2015 Earthquake in Nepal:
Mapping the Political Aftermath

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Abstract
In 1934, Nepal experienced one of its worst earthquakes in its modern history leaving behind large-scale damages in urban and rural areas and killing more than 4500 people in the Kathmandu valley. Since this event, the Nepalese people are aware of the tremendous risks of natural catastrophes. Today, Nepal is ranked as one of the most disaster-prone countries worldwide. Nevertheless, 81 years later it seems that the Himalayan nation was once again caught by absolute surprise. On Saturday, 25 April 2015, being obviously insufficiently prepared, the country suffered from an earthquake of enormous magnitude, leaving behind in destroyed infrastructures in several parts of the country, homes and historic buildings and many thousands of dead people. To make things worse, a series of heavy aftershocks have continued to shake Nepal, causing even more damage and havoc to the remote and increasingly isolated mountainous country. This raises some serious questions. For many years now, experts have been warning about Nepal’s vulnerability to earthquakes, stating that the latest disaster was not ‘unexpected’, but rather just a matter of time. Subsequently, many critics are asking why the country was not better prepared. The most common response to this conundrum is to explain the deficiency in disaster management capabilities within Nepal’s relentless political instability. Having this in mind, observers are wondering if the earthquake might change the unfortunate political patterns. In other words, will such a national catastrophe help to solve the political stalemate in the country or will it make bad things worse? In this context, domestic and international analysts are focusing their attention on the potential impacts of the temblor on Nepal’s internal security, the peace process and national reconciliation, especially whether the country might witness another armed Maoist insurgency. However, this article points out that the most important challenge is to develop and implement a transparent and fair mechanism for the distribution of international aid. It will be argued that this is sine qua non for a peaceful and sustainable recovery, and the reconstruction of Nepal. Therefore, this publication should be understood as an attempt to map the contemporary and future political scenarios determined by the most significant and historically rooted factors in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Introduction: Nepal – Inauspicious trajectories in an unusual challenging context
The political history of Nepal is not only chequered, but also truncated. Starting as a multi-party democracy in 1951, the country’s development during the following decades had been marked by several interruptions, making the state oscillate between absolute monarchy and democratic governance. Despite the armed revolution against the pre-1951 autocratic regime
of the *Rana* dynasty (the Rana’s controlled Nepal between 1846 and 1950 supported by the British colonial rule in India) and the increasing political awareness and movements among the country’s people, no substantial and sustainable efforts were made to transform Nepal into a democracy worth the name. However, despite various monarchical backslashes, due to the tremendous growth in people’s movements (*Jana Andolan I & II*) and an armed Maoist upheaval, the reactionary, pro-royalist circles were forced several times to bring the country back into the democratic fold. The most important features of these processes are the following. Firstly, the historic tripartite power structure of Nepal’s politics - monarchy, established political elites (foremost Nepali Congress), and Maoist movement - gradually transformed into a bipolar political decision-making system (reduced to two aversive poles: traditional political establishment versus Maoists). Secondly, the royal coup in 2005 marks the watershed in this development, not only constituting the last attempt of the king to restore the old order, but also establishing the rise of a new political force in Nepal, with an active civil society as the leading change-agent in the political landscape. In this context, it is important to note that in the previous years, cunning monarchs were always able to use the selfish interests of the party’s political elites and the party infighting caused by personal rivalries. Subsequently, the king was persistently in the position to persistently undermine the establishment of a democratic system and to turn the country into an autocratic monarchy again in which political parties and activities were banned.

