

## BOOK REVIEW

Hachhethu, Krishna. 2002. *Party Building in Nepal: Organization, Leadership and People*. 311pp. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point. ISBN: 99933-10-13-1. NRs. 550.00

The book under review, *Party Building in Nepal: Organization, Leadership and People; A Comparative Study of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)* is based on both archival research and field study. The author critically examines the party building process, especially that of the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) in the post 1990 period following the changes in the parties' goals and activities.

The study concentrates specifically on the post 1990 *Jana Andolan* or Restoration of Democracy period in Nepal, for it was then that the two political parties entered an entirely new phase of party building. It was a time when they underwent a number of distinct transformations "...from illegal organizations to legitimate contenders for political power; from movement or underground organizations to open competitive parties; from cadre based to mass based parties; from a small group of people sharing common interests to heterogeneous organizations consisting of people of diverse interests; and from ideology oriented organizations to power seeking parties." (p. 14)

The book, a result of a field survey of NC and CPN-UML leaders/workers obtained through a structured questionnaire and personal interviews and based on the concept of party building, brings out how these parties organize and work at the central and local levels and explores and analyzes the problems and prospects of party building. Moreover, being a comparative study of the NC and the CPN-UML, Nepal's two main political parties and contenders of power makes it even more interesting. The book also looks into a host of issues like emergence and struggle for leadership, candidacy and elections, relationship between higher and lower level organizations, relations between organizational and elected wings, conflict

generation and crisis management, party-people relations, patronage distribution and a host of other issues.

To contextualize the party building process, the book concentrates mainly on *expansion, system, harmony* and *dynamism* -four inter-related components- as indicators of party building and expands on how the components interplay in the party building process. It also attempts to find answers that relate to party building of the NC and CPN-UML and why they have relatively been more successful than other political parties in expanding their support bases. Whether they take into consideration the pluralistic characteristic of the Nepali society or not in selecting or electing their respective party leaders, the methods and criteria adopted etc. are also probed into. In the context of competitive politics, which both parties have entered into since 1990, the book also deals with whether they constitute and reconstitute their party organizations according to required structural diversification and functional specialization. Other issues pertaining to party building, as to how vertical relations between higher and lower units of the party is arranged and how horizontal relations between the organizational and elected wings of the party are coordinated also form a crucial part of the book.

However, the Faction and Conflict Management section, a vital part of the study leaves much to be desired, considering the thoroughness of other sections of the volume. As in-party factional conflicts are rife in both the parties since they became contenders in power politics, the publication also seeks answers to moot questions like the mechanisms the respective parties resort to in maintaining unity and cohesion and whether their activities correspond to the party's minimal responsibility of linking people's preferences with the government's policies. It cannot be disputed that today, especially after 1990, both the NC and the CPN-UML are heterogeneous organizations, considering the massive increase in their membership and diversification of support base. Therefore, it is but natural for them to be prone to disintegrative tendencies, thus supporting the theory that the power centric intra-elite conflict is the main factor behind the formation of factional groups at both central and local levels. The vertical split of the CPN-UML thus leading to the creation of the Marxist Leninist Party (ML) some time ago and tremendously weakening the Opposition in the House of Parliament is a case in point.

The NC party on the contrary, prides itself in staying united and tightly knit in spite of all odds and not breaking up though deep reaching political,

personal and professional differences are rife among its leaders. In other words, the NC as a political party has "miraculously" held together and avoided a major split in its rank and file despite its hyperactive power-centric intra-elite working overtime! As the writer contends, it could be that "emotional" "political" and sentimental attachments among the NC troika, Ganesh Man Singh, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Girija Prasad Koirala, were the binding factors that held the party together and that later after the death of Singh, "...Koirala and Bhattarai rather faced humiliation but saved the party from a break up." (p. 197). This contention however, could hold true for the pre-restoration of democracy days when the NC as a banned political organization was at the dancing end of the stick. It was a time when all members of the trio were alive, when they were united against a common political enemy and when they, virtually, by the sheer dint of their personalities, ruled and led the party to victory, overthrew the party less Panchayat regime and restored democracy in the country.

