

Promises Galore : Emergence and Transformations of Democracy in Nepal¹

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Introduction

'Democracy' is a familiar word to the majority of people in Nepal today. This word has been in use since last one century in the public lexicon in Nepal, although the usage gained greater currency following political change in 1951. The mass diffusion of the word through expanding networks of radio, television, print media, popular struggles, speeches of political leaders, books, school curriculum and other formal and informal communicative spaces has ensured that the sizeable majority of the Nepali people have heard, read, discussed, pondered and written about this word. A number of Nepali words are translatable equivalent of 'democracy', the most popular among them are 'prajatantra' and 'loktantra', although other words such as 'janabaad' and 'janatantra' are also used. These later two words are used to denote, with some caveats such as 'new' or 'people's', particular version of democracy that Communist Party began to promote in Nepal and they are translated with a caveat as 'people's democracy' (Mikesell, 2004: 1).¹

The ideas of democracy contain in them, among other things, promises. This paper is an attempt to chronicle the promises of democracy in Nepal. The approach adopted is historical in that the promises are viewed in the context of a historical process of the emergence of the very concept of democracy in Nepal and its evolution in the last century.

Democracy traveled to Nepal in specific time. It brought with it a variety of imaginations and it was brought to Nepal by a variety of groups of people. As with any other concepts, the encounter with the 'local' reality produced plethora hybrid meanings. As time moved, meanings also got transformed through a variety of political practices. Struggles of people, knowledge production, experiments in political practices, and changes occurring outside Nepal provided the impetus for its transformation. The popularization process created a variety of meanings—by transferring the concept from a small group of people in society to larger group of the masses.

The idea of democracy appeared as a new juncture in Nepal, although some authors argue that elements of democratic practices existed for a long time. For instance, Mikesell (2004) discusses the practices of local community institutions in different parts of Nepal in making decisions related to local affairs such as local dispute resolutions, distribution of natural resources, natural calamities, among others. While elements of what we understand as democracy today may have existed in Nepal for long time, the word 'democracy' and concomitant set of imaginations and practices associated with it appeared in particular time as an important disjuncture in Nepali history. The idea as governing principle of political domain in the context of modern nation state with its attendant notions of freedom, citizenship, popular sovereignty, and periodic elections, among others, emerged in early twentieth century as new entrant in the practice of political domain in Nepal (Gupta, 1993; Gautam, 1990).

For the purpose of this paper, 'democracy' is not conceptually defined a priori, but understood as imaginations and ideas about democracy that appeared in Nepal from the late nineteenth century onwards. In that sense, it is not an attempt to describe what true democracy was and, then to separate the chaff from the kernel. It aims, instead, to analyze in their ramifications the variety of ideas, imaginations and utterances of democracy by diverse actors and the transformations of these imaginations over time.

Broadly, three major processes have made perhaps the most far reaching impact on the formation and spread of the ideas about democracy in Nepal. The first was the process of implantation of 'western' ideas about democracy—the importation of the ideals of individual liberty, freedom of speech, equality of citizenship, representation in the state through periodic elections, end of hereditary rule, end of arbitrary justice, rule of law, and social justice, among others. This process of implantation began in the late nineteenth century when increasing number of Nepali people including the would-be political leaders of Nepal got exposed to the movement of independence in India and through that to a vast world of debates about democracy, socialism, freedom, colonialism, social change, social reforms, among others, that took place both in India and elsewhere (Koirala, 2005; Gautam, 1990; Gupta, 1993).

Second was the emergence and spread of left ideology which had its own notion of democracy and its own position vis-a-vis the liberal democracy. The spread of communist ideas after first the Russian and later the

Chinese Revolution had perhaps the most far reaching impact on the way democracy got reconceptualized among the Communist Parties all over the world, and through them among the constituency they have created. Nepal is no exception in that respect. The formation of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) coincided with the translation of the Communist Manifesto into Nepali language by Pushpalal Shrestha, one of the founders of the CPN (Shrestha, 2053 B.S). The CPN brought in and spread its own concept of democracy.

Third was the appropriation of the concept of democracy for the goal of ideologically sustaining the thirty-year rule of absolute monarchy during the Panchayat regime. The international political context of Indo-China hostility, the Cold War, ideology of development, and above all, absolute control over the military by the king, were the basis of Panchayat Rule. But at the level of ideology, it had to project itself as democracy. Therefore, Gandhi's village republic mixed with ancient Hindu practices of elite male village council found its expression in the Panchayat democracy for thirty years. Certain ideas about democracy--that suited the soil and climate, to use the words of one of the front ideologue of Panchayat system--got spread through state-controlled mass media (Onta, 2004). Further boost to this was provided by international development regime which saw development as independent of politics (Panday 1998).

This paper will be divided into broadly three parts. The first part will provide a narrative account of a broad historical trajectory that democracy has traversed in Nepal in the last one century. This will be followed by examining the democratic promises in the context of political openings that occurred in 1990, following the reestablishment of multiparty democracy. The final part will deal with the new imaginations that people have and how democracy remains a contested concept and practice. A post-script is also added to the original plan to describe a bizarre, but expected, turn of events after King Gyanendra usurped state power on February 1, 2005. This was the culmination of his take-over process that formally began on October 4, 2002, when he dismissed the then popularly elected prime minister, and began to rule through prime ministers he chose to put in office and dismiss when he wanted. A new promise-making has begun with that.

