

Nepal: A young democracy with much to show but still far to go

Gabriele Koehler

Only a few short years ago, Nepal emerged from a 10 year civil conflict which had cost 15000 lives – out of a total population of roughly 30 million people. There was considerable optimism, even euphoria, then, with high expectations of a peaceful, inclusive and prosperous country. As journalist Kanak Mani Dixit put it at the time: “On every lip today, there is the call and expectation of a Naya Nepal, and there is no doubt that the country has the economic resources and the human potential to achieve great heights. ... Nepal can, perhaps, be the model country of South-Asia, using its diversity of population, its fitting economy of scale, its proven ability at grassroots empowerment, and its continuous history of two centuries and more, to generate a momentum as a nation state like no other in the neighbourhood.” (Dixit 2007).

Some six years later, Nepal no longer makes headlines in the international media. The arduous process of transforming a conflict- and autocracy-ridden polity no longer captures people’s imaginations beyond Nepal itself. This is a pity because the country deserves attention for its political accomplishments and merits deeper analysis in light of its complex human development outcomes.

The political plane – mixed developments

Elections held – after some delays - in November 2013 reshuffled the composition of the Parliament, which doubles as the Constituent Assembly tasked to complete the drafting of a new, inclusive Constitution. Three parties - Nepali Congress (NC), United Marxist-Leninist (CPN/UML), and Communist Party Nepal (Maoist) (CPN (Maoist)) share the majority of the 601 seats. The remaining seats are divided up among 27 further parties, most quite small. There is no threshold – such as a 5-% minimum applied in other countries, because the small parties which are predominantly identity based, feared they would then not be represented in the parliament, designed to be as inclusive and representative as possible.

The two largest parties have formed a coalition, with the new Prime Minister from the Congress Party, and 18 ministers from the Congress and UML parties. The mainstream Maoists – different from the breakaway fundamentalist faction – voted in support but did not join an initially foreseen unity government.

The political trends are mixed – with some major accomplishments but also a challenge of unfinished business. Politically a major accomplishment is the fact that Nepal has succeeded in establishing itself as a secular republic, and at least notionally abolishing the oppressive Hindu social order, and re-establishing democracy and political debate. The deposed monarch lives quietly, with a government pension, in the capital.

With respect to an emerging Constitution, many points were agreed, at committee level, under the preceding interim government. Several contentious and potentially explosive issues remain. Two relate to the format of governance – monarchy or republic and if the latter, presidential or prime ministerial. One small party (Rastriya Prajatantra Party) wants to reinstate the Hindu monarchy, while all others across the board are in support of the secular republic as established in 2008. The Maoists are lobbying for a presidential republic, while

most other parties prefer a prime ministerial system as it gives precedence to – more inclusive - parliamentary processes.

Another contentious issue in the Constitution is the criterion for the re-designing of district boundaries. Maoists have been campaigning for the creation of identity based districts – which has a high risk of divisiveness along ethnic and language lines, while most other parties would opt for geographical districts based on Nepal's distinctive topography similar to the framework in place for the past decades and working reasonably well.

The fact that these issues are on the table and under discussion signal the emergence of a lively and resilient democracy.

Party politics are a more complex issue. The three large parties are nominally all left wing. The Congress Party sees itself as committed to democratic socialism. The United Marxist Leninist, despite its belligerent name, is aligned with the Socialist International. The CPN Maoist are communist with Stalinist leanings and not aligned with China, contrary to what their name suggests. However, despite their professed ideological positions as left-wing and egalitarian, internal party democracy is not well developed; almost without exception in all parties, male chauvinism, power politics and age-, not competency-based seniority, determine party leadership. Women, lowland Nepalis, the disadvantaged caste groups, and people under the poverty line do not figure prominently in inner-circle party politics, and party leaders are predominantly men from the so-called upper caste – Brahmins who originate from the hilly parts of Nepal. Moreover, with some parallels to other South Asian countries, political dynasties dominate the Congress Party, with the new Prime Minister, Sushil Koirala, being the 4th member of the Koirala family to take on the prime ministerial office. These dynastic party politics demoralise younger dynamic leaders and they exasperate voters who want a change from the 'business as usual' model.

