



Free Expression

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A NEWSLETTER OF FREEDOM FORUM

Nepal's 2026 Elections: Challenges to election integrity, free expression and press freedom

Nepal held general elections for the House of Representatives on March 5, 2026, electing representatives to all 275 seats in the federal parliament. A total of 93 political parties fielded candidates across the country, including 388 women candidates, one representing the LGBTQI community and 157 independent candidates. Despite taking place in a highly volatile political environment, the elections were concluded peacefully. Although many new challenges and trends noted in digital space have highly impacted electoral integrity and democratic process.

The polls marked a significant democratic resurgence following the 2025 Gen Z uprising. However, the environment for freedom of expression remained fragile for both citizens and political actors, particularly on social media platforms. The uprising itself, had been triggered by widespread youth anger over systemic corruption and the government's decision to impose a social media ban, which resulted in dozens of deaths, thousands of injuries, and ultimately the toppling of a two-thirds majority government.

Election campaign digitized

Following directives from the Election Commission Nepal to limit campaign spending and restrict campaigning to a 15-day period, political parties heavily shifted toward digital campaigning. As a result, information technology professionals were more engaged in designing digital campaign materials than in previous elections, where traditional campaign tools such as banners and printed manifestos dominated.



A noticeable transformation occurred as candidates increasingly used social media and messaging apps to communicate their manifestos and appeal directly to voters, replacing conventional door-to-door campaigning. Media reports also indicated significant spending on social media advertisements during the campaign period. However, this digital transition also introduced new risks. This year's elections witnessed an unprecedented surge in misinformation and disinformation, especially across digital platforms. Social media users and journalists who expressed critical views whether supportive or opposing candidates faced threats, harassment and intimidation.

Attacks on Media and Journalists

Journalists encountered multiple incidents of violence and obstruction while reporting on election-related activities. Freedom Forum documented at least five violation incidents during the election period.

- On February 8, Annapurna Post National daily newspaper's local correspondent Shiba Dhungana was threatened for reporting on candidates contesting the elections in Okhaldhunga, Koshi Province.
- On February 26, a prominent online news portal Ratopati.com's Koshi Province bureau chief Arjun Acharya was attacked in Jhapa-5 while covering a door-to-door campaign of Communist Party of Nepal (UML) Chairperson KP Sharma Oli. His mobile phone was confiscated and he sustained injuries to his head, eyes and face.
- On February 27, Raju Subedi, Presenter of online television Tvannapurna.com, received death threats and abusive messages on social media over his reporting on election-related issues, including allegations involving local political leaders on citizenship issues in Baglung, Gandaki Province.
- On February 28, Sunrisetvnews.com reporter Sudeep Thapa was physically assaulted in Kailali, Sudurpaschim Province

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Message from Executive Chief

Uphold public trust, Deliver governance and accountability

Nepal's politics has entered a new era with the near two-thirds majority secured by the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) in the March 5 elections. Formed just four years ago, the party's victory was unexpected and has brought youth leadership to the center of national politics. Carrying the key agendas of good governance and accountability, the new party achieved a decisive parliamentary victory and now has the opportunity to form the new government. The political transition that emerged after the September 2025 Gen Z uprising has come to an end. The interim government was successful to bring the country back on track by conducting peaceful elections of House of Representatives which was dissolved following the Gen Z movement.



Taranath Dahal

In other words, Nepal's shaken democracy has regained stability. This is a matter of satisfaction. With this shift, national politics is now largely in the hands of new and young leaders, while traditional parties have been sidelined. Nepali people, long weary of corruption and poor governance, have found renewed hope. The public has placed its trust in young leaders to deliver effective governance, improve public service delivery and embrace the spirit of reform. To sustain this trust, the government must deliver swift and visible improvements. It must fully utilize the power of its public mandate to gain public's trust, especially among the younger generation. Expectations are high and meeting them will not be easy, but the government must do.

This political change carries a mandate not only to reform governance but also to improve the constitutional framework. However, the fundamental values mainly, federalism, inclusion, republicanism and parliamentary system- enshrined in Nepal's 2015 Constitution and achieved after eight years of effort must remain intact. The issues of amendment should be constructive and identified based on a decade of practice and experience and aimed at widening and strengthening democracy.

For this, the government must build an environment of national consensus. Constitutional amendment requires agreement in both houses of Parliament, as well as broader support from political forces and civil society to ensure legitimacy. The youth-led RSP and government under Prime Minister Balendra Shah must lead this process with positive spirit, tolerance and responsibility. Nepal must not deviate from its commitment to an open and liberal democratic system.

At the same time, the government must act on key governance reforms. It should uphold the principles of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) by strengthening independent anti-corruption bodies, ensuring judicial independence, promoting transparency in public procurement, addressing conflicts of interest and protecting the role of civil society and the media in holding the power accountable. The government should also join the Open Government Partnership and adopt the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to reinforce its commitment to transparency, justice and non-violent politics. Long pending transitional justice issues must be resolved with a victim-centered approach. The government should also improve its human rights records by ending the culture of impunity and strengthening national human rights institutions.

To support these efforts, long-delayed legal reforms related to freedom of expression, media freedom, civil society governance and digital governance should be expedited in line with international best practices and liberal democratic standards. Meeting the aspirations of a new generation through democratic reforms is now the government's central responsibility. Strengthening the rule of law, ending impunity and safeguarding democratic institutions must be its top priorities. Any attempt to weaken these foundations risks triggering another political crisis.

Freedom Forum urges the government not to undermine the role of civil society and the independent press. We remain open to constructive collaboration to promote open, effective and good governance in line with the spirit of this political change. We will remain vigilant and committed to ensuring that cooperation between the government and civil society makes this democratic transition meaningful and successful. Happy New Year 2083!! 🌱

New advertisement regulation puts private media at risk

The Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers directed all the ministries and government agencies, including local levels to publish and broadcast advertisements, official notices and information exclusively through state-owned media outlets.