I

Emergence and Spread of the Idea

From the late nineteenth century onwards, a new political and social consciousness was emerging and spreading among some small but influential sections of population in Nepal. Initially, religious and social reformers and gradually, overtly political actors appeared in the scene. Increasing number of middle-class Nepalis were exposed to modernizing influences of education in India, which involved, among other things, their encounters with struggles and knowledge about democracy and political change. This was the time when a variety of actors in India were involved in struggles against colonialism, and for reforming the existing social and political order. These encounters led to new imaginations about society, polity, culture, economy and other aspects of public life in Nepal. They also made it possible to examine with critical eyes the existing reality in their own country. For these Nepalis, the ideas about democracy also became a vision for transforming those realities.

Lahures (Nepali soldiers in British and Indian Army) who served in the imperial army during the first and second world war had seen places other than their own, seen people who were different and had been in the forefront of the war. When they brought back home, they brought back images of the west. They also brought back different experiences. They were dissatisfied with what existed back home, where soldiers were treated abysmally by Rana rulers (Gupta 1993). Many of them settled in different places of India, instead of coming to Nepal, and some of them began to organize Nepalis living in India.

Nepal Praja Parishad's Emergence and Its Promises

In the immediate aftermath of the ascendancy of Rana rule in 1847, there were various attempts to overthrow this regime. Most of these were instances of intrigues and assassination attempts aimed at re-establishing the power of the king (Gupta, 1993: 20-22; Gautam, 1990). From the late nineteenth century,

however, a new disjuncture began to appear in Nepal. This new disjuncture was about injection of ideas about better society and polity, and gradual rejection of the existing order, characterized by familial rule, utter exploitation of landed peasantry by the ruling elites, and brutal suppression of any attempts at changing this order. Initially, religious reformists began to inject, mostly among people in Kathmandu, different truths about Hinduism from the ones propagated by the then existing religious pundits sanctioned by Rana rulers (Gautam, 1990; Gupta, 1993). By the early twentieth century, overtly political initiatives had begun to appear in Kathmandu and a few other places in Nepal (K.C., 1997; Koirala, 1998??). That time coincided with increasing number of Nepalis going to India and taking up education, where they got exposed to the political stirrings taking place there (Gupta, 1993; K.C. 1997; Koirala, 1998; Gautam, 1990, Upadhaya, 1997).

Raktapat Dal, Prachanda Gorkha, Nepali Civil Rights Committee, and a few other charity organizations, libraries and religious organizations were established. All of these shared their common disenchantment with the Rana regime. However, it was until the formation of Nepal Praja Parishad in 1935 (Gupta, 1993: 27), that initiatives with explicitly political goals had not started. In 1941, members and sympathizers of Nepal Praja Parishad distributed four different pamphlets in which it spelled out, in howsoever general form, political programs for future in Nepal. Leaders of Nepal Praja Parishad got ideas about democracy from their contacts with Indian political leaders and organizations. They read new books, and materials on various aspects of democratic system. While the earlier attempts were aimed at either religious reforms along the line of Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati in India (Gupta, 1993), these new leaders began to imagine new political practices.

In the pamphlets it distributed clandestinely in Kathmandu valley's main city centres in February 1941, it demanded, among others, abolition of hereditary rules of Ranas and guarantee of civil rights for people (Upadhyaya, 1997, p.34). In the first pamphlet, Praja Parishad indicted the Ranas for the misery the people have been subjected to in Nepal. It was addressed to the Ranas. It reads:

"Oh, Ranas! you had the opportunity to serve the people, but you became tied to your own selfishness. You tried to enriched yourself by sucking the blood of the people, instead of bettering their lives." (Translated by the author himself).

It then went on to tell that the Ranas were indulging in sins and selling Nepali youths to the imperialist British, and some day, they would have to account for that. "For your own selfishness, Nepali jati was enslaved by you", it said. At the end, the pamphlet said, "You still has time to cleanse yourself, and we hope you won't lose this opportunity"(Gautam, 1990: 393-394). The second pamphlet was addressed to people in general, and this reiterated its firm determination "to liberate the people by giving them proper education and to bring the country forward in progress." (ibid.: 395). It also indicted the Ranas for the misery of people. It reads:

"How long will you remain sitting bound by the Ranas' chains? How long will you remain half naked and half fed ? Have not you known the reason of your great poverty? If not, understand it is the avarice of the Ranas for money, which has reduced the country to beggary. It is the Ranas who have thrown your independence into the rivers of their self-will, have made you slaves and enjoyed themselves on the money earned by your sweat. They make you run to their gates and treat you worse than dogs. They claim that they themselves are the administrators of justice, but really they are robbers. It is about 100 years since they have been ruling, but what have they done for your improvement? Where is your hard earned money? It is deposited in their names in the banks of London and New York. You--unfortunate brothers--you do hard labour, but the benefit is enjoyed by the oppressors. You do not get food and are pressed down under poverty." (Gautam, 1990: 396).

