

## Media freedom yet to gain pace

This year (2015 May to 2016 April) witnessed- i) shrunk activities in media owing to the natural disaster- May 12 aftershock of 2015- especially in the hilly districts; ii) media persons faced double hostility- from the security bodies, and from agitating political parties and the cadres in the southern plains, which claimed a life of young journalist- Rohan Chaudhari- of Mahottari district, and iii) a glimmer of hope in media fraternity with the arrest of a mastermind of the murder of media entrepreneur though late- after six years of the murder.

Freedom Forum recorded a total of 59 incidents of press freedom violation in this monitoring period. However, the number of journalists affected in the incidents is over 100 across the country. There were 17 incidents of attack, while 12 threat and death threat combined, eight obstructions, seven vandalism and others.

It is quite worrying that political leaders and cadres are in the forefront to intimidate journalists. The arrest of ex-parliamentarian Sanjay Sah as the mastermind of the murder of media entrepreneur Arun Singhaniya, paints horrible picture of Nepali media as to how callous the political interests are towards free media.

The year beginning with a big aftershock (May 12, 2015) left media persons psychologically panicked, for they had lost their relatives and properties. It obviously shrank the media activism.

The most horrible incident of the year which remained ignored, and almost unheard is the killing of a young radio journalist Rohan Chaudhari of Jaleshwornath FM. He was killed in firing.

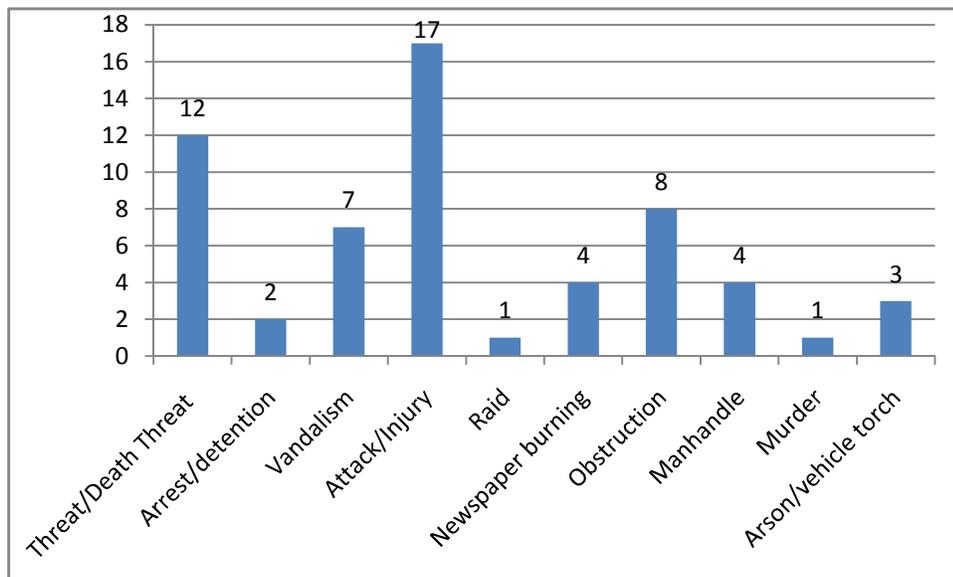
*"Rohan Chaudhari, 19, from Bajrahi village of Jaleshwor municipality, Mohottari, a district in the southern plains was killed in a police firing while he was reporting live to the Jaleshwornath FM from a local Mahendra Chowk on September 9, 2015. Shot on chest by the security command while taming protest, Chaudhari died on the spot," said Station Manager of FM, 90.4, Bijay Chaudhari, adding, "Sadly and astonishingly, the incident was ignored by many including media." Rohan had been working a RJ and reporter to the FM for 13 months.*

It was the indication how Nepali media/journalists remained at the receiving end of the political agitation especially in the southern plains coupled with rowdy demonstration and the obstruction on southern border. Attack, death threat, threat, manhandle continued both by the State and agitating sides. The agitating political parties and

groups continuously threatened reporters reasoning the news on protests was given little space in their media; while the security persons randomly assaulted journalists in the protests.

