



Nepal Speaks Out for Decentralization

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Nepal is a landlocked country with a size of 147'181 square kilometres. It has a population of about 20 million. **More than 80% of its population is rural spreading over diverse topographical zones – high mountains in the north, middle hills and plain area in the south.**

Literacy rate in Nepal is abysmally low and distribution of income is highly skewed and uneven. Its internal resource base is poor and limited. Development plans are heavily dependent upon foreign aid and donations. Nepal is a multicultural society with diverse caste and ethnic groups.

Nepal is a centralist state. In fact, Nepal as a nation-state was formed out of the drive to conquering feudatories and principalities, and establishing a unified and strong state. Prithvi Narayan Shah – the ancestor of the present reigning Monarch – conquered principalities and consolidated them into a state in 1769 A. D.

Following rulers governing the country since its establishment as a unified state did not allow for any diffusion of power. They rather strengthened the grip of central apparatchiks over the affairs of the state.

The history of Nepal of the past two hundred years is thus characterized by a process of state consolidation and power centralization. Some attempts towards relaxation of rigid state control through diffusion of power were carried out only during the sixties and seventies. But they failed owing to the fact that the partyless authoritarian political dispensation allowed no room for realization of democratic freedoms, human rights and accountable governance. The partyless authoritarian policy introduced in 1960 prevailed in the country until 1990. The Nepalese Monarchy occupied centrestage as a source of all power – executive, legislative and judicial. The Monarch governed the country as an absolute ruler. Since the partyless polity was a centralized monocratic system, the initiatives, whatever, towards decentralization resembled a curious mix of restrained deconcentration and cautious delegation of power.



Democratic change

Nepalese people rose against the overly centralized and absolutist regime. As a consequence multiparty democracy was instituted in 1990. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal – fifth Constitution in the history of modern Nepal – which was enacted following the democratic change in 1990 guaranteed fundamental human rights and allowed political organizations to be established, operate, articulate and aggregate interests and aspirations of the people.

Rationale of Decentralization in Nepal

Based on the premises of laws, government policies and on top of that the accent of the Ninth Five Year Development Plan (1997 - 2002 A.D.) – blueprint of planned development in Nepal – the following are the rationale of decentralization in Nepal.

- (1) Poverty alleviation
- (2) People's participation and self-sustaining development
- (3) Efficiency, legitimacy and equity
- (4) Accountability and transparency
- (5) Gender empowerment
- (6) National integration



Constitutional Provision

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 affirms decentralization for utilizing the benefits of democracy and creating opportunities for involving people in the governance of the country. The Constitution provides for representation of local government institutions in the Upper House of the National Parliament “as fifteen members would be elected by an electoral college composed of chairman, vice-chairman, mayor, deputy mayor and members of the village, municipality and District Development Committees”.

However, the Constitution does not provide an elaboration for the organizational scheme of local government and decentralization. The basic law of land, therefore, endows implicitly the National Parliament with a responsibility to formulate legislation on decentralization and local government. Nepal's decentralization scheme

is, therefore, based on a statutory framework enacted by national legislature. It is more a weaker version of decentralization and devolution of power.

Voices of Political Leaders

"Foundation of decentralization in Nepal is fragile. Political parties should build consensus to integrate decentralization into constitutional framework."

Man Mohan Adhikari, Former Prime Minister and leader of opposition in Parliament expressed this view on interaction held on decentralization.

"Decentralization of power has become a subject of national debate. Democracy, development and decentralization are very much interlinked to each other."

Local Development Minister Prakash Man Singh held this opinion speaking at a symposium on the local autonomy bill pending in the Parliament.

"Political parties exercise rhetorics in decentralization. They are not really committed to parting of power."

Parliamentarian Rajendra Pandey, a prominent communist legislator speaking at a seminar organized to debate decentralization.

"Decentralization is a process to strengthen and support local initiatives and empower the people to design the direction of change and development."

Sher Bahadur Deuba, Former Prime Minister who spearheaded fresh debate on decentralization when he was prime minister of a coalition government in 1996.



Decentralization framework

The local government units – Village Development Committees, Municipalities and District Development Committees – are organized pursuant to the provisions in the Local Government Acts formulated in 1991. The Acts recognize their autonomy as perpetually succeeding self-governing entities. The Village Development Committees and Municipalities are the elected units at the rung while district development committees are at the districts. District Development Committees are 75, and the number of Village Development Committees and Municipalities is 3912 and 58 respectively. Central control and supervision over local government institution is strong. Central government control and supervision extends over all spheres – institutional, administrative, financial and technical – of local bodies.

The local government institutions in Nepal are resource starved. They lack institutional capacity to undertake development functions. Neither are they capable to generate resources even for their own operation. The government sanctions grants and cash allocations but the resources provided to local government institutions are not utilized well. Participation of beneficiaries in identifying and implementing development projects is yet to be successfully achieved.



Gender empowerment

The Local Government Acts – the Village Development Committee Act, 1991, Municipality Act 1991 and the District Development Committees Act 1991 – have been amended recently. Important change towards enhancing gender empowerment has been introduced in the Acts besides providing an enlarged democratic composition of local bodies. At least 20% of the elected representatives in the village assembly (council) con-

stitute women. But the formal provision in the laws shall not be able to substantiate political empowerment of women. The matrilineal inheritance system compounded by low educational status and discriminatory social practices are obstacles to political and economic advancement of women in Nepal.

Voices of the People

"Reservation for women in local bodies is positive. But opportunities for women to ensure self-development is important."

Mrs. Laxmi Bhushal, a woman social worker in Mahendrakot VDC of Kapilvastu district.

"Local governments consult people now. Projects suited to our needs are executed."

Mangale Tamang, an inhabitant of Teenghare VDC where a water source repair and maintenance project is implemented with local government funds.

"Multiparty competition at local level has promoted political education in rural areas."

Ram Prasad Panthi, VDC chairman of Siddhara VDC, Arghakhanchi district.



Civil society and people's empowerment

Nongovernmental organizations and voluntary self-help groups are non-bureaucratic civic formations to foster democracy and decentralization. Grass-roots civic organizations also provide space for cultural expression and identity. The Constitution and local government laws enshrine the concept of a participant citizenry and active civil society. A large number of nongovernmental

organizations and self-help groups are established in the country at the grass-roots level. However, the relationship between local government institutions and civil society is not well structured. NGO-local government partnership is yet to foster. Civic groups are organizationally weak and lack an articulation of vision while local governments suffer from dearth of capacity, resources and most importantly democratic accountability.



Issues and problems

Political parties, bureaucrats, all agree to decentralization – political, administrative and financial. But there has been an absence of political will and commitment on the part of government to promote decentralization in the true sense of the term. The attitude of the people in the government still seems to be to rule, rather than to be responsive to popular needs and aspirations. Accountability, transparency and rule of law are buzzwords but hardly translated into practice. Ministers and parliamentarians fear that they will have to vacate political space if democratic decentralization is achieved in the genuine sense.

The nation's socio-cultural structure is also hierarchic and authoritarian. Decentralization in the form of empowerment of people and their participation in development and governance calls for a transformation in socio-cultural power structure, attitudes and values.



Conclusions

It has been said that decentralization is a difficult proposition even in the best of situations and circumstances. Those who hold power have become used to it and will not be prepared to resign to curtailment of power. This demands an attitudinal transforma-

tion in bureaucrats and honest political commitments of those in whose hands power has been concentrated. Popular aspirations for a democratic and decentralized society cannot be stifled. Decentralization is bound to be realized because without meaningful decentralization, a poverty free democratic society cannot be established. But this may take a long time.