



Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

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DEMOCRACY: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE*

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We do not live in a time when the idea of democracy is challenged. At least in the past 100 years or so, those who engaged themselves in imagining our governance system—the philosophers, the intellectuals, the thought leaders—have not opposed the idea of democracy. To that extent, there is a tacit acceptance that democracy exists and almost all the other imaginations follow this assumption. But, if we are to accept this assumption without discussing what democracy means every now and then, then the state of governance—designed in the name of democracy no less—in many countries including Nepal would stagnate and fail to evolve.

The challenge to democracy today comes from our understanding of it. In its simplest form, at the heart of democracy is the freedom to imagine new possibilities. This idea starts from an analysis of the status quo, that it is unequal and there are situated inequalities within it which compels us to imagine new possibilities.

Democracy then is an imagination of open and new possibilities. But this simplification is rather abstract—what is new, what do new possibilities look like? More often than not we jump to these questions before discussing new possibilities for whom? The answer inevitably is that it is open for everyone, and new possibilities are for everyone. Seen from this lens at the core of democracy is the idea that because everyone is free everyone can imagine a future for themselves. Whatever governance system by which we imagine our common future needs to be just and equal, the debate is only about how we make a system just and equal.

Our understanding of democracy, especially after the 20th century, informs us that three crucial elements make a system just and fair. The first is the agency that individuals have within a system that treats everyone equally. Within this system, which allows a common imagination of the future, everybody is simultaneously an individual being and a collective being. Paradoxical as it may be, there is ample space for the agency of individuals. Second, the method by which we imagine a common future. Social scientists use the term rationality, I prefer to use the word scientific inquiry. Third, a common future concerns itself with associational life. To

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be able to imagine a common future based on a collaborative effort, we must be free to use our prudence and design institutions. In other words, there are three core elements, individual space, rationality, and the free exercise of associational life forms, the latter is what we commonly refer to as freedom. Debates and discourses are aplenty when it comes to what these three elements mean, and it is these debates that frame our understanding of what democracy is. The challenge to democracy thus far is seen from the lens of this debate and if this debate were to be settled, we would look at the challenges and expectations from an entirely distinct perspective.

Expectations from a democratic system are rooted in a particular country's history. Expectations of the general populace and political actors from democracy in 2007 B.S. and post-2063 B.S. are entirely different, I believe. But when we talk about expectations, it would be useful to remember that no country in the world can claim that a particular democratic system of governance is complete if it achieves a set of goals. Even the most democratically developed nations have some form of inequality and so long as we can't reach a stage where everyone is equal, those who have been treated unjustly and unequally will always critique the democratic system. And it is within this context of unequal treatment that questions about expectations arise. But we must also understand that the question of expectations, hopes and despairs are abstract so long as there is no discourse about what concepts like freedom, fairness, and equality mean within the social context of a given nation.

Democracy is practiced within a particular framework. The nation-state is one such framework and the practice of democracy differs within these nation-states given their history, to that extent there are countries with multi-party systems and two-party systems. What we need to discuss more is the workings of the nation-state as a framework, or more particularly as a site where democracy is implemented. The other aspect of this framework is what we refer to as popular sovereignty. Since democracy

at its core is the common imagination of a future, the people are the source of power. The question then that logically follows is "What were these common imaginations?" The question of whether democracy has been delivered in Nepal—a question which I disagree with given the difficulty in answering what delivery means—needs to be looked at from this context of democracy operating within certain frameworks. If someone were to argue that post the promulgation of a new constitution in Nepal, everything would follow, then I would argue that there was no imagination of a future and there are problems with the imagination as well, if political parties made such declarations, then I would argue that political parties have limited understanding of democracy.

Three other things are worth noting when we talk about the practice of democracy. First is the logic of history. Say for instance a particular nation-state is chasing some form of democratic ideal, for now, I will take justice and equality as an example. An inevitable consequence of chasing any democratic ideal and even changing the system of governance system is resistance. Resistance comes from the historical institutions that have existed, groups that have historically benefitted from the status quo, and the political economy of resource allocation. This resistance that is rooted in a particular nation-state's history does not, however, function independently. It depends on the logic of social hierarchies. Social hierarchies, for the sake of simplicity, can be best understood in terms of caste, gender, ethnicity, and inequalities. These social hierarchies function depending on the nation-state and its history. These hierarchies then stand as roadblocks to the ideal of democracy. Third, is the logic of markets. Post the 20th century the general understanding is that the state is not responsible for everything and there are institutions other than the nation-state with which convergences and encounters will be necessary. In other words, the logic of history, social hierarchies, and markets affect the functioning and movement of democratic institutions.

Amongst the myriads of democratic institutions

discourse is often limited to elections. The reason, I believe, is the idea that without elections people cannot exercise their fundamental right to choose. Recall for instance that there are three crucial elements of democracy i.e., individual space, rationality, and the free exercise of associational life forms, these elements were however never imagined within the framework of nation-states. Historically democracy and its core elements were imagined within the framework of city-states. In today's world, the question is how we imagine democracy within the framework of large-scale political orders. In the absence of any discourse about democracy and democratic institutions within the framework of the Nepali nation state and its historical cleavages, we are left with a situation where the belief is that political parties are at the core of democracy. Political parties keep reminding us of these and the populace has by and large agreed to it.

If one were to look at the functioning of political parties, one would find that political parties in Nepal usually function based on familial ties. But we rarely discuss the role of family as an institution of democracy. Even within political parties, there is little discussion about how we arrive at common decisions given our various associational forms of life. The crisis today is the dearth of knowledge on our various forms of association life. For instance, before the 2007 BS it was common to make land donations to construct schools, what is common today is the land grabbing by political parties. In the absence of any discussion about our various forms of associations and how these have made us dependent on political parties and elections in the past 70 years or so, we have lost the ability to imagine varied forms of associational life which are crucial for any democracy. This, I believe, is the fundamental challenge we face today.

