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SN1101E – CA: Essay

III.1 Democracy is ill-suited to a small, poor and land-locked country like Nepal. Take a stand, for or against, this statement and argue robustly to prove your point.

Introduction

Democracy has been the trend where its system of governance that includes and appreciates active citizen participation¹ is seen as attractive and sustaining. However, countries have had varying degrees of success in adopting it, stalled by factors both natural and man-made.

The question focuses on Nepal, implying that democracy poorly fits countries that have limited land, poverty and is dependent on its neighbours. I argue that these reasons are weak and that the 'suited-ness' of democracy hinges instead on other pressing issues.

This essay will vigorously dispute the notions set and show more relevant issues that truly challenge the adoption of democracy. As South Asia's adaptation of democracy is different from other regions², I would mainly be using evidence from Nepal, the question's focus country, to support my arguments.

Size

Synthesizing Dahl's (1973) idea that 'city states should be small enough that everyone knew each other in order to foster participation in decision making process'³; and that this leads to greater interest and knowledge which in turn results in quality informed participation (Carole, 1970)⁴, we see the direct impact size has on democracy. However, most countries, like Nepal, already have the required density. Nepal is a country with 143,181km² of land supporting 28.9 million people⁵. This point to an average population density of 201.8 people/km². It is arguable that there would be uneven areas of density but when a country's democratic conditions is considered on the whole, the average density points that there is

¹ David N. Gellner & Krishna Hachhethu, *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocessors of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2008), p. 14.

² SDSA Team, *State of Democracy in South Asia – A Report* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

³ Robert A. Dahl and Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (California: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 5.

⁴ Pateman Carole, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.32.

⁵ United States. Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook 2008* (Washington DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2008), pp.441-444.

sufficient⁶ contact in Nepal to create the participative society that democracy requires. Thus, size is not a factor statistically.

Continuing Dahl's ideas, size in terms of population is also key. However, there is sufficient people, in the case of Nepal, to create credible consensus for democracy. Nepal's population has the capacity to raise 2 military factions (RNA vs. Maoists) and incubates numerous political parties (20 in 1991). It has the population size, contact and the consensus to rise to democracy. Although its population may be small compared to its large immediate neighbours (India and China), Nepal's desire and drive more than compensates for it. The current conflict can be said to be a manifestation of a political landscape that is too vibrant for its own good, but vibrant nevertheless.

Therefore, using size to denounce the ability to adopt democracy is short-sighted especially in Nepal's case.

Poverty

The second excuse echoes the words of Seymour (1959). He asserted that economic stability is a required step before democratization as it is important that people's basic needs are first met before they can have the capacity for democracy⁷. The reason is that poverty is considered a node in the vicious cycle of being both the cause and effect of political turmoil⁸. I would first argue that poverty may not necessarily end in such stereotypical results. Poor countries like India, Botswana, Mauritius have defied such theories⁹. Seymour himself changed this prerequisite to that of an 'encouraging factor' in 1994¹⁰. Thus, democracy cannot be said to be ill-suited due solely to economic instability.

⁶ Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, pp.5-29.

⁷ Lipset Seymour, 'Some Social Requisites Of Democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy', *The American Political Science Review*, 53 (1959), pp. 69-105.

⁸ Bishnu Raj Upreti, *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal* (New Delhi: Adriot Publishers, 2005), p. 27.

⁹ Dirk Berg – Schlosser and Norbet Kersting, *Poverty and Democracy*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2003), p. 1.

¹⁰ Lipset Seymour, 'The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited', *American Sociological Review*, 59, 3 (1994), pp. 1-22.

Furthermore, poverty can actually be a better ground for democracy to start from. Dirk Berg (2003) has noted that 'democracies in poor countries often exhibit better conditions both for fighting hunger and poverty, and for longer term economic development'¹¹. While one might believe that this is a general assertion, I argue that it is directly applicable to Nepal. Seddon (1987) stressed that people from poorer areas of Nepal (Kathmandu Valley, Terai) have been more politically active. This is due to greater dissatisfaction that causes greater 'willingness to act collectively'¹². Thus, Nepal's poverty is not an obstacle but rather a catalyst for democracy.

The third area of poverty would be its link to literacy. Poverty is usually seen as a hindrance to literacy resulting in an obstacle to democracy. At 48.6%¹³, the literacy rate in Nepal is not encouraging. As a key IDEA concept states that 'political education is crucial for a successful democracy'¹⁴, it is of no surprise that dissenters against Nepal's adoption of democracy would cite literacy as a key reason. I argue otherwise.

Firstly, the founders and many members of the core political parties are well educated. As political suppression forced many Nepalese into exile, a number of them took up education in Indian universities. Influenced by western political ideas, they founded the core political parties (CPN, NCP).¹⁵ Thus, the issue of literacy does not largely apply to the political parties.

