

**Is there a middle ground?
Political and economic platforms of political actors in Nepal**

By
Chaitanya Mishra
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu
mishrachaitanya@gmail.com

Introduction

Nepal is, once again, at a crossroad. The most obvious indicator of this is that the special session of the legislature ended on November 4, 2007, making early elections to the constituent assembly (CA) more unlikely, by increasing the distance between the principal political parties--including among those within the government, and without deliberating on and recommending an approximate date for the CA. A new regular session of the legislature has been called for the third week of November but it is far from certain how the government will handle the directives given by the special session to the executive. The directives, in effect, call for a revision of specific clauses of the interim constitution (IC), which require a two-thirds vote in the legislature, which is unlikely to be commanded by the parties that have forwarded the directives. Normally, the failure to command votes required to effect changes in the IC would have no effect on the extremely important agenda of CA elections and the parties who failed to garner the votes for the revision of the constitution would go to the people and seek their votes for the plank. But these are not normal times and, if precedence is any guide, party(ies) and other political forces may actively block the entire CA agenda on this account.

The election to the CA had earlier been postponed twice, i.e. in June 2007 and November 2007. The November postponement was on account of differences, principally between the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (NCP-UML) and Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) over whether the current legislature or the constituent assembly is the legitimate political platform to decide on the final status of monarchy, and whether the electoral system to be applied during the CA ought to be a mix of the first-past-the-post model and the proportional model or should it be fully proportional. It should be noted that the interim constitution of 2007, agreed to by all the three parties--as well as all other parties represented in the legislature--already lays down the norms regarding these two issues—that the electoral system to be adopted shall be a mixed system and that the final status of monarchy shall be decided upon during the first meeting of the CA. The very late CPN-M stand for abrogation of monarchy by the current legislature and for a fully proportional electoral system, while not completely without merit, has been charged with seriously upsetting the expected and agreed political course. The compromise resolution forwarded by the CPN-UML on abrogation of monarchy has also been charged with stepping backward from the existing provision on the matter in the interim constitution.

The CA, of course, would be the supreme body to lay down a new set of political-legal and other institutions and rules for governing the country. In doing so, it was widely expected to abrogate monarchy and herald a republic based on popular will and popular sovereignty. A successful election to the CA was also expected to lead to the final withdrawal of the 11-year long regime of armed conflict implemented by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M). In the mean time, the government and the legislature have failed to announce new elections to the CA. Further, with two postponements in the background, a third announcement of an election will remain suspect until it is finally consummated. Key political uncertainties, in addition, will definitely lurk in the background and at least sporadic sequence of violence and lawlessness could not be ruled out until a CA completes its deliberations and finally decides on a constitution. But the failure to hold an election to the CA, which was the principal politically substantive as well as strategic platform on which the cooperation, starting with the 12-point agreement of November 2005, between the established and parliamentary political parties on the one hand and the insurgent and extra-legal CPN-M on the other means that the most important step of defining, legitimizing and building a future remains to be taken. Nor can the key elements of an ostensibly discarded past be fully illegitimated and dismantled until a future is at least popularly and legitimately sketched.

In consequence, a widespread and intense sense of uncertainty and foreboding is once again etched across newspaper headlines as well as the faces of and conversations among lay citizens. This uncertainty and foreboding is also easily discernable in the weak implementation of the rule of law, frequent closure of highways and other public facilities, often unreasonable strikes at places of work, ethnicist, regionalist and religious-fundamentalist violence, a spurt in political and criminal abduction, and in the weak rate and pattern of growth of employment and economy. The prospect of expanded violence and lawlessness is suddenly heightened. The postponement of the election to the CA, thus, at times seems to be a precursor of a political unraveling at different levels. It may potentially heighten conflict within the multiparty government, which may lead to its fall. It may signify an end to a fairly ambient and cooperative relationship among the political parties—the CPN-M and the rest in particular—in defining the rules of the acceptable political, electoral, and possibly military, norms and maneuvers. Indeed, it may, at another extreme, lead to the resumption of organized and armed violence which in turn may, in the absence of a strong political center, feed expanded civil unrest of the ethnicist, regionalist, federalist, localist, fundamentalist and/or downright criminal kinds. This, in turn, may lead to a rise of monarchical, militarist and rightist forces ostensibly in order ‘to quell widespread violence’. Such violence may also invite international political and military intervention. Indeed, the possibility of such intervention has been raised by a couple of current and former political and military leaders in India. The UN itself, probably wary of the waywardness and tardiness of some of the political actors and the political process, has hinted that it could be more effective and helpful with a broader mandate than currently available to the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN).

Yet, the above portrays only one side of the current reality. The other side is one of serious and sustained preparation of common planks and platforms by the same set of political actors during the last two years. The preparation of a common platform began in

February 2005 when King Gyanendra carried out a royal coup and usurped the state executive authority. The triangular contest between the king, the seven- (parliamentary) party alliance (SPA) and the CPN-M suddenly began to take shape as a bilateral contest when the latter two political forces most significantly agreed in November 2005, in a broad ranging 12-point agreement, to implement popular rule through the political mechanism of CA, which would abrogate the very foundation of monarchical authority of 'granting a constitution to his subjects'. Historically increasingly invalidated and structurally incommensurate with rapidly changing society and polity, the monarchy conceded defeat following the 3-week-long and large-scale April 2006 popular movement. The restored House of Representatives (HOR) then declared itself sovereign, removed the king as the supreme commander of the army, and declared that Nepal would henceforth be a secular rather than a Hindu state. The SPA and the CPNM, in June 2006, then agreed to draft an interim constitution to administer the affairs of the state. The SPA and the CPN-M subsequently, in November 2006, signed a comprehensive peace agreement, which underlined the significance of a suitable constitution both for the promotion of peace and social and economic inequality. The interim constitution was itself promulgated in January 2007. The SPA and the CPNM then worked together in the interim legislature and the interim government.

