

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Party Functioning in Nepal

A Proposal for the Engagement of Party Members

Dev Raj Dahal, Head, FES Nepal Office

Introduction

The Nepalese political parties have played a historical role in democratic change, linked the closed society to public sphere, established civic and human rights, created constitutional state and initiated structural change of the state, polity, economy and society. Political modernization in Nepal has become possible because of the establishment of political parties imbued with various roles—political mobilization, mediation of power, political education, recruitment of representative leadership, aggregation and articulation of public interest and communication between the political system and citizens. The Nepalese parties have demonstrated courage and capacity for political change. But, the continued political instability so far indicates that they lack the necessary vision, skill and ability to govern, institutionalize and consolidate the democratic process, seek institutional stability and cope with the development challenges. Motivation of young leaders for party reforms is expected to democratize values, procedures, institutions and political culture and bear the prospects for accountable and transparent functioning of parties. Democratization of inner life of parties is the promising way to embrace a culture of inclusion, listening, deliberation and negotiation and a way out of the abyss of multi-layered conflicts in Nepal. It also democratizes the state through the negotiation of a post-conflict social contract, a workable constitution among diverse social and political groups by the elected Constituent Assembly (CA) and which provides the basis for the authority and legitimacy of the government. Key challenges for democratization of political parties in Nepal can be subsumed under the ideological and policy platform, party law in Nepal, areas requiring reforms and conclusion.

Ideological and Policy Platform

Human beings are held together by common values, mutual trust, worldview and beliefs encapsulated into an ideology about the general and particular goals. Ideology reduces the cost of cooperation, increases solidarity and connects individual members to organizational goals. *Nepal's endorsement of all the generations of human rights* brings the state closer to **social democracy** despite the diverse orientation of parties, such as conservative, nationalist, liberal or neo-liberal, social democratic, Marxist, Marxist-Leninist and even Marxist-Leninist-Maoist.

The left parties' acceptance to pluralistic politics, human rights, free press, independent judiciary and free and fair elections marks a new transformation of Nepalese politics. Interim constitution of Nepal has enlarged the concept of rights from civic and political to social, economic, cultural and ecological including right to work, education, health and social justice. The resolution of the problems of *gender, social and inter-generational injustice in the nation too requires a strong dose of social justice*, social programs and social transformation through a "common development concept" articulated in the peace accord. This is the way to make poor and dispossessed stakeholders of political system. What is still unsettled is how to establish *social justice*—through fair and equitable distribution of income, assigning more rights and duties to the marginalized or creating suitable opportunities, or taxing the well off more to subsidize the poor? The Nepalese parties do not disagree on the goal of *social justice* articulated in the principles of welfare state. The only question is: how far, how fast and how.

The *ideological and program contents of party schools are important for their democratic credential and socialization of cadres and citizens* to a more inclusive democratic political culture. A healthy start of political life in Nepal requires civic education as it does encourage critical thinking and values of democracy, peace and dignity so essential for the transformation of societies into a rationalistic and humanistic culture. Otherwise, politics becomes only theatrical which provides

entertainment for the short-run but remains devoid of substantive meaning for the life and hope of majority of Nepalese citizens. How do children and adult know their status have been *transformed from people to citizens if political education* of parties does not play critical role in this? Obviously, *democratic ethics is shaped in the domain of education, communication, socialization and moralization of citizens and leaders*. The enactment of Right to Information promises freedom, and transparency and access of public in decision making pertaining to public affairs.

The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) threat of revolt versus structural reforms and democratic republic versus federal democratic People's Republic cobbled together the centrist, liberal, soft left and even conservative parties to join hands despite dissimilar strategies, images, histories and identities. Its entry into April 2006 movement, peace agreement, power-sharing arrangement, participation in CA election and subsequent formation of government and its commitment to peace and new constitution indicate that it will steadily reform itself within the parameter of ideological impulse of "unity, struggle and transformation." The current ideological and strategic debate in the Central Committee indicates a trend toward self-refinement through critical internal deliberation and exposure of contents not only to cadres but also to the ordinary public. It has prepared a code of conduct for leaders.¹ Like CPN-UML it has now accepted a shift from centralized to "collective leadership" to share power at the centre and the periphery to satisfy cadres before the national convention on January 29, 2010 to be held after 18 years.

