

Inner Party Democracy in Nepal

Problems and Preferences

"Politics is derivative in a two-fold sense: it has its origin in pre-political data of biological life, and it has its end in highest possibility of human destiny." Hannah Arendt

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Introduction

Competitive political parties are the backbone of a pluralist democracy. But, a constitutional state cannot be governed by political parties with no democratic credentials, such as right to association, opposition and defense of one's own ideas and interests within their internal political life as well as forge general consensus among them to sustain democracy. Their democratic functions determine the condition of responsive leadership and shape civic culture of moderation, toleration and a balance between law and politics. Inner or intra-party democracy can be defined as the ability of a political party to engage its members in deliberation, decision-making and action of party affairs and enforce the transparency and accountability of office bearers to its rules of governance. The standards of inner party democracy are defined by their democratic statutes based on the spirit of national constitution, a coherent political program owned by its members, organizational networks in society for social and system integration and regular elections to select and circulate party leadership with moral perspectives and public vision. The internal interest and functioning of parties specifies their cooperation with other parties and coalition potential irrespective of ideological incompatibilities.

Inner party democracy means the approval of policy and personnel alternatives and assent from the party rank and file. These elements are indispensable to perform other tasks: inclusiveness, decentralization and commitment to rules and procedures of party operation. Without these, political parties will have no legitimate foundation for the roles they perform in a political system. Inner party democracy provides an avenue for new ideas, fosters a culture of deliberation, compromise and consensus among the party leaders and cadres and makes the organizational structure of the party cohesive in competition for power. It controls the discretionary power and authoritarian behavior of leaders, reflects the preference of broader electorates on agenda-setting and contributes to political democratization as well.

The socialization potential of inner party democracy enhances party members' sense of personal efficacy and empowerment and builds trust in leadership. Inner-party democracy is, therefore, important to reduce factionalism and seek peaceful resolution of organizational conflict over interests, values and appropriate political action. Critical discourse on these will help to understand the existing capacity gaps of Nepalese political parties by creating contextual knowledge, providing appropriate information on their governance and reform their historically-embedded political culture of personalized authoritarianism. "Power is a call for service and it cannot be the subject of inter-party competition" (Solzhenitsyn, 1991:70) devoid of national purpose and responsible political action.

Diversity of parties in Nepal represents the mosaic of its social and cultural asymmetry. Nepal's polity needs effective leaders to integrate this diversity and respond to key political questions such as nation-building, social contract, inclusive democracy and peace as well as address the diverse needs of citizens. The country's 74 political parties demonstrate varying degrees of transparency, inclusiveness, decentralization and participation by virtue of their social differentiation. The system of mixed election adopted for Constituent Assembly (CA) has crystallized 25 political parties of multiple sizes and produced a new distribution of power in society. But, neither the incumbent parties led by CPN (Maoist) can monopolize governmental power due to dearth of constitutional requirement of two-thirds majority in the Constituent Assembly (CA), nor can the second largest party Nepali Congress (NC) monopolize entire opposition space existing at multiple hierarchies. The stability of

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government and timely preparation of new constitution requires moderation from both sides although Nepal's politics has moved from consensus to competitive politics with the possibility to revisit confrontation. It has caught the implementation of post-conflict stabilization measures in halfway house. In this context, it is important to draw on the Nepalese experience in addressing the issue of intra-party democracy, assess the extent to which political parties are democratic by specifically looking at their organizational orientations, input functions of political parties such as election of leadership, financing sources, regulatory mechanisms and participation of marginalized groups, such as women, Dalits, Madhesi, indigenous and ethnic communities and minorities in their output functions, such as decision-making processes and outcome.

Inner-Party Democracy and Political Culture

All the political parties in Nepal have emerged as a force of "movement for democracy." As a result, during the movement they have opened themselves to the demands of social forces. But, the shift of their role from the movement to government changed their perspective, issues and priorities and they began to close off the opportunity for social mobility of underclass. Long socialization of leaders in "oppositional role" has conditioned their behavior and inclined to revisit this role even after sharing the governmental power. Many leaders, particularly those who have espoused hereditary traits, feared the democratization of party as a threat to their power. As a result, Nepal's political culture is deeply embedded in a fear psychosis: NC fears the radicalization of the nation's future, CPN (Maoist) fears the burden of past and CPN-UML and smaller parties fear both. Safety is provided by families and a web of power built around kinship, state classes and territorial networks. So long these forces dictate leadership behavior internal party democracy cannot be trouble-free. The problem of legitimate succession of leadership has bred extra-constitutional mode of conflict resolution every time and complexity in handling the multiple inclinations of political parties—transformation, incremental reforms and reaction. These conflicting inclinations rooted in conventional utilitarianism have marred the possibility of cooperative action within the parties and without. But, they provided an *élan vital* for periodic political change.

