

Polls as point of departure

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Winston Churchill (1874-1965), the late British Prime Minister, had the opportunity to stay on as the member of the House of Commons for nearly sixty-four years (with two short intervals). His tenure in the Commons had been full of idiosyncrasies, indulgences, tenacity and occasional childishness. It is only towards the end of his career, during and after the World War II, that he could establish himself as the greatest prime minister to occupy No 10 Downing Street.

People need patience with democracy, its institutions and the elected representatives. It can finally deliver what the common people want even if the process is slow at times.

Election is a democratic institution. Even if an election is being held by an illegitimate government, it is wise for those who consider themselves as legitimate representatives of the people to participate in it. The EU troika who visited Kathmandu recently clearly mentioned about the municipal elections to be held in April 2006, and called for parliamentary elections to be held in the country at the same time.

They also called for the EU to send an election observation mission to monitor these elections, and emphasized the need for all political parties to be able to participate fully in these elections. They thought that elections can transform the nature of Nepal's problems. They are definitely right in their approach.

There are very good reasons why the need for holding elections must be insisted by all as the doorsill requirement to deal with the problems

caused by the ongoing conflict. The first thing these elections will do is the reinstatement of representative institutions and give a fresh mandate to those who can represent the common people to resolve the Maoist conflict. With the election for the House of Representatives, the Constitution will revive itself with full force, and the jurisprudence of power and restraints, and the rules of checks and balances will quickly start circumscribing Article 127 and its misuse by the King.

The parliamentary and deliberative processes inherent in the Constitution will then create fresh impetus in all components of the power grid to move forward with national determination. This is the only way the King can be stripped off his newly acquired powers, and the democratic process and the political parties can again be empowered and pressed hard to create options for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

It is only in this context that the EU's call for a follow-up to the 2002 London International Conference will have relevance.

While elections are a must, they can furnish the desired result only if all political parties and the Maoists participate, and the preconditions for ensuring the sanctity of the electoral process are fully met.

In particular, the participation of Maoists in the elections can also serve as a proof of the fact that they are democratizing, and trying to renounce violence as a means to achieve political ends. Their participation in elections does not mean giving up their political demands. They can work out a common strategy with the parties in advance, and express commitment to the electoral politics as the process of change.

Even if they decide not to participate for strategic reasons, they can still help these elections as they will be creating their legitimate counter-

part in the peace process. It must have been clear to the Maoists by now that their historic demand of talking with the King straight (after destroying the political process and parliamentary institutions) has been the most unfortunate one for all. They not only helped pull down a democratic Constitution, but also the political parties, who still represent a majority of the Nepali people.

Elections can also bring a period of enthusiasm and euphoria, of resurrection of democratic commitment and

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can open the options of the common people in the street. Many among the common people are unlikely to be much impressed by the cease-fire and political rhetoric, much less by the kind of antics resorted to by the Maoists in the past.

If democracy, as the Maoists also claim, is the solution to the political problems that Nepal is facing, and if this is what is their mission, then it needs to be explained why they have been arguing about using democracy as the stepping stone to achieve a communist republic. This is the stumbling block, which comes on the way of peace negotiation between parliamentary political parties and the Maoists, and shows the gulf between them in their basic approach to the organisation of state power.

From a political, institutional and cultural point of view, what this message means is that democracy is only a transitory requirement, and the determination to instigate steps, as and when they are feasible, to achieve totalitarian objectives are already on the agenda.

After all, the independent critical mass of this country has not forgotten how the Maoists declared war against parliamentary democracy when it had started delivering its promises. The atmosphere of secrecy and disinformation which are consistently dished out by Maoists for strategic purposes explain for themselves.

Arrogance in politics is a problem in many countries including Nepal. This is why more and more people have become so disenchanted with the Maoists generally. This is true of the political parties as well. Despite the efforts of all parliamentary parties combined, and the goodwill of the international community, they are not successful to appeal to the political senses of the new generation.

Parties still look fragile, vulnerable to outside manoeuvrings, and indeed facing the legitimacy crisis from within. They need to speak straight, participate in elections, offer new hopes, and show the capability to address the conflict. The process has to start with an image of a solution to inspire optimism, hope, and mobilize peace.

In fact as Churchill said, those leaders are fanatic who can't change their mind and won't change the subject as well. This attitude cannot help transform the nature of the ongoing conflict in Nepal. In war as in life, it is often necessary when some cherished scheme has failed, to take up the best alternative open, and if so, it is folly not to work for it with all available strengths. Elections can be a point of departure.

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