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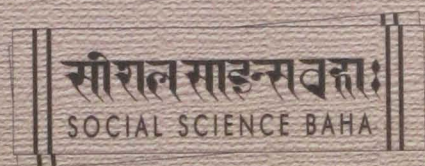
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# Views from the Field

## Anthropological Perspectives on the Constituent Assembly Elections

David Holmberg  
Judith Pettigrew  
Mukta S. Tamang

*with an introduction by*  
David N. Gellner





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This publication is based on a panel discussion convened by the Social Science Baha on 17 April, 2008, a week after the Constituent Assembly election. The Baha invited three anthropologists with long-term experience in various parts of Nepal, David Holmberg, Judy Pettigrew and Mukta S. Tamang, to offer their observations on the election, drawing upon their in-depth local knowledge to contextualise their experiences within the broader political, social, and cultural processes ongoing in their fieldsites. A fourth anthropologist, David N. Gellner, joined them as commentator and also to provide his own perspective from his role as an international observer on Election Day. The Baha would like to thank Judy and Sara Shneiderman for their help in putting the panel together.

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# **Social Science, Anthropology, and the Constituent Assembly Elections: Some Comments**

David N. Gellner

Nepali political scientists had a tough time in the days immediately after the 10 April 2008 election to the Constituent Assembly (CA).<sup>1</sup> They had confidently predicted that the Nepali Congress (NC) would win the CA election, that the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) would come second, and that the Maoists (Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, or CPN [Maoist]) would end up a distant third. As the results began coming in, the Maoists seemed poised to romp home as winners. For a time it looked as if they would take well over half the first-past-the-post (FPTP) seats, although in the end they won exactly half, or 120, of the 240 FPTP positions. In those early days, many forgot that Nepal had adopted a new, largely proportional system and assumed (or feared) that the Maoists might win two thirds of the seats in the CA, and would therefore be able to re-write the constitution on their own, not needing cooperation from anyone else. (Even President Jimmy Carter, who in all other respects was a very acute and perceptive observer of Nepali politics, articulated this thought, though he said that he did not think it a likely outcome.) In fact, of course, it was never possible for the Maoists to win even half the overall seats, given that roughly 60 per cent of the 601 places available in the CA were to be allocated proportionately and the Maoists' share of the vote was less than 30 per cent.

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1 I would like to thank Rajendra Pradhan for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

I do not believe that social scientists should be blamed that much for misreading the popular mood. After all, the political parties themselves had misread it radically. Both the NC and the UML were guilty of massive complacency and underestimating the appeal of the Maoists (by contrast, the Maoists captured the popular mood perfectly with their slogan: 'You've tried the others time and again, try the Maoists this time'). The Maoists themselves had no idea they would do so well. Otherwise, they would not have been so worried about the elections called for November 2007; they would not have pushed so hard for PR; and nor would Prachanda have made such ultimately fruitless efforts to meet UML general secretary, Madhav Kumar Nepal, and forge an alliance. It is clear, however, that their main ambition was to replace the UML as the main party on the left. They would, in fact, have accepted third place and would have been delighted with second place behind the NC.

It was not only social scientists and politicians who failed to spot the wave of support that came the way of the more radical parties. Local civil society members in the districts, with their ears to the ground, also failed to see what would happen. I was told authoritatively in Birganj, just before the election, that the newly formed Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) would be lucky to get 10 or 15 seats: had all the Tarai parties stuck together they would have swept the Tarai, but divided, they had little chance...

How, then, are we to explain the results? A complex combination of factors was evidently at play. Certainly, as the NC and others complained, in some cases there was intimidation by the Maoists. Reports make it clear that other parties had no chance in Rukum and Gorkha, for example. But that is very far from being the whole story. As Mukta Tamang notes, people voted spontaneously, freely, and enthusiastically for the Maoists. It was a combination, as he says, of 'hope and fear' at the same time. There was certainly, as he writes, a feeling that the Maoists should be given power, both to make them accountable and to prevent their return to the jungle, a sentiment I heard expressed more than once in Kathmandu. It was also certainly a vote for change, for a new possibility,



something different from the old parties who had failed the country so often. The ‘zeal’ (*josh*) of the Maoists impressed people, and if they had killed some people along the way, this was not held against them.

Anthropology is not the kind of subject that often makes predictions. An exceptional example, by someone who may count as an honorary anthropologist, is the 1992 article by development and Latin America expert Andrew Nickson, ‘Democratisation and the Growth of Communism in Nepal: A Peruvian Scenario in the Making?’ Nickson arrived in Nepal in 1990. Observing the striking structural and geographical similarities to Peru led him to make the insightful prediction that Maoism might do well there, at a time when Nepal experts, not so alive to a comparative perspective, discounted the political impact of the far-left groups.

But if anthropology cannot often make such predictions, it can lead to understanding after the event, an understanding that is much deeper and more nuanced than the flat numbers produced by opinion polls or actual polls. The essays collected here demonstrate conclusively that long-term, in-depth knowledge of particular places—knowledge of personal histories, networks, party affiliations, and significant local events—leads to ‘thick’ description and genuine insight.<sup>2</sup>

I myself was present for the election, but as an international observer invited by the Carter Center. My own areas of ethnographic expertise are the cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur (Patan). But I asked to be sent outside the Kathmandu Valley because: (a) I did not want to be part of the fly-in-fly-out jamboree of short-term international observers who would be swarming all over the capital; (b) I suspected that there would be little trouble or contestation in the Valley; (c) in an urban environment an anthropologist does not, to the same degree, have the advantages

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2 ‘Thick’ description was a term coined by Clifford Geertz to name the kind of rich, contextualized understanding of events that takes into account actors’ intentions and interpretations, as contrasted to the ‘thin’ description provided by more positivist social science. The locus classicus for this distinction is the introduction to Geertz (1973).

of an anthropologist who works in a village: one cannot know everyone involved; even for people who have lived in a city neighbourhood all their life there is a degree of anonymity; insights based on years of involvement are harder (though not impossible) to achieve; and (d) I wanted to see the election somewhere new, outside my usual stamping grounds. I was sent to Parsa District. Together with my election observation partner, Ashraf Shuaibi (second-in-command at the Palestinian Election Commission), our interpreter, Mukesh Kalwar, and driver, Sanu Lama, I drove all over the district, coming up close to the Indian border on three occasions.

The contrast is very clear between long-term anthropological observation and what can be achieved by an international observer, however well briefed and backed up (and the Carter Center is excellent in this regard—comparing notes with other teams, from the EU, DFID, and the UN, staying at the same Birganj hotel convinced me of this). On Election Day, international observers usually stay in one place for at most an hour or so, often much less. (We visited 14 different polling centres, with 44 booths, driving on bone-shaking dirt roads through all the five constituencies in Parsa, leaving at 5.30 am and finishing at 6 pm.) There is no way in which the international observer can judge the significance of the presence of one or other person as a candidate's representative within the station, as was done by Pettigrew, for example. It is a little more insightful than tourism, because local people and candidates will come to you and press you to visit certain notorious places where they fear booth-capturing may be about to happen. But the limits to what one can observe may be illustrated by the fact that in our whole exhausting day of observation we never saw children voting. On my return to Kathmandu, I spent a considerable amount of time talking to old friends in Lalitpur about the election. More than one asked me if I had seen children voting in Parsa. When I said that I had not, they responded, 'What kind of international observer are you? We saw children voting in Parsa sitting at home, and just watching the TV. The journalist gave the name of the polling station and the polling officer!'

Despite this, it is possible to defend the use of election observers. There was one particular village, notorious, we were told, for booth capturing in every previous election. We visited it twice during the day. UN observers also spent some considerable time there. The presence of international observers is very likely to have reduced the level of malpractice. Overall, the mobilisation of observers is about inspiring confidence in the process and can never guarantee that no abuses ever occur.

Judith Pettigrew's account is a beautiful exemplification of the value of anthropological fieldwork and of the value of repeated, long-term visits to the same place. Thagu's story is indeed impressive and made a deep impression on the Nepalis who attended the talk at the Social Science Baha. It demonstrates, as only a good narrative can, how affiliation and commitment—whether to parties, ethnic groups, or any other social unit—are part of a continually negotiated process, not a fixed attribute that can be captured by ticking a box.

David Holmberg stresses anthropology's commitment to complexity—specifically to acknowledging, and not crassly reducing, the complexity of social life. Only through sensitive historical and ethnographic awareness can it be explained how Bahuns in Nuwakot end up being Maoist supporters and Tamangs, the historically oppressed group in the area, end up as supporters of the NC, now the party of the establishment. (One is reminded of Ramirez's subtle analysis of different Bahun sub-lineage affiliation in Gulmi in *De la Disparition des Chefs*; unfortunately, this part of his work is not available in English, but see my extended review, Gellner 2001.) Thus, whatever national trends there are—and these are undeniably important—the explanation for particular alliances at the local level always rests on local histories—hence Tip O'Neill's aphorism with which Holmberg begins his essay.

Mukta Tamang shows, as does Pettigrew, how rural people, who may not fully approve of the Maoists' methods, come to support them nevertheless, as they seemed to be only group to address their concerns, especially after they had come to know them personally through close and long-term exposure. His report shows that, just as in Kathmandu, in the

depth of the countryside many people share the ideas that the Maoists need to be given responsibility so as to be held responsible, and so that the violence may end, and that a vote for the Maoists is a vote for change. Moreover, negotiation and discussion—working together for the collective local good despite different party alignments—is also a local response to nationally organised rituals of competition.