The range and intensity of collaboration between the two set of political actors for the period November 2005-November 2007 was, by any yardstick, not only impressive but also astounding, considering the facts that the two sets of actors belonged to two political, economic and ideological poles. The SPA was a conglomerate of parliamentary democratic parties while the CPN-M was, as the name implies, a Maoist party which valorized the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s, put its faith on one-party state, saw itself as the only active revolutionary communist party in across the world after the demise of the Peruvian *Sendoro Luminoso*, had become a key member of the Revolutionary International Movement composed of the Maoist parties across the world, and was actively and militarily-successfully waging a decade-long 'people's war' against both the monarchical as well as the parliamentary regimes in Nepal. From the point of view of the SPA, the collaboration was necessary because it had been fast losing ground within a triangular contest. Both the CPN-M and the king, in their separate but similar ways sought to dismantle the parliamentary system. (In CPN-M leader BR Bhattarai's words, the former king and the CPN-M were 'working separately but in unison' in several ways.) The CPN-M and SPA collaboration, however, also became possible because the CPNM was, beginning late 2003, reconsidering its political program. The New Democratic political-economic platform (which was initially formulated by Mao Zedong in the late 1930s and early 1940s as a platform against both internal warlordism and external colonialism and as a 'historically necessary' transitional political, economic and ideological precursor to full-fledged socialism) very slowly started to inch towards a transitional stage geared to the 'completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution'. Other phrases utilized by the CPN-M to characterize the new platform were 'an improved version of bourgeois democracy' and a political-economic platform that would be 'in keeping with socialism in the 21st century'. A concession against a proletarian state and in favor of a multiparty political system was certainly one of the key elements of a bourgeois democracy. (Of course, there was, and there may very

well be pronounced differences within the CPN-M on whether the parties would be 'mutually collaborative' or competitive and so on.) The call for a bourgeois democratic revolution, of course, also was a mandate in favor of capitalism, notwithstanding the fact that the CPN-M 'capitalistic' call was for one of the non-imperialist and national variety.

Problems and objectives

In this context, is the current divergence between the political forces and the consequent failure to hold the CA a definitive case of 'so near yet so far'? Is Nepal likely to continue to remain at the crossroads rather indefinitely? With a much-weakened center and a widespread and much-strengthened pluralist, regionalist, ethnicist, federalist, localist, religiously fundamentalist and other centrifugal politicized institutions and actors, many of which are also mutually contradictory, is Nepal likely to go back to organized violence? On the other side of the equation, are there enough commonalities—a 'middle ground,' as it were--between the political, i.e. the parliamentary parties, the CPN-M, the regionalist, ethnicist, federalist, localist, religiously fundamentalist and other similar forces? In addition, in the international domain is an important political structure and actor as well. Structurally, the world and regional capitalist and bourgeois democratic system is the major condition within which much of the middle ground has to be identified. The middle ground, in addition, should not be completely disagreeable to the immediate regional and global actors, e.g. India, China, the US, the EU and the UN.

Clearly, the presence of such a middle ground would inhibit an indefinite stay at the crossroad or a return to armed conflict and descent into a civil war, generalized violence and anarchy, and could instead possibly help to erect a platform of at least conflictual cooperation. In essence, while political forces would necessarily pursue their self-interest, they could broadly frame the 'rules of the game' and largely promote party self-interest within the frame of a middle ground. In doing so, the parliamentary parties and the CPN-M could also possibly give expression to and broadly subsume other politically pluralist and centrifugal forces, institutions and tendencies while at the same time creating a strong center. If this is the case, what are the possible political, economic and ideological platforms that this particular set of political forces could build and utilize to this end? Could the varied imaginations of the past, present and future, some of which are already sketched in the evolving and already voluminous literature on the 'restructuring of the state' as well as the interim constitution of 2007, potentially possess an overarching and broad common core? What bearings would these platforms have on the resolution of the current round of impasse over the final status of monarchy and fully proportional electoral system?

This paper seeks to arrive at preliminary answers to the questions raised in the previous two paragraphs. Essentially it attempts to juxtapose the broader world, regional and national historical and structural context on the one hand and the platforms of political forces on the other in order to identify a potential overarching common core. An identification of such an overarching and longer term 'middle ground', such as the one provided by the interim constitution of 2007, may not only possess longer term utility but also bear useful implications for the resolution of specific disputes such as those related to the final status of monarchy and the design of the electoral system. Such a middle

ground may also be occupied, despite the polarization and contradictions, by key political forces and, in this specific sense, the political forces may work in unison.

Political platform and ‘middle ground’

It should be noted, to begin with, that the SPA and the CPN-M have not come out with well-elaborated platforms. This is even more so with respect many other political forces. Often, given the fact that platforms respond to specific and current events rather than to a potentially overarching and longer-term common core, a few planks of the platforms remain over-elaborated while many more and potentially far more important planks remain under-elaborated. The planks will certainly become clearer during the elections to the CA. As it is, the analysis here relies on current pronouncements, older statements as well as deductions from practices specific to particular political forces.

It appears useful to start with three different attributes of political planks and political platforms. First, political planks and platforms can range from the very specific to the very general. (A political platform can be defined as a more or less coherent set of political planks, which of course also means that the less coherent—in relation to the set as a whole—planks will also be in a state of contradiction both in relation to one another and in relation to the set as a whole.) The identification of a purported ‘middle ground’, which in this case is a more or less coherent set of common features of political platforms defined by different political forces, accordingly, can range from the very specific to the very general. Platforms, when considered at the very specific or concrete level (e.g. at the level of attributes of planks and sub-planks or in the application of a general enunciation to a specific case or process), would certainly seem to possess huge array of diversity, large-scale disorderliness and sharp contradictions. Indeed, even a single platform would exhibit considerable internal diversity, disorderliness and contradiction when viewed in its multifarious concrete manifestations. The level at which the platforms should be reviewed, therefore, are at a fairly high level of abstractness or generality. A relatively high level of generality does not necessarily prohibit a consideration of more specific manifestation of the major planks.

