



FreeExpression

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A NEWSLETTER OF FREEDOM FORUM

Intolerance towards media, Info seekers on rise

Press freedom is an essential pillar of a democratic system. Government and public agencies are obliged to protect and promote free press so that their activities are ensured transparent and accountable to the people. As long as the public agencies and public officials are tolerant to free press, the media can play a vital role in bolstering democracy. In addition to informing public, the media plays a watchdog role and exposes malpractices of governance, thereby giving opportunities to the public officials to correct their behaviour and maintain good governance. Similarly, the right to information (RTI) is another equally significant right that has been an effective tool to help ensure good governance. Across the country, there are tens of hundreds of RTI campaigners, seeking information at public offices and bringing to fore the financial irregularities and corruption, which have taken a toll on good governance and public service delivery. Both press freedom and RTI are constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights in Nepal.

However, the government in recent times showed utmost intolerance to the media and RTI campaigners. The country witnessed two untoward incidents in which a critical media entrepreneur and RTI campaigners were harassed by the government. These stories paint a grim picture of growing intolerance to media freedom and RTI regime. The safety of RTI campaigners has emerged as a prominent issue of late. The concerned sides need more collaboration to ensure safety to information seekers. The information seekers in the Kathmandu Valley were detained for 10 days without any wrongdoing but for mere information seeking at a local level. The police arrested them and detained for 10 days. They were finally released with the court order that saw no ground to forward a case and continue detention. In a similar line, media baron Kailash Shirohiya, Chairman of Kantipur Media Group, was arrested by the police from

Provincial Networks in Action

With the formation of the provincial networks/mechanism in all provinces, the groups are holding meetings and discussing safety of journalists, press and freedom of expression, and digital rights. The networks having at least seven members, representing human rights monitoring body to Province governments and journalists' federation, are expected to build a shared responsibility toward fostering free press and ensuring journalists' safety. Freedom Forum facilitated the formation of the multi-stakeholders' networks. The representative from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Province Office, Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) Province chapter, High Court Bar Association, Human Rights Cell at Nepal Police in province, Office of the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, Province Attorney Office, and Freedom Forum Province representatives are in the networks.

"With the formation of provincial network/mechanism in Koshi Province with the incorporation of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and other public agencies including representative from the Office the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, multiple agencies' pay attention towards any anti-press incident and become further careful for the journalists' rights," said Bikram Niraula, an FF representative in Koshi Province. Similarly, Gandaki Province representative Rajan Upadhyay shared happiness that the network building had



been very effective medium to whet freedom of expression issues and journalists' rights in a collective manner. But network strengthening is important, he suggests.

Min Bam from Sudurpaschim Province shared that it was possible to form the provincial network for journalists' safety after the amendment in a Directive related to journalist's safety at the National Human Rights Commission. But, the network members need to be trained and resourceful so that they can be more strengthened and enlightened.

The networks/mechanisms in the province have underlined the need of capacity building on freedom of expression and digital rights which would help identify pressing issues relating to journalists' rights in the present digital context as well.

his office in Kathmandu, taken to Dhanusha, and later released. It panicked the entire media fraternity. Although the government had argued that Shirohiya was held over his citizenship row, it failed to initiate a legal case, for it was largely an attempt to suppress the media/Kantipur daily that had been exposing wrongdoing relating to cooperatives frauds. Importantly, series of stories on the cooperatives fraud had showed a link to the sitting Homeminister, and in vengeance the minister wielded power to tame the media. These two incidents show how the government is growing intolerant towards free press and RTI regime.

RTI campaigners released on 9th day

Nepal Police arrested the information seekers from Gokarneshwor municipality of Kathmandu. A police team mobilized from the Police Circle, Bouddha apprehended four RTI campaigners Ashmita Khatri, Adharsha Chhetri, Raju Sunar and Prem Shrestha on June 18. Again, on June 25 police arrested Kiran KC and Balaram Chalise over the same issue.

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Message from Executive Chief

Amend Media Council Bill

The government registered the Media Council Bill at the National Assembly on April 25, 2024. The bill which was brought five years ago was rendered nil with the expiry of the term of the Lower House (House of Representatives). The revised bill is now under discussion at the Legislation Management Committee of the National Assembly. However, the bill is currently facing wide criticism for its controversial provisions concerning press freedom and credible journalism. Freedom Forum has always been vocal, demanding amendment to the bill since its registration.



FF believes the proposed Media Council as per bill should be established as an independent and autonomous body for strengthening independent, fair and accountable journalism practice. Media Council, as envisioned in the bill, aims to be developed as an ombudsman to monitor, protect, and promote press freedom, and to address the grievances of mass media consumers. It will also formulate a professional and ethical code of conduct to regulate all forms of media and editorial content.

The proposed bill, however, fails to replace the existing Press Council Nepal with a reliable and independent Media Council. It has incorporated the provisions contrary to constitution's spirit and preamble which guarantee full freedom of press, freedom of opinion and expression and right to information. The provisions are explicitly mentioned in constitution's preamble, and Articles 17, 19 and 27. The present Media Council Bill has such provision that clearly indicate government's intention to make the Council just its tool, which is the most worrying concern. FF demands correction on it. With this view, FF also submitted a 25-point suggestions for the amendment and improvement of the bill to the lawmakers. Consequently, the lawmakers registered total 27 amendments on 13 clauses of the bill.

The bill having six chapters and 137 sections to govern the structure of media council, appointment and dismissal of officials. Council's fiscal and administrative autonomy are also mentioned. The proposed Media Council should be led by a triangularly balanced structure that involves a person from legal background as a Chairperson and experts and representatives from media sector, and representatives from media consumers as members. But, the proposed structure is biased; and the appointment process is control oriented, giving a high hand to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, thereby making the Council its appendage.

Hence, the proposed Bill poses a threat to press freedom. Its irrelevant and objectionable provisions for formation of Media Council warrant correction. The Media Council should be an independent content regulating body so that it would be capable to motivate and promote self-regulation of media. It is worth reminding that Nepal's National Media Policy has a clear mention for self-regulation of media, but the new laws and policies fail to adhere to this fact. Thus, serious and adequate discussions on this issue is imperative. The National Assembly's legislation committee had also discussed the old Media Council bill which was tabled five years ago. But the present bill fails to include suggestions furnished to the previous parliamentary committee meetings. It shows the government is still trying to adopt a 'repressive media policy'.

The legislation committee has again started consultations on the bill where FF was also invited since the beginning. Notably, the committee respects FF's continued lobby and advocacy regarding the bill. During the meeting, I also presented detailed suggestions for improvement in the bill. Let's hope the committee will address the amendment proposal and correct the bill accordingly.

Media Council should be established as an important entity for fostering an atmosphere for reliable and accountable press capable of fighting against the emerging challenges in this digital age. FF is always ready to extend collaboration to this end. Nowadays, we are engaged in a discussion with the lawmakers on the bill. It is positive that they seem deeply concerned towards the bill. Likewise, the government should also be receptive to the opinions and suggestions coming from the parliament and media sector for quality improvement and amendment of the bill. 🌱

— Taranath Dahal

FF joins Global Forum for Media Development

Freedom Forum is delighted to announce that it has become a member of the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) - the largest global community for media development, media freedom and journalists' support.

