

Education and Democratization

“Designing Liberal Democracy” – A Pedagogical Experiment

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In the spring of 2006, a junior-level political science class focusing on democracy at the University of Miami and the Nepal Study Center at the University of New Mexico collaborated on a pedagogical experiment that sought to enhance learning opportunities about liberal democracy by promoting intellectual exchange between two nations, Nepal and the U.S. This abstract will introduce the program, note several key themes of the students’ proposals to address issues of democratization, and highlight directions for future related activities.

The students began the program by exploring some of the general literature and theory on liberal democracy in order to draw their own conclusions about which components are essential to a successful democratic transition. The students identified seven key areas: immediate transition complexities, education and civil society, institutions, economic development, minority rights and equal representation, human rights, and popular support for the democratic system (which included corruption).

In the second part of the program, the students did a comprehensive “crash course” in Nepali history and politics in order to relate the newly-learned abstract concepts of democracy to the very real situation in Nepal. Armed with their new knowledge, the students divided into specialized groups and developed proposals for addressing each of the seven areas. It was during this time that students had intellectual exchanges on an electronic bulletin board with peers and pundits in Nepal.

Interestingly, across the seven broad areas, several consistent themes emerged. First, all of the groups came to the very reasonable conclusion that improving economic conditions can strengthen the democratic process. The concept of comparative advantage particularly dominated their discussions. Though complex, the students concluded that the relationships with India and China are pivotal, and in particular that the opportunities to sell energy products and tourism to the emerging middle classes in these nations present genuine growth possibilities. Consistent with the concerns of many in Nepal, the students also

recognized that how the newly created wealth from these programs is re-invested and distributed will greatly shape the country's long-term political and economic future.

A second consistent theme that emerged was "institutional development." In particular, two general ideas dominated the discussions of almost all the groups: proportional representation (PR) and federalism. While favoring a new PR system because of the improved representation, the students also expressed concern for the instability that the new structure might generate with the potential for many political parties. Similarly, while federalism offers tremendous opportunities for groups and/or regions to govern themselves, the students raised the issue that new layers of bad or corrupt governing may exacerbate existing problems. Students suggested that a federal system could be phased in carefully in performance-based stages. As regions demonstrate that they have the skill to govern themselves in the assigned areas – with corresponding capacity-building for these new sub-national governments – the central government should devolve more power to them.

A third theme that emerged from all the discussions and proposals was inclusion.

Clearly, with such ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity, this is a tremendous task. It is, however, a worthwhile one. The students argued that only if all of the groups feel like they are genuine participants in the new political process will there be widespread support for democracy. A consensus emerged amongst the participants that all groups – even many of the previously non-democratic actors – need to be incorporated meaningfully into the newly democratic Nepal. In fact, they argue that other nations' experiences suggest that it is better to err on the side of inclusion, not exclusion. While members of some groups have committed egregious offences that should not be ignored, Nepal should be looking forward and finding thoughtful ways to incorporate these actors as democratic ones.

Finally, all participants emphasized the role of education and civil society. The desired embrace of democracy by the people and the much needed economic growth will be both enhanced dramatically by improvements in education at every level, and the promotion of a flourishing civil society. That being said, an immediate major priority on universal primary education and improved secondary and tertiary education opportunities will put Nepal on the road to the self-reinforcing relationship between growth and education.

The two institutions are running the program again in the spring of 2007. In light of Nepal's actual transition back to democracy, we are going to change the focus slightly and instead concentrate on *democratic consolidation*. It is vital that we reflect on the changes after a year of Nepal's new democratic actors attempting to sort out the complexities of the initial transition. We sincerely encourage the contribution and participation – on any level – of interested individuals and institutions.