Policy on the use of social media in Electoral Management, 2077

Election Commission, Nepal
Kantipath, Kathmandu

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1. Background

In the present context of information and technology, the Internet and social media have become effective means to contact those at home and abroad and to be instantaneously connected to the current events. The use of social media is increasing with easy access to the Internet, both in rural and urban areas. In the context of the rapidly developing social media, with its history of approximately three-decades, the youths are the ones with more access to the social media and are also its major users. The ever-increasing use of social media has provided quickness and convenience, fundamentally changing the ways of social interaction, information dissemination, and services.

This media has helped disseminate information to all people, living both at home and abroad, simultaneously. At present, social media is used for multiple purposes. It is possible for people living in any country of the world to be connected to daily events concerning the political, social, economic, and educational affairs. Social media including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blog, LinkedIn, Google +, WhatsApp, Viber, TikTok, and, Tumblr are widely used across the globe.

The Election Commission can quickly disseminate messages and information to the followers and stakeholders through social media. Likewise, the followers can send the messages released by the Commission to millions of other users. The Commission can facilitate dialogues by addressing the issues raised by the stakeholders.

To facilitate all processes and stages of election and the activities that happen at the time of election, to address the sensitivity of security, to appropriately manage cyber security in the use of social media, to promote credibility of the Commission by making it transparent, to develop the policy concept on the use of social media in all stages and processes of election in the changed context, it has become necessary for the Commission to formulate and manage appropriate policies regarding the use of social media. Therefore, the Commission has formulated its working policy "to gradually make the use of social media and communication means in the election more systematic and effective" as per its Third Five-Year Strategic Plan in order to promote the credibility and prestige of the Commission amidst the international community by addressing the dynamics of social media in a clear and practical manner. For the implementation and electoral management of social media in election, the Policy on the Use of Social Media in Election Management, 2077 has been prepared in accordance with the Election Commission Act, 2073, Section 11 (a).

2. Past initiatives

Election Commission used its website in 2056 B.S. for the first time in its history. The results of the election for the House of Representatives held that year was published in the website. Since that year, the Commission has been regularly using the website. It started to educate the voters during the elections at all three levels held in 2017 A.D. It has been using Facebook, YouTube,

and Twitter. It has used the website to upload press releases, and YouTube for other notices, videos, interviews, and public service announcements. In the Constituent Assembly Election held in 2015 A.D, the Commission initiated the monitoring of social media under the monitoring provision of communication media. Likewise, it had started monitoring the information disseminated through the social media during the elections of all levels in 2017 A.D and the by-elections for the members of local levels, Provinces, and the House of Representatives, and the National Assembly held in 2019 A.D.

3. Present context

The access to social media is increasing among the users day by day. The available statistics shows that Facebook has been the most widely used form of social media wherein more than 2,700,000,000 active users use it monthly. Likewise, it is estimated that the number of active users on YouTube, an audio-visual social media platform, is 2,000,000,000. There are more than 330,000,000 active users on Twitter, a micro-blogging site, and more than 1,000,000,000 active monthly users on Instagram. Similarly, there are more than 2,000,000,000 active users on WhatsApp every month.

The Election Commission has been using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter as its official social media handles. The Commission uses its website and Facebook to publish decisions and important notices, and Twitter for general notices. It provides election related information and the videos, educational materials, animation video, and TV programmes to the voters. Likewise, the District Election Offices are transmitting their activities and information through a dedicated Facebook page - "*Hello Nirbachan.*" At present, the Commission has about 45,000 followers and users on its social media, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

According to the preliminary statistics of 2020 A.D, the number of Internet users over the world is 4,600,000,000; that is, fifty-nine per cent of the total population. According to the MIS report of Nepal Telecommunications Authority issued in September 2020 A.D, there are 228,009,727 Internet users in Nepal - 76.58 per cent of the total population of Nepal. As with the increase of the number of Internet users in the world, Nepal also witnesses an increase by 9.6 per cent in 2018 A.D and 2019 A.D as the statistics shows. In the present context, social media has become popular among the users and thus has proved itself as an effective and reliable means of communicating information on electoral activities.

