

That's democracy

Just as our April 2008 poll verdict, this Indian election, it appears, was about stability and progress of India



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One thing that provides India with the world's, particularly the West's, trust and respect is its virtually stable and reasonably functioning democracy. Like in Nepal, votes can still be bought by a glass of drink in many parts of India and millions don't cast their vote but vote their caste. And many don't even care about the democratic process. They ask a brutally simple question: "How does it matter to me who wins or loses?" Therein lies a challenge to all democracies all over the globe: indeed, how to attract people to the decision-making process and make it more inclusive? But still democracy in India is a matchless outlet for people to vent their anger, dissatisfaction, frustration and, at the same time, express their desires, aspirations and dreams.

This past week, as India (re)elects its Prime Minister and a new parliament through the world's largest participatory democratic process, the rest of the world, from Kathmandu to Washington DC watched in awe. This is where the real power of India lies: the capacity to hold mammoth polls successfully in such a diverse and paradoxical environment. As someone pointed out in a recent column here in Delhi, it's not one election that India holds at a time. It is as many as number of constituencies -- each of them with hundreds of thousands of voters -- that send representatives to the parliament.

This praise of India must be capped right here. India can't 'export' and 'spread' or 'strengthen' democracy in the neighborhood which many in the Indian intelligentsia aspire and desire publicly. But as long as

has, like the Indian creation, made it to the final list of 21 videos from 'over 900 contestants from 95 countries', is no less interesting. In fact, it presents the concept of democracy in a more colourful way, the same very way we have been experiencing and practicing it in Nepal. Videos can be watched and voted to victory until 15 June at <http://www.videochallenge.america.gov/>

So this time the power vested in Indian fingertips shockingly pushed aside the communists and some regional groups and gave the Congress party a thumping victory which, in more ways than one, appears to have paved the way for reform in India. (Man Mohan Singh who, even after a full five year term as the prime minister, is still remembered more as the finance minister of the early 90s who started economic reform in India.) A very famous personality in India who is largely associated with the ruins of one of the most backward states of this country saw his party almost wiped out in the polls. I haven't found anyone in Delhi so far from Bihar who like what Lalu Yadav did there. Everyone, in my interactions, praise Nitish Kumar who has been credited with turning around the state of Bihar in the past couple of years as the chief minister. No wonder, his party swept the parliament seats in Bihar while Lalu's licked the dust. That's how fingertips punish the culprits. Now Lalu is nowhere: kicked out of the central governing alliance, he has lost his political significance.

But the manner in which Lalu, the communists and many others who lost the election accepted the verdict shows the greatness of Indian democracy yet again. The elections, partly thanks to the electronic voting machines, were largely fair and the incidents of violence, which occurred mainly in the first of the five phases, weren't powerful enough to hijack and threaten the integrity of the process. So no one here is complaining about rigging or other electoral malpractice. Everyone, including the 'gang-lord' politician Pappu Yadav, Lalu's former ally, whose wife and mother lost



the Indian citizenry feels powerful enough to make or break their own governments for their own interests and progress, we, their neighbors, are happy and content for them.

The combined wisdom of people can rarely be wrong. Just as our April 2008 poll verdict was for peaceful transition of the country, this Indian election, it appears, was about stability and progress of India. The majority of the voters wanted to see a stable government free from the clusters of incompatible political ideologies. The Indian voters wanted the dam of development activities to be opened so that, as one 'Democracy Video' posted in YouTube suggests in a different context, their empty glasses could be filled with clean drinking water.

The video I am talking about is an entry from India to the Democracy Video Challenge, a worldwide competition organized by the American State Department in which participants explain the meaning of democracy with cameras in three or less minutes. A vote casted in the village election can travel all the way up to the national parliament (via district administration and state assemblies) and shake the natural resource ministry to open the dam from where the water comes to the voter's empty glass. "Democracy is," the video maker says, "when power is at your fingertips."

(The entry from Nepal by Tsering Choden, which

from Bihar constituencies, seems to have accepted the people's verdict gracefully. No one, like our Maoist comrades in Nepal, threatened to resort to violence if they were not voted to power. Not even Pappu. Fear psychology has, one can argue, very limited space in Indian democracy. And democracy in India has tamed the wildest of the wild leaders.

That, however, doesn't mean Indian democracy is free from tough bargains for political appointments and cabinet berths. Intra-party competition to bring down colleagues and secure a certain cabinet post, sulking coalition partners trying to milk as many government positions as possible and threats to 'support from outside' if demands are not met are reality. India was experiencing all this and more as it was preparing to swear in a new cabinet Friday. Nothing of this is new to the Nepali people, however, given our own experience of such things: one only needs to recall how annoyingly long it took us to form a new government this week.

