

# Book Reviews

Dhruba Kumar. 2010. *Electoral Violence and Volatility in Nepal*.  
Kathmandu: Vajra Publications.

Underlying Dhruba Kumar's *Electoral Violence and Volatility in Nepal* lies a deep disillusionment and frustration with the practice of multi-party competition in Nepal. As elections are the single-most important ritual that define a democracy, his study of the various elections held in the post-1990 period can be read as a study of the profound malaise that has affected the entirety of Nepali politics over the past two decades. Kumar's primary concern is to demonstrate how, in his words, "political parties...have not hesitated to deploy unfair means, even violence, to retain their ambitions in electoral competition making it a struggle for the seizure of state power rather than a fair means to ascertain popular consent for governance" (p. 10). Following from this premise, Kumar catalogues in great detail the various illegal means political parties have employed in order to win elections. Most of what he lists so painstakingly is common knowledge: the Nepali public, after all, is intimately familiar with attempts by political parties to "capture" polling booths and stuff them with votes, their use of proxy voters, attempts at bribery and the use of gangsters to intimidate the population into voting for a particular party.

The discussion of electoral malpractices is particularly illuminating when Kumar discusses how incumbent governments use state bodies in the service of electoral gain. Most notable here is the discussion of the Election Commission and how, despite its best efforts, it has not been entirely able to avoid interference by political parties. Kumar explains how Election Commissioners, being appointed by the prime minister at the recommendation of the Constitutional Council, are dependent on political leaders for their appointments. Then he details the various ways in which the Election Commission, although constitutionally independent, is in fact deeply "dependent on the Home Ministry for...the election administering process and on government funding for regular functions" (p. 114). Kumar convincingly demonstrates that this factor places constraints on the Commission from acting in an entirely neutral manner. Even when the Election Commission has made great efforts to prevent electoral fraud by instituting various regulations, he states, lack of bureaucratic will or capacity has prevented it from enforcing them. This

claim is substantiated by the provision of detailed examples of cases where the Commission has not pursued legal actions against those accused of electoral fraud.

The level of analysis is, however, highly inconsistent. In many cases Kumar simply lists facts collected from Election Commission documents and other reports, tying them together with very basic analysis that will fail to satisfy most readers. His discussion of the electoral system is particularly weak. Kumar claims that the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system adopted in all of Nepal's elections besides the 2008 elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA) "makes a mockery of political participation" (p. 80), as votes have an unequal value in it and majority governments can be formed even if a party is able to gain as little as a third of the popular vote. This, of course, is a widespread criticism of the FPTP system, though perhaps Kumar takes it too far by claiming that it is "grossly misrepresentative...of the popular will" (p. 82).

It is only in passing that Kumar mentions that the mixed system adopted in the CA elections remedied to some extent this problem by including in it a significant component of proportionally elected seats. While he provides much detail regarding the caste, ethnic and gender composition of the winners of the CA elections, the discussion of the mixed election system is highly inadequate. In fact, the reader will not be able to form a coherent understanding of the precise nature of the electoral system adopted in 2008 by reading this book. There is also no substantial discussion of the weaknesses of the electoral system adopted for the CA elections. Even the very basic criticism, which has been extensively discussed in the Nepali public sphere, that proportional representation causes too great a fragmentation of political authority and contributes to weak governance is not mentioned here. The lack of comparative discussion of various electoral systems has to be considered a major omission, especially in a context where the CA is debating what system to adopt for future elections. A work of serious scholarship on elections, one would expect, would seek to intervene in this discussion.

Much too often Dhruba Kumar's book is marred by emotive and knee-jerk responses to various facets of Nepal's political process. Sweeping assertions are made in passing, without any effort to substantiate them. After briefly discussing the Maoists' support to the demands of various ethnic groups, for example, Kumar states: "the proposition for self-determination has turned out as simply a charade in the national polity in the post CA-elections period" (p. 103). This is the last sentence of chapter and this is where discussion of the matter ends. In another place he refers

to the Maoist-affiliated Young Communist League (YCL) as a “Bandar Sena (monkey troops)” (p. 163). On occasion, Kumar also makes statements that are half-truths. He states for example that the “Maoists fought and won the CA elections from the position of strength by retaining their arms and guerillas intact...with their ‘base areas’ under the ‘people’s government’ and the ‘people’s court’ functioning uninterrupted in rural Nepal” (p. 162). While it is true that the Maoists did go to elections while retaining their arms, and that they used various violent means to coerce the population, their parallel governments and courts were almost nowhere in function during the period the elections were held.

The book is also replete with poor writing and grammatical errors. One sentence, plucked more or less at random, reads “The districts of Nepal Tarai, despite official measures taken for ceilings of Nepal-India border on election day, are porous enough to prevent infiltration as illegal activities are organized by criminal syndicates living across the border” (p. 137). Where Kumar writes “ceiling,” he means “sealing.” Where he writes, “...are porous enough to prevent infiltration,” he means “are so porous that they cannot prevent infiltration.” Taken as a single example, this may not be a significant matter, but such errors occur page after page, making reading this book a frustrating task.

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