4. Problems, opportunities, and challenges

4.1 Problems
The problems related to the use of social media in electoral management are as follows:

　4.1.1　Absence of necessary policy provisions for making the use of social media systematic to disseminate information regarding elections;

　4.1.2　Absence of necessary strategies to mitigate the potential attack, intervention, risk, negative influence, and miscommunication that may happen through social media;

　4.1.3　Failure to increase the number of followers of social media used by the Commission;

4.1.4 Low dissemination of information through social media because of the lack of link between social media and the website of the Commission;

4.1.5 Absence of interconnection between the social media of the Commission and the electoral stakeholders;

4.1.6 Problems related to the publication, dissemination, and documentation of voter's election education due to the lack of digitized form;

4.1.7 Limited knowledgeable and skilled human resources for the operation and regulation of social media, record management, and appropriate knowledge transfer system;

4.1.8 Lack of adequacy, clarity, and uniformity in the operation of "*Hello Nirbachan*" Facebook page, operated by the District Election Offices;

4.1.9 Lack of laws, policies, and institutional structures to control misinformation, disinformation, distorted information, and the hate speech during elections.

4.2 Challenges

The challenges for making the systematic and effective use of social media in election are as follows:

4.2.1 To make the election materials gender friendly, inclusive, and reliable;

4.2.2 To make the social media users responsible and accountable for the materials they produce, publish, and disseminate;

4.2.3 To control and regulate the cybercrime that may increase together with the increase in the number of social media users regarding the election and to avert the potential internal and external intervention;

4.2.4 To ensure credibility, impartiality, of election by controlling and regulating misinformation, disinformation, distorted information, and hate speech, dissemination of baseless, wrong, misleading, and hypothetical information against the election code of conduct, that may occur at the national or international level, through social media;

4.2.5 To monitor notices and information disseminated by political parties and stakeholders in all steps of the election;

4.2.6 To mitigate risks that may arise from wrong information about the validity of electoral process and credibility of the Commission through social media;

4.2.7 To develop the institutional system and competent human resources to verify the authenticity of the source of information, regulate the wrong information disseminated through social media, and to immediately respond to them;

4.2.8 To develop the election friendly ethic for the use of social media by voters and electoral stakeholders;

4.2.9 To establish coordinating relations between the political parties, stakeholders, and civil society, media house, social media forum, and regulating bodies on the use of social media.

4.3 Opportunities

Opportunities for making the use of social media dignified, secure, credible, and manageable in electoral management are as follows:

4.3.1 To constantly disseminate activities, information and education on election by the Commission to the users of social media as the infrastructures related to the use of social media are ready;

4.3.2 To improve socio-economic and governance system through digitization with a view to build the nation as envisaged in the fifteenth periodical plan;

4.3.3 To gradually provide public services from the Nepal Government through online mode;

4.3.4 To disseminate information through appropriate means respecting the citizens' rights to receive information from the public offices;

4.3.5 To use new technology to make the voter awareness programme effective;

4.3.6 To implement the Social Media Working Procedure Government Bodies, 2075 B.S. issued by the Nepal Government

4.3.7 To make the use of social media and means of communication effective for election according to the Third Five-Year Strategic Plan of the Commission;

4.3.8 To improve the quality of social media along with increasing the followers of the Election Commission on social media, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter;

4.3.9 To create an environment of coordination and collaboration with private sector on the use of social media considering their important contribution to the development, expansion, and operation of information technology;

4.3.10 To regulate the electronic materials in accordance with the Electronic Transaction Act, 2063 B.S.

5. Need of the policy

The appropriate management and effective regulation of social media is a need of the present times. The Third Five-Year Plan of the Commission (2020-2035 A.D) states that the working policy on the use of social media and means of communication in the election will be made systematic and effective. Voters' election education can be made effective through social media. In the context of increasing use of social media and its misuse for the wrong information, a policy on the use of social media is required to address the following issues:

