

Nepal's Proposed Governance Reforms: Emerging Trends and Impacts on Civic Space

Nepal is currently undergoing a major political and governance transition following the formation of a new government under Prime Minister Balendra Shah, representing the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).¹ With 182 seats in the House of Representatives, just two short of a two-thirds majority, the government holds a strong political mandate. This commanding position has created a rare window for ambitious structural reforms, but it also raises critical concerns about democratic balance, institutional oversight, and civic space.

The newly formed government has introduced a series of reforms and policy decisions, including a 100-point governance reform roadmap.² The roadmap, along with subsequent decisions, signals a bold shift toward efficiency-driven governance, prioritizing digital transformation, administrative restructuring, anti-corruption measures, and accelerated service delivery. These initiatives respond to long-standing governance challenges in Nepal, including bureaucratic inefficiency, duplication of functions, and systemic corruption. However, the speed, scale, and centralized nature of these reforms have also generated significant debate over their implications for constitutional freedoms, institutional checks and balances, and democratic safeguards. The following are the major development, incidents, impacts in this regard.

1. Digitalization and Centralization of State Power

At the core of the reform agenda is an aggressive push toward digital governance and centralized administrative coordination. Key proposals include the establishment of a centralized IT authority under the Prime Minister's Office, the development of a National Integrated Digital Governance Platform, implementation of the National Data Exchange Platform based on digital public

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c895v335xkgo>

² <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/03/29/government-unveils-ambitious-100-point-roadmap-for-effective-governance>

infrastructure, and adoption of “provide information once” principle through systems such as the Nagarik App.³

While these initiatives aim to improve efficiency and reduce bureaucratic burden, they also signal a deep consolidation of state control over digital infrastructure and citizen data. Large-scale data integration without a comprehensive data protection framework raises serious concerns regarding privacy, surveillance risks, and weak data governance safeguards. In the absence of clear legal protections, digitalization may unintentionally shift from a service delivery tool to a mechanism of enhanced state monitoring.

2. Freedom of Expression, Association, and Participatory Democracy

The roadmap reflects an effort to professionalize governance.⁴ The Reform Plan proposes administrative reforms, particularly the depoliticization of the civil service through bans on political affiliation and trade union activity. Clause 86 further calls for the removal of partisan student organizations from schools and universities in response to concerns over political interference, weak student representation, and declining educational quality.

Although framed as professionalization reforms, these measures may significantly restrict constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of association and expression. Trade unions, student unions, and political associations have historically functioned as important platforms for collective bargaining, civic education, leadership development, and democratic participation. Their weakening may reduce opportunities for citizens, particularly workers and youth, to organize around shared interests, advocate for rights, and participate in public affairs. Over time, this can weaken democratic culture by limiting structured channels for dissent and reducing pluralism in political life.

Additional developments reflect parallel tensions in civic space, including reported restrictions on legal professionals’ access to Singha Durbar despite presenting valid advocate identity cards and the presence of an administrative court.⁵ Concerns raised by the Nepal Bar Association further highlight emerging friction between state institutions and key professional communities. Although the

³ 100-Point Governance Reform Plan, <https://opmcm.gov.np/content/497/government-of-nepal--council-of-ministers-dated/>

⁴ Id, Clause 12

⁵ <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nba-asks-pm-balen-to-ease-lawyers-access-to-singha-durbar-96-40.html>

decision is said to have been withheld⁶, lawyers report that they continue to face unnecessary questioning and additional verification requirements to gain entry to Singha Durbar. These incidents collectively suggest a shrinking operational space for actors engaged in accountability and rights advocacy.

In one instance, police in civilian attire detained Gen-Z Red Force coordinator Smriti Timilsina and questioned her for four hours over social media posts before releasing her after obtaining a written commitment not to speak against the government.⁷ She described the incident as “abduction-style,” while authorities stated she was summoned over the dissemination of unverified information affecting Nepal–China relations.

Similarly, YouTuber Roshan Pokharel was arrested on 9 April in Panchthar following a Cyber Bureau investigation for allegedly posting abusive and defamatory content targeting Prime Minister Balendra Shah and other political leaders through his channel “Hades”.⁸ He was remanded to 10 days in custody by a local court, prompting backlash from Gen Z activists who viewed the arrest as an attempt to suppress free expression, before being later released following protests.

