

Concept Note

Conference on Democracy, Development and Peace in Asia

10-12 November, 2008, Kathmandu, Nepal

1.0 Background

The closing decades of the 20th century were years of ‘unprecedented political reform’ in the Asia-Pacific region. Major transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy began with the popular uprising against the Marcos regime in the Philippines in 1986 and the negotiated transitions from military rule to multi-party democracy in Korea and Taiwan in 1987, the UN intervention in Cambodia in 1993, the fall of Indonesia’s Suharto regime in 1998, Bhutan’s recent democratic transition from above, recent ongoing democratic transition in Nepal after a long decade of conflict and internal turmoil. Along with Japan and India, the region’s long-standing democracy, more governments are today chosen through competitive and freely contested elections than ever before. This represents a dramatic rise in political and civil rights enjoyed by its citizens from what two decade ago was a region dominated by authoritarian rule. In this context it is not hard to agree that “democracy has become a global choice of governance.”

However, this triumph of democratic governance has also been accompanied by triumph of a very minimalist discourse and practice of democracy. More often than not the arena of democratic polity has remained under firm control of a handful of political elites not only in Asia but across the third world. On the other hand globalization of capital and neo-liberal hegemony has facilitated the role back of State from its welfarist stances eroding to a great extent of whatever social democracy was installed or had historically evolved through struggles which has had deleterious effect on women, working population and other marginalized groups. Recent glaring examples come from India, the largest functioning democracy in Asia, where the “democratic state” is increasingly putting its weight behind big capital against its own denizens (whereas traditionally it played a mediating role, biased though, between capital and people/labour). Coupled with this the neo-liberals’ “global war on terror” and the consequent global environment of power play, domination and competition has enabled “democratic states” to institute draconian laws not only militarizing states but societies. Under such a circumstance, democracy has been reduced to merely an electoral process to mask the actual weakening of democracy. In such a context, where on one hand democracy has become a global paradigm of governance since the collapse of “really existing socialism” on the other the very meaning and practice of democracy in reality and its future prospects are in crisis.

In order to arrive at an assessment of how “really existing democracies” in Asia have fared, and also to re-examine and rediscover attempts and struggles to reconstitute democracy, it is of utmost importance to contextualize and discuss the socio-political system within which they are functioning.

It is also of utmost importance to realize the fact that in Asia formal equal political citizenship exists in a very unequal society marred by issues of castes, indigenes, oppressed nationalities, patriarchy etc. which perpetuates exclusion and oppression in everyday life of millions. From Asian experience it can safely be noted that a well functioning multiparty democracy does not ensure everyday democracy at the local level. A political democracy at the national level does not realize itself in a meaningful sense without social and economic justice at the local level.

2.0 Democracy, Development and Peace in Asia

Democracy must be political, economic, social and cultural. This would necessitate that democratic states give their citizens all democratic rights available under international law. National minorities and minority nationalities must be given equal rights and even special rights like affirmative action and extra autonomy for the regions they inhabit. This would only be possible if the development model is egalitarian, pro-poor and inclusive. The stress in development should be to provide the basis for rights and strengthen entitlements. This and not private profit should be the basic guiding principle of development. In the development debate of the 1960's it was accepted that growth plus distribution was equal to development, not merely economic growth alone. Therefore, for a true democracy and egalitarian development there has to be a major role for the state to regulate foreign and domestic capital in the interest of more egalitarian distribution of the benefits of growth. For this the environment of peace is absolutely essential.

Peace must mean social harmony throughout the country and between countries and not merely a time without war. It means that low intensity conflicts or civil wars that are being faced by India, Sri Lanka and many other Asian countries need to be ended on a just basis for there to be a real environment for both democracy and development. Where there is internal or external discord, internally anti-terror and other extraordinary laws are enacted and imposed. These strikes at the very root of democracy and usually effect minorities and minority nationalities more.

