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Democratic Transition in Post-Gyanendra Nepal

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Abstract:

... Democracy, by the people, for the People, of the People, shall never perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln

Democratic transition is defined as the 'interval' between an authoritarian regime and a consolidated democracy. Democratic transition is complete when the institutional structure is established; sufficient agreement is reached about the political procedures to form an elected government, and when a government comes to power through free and popular vote. Democracy and democratization have been perceived in the post-colonial societies as the domain of dream for the peoples and nations. Democracy was presented as an ideal form of government where freedom and justice are institutionalized through constructive interdependence. The 21st century regarded as struggle for social justice and inclusive democracy. It is democracy who gives a explicit example of accomodating various types of groups on the basis of caste, class, religion. Nepal is a multi-linguistic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. Linguistically, Nepal is divided into two broad categories: (a) Indo-Aryan group, which includes the Newar (3.63%), Nepali (Bahun Chhetri, Thapa, Shah, Rana, etc.) (48.61%), Madhesi (Tarai languages 32.86%), etc., which collectively accounts for nearly 80 percent of the total population of the country; and (b) Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid group, which includes Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar and Bhote and accounts for nearly 20 percent. The modern history of Nepal begins in 1769 when the late King Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered many princely states to create a single state, the Kingdom of Nepal. But, modernity in culture and developmental sense came to Nepal only after the overthrow of the Rana regime and subsequent establishment of democracy in 1951. However, the real democracy came to Nepal after 2008, when Nepal has ended its 240 years long constitutional monarchy to become a republic state.

Keywords: *Nepal, Democracy, Democratisation, Authoritarian regime, Maoist, Election, Constituent Assembly, Jan Andolan-II*

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is considered as the struggle for social justice and inclusive democracy. The installation of democracy takes place with the creation of new institutional structures which also comes through a political agreement between different parties because of the existing exploitative and discriminatory nature of authoritarian regime. In the long term, it has come to ensure political participation and socioeconomic inclusion of every individual in the government. The failure of institutional framework of democracy in initiating process of democratization based on inclusion, development and social justice leads to the erosion of democracy that has indeed been the problems of most the third world countries. The sudden collapse of the old regime may lead to an unrestrained competition among democratic actors, making the transition less consensual and more violent. The process of democratization began in Nepal after the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1950s. Since then, it has gone through a numbers of changes in political leadership because of number of reasons which prevail in the country. Nepal's transition to democracy since the overthrow of King Gyanendra in 2005 fits into the category where the absence of broad consensus among political actors has rendered the process chaotic and unpredictable. In 2005, when the political unrest continued and the peace talks reached a deadlock, the King abolished the government, announced a state of emergency and assumed the power. Nepal's main political parties decided to come together to fight against King Gyanendra's direct rule in November 2005. These political parties had approached then underground Maoists to join their movement for the reinstatement of the parliament which was dissolved by King Gyanendra. In April 2006, after nineteen-day non-violent popular street levels protest which is also known as 'Jana Andolan-II' had forced the King to step down and reinstate the parliament. With the establishment of People's Republic of Nepal, this insurgency came to an end in 2006 and finally the monarchy was abolished on 28 May 2008. An interim Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala led the nation to its first constituent assembly election which subsequently led to the establishment of a Maoist-majority government. Since 1990, country has shifted from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy, enduring in the process of long civil war, the murder of royal family in 2001, and at least 18 different governments, has been the cause for political landscape in the country. This tendency of

political instability resulting frequent changes in government and the conflict had impacted on the socioeconomic developmental process of the country. Lok Raj Baral argues that development itself is an inclusive concept and activity. One of the pertinent aspects of democratic development was that political parties continue to struggle for democracy when in opposition but failed to build institutions while they were in power. After they became successful and occupied power and other position they soon forgot their mission (Baral, 2012). Nepal has had history of political instability with several changing political governments and political violence, and since then it has been posing a number of challenges before country.