Similarly, erosion of political ideology, mirrored in the cohabitation of all parties with all irrespective of their political spectrum, has affected the historically evolved identities. This has caused a tension between their ideologies of Maoism, Marxism-Leninism, social democracy and nationalism and a common adoption of socially-blind neo-liberal policies. In contrast, Nepal's constitutional commitment to social justice and endorsement to human rights principles demands an orientation to a social state. The transnational understanding of politics has even impelled the CPN (Maoist) to march to "industrial capitalism" by crumbling what it calls all forts of feudalism—monarchy, agrarian system, Hindu identity of the state, national unification day and masculine dynamics of political structure and political culture—in favor of state restructuring, inclusive democracy and peace.

Critics, however, believe² that this grand crack has evoked a self-doubt among many Nepalese: Who are we?³ As collective socioeconomic stress of average Nepalese shows no sign of fading, citizens are increasingly defining themselves with class, ethnicity, religion, region and language for psychological safety and identity. Caught in an internal and external security dilemma even international community variously treats Nepal as a soft, weak and fragile state losing the necessity of political order, policy sovereignty and cultural identity. Security and authority vacuum has inspired the autonomous action of non-state armed actors for whom the state sovereignty is an

² "How can modern Nepal assert its identity as a sovereign nation-state independent of India and China without acknowledging Prithvi Narayan Shah's role in that creation?" asks Sunanda K. Datta-Ray in his article "Nepal must not disown its past" *Daily Pioneer*, November 21, 2008.

³ Eminent thinker Jurgen Habermas finds its answer in citizenship. He says, "Membership in a political community grounds special duties, behind which stands a patriotic identification. This kind of loyalty reaches beyond the validity of institutionally prescribed legal duties"(1997:512).

arch enemy. Despite majestic promise of social transformation the leadership change in Nepal, however, includes only an overlap between old and new and there are no efforts to limit the "leadership term" (Prasain, 2007:7) for the natural circulation of leadership in each generation.

The gap between party ideology and behavior, in contrast, has posed another difficulty to classify Nepalese parties into mass, cadre, ideological and pragmatic except the territorial identity of Madhesh espoused by Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (MJAF), Tarai-Madhesh Loktantrik Party (TMLP), Sadbhavana Party and Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP) as well as Chure Bhavar Ekta Samaj (CBES) and primordial caste and ethnic identity of some parties rooted in "biological life" to borrow Hannah Arendt's term. The general tendency of mainstream parties has been to become pragmatic, catch-all and mass-appealing. But, their inability to adjust and manage internal political friction has caused a fissiparous tendencies—fission and fusion—in the parties causing problems in the political institutionalization defined by their "adaptability, complexity, unity and autonomy" (Huntington, 1968: 13). The continuity of state institutions and discontinuity of political parties and civil society in Nepal have fostered a political culture of authoritarianism rather than state-society equilibrium. It is a characteristic of structural conservatism—"being attached to structures and processes of traditional paths of modernization without being prepared for reflection and correction wherever these paths contradict basic values and aims" (Meyer, 1998:55). The habit-driven tendency of top leaders to consolidate cronyism has impeded the effort to break with the past political culture, strengthen inner party democracy and cooperative solution of vital issues including the negotiation of fair compromise to realize what Hannah Arendt calls, "highest possibility of human destiny."

Key Areas to Nurture Inner Party Democracy

Political parties play an important role in the country's political system as they are the political artilleries of the state, key apparatuses of legislative process, creators of public opinion and democratic will-formation and suppliers of policy inputs on public issues. Inner party democracy is "the actual alternative to the authoritarian leader party because it guarantees the control of leadership, its selection and the participation of its members in the decision-making processes" (Meyer, 2007:11). Political parties as the main infrastructures of participatory democracy presuppose the practice of following democratic principles in their internal life to avoid anti-political reaction growing out of the inefficiency of political leaders to address the major national questions and foster the conditions for good governance.

a) Civic Education: Democracy is no longer a culturally-bound political system. Democratic ideals of freedom, social justice, human and ecological rights, solidarity and peace foster a culture of universal constitutionalism. In Nepal, however, erosion of these principles as unifying glue has bred divisions and increased political costs for voluntary cooperation. As a result, political authority has become too diverse and political parties have failed to function politically as per their statutes. The entry of pre-political, non-political and anti-political interest groups of society facilitated the capture of the government, political system and the state itself and devitalized their politically defined public functions.⁴ This has undermined the impersonality of public institutions to serve public good to citizens and civilize the culture of violent protest in Nepal. Liberation of the cadres from their hitherto socialization to follow dominant authority uncritically who seeks blind obedience rather than critical opinions on national policy questions and demonize legitimate dissent is a must for their civility. There is a need to democratize the contents of party schools so that cadres do not develop a fundamental tendency that their party is the best and the rest of the parties are worst to be disciplined and acculturated. Only well-informed citizens can discover the overlapping interests with others and enrich the quality of debate and policy making.