Secondly, even though the general public may lack literacy, their voting patterns are impressively matured. In the 1991 elections, the Nepalese set a clear vote, even in face of a great number of parties, to avoid stalemates in the parliament. This continued in 1994.

While the electorate can be criticized for voting CPN into power when communism was on

¹¹ Dirk Berg – Schlosser and Norbet Kersting, *Poverty and Democracy*, p. 1.

¹² David Seddon, *Nepal: A State of Poverty* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd (1987), pp. 216-217.

¹³ United Nations Development Programme, "2007/2008 Human Development Report".

http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_NPL.html Last accessed: 14 Sep 09.

¹⁴ Gellner & Hachethu, *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocessors of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Karl-Heinz Kraemer, "Lecture presented at the South Asia Seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 19, 1999 - Democratization and political parties in Nepal", http://www.nepalresearch.org/publications/harvard_9903.htm Last accessed: 27 Sep 09.

the wane, one must remember that CPN had presented themselves as social-democratic rather than communist. It 'declared its support to constitutional monarchy, multiparty system, parliamentarianism and even a free market economy'¹⁶. The electorate has shown political consciousness even in lieu of inadequate literacy. This supports my view that poverty and low literacy does not entirely cause democracy to be ill-suited.

Lastly, I propose that democracy is actually the solution to poverty. Gangopadhyay (2003) recognized that 'democratisation helps to allocate economic resources better by serving the interests of the majority of voters'¹⁷ especially in South Asia.

In conclusion, I reject that poverty is a hurdle but rather catalyst to democracy which can in turn provide a solution.

Land Locked

The most glaring weakness of a land locked country is its lack of access to the sea which heavily undermines its trading ability. This impedes economic growth and causes reliance on the country's immediate neighbours. Nepal is heavily dependent on India for both trade and for its goods to pass through in order to access world markets. Due to this, Faye (2004) stated that India plays a large role in Nepal's development¹⁸. However, Nepalese are highly against Indian 'imperialist'¹⁹ influence. Unlike Bhutan, where India is allowed to be influential in its foreign policies, Nepal's treaty with India (1950) caused a great upheaval. It is of no surprise that India does not believe in a 'people's government' in Nepal and does not lend its full support in Nepal's development. Thus, it can be said that the land locked countries face inevitable neighbourly pressures that may hamper development.

¹⁶ Karl-Heinz Kraemer, "Lecture presented at the South Asia Seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 19, 1999 - Democratization and political parties in Nepal".

¹⁷ Partha Gangopadhyay, 'Liberalisation, Democratisation and the Distribution of Urban Local Public Goods' in Manas Chatterji and B.M. Jain (ed.) *Conflict and Peace in South Asia* (Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 57.

¹⁸ Michael L. Faye, et al, 'The Challenges Facing Landlocked Developing Countries' in Taylor & Francis (ed.) *Journal of Human Development* (Oxford: Routledge Publishing, 2004), p. 31-66.

¹⁹ Bishnu Raj Upreti, *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal* p. 46.

Furthermore, Nepalese fleeing the Rana rule²⁰ have mostly gone to India resulting in Nepal losing large numbers of educated upper caste citizens²¹. It is possible that the brain drain can be lethal in Nepal's march to democracy. However, I argue this migration has caused India to be the origin of Nepal's democratic movement instead. The leaders of early political parties (NCP, CPN) were influenced in their education, forming their parties in India²² as they were politically suppressed in Nepal. The CPN in later years, found refuge in India to rebuild its political, and later, military efforts as it gained support of Indian leftist parties²³. Thus, the diffusion of political ideas across land borders has actually ignited a country's road to democracy.

In India's resentment towards Nepal, I argue that this is caused more by Nepal's unstable government rather than its unpopularity with the Nepalese. India does not know if any treaty would last, thus seeing 'the army as its truest friend'²⁴. This characteristic is predominant for foreign countries that do not trust the democratic process of a developing nation. While India is certainly a current barrier for democracy, a stable political leadership would encourage India to support Nepal's development and its quest for democracy.

As such, the land locked characteristic together with poverty and size is not the root of the problem. Rather, political instability is the main hindrance. This is caused by more pressing issues that would now be discussed.

²⁰ Bhuwan Chandra Upreti, 'Dealing with Maoists: Nepal's Experience with Peace Negotiations', pp. 225.

²¹ Dhruva Kumar, 'What Ails Democracy in Nepal?' in Dhruva Kumar (ed.) *Domestic Conflict & Crisis of Governability in Nepal* (Nepal: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, 2000), p. 17.

²² Michael Hutt, 'Monarchy, Democracy and Maoism in Nepal' in Michael Hutt (ed.) *Himalayan 'People's War' Nepal's Maoist Rebellion* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), p. 3.

²³ Bishnu Raj Upreti, *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal* p. 45.

²⁴ The Economist, "Two armies into one won't go", http://www.economist.com/opinion/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=13610863 Last accessed: 15 Jul 09.