In May 2024, GFMD welcomed FF along with other ten organizations into the community reaching total 199 member organizations. GFMD said that new organizations with diverse visions and skills will contribute to the synergistic effect, expecting it to be helpful to bring positive impact on the worldwide media landscape.

FF's Executive Chief Mr Taranath Dahal attended GFMD General Assembly held online on April 24. During the assembly, GFMD members had discussed possible strategies for supporting journalists.



GFMD community works with a mission to strengthen and support media ecosystems, empowering journalists, media professionals, and civil society organizations to drive innovation and promote pluralism.

FF is proud to be a part of the global community. As an organization dedicated towards protection and promotion of freedom of expression and journalists' safety in Nepal, FF takes this membership as an opportunity to make visible its activities for the cause of democracy in the country and abroad via the global arena.

Executive Chief Dahal observed that becoming the member of GFMD provides an opportunity for FF to build further collaboration to advance democratic values irrespective of border. "It will help us build a partnership for achieving the goal of protecting and promoting democracy through respect of FoE, press freedom, civic space and digital rights," he underlined, extending sincere gratitude to the GFMD leadership for its recognition to FF.

FF's membership of GFMD has come at a time when atmosphere for media and CSOs in Nepal is witnessing hard times, thereby warranting attention from various sectors to ensure sustainability.

The GFMD is a Belgium-based international network of journalism support and media development organisations. It works together to support journalism and media through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and advocacy. 🌱

Freedom of Expression Violations

Koshi Province

Misbehavior

Chief Administrative Officer of Shivasatakshi Municipality Amrit Bahadur Rai spoke foul on noted RTI activist Sharada Bhusal for requesting information on March 31 in Jhapa. Jhapa lies in Koshi Province of Nepal.

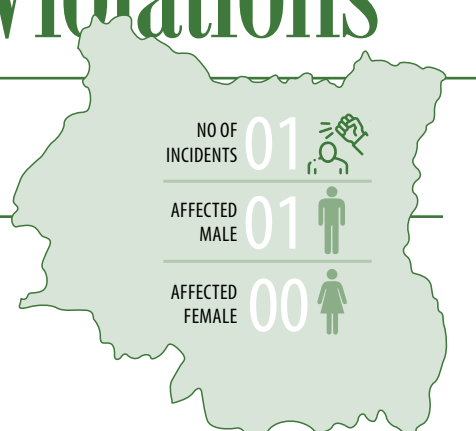
Activist Bhusal shared with Freedom Forum that she had requested information relating to the municipality's internal and external audit reports using RTI application on January 31, 2024 through email. Following her request, the officer Rai called her on mobile and spoke foul on her. Bhusal shared an audio clip of the call with Freedom Forum. In the call, Rai was found shouted at Bhusal for information seeking through her email.

"Do you think you will get information delivered at your home? Did you pay for the extra pages of information as per RTI Law," he shouted.

Bhusal responded that she was expecting the information through email but if she needs to pay, he could inform about it through email. Moreover, the chief administrative officer Rai continuing scolding and accusing activist Bhusal of intentionally trying to trouble government officials in the pretext of RTI.

Death threat

Nayapatrika national daily's Jhapa-based reporter Chiranjivi Ghimire received death threat for his reporting on May 4. Jhapa lies in Koshi Province of Nepal. Reporter Ghimire shared with Freedom Forum that news with reporter Ghimire's byline was published on web portal of the daily <https://www.nayapatrikadaily.com/> on May 4. The news was about illegal extraction in the Mawa river with involvement of local representatives and the locals being threatened by contractors.



After publication of news, contractor Binod Thapa called Ghimire on mobile and threatened saying that he could do anything to Ghimire. Thapa also spoke foul during the call, according to Ghimire. Thereafter, reporter Ghimire filed a complaint at a local police office in Damak.

Reporter Ghimire further informed that Deputy Superintendent of Police Nisan Thapa had assured of calling the contractor to police station for further investigation. Ghimire added, "I am also discussing with fellow journalists and preparing to lodge a complaint against the contractor for his offensive behavior."

Madhesh Province

Death threat for writing news on corruption

An executive editor at dawanal.com news media, Arjun Thapaliya, received a death threat for reporting on April 3 in Siraha. Siraha lies in Madhesh Province of Nepal.

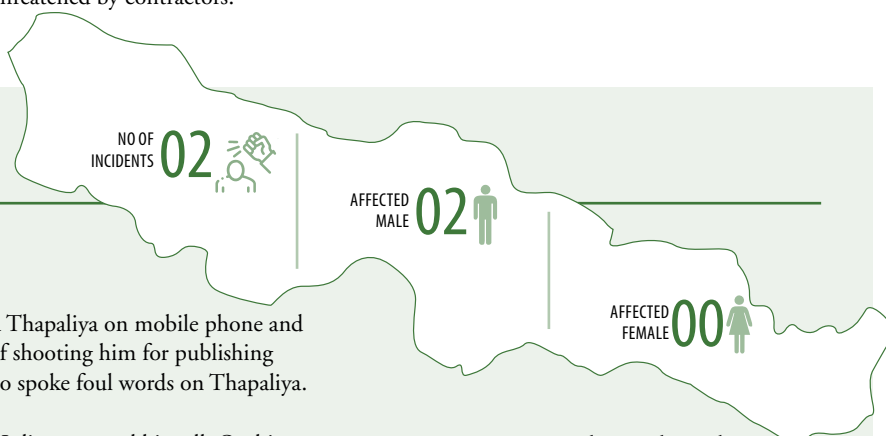
Freedom Forum talked to Thapaliya about the incident. Editor Thapaliya shared with FF that he had been following activities of Golbazar Municipality and writing news on the municipality's misconduct. On the day of incident, Thapaliya published news about financial irregularities in construction of a highway in the municipality. He also mentioned alleged involvement of Chief Administrative Officer, engineer and ward chairperson in the corruption. After half an hour of publication of the news, administrative

officer called Thapaliya on mobile phone and threatened of shooting him for publishing news. He also spoke foul words on Thapaliya.

"Thereafter, I disconnected his call. On his 18th attempt as I received the call, he shouted that he would immediately come to me and shoot me", said editor Thapaliya, "Then, I went to lodge a complaint at Area Police Office, Golbazar but they refused to register it. I will again go there tomorrow."

Detention

Madhesh Province bureau Chief of Nayapatrika national daily, Hadis Khuddar, was attacked and taken under control while reporting in Dhanusha on June 6. Freedom Forum's representative for the province, Rajan Singh, informed that police attacked Khuddar while



reporting on a protest by youths in the premises of District Police Office, Dhanusha. Local youths were protesting at the office, demanding fair investigation on a case of attack upon a local youth with knife. "While journalist Khuddar was taking a video of the protest, policepersons attacked him and seized his mobile phone. Journalist Khuddar showed his press identity card but they did not stop but took him to the police station", shared representative Singh. After an hour, Khuddar was released by holding discussion among fellow journalists and police officers. The police chief has also assured of taking action against the policeperson who detained the journalist, said representative Singh.