It is now universally accepted that civil society is a critical actor in this process. The old statist model of progressive development which did not empower civil society turned into a political – economic-bureaucratic disaster like the old socialist bloc countries. Having said that it is also important to note that in specific Asian context "civil society" needs to be debated and redefine in order to have effective empowerment. If we consider the fact that civil society in a largely rural Asian context is confined to urban centres and the middle classes, there arise serious doubts on fairness and equality in deliberation within civil society. The public sphere of "Asian civil society" essentially excludes certain voices and marginalizes others by glossing over intersection of class/gender/race/caste/nationality. The language that civil society operates through and deliberates is the language of legality and civic morality derived from the notion of modern state, whereas in the third world, majority of the population doesn't have access to knowledge that produces expertise over that language. In other words the deliberative language of Asian civil society is monopolized by few in the larger society. So the question remains how to re-imagine civil society in an Asian context beyond statist parameter which will also be inclusive of hitherto excluded sections like indigenes, dalit and other subaltern subjects.

For real democracy the state must be transparent and accountable, not only to political representatives but also to civil society. This is the recognition behind the movement for the right to information of state and Para-state bodies. Only when the basis on which the state takes decisions and the impact thereof is public knowledge can bureaucratic and public corruption, and inegalitarian policies, be exposed and necessary actors be held accountable.

Development must be sustainable. This has been made even more urgent by widespread displacement of the poor by mega projects, ecological degradation and climate change. Development to be sustainable must also avoid extraordinary laws and operate through the rule of law as defined by numerous international law instruments, particularly international human rights and humanitarian law. In all Asian states, where extraordinary and anti-terror laws exist, dissidents have been targeted, as have communities to which the terrorists are alleged to belong. There will be

a tension between the powerful economic and political actors who are disproportionately influential or actually control the state, and civil society which works for a more peace loving, egalitarian and sustainable development. This struggle now has international dimensions given the role of international actors like the World Bank, IMF, WTO, MNCs and OECD governments. All of these actors more strongly support neo-liberal economic ‘reforms’ and in some cases even seek to destabilize political forces who are committed to more pro-people reforms.

To build a just and humane society and polity by one country alone is extremely difficult if not impossible. There has to be international solidarity between states and civil society. This will bring to the fore a central contradiction that the states are generally wedded to neo-liberal reforms to which the ruling elites in Asian countries are generally committed. However, as the example of Latin America shows, a vibrant civil society can bring in pro-people reforms by uniting and supporting popular forces in the elections. But since the powerful bureaucracy, army and ruling elite are not displaced, attempts at counter revolution are quite likely. The attempted destabilization of Hugo Chavez is a stark example.

The role of civil society is pre-eminently to democratize the state. This means not only reforming state structures but also empowering and educating civil society so that growing civil society movements can continue to act as a check against anti-people forces and act as the catalyst for the strengthening of democratic and pro-people forces. This will necessitate a sharpening of the ideological debate. Basic concepts and strategies for democracy, development and peace will have to be publicly debated and accepted not only to displace neoliberal economics but also to popularize conflict resolution and avoidance models. All this together with the imperative and contours of sustainable development will have to be made central to public discourse. Perhaps even more importantly, hegemonic and the US imperial project will have to be analyzed in its specificities in individual countries, and alternative sovereign people-centric alternatives including of resistance to imperialism will have to be developed.

This will require tremendous activity by civil society. The challenges are great but there is no other alternative. Globalization is not an alternative as the current crisis of the US economy shows, but is instead a profound threat to democracy, development and peace.

3.0 Transitional Democracies and question of Democratic Governance

The establishment of a democratic regime of any variety does not necessarily guarantee the quality of democratic practice and governance. This fact can be asserted from experiences of many recent transitional societies in Asia, where newly installed democratic institutions are corrupted in order to protect political elites’ interests and save their regimes from popular mandate resulting in subversion of civil and social rights. It has often led to old elites obstructing any separation of powers between executive and judiciary, which leaves the executive authority in a position to encroach upon the prerogatives of the other institutions. Secondly, these democracies focus on electoral rights to the detriment of human rights such as freedom of the press, right of association, freedom of religion and minority rights. Thirdly, political participation led by those “quasi-democratic forces” does not benefit ordinary citizen and even less the marginalized and disadvantaged people. Rather it is even further enriches the elite and the wealthy in the societies. Thus, these transitional democracies are in constant risk of reverting back into a very exclusion form oligarchy.

