

# Book Reviews

Mahendra Lawoti, ed. 2007. *Contentious Politics and Democratization in Nepal*. New Delhi: Sage.

Scholars largely concur that the historical rise of modern democratic states and social movements was contemporaneous, but few have explored recent phases of democratization and social movements. Nepal's political experience during the 1990s makes a compelling case to explore this issue. In *Contentious Politics and Democratization in Nepal*, Mahendra Lawoti addresses this theme: did social movements (or "contentious politics" as he prefers to call them) in the 1990s strengthen or weaken "democratization" in Nepal? The answer is divided into five sections: context and framework, the Maoist insurgency, identity politics, collective public protests, and contentious politics and democratization. A total of 13 articles authored by scholars working on such diverse fields as conflict management and social psychology are included in the five sections.

Part I describes the overall framework of the book. Lawoti tells his readers that the book is informed by current theories of social movements which put factors such as organizations, framing, and political opportunities at the center of the analytical framework. While maintaining that contentious politics in Nepal has a long history, he situates political activism in the 1990s specifically in the "constitution-engineering process" during the drafting of the Constitution of Nepal 1990. The argument is plain: as the Constitution of Nepal 1990 largely failed to include cultural aspirations of the people, culturally "marginal" and other ideological groups expressed their discontent through social movements. He argues that Caste-Hill Hindu Elite groups whose interests were represented by the Nepali Congress, the United Left Front, and the Royal Palace succeeded in maintaining their cultural hegemony largely through their numerical strength in the constitution drafting committee and the outright manipulation of constitutional provisions. Lawoti presents contentious politics in the 1990s as reaction to the 1990 Constitution, undemocratic political culture during the period, and the centralization and executivization of power.

The Maoist insurgency section includes four articles. Shisir Khanal raises a very important and interesting question on the emergence and

growth of the Maoist movement (MM): how and why did the MM begin in the mid-1990s? He criticizes social psychological perspectives, often endorsed by the media and intelligentsia alike, claiming that the rise of the MM cannot be understood as grievances and frustration generated by inequality and marginalization. He claims that in the mid-1990s (in fact, it appears that the Maoists had decided to go to war much earlier) Nepal was faring well economically and the people were being empowered. Why then the MM? He attributes the emergence and the “success” of the MM to Maoist leaders who were determined to push forward their revolutionary programs along with the political opportunities offered by the dwindling repressive capacity of the state and the divided elites. I wished Khanal had been consistent in his arguments. At times he resorts to the same social psychological processes which he discounts in his theoretical framework. In fact, social psychological factors, such as “grievances,” “alienation,” “felt needs,” and “frustration,” largely inform the book.

Li Onesto nicely compliments Khanal’s arguments. She offers an insider’s view on how the Maoists doggedly pursued their goal from primitive fighting to the “threshold of power.” The blueprint for all this came from none other than Chairman Mao himself. Thus the making of the MM has to do with the heroic efforts of the Maoist fighters and the leadership. As the Maoists often repeat instinctively, she notes that the United States and India are two of the biggest obstacles to the Maoist revolutionary plan in Nepal. Onesto’s spirited discussion of the Maoist movement actually ends in a rather gloomy note: how to do “revolution in a globalized world?”

Ivan Somlai offers a “stakeholder” analysis to understand the complexity of the Maoist insurgency and to formulate a negotiation strategy. He argues that in addition to the often-talked about parties in the conflict (i.e. the government and the Maoists), Nepal’s insurgency involves directly or indirectly a myriad of actors and social forces with their own peculiar interests. These forces include groups such as armed groups in the southern plains and civil society in urban centers. An effective negotiation process should take into account all of these forces even though the process might be cumbersome and time-consuming. Apparently, the article was prepared well before the April Movement in 2006. Although what shape the current peace process eventually will take is far from clear at this stage, there is good reason to believe that the pact between the Maoists and the political parties actually deviated from Somlai’s preferred model, which he terms a “trans-stakeholder approach,”

in several ways. It appears that he is pessimistic about the prospects of the current peace process. I only hope that he would be proved wrong.

Mary Crawford, Michelle Kaufman, and Alka Gurung look at the often-neglected humane side of the conflict: violence against women and children. They present several cases in which children and women suffered systematic violence at the hands of security forces as well as the insurgents. Violent acts ranged from rape and abduction to the hampering of outreach work by national and international non-governmental organizations. Although the authors describe their cases vividly, at times it is hard to figure out how much the insurgency actually contributed to the ever gloomy situation. The authors probably overstate a few of their observations. The mushrooming of cabin restaurants in Kathmandu, for example, could well be the result of broader societal trends that preceded the insurgency. As the authors hint throughout the article, the political economy of violence against women and children in Nepal is a complex phenomenon that clearly goes far beyond the current insurgency.

