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NEPALI CONGRESS AND THE 1986 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NEPAL : REASONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF ITS NON-PARTICIPATION

After the abrogation of the parliamentary democracy by King Mahendra in 1960, the Panchayat system of Nepal came into operation in 1962. The new system has undergone significant changes during the last twenty six years of its existence. These changes were prompted by a nation-wide student revolt towards the late seventies, which had ultimately culminated into a mass movement against the Panchayat system. The Panchayat leadership after securing people's mandate in the May 1980 referendum introduced several changes in the system, and thus, gave a different nature and direction to it.

An important change was brought in the form of the third amendment to the constitution in December 1980, under which direct election to the National Panchayat based on the principle of universal adult suffrage was introduced. Earlier, indirect elections were held to the National Panchayat. The first general election, which was held in accordance with the new provisions of the constitution in 1981, remained one sided as the outlawed political parties of the kingdom decided to keep out of the electoral contest. These parties argued that ban on the political parties had not been withdrawn and adequate political rights and freedom was lacking. Moreover, it was

essential for every one seeking election to the National Panchayat to secure membership of any one of the six class organisations. For the outlawed political parties obtaining membership of class organisations would have meant acceptance of Panchayat philosophy which they did not intend to do. The parties demanded that these restrictions should be removed. But the government declined to accept these demands of the outlawed political parties before the elections were held.

In the second general elections to the National Panchayat held in 1986 some of the outlawed political parties particularly the communist party took part, but the Nepali Congress, which happened to be the largest outlawed political party of the kingdom, decided to continue with its earlier policy of boycotting the elections. The decision of the Nepali Congress had not only important implications for the electoral outcomes but also put the party itself in a complex situation.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to analyse the various conditions and constraints in which the Nepali Congress decided to remain out of the electoral politics, and also its implications for the elections as well as on the course of political events in the kingdom in the post-election period.

Nepali Congress and the Democratic Process in Nepal

The movement for democracy in Nepal is closely associated with the role played by Nepali Congress. Infact, it was Nepali Congress which brought success to the anti-Rana movement. The party came into existence after several groupings and re-groupings among the Nepalese living in India during the late thirties and the forties. A party named All India Nepali National Congress was formed at Varanasi on 13 October, 1946. It was largely composed of the Nepalese students living in India. In the Calcutta Conference of the party held on 25-26 January 1947, the word India was dropped and

it was renamed as Nepali National Congress. In August 1948 a Nepali Democratic Congress was formed. On 9 April 1950, with the merger of these two political groups the Nepali Congress came into being.¹ Many of the members of these political groups were associated with the Indian National Movement and were deeply influenced by the western liberal political ideas. The basic objective of Nepali Congress was to bring an end to the autocratic rule of the Ranas and to initiate a process of democratisation in the kingdom.² They were obviously influenced by the parliamentary system of democracy. After the conclusion of the tripartite agreement in New Delhi in early 1951, which put an end to the Rana rule, and also led to the formation of a Rana-Nepali Congress coalition government, Nepali Congress emerged as the strongest political party in the kingdom.³

During the fifties the Nepali Congress even while accepting the monarchy, made some important contributions towards the modernization and democratisation of the country.⁴ Intense factionalism within the party as well as the inter-party conflicts had made the process of democratization difficult, and paved the way for the re-emergence of the authority of the King. Yet, hopes for democracy were not totally lost. In the 1959 general elections, which the country had experienced for the first time, the Nepali Congress secured majority of seats and formed the government. Thus, the vision of the Nepali Congress to introduce parliamentary democracy in the

1. For details see, Parmanand, *The Nepali Congress*, New Delhi, 1982 ; Kanchanmoy Mazumdar, *Nepal and the Indian Nationalist Movement*, Calcutta, 1975.