5.1 To establish policy provisions for an appropriate integrated policy in all electoral processes and steps;

5.2 To transform the methods of information dissemination in electoral management in line with the characteristics of social media;

5.3 To manage challenges that might come across in elections while social media,

5.4 To make the Commission activities transparent by easily and quickly disseminating them to the target groups and stakeholders;

5.5 To establish a two-way communication system by promoting coordination and collaboration and making access to education economical and easy for stakeholders through social media;

5.6 To increase the access and availability, and dissemination of the materials for voters' education, which are targeted to the youth, women, inclusive groups, and persons with disabilities;

5.7 To develop institutional system and competent human resources to ensure the authenticity of the source of information and regulate misinformation, disinformation, distorted information, miscommunication, and distorted news that are disseminated through social media;

5.8 To monitor the election related news, notice, and issues that are disseminated through social media by the political parties, media, and electoral stakeholders in all steps of the election.

6. Institutional Commitment

Election Commission is committed to the effective implementation of the use of social media in electoral management on the following issues:

6.1 Stakeholder centered
It will disseminate correct and factual information and messages considering the need and interest of the voters and stakeholders.

6.2 Immediate information dissemination and response
It will immediately disseminate the information and messages related to the voters and stakeholders and address the comments, suggestions, and responses that come from the users.

6.3 Two –way communication and transparency
It will use and facilitate the social media for a two-way communication by informing the voters and stakeholders of the activities of the Commission in time.

6.4 Wider access
It will facilitate wider access to social media through the extension of technology and in coordination with the private and public service providing entities which will establish it as a major means to disseminate the message and information.

6.5 Reliability
It will promote mutual trust between the stakeholders by managing elections and disseminating the information that can be conducive to the established values and principles of election and ensuring regular contact, coordination, and collaboration with the stakeholders through social media.

6.6 Documentation and reformation
It will reform the activities of the Commission on the basis of appropriate suggestions and will record the information, dialogue, queries, responses, and suggestions that come from the stakeholders through social media. It will also make systematic records of the informative materials produced by the Commission.

6.7 Fairness and equality

It will ensure fairness and equality through social media while treating the political party, candidate, individuals, institution, gender, and ethnicity.

6.8 Addressing the diversity

It will produce and disseminate the election materials through social media by considering diversities such as women, youths, persons with disabilities, age group, educational level, language, and geographic area-friendly while producing, publishing, and transmitting them.

6.9 Hearing the grievances and addressing them

It will make appropriately and reliably manage hearing and addressing comments, suggestions, responses, views of general citizens, stakeholders, and users of social media regarding the materials disseminated from the Commission and the offices under the Commission in connection with the systematic and effective use of social media in electoral management and operation.

7. Vision

Systematic, dignified, and reliable social media

8. Mission

To use social-media in a systematic and well-managed manner for free and fair elections.

9. Goal

To make the use of social media safe, systematic, reliable, dignified, and accessible for electoral fairness

10. Objectives

10.1   To make use and regulation of social media effective by establishing the election information as reliable, economical, accessible, and of high quality;

10.2   To establish a two-way communication and make the information, activities, and election education material easily accessible to the general people through social media;

10.3   To develop multilateral coordination and collaboration in the use of social media, for promoting the credibility and reliability of election.

11. Policy

11.1   Social media will be appropriately used in all stages and processes of the election;

11.2   A two-way accountability will be established by making the activities transparent using the opportunities and possibilities created by the social media;

11.3　Two-way communication will be established by making the election and voters education system accessible to the stakeholders through the optimum use of social media;

11.4　Coordination and collaboration will be established with the stakeholders to immediately address the problems and to verify the authenticity of the source of information through effective regulation of informative materials disseminated through social media;

11.5　The possible risk and intervention that might come across the election management and operation will be controlled through social media.

12. Strategy

12.1　Strengthening the institution and building capacity of the Commission for the proper use of social media in all stages and processes of elections;

12.2　Making the operations and activities of the Commission transparent and accountable through the use of social media;

12.3　Increasing the use of social media in voter and civic education;

12.4　Increasing the access of gender and inclusive groups, persons with disabilities, youths, and target groups to voter education, information, and communication materials for inclusive and gender-friendly election;

12.5　Promoting coordination and cooperation with stakeholders for regulating the use of social media to effectively conduct and manage elections;

12.6　Taking corrective actions by identifying the measures to minimize the risks that might come across while conducting and managing the election through the use of social media.