Both Tamang and Holmberg point to the ritual and festive aspects of national elections. Elections are indeed a great Durkheimian periodic rite, both symbolising the nation and emphasising division at the same time (one only has to remember the violence and killings which accompanied the election, despite its being the most peaceful in Nepali history, to see that divisions are also exacerbated). It is a great achievement to have held the elections at all. Despite widespread disillusion with the political class in Nepal, simply holding the elections demonstrated that the state was neither quite so failed, nor the political class quite so useless as often feared. Progress on constitutional issues will be slow and it would be utterly naïve to believe that demonstrations, *bandhs*, strikes, and bombs are going to vanish from Nepal's political scene now that the CA election has been held. Nonetheless, the entire nation has spoken. Villagers in the Tarai have queued in the sun for over an hour to cast their vote; many people travelled long distances; and pretty much everyone who physically could vote, did so. Identical villagers just over the border had no interest in what happens in Nepal—they have their own MPs and MLAs in assemblies in another country. Despite the openness of the border, despite all the traffic across it, despite the impossibility of 'sealing' it, despite the fact that no geographical feature marks the boundary for most of its length, the existence of two different states does in the end make a difference.

Apart from some honourable exceptions (Caplan 1975, Borgström 1980), local politics were not much studied by anthropologists of Nepal before 1990. Even political scientists preferred to concentrate on events

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3 On India, see Mitra (1979) and Hauser and Singer (1986), both collected in Jayal (2001). See also Banerjee (2007) and Michelutti (2007, 2008).

and opposition at the national level. A recent collection (Gellner and Hachhethu 2008) attempts to bring political scientists and anthropologists together, both on Nepal and on its wider region. The two approaches have much to offer each other. Just as anthropologists have learnt much from political scientists (e.g. James Scott 1985, 1998), the short pieces published here show unquestionably, in my opinion, the potential that anthropology has to offer in advancing the study of both elections and local politics more generally. Anthropologists and political scientists working on India are ahead of those who specialise on Nepal, in this area as in many others, but the potential for important new research to emanate from Nepal—important both for Nepal and for wider social science—is demonstrated by these short articles.<sup>3</sup>

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# All Politics Is Local

David Holmberg

## Introductory

Thomas Phillip ‘Tip’ O’Neill, Jr, the long-term representative from Massachusetts to the US Congress and a former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, is famously known among political scientists in the United States for his pronouncement, ‘All politics is local.’ This observation may be more salient in Nepal than in the United States for multiple reasons, having to do with social diversity and micro-histories in Nepal, a point I will elaborate on in a moment. Perhaps one of the reasons that most pundits and social scientists (including myself) were wrong about the surprising results of the first-past-the-post section of the election to the Constituent Assembly was that we tend to look out from one locality or another. Most pundits are caught up in the hothouse of intellectual discourse in the Kathmandu Valley, where, as they talk among themselves, they do not hear voices from the hinterland or its intrusions into the burgeoning neighbourhoods of the city. We talk too much to ourselves and only pick up in passing little hints of what is on people’s minds. Alternatively, we look out from rural locales (the position in which I find myself) and over-generalise from one specific socio-geographic place.

As I have argued now for several years when finding myself caught up in analyses of Nepali politics, pundits have generally been wrong to emphasise just three internal centres of power in the events leading up to

Janāndolan II and immediately after: the king and the [Royal] Nepalese Army, the political parties, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), ignoring such significant developments as ethnic activism, the burgeoning number of youth, the rise of the middle class, and, more broadly ‘the people’. Over the last decade, the aforesaid triad was invoked over and over in both journalistic and academic contexts in Kathmandu and in international capitals like Washington DC. In my experience, just looking at the political elites has tended to privilege a vantage on Nepali politics as a struggle between these competing nodes of power. This conventional wisdom of three forces, of course, became more complex in the most recent history, particularly as Madhesis began to become a factor that could not be ignored. It will become even more complex as we move out from the elections we have just witnessed. But, I think, myopic attention to the machinations of political elites and nodes of power puts us in a compromised position for understanding elections, particularly in Nepal where there had not been an election for a decade.

We continue to be surprised by events in Nepal in part because we neglect the fact that the socio-political situation is far more complex than reductive models of Nepali politics allow. We were unable to see the result of the election in the same way as we were unable years ago to see that the Maoists had gained much greater active as well as tacit support from ‘the people’ in many parts of Nepal, including especially the rural areas, than anyone realised. Up until the *akalpaniya ghaṭanā* of 2001 (the ‘unimaginable event’ of the palace massacre) and the stunning attacks by Maoist forces after that, the potential of the Maoists had been consistently played down both within Nepal and without. Although political parties as well as civil society organisations were active in organising demonstrations that constituted Janāndolan II, most were surprised by the scale of the crowds and the intensity of feeling produced by masses of Nepalis who were fed up with the old order. This inability to recognise or give credence to events like the rise of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or CPN (Maoist), reminds me of a comment made by a Peruvian historian at a conference at Cornell University; comparing the



Maoist insurgency in Nepal with the Peruvian ‘Shining Path’ insurgency, he noted that the potential of the Shining Path movement in Peru was in its inception ‘invisible’ except from the hinterland. I think that we often find ourselves in a similar situation here in Nepal where much of what is going on in Nepal is invisible except from outside the centres of power, both political and academic. The boundaries between peripheral villages or hinterland and the urban neighbourhoods are now, of course, highly fluid and villages can be found flourishing and transforming within the city. Social geography may be changing but social separation remains real.

I would suggest here that the socio-geographic hinterland both ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ from the perspective of the educated urban population is made up of localities with distinct webs of social and political relations that reproduce long-standing divisions in Nepali society along linguistic, ethnic, and more and more class lines as well as creating new alliances. In the parts of Nepal I know best, voting remains a social act where decisions on voting are made according to highly localised sets of relations—kinship and its extensions being critical—in producing specific alliances and divisions in the context of highly localised political histories. Thus, a corollary of the assertion that all politics is local is that each locality has a unique set of social relations and a unique history. Party ideology is more often than not trumped by social relations: people vote for *āphno māncheharu* who are, at one level, symbolic of the collectivities they represent. It is these relations that spread out from kin networks through ethnic, caste, party, or class associations and, when summed up across Nepal, produce the results we are all interpreting.

What does anthropology bring to bear on the subject of electoral politics that might contribute something distinctive to our understanding of politics? We certainly do not bring clairvoyance or special powers of prediction. I certainly claim no expertise on politics—particularly on the broad, national scale—but as an anthropologist I have over the years come to know something about a particular locale and its political life. Anthropology works out from localities and anthropologists have tended—more than our colleagues in other human sciences—to take localities

seriously. Our principal form of knowledge-production is ethnography, often characterised by long-term residence among people in a particular locale (social or geographic)—whether it be in urban or rural climes. Anthropologists gather data that more often than not complicates generalising top-down visions of political life by working up and out from concrete locales.

It seems to me that there are at least two ways you can go about making sense out of what people do in national, socio-political enactments like elections. We can mine the statistical data that is now being accumulated and make hypotheses about what happened. We already hear generalisations: the election result was a substantial rejection of the *status quo*, including authoritarian rule of royals and the ossified, non-inclusive, and gerontocratic structure of the parties; or the result was a massive surge of desire by the ‘people’, especially young people, Dalits, *ādivāsi janajāti* groups, the poor and disenfranchised—for something different and something better for the future. The reigning explanation, besides that advanced by a defeated establishment (somewhat weakly, in my view) that the result reflects a pervasive climate of intimidation—is that the people want change and they saw some parties and some candidates as the agents of change.

Anthropologists can and do, of course, participate in these generalising analyses, bringing their own experiences in particular locales to bear on interpreting or explaining elections but the genius of anthropology is that through the serious engagement with localities, anthropology keeps *complexity* at the forefront of a more distinctively anthropological project. We thus approach ‘elections’ as something more than the crystallisation of thousands of individual acts of applying a swastika rubber stamp next to a party symbol on a ballot paper. One of the things that anthropologists can bring to bear on understanding elections at a more theoretical level relates to how we frame the social act of voting. I was struck in my observation of elections in just one place that voting patterns are less a distillation of finite variables (party, age, ethnicity, class, etc) that lend themselves to broad generalisations but rather the outcome of acts of social production in which people collectively enact and thereby produce

socio-political relations. In this approach, an election is irreducible to the kinds of variables we invoke when we want to generalise about the statistical reality through which we perforce *reduce* an election to a set of key variables. The task of anthropological approaches is to keep *complexity* at the forefront of an explanatory or interpretive project not, as Levi-Strauss famously suggested, by reducing complexity but by making it more comprehensible. In my view both of these approaches, and I am sure there are several others, are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, they complement each other. What I see as distinctive about an anthropological approach to the recent elections rests on three separate principles: 1) locality is important; 2) elections are best approached as a form of social production; and 3) they are complex.

