High Expectations, Deep Disappointment:

politics, state and society in Nepal after 1990

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The Maoist movement has been gaining momentum in Nepal since 1996, and in early 2002 nobody could deny its saliency or its far-reaching impact upon peoples' lives there.[1] Indeed, the Maoist movement had been setting the political agenda to a very large extent for some years, and it remained uncertain how a satisfactory settlement could be reached when the political stakeholders' positions and aims clashed so severely. Inside and outside Nepal, many different views, perspectives and positions have been taken on the Maoists' goals and their impact upon Nepal's future development and well-being. Obviously, visions of where Nepali society is heading and how to get there differ significantly, according to political allegiance. Very shortly after the successful implementation of a multi-party system in 1990, the Maoist leaders decided that their goals could not be pursued within the parliamentary process. The bulk of the population, on the other hand, expressed great hopes and expectations in the immediate aftermath of this 'spring awakening'.

The majority of the Nepali people have not joined the Maoist movement. However, there is no doubt that its popularity grew during the 1990s, while the formal legitimacy of the political system and its office holders suffered severe losses. Most Nepalis do not regard the Maoist movement as an alternative to the current multi-party political system. However, the nature of the democratic transition in Nepal may have induced disappointed citizens to seek other political options. This essay is an attempt to reflect upon the democratic transition in Nepal over the last decade. Rather than investigating the disruptive impact of the Maoist movement upon this process, another perspective is being adopted here. It is argued that the existence of popular support for the movement (although not the impetus for its formation) needs to be seen in the rather unsatisfactory path of democratisation in Nepal, as perceived by the majority of the population.

I suggest that one major reason for the existence of popular support for the Maoists is the widely discernible disillusionment with current political structures and processes, and therefore it is crucial to highlight the main features of this ailment. I am not suggesting that great hopes are being placed in the Maoist movement, but an openness to political alternatives is discernible. The path of the political transition in Nepal has been all the more criticised and deeply regretted by the Nepali people because in the aftermath of the 1990 'spring awakening' expectations regarding the transformation of the state, politics and societal forces had been very high and the disappointment was, subsequently, very deep.

The 'spring awakening' and a turbulent decade

After the political changes of 1951, the question of whether democracy was an adequate political form in view of Nepal's historical legacy was extensively debated. By 1990, however, the great majority of Nepalis had endorsed the idea that a multi-party democracy was the most suitable form for the country and had joined forces in a struggle for its realisation. Very soon a discussion was taking place in public about how democratic transformations were to be designed, and how their goals would be realised once they had been set in motion. Everybody acknowledged that the odds against success were severe, given the adverse political forms and positions which were firmly established within Nepali society, the slow pace of economic growth, and the disruptive nature of the changes generally known as 'modernisation'. The obstacles have been numerous, without doubt. The fragile economy was under great strain following the 1989-90 dispute with India, and severe floods in 1993 augmented these hardships. Besides, administrative and political reforms did not bring the expected results. To name just a few elements: the political parties, especially the Nepali Congress, were severely affected by internal disputes and autocratic tendencies; the relationship between the government and the opposition remained precarious; and policies such as decentralisation, liberalisation and governmental reform had not (yet?) brought the expected results.

Nepal's experiments with democratic reform, and their rhetoric and representation, have taken several turns since the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951. It is not difficult to demonstrate how complex and even paradoxical the political changes have been: one needs only to

remember how fundamental and radical the democratic transition was, in view of the nature of the former political structure, the old political culture, and the social order. Among the paradoxes that come to mind were the attempts under King Mahendra's rule to depict democratic institutions through recourse to religious concepts (Burghart 1984). It is also not self-evident that it is possible to elect a communist government through general elections in the last Hindu kingdom on earth—as was the case during the 1990s!

From the late 1970s onwards there were ebbs and flows of civil discontent with regard to so-called 'Panchayat democracy'. In November 1989, I was sitting in the house of a Congress opposition leader in Dolakha district when Radio Nepal broadcast a report on the momentous events surrounding the fall of the Berlin wall. In spring 1990, Nepal too was overwhelmed by the new democratisation wave (Hachhethu 1992) and, as everybody recalls, the king gave in to persistent protests, in the course of which at least 40 persons had lost their lives. His Majesty agreed to form a government based upon a multi-party system, and to install one of his fiercest political opponents, K.P. Bhattarai, as the Prime Minister *ad interim*. Many people remember the live transmission of 9 November 1990, when King Birendra read out the text of the new Constitution. This was the moment when a new political form was promulgated within which sovereignty no longer belonged to the king but to the people; which guaranteed the division of judicial and executive powers and the multi-party system; and which conferred far-reaching civic and political rights on Nepali citizens ... who were no longer subjects.

'We want democracy' —this slogan was heard all over the country at that time, in countless villages and cities. And today? Most of my conversational partners would probably subscribe to Parry and Moran's (1994: 15) statement, based on observations in many other countries around the world: 'Notwithstanding its triumph as an ideology of this era, democracy is an uncertain stage and democratisation an uncertain process'. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the majority of the Nepali people views democratisation—along with economic growth— as a central societal goal, and only a few wish to see the former system return. Nor does it seem that the Maoist option has wide public appeal. However, in view of the disappointing performance of the short-lived governments elected after 1991, it is not surprising that the movement has gained momentum.