Second, political platforms and middle grounds are not fixed but dynamic sites. Even at the relatively abstract and general level, the attributes of political platforms can undergo a significant transition within a short span of time. Such a transition is led buy a number of factors or combinations thereof. Among these are: (a) shifting internal balance of power among different factions of a political force, (b) recent successes enjoyed by a political force, including in relation to alliance building, which may lead to an entrenchment and/or expansion of its existing political platform, (c) entry into a bargaining sequence with other political forces, within which a party may harden or broaden its existing political stance for positional advantages, (d) major transition in the mode of acquisition of power, e.g. by means of people’s war to popular political revolt to electoral success, and (e) transitions in the relative significance of the external environment, e.g. because of expansion, intensification or otherwise of international ties at the immediate neighborhood, regional and global levels such as through globalization and (f) changes in the balance of power at the neighborhood, regional and global levels, e.g. because of differences in economic and financial growth, political unity and/or military prowess.

That a political platform and a middle ground is not a static location hardly needs to be overemphasized: The platforms of all political forces and hence the location of a middle ground is very different now compared to what these would have been two years ago. At that time, a middle ground would most likely have promoted a platform for temporary suspension of armed action and negotiation and/or a platform for bringing the SPA and the CPN-M against the monarchy. This also implies that a middle ground is not a tensionless and 'blissful' location: It is very much subject to the push and pull of immediate political forces, global and regional—both bilateral and multilateral—forces, and short and medium run historical transitions.

Third, and most importantly, political platforms are not primarily psychological products; they cannot be 'wished in' and 'wished out' by the party leadership or rank and file although, as noted, political forces can influence the rank and file as well as some political outcomes. In addition, political forces do puff up and embellish their platforms or particular planks thereof for bargaining and positional advantage. To be sure, there are 'open' and 'closed' hands, that political forces utilize during negotiations. It has to be emphasized puffing up may be particularly acute at this time because of the ongoing negotiations at various levels, including party level negotiations. Puffing up is aggressively being utilized for power plays at the local, regional and HOR levels and for negotiations with sub-national groups, parties as well as international actors. (Puffing up, of course, also has internal uses: As everywhere and at all times, it is a great party unifier.)

On the other hand, and much more importantly for the medium and the long run, political platforms, particularly at the more general and abstract levels, are historical products and are socially structured in definite ways. Platforms are products of history at several levels, e.g. at the level of the party itself, at the level of the region, class, country, etc. and at the level of the neighborhood and, increasingly with the rise and further development of the integrated world capitalist system—which has led to both globalization and imperialism—at the level of the region and the world. As a corollary, the platform of a political force undergoes changes as a consequence of a transition in the historical process at different structural levels.

World and regional context

Viewed in this light, the platforms prepared and being utilized by the multiple political actors are partially historically valid even as the platforms contain much subjective rumination and staged power play. (The 'subjective' is often deeply held; it is not a consciously utilized bargaining device. That it is deeply held, however, does not make the subjective historically valid. The staged power play, on the other hand, is a self-consciously utilized bargaining device.) In order to inquire whether there is indeed a middle ground, it is fundamentally important to distinguish between a subjective wish list on the one hand and historically mature and imminently maturing mandates and possibilities on the other. Political actors that identify and act upon mature and imminently maturing historical mandates and possibilities execute a valid, progressive and politically liberating agency role. On the other hand, political actors, which force subjective rumination as an objective realization or imminently maturing tendency of

history, execute either a reactionary or an extreme leftwing blunder. While this is simple enough, the difficulty lies in the fact that a political actor is not often a unified whole. It may have many factions that possess diverse interpretations of the objective and the subjective.

The historical context in question has many layers and at once comprises the existing and evolving nature of the world, regional, national and the sub-national, e.g. regional, local, ethnic, religious, etc. level systems. These systems have definite political, military, economic, financial, cultural, ideological, etc. features. A political platform is largely a response to these systems and features. In part, a platform is, of course, also an instrument for managing and changing such systems and features.

Substantively and at the encompassing world-historical level, the continuing development and vitality of the capitalist world system and the weakening of non-capitalist as well as national capitalist systems across the world—in relation to economy, polity and culture--necessarily conditions and limits at least the medium and very probably the longish run alternative political-economic options for all countries of the world, most obviously for a peripheral and dependent formation such as Nepal. This becomes even clearer and comes much nearer to home as one considers the fact that it is Nepal's two immediate neighbors, India and China which have instituted political, economic and ideological systems which have led them to the highest rate of capitalist growth the world over within the last couple of decades (more precisely, three decades in the case of China and two in the case of India). The very high rate of growth in India and China is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. China's economy is slated to rival that of the US during a couple of decades and the living standard of one-fourth of India's population already rivals that of Europe. It is a 'strange' working out of history that both of Nepal's neighbors are growing at the fastest and very high rate. It is, in a way, stranger still that this is taking place simultaneously.

This also implies, on the other hand, that this is a truly immense and unprecedented opportunity for political forces in Nepal to prepare political platforms that seek to build upon and benefit from. This is an objective and concrete opportunity at hand, not a deduction from a subjective interpretation of 'history'. This, however, also means that the nature of the political economy of Nepal and its overarching political and economic platform should not continue to be qualitatively different from that of India and China. Major and sharp differences in policies between India and China on the one hand and Nepal on the other will, by the medium run, not only generate and/or exacerbate dependence and contradictions in a particular sphere but will also have pronounced cross-sphere implications. Major differences in the economic platform and political power between the two sets of countries are certain to generate or exacerbate political, military, ethnic, demographic, etc. tensions between them. (The 'undue influence of India in the ongoing political transition, as in the previous ones, is something that has already found muted yet frequent discussion in the press in Kathmandu. This is obviously a consequence of an increasing platform and attainment gap between India on the one hand and Nepal on the other.) A serious or growing rift with powerful neighbors is certainly not something Nepal can afford.

