First General Elections in Nepal—I
Recent Political Trends
Rama Devi Pant

"THAT despite its prolonged periods of frustration (between 1951 and 1958) Nepal should embark upon the first general elections in the country's history (on February 18, 1959), based on the twin principles of adult franchise and secret ballot, is a heartening sign. Rifts both within and outside the political parties and frequent cabinet reshuffles have led to chronic instability in Nepal politics. Nor is the economic climate any better. Inflation has raised its head. The Five Year Plan, almost half way through, has not got along smoothly, and most projects envisaged in it have remained mere declarations of intentions. The negligible success of the democratic experiments tried so far by King Mahendra could hardly provide the incentive for the improvement of the economic and social standards of the 80 lakhs of people who inhabit the intractable hilly parts and extensive tarai regions of the country. A general election was the obvious answer.

How far the general elections will go in laying the foundation of democracy in Nepal is a question which it is too early to discuss. But no impartial student of Nepali politics can ignore two obstacles, tradition and inexperience, which have to be overcome to make democracy work. Much depends on King Mahendra who is dedicated to usher in constitutional monarchy, but whose effective power, as past events have demonstrated, has been increasing beyond all measure, mainly because of the uncertain position of the party leaders, some of whom even now wish to postpone the elections to enable them to continue in office and to exercise the little power they have.

Promised Eight Years Ago

The subject of elections has received a great deal of attention both in government communiques and political party propaganda during the last eight years, though, of course, the emphasis on it has shifted not infrequently. King Tribhuvans first Royal proclamation installing the first interim cabinet (Rana-Congress) at one place declared: "And whereas it is now our desire and our resolve that our people should henceforth be governed according to the provisions of a democratic constitution framed by a Constituent Assembly 'selected by them'" (February 18, 1951).

To date the following ministries have made some reference, as and when they found it necessary, to the question of elections. It will be recalled that after the termination of the Matrika Cabinet on April 14, 1956 and during the first direct rule of King Mahendra with the help of advisors, four prominent political parties (Nepali Congress, Nepali National Congress, Praja Parishad and Rashtriya Praja Party), had boycotted the Convention called by the King on May 13. In a joint declaration they had demanded the termination of the direct rule of the Crown because it was "antidemocratic", and had urged on the King to take immediate steps to set up a democratic form of Government "to enthuse the people for honest and impartial election." Though practice shows that such joint declarations, and even joint front!, have never been based on sound grounds of unity and planned policy, they are indicative of the importance attached to holding general elections in the country. Such announcements by a party in government also have not been uncommon. When the Achary cabinet was expanded (February 5, 1956), the main reasons put forward for this expansion were: (a) to cope with increasing governmental activities owing to growing developmental activities, and (b) for making suitable preparations for the forthcoming general elections. Similarly, Dr K I Singh also, during his ministry of 110 days last year, constantly referred to the holding of general elections. Finally, the present Council of Ministers (set up on May 14, 1958, after the end of the six-month old direct rule of the King) was scheduled to continue till the forthcoming general elections.

Constituent Assembly or Parliament?

What is the purpose of the elections? This controversial question has been agitating the public mind all along. In his first Royal proclamation, quoted above, King Tribhuvan had referred to the elections for setting up the Constituent Assembly first, but after many vicissitudes (described below) it has now been finally decided that the elections will be held for a parliament composed of two houses.

Controversy on this question reached almost a boiling point towards the end of 1956, when the ruling Praja Parishad Government was called upon to decide the issue, thereby putting an end to earlier attempts at putting off discussion on this touchy problem till the last moment. This was done perhaps to elicit the most representative public opinion in the interim period. At that time the Nepali Congress decided that the elections should be for a sovereign Constituent Assembly. The then ruling party leaders, on the other hand, held that the elections should be for a Parliament. For, they argued, there could not be two sovereigns in the State—the King as well the Constituent Assembly. The Nepali Congress and its supporters maintained that, having a sovereign Constituent Assembly in addition to the King was not necessarily tantamount to dual sovereign-
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ty, for in their view, the sovereign
could delegate his legislative powers
only to such an elected body. The
Congress, therefore, contended that
the King must formally grant to the
nation a constitution framed by the
elected representatives of the peo-
ple, and that representative assembly
would, at the same time, function as parliament for the day-today
administration of the country.

