

Democracy in Nepal Passes a Second Test

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Featured image: Pro-democracy protests in Nepal (Source: [GEOCITIES.ws](#))

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Nepal's 28 million citizens have waited 20 years for the elections that finally took place during recent weeks (with the final 10 percent of ballots still being counted). These are nationwide elections for city, ward and village chairpersons, mayors and councils— positions vacant for two decades. These newly elected officials might offer some order and hope to citizens' largely stagnant lives for too long. The democracy they had welcomed with the overthrow of the monarchy brought them little beyond party and ethnic squabbles and ineffective governance from Kathmandu, their corruption-infected capital.

The U.S. public and American media are usually fixated on human trafficking, Hindu goddesses, Buddhist monks and Himalayan lore when pausing momentarily to glance at Nepal. The U.S. State Department has shown little interest in the country's determined although lumbering course into democracy as well.

This infant republic was created in 2008, brought about in large part by a hard-fought Maoist revolution that forced the government to sign a cease fire and accept Maoist participation in the nation's governance. A plethora of parties fighting for dominance led to unsteady coalitions, while a succession of Maoist and Marxist-Leninist leaders shared a fragile leadership, almost by rotation. Not the color of democracy the U.S. would endorse and celebrate. Even when the 240 year old monarchy was abolished in 2008, there was no audible cheering in Delhi, London or Washington.

Nevertheless this awakened people forged indomitably ahead. While the central government operated by patching together a constituent assembly to function as a parliament, divvying up the leadership among the major parties to solidify the democracy, a new constitution for the republic was essential. A constitution would define election zones and administrative districts, allocate seats, qualify candidates and voters, and set standards for the campaign and polling processes of the new democracy. Meanwhile identity politics became an increasingly contentious issue, further delaying accord on the constitution.

Finally in 2015 the constitution was voted in, paving the way for these elections. After 20 years without representative local government, citizens—from isolated mountainous regions to densely populated tropical plains, in every city and village—have their opportunity to try out democracy in their own neighborhood.

This long anticipated event drew many aspiring newcomers to declare their candidacy: young challengers, women (by law entitled to 30% of seats), and dalit (discriminated castes)

who, like women, had not previously considered leadership positions. On its side, the citizenry has proved surprisingly engaged in this election. Farmers took precious time from planting season and faced hazardous travel conditions during the monsoon rains, to cast their ballots.

Unhampered by their infancy as a democracy and aware of the opportunity to counter a pervasive culture of squabbling pretenders and corrupt party politics, Nepalis today are somehow optimistic about new possibilities. They still feel the effects of the vacuum in leadership in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake. Because no local authorities were in place to systematically coordinate aid, compensation and repairs of damaged buildings and roads were neglected or haphazardly managed.

An astonishing average 70% turnout at the polls has surprised many observers. Especially city people did not expect their uneducated citizens and villagers they had judged as 'politically illiterate' to exhibit such keenness. Kathmandu residents closely following the results interviewed in recent days seemed optimistic. Villagers' response is also impressive because travel is hazardous during the monsoon rains; and this is the planting season when farmers, women and men who constitute majority of the population, are occupied in their fields.

[As for the results](#), beyond the high turnout, there have been some upsets in party standing: first, we see generally lower support across the country for the Maoist Party; it registers a weak third place in the polls. Maoists played a major role in Nepal's transition to democracy and the establishment of the republic after the 2006 cease fire with their leaders holding the premiership at various times since then. But during their dominance over the past decade, they've earned a reputation for corruption on the same scale as other parties.

With almost all the results tabulated for the 15,000 posts being contested, the outcome is clear and consistent nationwide. [Leading the polls unequivocally](#) with 133 local units is the Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML or MLN) in coalition with the Communist Part of Nepal (CPN). (Note: In regards to the leftist designation of Maoist and UML, none are as socialist as might be expected: e.g. none have carried out land reform.) They're followed by wins in 115 localities by the centrist Congress Party which dominated politics in Nepal's pre-republic era. What surprises B. Shrestha, a Nepali colleague contacted by phone is the outcome in the Terai (the plains area bordering India). There, the UML is leading, taking precedence over small regional 'ethnic' parties.

The results seem to be a turnaround for the region which had taken a hostile stance towards the dominant parties and held up the signing of the constitution. Its embrace of the UML-CPN is a sign that the Terai is more firmly a member of the republic. (On another front, poor showing by the royalist party suggests that Nepal's monarchy is truly put to rest.)

Many women candidates succeeded in winning both mayoral and deputy mayoral positions. Their success follows a constitutional mandate and the standard set by [three women in Nepal's top positions](#), including president, in the central government. This will surely become a watershed for an increased presence of women not only at the national level but also in local leadership.

Last October, as the American presidential campaign was drawing to a close, I joined a family of Sherpa friends around a warming wood stove at their family home in the mountains. When conversation turned for a few moments from their own party politics to

the U.S election, someone commented:

“Well, if in 240 years the Americans haven’t worked out everything, Nepal, in less than 15 years, isn’t doing so badly.”

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