It could well be that in those days, the magic of the troika worked and that B.P. Koirala's idea and confidence behind handing over the party responsibility to these three leaders was basically "... to combine, Singh's radicalism, Bhattarai's efficiency and GP Koirala's dynamism and also to neutralize their demerits- rigidity, lack of political judgment and instability respectively. Since all were founder members of the party, their leadership symbolized the continuity of the NC's long struggle for democracy. The party's rank and file also expressed loyalty to the troika leaders: Singh was hailed as an *Iron man*, Bhattarai as a *Saint* and Koirala as a *Revolutionary*." (p 41)

The troika leaders in their long struggle had gone through thick and thin, trials, tribulations and harsh prison sentences. Thus having remained close comrade in arms for well over fifty years in a bitter struggle to overthrow Rana autocracy and later the party-less Panchayat system to usher in multi party democracy brought them even closer. Their relationship matured over the years and effortlessly reached a soul mate status of sorts. However, the contention can be challenged on grounds that the success of the mass movement and the restoration of democracy in the country in 1990, in dramatic fashion, changed all that. The bickering that ensued among the once solidly united troika over minor policy matters, party functioning, appointment of party members in their respective groups to important posts/positions and one upmanship in the political power game, almost brought about a vertical split in the party's rank and file on two occasions.

The Achilles heel of the NC party has always been that when not in power, it stands solidly united, but the moment it achieves victory, or for that matter gets the people's mandate to form a majority government, the bickering and fierce infighting for the spoils of power begins. Since its very progressive inception in India followed by its halcyon decade in the 1950s as a truly emerging democratic party, its revolutionary rule in Nepal followed by its exiled paroxysms in India, the bickering within the party had already started. In the last decade, with the restoration of democracy in the country followed by the fierce infighting among its leaders, its major founding stalwart, Ganesh Man Singh the *Iron Man* detached himself for all practical purposes from the NC party. He lamented that "...the party, right from 1950-51 with the advent of democracy in the country had fallen victim to the internecine quarrels among the Koirala *bandhus*" -namely Bisheshwar Prasad Koirala and his elder half brother Matrika Prasad Koirala- when they along with their supporters went different ways. Now in his old age, another founding father of the Nepali Congress, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, is counting his disillusioned days having witnessed the vertical split in the NC rank and file brought about by the warring lobbies led by Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba respectively.

Looking back, the 1959 general elections should, in all actuality have initiated a period of political stability in the country considering the overwhelming mandate the NC received. However, instead of accepting the massive trust bestowed on them by the people, senior NC party leaders right from the prime minister sought to marginalize other political parties and their leaders. The arrogance, thus exhibited by Nepal's first elected government, ironically proved a catalytic factor that destabilized the very political system the NC party, along with other political parties, had painfully achieved.

In the latter half of 1960, the BP Koirala government made yet another fatal move of appointing NC party workers as district development officers. The shortsighted decision not only widened the potential for corruption but also helped spread to the local tiers the partisan bickering eating away at the centre. Under such circumstances, coupled with the absence of a readiness to address the potential for instability inherent in party politics, even a genuine quest for modernization would have proved futile. The BP Koirala government's efforts to expand its influence well beyond the political sphere mandated by its election victory set the stage for the Royal takeover.

Some thirty years later, despite having won a comfortable majority in two of the three national elections after 1990, the NC has miserably failed to live

up to the responsibility that comes with popular faith. Because of the politics of power, the name of the game after 1990, Nepal has squandered much of the international goodwill it had generated as a democratizing country. In the midst of all these developments, our politicians forever see imaginary threats to democracy emanating from every conceivable quarter. It is high time the politicians of all parties instead of turning paranoid, admit their failures and shortcomings to properly nurture the multi party dispensation that the people fought, bled and died for.

It is unique and an irony of sorts that the threat to the NC party comes not from the Opposition, but from within -the grieved wing/lobby/camp of the party itself that more or less, also plays the role of the Opposition in the House. This, as a result has not only tremendously weakened democracy in the country and seriously eroded the credentials of the NC party that once prided itself on being synonymous with democracy itself, but has also relegated the role of the real Opposition in the House to that of a passive thumb-twiddling observer.

