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Political predictions in Nepal

Aditya Man Shrestha

It would have been much better if somebody had told the story that I am going to tell you. The story is all about political predictions in Nepal inadvertently made in course of writing in the Nepalese newspapers particularly *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times*. I am not an astrologer professed to predict political events on the basis of the interplay of the planets. However, what was foreseen during the dispassionate analysis came out true even to my own astonishment. For want of anybody coming forth to tell the story, I have come forward myself.

To pick up the latest case of the Madhesh uprising, the forecast about it came out incredibly true. Some 28 months ago, in September 2004 I had said that there would be "an uprising of the Madhesis" and that really took place in 2007. There was however nothing extraordinary what had been said. It was pointed out that "there is increasing consensual demand for re-organization of the State with recognition for a right to self-determination, federal system of government with utmost autonomy to indigenous community and fair representation in the national legislature, executive and judicial branches. The Madhesi leaders have made it clear that uprising is in the offing for the fulfillment of these aspirations." What was actually extraordinary was complete oblivion of the obvious facts on the part of the agitators-turned-rulers.¹

Linked with this prediction was yet another prophesy more serious and more consequential. However that is open to question. It was said that the Madhesi movement "is the beginning of the end of Nepal. It is not because the Madhesis want to break the country into pieces but mainly because our leadership is too insensitive and incapable of keeping a diverse people united." Going by the current chaotic developments in the Terai region, it would not take a long time to see the disintegration of the country happening. It is because the government has no control over it, the Maoists have been made the target of their old friends and new enemies, and the Madhesi rebel groups are too many to be brought into order. On top of it, the role of India, the government and the non-government forces, is too pervasive and divisive. Nepalese leadership has no capability to keep the country united.

When it came to the question of King Gyanendra, things came out almost everything true.

Before the king dismissed the Sher Bahadur Deuba government and took over, for example, executive power on Oct. 4, 2002 I had said he would do it and take Nepal 50 years back. He did it true to the every word I had foretold. He exercised discretionary power under the Article 127 in dismissing and appointing prime ministers and ministers as his grandfather and father were doing in the 1950s and 1960s.²

¹ Aditya Man Shrestha, New uprisings: Time to address popular grievances, *The Himalayan Times*, 13 Sept. 2004.

² Aditya Man Shrestha, Nepal's destiny swinging back and forth, *The Kathmandu Post* 30 Sept. 2002.

Subsequently, I made a firm assertion in July 2003 that King Gyanendra was no constitutional monarch. Those who thought he was were fools. By 2005, following the royal direct takeover, it became clear that the king did not subscribe to the principle of constitutional monarchy.³

If more evidence were required, we can refer to Dr. Tulsi Giri who minced no words in 2005 on this issue. He declared that the people could choose between democracy and monarchy, an expression of the king's mind. It is worthwhile to recollect that the king abandoned the use of the "constitutional monarchy" in his public speeches together with the oft-quoted multiparty democracy. To add, he wanted to be not only seen but also heard by the people. He wanted to play the role of a constructive monarch. The royal takeover of 1 Feb. 2005 was the climax of this aphorism.⁴

As explained in July 2003, the king made a choice of following the Mahendrapath of revising active monarchy in 2005. In this attempt, I pointed out, he could come out with a new agenda of peace making and nation building. He could ask his people to keep quiet and follow him for, say, two years, five years or ten years. Just after one and a half years, the king asked for three years to restore peace and consolidate democracy.⁵

In August 2003, it was explained that the king could and would use the symbolic Sudarshan chakra (a powerful weapon belonging to Lord Krishan) in the form of the army, the police and the state machinery. That, of course, he did to the utmost following the royal takeover and declaration of the state of emergency. His actions came close to further details envisaged in 2003. He rounded up, as King Mahendra did in 1960, all the prominent political leaders and put them behind bars. On the other hand, he gave the security forces marching orders to smash out the last fortress of the Maoist rebels. A reign of terror, massacre and bloodshed resulted, as envisaged, from the release of his Sudarshan Chakra.

In October 2003, it was also contemplated that the king could afford to ignore the rebels; the political parties and the foreign powers provided he could take care of the people, their security and their welfare. Indeed, in 2005, he did it by suppressing the political leaders, ignoring the international community and assaulting the rebels. He too undertook frequent tours of different regions of the country to go close to the people and attend to their grievances. But how he failed in his attempts is a different story.

In Sept. 2005, it was already clear that the king was losing grounds in his direct rule. In this background, I had sounded a note of caution that a king at the giving end could soon

³ Aditya Man Shrestha, King's two mistakes: His capability and intention are in question, The Himalayan Times, 7 July 2003.

⁴ Aditya Man Shrestha and Santosh Sigdel, Raja le ke bhane and ke gare, New ERA, 2007.