2. Parmanand, *op. cit.*

3. For details see, Bhola Chatterjee, *Recent Nepalese Politics*, Calcutta, 1967.

4. For a detailed study of various developments in the post 1950 period see: Anirudha Gupta, *Politics in Nepal*, New Delhi, 1964; Bhuwan Lal Jashi and Leo E. Rose, *Democratic Innovation in Nepal*, Berkeley, 1965; Bhola Chatterjee, *Nepal's Experiment with Democracy*, Calcutta, 1977.

country came to a success. The elections were in a way indicative of the fact that the Nepali Congress was the largest and better organised party of the kingdom, it was highly nationalistic and also capable to govern the country. But before the Nepali Congress government could take concrete steps towards introducing socio-economic reform measures, which the Prime Minister B.P. Koirala wanted, King Mahendra dismissed the government, abrogated the parliamentary system and himself took over all the powers. The action totally disrupted the process which the Nepali Congress had initiated. Hereafter all the political parties of the kingdom were banned and the organised political activities were declared illegal. The Nepali Congress tried to launch a struggle against the royal takeover but they did not succeed. The party also expected support from India but could not secure it. India got reconciled to the Panchayat system after 1962, which was a great setback to the party. However, they continued to oppose the Panchayat system.

Nepali Congress and the Panchayat System

The Nepali Congress did not accept the new political order—the Panchayat system—on the following grounds :

1. It did not provide political rights and freedom to the people;
2. It did not provide any scope for the development of a democratic system ;
3. There was no scope for the operation of the political parties since they had been declared illegal.

Therefore, the Nepali Congress firmly opposed the Panchayat system and decided to continue a struggle for the reestablishment of the parliamentary democracy. Towards the end of the sixties, however, a change occurred in the Nepali Congress policy. A policy of reconciliation with the King was followed after B. P. Koirala's release on 30 October 1968. There was also a thinking in the party that it should contest elections to the village and town Panchayats

in order to establish a multi-party system of government.⁵ But neither B. P. Koirala's reconciliation approach could bear any fruits nor the party participated in the elections. In the subsequent years while the government followed a policy of consolidation of the Panchayat system, the Nepali Congress continued its opposition. It received a clearcut direction and leadership when B. P. Koirala returned to Kathmandu on 30 December 1976 after his long exile in India. The party was now more hopeful for an anti-Panchayat movement. B.P. Koirala although did not completely give up his policy of reconciliation but reasserted that the party would continue its struggle for the restoration of democracy. The Nepali Congress pin-pointed its demand for constitutional reforms—direct elections based on the principle of universal adult franchise and political rights. It gave full support to the student movement which broke out in the kingdom towards the end of the seventies.

Much hopes were pinned on the 1980 referendum which the country was to hold in order to decide whether to continue with the Panchayat system or a change over to the multi-party form of government.⁶ At one stage the Nepali Congress along with other political parties were quite hopeful about the results of the referendum. It was even believed that the multi-party camp would secure a landslide victory. But to their utter surprise the results of the referendum went in favour of the continuation of the Panchayat system. Thus all the possibilities to overthrow the panchayat system through constitutional means got frustrated.

Approach of the Nepali Congress towards the subsequent constitutional reforms was that these did not contain any practical

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5. It is said that B. P. Koirala had written a letter to one party worker in Nepal indicating that the party should contest Panchayat elections with an objective to fulfil party's democratic objectives. The Suvarna faction had also given its consent on this issue.
 6. For details see : B. C. Upreti, "The Politics of Referendum," M. D. Dharmdasani, (ed.) *Political Participation and Change in South Asia*, Varanasi, 1984, pp. 34-63.

measures towards the restoration of democracy in the kingdom. The party along with other outlawed political parties of the kingdom did not participate in the 1981 elections on the plea that the political system did not provide a congenial atmosphere for their participation. But the situation changed in the 1986 elections. While the conditions remained the same, most of the outlawed political parties decided to contest in the elections. The Nepali Congress alone was the major political group which had remained out of the polls.

The 1986 Elections

The second general elections of the National Panchayat were held on 12 May 1986. A total of 112 members⁷ were to be elected by nearly 9.0 million voters from 75 districts of the kingdom. As earlier, all the candidates seeking election were required to take an oath proclaiming allegiance to the Panchayat system and acquire membership of any of the six class organisations.⁸

Reactions of the Nepalese Congress

Reacting immediately to the declaration of the second general elections, the Nepali Congress declared that it would not participate in the elections as earlier, unless certain changes were made in the political set-up. The party leaders had also resented that they were not consulted by the government before fixing up the date of the elections. It was reported that the King had promised the party leaders for such consultations.⁹ Almost all the top leaders of the Nepali Congress had subscribed to the view that it would be difficult for the party to contest in the general elections if the situation continues to be the same. But there were sharp differences among them over the changes that could be brought in the political set up

7. 28 Members of the National Panchayat are nominated by the King. Thus the total strength is 140.

