

Conflict and Related Issues

An assessment of the causes of conflict in Nepal

Bishwa Nath Tiwari

Tribhuvan University, Nepal

With the end of Cold War, the nature and consequences of conflict changed significantly in the world. Today there is conflict more between the peoples of a country than between countries. Thus, the reasons of conflict are changing with the lapse of time. As the number of deaths owing to conflict has been accelerating in the recent decades, it is of utmost importance to look into its causes. Against this backdrop the present study makes a modest attempt to find out the causes and correlates of conflict and its intensity using cross-sectional data of 75 districts of Nepal.

The Maoist conflict in Nepal started in 1996 from two districts of Mid-Western Development Region and spread all over the country within a decade. All 75 districts except two, Manang and Mustang, reported casualties as high as more than 13,000, and more than 200,000 displaced persons. After more than a decade, the conflict came to a halt with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord on 21 November 2006. With this event, people's expectation has increased, which needs to be properly managed by the Government of Nepal; otherwise, the possibility of conflict relapse cannot be ruled out. Previous experiences of post-conflict countries reveal that there is 39 percent risk of conflict relapse in the first five years and an additional 32 percent risk in the next five years of post-conflict situation. This signifies the importance of looking into the dissatisfaction and causes of conflict while devising conflict prevention strategies.

The cost of conflict varied widely across regions and areas of Nepal. The direct cost in terms of number of killings was highest in the Mid-Western Development Region and lowest in the Eastern Development Region. The conflict was intensified with the mobilization of army in 2001, which led to the highest number of casualties in 2002 and a higher number of killings by that state, compared to those by the Maoist rebels. Local political workers were at the top of the list of people killed, followed by agricultural laborers, implying that the rural population and poor were more vulnerable to conflict risk.

There was a wide variation in the number of people killed across the districts, even among the districts of the Mid-Western Development Region, ranging from 30 in Humla to 904 in Dang, which implies that the level and intensity of conflict depended on a multitude of factors. On the whole, the average number of persons killed in a district of Nepal was 178. Excluding the Mid-Western Development Region, all other regions had their district averages less than the national average. This implies that the Mid-West was the worst affected region. In fact, three of the 75 districts – Rukum, Rolpa, and Dang of the Mid-West development region – share nearly 15 percent of the total casualties.

For the empirical assessment of conflict in this paper, conflict in a district was measured in two ways: the level of insecurity (high or low) and the number of people killed. Two linear regression models were estimated to look into the causes of conflict. In one model, a dummy variable represented the level of insecurity; the high level of insecurity was considered the presence of insecurity, whereas the low level of insecurity was considered the absence of conflict. The data on the level of insecurity was obtained from the classification of districts by the UN system of Nepal. In another regression model, the number of killed persons was the dependent variable, and altogether 21 independent variables were included for estimating their effect on the conflict.

The estimated results of the first regression model (level of insecurity as dummy dependent variable) suggested that economic, social and natural factors such as poverty incidence, income, food security, proportion of female in non-agricultural operation, composite development index, elevation, and caste polarization influenced the level of insecurity in a district. In particular, poverty incidence and low caloric intake were positively associated with conflict, whereas increase in income, share of female in non-agricultural occupation, level of overall development, proportion of Janjati population and elevation were found to dampen the likelihood of insecurity.

The second model estimated with the number of people killed in a district as the dependent variable suggested a different set of variables to affect the intensity of conflict. Literacy rate and proportion of Janjati population were negatively related with the number of killings, whereas an increase in food insecurity, share of female in non-agricultural occupation and the proportion of forest area aggravated the conflict. It is critical to note that this model found a positive association between the proportion of female in non-agricultural operation and the intensity of conflict, whereas the other model suggested a negative association between the two. This

contradictory set of findings needs further investigation. However, there is no contradiction between the two models in the finding that the intensity of conflict was higher in a district with a larger proportion of forest.

The results of the above two models are generally comparable with those of previous studies. Yet, this study has value addition in two aspects. The first is the finding that conflict is not only due to economic reasons but also because of social and ethnic reasons. This is evident from a negative relationship of level of insecurity with the proportion of Janajati population. In a district where the proportion of Janajati population was higher, the level of insecurity was lower. This finding is in conformity with the finding of few other studies including that of Gurung (2004), who found an inverse relation between the proportion of Janjati population and number of insurgency-related deaths. In particular, Gurung found that the Western Hill districts with the highest number of insurgency-related deaths had the second lowest proportion of Janjati population, while the Central Mountain districts, with the lowest insurgency-related deaths, had the highest proportion of Janjatis. However, such a clear negative relation was not evident in case of Dalit population of Nepal.

The second important value addition of this study is that conflict is a result of mismatch between political empowerment and economic empowerment. With the growing political empowerment, people were not becoming more economically empowered, and thus there was conflict. This finding has a significant policy implication for improving service delivery and for providing employment and income earning opportunities in districts. The overall conclusion of the present study is that there is a need for recovery and reconstruction in all the three dimensions – political, economic and social, and that an over-emphasis on any one dimension can jeopardize the post-conflict situation and obstruct the way to a lasting peace. The overall policy implications of the findings are that increasing employment and income opportunities, improving food security, and decreasing caste polarization, together with bringing political progression as per the Comprehensive Peace Accord could prevent conflict relapse in Nepal. If the state fails to meet the rising expectations of the people, it would be difficult to bring a long lasting peace in the country. This vindicates the strategies taken by the Government of Nepal in the formulation of three-year interim plan, which focuses on creation of employment with the lens of inclusion and reintegration through massive investment in rehabilitation and reconstruction, and successive progression of the state.