

The Decline of Political Trust in Nepal

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Public trust in politicians of Nepal ranks 121 out of 137 countries for 2017 (down by three in rank from 2007 to 2017) and lags far behind other South Asian countries as per *TCdata360* of World Bank Group.¹ The lacking trust in the political leadership reflects in a popular Nepalese saying: “*Jun jogi Aaye pani kanai chirekaa*” which translates to “All saints come with ear slit”. It implies the notion that regardless of who comes to power, the person is always a demagogue. This notion, which represents the strong sense of repugnance of ordinary Nepalese over politicians and the ruling class, remained in the Nepali society despite the transformation of the political system, and the initial hopes which came with it. I argue that this lack of trust in the political leadership has negatively impacted the trust in the political system as a whole, and the resulting diminishing of political performance has in turn furthered the public’s distrust in political institutions – a vicious circle in Nepali politics.

Trust in politics and political institutions has become low in Nepal especially in the post-conflict era and one of the primary reasons is political cynicism in the country. A larger section of the population considers politics as a game, often a dirty game, being played to achieve might and position. Even though political trust is one of the key components for a stable democracy, the decade long civil war, the tumultuous peace process, the years-long constitution drafting journey and seasonal governments have left a trail of political distrust which might last for years to come. In any case, when trust is low and the government cannot operate efficiently or vice-versa, it creates further distrust, creating a vicious circle. The distrust in political institutions slows down the growth of democracy and declines citizen participation in politics.

¹ The World Bank. 2017. *TCData360* (<https://tcdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/h45ea0a18>), accessed 23 October 2020.

The economic status of the state and overall well-being of the citizens might additionally play a crucial role in measuring the trust level in politics. The contemporary Nepalese society categorised the citizens into two groups: materialists and post-materialists. Materialist values for a successful democracy depend more or less solely on the economic performance of the state; if citizens are happy with the economic situation in the country, they are likely to trust the rulers and the political institutions. Post-materialists, on the other hand, focus on personal freedom and individuality, and therefore might have issues of trusting political authority.

A rise in corruption, slow-paced economy, poor accountability and transparency, the culture of nepotism and favouritism, false promises by the politicians, absence of rule of law, abuse of power, and lack of development in this fast-moving world are some of the key reasons why people, especially the younger generation, have started losing trust in politicians and maintain a distance from politics in Nepal.

In Sanskrit, the literal definition of “leader” is “Nayati iti neta”. *“It is rather the leader, not the politician, who develops the society and the nation forward.”* Unfortunately, Nepal has too many politicians but the nation lacks a leader. It is said that politics is the king of policies. Even if the word “king” is limited to the main meaning, the one who rules in the heart is the “king”. In many ways, that is not the case. Even in Nepal, in the last two decades, despite the drastic changes in all sections of society, there have been no changes in politics itself. The paradox is, even at a time when the country has finally seen the strongest government in the last three decades with a two-thirds majority, the citizens, especially the youths, are disillusioned with politicians and politics. People are frustrated with the current breed of leaders, who have been in the league for a couple of decades and are looking for new faces.

The irony, however, is that there are limited possibilities. People always were in search of a collective power to influence social change, perhaps in the form of new political parties and leaders who could deliver services to the public, practise what they preach, and eventually transform the nation. For instance, in the general election for the first Constituent Assembly election in 2008, following the peace process, voters tilted towards the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and made it the largest party in the Constituent Assembly with a remarkable victory – despite knowing that thousands and millions of people were killed and displaced in the Maoist armed conflict and that the same party was largely responsible for it. One of the primary reasons for the victory was that the Maoist party was new and claimed to be revolutionary – and people were tired of trying the same conventional politi-

cal parties. Nonetheless, the result after the victory was largely different from what the public had expected.

Even after the end of civil war and the restoration of the peace process, the country for long remained in a transition phase, followed by years of protracted negotiation over a new constitution. Political leaders failed to hold the elections on time and the state witnessed a number of unstable governments for a long time. International players, diplomatic missions and INGOs overtly interfered in domestic politics – targeting national sovereignty. Even more, the rise of small armed groups, unstable and violent political movements in Madesh, the absence of rule of law, scandals on massive corruption and abuse of power for political gains furthered the people losing hopes and confidence in the political system and the leaders representing it.

At present, the nation is considered to have overcome transition and witnessed the election of a powerful government with a two-thirds majority. Yet, people still cannot be considered contented with the government and political leaders. Even after the five years of formulation of transitional justice mechanisms – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) – the war-era victims have not yet received justice. Five years down the line, thousands of victims of the 2015 devastating earthquake are still homeless. The tall electoral promises once made to get votes have not been fulfilled. Rather, in the name of a parliamentary majority, leaders have misused their power and got involved in corruption, resulting in more chaos, more political turmoil, and even more civic frustration. Therefore today, as Voltaire once stated, people are willing to be ruled by one lion rather than a hundred rats – referring in the Nepali case to the notion that monarchy was better than the current corrupted political system.