The directive, issued on April 1 and signed by Section Officer Binod Regmi states that this decision made at the Secretary level aims to ensure uniformity and transparency in the publication and broadcast of advertisements and information, reduce public expenditure and promote state-owned media.

Freedom Forum expressed serious concern over the decision made by the newly elected government. This move appears unusual and surprising. All the media outlets- state-owned and private- should have equal and competitive access to government advertisements.

FF's Executive Chief Taranath Dahal noted that non-discrimination in the allocation of government advertisements is also one of the fundamental standards of press freedom. Although the government claimed that this move is intended to curb corruption and promote transparency in Nepali media, it restricts press freedom and will have an impact on media sustainability.

Therefore, FF urges the government to withdraw this directive and initiate dialogue with relevant stakeholders to develop appropriate legal and institutional frameworks for advertisement management. The newly elected government is also urged to ensure a fair advertising market where all types of media ownership can compete and flourish under a non-discriminatory policy. 🌱



Freedom of Expression Violations

Koshi Province

Threat

Reporter for the Annapurna Post national daily, Shiba Dhungana, received threats over news on February 8. Dhungana is also the editor of Nagarikmedia.com, based in Okhaldhunga.

Talking to Freedom Forum, Dhungana said that since January 26 he had published news reports and videos related to political parties' candidates for the upcoming elections, as well as internal party disputes over candidacy. The reports were published in Nagarikmedia.com and the Annapurna Post daily. Dhungana also shared related content on social media. Following the publication, individuals claiming to be relatives of political leaders issued threats to Dhungana.

"A person named Prachanda Khadka, who introduced himself as a cousin of Nepali Communist Party (NCP) leader Gyan Bahadur Khadka, along with Bijay Lama and Jung Tamang, repeatedly used abusive language to threaten me through messages and phone calls allegedly over news reporting and its impact on their campaign. Similarly, a few other individuals also called me from new and unknown numbers, but I declined the calls," journalist Dhungana said. He added that he informed the concerned leader about the threats; however, the leader said he was not aware of the individuals making the calls.

Manhandle

Editor at Ranbhumi.com, Pawan Bikram Shah was manhandled while covering a news in Biratnagar on February 20.

Journalist Shah shared with Freedom Forum that after receiving complaints from local residents about alleged irregularities in the construction of a drain, he went to the site to report on the issue. "I was talking to locals nearby and recording videos of the site when a person named Jitendra Khadka and his family members manhandled me and attacked my camera," Shah said.

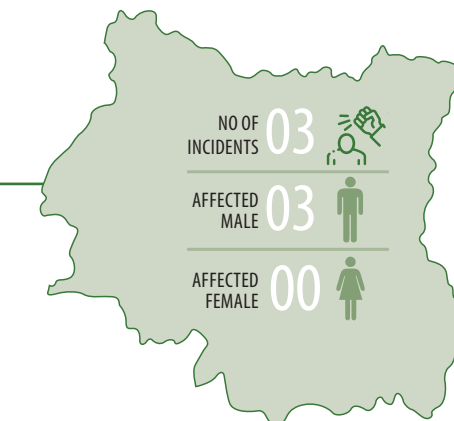
According to Shah, Khadka is a member of the consumers' committee involved in the construction of the drain.

Shah further stated that Khadka also misbehaved with him at the local police station, where both parties had been called to facilitate a discussion. On February 25, both parties agreed to reconcile after Khadka apologized for his behavior toward journalist Shah.

Attack

Chief of Ratopati.com's Koshi Province bureau, Arjun Acharya was violently assaulted while reporting election activities in Jhapa on February 26.

On February 27, Journalist Acharya shared a press note on his Facebook wall stating that he was reporting on door-to-door campaign of the CPN UML party's leader KP Sharma Oli in Kamal Rural Municipality, Jhapa along with his team. "During reporting, I noticed a few local women shouting at youth volunteers. They told me that the volunteers abused them using obscene language for supporting another political party", Acharya said. He added, "When I tried to record on my mobile



phone, a group of four or five youths grabbed me, seized my phone and glasses, and took me about 50 meters away to an isolated area, where they beat me indiscriminately."

They did not stop even after Acharya identified himself as a journalist. They also threatened him saying, "Come to Damak, the matter is not settled yet." Acharya sustained injuries in his head, eyes and face and received treatment at the Neuro Hospital, Biratnagar.

Talking to Freedom Forum, Acharya shared that his mobile phone and eyeglasses were lost in the incident. He further informed that Deputy Superintendent of Police Kishor Lamsal had asked him to visit the police station to identify the attackers. Acharya registered a First Information Report (FIR) at the police station on February 27.

Following this, both parties were summoned to the police station on March 15. In the presence of representatives from the political party, Federation of Nepali Journalists Morang, municipality office and police, they signed a mutual agreement. The party cadres agreed to publicly apologize for the attack and compensate the journalist for his medical treatment as well as his lost mobile phone and eyeglasses. Acharya also agreed to withdraw the case.

Madhesh Province

Misbehaviour

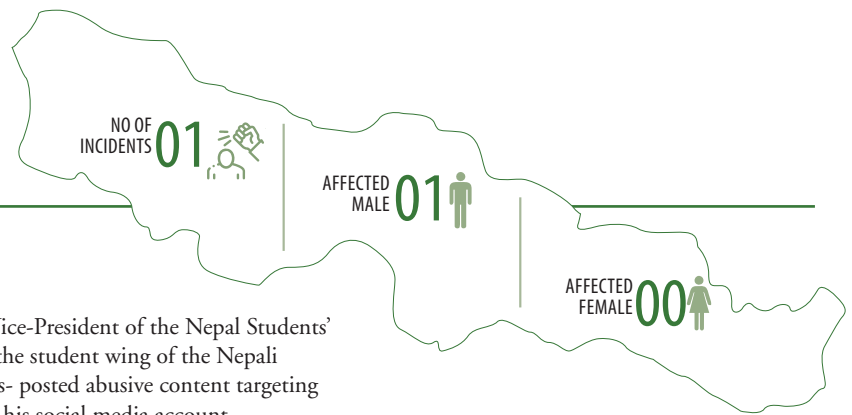
A political cadre abused Kantipur Publications reporter Binay Azad on social media. Azad is a reporter based in Siraha, Madhesh Province.