On 12 April, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that the government respects freedom of expression and press freedom as guaranteed by the Constitution, while emphasizing that these freedoms must be exercised responsibly and that acts such as inciting public unrest, insulting individuals, or using abusive language are punishable by law.⁹ While reaffirming constitutional rights, broad and undefined terms such as “public unrest” or “insult,” combined with state monitoring and surveillance, may create uncertainty around lawful speech and directly threaten freedom of expression, freedom of association, and privacy. Such measures also risk enabling selective enforcement, self-censorship, and greater administrative discretion over critical expression. The press release further stated that government agencies are “surveilling” such activities, which may create uncertainty around lawful speech and pose direct risks to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and privacy. Such measures also risk enabling

⁶ <https://khojsamachar.com/lawyers-singha-durbar-entry-id-restored/>

⁷ <https://ekantipur.com/news/2026/03/31/police-release-gen-g-red-force-coordinator-after-4-hours-of-questioning-44-40.html>

⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nepal-journalist-arrested-for-criticising-pm-balendra-shah-released-after-protests/article70854356.ece>

⁹ Press Statement issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs issued on 12 April 2026, <https://moha.gov.np/post/pa-ra-sa-va-ja-niapa-ta-210>

selective enforcement, encouraging self-censorship, and expanding administrative discretion over critical expression.

Further concerns have been raised regarding the widespread use of “urgent arrest warrants” by police in the Kathmandu Valley. An analysis of cases filed during Falgun 2082 (mid-February to mid-March 2026) in the district courts of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur found that 628 of 788 accused persons (over 80%) were arrested without prior court approval under urgent warrants.¹⁰ Among the 44 minors arrested during the same period, 98% were detained through this process. When extraordinary powers become normalized, they can disproportionately affect young people, marginalized groups, and those with limited access to legal support, further weakening confidence in the justice system.

Taken together, these developments indicate more than isolated incidents. They reflect a broader pattern in which administrative controls, policing practices, and restrictions on collective organization may gradually narrow civic space. If left unchecked, such trends risk weakening procedural safeguards, eroding democratic participation, discouraging independent advocacy, and reducing the ability of citizens to freely express views, associate with others, and hold power to account.

3. Legislative Overreach and Procedural Deficits

A major concern across the reform agenda is the accelerated pace of law-making. Key legislative initiatives, including the IT and E-Governance Bill, data governance frameworks, amendments to the Public Procurement Act, Project Facilitation laws, and a National Integrity Policy, are being fast-tracked within 30–60 days.¹¹

While rapid reform reflects political urgency, it significantly limits opportunities for meaningful consultation, evidence-based policymaking, and parliamentary scrutiny. Previous experiences, including the IT Bill (2018)¹² and the Social Media

¹⁰ <https://ekantipur.com/news/2026/04/11/urgent-arrest-warrant-polices-weapon-to-arbitrarily-arrest-citizens-15-06.html>

¹¹ Supra Note 3

¹² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/nepal-information-technology-bill-threatens-freedom-of-expression/>

Bill (2025)¹³, where limited stakeholder consultation led to widespread criticism and public backlash, highlights the risks of this approach. Such gaps in consultation not only undermine trust in law-making but also risk producing reforms that may inadvertently restrict constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, privacy, and association. Consequently, the lack of meaningful engagement with civil society, academia, and affected communities increases the likelihood of laws that are procedurally weak and misaligned with ground realities.

The absence of structured engagement with civil society, academia, and affected communities increases the risk of overbroad or poorly designed legal provisions. This undermines procedural legitimacy and weakens public trust in governance institutions.

4. Media Pluralism and press freedom

On April 1, a secretariat-level decision directed all public entities to adopt austerity measures and ensure a more transparent and unbiased flow of information. It further instructed that government notices be published or broadcast primarily through state-owned media, including Gorkhapatra Sansthan, Radio Nepal, and Nepal Television.¹⁴ The directive also introduced direct payment transfers from government funds to media bank accounts, with officially approved rates and discount structures determined by the respective media houses.