### **A view from one place**

The organisers of this roundtable discussion asked us to provide vantages on what happened in different locales in which we work. I have lived and conducted research on and off in a set of villages to the northwest of the Kathmandu Valley. Most of my work has been in the northwest sector of Nuwakot District with occasional research forays into Rasuwa District. I have lived and worked primarily with the Tamang, who are the largest ethnic population in the region, constituting at least 38 per cent of the population according to the 2001 census (if it is indeed accurate) followed by Bahuns and Chhetris at about 34 per cent. Nuwakot then has one of the highest densities of Tamang voters of any district in Nepal, surpassed only by Rasuwa and Makwanpur. I conducted my initial research in this area in 1975-77 and have kept in close contact with the communities in the region over the years with major projects in the region in 1987, 1993-94, and 1996-97, and long-term residence in Nepal in 2004-05 with regular visits to the village even at the height of the insurgency. I have visited the community at least once and often two or three times a year over the last decade.

I should contextualise my involvement in the recent election. For a set of circumstantial reasons I am closely associated with individuals

who have been members of the Nepali Congress party since the late 1940s when the Nepali Congress (NC) led the struggle in this region and throughout Nepal against the Rana regime, a regime whose presence was particularly oppressive in the immediate area where I worked due to the forced labour regime known as *rakam*. During 1975-77, the height of the repressive Panchayat era, I lived in the compound of a populist Tamang leader who was my patron in the area, a man who had been imprisoned some seven times beginning in the early 1950s with his last major stay in Central Jail in Kathmandu where he was, as an NC activist, imprisoned with B.P. Koirala and Ganesh Man Singh. I will call this man Phai Lama, his village name.

Phai Lama was chosen as village head in the first election in 1951 for an administrative unit that covers what is now three village development committees (VDCs). He was elected almost continuously in prominent positions right up until 1977 except for the period, of course, when he was in jail in 1960-61. He was brought into the NC in the late 1940s by friends in Trisuli Bazaar and had been instrumental in organising resistance that led to the demise of the *rakam* forced labour system in the 1960s. He reached his pinnacle of political prominence after the first democratic ‘experiment’ of 1959. Two main parties competed in that election in what was then West No. 1 (comprising today’s Nuwakot, Rasuwa, and Dhading): the NC and Gorkha Parishad. The NC won nationally but Gorkha Parishad prevailed in the district, producing instability. Phai Lama was appointed by the central administration to the position of Block Development Officer for the whole northern region of the district. Riots throughout the region (some of which I have written about elsewhere [Holmberg 2006]) produced a tense situation and after Mahendra re-established direct royal rule on the pretext of re-establishing order, Phai Lama—like all activists—was tortured, imprisoned, and nearly summarily executed.

Upon his return from prison, he continued to win elections at the local level during the partyless Panchayat era right up to the Back-to-the-Village Programme of 1977. Although he continued to be politically

prominent in the region, the Back-to-the-Village Programme required that all candidates in elections obtain an endorsement or sanction (*anumodan*) from a Zonal Back-to-the-Village Committee. Phai Lama was denied an endorsement and his village rival and kinsman (formerly allied with the royalist Gorkha Parishad) received the endorsement. Phai Lama and his followers boycotted the election and he slowly retired from active political life. In the national elections that succeeded the Janāndolan of 1990, local sentiment was that Phai Lama should receive a ticket from the NC to run for a seat in the new parliament, a ticket he was denied. The NC, in the view of many Tamangs, neglected long-time Tamang activists—including those who served as guerilla soldiers when the Congress fought against the purveyors of the royal coup in 1960—in favour of high-caste party operatives. In more recent politics Phai Lama's nephew, a successful construction contractor based in Kathmandu, has emerged as his successor at the local level and became the chair of the VDC at the time of the last election 10 years ago. In the history of recent elections, Tamangs in Nuwakot, despite their demographic presence, have never been chosen by any major party to run for national office.

This election is historic if for no other reason than Bahadur Singh Tamang (Lama) received the NC ticket for Constituency No. 3 in Nuwakot, and Hit Bahadur Tamang received the CPN (Maoist) ticket for Constituency No. 2, and a few other Tamang ran for minor parties. Bahadur Singh Tamang received 34 per cent of the total vote but lost to the CPN (Maoist) candidate, Post Bahadur Bogati, who won 38 per cent of the vote. Hit Bahadur Tamang lost to the national leader of the NC, Ram Sharan Mahat, by 104 votes out of 42,874, both receiving slightly more than 40 per cent of the total votes. Maoists thus nearly swept Nuwakot with only Ram Sharan Mahat of the NC squeaking through with a victory in Constituency No. 2 while the CPN (Maoist) won in constituencies 1 and 3. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or UML, which had won in two of the three constituencies in the last election ten years ago came in a distant third to the CPN (Maoist) and the NC. The more conservative, royalist parties, Rastriya Prajatantra Party,

Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal, Rastriya Janashakti Party, even though they included Tamang candidates, were roundly defeated throughout the district, garnering only 3 or 4 per cent of the vote.

In reference to ethnicity in this election there are two main points I would like to make. First the fact that Tamangs were on the ballot this time reflects a sea change towards inclusiveness at least within the NC, CPN (Maoist), Rastriya Janashakti Party and Rastriya Prajatantra Party, who all fielded Tamang candidates in one constituency or another. The UML fielded no Tamang candidates. Although this inclusiveness is progress from the past and demonstrates a new necessity for political parties, out of the 12 candidates fielded by the top three parties (CPN-M, NC, and UML) only two were Tamangs with 10 from the Chhetri-Bahun community, who thus remain over-represented in the parties as well as the candidate lists. For the one seat in the neighbouring district of Rasuwa, where two thirds of the population is Tamang, the NC and UML fielded Bahun candidates against the CPN (Maoist) candidate Prem Bahadur Tamang, who won the election in a landslide.

Second, it is my impression that ethnic consciousness is much higher in the district than in the past, reflecting the elevation of ethnic discourse by political activists in the centre. Where you could say that ethnic organisations began in most instances as an urban phenomenon the effects of identity discourse as articulated by *ādivāsi janajāti* organisations are clearly evident. One conversation I overheard focused on whether a king was necessary in Nepal. One of the establishment figures in the village remarked that a village needs a headman and the country needs a king. Another man chimed in, ‘...but the king of Nepal is a Hindu king and we are Buddhist. The Dalai Lama is at a higher level than the Hindu king!’ In another conversation, I asked a man about the relevance of the idea of establishing Tamsaling, or an autonomous federal unit based on the Tamang language and ethnicity; he replied that this was just a political ploy by the Maoists and that what possible substance could there be to a Tamsaling that was headed as always by Bahuns.

Although consciousness of ethnic differences is not new, the way

villagers talk about issues reflects national discourse. Nevertheless due to the localised nature of alliances at the local level where people follow *āphno mānche* in their voting behaviour, the ‘Tamang’ vote—if we can even say there is such a thing—probably split along party lines because people followed local leaders in deciding their votes and these leaders represent different parties in different locales. The immediate set of villages I know best are part of 4 VDCs in Constituency 3 and voting by Tamangs—as reported by local informants (and difficult for me to confirm)—was heavily in favour of the NC candidate, Bahadur Singh Tamang, a relatively young man of 38. Post Bahadur Bogati, a Chhetri from a nearby largely Bahun village, was the Maoist candidate, a candidate whose own son had been killed during the insurgency. Although the patterns in the immediate area I know best may not prevail elsewhere in the district or in greater Nepal, the main clusters of support for the Maoists during the insurgency reflect this ethnic divide. Only a smattering of Tamangs from the immediate area joined the Maoists during the period of the insurgency but a large number of young men and young women from the home village of Bogati and from another Jaisi Bahun village in the area were recruited and were active in the Maoist militia and army. Village informants reported to me that these Bahun communities voted substantially for the Maoist candidate.

The only incident of potential intimidation reported to me in the immediate area where I was reflects these ethnic divisions. On the first day I arrived in the Tamang village where I stayed, news began to circulate that 57 (people were quite precise about the number) young men from the CPN (Maoist) candidate’s village had started to walk up toward a more remote Tamang village carrying *laththis*, with the intent to intimidate voters there. My informants reported that a group of 70 to 80 Tamang young men from the NC candidate’s immediate area also headed up the three-hour trail towards the said village and blocked the access route. There was little question but local backers of the Tamang NC candidate felt that the more remote village was part of their block. According to the Tamang eyewitnesses who were there, the young Bahun men of the

CPN (Maoist) were threatening to cut the hands and feet off of anyone who did not vote for their candidate. The young Tamang man who reported the incident to me and was present at the encounter scoffed at the threat and claimed their group responded, 'How will you know who votes for whom? Are you going to cut off everyone's hands and feet?' The situation was defused through negotiation and the two groups returned to their respective home villages. In the immediate area where I was staying, villagers reported that no one would try to intimidate them and that the Maoists had gone to the more remote village for that reason.