Bagmati Province

Female reporters misbehaved at public office

Reporters from Makwanpur district- Manju Mainali and Chhabi Anitya- were misbehaved while reporting on May 14. Mainali is reporter with the Himalaya Times national daily and Anitya is with the Sourya daily.

Reporter Mainali told Freedom Forum that she along with fellow reporter Anitya reached Hetauda Sub-metropolitan city's ward office to collect news and information on Chepang community children being deprived of birth registration. Reporters duo were on follow-up reporting for the news published four months ago about six children in a Chepang community family deprived of birth registration certificate.

"When we asked ward chairperson Deepak Khadka about the birth registration of the children, Khadka furiously told us to leave the office or he would use force to send us out. Thapa also called us 'thief' and seized reporter Anitya's mobile while she was trying to record video of the incident", shared reporter Mainali.

"Furthermore, Khadka and other ward members again took to social media to share 'fake information' about us through Facebook

live. This is a serious harassment. I am very disturbed. In this situation, I am unable to continue my profession", said Mainali in a disappointment.

Manhandle

Journalists associated with different online news media were manhandled while reporting on May 22 in Kathmandu.

Journalists were Krishna Kattel and Navraj Pahadi from hareknews.com, Sudeep Bhandari from pathibharachannel.com, and Pushkar Bhandari from rightsanchar.com. They were manhandled while reporting on footpath expansion at New Road, Kathmandu.

According to Kattel, the locals were protesting against the Kathmandu Metropolitan City's order to expand footpath at New Road.

"After we reached there to report on the KMC's order and locals' reaction, few local people pushed us out of the premises. They also kicked one of the journalists and tried to seize our reporting devices but the on-duty police officers helped us leave the site safely", journalist Kattel shared.

Thereafter, as journalists tried to report the incident at a nearby police station, ward chair-



person Chin Kaji Maharjan apologized to them on behalf of the protestors and ensured that such incident will not repeat in future.

"It seems the attack was targeted against me as I have been reporting on the issues surrounding the place. I have also learned that a social campaign along with my photo has been started to ban my entry to New Road area. But this does not stop my work", Kattel said.

Local level threatens media

Bigu Municipality of Dolakha district in Bagmati Province issued a statement on June 17, accusing local media and journalists of publishing fabricated news and advertisement of the municipality without knowledge of the municipality officers. The municipality has threatened to take legal action if media do not stop publishing 'fake news.'

Responding to the municipality's statement, journalists' local network also issued a statement on the same day. Through the statement, they expressed dissatisfaction over the municipality's accusations. News published in the

Meta restricts news media, warrants transparency on content regulation

Meta, the largest tech platform used in Nepal, blocked an online news media- www.thedmnnews.com from making updates. Siromani Dhungana, Chairman of the Democracy Media Network which runs the media, informed Freedom Forum that hundreds of posts with news stories and opinions were deleted by Facebook.

"Upon the removal, no message was sent to us regarding the actions by Facebook.

It has deprived us of knowing the actual reason for posts removal and restrictions. We are not given a chance to provide justification or make clear on our defense," he told FF, adding that his media had adhered to the journalistic ethics and professionalism.

Although a Meta representative was approached, the media was denied reason behind restriction. Meta is the most popular digital platform in Nepal for citizens and media to augment their views and business, but such blockade without providing any reason is worrying.

To this, FF Executive Chief Taranath Dahal said, "It is a serious issue of tech accountability and transparency. Many including journalists and media are suffering at the non-transparent measure of Meta on dealing with contents. The restriction of www.thedmnnews.com is not only a throttling and taking down some contents but a blanket approach to restrict entire website." Later, on June 9 Meta lifted restriction imposed on the web portal. 🌱

local media were based on the report of Office of Auditor General. The report discussed corruption and monopoly at the local levels in Dolakha. Journalist Deep Shankar Chaulagain told Freedom Forum that the accusation of the municipality is worrying. Similarly, the media or journalists must abide by the code of conduct, he added. The local government's blanket approach of discrediting media is a wrong trend.

Comedians suffer cyber trolls

Freedom Forum showed concern over the escalating cyber trolls against comedian duo Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansha Acharya, popularly known as Maha Jodi, for their views against the arrest of media mogul Kailash Sirohiya.

A day after the arrest of Sirohiya, Chairperson of Kantipur media group, Kantipur Television

had interviewed various experts and media professionals, including comedian duo for their views on arrest of Sirohiya. During the interview, they had expressed concern over government's move to arrest media owner Sirohiya. It had violated media freedoms and panicked media fraternity, they viewed.

However, since they gave views against the government move, they became victims of cyber trolls. In the wake of mounting cyber harassment, they were bound to retract their views.

On May 27, Shrestha and Acharya appeared in a short video, saying, "They should not have been spoken on the matter sub judice in the court." This incident clearly indicates that cyber harassment has been intensified to suppress the critical views against the Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, who has allegedly involved in the misappropriation of cooperative funds. The Kantipur daily had carried a series of news reports on it, and to the vengeance, the govern-

ment arrested Chairperson Sirohiya, while he had already showed readiness to cooperate with the State agencies in the issues relating to his citizenship.

Moreover, the followers of the Home Minister Lamichhane's party- Rastriya Swatantra Party- have launched coordinated campaign to castigate and discredit media including the social media pages of Kantipur media. 🌱

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

Freedom Chautary podcasts

So far, Freedom Forum has produced and broadcasted total 142 episodes of podcast related to press freedom, freedom of expression, right to information, open and accountable budget, public finance management, impunity for crimes against journalists, digital safety and open government initiatives. In the recent three months, FF broadcasted five episodes of podcasts from 138 to 142. In episode 138, Joint Secretary at National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Yagya Prasad Adhikari discusses the commission's current status of implementation of Directive on Formation and Work Procedure for Safety Mechanism on Protection of FoE, 2019. As the directive was recently amended to include formation of networks/mechanisms at province, NHRC is working in collaboration with FF for smooth operationalization of the province networks. Mr. Adhikari describes the contextual background for formulation of the directive, its objectives and its importance to ensure free press and free expression all over Nepal.

Episode 139 is the sharing of experience of the citizen auditors during their performance audit research in the hospitals in Kathmandu district. The auditors visited primary health centers and big hospitals

providing health insurance service in the district and collected responses from more than 100 respondents both from hospital staffs and patients. In this episode, auditors share current situation, problems and shortcomings in implementation of government's health insurance program.

Next episode 140 discusses overall press freedom status of Nepal. The podcast based on Freedom Forum's annual press freedom report provides glimpses of its year-long monitoring from May 2023 to April 2024 on press freedom and freedom of expression issues in Nepal. The presenters discuss nature of press freedom violation incidents, affected journalists' and media, media-related laws and policies drafted during the period. They also shed light upon current challenges in Nepali media and the way forwards for professional and sustainable media.

Further, episode 141 is about worldwide launch of 'Open Budget Survey 2023' report by the International Budget Partnership (IBP). IBP is a US based non-government organization

promoting open, accountable and participatory public finance management. The survey conducted by IBP's partners' worldwide including Freedom Forum is the only independent, comparative and regular measure of budget transparency and accountability around the world. The episode is re-broadcast of the launch event organized virtually.