Its emphasis on "civilian supremacy," people-oriented republic, federalism, blending of class with ethnicity, caste, gender and territoriality and indigenization of economic policy towards industrial capitalism, cooperatives and private-public mix indicate that it will continue to seek "structural change." It will have implications for the transformation of its wartime structure and political culture towards more democratization and reduction of non-democratic challenge to political power. The cooperation of its trade unions, students unions, women's groups and several civil society bodies with corresponding groups from other parties provides "social learning" both to autonomize ancillary organizations and democratize the party apparatuses espousing universal professional ethics. To maintain and consolidate its recently gained clout in CA elections it will likely to restructure the party into mass-based, catch-all type than exclusively ideological ones as the latter tends to minimize future electoral prospect.

The recent election for the position of Nepali Congress (NC) parliamentary party is a major step towards the democratization of party structure. In an effort to address the long-standing grievances of its rank and file, the NC's special Committee to Suggest on Statute Amendment, has prepared a draft amendment to make the party structures more democratic by promoting the inclusion of minority, excluded groups, include the number of elected members in various levels of committees, increase the number of representation from sister organizations at the general councils, reserve certain quota for public relation offices in foreign countries and adjust its structures attuned with country's adoption of federalism. The 12th general convention of the party on March 10-14, 2010 will adjust these suggestions emerged out of extensive deliberation in all the 75 districts and beef up a culture of inner-party democracy.

The CPN (UML)'s critical debates on party lines about organizational freedom versus political freedom and subsequently several lines of ideological arguments have been encapsulated in People's Multiparty Democracy, its reinterpretation and renewal. It has also opened debates on national policy questions and strengthened the organizational structures from the base. The

¹ The code of conduct stipulates: central committee members should not demand responsibilities citing personal interest, they should behave like professional revolutionaries, no central committee member should be involved with NGOs or INGOs, they should not be involved in graft, smuggling or extortion, they should not rent an apartment away from their working area, all the properties of the members should be provided to the party, no central committee member should admit their children abroad or in private or boarding schools and central office bearers should take part in physical labor for a day in every two months while the CC members should take part once a month.

inclusionary and critical debates, however, became sharpened following its seventh national convention and culminated in the 8th but it suffered from "epidemics of groupism." Demand for inner party democracy is liberalizing it. But, it is generating contradiction over the gap between party name, goals and institutional behavior along middle path of political spectrum. Newly emerged regional parties, such as Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (MJAF), MJAF (Democratic), Tarai-Madhesh Loktantrik Party (TMLP), Sadbhavana Party and a host of ideological, single issue and personality-oriented parties do share their ideological platform with the mainstream ideologies and parties, despite cross-cutting cleavages on a number of issues such as policy sovereignty, federalism, Hindi language for Tarai, land reforms, model of state, electoral system and system of representation. Collective unawareness to these issues is staggering and they have wider implications for party building from bottom-up.

Party Law in Nepal

The Interim Constitution (IC) prohibits the banning of political parties except in cases they jeopardize Nepal's sovereignty, foment violence and conflict between caste, ethnic and religious groups or act against public morality or its laws contravening the constitution. In order to get recognition political parties have to be registered with the Election Commission (EC). But, they must fulfill several conditions: the statute and regulations of parties must be democratic, hold election of its all authorities in every five years, various levels of party committees should be manned by women, Dalit and marginalized groups and formulate adequate provisions in the party statute to discipline members. The EC can reject the registration of party if the latter discriminates its membership of individuals on the basis of religion, caste, language and ethnicity, crafts its name, objectives, symbol or flag to undermine religious and communal unity, disintegrates the nation or prepares their statutes on the basis of non-party or one party system. The provisions of the IC stipulate that 10,000 voters name should be submitted to the EC for the registration of parties. But, it does not apply to those which have representation in the legislature. The implementation of these provisions, however, requires strong "national integrity system" including finance and the autonomy of EC from party politics.

Areas Requiring Reforms

Congruence between Constitutional Vision and Party Manifesto

Congruity of party programs with the spirit of constitution fosters a culture of consensus and prevents polarization both at the national and party level and thwarts extra-constitutional and anti-systemic tendencies. There is a need to enthuse in the party a listening culture—listening to the voices of local cadres of parties, ordinary supporters and even broad mass who can become potential supporters in the future. Civil society institutions should provide alternative ideas and autonomous leaders who can speak out against the unconscionable behavior of incumbent elites.

