



Date: August 16, 2004

To: NDI

From: Mark Feierstein
John Moreira

Re: Faith in Democracy Endures, In Spite of Disappointments
Report on the Baseline Survey and Focus Groups

The Nepalese are deeply dissatisfied with the state of their country and frustrated that they are no better off now than they were before the democratic opening in 1990. Nevertheless, they do not find other political alternatives appealing. On the contrary, there is strong public support for a deepening of the democratic process and a rejection of such options as a return to the Panchayat system or a Maoist republic. The severe problems that the country faces – including unemployment, the Maoist conflict, and official corruption – have hardly shaken the public's faith in the concept of democracy. The Churchillian adage that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the rest would seem to sum up well Nepalese attitudes toward the options that they confront.

The continued faith in democracy, despite the difficulties that the country faces, is matched by a surprising degree of support for the country's political leadership. Even though there is nearly universal agreement that the country is headed in the wrong direction, pluralities approve of the performance of the King and former prime minister. This is not to say that the King and government escape blame for the country's problems – on the contrary, Nepalese are deeply disappointed that their leaders have not done more to improve the economy and end the civil unrest – but there appears to be a sense that many of the country's problems are so deeply rooted that they defy easy solution.

The public seems to evaluate political parties through a comparable prism. Although the Nepalese believe the parties mostly act in their own self-interest and engage in widespread corruption, the most popular ones receive respectable ratings.

Public views of the Maoists are conflicted as well. Although there is widespread condemnation of their tactics, there is also much support for some of their goals, including holding a Constituent Assembly to write a new Constitution and ending the caste system. About 20 percent of the public can be characterized as supportive of the Maoists.

There is no such ambivalence, however, with regard to how to end the conflict with the Maoists. The public overwhelmingly rejects a military option and is desperate for

talks to be held among the parties, government and guerrillas. It pains the Nepalese that the country is being torn apart by the armed conflict, and they are willing to entertain nearly any policy option that would end the fighting and bring the Maoists into the political process.

The desire for inclusion is evident in attitudes toward gender and caste as well. Most Nepalese, particularly the young, believe that women should generally have the same rights as men (although there is more doubt about the proper level of political involvement for women). There is also strong disapproval of the caste system, although it appears that many people are not quite prepared to abandon it.

All of these issues provide an opportunity for political parties to advance a popular agenda and burnish their images. Although the standing of most parties is fairly low, most people do not have a strong sense of individual parties. Any party that credibly addresses the public's concerns about the economy and the conflict, as well as convey that they are serious about fighting corruption and eliminating it within their own ranks, will have an opportunity to markedly expand their following.

These are the principal findings of our baseline research, which included 10 focus groups in rural and urban areas in February and March and a nationwide survey of 3,214 people covering a little more than 90 percent of Nepalese territory. The sampling error on a simple random sample of this size is 1.7 percent.

Dissatisfaction Driven by Unemployment, Violence, and Corruption

Nepalese are profoundly dissatisfied with conditions in their country. An almost unanimous share of respondents (95 percent) think the country is going in the wrong direction, while a mere 4 percent believe it is headed in the right direction. These are the most negative figures that we have ever recorded, in work that has spanned more than 40 countries.

Three issues in particular are driving this discontent: unemployment, the conflict with the Maoists, and government corruption.

Nearly half the respondents (45 percent) cite unemployment as one of their top two concerns. The lack of jobs is of particular concern to younger men; a majority of men under 35 list unemployment as one of their top two concerns. The lack of jobs is of also of great concern to the Dalits, more than half (53 percent) of whom cites unemployment as among their top two worries.

Maoist violence (37 percent) is the second leading concern. Almost half of the lowest socio-economic level (45 percent) cite the Maoist violence as one of their top two concerns¹.

The third leading area of concern is corruption (33 percent). Corruption is a greater concern among older men (37 percent) but a lesser concern among older women (26 percent). Corruption ranks lower as a concern among people in lower socio-economic levels; for example, only 27 percent of Dalits cite it as one of their top two concerns.