8. The six class organisations are those of peasants, women, ex-servicemen, youth, labour and servicemen.

9. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 February 1986, p. 27.

and the governmental machinery, so as to create a congenial atmosphere for general elections. Ganesh Man Singh had expressed the view that the Nepali Congress would participate in the elections only if freedom to hold meetings and conferences was granted, as was done at the time of referendum.¹⁰ B.P. Koirala on the other hand, had stressed that they would participate only if an interim government was constituted, which would ensure free and fair elections.¹¹ Besides, it was also said in certain quarters that the provision of acquiring membership of class organisations should be abolished and separate election symbols should be allotted to the political parties. These opinions would have not made much difference but they did reflect lack of a clearcut and co-ordinated opinion about the preconditions for elections which the party would have liked. The diverse opinions in this regard not only reflected that the party leadership lacked unanimity but also created confusion among the party cadre as well.

The Reconciliation Approach and the Boycott

There was also a strong opinion among the Congress leadership that the party should initiate a dialogue with the King so as to devise means in order to ensure fair elections and to make a congenial atmosphere for elections. This policy of reconciliation was represented by G.P. Koirala, brother of B. P. Koirala. Infact, it had been B.P.'s line of thinking which had been opposed by other leaders even earlier. G.P. Koirala had a firm belief that certain reforms will be brought in the panchayat system before elections.¹² He was of the opinion that the King had to choose an alternative of the Panchayat system from among the Nepali Congress and the

10. *Yugdhara Weekly*, 20 January, 1986, Nepal Press Digest (NPD) Vol. 30, No. 4, 21 January, 1986.

11. *Deshantar Weekly*, 8 February, 1986 (NPD, Vol. 30, No. 7. 17 February, 1986).

12. *The Motherland*, 6 February, 1986.

left forces he would definitely accept the Nepali Congress as an alternative. It is difficult to state on what calculations his assumptions were based, but later on these were proved to be fairly baseless, as neither the King favoured the reconciliation approach nor he introduced any kind of reforms. Nevertheless, G.P. Koirala strongly asserted that

"It is quite justified for the Nepali Congress to demand that it should be allowed to participate in the election as a distinct group. Extremists and those who dance to the tune of foreign forces are doing so in a clandestine manner. They believe neither in the crown nor in stability. If the Nepali Congress joins the Panchayat system, these elements will emerge as an alternative being provided by the Nepali Congress. His Majesty too probably regards the Nepali Congress as an alternative if the Panchayat system can not function. In the absence of the Nepali Congress extremist forces will come into direct confrontation with the crown, and in that event, not only the crown but the nation itself will be wiped out."¹³

The other Nepali Congress leaders, however, had serious doubts about the reforms to be introduced by the King. G. P. Koirala welcomed the decision to form an interim government. But the other leaders were not happy with this development. G.M. Singh clearly said that the formation of an interim government did not make much difference as N.P. Rijal who headed the interim government was a veteran Panchayat leader.¹⁵ Thus it seems that other Nepali Congress leaders had no faith in the reconciliation policy of G.P. Koirala. It can be said that on this point they were more realistic than Koirala.

13. *Rashirapukar Weekly*, 6 March, 1986 (NPD, Vol. 30, No. 10, 10 March, 1986)

14. *Deshanter Weekly*, 6 March 1986 (NPD, Vol. 30, No. 10, 10 March 1986).

Failure of Talks

At one stage it appeared that the reconciliation approach had succeeded when the interim government decided to invite the Nepali Congress to discuss their demands. Three Nepali Congress leaders- G.M. Singh, K.P. Bhattarai and G.P. Koirala participated in these talks. The Nepali Congress put forward the following demands :

1. An impartial atmosphere should be created for the elections. For this purpose an interim government headed by His Majesty himself should be constituted.
2. The constitutional provisions for the membership of class organisations and allegiance to the Panchayat system should be abolished.
3. Freedom of speech, holding meetings etc, should be granted.

These demands were not acceptable to the government because they were against the basic character of the Panchayat system. N.P. Rijal made it clear that people had shown their faith on the Panchayat system in the referendum and that the recognition of political parties would bring basic changes in the Panchayat system which were "neither necessary nor desirable".¹⁵ As a result the talks broke down without reaching any conclusion. Nevertheless, G.P. Koirala was still hopeful of certain reforms. He held 'reactionary forces' responsible for the failure of talks. Although he did not make it clear as to whom he viewed as reactionary forces but, it appears that they were those leaders of the party who had agreed for the talks with the government unwillingly. G.P. Koirala still believed that the King would introduce certain reforms. But it never happened.