The 'third wave of democratisation' (Huntington 1991) which swept over Nepal, along with other countries, has not only mobilised people at the political centre in Kathmandu. On the

contrary: all over Nepal, even in the remotest valleys of the Himalaya, political change has been clearly visible. A new generation of activists and leaders emerged, promoting and debating new visions of the social order and forging new coalitions. The formal guarantees of a democracy—universal franchise, the separation of powers, rights to information and organisation—have been established, and they do not exist merely on paper. A number of very successful reforms and developments occurred, among which the king's acceptance of his new status as a constitutional monarch was crucial. Furthermore, the new constitutional provisions were realised in many important respects: Supreme Court verdicts, such as those on elections, were upheld; elections were conducted in a free and fair manner; the rights to organisation and to information were realised; and the army stayed out of politics.

However, efforts to realise further goals were impeded by many different barriers. These included, to name just a few: the organisational weakness of state agencies, a lack of political will, a lack of efficiency, almost non-existent systems of accountability, far-reaching centralisation, power abuses, and autocratic, hierarchic and fatalistic orientations. These weaknesses will be examined in more detail below. Since this analysis is intended to support the thesis that there is a link between people's disappointment with their government's political performance and the popularity of the Maoist movement, but does not claim that the Maoists' visions provide a thinkable alternative, it is necessary to establish that many other reasons underlie the movement's emergence and the dynamics of its escalation.

Excursion: why has a Maoist movement emerged in Nepal?
No simple explanation can be given for the emergence of the Maoist movement in Nepal, or for its success. First, we need to consider the regional (i.e. South Asian) repertoires of leftist ideologies and modes of action underlying protest movements, including armed conflicts. Over the last five decades, South Asia has seen various stages of left-wing mobilisation, disparate forms of civil disobedience, and armed conflict. The Naxalite movement was the most prominent early influence on the political agenda, but it was by no means unique. Previous movements have left a rich legacy behind: this provides guidance on how to organise and suggests discourses on injustice and appealing modes of self-representation. Moreover, the Nepali Maoist movement fits not only into a South Asian pattern of how to conduct and represent armed conflicts: global ebbs and flows of mobilisation and insurgency have built up a pattern of action which can be 'read' and 'understood' in all parts of the world.

Second, there is the impressive ability of the movement's leaders to mobilise, organise, and maintain the involvement of their followers. The strong linkages to a local base that Baburam Bhattarai was able to establish in West Nepal during his prolonged stay in Rolpa and Rukum districts are especially worthy of mention. In my view, the ability of the leaders to traverse geographical and social distances while mobilising local people must be seen as a lesson for many persons in elevated formal political and administrative positions. The inability of state officials, especially politicians, to bridge their social distance from the vast majority of the population has impeded the democratisation process.

Nepal's rugged terrain is the third condition privileging this type of action, and comparisons with Peru and Afghanistan come immediately to mind. Given the precarious economic situation in the country, joining the Maoist movement became an attractive option for young men and women in a growing number of districts. Some of these districts are not really remote, but the ability to maintain control and to shift quickly between places is severely impeded in Nepal. The fourth reason lies, as has repeatedly been stressed, in the low level of societal development, especially economic development, which could provide a venue for the incorporation of capable young people into the labour market. If the Maoists are a young people's movement, then they appear to be an 'outfall' option (Elwert 2001) for those who consider themselves unable to gain access to the formal system.

Finally, and this will be the main thrust of this essay, such 'outfall' options cannot be explained simply in terms of a lack of opportunity in the labour market. It is obvious that the persistent stagnation of development in the field of production and consumption has been combined with deficiencies in political development, hence the inability of the vast majority of Nepal's people to participate in political processes and institutions. Because deficiencies in various fields reinforce each other, people's disappointment with the lack of democratic innovation in politics and administration has increased their readiness at least to consider other political options. This is why I perceive the appeal the Maoist movement has acquired in Nepal to lie in, among other things, the disenchantment of many people all over the country with the path Nepali politics is taking. The weak performance of the governmental bodies and political leaders has enhanced the readiness of some stakeholders to follow the Maoists and to embark upon an alternative line of political transition. This trend may not be apparent among the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, but it shows up in more remote areas of the country.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the current crisis systematically, and from different (e.g. top-down and bottom-up) perspectives (Panday 1994).

Nepal's lack of 'deep democratic' institutions

Several leading Nepali political scientists, as well as their colleagues in neighbouring fields of research, have analysed the current crisis in the democratic transition in Nepal (e.g. Kumar 1995; Hachhethu 1995; Kumar 1995a), and have provided in-depth results regarding the deficiencies in politics and institutions at national level (e.g. Dahal 1996). In my view, these findings need to be supplemented with contributions from yet another perspective, i.e. by investigations of discontinuities in political and governmental processes, as observed at the sub-national level, in villages and towns all over the country. A democratic transition which fulfills the formal criteria of a polyarchy (Dahal 1996) is a very substantial move in the process of political reform, but it does not suffice. 'Deep' reforms, to borrow Diamond's term (1997), must occur, in order to avoid what Claude Ake (1995) has aptly characterised as the 'democratisation of powerlessness', a condition in which formal rules and regulations exist only on paper. Either the rhetorical depictions of the power holders cover up substantial civil, political and other human rights abuses, or else democratic forms enter into an uneasy co-existence with the autocratic and particularist institutions of a former era.

