

ISAS Brief

No. 533 – 13 December 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Nepal's Elections 2017:

A Watershed in Nepalese Political History

The year 2017 marked a landmark period for Nepal as the country held its first elections as a federal republic under a new constitution. This paper presents a snapshot of the significance of the elections in the context of the country's political history as well as the potential domestic and external ramifications of the polls.

Ankush Ajay Wagle¹

Introduction

Nepal recently held its first national and provincial elections following a 10-year long civil war which ended in 2006. The election for the seats in the parliament and provincial assemblies, which took place amidst relative calm in two phases on 27 November 2017 and 7 December 2017 respectively, involved a substantial voter turnout.² Although several parties registered for the elections, the contest broadly devolved into a two-sided battle between the 'democratic' alliance of the Nepali Congress (NC), alongside erstwhile royalist parties, and a 'left' alliance of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN (UML)] and

¹ Mr Ankush Ajay Wagle is Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at ankush@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

² "First poll since civil war ended", *BBC*, 26 November 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42126210>. Accessed on 1 December 2017.

the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) [CPN (MC)].³ Earlier this year, from May to September, the country held local elections across over 750 local governments which saw the three aforementioned parties sweep the polls. These electoral exercises are particularly noteworthy as they are the first under a new constitution adopted in 2015 following the replacement of the long-ruling monarchy with democratic rule. In order to better appreciate the significance and implications of this occasion, it is first necessary to understand Nepal's political background preceding the elections.

Nepal's Politics: Transient Stability and Fickle Alliances

The kingdom of Nepal was established in the 18th century by Prithvi Narayan Shah. The Shah dynasty continued to rule Nepal until 2008. However, a key change in power occurred in 1846 when Rana Jang Bahadur, a military commander, wrested control of the state and designated the Ranas as the prime ministers of Nepal, rendering the King a figurehead leader. However, in 1951, a movement by the NC, supported by the King, 'conclusively ended' the Rana regime in Nepal,⁴ thus handing the power back to the Shah Kings. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed much political upheaval in the country. Following the first constitution in 1948, Nepal saw four more constitutions in 1951, 1959, 1962 and 1990 respectively. In 1960, King Mahendra banned all political parties and instituted the *Panchayat* system wherein the monarchy possessed 'absolute powers'.⁵ The party ban remained in force until 1990 when King Birenda gave in to pressure from the *Jana Andolan* (people's movement) and established the 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal', making Nepal a multiparty democracy. In 1996, a Maoist faction began the attempt to overthrow the monarchy, sparking the Nepal Civil War which continued till 2006, claiming an estimated 13,000 lives.⁶

³ "Nepal votes in key general election", *Aljazeera*, 26 November 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/nepal-gears-key-election-171125103625452.html>. Accessed on 1 December 2017.

⁴ Bhandari, Surendra, The King versus the People: The Abolition of Monarchy and Constitution Making in Nepal, 1 June 2012. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2367755> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2367755>. Accessed on 7 December 2017.

⁵ Narayan Khadka (1994), Politics and the economy during Nepal's partyless panchayat system (1961-1990): a study in retrospect, *Asian Affairs*, 25:1, 47-59, DOI: 10.1080/714041236 Accessed on 1 December 2017.

⁶ Nepal Conflict Report: Executive Summary, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2012. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/NP/OHCHR_ExecSumm_Nepal_Conflict_report_2012.pdf. Accessed on 1 December 2017.

