

Summary of article for CMI website

**‘Common ground: Social democracy’**

(*Himal Newsmagazine*, 1-28 May, 2008, Pp. 14-16.)

By

Chaitanya Mishra

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu

[mishfam@wlink.com.np](mailto:mishfam@wlink.com.np)

The April 2008 general election to the constitutional assembly (CA) was preceded by much political conflict among the political parties and other political forces. In some areas, there was significant armed conflict as well. Whether the CA and the government will be effective in preparing a common platform from among the competing party, class, ethnic, regional, and federal, local and other interests remains to be seen. The platform will also have to pay due heed to the two powerful immediate neighbors, India and China, which have rapidly become globally significant, as also to those of the USA, EU and other countries and configurations which are politically powerful and financially significant for Nepal. Only such a platform will be able to promote democracy, development, growth and social justice. Such a platform will also bear more chances to lower political conflict and avoid large-scale violence. As much as possible, the key elements of such a platform are best specified in the new constitution which will hopefully be finalized within the next two years. Such common elements will also have to be gleaned from political-party policies, recent inter-party agreements and the interim constitution which synthesized many of the earlier agreements.

A common ground, however, is not a static point. It is a moving platform which is pushed and pulled by various local, national and international forces and political, economic and cultural interests, including those of the political parties. A common ground is also not primarily a psychological ‘feel good’ or ‘feel united’ product. It cannot be willed in and out. A common ground, instead, is primarily a historical-structural product. These histories and structures relate simultaneously to political parties, class, entrepreneurs, ethnic, caste, gender and regional groups, as also to the nature of the immediately neighboring states and peoples and to the world capitalist system.

Policies of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPNM), Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF)—the four largest parties—and most other political parties show considerable mutual incompatibilities in political and other matters. The CPNM has often—since 2003—officially portrayed itself as a party which upholds norms related to bourgeois (capitalist) democracy—of course as a transitional political-economic form. But a push from several members of the central committee and a large number of second and tertiary level leaders toward the Maoist New Democracy, either as a political or populist response, cannot at all be discounted. Most even in the top ranks of the CPNM leadership would see bourgeois democracy not as a ‘historical necessity’ or ‘historical opportunity’ but as an unwanted compulsion forced by history. The NC, while nominally a party which upholds ‘democratic socialism,’ has substantially transformed itself as a politically liberal democratic and financially neoliberal set up. The CPN-UML favors a

redistributive policy but it is uncertain of the overall direction of the economy, including in relation to the role of the market and the state, the historical role of capitalism and bourgeoisie, as also of private investment. The Tarai/Madhesh-based parties, including the MJF, on the other hand, are solidly behind capitalism and seek to prioritize the interests of the Tarai/Madhesh in relation to polity, economy and culture.

Even as the political and economic policies of particular parties are considerably dissimilar and sometimes in obvious mutual conflict, the overall tenor of the (a) series of agreements that the parties entered into since the end of 2005, i.e. just prior to the 2006 political movement, (b) the post-movement agreements to date, and (c) the interim constitution, on the other hand, indicate that there is a fair amount of unanimity among the parties—at least in relation to an inter-party collaborative platform. That is, while a party, left on its own, e.g. if allowed to run a government on its own, may pursue a specific set of policies, the party would, if forced to work with other parties within a collaborative government, dilute or postpone such policies and could work on the basis of a wider consensus or agreement. The agreements entered to by the different parties during last three years, thus, consistently has prioritized political freedom, competitive party system, a fairly similar set of fundamental rights, universal access to basic education and primary health, food security and employment promotion—including a level of guarantee of rights to work. Now, the degree to which the different parties are tied to these positions may not be the same, and this will become clearer once these policies begin to be implemented. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that very diverse parties have come to an agreement on a very wide front. The CA electoral results can also be read to have underlined a decided preference for social justice.

In essence, the political parties and the CA electoral results seem to be pushing for a political-economic regime of social democracy. In a sense, it could even be argued that the series of political movements during the last 75 years were political expressions directed against hereditary rule and associated norms and values and ascribed social stations, privileges, and patterns of ownership of resources. The movements, it may be noted, valorized labor, equity, and liberty.