The economic, social and environmental sphere – here too: mixed trends

As the political sphere absorbs much energy, the real issues in Nepal are on a different plane. Notably rural Nepalese are overwhelmingly concerned with development issues. As one senior parliamentarian from Southern Nepal put it poignantly: “We go to the villages for discussions or surveys regarding voters’ preferences regarding the political format of the country. But of course, their concerns are far more tangible ones: piped drinking water, toilets, 24-hour electricity, access to a functioning health service, and most of all employment – better regulations for migration or decent work at home.”

In Parliament and media alike, surprisingly little discussion takes place on these core human development questions, and one is hard put to distinguish among the political party programmes in terms of their positions on these issues.

Nevertheless, from a bird's-eye, abstract, macroeconomic level, Nepal has charted considerable progress, even before the end of the brutal conflict. GDP growth rates have been at 4-5% annually. Officially measured poverty lines showed a reduction in the national poverty line from 33% to 25% between 2000 and 2007. Nepal's ranking on the human development index registered the fastest improvement of the 187 countries recorded, rising from 0.210 in 1980 to 0.428 in 2010 (UNDP 2010). Child mortality and maternal mortality have decreased. Primary school enrolment stands at 95%.

But, as one senior Nepali observer puts it: “These statistics are at the same time encouraging – and disconcerting. The reported success is counterintuitive and does not tally with ordinary people's situations.” That is, they do not reflect seasonal food insecurity. They do

not convey what everyday life is like in the dank, crumbling housing in dusty Kathmandu with no running water and 12-hour electricity cuts every day; what going to school in dark unheated public school buildings without toilets and without window panes must be like in the severe winters; the effort it takes to do agriculture or collect water in steep mountain regions where some villages are a 2- or 3-day walk from the nearest market or clinic.

Beneath the already difficult socio-economic situation lies the multilayered process of social exclusion resulting in a horrendous spread between the human development outcomes for privileged versus excluded communities – the “minorities of faith, region, language, caste, and even altitude” (Dixit 2007). Trends for them continue to put to question the more positive overall statistics. Dalits – the most disadvantaged caste – are doubly as likely to be income poor, have literacy levels a third lower than the so-called upper castes, and Dalit women’s life expectancy is five years less than that of other women (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011 a and b). In all groups, the situation of girls and women is worse than that of men and boys (National Planning Commission 2008).

The second area that puts to question the encouraging human development index statistics is the issue of employment. There is new investment in the Kathmandu valley in particular; from road construction to the development of upmarket high-rise housing and retail malls. A new trend is that the overseas-educated sons and daughters of the elites are returning to take up jobs in Nepal. The new businesses in the services sector are impressive but these activities alone are not sufficient to absorb all of the manpower that is available, especially the youth. As a result, more than 1000 Nepalese leave the country every day - to take up low skilled jobs often treacherous circumstances in India, Malaysia or the Gulf states, often under working conditions not much different from those of indentured labour. In 2013, one Nepali worker died abroad every day under un- specified circumstances, usually leaving their indebted families without a financial compensation – which would at least secure their economic survival.

The third multi-faceted development is in the area of the environment. Nepal is one of the first countries to develop a well-functioning systems of community forest management where, often under the leadership of self-organised women’s groups, reforestation has been a singular success. But on the other hand, there is severe ecological pressure in the Himalayas, where glaciers are melting threatening surrounding villages and habitat, and putting entire regions at risk of flooding and landslides. There is a severe shortage of ground water and river water, notably in the Kathmandu valley.

What next?

The new government is currently taking office. The Prime Minister has assured that the new Constitution will be completed in a year’s time. An important complementary action would be to organise local-level elections. These last took place in 1997, and the mandates of the elected village and district officials expired in 2002. Local communities since then have been organising themselves, in some instances well, in others exposed to oppression and distortion by party cadres who reportedly mis-direct the community development funds from the central government to their own party members.

Local-level elections would help formalise village- and district-level empowerment and would also shake up ossified power structures in the Kathmandu political establishment as new political leaders could potentially come up.

With Constitution writing and local elections put in motion, the government can, if it wills, turn its full attention to the matter of the country’s economic, social, and environmental

issues. That could re-confirm and reinforce the accomplishments that Nepal has made since the end of the civil conflict, and help turn the encouraging statistics into palpable reality.

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