But then democracy -- despite uncountable differences -- is all about working together. Some win and some lose; some voices are heard while others are respectfully ignored by the majority. That's democracy.

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Learning from the tigers

Colombo had successfully appropriated the "war on terror" discourse for a massive military offensive against the LTTE

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When British foreign secretary David Miliband arrived in Colombo on April 29 to press for a humanitarian halt in Sri Lanka's military offensive to run over the last corral of LTTE leadership, the response was interesting. Miliband gave a long explanation, distinguishing his government's concern for civilian population and the right of Sri Lankan troops to rout Tigers. But Colombo was in no mood to listen to even a remote suggestion for a halt. Within hours, huge derogatory posters with Miliband's picture, "Wanted for aiding and abetting terrorism" were put up across Colombo. The Sri Lankan defence minister Nandasena Gotabhaya Rajapakse -- the president's younger brother -- even asked the US and UK to "mind their own business". The United Nations was also accused of double standards and pro-terrorist leanings. Outside the British embassy, a group of pro-government monks sat on a protest, asking Britain whether they would pressure the US to send humanitarian aid to Osama Bin Laden.

Colombo had successfully appropriated the "war on terror" discourse and used it effectively to go for a massive military offensive against the LTTE that was literally ruling 15,000 square kilometers in the north and east of the island. Though the Tigers had nothing similar with Al Qaeda or other Islamic groups, Colombo deliberately fit its decades-long ethnic problem in the larger discourse of the war on terror.

Ignoring every call for a ceasefire, the Rajapakse regime provided its armed forces with unflinching political support to take the war to its logical conclusion. And when the elite regiment of the Sri Lankan army's 53 division finally made the final push, they not only eliminated the entire top brass of the LTTE, but also claimed to have produced the bullet-ridden body of its chief Velupillai Prabhakaran. This final battle has put the curtains on the LTTE, who effectively occupied the centrestage of the ethnic dispute between Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese population and its Tamil minority.

But the violent rout of one of the world's most powerful terror group, which had militarily defeated Sri Lanka's army in three earlier wars, forcing Colombo to join a peace process brokered by Norway came with a bigger lesson for insurgencies fighting for a political cause. AK-47s cannot defeat a state and when people and communities with genuine political grievances take up arms, it only provides the state with an easy way out to enforce a military solution. 9/11 has completely blurred the line dividing terrorism and armed struggle for political rights and now any violent movement -- no matter how genuine and righteous its cause may be -- will not get any sympathy from the international community.

The rise and fall of the Tigers, in fact, is a lesson for insurgent groups across the world. From a gang of 40 boys in 1975, the group rose to achieve a military prowess unknown for any insurgent group in the world. The discipline and determination of its cadre to lay down their lives for the Eelam cause was unprecedented. After 25 years of single-minded devotion and readiness to kill and die for the Tamil homeland, Tiger leader Prabhakaran seemed invincible. But the Tigers failed to understand that war alone is never enough. And at the height of their military success when they forced Colombo to enter into a peace process, Prabhakaran and his group didn't understand the necessity of the transition from terror tactics to pure politics. History had given the Tigers a rare chance even in a post-9/11 world to sit at a negotiating table and ensure that the Tamil minority gets genuine political and constitutional rights in Sri Lanka. But like several other insurgencies, the Tigers too were

blinded by their military success and a false sense of invincibility. Today, the Tamil minority, in whose name the Tigers killed and died, are at the mercy of a ruling alliance in Colombo which is dominated by a Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist discourse. In the process of the Tigers' humiliating defeat, they took away any semblance of credibility from the moderate political forces from the Sinhalese majority too. The military success of Rajapaksha regime has effectively eclipsed Ranil Wickramasinghe and other political parties who had supported a historic truce with Tigers in 2002.

Like the Tigers, the Kashmir insurgency also had several opportunities to understand the world's changing political realities, halt violence and take a moral high ground on a negotiating table. But each time, the opportunity provided by a military success was lost with a complete underestimation of the power of the state.

Then there is another worrying aspect of the Tigers' rout. This group had consistently silenced every voice of dissent among its own community with the aim of becoming the sole representatives of Tamil aspirations. And after their rout, there is hardly any other voice to represent the besieged and battered Tamils in Sri Lanka. In fact, Colombo's propaganda machinery has become so effective that even non-violent representatives of Tamil grievances are dubbed Tiger proxies and thus terrorists.

