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## Nepal: Why All this fuss over Local Elections? : Update No. 294

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By Dr. S. Chandrasekharan

One notices that the present government of Nepal led by the Nepali Congress-UML combine gets into unnecessary and trivial controversies that would only further delay its primary task of getting a new constitution in time. In this process, the faith the people had put in them in electing them in overwhelming numbers in the last interim assembly elections also gets eroded.

A case in point was the unseemly controversy over who should finally approve or authenticate the new constitution- the President or the Speaker with the Nepali Congress opting for the President and the UML opting for its representative- the Chairman of the interim assembly. After days of intense debate and discussions, it was finally decided that while the chairman of the Assembly would approve the new draft, the President would "unveil" it! One could ask- Does it make any difference at all?

It took almost four months after the elections, for the assembly to finalise its rules and regulations and the hard part of deciding on the contentious issues in the new constitution is yet to take place. The rate of progress has been painfully slow.

Yet the government is dilly dallying on an issue that is not directly relevant to the constitution making but yet would definitely have an impact on the ability of the present government to decide on hard and contentious issues- here the local body elections.

One of the points agreed to between the Nepali Congress and the UML in forming the government was that local body elections will be held within six months. In fact this point was agreed to even earlier during the interim regime of Khil Raj Regmi when all the four groups, the NC, the UML, the UCPN ( Maoist) and the Madhesi Groups agreed to hold the local body elections within one year.

Even at that point of time, the problems that will be faced in conducting the local body elections were very well known and yet the decision had the unanimous acceptance. But what has changed now is that the Maoists had since lost- lost very badly in the interim CA assembly elections and is not confident now of doing well in the coming local body elections. Hence the U turn and the demand by the Maoists to have elections only after the new constitution is promulgated.

Some in the Nepali Congress are seen to be having second thoughts now over conducting the elections under the charge of the present Home Minister Bom Dev Gauthan of UML. It is said that earlier when the local body elections were held years ago, Bom Dev Gauthan as Home Minister had "bull dozed" his way. But this need not be so now when the Nepali Congress is heading the government. The problem appears to lie elsewhere-in Koirala who is seen to be very indecisive.

Meantime, the Maoists (UCPN -M) have opposed the elections being conducted before the new constitution. According to Dahal, conducting the elections earlier would be a "political blunder". He has given three reasons for opposing the elections. 1. It would distract the parties from the more important task of writing the constitution. 2. It would spoil the cordial relations that exist among the parties. 3. In the interim constitution there is no provision for local elections.

The reasons given are not weighty enough to postpone the elections and the interim constitution can be amended to conduct the elections. But what is under "test" is the "ability" of the present government to go ahead with what it had decided and deemed to be good for the country.

Dahal is also putting pressure by getting closer to the Baidya faction. One of the two points of agreement between the two Maoist groups is to warn the Nepali Congress and the UML to desist from holding the local body elections. There is an indirect threat of taking the issue to the streets!

Dahal in joining hands with the Baidya group claimed that he was ready to revise his ideological approach to India if that would help the two parties to come together and offset the party's perceived compromise on national sovereignty issue- ( an attack on India). Dahal is known for shifting the goal posts and those analysts in India who seem to have "immense faith" in Dahal should note his current pronouncements!

Elections to the local bodies were held sixteen years ago and with the intervention of Maoist insurgency, the local bodies were allowed to go into a limbo from 2002 onwards. From then on till after the first constitutional assembly elections, the Maoists had a complete sway in the country side. The VDCs and their members were the main targets during the insurgency and the government's writ in the country side had not run for the last twelve years.

There is therefore a need to conduct the local body elections as soon as possible.

There is also another view point that now there has been no local body for twelve years, nothing will happen if it is delayed for another year.

Perception matters and the present government should not be seen to be weak. Either way the Government of Sushil Koirala should take a firm decision quickly and go on with its primary task of constitution writing.

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