

Himalayan Journal of Development and Democracy, Vol.2, No. 2, 2007

Political Structure and Democracy

Pursuing democracy: explaining political transitions in Nepal

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Nepal has been struggling to consolidate democracy for more than a half century. The 1950 Revolution, led by the Nepali Congress party, ousted the Rana oligarchy and bestowed sovereignty in the hands of Nepali citizens for the first time in the country's history. Political parties succeeded in bringing down the centuries-old feudal regime, but after a decade, they proved unable to manage and consolidate democracy. Failure to institute democratic practices and the pursuit of narrow party interests reduced the people's faith in democracy, creating an opportunity for a return to an autocratic monarchic (Panchayat) system in 1960. It took 30 years for the public to regain faith in the party system, culminating in the ouster of the Panchayat system in 1990. However, a consolidated democratic system proved to be elusive once again. What was unleashed, instead, was one of the most destructive forces in Nepali history. The Maoist peoples' war, launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist), has taken the lives of roughly 13,000 Nepalis. Meanwhile, the dysfunctional post-1990 political system paved the way for a comeback of autocracy in February 2005. This proved to be short-lived, though, as all of the major parties, including the Maoists, came together to force King Gyanendra out of power in April 2006. Several patterns can be observed from the modern political history of Nepal, but two deserve special attention.

First, political parties have been quite successful in bringing down autocratic regimes in Nepal, but only when all of the major parties work together for a common goal. A single party has never been able to topple an autocracy on its own. Mass participation was also critical in bringing down autocratic regimes in 1950, 1990, and 2006, and occurred only after the unison of the major political parties. What are the linkages between civil society and the party system that explain success in ousting autocratic regimes?

Second, although successful in toppling autocratic monarchies, political parties have yet failed to institutionalize democracy. What have

been the critical variables missing from past experiments with democracy in Nepal?

By offering some initial answers to these questions, this paper has three purposes. First, we draw upon the literature on social movements and protest cycles to explain the causes of mass participation in revolutionary movements. Second, we apply the insights of New Institutionalism to explain the failure of past experiments with democracy. Finally, we assess current prospects for democratic consolidation in Nepal.