A look at the fate of the Tigers has a script that fits almost every insurgency that has been recently crushed. The struggle of Chechen people in the caucuses is a perfect example. They were able to militarily oust Russia from Chechnya in August 1996 but failed to end the war. Soon they provided Moscow with a perfect alibi for military invasion when they incited a rebellion in neighbouring Dagestan. Then, 9/11 changed the discourse for good. The traditional strategy of armed struggles to seek support on the issue of human rights violations by the state and the



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fear of a humanitarian crisis no longer generates support in the West, especially the US, which was blamed for similar high-handedness in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The final lesson is about the support from neighbouring countries to armed struggles. The Sri Lankan Tamils understood in the most brutal manner that no nation in the world supports a separatist struggle unless it has strategic vested interests. It is no secret that Tigers were propped up by New Delhi to achieve a long term strategic goal inside the island nation. Soon, however, the ambitions of the group and its leader Prabhakaran clashed with New Delhi's interests, turning the Tigers against the very hands that fed it. The disastrous consequences of this support are still resonating in Sri Lanka and India where its flames consumed a former prime minister. The story is, in fact, repeating itself in Pakistan today where the army is battling

Taliban along its western border.

States battling an insurgency within its borders also need to understand that military success alone cannot help bring peace. Colombo has a golden opportunity today to reach out to its Tamil minority, devolve and provide constitutional guarantees to address their genuine grievances. If that does not happen, it is only a matter of time before another Prabhakaran is born in the besieged north.

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letters to the editor

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New government

The election for prime minister is scheduled for Saturday, so let us hope that we will finally have a new government ("PM election on Saturday", May 22, Page 1). But history is not going to forget the Nepali Congress' uncorrectable mistake of instigating the president to make an unconstitutional move on behalf of the Army. The NC is yet to answer the Nepali people regarding that blunder. In any case, let us hope that the new government will be more people-oriented and that the would-be prime minister will work as per the consensus of parties, people and the constitution. Lastly, let's hope the CPN-UML will not work under the direction of the Nepali Congress.

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Nepal is most likely to have a new leader in the form of Madhav Nepal since all the parliamentary arithmetic problems have been almost set-

tled by hook or by crook. The CPN(UML) seems to have cleared its way towards forming the most complicated coalition government ever witnessed. But too many questions remain unanswered amidst this political turmoil. For example, how will MK Nepal, who has failed to implement his ideological party line (or the so-called "Peoples Multi-party Democracy") in the capacity of his party head, steer the peace process towards drafting a new constitution? Moreover, isn't it absurd that MK Nepal has failed to understand that various elements are hatching a conspiracy against him and his party, the nation and the people? The Nepali Congress has been clever and far-sighted enough to place MK Nepal on the frontline at this complicated political juncture. MK Nepal seems overwhelmed by the opportunity to become prime minister for the first time, but it is doubtful he will satisfy all the political factions with different political psyches.

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Via Supreme Court

I wholeheartedly agree with your editorial that the Supreme Court (SC) is the only institution that can resolve the two constitutional issues ("ASAP will be fine", May 20, Page 6). I would, however, like to point out that it was the leadership of the United CPN (Maoist) that sought to undermine the neutrality as well as the legitimacy of the SC. If the Maoists, therefore, still genuinely believe in democratic process, they should stop disrupting the workings of the CA and openly commit themselves to accepting the judgment of the SC whether it is in their favour or not. The SC on its part should try to deliver its verdict as a matter of urgency and the CPN-UML and the Nepali Congress should allow the present caretaker government to continue in office till then. Such commitments will show genuineness of their commitment not only to the democratic process but also of their oft-repeated claims that they want to work together in the long-term interest of the country and

people. Another government without the resolution of the two constitutional issues and support of the party with largest number of votes and members in the CA is doomed to failure and will take our country back to the unprincipled and narrow partisan politics of the past which we can ill afford.

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Tragic end

The news of LTTE's apocalyptic defeat at the hands of the Sri Lankan army has sparked jubilant celebrations throughout the war-torn country ("Prabhakaran's body found: Lankan Army", May 22, Page 7). Tamil Sri Lankans and LTTE's sympathizers and supporters outside may be feeling sad about it. I felt sorry to see the photograph of leader V. Prabhakaran's dead body. However, it was inevitable since the group had been unleashing extreme violence

for a long time. In response to the injustices done to the Tamil minority (about 18% of population) by the then Sinhalese government, many Tamil nationalist groups emerged out of which LTTE, formed in 1976, came to the forefront with its ultra-nationalist rebellious character. LTTE's record of violence decreased the moral support it had initially received from some quarters of the international community.

This chapter of Sri Lankan history sends a strong message that violence ultimately meets a tragic end. Robespierre, Jonas Sabimbi, Abesmal Guzman and several others who used violence tactics to usurp power met a similar fate. Even the ANC of South Africa had to shift from its policy of violence to non-violent principles to end apartheid. In the Palestinian occupied territories, the Palestine Liberation Organisation achieved nothing through violence; nor have Hamas and Al Fatah attained anything. There are a few exceptions but exceptions don't make a rule.

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