In 2001, most of the royal family members were murdered by Prince Dipendra (who also committed suicide) and Prince Gyanendra became king. He assumed totalitarian control in 2005 but was coerced into abdicating the next year due to a second *Jana Andolan*. The subsequent administration brokered a peace with the Maoists and they mutually agreed to dismantle the monarchy after the constituent assembly elections. This duly transpired and Nepal officially became the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal in 2008. The next seven years were marked by a legislative lacuna until 2015 when a new constitution was finally adopted. The constitution resulted in polarisation, with dissatisfaction among some ethnic groups in particular (such as the Madhesis), and the outbreak of violence as well.⁷ Against this disjointed political backdrop, Nepal held important local elections in mid-2017, where over 35,000 representatives were elected.⁸ These were then followed by the November-December 2017 elections for the 275 seats of the House of Representatives in the federal parliament and 550 seats in the provincial assemblies

In addition to a volatile history, another striking feature of Nepalese politics has been the seemingly endemic, relentless shifts in allegiances and power within and between the political parties. For instance, the incumbent NC underwent a split in 2002 when the current Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba formed the Nepali Congress (Democratic) faction due to differences with NC's President Girija Prasad Koirala. The two factions united again in 2007. Similarly, the CPN (MC) also underwent an internal split in 2012. The CPN (UML), currently the largest opposition party, has also previously formed a coalition government with the NC, its rival in the current elections. Even smaller royalist parties have undergone several splits and changes in loyalties. For instance, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party split in 1991, 1992, 2005 and 2016. The depth of the political divisions is witheringly clear by the fact that, in almost three decades of multiparty democracy, Nepal has had 26 prime ministers and none of their governments have completed a full term.⁹ Thus, in a country "riven by political factions and feudal enmities",¹⁰ the 2017 elections present a moment of reckoning.

⁷ "Amid Protests, Nepal Adopts Constitution", *New York Times*, 21 September 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/asia/amid-protests-nepal-adopts-constitution.html>. Accessed 1 December 2017.

⁸ "Nepal embarks on new political course", *The Asia Foundation*, 29 November 2017. <https://asiafoundation.org/2017/11/29/nepal-embarks-new-political-course/>. Accessed on 4 December 2017.

⁹ "Politics is still a man's game: Can Nepal's elections finally bring stability", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/nov/24/nepals-elections-finally-bring-stability>. Accessed on 6 December 2017.

¹⁰ "After Maoist Protests, Nepal faces a murky future", *Time*, 12 May 2010. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1988455,00.html>. Accessed on 6 December 2017.

The 2017 Elections: A Momentous Occasion

Given Nepal's turbulent political history, the elections are naturally a momentous event for the country with important domestic and foreign connotations. Two such important and interconnected implications are the success of Nepal's federal model amid challenges and its external relations vis-à-vis its immediate neighbours. These are further described below.

Federalism in Nepal was proposed in the 2007 interim constitution and enshrined in the 2015 constitution. The 2017 elections, being the first to be held under the new law, are naturally a litmus test for the proposed new structure of government with three tiers – local, provincial and federal. These three tiers are expected to “enjoy relations based on principles of cooperation, coexistence and coordination”.¹¹ The constitution also outlines several jurisdictions with concurrent power-sharing agreement such as services (electricity, drinking water and irrigation), agriculture, industries, minerals, infrastructure, disaster management and poverty alleviation. However, notwithstanding the intricacies of the federal government, the local elections, concluded in September 2017, have already thrown up possible difficulties in the functioning of the system due to the elected officials' perceived lack of experience in and knowledge of governance.¹² Furthermore, the stark demographic and economic differences between Nepal's seven provinces could be further exacerbated by the results of the provincial and national elections. This is already being seen to an extent. For example, the Madhesis, an ambiguous geo-ethnic group of people which resides in the Terai plains in southern Nepal and accounts for more than a third of the population,¹³ has long felt disenfranchised by the central government. The passing of the 2015 constitution was marked by several violent incidences and casualties involving the Madhesi people. Even the local elections this year were initially boycotted by the Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJP-N), a Madhesi representative party (although the party later registered for the third and final stage of the elections).¹⁴ In province 2, which is an administrative province of the Terai, the RJP-N

¹¹ Constitution of Nepal, *World Intellectual Property Organization*, 2015. <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/np/np029en.pdf> Accessed on 6 December 2017.

¹² *The Asia Foundation*, op cit.