Nepal has been undergoing rapid transition during the last three decades. The size and proportion of the population dependent on agriculture, while still very large, has come down quite sharply. Service, transport and communication, construction, etc. sectors within and outside the country have grown rapidly. By this, there has been considerable diversification in modes of generation of livelihood. Concomitantly, there has been a growth of bourgeois and, primarily, petty bourgeois categories and interests. The urban is 'enveloping' the 'rural,' despite the very large size of the 'rural' by means of demand for labor, supply of wages, very large-sized remittance from workers abroad (relative to the size of the national economy) and, of course, supply of information, credit, commodities, etc. The urban, in addition, is valorized much in relation to norms, values and culture and the urban has begun to set the 'tone' for the rural. In essence, there is no longer a categorical demarcation between the urban and the rural. The new generation—most of which, for the first time, is in school, and is seeking liberation from the rural and the agricultural. Towns, cities and foreign lands are firing up the imagination of the young. The young are also concurrently being forced out of the rural and agricultural.

In this specific context it makes more political and economic sense to 'opt' for social democracy rather than a democracy which is liberal or neoliberal. The latter options may well not be durable or lead to a successful completion of the current transition. On the other hand, such options may further sharpen social and spatial contradictions and abet political conflict and armed and organized violence. Economic expansion and growth, necessary as it is, must also simultaneously promote health, education, skill, food security and employment. It is very important to recognize that the politics and economics of the new state has to emphasize the creation of self-dependent and politically charged and organized students, citizens, workers and consumers who can imbibe and hold on to the new values which are consonant with social democracy.

Social democracy is a political-economic system which equally valorizes private capital and labor and seeks to bring the bearers of these resources together on a capitalist platform. It may not be altogether possible for a state in Nepal, within this specific phase of local, national and world history, to promote employment and income, personal and collective self respect, and freedom and peace, without protecting and promoting private capital. On the other hand, political freedom and peace, individual and collective self respect, and education, skill, health, and food security, cannot be accessed without expanded production along capitalist lines. Expanded public financing to attain the social democratic goals cannot be accessed without it.

The preceding by no means implies that capitalism and bourgeois democracy, including the social-democratic kind, are 'natural' or immortal, that 'history has ended,' or that no other production and social system will come into being in future. Far from it. Like all historical systems, capitalism and bourgeois democracy will, primarily because of its own internal logic which has continued to fuel its further development, become ridden with contradictions and wither away. While it is by no means certain what the future system will be like, it can be expected that a system and a people which/who have undergone the historical experience of a long capitalism and bourgeois and social democracy—together with shorter but potent bouts of socialism—will build a system which is more democratic and progressive.

What is the lifespan of the capitalist system? Left intellectuals and politicians possess several enviable qualities but most of them also possess the dis-quality of subjective optimism. Lenin had declared that capitalism had reached its peak one hundred years ago and that henceforth it had nowhere to go but 'down'. It now appears that capitalism has at least some more—if not much more—life left. In China, capitalism, long buried, has been brought back to life and we are witnessing the spectacle of a post-socialist capitalism in bloom. It was argue there that it was social relations of production that had fettered the development of forces of production. This was opposite from what most Marxist views which maintain that the development of forces of production fetters existing relations of production which can be unfettered only with a realignment of the relations of production. Apparently, it is because of the forces of production have been released from their fetters in China that it has seen spectacular economic development and growth. The Chinese decision that achievement of excellence in capitalism was essential to move forward in a world-capitalist system, at least for now, has been historically vindicated.

The social democratic route is also the best possible 'option' in order to benefit from the unprecedented historical processes taking hold in the immediate neighboring countries of India

and China. The expansion of economies and the high growth rate of these countries provide unprecedented opportunities for Nepal. (It might be recalled that the prosperity of Kathmandu Valley and surrounding areas during the Malla period was achieved at a time when the economy of both the neighbors was in expansion.) It is noteworthy that neither of these two countries has adopted a neoliberal policy, and that social democracy, under different guises, is the basic policy thrust in both the states. This also means, however, that in order to learn and gain from this historic opportunity, the new Nepali state should not take a path that is fundamentally different in nature from those taken by the neighbors. If the path is qualitatively different, not only would Nepal miss the 'neighborhood bus' but economic, political, cultural, demographic and even military contradiction may well sharpen between the neighbors on the one hand and Nepal on the other. Nepal cannot afford such a course. It is worth emphasizing also that both India and China have decreased their poverty ratios by impressive margins after 1990 and 1978, respectively, following the demise of 'socialism' in China and 'Nehruvian socialism' in India.