Questions today about the challenge to democracy come from the lens that political parties are the agents and institutions of democracy. In my everyday life, I believe that political parties and I as an individual are equals to the extent that we can both imagine a common future for Nepal. So long as I don't believe in this form of equality, I

work under the assumption the burden for this imagination falls entirely on them. As soon as I start believing that the political parties or rather the associational form that they adopt carries the same weight as the associational form I adopt to imagine a collective future I start exercising my agency. This assumption of inequality is what results in a transfer of agency from the individual to imagine a collective future to the political parties and this is to a large degree what has happened in Nepal.

I do not however believe that Nepal is overtly politicized, it is rather less politicized. Political parties and political power are only somewhat connected with politics. Politics is merely about the role we play in imagining our collective future. Two things are worth noting here. First are the benefits that follow from imagining a collective future. If we take the 2062/63 Jana Andolan as the start of a new political system, and believe that it is an opportunity to imagine a collective future, we must also ask who benefits from this opportunity. We must recall here the logic of history, hierarchy, and markets tells us that certain groups will have access to this opportunity. We might refer to these groups as permanent establishments that can benefit from their access to decision-making centers and the structures therein. What is worth noting then is that what we commonly refer to as democracy or the start of democracy was not necessarily so, it was rather only a point of departure. The debates and discourses we should have had about the arrangement of democratic institutions never happened. The other thing is our understanding of politics. Questions today about politicization and democratic delivery have come from the lens that politics is about power and strength. I would argue that politics is about popular sovereignty. If we are to look at politics from this lens, then we can begin defining the connections between politics and the people. Nepal has done very little of this.

Historically, democracy has had an identity. When we talk about democracy we inevitably return to Athens, Greece. People gathered to talk about the city-states, war and peace, and other

aspects concerning the life of the citizens. But the gathering was largely dominated by men; women, slaves were not allowed to partake. To that extent, what we have commonly referred to as political membership has largely been restricted to one group. In Nepal's case, this membership was restricted to four or five powerful houses and the members of that particular household. By 1950 BS, the number of powerful houses had increased to 30. In today's time, this is somewhere between 250-300. What follows then is an analysis of the identity of these

nature i.e., one that relates to the hierarchies and the political membership that come with these hierarchies. From this lens comes the call for making our political membership inclusive. The reasoning is simple, until and unless we can make our political membership broader, we cannot collectively design democratic institutions that suit Nepal's cultural, ethnic, and other forms of diversity. To date, we have failed to take ownership of this idea of broader political membership. There are at least two other connected threads worth noting here.



households, it is largely dominated by males, brahmins, chettris, and newars. The structure that these groups then built also has a separate identity, one that is linked to the group's own identity. The identity of the Nepali framework of democracy then is one of the monarchs, monarchy, Hinduism, and a male-dominated political membership. This framework as an inevitable consequence of the identity it has is devoid of the collective imagination of those who were at the periphery. The question of identity then is best assessed from the lens of the state's cultural

First is the fact that those who have historically benefited from exclusive political membership will always resist such a call, they might even go so far as to use the term demagogues in support of their resistance. Second, is the question about the effect that these exclusionary institutions had on the everyday life of the citizens. Both the centralized nature of resource allocation and the technological innovations of the 21st century have effects worth considering. As a theory, the latter's effect is best summed up as the movement from the subject of governments to the subject of

technology, to that extent the current framework of nation-states only partially addresses these effects.

It would also be useful in understanding the difference between populism and popular sovereignty to further our understanding of democracy. Elections are by far the best application of popular sovereignty. A candidate wins if they can secure the majority votes. The standard textbook definition is 51 % of the votes, but if we are to look at the vote shares of those that have won elections in Nepal, it is hardly more than 40%, the essence is merely on the competitive nature of elections. Populism, although related to popular sovereignty, is different no less. In its simplest form, populism is any attempt to find simple solutions to complex problems. This attempt results in Nazism, the rise of leaders like Mussolini, and genocide. What is interesting is that the rise of leaders with populist tendencies was through a well-defined democratic process. The question then simply is why one should be concerned with populism. Since it is about boiling down complex problems to simple ones, they often result in political cleansing, often masked under the veil of ideology. Historically, we have had to witness such cleansing. The other concerns ethnic cleansing. The refugee problem today is by and large a result of a mixture of exclusionary politics and populism, i.e. one that identifies one particular group as the root of the problem and pits one group against the other. Populist tendencies are not limited to any one group in the political spectrum and until and unless we are not weary of such tendencies we cannot move to the space of democratic imagination.

Finally, the question of why our federal processes have failed is worth exploring. The simplest answer is that our point of departure was wrong. First, our constitution deviated from the pillars of identity and capability identified by the High-Level State Restructuring Commission. Second, deliberative practices within the constituent assembly were limited. The fate of the nation and the structure of federal Nepal was decided by the top leadership of the political parties, which

consisted of high-caste men. Their decision was in turn based on the need to win elections, to that extent, they carved out provinces in a manner that would ensure that their group would prevail in the elections. As a result, we are merely practicing the same governance system that we did previously albeit with a little twist. I would say that we have merely moved from the system of five development regions to seven development regions. It is worth noting also the source of discontent today. It has come from those who would lose the most from the decentralization of resources. Some have even gone so far as to claim that federalism is costly for Nepal, I would argue that corruption is costlier than the practice of federalism. The concern about the cost of federalism in Nepal is thus merely a complaint about the shrinking resources at the center.

