
AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 133

RURAL RADIO PROMOTES DEMOCRACY IN NEPAL AMIDST CONTINUING UNCERTAINTY OVER ELECTIONS

November 7, 2007, Washington, DC and Baglung, Nepal: While Nepal's political parties continue to bicker over elections, tens of thousands of minority and indigenous people in Baglung, Central Nepal are being encouraged to participate in the electoral process through a pioneering new radio program.

The half-hour program is produced from Baglung by Yogendra Milan Chhantyal, regional coordinator for the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), a grassroots network, with support from The Advocacy Project (AP) in Washington.

The program is transmitted every Sunday by Baglung FM radio to remote villages in 9 districts, and seeks to help marginalized groups understand Nepal's complex electoral system. AP has posted the first seven episodes on the Internet, and is encouraging Nepalis in the US to contact Mr. Chhantyal with feedback.

Meanwhile, a special session of the Nepali parliament took one step closer towards holding elections on Sunday and agreed to use full proportional representation (PR) when elections eventually take place, probably next spring.

The decision broke a political deadlock and came on a proposal by the Maoists, whose withdrawal from the government had forced a postponement of the elections, originally scheduled for November 22. The Maoists agreed to drop a second demand – to abolish the monarchy immediately – in return for passage of their PR proposal.

Still, introducing full PR would require a change in the interim constitution, and a two thirds majority in parliament. It remains to be seen whether this will be acceptable to the Nepali Congress party, which holds the largest number of seats and is strongly opposed to full PR.

Many of those listening to Mr. Chhantyal's programs in Baglung might welcome a full PR system, because it would guarantee greater representation for indigenous, Dalit, women, and minorities in a new constituent assembly, and also ensure that minority rights are firmly enshrined in Nepal's new constitution.

Mr. Chhantyal began his project this summer with help from Tassos Coulalogou, one of six Peace Fellows recruited by the Advocacy Project to support civil society in Nepal. Mr. Coulaloglou traveled widely and graphically described the underdevelopment of minorities in his blogs. One village, Nishi, suffers from 80% illiteracy and lacks almost all basic services.

But the isolation has also created huge demand for radio, and Mr. Coulaloglou expressed the hope that Mr. Chhantyal's new program would promote social justice as well as entice people to participate in elections. "We also hope that the program will create an open environment for victimized people to receive compensation and justice," he said.

COCAP and AP have made the programs available to Nepalis living outside the country via the Internet. Baglung FM does not have a high-speed connection, which means it cannot stream directly to the World Wide Web. But the first seven editions were saved on a CD, taken to Kathmandu, and uploaded to the Internet. They can be reached through the AP website.

AP is now promoting the program among the Nepali diaspora. On Sunday, Devin Greenleaf, a student at American University who also served in Nepal this summer as an AP Peace Fellow, addressed hundreds of Nepalis at a meeting of the Nepali-American society near Washington. Mr. Greenleaf encouraged his audience to listen to the program online and send suggestions to Mr. Chhantyal.

AP is seeking to raise \$1,100 to support the radio program until the end of the year. The Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM), at Georgetown University, has donated \$300.

- Email Yogendra at ymcbgl@yahoo.com
- To read the blogs of Tassos Coulaloglou visit:
<http://advocacynet.org/author/tassos/>
- For more on Nepali American society, email the President, Prem Sangraula:
psangraula@yahoo.com

The Advocacy Project is based in Washington D.C. Phone +1 202 758 3328. Visit the AP web site for information about our current projects at <http://advocacynet.org/>. For questions or comments about the AP and its projects, please email us at dcoffice@advocacynet.org.