There was then an ethnic divide at play in the particular configuration I witnessed, a divide that ironically makes the historically dominant population of Bahuns allied with the party that now champions the dispossessed, and the historically dominated Tamang standing with the Nepali Congress. Ideology does not seem to rule in this configuration but rather a complex local history which produced very particular sets of alliances. As in local politics everywhere, the question for local voters and constituencies seems to break down to what their representative has promised to produce in economic and political terms. What sorts of resources and projects will the candidate bring into communities, creating 'source-force', projects, employment, and income? For instance, people seemed to have the potential for patronage in their minds when, in one teahouse conversation, a group of men were speculating about the effectiveness of the local NC candidate because of his comparative youth. They were wondering aloud whether Bahadur Singh Tamang would be able to produce patronage for the local community because he was only in his mid-thirties and, in their experience, you had to be at least 60 years old to become a minister of state and have the clout to really deliver. Most villagers did not seem all that concerned (or conscious?) of the fact that the election was for a body of people who would oversee the process of writing a new constitution and eventually ratifying that constitution. They were voting for their person and for his party and more with the idea that they were electing a government and the purpose of a government was to do things for them. People located in the community thought that Bahadur



Singh, a highly successful contractor, could do something for them and the vast majority that I spoke to indicated that they would vote for him.

There is another American electoral expression which is also highly relevant to the Nepali election scene. We speak of 'retail' politics and 'wholesale' politics, where 'retail' refers to the door-to-door, face-to-face campaigning that occurs in some states during our primary elections and 'wholesale' refers to the mass media campaigns that now end up dominating most US elections. In Nepal, there is very little 'wholesale' campaigning even though media reporting on major speeches of political stars may end up having a wholesale effect. But media reporting and advertising, at least in the areas I am familiar with, played a negligible role, if any, in voting behaviour. Although ties of kinship may be transforming and being supplemented by other forms of relationships, kinship and its extensions continue to be critical to understanding local voting behaviour. Nepali politics has always been highly structured by kinship and its extensions (caste) and, in many ways, politics continues to be coextensive with kinship, especially at the local level where it is impossible to understand what is going on unless you have a map through local relationships.

As I remarked at the outset, the candidate for NC in Constituency No. 3 in Nuwakot is the nephew of one of the early NC activists in the region. His campaign, which I was more or less in the middle of for several days, worked out from his kin through networks of consanguineal and affinal kin throughout a set of villages that fundamentally comprises the area in which marriages were historically contracted. The immediate brothers and cousin-brothers of the candidate as well as their children—male and female—had specific responsibilities leading up to the election day as they went from village to village to ask for votes. In the days and weeks immediately before the election, canvassing for votes became a full-time activity. Everyone worked hard to make sure that the candidate's local base came out in force. Individuals working outside the village—some at a great distance—returned to the village in order to vote for their own fellow-village candidate and there was a strong sense of local solidarity articulated through the activity of the election. The only time I have

witnessed such collective activity in the past was in the performance of large-scale rituals where everyone worked to produce themselves as a socio-political collectivity, a theme I will take up in my conclusion. Such collective action is not necessarily the norm and the village could have as easily been rent by division as by unity through collective action. The village had in fact been riven by such factions in the past, factions that were headed by two individuals from the same local lineage who had allied themselves with district and national factions of royalists and the NC. The complete dissipation of royalists as a political force in the district, however, had allowed the village to come together, according to informants, around their own kinsman who, for the first time, was running at the national level, a candidate who in his status as a successful contractor in Kathmandu could, at least in this election, transcend local rivalries.

My comparison of the act of voting with collective acts like rituals may not be as far fetched as it seems. There is a way that politics is ritual and ritual is politics. When I told a Nepali friend of mine in America that I was going to try to go and spend the election in the village, he told me that elections in Nepal were a *jātrā*. He was right. Villagers voted with a level of enthusiasm that would stun most Americans. When I arrived at the voting booths at 7 am, there was already a substantial crowd of people gathered. Election officials had set up ropes demarcating voting areas and lines for men and women. They had affixed 'no smoking' and 'no weapons' signs on the *pipal* tree at the *chautara* as well as plastered voting instructions on the walls of the school buildings. Women, young and old, wore their finest dress with the older women, as well as a few younger women, wearing their finest hand-woven skirts (*shyama*), declaring ethnic pride, while the younger women in brightly coloured *kurta-surwal* or the occasional jeans, camouflage, and T-shirt declared their modernity in association with other youth. People squeezed into the lines and stood for hours waiting to vote. Almost everyone remained at least for a while after voting to chat in clusters and to watch the proceedings. Policemen strutted around with their *laththis* good-naturedly forcing people back from the roped areas now and then only to have them return. The

local tea houses did a brisk business and clusters of men sat around discussing politics. Most impressive to someone who is used to elections with low turnouts, everyone in the community voted. In fact, the voting began with the elderly and infirm who were carried down to the voting area and helped to vote by a grandchild. Voting then was a social act as much as an individual act and these acts, like other collective actions like rituals, produce socio-polity at the local level and empower communities even when their candidate loses.

In conclusion, I would say that the voting I witnessed in one village, which is but a part of one constituency in one of the country's 75 districts, confirmed that Nepalis voted for change. Their way of voting for change, however, was not to vote for the CPN (Maoist) against the UML, NC, or RPP, but to vote for the first time in a national election for a Tamang candidate, a comparatively young and successful businessman who had finally broken the glass ceiling of the Nepali Congress hierarchy and got a ticket to run—unlike his uncle who suffered under the repression of the royal regimes of the Rana and Panchayat eras—in a district in which Tamangs are the demographically dominant population. He represented a party that had begun in the district almost 60 years ago as the champions of the dispossessed. Although this party is now seen as part of a conservative 'establishment' from the national perspective, locally, Bahadur Singh Tamang's affiliation through his uncle to the NC represents a local legacy and party identity that would be invisible to the outside. If voting in Nepal more generally reflects the kinds of processes and histories I witnessed, the results we see are complex and our conjectures must be fleeting.

### **Postscript**

During the question period following our oral presentations for this panel, the suggestion was made that anthropology could be interpreted in its apolitical writings as having worked to uphold the Panchayat regime. I did not fully or adequately respond to that comment during our discussion. There are two points I will make here in addition to the response I

made then. First, the act of writing about excluded populations during the Panchayat era in itself had political consequences. Writing was recognition of peoples who in state ideology were not supposed to exist. In fact, anthropologists have in current debates been accused of stimulating *janajāti* activism solely on the basis that they took excluded populations seriously. The anthropologists I personally knew during the Panchayat era—and I knew most of them—were highly conscious of the repressive nature of the regime and of Nepali politics. No one I knew would have seen themselves in support of repression. Rather, I think most anthropologists placed themselves very much in opposition to that repression. Second, in a more personal vein, I came to know a lot about local politics but have not written about what I know until recently. I made a vow not to write about what I learnt in the 1970s for a long time not because I wanted to ignore politics but because I felt an obligation to protect the people with whom I worked from potential persecution. Where it was easy for the Home Ministry to order me out of Nuwakot District ‘for my own safety’ for alleged crimes against cows by my patron, as they did in 1977, the consequences of exposing any aspect of local politics in writing would have put my informants and friends at serious risk of reprisal. The Panchayat era was an extremely repressive period and I do not think my fears about potential reprisals against individuals I knew were exaggerated; we only have to backtrack two years to the consequences, including torture and death, associated with a repressive regime. I admit that much anthropological writing about Nepal historically focused on questions that are not obviously ‘political’ but I also think that if you read between the lines you will find that some writings are more political than appearances suggest. I think the kind of freedom that now exists to write and speak simply was not possible for a variety of reasons during the Panchayat regime.

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# Observing the Elections in Central Nepal<sup>1</sup>

Judith Pettigrew

Early one morning in September 2004, I overheard a whispered conversation between my neighbour, who I will call Thagu<sup>2</sup> ('eldest son' in Tamu Kwi, the Gurung language), and my village sister. Thagu whispered,

They arrived when it was raining and sheltered in our house for about an hour. They have gone now but they say that they will be back in the evening with their friends. They have left their packs on the veranda. What should I do? I want to move them in case the army arrives, because if they find them we will be killed, but I am terrified that they contain bombs which might explode if they are moved.

So began what Thagu described to me as 'the longest and worst day of my life'. The army did not arrive, the bags did not explode, and the young Maoist women who deposited them, returned in the evening to collect them. Later, Thagu commented, 'I have never been pleased to see the Maoists, I do not support their ideas, and do not like them frightening

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1 The Social Science Baha discussion that this paper was originally presented at grew out of a conversation between Sara Shneiderman and me. I would like to thank Sara for helping to organise the event and the Social Science Baha for hosting it.

2 All personal names in this piece are pseudonyms except for names already in the public domain.

and threatening us, but that day I was happy when they re-appeared and removed their bags.’

On election day in April 2008, I arrived at the polling booth at 6.50 am just before it opened. I decided to introduce myself to the polling officers, who were strangers to the village and did not know me. As I walked across to meet them, I greeted the representatives from the different parties: three from the Maoists, three from the UML, three from the Nepali Congress, and a single representative each from the smaller parties. The majority were Tamu (Gurung), a small number were Bahun, and one was a Dalit representing the Maoists. Many were people I had known since I began my research in the village almost eighteen years ago in 1990. These people are first and foremost fellow villagers with multiple ties and interrelationships that pre-date the elections and will continue after them. They are people who are related to each other, who are friends, acquaintances, adversaries and colleagues. Some sit together on various village committees, some work together, but on that day they were positioned in very different camps. The previous evening they had met and agreed to cooperate so that polling would run smoothly. I spoke to the Congress workers first, and then to the Maoists—the lama’s son and a tailor stood alongside their third representative...my neighbour, Thagu.