The pamphlet then goes on calling them to "wake up... and relate reasons of your by raising your voice against these oppressors." It also calls upon people to "rise and shake off" impotency and establish unity among themselves. In the third pamphlet, the Praja Parishat put forth a few of its principles of political system. It read:

"Government is neither the individual property of anybody nor is it anybody's patrimony. It is a limb of civilized society. It is an institution whose duty is to enforce the laws, made by a society. It should therefore be in accordance with the wish of the society. Law is simply a tie among the members of a society, therefore, none but the society itself has the right to formulate it. A society which has not possessed this right cannot be called independent..... A King or government body is a servant (sic.) of society and his duty is, as said above, to enforce the law of the society and to impart justice to the people in accordance with the laws" (Gautam, 1990: 398).

These pamphlets were clandestinely distributed in different city centres. Their impact could be gauged from the fact that immediately afterwards the Rana government issued a public notice (istihar) in Gorkhapatra asking people to inform them about people distributing these pamphlets. They also set a reward of Rs. 5000 for the information (Ibid: 397).

The arrests of most of its leaders and death sentence to four of its members brought to a halt the spread of Praja Parishad's political activities. But new stirrings were beginning to happen. Workers striked in Biratnagar. In Kathmandu valley also, there were public demonstrations in 1947, and the government employees also striked (Shrestha, 1996).

Nepali Congress Makes Promises

In the mid-1940s, Nepali National Congress was formed in India by several young people who had actively participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942. This then was merged with another Democratic Congress Party in late 1940s resulting in the formation of Nepali Congress. Many of its leaders including Ganesh Man Singh were involved in Praja Parishad activities. Others were involved in struggles of independence in India. B.P. Koirala along with his other colleagues prepared a manifesto which can be taken as next set of codification of promises of democracy in Nepal.

Broadly, like Praja Parishad, it also championed the end of Rana rule. But its manifesto had more details than Praja Parishad pamphlets. It analyzed the Rana rules in terms of how it related to the misery of general people. Among other things it pointed out the exploitation, tyranny, lack of freedom, lack of education, no rule of law, and lack of progress as directly resulting from the Rana's policies of absolute but completely unaccountable control over state. " We Nepalis are ground under the stone of medieval reactionary rulers", it read (Koirala, 1996: 3). "Congress has been established by youths," it declared, "to end the autocratic government as soon as possible and bring the country towards progress." (ibid.:5). It also outlined its own programs.

While it championed constitutional role for the king, it was also unequivocal about this. "We want to make it clear here that we will give him (the king) as much power as is due to a constitutional ruler so that his majesty also won't tread the path of autocracy in future." (ibid: 6). Rule by the popularly elected representatives became the central element of Nepali National Congress's manifesto. Besides the promise about new ways of governing the state, it also had some promises in the economic, social and cultural fronts. It said:

"Nepali Congress will also lead economic reform and improve the economic condition of the people. Economically, present social system in Nepal is very unjust. Because of the wide gap between the rich and poor, all the social power has dissipated. In the society that Nepali Congress is going to build, there won't be any place for exploitation..... Nepali Congress has come to a conclusion that mere talk of democracy is useless. Pure political change won't lead to real welfare of the people." (ibid: 6-7).

The manifesto has detailed promises about industrialization, just wage for the workers, membership of UN, and expanding international relations (ibid: 6-7). In 1952, B. P. Koirala prepared detailed document about what the Nepali Congress aims to do in Nepal. Besides the identification of the fundamental elements of liberal democracy, viz., the free press, freedom of expression, independent judiciary, periodic elections,

rule by representatives of the people, among others, he also outlined his economic, social and other programs. Among them were the 'abolition of birta ownership of land and other land reform initiatives such as ensuring tenancy rights, increasing the shares of tenant farmers from the produce of the land from the then existing 1/2 of the produce to 2/3rd of the produce. It also outlined the need of collective farming in new lands and setting up of grain bank as a way of generating local credit system so that the then existing usurious interest on loan from local landlords would be discouraged and eventually eliminated (ibid: 17-18).

Communism's Birth and New Promises

The details of Russian revolution began to spread as the Russian state began to produce and spread the publicity materials about revolution, Marxism, Leninism, dialectal materialism, and communist manifesto, among others, throughout the world. They also began to organize travels for emerging communist leaders from around the world including those from India. The spread of communist ideas in India and contacts that some Nepalis built with communist movement in India had tremendous impact on the way democracy got imagined by a significant section of political leaders in Nepal.