¹³ “Nepal's ethnic Madhesis fight for dignity and equality”, *Aljazeera*, 5 April 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/03/nepal-ethnic-madhesis-fight-dignity-equality-tarai-160318100945995.html>. Accessed on 4 December 2017.

¹⁴ “Rastriya Janata Party Nepal registers with Election Commission to take part in local polls”, *The Indian Express*, 27 August 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/madhesis-rastriya-janata-party-nepal-registers-with-election-commission-to-take-part-in-local-polls-4816013/> Accessed on 4 December 2017.

won 25 seats and 30 seats for the Mayor/President and Deputy Mayor/Vice President positions respectively (out of 136 each),¹⁵ giving it a small, yet not insignificant platform, at least at the local level. Although the party is unlikely to perform very well in the national and provincial elections, the representation within its local voter base in the Terai, combined with concurrent power sharing under the federal model, will allow the RJP-N to pursue its demands for an autonomous Madhesi state and more local levels in province 2. Amidst such loyalties and keeping in mind the constantly shifting sands of Nepali politics, the election results could well make the federal government a highly tenuous one, prone to infighting, gridlock and disparate political priorities.

Secondly, the elections raised another key issue for Nepal, namely, its external relations. Being bordered by India and China, Nepal naturally has had to practice a balancing act between the two power players and, in a sense, its foreign policy has historically been shaped by this salient point.¹⁶ In recent times, it has seemingly swung both ways. For example, in May 2017, the Nepalese government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Chinese government on the latter's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (an initiative which India has overtly shunned). Later, in June 2017, the Nepal government entered into an agreement with the China Gezhouba Group Corporation for construction of the Budhigandaki Hydroelectric Project. However, in November 2017, the agreement for the project was cancelled. The turnaround in the government's stance was obviously due to the fact that the MoU and project agreement were signed by the CPN (MC) and were cancelled by the NC, which took over in June 2017. Thus, the elections are one of the starkest contexts for highlighting the trilateral interaction and have been described as "an almost direct face-off"¹⁷ between China and India as the former has the support of the CPN (UML) alliance while India supports the NC. This issue is also linked to Nepal's trade ties, which are overwhelmingly in India's favour as compared to China – in 2015, India accounted for 63.4 per cent of Nepal's exports and 60.62 per cent of its imports.¹⁸ Nepal is also highly dependent on India for certain necessities such as fuel. A blockade of fuel in 2015, which Nepal blamed

¹⁵ Election Commission Nepal, Province 2 Local Election Result Summary <http://result.election.gov.np/ElectionResultSummary.aspx?phaseID=3> Accessed on 6 December 2017.

¹⁶ For an in-depth understanding of Nepal's foreign policy vis-à-vis India and China, see Rose, L 'Nepal: Strategy for Survival', 1971. Oxford University Press,

¹⁷ "Nepal elections: An India-China battle at the ballot box", *The Hindustan Times*, 25 November 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/nepal-elections-an-india-china-battle-at-the-ballot-box/story-faKIVJINpqAqOkyPmLr0ZL.html>. Accessed on 1 December 2017.

¹⁸ Trade Summary for Nepal 2015. *World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank*. <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/NPL>. Accessed on 4 December 2017.

on India, caused much strife, both economically and in bilateral relations. The sum of these factors has, thus, infused the elections with a diplomatic twist. Lastly, the economic prowess of the country also depends much on stable political leadership which completes its mandate. Given the discordant past interactions of the parties contesting the elections, a stable political environment again depends on the success of the federal model and its complications described previously.

Conclusion

Nepal's elections in 2017 are undoubtedly a milestone event in its history. Some have hailed the elections as a critical, cautious step towards democratic reform while others are less optimistic. However, regardless of the outcome, the elections warrant attention. The fate of the country, for better or worse, depends not only on who ultimately gets elected to power, but also in how those elected manage the new federal system of governance as well as the country's critical external affairs with its neighbours.

.