



Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN NEPAL*

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Ever since the two major political parties i.e., Nepali Congress and the Communist party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninists entered into a coalition agreement to form the government for the remainder of the term, there has been a lot of discourse about what it means for Nepali democracy. Indeed, questions about whether the opposition voices will be heard or even respected are genuine and we are yet to see how it truly unfolds. But if one were to look back, even myopically, these two parties, supposedly with different and opposing political ideologies, have entered coalition arrangements.

All major political developments in Nepal whether it be the end of the party-less panchayat system, the overthrowing of the monarchy or even the most recent federal transition is a result of these two major political parties and a few others coming together. Indeed, these were larger agendas and absent the need for political movements, Nepal's political parties have always functioned based on "Let bygones be bygones." Political parties have made malicious remarks

about each other and yet they have somehow managed to look past it, that too, in a very short span of time. The coming together of different parties to that extent is not surprising. While some may argue that the coming together of a left leaning party (CPN-UML) and more market-oriented party (Nepali congress) is somewhat of an anomaly, I would like to remind them that a Left-Right dichotomy in Nepal does not exist. All political parties in Nepal, as informed through their manifestos, lean towards the left of the center, there may be some differences, but their orientations are similar, and almost all of them—one way or the other—make reference to the word "Socialism" in its varied forms.

What is different this time around is that the current set-up of the federal parliament supported the start of this arrangement. It is well known that political parties that have been left out of the government start scheming to topple the incumbents. It is only the "political ego" that gave impetus to the success of the current scheme. Both the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML with 32 and 29 per cent of the seats in the House of representatives respectively depended on the support of other parties and most importantly the support of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists. That the two major

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parties, that too the oldest, had to heed, time and again, to the demands of Maoists, a relatively newer party, which only won 11.6 per cent of the seats ultimately led to the two coming together.

This arrangement was premised against the backdrop of a seven-point agreement. The agreement is generic and we will know more details as time passes by. What seems to have caught the attention of many, including me, is the idea of a constitutional amendment for greater stability. Personally, I don't think that the two parties have taken the idea seriously. As is the culture in Nepal, a commission, or a committee or a high-level committee to study and recommend amendments will be setup. The fate of such a commission and the proceedings remains unknown. What is known however is that any amendment to the constitution requires the support of all political parties. The Constitution of Nepal has been amended twice and both these times a larger agreement between all political parties was reached. I would argue that any talks about the amendment must start after the Constitution of Nepal has been implemented in line with what framers of the constitution intended it to be.

The lack of it aside, there are important discussions that have arisen, both inside the parliament and outside of it with regards to certain things that require revisiting. These include the fate of constitutional commission, the lack of adequate revenue rights for provinces, the inadequacy of our fiscal architecture, the duplication in rights assigned to the three levels of government and the need to reimagine our sub-national governments from the lens of public service delivery. I believe these to be important conversations and I regard the constitution as a dynamic document, it should be amended when required and our constitution too requires some of them. But despite this I don't think that the current coalition will even attempt to start the conversations surrounding it.

At the same time, there is a concern that Nepal might be headed towards a two-party system. Global political movements till date tell us that

a country gradually moves towards one and a country cannot function in isolation from these movements. I don't think that Nepal is headed in that direction, yet. The multiplicity of ethnicities in Nepal is one reason for it. No political party can win the trust of all of them, to that extent we see a rise in regional forces and there is precedence of regional parties successfully converting into national parties. We also see, at least in recent years, the formation of new parties that enjoy significant support. But more importantly, the move towards a two-party system was up for discussion during the making of the Constitution of Nepal. Strong opposition to it led to the adoption of a framework that fosters a multi-party system. To that extent we see political parties of all colors, some that argue for a constitutional monarchy, others that argue for a secular state and that I believe is the beauty of Nepali democracy, that it allows debate to foster, and it allows friction between ideas.

A similar concern of late is the relevance of regional parties and their continued survival. It is somewhat true that regional political parties were able to establish themselves by demanding a federal state, they gained popularity within the geographies they operated in because of it. But it would be wrong to assume that their end goal was a federal structure. It was rather the need for an inclusive state or more appropriately the need for access to formal state structures. That demand till date remains unmet and regional parties operate within this space. Within our multi-party system, it would be wrong to argue that regional parties are no longer required because the federal agenda has been endorsed by the constitution. Our state remains largely exclusive and within this space of exclusion there is friction between political parties and between the three tiers of the government. One need not look further than the writ petitions brought before the constitutional court by elected representatives of the local bodies. I believe these tensions will further strengthen our federal system and regional political parties remain relevant even today to ensure a vibrant democratic space.

The metric of a vibrant democratic space or an effective political party is not what they stand for or the popularity it enjoys, it is rather the work they do. I mentioned previously that there is no left-right dichotomy, all political parties orient themselves towards the left through the use of a variety of names including but not limited to BP's Socialism, Democratic socialism, Welfare socialism or Social democracy, but it would also be wrong to assume that none of them support the active participation of the private sector. Indeed, in recent years, political parties both new and old have shifted their agenda towards economic growth but such a focus has only been limited to the election campaigns. Elections are about gaining the trust of as many citizens as one can and in that process, it is not uncommon for political parties to make as many promises as they can. But they remain just promises, to those that promise more liberal policies, more open economy, I say "Walk the talk," I am yet to see one.

Our contemporary discourses are often dominated by conversations about migration. The emigration of many youths is supposedly seen as problematic. Yet they are merely citizens seeking better opportunities elsewhere and in focusing on aggregates we only seem to focus on the youths leaving the country and not on those that have returned. What they do after returning remains unknown and whether they find opportunities in Nepal after returning remains understudied. One concern that I find genuine is the fact that when a major chunk of youths depart where does the impetus or the pressure for reform come from? Theoretically from a period of crisis follows reforms, but Nepal is not headed towards one and simply cannot withstand another crisis, nor can it sustain the status quo. While the pressure that we talk about might never come, I am hopeful about reforms in the future. My conversations with politicians have led to me believe that political parties are aware of the fact that the status quo is not desirable and there are those within the party system that are pushing for reforms. Even the debates in parliament are largely geared towards

the need for reforms. While these may never translate to sweeping broad reform programs, we do nonetheless see marginal changes and I am a firm believer in marginal changes.

A less talked about but a concerning factor is the internal democracy within political parties themselves. A national democracy will only be as strong as the internal democracy within the political parties. By and large, the voter base seems indifferent to the internal workings of the political parties. Their interests only peak come election and that to a certain degree adds to the culture of weak democratic proceedings within political parties. Nonetheless, today there is far greater information about the internal politics of a party than before. Agenda's put forth in central committee meetings, the suspension of members, the action taken against some members, the discussions that follow during the general convention are both readily available and reported in greater frequency than before. This in itself is a good sign. The availability of this information will force political parties to be more democratic.

Finally, there have been speculations aplenty about new political forces. New forces are just that, entirely new and one can only see what they are made of when they have their first general convention. I don't know what the fate of the much-awaited 2084 elections will look like, but one thing is certain old political parties can no longer ignore new and younger forces. So far, the CPN-UML has been successful in positioning itself as a political party that values young voices. One need not look any further than supremo Oli's choice of the chief whip, a young parliamentarian. It is both a politically strategic move to suppress dissenting voices within the political party and a popular move. For the insiders, it is a question of ego. By selecting younger people in key parliamentary positions, Oli has already sidelined veterans of the party and at the same time managed to project an image of party of young leaders. Regardless, political parties will find it difficult to stay relevant if they cannot tap into young voices.