Nepal conforms to a widespread pattern of transitional situations all over the world, in which reforms have been undertaken, but have not been successfully implemented. Very often, formal rules and regulations are not being realised or institutionalised, and, rather than lose their former prerogatives, resourceful strongmen manage to gain ground within the new system (Migdal 1994). Especially when viewed from a local-level perspective, a range of inconsistencies become apparent when democratic reforms are confronted with pre-existing coalitions, forms of particularist incorporation (O'Donnell 1997) and autocratic attitudes, which bring the reforming forces to a halt (see Hagopian 1994). Uneasy compromises emerge unintentionally, or they can be forged on purpose. For instance, in the West African context Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1999) discern 'parallel structures': formal state institutions, designed according to democratic patterns, continue a precarious co-existence with previous political structures, dominated by local leaders. Migdal (1988) has proposed a 'triangle-of-accommodation' model, suggesting that formal office holders come to negotiate with strongmen who strive to retain their power enclaves, and that all eventually come to

accommodate one another. In the Nepali context, such accommodations result in a formation I call a 'distributional coalition' (see below).

The main indicators of the national crisis in Nepal become especially accentuated when they are viewed from a local perspective. The problems of Nepal's democratic transition become apparent in three distinct but interrelated areas. First, the persistent problem of the lack of systems of accountability in Nepal needs to be highlighted: this problem prevails not only at the centre, but all over the country. This deficit shows up, first and foremost, in the performance of many civil servants who are the key persons in their respective districts, though it is not confined to their actions. Second, many examples from all over Nepal indicate that quite a few elected politicians are inclined to seek autonomy from their constituencies. It is important, therefore, to establish how politicians represent their constituencies and through what means the followers can make their leaders support common goals and objectives. Third, a clash of values, attitudes and representations needs to be detected. In a world where new modes of interaction overcome spatial distances, the role of verbal representations in the creation of images becomes crucial. Since local societies in even the most remote parts of the world are increasingly drawn into global streams—in the case of Nepal, especially through links established in the course of development co-operation—handling representations becomes a strategic resource. Handling powerful rhetoric can be socially extremely effective nowadays, when the harmonising depictions of social relations offered by local leaders cover up persisting social cleavages. By using such egalitarian rhetoric, the élites create grey zones of power.

This discussion is intended to demonstrate that in situations where a 'democratisation of powerlessness' obtains, the strategic use of democratisation rhetoric can bring about social effects that are contrary to the stated goals — i.e., it can reinforce autocratic structures rather than bring about their end. Early Western debate on participation models has already highlighted the élite bias inherent in participatory forms. Currently, at a time when 'participation' has established itself as a powerful rhetoric, those people (and there are many of them) who experience their leaders as unjust, corrupt, and independent of their constituencies, resent the gap that exists between the egalitarian rhetoric employed by local élites on the one hand and the power differentials experienced in everyday life on the other.

This essay deliberately adopts a local level perspective. It is only through knowing about everyday forms of conflict and disappointment that we can become fully cognisant of the disenchantment with the political system, and especially of the ways in which high-flying plans and rhetoric are realised in practice. However, we still know little about local level politics and the continuous negotiations that take place over institutions and values. Therefore, my hidden agenda here is to suggest that scholars who work in Nepal expand this crucial field of research. It is essential to combine the efforts of scholars of various disciplines if we are to grasp the discontinuous nature of exchanges between the state, society, and the international organisations that have been intervening in Nepal for many decades Shrestha 1996, Poudyal 1994) and have significantly affected the direction of the political process. It is most especially when they are observed from the 'local level' perspective that the transitions, changing potentials and problems of Nepal's young democracy come to light. From this perspective, the extremely discontinuous nature of the on-going incorporation of local societies into state and global structures becomes clearly apparent.

The expansion of governmental spheres of influence

During the last few decades, the Nepali state has expanded significantly and (at least until 1996, when the Maoist movement started to gain momentum) it has managed to incorporate the major political forces into its formal structure. Until recently, it was able to maintain law and order throughout the country. Since 2000, however, several districts have been brought under Maoist rule. All over Nepal, governmental agencies and their representatives have been involved in the distribution of goods and expertise, aimed, as has been repeatedly stated at official level, at the enhancement of production and consumption. The governmental practice of (re-)distributing resources is by and large a new phenomenon in Nepal. For centuries, the state had been extracting goods and money from its subjects through different kinds of revenue collection (M.C. Regmi 1972, 1984), and only granting exemptions from or reductions of the prescribed contributions when subjects were clearing land, building terraces or constructing irrigation channels, and thus paying their dues with their labour instead. Currently, although it continues to collect revenue, the state either redistributes part of the revenue, or channels down the resources that flow in to Nepal from abroad as foreign aid.

Through its distributive practices—or, to be precise, through its potential to provide financial resources and services to the people—the state's expansion and its grip upon its citizens has increased significantly. The functionaries of state agencies, from the highest civil servant

down to the peon, have established a focal position for themselves within Nepali society. Because they dispense goods and services which are badly needed by almost everyone, they have come into focus as potential distributors. In most parts of Nepal, the governmental agencies remain the only providers of such resources. It is only in the central districts and in the Tarai that *exit*-options (Paul 1992, using Hirschman's concept) are available. The option of acquiring goods and services through market mechanisms is lacking in most other parts of the country. In view of this fact, state offices and officers—be they the Local District Officer or the peon—acquire the role of *gate-keepers*. Being in charge of goods and services to which the population holds a legitimate right but has no means of claiming, they can deliberately create scarcities or delays in provision, so that their services acquire the nature of scarce goods. A myriad examples come to mind: issuing licences, registering land, allotting credit, paying out money through the cashier's desk, providing fertilisers on time, selling food-stuffs allotted to regions prone to food scarcity, or piling up court cases in order of precedence.

