

The Status of Youth Civic Space in Nepal
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Youth in Nepal have doubled down on expressing their dissatisfaction on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the government, as both the infection and death rates surge and reports on [corruption](#) of medical supplies are making headlines. Last year, during the rise of the first wave of COVID-19, youth took to the [streets](#) in Kathmandu and other major cities and participated in physically distanced protests, and a few activists even sat down in a hunger strike against the government incompetence in dealing with the pandemic. With the rise in use of social media by youth, their '[online activism](#)' has been transforming into an 'on-the-ground campaign' exercising their freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

The COVID-19 protests are only one example of the rise of unorganized gatherings of young people that were initiated through social media. In the last decade, youth around the nation have assembled in support of several movements like '[Occupy Baluwatar](#)' protesting violence against women, '[Solidarity with Dr. KC](#)' for the improvement in medical education and the health service sector, and [#DalitLivesMatters](#) against the killing and discrimination of Dalits. Social media played a vital role in these youth-led gatherings demanding justice. However, before the social media era in Nepal, there were very few instances where a significant number of the youth population came together across the country to advocate for a cause. As these movements suggest, building the capacity of young people to effectively use social media tools can protect and promote youth civic space in Nepal.

Nepal's youth-led civic organizations have existed for over two decades, yet they struggle to engage youth in general because most of their focus has been in gathering resources for themselves. For numerous youth groups, the main agenda for creating and operating youth-focused organizations is to receive funding, implement projects and gain exposure, whereas as effective engagement with their peers has been a lesser priority. On one hand, youth civic institutions have rarely innovated or implemented progressive programs that bring visible changes in society. On the other hand, most of their time and their engagement is influenced by the interest of government agencies or international organizations and many in leadership positions remain in the hands of the elites. Such instances have created frustrations among the majority of youth activists, meaning few of them benefit. As a result, the perception among the general population is that civic organizations (popularly termed as NGOs) are 'dollar digging businesses' is getting stronger, reducing the trust of civil society as a whole.

After the promulgation of a new constitution in Nepal in 2015, the country transitioned into a new governance system creating a hope among youths that they would have opportunities to engage in local level civic activities. Similarly, the development of the [National Youth Policy](#) in 2015 envisioned active engagement of youth in nation building and sought to provide ample opportunities for them in education, employment, health, and livelihood services. As a result, the National Youth Council was formed to develop youth leadership skills and entrepreneurship and increase the role of youth in decision-making at the local level. However, it merely became a platform for managing youth cadres of major political parties at the federal, provincial, and local level. Though such a transformation of the governance system and the establishment of new

policies and institutions expanded civic space for youth, in reality youth organizations started being heavily influenced by the government, thus challenging the ability for youth to work independently.

Today, youth are looking for meaningful ways to participate in decision-making at the local level, so that they can collaborate with local government to enhance public sector accountability, social justice, and freedoms in their respective municipality. They see themselves not only as a supporter but as a partner in governance and development. For example, youth attempted to engage in meaningful participation during COVID-19 through online social media campaigns, such as the '[Digital Civic Engagement Project](#)', where seven youths representing each of the provinces in Nepal came together digitally to understand challenges faced by local government in handling effects caused by COVID-19. They worked with their peers in creating digital posts to share on social media and utilized youth volunteers to provide immediate food and sanitary support for vulnerable families at the local level. Such efforts from the youth at the grassroots level aided the government in the fight against the virus during the first wave.

At the local level, governments are unsupportive of youth engagement because they fear youth institutions pointing out their incompetency. They have started creating barriers to youth organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) for operating freely. Numerous requirements imposed on organizations effectively shrink civic space for youth, violating their freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. These [requirements](#) include registering organizations at the Municipality Office, the District Administration Office, and the Social Welfare Council (SWC); renewing the organization annually in all three bodies; and, receiving pre-approval of every activity from the municipality and SWC. As youth have little knowledge and little exposure to such legal procedures, this hassle discourages youth to open and run youth-focused organizations.

Additionally, by restricting youth groups' ability to function as a watchdog as well as a partner for the government, the government undermines their freedom of expression. The government does so by regulating 'unorganized campaigns' especially those triggered by youth through social media engagement. "[The Online Media Operation Directives](#)" issued in 2017 obliges online journalists to register and renew every year with the Department of Information of the Government of Nepal, which places independent youth vloggers, bloggers, and e-entrepreneurs at risk of losing their accreditation and could further obstruct their operations. Recently, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology introduced a new draft directive to prevent online media and social networking sites from spreading hateful messages. The vague wording used in the new directive is intended to obstruct freedom of expression, especially among the young generation who is active and vocal on social media and coordinates campaigns highlighting the government's incompetence and unaccountability.

Youth civic space in Nepal needs tremendous support from both the national and international communities to fight against the current governments' repressive policies and actions. To build leadership and capacity, youth leaders should be trained to think and act strategically in running youth groups and organizing online and on the ground. The international community should pressure the current government to respect civic freedoms not only by expressing concern with current regulations but by strictly demanding that the government uphold the freedoms

guaranteed by International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which Nepal ratified in 1991 and which is a binding international treaty. The international community must also work with civil society to advocate against policies that repress independent voices online, government surveillance online, and restrictions against freedom of opinion and expression. It has become very important for established CSOs to work with local youth clubs and groups to convene policy dialogues and public hearings, to monitor the implementation and impact of policies, and to promote freedom of expression, association, and assembly in a bottom-up manor. Last but not least, youth themselves need to build strong networks for protecting and promoting youth civic space in Nepal.