⁵ Aditya Man Shrestha, Nepali politics,: Four choices before the king, The Himalayan Times, 15 July 2003.

turn into a receiving end as it had happened in the case of his elder brother King Birendra in 1990. “It is the turn of the present king (Gyanendra) to be able to read the gravity of the situation and act in time. In other words, he should not allow the situation to drift in such a way that would put his position from a giving to a receiving end as was observed in the run-up to 1990 change-over.” Being all-powerful he was certainly at the giving end at that point of time. But before eight months thenceforth, he got into a receiving end after losing all powers to the agitating political parties.⁶

In October 2005, I described how the king had been lucky throughout his career despite the bad luck of his kingdom. However, there was a note of warning stating “either the king has to make his country as lucky as he is or the unlucky country will eventually make the king equally unlucky. There is no way for the king to remain lucky forever and his people suffering from interminable bad luck.” It took hardly six months when the Jana Aandolan II started and turned the king utterly unlucky.⁷

It is the article published in The *Kathmandu Post* on 30 September 2002 that pointed out eight potential scenarios, which became, to a large extent, the reality within two years.

The first and foremost vindication of the prediction was established just after a couple of days of its publication, as stated earlier, when King Gyanendra assumed all executive power on October 4 of the same year by dismissing Sher Bahadur Deuba government. At a time when there were too many speculations on the use of Article 127 of the constitution and the politicians and lawyers were asking the king to exercise the power according to their advice I had clearly stated that the failure to hold the elections “eventually leads to the invocation of Article 127 of the constitution that empowers the king to exercise discretionary power for its resolution. It means that we are swinging back some 50 years when the king was free to nominate cabinet ministers according to his choice.” No matter how many protests had been made since then against this “regressive” royal move the situation remained for several years unchanged with royal will prevailing.

Secondly, it spoke of the expansion of the Maoist control over the rural areas. It said, “While Prime Minister Deuba, his cabinet colleagues and other political leaders keep on debating with frequent somersaults over the election issue, the Article 127 implications and the all-party coalition government, the Maoists might exploit this opportunity to expand their existing control over an estimated one third of Nepal especially in the rural areas.” That is exactly what the Maoists did in two years’ time extending their influence all over the rural areas and increasing capability of striking at any district headquarters.

Thirdly, it said, “We may even witness the 1990 scenario reenacted when Patan was under seize of the democratic forces fighting against the Panchayat rule. Let us just

⁶ Aditya Man Shrestha, Political crisis: Which way is the wind blowing?, The Himalayan Times, 5 Sept. 2005.

⁷ Aditya Man Shrestha, Lucky king of unlucky kingdom, The Kathmandu Post, 27 Oct. 2005.

imagine, the Maoists infiltrate Bhaktapur or Lalitpur and launch a house-to-house fight against our security forces. We cannot imagine applying the Rolpa or Rukum counter operations in these cities. Perhaps we will go back to the Malla days when the city-states of Kantipur, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur conducted their warfare against each other for supremacy over the valley.”

The security forces that claimed to have foiled the Maoist plot to launch an attack in the valley early 2005 corroborated this phenomenon. They even put the weapons, grenades and their accessories seized in the valley on public display. It was also admitted by the Maoist regional leadership that about 500 of their combatants had infiltrated the valley for the purpose but the assault was cancelled as the government forces killed their leaders.

Fourthly, an economic blockade of the Kathmandu valley and disruption of supplies had been envisaged. Kathmandu valley has its biggest weakness in having only one road access. It, therefore, said, “Kathmandu is the most vulnerable place to a fighting like the one going on in other parts of the country. Having a big concentration of population, it is easier to spread panic, a detriment to the lawful government. Its biggest weakness is the road access, which is in effect only one. If somehow the rebels succeed partially or wholly to strangulate the valley resulting into disruption of supplies we can envisage a situation that can hardly be manageable for maintaining peace and security.” The Maoist blockades came in the summer of 2004 but in a milder form than contemplated.

Fifthly, the logical measure to follow an effective economic blockade could be nothing less than a situation under which “we may also see food, medicine and other necessities air-dropped for the survival of the valley people. Under such circumstance, we will revert back to the last days of the Ranas in 1950 when propaganda pamphlets were distributed over the valley by aircrafts flying from India.” The valley blockade of 2004 led to an emergency meeting of the Indian cabinet and broached over a contingency plan to airdrop the provisions, if necessary.

Sixth, the only situation that has not yet arisen as contemplated in that 2002 article is the evacuation of the foreign community from the capital. However, there was a contingency plan in place to evacuate the diplomatic corps and the expatriate community from the valley by helicopters. There are two helipads available within the premises of the foreign embassies in Kathmandu. Moreover, the American Peace Corp volunteers were returned home following a grenade blast by the rebels at the American Center resulting into minor physical damage but no human injury.

“Worse comes to the worst,” it said, “there might be evacuation of the foreign community residing in the capital. Would it be like the Saigon evacuation at the end of the Vietnamese War? Alternatively, would it be like the Kabul rescue operation of the foreigners on the eve of Taliban onslaught over that city? The world offers too many

examples that can repeat amidst us given the kind of civil war we are already in. Who can say there won't be mass refugees streaming down to India from different parts of Nepal? An exodus of the hundreds of villagers, if not in thousands, has already taken place from the Maoist-affected areas in the western part of Nepal. Will it not bring back the crisis that marked the Indo-Bangladesh border just before the Indian intervention in East Pakistan and birth of a new nation in 1971?" Early 2005, India raised the issue of Nepalese refugees taking shelter in India following the violent ethnic clashes in Kapilbastu district.