By 7.30 am, it was obvious that Thagu was not the only villager who was impressed by the CPN (Maoist). Although some people spoke of the former insurgents in whispers, the Maoist group outside the polling booth was impressively large, and included Tamu ex-British soldiers, relatively well-off farmers, older Dalit men, middle-aged Bahun women, and Tamu and Chhetri youth. The Nepali Congress and UML groups were also large but less diverse. The Congress group, in particular, included large numbers of middle-income, middle-aged and elderly Tamus and was more homogenous than those of the other parties.

### **Kwei Nasa**

The village, which I will refer to as Kwei Nasa (a Tamu Kwi pseudonym) is in Constituency No. 1 of Kaski District and was previously a

Congress stronghold (the immediate past incumbent was Taranath Ranabhat, speaker of the last House of Representatives). In 2008, Dev Gurung,<sup>3</sup> who had spent a night in the village some weeks prior to the election, won the seat for the CPN (Maoist).

Kwei Nasa consists of several hundred households located along the upper slopes and top of a ridge in the mid-hills of central Nepal. It has a health post, rice mill, teashops that serve as general-purpose stores, and a kerosene distribution centre, but it has no electricity. Tamu people founded Kwei Nasa, and they continue to be in the majority, but about 20 per cent of the population is Dalit. The outlying hamlets are home to other ethnic groups (Tamang and Magar) as well as Bahuns and Chhetris. Many villagers have relatives in foreign armies (British and Indian) or working overseas, and remittances make a significant contribution to the local economy.

I lived in Kwei Nasa from late 1990 to early 1993 and have re-visited ever since on an annual basis. Starting in 2000 and particularly from 2002 onwards I returned to the village three to four times each year to chart the course of the insurgency in the area. I undertook research during all phases of the insurgency, including the two states of emergency, active phases of fighting, ceasefires and in the post-conflict period.

### **Chronology of the insurgency in Kwei Nasa**

To contextualise the events of the 2008 election, the following section provides a brief chronology of events during the insurgency in Kwei Nasa.

Maoists became active in the village in the late 1990s. Initially, they made speeches, gave cultural performances and asked for financial donations and guns. Their presence increased when a training camp opened in the forest above a neighbouring village. While most Maoists were not local, there were Maoist activists in nearby predominantly Bahun hamlets which had families with long histories of left-wing activism. There

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3 Gurung also successfully contested a seat in his home district of Manang. He has chosen to represent his home constituency and not Kaski 1. Re-polling in Kaski 1 is scheduled for early 2009.

were also Maoist sympathisers in Kwei Nasa, although the degree of sympathy was difficult to gauge, especially once the conflict escalated. The majority of villagers, however, were non-aligned.

With the arrival of the Maoists, these villagers feared the implications of the changed political situation. Some people worried that pre-existing conflicts would become superimposed onto Maoist agendas, and this period marked the beginning of conflict-related suspicion of intimates. People's imaginations were fed by stories of what had happened elsewhere, and what they feared might happen in Kwei Nasa.

The security situation changed markedly with the escalation of the insurgency in 2001 and the imposition of a state of emergency. The Maoists went underground and the Royal Nepalese Army was actively engaged in a counter-insurgency campaign. Non-aligned villagers were deeply fearful of being accused by the Maoists of acting as army spies, and of being viewed as Maoists by the army. People feared the Maoists but they were much more frightened of the army which remained aloof.

In the violent aftermath of a soldier's killing in a nearby village, the army visited Kwei Nasa by helicopter, set up camp and conducted an indiscriminate and at times brutal search-and-cordon operation in the area. Non-aligned civilians from neighbouring villages were killed and some Kwei Nasa villagers were briefly interrogated. In addition to the relatively frequent visits of the army, there was a continuous Maoist presence in the village, partly because a locally popular senior leader was from an adjoining hamlet.

During this period, there were many Maoist actions. A teacher was publicly humiliated for criticising the insurgents and out-of-village workers were beaten because the Maoists thought they were criminals. The staff of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) were intimidated, then forced to stop their activities, and finally chased out of the village by the Maoists.<sup>4</sup>

Although there were threats and intimidations, people appreciated

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4 This was because ACAP was under the umbrella of an organisation that had royal patronage.



aspects of the Maoists' approach. Unlike the soldiers, villagers could talk and reason with the Maoists and thereby exert some influence. Mass meetings were informative as policy was explained and while their actions might not be supported, people could understand the basis on which their decisions were made. It was a complex co-existence.

Between 2003 and 2006, the village was under *de facto* Maoist control. The army visited rarely but the Maoist culture of surveillance penetrated deeply. Villagers supported *and* betrayed each other and people's fear focused on who was an insider and who an outsider.

In 2004, the area was under the control of a detached and punitive Tamu commander (political commissar) named Jitendra after the popular local commander, Moti Lal, a Bahun, had been killed. Moti Lal was seen as fair, non-punitive and people believed that he protected them and they worried about his death which eventually came. In late 2004, Jitendra banned meetings held by the ACAP-formed committees. The committees were disbanded and the members had to resign. This made the management of the day-care centre and other development activities such as conservation of the forest more complicated. Jitendra stated that things could be run 'in the traditional manner', leaving it up to locals to interpret this. No one was sure what exactly this meant but it seemed that while *ad hoc* 'committee' meetings could be held, the bureaucracy relating to the formal committees such as minute-taking, official scheduling of meetings in designated buildings, etc, was to cease.

In late 2005, Maoists arrived at the home of Chandra Bahadur, a 33-year-old social activist, Nepali Congress member and local leader. The Maoists told him that he had to attend a meeting of the Tamu Mukti Morcha (Tamu Liberation Front) in Khoda, a village a day's walk away. When he arrived at Khoda, he discovered that local leaders from all across the area had been assembled. In front of thousands of people, Chandra Bahadur was garlanded as a member of the Tamu Mukti Morcha central committee along with 11 other unsuspecting local leaders. Deeply taken aback, Chandra Bahadur asked if he could resign. He stated that he would help informally, but did not want to be an official member of the

front. The event at Khoda was broadcast on radio, his name was mentioned, and he had to report to the army to explain what had happened. Chandra Bahadur relocated to the city and did not return until the ceasefire of mid-2006.

## **Post-conflict**

The conflict ended in 2006 and by the end of the year, most people had recovered from the effects of chronic fear and recreated their lives. Some people 'came out' as Maoists while others joined the party. The evaluation of the Maoists during the insurgency was overwhelmingly negative and some found it difficult to acknowledge their affiliation. Membership of the party remains a sensitive topic and even those who have openly joined discuss their participation somewhat circumspectly.<sup>5</sup>

Across the country and especially in the rural areas which bore the brunt of the insurgency, there are specific local processes, events, reasons and calculations which led people to vote the way they did. In the following section, I examine the role played by changes in Maoist-villager interrelationships and the process of 'forgetting fear'.

## **Maoist-villager interrelationships**

### *The visit of the PLA*

In mid-2006, between 200 and 300 members of the PLA (the Maoists' People's Liberation Army) spent a month in Kwei Nasa undergoing training. As they were no longer underground, many villagers had lengthy conversations with them without fear of repercussions. Later that year, a 31-year-old woman explained how her ideas about the Maoists had changed following this visit. She said,

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5 Those who have joined the Maoist movement are viewed by many people with a mixture of bemusement, suspicion and exasperation. Some family members have vocally criticised decisions by their kin to join the party. When I interviewed a new CPN (Maoist) party member in July 2008, he assumed that I was going to tell him off!

In the past if I heard their name, I was frightened. I thought, ‘What type of people are they?...who carried guns, killed people, and terrorised the village.’ They brought a particular type of fear. Now there is no fear. We can move around...I can talk openly with the Maoists. I have discovered that the Maoists are *people just like us*.

My neighbour, Thagu, and his family hosted a group of cadres and he spent many hours in their company. Thagu is a thoughtful man who has worked as a labourer in Dubai, India and Malaysia, and previously he had been rather annoyed with the Maoists. When they arrived, demanding food and shelter, he sometimes said to them, ‘Why should I look after you? Am I your wife that I should feed you and cook for you? We hardly have enough for our own family.’<sup>6</sup>

During their month-long stay, however, he saw another side and became especially close to a young man who had been shot eight times in the head. The female cadres impressed him as they talked about the freedom they had gained among the Maoists in contrast to the constraints of their previous lives.

Most importantly, Thagu was impressed by the Maoists’ commitment to rural Nepal. He is exasperated with the lack of development in the village. Although the village is—since the opening of a road in the last few years to the base of the ridge on which lies Kwei Nasa—less than half a day away from Pokhara, it has no electricity and can only be reached on foot after a long steep climb. Thagu is also frustrated with the undevelopment of agriculture, the poor educational and health facilities and the general marginalisation of rural areas. He is not wealthy enough to relocate to the city, and even if he were, he does not want to join the never-ending Tamu urban exodus. He wants to live in his village, farm and raise his four children. The Maoists are the only people who have seriously engaged Thagu and, without their guns, he hopes that they

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6 I am grateful to my colleague Alpa Shah for this quote which formed part of a conversation she had with Thagu in March 2008.

offer the possibility of a better life for him and his family.<sup>7</sup>

Kinship ties are an important consideration in an analysis of voting patterns in Nepal and the Congress party workers I spoke to in March 2008 assumed that these would continue to work to their advantage. Thagu, however, is an example of the breaking up of these ties as he comes from a 'Congress family'. Kinship may be crucial to understanding local voting patterns but equally important in the election of April 2008 was the dissolution of those long-standing ties.