On January 1, Azad reported on the misuse of a government vehicle during a picnic program organized by the Nepali Congress in Siraha. Following the publication of the news, Jitendra

Yadav, Vice-President of the Nepal Students' Union- the student wing of the Nepali Congress- posted abusive content targeting Azad on his social media account.

On January 5, police took Yadav into custody following a complaint filed by Azad and released him later the same day. According to

Police Chief SP Anant Ram Shrestha, Yadav apologized for his actions and pledged not to repeat such behavior in the future.



Bagmati Province

Manhandle

Journalists were targeted while covering a protest in the federal capital of Nepal, Kathmandu. The incident took place on March 28.

Five journalists covering the protest organized by the political party Communist Party of Nepal-UML were manhandled.

The affected journalists include Daya Dudraj from Kantipur National Daily; Kaushal Kaphle and Prasun Sangraula from Onlinekhabar.com; Ashish Guragain from Ratosurya.com; and Suraj Khadka from Nplpress.com. They were

manhandled by party cadres while reporting at the party's central office in Lalitpur, Bagmati Province.

Speaking to Freedom Forum, reporter Kaphle said that he, along with Dudraj and Sangraula, had reached the party office premises at around 1:00 pm to cover news related to a committee meeting following the arrest of former Prime Minister and party's chair K. P. Sharma Oli. A group of party cadres chased them away from the premises.

"As we approached with our mobile phones to take photos of cadres burning tyres, they again

shoved us and verbally abused us, shouting, 'Where were your cameras when the nation was burning?' Kaphle added. "They were so enraged at the time that I felt somewhat fearful to continue reporting", he said.

In a separate incident, Khadka was also manhandled while covering party cadres' protest in Babarmahal, Kathmandu. His camera was damaged and his hand injured. Similarly, Guragain was manhandled when he questioned cadres about their abuse of journalists. He fell to the ground during the incident.



ECN imposes fine against Setopati online

Freedom Forum expresses serious concern over the decision of the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) to impose a fine on Setopati.com for allegedly violating the election code of conduct. The commission issued the decision on March 9. Earlier, ECN had written to the Press Council Nepal (PCN) requesting action against Setopati.com, a leading online news portal, for publishing a public opinion poll related to the March 5 elections on February 16. The PCN subsequently sought clarification from the portal alleging that its content violated both election and journalistic codes of

conduct to which the outlet had responded.

News reports including- '*Sobita Gautam will win the election in Chitwan-3: Renu Dahal second*', 'Main contest in Kathmandu-3 between Raju Pandey and Kulman Ghising' were published ahead of the elections. Following public criticism, the outlet edited the news titles and publicly acknowledged that the outlet had failed to maintain institutional restraint with editor's message. The portal further clarified that the reports were based on field surveys and interviews with more than

1,000 voters across multiple constituencies and were not intended to influence voter decisions.

On February 26, Editor-in-Chief Ameet Dhakal filed a writ petition at the Supreme Court against both ECN and PCN arguing that the letters issued violated constitutional guarantees of press freedom. The Supreme Court subsequently issued a show-cause order against the outlet on February 27. With the start of election's silence period, no any interim order was issued. Again, on March 9 the ECN instructed the outlet to submit fine amount Rs. 1,00,000 within 15 days.

Gandaki Province

Death threat

Reporter Tolakanta Bagale of Rastriya Samachar Samiti (RSS) from Syangja received death threats over a news report on February 12. Bagale is also station manager at Radio Adhikhola 105.4 MHz.

Reporter Bagale told Freedom Forum that he had covered a news story on February 6 about a local woman's efforts to protect stray dogs. "I also posted a video report of the coverage on my social media page. After that, a local businessman Surya Prasad Kafle shared abusive posts against me on his social media page Waling Nepal. While he was drunk, he also shared a video accusing me of publishing news about others' work using his dogs. He further threatened to cut me into pieces and feed me to his dogs," Bagale said.

"I simply wanted to highlight the good work happening in my community but he misunderstood me. I reported the incident to the local police on February 13," he added.

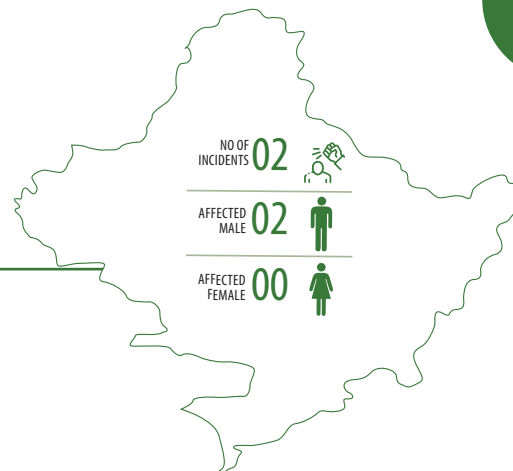
Following the complaint, police arrested Kafle. He was released the next day after apologizing to the journalist and committing not to repeat such acts.

Death Threat

Publisher and Director of Tvannapurna.com, Raju Subedi received death threats and abusive messages on social media over his reporting on February 27.

Journalist Subedi informed Freedom Forum (FF) that while reporting on election activities in Baglung, he received a tip-off about the alleged illegal issuance of Nepali citizenship certificates to Indian nationals.

On February 26 he published a news report stating alleged involvement of local political leaders in issuing citizen certificates. Subedi told FF that the news was based on documents received from news sources.



Following the publication, party cadres posted abusive content on Facebook targeting Subedi and accusing him of acting against their party. Subedi shared screenshots of the posts and messages with FF. The posts and messages contained death threats, threats of arson at his residence and calls to attack him wherever he is found, if he did not delete the published news.