Lastly, 142nd episode published in Nepali language is about Open Budget Survey 2023 result for Nepal. In the podcast, OBS researchers discussed the results of two-years long research on status of Nepal's budget transparency and accountability. Additionally, the researchers also shared the concerns over the rise of debt and debt-servicing costs

over capital expenditure in most parts of the world including Nepal. Likewise, they also pointed out importance of the latest survey as Nepal parliament just concluded discussion on executive budget proposal as well as analyzed the overall changes and amendment since the beginning of OBS survey in 2006. They also highlighted critical and essential recommendations of OBS 2023 which needs to be acted upon. 🌱

Challenges Persist on Nepal's Press Freedom

'Year of inaction' on law and policy for free press

May-3 Report, 2024

Increase in incidents of press freedom violation; inaction on law and policy reform; thriving digital media, thereby shadowing news and press freedom issues and resulting to discredit to professional media; populist politics on rise with impact on journalism; indifference to impunity relating to crimes against journalists; continuous erosion of financial status of media and job hopping among journalists featured significantly this past year from May 1, 2023 to April 30, 2024 in Nepal.

Freedom Forum recorded 60 press freedom violation incidents from May 1, 2023 to April 30, 2024. In 60 violation incidents, a total of 88 media persons- 77 male and 11 female journalists- including 3 media houses were directly affected. This past year witnessed rise on violations, as the previous year from May 2022 to April 2023, had only 40 incidents of violations which had affected 79 media persons including eight female and four media houses.

This year, FF categorized violation incidents into five types: 7 incidents of obstruction, 22 threats/death threats, 2 arrest/ detains, 21 attack/ manhandles and 8 misbehaviors.

Out of total 88 media persons affected this year, 27 faced obstructions; 22 received threat and death threats combined; 3 faced arrest and detention; 25 attacked, and 11 misbehaved. Similarly, three media houses were attacked, and one vandalized. Two media houses were threatened and one was attacked for the published news.

Journalists Sunita Gautam and Tekman Shakya at www.nepalsetimes.com were taken under control for at least three hours in a police station for reporting on demonstration at Department of Foreign Employment.¹

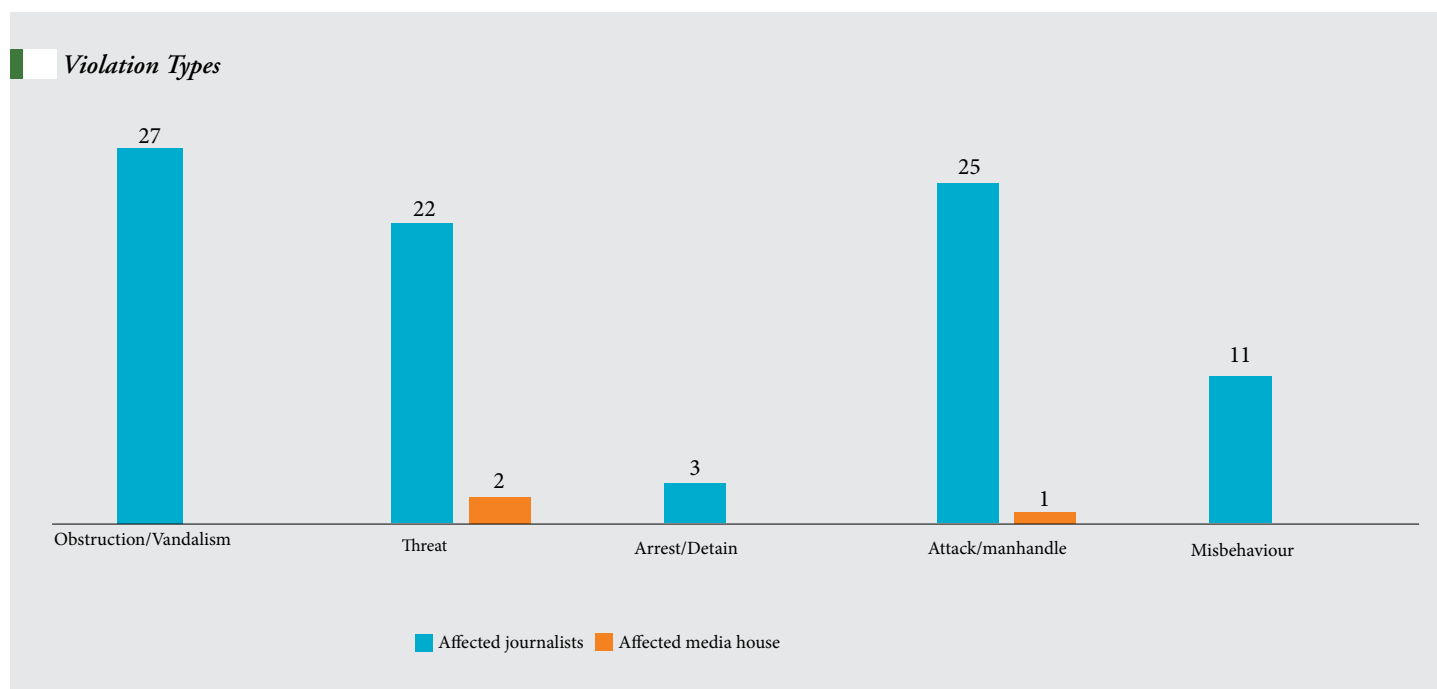
Reporter Shanti Gharti Magar was attacked while reporting a protest in Kathmandu. She also shared a video clip of the incident where she repeatedly asked the police officers to see her press identity card but in vain. She was held briefly and was injured as well.²

According to FF's monitoring data, seven journalists received threatening messages through social media (majority from Facebook) and two journalists were victims of abusive and misleading posts on others' social media accounts.

Journalist Ram Krishna Poudel from www.bikashnews.com received death threat through phone calls and messages on social media for news about entrepreneur Durga Prasai published on the news portal. Prasai called on Poudel's mobile and ordered him to delete the news. Poudel shared that he also received at least 50 threatening messages on WhatsApp and was fearing the attempt to hack his social media accounts.³

This year too, Bagmati Province saw the highest number of press freedom violation (24) with majority in federal capital, Kathmandu. In these incidents, 48 media persons including 7 female and 2 media houses were affected.

Following this, 12 incidents took place in Madhesh Province affecting 14 media persons.



¹ <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-single/1433>

² <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-single/1396>

³ <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-single/1391>

Similarly, 11 incidents were recorded from Koshi Province affecting 12 media persons including 2 females. In 7 incidents occurred in Gandaki Province, 8 journalists were affected; while 3 incidents in Lumbini Province affected 2 journalists and 1 media house, 1 incident in Karnali Province affected 1 journalist, and 2 incidents in Sudurpaschim Province affected 2 females and 1 male journalist.

Remaining 21 media persons were mentioned under 'others' category which include news agency, online television, YouTube channels and incidents where group of journalists from different types of media are affected.