2. Evolution of Political System and Democracy in Nepal

Nepal's citizens are predominantly rural, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and have unequal economic status, which provide a fertile ground for political parties to exploit the grievances and aspirations of racial, ethnic, caste, class, tribal, religious, linguistic, regional and gender groups for political expediency (Bhattarai, 2007). However in Nepal, the concept of democracy of modern day evolved nearly half a century ago when a small group of party activists based in India organized a movement to overthrow the century-old Rana autocracy (1846-1950). The struggle for democracy in Nepal began with the formation of political party in 1930s, which was previously unknown in Nepali politics. The political parties were inspired by Indian National Movement, which encouraged the Nepali youths to form their own political parties. The first political organization was Praja Parishad, an underground organization formed in 1936 in Kathmandu. The main aim of this party was to raise political awareness among the masses. However, due to arrest of several leaders, the organization suffered serious setback. In 1946, the anti-Rana movement got a shot in arm when B.P. Koirala established a new political party called the Nepali National Congress (NNC), which pledged to help the Indian people achieve national independence, at the same hope to bring political changes in Nepal. In 1950, after the merged of Nepali Democratic Congress with Nepali National Congress, the Nepali Congress came into being with the objective of bringing an end to the autocratic regime of the Ranas (Pyakurel, 2012).

However, in the 1950, the process of democratization began in Nepal soon after the overthrow of the autocratic Rana regime. The phase of 1950s proved to be highly challenging for the democratic forces in Nepal, as they had faced numerous constraints in stabilizing democracy. Political parties that played a major role in the overthrow of Rana regime and were expected to function for the stabilization of the democratic system. However, they were failed to act in that direction rather strengthening to royal authority. It also gave an opportunity to the monarchy to label the activities of political parties undemocratic and unfavorable to the prevailing condition in Nepal. In fact, the Nepalese politics since 1951 had been marked by the emergence of a large number of political parties and groups on the one hand and continuous fragmentation, groupism and personal rivalries among them. It seems that the political parties lacked experience, a sound mass base and a clear programme. It paved a way for the re-emergence of traditional elite under the leadership of monarchy (Upreti, 2012). In 1959 Nepal was endowed with a democratic constitution and parliamentary government after the 1959 election. The Nepali congress under the leadership of B. P. Koirala formed the government but this government was not allowed for work long. In December 1960, King Mahendra abrogated the parliamentary government and took power in his hands. After taking over the powers, King moved towards searching an alternative political order, which would establish supremacy of monarchy and at the same time fulfill minimum democratic aspirations of the people of Nepal. Hence he finally appointed a 'Constitution Committee' to study the political system of various developing countries. However, that Constitution Committee suggested for the establishment of Panchyat System (Ibid.)

This Panchyat System was totally based on the supremacy of monarchy and its guidance. King had described it as a truly Nepali political system based on the culture and tradition of Nepal. This new political system however was not accepted by democratic forces of the Nepalese kingdom, and it was clear that neither it had ensured an indigenous model of democracy in nor could it meet the qualification of the western model of democracy. Nepal in the late 1980s was not only affected by internal struggles but was also greatly influenced by the democratic wave that was taking place all over the world. The political change in 1990 introduced formal liberal democracy but no signing change took place to transform the state structure and make it inclusive. The members of Khas community who make merely 20 percent of the population occupied nearly ninety five percent of the positions in the bureaucracy and security sectors. Though, Nepal was acknowledged as multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country in the 1990 constitution, yet the politics and governments of the country did not reflect the diversity of the country (Giri, 2012). The people's war launched by the Maoist since 1996 began to dismantle the edifice the old state and brought to the fore the demand of the different nations and nationalities and ethnic communities for creation of provinces based on identity, history, language and regional specificities. However, before the Madesh movement the different ethnic groups mostly living in the hills merely talked about autonomy and non-territorial federalism. It was the Madhesh movement that compelled the seven parties to adopt the principal of territorial federalism in the interim constitution. The Maoist insurgency, the royal coup followed by movement for peace and total democracy, the Madhesh uprising played a vital role in weakening the monarchical state and opening the avenues for making of Nepal a federal and democratic Republic.