In the mean time, the capitalist mode, for this phase of history, also opens up the imminent internal possibilities of growing out not only of the remains of pre-capitalist formations but also of the possibility of gradually weaning itself out of the broadly and deeply peripheral capitalist form and of building a more developed capitalism. Samir Amin (and, to a certain extent, all the *dependentistas* including the early Andre Gunder Frank) described and explained underdevelopment well enough, i.e. expanding disarticulation within a given national or regional frontier as a consequence of capitalist development elsewhere. But while he read the past well, he was myopic and thus ahistorical while gazing at the future: While the past had a history, the future was frozen. The process of disarticulation, while real, could not be sustained at an accelerated or even at a given rate forever. Disarticulation would become costlier even to those who are at the forefront of disarticulation; a disarticulated economy would be characterized by cheaper labor which national or international capitalism would be happy to utilize; nations and peoples would come to learn of the 'tricks of the trade' during the process of disarticulation; and so forth. Indeed, the costs required to support sustained and highly integrated articulation, e.g. spread of military bases across the world, other escalating security costs, the rise of middle and managerial class at home, etc., would increase as well and the hegemonic disarticulating structure would begin to weaken and falter. In a sense, hegemony would devour itself. That both articulation and disarticulation could not continue to a very long future is among what Immanuel Wallerstein taught us: That hegemony cannot last forever and that a hegemon gives way to another--as the Dutch did to the English and as the English did to the North Americans. These are crucial lessons political forces in Nepal, particularly those in the left, have to learn at least for the longish future. Platforms of political forces can learn from its giant and fast-growing neighbors and Nepal can dovetail its economic policies to those of its neighbors, and then it can integrate its economy to those of its neighbors.

Economic learning, dovetailing and integrating, on the other hand, bear definite political, ideological, cultural, etc. implications. One cannot, at least in the longish run, integrate on the economic domain without instituting commensurate political, ideological, cultural, etc. transition. Without it, the growth of the economy will tend to drag after a definite period or the returns from economic growth will tend to be cornered by a particular class or subgroup, in which case the prospects of violence and forceful political transition would tend to heighten. Some, therefore, have argued that Indian growth pattern is much more sustainable than the Chinese growth pattern, buffered and nourished as it is by political freedom at the individual and party levels.

It is another 'strange' working out of history that neither of the two neighbors has yet taken to the truly neo-liberal mold. It could legitimately be argued that, in their politically and otherwise different ways, they are slowly but gradually shaping up as social democratic political-economic systems. The significant 'social' content of India's economic policy and distribution system has not suffered a lapse as a consequence of its embrace of market friendly policies since the early 1990s. Indeed, the scope of employment and social welfare has widened during the past two decades. China's market socialism has performed reasonably well from the redistributive point of view as well.

While there is much that both India and China must do on the redistributive front, the new regimes in the two countries have reduced poverty in far larger numbers and proportions as well as far faster than the old regimes there, which were doctrinally democratic socialist and socialist, respectively, but which failed to push performance to a high level. No doctrine, on the other hand, can thrive prolonged underperformance.

These potentially huge planks on growth, redistribution, empowerment, citizenship, and indeed the shaping up of full-scale political economic systems, however, have largely been lost to political forces in Nepal, even during this period of significant social and political transition, and despite the fact that the new political economic systems are taking shape just across the southern and northern borders. The transition is hardly ever defined or platformed as a shaper of Nepal's future relations with the world at large and the neighbors in particular. Surely, some political forces have viewed the 2006 political transition (as also the 1990 and earlier transitions) as having been accomplished in part due to the 'goodwill' of neighboring and other countries. Some others, on the other hand, have also held the view that a few countries retarded the scope and intensity of the current (as well as earlier) transitions. Some, in addition, have also held the view that the transition has the potential to undo Nepal's sovereignty. But both how the transition took shape as a world-historical event and how the event or the process could be utilized to gainfully shape Nepal's international economic, political and other relations largely remains to be platformed by political forces in Nepal. There could be much middle ground found here by the otherwise highly contentious political forces. Part of a middle ground could evolve out of an explicit recognition of this immense and unprecedented opportunity. An encompassing and longer-term historical imagination could be an aid to legitimately devalue lesser preoccupations.

Party platforms

The NC platform has increasingly taken a liberal and to a significant extent, and under sustained pressure both from its business constituency as well as multilateral organizations, a neoliberal stance to growth and redistribution. The old guard there still retains its some of its old Fabian-Nehruvian socialist leaning—which, however, are largely administered within patrimonial and overly-bureaucratized structures—but increasingly finds itself outflanked by its younger leaders who find themselves more attuned to free-market principles and to the platforms of neoliberal multilateral organizations. In essence, the NC platform adequately recognizes the significance political freedom and economic growth but is conservative in relation to redistribution.

The CPN-UML platform is not well defined either with respect to growth or redistribution. Politically, it has successfully shed its doctrine of a single-party state and is widely regarded as an upholder of the multiparty system. Economically, while it is shedding the old statist ideology and even as it has increasingly come to recognize the significance of the market, the CPN-UML economic platform often appears to be in the middle of everywhere. As a nominally communist party, it has found it difficult to take on or accept the tag of a social democratic party despite the fact that much of the party leadership would be happy with a social democratic banner.

The CPN-M is at a crucial juncture of its evolution and reformulation of its policy and program. Just a few years ago, the CPN-M was committed to the New Democratic political-economic platform, which was classically defined as a transitional platform that would be utilized to clear the way for a socialist state. This is what led to the strategy of 'people's war'. The fundamental political-ideological transition from allegiance to a program of New Democratic state to a program that would seek to 'complete the bourgeois democratic revolution' is what led the CPN-M to the conclusion that 'people's war', by itself, was not an adequate strategy. Bourgeois democratic revolution could not be completed without 'roping in,' and working together with, bourgeois democratic parliamentary parties. This is what led to a CPN-M rapprochement with the parliamentary parties, who were being rapidly caged in by King Gyanendra and monarchy. The rapprochement has paid back, among others, in terms of the nature of the 2006 political transition and the 2007 interim constitution. But, and while the details are still sketchy, it appears that the political-ideological transition within the CPN-M is far from complete and the bourgeois democratic platform remains to be fully approved even as a transitional mode by several, possibly many middle and top ranked leaders within the CPN-M. This set of leaders apparently is politically and ideologically convinced that it is an appropriate time to push for a New Democratic state right away and that such a state could begin preparing the society for an eventual transition to a socialist platform. Indeed, this view was endorsed by the CPN-M as a party on the eve of the declaration of 'people's war'. At that time, it was categorically declared that the objective conditions for 'people's war', which would lead to a New Democratic state, were already mature and that false subjective ideological readings had for long been responsible for postponing the ultimate plunge into a 'people's war'.