Subedi informed local administration and police about the incident. "Baglung Chief District Officer Krishna Prasad Adhikari told me that he was unable to ensure my protection amid severe threats against me, especially with the election around the corner. In this situation, I do not feel secure continuing my reporting", said journalist Subedi.

Lumbini Province

Misbehavior

Editor-in-Chief at Hamropaila.com, Ganesh Pokhrel was abused on social media over his reporting on January 5. The news portal operates from Kapilvastu, Lumbini Province. Pokhrel is also Station Manager at Radio Banganga, which is based in Kapilvastu.

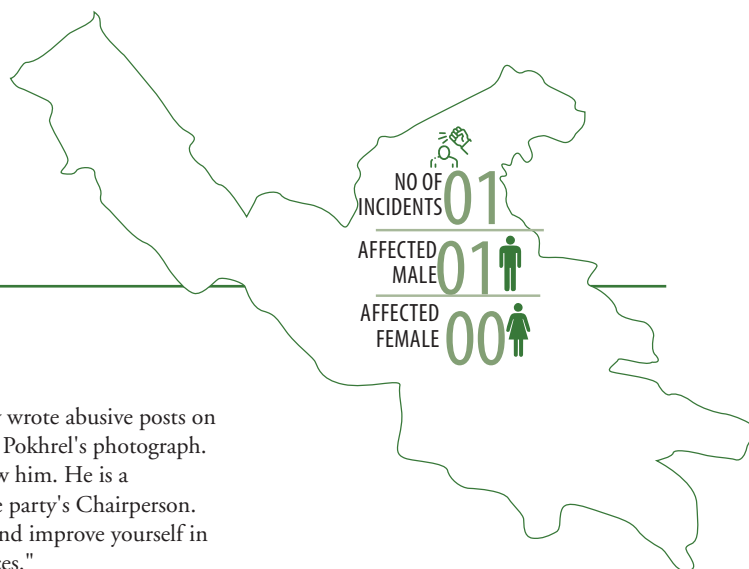
Editor Pokhrel shared with Freedom Forum that news on internal dispute within Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) was published on the portal along with an audio clip of a conversation between leaders. Following the publication, two persons- Krishna Pariyar and

Shivacharan Chaudhary wrote abusive posts on social media along with Pokhrel's photograph. The posts stated- "Know him. He is a journalist bought by the party's Chairperson. Mr. Pokhrel, be aware and improve yourself in time or face consequences."

Editor Pokhrel informed FF that the audio was published with consent from the RSP's Kapilvastu Chairperson Shiva Kumar Subedi. "That was the first time I spoke to the Chairperson and I donot know him personally. I have evidence of my conversation with him. Instead of adopting legitimate process for discontent over news, their posts have harmed

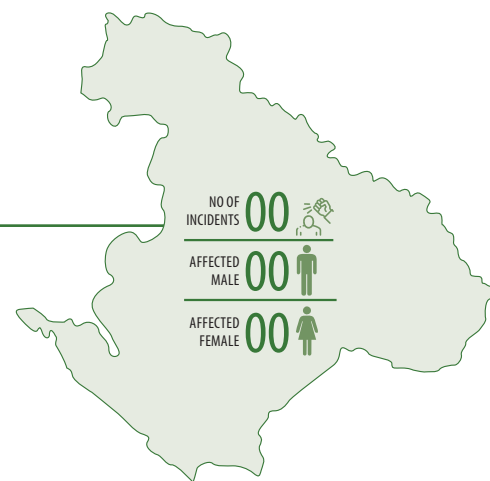
my personal and professional reputation. I will seek legal remedies against this act", said Pokhrel adding, "They even called me through unknown numbers and wrote threatening messages."

After Pokhrel stated that he would seek legal action, they deleted their social media posts on January 6.



Karnali Province

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



Sudurpaschim Province

Manhandle

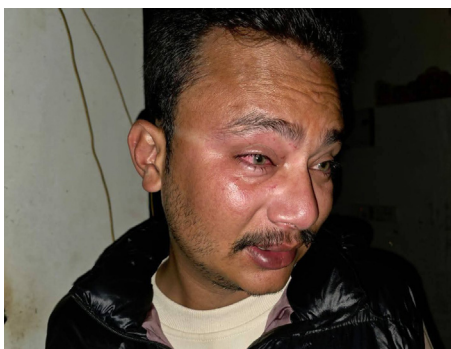
Reporters Laxman Dhungal and Usha Kiran Jyoti of STS Television were harassed while covering a news story on January 7 in Kailali. The television channel is aired from Dhangadhi.

Reporter Dhungal told Freedom Forum that the incident occurred while they were reporting on traffic police action against local motorcyclists for violating traffic rules.

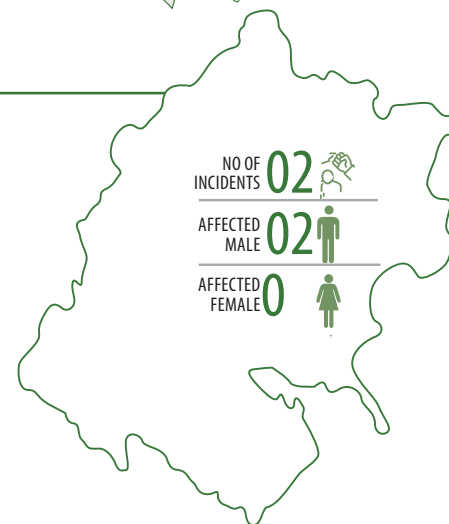
“We were recording video of traffic police stopping individuals who had violated traffic rules for news purpose. Meanwhile, one of the officers angrily approached us, shouted at us for filming, and seized our reporting devices. He also attempted to delete the video, but we stopped him after showing our press identity cards,” Dhungal said, adding, “Had my female colleague not been present there, he would have slapped me as well.”