⁴ "The autonomy of politics becomes evident by virtue of its being able to treat, distinguish, and comprehend the friend-enemy antithesis independently of other antithesis" (Schmitt, 1996:27)

The political socialization function of Nepalese political parties has yet to fully transform the subsidiary identities of people into a citizen with equal rights and corresponding political obligations. Building citizenship is a rational response to the assertion of subsidiary identities or reactive re-tribalization of party politics. Party schools should establish a functional link between universal democratic ideals and national identity formation through their exposure to party manifestos. It is difficult to sustain the interest of cadres and supporters in party ideology, political issues and values and muster their loyalty if continuous political socialization does not become a part of their internal political life. Enlightenment, rather than indoctrination of cadres and supporters, on public issues through civic education can create their stake in the party and the polity. This strengthens cross-party trust and an aptitude of party members for collective action for the democratization of leadership. Introduction of human rights-based code of conduct for the militant party cadres and collaboration of young ones with local police and civil society can help establish law and order, local initiative for public good, reconciliation and peace. Political café in Germany regularly organizes dialogues on controversial political issues by engaging party workers, legislators, political analysts and youth and impart critical socialization.

b) Recruitment of Political Officials: The central function of a party is to win and administer power for effective governance of the nation. Nomination of capable and popular candidates for the electoral contest has a better chance of winning. Recruitment of properly educated, politicized and loyal cadres in various leadership position of party hierarchy can renew the internal life of party politics. But, too much bureaucratization of party reduces democracy to voting only, loses any interest in social change and even suppresses the individuality of cadres and supporters. In Nepal, control of party structure throughout life by a small group of leadership and their monopoly in the nomination of candidates have prevented the induction of young and qualified persons and, as a result, many parties have lost dynamism and resiliency. The NC, Rastriya Janashakti Party and Rastriya Prajatantra Parties can be cited as examples. Other parties, such as CPN-ML and NSP have also developed a tendency to split than compromise.

Similarly, recruitment of powerful business persons who do not agree on party ideology can threaten party platform when their pecuniary interests are compromised. Four traits have marred the internal development of Nepal's political parties: primacy of gerontocracy, hereditary and familial succession of leadership, clientalist networks and a lack of sound think tanks to update vision and policies as per the spirit of age. These are the clear signs of feudalism as they clock the inclusive character of party building. Lack of systematic record keeping about members and their contribution and prerogative of leaders in the promotion of cadres indicate an *ad hoc* mechanism in the recruitment of political officials in the party, legislature and also in the government. Domination of political parties in Nepal by super caste individuals, father figures and even pathological leaders⁵ has induced the rise of inner-party factionalism, clientalism and even split. Lack of collective institutional culture has created a gap between authoritarian politics and fulfillment of social rights of citizens. It has triggered an electoral danger to the moderate and conservative parties. "Binding orientation of the work of leadership in public and in the political institutions of the country" (Meyer, 2007:20) can enforce their accountability to the cadres and the general public.

c) Interest Aggregation and Articulation: The electoral outcome and general party performance in public life are largely determined by the capacity of political parties to represent diverse citizens, provide negotiated policy choices for public goods and gain sound skills to govern. Party platforms socialize the citizens with ideology, mobilize, articulate, communicate and mediate the demands of

⁵ When political leaders act in dysfunctional ways, the cadres and supporters leave the party out of frustration and disappointment. Noted social scientist Prayag Raj Sharma argues, "Party leaders in Nepal are aging patricians who are in leadership positions just by virtue of their age and seniority in party ranks, rather than on account of their energy, drive and commitment to the politics demanded by the hour" (2008:156).

citizens, nurture political leadership and transmit the outcome of state policy back to them for support. The capacity of Nepalese political parties to perform these functions during the elections is high. But, there is a tenuous link between these functions and policy outcome. Unstructured, anomic and hostile political engagement (especially of armed groups) and low institutionalization mark the limitation of the political system to address the demands of society and bring diverse forces into democratic competition. The most serious problem of Nepalese political parties is the deficiency of channels for peaceful political expression. This has made Nepalese politics aspiration-fuelled, confrontational and violent prone. As a result, it has undermined the prospect for governmental stability.