Minimize Extra-Party, Extra-Parliamentary and Extra-Constitutional Political Participation

The power-centric approach of mainstream leaders devoid of democratic culture has fostered the role of non-political, anti-political and armed non-state actors. Imposition of election candidates from above has bred not only factionalism but also bureaucratic tendency among leaders. The selection of candidates by local party committees by majority is central to make it transparent and exercise the constitutional right to information. Political participation through extra—political channels such as civil society, media, professional groups, primordial associations and non-state actors is growing. In contrast, open communication between the party and society has been reduced to elections, social movements and agitation. The old ways of one leader and many cadres communication has shifted to many leaders and many cadres communication. This old style that served the party well in a vertical chain through "narrow elite base" is now fiercely contested by horizontal series of groups. Nepalese parties are seeking to reform themselves from "group-enclosed" nature to open, transparent and

responsive institutions as they move into the future. This is important to increase party's internal ability for competition and politicization of the people into civic culture.

Maximize Social Responsiveness and Accountability

In NC 50 percent of central committee (CC) and other party committees of various hierarchies are nominated by the party president so far. The executive committee does not have any decision making rights in the NC. The president has veto power. The local party committees are only the command receiving subordinate bodies. Its Mahasamiti meeting in November 2009 has, however, endorsed a provision to elect 75 percent members in the 85-member CC. Now, the president can nominate only 21 members from among women, Dalits, indigenous groups, Madhesi and Muslim communities. The party president can appoint three office bearers-vice president and two joint general secretaries with the approval of CC. The new statute also ensured election of 14 central members from each zone. In CPN-UML only 5 percent elected convention members are nominated by CC. The elected CC can nominate 15 percent of the elected members. The CC also nominates some members of zonal committee. District committee, electoral constituency coordination committee and Ilaka committee have to get approval of its decisions from super ordinate committees. All the vacant seats are filled as per the direction from above. The formation of party committee is associated with leadership selection. The level of mutual respect requires a sense of equality between leaders and cadres.

The UCPN (Maoist) and newly emerged parties are struggling to democratize party structures and various committees in a more inclusive way. Inner-party democracy strengthens the responsiveness of parties towards "functional groups" in society, enables the party organization to become flexible for cooperation with actors from diverse civil society and prevents them from becoming exclusively authoritarian, government-oriented and statist. In normative terms, intra-party democracy is essential for the acceptance of ideology, civic and moral renewal of organization, policy and personnel choices as well as to tie the parties with the lives and hopes of each generation of citizens. The inner party democracy also does one symbolic duty as it increases international legitimacy of parties.

Increase Representation of Social Diversity

Iner-party democracy beefs up the internal coherence between leaders and cadres, dynamism and deliberation of party rank and file and minimizes the degree of factionalism, conflict and split that often threatens the very identity of party. Social representation of diversity in the party structures enables them to capture the diverse space of society, deepens party's organizational roots and fosters both social integration among various people in equal terms and system integration with the institutions of governance. This is important to override all sub-national loyalties to the loyalty to national polity and people can find a sense of justice in democracy and its infrastructures, such as political parties and civil society. The stake for the democratization of Nepalese parties is growing higher with the mobilization of consciousness of people by primordial traditional groups and rational civil society and offering alternative channels for aggregation, articulation and communication of public interests.

Balance between Political Institutionalization and Participation

In Nepal, the stake for the democratization of the internal life of parties has never been so high now than in the comparable period of the nation's history. Mass mobilization of people and the rise of the level of mass consciousness following Constituent Assembly (CA) elections are challenging both hereditary, traditional bureaucratic and gerentocratic privileges of leaders for elected, young, rational and dynamic ones. There is a need for the parties to expand the institutional domain to absorb newly mobilized social groups and prevent *political decay caused by high participation and low institutionalization of political process*. Voice for inclusion and more democracy is becoming louder and louder in the rank and file of political workers as they also demand the principle of *subsidiarity* in leadership selection and recruitment of party officials from the diverse life of society. Democracy

entails participation and shared responsibility, not exclusive dependence of citizens on leader to solve their entire problems.

Politics of Negotiation and Compromise, Not Negation and Confrontation

The Nepalese political parties need to abolish the *politics of negation* in favor of *negotiation* and avoid personal attacks to sideline issues that turn citizens' attention away from real challenges to their life, liberty and property. It presupposes the role of civil society and media in communicating common ground, connecting political parties and formulating realistic agenda for consensus on common issues. They should also help leaders overcome their attitude anaesthetized by media entertainment. The party conventions should provide them sufficient opportunity for discussion on basic issues such as public security, food, health, education, sanitation, irrigation, management of local resources, etc of local importance so that trusts of grassroots people will increase for the district and central party leaders. The politics of negation should be applied to the corrupt, criminal, authoritarian and anti-social elements seeking to capture party leadership through undemocratic means.

