

Lok Raj Baral. 2012. *Nepal – Nation-state in the Wilderness: Managing State, Democracy, and Geopolitics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

*Nepal – Nation-State in the Wilderness* is the latest book from Nepal's prolific political scientist Lok Raj Baral, who can be found these days, nicely attired, in the offices of Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies, where he does his research, and meets journalists who go to him with questions on contemporary politics. I've met him three times so far for interviews, and every time we've met, we have never run out of things to talk about – which is not something you can say of most people you meet. The book was published in 2012, and considering the snail's pace of the publishing industry, it was presumably written even earlier. So although it might be argued that it's a little late to be reviewing it now, I think the topics it dwells on are still pertinent, and will continue to be so, in my estimate, for decades.

For those trying to theorize Nepali politics, Baral's book can be an eye-opener. He has developed the 'jump theory' of Nepali politics, which I have

interpreted to mean that Nepali politics cannot really be fit into any theoretical models in place. As Baral states in the introduction “Nepali political history is not sequential and coherent and, therefore, defies many commonly held generalizations of such developments” (p. 13). The way to understand political developments is to see them as a series of jumps – short, long, high, low – that take us toward a liberal democracy. Thus, the end of Rana regime in 1951 was a high jump, followed first by King Mahendra’s coup in the early 1960s, which was certainly a jump backward. Then the 1990 movement was a shorter jump, followed by the movement in 2006, a much longer jump.

Why does Nepali politics keep jumping around instead of settling on a liberal democracy? According to Baral, that is because the ‘sudden breaks’ from the past, as the successes of several movements for democracy would suggest, are an illusion. The end of Rana oligarchy, therefore, turned into a revival of the absolute monarchy because although there was a regime change, there was no change in the political culture. Similar ‘politics of disruption’ played out later. In 1990, elements of liberal democracy were regained, to be snatched by King Gyanendra from 2002 onwards. This continued until 2006, when the movement created a ‘long jump’ that abolished the whole institution of monarchy.

What is it about the nature of the state that makes it so hostile to change? In Chapter Two, titled ‘Nepali State Revisited,’ Baral starts by affirming the central role the state plays in people’s lives, the realization of which compels them to revolt against their rulers time and again. The state largely belongs to a narrow caste-based group with a rigid culture, who enjoy a total control over the state structures such as the army, police and bureaucracy. This is a fact which has not changed even after perhaps the most serious attempt to ‘capture’ the state mounted by the Maoists. Old demands, for example, the demand for Hindi to be accepted as a national language by the Madhesis since the 1950s, have still remained unfulfilled. Similarly, the control over the army has been the exclusive privilege of a caste group – notwithstanding the first, and the only non-Chhetri chief of army in 2009.

“Nepal was indeed a military state because it was the mainstay of political power,” says Baral (p. 61). Although the army’s ‘unchallenged role’ in national politics has been curtailed by the 2006 movement, he has no doubts that it still wields an unparalleled power. As a testament to the army’s strength, Baral repeatedly throughout the book problematizes the role of external powers, mainly India, played when the democratically elected Maoist Prime

Minister Prachanda tried to sack the army chief Katuwal in 2009, and concludes that the army is “not fully under the control of the elected government.” Although the challenges posed by external powers is a running theme throughout the book, Baral dedicates Chapter Three (‘Quest for Status: Wars, Treaties, and Diplomacy’) and Chapter Five (‘Nepal and the World: Managing Geopolitics’) to the topic. Chapter Three starts with the discussion of Nepal’s expansionist wars, brought to an end by the confrontation with Great Britain in 1814-1816, and Nepal’s wars being carried out with Tibet, which once invited decisive Chinese intervention in 1792, mainly to advance its trade interests. Historians today look at the treaties signed at the end of these wars as evidence of Nepal’s sovereignty in those times, with the 1923 treaty with Great Britain, which projected Nepal’s independent status, as the precursor to the 1950 treaty with post-independence India.

A former ambassador, Baral has much to say about Nepal–India relationship, as well as the rise of China and its implications on Nepal’s foreign policy. The 1950 Treaty, derided by the ‘nationalists’ of all ideological orientations, as the writer shows, is perceived by both India and Nepal to be unequal to them, but “India sticks to the spirit of the treaty while Nepali political elites simply make a propaganda issue for projecting themselves as nationalists” (p. 85). On the whole, he considers that the treaty clauses have been ‘eroded’ and the security clauses, which irritate Nepali nationalists, been diluted. Baral cites Nepal importing weapons from China in the 1980s as an example of such dilution. Unfortunately, he does not discuss its aftermath in much detail. India’s blockade against landlocked Nepal in 1989, provoked by the arms imports from China, was probably one of the low points of Nepal–India relations, at least in my lifetime, and could have been a good anchor to discuss the constraints of relationship between Nepal and its giant neighbors. Baral does conclude, however, that the blockade proved at that time that China “cannot be an alternative at a time of difficulty” (p. 99).

In Chapter Four, after detailing the parties’ failures to consolidate democracy, including their inability to address ethnic, regional and other ‘parochial’ trends, Baral pins down “three major villains of democracy: monarchy, parties and external powers” (p.181). Here, he goes against the conventional wisdom in political science that the middle class, or the upstart class, is the defender of democracy. The orientation of Nepali middle class, he says, goes against the spirit of democratic culture: “The decline of democracy in Nepal is particularly precipitated by the so-called middle class

whose greed for money, if not power, has also seeped down to the rural level” (p. 179).

Chapter Five is, in my opinion, the most interesting chapter the book, because it reveals a fundamental dilemma Nepal faces. After a ‘century of humiliation’ as the Chinese call the period under colonial powers that ended with Maoist victory, China is on its way to become a superpower. How to benefit from this new superpower in the north without alienating Nepal’s traditional friend in the south is probably the biggest challenge for Nepal’s foreign policy, a challenge that will be made more difficult if India continues to follow its ‘traditional policy,’ inherited from the British Raj with some modifications, toward Nepal. It’s a policy, Baral documents, that has seen it play an active role in forming and dissolving governments, especially after the 2008 Constituency Assembly elections. Moreover, after the end of monarchy, China, too has increased its engagement with Nepal, and would like to see reciprocity, which it has not received so far, from Nepal. “But how long Nepal would be able to resist the Chinese pressure for treating them at par with India?” Baral asks (p. 225).

Baral concludes his book by pointing out that a real sense of nationalism – one that is not predicated on anti-India rhetoric, or playing the ‘China card’ – is missing in Nepal. He identifies nine areas that need to be addressed if Nepal is to get out of current political wilderness. These include making a new constitution and restructuring the state, minimizing disparities, and agreeing on the overarching ideology of the country, as well as the foreign and security policy.

The book is rich in description and details. It is part history, part political science, part editorial written by a realist. The 308 pages of the book tend to get a little repetitive at times, but it is the repetitiveness that gives the book a quality of being conversational. There are minor mistakes, as Baral would be the first one to tell you. The name of the Indian diplomat Shyam Saran, who, according to Baral, effectively prevented Prachanda’s re-election as Prime Minister in 2010 by convincing the Madhesis to withhold their support, is misspelled, and in one place it says BP Koirala was in his 90s when he became Nepal’s first democratically elected prime minister. BP was, in fact, in his 40s.

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