

MEDIA-NEPAL: Living Dangerously With the Censors

By Sonny Inbaraj

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For community radio broadcaster Ghama Raj Luitel, life is a daily struggle of living dangerously in emergency-ruled Nepal where jail remains a distinct possibility at every waking moment.

On Feb. 1, immediately after King Gyanendra dismissed the government and declared a state of emergency, FM radio stations were ordered to stop broadcasting news of any kind and only play music.

But 'Radio Sagarmatha', broadcasting on FM102.4 megahertz, decided to defy this order and Luitel, as the radio station's programme director, instructed his broadcasters to continue producing public-interest programmes without any hard news content in them.

"The Ministry of Information and Communications has given us strict instructions not to broadcast any programmes like interviews, news, talk shows and listener call-backs. If we want to stay on air, we have to toe the line and only broadcast music," he said.

"But we are a community radio station and we have our responsibility to inform communities. We cannot be just playing music," Luitel told IPS in an interview.

Among the programmes 'Radio Sagarmatha' still airs are ones dealing with the environment, gender issues and good governance. But Luitel admits it's difficult to keep news out of these programmes.

"It's a risky game we're playing. But all of us in the radio station are ready to be arrested any time. We're not afraid of jail."

"We will stand firm in our belief that we have the right to inform truthfully. That can never be taken away," said Luitel.

According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch, over 600 rights activists, journalists, lawyers, students and political activists remain detained since Feb. 1.

'Radio Sagarmatha', however, was forced to drop one important programme entitled "Peace Campaign" which gave both the Maoist insurgents and the Nepali government an opportunity to present their positions.

Members of the Maoist group have been known to call the station and thank them for providing "good ideas" at resolving the conflict.

"That programme is definitely out for us. The army in fact wanted it taken off the air," revealed Luitel.

In his announcement over state-run television declaring emergency, King Gyanendra accused the government of failing to conduct parliamentary elections and being unable to quell the Maoist insurgency, which has seen over 11,000 Nepalis die in the past nine years.

The 'Radio Sagarmatha' programme director recalls that Feb.1 night. "It was a bitter experience. At the time we were in our radio station watching the king's emergency proclamation on television. It was about 8:00 pm.

"While the king was speaking, I saw from my window about 15 soldiers entering the radio station's compound. They then made their way to the newsroom, and the officer who was leading the troops, a captain, asked me who was in charge of the station. I told him, I was," said Luitel. "Then he ordered me not to broadcast news but only music. And in between the music, we were even not allowed to speak. The army officer instructed me to just play music without any interruptions."

"But at that time we were re-broadcasting the king's address. We were defiant and said we had a duty to inform our listeners that emergency had been declared."

The community radio station is indeed a force to reckon with as its reach extends around the Kathmandu Valley, which includes the capital Kathmandu, its satellite towns like Lalitpur and Bakhtapur, together with eight nearby districts.

'Radio Sagarmatha' has 1.5 million regular listeners out of the five million people in the area covered by the station's FM signal.

"We developed the station as an open forum for public discussion. In our current affairs programme our listeners could call back and take part in the discussions. We had lively debates on government policy," said Luitel.

For that reason, following the royal coup, the palace-led government wanted all the country's 43 FM stations shut.

"I think we had been marked and they felt threatened by us. The current thinking is that FM radio stations are dangerous because they're capable of inciting people to revolt," explained Luitel.

But the community radio broadcaster warns that his station is being bled dry. Advertising revenue has virtually dried out after the government forced 'Radio Sagarmatha' to drop its daily broadcast of the 'BBC's' Nepali language news service.

"It was of our major revenue earners. Many advertisers wanted a plug before the BBC broadcast started or immediately after it ended," said Luitel.

"Now we have lost over 75 percent of our advertising revenue, since the declaration of emergency," he revealed. "We're in very difficult times. We earned about 150,000 rupees (2,173 U.S. dollars) a month. But now advertising revenue has dropped to a mere 25,000 rupees (362 dollars) a month."

It's Luitel's task to motivate his staff under such difficult circumstances. But he admits it now seems a gargantuan task.

"The current volume of advertising makes it very difficult for us to survive, and it's very painful for me to now start thinking about cutting staff in order to make ends meet."