No sooner had the Praja Parishad party promised an all-party
convention to thrash out this issue
than King Mahendra dissolved the
Acharya Ministry on the charge
that it was not capable of holding
the elections. That was July 1957. Followed the agitation of the
Democratic Front (of the Nepali Congress and Nepali National Con-
gress). The King, after another period of direct rule, at last, success-
fully negotiated with the Front to
have elections for a parliament. A
new Election Commission was formed.
On May 15, 1958, a new Coun-
cil of Ministers, without a Prime
Minister, was set up to con-
tinue till the general elections.
On November 9, 1958, King Mahendra,
in a Royal Proclamation broadcast
by Radio Nepal, called upon the
people of Nepal to elect 107 members
(two more members representing
the remote Jumla and Humla, in
extreme west Nepal, were announc-
ed later) to a Parliament in Nepal’s
first general elections, based on
adult franchise, polling for which
was scheduled to begin on February
18, 1959.

Nationals and Aliens

Even after this Royal Proclama-
tion, which had in effect given the
‘go ahead’ signal to the Election Commission to make the final pre-
parations, and the subsequent call
for the filing of nomination papers,
certain forces have been actively
working (albeit a very small mino-
ry) for postponing the date of
elections.

Certain parties and individuals,
even after submitting their nomina-
tion papers, have been trying to get
the present date postponed on the
plea that distinction should be made
between nationals and aliens, parti-
cularly in the tarai regions which
extend over 600 miles of Nepal-India
border. What they demand is that
the elections should be postponed
until all persons on the electoral list
have been scrutinized, and in case
non-citizens have been enrolled their
names should be cancelled. Leaders
like T P Acharya, the former Prime
Minister, and Ranganath, the form-
er Minister of State, have been
supporting this view, though of late
such views are waning gradually.

One House or Two?

Certain social and political parties
(composed largely of splinter
groups), most of whom are not
contesting, had submitted a memo-
randum to King Mahendra, on De-
cember 20, urging for postponement
of general elections until all neces-

sary preparations were complete,
and the electorate became quite con-
scious of their rights etc. However,
their undemocratic move has neither
been seriously attended to by His
Majesty’s Government, nor did even
the public in the capital take seri-
ous notice of it. This is well prov-
ded by one incident. On December
21, when about 100 persons belong-
ing to this group demonstrated on
one of the main thoroughfares of
the capital, they were assaulted and
beaten by their opponents (majority
of the people).

Last but not the least, there is
the third Advisory Assembly (in-
augurated on November 26) which,
surprisingly enough, in spite of the
King’s desire, as expressed in his
inaugural address from the throne,
that “all members would work for
creating necessary conditions for
peaceful and fair elections” adopted
two non-official resolutions in 30
days demanding postponement of
the elections on a number of flimsy
grounds. Even a leading member
of the Nepali National Congress
(whose representative is the Home
Minister) supported this move spon-
sored by a leader of a splinter group
of the Nepali Congress in the form
of an address to the King. He had,
however, also observed that the
Royal Proclamation of 1957 had
asserted that elections will be held
for a parliament composed of two
houses, and since the Constitution
has not been made public and since
the People’s Representation Act of
1959—elections are scheduled to be
held under this Act —did not say for
which of the houses elections will
be held, general elections should be
postponed.

Independents Galore

Two broad reasons can be attri-
buted to all such moves for post-
poning the present date. First, both
in the Assembly and outside in the
country, independent members out.

number those with clear-cut party
labels. Secondly, of late enthusiasm
of some of the political parties for
elections seems to be waning be-
cause of the uncertainty or lack of
knowledge about the constitution
which the King intends to promul-
gate very shortly.

However, in spite of all such -ad-
verse forces, while proroguing the
Assembly (which, probably, might
not be called again at all) on De-
cember 21, the King repeated that
elections would be held on the date
fixed in the proclamation of Nov-
ember 9. In view of doubts and
whispering campaigns described
above, reiteration of the target date
was necessary. It has to a great
extent lessened the prevailing scep-
ticism in Kathmandu, which, of
course, governs in so many ways
the mass psychology in the other
parts of the country.

Parties and Personalities

It is said that there are more than
100 parties in Nepal. Although it
is true that following the new set
up after February 1951 with King
Tribhuvan as the constitutional
head—and in the absence of any
democratic tradition-political par-
ties have been cropping up like
mushrooms, the total number is not
quite that large. There are four or
five prominent parties. To these
should be added the splinter or
parallel groups formed often enough,
but, their number is limited because
both formation and liquidation have
been quite common, indeed the two
processes have almost gone together.