The CPN-M apparently also views at the 2006 and ongoing political transition with considerable ambivalence. Even as the CPN-M views the transition with satisfaction and pride, some of its top leaders time and again just prior to April 2006 argued that were it not for regional and global powers and had the armed conflict been limited to the CPN-M army and the royal army, Nepal would inevitably have taken shape as a New Democratic state. It would seem that the statement reflects—to be sure in relation to the pre-April 2006 context, as much a longing for the New Democratic platform as an unwillingness or even opposition to learn from the political-economic platforms of other countries, including the two immediate neighbors. On the other hand, top CPN-M leaders have also repeatedly noted that the transitional political-economic platform would be bourgeois democratic in character. The relative role of the state and political forces and the capitalist bourgeoisie in leading the bourgeois democratic program, however, remains unelaborated.

The course of the ambivalence and the outcome of the apparent political and ideological struggle within the CPN-M are obviously of crucial significance for an overarching CPN-M political-economic platform. In addition, the CPN-M, by all accounts, is also engaged in an ideological struggle within the Revolutionary International Movement, which is a coalition of Maoist political forces worldwide, as well as the Communist Party of India-Maoist, over the CPN-M's 'strategic (i.e. not only tactical) suspension of people's war', joining of the government, and so on. Given the recent history of the CPN-M as a radical

communist party, the internal and external struggle it is apparently facing and the constituency it believes it caters to is, at least in the short run, unlikely to endorse a platform that does not give some—possibly even a symbolic—space to the socialized mode. A ‘radical’ set of CPNM leaders may well argue that the absence of such space for ‘collective economy’, which was of course practiced at a large scale in the Soviet Union and China and which was also brought into operation by the CPN-M in a few locations during the latter period of the ‘people’s war’, constitutes a betrayal of the entire platform on which ‘people’s war’ was founded. On the other hand, and in an expected twist of party politics, the socialist platform of proportional representation along class lines put up by the tiny Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party (NMKP) was disapproved during a recent HOR deliberation by all non-NMKP legislators, including those in the CPN-M (in favor of proportional representation along caste-ist, ethnicist and regionalist lines).

An aggressively social democratic platform, on the other hand, is likely to run into trouble with the centrist and rightist political parties and forces and parties, e.g. Nepali Congress Party, Rastriya Parajatantra Party, Rastriya Janashakti Party, both factions of the Sadbhavana Party, as well as significant sections of the NC and even the CPN-UML. In addition, while elaborate platforms are lacking, it can be argued that ethnicist and regionalist forces, because such forces have to claim that they speak for ‘all peoples’ within an ethnic group and/or a region regardless of the ownership or socioeconomic status of constituent locales, households and members—so as to keep the flock together, are likely to serve the center or the right. There is a long history of the right playing the ethnicist and regionalist cards, including in the monarchical Panchayat system. In addition, having erected, supported or succumbed to the ethnicist and regionalist platforms, most political parties would be wary, within the medium run, of antagonizing the ethnicist and regionalist platforms in the interests of an aggressive social democratic platform. Such a platform may particularly run counter to the interests of the relatively rapidly expanding size and clout of the petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie in the Tarai urban areas, which are likely to economically and demographically grow relatively faster in the future. The Tarai urban areas are also likely to acquire a much-enhanced political clout.

The implementation of an aggressive social democratic platform, or even a mild social democratic platform, depends fundamentally on a long term compact between the larger and commercial landholders, petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie on the one hand and small peasants and laborers on the other, together with their respective political representatives in the form of parties and their members. A social democratic platform requires a political-ideological commitment to the plank of essential equality among human beings and/or a pragmatic orientation on investing material resources in the form of taxes and so forth for insuring popular engagement, security, peace and peaceful transition. It requires an ‘active’ state, which can judiciously prevail on the resource-rich to plough back part of the profit, income or even produce to a non-wage fund which is redistributed back to the small peasant and the laborer at various stages of life, e.g. during unemployment, sickness, old age. The level of living of the small peasant and the worker thus becomes partially detached from the wage bill and other sources of personal and household income, e.g. farm produce. In addition, implementation of targeted anti-

poverty and pro-employment policies, minimum wage policies, policies that prohibit exploitative and unfair labor practices, targeted programs and subsidies on education, food, health, etc. can also be included within the rubric of social democracy. Such a platform is also ideally founded on a nonsectarian, non-regional and 'secular' platform of universal individual citizenship.

But the social democratic platform cannot beggar the investor, the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. Instead, within the limits set by a regulatory authority of the state which, among others, lays down a set of rules which govern fair labor practice, the platform privileges the bourgeoisie to drive the engine of production, employment, profit, value creation and so forth. The engine is driven by private interests and not by collective, bureaucratic or patrimonial or political-party or trade union interests. Essentially, the social democratic platform valorizes private interests as much as it valorizes social interests. It is forced to tread a fine balance which irresponsible political parties and rapacious enterprises can easily damage and, during its infancy in particular, grind to a halt.

As is the case with politicians in many other places, none of the political forces has prepared a definite platform for building institutions and, in particular, raising resources to begin implementing even a milder version of social democracy. Instituting and implementing universal income and other tax laws and/or raising the coverage and rate of income and other taxes have been very difficult for parties and politicians. This is particularly difficult for politicians in Nepal who have enjoyed the 'free lunch' of patrimonial programs and expenditures and international loans and grants. On the other hand, the social democratic platform, essentially, is founded on co-dependence, autonomy and self-respect. It is obvious that international assistance will not and should not fund social democracy at home.

