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Views from the Field

Anthropological Perspectives on the Constituent Assembly Elections

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Introduction

Social Science, Anthropology, and the Constituent Assembly Elections: Some Comments

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Nepali political scientists had a tough time in the days immediately after the 10 April 2008 election to the Constituent Assembly (CA).[1] They had confidently predicted that the Nepali Congress (NC) would win the CA election, that the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) would come second, and that the Maoists (Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, or CPN [Maoist]) would end up a distant third. As the results began coming in, the Maoists seemed poised to romp home as winners. For a time it looked as if they would take well over half the first-past-the-post (FPTP) seats, although in the end they won exactly half, or 120, of the 240 FPTP positions. In those early days, many forgot that Nepal had adopted a new, largely proportional system and assumed (or feared) that the Maoists might win two thirds of the seats in the CA, and would therefore be able to re-write the constitution on their own, not needing cooperation from anyone else. (Even President Jimmy Carter, who in all other respects was a very acute and perceptive observer of Nepali politics, articulated this thought, though he said that he did not think it a likely outcome.) In fact, of course, it was never possible for the Maoists to win even half the overall seats, given that roughly 60 per cent of the 601 places available in the CA were to be allocated proportionately and the Maoists' share of the vote was less than 30 per cent.

1 I would like to thank Rajendra Pradhan for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

I do not believe that social scientists should be blamed that much for misreading the popular mood. After all, the political parties themselves had misread it radically. Both the NC and the UML were guilty of massive complacency and underestimating the appeal of the Maoists (by contrast, the Maoists captured the popular mood perfectly with their slogan: 'You've tried the others time and again, try the Maoists this time'). The Maoists themselves had no idea they would do so well. Otherwise, they would not have been so worried about the elections called for November 2007; they would not have pushed so hard for PR; and nor would Prachanda have made such ultimately fruitless efforts to meet UML general secretary, Madhav Kumar Nepal, and forge an alliance. It is clear, however, that their main ambition was to replace the UML as the main party on the left. They would, in fact, have accepted third place and would have been delighted with second place behind the NC.

It was not only social scientists and politicians who failed to spot the wave of support that came the way of the more radical parties. Local civil society members in the districts, with their ears to the ground, also failed to see what would happen. I was told authoritatively in Birganj, just before the election, that the newly formed Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) would be lucky to get 10 or 15 seats: had all the Tarai parties stuck together they would have swept the Tarai, but divided, they had little chance…

How, then, are we to explain the results? A complex combination of factors was evidently at play. Certainly, as the NC and others complained, in some cases there was intimidation by the Maoists. Reports make it clear that other parties had no chance in Rukum and Gorkha, for example. But that is very far from being the whole story. As Mukta Tamang notes, people voted spontaneously, freely, and enthusiastically for the Maoists. It was a combination, as he says, of 'hope and fear' at the same time. There was certainly, as he writes, a feeling that the Maoists should be given power, both to make them accountable and to prevent their return to the jungle, a sentiment I heard expressed more than once in Kathmandu. It was also certainly a vote for change, for a new possibility,

something different from the old parties who had failed the country so often. The 'zeal' *(josh)* of the Maoists impressed people, and if they had killed some people along the way, this was not held against them.

Anthropology is not the kind of subject that often makes predictions. An exceptional example, by someone who may count as an honorary anthropologist, is the 1992 article by development and Latin America expert Andrew Nickson, 'Democratisation and the Growth of Communism in Nepal: A Peruvian Scenario in the Making?' Nickson arrived in Nepal in 1990. Observing the striking structural and geographical similarities to Peru led him to make the insightful prediction that Maoism might do well there, at a time when Nepal experts, not so alive to a comparative perspective, discounted the political impact of the far-left groups.

But if anthropology cannot often make such predictions, it can lead to understanding after the event, an understanding that is much deeper and more nuanced than the flat numbers produced by opinion polls or actual polls. The essays collected here demonstrate conclusively that long-term, in-depth knowledge of particular places—knowledge of personal histories, networks, party affiliations, and significant local events—leads to 'thick' description and genuine insight.[2]

I myself was present for the election, but as an international observer invited by the Carter Center. My own areas of ethnographic expertise are the cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur (Patan). But I asked to be sent outside the Kathmandu Valley because: (a) I did not want to be part of the fly-in-fly-out jamboree of short-term international observers who would be swarming all over the capital; (b) I suspected that there would be little trouble or contestation in the Valley; (c) in an urban environment an anthropologist does not, to the same degree, have the advantages

2 'Thick' description was a term coined by Clifford Geertz to name the kind of rich, contextualized understanding of events that takes into account actors' intentions and interpretations, as contrasted to the 'thin' description provided by more positivist social science. The locus classicus for this distinction is the introduction to Geertz (1973).

of an anthropologist who works in a village: one cannot know everyone involved; even for people who have lived in a city neighbourhood all their life there is a degree of anonymity; insights based on years of involvement are harder (though not impossible) to achieve; and (d) I wanted to see the election somewhere new, outside my usual stamping grounds. I was sent to Parsa District. Together with my election observation partner, Ashraf Shuaibi (second-in-command at the Palestinian Election Commission), our interpreter, Mukesh Kalwar, and driver, Sanu Lama, I drove all over the district, coming up close to the Indian border on three occasions.

