

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part I]

## Crises in Nepal: Rise of the Pandemic and the Rise of Threat to Governance

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected countries all around the world. Some countries like China, New Zealand, and Denmark have persevered well through the pandemic whereas many big countries including the USA, UK, India, and Brazil are continuing to struggle to overcome it. In countries like North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Senegal the government has taken stringent steps to battle the pandemic, and the public has fully supported the measures taken by the state. From the cases of countries like the USA and the UK, it is evident that government effort cannot mitigate the effects of the pandemic; the role of public support is equally imperative.

During the peak state of the pandemic, when neighboring giants like China and India were developing vaccines for mass inoculation, Nepal was dealing with an internal feud among politicians. The first case in Nepal, confirmed only on January 23, 2020, was a 31-year-old student who had returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January. As of January 21, 2021, the total infected cases amounted to 268,310, and the fatality from the virus was recorded to be 1,975 people. This number could have been largely controlled if proper policies were implemented and safety protocols were monitored. The Nepal government started losing its credibility as it failed to implement measures effectively, compensate victims, and got involved in power politics and corruption. Nepal has faced many issues on governance that have led to the current vulnerable state of Nepal that is unable to control the pandemic.

### Shrinking Civic Space Through Restrictive Legal Measures

The Home Ministry had instructed the government secretaries to ensure that the distribution of relief to victims of natural disasters like landslides, floods, and earthquakes, is guided by the 'One Door Policy'. This means interested

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the year, ADRN members will publish a total of three versions of the Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia Research to include any changes and updates in order to present timely information. The first and second parts will be publicized as a working paper and the third will be publicized as a special report. This working paper is part I of the research project.

individuals and NGOs/ INGOs need to channel their supplies through the government.<sup>2</sup> The government reinforced the mandate once again in April 2019 so that the victims of the thunderstorm in Bara district could only receive relief only through the 'one door'.<sup>3</sup> As the decisions made were abrupt, donors could not immediately support the victims. The bureaucratic hurdles and legal formalities delayed aid and donors were discouraged. (Foundation 2020)

In a recent article by the South Asia Journal titled, 'Democracy in Nepal is under Threat', it is mentioned that despite the fundamental notion of democracy requires that all people should be treated equally, the present regime in Nepal provides more privilege to its close supporters and is brutal and harsh towards the critics. Nepal increasingly appears to be governed based on exclusion, intolerance, and the notion that some citizens are more equal than others.<sup>4</sup>

A circular issued by the Nepali Ministry of Federal Affairs and General administration on March 25, 2020, stated that all individuals, organizations, government, and non-government sectors should deposit all kinds of relief materials at the local governments to avoid duplications of relief actions (Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration 2020). Social media and newspapers were flooded with grievances stating that the government has turned deaf ears to its people. Proposing various undemocratic bills like NHRC Act (Amendment) Bill, Media Council Bill, Bill on Mass Communication, Information Technology Bill, and measures proposed to register, monitor I/NGO's activities was seen as a method to suppress the voices of the public.<sup>5</sup>

## Economic Slump

Due to the threat of the pandemic, Nepal applied a country-wide lockdown that came into effect on March 24, 2020, and ended on July 21, 2020. A series of partial and full lockdowns followed. Under these circumstances, COVID-19 blocked the supply chain, production, and delivery of services. Schools, workplaces, shops, and public institutions were also heavily affected by the pandemic. Of the social classes, the low-income group such as construction workers, daily waged factory workers, small shop owners, street vendors have been hit hard by the pandemic. Informal employment comprises more than 94% of the total workforce in Nepal as compared to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh which comprises more than 80%. According to the World Bank, Nepal's economy has come to a standstill mainly due to the lockdown in the last fiscal year that ended in mid-July, registering a growth of 0.2 percent.<sup>6</sup> On top of that, the country had been faced with continuous corruption.

Asian Development Bank Country Director for Nepal, Mukhtor Khamudkhanov stated that the economy

<sup>2</sup> "Govt Adopts One-Door Policy for Relief Distribution," *The Kathmandu Post*, August 15, 2017, <https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2017/08/15/govt-adopts-one-door-policy-for-relief-distribution#:~:text=Kathmandu-,The%20government%20has%20adopted%20a%20one%2Ddoor%20policy%20for%20distribution,without%20coordination%20with%20the%20authorities.> (Accessed January 20 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "Bara DAO Implements One-Door Policy in Relief Distribution," *Setopati*, April 5 2019, <https://en.setopati.com/social/143440>. (Accessed January 20 2021).

