Ethnicity and State Restructuring

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Political parties, rights activists and organisations, and experts have all forwarded their own models of state restructuring, and there have been claims and counterclaims on the suitability their models. In addition, there have been criticisms to others' models. Those advocating administrative federalism oppose ethnic federalism, and proponents of ethnic federalism criticise those advocating regional federalism. Even among the proponents of ethnic federalism, there are disagreements regarding delineation of the provinces, which seems natural in a country with many ethnicities and nationalities and impossibility of ethnic federal provinces for every one of them.

In the census of 2058 (2001), there are particulars of more than one hundred groups of various castes and ethnic groups. Nepal is a country marked by ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. So people ranging from Chhetri with a population of 3.5 million to Kusunda with a population of just 164 are residing in Nepal. Not a single nationality, Janajati or language group has a majority (Khanal 2061:3). In terms of population, Chhetri is the largest group that constitutes 15.8 % of the total population while the second largest group is Bahun with 12.74% of the population. Besides, the ethnic groups of Magar, Tharu, Tamang and Newar each comprise around 5% of the population[1]. There are altogether 18 castes and ethnic groups that make up 1% of total population[2]. Rest of others constitute less than 1 % of the population each (Khanal 2061:3).there are 31 ethnic and caste groups with more than 100,000 population, which is 0.5% of the population, with 53 caste and ethnic groups having less than 50,000 population and among them 19 have less than 5000 population (Sharma 2008:10)

The district-wise scenario is also similar. In most of the districts, no caste or ethnic group enjoys majority. "Out of the 75 districts, Chhetris are in majority in 9 in districts while Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Newar and Gurung have majority in one district each, adding up the total number of districts where one caste/ethnic group is in majority to 14"(Khanal 2061:6). In 61 districts, no single group has a majority.

State restructuring based on ethnic majority districts is also difficult "because no ethnicity has majority in more than one district. It is only Chhetri who have majority in 9 districts; however, Chhetri being a caste cannot be a basis for an ethnic province. Similarly, there will be problems in districts with no ethnic majority (Manandhar et al. 2065:16). In addition, there are problems with ethnic majority districts as well.

> "Of the four Tharu-majority districts, only two Bardia and Kailali are contiguous. The other two Dang and Sunsari are not only not contiguous but also far apart. Kanchanpur does not have Tharu majority. Sunsari in the east simply cannot be in a Tharu province. Kaski though it is adjacent to Gurung majority district does not fall into one. Magar-majority districts are in two separate parts: Rolpa, Baglung, Myagdi and Pyuthan one side, and Nawalparasi,

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[1] As per population census, 2058(2002) Magar-6.75%, Tamang-5.64% and Newar 5.4%
[2] Chhetri, Bahun, Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, Muslims, Kami, Yadav, Rai, Gurung, Damai, Limbu, Thakuri, Sarki, Teli, Chamar, Koiri

Tanahu and Palpa on the other. Rai-majority Ilam district cannot be placed in the same as other contiguous districts of Dhankuta, Solukhumbu, Khotang, Bhojpur and Sankhuwasabha" (Manandhar et al. 2065:17).

Similarly, it is a fact that no ethnic group in Nepal has dense settlement in Nepal. "There are 72 ethnic groups who are not a majority in any VDC and 37 groups do not constitute a significant group in any VDCS" (Sharma 2008:19). Even a village without ethnic diversity is hard to find, let alone a region. Caste and ethnic people are living in harmony even in small villages. However, attention should also be given to the pattern of settlement, migration as well as socio-economic relations. ".......... because of centuries-old settlement pattern, migration as well as socio-economic relations, structure, it is not only difficult to categorise any territory as a place of origin of one caste/ethnic but this can also became a subject of dispute. To analyse any caste/ethnic group on the basis of geographical boundary alone will be inappropriate, and this will be always wrong (Khanal 2061:5)

At the same time, some ethnic organizations including the Maoist have put forth the proposals of the concept of ethnic autonomy. There are people who call these proposals as unscientific. The idea of ethnic provinces proposed by the Maoists has a danger of giving birth to another form of discrimination and separatist movement. "In the ethnic regions proposed by the Maoists............. no particular ethnic group commands a majority. They are not found in substantial numbers even in a small geographical area. In Nepal there is a reality of the presence of such type of mixed settlement in one hand, while on the other hand there is equal probability of the rise of another form of discrimination and rebellion because of the system of one particular ethnic group ruling over others" (Pun Magar:32).

Moreover, some have termed the issue of ethnic regions raised by the Maoists as a suicidal move. "In our country, there are approximately 100 cases/ethnic groups and it is not possible to create separate regions for them all. All the ethnic groups have been sharing common sentiments during the time of hardship and prosperity and all Nepalese are woven in one common economic life and have been struggling against foreign dominance. So the demand of ethnic region/state is not only inappropriate for us but will also be suicidal" (Shrestha 2062:18).

The Maoists-proposed ethnic-regional federalism is basically ethnic federalism. There are 101 ethnic groups, but they are talking about granting ethnic autonomy to only seven ethnic groups while, according to them, other ethnic groups will be granted semi-autonomy. Semi-autonomy is authority delegated from above. On the other hand, they (Maoists) are talking of granting separate states to groups having less population than Bahun, Chhetri and Dalits but not to these groups. So there is a possibility of opposition against this proposal from the major ethnic groups themselves.

