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Political situation after local elections in 6 of the 7 future provinces

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by Karl-Heinz Krämer

Local elections, overdue for 15 years, finally have taken place in all but one of the future federal provinces. Elections in province 2 are still unsure though scheduled for 18 September 2017.

The run-up to the elections has been overshadowed by unrest among a number of political forces that resulted from the dissatisfying new constitution in 2015 as it had been forced through by the leaders of the three big parties. This unrest began with the blockade along the Indian border in the aftermath of the promulgation of the constitution and the dissatisfaction never really ended, especially among a number of Tarai forces.

According to the constitution, the new federal system has to be implemented before 21 January 2018, i.e. in less than 200 days time, including elections on all three levels of the new political system. This has put the ruling elite under enormous pressure after it already had wasted one and a half year for its traditional power struggles.

The current government led by Nepali Congress and CPN-MC had promised constitutional changes to the Tarai forces because the coalition was in need of their support to get into power. At the same time, they knew that they did not have the two-thirds majority in parliament that would have been necessary for such amendment. On the other side rejected the main opposition party, CPN-UML, restrictively all demands by the Tarai and Janajati forces, irrespective of their merit. Instead, they called for immediate local elections, something they had never talked about when their president K.P. Oli was Prime Minister.

There was no doubt that local elections were necessary for different reasons. The problem was that the requirements to hold such elections had not been met, yet. To mention only a few shortcomings:

- the local restructuring was pushed through in a hurry with many new local units being heavily disputed; even the 7 provinces and their borders were and are still under discussion;
- the Election Commission did not have enough time to update the electoral rolls properly and was further put under pressure by often changes in the election schedule by the government;
- millions of migrant workers did not get a chance to participate in the elections even though this had been required by the constitution;
- there was not enough time to educate the voters on the complicated election system leading to partly more than 20 per cent invalid votes, especially in several metropolitan cities;
- the identification of candidates on the ballot papers through the election symbols of their parties left many doubts; only the parties with seats in the current parliament got a single nation-wide symbol; this meant a great disadvantage for candidates from all other parties;

- laws and regulations to run the local units had and have not been passed, yet; fiscal regulations for the local units are still under discussion;
- the election manifestos of all bigger parties predominantly dealt with national issues, not with local ones, giving the impression the parties were running for parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless have the elections mainly been peaceful. This reflects the people's excitement to elect their own local representatives after twenty years. The results, so far, show a clear trend though evaluations are still incomplete: The CPM-UML must be seen as the winner of these elections, at least with regard to the positions of mayors/chairs respectively their deputies in the municipalities respectively rural municipalities. This reflects several trends after 1990. In the last local elections of 1997, the CPN-UML had also been the winner. If one compares the elections after 1990, left forces have continuously grown in strength compared to the Nepali Congress, though this strength is relativised by the multitude of left parties. Until 1999, the CPN-UML had been the main profiteer of this trend. This changed in the CA elections of 2008 when the now CPN-MC entered the election process and even became the strongest party. Since then the CPN-MC suffered several splits and lost a lot of voters what was already proved in the CA elections of 2013. Main profiteer has once again been the CPN-UML. Different from the 2013 elections, the Nepali Congress is now only second strongest party behind the CPN-UML but far in front of its coalition partner CPN-MC. The ultra-conservative RPP, that stands for a return to monarchy and Hindu state and rejects the federal structure, has once again sunk into insignificance. But also other small parties hardly played any role. Some analysts interpret the election result as a signal that Nepal is on its way to become a three party system, especially against the background that a three percent hurdle for the upcoming parliamentary elections has already been decided.

Some analysts attribute the UML's success to its stiff attitude with regard to the rejection of constitutional amendments and its pressure to hold local elections immediately. The latter may indeed have played a role. But the former argument cannot be proved since the Tarai and ethnic forces, that had vehemently called for a constitutional amendment ahead of the local elections, gave a picture of misery. Some of these forces had unified prior to the elections but they still were too numerous though they pretended to have common interests. Most of all, they were undecided if they should take part in the election until the very last moment. The newly formed Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN) even boycotted the first two rounds of elections.

This behaviour gives rise to doubts if these parties really represent the interests of Tarai and Janajati groups which without any doubt are still not really included in the new political system. Sometimes, one gets the impression that the power struggles within these Tarai and Janajati parties are not much different from those that take place within the three big parties for long.

Related to the local elections, one must say that these parties showed a lack of democratic understanding. By boycotting the elections or at least discussing such boycott, they robbed the members of those groups which they pretended to represent of any chance to get their interests represented on the local level. What, for example, is now the chance of the RJPN to have any say on the local level for the next five years? The party is in an offside position as it has refused to become legitimised by the voters.

Based on the coalition agreement between Nepali Congress and CPN-MC of August 2016, NC president Sher Bahadur Deuba assumed the office of Prime Minister from Pushpa Kamal Dahal in early June 2017. According to constitutional rules another new government will be formed in early 2018 after the next general elections. But even one and a half month after his election has PM Deuba, who failed as Prime Minister three times before, not even formed his full cabinet. Important decisions are not taken. There have to be elections to the provincial parliaments, the National Assembly and the House of Representatives. All these elections require numerous legal regulations and preparations. So, there is good reason to doubt that all this will happen until January 2018.