Considering these challenges in transitional phase, for fruitful process of democratic consolidation, institutionalization of democratic practices and governance remains a key challenge. In this regard, it becomes pertinent to address as to how to promote democratic institutions in societies where democratic governance has not yet taken roots; in other words the need is to focus on the development of actors or institutions essential to the democratic processes such as political parties, judicial and legal systems, civil societies, independent medias, professional and non-politicized armies, while taking into consideration the specific socio-political and cultural context.

4.0 Nepal as the Venue

It is with this backdrop in mind that LDC Watch, KDF, ARENA and SAAPE secretariat feels the recent going transition to democracy in Nepal provides a good opportunity as well as a formidable challenge to rethink democracy and to re-evaluate how democracies have fared in Asia.

Nepal, a society with very high level of social discrimination and wide spread poverty, witnessed the ushering in of a democratic polity in 1990 as result of what is today known as *Jana-andolan* (People's movement). The events of 1990 brought about a major political change in form of multi-party democracy and adoption of a constitution and it brought about high hopes and expectation among the people of Nepal especially the marginalized and excluded who constitutes the majority of the population. Despite these important changes the State failed to live up to the expectation of the people, and the role of State had been the same as before which was to maintain internal security and appropriate the surplus produced by peasants and other social class to maintain the State apparatus and continued control of the a small elite of traditional landed aristocracy. The marginalized and the poor strata saw it as a failure of democracy and State. It is within this socio-economic context that the Maoist "people's war" was very successfully able to mobilize different marginalized sectors of the society while pushing the country to brink of abyss. The "people's war" with promise of emancipation from various structural oppression and violence provided the oppressed and the marginalized with a reference for resistance. The state took the opportunity to militarize itself in the name of fighting Maoist insurgency and the Maoist waged war against the State to establish a "New Democracy"; however this civil war brought untold suffering to people with almost 14,000 deaths in 10 years (1996-2006). The human rights violation perpetuated by Royal Nepalese Army and other State forces have been well recorded by various civil society organization and on this account the Maoist are not without blood on their hand as well.

But if on one hand the decade long civil war pushed rural Nepal into a war-ravaged countryside, on the other hand politico-social stirrings at the grass root of the Nepalese society which culminated into the *Jana-andolan- II* of April 2006 (the 2nd people's uprising in April 2006) has forced mainstream pro-democratic political forces to bring in important issues of exclusionary socio-economic and cultural structures and has greatly empowered people marginalized by those structures (like patriarchy and caste system deeply entrenched in Nepalese society). Prior to now mainstream pro-democracy political force on its own volition had failed to bring the issue of exclusionary structures which violates economic, social and cultural rights under scrutiny except providing lip service during electoral process and in the parliament. The recent constituent assembly (CA) results are also indicative of this, it has, apart from bringing the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) from armed struggle to become the largest party in the CA, also ensured the largest representation of women (33.2%) in the history of Nepal along with significant representation of traditionally marginalized castes, nationalities and other minority groups like bonded labourers, street vendors, differently able, gay and lesbian rights activists etc. Such diverse representation is not only unprecedented in history of Nepal but whole of South Asia. This has definitely created

hope that the future course of state governance will uphold the issues of economic, social and cultural rights. But at this point some amount of caution is also required; even though Nepal transitional phase has created a prospect of more inclusive democracy the process will also throw up tremendous challenges in a post conflict scenario.