It took Thagu some time to 'come out' as a Maoist. He confided in me in early March that he was a party member but at that time not many people knew of his affiliation. He is very aware that people in the village suffered during the insurgency and while much of this related to the fear of being caught between the 'fires' of the opposing armies, it also concerned the specific hardship caused by the constant presence and behaviour of the Maoists.

Following the signing of the peace agreement the mystique that surrounded the insurgents was shattered. For the first time in years, it was possible to talk openly with them without the danger of repercussions. People who were used to thinking of the Maoists as the 'other' began to find that they were surprisingly like themselves. In late 2006, a woman in her early thirties commented, 'Before, I was frightened of both the Maoists and the army... If we did not provide food and accommodation they could become angry... Now, there is no fear because now we know that the Maoists are also people like us.' What is different is that they can interact with Maoists largely without fear of violence. The social relations are balanced in a way that they were not during the insurgency.

During 2006 and 2007, Maoist actions continued and, at the request of the family, there was a re-investigation (by the Maoists) into the death

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7 There are multiple motivations for joining the Maoists. Thagu states that he is ideologically motivated. Others also emphasised his ideological commitment and his hopes for the future. While not diminishing these motivating factors, his membership of the CPN (Maoist) may also be an attempt to further his political ambition. This requires additional investigation.

of a village man some years previously. This led to some arrests and the brief abduction of a suspect by the Maoists. It was during this period that I started seeing Maoist mobilisers working openly in the village. In December 2006, I interviewed a grey-suited young woman, a member of a prominent local Maoist family, who was enthusiastically attempting to engage village women in Maoist programmes. As we spoke, a group of villagers gathered, some eyed her suspiciously and protectively wrapped themselves in their shawls while others looked with interest at her publications and listened intently to her stories of grenades that did not explode and the hardships of sentry duty. The demystification of the Maoists was firmly underway and a new type of interrelationship was developing.

### *'Forgetting fear'*

A degree of intimidation remained but people no longer feared the Maoists (or the security forces) and although they remembered the hardship of the conflict, they had made choices. 'Forgetting fear' was a coping strategy that allowed villagers to put the past behind them. After years of conflict, people desperately wanted peace and this meant actively engaging with those who had previously frightened them. People were willing to forget,<sup>8</sup> and violence was just one component of the Maoist picture. It was *not* the single defining feature.

## **Conclusion**

Why did previously non-aligned and often fearful villagers vote for (and in some cases join) the Maoists in Kwei Nasa?

First of all, many people did not vote for them. On Election Day, I sat in the middle of a crowd of villagers. Some of my companions whispered tensely when a Young Communist League (YCL)<sup>9</sup> group appeared,

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8 This is not the case for people who were deeply traumatised. People interviewed in other villages, and who were injured in crossfires and traumatised, re-experienced fear each day.

9 The YCL is the youth wing of the CPN (Maoist). The organisation was formed/revived in January 2007 just before the Maoists joined the interim parliament. They have a reputation for intimidation and many people are fearful of them.

and when they had left, they told me that because of past violence and the threat of violence they were not voting for the former insurgents.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, many people in Kwei Nasa *did* vote for the Maoists. What factors prompted them to do so?

Clearly, the month-long 2006 visit by the PLA was important. It allowed villagers to develop a new type of relationship with the Maoists. Many people liked what they saw. Thagu, for example, was inspired by the Maoist's commitment to rural areas and their promise of a new inclusive Nepal. Without their guns (and in conjunction with the 'forgetting of fear') the Maoists were an appealing option.

This is a predominantly Tamu area and the constituency was won by Dev Gurung, a Tamu and a prominent Maoist, a 'local boy made good' (not entirely 'local' as he is from nearby Manang district but 'local' enough). Many people told me that Dev Gurung has benefitted from mentoring, training and opportunities in the CPN (Maoist). The advancement of a Tamu to the highest echelons of the Maoist party, and his fielding as a candidate illustrated the party's commitment to the *janajāti*, (the broad grouping of Nepal's ethnic groups that includes the Tamu). This was an important motivating factor and especially for youth who acutely experience the lack of opportunities.

The Maoist agenda also appealed to Dalits from Kwei Nasa. Dau Bahadur, the Maoist polling booth representative, like Thagu, had worked overseas as a migrant labourer. In July 2008, he told me that this experience had provided him with alternative models of social interrelationships. When the conflict ended, he readily joined the Maoists, using the movement as a platform to advance Dalit rights. As a locally prominent party member, he has moved the agenda of Kwei Nasa's Dalits into the political centre stage for the first time. In July 2008, he was raising funds to build

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10 Although some people felt intimidated when the YCL briefly appeared, voting in Kwei Nasa took place in an atmosphere that was, as far as I could ascertain, free of intimidation. There was a brief but heated argument between representatives of the Nepali Congress and the CPN (Maoist) mid-afternoon when the former accused the latter of encouraging proxy voting, but otherwise the poll was conducted peacefully.

the first public toilet for use by Dalits in the village and planning an upcoming visit to the party headquarters in Kathmandu. In November 2008, he was elected to the committee of a newly formed village-wide social development project.

The Maoists were the only party to seriously mobilise villagers. From the ceasefire onwards, they attempted to actively engage villagers. They had the advantage in that they were already 'in the field' but no other party made a serious attempt to rival them. Kwei Nasa had previously been a Congress stronghold and party activists assumed that it would be again. In a serious miscalculation, they anticipated that history, pre-existing loyalties and kinship ties would reconfigure as usual. Candidates made belated and half-hearted visits but it was too late and too little. Local party members also misjudged the changed atmosphere. Nepali Congress activist Chandra Bahadur stated confidently in March 2008 that 'Congress will win in this village, this is a Congress village'. Many people did vote Congress, but not enough.

Much of the post-election analysis suggests that people were willing to give the Maoists a chance. They were exasperated with the ineptitude of the other political parties and felt abandoned by them. They were willing to try the untested. The Maoists might be untested in the formal national political arena but they were *not* entirely *untested*. The insurgency was rural-based and people have co-existed with them for years. They observed the Maoists fight a war, run a parallel government, develop an effective surveillance network, move huge numbers of people across the country, attempt reforms and so on. They have watched them do many of these things very successfully. When compared with the repeated failures of the other political parties it is hardly surprising that they are prepared to give the Maoists a chance.

### **The contribution of anthropology**

What is so specific or special about an anthropological perspective? How might it contribute to a particular understanding of an election?

Our greatest contribution, I suggest, lies in our detailed, long-term

fieldwork; the teasing out and understanding of a specific context and of how things play out over time in one location (while at the same time situating these local processes in wider regional, national and international contexts). Such work provides indepth knowledge of personal histories, the ongoing complexity of interrelationships, the forming and re-forming of networks and affiliations, and the subtle shifts in kinship-based patterns of behaviour.

Our enduring engagement with localities co-exists with a perspective that challenges the taken-for-granted, and struggles to understand the contested, nuanced and contradictory complexity of everyday life. This standpoint provides the possibility for insights that are entirely different to those of a short-term election observer, a human rights worker who visits to document an atrocity, or a researcher who arrives to administer a survey. In-depth local knowledge and long-term observation are essential to explaining *why* what has happened has happened. Short-term methodologies and fleeting visits will not access these processes. In these conceptualisations, there is the danger that Thagu becomes merely 'a Maoist'. The detailed process, sequence of events, interrelationships, shifting affiliations and specific personal journey which led a thoughtful 35-year-old Tamu farmer to become a member of the CPN (Maoist) will be bypassed, and with it much of the complexity of how the Maoist movement has worked in rural Nepal.



# A Fiesta at the Polls: Participant-Observation Notes

Mukta S. Tamang

## Introduction

Election Day on April 10, 2008, was one of the most historic days in contemporary Nepal.<sup>1</sup> The long-awaited Constituent Assembly (CA) elections took place, bringing together all contending political actors and people to participate peacefully in a nationwide vote. The results of the CA election, however, surprised many, and everyone is busy analysing why the CPN (Maoist) was able to make an impressive showing, and trying to understand what the future scenario might hold. This paper aims to present some personal observations on the CA election from an anthropological perspective. While I am convinced that such a view can add value to the debate, I am also aware that it becomes difficult to demarcate ‘anthropological’ from other perspectives, especially for someone like myself who has not systematically studied elections before.

Anthropology produces knowledge through a distinct kind of practice called ethnography in which participant-observation is a key mode of engagement. If one were to consider that one way to become anthropological means doing participant-observation, it is fairly fitting to call this presentation ‘participant-observation notes’ of the CA election as I was a voter in my own capacity as a citizen of Nepal, and also an observer as a student of anthropology. Anthropologists often bring back

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1 I would like to thank Rajendra Pradhan and Deepak Thapa for their valuable comments and suggestions for improving the paper.

stories from the village that cover different dimensions of an event or process. So, I will follow this tradition and weave a story as a voter-observer and include some of my own interpretations. While I will try to employ standard disciplinary methods to generate and interpret my observations, I understand that this will be fraught with certain limitations, emerging partly from my subjective position as a local voter.