Elements hostile to journalists

In majority of the incidents, journalists (35) were affected by security persons followed by political cadres (14), government employee (13) and criminal / goons (7). Moreover, 19 media persons were affected by elements such as businesspersons, locals, contractors, etc.

Observation and Analyses

Law and Policy: A year of Inaction: -

- The bill session of the federal parliament-House of Representatives (HoR), was

expected to bring the laws awaited for long for media reform in Nepal. However, the dispute among the political parties caused prorogation of HoR. It thwarted the parliamentary proceeding and deliberation on the important bills relating to mass communications, media and press freedom like IT Bill. This year can be termed a 'year of inaction' in law and policy making on free press in Nepal.

- The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MoCIT) was preparing draft of Mass Communications Bill, to which FF provided inputs for changes to ensure press freedom. Also, the ministry was provided inputs to the draft bill on Information Technology and Cybersecurity. As per its initial observation, the bill though relatively progressive was not unclear on how it could promote and protect human rights, especially freedom of expression, privacy and citizen's data online and cyber space.⁴

On Impunity: -

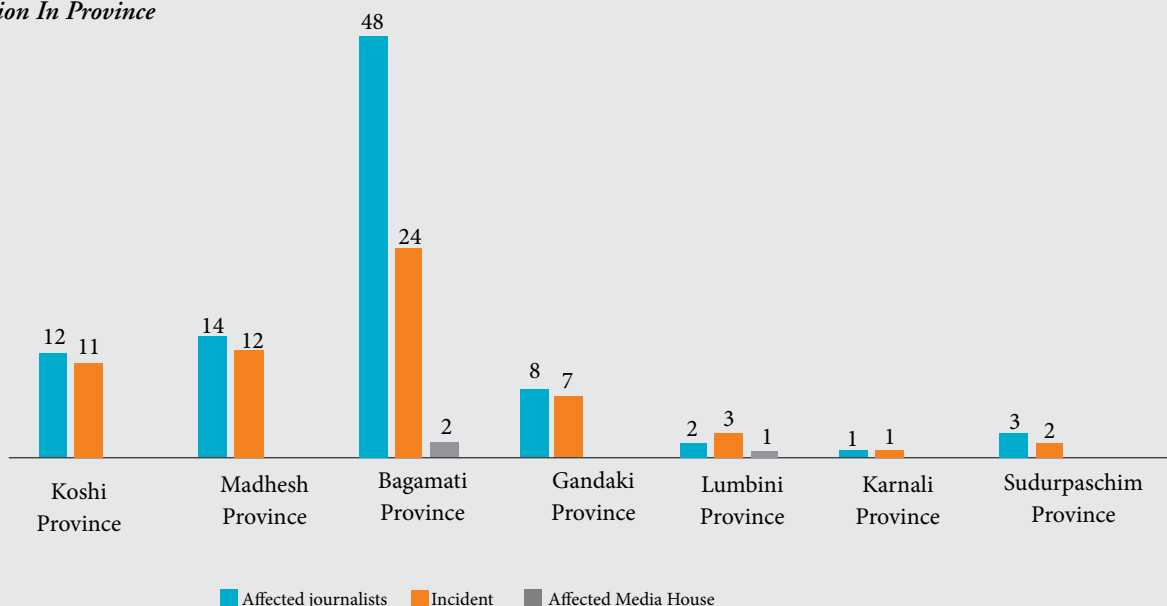
- Few cases of impunity relating to crimes against journalists from the conflict period are still pending and the journalists' families are desperately waiting for justice, while prosecution is yet to start in few cases. Ten cases of slain journalists are pending at Truth and Reconciliation

Commission while, six cases are awaiting investigation, prosecution and adjudication.⁵

Others: -

- The media content regulatory body, Press Council Nepal, has been asking the Nepal Police to investigate and take action against YouTube channels for 'publishing rumor, and exaggerated and obscene contents'. Similarly, the Council wrote to Nepal Telecommunications Authority to block a dozens of portals for allegedly violating journalists' code of conduct and 'publishing contents inciting violence'.
- Press Council Nepal has been urged repeatedly to maintain transparency in its monitoring of news content and actions it takes against online news portal and YouTube media. At a time when the YouTube journalism is emerging of late in Nepal as well, the public agency is often in doubt of taking a broader approach to deal with digital sphere so that press freedom and journalists rights are protected.
- The journalists who write news stories about the irregularities and corruption at public offices are always in threat. They are attacked and issued threat/death.

Violation In Province



⁴ <https://freedomforum.org.np/make-cyberspace-foe-friendly/>

⁵ <https://freedomforum.org.np/download/annual-media-report-2023/?wpdmdl=5523&refresh=662a11f595f291714033141>

Reporter at www.makalukhabar.com Shibendra Rohita was brutally attacked by Chief administrative officer of Dhanauji rural municipality, Dhanusha and his relatives for publishing news about corruption at the municipality on the web portal. He was severely injured on head and chest. He got recovery after treatment for ten days in Kathmandu.⁶

- It is a positive development that under the leadership of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) a journalist safety mechanism has come into operation as a result of long initiation of multiple stakeholders including civil society. It is expected to contribute to journalists' safety across the country in addition to protection of freedom of expression.

- Although modern technology- AI- has been leveraged by Nepali journalists to ease their works- translation, editing, and enriching contents- these are no cases reported so far from journalists as AI breaching their rights.
- Many journalists receiving intimidation for their work in digital media, it clearly indicates gradual shift from traditional media to digital media. Total 34 journalists affiliated to 30 online media got threats. Nine journalists got threat via social media.
- For lack of new laws and policies, the old law as Electronic Transaction Act (ETA) has been inflicting journalists.

Journalists Pushkar Bhatta and Aishwarya Kunwar were kept in detention for four days under cybercrime charge citing Electronic Transaction Act as per order from the District Court, Kanchanpur. They were arrested for reporting on mismanagement in a security office, Kanchanpur. Later, they were released from detention with agreement among fellow journalists.

- As in the past, the political parties and their leaders continued verbal commitment that they protect press freedom. But, they are unable to teach cadres at local levels on how they should cooperate with journalists for promotion and protection of free press and ensure safety to journalists.

Media's financial status on erosion

- Entire media industry hit hard by the COVID-19 impact, is yet to revive in Nepal. The impacts are lingering in media, which would further cost financial sustainability of media houses, of journalists. FF's initial study had shown that as high as 100 media outlets from seven provinces had stopped their operation and approximately 243 media persons quit their jobs in 2023. Acute financial crisis is taking a toll on private and community media.
- Owing to dwindling financial health of media houses, journalist have no option but to quit the jobs and move for next field. It has

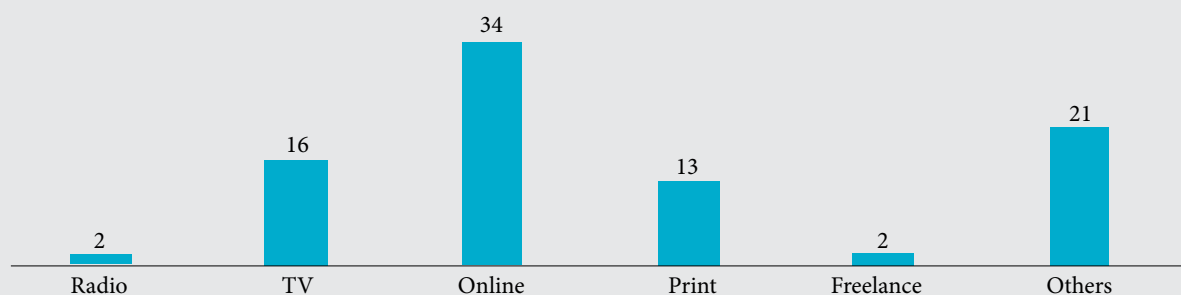
resulted in dearth of investigative reporting, acute under-reporting and un-reporting of the issues that warrants attention.