Decline of old parties, especially NC, CPN-UML, RPPs etc is caused by the high mobilization and high participation of citizens in the political process and low institutional capacity of these political parties to absorb the newly mobilized social groups. Growth of regional parties like Sadbhavana Party, MJAF and TMLP is mainly attributed to the inability of central leadership of old parties to understand the emerging social dynamics unleashed by their own right-based distributional struggles and social movements for power, resource and identity. These new parties are not without self-ironies as Backward Caste Groups are seeking justice while Tharus are demanding legitimate space for them. The social movements are being heard in political articulation and are expected to transform CPN (Maoist) from class-based militarized entity to mass-based political party in the future.

The organizational transformation from armed rebels to peaceful politicians, according to Kovacs, depends on the rebel group's internal cohesion during the peace process; its level of popular support among the population at large at the time of the transition and the amount of legitimacy that the international community is willing to grant" (2007:8). The latter two conditions already exist in Nepal's case but the first is creating tension between two factions of CPN (Maoist) on democratic republic versus People's Republic. It has already integrated gender, Dalits, ethnic, Madhesis and indigenous groups and territoriality into class politics in a catch-all party style but it has evoked a fear among the moderates and conservatives about the possibility of "transformation of democracy into semi-anarchic regime which will bring about the disintegration of the state" (Bobbio, 2002:298). It has to overcome the tendency to occupy all spaces—position, opposition and rebellion—and leaving others in tatters. The culture of respecting electoral space of parties can open the possibility of adjustment of all including those potential and left out parties.

d) Inclusion of Marginalized Groups: The internal structure of political party decides who should participate and who are excluded. The larger circle of inclusion in the party can garner the higher degree of legitimacy, deliberation and rational action. The Constituent Assembly election has provided five groups of people—women, ethnic and indigenous groups, Dalits, Madhesis and people of backward region—an opportunity to strengthen their social representation in political power. They are now demanding inclusion in the decision-making committees of political parties to rectify the imbalance in political representation. But, the educational, economic and institutional preconditions to sustain this bloated political class are weak. There is poor boundary maintenance between interest groups, such as NGOs, civil society, business chambers, etc and political parties. Weak social, gender and inter-generational representation in the district and central committee of old parties have propelled various new social groups to veer around radical parties or form new groups, associations and movements. In fact, the system of proportional representation in Nepal has expanded the growth of multiplicity of parties but many of them do not seem viable to sustain the interest of their supporters.

e) Mediation of Local Interests: A participatory democracy can only be built from the bottom up. The degree of openness of a party to society increases the level of political attachments of diverse members and supporters and augments their stake in its survival, maintenance and consolidation in the life-world of citizens. Inner party democracy motivates the party cadres to strengthen their

relationships in society through party networks, auxiliary organizations, civil society and professional groups and allow them to exert influence on the central and district committees of parties. Principles of subsidiarity makes leadership selection representative, fair and effective and transformation of authoritarian leader-party into mass-based parties becomes possible (Meyer, 2007). National conventions of parties provide opportunities for each individual member to contribute to forming the political will of political parties, observe the organizational dynamism and debate about new needs, policies and programs. A semblance of inner-party democracy in Nepal has enabled the articulation of voice and visibility of politically committed citizens within the party for reforms and restructuring and bridge the gap between the party leadership and its district and local level party functionaries. The absence of inner party democracy easily fosters cult of personality, patronage and conflict and tears the political public sphere donned by human rights and democracy. Democratic ends cannot be met by undemocratic application of means (Dahal, 2008:4).

f) Political Communication: Nepal has already enacted right to information act. The protection of this right, however, requires an agency. This legislation promises to create an open and transparent society. But, some important considerations have to be addressed. First, how the government treats the media institutions and journalists strongly affects the development of news media and the quantity of news. Second, the implementation of this Act largely rests on the change of public service structure that until recently barred the disclosure of information by a subordinate without the prior approval of a superior. Therefore, unless the receivers and providers of information are familiarized about this Act it will be difficult to transform the existing political culture of maintaining confidentiality and secrecy of information.

In a conflict-torn state like Nepal conflict sensitivity of the news is equally crucial to foster social trust, reconciliation and peace. The core problem of Nepalese political parties is how to communicate properly and use media for the democratization of society and public sphere. Party-controlled media, like those controlled by business tycoons, only fosters conformism, sales of rhetoric, image or anti-image projection of leaders and thought-control as there is one-way communication without feedback. This has weakened the voice of opposition within the party who want to introduce reform measures to modernize party structures. A code of media ethics must be enforced so that those controlling the media within the party do not silence the voice of conscience and upset democratic equilibrium in the party. If public opinion is completely monopolized by the media, political leaders cannot become the living voice of the electorate (Kyogoku, 1993:199). Democratic media, therefore, must enthuse in the leaders the ethics of responsibility, the "idea that politicians had to assume responsibility for the consequences of the causes and goals they advocated, whether these consequences were intended or not" (Almond, 2002:67).