Attack

Reporter with Sunrisetvnews.com, Sudeep Thapa, was attacked in Kailali on February 28. Freedom Forum spoke with Shravan Deuba, President of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), Kailali Chapter about the incident. President Deuba informed FF that reporter Thapa was attacked while returning home after covering election activities. As he was walking, two individuals on a motorbike followed him. Upon recognizing Thapa, they beat him on face and fled the scene.



Injured journalist Sudeep Thapa



Chairperson of Sunrisetvnews.com, Uttam Thapa informed FF that reporter Thapa sustained injuries to his eyes and face in the incident. Following the attack, Thapa received treatment at Sarathi Hospital in Kailali. The incident was reported at District Police office, Kailali with one of the attackers identified as a local Himanshu Bohora. Police arrested him and held discussion with the journalists. Bohora apologized to reporter Thapa and agreed to cover his treatment expenses. The reason for attack is yet unknown, informed reporter Thapa. 🌱

ECN writes to Press Council seeking removal of BBC documentary

The Election Commission of Nepal has issued an official letter to the media regulatory body, Press Council Nepal, requesting removal of a documentary published by BBC on February 26.

The documentary titled *Shot Like Enemies: Inside Nepal's Gen Z Uprising* was published on the YouTube channels of BBC World Service (English) and BBC Nepali Sewa (Nepali) on the same day. Both videos have gathered approximately

2.5 million views. According to description on the video, the documentary is based on more than 4,000 videos, photographs, and leaked police radio transcripts obtained by BBC journalists. The documentary focuses exclusively on the Gen Z uprising held on September 8.

The Commission reportedly expressed concern over the documentary's content, citing its potential impact on the upcoming House of Representatives election. According to Sujun Maharjan from Monitoring Division of the

council, PCN was investigating the case.

FF's Executive Chief Taranath Dahal states that disclosing the truth through investigative reporting is a duty of press and right to know the truth is a fundamental right of public. However, if the content of a report was false, fabricated or manipulative, the concerned authorities would have taken legitimate action in accordance with the law."

Ordering the removal of the published content is against the press freedom, he noted. 🌱

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while returning home after covering election activities, sustaining injuries to his eye and head.

In addition to physical attacks, regulatory pressures also emerged.

- On February 16, the Election Commission (ECN) wrote to the Press Council Nepal (PCN) to take action against Setopati.com, an online news portal, for publishing a public opinion poll on election outcomes. The Press Council sought clarification, alleging a violation of the code of conduct. Setopati.com subsequently filed a writ petition at the Supreme Court, arguing that the move violated constitutional guarantees of press freedom. On March 9, the Election Commission imposed a fine of NPR 100,000 on the media.

Such incidents risk fostering self-censorship among journalists, particularly when reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption and political movements. Elections Commission's Information Integrity Promotion Center claimed 612 contents as 'Harmful Information' published on various platforms including media outlets from February 20-26. The commission further claimed that 74 cases were referred to the Press Council Nepal.

However, Press Council Nepal reported that the council received 25 letters seeking action from Election Commission. Of these, 16 cases have been resolved, six were notified regarding their content and remaining three were cautioned to publish credible content. These were alleged for violation of election code of conduct and publishing misleading contents such as public polls, fake screenshots of news portals. Chief Administrative Officer Deepak Khanal told Freedom Forum that the Council's own monitoring between January 18 to March 8 identified total 987 media publishing fake or misleading contents. Of these, 844 were registered media and 143 involved fabricated screenshots impersonating credible media. The council notified 125 media through phone calls and issued letters to 269 media. Further, 43 cases were referred to the Cyber Bureau of Nepal Police and 550 remain under investigation at the Council.

Rampant Mis/Disinformation and misuse of AI tools

The pre- and post-election period saw a surge in misinformation across social media and online news portals, undermining information integrity - a core pillar of freedom of expression.

Political speeches, statements and public opinions were frequently distorted in ways that could influence voter decision-making.

According to a study on misinformation trends and fact-checking during elections conducted by NepalFactCheck.org Editor Umesh Shrestha, misinformation increased significantly during the five-week period surrounding the elections, from February 1 to March 23. Preliminary findings of the study suggests that total 125 fact-checking reports were published analyzing 113 election-related content during this period. These fact-checking were done by NepalFactCheck.org (69), Techpana fact-check (54) and NepalCheck (2).

The study notes that old videos and statements were repurposed and circulated as current content to discredit candidates. For instance, an interview of Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) candidate Sobita Gautam seven years ago was selectively edited and shared on social media; while a speech by Nepali Congress candidate Gagan Thapa on indigenous communities was edited to suggest offensive remarks.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools further amplified the problem. Deepfake videos depicting Indian celebrities supporting Nepali candidates, as well as AI-generated content exploiting religious sentiments, circulated widely. On February 26, a video of Indian celebrity Ranbir Kapoor supporting RSP candidate Balendra Shah went viral on social media. NepalFactCheck.org verified the content as baseless and misleading as it was created using AI. Similarly, on March 5, posts circulated on social media claiming that a ballot box was damaged due to gunshot from the police showing a large hole in the ballot box with torn ballot papers inside the box. A fact-check by Techpana.com confirmed that the image was AI generated.

Some of these posts also linked the leaders to the religious sentiments and attempted to manipulate the voters. On the first week of March 2026, a photo circulated on social media claiming that Leader Balendra Shah wore a cap, typically worn by the Islam followers and that he could not protect Hindus and the state. Techpana fact-check confirmed that the photo was edited and shared on social media with the intent to mislead public and manipulate voters' perception.

Online harassment and gendered abuse

Women candidates and public figures were

disproportionately targeted with online abuse, harassment and disinformation. They faced body shaming, trolling and coordinated attacks aimed at undermining their credibility and participation.

Few examples are- RSP candidate Ranju Darshana, who contested the election during the final stage of her pregnancy, was subjected to obscene and abusive comments. Another candidate of proportional seat from RSP and artist Reema Bishwakarma was targeted with AI-generated deepfake images linking her inappropriately with male leaders. Similarly, Bina Kadayat, a solo candidate of RSP from Jumla, faced derogatory remarks on her personal life.