- Meagre investment on training and capacity development of journalists, and for public interest journalism and investigative stories is worrying concern.
- With sharp rise of people's digital/online presence, information pollution has been an equally upsetting issue. It is drowning media landscape, thereby spurring discredit to media and journalists and encouraging attack on reporters.
- Business model of online news media is still uncertain. Despite rising number of such media, their sustainability is yet to be secure. There are over 4,000 online news media in Nepal.

Projection and Discussion

- Media, IT and digital/cyber related laws and policies need to ensure press freedom. Progressive approach is must for it.
- In the wake of spurt of digital media and YouTube journalism, atmosphere conducive for alternative media is essential so that journalists affiliated there can be protected.
- Nepali press and media persons are likely to bear the brunt of populist politics. So, their better digital/IT awareness, skills and informed approach of news is required to protect their rights and save free press.

Affected number



⁶ <https://nepalpressfreedom.org/main/issue-single/1390>

- There is growing urgency of thorough research, study and recognition to digital press so that multiple problems as fake news, and mis/disinformation can be tackled in collaboration, rather than dealing with these threats in silos. The siloed approaches is likely to end up in blame game, not informed decisions.
- Need of robust fact check desk/mechanism at media houses, and media content regulatory bodies is another need to this regard.
- The long awaited justice process should be accelerated so as to end prolonged impunity and ensure justice to the awaiting victim journalists' families.
- Although no immediate threat of artificial intelligence (AI) was reported by Nepali journalists in relation to press freedom, the capacity building of journalists on par with latest technological development including AI is imperative. Enhancement of journalists' skills and knowledge and modern IT and AI would not only facilitate them in work but also ensure safety against digital risks, and protect press freedom as well. 🌱

Continued from Page 1.

Talking to Freedom Forum, Deputy Superintendent of Police at the Police Circle, Raju Pande, shared that they were apprehended after the municipality complained of harassment and offensive behavior while seeking information. FF, later learned that they were arrested based on a complaint lodged by an unidentified person.

Meanwhile, the RTI Federation claimed that the RTI campaigners were arrested and a case initiated against them on a false allegation in collusion with local government and police administration for mere exercise of right to information: they sought information over the irregularities at the local government. On June 23, the District Court Kathmandu extended detention period for three more days of RTI activists Ashmita Khatri, Adharsha Chhetri, Raju Sunar and Prem Shrestha. On enquiry on FF on June 24, Deputy Superintendent of police Pande said that they were charged with 'Fraud and Organized crime'. Pande however declined to share further reasoning that the case was under investigation. On June 28, the court ordered police to release six activists reasoning lack of evidence to keep them in police custody. However, the court asked them to appear whenever summoned at the court.

Media entrepreneur released on 9th day

Nepal police arrested a noted media entrepreneur Kailash Sirohiya, Chairperson of Nepal's largest media- Kantipur Media Group on May 21 from the media office in Kathmandu. He was arrested on the basis of an arrest warrant issued from District Court, Dhanusha following a complaint filed on April 28, accusing him of holding multiple citizenships. The complaint was lodged by a committee member of a sister organization of Rastriya Swatantra Party.

Moreover, the warrant was issued in the background of series of news publication critical to Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Ravi Lamichhane by the Kantipur national daily. It had been publishing news about the alleged involvement of Home Minister Lamichhane in



Photo: www.epardafas.com

the misappropriation of cooperative funds along with convincing documents. Minister Lamichhane is the president of Rastriya Swatantra Party. Lamichhane repeatedly discredited media for publishing news critical to him.

On the day of arrest, police officers barged into the publication's house and arrested Sirohiya from his office chamber. Dozens of freedom of expression advocates reached the media house against the arrest of Sirohiya. Chairperson Sirohiya was then taken to Dhanusha District Police Office where he was kept in detention. On May 22, Dhanusha District Court remanded Sirohiya to custody for three more days for further investigation on citizenship related case.

In response to the incident, thirty-one editors of mainstream media submitted a joint letter to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal to draw the attention of Nepal government on the arrest case. The letter read- the context of Sirohiya's arrest from the media house was intended to create fear and pressure on the press.

On May 23, delegates from Press Council Nepal visited the media house to monitor the arrest of Chairperson Sirohiya and its effect upon the journalists in newsroom. The Council talked to the journalists and informed that they will make public the Council's opinion on the case after thorough investigation.

Similarly, the National Human Rights Commission Nepal central office team visited the Kantipur Media Group office in Kathmandu and NHRC Madhesh Province office team met

Chairperson Sirohiya in the police custody to investigate the case on May 22. NHRC urged Nepal government to fairly investigate the case in line with the human rights guaranteed by the Nepal's constitution and international laws to ensure freedom of press and expression.

Moreover, other national organizations relating to media and freedom of expression including Federation of Nepali Journalists and Press Union Nepal and several international organizations including International Federation of Journalists have denounced the arrest of Chairman Sirohiya. Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnes Callamard also showed concern over Sirohiya's arrest during her recent visit to Nepal.

The court extended Sirohiya's remand thrice adding three days on each till May 29. Sirohiya was then, released on May 29 with order from Dhanusha District Attorney Office to the Lalitpur Police office. As per order, Sirohiya does not need to be kept in detention for further investigation; however, he should be present himself should a call is made. Sirohiya was brought back to Kathmandu for treatment on May 28 after he experienced heart-related problems.

After his release, media entrepreneur Sirohiya said that despite his readiness to cooperate in the investigation process he was detained for nine days just to torture him and to create fear in the media fraternity. He added that he would seek legal remedy against those involved in this vengeance. FF closely observed and monitored these incidents. 🌱

Improvement in Budget Transparency

Nepal has improved the open budget transparency index with score of 50 in the latest Open Budget Survey, 2023.

With the budget transparency score of 50, Nepal secured 59th rank in overall position in 2023 which was 77th in 2021 according to the International Budget Partnership's (IBP) latest Open Budget Survey, indicating the improvement of public access to budget information in Nepal.

"In these turbulent times, governments can restore public trust in their ability to deliver by opening up the budget process to meaningful engagement. Engaging the public is a winning proposition. As the pages of this report illustrate, despite slow progress in the survey's global averages for budget transparency and public participation, there are several examples of countries that are benefiting from more transparent and inclusive budget practices" said Ana Patricia Muñoz, Executive Director of IBP. She further added that an open budget process is critical to supporting the ability of democratic governments to deliver tangible gains to their people.