While framed as a reform for efficiency and fiscal discipline, the decision raises serious concerns for media independence. Reduced government advertising and public contracts for private media outlets may further weaken the already fragile financial sustainability of independent journalism. Many media houses in Nepal are already facing financial stress¹⁵, with reports of delayed salaries for journalists, and this shift could further deepen institutional vulnerabilities and polarize the media sector by affecting key revenue streams.

¹³ <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/nepal-restrictive-social-media-legislation-targeting-of-journalists-and-excessive-force-at-protests-put-freedoms-at-risk/>

¹⁴ <https://english.nepalviews.com/2026/04/02/directions-to-publish-information-only-in-government-owned-media>

¹⁵ <https://ekantipur.com/news/2026/04/15/media-in-a-fight-for-survival-journalists-have-been-without-pay-for-months-39-44.html>

Increased reliance on state-controlled media may also strengthen government influence over information flows and narrative building. Overall, this trend risks narrowing media diversity, weakening pluralism, and constraining space for critical and independent journalism within Nepal's information ecosystem.

5. Digital Governance, Security Narratives, and Rights Risks

Emerging state narratives around national security and digital modernization, including remarks by Chief of Army Staff Ashokraj Sigdel, reflect a growing emphasis on integrating technology into governance and security frameworks.¹⁶ He noted that national security is not the responsibility of a single institution but a shared concern of all stakeholders, and stressed the need to view geopolitics in close relation with technological developments. While such modernization of security approaches is important, it also underscores the need to ensure that digital governance reforms remain aligned with human rights standards and are not used to justify disproportionate control, surveillance, or restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

6. Multi-Stakeholder Exclusion and Transparency Deficits

A cross-cutting concern across all the reform areas is the lack of inclusive and transparent policy-making. There is limited public clarity on how reform priorities were identified, with little evidence of structured consultation or participatory decision-making.

For example, the government formed a taskforce to prepare a discussion paper on constitutional amendment¹⁷, one of the commitments under its 100-point reform roadmap. However, the taskforce is composed only of representatives from national political parties, excluding stakeholders from local and provincial governments, civil society, and other relevant sectors. Although the main opposition, the Nepali Congress, submitted remarks on the Terms of Reference (ToR) and stated it would not participate without further clarification, the taskforce has continued its work without addressing those concerns.

Civil society organizations, academia, professional associations, and affected communities have largely been excluded from the design and sequencing of

¹⁶ <https://www.nepalpress.com/2026/04/01/709684/national-security-issue-must-be-redefined-army-chief/>

¹⁷ [Task force in intensive discussion for constitutional amendment](#)

reforms. This top-down approach risks weakening democratic legitimacy, reducing accountability, and eroding public trust in state institutions.

Conclusion

Taken together, Nepal's governance reform agenda reflects a critical policy paradox: the pursuit of efficiency, modernization, and institutional strengthening on one hand, and the potential erosion of democratic norms, civic freedoms, and institutional checks on the other.

The concentration of executive power, rapid legislative timelines, weakening of independent media, constraints on right to freedom of expression and association, and limited stakeholder participation collectively risk reshaping Nepal's democratic landscape in ways that may reduce pluralism and accountability.

Moving forward, the success of these reforms will depend not only on their technical design but on their democratic grounding. Institutionalizing meaningful multi-stakeholder consultation, strengthening rights-based legal safeguards (particularly in digital governance), ensuring media pluralism, and reinforcing constitutional protections for expression and association will be essential to ensuring that governance reform does not come at the cost of democratic resilience.

About Digital Rights Nepal

Digital Rights Nepal is a not-for-profit organization founded in 2020, committed to promoting and safeguarding digital rights in Nepal. Our mission is to ensure that everyone in Nepal gets access to the free, open, secure, reliable, and affordable internet and is equipped, empowered, and enabled to uphold their digital rights. DRN staunchly advocates for online freedom of expression, privacy, data protection, access to information, and democratic internet governance. Similarly, DRN actively engages on cyber laws, policies, and cybersecurity concerns, striving to create a safer digital landscape. DRN takes pride in nurturing the next generation of digital rights advocates, shaping a future where digital rights are universally respected and protected.