Obviously, the state has something to give in contemporary Nepal. However, it has often been the case that governmental bodies have functioned on principles which are very different from those laid down in the formal rules and regulations. As in many other countries, numerous state officials impede the functioning of their offices while exploiting their positions to put their private interests first. By creating scarcities and obstacles, they deliberately create a gap between state and society, and subsequently act as mediators, helping those people who are willing to make a private contribution, while letting the others wait. In many countries (and Nepal is no exception here), parallel structures emerge—in a different sense from that discussed above—because individual civil servants use their positions to establish informal horizontal and vertical networks within and outside their organisations. When a civil servant uses resources provided by his own office, such informal networks tend to become institutionalised. Michael Lipton (1989) suggests that this kind of parallel structure brings about true 'shadow configurations'. Therefore, following Long (1993), Handelman (1995) and others, we need to distinguish between organisational logic on one hand and individual action on the other. Dynamics within the formal structures of state agencies and the individual actions of their functionaries tend to impinge on one another, with consequences that are partially unintended.

Through their (potential) distributive practices, state bodies and officials tighten their grip on and extend their influence over society, while only a few people are able to gain access to

goods that are legitimately theirs, scarce though they may be. In view of the tremendous obstacles that are put in front of most people in Nepal in order to prevent them from getting hold of goods they have been promised, they are unlikely even to receive such basic welfare services as health treatment or drinking water. While the official rhetoric stresses the on-going decentralisation process as a means of enhancing people's participation in order to strengthen development efforts, it is striking that the amount of responsibility allotted to local people in these new designs far exceeds their competence and their chance to claim their rights (see e.g. Gilmour and Fisher 1989).

Zygmunt Bauman's thesis of 'seduction' (Bauman 1993), established in the context of Western societies, holds true for Nepal as well. This maintains that when the state has something to give to its people it is less compelled to display any ideological manifestations. In official rhetoric, state officials stress that their major concern is to enhance the productive base of the country and to contribute to people's well-being through investment in the consumer sector: hence this new emphasis on the provision of financial resources, goods and services. There is no doubt that some efforts (carried out both with and without foreign assistance) have borne fruit. However, we must not overlook the hidden agendas that accompany these laudable endeavours. 'Giving something' to people strengthens the state's position because there is less incentive for the state to use force or the threat of force. The political scientist Jonathan Fox maintains that with the increase of distributive practices 'carrots' acquire a more important role than 'sticks'. Given the privileged position of state officials as gate-keepers, they are able to establish themselves in focus and hence to strengthen their standing vis-a-vis the population whose 'servants' they are supposed to be. While 'the state' as provider reinforces its focal role, the officials tend to create — or at least to reinforce — semi-clientelist structures (Fox 1994), in which informal networks bind clients to them.

While a state's legitimacy is enhanced for as long as it continues to strengthen its citizens' life-chances as producers and consumers, it may lose legitimacy when its plans and rhetoric are not matched by practice. It is bad enough when it fails to provide the goods: it is all the worse when the scarce goods listed in the Five-Year Plans do not reach the public, but are captured by those responsible for their distribution. The lack of accountability systems relates directly to the topic of democratisation. With the division of executive and judicial powers, various means emerge which possess the potential to guarantee the rule of law and good

governance. Public accountability obtains through diverse means (see e.g. Paul 1992), and professional standards within governmental agencies that should rule out misuse are but one option. 'Horizontal systems of accountability' (O'Donnell 1997) are an important element of democratic institutions. The existence of governmental agencies exerting control over each other is simultaneously an indicator of democratisation and an important base for strengthening it. Another potential means is judicial practice, through which abuses can be brought to court. However, the design of Nepali decentralisation does not foresee the provision of either of these two types of control at district level. Whatever controlling mechanisms obtain, they are vertical in character, conforming to the overall centralised pattern. Citizens cannot assert their social and economic rights in a district court against persons who abuse their power, nor are there established mechanisms to control corruption horizontally, i.e. between and through independent state agencies at district level. Finally, there are no provisions to fight abuses through the political process.

Political participation

The re-establishment of a multiparty system in Nepal has been a decisive step towards creating a base to strengthen people's participation. Elections in multi-party democracies open up diverse possibilities for political participation: the freedom to exert political will, the equality of all to give their votes, the opening up of spaces in which deliberations can be carried out. As a consequence, the legitimacy of political procedures and confidence in the system tend to be enhanced. When one remembers the political cultural climate before 1990, it is clear that decisive changes have taken place: where harmonising rhetoric formerly abounded, nowadays there is wide scope for critical dispute. Admittedly, the persistent hierarchical orientations still persist, and tend to impede the expansion of popular political will. Nevertheless, it seems that the process of opening up the public sphere for controversial debate and for critical examination of the élites is now irreversible. This has not always been the case: formerly, the norm was subordination and subservience to the superior, and avoidance of any public critique of those in power.

However, it cannot be denied that the development of democratic institutions continues to be impeded. The disappointed electors have the option of not re-electing their representatives after the latter have failed to perform, and they make use of it. But the far-reaching 'autonomy' (Fox 1992) that many politicians enjoy vis-à-vis their voters is striking in Nepal, especially when the only political opponents have already disappointed their constituencies in

equal measure in former legislatures. Additionally, there is the problem that local politics is embedded in a larger political system which is dominated by hierarchic, centralised and nepotist orientations. Politicians who strive to live up to egalitarian standards may not be able to gain the necessary support from their political superiors or other powerful personalities. In Nepal, as in many other developing countries, the notion is widespread that all public contributions, including development projects, have to be mobilised through private channels of access. As a result, weak networks may render dedicated leaders powerless, despite their righteous moral standing.