Equilibrium between Individual Rights, Group Rights and Human Rights

Recently, in Nepal, too-much party-mindedness stimulated the people to fight for group rights than exclusively individual freedom. The CA has increased the representation of five groups of people—Dalits, ethnic groups and indigenous people, Madhesis, women and backward regions. For many of these groups, agitations have become a convenient tool to be heard and heeded to and break group-enclosed leadership culture and excessive party mindedness. This has made difficult to de-link politics from violence and strategy to liberate the oppressed through reformist measures. The Interim Constitution has expanded social rights of people including cultural and language rights beyond the capacity of the state to fulfill them. All communities must have the right to express their identity, so the new constitution will be obliged to guarantee them. But the division of political power along ethnic lines is a risky strategy for conflict-resolution as modern *politics is rooted in ideology rather than biology*. It is relatively easy to resolve ideological and interest-based conflict through understanding and negotiation but ethnic conflict has the propensity to become emotionally charged which negates the existence of the other and respect other's legitimate interests. The direct violence and recent ethnic and political agitation have been causing economic paralysis and constraining the nation's move towards a stable democracy that can deliver development and peace.

Mechanism of Conflict Resolution

All the major parties of Nepal are suffering from internal frictions due to a manifest gap between their ideologies and the reality of performance. They are also encountering the post-conflict challenges from new parties such as Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (MJAF), MJAF (Democratic), Tarai-Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP), Sadbhavana Party, civil society, media, distributional social movement and 109 non-state armed actors. Political leaders must acknowledge the problems of society, find common ground and democratize further by opening the parties to diverse perspectives of society for deliberation, synthesize the contesting vision clearly into a national framework and negotiate a new social contract, a workable constitution as soon as possible. Communication at various levels of leadership, culture of deliberation in committees, management of dissenting voice, evaluation of cadres and leaders and rebuilding broken relationship are essential to mitigate conflict. Otherwise, the politicization of ethnicity, caste, class and territoriality will weaken the parties, inspire the leaders to unprincipled competition than certain degree of consensus and suffer from *fundamentalist gap*, polarization and deadlock. In the party rank and file it is essential to address genuine demands, capture the resilience of Nepali society, foster the unity and harmony between groups and promote system's capacity to adapt to the demands of "public opinion." An inter-party conflict resolution mechanism is, therefore, needed to confine the parties to "political sphere" of policy and law-making with the desire of supporting citizens' initiatives and steer the country in a clear constitutional direction.

Incubation of Civic Culture

Factionalism, split, leader for life, dominance of hereditary elements, social and gender bias and vertical patron-client relationship characterize the political culture of Nepalese political parties. The *generational and gender gap* in the leadership especially of second and third generation failed to attract the aspiration and commitment of youth in the party. The remedy is the decentralization of structural set up of parties to expand the social base of parties and make leadership selection inclusive. Similarly, there is also a need for the party to look for leaders who can *inspire vision and sustainable change* than the father figures (patriarch) who fear change including the change of leadership. The coming battles among the factions of various parties' for leadership will inspire *democratic selection of leaders in the future through electoral means than charisma and tradition*.

Conclusion

Democratization of political parties can offer old parties an opportunity to renew beyond the patchwork of elite consensus for cooptation and cohabitation and encourage members to participate actively both inside and outside the party platforms where open discussion takes place about political affairs. Nowadays, problem of inner party democracy has been intensely debated in Nepal. Different perspectives—conservation, reform, radical change and reaction—are competing for factional primacy. This has stimulated Nepal's political dynamics but it has also made Nepali politics rhetorical and unstable. Injection of diverse groups of society in the various committees of these parties is expected to inspire innovation, creativity and dynamism for popular mobilization and garner the legitimacy of rule. This minimizes friction, strengthens the electoral synergy and support constructive negotiation and compromise.

Points to Ponder

- How is it possible to open the Nepalese political parties to new ideas and engage youth, women and marginalized groups in their decision-making committees?
- What are the institutional incentives for political parties to build consensus among them for addressing major public issues of governance and development?
- How can international community help political parties to foster a culture of compromise necessary for democracy consolidation?