Establishment of the Communist Party of Nepal furthered the spread of ideas about communism and its own version of democracy. But many years before the establishment of CPN, a number of people in Kathmandu were involved in reading and discussing various books about communism, socialism and democracy. One Biharilal used to bring books about Russian Revolution, socialism, and communism and would give them to the members of this group (K.C, 2001[1999]: 37-39). Pushpalal Shrestha, the founding leader of Communist Party of Nepal translated the Communist Manifesto in 1949 (Shrestha, 1996: 43). He wrote a long introduction about the history of the world communist movement in Nepali language. This book was released coinciding with the formation of the Communist Party of Nepal on 15 September 1949. Pushpalal Shrestha, the founding general secretary of the party also prepared the manifesto of CPN. We do not yet know how many copies of this was printed and where was it distributed. But the very fact that this was published in Nepali was an indication that communist literature was making its way into Nepali political lexicon. Besides these, the CPN also published series of pamphlets. In the first pamphlet that the CPN had published after its establishment, it had identified major areas of its promise to the people. The title of the pamphlet very instructive: *Civil Rights, Need of Every Class: Therefore, Form Revolutionary Civil Rights Committee*. This pamphlet was distributed denouncing the token reform measures that the then Rana government announced as a response to popular demonstration and strikes of civil servants (Shrestha, 1996, p. 46). Fundamental freedom to citizen was necessary, it argued, for a variety of reasons, among them were the following:

- Civil rights for workers so that they could fight for increasing their wages and dearness allowance
- Peasants should be free to determine the price of their product, their right to land and their just share in the produce of land
- Students need civil rights so that he could struggle for higher education for free or low fee.
- Women need civil rights so that she could fight dual slavery. (ibid.: 48) .

A sense of euphoria also is palpable in Pushpalal's announcements through that pamphlet. "In China, revolutionary people are winning. Revolution has come at our own gate. Even in Burma, Malay, China, Indonesia and Telengana--the heart of India, revolutionary flames have arisen", the pamphlet said (ibid: 50). Pushpalal was vehemently opposed to Nepali Congress for a long time, and his imagination of democracy was partly based on the denunciation of what Nepali Congress stood for. In the manifesto of CPN, he wrote:

"... Nepali people should take different route. That route is to eliminate existing feudal system and the dominance of imperialist-capilast domination over Nepal with active help from world democratic (socialist) camp, and to establish people's democratic state; or to establish such nation-state in which people become the owners of the state's wealth and they would develop the resources for their own benefit." (ibid.:59)

This was standard text-book position for a communist party. In terms of detailed programs, the manifesto listed twelve promises:

1. Complete elimination of feudal autocracy and foreign occupation and full and real independence;
2. Democratic government representing workers, labourers, peasants and oppressed petty bourgeoisie, and which is opposed to British-American imperialism and their Indian stooges, and which is in active cooperation with democratic (socialist) states for the establishment of peace and liberation of all the peoples of the world.
3. A constitution based on adult franchise which would ensure full freedom to ordinary people and which guarantees democracy and fundamental economic rights. Special privileges and discriminations based on caste, race and ethnicity will be eliminated and will be made legally punishable offence.
4. Elimination of Jamindari system of landownership and elimination of all kinds of feudal exploitation, and redistribution of land to the tillers, elimination of rural indebtedness, and adequate wages to agricultural labourers
5. Nationalisation of banks, industrial and transport businesses, gardens, mines, and elimination of foreign investment in these sectors
6. Nationalisation of big industries, big banks and insurance companies, guaranteeing worker's control in them, minimum living wages guaranteed, and eight-hours working period.
7. Eliminating the involvement of big business from the development of national resources and making of economic planning and strategic sectors.
8. Elimination of all oppressive laws
9. Elimination of bureaucracy and administration run by popularly elected committees
10. Arming the general people and establishment of democratic army
11. Free education and compulsory primary education
12. Equal democratic rights to women (ibid.:60-61)

These promises have a ring of familiarity about them now, but when they were first made, they were very new public ideas. There have been slight changes in these promises over time. There were many other political parties, which came into existence during 1951-1960 period. They also had their set of promises and visions. They however, fell within the major two strands represented by Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal. Moreover, their public influence was very limited compared to these two political parties.

Panchayat Democracy: Suitable in Nepali Soil and Climate

On December 15, 1960, King Mahendra dismissed the elected government, dissolved the parliament, arrested political leaders, and with military force, usurped control over the state. Thus began the new era of Panchayat system (Gupta, 1993), and with it arrived a new era of promise making. An additional notion of democracy began to be promoted through all the available state apparatuses. Panchayat democracy with its supposed root in traditions and working for harmonious relationships among different people in the country--began to promote itself with vengeance. The political parties, which were banned in the aftermath of the coup, had to operate clandestinely.

On January 5, 1961, King Mahendra made first public pronouncement outlining the basic principles of his rule. The promise was "mental and spiritual regeneration of the people" and opening up of "a new spring of power which will remove the centuries old poverty ignorance and backwardness of the country" (Gupta, 1993: 239). Vaguely worded promise of "a thorough study of all the problems connected with land system" was also announced, although it was short of promising anything concrete in changing the land tenure

system in the country (ibid.). Protection of nationalism and doing development became the ostensible aims of the Panchayat system. At the core of it was the promotion of the system as one "sprouting forth from the basic life-pattern of the Nepalese people" (quoted in Gupta, 1993: 243).