Since most local electorates have been repeatedly disappointed by the performance of their leaders, and tend not to believe the political candidates anymore, their expectations are likely to diminish. Often, out of two unpleasant options—a corrupt leader, or a weak leader – people may opt for a leader of lower moral standing who is however more likely to acquire badly-needed goods and services by mobilising his own patrons. In the continuous power game, different undesirable options obtain. While private networks and semi-clientelist structures prevail, the political leaders in villages and districts tend to extend their autonomy from their local supporters when they can demonstrate strength through external networking. As a consequence, those leaders who can present themselves as skilful providers of goods and services acquire at the same time the ability to withdraw from the control of the electorate. Their elevated political and social standing is by no means incidental. On the contrary, in at least some parts of rural Nepal there is a strong tendency for distributional coalitions to form between civil servants, politicians and entrepreneurs.

The term 'distributional coalition', coined by Mancur Olson (1982), was developed from the rent-seeking approach, focusing on forms of collective action within organisations involved in the re-distribution of societal produce. While Olson's analysis identifies distributional coalitions as formal structures (trades unions, lobbies, cartels), this notion will be used in relation to Nepal to depict informal structures in the first place; that is, distributional coalitions will be analysed as they are formed by office holders within and between organisations. Olson's model provides a basis for this analysis in many respects. First, it identifies a drive to coalition formation in the course of distributive practices, i.e. the many governmental and non-governmental activities usually depicted as 'development'. Second, Olson's very influential thesis on the logic of collective action holds true for Nepal as well. The smaller the co-operative units, the higher the likelihood that they will be efficient. The

more efficient they are, the greater the gratification of those involved. To be a member of a coalition means receiving a reward which exceeds the individual losses of those excluded from the coalition, who receive less due to the practices of its members. Members of distributional coalitions who act as gate-keepers are much smaller in number than the persons who are entitled to the goods that are being misappropriated. These are the great majority: the tax-payers, the consumers, those who are especially needy.

The main reason for the formation of distributional coalitions is the state's role in channelling down goods, funds and services, and its weakness in the sense that accountability mechanisms do not function properly. Members of distributional coalitions who benefit from this deficiency can be seen as strategic groups (see Evers and Schiel 1988). Within the coalitions, the main objective is to maintain and augment opportunities for the appropriation of state-managed resources by persons in public positions, who take advantage of these positions by participating in 'capture', and benefiting individually.

In many districts of Nepal, the value of the goods allotted to the population and re-distributed by state organs far exceeds the sum which is brought together through taxation locally. Clarke (2000) even suggested that external funds are locally considered as 'manna from heaven', in the sense that they happen to come 'from nowhere'. This may be the reason why people do not openly protest that resources allotted to them have been misappropriated—the idea of ownership or entitlement has not been generated. Further research is necessary in order to establish whether the population is more ready to protest against such misuse when the goods that are being redistributed are regarded as self-generated. Also, it remains to be seen whether distributional coalitions are less likely to form in those parts of Nepal where markets provide an exit-option vis-à-vis the state, or at least whether they are less successful and, if so, why.

The distributional coalitions are formed and operate through the pooling of various resources, brought together by a variety of partners. This is where the role of the politicians becomes crucial, whether they are themselves entrepreneurs, especially contractors, or not. While there is a strong tendency to restrain access, coalition partnership is open to those who bring in new resources. Three types of actors prevail, however. They have been identified in other countries by authors such as Paul (1992), Migdal (1988) and Hart (1992), where they form perennially shifting but basically similar constellations. In Nepal, state employees, politicians and entrepreneurs pool their resources, while remaining in accommodation processes that are

always difficult. It goes without saying that they are all involved in the capture of societal resources. At this juncture, the critical role of many politicians comes to light. Rather than controlling capture and acting on behalf of their own constituencies, they are accused of persistent power abuses. The allegations are not necessarily made with anger. Minor cases of corruption and nepotism are taken for granted as a rule, and occasionally even narrated with a smile. However, all over Nepal the 'clients' within the population increasingly consider themselves to be the legitimate recipients of goods and services provided by 'the state'. Therefore, disappointment, if not anger, is more and more often expressed.

Distributional coalitions are small units consisting of persons occupying different positions and charged with different functions, who channel resources away from their rightful recipients. The partners differ in their relation to the local population. While Nepali civil servants circulate between districts, politicians and entrepreneurs are 'local people' in the sense that they have usually been born in the area and have spent most of their lives there. The local élites, especially the elected politicians, need to manoeuvre between different groups of people. They are involved in dense webs of relationships with the local population, established through kinship, friendship and patron-client relations, as well as through less personal relations which come about through the electoral process. Simultaneously, they form alliances with their political superiors as well as with officials, i.e. with persons who are in different ways external to the local context. External ties and external support are an important resource for the politicians. On the one hand, goods and services that are badly needed locally can be procured through these channels, and this provides a good basis for re-election. Frequently, chances of re-election are enhanced when the local electorates expect their leaders to be good 'providers' of resources. On the other hand, of course, the electorate seeks to commit its leaders, to make them accountable, publicly and privately, whereas the politicians are keen to use their external support to gain as much autonomy from the local basis as possible (see Fox 1992).