"[.....] it is clear that in a country like our, importance should be given to ethnic/caste unity and not differences. Creating any state for a single caste, Janajati, or minority will endanger the rights of other communities and will have an adverse effect in the harmonious relationship. Ethnic autonomy can be granted to a substantial population in any local place. However, ethnic states or federalism is not appropriate in case of Nepal" (Singh, 167).

Apart from this, the Maoists proposal is also erroneous in terms of population. For instance, in the Maoist-proposed Magarat, Magars constitute only 23.51% of the population and Gurungs only 18.39% in Tamuwan. In Tamsaling, the population of Tamangs is 30.81% while the population of Tharus in Tharuwan is no more than 22.53%. The situation in other ethnic regions is also similar.

It is not only the Maoists' but other ethnic federalism models fallacies. In some proposals, no thought seems to have been given to geography while seeking a population majority. Yet, the proposed provinces will not have the ethnic majority. For example, in the proposal of Mangal Siddhi Manandhar, Limbus only constitute 25.98% in Limbuwan and Rais number 33.99% in Khumbuwan. Newars number 26.65% in Newa, Magars 35.61% in Magarat, Tharus 28% in Tharuwan. Similarly in the far east, Bahuns make a majority at only 29.63%. Mithila is the only region where more than 50% are Mithila speakers. In some proposed ethnic provinces, the ethnic communities almost constitute 50% of the population; 49.52% Tamangs in Tamsaling, 48.43% Gurungs in Tamuwan, and 46.33% Chhetris in Khasan.

The Tamuwan proposed by Manandhar encompasses villages of Dolpa and Dhading, which means a resident from Baseri in Dhading will have to cross four proposed provinces to reach Dolpa. Should administrative convenience, natural resources and economic feasibility be ignored in the name of ethnic pluralism? Surely not. Of course, Manandhar has said that in the age of transportation and communication, geography should not be the deciding factor. However, Nepal still has not reached the level of infrastructure in communication and transportation as claimed by Manandhar, and it will not be easily done in the future also.

In the regions/states proposed by K B Gurung, there is no majority of concerned caste/ethnic group. For example, in the Limbuwan autonomous region, the population of Limbu is only 31.61% whereas the population of other indigenous/ethnic population is higher at 35.25%) and Bahun/Chhetri constitute 25.63%. In the Khumbuwan autonomous region too, the population of Rai is only 26.95% while other indigenous/ethnical nationalities and Bahun/Chhetri constitute 32.04% and 30.14% of population respectively. In Tamsaling autonomous region, the population of Bahun/Chhetri is more than that of Tamang. The situation in the regions of Newa, Tamuwan and other proposed autonomous regions is not different to that of Tamsaling. Therefore, in the autonomous regions put forth in the proposals of state restructuring on the basis of ethnicity the caste/ethnic groups for whom the system of rule is intended are not in significant numbers compared with other caste/ethnic groups.

> "Centruies–old migration in the hills and to Tarai in the last few decades has led to many small minorities in large ethnic areas. This has resulted in ethnic diversity even in single ethnic majority areas. [...therefore] in the majority of ethnic units, the largest ethnic group will be a minority" (Sharma 2008:83).

Ethnic restructuring proposals show that it will lead to one group ruling over the others, and the fact they this might lead to another form of discrimination and invite conflict cannot be discounted. Maoist central committee member Dev Gurung, however, claims that they have divided the regions on the basis of indigenous people residing there. The ethnic group who are oppressed until now will assume the leadership of rule while others participate in the structure we have proposed. Whether it will be scientific or not is a matter of difference from class viewpoint. Ours is a policy to establish the oppressed group in state regime and to displace the oppressor group", says Gurung [3].

There are also international examples of ethnic federalism not being long-lasting. There is no saying that there will be acceptance when there is no absolute majority of the rulers. Once ethnic provinces are established, other people might also go for their own movements, and this might lead to increasing number of provinces.

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[3] Nepal weekly 9th Push, 2063 'Restructuring Design'

"Beginning with three federal states, Sudan's journey has led to 26 states and on the verge of disintegration. [….] stagnation of Ethiopia is mainly due to federalism, especially ethnic federalism. [….] the experience of Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria and Congo teach us that ethnic federalism can lead to state dissolution. In Nigeria, three ethnic states were proposed for cheap publicity as in our country and three were created in 1963. In the next few days, there was a demand for another one and this eventually led to 36 provinces. Today, Nigeria is 159th poorest country in the world, and everyday sees ethnic violence" (Acharya 2065:173).

In the case of Nepal, the Maoists during the conflict had followed the strategy of giving administrative rule to any group, Janajati or language group with substantial settlement in an area. This decision was taken when they were not only suffering losses at the hand of Nepalese army but their cadres were also deserting them. They were forced to raise provocative/attractive regional and ethnic issues to attract the masses to their cause. An act of compulsion then has started to put them in a difficult position now.

The Maoists proposal of dividing Madhes into various provinces has caused dissatisfaction among its Madhesi leaders. Matrika Yadav, former head of Madhesi Mukti Morcha (Madhesi Liberation Front) and others have already quit the party. And remaining Madhesi leaders have started talking about a single Madhes. However, the latest Maoists proposal has divided the Madhes. Thus, there is contradiction between the Maoist party policy and its leaders on state restructuring.

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