

'End of monarchy and loosening of traditional social bonds.' *Nepal* (Weekly newsmagazine published from Kathmandu), June 8, 2008, Pp. 34-6.

By
Chaitanya Mishra
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu
mishfam@wlink.com.np

The article argues that even as the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPNM) were the proximate actors which established a republican state of Nepal in 2006, a deeper historical-structural perspective is necessary in order to comprehend the end of a longstanding monarchy and the concurrent birth of a republic. Such a perspective is also necessary so as not to inflate the significance of the SPA and the CPNM to a point where history and structure become irrelevant and agency becomes all-powerful, ahistorical and mysterious.

The antecedents of the birth of the republic have to be located, in the foundational instance, in the changing modes and expanded diversification of generation of livelihood. Such diversification and consequent social differentiation have been taking place there during the last three decades much more rapidly than in the past. The social bonds that tied a young farmer to his father—who controlled the farm assets—is of a different nature than that between a father and a son whose son attends school, takes up a non-farming job in and around the locality or migrates outside altogether, is driven by non-agricultural and non-rural opportunities and possibly marries of his own accord. The familial relationship characteristic to a peasant household is, for a sizable body of the rural agricultural households, broken. For most of the rest of the households, it is on the verge of breaking down. Such relationships, in almost all cases have, or are being, transformed. So is the relationship of this hypothetical young farmer with his childhood friends, the community, the caste group, local political and leadership structure and so on. These processes which have gradually and ceaselessly reduced the significance of older modes of livelihood generation, have also successfully delegitimized many of the local and national political structures, values and norms which were erected under the older modes. Illustratively, not only has the significance of a father—as an authority figure, as a controller of productive resources and as a commander and manager of household (and outside) labor—been reduced, but a similar 'fate' has delegitimized the often hereditary and unelected village leadership. The old modes of generation of livelihood and these (and other similar) sources of legitimacy of leadership were the frameworks within which the legitimacy of monarchy was built upon. On the other hand a diversified livelihood generation pattern and the consequent intensification of social differentiation—and individualized and achievement orientated—society is incompatible with politically and militarily empowered monarchy. With the delegitimation of the old mode of production and associated political leadership, the institution of monarchy, which had survived in a reduced form following a series of antimonarchical political movements—particularly those of 1980 and 1990, came crashing down. The reorganization of economic, political and social relationships is, thus, not limited to the family and the household,

but traverses the whole spectrum from the micro to the macro, including that of the state and the world.

It is worth noting here that four decades ago the agriculture sector used to produce 70 percent of GDP; now it is less than 40 percent. The structure of production and modes of generation of livelihood has, thus, been substantially diversified. For the first time ever only 48 percent—less than one-half of all male labor force participants are engaged in agriculture. More than one-half, then are engaged in diverse nonagricultural occupations. This is no less than a watershed moment in Nepal's history. More than eight million are attending educational institutions. This is also historically unprecedented. Most of these students, almost all at Grade 6 and up, are first generation post-primary school-goers. These students are not only gaining new information at school they are comparing, critiquing and developing new relationships, structures, norms and values, including in relation to family, community, caste, class, gender, state, and polity, economy and ideology. They are loosening the grip of the older structures including the family and the household, locality, pattern of work and livelihood, and so on. Many, for the first time ever, and very unlike their parents, are reading newspapers, listening to multiple radio stations and switching on and off a host of TV stations, including CNN and Aljazeera and MTV and ESPN.

Nepal, thus, finds itself in a vortex of multi-sided transitions, including in relation to economic, political and social relationships. Each new generation, very largely unlike those in the past, is starting to confront and reinvent a new social order. A large section is involved in labor migration and is fashioning a new livelihood. Indeed, more than one-fifth of the adult male population of the country—by any yardstick a very large number and proportion, works outside the country. Many more migrate inside the country looking for and often, although not always, finding temporary or seasonal wage, contractual or other kind of work. People who are enmeshed in such modes of livelihood gradually wean themselves away from modes of social and political structures and relationships which were adjuncts to older and different modes of earning a livelihood.

The political transition that has taken place, despite the fact that the CPNM was a—if not the—key protagonist, was primarily led by petty bourgeois and bourgeois interests. This by no means imply that the landless, the menial wage worker, the 'informal sector' worker and small entrepreneur, the very poor, etc. did not push the political movement through. They did. And not all of them or very possibly not even the majority of them belonged to or sympathized with the CPNM. But the motif of the transition, despite the 'leftwing' within the CPNM—which still aspires to an immediate New Democratic or even a Socialist transition, was one of capitalism and bourgeois democracy. The ethnic and regional struggles since the beginning of the 1990s were also primarily fueled by petty bourgeois and bourgeois interest although much of this was masked by populist notions of identity, which had indeed been diminished under the caste and clan, etc. system which also had increased the 'developmental gap' during several preceding decades.

Successive political movements, particularly those of 1950, 1980, 1990 and 2006 were not mutually isolated movements. Each of the movements built on the preceding one. In particular, while some have interpreted the 2006 movement as having been built on the failure of the 1990

one, it makes much more sense to argue that the 1990 movement was fundamentally instrumental in paving the way for the 2006 one. The 1990 political movement and political compact led to a far more legislatively bound monarchy, legalized political association and political parties and allowed a host of freedoms including freedom of speech and media. Minus these conditions, freedoms and rights—including, of course, the loss of rights and freedoms during the short lived direct monarchical rule immediately preceding the 2006 movement—the 2006 movement would very probably not have succeeded. In addition, of course, and at the more proximate agency level, the CPNM military strategy and strength, the SPA's political legitimacy and the 12-point agreement between the two political forces sounded the death knell of monarchy. Of course, the last king's own lack of foresight and foolhardiness—which was largely a historical outcome itself—was also, to an extent, responsible for the demise of monarchy.

Sustaining the new republic is by no means an easy task. It requires economic and political reform on a number of fronts. The crux of this reform is the creation of large-scale additional gainful employment opportunities and the education, skilling and re-skilling of a large number of young people. The recent outflow of a large proportion of youth away from home-centered production to the wider labor market is large and bears a huge political potential. The ethnic and regional movement also acquires much of its strength from this outflow. This outflow can be utilized to build a new society only if the new emerging state can harness the productive energy through much expanded private and government investment, raised access and quality of education and skill and appropriate—labor-friendly and capital-respectful—labor laws. It should be noted that under adverse conditions, this outflow, un-tethered from old anchors, modes of livelihood generation and belongingness, bears the potentials to undo the emerging state and usher in a period of instability, violence and anarchy.