Eleven parties were recognised by
the Election Commission as all-
Nepal parties on condition that they
would contest at least 20 per cent
of the 109 seats of the national
parliament. Of these eleven two
have been unable to secure the
necessary percentage. The final list
of candidates (as on February 3)
gives the position of the nine parties
and independents as follows:

Nepali Congress 109
Gorkha Parishad 85
Samyukta Praja Party 84
Nepal Prajatantrik Mahasabha 70
Praja Parishad (Acharya) 49
Nepal Communist Party 48
Praja Parishad (Mishra) 37
Nepali National Congress 22
Tarai Congress 21
Independents 338

Total 863
February 21, 1959

It will be seen that only the Nepali Congress is contesting all the seats. Even so it is doubtful whether all the parties will be able to come through effectively. It is believed that some of the parties might have strung along their dummy candidates in some of the constituencies just to conform to the requirements of the Election Commission and secure all-Nepal party status. Of course, nothing can be said at this stage about the success of any particular party or parties, since the basis of their effective strength can be measured only on the polls and cannot be gauged from the number of candidates contesting.

Contest in Kathmandu Valley

From right to left, the Gorkha Parishad, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party are believed to wield some influence with the electorate and are thus of some importance. The strength that Communist Party is supposed to have cannot be gauged from the number of candidates put up. But it is the most united party with some enthusiastic workers. Both the Nepali Congress and the Gorkha Parishad seem to be confident of bagging the majority of seats. However, it is a fact that even today, except in Kathmandu capital and certain other district capitals, the peasantry, in general, have not heard of either of them. Chances of the Prajatantrik Mahasabha and the Samyukta Praja Party are understood to be slender, though, of course, a very few top-ranking leaders (like Dr K I Singh) might succeed. Dr Singh is reportedly quite popular in the far western hilly parts, but his opponents confidently assert that he will not win.

While the average number of candidates contesting the elections can be roughly estimated at about eight per constituency, there are cases of as many as 19 candidates for one constituency. The independents comprise a little more than half of the total number of candidates. In the light of experience gained from India's first elections, it would seem that independents, whose leadership in most cases though local is quite strong, thanks to the lack of constructive activities in the case of most party workers outside Kathmandu, would come out well. Most of the top-ranking political leaders are contesting from Kathmandu or certain important district capitals.
Birganj. Latest reports indicate that for the five seats in the Kathmandu Valley, more than 70 candidates are running, which include, among others, Dr Regmi (present Home Minister), S P Upadhya (former Home Minister), T P Acharya (former Prime Minister), Ranganath (former Minister for State) Ganeshman (former Minister for Industries and Commerce), Pushpalal (Communist) and Tulsilal (former general secretary of the Communist Party and now a leader of the Politbureau).

Manifestoes and Approaches

All parties in Nepal right from 1951 down to the present day have appeared to be striving, mostly on paper, for a solution of the socioeconomic problems of the country. In practice, however, the parties in power and those which formed the ministries (so far Nepali Congress, Nepali National Congress, Praja Parishad, Prajatantrik Mahasabha, Samyukta Praja Party) could not or did not take concrete steps towards solving such problems. Nevertheless, an analysis of the election manifestoes issued by some prominent parties during the last one or two months, should prove useful, at least as an indication of their professed ideals.

Congress

The Nepali Congress (which was instrumental in overthrowing the Rana yoke in February 1951) like most other parties attaches great significance to agrarian reforms, advocates abolition of Birta and Zamindari, protection of forest wealth, fixation of ceilings on land holdings, improvements in methods of agriculture, provision of adequate facilities for irrigation, etc. Development of Industries has also been emphasized, with some reference to the small-scale and cottage Industries. High priority is given to development of communications and planning for economic advancement of the country.

The manifesto in its 3,000 word document asserts that the Nepali Congress party's foreign policy is one of friendship with all nations of the world and closer relations especially with neighbouring countries.

Gorkha Parishad

All the other parties have more or less touched upon the same sort of problems and the remedies suggested also are not fundamentally
of nationalism, establishment of

different. Differences there are. The Gorkha Parishad, for example, is not shy to call itself ‘a conservative party though it has an election programme which in some sense may be considered more revolutionary than those of others.