These cases are indicative of a broader pattern. Women candidates are frequently targeted not only personally but also through attacks on their families, discouraging their participation in politics. Supporters of such candidates also faced trolling and harassment.

To conclude, these incidents highlight a troubling gap between legal provisions and their practical implementation, particularly of fundamental rights during elections. Although Nepal's constitution ensures freedom of expression and press freedom, these rights remain contested in practice. While this year's election was not visibly influenced by the misuse of AI-generated content, potential risks in future cannot be ignored. With the upcoming local and provincial elections expected to involve thousands of candidates, the use of social media and digital platforms is likely to have significant impact on civic opinion and electoral decision making. Thus, serious multi-stakeholders' dialogue based on





Source: NepalFactCheck.Org

current experiences to ensure a safe electoral environment and effective regulation of digital space is an urgent need.

Moreover, the spread of mis/disinformation, attacks on journalists and targeted online abuse especially against women candidates undermine election integrity, affect public decision-making and hinder inclusive democratic participation. These challenges underscore the urgent need to strengthen media and information literacy among citizens. Promoting independent fact-checking skills of civil society organizations and fact-checkers and increasing public awareness of journalists' rights safety are steps toward safeguarding democratic processes in Nepal's evolving digital landscape based on this year's electoral experiences.

Joint Statement on Digital Rights: Cybersecurity and Disinformation pose serious challenges to free and fair elections

Freedom Forum joined twenty digital rights and press freedom organizations in urging all the concerned stakeholders to ensure both physical- and digital- safety in the House of Representatives election scheduled for March 5. The organizations further emphasized the need to guarantee a reliable information ecosystem thereby, contributing to a free and fair election.

Issuing the statement on February 7, 2026, the organizations expressed their solidarity and commitment to this campaign.

Press Statement
Date: 2082/10/24
Kathmandu

We, the undersigned organizations working to promote democracy, press freedom, and digital rights, express our serious concern over the growing risks of cybersecurity threats, misinformation and disinformation in the context of upcoming elections in Nepal. The overall pre-election environment has been concerning and we anticipate three days prior to election day would be particularly sensitive.

Free and fair elections not only mean safe voting process but also require information integrity, an atmosphere free from misinformation, disinformation and information manipulation. During this sensitive period, the risk of coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns causing damage to electoral credibility, social harmony and public trust is extremely high. Thus, we wish to raise serious concern about the possibility of Nepal's elections being used as a 'testing ground' for spreading misinformation and information manipulation.

While the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) and few civil society organizations are capable and committed to identifying and analyzing misinformation, we are concerned that the broader election monitoring mechanism has not been sufficiently active in addressing this serious challenge.

In this context, our analysis and recommendations are as follows:

- As the election date approaches, public information and awareness campaigns to combat misinformation must be immediately intensified.

- Strong coordination and collaboration among the government, ECN, media and civil society organizations (CSOs) are essential, to effectively combat organized misinformation and disinformation campaigns. This includes developing mechanisms such as a "Misinformation dashboard" for editors and journalists, and establishing rapid and fact-based debunking systems for false and misleading information through collaboration among media houses.
- In the digital age, cybersecurity during elections directly impacts public trust, social harmony and democratic stability. It is no longer a technical issue but a matter of national security. Therefore, Nepal Government must support Cyber Bureau of Nepal Police with adequate resources, skilled personnel and enhanced technical capacity.
- Content creators active on social media significantly influence public opinion. ECN and CSOs must ensure that creators are aware of their responsibility in information dissemination and are held accountable through clear and transparent initiatives.

- The ECN should coordinate with international social media platforms - especially Meta and TikTok- to identify and control false and misleading content thereby, ensuring accountability of the platforms.
- Publishers and editors of print and online media resorting to self-censorship due to threats or fear, including campaigns such as “unfollow campaigns” is a worrying practice. Such action indicates an evasion of journalistic norms, professional ethics and democratic responsibility.

The credibility of Nepal’s democratic process is determined not only by secure ballot boxes

but also by public opinion shaped by accurate, factual, and informed information. We firmly believe that the ECN must lead this effort. We reiterate that CSOs, networks and activists are fully committed to supporting and strengthening this process.

Organizations and network in solidarity

1. Digital Rights Nepal
2. Dignity Initiative
3. Center for Media Research- Nepal
4. Freedom Forum Nepal
5. Open Internet Nepal (Internet Society Nepal Chapter)

6. Media Advocacy Group (MAG)
7. Child Safe Net
8. Digital Media Foundation
9. Media Action Nepal
10. Human Rights and Justice Center
11. Body and Data
12. Purple Foundation
13. Nepal Internet Foundation
14. Nepal Voting Rights Forum
15. The Story Kitchen
16. Youth Innovation Lab
17. Citizens’ Voice
18. Nepal Peace Organization
19. Women Leaders in Technology 🌱

Budget Trailblazer: Subash Dahal

Each month, we shine a spotlight on partners who are using budget advocacy to bring transformational change to their communities. This month, we’re highlighting Subash Dahal, Public Finance Management Coordinator at Nepal’s Freedom Forum.

Freedom Forum is our longtime Open Budget Survey partner in Nepal and has a deep history of budget expertise, advocacy and comprehensive engagement, especially with the Office of the Auditor General, Ministry of Finance and Legislative Committees. Freedom Forum pioneered the development and implementation of the ongoing Citizen Participatory Audit in Nepal and are recognized for forging strong connections between civil society and both national and subnational governments. Since 2020, we’ve also partnered with Freedom Forum through our EU-supported work to provide budget training to a variety of civil society organizations to help them track budget allocations and monitor how public money is being spent.

Tell me about your work with Freedom Forum and how it changed once you started partnering with IBP.