3. Challenges to Democratic Transition in Post-Gyanendra Nepal

A number of Third World countries have moved either from military dictatorships or one-party authoritarianism to pluralistic democracy in recent years. King Gyanendra's takeover of thrown in mid 2001 after the Royal massacre, the political situation in Nepal was worsen. Unfortunately, however, while the Maoists were successful in gradually pushing their agenda through violence and intimidation, the lust of power, of King Gyanendra and the confusion among the political leadership aggravated the domestic turmoil in Nepal. Instead of showing prudence and statesmanship in dealing with the Maoists rebels, the king showed more interest in exploiting the situation in his favour. First, he dissolved Nepal's parliament on 22 May 2002, and then dismissed the Sher Bhadr

Deuba government in October that year accusing Deuba of being incompetent in running the government beset by an increasingly deadly Maoist insurgency. He nominated Lokendra Bahadur Chand as prime minister. But, when the street rallies organized by the main opposition parties for restoration of democracy forced him to resign, then the king specially selected Surya Bahadur Thapa as Nepal's prime minister in June 2003. Though, political parties re-launched their agitation and street protests against this undemocratic practice of the king (Jha, 2008).

However, it strengthened the power of King, who always tries to use the inability of government and finally imposed emergency in February 2005. The king had suspended fundamental rights and assumed all executive powers in the name of bringing back peace and effective democracy. But in reality he hurtled his kingdom into the abyss of absolute monarchy. It was totally an act of unconstitutional and authoritarian rule of monarchy. The imposition of direct rule of the King, and the resurgence of traditional base of power indicated that the situation was fast going out of the hands of the democratic forces. Nepal's main political parties decided to come together to fight against King Gyanendra's direct rule in November 2005. It was realized that there was an urgent need of polarization of democratic forces and also that there was a need to launch a struggle for rebuilding of democracy in the country (Upreti, 2012). Nepal's mainstream political parties and Maoist have reached an agreement on a basis of alliance against monarchy. However, when a lot of groups mobilize in changing societies, if the existing political institutions are unable to accommodate the new demands, politics could witness violence and destabilization (Huntington, 1968). In the Nepali context, democratization could mean, among other things, expanding and deepening democracy by reforming the polity to include the traditionally excluded groups and extending civil liberties and political rights to them (Lawoti, 2007). Whatever Nepal has been observing since the first phase of democracy, this phenomenon has come across. The demand of political parties for strengthening peace and stability in the country has been main issue. The demand of Seven Parties Alliance was to restore democracy and peace in the country was one of the best examples in this regard. In May 2005, this Seven Parties Alliance agreed upon a six-point agreement that included restoration of the parliament as of 1999, and the 1990 constitution. It also agreed to establish multiparty democracy and hold elections for the constituent assembly.

However, after 10 years of a Maoist insurgency and a gradual royal putsch, the people's movement of April 2006 (Jan Andolan-II) has laid the foundations for a new political beginning. In March 2006, it was decided to launch a movement for the restoration of multi-party democracy and it finally began on 6th April 2006. The movement soon after became widespread and violent. It was for the first time in the history of Nepal that the King was abused and denounced for his acts publicly. After the third party involvement, King Gyanendra declared restoration of Parliament after 19 days struggle on 24 April 2006. The polarization of various democratic forces and the intensity of the movement at the domestic front and international pressure on the other hand had compelled King to step down and pay wave for the restructuring of Nepali state (Upreti, 2012). Hence, it can be argued that the peace process to build a new Nepal began with signing of the historical Twelve Point Agreement on 21st November 2005 and entered in a crucial phase after the Constituent Assembly election in 2008. The Constituent Assembly election was important in order to frame a new constitution. But, it was failed to meet the deadline for writing a new constitution for the country in given frame of time which was till 27 May 2012. Former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai announced that new elections, which will be held on 22 November. However, the political process was not that smooth for building a congenial atmosphere to hold election for the CA. One of the main obstacles has been disagreement over whether the states which will be created will be based on ethnicity (Upreti, 2010). Nepal's numerous problems must be understood against the background of historical and social developments of the country. Hence, the political parties of Nepal have agreed on forming an interim government under the leadership of Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi in order to hold CA election to end the political deadlock. It is argued that the election of November 2013 Constituent Assembly, which can provide the foundation for a new and inclusive Nepal against the growing tensions along ethnic, regional and gender lines. However, the second Constituent Assembly election were held successfully on 19th November 2013 and country still waiting for a new constitution. Since 2006, Nepal has struggled with the difficult transition from war to peace, from autocracy to democracy, and from an exclusionary and centralized state to a more inclusive and federal one. The new democratic Nepal has been struggling for a constitution. Nepal's immediate priority is the promulgation of its constitution. If it does not succeed, then we know what situation will occur again in Nepal.

4. References

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