

Opinion

Democratic Discourse in Nepal

Lok Raj Baral

Two contradictory trends showing both silver lining in the ongoing political exercise and frightening uncertainty and disillusionment with the capacity of parties and leaders dominate the ten year's democratic discourse of Nepal.

The first trend focuses on the positive side of the whole exercise that has been carried out against the background of transition from an authoritarian model into a multiparty one. Judged objectively, the transition that was made possible by compromise of the principal political forces laid the ground for a stable two party dominant system through electoral processes. Similarly, crafting of various institutions, conduct of periodic elections, participation of about 60 percent of people in all general and local elections are no less spectacular in a poor country like Nepal. Moreover, the retreat of the CPN (UML) and other left parties except the Maoist from militancy to present themselves, if clubbed together, as an alternative force in the context of ongoing parliamentary politics, and the overall strategic flexibility of systemic parties noticed during the last ten years are noteworthy. Although some conflicting opinions and tactical lines adopted by these left parties sometimes send a wrong signal for the sustainability of the multiparty system, they, particularly the CPN (UML), cannot however be wished away for the present.

Thus, a paradoxically prismatic situation exists in the Nepali multiparty system with communities as an alternative to the Nepalese Congress. Whether or not these left parties would provide perennial guarantee to the continuity of the multiparty system depends on their own future role. Yet, viewed against the background of many left groups, the present system seems fraught with both imponderables and uncertainty. For ensuring the longevity of the system as well as for moderating the communists also depends on the good image, homogeneity and efficiency of the NC party and government.

The Second Trend

Despair, uncertainty and fear of backlash, misgovernance, rampant corruption and a bleak prospect of the multiparty system itself by contrast characterize the second aspect of the whole exercise. And defences advanced by politicians for the bright side of the process are esoteric at best and "empty rituals" at worst. The unfolding of past legacies rooted in the culture and behaviour of Nepal's political elites was evident during the entire ten years' time demonstrating their spurious commitment to the established process. Although the crafting of institutions was smooth against the background of political diversities of forces and shifting ideological positions they have been displaying over the years, parties in general have not been able to pass the public test despite their electoral gains and increase of seats in the parliament.

Elections themselves carry no sense if the government and parties mandated by the people fail to act decisively for transformation of the country qualitatively. If a party cannot function as an organization by accepting the minimum norm, how can the system achieved legitimacy?

How the newly crafted institutions such as parliament, judiciary, government and other constitutional bodies are working and how the general people perceive them for their overall function is also significant. Voters who have generally been enticed both by the 'mobilizational populism' of the parties and by a variety of other resources prominently money and muscle power, seem to provide dispassionate judgments after the election as our recent field works in some districts have suggested. The general people at the grassroots and other levels are bitter critics of politicians who treat them merely as a vote bank. Surprisingly, such negative popular perceptions about parties and politicians have, on the contrary, improved the evaluative capacity of the people without, however, having translated their anger into electoral outcome.

Problems and Alternatives

Although despairing of and fatigued by unscrupulous politicians, the people find that they have no other options but to improve the system. Yet, some do not see any prospect of improvement and hence prefer to find more extreme steps for redemption. Now it has been realized that crafting of institutions and politics as usual is not a sufficient solution to the country's overarching crises. How far these institutions are capable of managing crises or conflict becomes crucial. It seems that Nepal's major political changes since 1951 to 1999 have only been partly successful in making any dent in the hierarchical social and political structures based on ascription. So it is difficult to speculate today how the trajectories of democratic politics would be shaped by parties and leaders whose primordial loyalties are stronger than the demand of qualitative change of the status quo.

Lack of coordination among the various agencies of the state and interpersonal and intra-party feuds that hit the efficacy of the government have made the whole exercise more painful for the people. Sometimes, we are constrained to grope in locating the actual power and status of the government mandated by the people because political leaders have invariably compromised the spirit of the Constitution in order to cling to power and positions that have been used exclusively for patronage distribution.

Although the transition seems to be a longer one with high potential of disruption due to the weaknesses of the political parties, they (parties) have, nonetheless, been able to show a kind of systemic cohesiveness for these years for safeguarding the system. Yet, stability ensured by the parties would alone matter little if the democratic essence of progress is lacking in conducting the affairs of state. Since the systemic parties have no alternative to the existing regime because of the compulsions of time and the international context, they are under tremendous pressure to be both systemic and performance-oriented. Whatever stories of political backlash are circulated deliberately or otherwise therefore seem to originate from the weakness of political leaders who find fault with others rather than try to be confident of their own role for running the government and party.

A Note of Caution

Nostalgic of the past in the wake of failure of political parties and leaders, ordinary people may consider authoritarianism as a solution to the malaise of the country. Though it can be an instant reaction of the people, such experiment is bereft of its credibility and capacity to continue beyond a certain period. Yet, by way of caution, it can be stated that politicians may manipulate the existing democratic system for their own interest to the exclusion of ordinary people. Continued dominance of elitism based on rigid socio-economic and political hierarchy, regional and communal feeling being spread on flimsy pretexts, progressive decline of institutions to work as agencies of conflict management, and the erosion of the role of the state for providing minimum human security as per the spirit of the constitution would, if left uncorrected, dampen the prospect of democratic survival. Can the parties in power and in opposition wake up to these challenges and work in tandem to stem them? Or will they allow the country to head towards a major catastrophe?

Lok Raj Baral is a leading Political Analyst in Nepal.

Courtesy: The Kathmandu Post, February 22, 2001.