Nonetheless, despite all the political turbulences, in 1990 a new constitution was introduced providing political and social equality for every Nepali, regardless of particular distinction or origin. However, the political reality was quite different. The way how the power was structured in the political system of Nepal, still only served the small but influential political elites, especially those linked with the ‘royalist network’, and not the general public at large. In this context, we can state that the ruling establishment focused more on individual interests and engaged in power politics for its political survival, than on serving the demands of the Nepali people. Furthermore, the decision-making power and the access and distribution of national resources were not at all representative of the social and ethnic diversity and complexity of the country. As a result, emerging protests and criticism were suppressed, while becoming increasingly rooted in the life and the awareness of the entire society and waiting for the next occasion to create public and political disturbances. The disillusionment with Nepal’s political system and its development as well as the plight of Nepal’s disadvantaged and marginalised social groups found its expression in the launch of the *Jana Yuddha*, the
People’s War, by the Maoists in 1996. Aimed at toppling the monarchy, this ‘communist movement’ was initially a low-intensity, mainly rural campaign, but claimed non-debatable adherence to an anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist ideology of peasant-led armed revolution. Since then, the Nepali Maoists have grown into one of the South Asia’s most powerful rebel groups. However, the scenario changed in October 2003, after the US government blacklisted the CPN-M as a terrorist organisation, freezing the Maoists’ assets and barring their financial transactions. Furthermore, the US and several other countries offered additional military assistance and development aid to combat this ‘new terrorist threat’ in the Himalayas. Among several other factors, it helped to create a military stalemate in the Himalayan country. While the regular Nepalese Army was not able to push back the Maoist insurgents despite the massive support from abroad, the Maoist militia, also known as People’s Liberation Army of Nepal (PLA), did not succeed in seizing the power in Nepal’s political centre. After at least ten years of fighting, the combatants finally started to take stock of the disastrous consequences of the civil war. The human and economic losses of the insurgency were tremendously high. The civil war cost the country approximately 15,000 to 20,000 lives, large-scale damages to the infrastructure, while investors lost confidence and tourism diminished as the main source of income. On top of this, the Maoists frequently declared general strikes, so called bandhs, paralysing what was left in terms of economic activities during that time. Being aware of the military standoff and the social and economic cost of the war, there was a growing conviction to form a new alliance with former s to combat the monarch as he represented the real common enemy. In consequence, while a peace agreement was signed in 2006, the Maoist insurgency came to an end, and the monarchy was abolished in favour of the re-introduction of multi-party democracy. But like in the early 1990s, the political situation neither improved nor stabilised. The dysfunctional political system continued to be featured by serious intra-party and inter-party conflicts, lack of inner party democracy combined with the inability to accommodate and articulate the interests of the people, and widespread (state) corruption. In result, the highly fractious politicians have been unable to come to an agreement on a new constitution. The latter must be seen as an absolute, essential condition for the stabilisation of the political system and its institutional-administrative structure. In sum, the end of the civil war, in combination with the end of the monarchy were doubtless two of the most critical junctures since Nepal’s foundation in the late 18th century. Nonetheless, politicians and their respective political parties gambled away the potential peace dividend beneficial for a constitutional consensus. Today, after witnessing one of the greatest national disasters in the country’s history, we have to evaluate if Nepal’s
divisive political camps and their leadership are trying to regain lost ground in trust and credibility by working together for a common cause: rebuilding the socio-economic foundations for development and setting the institutional framework for democratic transition in Nepal. Having this in mind, one of the first steps is to pose the question: Why wasn’t Nepal equipped to deal with the inevitable earthquake?

Assessing the linkage between political instability and disaster preparedness in Nepal

Most of the challenges and unfortunate trajectories in Nepal are not limited only to this country. Most of Kathmandu’s road-blocks hindering improvement of its social, economic and political conditions can be found in other South Asian countries as well. However, it seems that the Himalayan state and its society illustrate all kinds of possible fault lines hampering sustainable development: relentless political instability, bureaucratic dysfunctionality, rampant corruption, traditional nepotism, high population density, massive poverty, deeply entrenched fatalism, weak infrastructure, and an unusual challenging mountainous terrain. Furthermore, unrestricted political struggle within the highly polarised political parties and their factions, ethnic feuds, and a decade long civil war have severely weakened the capacities of any government to be fully functional and to deliver good governance. In consequence, Nepal as the most disaster-prone country in the world is still hampered by a ramshackle institutional infrastructure for the management of natural catastrophes and an incoherent policy approach for disaster preparedness.