Part III of the book deals with “identity politics.” This section includes three articles, one on the Mongol National Organization (MNO) in eastern Nepal and two on Newar activism in Kathmandu. In one of the most informative chapters in the book, Susan Hangen directly addresses the question the editor of the book asks in the opening section regarding the relationship between democratization and contentious politics. She first notes that, in the context of Nepal, it is hard to maintain a strict boundary between social movement organizations and political parties. Although marginal ethnic political parties might give an impression that they hinder democratization by promoting parochial interests and identities, she found that the MNO actually contributed to the democratization of Nepali polity and society by empowering rural, uneducated masses in villages in east Nepal.

While Bal Gopal Shrestha examines the rise of Newar nationalism in general, Keshav Lal Maharjan explores the rise of Theravadin Vihar Buddhism among Kathmandu Newars. It is noteworthy that Shrestha candidly describes how class, caste, gender, and political orientations have historically complicated Newar activism in Kathmandu. This type of admission and analysis is often missing in scholarly debates on identity movements in Nepal. Shrestha’s points could well be extended to the MNO and other groups, for example. Maharjan, on the other hand, chronicles how Theravada Buddhism came to fill the voids created by political exclusion and the ills of modernization. I have a few reservations with his argument however. That new religious-cultural movements can

be explained as reflecting and reacting to the “material” reality should be taken cautiously. Such arguments often take this form: people turn to new cultural systems (or cultural politics) as strategies to solve their individual or group problems. If this were the case, hundreds of thousands of people would join Theravada Buddhism. This clearly is not the case. On top of this, I was not fully convinced that the data gathered by Maharjan in Nakadesh allow one to conclude the way he does.

Part IV of the book takes readers to the streets. Genevieve Lakier examines the use of coercive protest tactics (e.g. road blockades, coercive strikes, sit-ins) by two groups: the Kamaiyas and the transportation syndicate, the Federation of Nepal Transport Entrepreneurs. The Kamaiyas succeeded in expanding their social and political rights. The transport syndicate, on the other hand, defended its traditional privileges against the potential entry of new transport entrepreneurs in the areas of their “control.” The government thus failed to implement its own liberal economic laws. Although coercive protest tactics at times might produce emancipatory results (such as the Kamaiya movement), Lakier takes them as examples of “illiberal democracy” because they interfere with fundamental liberal rights and the state’s monopoly on violence.

Amanda Snellinger looks at the student movement in Nepal. Like Hangen, she begins with problematizing social movement theories developed in Western contexts. Indeed, Nepal’s student movement does not fit neatly with the theories developed in the context of “institutionalized” Western democracies. She argues that Nepal’s student movement fluctuates between norm and value-based politics depending on the macro-political environment. She points out that, despite cynicism among ordinary citizens, student movements have historically played important roles in Nepal’s political development. Snellinger further notes that the organizational set-up, lack of internal democracy, and the patron-clientele relationship with the parent parties are some of the factors which make it hard for student leaders to push forward their progressive agendas in the nation’s political priorities.

The final section of the book includes two articles; one by Anne Rademacher and another by the editor of the book. Rademacher’s work stands out from the rest in that it moves away from the positivist research orientation that generally informs the book. She analyzes environmental discourse (rather than “framing”) in Kathmandu to understand how democracy is reflected and refracted in and through the discourse of environmentalism. Democracy here is a cultural lens through which people imagine their social world. Based on her fieldwork among

development professionals, NGO workers, and environmental activists, Rademacher shows that environmental workers often equated political practices in the 1990s to the ecological chaos in Kathmandu. Second, people came to view undemocratic political actions such as the state of emergency in 2001 as a semblance of “order” amidst democratic chaos in the 1990s.

In his concluding essay, Lawoti argues that contentious politics in the 1990s have had mixed results. On the one hand, it expanded public participation, increased public awareness, opened up discursive space, and even ensured several concessions from the government. On the other hand, use of social movement tactics by privileged groups such as the transport syndicate and the [Maoist] challenge to electoral politics undermined democracy. At the heart of this dual impact of contentious politics on democratization is the deployment of “coercive” protest tactics in varying degrees by almost every protest group or organization. Clearly, social movement is a double-edged sword; it seems, however, that this is also an extremely complicated issue. The case of the Maoists is an explicit example. Lawoti tells us that by “mobilizing” the rural poor the Maoists contributed to democratization; at the same time, he argues that the Maoists undermined the democratic process by opposing electoral politics. Third, he devotes a section in his concluding essay to “factors leading to reliance on coercive methods.” These factors include “alienation” of the masses and unresponsiveness of the government. If these “factors” really led the people to coercive protest tactics, how can an ordinary citizen, a protest participant, and a social scientist understand coercive protests and their impacts? Although scholars generally agree that violent protests decreased progressively as “democratic” polity took root in the Western world, the debate on the relationship between coercive tactics and movement outcomes is far from over even in the context of Western democracies. Do we then need a new language other than the one offered by liberal political theory?

Finally, Lawoti must be praised for the book. Individually, all articles have something interesting to say. Many articles are actually part of bigger research projects the authors have carried out in recent years. I presume that interested readers can easily access those projects if they so wish. Articles included in the book focus not just on elite discourses, but also on ordinary citizens in rural areas. The book is highly informative for those interested in Nepali politics in the post-1990 period.

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