The current communist government has been criticised by the civil society and by the intellectual communities for squandering its two-thirds mandate and wielding its de facto power over the legislature, executive, the judiciary and the security agencies. Furthermore, the constitutional organs are seen to be heavily influenced by the Prime Minister's office. In 2019, the current government additionally took some controversial moves to challenge the fundamental democratic principles by introducing various contentious bills to shrink the civic space. The government suggested a series of bills in parliament with provisions to criminalise acts of free speech, going against the right to freedom of speech and expression. The bills include the Media Council Bill, Information Technology (IT) Management Bill, the Guthi Bill – to nationalise community trusts, the Commission on Human Rights Bill – to undermine the independence and effectiveness of the NHRC, and the National

Security Agency Bill – and give authorities unwarranted powers to enforce harsh punishments. All these bills limit the freedom of expression of the general public, media personnel, human rights activists and civil society as a whole.

Next to the curtailment of basic freedoms, the government and the leaders have been widely criticised for failing to establish good governance. They were rather found being involved in massive corruption and fraud cases. For instance, the Baluwatar Land Scam – involving high-profiles including the former Deputy Prime Minister, former land reforms ministers, former government secretaries to businessmen – or the passive diplomatic talk with India over the boundary dispute, especially after India released its new political map laying claim to a region, known as Kalapani, as part of its territory; or the corruption charge against the minister for communication and information technology, Gokul Prasad Baskota, forcing Shiva Maya Tumbahamphe to stand down as parliament speaker and electing Agni Sapkota as a Speaker of the House – a Maoist leader who faces a kidnapping and murder charge for an insurgency-era killing – completely failing in addressing COVID-19 rapid outbreak in the country. Likewise, even after the country has adopted a federal structure instead of a centralised state, provincial and local governing bodies have not been able to function properly, let alone to deliver needed services. Instead, again, cases of corruption and abuse of power by the local authorities have increased. At the same time, with a greater number of governing bodies and controlling units in the federal structure, the clash of power and authority seems inevitable. As the federated states clash for power, claiming to serve their people better, the exerted effect has made Nepal less democratised than ever. Thus, people at the grassroots have lost faith in their local representatives as well.

The Federal Republic Nepal was marked as the harbinger of a new era, giving an incremental rise in people's urge for prosperity and furtherance of democratic ideals, filling the vicious gap between the rulers and the ruled. However, the aspirations of every section of the society – women, youth, Dalits, Madhesis, indigenous and ordinary citizens – for an inclusive, equitable, progressive and participatory democracy, which was promised by the new political system entrusted by the new constitution, were disappointed. As such, the public trust into the elected officials as well as the opposition declined.

The perpetual political instability, even after the advent of every other new political heyday, is one of the major cause of declining political trust in Nepal. The present government or ruling party alone cannot be incarcerated for this. A fortiori, politics or political leadership is a must to run a democracy, yet pertinent concern arises over the inefficacies of leaders in times of crises. Our politicians, incumbents in government and political cadres should care more about the political trust and

confidence which the political rationalism furthers, rather than focus only on electoral votes to gain majority.

There are some cross-cutting issues which always surface regardless of the political party in power or the ideology of the respective ruling class. Corruption, rule of law, institutional autonomy, meritocracy, independent judiciary, democratic culture, etc. are those matters which the political leadership have often disappointed public from their mediocrities. The concern is why the political leadership has failed to become crusader in curbing corruption and the strengthening of needed democratic institutions, like the judiciary. Why remain the integrity, credibility and accountability of leaders or those in power questionable and unsettled? Do we lack the kind of leadership that promotes Herculean reformations in our political culture and that is able to win the hearts of ordinary Nepalese or does our electoral system owe liability for these political aberrations. Those who climb the ladders of political power have overlooked these pressing problems and thus they culminated in political distrust and low confidence. Political trust is all about the scale to which the political class delivers or acts in congruence with public interests.

But what lessons can we draw? To put it with another Nepali saying: *"I have been wiping a mirror for years, but there was a stain on my face"*. We preach but do not practise, we make speeches ourselves, but we ask others to do things for improvement first. Yes, the mistake was made here. The stain is on our face, but we constantly wipe the mirror. "Behavior change" is what many educators call "learning". Therefore, the time has come that able and agile youth should become conscious and take a lead for a difficult present and better future.

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