13. Working policies

The following 30 working policies identified under six strategies for the use of social media in election management are as follows:

Strategy 1　Strengthening the institution and building capacity of the Commission for the proper use of social media in all stages and processes of elections

13.1　Policy and legal provisions related to elections will be improved and modified in such a way as to use and regulate social media.

13.2　The roles and responsibilities of the Commission and its subordinate offices will be clarified by establishing a mechanism, recording, and setting standards in the use of social media.

13.3　By increasing the capacity of human resources in the Commission, a team of efficient and necessary manpower will be managed to use social media.

13.4　For the use of social media, the information technology system of the Commission will be made safe, reliable, trustworthy, and of high quality.

13.5   Arrangements will be made to address the suggestions, feedback, and support received from the general public and social media users regarding the content transmitted or published by the Commission regularly.

13.6   Websites, apps, and social networks used by the Commission will be regularized, organized, and updated.

13.7   Criteria related to the use of the official social network platform of the Commission for recording and transferring the content of the election and formal mechanism for the same will be developed and implemented.

Strategy 2   **Making the operations and activities of the Commission transparent and accountable through the use of social media**

13.8   Social media will be established as a means of communicating information about the content of election and voter education.

13.9   Social media will be used to disseminate information and notices related to the election in all stages and processes of the election.

13.10   Stakeholders will be made accountable for using social media by making necessary amendments in the election laws.

Strategy 3   **Increasing the use of social media in election information and voter education**

13.11   Information materials for election and voter education will be prepared in a way that can be communicated through social media

3.12   Updated information materials on election and voter education will be communicated through social media as per the need.

13.13   The social network platform of the Commission will be linked to the website of the Commission.

13.14   Coordination and cooperation will be established with the political parties in disseminating information on the election and voter education through social media.

13.15   Motivational measures will be used in extending election education to election stakeholders, educational institutions, teachers, students, youths, and other users through social media

Strategy 4   **Increasing the access of gender and inclusive groups, persons with disabilities, youths, and target groups to voter education, information, and communication materials for inclusive and gender-friendly election**

13.16   Geographical, social, cultural, linguistic, and gender-friendly election education and information materials will be prepared and disseminated.

13.17   The use of the innovative disability-friendly technology will be increased for the access of persons with disabilities in election and voter education and information materials.

13.18   Gender and inclusive groups, persons with disabilities, youths, and target group related organizations will be encouraged and made responsible for

the production and distribution of information and communication materials on election and voter education.

Strategy 5 **Promoting coordination and cooperation with stakeholders for regulating the use of social media effectively in conducting and managing the elections**

13.19 The Commission will coordinate and cooperate with the electoral stakeholders in regulating the use of social media.

13.20 Efforts for coordination will also be made to mobilize technical assistance of the development partners for effective development of the social network platform of the Commission.13.21   While using the social media, arrangements will be made to exchange expert services with universities, academic institutions, research institutions, private sectors, fact-checking organizations, social networking organizations, social networking forums, etc.

13.22 In order to make the social media user-friendly, best practices in various fields related to content production and communication, and innovative concepts and technologies will be adopted.

13.23 Information and feedback systems from the stakeholders in a continuous manner will be established in the Commission.

13.24 Regulation will be made effective by expanding coordination and affiliation with social media service providers.

Strategy 6 **Taking corrective actions by identifying the measures to minimize the risks that might come across while conducting and managing the election through the use of social media**

13.25 Research and in-depth study will be conducted to identify and manage the probable violence and risk, mitigating measures for such risk, and analyze its advantages and disadvantages in using social media in the election.

13.26 Arrangements will be made to work through the appropriate mechanism for the regulation of facts and information related to external interference through social media during the election period.