After several meetings held at different levels, holding diverse opinion about the party's stand and thus creating lot of confusion among its leaders, the Nepali Congress ultimately decided to hold

15. NPD, Vol. 30, No. 13, 31 March, 1986.

on to its boycott decision. The Nepali Congress leaders could have taken such a decision much earlier but, because of differences and confusion within the leadership, and hopes for reforms by the government they could not do so. This belated decision not only confused the party cadres but also the other outlawed political parties which were themselves prepared for contesting the elections.

Reasons Behind Boycott

The following reasons can be attributed to Nepali Congress decision to boycott the elections :

1. As has been mentioned earlier, the Nepali Congress as well as other political parties wanted that the pre-conditions laid down by the government for those who were contesting the elections should be abolished. For instance there was a provision that each candidate will have to seek membership of any of the six class organisations before filling his nomination. Now, this would have implied in a way the acceptance of the Panchayat philosophy,¹⁶ to which the Nepali Congress was totally opposed.

Similarly, the Nepali Congress obviously wanted to contest in the elections with its own independent identity, with separate election symbol, etc. The membership of class organisation would have diminished its own identity. Since the Nepalese government was strict to these provisions the party had to withdraw itself from the elections.

2. The party was fearing rigging in the elections and also other kind of electoral mal-practices. It may be noted that the party had alleged the government of adopting electoral malpractices in the 1980 referendum and the 1981 general elections. So they wanted assurances about free and fair elections. They did not accept the formation of an interim government under the leadership of N.P. Rijal as he himself was a veteran Panchayat leader.

16. *The Gorkhapatra*, 5 April, 1986.

3. It appears that the party leadership was sharply divided on many issues. One group had faith over King's assurances and wanted to follow a policy of reconciliation. But the other group was totally opposed to it. They neither had any faith on reconciliation approach nor in the formation of an interim government. So, when the rapprochement with the government failed the other alternative left to them was to boycott the elections.

4. It might also be possible that the party had serious doubts about its performance in the elections. After B.P. Koirala's death there was a crisis of leadership. There were sharp differences among its top leaders. The party also did not seem to have sufficient sources to contest elections on a nation-wide scale. Since the political parties were banned it was not possible for it to operate freely. Hence it was also doubtful that the party had sufficient social base to win the elections. In these circumstances the party leadership might have thought it wiser to remain out of the election fray instead of badly losing the elections.

Revolt Inside the Party

The Nepali Congress decision to boycott the elections gave rise to dissatisfaction among the party cadres. Actually the cadres, particularly the young party workers were in favour of participating in the elections. At several times they had been assured of a chance to have the taste of electoral politics. It is said that the party's decision had frustrated many of the NC leaders and created a political confusion in the country. Those who were in favour of contesting in the elections believed that such a decision could neither benefit the country nor the party itself. Gopal Man Shrestha, a member of the Central Advisory Committee of the Nepali Congress had remarked; "one should not remain aloof from the people on the plea that the elections will be rigged ..".¹⁷ Initially many dis-

17. *Deshantar Weekly*, 23 February, 1986 (NPD, Vol. 30, No. 9, 3 March 1986).

strict party chiefs and other workers had decided to contest in the elections on their own. Such reports were heard from Sindhuli, Ramechhap, Manag and Palpa districts.¹⁸ But finally only nine persons had contested in the elections as dissidents and all of them were defeated. However, it was clear that there was dissatisfaction over party's belated decision. It could not take a concrete decision at an early date. On the contrary the party workers were told initially to prepare themselves for elections which had further confused the situation. It can also be pointed out that the party could have launched a nation-wide campaign to convince the masses about their stand and decision. It was not sufficient to organise meetings in certain districts.

The Nepalese press had mixed reactions over the Nepali Congress decision of boycotting the elections. Some newspapers had strongly condemned the party for the decision. *Samaj* (4 April 1986) had warned the party that the boycott will isolate it from the people. It was indeed an important issue. Because any political organisation could loose its mass base by refraining itself from the electoral politics every time. *Pratidhwani Weekly* (6 April 1986) had viewed it as an irresponsible decision. *Matribhumi Weekly* (8 April 1986) was of the opinion that the general elections would remain a one-sided show because of Nepali Congress boycott. But on the other hand a number of newspapers like *Bishwadeep Rajdhani Weekly*, etc. had supported the decision.