The role of civil servants in the distributional coalitions is obvious: they manage the goods allotted to the public. Despite continuous efforts to decentralise, the civil servants continue to operate within highly centralised and hierarchical structures. It also seems (but thorough research is needed in this field) that in view of the highly unstable political situation the role of the bureaucracy has strengthened and the state has expanded all the more. Acting as gate-keepers to the resources they are supposed to allot, many civil servants tend to present

themselves as unreachable to their 'clients', while the clients seek to gain access to them and to establish personal relationships with them. But those civil servants and employees who come as strangers to new districts are usually unable to extricate themselves from the relations and commitments already established by their predecessors. Again, more research is required to establish how widespread the existence is of distributional coalitions in districts all over Nepal. Where they have been established, they function because participation in such networks pays.

The question of why the individual stakeholders join in is not difficult to answer. Civil servants need politicians who are ready to misuse funds, because they can control their constituencies. If politicians were not co-opted (though there is a question about who co-opts whom), people would be more likely to protest. Also, it is essential to implement a *part* of a project and disburse a *part* of the funds; in order to do so, they require the co-operation of politicians and contractors. When it comes to misappropriating funds and allotting them to their rightful recipients, there must be a balance between 'retain' and 'take', because the prospect of being allotted further funds must keep open criticism at bay. If too many resources are misappropriated, protest is more likely. All over Nepal, there is a tremendous need for funds and projects, and as aid organisations provide not only resources that can easily be captured, but also non-differentiable goods such as bridges or schools, local people can expect to benefit in future. Additionally, successful results must be displayed whenever superiors or the representatives of development agencies come to evaluate progress. Here, the entrepreneurs play a crucial role because they are in charge of attracting a labour force.[2] It is also their task to produce presentable results. Implementers and donors need to be shown successful projects: schools, irrigation channels, health posts; and they want to see 'the proper attitude': progressive farmers, co-operating user groups, functioning local communities.

Nevertheless, in view of frequent abuses of power and misappropriations of funds, the question arises immediately: why has there not been more protest? The answer lies, first, in the lack of such a tradition in many parts of Nepal. Second, the distributional coalitions, as much as they strive to keep their size small, are unable to close their boundaries. Numerous aspirants are able, as a consequence, to gain access to key partners among the political leaders, and at times, especially before elections, they become indispensable. On the other

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[2] Especially in remote areas of Nepal, labour is a scarce resource due to seasonal labour migration.

hand, of course, the politicians and their allies have an interest in not sharing the resources they misappropriate with this 'middle field'. The bargaining results in political patronage and in promises ... that need to be fulfilled, one day.

The precarious character of the Nepali democratic transition and administrative innovations comes to light in the bargains reached between key members of distributional coalitions and the 'middle field'. Formally, democratic institutions, in the form of adult franchise, multi-party elections, right to information and freedom of speech, as well as far-reaching administrative measures aimed at decentralisation and enhanced accountability systems, have been established. However, the persistent paternalist networks and very rational clientelist attitudes (to gain access to strong leaders and benefit from these relations while leaving the bulk of the local population behind) bring the reforms to a halt. The growing disappointment with the system comes from two directions. First, not many members of local societies manage to gain access to these networks, and, having tried for a while, they look for other options. Additionally, those members of the middle field who have been hoping for benefits in exchange for their loyalty may not be inclined to wait any longer. In their case, the option of 'voice', to use Albert Hirschman's term, may gain more and more appeal.

The growing gap between public rhetoric and the realisation of plans and promises
The actions of all the stakeholders involved in distributional coalitions have had a detrimental impact on the success of development co-operation in recent decades. In their actions, they have been supported by their external 'partners'. Or at least, according to villagers in several parts of the country, they have not been prevented from conducting harmful action by the external partners, and especially by the donors. The villagers' criticisms stress that donors are not really willing to evaluate results, and they claim all too quickly that a project is successful. Hence, in the assessment of many people among the local population, foreign donors have been repeatedly, though unintentionally, providing backing to persons involved in capture and misuse. This unintended support is identified especially in the fact that the culprits are not taken to task when projects fail.

Various reasons are given for this ambiguous situation: first, many failures are not evaluated as failures, but are instead interpreted as successes. Hence, an irrigation channel that has never been put into use can be seen as a failure, but an alternative assessment can claim that now that all the important preparations have been completed, it will be put into operation shortly.

This kind of explanation is rather common: 'what is not completed will be finalised in due course', whatever 'in due course' may imply. The second argument runs as follows: because development aid organisations need to rely upon local allies who are capable of mediating between the local society and their partners from development agencies, the implementers are prepared to tolerate some aloofness and minor failures by these focal figures. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1999) have coined the term 'development broker' ('Entwicklungsmakler') to denote a special category of person who is capable of maintaining intercourse with the donors, who knows their language (i.e. key categories) and who proves to be an efficient partner, as a successful organiser of fellow villagers in various development activities. They suggest, and observations from Nepal confirm this view, that a fair deal of tolerance, and even support, is accorded to persons who are capable of fulfilling the donors' objectives.