These developments make it evident that the troika unity was a thing of the past, and when personal and political differences among the trio surfaced after 1990, fanned by the upwardly mobile political aspirants of their respective lobbies/camps for matters of personal gain, the NC's political ball game took a different turn. The chink in the NC armor -denied all along by the troika- became clearly visible. However, whether it was for old time's sake or due to the tacit understanding among the troika leaders, as the writer contends, the NC party remained stubbornly glued together.

However, after the death of Ganesh Man Singh, the chink in the NC armor further widened and the blatant power game within the party reached new heights. The frequent ego clashes between the two remaining legs of the troika, Bhattarai and Koirala, brought about two distinct factions within the Nepali Congress, one led by the latter and the other by Sher Bahadur Deuba, Bhattarai's blue-eyed boy. The factions were of late engrossed in a fierce struggle for the party flag and the election symbol, to prove once and for all which is the "real," "legal" or "authentic" NC party and thus contest the forthcoming polls scheduled for November 13. Though the much controversial verdict of the Election Commission after much delay has gone to the Girija Koirala lobby and has resulted in a vertical split in the NC, with Deuba and his lobby in founding a new party, the infighting however, seems far from over. At the rate both factions are going for each other's jugular and with the CPN-UML in the meanwhile making the proverbial hay while the

sun shines, the country's political stage, come the November polls, seems all set for another bout of power politics.

In this connection, it will also be worth noting that in the past, especially after 1990, the relationship between the NC troika and Indian leaders and politicians of the *Chaksibari* fame, who virtually played midwife to Nepal's democracy, have been stiflingly close. History also bears testimony to the fact that a united NC victory in the general elections resulting in the formation of a NC government at the helms of affairs has always been in the Indian interest. Therefore, the possibility of external pressure in the name of democracy and human rights by regional and international powers on the NC party leadership to kiss and make up once more, cannot be ruled out. The split in the CPN-UML thus resulting in the Marxist Leninist party (ML) before the last elections, wherein the latter came out with a bloodied nose with not even a single seat in the House, could also be an incentive for another of those innumerable patch ups.

Therefore, the logic/argument forwarded by the author behind the "divide" in the CPN-UML ranks and the "unity" of the NC as a single party, especially after 1990, though acceptable on the surface, may however, appear a bit too simplistic when put under the political microscope. In this regard, the post *Jana Andolan* political developments to date -especially, in matters of foreign policy where there has been a clear deviation from the 'yam and boulder' concept judiciously propounded by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Unifier and founder of modern Nepal is a case in point. Besides, numerous instances of leaders, especially of the NC, dashing off to neighboring India at the slightest pretext, to seek help and advice from their political *gurus* whenever the unity of the party is threatened, also lends strength to the argument that NC party unity is more cosmetic than anything else.

It would therefore, be somewhat naïve on our part to suppose that regional and extra-regional powers -in spite of vested interests- have no hand whatsoever, behind the "divide" or "unity" in the country's main political parties. For a country like Nepal, strategically located as it is between China's soft underbelly (Tibet) and India's heartland (Indo Gangetic Plain), the issue merits deeper study and thorough analysis. It is therefore imperative that an otherwise balanced and objective post *Jana Andolan* study -such as the book under review- also look critically into this very important aspect, so as to provide graphic insight into the faction and conflict management, and leadership component of party building in Nepal.

The book, as mentioned by the author at the start, originated as a Ph.D. dissertation, but the publication as it stands, still reads like one -having been unable to shed the "skin" and "tone" of a doctoral thesis. For a broad readership, this may need serious looking into should there be a second edition to the volume. The book, nevertheless, is a treasure trove, not only for scholars and students of political science, but also for those interested in the history, development, transformation and party building efforts by Nepal's two main political parties, the NC and the CPN UML, especially in the post 1990 period. The publication is significant in that unlike other publications of the post *Jana Andolan* period it is a comprehensive and praiseworthy attempt at studying local organizations of political parties -an area neglected in previous publications.

– Ananda P. Shrestha