Another important element of the system was its notion of 'class' coordination. Among the institutions established were different 'class' organizations as mechanisms of building coordination, and not contradictions, among different class of peoples in the country. A policy statement on that stated:

"Although there appears to be, generally speaking, mutual contradiction between the peasantry and the landlords, between the traders and the consumers in general, and between the mill-owner and workers, we have to impress upon the various social classes and sections that, in the cause of national advancement, each of them must, to a certain extent, renounce their interests." (quoted in Gupta, 1993: 258).

Class antagonisms, and attendant chaos in society, was projected as the features of parliamentary democracy and Panchayat democracy was to end that by establishing 'class' organizations that would coordinate with each other. Another significant promise made was the doing away with caste privileges through the overhauling of legal code. The new code, in addition to ending the caste based privileges, also abolished polygamy, child marriage (ibid.:267).

This was the time when the parties worked underground and spread the message. While the communist parties tried to put forth detailed programs, the Nepali Congress' singular goal was the re-establishment of multi-party democracy, a few pronouncements on social, economic and political themes by B.P. Koirala aside. Many of the communist groups had many things in common in terms of broad programmatic promises, but bitter rivalries arose among them over strategies to be adopted for their preordained revolution. So fighting Panchayat and establishment of 'freedom', 'democracy', 'individual liberty' yet again became promises of political parties.

International development regime operated on the assumption that politics and development were separate and development was considered to be 'neutral' to the political system. The dismissal of the elected government in 1960 also coincided with the time when developmental assistance was beginning to increase (Mihale, 2003). Panchayat's main slogan became doing development and doing away with 'politics'. Promise of roads, healthposts, irrigation, modern agriculture, modern education, became the rallying cry during the period.

A set of new rationales were identified by King Mahendra to justify his takeover among them, the following were outlined in his speech to National Panchayat on August 30, 1964:

1. There was political instability
2. Economic progress lagged behind,
3. A pessimistic outlook prevailed in the society,
4. Groupism and partiality became rampant,
5. Mutual leg-pulling took the place of national development,
6. The poverty and ignorance of the people were exploited to further party interests,
7. Forgetful of the real interests of the nation, a handful of people busied themselves with advancing their narrow self-interest,
8. People had to suffer on account of failures in maintaining law and order,
9. Slowly but steadily, healthy traditions and realities were forgotten and an artificial and unrealistic system was encouraged, and
10. At length, despite the inherent goodness of the western parliamentary system, it had to be discarded because of its expensiveness for the political parties, which made it impossible for them to meet their expenses without external financial support and thus naturally made them dependent upon others. Not only that, their party interests alone absorbing their attention, the

vital interests of the nation were forgotten and national development, nationalism, national unity, independence and sovereignty were endangered and even the very existence of the country was threatened. (HMG-N, 1965: 20-21).

Panchayat democracy was to address these problems. King Mahendra's another famous promise was "to telescope two centuries of progress within a decade or so" (ibid.: 19). Democracy, therefore, was an instrument and not an end in itself. A recently put up hoarding board outside the palace wall at the intersection of Kantipath and Tridevi Marga near Thamel in Kathmandu boasts of an instructive quote from King Mahendra's speech:

Democracy is not for the sake of democracy, but for the people and for the building of the nation.

In Panchayat democracy the idea of democracy as an end in itself did not have any place. Some of the objectives of his power-grab on December 15, 1960 were:

To establish stable political conditions through the medium of the partyless, democratic Panchayat system based on a regard for spiritual values;

To achieve the development of the country in consonance with the demands of the times, by safeguarding the independence, sovereignty, nationality and unity of the country as well as individual liberty;

To achieve economic growth by means of industrialization of the country by creating a society free from exploitation from the village level upward (ibid.: 21).

King Birendra also carried on more or less the same path. The development of the nation became the singular defining goal of Panchayat for thirty years. He reiterated the need of 'discipline' and justified the remodeling of democracy along "an indigenous stamp of our own."

"It has also become clear to us that democracy cannot last without the supporting foundation of development," he declared on the occasion of the King Tribhuvan Memorial and National Democracy Day on February 19, 1975 (HMG-N, 1982: 89). Promises also took on more concrete forms. On the occasion of his own coronation, King Birendra said:

We wished to see hungry fed, the naked clothed, the sick tended. We wish to see all our children receive the light which education imparts. We wish to see every Nepali learn at least a useful skill or vocation, so that the self-respect earned through useful effort is not denied to any one. We wish to see growth and development in transportation, agriculture, industry and all other sectors of our national economy and its effects distributed evenly so that people in all parts of the country are able to increasingly share in the ensuing climate of peace and prosperity (ibid.: 91-92).

The promises during Panchayat system remained more or less the same--and development became the central organizing theme of those promises. After all, King Mahendra's usurpation of power was publicly projected as necessary act to take the country on the fast track of development and progress. From time to time, promises of liberty, freedom, individual rights, among others were invoked. But the development imaginary dominated and overshadowed all the other claims and promises.