Implications of NC's Non-Participation

The Nepali Congress decision to boycott the elections and not to participate in it in any way had wider implications for the Panchayat system and the party itself.

As we have pointed out earlier, the party's non-participation in the elections had made the elections completely a one-sided show. The Panchayat system could secure an easy win. Infact the parti-

18. *NPD*, Vol. 30, No. 16, 21 April, 1986.

cipation of the Nepali Congress in the elections could have strengthened the opposition and would have put forward an alternative to the Panchayat system in alliance with other opposition groups. But the non-participation had rather paved an easy way for the Panchayat camp and thus helped in maintaining the *status quo*.

It can be seen that the Nepali Congress boycott policy had its impact on the leftists. The leftists, particularly the pro-Moscow groups had decided to participate in the elections. They could secure 16 seats out of a total of 112 for which elections were held. The left candidates also had the record of defeating some of the Panchayat stalwarts like, Jog Meher Shrestha. Thus the left has certainly strengthened its position in comparison to the Nepali Congress. According to some political commentators the leftists may pose a serious challenge to the Nepali Congress as well in the future.

The Nepali Congress decision to boycott elections had also reflected serious differences among its leaders and discontent among the party workers. It had lacked cohrdination and a clear cut appraisal of the political conditions in the country.

It can also be said here that the party's decision to boycott the elections could not insert much influence over the voters. This was evident from the fact that quite a significant percentage (average 60%) of voters had exercised their right to vote. It is widely believed that the party decision did not appeal to the masses. A better course of action could perhaps be to have made their position clear and then let the masses decide.

The Post-Election Developments

The differences among the party leadership have further sharpened in the post-election period. There were different opinions about the future course of action. While it was accepted by all that the party should continue its demand for the establishment

of a multi-party system, it was not clear as to what should be the course of action. Ganesh Man Singh appeared to be in favour of launching a 'Satyagrah Movement' in cooperation with other political parties. But this approach was not subscribed by others. G.P. Koirala was of the opinion that the situation was not yet ripe for launching any such movement because of poor response from the people.¹⁹ He instead emphasised the reconciliation approach. He said in a statement that :

"I do not support the idea of such movement in the present situation for, the line of national reconciliation has not yet lost its relevance. I believe that His Majesty wants to develop democracy on an institutional basis."²⁰

The party President had, however, maintained a neutral position.²¹ The differences among its leaders were further clear on the issue of participating in the village and town Panchayat elections held in the first half of 1987. However, keeping in view the widespread dissatisfaction among its cadres the party belatedly decided to participate in the elections but lost badly. The Panchayat camp secured majority in 65 percent constituencies, the leftists in 20 per cent but the Nepali Congress in 15 per cent constituencies only. They even lost in the home town of late B. P. Koirala.

To conclude, the Nepali Congress decision to keep itself out of the 1986 general elections was rooted on the contention that the Panchayat system did not provide a congenial atmosphere for the outlawed political parties to participate in the elections. Therefore, the party had upheld the view that adequate reforms should be introduced before the elections. The Nepalese Government did not accept their plea on the ground that such reforms would have

19. "One Left Step-Forward", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 October, 1986, p. 28.

20. *Deshantar Weekly*, 29 August, 1986 (NPD, Vol. 30, No. 35, September, 1986).

21. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 October 1986,

changed the fundamental character of the Panchayat system which was neither essential nor desirable.

The non-participation of the Nepali Congress assured the victory of Panchayat camp, on the one hand and smoothened the way for the leftists to strengthen their position on the other. At the same time it also became clear that there were serious differences among the top party leaders. There were discontent and dissatisfaction among the party cadres as well as among the second line of party leadership. The party had lacked a clear cut policy regarding the elections as well as the future course of action. Nor was there any proper assessment of its strengths and weaknesses.

In the context of these drawbacks it was believed that the party would further annoy its supporters and loose the mass base. Perhaps it is because of these fears that the party took the decision to contest in the 1987 local elections. Nevertheless, it is certain that in the future the party will need to strengthen its position against both the Panchas and the leftists, which would perhaps be more difficult if the present situation within the party continues.