When Nepal moved from a highly centralized state to federalism in 2015, it decentralized power into a three-tier structure of federal, provincial and local governments, which included provisions for marginalized communities to raise their voice. But there was no clarity around budget timelines and when budget discussions were

held so community members were unable to meaningfully participate.

Before we started working with IBP, we were able to access and review a few government policies and documents, but there was a lack of unified voices and advocacy in the field of budgets, accountability and good governance. The fiscal aspect was missing.

As Freedom Forum worked on the Open Budget Survey, we saw that the call for transparency and citizen-focused budgeting is a greater good that can have a huge impact on the cause of citizens’ rights.

Over the years, with IBP’s help, we’ve been able to build a community that understands budget timelines, the duties of the local municipal government and how the community can advocate for better and fairer allocations for social services like health and education. We helped them understand that this money is not for the use of a political leader or mayor of the municipality – that it is their right to participate, to be heard and call for changes.

The motto that “money should be used for the people,” that’s the greater end goal that Freedom Forum took forward. We now have individual champions, legal experts and journalists as partners in this mission, taking our transparency, and citizen-focused budget advocacy to the next level.

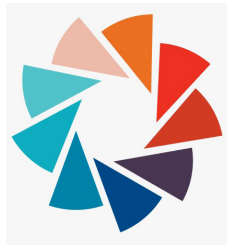


Nepal recently experienced a large, youth-led protest that forced a change in government. A breakdown in public services and poor management of public funds helped sparked this change. An interim government has now been installed and new elections are planned in March 2026. What led to this and how did it change the people’s view of government? When the government ruling system changed from a constitutional monarchy to a presidential system in 2009, the executive power went to the prime minister. OK, citizens said, now it is time for us to have power and a voice in the country. Let’s hope that they will address our concerns and ensure security and economic growth. Unfortunately, the government made big promises but didn’t fulfill them. The first breaking point was Covid. There were two years of shutdown. Peoples’ savings were depleted and they couldn’t work because of the lockdown. It forced many of our young people to go abroad for school or work. Our government has



a limited private sector and limited government jobs, which eventually brought things to a boiling point.

The recognition that the government was not able to provide basic services for its people, combined with the Covid crisis, made people realize that the government was not a good steward of public money and it prompted them to speak up and start asking more questions about how their money was being spent. Their actions made it clear that if the government doesn't make improvements in openness and engagement with citizens and respond to people's demands, the government's effectiveness and credibility will be tarnished.



Tell me about the Public Financial Management Working Group you helped form to share information across sectors and provide concrete opportunities to follow up with other civil society groups on key issues and how you are responding to the government upheaval. When we first started working with IBP, we held a budget advocacy training to bring civic groups from different sectors together, such as gender equity, health and education, at both the regional and local level. The participants were so inspired by the training that nearly all of them returned for a second training. At the end of that training, their desire to continue their advocacy across sectors spurred the creation of a civil society Public Financial Management Working Group.

We were just starting to lay out our plans for the Working Group when the government

collapsed. Determined to continue our advocacy work while we await the upcoming election, we decided we will try to monitor how much the interim government spends on the upcoming election. A key question will be how they pay for the election – will they accept foreign aid, or will it be paid for out of the pockets of the people by shifting money from basic services like health or education? In this way, we can continue our advocacy even before a new government is sworn in.

As part of reform efforts before the crisis, the previous government moved from a centralized system to a decentralized system where public money was sent to local governments for distribution. As part of the decentralization process, in 2022, the government rolled out a web-based public financial management tool for local governments called SuTRA, but only government officials were allowed to access the information. Tell me about that.

The Sub-National Treasury Regulatory Application (SuTRA) was created to strengthen planning, budgeting, and accounting at the provincial and local government levels and was launched to modernize public financial management, providing a standardized, efficient, and transparent platform for sub-national governments to handle their financial operations effectively.

Every local and provincial government uses it – but it's not available to us. If we were able to view this daily budget activity, it would help us strengthen our advocacy because we would be able to track allocations and expenses as they happen. After all, accessibility of information is a citizen's fundamental right. We could then

say, OK, this is the budget allocation and they have until this date to spend the money. If we see discrepancies, we can say, "This is not actually what was spent" and can use that data to support our advocacy. We could then say, OK, this is the budget allocation and they have until this date to spend the money. If we see discrepancies, we can say, "This is not actually what was spent" and can use that data to support our advocacy.

Freedom Forum and IBP had been planning to make a joint submission to the government to make the SutTRA System public and available to civil society organizations before the crisis. Where are you in that process? That is in our pipeline, but I'm not sure we will be able to do this in the interim government period. But we will have a good coalition of international support, and hopefully when the next elected government arrives, it will be a good moment to make that call to action.

Now that elections are on the horizon and some stability has returned, what are your hopes for Nepal's future?

When the interim Prime Minister was appointed and sworn in she announced that new elections would be her first priority. Smoothly conducting the upcoming elections would be a success of this government. Right now, however, there is relative stability.

During the upcoming period when candidates are nominated to run for office, we will consider how we can engage with both the candidates and political parties. We hope that when a new elected government comes to power, then we will have a great opportunity because this will be the first election determined by the people's majority and we are hoping that the new faces will be young leaders committed to good governance. The people-elected government will have a full mandate to work for the people and work for transparency and development. 🌱

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Source: <https://internationalbudget.org/budget-trailblazer-subash-dahal/>

Nepal 2026 General Election: Observers' Report



Freedom Forum (FF) observed House of Representatives elections held on March 5, 2026 as representative from civil society organizations in collaboration with General Election Observation Committee (GEOC). Chairperson Hari Binod Adhikari and Administrative officer Aruna Adhikari and Media Monitoring Officer Nanu Maiya Khadka participated in the observation of elections. The observers conducted monitoring

and assessment of designated polling stations in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts on a day before and on election day.

The General Election for Nepal's House of Representatives was successfully held on March 5, 2026, electing representatives for all 275 parliamentary seats. Despite a volatile political backdrop following the 2025 Gen Z movement and subsequent government change, the

election concluded peacefully nationwide, with no major incidents of violence reported.