If one believes most of the international and domestic political observers, the major reason for the currently flawed crisis management is the ongoing political and constitutional crisis in Nepal. But it would be a false interpretation to blame only political instability for deficient disaster preparedness. Of course, it is a crucial factor but one must also take into account the low level of economic development, the very limited financial resources as well as the extremely difficult terrain. Actually, when the earthquake hit the country, Nepal was just beginning to experience some kind of basic political normalisation and progress in economic recovering after years of armed conflict and political stalemate. In fact, the political elite in Kathmandu did remarkably better to stabilise the country compared to the decades before the end of the civil war in 2006. Doubtless, the deep political crisis and the perceived lack of leadership are not only hampering the decision-making and implementation processes regarding a coherent disaster management policy but they are also creating frustration and a fatalistic mindset among the country’s civil servants. The latter phenomena had limited the
enthusiasm for adequate preparedness and slowed down rescue and relief efforts of the civilian bureaucracy. Nevertheless, despite political instability, shortages in resources, and scepticism about a realistic opportunity to carry out efficient long-term disaster planning in order to be prepared for major earthquakes, the country’s government was finally starting to take some first concrete steps. For example, in 2009 a ‘National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management’ was developed, the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC) was formed, and the National Planning Commission was instructed to integrate disaster reduction risk management into its overall development strategy to prepare for future catastrophes. Also a National Coordination Centre was set up with numerous functionaries in order to cope immediately with calamities. However, although whatever was done was a move in the right direction it was obviously too little, too late. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that many observers are increasingly worried about further political instability and the deepening of socio-economic cleavages in the context of Nepal’s rebuilding and redevelopment.

Prospects for stability, recovery and reconstruction

It seems that Nepal is slowly getting out of its state of shock. Beginning with the parts which are less affected by the earthquake and are now gradually finding their way back to some ‘routine and business as usual’. Of course, the current situation and the insufficient disaster management are significantly raising anger among the affected people. However, the major threat for the stability, peace, and security in the country lies in the long-term process of reconstruction, especially when it comes to the distribution of international assistance. In this context, the current inadequate governmental disaster management and subsequent rising enragement among many of the earthquake victims will deepen the already existing socio-political cleavages within Nepal’s fractured society, but they will not be the only sole responsible for severe socio-political upheavals, like the Jana Andolan movements or another armed insurgency. Having said this, now the most pressuring issue is how to find an adequate mechanism to distribute the funds allocated for long-term reconstruction. There is already much criticism and growing frustration about irregularities regarding the distribution of aid at this very moment.

But Nepal is not the only country facing these kinds of problems regarding how respective local governments deal with international disaster relief programs. Making a comparison between Sri Lanka and Nepal might be discouraging but it can provide important lessons on what can go wrong if aid distribution is guided by a political agenda. More concretely, the failure of the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), which was
supposed to establish a joint mechanism (between the hostile Singhalese government and the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam/LTTE) to distribute international assistance after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, shows that partisan interests and political aversion in the context of disasters management in post-conflict scenarios can spark again latent armed conflicts. On top of this, the discontent over aid distribution helped to bring the autocratic government of Mahinda Rajapaksa to power in 2005. Therefore, the case of Sri Lanka stresses the non-debatable significance of establishing a transparent and fair system for the coordination of large-scale international financial and technical assistance. Having this in mind, the latest decision by the Nepalese government to set up the Prime Minister’s Disaster Relief Fund in order to centralise and control the flow of international aid might be a good way of disbursing large sums from multiple donors from an administrative perspective but it does not take into account the sensitivities and fears of the opposition. Looking at the long history of institutional dysfunctionality, patronage, and corruption within Nepal’s administrative-political system, a government-controlled distribution system will neither be in the interest of international donors’, nor in the opposition’s, nor in large segments of civil society’s. In consequence, the current procedures of aid distribution might have severe negative impacts on the long-term stability and reconstruction of the country. Nevertheless, each assessment of possible future scenarios must take into account that the earthquake could also develop positive ramifications helping to break the path of the miserable political culture and processes.