Platform on 'restructuring of state'

The interim constitution of 2007—and subsequent amendments made to some its provisions—has laid down certain highly significant provisions to restructure the old state of Nepal. Some of the restructured provisions have already been implemented and some others have been opened up for restructuring through the deliberation and decision of the CA. The suspended state of monarchy and the taking over of the responsibility of the head of the state by the prime minister, the declaration of a secular and federal state, and the mixed electoral system which valorizes the pluralness of the society in terms of caste, ethnicity, gender and region, affirmative action, and a new and expanded set of rights, including those on food, education and health are some of the more important middle grounds agreed to by all political forces.

On the other hand, there are several areas on which agreements have been arrived at. The ethnicist and regionalist issues are the more important in this category. The ethnicist and regionalist platform has had a long history and political practice. (The caste-ist and, of course, gendered as well as religiously hierarchized political practice also has had a long history as well.) The platform can therefore usefully be divided into two: the 'old ethnicist/old regionalist' platform (OERP; OEP/ORP) and the 'new ethnicist/new

regionalist' platform (NERP; NEP/NRP). The OEP, for a long period of history, categorized peoples in terms of caste and ethnicity. The collective nonmaterial and material attributes of the high caste groups, e, g, 'purity', language, religious faith, etc., were valorized over others and members of high caste groups, in consort with the state, exercised hegemony over others, including ethnic groups. However, while members of the high caste groups did tend to utilize these religion and state supported privileges to expand life opportunities, this was not always successful. In consequence, there were significant local variations in how much caste belongingness mattered in advancing material or even nonmaterial gains. Ownership of productive resources certainly surpassed caste privileges in temporal matters. Nonetheless, and in general, the state (and the society) did tend to privilege members of the high caste category and Hindu religion over others. More concretely, this privilege accrued, first, from the interface of Nepali language with education and non-agricultural employment opportunities in public and private domains and from the operation of kinship, caste and 'old boy's' network. These forms of interface were largely limited to urban areas and educational institutions and the civil service, including the security apparatus. That is, the interface was much less operative in the much larger rural areas. The low socioeconomic attainment of members of high caste groups in the western and far western Hills, where they are in plurality or majority, is proof enough. But because the administration was centralized, the small but far-flung bureaucracy imbibed and sought to valorize attributes of the center and the high caste groups over the local and that of lower caste and ethnic groups. The second interface between the state on the one hand and caste and ethnicity on the other, which was related to caste and ethnicity (and gender) specific application of laws and rules of punishment and which was in principle operative from 1854 AD at the latest to 1962, had a much wider coverage. That the first relatively restricted interface is far more frequently and intensely invoked than the second one in the ethnicist discourse today is a reminder of the fact that the discourse, to a very large extent, is not of a retributive but restitutive nature.

The ORP was born out of the imposition of a frontier-like political and economic relationship by the Hill-based Gorkhali state to a resource-rich plains area and peoples. The Hill state and its functionaries prized the plains for forest products, fertile agricultural land and for the expanding colonial-capitalist market across the border in India where forest and agricultural produce could be sold. The area could also potentially unite a feuding aristocracy, support a larger civil and military bureaucracy, and serve as protective belt to the Hill heartlands, Kathmandu in particular. Local and immigrant laborers from across the border, as frontiers people, were regarded as non-natives. (Of course, given the autocratic nature of the regime, the peoples in the Hills were no citizens either.) Because the 'non-natives' could not be trusted, they had to procure a passport to visit the capital and they could not enroll in the army. This situation lasted till the 1950s. Some of the elements continue today.

The post 1950 political-economic platform of 'development' exerted contradictory pulls, often exacerbating the divide among the high caste, particularly urban high caste groups and other urban residents on the one hand and the low caste, ethnic and Tarai, including Madhesi, peoples on the other. The platform led to sharp a divergence in the literacy and

schooling rate among the high caste groups, low caste groups, ethnic groups, gender groups and regional groups, including in the Tarai and the western and far western regions and between the rural and the urban areas. The overall literacy rate of about 5 percent in 1950 did not allow for a large intercaste, caste/ethnic, regional, gender and rural-urban gap. The literacy rate, in particular, began to pick up relatively rapidly since the implementation of the New National Educational System Plan in the early 1970s. The rise in literacy was far from neutral with respect to caste, ethnicity, gender and region and rural and urban residence. The 'literacy divergence' between these groups widened right till the end of the 1980s, i.e. the widening lasted for almost two generations. Literacy and school education, on the other hand, was foundational to nonagricultural and urban jobs. Access to such jobs in the expanding bureaucracy, the security agencies, educational institutions as well as in the private sector was much easier for school educated members of the high caste groups, particularly those who lived in or moved to the urban areas. Divergence also widened in infant mortality, longevity and the state of health in general among and between the caste, ethnic, regional, and rural-urban groups. A similar process was also at work in different other capability domains. In a sense, therefore, it could be argued that the OERP, though 'really old', came in full bloom within the specific nature of the post-1950 political-economic and 'developmental' platform. The 'traditional' hierarchical framework, the centralized nature of the state, the specific nature of 'developmental' platform and the birth and expansion of international financial and policy assistance together created a brew that was deadly for equity and equal citizenship. This brew was also responsible for much of what now goes under the rubric of exclusion.