As always, political cadres and security persons and traders remained the most hostile to free reporting.

### Press Freedom Violations during a year (May 2015 to 2016 April)



Total Violations 49, No. of journalists affects 100 +

### Some points

Nepal got new constitution from the Constituent Assembly on September 20, 2015 which has created a broader democratic context to institutionalize reforms on media sector.

Threat was more to reporters writing on financial irregularities, smuggling and administrative malfeasance.

Security agency, especially police persons controlling protest/riot failed to segregate journalists from protesters, and respect of their rights.

Political parties are yet to internalize the importance of press freedom and journalists' right to free reporting.

Due to protests, many national media, especially Kathmandu-published newspapers were obstructed to reach towns and cities in southern plains for nearly four months.

Some FM radios in Madhes were found used to glorify protests, breaching the code of conduct.

Pressure from both State and agitating parties mounted on media thereby blocking news, disrupting work atmosphere.

Political parties, groups, and people from the southern plains felt belittled by the national media with littler coverage of their protests.

For lack of clear and comprehensive laws to govern internet, the practice of freedom of expression on internet is challenged.

**On policy:** The Ministry of Information and Communications formed a committee to study the overall media and formulate a new media policy. As the country has witnessed the big change on political and constitutional setups, broader media policy is imperative, but, the committee lacks the farsighted vision to incorporate the views from the wider range of stakeholders for perspective media development.

Press Council Nepal, a State agency to see code of conduct on journalists, brought a preliminary draft of the Journalists' Code of Conduct-2016. It seems the Code of Conduct was brought in haste. Similarly, it is learnt that efforts are made by the Council to classify journalists and making journalists to take eligibility exams signals possible State control on media and journalists.

**Impunity Watch:** Nepal police, after six years of the murder of media entrepreneur Arun Singhaniya from Janakpur, a city in the southern plains of Nepal, proved that suspended member of parliament (MP), Sanjay Sah, was the mastermind.

Held on another crime- bomb blast in Janakpur city, the police investigation revealed that he was the mastermind behind the murder of media entrepreneur Singhaniya. Singhaniya was the chairperson of Radio Today Communications Group. The police investigation further disclosed that four other persons –

Chandra Dip Yadav, Yongendra Sahani, Om Prakash Yadav and Mukesh Chaudhary- were also involved in the murder. Singhaniya was shot dead at local Shiva Chowk of Janakpur city on March 1, 2010.

The police paraded them organizing a press meet on April 6. As per the investigation, Sah paid the goons to finish off media entrepreneur Singhaniya after the Janakpur Today disseminated a story on a burglary.

**Attack on journalist inside Singha Durbar:** Kabin Adhikari, a photojournalist with an online news portal- onlinekhabar.com, was attacked by police persons inside Singha Durbar, the central administrative place of the country. He was attacked by police while photographing the arrest of civil servants inside Singha Durbar, on April 10.

The anti-graft body, Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), arrested senior journalist Kanak Mani Dixit from the capital city on April 22. The CIAA arrested noted journalist and Chairman of Himal Media, Dixit, citing the reason that he did not cooperate with the CIAA investigation on his properties allegedly amassed by the illegal means. However, noted journalist, during the arrest said, “The CIAA action on me is biased and I am picked from the very place then king had arrested me during royal coup.”

### **In conclusion,**

State side including political parties and security agencies remaining the most hostile elements to limit press freedom shows the dire need of democratic culture in the political parties.

The unawareness among the security persons to segregate journalists from the protestors means they need proper training on respecting journalists' rights during protest

The committee to prepare draft on new media lacks the activism to incorporate the views from the broad range of stakeholders. The committee is in need of holding broad discussion and debate with the pressing issues of media so that diverse views would surface to get due address. The committee's decisions must suit the democratic values.

Attack on journalists inside Singh Durbar, one of the safest places, shows how unreceptive the very central administration of the country is towards free reporting. If such place is not safe for journalists, where can they be safe? Which is the safe place? Attack on such premises is condemnable.

Any policy brought in haste does not grasp the changed dynamics of media. Only broad discussion with stakeholders can help ensure the media freedom- a prerequisite to democratic system.

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