The contrast is very clear between long-term anthropological observation and what can be achieved by an international observer, however well briefed and backed up (and the Carter Center is excellent in this regard—comparing notes with other teams, from the EU, DFID, and the UN, staying at the same Birganj hotel convinced me of this). On Election Day, international observers usually stay in one place for at most an hour or so, often much less. (We visited 14 different polling centres, with 44 booths, driving on bone-shaking dirt roads through all the five constituencies in Parsa, leaving at 5.30 am and finishing at 6 pm.) There is no way in which the international observer can judge the significance of the presence of one or other person as a candidate's representative within the station, as was done by Pettigrew, for example. It is a little more insightful than tourism, because local people and candidates will come to you and press you to visit certain notorious places where they fear booth-capturing may be about to happen. But the limits to what one can observe may be illustrated by the fact that in our whole exhausting day of observation we never saw children voting. On my return to Kathmandu, I spent a considerable amount of time talking to old friends in Lalitpur about the election. More than one asked me if I had seen children voting in Parsa. When I said that I had not, they responded, 'What kind of international observer are you? We saw children voting in Parsa sitting at home, and just watching the TV. The journalist gave the name of the polling station and the polling officer!'

Despite this, it is possible to defend the use of election observers. There was one particular village, notorious, we were told, for booth capturing in every previous election. We visited it twice during the day. UN observers also spent some considerable time there. The presence of international observers is very likely to have reduced the level of malpractice. Overall, the mobilisation of observers is about inspiring confidence in the process and can never guarantee that no abuses ever occur.

Judith Pettigrew's account is a beautiful exemplification of the value of anthropological fieldwork and of the value of repeated, long-term visits to the same place. Thagu's story is indeed impressive and made a deep impression on the Nepalis who attended the talk at the Social Science Baha. It demonstrates, as only a good narrative can, how affiliation and commitment—whether to parties, ethnic groups, or any other social unit—are part of a continually negotiated process, not a fixed attribute that can be captured by ticking a box.

David Holmberg stresses anthropology's commitment to complexity—specifically to acknowledging, and not crassly reducing, the complexity of social life. Only through sensitive historical and ethnographic awareness can it be explained how Bahuns in Nuwakot end up being Maoist supporters and Tamangs, the historically oppressed group in the area, end up as supporters of the NC, now the party of the establishment. (One is reminded of Ramirez's subtle analysis of different Bahun sublineage affiliation in Gulmi in *De la Disparition des Chefs*; unfortunately, this part of his work is not available in English, but see my extended review, Gellner 2001.) Thus, whatever national trends there are—and these are undeniably important—the explanation for particular alliances at the local level always rests on local histories—hence Tip O'Neill's aphorism with which Holmberg begins his essay.

Mukta Tamang shows, as does Pettigrew, how rural people, who may not fully approve of the Maoists' methods, come to support them nevertheless, as they seemed to be only group to address their concerns, especially after they had come to know them personally through close and long-term exposure. His report shows that, just as in Kathmandu, in the

depth of the countryside many people share the ideas that the Maoists need to be given responsibility so as to be held responsible, and so that the violence may end, and that a vote for the Maoists is a vote for change. Moreover, negotiation and discussion—working together for the collective local good despite different party alignments—is also a local response to nationally organised rituals of competition.

Both Tamang and Holmberg point to the ritual and festive aspects of national elections. Elections are indeed a great Durkheimian periodic rite, both symbolising the nation and emphasising division at the same time (one only has to remember the violence and killings which accompanied the election, despite its being the most peaceful in Nepali history, to see that divisions are also exacerbated). It is a great achievement to have held the elections at all. Despite widespread disillusion with the political class in Nepal, simply holding the elections demonstrated that the state was neither quite so failed, nor the political class quite so useless as often feared. Progress on constitutional issues will be slow and it would be utterly naïve to believe that demonstrations, *bandhs*, strikes, and bombs are going to vanish from Nepal's political scene now that the CA election has been held. Nonetheless, the entire nation has spoken. Villagers in the Tarai have queued in the sun for over an hour to cast their vote; many people travelled long distances; and pretty much everyone who physically could vote, did so. Identical villagers just over the border had no interest in what happens in Nepal—they have their own MPs and MLAs in assemblies in another country. Despite the openness of the border, despite all the traffic across it, despite the impossibility of 'sealing' it, despite the fact that no geographical feature marks the boundary for most of its length, the existence of two different states does in the end make a difference.

Apart from some honourable exceptions (Caplan 1975, Borgström 1980), local politics were not much studied by anthropologists of Nepal before 1990. Even political scientists preferred to concentrate on events

3 On India, see Mitra (1979) and Hauser and Singer (1986), both collected in Jayal (2001). See also Banerjee (2007) and Michelutti (2007, 2008).

and opposition at the national level. A recent collection (Gellner and Hachhethu 2008) attempts to bring political scientists and anthropologists together, both on Nepal and on its wider region. The two approaches have much to offer each other. Just as anthropologists have learnt much from political scientists (e.g. James Scott 1985, 1998), the short pieces published here show unquestionably, in my opinion, the potential that anthropology has to offer in advancing the study of both elections and local politics more generally. Anthropologists and political scientists working on India are ahead of those who specialise on Nepal, in this area as in many others, but the potential for important new research to emanate from Nepal—important both for Nepal and for wider social science—is demonstrated by these short articles.[3]

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