III

People's Movement of 1990 and After: Democracy in the Making

For thirty years between 1960 and 1990, the political parties struggled for the change of Panchayat system. There was no common agreement as to what they were fighting for, though they had their own programs. The communist parties regarded liberal democracy as nothing more than a bourgeoisie ideology of veiling its domination over the working class (Shrestha, 1996). This brought them at loggerhead with Nepali Congress for which liberal democratic framework was the foundational premise of democracy. The late 1980s saw the collapse of communist regimes in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In Nepal this led to

reassessment of the position of some Communist parties vis-à-vis democratic framework of governance. This reassessment made it possible for building a common minimum program between communist parties and Nepali Congress. Overthrow of Panchayat system and establishment of multi-party democracy became the common minimum rallying points for political parties on the left and Nepali Congress, which had been at loggerheads with Panchayat rulers as well as among themselves.

After one and half months of struggle, with several dozen dead, the king lifted the ban on political parties on April 9, 1990. A new promise-making began to happen from that day onward. Major political actors had very general and broad understanding about establishment of multiparty democracy, and the promises inherent in them were more or less old things from their old party manifestos, pamphlets and other party documents.

The political opening of 1990 allowed not only to function openly, but also opened the possibilities for other sectors for society to articulate their own visions of future. The democratic opening thus provided a plethora of spaces for debating, critiquing, imagining and building different democratic spheres. It also provided spaces for articulating the needs for transforming the existing social, political and other institutions which were not democratic. There were some moments when promise-making became public events. Making of the Constitution of 1990 was that moment, which was followed by several rounds of elections. In addition to these public moments of promise-making, numerous public political processes in the form of citizen's initiatives created new sets of promises.

The Constitutional Moment

The constitutional moment began to produce new imaginings. Formal procedural issues about election, political freedom, freedom of speech, freedom to practice one's own culture and religion, among others, became new sets of promises. The state is seen as not only a neutral arbiter in the great competition game of the market, but active agent for providing social services (Onta 2004, pp.97-124), ensuring social justice and promoting equality. Although the constitution did not take into account these promises as 'state responsibility', it nonetheless provided that scope by including several guiding principles of the state.

The constitution of 1990 provided some basis for state's role in social, economic and cultural sectors. It has a number of promises of the state towards its citizens in the form of directive principles and policies of the state. While the directive principles and policies outlined in the constitution are not justiceable, they nonetheless point towards the state domain envisaged. The state domain, as stated in the directive principles straddles economy, culture, health, education among others. The Constitution states:

- (1) It shall be the chief objective of the State to promote conditions of welfare on the basis of the principles of an open society, by establishing a just system in all aspects of national life, including social, economic and political life, while at the same time protecting the lives, property and liberty of the people.
- (2) The fundamental economic objective of the State shall be to transform the national economy into an independent and self-reliant system by preventing the available resources and means of the country from being concentrated within a limited section of society, by making arrangements for the equitable distribution of economic gains on the basis of social justice, by making such provisions as will prevent economic exploitation of any class or individual, and by giving preferential treatment and encouragement to national enterprises, both private and public.
- (3) The social objective of the State shall be to establish and develop, on the foundation of justice and morality, a healthy social life, by eliminating all types of economic and social inequalities and by establishing harmony amongst the various castes, tribes, religions, languages, races and communities.
- (4) It shall be the chief responsibility of the State to maintain conditions suitable to the enjoyment of the fruits of democracy through wider participation of the people in the governance of the

country and by way of decentralization, and to promote general welfare by making provisions for the protection and promotion of human rights, by maintaining tranquility and order in the society.

The constitution also has some guiding policy outlines which delineate the domain of state in different sectors. Among them include the policy of "raising the standard of living of general public through the development of infrastructures such as education, health, housing and employment of the people of all regions", equitable distribution of economic resources, and addressing environmental problems.

It also envisages some measures to "protecting the rights and interests" of working people, safeguarding the "rights and interests of children" and ensuring "that they are not exploited, and shall make gradual arrangements for free education." It also outlines special provisions for "orphans, helpless women, the aged, the disabled and incapacitated persons."

The promise of equality of citizenship is the hallmark of the constitution. The liberal principles of freedom of speech, fundamental human rights, freedom of assembly, among others, are also enshrined in the constitution and constitute some of the fundamental promises of the state. During the making of this constitution, submissions were asked from general people. The members of the commission went to all the 75 district headquarters to collect people's submissions. Dalits, janajatis and groups from remote areas made their specific submissions regarding the nature of the state, and their rights.

Electoral Moments and New Promises

Elections became the moments when promises were put out for public consumption. It is important to note here that party manifestoes are important documents simply because, at least after 1990, they began to be mass produced to be distributed across the length and breadth of the country. The political parties had to reach out to the general public with their own set of ideas and, public meetings and other forms of canvassing took the centre stage, but the manifestoes provided the reference points.

Open-endedness and contestation is clearly visible in different positions that political parties took on social, political, economic, cultural, foreign policy, employment, health, among others. What is palpably common is the overwhelming emphasis on the role of the state in the delivery of those promises. But, there are clear differences also visible. Nepali Congress began to adopt liberalization policy with vigour and proposed to give increasing role for private and foreign investments in economy and other social sectors such as education and health (Nepali Congress, 1991). The nuanced change was visible when it shifted its emphasis from state's responsibility in the provision of public goods to increasing individual incomes so that people would be able to consume social and other goods. The responsibility was shifted from state to individual. It said:

"Nepali Congress in the coming 15 years expresses its promise to raise the income of majority of rural peasants, workers, landless, small entrepreneurs, low-salary employees, teachers and civil servants, ex-armymens, women, elderly and people from backward caste and ethnicities so that they would be able to get their own home, education, food and clothing, medical services and adequate entertainment" (Nepali Congress, 1991: 7).

