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Transforming Nepal's political system: party positions and public opinion (2004-2012)

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English Summary for the PhD Thesis by Pawan K. Sen: *Transforming Nepal's Political System: Party Positions and Public Opinion (2004-2012)*

The study analyses the structure and dynamics of opinions of the general public of Nepal with the radical transformation of the country's political system in the recent past, with a particular focus on the four major state restructuring issues (i.e. four major political reforms: republicanism, secularism, multilingualism and federalism), and compares them with the positions taken by Nepal's major political parties on these reforms. The four reforms together made up the transformation that was eventually codified into the new Constitution of the country in September 2015. However, even when the new Constitution was promulgated, the public opinion had not preferred to all four reforms.

This researcher's access to raw data of public opinion polls conducted during the period of transformation, have enabled him to study the structure and development of Nepal's public opinion on issues of transformation, and to compare this to the positions taken by the main political parties. The researcher has also been able study a considerable body of literature concerning quantitative and comparative research on political transformations in Nepal and other countries, particularly empirical research on the relationship between political parties and public opinion. This research reveals that there is a dominant role of political elites from the major political parties in the transformation of country's political system. However, the research has also shown that a new political system's legitimacy and sustainability depend not only on the strong (and non-violent) support of the main political parties, but also – despite findings supporting the theory of 'democratic elitism' – primarily on that of the general public or citizenry – even if the latter has not been directly involved in shaping this transformation through for example a referendum on a new constitution (such a referendum did not occur in Nepal, though the people did elect the Constituent Assembly).

Amongst the four reforms discussed in this study, on only one reform i.e., from monarchy to republic, the latest public opinion (April 2012) showed majority support (i.e., 50 percent) for a republic, with a substantial minority of 39 percent still supporting the monarchy. On the issue of Hindu state vs. secular state, there was more public support than opposition for retaining of the Hindu state instead of a secular state. The latest finding (April 2012) showed that 55 percent would had preferred to maintain the identification of the state with Hinduism while only 37 percent agreed with the adoption of a secular state. On multilingualism, the latest survey in which the question was asked (July 2009) revealed only 40 percent support for recognition of other national or foreign languages as official languages against a majority of 55 percent preferring a Nepali-only language policy. In both cases, the proportions of the population that agreed with the reforms are substantial, but remain minorities nevertheless. With regard to the reform of the unitary state into a federal state, there was more public support for federalism (28 percent) than for the unitary state (14 percent) in the latest survey (April 2012), but more importantly, a majority (58 percent) could not express any choice definitively (i.e. either they had not heard about the issue, or did not understand it, or didn't know what to think of it).

Looking at the pattern of support for the reforms across regions, ethnic groups, religious groups, political affiliation, educational status etc., the survey data revealed the supports for obvious expectations: the supporters of the Maoist party who first demanded these reforms tended to agree with them; the groups in Nepali society that had been negatively affected by the centuries of domination by the Hindu high caste hill group and the attempts to homogenise Nepali society were mostly in favour of reforms that introduced a republic, secular state, multilingualism and federalism. What is interesting, however, is that these relationships between groups and preferences for reforms are far from deterministic: for example, in all surveys over 60 percent of Hindus preferred maintaining the Hindu state, but between a quarter and a third of this religious group actually preferred a secular state. Meanwhile Buddhists, the largest non-Hindu religious group, showed clear majority support for a secular state in most surveys, but also sizeable minorities (of up to 35 percent) wanting to keep Nepal as a Hindu state. In addition, there are interesting exceptions to what one would expect. Given the long association of the Nepali state with efforts to assimilate other groups into the culture of the Hindu high caste hill group, it would not be surprising if support for retaining the monarchy was strongest and declined least and latest among members of that group compared to support among more marginal groups, such as Dalit, people living in the Tarai, and indigenous groups. But the data showed that, if anything, support for the monarchy declined earlier and more among members of the hill high caste group. Federalism became controversial only late in the transformation, largely because of political action in the Tarai. Yet, both awareness of and support for federalism fluctuated among groups living in that part of the country. A composition effect offers only a partial explanation on the abolition of the monarchy, Hindu state and unitary state because though the preferences of the higher educated were closer to those of the elites but not identical. On the issue of multilingualism, the higher educated were less supportive of the reforms. Majority of them supported the Nepali-only policy.

By examining the relationship between the decisions of the political elites and public opinions, it is possible to distinguish three main positions or perspectives: 1) the decisions by the political elites reflect public opinion; 2) the decisions by the political elites reflect their own judgement; and 3) the decisions by the political elites and public opinion are in a reciprocal relationship, adapting to each other. The literature shows support for each of these three positions. Which of the three positions actually applies seems to depend on various sources of variation. For this study of Nepal's political transformation, issue salience seems particularly relevant. If reforms are not or less salient to the general public, the probability increases that the decisions taken reflect the agenda of the political elites. In this case over time public preferences are likely to move closer to the decisions already taken. If reforms are more salient, public opinion and elite decisions reciprocally influence each other, and over time public preferences and elite decisions converge. At first sight, however, this study does not empirically support these expectations.

It might be argued that on some of the issues the parties also moderated their positions to some extent. This is clearest on the abolition of the Hindu state. The elites maintained their decision to move to a secular state, but added to the constitution a definition of 'secularism' that included protection for traditional religious practices. In addition, a law against proselytization was adopted in 2017. Article 158 of the National Panel Code (2017) prohibited proselytization to allay

the fears of the Hindu majority. With regard to language policy, the eventual implementation of multilingualism in which Nepali remains the administrative language at the national level and other languages can be recognized as administrative languages in each province, can also be interpreted as a concession to public opinion. However, even such a more nuanced assessment does not deny the gap between elites and public opinion, and there is no evidence that such concessions have led to more public support. However, it may be too early to reach a conclusion about the legitimacy and consolidation of the new political system of Nepal. There are occasional calls for a return to a Hindu state or even for a restoration of the monarchy, but so far they do not seem to mobilise significant movements. The right-wing Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), for example, has been organizing mass demonstrations demanding the restoration of both the monarchy and the Hindu state. They argue that these two things are necessary for protecting democracy and bringing political stability in the country.

Finally, the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution formally concluded one of the most radical transformations of a political system in the recent history: from a monarchy to a republic, from a Hindu state to a secular state, from a unitary state to a federation, and from one official language to a multilingual state. The political elites of Nepal proved themselves to be the benevolent guardians of political tolerance and minority rights. Nepal has always been characterized by great cultural diversity, but from the foundation of the Gorkha Empire in 1768, Nepal's history can be summarized as a long attempt at political and cultural unification modelled after the culture of the dominant Hindu high caste hill group. The new constitution abandons that project and seeks to embrace and formally acknowledges the country's diversity.