



Electing Peace: Nepalis Vote in Historic Polls April 10, 2008

Two years after the major political parties and the people of Nepal boycotted the municipal elections ordered by King Gyanendra in Feb. 2006, citizens turned out in historic numbers to take democracy into their own hands – and take their opinions to the ballot box. Sixty percent of the 17.6 million registered voters (of a population of 27 million) have cast their vote – electing a peaceful political transition.

As Nepalis await the official election, reports of violence and disruption mark the headlines. In the far western region of Surkhet, where Dee Aker, Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) Interim Executive Director, is an elections monitor with The Carter Center delegation, the vote was delayed following the assassination of a local candidate. Prior to election day, “violence and threats continue[d] to increase” reported Aker. Despite the spike in electoral conflict, the constituent assembly election is “part of the ongoing peace process” in Nepal, stated Chief Elections Commissioner Bhoj Raj Pokhrel.

In global politics, the measure of democratic success is too often reduced to the election day alone. The hard work and preparation that created the foundation for elections is often overlooked and, in the wake of elections, campaign promises remain frequently unfulfilled.

When international and media attention fades after votes have been counted, the Nepali people will be left to build a peaceful, democratic society, a task of Himalayan proportions following a decade of war waged by the Communist Party of Nepal Maoists (Maoists) that took 13,000 lives.

The first elections in a decade were not brokered by external forces, but instead are rooted in the non-violent people’s movement which opened the space for the political parties and the Maoists to negotiate an end to the violence.

Throughout the April 2006 revolution which challenged the repressive rule of King Gyanendra, thousands of women and men mobilized across Nepal through rallies, poetry readings, satirical plays, mass meetings, letter campaigns, candlelight vigils and door-to-door advocacy. Defying shoot-to-kill curfews, women called for the repeal of discriminatory laws and for equal participation in the restructuring of the state.

Women’s groups organized not only to express their democratic solidarity and demand restricted powers on the monarchy, but also to raise awareness of the rigid hierarchical social structure and discriminatory traditional socio-cultural values that marginalize women and

other sectors of Nepali society. As they flooded the streets to celebrate the king's abdication of power, they simultaneously called on Maoists and political parties to order a ceasefire and reform unjust legal codes.

The people of Nepal "proved that a revolution through nonviolence is possible," reflected Shobha Shrestha, Nepali democracy advocate with the nongovernmental organization South-Asia Partnership-Nepal and Masters of Peace and Justice candidate at the University of San Diego.

Thus, this twice-delayed election is a manifestation of the political will of the people of Nepal to transform their society. The mixed electoral system, with quotas for women, Dalits, Madhesi and other marginalized communities in Nepali society, is a product of the people's visionary efforts.

Those elected to the 601-seat constituent assembly will be charged with first deciding the fate of the 240-year monarchy in Nepal. They must also respond to the people's demands – the foundation on which this political transition has been constructed.

Specifically, women's organizations are looking beyond the April 10 polls. Women leaders from politics, the legal community and civil society framed their common priorities as "minimum principles for action" in November 2007, through the IPJ Women, Politics and Peace workshop series (<http://peace.sandiego.edu/programs/nepal.html>). They stand united to advance shared goals such as implementation of 33 percent reservation for women in all seats of government; property and inheritance rights for women and widows; citizenship in the name of the mother; end of structural injustice in economic, educational, health care and other social sectors; promotion of rule of law and combating impunity; and enhanced security and protection from gender-based violence.

Political analysts predict none of the largest political parties – the Nepali Congress, the United Marxist Leninist, or the Maoists – will earn an outright majority of seats. Regardless of who wins, the new government must be willing to cooperate, compromise and unify a divided nation.

While over 826 international observers from 28 international organizations were deployed to "build confidence in the ongoing electoral process," the long-term support of the international community for Nepal's peace process must extend beyond elections monitoring.

From the mountainous highlands to the lowland Terai, the international community must foster political leaders' partnership with civil society to manage expectations and prepare the population for inclusive public participation and responsive governance, two pillars of democracy.

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