In its basis, it should be noted, the Gorkha Parishad is revivalist, and proclaims itself as the saviour of nationalism, religion (among the illiterate masses), democracy and national culture.

Samyukta Praja Party

The Samyukta Praja Party, formed towards the end of 1955 by Dr K I Singh after his return from China, was in power for 110 days after the fall of the Acharya Ministry. The emphasis of this party all the time is on honesty, integrity and all such virtues for the improvement of the administrative machinery. In its manifesto it advocates the liquidation of landed aristocracy in a more radical way, nationalisation of the forest land and utilisation of natural resources for economic development.

The Praja Party’s lack of realistic approach to basic problems has almost come to be proverbial. For instance, during its ministry two plans, the First Five Year Plan and the Two Year Plan, with different objectives and implications, were tried to be implemented simultaneously, resulting in confusion and stagnation.

Prajatantrik

The Nepal Prajatantrik Mahasabha is hardly one year old, but it now boasts of country-wide influence. As a result, it is largely composed of diverse elements from different groups. Its more important slogans are a) nationalism and b) constructive work.

Praja Parishads

The Praja Parishad established in 1936 is the oldest party. But after the split in August 1958 following the rivalry between T P Acharya and B K Mishra (the then President), it appears to have been thoroughly incapacitated.

Between the two Parishads contesting the elections there is no difference in ideology. Of the parallel parties, known by the same name, the Praja Parishad (Acharya) in its election programme has committed itself more realistically to these four objectives: protection of nationalism, establishment of democracy, raising the general standards with the middle class as the backbone and acceleration of developmental schemes.

Communist

The Communist Party wants national reconstruction through industrialisation, land reforms, removal of unemployment and protection of arts and culture. It is strictly against any investment of foreign private capital in national industries. Due regard has also been given to the problems of stabilizing the exchange rate along with countrywide circulation of Nepali currency.

National and Taraj

The rest of the parties, including Nepali National Congress and the Tarai Congress, in spite of the fact that they have also released election programmes, do not have definite ideologies as such. Most of them have little or no influence, even in selected regions.

No Sharp Difference

The election programmes of almost all the parties from right to left do not differ much on ideological matters. Of course, there is some difference in emphasis here and there. Except a few parties like Nepali Congress, Praja Parishad (Acharya) and the Communist Party, manifestoes of most others read like mere slogans. The same problems have been posed, more or less with similar approach. No wonder the public does not find much to discriminate between this or that party. The trend of voting would therefore depend much on the financial strength and method of canvassing adopted by the different parties.

Promises and approaches do not appear realistic. The reasons are not far to seek. During the past eight years, shifts in membership from one party to another, have been quite common in Nepal politics and no single party possesses solid and permanent blocks of devoted adherents. Secondly, the leadership of most of the parties is characterized by opportunism. This has occasionally given rise to parallel organisations and kept the leaders busy solving internal rifts. This preoccupation has resulted in difference to the realities of the day.

Public Apathy

In the prevailing confused political atmosphere, what with the absence of party activity in different parts of the country for arousing mass interest, it will not be surprising if even on the eve of elections public opinion is in a disorganised state. By and large, in the greater parts of the country no broad assessment of the character and strength of the respective parties has been made.

This lack of agitation in the minds of the people is mainly due to the following reasons. First, as yet not many publicity and canvassing campaigns have been set into motion. Even in Kathmandu capital election fever is virtually absent among supporters of the respective candidates. Secondly, even today most parties do not have branches outside the main cities. Thirdly, no tangible reforms in the land system have been implemented in the past eight years. The peasantry (constituting 95 per cent of the population), frustrated and disillusioned is disinclined to listen to the high down promises of the politicians. Lastly, as explained above, most of the reform measures envisaged in the election programmes are Utopian, in the sense that particular defects have been attacked for solution without an overall, rational and convincing attempt to cure the disease.

Prospects

However, it is expected (on the basis of tour-reports of certain regions by the Election Commissioners) that at least 50 per cent of the electorate will exercise the franchise - perhaps to satisfy their curiosity if nothing else! There is another factor. A draft of the constitution framed by some experts has been before the Council of Ministers for some weeks. If the people are given time, say even one week, to understand what kind of powers will be vested in the Parliament for which they have been asked to cast votes, they may perhaps show more eagerness about going to polls. But, as explained above, the results are unpredictable. The local influence of the candidates as well as the spot canvassing carried out by the parties are the two factors which will by and large sway the votes.

(To be concluded)