There were other currents at work. The malaria control program starting the mid-1950s and more direct state encouragement led many members of caste and ethnic groups in the Hills migrate to the Tarai not only seasonally but also permanently. State sponsored and 'spontaneous' resettlement programs (which continued right to the 1990s) led to large migratory streams to the Tarai. This led, in places, to agricultural land, pasture and labor related conflicts between the Hill migrants and the Madhesis and later came to symbolize the 'colonialism' of the Hill dwellers vis-à-vis the Tarai and the Madhesis. The Madhesis, including the poorest of them, however, were never allowed to benefit from the resettlement programs. The 1964 land reform act, on the other hand, awarded partial proprietary rights to agricultural tenants most of whom were Madhesis. The act also fixed ownership ceiling over agricultural land. Both of these platforms, despite implementational flaws, benefited the medium and small farmers in the Tarai, including the Madhesis. In addition, the principal road artery of the country, the East-West Highway, was constructed along the northern border of the Tarai, which led to large-scale public and private investment along the corridor and the Tarai district headquarters. In consequence, employment opportunities in agriculture, industry as well as services expanded substantially in the region, unlike in the Hills. In part because of these processes, both access to and quality of social services improved relatively rapidly in the region. The highway also became a thriving commercial corridor. The economic center of gravity of the country had decidedly shifted to the Tarai. From the economic equity point of view, the Madhesi charge of colonialism no longer holds.

The recent ethnic and regional (in relation to the Hill and the Tarai) upsurge has, in part, has to be seen in this light. It should be noted that despite the fact that the two upsurges are widely interpreted in a discrete and segregated manner, the two are largely historically and structurally homologous. To be sure, the two are not exactly alike and one can identify specificities to each. But the historical and structural core is largely the same. And it is not only that the two were the historical 'other' to the ruling high caste groups and that the two diverged widely due to the post-1950 political-economic and developmental platform. In both instances, the majority of the current generation is seeking to make its own life away from the households it was born to. The rapidly sharpening contradiction between the family farm on the one hand and family labor on the other means that bulk of this generation does not expect to live (only) by farming the family operated plot. The increased longevity of the previous generation also means that inheritance of productive assets may have been significantly delayed compared to the previous generation. This is also a generation, where a majority is literate and significant proportions has graduated not only from the primary but also the secondary school. If the immediately preceding one was the initial NNEP generation, much of the present belongs to the school wave of the mid to late 1980s when the gap between the upper caste groups and the others had started to narrow. In essence, this is the first generation from laboring, landless, and small farmer households, lower caste groups, ethnic groups and Tarai and Madhesi rural areas who acquired literacy and education and is both forced, and at the same time willing, to attempt making a living independently from parents and places of origin. The large expansion of migratory stream to West and Southeast Asia is, on the supply side, a consequence of this search for independent living.

The changing structure of the economy in which agriculture has a much lower share—both in terms of production, productivity increase as well as employment and the increase in the share of service sector jobs compared to that in the previous generation has come in handy to this new generation. The expansion of commerce and the communication network--the East-West Highway and north-south link roads particular has also been helpful to this generation. But the magnitude of supply of such jobs is far smaller than the demand for it. The ethnic and Madhesi nationalist, federalist, localist, self-determinist ferment, thus, partially derives from the growth in demand for non-agricultural and urban jobs, social services, 'protected entrepreneurship' and so on. (While this applies to recent ethnicist politics also, the Madhesi petty bourgeoisie, bourgeoisie and the 'political class' there is now pushing for a political status which is at least commensurate to the Tarai's economic status and clout. Structurally also, the gap or contradiction between the economic and political clout of the Tarai could no longer be maintained or lie unresolved.) It surely also derives from the demand of liberation from political domination by a high-caste and Hill-based state but there is little doubt that it possesses much more immediate material incentives. It has to be note that democratic and citizenship rights did not accrue to the Hill dwellers under autocratic monarchy either.) Interpreted from another angle, the upsurge is founded on the demise of pre-capitalist forms and a rapid rise of petty bourgeois and bourgeois economic structure both in the Tarai and urban areas across the Hills. The urban, for the first time in history, occupies the driver's seat for the new generation not only in terms of the imaginary but also in existential terms. In terms of the imaginary, the new generation ranks the local, the rural,

the agricultural, and the familial way down and this trend of relative ranking, if anything, is likely to become sharper. (In order to gain a perspective, one just has to ponder over the future predilection of the nearly eight million children and youth currently studying in schools.) In a powerful sense, the new ethnic and regional upsurge is certainly communal, as the old one was. But at a deeper level, it is the land/labor contradiction at the household level, the relatively rapid development of the labor and commodity market, the urban domination of the rural, and the growth in human capability that is driving the upsurge.

It is primarily not the socialist left which drives this upsurge, and the social democratic platform may not receive support from the upsurge. Much of the upsurge, for some time to come, will side with the petty bourgeoisie. Some among these, medium and larger land holders who feel threatened by the rise of the market and the petty and non-petty bourgeoisie may turn to the political right instead. Many of the key leaders of the ethnicist and regionalist upsurge also come from the landed or petty bourgeois background. The immediate interest of such group is relatively narrow, e.g. urban education, job, protected entrepreneurship, and so forth, but such a group also politically benefits from sharpening a nationalist consciousness among the wider category of residents or members there, i.e. including of the laborer, small peasant, etc. most of whom cannot yet claim such education, job, entrepreneurship, etc. Several of the key leaders of the upsurge also, in an immediate sense, belonged to the CPN-M. But the CPN-M could not hold it together in the case of the Tarai in the face of a relatively rapid capitalist transition there, despite the fact the CPNM did much to raise the nationalist consciousness and political organization. The Hill may follow a similar pattern with a relatively rapid capitalist transition there.

The ethnicist and regionalist upsurge was supported by three other factors. The first was the 1990 democratic transition. The freedom of political organization, speech and media laid down supportive conditions for all kinds of political voices, including the ethnicist and regionalist one. Such organization became legitimate under the expanded list of fundamental rights and notions of citizenship. A host of relatively feeble voices suddenly acquired volume as well as a willing body of audience and potential cooperators in the new democratic set up. Second, the new ethnicist voice, in particular, received considerable international political and programmatic support by way of the UN year and decade of the indigenous peoples. With this support, the Nepal Federation of Ethnic Nationalities (NEFEN) suddenly morphed into the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). All 'ethnics' were transformed, ipso facto, into indigenous peoples, which implied that all 'non-ethnics', including Tarai dwellers and the Madhesis, were latecomers if not downright foreign. In addition to the gaping historical question as to which ethnic group came over when (or whether the in-migration of an ethnic group was carried over several centuries or several millennia), also left unanswered was the larger political and structural question of how indigeneity privileges and how a non-indigenous or latecomer status derogates from the notion and practice of equal citizenship within the parameters of a bourgeois democratic state. Third, the ethnicist and regionalist voice was amplified by the CPN-M and restructured in terms of ethnically federated homelands. Seven such homelands and two multi- or non-ethnic federated regions were

projected. It was argued that ethnically organized federal units equipped with the power of self determination was the key to political liberation as well as economic and cultural development. The CPN-M argued that this was the only antidote to ethnic and regional hegemony, centralization, cultural domination as well as underdevelopment.