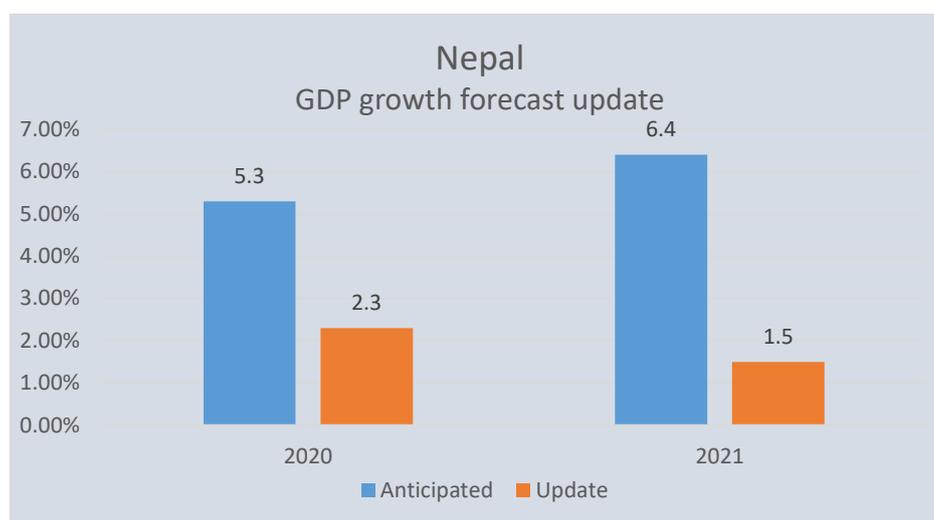
<sup>4</sup> Ravi Nayak, "Democracy in Nepal Is under Threat," *South Asia Journal*, May 9 2020, <http://southasiajournal.net/democracy-in-nepal-is-under-threat/>

<sup>5</sup> "Nepal Government Attempts to Shrink Civic Space and Weaken Human Rights," *THRD Alliance*, May 20 2019, <https://www.thrda.org/situation-update/nepal-government-attempts-to-shrink-civic-space-and-weaken-human-rights/> (Accessed January 20 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Sangam Prasain, "World Bank projects Nepal's economic growth for 2020-21 at 0.6 percent", October 9, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/10/09/world-bank-projects-nepal-s-economic-growth-for-2020-21-at-0-6-percent>

of Nepal will continue to notice a decrease even if lockdown measures are eased due to the decline in exports, remittances, and tourist income. The economic downturn of Nepal's predominant trade partner, India, was also said to have stunned the growth of Nepal's economy. He further added that "Growth may decline further if the containment period prolongs with periodic lockdowns in major hotspots and consequent restrictions in economic activities through this fiscal year"<sup>7</sup>.

**Figure 1: Nepal GDP During Pandemic**



Source: Asian Development Bank<sup>8</sup>

### Increased Corruption and Loss of Faith Among the General Public

According to the "Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)" report by Transparency International (a global movement working in over 100 countries to end the injustice of corruption) Nepal Chapter, the perception of people who think government corruption is a big issue in Nepal has increased significantly in Nepal over the past year<sup>9</sup>. Although Nepal has theoretically incorporated all basic principles of democratic governance, many voids were found in the system. The rise in the corruption barometer amid pandemic is a great threat to democracy.

When the Nepal Army was assigned the responsibility to purchase medical supplies through government-to-government deals, the circumstances were created so that supplies were not only procured from China but also extreme add-on prices were added. This measure exposed the Nepali policymakers' collusion with Chinese suppliers. It was an open secret that the army was assigned to handle the deal as the army falls outside the jurisdiction of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority. This gave a detrimental blow to the image of the army, even though the Chief of Army Staff, unlike his 'business-minded' predecessors, was

<sup>7</sup> "Nepal's Economy to Slow Further in FY2021." *Asian Development Bank*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.adb.org/news/nepals-economy-slow-further-fy2021>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "84 percent of people in Nepal think that government corruption is a big issue: TI report," MyRepublica, November 25, 2020, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/84-percent-of-people-in-nepal-think-that-government-corruption-is-a-big-issue-ti-report/> (Accessed...)