Over the last few decades, a large number of important development activities have been carried out by His Majesty's Government and non-governmental organisations with foreign assistance. The whole country has benefited, albeit unevenly, from roads, bridges, power stations, schools, health posts, environmental protection devices, savings schemes, loans to farmers and entrepreneurs, and drinking water schemes, and this list could go on. However, severe criticism has been formulated, repeatedly and by a variety of actors, of the extent to which resources allotted to the beneficiaries have been captured and have never reached them. The related problems are many and various. Above all, members of local societies are deprived of crucial resources that would enhance their production and consumption. However, other problems are no less dramatic. Currently, even in the most remote areas of Nepal, villagers are well aware that the success of development cooperation has to rely upon representations of its success. What the villagers observe is that enthusiastic depictions of development interventions do not necessarily correspond with local assessments. Moreover, the villagers' experience is that their leaders often benefit from aid at their expense, regardless of its success.

Success is no longer measured purely by results, but also in the forms of local co-operation, internally as well as between the villagers and their various 'partners'. This means that the process also plays an important role, and not solely the outcome. Especially in recent years, development co-operation has been shaped, very rightly, as a process that entails learning, in such a way that new capacities can be developed in terms of political awareness and democratic attitudes. Democratisation is a value as such, and the notions it carries—especially

'participation' and 'civil society'—have been repeatedly portrayed as desirable. As a result, they have been furnished with positive connotations in the national and international public spheres where development co-operation is scrutinised. The local and national audiences debating the direction, efficiency and merits of such interventions, as well as the international audiences that provide support and money, are particularly important examples of such public arenas. Hence, those persons who use these terms are likely to gain in legitimacy, as has been observed all over Nepal in different situations in the course of development interventions (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1998).

The high legitimacy of the term 'participation' stems from the fact that those persons who argue that popular participation has become an important element of public-political life simultaneously imply that they have played an important role in this process. Public images can be manipulated in many different ways. However, it is one thing to make this claim and quite another to provide evidence that the local power structures have been altered in such a way that a growing number of people, especially those formerly excluded from the formulation of the political will, can formulate their goals and undertake measures in order to implement them.

Unfortunately, there is a strong tendency for local élites to deploy the rhetoric cherished by international donors very successfully. It seems that members of élites who pursue their private interests, and also many donors, have an interest in creating grey zones or smokescreens which use rhetoric to cover up deficiencies in project implementation. Those members of élite groups who manage to manipulate fashionable values and categories tend to expand their resources at the expense of their fellow villagers. This is because egalitarian rhetoric does not only tend to conceal persistent inequalities within local societies, it can even exacerbate them. Viewed from the perspective of oppressed and marginalized people, this type of new coalition is yet another instance of inequality, which contributes to a diminution of confidence in the functioning of the national and international orders.

By referring to one case study, it can be demonstrated how this postulated discrepancy becomes socially effective when members of a local society learn how they are being represented by donors, and how they can manipulate the idealising images that have been attributed to them to their own advantage (see also Pfaff-Czarnecka 1998). The following account of a development intervention in a village in far west Nepal shows how members of

this local society have learned to use and manipulate the value-loaded notion of 'local community'. I intend to show what some of them gain by playing this game, and to identify the interests that have made this representation so central to negotiations.

The village in question provides a good example of the ways in which members of a local society react to the notions carried into their lives by those who come as development experts. While looking mainly, if not only, for its own benefit, and as it appropriates common resources for itself, the local élite has managed to create an egalitarian image of the village and to communicate it to outside observers. It goes without saying that the élite is successful in presenting itself as especially dedicated to the general well-being. Even though the majority of the villagers resent the discrepancy between the outward appearance and the selfishness of their leaders, they remain silent.

The story can be summarised very briefly. The village is known for being very successful in implementing development projects, and especially for the ways in which these are carried out through collective action. There are two functioning drinking water faucets and several kitchen gardens — a rarity by the standards of far-west Nepal! The village also has three well-maintained latrines that are a novelty in the area, and, when asked, the village headman is always ready to demonstrate the weaving skills he acquired in a government-sponsored training programme. Everything seems to work, and the local leaders dispel any possible objections in advance. To give an example: originally, five water taps and eight latrines were planned. If they are asked when the remaining items will be completed, the leaders state that so far all of these objects have been built collectively, and that the project will be completed in due course. What they fail to mention is that so far the village collectivity has contributed its labour to building structures only in the immediate vicinity of the leaders' dwellings. They are also silent about the fact that the rest of the villagers have been waiting for their facilities to be completed for the last three years.

In the meantime, a film team organised by the donors visits the village and produces a documentary film to record these successes. The communal spirit of the village is beautifully illustrated in footage of colourful feasts and picturesque terraced houses. Although most of the villagers readily join in the shooting, in private discussions their criticism grows. The majority of the population feels they have been made fools of. Hardly anybody expects to

have water taps built in his part of the village through collective effort. The resentment and the distrust of future development interventions are strong.

On the other hand, the enterprising leaders (so skilled in creating positive public images) have been rewarded for their skills. They have received money to pay the workers' wages, and for materials and the necessary equipment for building a village library lit by solar energy. The library reflects the leaders' progressive and communal spirit all the more! It symbolises learning and a predilection for appropriate technologies (solar energy is rarely used in this area; the equipment is too expensive). Furthermore, a library implies common access. But this is not the case: the building is primarily reserved as a meeting place for the leaders, who all belong to the same political party.

I hope to have indicated the main dimensions of the discrepancy. The village élite is able to display the communal spirit which it and its villagers have demonstrated to the outside world. However, it feigns this spirit, and by doing so profits from it. As a sort of distributional coalition, the leaders benefit most from the external support while contributing no more work than their fellow villagers. One of their major resources is their ability to manage the public image that is externally attributed to them. Of course, it is an achievement to be aware of the existence of such a highly valued image. Furthermore, it requires an ability to create — or rather to take advantage of — the grey zone which exists in global representation patterns. The ability to manage a public image is a strategic resource: it extends the local leaders' external contacts and enhances their prestige. Consequently, they are able to fortify their own position in relation to the other villagers.