13.27   For the regulation of information content transmitted on social media, collaboration with the security forces, cybercrime control entities, government bodies, fact-checking organizations, investigators, private sectors, election observation agencies, and social media associations will be increased.

13.28 Cooperation with Nepal Telecommunication Authority, Press Council, and Internet service providers will be enhanced for regulation and management of possible risks and misleading information through social media.

13.29 Efforts will be made to control misinformation, disinformation, distortion of information, and hate speech using appropriate information technology.

13.30 A mechanism will be set up in the Commission for effective monitoring in all stages and processes of the election by reducing the probable risks associated with the use of social media.

14. Expected achievements

The use of social media can be fruitful in increasing the outreach of the Commission with the election stakeholders, improving the quality of the election, minimizing the expenses for communication and dissemination, and making the overall operation of the Commission effective through collaboration with the stakeholders on election and voter education. The following achievements are expected through the use of social media:

14.1   Enhanced access to the activities and informative messages of the Commission for the general public and the electoral stakeholders

14.2   Increased access to the activities of the Commission for the geographical, social, thematic, linguistic, gender based, and inclusive communities.

14.3   Election and voter education materials for the persons with disabilities in place.

14.4   Two-way communication will have been maintained with electoral stakeholders.

14.5   Voters will have been provided election and voter education in a conducive environment.

14.6   The content of the election information will have been communicated and disseminated in a simple, concise, and quick manner.

14.7   "Enhanced transparency in the election process.

14.8   The election campaign will have been cost-effective.

14.9   Voters will have got the election and voter education, information, and materials will have been made accessible to the voters.

14.10 Institutional mechanisms will have been established to regulate the social media.

14.11 Support will have been available in reducing social media-related risks, and cybercrime.

14.12   Improved coordination, collaboration, and affiliation with different stakeholders for the regulation of social media.

14.13 Enhanced electoral credibility.

14.14 The election management will have been voter-friendly by addressing the advice, suggestions, and feedback from all the stakeholders.

15. Institutional provisions

15.1   Steering committee

15.1.1 For effective implementation of the provisions mentioned in the policy regarding the use of social media in electoral management, a steering committee, as given below, will have been formed:

(a) Election Commissioner (designated to be responsible   - Coordinator
for the related matter)

(b) Secretary of the Election Commission   - Member

(c) Chairperson, Nepal Telecommunication Authority   - Member

(d)	Chairperson, Press Council, Nepal	- Member
(e)	Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs	- Member
(f)	Joint Secretary, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology	- Member
(g)	Deputy Inspector General, Nepal Police	- Member
(h)	President, Federation of Nepal Journalists	- Member
(i)	President or Representative, Federation of Nepal Industry and Commerce	- Member
(j)	Division Chief, Election Commission (Concerned Division)	- Member Secretary

15.1.2 Representatives of fact-checking organizations, professors of journalism, researchers, and experts on social media can be invited to the meeting of the steering committee as per the need.

15. 2   The functions, duties, and powers of the steering committee will be as follows:

(a)   To assist the Commission in making policy decisions on the use of social media in the conduction and management of elections;

(b)   To facilitate and coordinate in including issues related to the use of social media in existing and new election-related laws;

(c)   To recommend to the Commission based on the suggestions received through study and monitoring by experts or expert groups on the use of social media in the conduct and management of elections;

(d)   To review the implementation status of this policy from time to time and issue necessary instructions to the Secretariat of the Commission and the Implementation Committee for its implementation;

(e)   To recommend to the Commission to form a team of experts to monitor and evaluate the information disseminated through social media during the election period and to control the misinformation, disinformation, distortion of information, and hate speech through such media;

(f)   To make arrangements to regulate potential risks through social media;

(g)   To conduct research and in-depth study for the identification and management of the benefits, disadvantages, violence, and risk reduction measures of the use of social media in the election;

(h)   To do other necessary tasks.