Some of the ethnicist and regionalist position as well as the CPN-M position on this issue—as argued, is historically valid and has been vindicated and thus incorporated in the platforms of various political parties as well as the interim constitution. Among others, the declarations of a secular rather than a Hindu state, affirmative action in public education and public employment, and the mixed electoral system, under which half of the legislators are to be elected on an ethnically and regionally proportional basis are particularly noteworthy. These have formed key planks of a ‘middle ground’ among contentious political forces.

There have been serious questions on whether a starkly ethnicist and regionalist position, which does not recognize class and socioeconomic status of a household or individual serves the bourgeois democratic—whether liberal democratic or social democratic—politics well enough or whether the category of class has been jettisoned. This question acquires a particular salience when considered against the fact that within the current political spectrum in Nepal, the center and the left is in a large majority. The center and the left, in addition, lead the powerful political movement of April 2006. Even more surprising is the fact that it is the CPN-M that is pushing the hardest for an ethnicist, and not class-based political transition. The CPN-M has for the last five years consistently made the invalid claim that class and ethnicity are nearly synonymous in the context of Nepal. A more reasoned position, instead, would be that the two go together to a significant extent but the two do not completely or even largely overlap. There is little doubt that the CPN-M initially took on an almost exclusively ethnicist position as a powerful instrument in its effort to dismantle the old state during the course of the ‘people’s war’. That is, the ‘ethnic handle’ was the most powerful instrument that would supplant local and regional apparatus of the state and to ultimately serve the military objectives at the national level during the course of a raging insurgency. This, even as ethnicity is, as noted, a significant marker of oppression and reduced opportunities, it is much too blunt an instrument to be exclusively wielded for the long term in a bourgeois democratic (whether liberal democratic or social democratic) political theater. The NC, NMKP and the SJM political platforms consequently have called for a much more nuanced utilization of the ethnicist and regionalist planks.

One could argue that in exclusively favoring the ethnicist and regionalist line, the CPN-M and the many of the left political forces are abandoning a constituency they had been founded on. They can well be charged to have abandoned the large body of small peasants, the poor, the unemployed, the agricultural and non-agricultural wage workers and the dispossessed. One of the implications of constituency abandonment, of course, would be that the rise of a new political force based on such constituencies could not be discounted.

Issue of Federalism

Self-governance is a key pillar of a democratic regime. A federal set up, in turn, is an important strategy of governing a political unit without undue interference from the outside. This is another middle ground that has been accepted by almost all political parties. However, there is no consensus on whether the alignment of a federal unit should be along the ethnicist line or whether it should follow consciously a 'regional' pattern. The argument for the latter is that Nepal, at this phase in history, is ill equipped to handle an ethnic alignment. It has been argued that such an alignment may encourage separatism, particularly when a federal unit is endowed with the right to self-determination. The SJM, it should be noted, calls for a unitary state with local governments that are autonomous partly on this ground. The NC also disapproves of an ethnic alignment. The CPN-UML appears to favor an alignment that 'respects both ethnic and regional alignments'. The CPN-M and the ethnicist and regionalist political forces, on the other hand, favor a more or less strict adherence to the ethnic line.

There are other practical and historical-theoretical grounds to question an ethnicist alignment of federal units. On the practical side, with more than 90 ethnic and caste groups and more than 60 languages, an ethnic alignment threatens the prospects of an almost infinite regress, the course of which could see an immensely negative political, economic and human consequence. On the historical-theoretical side, the ethnicist line regards ethnicity as (a) primordial and unchanging, (b) as the most important of all identities, and (c) calls, implicitly, for the practice of ethnic purity and ethnic apartheid. All of these, of course, are false as well as most undemocratic. A democratic culture is a plural, mutually learning and changing culture, not a ready made, fixed and unchanging culture. The failure of the ethnicist federal argument is the most telling in the case of the Dalits, the group at the brunt of the most intense oppression. If liberation from oppression can be had only from federal self-determination, how would the Dalits achieve it?

There are other unresolved questions with respect to federalism. How 'federal' is federal? What can Nepal learn from the quasi-federal and increasingly less federal nature of India, if not of the US? Is one-step federalism the answer or does one need to imagine a series of 'federations' right to the level of the settlement? These are also questions that must find a resolution for the elaboration of a middle ground.

Monarchy and fully proportional representation

Monarchy has not only resisted and usurped democracy in the past—and is certain to do so in the future if given an opportunity, it also lies in sharp structural contradiction with social, economic and political transition taking place in Nepal. It is incommensurate with even a mildly federal structure, with a secular state, with pluralism, with the 'abolition' of caste, clan, gender, etc. based privileges. It is an anachronistic and counterproductive institution. While a refined and common political language has to be found by the political parties, monarchy must be laid to rest. The parliament can now declare the abolition of monarchy, subject to ratification by the first meeting by the CA.

The fully proportional electoral system is by no means undemocratic. But there are two issues to be wary of, given the hegemonic nature of the current discourse of 'restructuring

of the state'. First, 'proportional' should not imply proportional only in the ethnicist, regionalist, gender, etc. sense. The society is not only ethnic; it is also a class society, a society of multiple trades, multiple and syncretized religions, and so forth. These and other major bases of social life have to find a political representation in a democratic and inclusive polity. Second, bourgeois capitalist democracy is also, in part, about competition and achievement, unlike the feudal form that relied almost exclusively on ascription. A democratic middle ground has to have some openness.