5.0 Proposed Agenda and Key Issues

The general objective of the conference is to strengthen democracy, development and peace in Asia. “Really existing democracies” across Asia have failed to address the issues of the ‘downtrodden’, oppressed and marginalized on many accounts. The issues of exclusionary structures which violate socio-economic and cultural rights have become a part of official State discourse but more often than not just as lip service. A good illustration on this point would be again India¹, where out of approximately 3 million (in both tiers of state and central government) elected representatives 2 million are women and 22% represents dalit and indigenes (adivasi) and yet women, dalit and indigenes remain more oppressed and vulnerable than ever before. It can be argued that the within the present “really existing democratic” framework representation often becomes a mechanism of producing a new ‘rent taking’ political elites who might still bear the name of marginalized.

Developmental model pursued both by authoritarian as well as democratic regimes in Asia have been invariably top-down, devastating and exclusionary, benefitting only a small section of the population (often guided by interest of global and big national capital). In the wake of this developmental paradigm, millions have been rendered homeless, deprived of their livelihoods. And majority of them happens to be indigenes (also dalit in case of South Asia) and marginalized. On the other hand, even though many Asian countries have a formal political democratic setup, democracy is visualized and it operates within the larger paradigm of nation building/nation, without recognizing or erasing the homogenizing tendencies of the notion of modern nation itself which renders minority nationalities and linguistic, religious and other minority as the “other.” This has led to long standing conflicts with the State often militarizing not only itself but also societies. In short, the kind of development matters tremendously to democratization and peace and vice versa, and therefore, identifying key questions and challenges to development and conflict resolution at every stage of democratizations are crucial for all actors for democracy building.

It is in the light of these general crisis and short comings of democracy in Asia and taking into consideration the unfolding dynamics of the recent Nepalese transition that LDC Watch, KDF, ARENA and SAAPE secretariat proposes to hold a three day conference in Nepal. The conference will take recent changes and challenges in Nepal as a referral point but will also try to encompass Asia in general, as most Asian societies have a similar mutually relevant socio-cultural context and fairly similar economic situation at the grassroots’ level. Some of the key agenda that the conference will aspire to tackle are listed below:

Key agenda:

- To show that sustainable development, peace with dignity and justice and democracy are dialectically linked and that each sustains and impact the other,

¹ India, in this proposal, has been extensively used for citing illustration about democracy in Asia, but not without reason.s As Marx once said the best way to understand the anatomy of monkey is to understand the anatomy of human beings. It cannot be easily disputed that India has been one of the oldest well functioning institutional democracy.

- To look at development not only as the growth of GNP or other national indicators, but rather at human development and how economic development impacts on the lives and capabilities of people including expanding economic, social and cultural rights. How to make sustainable development as a key component of democracy,
- To show from past experience across Asia that instituting a multiparty democracy and an electoral process at local, regional and national level doesn't ensure economic justice and social justice. So, how to envision a new structure of which will ensure justice? How to do institution building and making people friendly constitutions,
- To look at long lasting peace (not just absence of conflict) and democracy as intertwined processes. Which means addressing entrenched societal structures which violate basic tenets of democracy and how to address them in a democratic framework,
- To consider the fact that most countries in Asia today face a challenge from majoritarian religious mobilization. The need is to bring back secularism as a key tenet of democracy i.e.: striving not just for a secular State but also how to constantly secularize societies,
- To look at institutions, structures and policies and politics in Asia that have favoured inclusive and peaceful people oriented development, and that can be used as example in other parts of Asia,
- To assess problems and prospects of Asian societies and how democratic rights can be improved. To assess the idea of Asian values,
- To distinguish the different stages of Asian democracies, their special and separate problems,
- To identify key challenges in Democracy - Civil Society complex in Asia, and
- To identify key challenges to Democratic Governance in transitional and consolidating Democracies in Asia

Key Issues:

- Development and democratization: assessing the impact of economic development to democratization and vice versa
- Principles and ways to make development as a key component of democracy
- Developing multiparty democracy and electoral process at local, regional and national level in the framework of economic and social justice
- Understanding democratic transition in Nepal
- Democratization and development-peace complex: addressing societal structures that clash with basic tenets of democracy in a democratic framework
- Secularism as a key tenet of democracy: interaction between secular state and secular societies: Are we becoming majoritarian democracies? The issue of minority rights; excluded social groups' policies and institutional arrangements for inclusion
- Key challenges to democratic governance in transitional and consolidating democracies in Asia