Seventh, regarding New Delhi talks the prediction came close to fulfillment. "If ever such a situation (New Delhi talks) arises, we will again go back to 1950 when the armed revolution launched by Nepali Congress against the Rana regime in collaboration of the king ended at Delhi talks. Any peace talks on the current resolution of Nepalese crisis will likewise have three sides, the Maoists, the democrats and the king. Mr. B.P.Koirala has, in his memoirs, described how the Delhi negotiations were held by keeping the Nepalese warring factions of those days in isolation and the Indian mediators dictating the terms. In all probabilities, the nature of the future talks, if held in the Indian soil, will not be different from that of 1950. The attitude of India towards Nepal and that of Nepal towards India has not changed over the last 50 years. It has in fact hardened."

The New Delhi talks took place with the successive visits of the Nepalese leaders to India first by Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala followed by RPP Chairman Pashupati Shumsher Rana and UML Secretary General Madhav Kumar Nepal in early months of 2004. Close on their heels, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba visited India in the beginning of September. King Gyanendra paid his visit to India in November of 2004. As the top Maoist leaders were residing in India, there was no difficulty in getting all of them together. Although no formal talk took place in New Delhi on Nepal between Indian and Nepalese leaders, the Indian government played a key role in the Nepalese crisis arising from the Maoist insurgency and later from the royal action.

Eighth, the most important was the outcome of the likely Delhi talks. It had clearly said, "In 1950, India had just achieved its independence and there was Jawahar Lal Nehru as Prime Minister who was a liberal, democrat and an idealist. Today, India is conservative, pragmatic and matter-of-factly. It feels Nepal is too troublesome. The emerging crisis in Nepal may give a good opportunity to India to say enough is enough and cut it down to size. Nepal should no longer be a nuisance or a pain in India's neck. It won't be surprising in this context to see an outcome from tripartite negotiations among the Nepalese warring factions held under the Indian auspices, comparable to the position of Bhutan to the best and to that of Sikkim to the worst."

Nepal headed towards positioning itself like Bhutan in relations with India. By virtue of the India-Bhutan Treaty of 1949, India controls the foreign relations and defense of Bhutan irrespective of its status as an independent sovereign country, which is also a

member of the United Nations. Nepal's defense system went too close to India with continued supply of arms and training provided by New Delhi. Even the arms supplied by the US to Nepal for combating the Maoists guerrillas in Nepal came with due consent of India. The heavy dependence of Nepal on India on this matter has its explicit impact on other aspects of bilateral relationship that is reminiscent of India's relations with Bhutan

Regarding violence, it was foreseen not coming to an end even after the Maoists renounced it. I had said in 2002, "The constitutional framework does not make room for a violent activity but violence made its presence felt in the country. Therefore, even if the Maoists renounce violence permanently with the successful outcome of any potential talks, there is no guarantee that violence will end forever in Nepal. The splinter group in the Maoist cadre is an indication towards this direction. There would be many more such groups emerging until the basic conditions remain the same."⁸

"Until the real issues of the people are addressed, violence will remain an unavoidable feature of Nepalese political life. Poverty and desperation in the Nepalese society are a perennial source of violence. Geography is a favorable factor for it. It is just a question of new disgruntled organizers how far they could go in making it an effective instrument. In the wake of current violence, we crave for peace talks leading to permanent peace. Peace talks by itself are no solution. It is again only a means to a solution. Most of us are thinking in terms of sharing power among the contending forces. That might bring about a political solution but might not eradicate violence. To do away with violence we must get to the roots of our problems. We know what they are – development, justice, and equity."⁹ It is self-explanatory in the present context of 2007.

Similarly, what was said in 1991 that democracy would fail in Nepal actually did come out true in 2002 after a decade or so. The article, Democracy in Undemocratic Nepal, published in *The Independent* of November 20, 1991 turned out very prophetic. It was the time when the people's movement against the absolute monarchy had just succeeded and a parliamentary democracy had been introduced. A 30-year old citadel of the Panchayat system under the direct leadership of the king had fallen down under the stress of mass revolt and the protesting political leaders had taken over the reins of control. A fully democratic constitution was underway with guarantee to individual and political freedom and fundamental human rights. It was the time when the fate of an active monarchy was thought sealed for good. It was the time when the people felt liberated from political suppression and demonstrated great sense of sacrifice and commitment to democracy.

The article was a little cynical about working a fully democratic system in Nepal. Therefore, it said, "Democracy has come to stay in a basically undemocratic Nepal." It did not take more than a decade to see the citadel of democracy shaking. When the king dismissed an elected prime minister on October 4, 2002, my fears were not far-fetched. Not that I did not like democracy but that certain preconditions must exist for its success, which, I believed, did not in Nepal. It becomes all the more difficult to make it work in a

⁸ Aditya Man Shrestha, When will violence end in Nepal?, The Kathmandu Post, 26 Oct. 2002.

⁹ Ibid.

society where the most responsible people behave most irresponsibly. That is why democracy faced a crossroad in 2002. (end)

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