

# Defense of democracy

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The book *In Defense of Democracy: Dynamics and Fault Lines of Nepal's Political Economy* is the latest account of the political economy of conflict-stricken Nepal. Written by Dr Ram Sharan Mahat, a mainstream economist with liberal political traditions, the book intends to shed light on how democracy had a descent beginning in Nepal and how it had been serving the needs of the country till King Gyanendra became intolerant, and beleaguered the democratic destiny of this country.

At the outset, Mahat's 'defense' of democracy at the functional level may be described by a lawyer as the "affirmative defense" as opposed to "complete defense." He has argued that democracy has delivered, although there are rooms for improvement, and that democracy must be preserved, because it has several promises to keep. He does not shield the democracy governments down through 1991 from every charge that has been leveled against them. Rather, he pleads a 'defense' that does not deny the truth of many allegations, but pleads for patience and sincere reforms based on his analysis of the political economy, leading to the conclusion that the king has become unnecessarily inconsiderate and impatient. However, his defense for the institution of democracy is no less than "complete defense."

Starting with the analyses of the political economy of national unification, historical perspective, Mahat gives a perspective on the usurpation of

state power by the Ranas, the political achievement of the 1950s and subsequent instability, and then the imposition of the non-party Panchayat democracy. The restoration of democracy in 1990 is then discussed in a verbose manner focusing on plans and reforms, and performance and delivery. There are figures which back up his claims, and most of the time, he sounds convincing. He also presents a thoughtful analysis of the nitty-gritty of politics and development that Nepal and its newly restored democracy had to live with during the last fifteen years.

Mahat continues to maintain his solicitous approach even while discussing critical issues and fault lines in the contemporary politics. Issues ranging from societal exclusion and neglect of a big chunk of the national population, corruption, the cancellation of Arun III, the refugee impasse, and the security issues hovering over Nepal to the violent Maoist insurgency have all been judiciously analyzed. His opinions are articulate, modest, based on facts, or at least closer to the truth. There are figures around; comparisons have been made at times to reach to the conclusion; but ultimately his approach is qualitative, not quantitative.

Mahat, an astute politician, is not dull, ambiguous, and non-stimulating anywhere in his arguments, language and style. Much of the comments of the book are not on what Mahat has chosen to discuss but what he has decided to avoid. Deliberate or coincidental, Mahat does not project any economic vision that this country might have in the twenty-first century. The future of Nepal's democracy definitely depends on the ability to find out a fast-track development to a great extent. This country could have developed much faster and better than what has been its speed so far. But the policy makers

could never think of development beyond the parameters of poverty reduction.

Many countries around us in the period of the last 15 years achieved unparalleled growth based on alternative strategies to deal with persistent poverty, a situation where people remain poor for much longer period of time, and many of them just don't have anything except poverty to pass to the next generation before they die. The challenge of dealing with issues like poor access to productive capital assets, employment, and higher human capability in terms of education and skills cannot just be wished away.

But the sort of plan and programs that are included in the poverty reduction strategies of the subsequent governments in Nepal after the restoration of democracy in 1990 can only stabilize poverty at current level, if they are successful at all, but they cannot help the country to get on to the ladder of prosperity. For that Nepal also needs to learn from the East Asian countries, particularly Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, with other Asian economies, such as Japan and China, who pioneered what has come to be seen as a particularly "Asian" approach to economic development. Nepal remains the best strategically located place for this.

Apart from the naïveté of Mahat to delve into this issue, Mahat also ignores the fact that the democracy suffered a lot also because of lack of able, more-than-average and determined leaders who could give results. There is a sort of "the set-up-to-fail syndrome" in politicians everywhere basically because of their poor educational background and exposure. He has downplayed its impact on political culture of the 1990s, the power dynamics, and the foul movements one after another. An analysis of the reign of terror in Nepal

without giving adequate space to this constituent is unlikely to cut much ice.

The problems of democracy as have been discussed by Mahat in this book were not always of local origin. But he hesitates to deal with this aspect of Nepal's national tragedy which has been well explained by authors like the late B P Koirala, Leo E Rose, John T Scholz, Margaret W Fisher, Bhuwan Lal Joshi, and senior constitutional lawyer Ganesh Raj Sharma (to mention just a few). Mahat's psychiatry of the security perception is unintelligible if it is not linked with the genesis of the Maoist movement, and its role in modern Nepal.

Suffice here to quote Leo E Rose from his 1973 book: "Some future Indian government may well conclude that the simplest solution to New Delhi's chronic problem with Nepal would be to replace the existing regime in Katmandu with one considered more reliable by the Indian authorities. While this would probably prove counterproductive in the long run, it could be accomplished with relative ease in several ways: direct intervention by Indian troops; slightly disguised intervention through the use of the Gurkha units in the Indian army or ex-servicemen resident in India; indirect intervention through support of a Nepali revolutionary movement; or an all-out economic blockade."

These comments apart, a sincere work like that of Mahat is always a proud investment in a democracy which suffers not only from the middle-of-the-road politicians, and the violent insurgency, but also from a king, who has usurped executive power and put monarchy at stake. In the ultimate analysis, the stakeholders of democracy must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope. The time is always right to do what is right. Mahat has significant recommendations in this regard.