The CPN (Unified Marxist-Leninist-UML) on the other hand proposed higher responsibility of state in social and economic sectors. It emphasized 'scientific planning', 'economic programs for regional development', 'making basic health and maternity services', 'addressing landlessness', 'elimination of bonded labour system that exist in western Nepal', 'ensuring tenancy rights', 'promotion of import-substituting industries', 'free education till high school level', spreading health services to village levels, among others (CPN-UML, 1991).

Almost all the political parties promised fundamental freedom as enshrined in the Constitution of 1990. The CPN--People's Front, however, rejected the constitution of 1990 as completely regressive and took part in the electoral process only to expose the system. It called for, among other things, 'making of a republican constitution through popularly elected constituent assembly', 'elimination of all the economic,

social and cultural inequalities', 'bringing army, police and administration under the firm control of people's representatives', 'elimination of religious monopoly and declaring a secular state' (United People's Front Nepal, 1991: 7-10). It also outlined detailed programmatic promises in relation to 'food, shelter, clothing, health, education, entertainment' provisions for the people (ibid.: 10-11). But it made it clear that the representatives elected on its platform 'won't participate in government under present system, and won't help the reactionary forces" (ibid.:15). So its promises were about the days to come when they would have their own political system in place. Three general elections and two local elections have been held until now, the these were perhaps the most visible spaces of promise-making.

IV

Popular Imaginations : Transforming Promises

The political change of 1990 opened up multiple imaginations not only among the political parties, but other institutions which may not vie for direct political power of the state, but which would, nonetheless, involve in a variety of ways in transforming the conceptualizations of democracy itself. The promises that political parties made to general people were primarily aimed at citizen-voters or 'participants' in revolution. Underlying assumption in this was that these promises were made to people by political organizations.

Democratic opening, however, also created possibility for people in a variety of ways to challenge their own role as voter-citizen and to assert themselves as 'active citizens' (Bhattarai, 2001; 2002). After the political change in 1990, new actors--broadly lumped within 'civil society'--have grown and spread. Civil society in the initial years got conceptualized as the very foundation of democracy, as moral force for rectifying the authoritarian tendencies of the state and rapacity of the market (Gyawali, 2000?).

Democracy is also a space of possibilities for people to take action--to get organized, to press for their demands, to create institutions that address those demands, to advocate for certain public policies, among other things. A variety of social and political actions carried out by dalits, janajatis, women, rural poor, and many other historically marginalized groups are pointers towards that.

The open political space saw variety of public agenda emerge, which were not overtly political issues until 1990. Nepal's ratification of several international human rights instruments became a major promise-making exercise ('Chintan', 2004: 304-363). Popular actions brought in new set of promises from political parties and the state, among them being several initiatives on addressing caste discrimination, inclusion of janajatis in the mainstream, gender-based discrimination, regional inequalities. State policies were devised and programs formulated. Institutions were set up. New imaginations emerged about a different democracy, which is more inclusive, which allows for their participation, which promotes equality in a very substantive sense (Mainali, 2004). Democracy is not a 'finished' thing, but something that is in-the-making, that is transforming.

The promises are not coherent set of ideals, but contested set of possibilities. The differing ideological positions produce differing set of promises. This is very sharply discernible in the way the roles and responsibilities of the state are identified. A new international context arose in the 1980s which tried to redefine the role of state away from social and economic sectors and limit it to law and order and regulatory functions. These neo-liberal positions were carried and implemented through institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Nepal's high dependence on these institutions produced a peculiar situation in which political actors were under tremendous pressure to revise their promises along the imperatives of these institutions (Panday 2000). Nepali Congress left behind its social democratic promises and adopted neo-liberal positions in this light. At the same time, state remained

central institution for imagining the delivery of social services to Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist).

Conclusion

Democracy is a contested concept and practice, and this is reflected in a variety of promises it evokes. Democracy became a reference point for a variety of visions that, many times, clashed with each other. The clashes happened along familiar lines of established political ideologies. These clashes also occurred in the context of Nepal's particular positions vis-à-vis the global financial institutions, which increasingly set policy and program agenda of the Nepali state (Panday 2000). Revisions of promises among, for example, political parties have occurred in this context.

The increasing focus on the market for the delivery of social services has led to policies that are weak in substantive involvement in the social life of its citizens. The emphasis on limiting procedural aspect of democracy comes from this increased pressure for distancing the state from social sector interventions through budgetary provisions, policies and programs (Roka 2004). As an open space, at the same time, democracy allows the possibilities of new promise-making. The public agenda set by popular initiatives become new set of promises for political actors as they vie for electoral contests.