FF representatives monitored polling stations across Kathmandu and Lalitpur. The observation covered multiple wards of Gokarneshwor Municipality, Kirtipur Municipality, Kathmandu Metropolitan City and Mahalaxmi Municipality.

Observers noted that voting began on time across most polling stations and proceeded peacefully. All the polling stations had separate queues for men and women and elderly, pregnant, and persons with disabilities were given priority to cast vote.

The election marked a noticeable shift toward digital systems, including online observation tools and reduced paper-based reporting.

However, several challenges were identified including limited accessibility, gaps in voter education, lack of necessary health facilities in some polling stations. Voters were found to be less aware regarding voting procedures that led to invalid votes. In some cases, missing voter identification also caused confusion among voters.

The observers concluded that the election was conducted in a free, fair, peaceful and secure environment, with coordinated efforts of security agencies and election authorities. However, improvements are needed in voter education, accessibility infrastructure, and service standardization across polling stations. 🌱

May this year of 2083 BS inspire everyone to create atmosphere for unobstructed exercise of human rights including freedom of expression and information to pave way to better democracy.

Happy New Year 2083

Freedom Forum Family

Performance Audit surveys on National Social Security and Health Insurance programs

Freedom Forum (FF) has successfully conducted performance audit surveys focusing on the Social Security Allowance Program and the National Health Insurance Scheme. The findings and detailed survey reports have been officially handed over to the Performance Audit Directorate of the Office of the Auditor General Nepal (OAGN).

This study was conducted under the Citizen Participation in Audit (CPA) initiative. The surveys follow a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between FF and OAGN on January 5, 2026, for participation in performance audits for the fiscal year 2082/83. This marks the latest chapter in a five-year collaboration where FF has supported OAGN in promoting civic oversight.

This year's performance audit focused on two vital public service sectors that directly affect citizens.

Social Security Allowance Program: Evaluated data management, service delivery, and citizen access. The survey tracked the entire process from registration to the receipt of funds, assessing the ease of access for 65 senior

citizens and 45 widowed single women (110 total respondents) across 12 wards in six municipalities within the Kathmandu Valley.

National Health Insurance Scheme: Assessed the gap between medicines covered under the insurance scheme and those purchased out-of-pocket by beneficiaries. Surveyors gathered feedback from 69 insured citizens across eight hospitals in the Kathmandu Valley.

Using structured questionnaires provided by the OAGN, four FF surveyors—Subash Dahal, Nanu Maiya Khadka, Aruna Adhikari, and Manju Dahal—engaged in direct field surveys, stakeholder discussions, and evidence collection.

Beyond the formal questionnaires, the team documented independent observations regarding the hospital environments and service delivery hurdles. These qualitative findings and recommendations were submitted in a separate report to the OAGN to provide a holistic view of the current systemic challenges.

As a leading civil society organization (CSO), Freedom Forum has been a pioneer of the



CPA initiative in Nepal. The organization has trained over 95 citizen auditors and established a robust national network.

Following previous years' audits, FF remains committed to advocating for greater citizen engagement in the auditing process to ensure government accountability. 🌱

The world needs more working women like you to empower others and lead the way to success. Woman who never gives up. Stay strong and keep shining.

Happy Women's Day

Freedom Forum Family



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		
	Manju Dahal: Front Desk Assistant, Ganga Kumari Gurung: Office Assistant		
Roster of Consultants/ Researchers	Subash Dahal		
Ongoing Project Information	Project Name	Supporting Agency	Date of start of project
	Open Budget Survey	International Budget Partnership	17th March 2025
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 didn't receive any grants from January to March 2026		
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		

Protecting Women Journalists Protects Press Freedom

On International Women's Day, Free Press Unlimited celebrates women journalists who risk it all to bring us the truth. Across the world, women journalists are documenting conflicts, exposing injustice and bringing forward stories that would otherwise remain unheard.

Yet in many parts of the world, doing this work comes with disproportionate risks. Women journalists face harassment, intimidation and violence simply for doing their job. Supporting their safety is therefore not only about protecting individuals. It is about protecting press freedom itself.

Gendered threats aimed at silencing women journalists

Violence against journalists is a global problem. But women journalists face a particular form of attack: gender-based harassment that targets them not only because of their work, but as women.

Online abuse has become one of the most widespread threats. Research shows that 3 in 4 women journalists have experienced online violence while performing their jobs in 2025. Women

journalists also frequently face misogynistic insults, coordinated harassment campaigns, sexualised threats and attempts to discredit their work. 42% of women journalists have experienced offline attacks connected to online abuse, more than double the incidence rate recorded in 2020.

The impact goes far beyond individual harm. Online violence often causes severe psychological stress, feelings of isolation and pressure to withdraw from public debate. One in three



Image credit: UNDP Somalia

women journalists has considered leaving the profession because of online violence (2020). When women are pushed out of journalism in this way, the public loses vital perspectives and essential stories remain untold. Violence against women journalists is therefore more than a personal attack. It is a form of censorship.

A recent example of the importance of women journalism comes from Somaliland, where journalist Fatima Mohamed produced a video report on gender-based violence in displacement camps. Across the Horn of Africa, prolonged drought has forced thousands of families from their homes, creating conditions in which insecurity and violence often increase.

By approaching the story with care and building trust with local organisations, Fatima created space for survivors to share their

experiences. Her reporting shows how diverse voices in journalism strengthen coverage, not only by bringing new perspectives, but also by helping journalists connect with communities whose stories are rarely heard.

FPU supports women journalists to work safely

Creating safer conditions for women journalists requires both immediate support and long-term structural change. Free Press Unlimited works with journalists (like the above mentioned Fatima Mohamed), media organisations and partners around the world to strengthen safety mechanisms and build more inclusive media environments. 🌱

For more visit the link below

Source: <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/current/protecting-women-journalists-protects-press-freedom>

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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