- Democracy and equity: political, economic, social and cultural rights
 - # Civil society and political society in sustainable democracy, development and peace
 - # Judiciary and judicial responsibility; and the rise of the executive in Asian democracies
 - # Is effective local self-government possible without land reform? Financial powers in local self government
 - # Global War against Terror [GWAT] and militarization's impacts on development and democracy in Asia
- Synthesis of agenda for civil society and governments for further actions and policies

6.0 Participation and Participants

The conference will aspire to bring together various progressive experts and representatives with organic links to various grassroots movements striving for change from different parts of Asia. The resource persons would be drawn from various sectors of expertise, political leaders, academics; members of civil society organizations, people's movement as well as from among fraternity of LDC, ARENA, KDF, SAAPE and partner organizations included. The conference will also strive to bring together different stake-holders in more fruitful democratization in Asia including civil society actors, policy makers, parliamentarians, and also representatives from different marginalized sections of the Nepalese society like women, dalit, workers, unemployed youth; and also representative voices from among students.

Thus, the participants will mainly comprise of academics, representatives of civil society organizations, social movements, community organization, relevant institutions, experts, trade union leaders, and parliamentarians

Presentations will be made related to the outlined agenda of the conference by invited resource persons whose input would be subject to collective discussion and critique by general participant of the conference.

The conference also intends to hold a round of deliberation designed as a round table discussion among various above mentioned representative voices from various sections of Nepalese societies. The main purpose of the round table would be to bring together different visions and understanding of democracy from different specific location of the society.

7.0 General Format and Other Information of the Programme

Duration:

Three full day conference from 10th to 12th October 2008

Venue:

Kathmandu, Nepal

General Modality of the Conference:

Plenary presentations as guest speeches, keynote and summary of thematic workshops; thematic workshops; participant interactions and hearings

Language of the Conference:

English

The Organisers:

The conference is being jointly organised by LDC Watch, KDF, ARENA and SAAPE Secretariat. The detailed information about the conference is enclosed herewith with this letter for your kind reference.

i) Least Developed Countries (LDC) Watch is a global alliance of national, regional and international civil society organisations, networks and movements based in the LDCs and supported by development partner countries. It facilitates initiatives and struggles of the people to undertake advocacy, lobby and campaign activities on and around the issues of poverty, hunger, social, economic, political and ecological injustices in the. It is one of the principal civil society players pressurizing to and partnering with the concerned stakeholders at least to adhere to their commitments for human rights, social and environmental justices in the LDCs. (For further details, please visit <http://www.ldcwatch.org>)

ii) Korea Democratic Foundation (KDF) has played a key role in enhancing Korean democracy, collecting and recording historical materials to build archive of Korean democracy, providing education program for democratic citizenship and promoting democratic values and human rights in and out of Korea. Now KDF is about to make one step further, expanding international cooperative efforts to make a contribution to development and spread of democracy through the projects aimed to share the past experiences, new ideas and practices of the world." (For further details, please visit <http://www.kdemocracy.or.kr>)

iii) The Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) defines itself as a regional network of concerned Asian scholars, activists, and researchers aimed at contributing to a process of awakening in support of meaningful and people oriented social change. Its strategic perspective is the search for and the advocacy of alternative paradigms and development strategies that would contribute to genuine democratic deepening. (For further details, please visit <http://www.arenaonline.org>)

iv) South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) is a regional alliance of civil society networks facilitating linkages among and between groups in the region, throughout the global south and with the groups in the North. SAAPE's main focus is poverty eradication through policy research, advocacy, lobbying and campaign works. (For further details, please visit <http://www.saape.org.np>)

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Follow up:

- Conference Report and distribution
- Follow-up consultation according to the proposals made in the conference