### **The region of south-eastern Kavre**

On Election Day, I was in Constituency No. 1 of Kavrepalanchowk District. This constituency is in the southern part of the district and borders the districts of Sindhupalchok, Ramechhap and Sindhuli. In order to contextualise my observations, I would like to begin by offering some background on the locale. Part of this information is based on fieldwork conducted in 2002-2005 as part of my PhD research in the region of Temal in Kavre district, to the northeast of my village. Geographically, Constituency 1 of Kavre starts from the edge of Sailung Lekh mountains and traverses through Temal hill, crossing both the Sunkoshi and Roshi rivers to finally cover the southern flanks of the Mahabharat range where forces of the English East India Company led by Captain Kinloch and Gorkhali troops met in battle in 1767.

According to the Election Commission of Nepal, this constituency has 82,390 voters spread across 29 village development committees (VDCs). In terms of size of the voting population, these VDCs range from Saramthali with only 1,070 voters to Mechchhe with 6,009 voters.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the population based on the 2001 census reveals that 53.6 per cent of the people in this constituency are Tamangs, followed by Bahuns with 17 per cent, Magars 7.7 per cent, Chhetris 6.3 per cent, Dalits 5.1 per cent and Newars 4.7 per cent.<sup>3</sup> There were a total of 15 parties contesting in the first-past-the-post section of the CA election, with the social composition of the candidates being 10 Tamangs, three Bahuns, one Thakuri and one Newar.

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2 Election Commission (2008).

3 CBS (2007).

The VDC where I cast my vote is a relatively small one, with only 1,284 voters. The population consists of only four ethnic/caste groups with Tamangs comprising 74 per cent of the total. Next are Thakuris (15 per cent), Magars (6 per cent) and Kamis (4 per cent). Four political parties are most visible in the VDC: Janmorcha, CPN (UML), Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist).

Politics in the modern sense entered this area back in the 1950s. This was because the Roshi river formed the corridor leading to the eastern hills as well as the plains, and hence this region occupied strategic significance as the gateway to the Kathmandu Valley during the Rana period. The township of Mangaltar was one of the Rana outposts that the Nepali Congress forces attacked during the 1950-51 insurgency. Later, when Nepal was divided into 109 constituencies for the first general election in 1958, this region was called Dakchhin Chautara, or Southern Chautara. Of the 11 candidates contesting that election from this constituency, Tirtha Man Lama of the Gorkha Parishad emerged victorious with 3,568 votes; his closest contender was Sapta Lal Tamrakar of the Nepali Congress with 1,324 votes.

In 1960, the morning after King Mahendra dissolved parliament in a *coup d'état*, Tirtha Man Lama found himself in jail where he spent the next three years as a political prisoner. The 'partyless' Panchayat system introduced by Mahendra in 1962 initially followed what has been called an 'indirect electoral system' in which leaders were selected by the centre rather than elected by popular vote. It is noteworthy that throughout this period no one popularly recognised was chosen to represent this region in the Rastriya Panchayat, the national assembly.

As a response to immense public pressures and internal contradictions within the system, some reforms were introduced in 1980. The 'reformed' Panchayat system held two elections to the Rastriya Panchayat, in 1981 and 1986. Both elections were won by Satya Man Lama (currently with the Rastriya Janashakti Party). Barring the short interlude of 1959-60, this period was perhaps the first time the national legislative body was formally linked with the people through elections. It was also during this

period that Nepal began introducing itself as a 'developmentalist state' as opposed to an extractive one to the villagers in this region, for instance, by establishing the first high school in the Tamang village of Thulo Parsel.

Elections in the villages are, by and large, connected with the idea of bringing resources for physical infrastructure such as schools, drinking water, roads and electricity, which are also understood as 'development'. The development agenda continued to get highlighted in the post-1990 elections. Nevertheless, with all the representatives elected in the three elections after 1990 belonging to opposition parties, one can surmise that the idea of resistance and opposition also received considerable play in local political discussions. In the 1991 election to the House of Representatives, Kaman Singh Lama was elected. Lama belongs to Samyukta Janamorcha Nepal, a party which has perpetually remained a small opposition group in post-1990 politics. Both 1994 and 1999 went to Siva Bahadur Deuja of the CPN (UML), a party that was never able to enjoy untrammelled power even though it was in government a number of times. There was also a strong presence of the Nepali Congress, which had always come in second in all the parliamentary elections in this constituency, even though it formed the government at the centre a number of times. The idea of a communist opposition was thus not insignificant in this region.

The emergence of the CPN (Maoist) in the area and the beginning of its underground activities can perhaps be linked to such oppositional consciousness. The first incident related to the Maoist 'People's War' that began in February 1996 was a raid on the house of a so-called money-lender-landlord by the Maoists in Mechchhe village towards the end of the same year. This event marked the beginning of Maoist interventions in this region and grew in intensity till 2006, and included offensives against the security forces as well such as the attack and virtual destruction of the police camp in Bhakundebesi in February 2002, the first attack on government troops during the six-month-long state of emergency imposed in November 2001.

The bulk of the Maoist cadres and leaders in this area are from Mechchhe

and Pokhari Chauri VDCs, the former with a Tamang concentration and the other, home to a strong Bahun community, and they were deployed in what the Maoists called the ‘eastern sector’, covering parts of Ramechhap, Dolakha and Sindhuli districts. Early Maoist activities—mostly cultural—began in the VDC where I voted as early in 1998. In the course of the decade-long fighting, two men from this VDC died: one 38-year-old man was killed by the Maoists for allegedly working as an informer<sup>4</sup> while the other had joined the Maoists and was reportedly killed in an encounter with security forces. The Maoists had established themselves as a political party in the VDC by 2004 with the formation of a *jana sarkār*, or ‘people’s government’, at the village level.

Traditionally, the politics of this VDC has been dominated by individuals belonging to the Tamang Thokar clan with nominal participation from other sub-groups and castes. Thokars are linked to other groups and villages through kinship networks, real or ritualistic. Even Thakuris and Magars are part of this network through relationships of *mīt*, or ritual friendship. Political party affiliation and election support is generally sought through kinship networks but the introduction of party politics after 1990 provided people with a choice to associate themselves with different groups and not remain limited to kinship affiliations. The all-party coalition in the VDC, for example, currently has four political parties with a fairly equal degree of influence in local affairs. Party affiliation is often forged by individual aspirations and their connections with people outside the village rather than clan or hamlet rivalry. Even so, there is a general perception of which hamlet or clan belong to which party even though these identities are often blurred, fluid or fluctuating, as individuals continually shift their political allegiance.

### **Preparing to vote**

I went to the village two days before Election Day. I travelled leisurely, stopping at teashops on the way to get a sense of the election atmosphere.

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4 INSEC (2000).

On the way, I had the opportunity to meet people from at least three neighbouring VDCs. Local leaders from different parties expressed their confidence that their own parties would win a substantial number of seats in the CA. I wondered if there had been a shift in party loyalty and got the impression that there was very little of that. Talking to the mostly middle-aged male leaders, my preliminary conclusion was that the old pattern of voting would repeat itself with only minor shifts. Previously, the VDC chairpersons in all the three adjoining VDCs were from among the CPN (UML), with a considerable presence of the Nepali Congress and Janamorcha Nepal in the VDC councils.

A day before the election, youths and others from the village working in Kathmandu and elsewhere began arriving in the village. Informal estimates suggest that around 20 per cent of the youth population works outside the village. The majority of them earn a living as painters of *thangka*, or traditional Buddhist art, and carpet-weavers while some work as unskilled labourers in Nepal and abroad. Many of those who came back to the village for the election were first-time voters, and their return was made possible by the declaration of a five-day-long national holiday for the election.

In the evening, a meeting was called by the elders to orient the returnees on how to vote. Around 30 men and women turned up, and I adopted the role of a self-appointed facilitator and suggested that all the participants be given a chance to express their views. The elders agreed, and in order to hear what people thought I tried to create an environment for everyone to speak out freely.

The discussion started with an overview of the situation with everybody reflecting on the changing political context. The elders reiterated the need for village unity and the necessity to uniformly vote for a particular party and wanted to continue with the old party affiliation. Their sons and daughters-in-law, however, inquired whether they should not rethink this arrangement. They argued that for issues such as republicanism, federalism and rights of historically marginalised groups of *àdivàsi janajāti*, Dalits and women, voting for the Maoists would be the best

option. As the discussion proceeded, I asked proponents of both perspectives to clarify how their specific positions would be helpful to the village. I also added that those youth who are interested in a political career might want to take into account their future political aspirations while deciding which party to vote for. Finally, the meeting reaffirmed the need for village unity but also agreed on the secrecy of the ballot. As a participant myself, I supported this conclusion.

Understandably, the elders, given their established identity and relations with the party cadre and leaders, were reluctant to change their position. They had a number of reasons why one should not vote for the Maoists, the main one being that with their links to the old parties, it would be easier to ask for government assistance for village development. The Maoists had neither the credentials for village development activities nor had any credible links been established with the CPN (Maoist) even after the Maoists had set up a 'people's government' in the village. Further, those who had affiliated themselves with the Maoists were relative newcomers into politics and generally belonged to the less affluent families. There were concerns about which individual, clan and hamlet would gain political prominence in the local political space. In other words, the local political struggle and power relations were certainly one of the primary concerns.