The limits of procedural democracy is expressed in now-widespread debates about the exclusion, the need of inclusive political processes and institutions, assertion of the equality of citizenship, and raising of new demands by a variety of actors (Mainali 2004). In democratic debates, those arguing for more substantive democracy have clear domination. This has led to a new set of promises about building inclusive state structures, social justice, and democratic and accountable governance (Acharya, 1996).

The substantive claims are not limited to state domains alone. The campaigns for the elimination of untouchability in society--mostly led by dalit activists, have pointed towards a new social contract between different people's not based on manusmriti², but on the notion of substantive equality among human beings. At the community level, the historical subjugation of cultures in the form of sanskritisation by dominant hindus--in direct collusion with the state--is being interrogated and demand for secular state is finding wider acceptance (Lawoti, 2004).

Women's movements have brought to the fore a number of new notions and practices which point towards democracy not only in the formal procedural sense, but at the everyday realm of social and political life. Issues such as equality of citizenship, right to parental property, right to control over reproduction, among others have been at the forefront of the mobilizations. At the micro-level, the idea that men and women do not have naturally different and unequal positions, but society has produced that is gaining ground. This has been diffused through a variety of mechanism--various mass media, 'gender trainings' organized by a number of non-governmental organizations, women's groups, among others.

Procedural issues have also been now discussed in their relations to substantive issues. The issue of inclusive political institutions is, for example, both substantive and procedural. As a procedural issue, it is concerned with designing of institutions in such a way that the demands for inclusion of different sections of society are made possible. But at the same times, these procedural debates are integral part of the substantive issue of equality of citizenship raised by historically marginalized sections of society. Proposals and demand for electoral reforms, reforms of the political party institutions, the demand for federal governing system of the state, among others, are such issues (Khanal, 2005; Lawoti, 2004). They fundamentally alter the substantive arrangements in society and polity by making it possible for excluded sections of the society to assert their political positions. Therefore, there is no clear boundary, at times, between substantive and procedural issues.

The meanings of democracy got transformed and widened as more and more people began to articulate their own visions and practices of democracy. The uneasy existence of very top-down hierarchically run and personality-dominated parties with emerging democratic practices that aim to transform these

undemocratic institutions have created possibilities for re-imagining democracy. Promises are produced in the context of political practices. Therefore, the promise of democracy has become an arena of contestation.

Post-Script

The February 1, 2005 marks another turning point in the history of promise-making. A clearly authoritarian move is again couched in the language of democracy. The king has usurped all the political power, but has left no room for criticism. At the same time the king has also made a variety of promises. Claimed as "a historic decision....to defend multiparty democracy by restoring peace for the nation and the people", the move was a "beginning of a new era". King's life size portrait-carrying billboard planted on the rooftop of one Durbar Marga houses immediately after the king's seizure of power read: "beginning of new era."

His indictment of political parties had similar tone to what his father King Mehendra had in the 1960s. "Multiparty democracy was discredited by focusing solely on power politics," he said in his February 1 proclamation. Terrorism provided a new justification for the action this time, in addition to development and prosperity, as his predecessor did in the 1960s. A new promise of "meaningful democracy" was made. Unlike his predecessor, King Gyanendra shared his "unflinching faith in multi-party democracy."

In response political parties also have come up with their own set of new promises. Transforming the present armed conflict has become the central elements of these assertions. But some other points have also been made. A new constitutional moment has been imagined through which not only to resolve the ongoing armed conflict, but also to transform the state into more plural, inclusive and participatory one. Significantly, a new culmination is also seen in promises that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) have made recently. A dilemma is palpably visible in their trying to present themselves as in favour of multiparty democracy with guaranteeing of fundamental freedoms. It is still very uncertain what path the future will take. It is equally possible that politics will be reverted back to Panchayat era system of guided-democracy, although king's rule after February 1, has seen numerous instances of failures and embarrassments. This could also be possible that a new process will unfold in which fundamentals of what is generally understood as democracy becomes the consensus and a broad social contract can be forged to formalize that consensus through new constitutional moment--be it in the form of election to constituent assembly, sovereign parliament, or drafting of a new constitution through a commission to be endorsed through some form of popular will. Democracy still will remain contested terrains where competing promises will continue to be made. What would be significant, though, is if the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) also accepts the foundational framework of periodic election, independence of judiciary, separation of power, fundamental freedoms, among others. That could yet again be a new era in promise-making. Of course, predicting is a risky business at this time of uncertainty, but hoping something better has always been part of democratic promise throughout history.

End Notes

¹ In Nepal there are over one hundred officially recognized languages and none of them have their own words directly translatable for democracy. The reason was obvious. The spread of Nepali language throughout the country was carried out as a systematic attempt of unifying the diverse groups by subsuming them under one linguistic community. Secondly, the usage of word and its spread was monopolized by predominantly Nepali speakers. Therefore, now, all the major linguistic groups use 'prajatantra' or 'loktantra' or 'janabad' or 'bahudal' (multiparty democracy) to connote democracy, depending upon, again, the user's political background, rather than linguistic one. For those uninitiated in the formal political processes, 'prajatantra' is the most commonly used.