Modernization of Internal Party Structures

The defense of internal party democracy is strongly associated with the need of organizational practices of political parties to realize the expectations of their members, supporters and the general public for better inclusion, transparency and accountability. Nepalese parties are normally organized around national, regional, district and local levels. But, they are not properly institutionalized. As a result, decision-making regarding the nomination of candidates and public policy is highly contested. Personalized authoritarianism has dominated both input and output functions of political parties. The ancillary institutions are organized around the main party line and, therefore, suffer from a lack of "autonomy" to aggregate the diverse interests of society.

Politics in Nepal is, therefore, highly columnarized along party lines and decision-making is done by the center without much consultation with lower levels. This has made every decision controversial. Only during the national convention policy questions are debated. But, the resolutions are passed hurriedly without much understanding. As a result, the intermediary and subsidiary forces of social movement is struggling to break these patrimonial structures and seeking decision-making along horizontal and decentralized line. Sister organizations of various political parties of Nepal, such

as women, students, teachers, trade unions, etc have the propensity for cooperative action on major issues affecting them. But, youths, Dalits, Janajatis, Aadibasis and trade unions are especially facing a tension with their mother parties as they feel the need to forge solidarity on a number of public issues with like-minded organizations and garner cross-institutional social capital for effective collective action.

Party Financing

The availability of financial resources in the party is uncertain, opaque and even non-existent (Khatri, 2002). The annual fees are hardly paid by party members. Donation from business persons and party workers, sale of license, extortion, party-based NGOs, donors, privatization of public property and rent-seeking through the promotion of officials are the main sources of party financing. Political parties also sell the posts to rich persons for the sake of funding elections and party campaigns who may not accept party ideology and principles. Many times such acts have provoked reactions from the loyal cadres and caused defection. Similarly, local party elites have also tendency to manipulate membership rolls for their own profits. As election has become costly candidates often trespass the financial ceiling set by the Election Commission. Similarly, auditing of the party fund has been ritual affairs. As a result, enforcement of public accountability and transparency has become difficult.

Conclusion

Inner party democracy helps to democratize the functions of leadership and party structure. It is, therefore, considered as a vital precondition of a functioning democracy. In transitional democracies like Nepal, a broader political environment in which political parties are formed lack sufficient institutionalization and, therefore, suffers from weak transparent and accountable regulatory mechanisms and leadership styles. The terminal gap between preaching and practice has disillusioned the voters about party leaders' rise to governmental power, created credibility gap and shifting loyalty of cadres and voters from one political party to another at a mass scale. This has made political sphere highly unstable and conflict-prone and negotiation of a legitimate social contract difficult.

One cross-party conflict resolution mechanism is needed to avoid split and enforce party laws; institutionalization of specialized committees in the parties is another area; and organization of regular dialogue on public issues including civil-military relations is still another area for policy attention. The irony of Nepali politics, however, is this: despite vibrant press and civil society, democratic consolidation of public institutions is low. This may be attributed to the deinstitutionalization⁶ of political parties and institutionalization of patrimonial culture in the state and public sectors. This system favors those officials who are in power, well-known and can use the resources of their office for the expansion of their political constituencies. Too much party-mindedness must not be allowed as it saps the people's spiritual and creative energies for moderation, reconciliation and peace.

Civic education based on enlightenment values and principles is essential to expose the supporters and cadres of party to deliberation, shared understanding, compromise and consensus and reduce the element of militarization of society. Only cultivated citizens are capable of active participation in democratic politics and make leaders accountable for their actions. There has been hardly any study on the impact of political party deficiencies on democracy in Nepal. The debate on internal-party democracy informs the existing challenges the Nepalese political parties are facing in fostering civic culture and the support they require from the international community in becoming civic-minded, open, inclusive and effective representative organizations of society.

⁶ According to Robert A. Scalapino "Political institutionalization is a process whereby a political structure is made operational in accordance with stipulated rules and procedures, enabling regularized, hence predictable, patterns of political behavior, minimal trauma in power transfer, and a foundation for the effective development of policies as well as application of justice." According to him "successful political institutionalization enables a movement away from the high dependence on personalized rule and also makes orderly, evolutionary change possible" (1986:1).

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