The Open Budget Survey 2023 assessed 125 countries, which are home to 95% of the world's population and include budgets totaling more than \$33.5 trillion in spending in Fiscal Year 2022. This locally-led process was conducted with in-country researchers, peer reviewers, and government reviewers who completed 30,000 indicators across all surveyed countries, assessing 672 publicly available budget documents and 299 participation mechanisms. This latest round comes at a turbulent time of unprecedented challenges. Rising debt, inflation, conflicts, closing civic space and climate change have led to serious setbacks for many.

Global budget transparency has increased by 24% since 2008, but it is still well below what is considered sufficient (a score at or above 61 out of 100) to allow for meaningful public engagement. Legislative oversight is also well below sufficient levels, and public participation is rare. Average audit oversight scores are sufficient, but challenges remain to ensure governments follow up on audit reports. The pandemic provided an excuse for many executive governments to sidestep the legislature in its budget practices, and legislative oversight practices have not bounced back since

Nepal has improved the availability of budget information with publication of key budget documents, mainly Year-End Report in time which however was published late in the previous cycle of open budget survey in 2021. The pre-budget statement (PBS) and Citizen Budget status remains same to that of previous years, according to the 2023 Open Budget Survey Nepal summary report.

As the research by IBP and other organizations demonstrates, open budgets offer a promising pathway for countries to thrive socially and economically. They can restore trust in governments and strengthen strained relationships between public institutions and the people they are meant to serve.

The OBS 2023 survey provides a telling snapshot of Nepal's current practices related to budget disclosure, opportunities for public engagement in the budget cycle, and effective checks and balances. The Measures of Open Budgets: Budget transparency is assessed in the OBS by the public availability and contents of eight key budget documents that all governments are expected to publish as per international standards. Specifically, the survey examines whether they are published online in a timely manner and the information is comprehensive.

- The global average transparency score was 45 out of 100, short of 61 considered minimum threshold to foster an informed public debate.
- Nepal scored 50 in budget transparency which is above the global average.

Public participation is assessed based on formal opportunities for civic organizations and individuals to engage and provide input throughout the budget process.

- The average global score for public participation is dismal: 15 out of 100.
- Nepal scored 31 in public participation in budgetary process.

Oversights measured based on the role played by legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) in the budget process.

- A score of 61 out of 100 is considered adequate oversight and global average is of Legislature oversight is 45 and SAIs oversight is 62.

- Nepal scored 36 in legislature oversight which is lower than global average whereas SAIs oversight is 67 which exceeds global average.

Nepal government could quickly **improve** the situation by:

- Include in the Executive's Budget Proposal data on the financial position of the government, data on the macroeconomic forecast and data on estimates of expenditure arrears.
- Publish a glossary of budget terms along with Executive Budget Proposal to improve budget literacy.
- Improve the comprehensiveness of the Enacted Budget as well as other budget documents by publishing disaggregated and machine readable data.
- Include in the In-Year Reports (monthly and quarterly Economic Bulletins), actual expenditures for administrative classification, functional classification, and individual programs, including information of the budget execution at the sub-national level (provinces and municipalities).
- Include in the Year-End Report comparisons between planned revenues and actual outcomes, comparisons between planned nonfinancial outcomes and actual outcomes and comparisons between the original macroeconomic forecast and actual outcomes.

Likewise, Nepal needs to work on **improving the public participation** in various budget process where Nepal is far behind from the sufficient score of 61:

- Continue and sustain the practice of pre-budget consultations with stakeholders, including at the provincial level, and submit its report to the Parliament. Additionally, the Ministry of Finance and the Revenue Advisory Committee should have a practice to inform the citizens on which recommendations and inputs received were used to improve budget policies.
- Actively engage with vulnerable and underrepresented communities, directly or through civil society organizations representing them.
- Implement the actions of the National Strategy for Public Engagement in Public Financial Management, which was published jointly with the PEFA secretariat and after extensive consultations with civil society.

Even though Supreme Audit Institute of Nepal oversight sufficient and is above global average, Nepal's Federal Parliament provides weak oversight during the planning stage of the budget cycle the implementation as well. To improve oversight, the following actions should be prioritized:

- The Executive's Budget Proposal should be submitted to legislators at least two months before the start of the budget year.
- Legislative committees should examine the Executive's Budget Proposal and publish reports with their analysis online.
- A legislative committee should examine in-year budget implementation and publish reports with their findings online.
- In practice, ensure the legislature is consulted before the executive shifts funds specified in the Enacted Budget between administrative units or reduces spending due to revenue shortfalls during the budget year.



- A legislative committee should examine the Audit Report and publish a report with their findings online.

IBP first launched the survey in 2006 with the goal of assuring that all citizens, especially those from underserved communities, have the opportunity to understand and influence how public money is raised and spent. Data are collected by independent civil-society budget experts who are not beholden to any national government. Their findings are reviewed by anonymous peers, and representatives from the assessed governments are offered the opportunity to review and comment on the findings.

Taranath Dahal, Krishna Sapkota and Subash Dahal of Freedom Forum were researcher for Open Budget Survey 2023 from Nepal. 🌱

Law/Policy Watch

FF suggests points for lawmakers to amend Media Council Bill

Freedom Forum has been continuously observing the political and legislative developments so that bills, especially related to the freedom of expression, journalists' rights and internet freedoms could be analysed and timely change ensured.

In this regard, FF studied the Media Council Bill submitted in the upper house of the federal parliament, National Assembly, and provided feedback to the lawmakers and parliament secretariat.

The points that warrant attention were identified and the lawmakers suggested as recommendations. FF made the suggestions in 24 points.

The points for the amendment were on structure of the Press Council, recommendation committee, code/ethics and self-regulations, journalists' accreditation, independence and accountability.

Freedom Forum Executive Chief Taranath Dahal observed that although there was a slight improvement in the Bill as compared to the previous initiatives, lawmakers could still forward some recommendations to make the Bill FoE-friendly. The Act should come in a way as to foster journalistic practices and values rather than to impose code by the government.

He further stressed that protection and promotion of FoE on internet is a need of hour, so

any provision in the Bill should not breach the healthy practice of FoE in this new medium. Also, revision on the traditional structure of Press Council Nepal is imperative to fit the present development of IT which has facilitated the internet freedoms, Mr Dahal underlined.

Furthermore, Mr. Dahal has been actively participating in the National Assembly Legislative Committee meeting as an expert to provide necessary feedbacks on the bill. In the meetings, Mr. Dahal presented major concerns on autonomy, accountability and structure of Press Council Nepal, scope of code of ethics and self-regulation including 25 points of recommendation. 🌱

World Press Freedom Day observed

Freedom Forum marked the World Press Freedom Day 2024 by organizing a program entitled 'Press Freedom and Human rights'. It was held on Zoom online platform on May 3. It was held in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Nepal.

Initiating the program, FF's Executive Chief Taranath Dahal shared with participants the importance of World Press Freedom Day and its historic beginning. It is the Day to celebrate media and journalists' rights and role to promote democracy and human rights. He said, "The day is celebrated to express solidarity with journalists and media persons who face threats, attacks, imprisonment in course of their work around the world." This day is also marked to remind states of their fundamental responsibility towards protection of media rights.