Nepal’s unfortunate political patterns: The Earthquake as a potential ‘game changer’

Ultimately, there have been examples where dramatic, extraordinary catastrophes have shaken up entire societies, common people and elites, to such a large extent that they can help solve problems that appeared intractable. Also in Nepal, after experiencing a natural disaster of such magnitude, there is reason to hope that the country’s elite will finally be willing to learn the lessons from the past and to break with the unfortunate entrenched political patterns, which brought the country from one crisis into another. Therefore, some fundamental prerequisites are required. Besides international assistance, what the country needs the most is a ‘national consensus’ to ordinarily deal with the upcoming challenges beyond narrow party politics and a ‘constructive working relationship’ between government and the Maoist-led opposition pushing aside old mutual aversions. Repeating historical failures would lead to a total disaster in all spheres of state and society - economically, socially and politically - and even another armed confrontation cannot be ruled out. However, in order to create the environment for
change, all major political actors must understand the urgency of the situation as well as have the willingness to put partisan interests beside. Only then, a ‘national consensus’ and a ‘constructive working relationship’ can be achieved. The earthquake could function as one of the most significant critical juncture in the country’s truncated political development. A positive sign in this direction is that there is growing awareness and sense of responsibility towards the Nepalese state and its people among the different political camps. A noteworthy indicator therefore is that the latest general strike, primarily organised by the Maoists, was withdrawn after an influential faction of the former insurgents (supported by the general public and business groups) intervened in order to stop this harmful shut-down of the economy and the public services. Concerning this, it will be interesting to monitor how far the suspension of a strike was a single happening or if it is a trendsetter within the Maoists political behaviour.

**Potential impacts of the earthquake on the national reconciliation process between the government and the Maoist movement**

Looking at the Maoists, in the first place we have to differentiate between the political and the military dimension of the Maoist movement in Nepal. Ultimately, there is always a concrete threat of an insurgency. After signing a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in November 2006 with the government, the former rebels came into power through elections in 2008, after focusing on the political struggle and building up one of the largest political parties in Nepal (Communist Party of Nepal –Maoist/CPN-M, later known as Unified Communist Party of Nepal –Maoist). Nonetheless, they failed to establish a functioning government. The most important challenge for the Maoists was that the entrenched political forces rejected to work together with its former combatants. After they were forced out of office, but still having a significant role in the Constitutional Assembly, they tried in the recent years to implement their vision of a Nepal consisting of Federal States along ethnic lines. However, the current government opposed this vision vehemently. After witnessing the severe disappointments of the Maoists in the country’s politics, the rumour that they would re-ignite their so called ‘people’s war’ is remarkably tenacious. To this end, one should also keep in mind the fact that the epicentre of the earthquake was located in the Northwest, not far from Kathmandu, in an area in which the Maoist insurgency (movement) had a significant support base and leverage during the last two decades. In this context, it is very worrisome that this part of Nepal feels extraordinarily neglected by the central government. However, it seems that even the Nepalese Maoists finally understand the economic-political changes in its
ideological paragon with China and they are discovering the ‘power of the purse’. Therefore, most of the former rebel leaders prefer to enjoy the benefits of being a stakeholder instead of being a destitute ‘anti-state actor’. Furthermore, after joining the peace and reconciliation process, many of the former Maoist fighters were absorbed into the regular armed forces. However, it is hard to assess if the Maoists still maintain armed militias in the country, and the nature of their willingness as well as their capacities to stage a new civil war. Nevertheless, it is most important to avoid anything, which could widen the divisions between the government and an opposition led by Maoists. If not, militant sections of the Maoists might rethink their decision to lay down their weapons in order to join the process of political-reconciliation and democratic transition. But now with Nepal suffering from large scale damage, human losses and insufficient disaster management, the threat of politicised reconstruction programmes, the Maoists have an open road to stage a major political and peaceful comeback.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that since the end of the Maoist insurgency and the abolishment of the monarchy, Nepal’s democratic transition is stuck in a deep constitutional crisis and that it is hampered by numerous other unfortunate factors, like endemic corruption, frustrated political-bureaucratic administration, incompetent, selfish politicians, non-functional political parties, and weak institutions. Instead of building a common ground for an effective institutional structure to strengthen the process of peace and national reconciliation, there was a slow but persistent weakening of the existing political-administrative framework. Furthermore, the last years were characterised by a deterioration of the quality of political leadership. Nevertheless there is also a great awareness among all major political actors that the political transition, which has been taking place, is not only far-reaching but also non-reversible, despite all hurdles originating from the challenges brought by the environment and human-based inadequacies. Today, the Nepalese people want to leave the old autocratic state behind, in order to embrace a totally new concept of Nepal; a democratic and federal one. But due to the social and political complexity of the country, the entire political transition process remains highly uncertain. At the moment, the major obstacles in contemporary Nepali politics are how to cope with the high expectations of the disappointed populace after the end of the civil wars, the growing frustration over the insufficient disaster management, the extraordinary tasks regarding managing the reconstruction process as well as how to ensure peace and political
stability. To handle these challenges, various changes in the mindset of the most crucial actors are essential:

Firstly, the general public has to reduce its expectations as far as Realpolitik is concerned. In order to do so, the Nepali people have to accept the fact that the lack of functional political institutions and leadership skills will continue to hamper an immediate implementation of any far-reaching and large-scale social, economic and political reform programme. This cannot be changed overnight. Therefore, the common people and the political opposition need to find a balance between putting pressure on the government to improve their capacities and accepting gaps in good governance to maintain social-political harmony. Any political radicalisation of the people, resulting in destructive ways to express further dissatisfaction outside the parliamentary process, will pull the country into a deep crisis and anarchy. In this context one can argue, that after the breakdown of the country’s old political structures, the rupture of alliances between palace and pro-royalist traditional elites and institutions as well as the necessity to deal with the consequences of the 2015 Earthquake are opening a window of opportunity for new political coalitions. However, internalising the idea of consensus will also prove the will and capability of the Maoists to face the challenge of transforming themselves from an anti-system force into a stakeholder of a competitive, multi-party democracy.

Secondly, the Maoists have to distance themselves from their extreme attitude in the formulation of demands and consequently in their decision-making process. This is a necessary condition in order to be able to build a consensus and to take part in the formation of political alliances as well as in coalition politics. Without the latter two elements (which must constitute core elements of the political culture in Nepal), neither the established political parties nor the Maoists will be able to bring about any noteworthy social and political change in the contemporary or future Nepal.

Thirdly, the mainstream political parties have to overcome ‘dynastic rule’ and undergo major internal processes of democratisation. Additionally, they have to vanquish the deeply entrenched existing patrimonial political culture, in which the general interests were subordinated or ousted by particular interests of the ruling party elites and their networks.

However, since Nepal’s elite is still hindered from functioning as a promoter for political change, one has to look for alternative engines to enhance the process of democratic transition. Having said this, the country’s biggest asset in the current crisis is the emergence of a strong civil society and a growing social capital since the introduction of multi-party
democracy. The civil society forces with the help of the international community have the ability to put Nepal on the right track towards recovery and political reconciliation. The 1934 earthquake already showed that Nepal’s vibrant communities are able to successfully rebuild the country. In order to engage the country’s civil society even more, the government should create more opportunities for political participation of the people. In this direction, it would be of utmost importance to come to an agreement on a new constitution and to introduce local elections. Local elections have been suspended since the late 1990s, when the Maoist insurgency began, and every attempt to re-introduce them has lead to harsh political strife. The lack of elected local governments in Nepal’s 75 districts and roughly 4,000 villages and municipalities, has become acutely evident after the 2015 earthquake. Ultimately, it was civil society, which filled the gaps that were emerging due to the shortcomings of the national government in Kathmandu and the absence of elected representatives at the local level. In sum, the appearance of civil society as a significant factor in the political landscape will serve as a valuable resource to bring about change, especially towards the improvement of the country’s political culture. Only if there is immediate change and progress in the mindset of the leadership of all different political colours, Nepal’s fledgling democracy will not be able to stabilize and prosper.