Quality of Leadership

The crux of political instability under democracy, especially in Nepal, is the lack of quality leadership offered by the various political groups rather than the factors offered by the question. The Maoist's successful push for intervention in 2001²⁵ is testament to this. The fragility of the leadership has also caused a loss of confidence from Nepal's own citizens.

The leadership has failed to be inclusive. Political parties see no reason to include citizens in any other state decisions other than elections²⁶. Dhruva Kumar (2008) said that the democratic system has instead produced a governance of 'power, authority, and hegemony or domination... rather than a facilitator of collective interests'²⁷. These factors coupled with social issues of 'rampant poverty, abject destitution, systematic and severe caste discrimination' made Nepal an excellent 'breeding ground for insurgency'²⁸.

It has also managed economic and social challenges²⁹ poorly. The lack of a sustained leadership has caused democracy to fail in delivering the promises of an overall improvement in the standards of living which is crucial in the eyes of voters.

The above two concerns are subsets of the democratic field being dominated by a struggle of power and personal desires³⁰, not that of ideologies nor a sincere desire to bring Nepal to greater heights. Parties have instead been seen to have a 'general tendency to terminate the transition process prematurely so that new institutions are erected alongside old ones, allowing the established elites to retain a good part of their resources and positions.'³¹ This

²⁵ Dhruva Kumar, 'What Ails Democracy in Nepal?', p. 19.

²⁶ Gellner & Hachhethu, *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocessors of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours*, p. 16.

²⁷ Dhruva Kumar, 'Obstacles to Local Leadership and Democracy in Nepal' in David N. Gellner & Krishna Hachhethu (ed.) *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocessors of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2008), p. 25.

²⁸ Bishnu Raj Upreti, *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal*, p. 26.

²⁹ Dhruva Kumar, 'What Ails Democracy in Nepal?', p. 24.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

³¹ Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, 'Distributional Coalitions in Nepal: An Essay on Democratization, Capture, and (Lack of) Confidence' in David N. Gellner & Krishna Hachhethu (ed.) *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocessors of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2008), p. 73.

severely questions the integrity of the democratic system and if it really serves its main role as a people's government for the people.

Poor Conflict Management

Another critical problem is the 'inability to manage political conflict constructively'³². This causes opportunities for state reform to fall into crisis and leaves the delicate political transformation on the tenterhooks. This can be seen in Nepal's inability to fully comprehend and interpret the Maoist insurgency. When studies were organized to understand the Maoist problem in 2006, most reports suggested solution 'through peace talks' and that the Maoist problem is not because of the 'failure of democracy but rather the weaknesses in the state governance system'³³. The negotiating parties and the government did not show flexibility or interest in peace talks with the Maoists and were not sincere in implementing decisions. This caused the Maoist to become highly distrustful of the state and the effectiveness of peace talks³⁴.

Optimists might point to current trends that political parties are colluding and have understood the need for alliances to make a successful political push. However, I stress that such moves are simply temporal. Alliances are short-lived. CPN and the SPA went into an alliance, toppling the king in 2006 even though they were 'diametrically opposite'³⁵ in terms of their objectives. Such alliances succeeded in solving an immediate problem but lasted no further when the monarchy's imposed emergency had been lifted³⁶.

The 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA), which was hailed as 'innovative in nature because of the ideological convergence of all political forces'³⁷, is falling apart. A key agreement was the integration of the Nepalese Army and the Maoists fighters. This is

³² Bishnu Raj Upreti, *Armed Conflict and Peace Process in Nepal*, p. 26.

³³ Ibid, pp. 119-120.

³⁴ Bhuwan Chandra Upreti, 'Dealing with Maoists: Nepal's Experience with Peace Negotiations', pp. 221-222.

³⁵ Lor Raj Baral, 'Nepal: Political Dynamics and Challenges' in Tan Tai Yong (ed.) *Socio - Political and Economic Challenges in South Asia* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2009), p. 72.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 78.

collapsing as the royalist nature of the NA is still not ready to accept the Maoist as part of the military setup. Coupled with recent disagreements over the position of Army chief³⁸, the foundations of the CPA are clearly being shaken at this very moment.

The inability to resolve conflict sustainably is thus a critical stumbling block to the democratic process.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have proven that the given parameters of size, poverty and being land locked are poor excuses to deem democracy ill-suited for a country like Nepal. Instead, more pressing issues such as leadership quality and conflict management will determine a country's ability to become a democratic state.

In examining Nepal, whether King Mahendra's belief that 'multi-party parliamentary democracy was... unsuited to Nepal'³⁹ is true, is yet to be seen as it is in the hands of the political leaders of Nepal to make democracy suited for the nation, where they constantly have been the root hindrance instead.

³⁸ The Economist, "Two armies into one won't go", http://www.economist.com/opinion/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=13610863 Last accessed: 15 Jul 09.

³⁹ Michael Hutt, 'Monarchy, Democracy and Maoism in Nepal', p. 3.

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