15.3. Implementation committee

The following implementation committee will be formed in the commission to effectively implement the policy related to the use of social media in election operation and management:

(a) Concerned Head of Division, Election Commission   - Coordinator

(b)	Under Secretary, Act Rules and Decision Implementation Section, Election Commission	- Member
(c)	Under Secretary, Political Party Management Section, Election Commission	- Member
(d)	Under Secretary, Planning, Monitoring, and Foreign Relations Section, Election Commission	- Member
(e)	Under Secretary (Technical), Information Technology Section, Election Commission	- Member
(f)	Under Secretary, Voter List, and Election Operation Section, Election Commission	- Member
(g)	Under Secretary, Election Education Training Section, Election Commission	- Member Secretary

15.4. The functions, duties, and powers of the implementation committee will be as follows:

(a) To prepare and implement an action plan following the policy on the use of social media in electoral management;

(b) To identify areas and topics of use of social media;

(c) To identify and submit to the steering committee the issues related to the use of social media, which should be included in the existing and new laws related to the election;

(d) To hear the complaints related to the use of social media;

(e) To monitor, evaluate and review the programs and activities conducted for the implementation of the policy;

(f) To take necessary actions to make the information management system of the Commission social media-friendly;

(g) To formulate and implement appropriate strategies for the regulation, management, control, and action to be taken on the hate speech-related activities through the use of social media;

(h) To arrange trainings for the human resources involved in the implementation of the policy;

(i) To coordinate inter-agency use of social media;

(j) To make effective regulation on the activities of misleading information, misrepresentation, and hate speech that may occur through social media;

(k) To identify, enforce, and reduce the election-related risks through the use of social media;

(l) To submit the report of the implementation committee to the steering committee;

(m) To do other tasks as specified by the steering committee.

16. Major programmes

To implement the policy on using social media in electoral management, the following programmes will have been implemented:

16.1 Policy reform programme

The policy provisions related to social media of the Commission will be implemented in such a way as to increase the use of social media, the legal provisions in the use of social media will be identified and improved, and modified as required. The issues specified by this policy will be included in the policy and law to be formulated by the Commission.

16.2 Institutional reform and capacity building programme

Coordination and Collaboration between the external bodies and with the internal institutional arrangement, human resource management of the Commission will be made on the use, operation, and regulation of Social Media,

16.3 Election education, information and materials production and communication programme

Election education, information, and materials produced by the Commission will be disseminated on social media

16.4 Targeted programmes

The election-related programmes and materials will have been produced and disseminated on geographical, social, thematic, linguistic, gender, and disability-friendly basis.

16.5 Social media management and regulation

The programme will be implemented to reduce the possible risks through social media.

16.6 Study and research

A study and research programme will be conducted for the identification and management of risk mitigation measures through the use of social media.

17. Financial management

The resources required for the implementation of this policy will be mobilized from   the resources of the Government of Nepal. In the field of technology and technical equipment and related capacity development, the resources of the development partners/ agencies can also be mobilized within the scope of the foreign aid policy of the Government of Nepal. As required for financial management, coordination and cooperation can be made with the Province Government, local level, private sector, civil society, and election stakeholders.

18. Action plan on implementation of the policy

The Commission will formulate an action plan in coordination and cooperation with the concerned parties. The programmes specified in this policy will be incorporated in the annual programme of the Commission for implementation.

19. Risk

Aspects of possible violence through social media, misinformation,　misinterpretation of information, availability of skilled human resources to adapt to the regulation strategy of hate speech, continuity of work, legal reform, availability of necessary resources from the Government of Nepal, website security, and continuity of support from development partners are identified as risks.

20. Arrangements for monitoring and evaluation

20.1　The Commission will continuously monitor and evaluate the implementation of the action plan, approved for regulating the social media in the election process, by the　Secretariat and its Subordinate Offices. Such monitoring and evaluation will be done through the regular mechanism of the Commission.

20.2　As required, support will be obtained by evaluating the implementation of the policy through experts or expert groups.

21. Policy review and revision

The policy regarding the use of Social Media in electoral management will remain as a living document. The Commission may review the policy based on available suggestions, procedures, and feedback, and modify it as required. The Commission may interpret, add, amend or appropriate or remove obstacles to the implementation of this policy as required.