

# Local transitions

Rather than a couple dozen Kathmandu-based elites controlling transitional politics, locally-rooted democratic practice would be a better bet

NEPAL'S 'politics' of political transition is fundamentally flawed and it's not because parties are failing to reach consensus. Instead, it is because they are taking a wrong approach to transitional politics, which



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is centralised and controlled by about two dozen Kathmandu-based political elites (KBPEs). In this context, it is critically important to decentralise transitional politics. However, several myths sustain the current centralised approach. We must discard the myths that: Kathmandu leaders are legitimate, that a new structure of the state can be enforced from the top, that the social cost of transition is negligible, and that local democracy is an issue to be decided by state governments later. If the goal of transitional politics is to genuinely bring the government closer to the people, we must engage them meaningfully. The best way to do this is to agree on local government first, and establish the elected local base for advancing democratic politics in the country.

In democracy, the people's power is exercised by elected leaders. New wisdom on democracy suggests that even elected leaders are required to constantly talk to their people (or deliberate with them) to authentically represent people's views. But the KBPEs are neither elected nor required to deliberate with local people, and yet enjoy unquestioned political legitimacy. Do these KBPEs really represent the views of 29 million Nepalis? The truth is that after the demise of the elected Constitutional Assembly, there is now a crisis of representation.

Recall that the current politics of transition was animated by the people's desire to bring the government closer to the people by restructuring the unitary state into a federal and locally-rooted democratic system. This was an aspiration of the 2006 April uprising and previous civil unrest. But how did we end up with such centralised politics to achieve that end? More importantly, what makes such centralised politics emerge and

sustain itself despite the goals of federalism and people's empowerment? Three deeper systemic beliefs sustain an elitist politics of transition in Nepal.

First, the feudal political culture in Nepal allows political elites to exercise authority without electoral endorsement from the people. Once someone becomes a leader through electoral outcome, political movements or civil society mobilisation, the person occupies that position forever. The leaders thus become life-long leaders. This patrimonial culture allows them to remain in power without much resistance from the people.

Second, the widely-accepted belief is that all important issues of restructuring can be settled once and for all through one 'big bang' agreement (*sahamati*) among the KBPEs is flawed. That relegates the entire scope of transitional politics to producing and reproducing *sahamati*. Such a 'big bang' approach is not only undemocratic, but also substantively hollow, as decisions on critical structural issues of the state must entail genuine deliberation, analysis, confidence building and maturity. The KBPEs invoke the notion of 'big bang' *sahamati* only to prolong the political transition and hence continue to remain in power.

For sure, *sahamati* is not going to resolve the outstanding issues which number over 100 (identified by the dissolved Constitution Assembly). Solving these issues requires a phase-wise process, in which decisions taken in the early phases contribute to reaching understandings on other issues in the subsequent phases.

Third, the current debate is unnecessarily obsessed with issues related to one particular scale in the essentially multi-scale nature of the political system. The debate is among those who are radically federal, modestly federal and anti-federal. Everyone agrees that state restructuring involves defining the three vital spheres of governance: local, state and federal. However, the current debate is privileging one particular scale of politics which we call *sanghiyata* (federalism), and overlooking other layers that bring power much closer to people—that is, local democracy. Recall that since 2002, there have been no elections to local government. If old political parties and parliamentarians could debate among themselves about a new Nepal, why couldn't the old local governments



debate new local governments? The local system has been put on hold by the KBPEs, and the District Development Committees and Village Development Committees are run by government staff. The current group of elites are so powerful that they fail to find local politics to be of any use to them—it is only federal and national politics that matter. On top of that, those who are concerned with local politics are unfortunately already conditioned to believe that solutions must come from the top.

It is increasingly clear that decisions taken by KBPEs will strengthen the national and meso-sphere of politics, and weaken local politics. If we want to be democratic in the current phase of transitional politics, we should allow people to exercise their rights to choose and participate in the decision-making process. This can be done only through transferring the right to drive the transition to the local level, away from the national elites. The ruling elites could agree on one point—local structures of democracy and then holding local elections. This could be the first step, in the way former king Gyanendra reinstated the old parliament in 2006, to allow transitional politics to take its course. Such a decision to localise transition should become the single issue for current elites to agree and act upon. The KBPEs must admit that they have failed in their seven years of tenure and they must be ready to go now.

That way, we could soon have 1,000 or so self-governed, functioning, viable

rural and urban councils across the country. The rural councils could be something between what the DDCs and VDCs currently are. Urban councils could be just like our small towns such as Butwal and Tansen. If given power, the 1000 local government units across the country will not only address the socio-economic roots of inequality and exclusion, but also bring in the most authentic representation needed in macro-level politics. The elected local leaders will be directly answerable to local people, who will have a better sense of what their leaders are doing. That's why going local—and hence empowering the local communities—is more democratic than having a few elites negotiating an agreement on the structure of the country.

The local has always remained resilient and powerful in Nepal. National politics is failing, while locals continue to create new community colleges, hospitals and roads. Of course, there are equally serious issues of exclusion with respect to caste, ethnicity, gender and class at the local level. But solutions to these cannot be imposed from the top either. For many years, we have had a law to outlaw caste-based injustice, but it is more through local politics than national law, that we have achieved some progress. Locally-rooted politics of transition would be entirely different from what we have currently: retiring groups of elite males, debating the future of the nation, essentially sucking up all local energy and power.