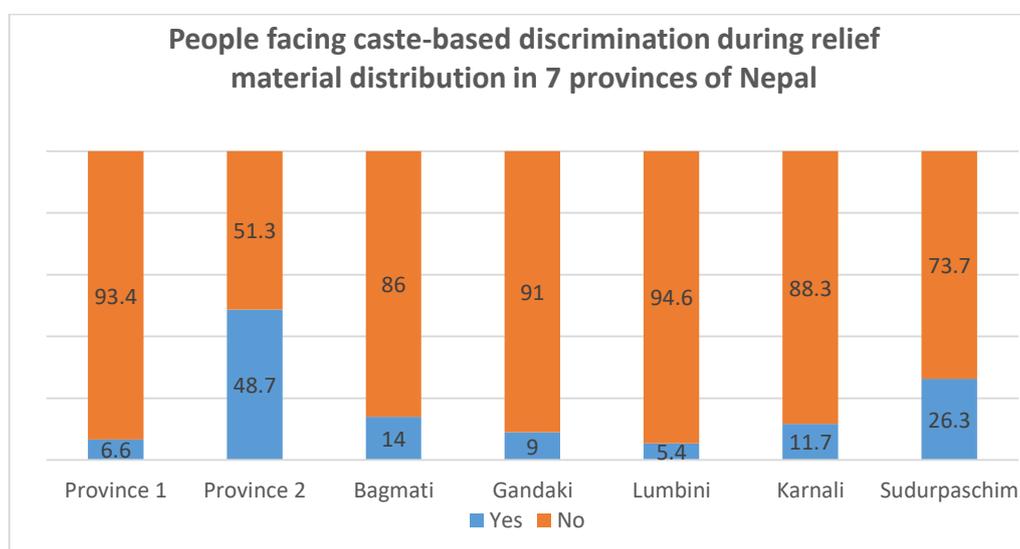
considered to be professional that did not tolerate nonsense.<sup>10</sup> Wagle, a professor at the Kathmandu University School of Management and an Econo-political analyst, further added that the government had deliberately amended the Public Procurement Act for the 10th time to protect the interest of their chosen contractors.

Prolonged lockdown led to dissatisfaction and complaints among the businessmen and industrialists. Unlike in countries like India, the Nepal Government did not take measures to compensate losses of businesses. An extract from the paper by Dhurba Gautam published by National Disaster Risk Reduction Centre Nepal showed that the situation of small shop owners and daily wage workers was even worse.

"The lockdown has caused not only a shortage of essential supplies such as food, cooking gas, drugs and medical supplies, water and so forth but also a price hike. The lockdown has been extended twice in order to break the chain of coronavirus infection. The lockdown has put daily wage [laborers], squatters, poor and marginalized sections of the population at risk because they lack food supplies and basic health care facilities."<sup>11</sup>

Complaints like uneven distribution of relief materials were made as people in need were either not receiving adequate relief, or not receiving relief at all. It was found that people with political connections were getting benefits at local levels. Therefore, the most marginalized caste groups like Dalits were further marginalized during the pandemic. Research conducted by the Samata Foundation (the only Dalit-led think tank in Nepal for evidence-based policy advocacy) has categorically revealed the discrimination faced based on caste in the different provinces of Nepal.<sup>12</sup> The report showed the discrimination in the relief distribution process and led to 20 million Dalits losing trust in the government and its mechanisms.

**Figure 2:** People Facing Caste-Based Discrimination During Relief Material Distribution in 7 provinces



Source: Samata Foundation 2020<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Wagle, Achyut. "Opinion: State Plunder during a Pandemic," The Kathmandu Post, June 22, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/06/22/state-plunder-during-a-pandemic> (Accessed January 19 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Dhurba Gautam, *The Covid-19 Crisis in Nepal: Coping Crackdown Challenges*, Kathmandu: National Disaster Risk Reduction Center Nepal, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Gopal Nepali, Ujjwal Sundas, and Krishna Adhikari, *Covid-19 le Dalit samudayama pareko prabhav*. Research, Lalitpur: Samata Books, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Affect of Covid-19 pandemic on Dalit community. *Foundation, Samata*, Kathmandu Samata Books, 2020.

Almost after a year of the pandemic, people were met with more confusion in tackling the disease. Academic institutions like schools, colleges, and tuition centers remained closed. Industries and businesses did not recover completely. Hotels, theatres, and recreation centers also remained closed. Many people in the lower class that depended on daily wage jobs and informal work became unemployed and the government did not make any type of compensation. About 45 % of people working in informal sectors have been unemployed during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> In places like markets and shopping centers, people stopped complying with health protocols and have returned to their daily routine.