Dahal also informed the participants about this year's theme of celebration connecting free press and its role to address climate crisis. He also expressed worry over the biggest threats of mis/ disinformation to media and journalists who report on elections.

Mr Dahal praised the contribution of NHRC towards protecting freedom of expression and journalists' safety in Nepal. "NHRC's recent amendment to its directive relating to journalists' safety and formation of safety networks at province level are commendable towards promoting democracy and human rights."

On the occasion, FF's report on press freedom presented. As per report, FF recorded increase in the incidents of press freedom violations this year as compared to the previous year May 2022/23. According to the report, FF recorded 60 incidents of violation this year which affected 88 media persons- 77 female and 11 male, as compared to 40 incidents affecting 79 journalists last year.

Among total affected, majority journalists (27) faced obstruction followed by attacks upon 25 journalists. Moreover, 34 journalists affiliated to 30 online media got threats and nine journalists got threat via social media. The report also highlighted financial crisis taking a toll on Nepali media, which has badly affected their professional and financial sustainability.

The report made projections for the upcoming year that in the wake of emerging presence

of digital media and YouTube journalism, atmosphere conducive for alternative media is essential so that journalists affiliated there can be protected. Digital awareness and skill building of journalists are other components to focus on in future to keep journalists updated on the rapid technological developments.

Similarly, senior Joint Secretary at NHRC Yagya Prasad Adhikari pointed out media's watchdog role. "Journalists are the voice of the voiceless and act as a bridge between the government and citizens," Adhikari observed, reminding that fundamental rights of journalists and media are ensured by the Nepal's constitution.

He also shared latest initiation of NHRC to protect freedom of expression in Nepal with the formation of journalists' safety mechanism in all seven provinces. These unique mechanisms which will be the source of evidence to record, monitor and investigate FoE issues in the country. It also helps contribute to nation's reporting to Universal Periodic Review mechanisms.

In the program, Manju Khatiwada from Madhesh Province office of NHRC shared that the office was actively lobbying with concerned sectors to work on free expression and journalists' safety in the province. She urged the media not to lose credibility. Capacity enhancement of journalists is imperative, according to her. Khatiwada also expressed her team's commitment to strengthen their collaboration with FF to ensure journalists' safety in the province and justice to the victims.

Rekha Dutta from Madhesh Province office added to Khatiwada's views as they had also recorded anti-press incidents where media faced threats for fair reporting. Journalists' safety is also a big challenge in the province. Hence, a collaborative approach is needed, she underlined.

FF's representative from Lumbini Province Sudeep Gautam shared updates on media related policy developments in the province. He said that recently brought Communication Policy was not media-friendly and government's intention to suppress media is really worrying. The province government has not yet listed all the online media currently operating in provinces for public welfare advertisements. Recognition of online media platform is a major challenge in the province, according to him.

“Journalists are the voice of the voiceless and act as a bridge between the government and citizens”

Loknath Bastola from NHRC Karnali Province office said the freedom of expression issues should be discussed seriously among general citizens. The province network recently formed has already started looking into the ongoing issues on FoE in the province.

Chairperson at Federation of Nepali Journalists, Madhesh Province Rajesh Kumar Karna shared few incidents where cases of victim journalists were ignored by local administration and even right defenders were yet to pay adequate attention. Media in the province are under threat and journalists face censorship in their profession. Hence, collaborative approach from all the concerned sector is essential, he stressed.

A journalist from Gandaki Province, Ramesh Paudel said that press freedom, as a term has been misused by the elite bodies in society. Political leaders' opinion towards media which rapidly spread through social media has caused negative impact on overall media credibility. While media should also be accountable, such impacts must be minimized, he stressed.

Honorable member at NHRC, Manoj Duwady opined that FoE is under threat due to the state and political groups' intolerance towards criticism from journalists and citizens. NHRC is continuously lobbying to protect press rights and FoE through its Directive. The Directive is important to ensure physical security of journalists and press freedom.

Concluding the event, FF's chairperson Hari Binod Adhikari called upon NHRC, media and civil society to actively collaborate for protection of journalists' rights and end impunity. While democracy and press freedom are complementary to each other, safety of journalists is essential, he stated. 🌿

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
	Open Budget Survey	International Budget Partnership (IBP)	1st January 2023
	To strengthen free and safe digital civic space for protection and promotion of freedom of expression	International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX)	1st November 2023
	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 amounting Rs. 2714595.38 (April to June 2024)		
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		

Civic space in Hungary

EU's urgent action needed

The EU should accelerate legal action against Hungary and seek the suspension of the repressive Law on the Protection of National Sovereignty.

This statement was originally published on hrw.org on 28 June 2024. Accelerate legal action against Hungary, seek suspension of repressive legislation

The EU should take immediate action to protect civic space in Hungary, Human Rights Watch and nine other organizations said in a statement released on June 27, 2024. The EU should accelerate legal proceedings and seek the suspension of the country's repressive Law on the Protection of National Sovereignty, which has been used to target Transparency International Hungary and the investigative journalism outlet, Átlátszó.

The following is the groups' statement.

We Stand With Transparency International Hungary and Átlátszó

EU Needs To Urgently Protect Civic Space in Hungary

The undersigned organisations call on the European Commission and EU Member States to take immediate action to protect civic space in Hungary and express our unwavering support for and solidarity with Transparency International Hungary and Átlátszó, who have recently been targeted for investigation by Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Office.

Transparency International Hungary is a watchdog committed to exposing corruption and Átlátszó is a Hungarian investigative journalism nonprofit focused on uncovering stories of cor-



A member of the Hungarian investigative journalism nonprofit Átlátszó is interviewed by AFP, in the outlet's office, in Budapest, 2 February 2021. ATTILA KISBENEDEK/AFP via Getty Images

ruption and misuse of EU funds in Hungary.



Transparency International, in its Corruption Perceptions Index, has ranked Hungary as the most corrupt in the European Union for two years in a row, and the targeting of the two organisations seems to be a clear act of retaliation by the Hungarian government. It also appears designed to send a broader message of intimidation to Hungarian citizens, civil society organisations and journalists, striving for transparency, accountability and a society that is free of corruption.

The European Commission should accelerate the infringement procedure it has commenced in response to Hungary's Law on the Protection of National Sovereignty and its enforcement arm, the Sovereignty Protection Office. We also urge the European Commission to refer the matter to the Court of Justice of the European

Union requesting interim measures to suspend the enforcement of this law and protect other civil society organisations and others who work in Hungary and might face similar intimidation.

The investigations, enabled by the controversial Law on the Protection of National Sovereignty, appear to be an effort to silence critical voices and weaken anti-corruption initiatives. They contravene the democratic values and human rights enshrined in both Hungarian and European Union law. Such action endangers not only individual organisations but also the broader space for civil society and democracy in Hungary. We urge the European Commission and EU Member States to take immediate and decisive action as described above to protect NGOs and independent journalists in Hungary. Ensuring their freedom and safety is vital for upholding transparency, accountability and democracy within the EU. 🌱

Source: <https://ifex.org/eu-needs-to-urgently-protect-civic-space-in-hungary/>

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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