Nowadays, development interventions involve a variety of actors: international aid organisations, transnational NGO networks, local politicians, civil servants and élites, as well as other interest groups from among the local society. Hence, people who belong to different cultures (including professional and organisational cultures) are brought together by development interventions. Furthermore, in these arenas different scales of social organisation come together, and these could hardly be more disparate. Since they dispose of forceful means, development interventions provide direct links with and channels of access into local societies. The development discourse, combining two impossibly different levels of social organisation (figuratively speaking, the 'think-tanks' in Washington and local villages) is only possible because development practice has in fact created such a link: it has enhanced access

to remote societies through institutional arrangements. Additionally, one important field of development practice appears to overcome societal cleavages by creating public images that are well-suited to the negation of physical distances and power differentials. Positive terms such as 'solidarity' and 'communal forms' are the most salient images in this process.

Hence, I repeat, development agencies emphasise participatory forms: terms such as 'people's participation' and 'community involvement' are considered to be especially effective ways of stressing the active role of the local population in solving their problems. We should not overlook the political correctness inherent in such programmes: the highly esteemed notion of 'community' implies equality and co-operation — and hence norms of reciprocity — as well as the beneficial role played by the foreign expert, the national expert, the village leader, for the sake of local societies integrated by common values and norms. Seen in this way, the villagers are portrayed as the principal agents seeking to enhance their own well-being, while the civil servants and the development experts assume the role of partners. Obviously, this terminology bears a high legitimating potential for those who claim that they are facilitating the process.

To some extent, these dynamics within local societies reflect the processes that are taking place on the international aid scene. Generally, 'images of villages and village life accompany the promotion of development ideals' (Pigg 1992: 491). As has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars, two important factors accompany aid cooperation. First, there is 'an asymmetry of power that no amount of well-intentioned dialogue can remove' (Elliott 1987: 65); and second,

> many local institutions have developed a capacity to absorb the pressures from the donor... This is not only a question of dressing up project applications in the language the donors are known to like: it is much more a question of creating the impression of movement in directions which the donor is thought to be demanding... a smokescreen of pseudo-participation will be put down which will leave the real distribution of power unchanged (ibid.).

Just as local élites find ways to avoid being made accountable to their fellow villagers, development experts can also avoid close scrutiny. Grey zones which impede the flow of information protect at least some of those concerned with promoting global images of

solidarity from losing their legitimacy. While representing others, they can take advantage of existing spatial and social distances: 'the effects of human action reach far beyond the 'vanishing point' of moral visibility' (Bauman 1993: 193). Legitimacy is maintained by presenting harmonious pictures of solidarity. However, under these conditions, while postulating partnership (unless partnership has really occurred), the distance between the putative partners is increasing.

Conclusion: The strengthening of hierarchic and autocratic power structures

All the ambivalences, paradoxes and discontinuities discussed in this essay indicate that political transitions cannot be conceived of as linear processes. The Nepali experience confirms the findings of research in political science, sociology and anthropology. All those naïve-sounding but nevertheless well-received prognoses which state that everything is getting better and better are being confronted with models which conceptualise cyclical dynamics in power constellations; with approaches on the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' (Fox 1992), as well as with the concept of political reaction (Hirschman 1992). In many countries the 'democratisation of powerlessness' (Ake 1995) has occurred, instead of a linear process of democratisation. This state of affairs is particularly likely in situations where the official rhetoric paints a picture of popular participation, while polarisation continues.

It is not only the politics and processes of state expansion that are prone to significant drawbacks. Also, the widely discussed and highly valued 'civil society', or that which represents itself as such, displays significant discontinuities when élite members expand their autocratic rule while presenting themselves in egalitarian clothes. It is important to be cautious of promising representations, such as those which proclaim the potential benefits of networking 'from below', in case they conceal the élite capture of such endeavours. We do not know the extent to which these political, social and cultural discontinuities impede people's willingness and potential to pursue their own goals. The less confidence there is in the existing structures, the greater the likelihood is that people will be amenable to political alternatives. Precisely because there are strong civil society potentials in Nepal, it is important to distinguish between the 'desirable' and the 'given'.

Nepal's political transition can be seen as an ambivalent process. The political take-off has been significant, but a strong headwind impedes efforts to democratise. Despite tremendous gains, such as the right to information, free expression and free association, the voices of

many concerned citizens, or of those who seek to counteract abuses of power, have not resulted in measures which counteract the obstructive forces. Furthermore, there are no functioning systems of accountability. Political leaders quite often achieve a fair deal of autonomy from their electors, all the while elaborating their clientelist bastions and maintaining their hierarchical attitudes, but successfully hiding these endeavours. Furthermore, we must not overlook the globalising forces that contribute to the potential for conflict, especially by exacerbating the on-going polarisation of Nepali society. The deficiencies of the Nepali democratisation process have their roots in, among other things, the nature of external intervention, which needs to be understood through further research, and altered. At the moment, little confidence may be derived from the fact that the on-going efforts to pursue democratic reform fail to reduce opportunities for autocratic capture. This is the area in which new options—i.e., more radical efforts to pursue democratic reform, but not the Maoist vision— are desirable.

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