Fear also played a role. The fear, however, was not the immediate fear of a Maoist assault as a result of not voting for them but of future violence. People thought that if the CPN (Maoist) were to lose, they may choose to go back to the jungle, and, even worse, might try to marginalise the village which did not vote for them.

The youths tried to convince the elders that fear should not be of Maoist violence alone and that they should be concerned with violence in general. In local memory, the Maoists were violent and unreasonable, but they were also accessible to negotiation and susceptible to criticism. During the whole period of the insurgency, the presence of other political party leaders in the village was virtually nil. The possibility of securing help from government security forces did not exist since the latter

were beyond the approach of ordinary villagers. Youths, hence, thought that the violence from state security forces was worse in terms of inaccessibility and lack of accountability. Voting for the established parties, in their view, was not the way to prevent state-sponsored violence. For them, the old parties symbolised the institutional embodiment of the elite's refusal to change—even at the cost of violence—while change was exactly what the young needed. They also argued that the Maoists needed to be held accountable for their actions, and one way to do that was to vote for them.

To me, this expressed the complexities of how the decision to vote and in which way is made at the local community level, especially in the context of changing dynamics in the inter-generational relationship. The exposure of the new generation to new ideas and their contacts outside the village have enabled them to articulate their differences with the older generation. Their reading of the contemporary context as well as the ability to engage in dialogue with their elders was useful in providing depth to the discussion. The fear factor was certainly operational in the voting decisions. The fear, however, was not uni-dimensional; it was not only fear of violence, both by the Maoists and by the state but also fear of the status quo. That, and the desire for peace, intermingled to help the youth decide who to vote for.

### **The event of the election**

In the morning of Election Day, the polling officer called an all-party meeting to start the polling. Unfortunately, the meeting did not go as the officer wanted. As the Maoist supporters of the VDC appeared in their fresh but intimidating white T-shirts with logos and slogans, other party representatives objected that this was against the election code of conduct. Things were a bit tense for a while but all was settled with the Maoists agreeing to wear jackets to cover the slogans. Apart from the political parties, the negotiation was participated in by the three election observers and the polling team. The polling officer who had been deputed from the Banepa branch of Nepal Bank Limited did a good job as



a mediator even if he continued to seem a bit nervous throughout the day.

Things became even more congenial in the afternoon. By around 4 pm, when all the active voters had cast their votes, the party representatives together explored the possibility of wives voting in lieu of their husbands who were outside the country. Although this was not allowed in the end, I thought of it as an attempt at *sarbadaliya dhādali*, or all-party collective fraud. Viewed from another angle, this indicated to me how negotiation is gradually replacing previous modes of problem-solving that consisted of simple feudal imposition or elite trickery. I am not suggesting that negotiations did not exist in the village earlier but an open approach to settle issues collectively was something worth noting. The key message seems to be that force is becoming less and less of a viable option for all. Non-transparent and other nefarious behaviour was viewed suspiciously. For example, people were not fooled by the Maoists' threat that they will see who votes for whom through satellite. Nor could anybody offer free food, drinks and cash to lure poor voters, as was common in previous elections.

Villages of Ward No. 9 were located at a distance of about an hour and a half from the polling station. The peak period for voting was around noon when the highest number of people gathered in the school grounds that had been converted into a polling station. People were meeting and greeting each other, and their informal exchanges made the environment very lively. If you could have added *dohori* songs, the CA election would have resembled a real *jātrā*, or fair, where people arrived dressed in their best. All elections are like festivals but the CA election was relatively more relaxed than others.

My experience is that past parliamentary elections strained village harmony. Electoral politics generate partisan conflicts that threaten kinship exchange responsibilities, clan solidarity and inter-village networks. Despite the fact that a great deal of concern existed about local power relations, there was less tension this time. It is possible that such a relaxed mood was due to the fact that constitution-making is something

more abstract than electing an uncle as the VDC chairperson. The CA election and the question of the kind of constitution desirable were quite removed from everyday life and I suggest that this distance allowed the villagers a fairly detached analysis in deciding who to vote for. This practice, I guess, can only deepen democracy.

The ethnic/caste dimension of the parties and their candidates, and the voting behaviour of the people are not irrelevant to discussions in the village any more. Parties advocating the idea that the role of ethnicity/caste in politics is dis-integrationist and parochial are looked upon with suspicion, and even regarded as carrying the feudal and communal agenda of 'old Nepal'. The local representative of the Nepali Congress, for example, had great difficulty explaining why his party chose a Bahun candidate in a Tamang-dominant area while all the other major parties fielded Tamangs. The agenda of inclusion had become much more explicit after the Maoist's adoption of the issue as well as by years of advocacy by the indigenous people's movements in the villages.

Individual contact with Maoist cadres also had interesting implications in influencing voting decisions. The following narrative involving two women from the same house may have some resonance here. The women belong to a relatively poor Tamang family. The elderly one told me that she would never vote for the Maoists. She had had bad experiences with them during the conflict. She complained that they went straight to the top floor of her house without permission; demanded that they be given food; forced her son to help them carry loads; etc. But her daughter-in-law had a different perspective. The younger woman, who was in her 30s, told me that the Maoists had definitely given them a hard time, and they were terrified of being caught in a crossfire whenever they arrived in the village. But she had also come to know many of the Maoists since they had spent nights in her house, talked to her, sang and danced; she had also heard some among them had died. She was sympathetic towards the Maoists.

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5 The actual voting pattern in particular VDCs cannot be ascertained since the ballots from all the VDCs in a constituency are counted together.

For both men and women, the Maoists evoked sentiments of anger and sympathy simultaneously. They also embodied hope and fear. Most importantly, perhaps, in how it affected the electoral outcome, was the fact that it was largely the Maoists alone who had been in the villages for the last twelve years, interacting with the people and making it possible for them to dream of a different future. Other parties gradually became more like absentee parties—like the landlords who come only to collect rent.

In the VDC where I voted, only about 25 of the approximately 600 households had declared themselves to be Maoist supporters. The estimate after the poll was that the Maoists received about 50 per cent of the total votes in the VDC.<sup>5</sup> According to the Election Commission, 63 per cent of the votes were cast in this constituency, and the Maoist candidate, Surya Man Dong, secured 27,471 votes, or 55.24 per cent of the total cast, in Constituency 1. Dong hails from Mechchhe VDC and is among the first generation of Maoist cadres from the area. His nearest competitor, Sangram Singh Lama of the CPN (UML) got only 8,407 votes. It appears that people, by and large, chose to vote for the Maoists despite all the complexities involved in making their decision. It is these complexities, and why and how they decided to vote, that is beyond the imagination and expectation of the Kathmandu elite.

## Conclusion

Political scientists agree that democracy should be more than just about elections but neither can it be less. An election is one of the major ways in which democracy is produced.<sup>6</sup> The CA election was part of the repertoire of Nepali democracy since its very infancy. It was first proposed in the early 1950s with the Nepali Congress as its strongest advocate, and the idea was later backed by the communist parties. Such an election was, however, postponed for many years by the autocratic Panchayat system established by King Mahendra and then by the multiparty demo-

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6 Pastor (1998); Schmitter and Karl (1991).

7 Kertzer (1988); Paley (2002).

8 Coles (2004).

cratic system re-introduced in 1990. In the agenda of many of the political parties, however, democracy was thought to be incomplete without a constituent assembly to write the constitution. The CA election thus was the culmination of this political agenda that reproduced and reinvigorated Nepali democracy and expanded it down to the villages.

Anthropology analyses elections as a state ritual that shows how democracy is to be understood, or how the relationship between authority and subordination is legitimised.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach focuses on the function and meaning of elections. This can enable us to understand the process by way of which elections symbolically authorise elected candidates to govern citizens and legitimise state governance. Elections can also be analysed as ways of producing democracy through its technicalities of party campaigns, ballot papers, indelible ink on the index finger, international observers, polling officials and vote counting.<sup>8</sup>

Nepal has now had at least five general elections, from *Ām Nirbāchan 2015* (General Election 1958) to *Sambidhān Sabhā Nirbāchan 2063* (Constituent Assembly 2008), and is thus ripe for further explorations in political anthropology. Anthropology can help in the understanding of the process by detailed analysis of the local complexities and processes set against the wider political economy and the historical context, besides providing a perspective on how democracy is perceived and practised in specific localities. My own inclination is to analyse elections as practices directly related to power relations since elections set the stage for these practices to take place. The result of the CA election has brought major changes in the composition of the national body that will write the new constitution for a new Nepal. The election in the village I participated in mandated a change in power relations at the local, district and national levels, and all this without the bulk of the voting population declaring allegiance to any party.

The CPN (Maoist) won 38 per cent of the seats in the CA, far ahead of the established parties such as the Nepali Congress and the CPN (UML), and opened the door for the removal of the 250-year-old monarchy. In a sense, Nepal's CA election echoed the general election in Mexico in 2000,

which resulted in the surprise ouster of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) after more than 70 years in power. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo wrote a poem on that election, which begins:

*Funereal joy, says a television voice,  
the death of the ruling party.  
Voters with children and elders  
gathered that morning, a fiesta at the polls.*

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