.

Journalists began afraid of government when they wrote for wildlife conservation and criticized province government's decision to locate province capital at Godawari. Government took criticism as protest but not as suggestions.

The media organizations, without any bias, must begin working for journalists' safety.

No objection of burning newspaper by the province government contributed to mounting fear to the journalists.

4. Dirgharaj Upadhyay, Editor and Manager, Paschim Today daily and Paschim Today FM Radio

Situation of media and journalists here is disappointing. Everyone knows who the murderers of JP Joshi are but they are never arrested. Journalists are working with mounting fear, thereby putting life and profession in risk.

If a journalist writes in favour of government, it is ok. But if the news is written fairly, the journalists affiliated to the government threaten the fellow journalists. Those in the government have divided the journalists in two groups- for and against.

"Current activities of government have shown that the more stable the government the more hostile it is to media"

The arrogance of two-thirds majority of the government has led to biasness toward press. The Civil Code has risked individual privacy.

Government was intolerant towards media when they criticized its decision to place provincial capital at Godawari.

Many lawmakers at province are controlled by the interest of particular party lawmaker regarding the location of province capital.

Journalists here have no courage to write about tax, income of temple, and corruption on school and at local level.

Civil society, government, media organization and human rights institutions must work together to protect FoE and journalists' rights and end impunity for crimes against journalists.

Current activities of government have shown that the more stable the government the more hostile it is to media.

5. Baburam Rijal, Legal Practitioner

None can breach the free press. If the free press is suppressed, constitution is invoked to restore journalists' rights. Federalism must protect FoE and the various layers of government need to recognize the role of media.

6. Jagat Saud, Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists, Kailali Chapter

There is tremendous threat to journalists to carry out fair reporting. The recent Civil Code has created mounting threat to journalists' safety.

Although the central government has made some amendment in the Code, the journalists here are threatened citing the Civil Code.

The province government neither has their own rule nor have an act. Impunity is rising. Administration has failed to arrest the criminals. Those assailing local journalists Laxmi Joshi and Lokendra Bista are yet to be identified. There is huge threat from political level and the criminals.

The recent Civil Code has created mounting threat to journalists' safety."

Freedom Forum also needs to give us training to boost skills and safety.

7. Surat Rawat, Journalist and artist

Journalism is facing risk here. Healthy criticism is the ornament of democracy. So, the criticism must be taken positively. Collaboration among journalists and government is imperative for journalists' safety.

8. Tirthraj Pandey, Teacher and cultural artist

As the media is facing threat, the media organizations need to pay attention to it.

9. Ganesh Nepali, Intellectual

Intellectuals are always for the FoE. Journalists too need to work in an impartial manner.

Kanchanpur district

There are a dozens of FM radios, eight dailies and half dozens of weekly. Some 200 journalists are working actively here.

The media here frequently questioned the investigation over the rape and murder of Nirmala Panta. Till the preparation of this report, no murderer has been identified by the security body and administration. Despite the media pointed out the need of fair investigation, the journalists were attacked. Rather, even the central member of the ruling party had made a public comment that the rape and murder of Nirmala Panta was unnecessarily exaggerated. Those assailing journalists are also not arrested.

The media community here is of the view that if the government had investigated the incident as per the news carried by media, the criminals behind the crime would not have let off the hook.

10. Chitranga Thapa, Senior journalists, Bureau Chief of Kantipur daily

We've been suffering from self censorship. Major national dailies including Kantipur were torched reasoning the news on provincial government's decision of the province capital. The issues of province capital and Nirmala's murder created much fear among journalists- whether to write fact or suffer self-censorship.

"Lately, social media have been easy medium to threaten and speak foul on journalists"

Although those torching the newspaper were said to be arrested, they were later released immediately without any action. They have not been identified. It is also not sure upon whose recommendation they were released. Rather we, journalists are asked to condone them.

Media had not protested against government's decision on province capital, but made aware that the forest at Godawari was of global value in terms of wildlife and biodiversity.

Lately, social media have been easy medium to threaten and speak foul on journalists.

In Nirmala's murder case, media's suggestion was not heeded by the security.

Journalists themselves are against journalists, which is a terrible trend.

Media organizations must support for ensuring safety to journalists.

Provincial law is also required to protect media and journalists.

11. Mohan Budha Air, Journalist

Smooth coordination among journalists is equally important to make this profession safe.

12. Arjun Saha, Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalist, Far Western Province

Both media persons and journalism are in risk in this province. Journalism is influenced by particular interest and biasness. There is huge section that is demanding news/journalism in its favor.

There are very few stories on corruption. None cares professional journalism. Journalism has dwindling image on civil society.

"Attacks on media for writing on social aberration are continued unabated."

As the issue of province capital has reached the court, there is no news on it for now.

Attacks on media for writing on social aberration are continued unabated.

Government can be forced to work for ending impunity once the civil society and journalists come together and create pressure. Adherence to code by journalists also helps decrease attack on media.

CONCLUSION

With the discussion held with the above representatives, following conclusion has been drawn by the mission-

- In the provincial capital, journalists are worried both about risk and self practice that is against professionalism
- Leading journalists and human rights institute argue that journalists themselves do not abide by code
- Media professionalism and integrity is eroding because the journalists are working as aides to local and federal governments. With this, journalists impose biased views on news or decry the news of opposition. It has resulted in a situation that journalists are divided- for and against particular political party/ leader and government activity.
- Despite the formation of governments at local and provincial levels, the national level media carries much significance.
- The governments at local and provincial levels were getting autocratic because of feeble presence of opposition. Governments are becoming intolerant to criticism.
- Local newspapers were found using contents from national media even without giving credit.
- The qualm in the journalists showed that they would gradually quit the profession.
- Journalists were speaking foul on fellow journalists on social networking sites, it indicates disharmony.
- However, almost all journalists were expecting cooperation from the central level from the media organizations as Freedom Forum.

(The media mission had the members- FF Chairperson Hari Binod Adhikari, Far West Bureau Chief of the Kantipur daily, Chitranga Thapa, senior journalist and former chairperson of Kailali district chapter of Federation of Nepali Journalists, Dirgharaj Upadhyay.)