According to a report of the International Labour Organization (a United Nations agency setting international labor standards) nearly 3.7 million workers earn their livelihoods in sectors that experience the most risk due to the reduction of economic output brought on by COVID-19. Government in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have already passed large stimulus packages to provide support to the most economically vulnerable in their countries, including emergency funding /relief for businesses and individuals. It can be said that Pakistan has been the most successful country to fight against COVID-19 among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries.<sup>15</sup>

The three months' COVID-19 lockdown report (March 24 to June 24) produced by the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), a key non-government human rights organization in Nepal, reported multiple human rights violation cases. Cases documented during this period include unmanaged quarantines, misbehavior of thousands of Nepali returnees from India, negligence towards the provision of adequate healthcare, abuse of human rights defenders (especially health workers, journalists, and teachers), and violence against women and children.

There was a total of 1119 victims who faced abuse and violation of their human rights. Of the total, 64 were victims of state-induced human rights violations. 1,055 victims of human rights abuses were induced by non-state actors, of which included 841 female victims<sup>16</sup>. 2021 marks the twelfth year of the declaration of Nepal as a republic country. Certain promises of the new republic have been fulfilled but many promises remain incomplete. Therefore the citizens have become very dissatisfied with the government.

### **Poor Research Laboratories and Demotivated Medical Personnel**

It is well known that resources are limited in a country with poor scientific infrastructures. In Nepal, hospital beds were fully occupied by COVID-19 patients and therefore it was difficult to admit new patients. Dr. Ajay Thapa, chief of the emergency department at the Grande Hospital, stated that although there were over a dozen seriously ill patients, the hospital could not cater to all of them.<sup>17</sup> As the country was plagued with more and more COVID-19 patients, the lack of infrastructures and lack of trained medical personnel added to the trouble of containing

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<sup>14</sup> Gopal Nepali, Ujjwal Sundas, and Krishna Adhikari, *Covid-19 le Dalit samudayama pareko prabhav*. Research, Lalitpur: Samata Books, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Gopal Nepali, Ujjwal Sundas, and Krishna Adhikari, *Covid-19 le Dalit samudayama pareko prabhav*. Research, Lalitpur: Samata Books, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Nepal, "Situation of Human rights within three months of lockdown", July 27, 2020, <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=32282>,

<sup>17</sup> Arjun Poudel, "Serious Covid-19 Patients Are Not Getting Hospital Beds," The Kathmandu Post, October 19, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/health/2020/10/19/serious-covid-19-patients-are-not-getting-hospital-beds>. (Accessed January 20 2021).

pandemic-related issues. Another major limitation in the testing and controlling of COVID-19 in developing countries is the lack of trained manpower capable of performing the molecular biology experiments (e.g. viral RNA extraction and qPCR) required to test for SARS-CoV-2 and interpreting results.<sup>18</sup>

The frontline medical personnel (doctors, nurses, and lab technicians) and other medical personnel involved in sample collection, tracking of COVID-19 patients, and overall working at the frontline were supposed to receive incentives called 'risk allowance' as instructed by the Ministry of Health and Population. The designated COVID-19 hospitals have been given the risk allowance up to mid-October 2020 and the hospitals were directed to distribute the allowance at the earliest possible time.<sup>19</sup> According to Adhikari, the assistant spokesperson of the Ministry, hospitals had received Rs 668.7 million in risk allowance as well as the treatment costs for COVID-19 related patients.

As of current, medical personnel has shown dissatisfaction as they did not receive the medical incentives as announced by the government. The issue regarding medical incentives has been pending for the last 10 months. Over 300 medical personnel including doctors and members from the junior welfare society in BP Medical council in Dharan have continued to protest.<sup>20</sup> It was found that the medical incentives were disproportionately distributed in various hospitals. Although the impact of the pandemic has been getting stronger the government has continuously failed in solving COVID-19 related issues. The government has failed to procure emergency medical supplies, create relief measures on essential food items, and distribute relief packages to the vulnerable.

Amidst the pandemic, national daily newspapers and channels covered other important issues such as the rising feud amongst political party leaders of the ruling party. There was a huge lack of accountability and democratic governance in the present government.

### **Increased Threat of the Pandemic and No Concrete Measures**

When one steps out of their house, one can easily find a taxi, a bus, or a tempo.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the roads have returned to the normal before the pandemic. Offices and shops are open after the lockdown measures were removed. A substantial number of people walk around without face masks.

Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation issued a notice on decisions made by the ministerial level regarding the Public Vehicle Operation and Monitoring Directives. The directives stated that all owners of public vehicles and passengers should comply with certain safety standards throughout the pandemic period. The standards attached along with the notice have clearly defined how social distancing should be maintained inside public vehicles. The standards have also instructed the vehicle owners to clean the vehicles with disinfectant daily. The use of masks and sanitizers has been made mandatory<sup>22</sup>. However, the implementation of

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<sup>18</sup> Giri and Rana, "Charting the challenges behind the testing of COVID-19 in developing countries: Nepal as a case study", June 2020, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590053620300471>

<sup>19</sup> Rastriya Samachar Samiti, "Govt Asks Hospitals to Immediately Release Risk Allowance to Frontline Medicos," The Himalayan Times, November 27, 2020, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/govt-asks-hospitals-to-immediately-release-risk-allowance-to-frontline-medicos/>. (Accessed January 18 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Pradip Menyangbo, "कोभिडको सेवा बहिष्कार" [Covid's Service Boycott], Kantipur Daily, January 7 2021, <https://ekantipur.com/pradesh-1/2021/01/20/161110756293074991.html>. (Accessed January 21 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Popular means of a transportation in city areas in Nepal. 6 -8 people can travel together in 'Tempos' at once in fairly cheap price.

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, Nepal "Public Transportation Operation Directory", October 6, 2020,

these measures has been extremely poor. After the notice was first issued, it seemed as if everyone was following the protocols. However, after time, neither the vehicle owners nor the passengers properly followed these measures. The fares were also increased by 50% to decrease risks but daily commuters continued to use public transportation. The government has also not been properly monitoring to ensure that the measures are being followed.<sup>23</sup>

A new type of coronavirus, the SARS-COV2 was detected in Nepal in 6 people who recently returned from the UK. The government published a press release on January 18, 2021, to inform the public of the new virus. However, the shortage of medical facilities and resources, a lack of COVID-19 response measures, and the increased corruption leading to the questioning of accountability led to more crises in the forms of fatality, unemployment, and poor mental health.

Amid the pandemic, the incumbent dissolved the lower house in Parliament. There have been more and more political uncertainties looming over Nepal as the country is focused on the internal feud among politicians. The government announced that the mid-term election will be held in February 2021 to elect 275 members of Parliament at the federal level which, according to the Election Commission of Nepal, will cost about NPR 10 billion. The cost will rise in threefold if all three-tier election is announced.<sup>24</sup>

Part of the Nepal Communist Party started to protest against the dissolution of the parliament. High-profile political leaders led protests in which social-distancing measures were not kept. There were regular hearings at the Supreme Court of Nepal on the writ petitions filed against the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

## Way Forward

Due to the poor governance and shortsightedness of the government, the threat of the crisis is continuing to increase. To minimize the potential danger the government should immediately take the following measures.

Mass gatherings should be prohibited as much as possible as unnecessary protests and gatherings increase the risk of the spread of the virus. Another solution would be to require that the safety protocols be followed by the protestors during protests. Frontline medical personnel, people from low-income groups, and people from marginalized communities should be compensated for their pandemic-related losses.

## The Cost of Nepal's Next Parliamentary Election

The federal government should come with a broad central policy guideline on pandemic control. Provinces and local governments need to further formulate their own guidelines that are based on their unique context. The policies should also be implemented and monitored to create positive results. Therefore, monitoring systems

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<https://mofaga.gov.np/news-notice/2132>

<sup>23</sup> Anup Ojha, "Valley Public Vehicles Are Not Complying with Health and Safety Protocols," The Kathmandu Post, September 22, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/valley/2020/09/22/valley-public-vehicles-are-not-complying-with-health-and-safety-rules>. (Accessed December 4 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Ashok Dahal, "100 billion: The cost of Nepal's next parliamentary election," The Annapurna Express January 21, 2021, <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/rs-100-billion-the-cost-of-nepals-next-parliamentary-election-2984>

should be made in order to ensure that COVID-19 policies are properly implemented and followed through.

To regain trust from the public, the government should make expenses and methods of procurement transparent. Also, as neighboring giants like China and India are making progress on controlling the pandemic, Nepal should maintain balanced relationships in order to gain medical support. This will allow for economic growth and political stability of the country. ■

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