The focus on corruption is reflected in the strong ratings of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority. The authority is the most highly regarded entity that we test in the survey; its thermometer rating on a scale of 0 to 100 is 59 degrees. [Figure 1]

Thermometer Ratings: Government Organizations
Mean Score on a Scale from 0-100

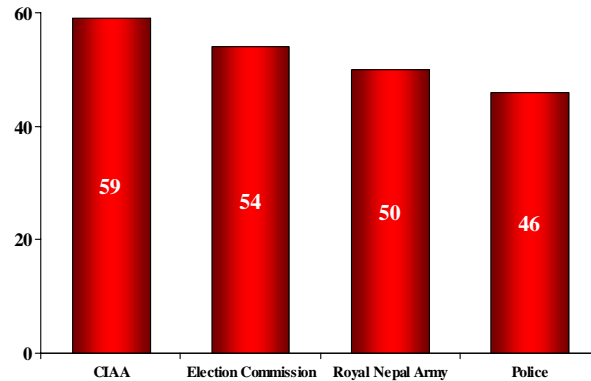


Figure 1

Political Leaders Get Benefit of the Doubt

Given the deep dissatisfaction with the state of things in the country, political leaders get fairly decent ratings. [Figure 2] This is in contrast to the wholesale rejection of the political class that we tend to see in other troubled countries. A plurality of the public (42 percent) approves of the job the former prime minister had done; and his thermometer rating is a cool, though not frigid, 40 degrees.

Thermometer Ratings: Political Leaders
Mean Score on a Scale from 0-100

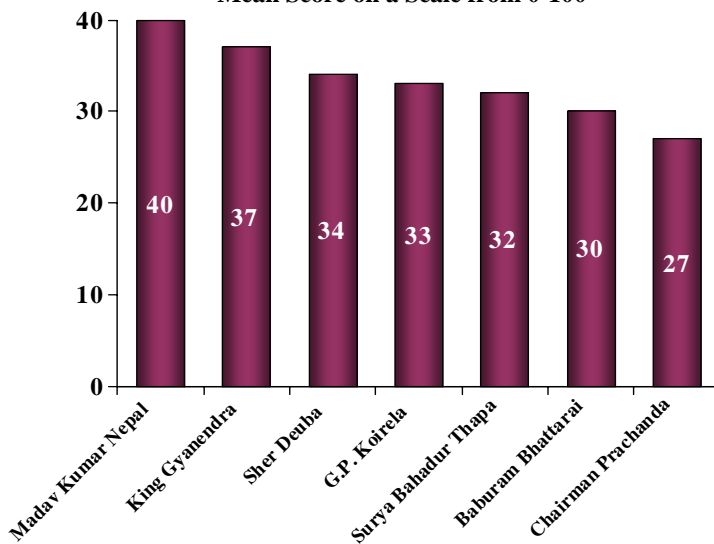


Figure 2

A plurality (46 percent) also approves of the performance of the King,

¹ Socio-economic level in Nepal is determined by occupation and educational. A-level is the highest level and comprises about 5 percent of the population; B-level 16 percent; C-level 25 percent; D-level 35 percent; and E-level, the lowest, is about 19 percent.

and his thermometer rating is a low, though not awful, 37 degrees. The King is most highly regarded among older citizens and residents of urban areas. Brahmins have the highest level of disapproval of the King; about half (49 percent) disapprove of the job the King is doing.

Although the King gets fairly high approval ratings, Nepalese nevertheless blame him for many of the problems in the country, believing that he could be doing more than he has. Many of the focus group participants say, for example, that the King could have already resolved the Maoist conflict and that he needs to facilitate a resolution to the conflict by bringing the Maoists and political parties to the negotiating table to work out a resolution with the government.

Political parties also receive respectable ratings. The thermometer rating for “political parties” is 44 degrees, although the range for individual parties is 25 to 45 degrees, with the UML and NC at the top and NSP and RPN at the bottom. [Figure 3]

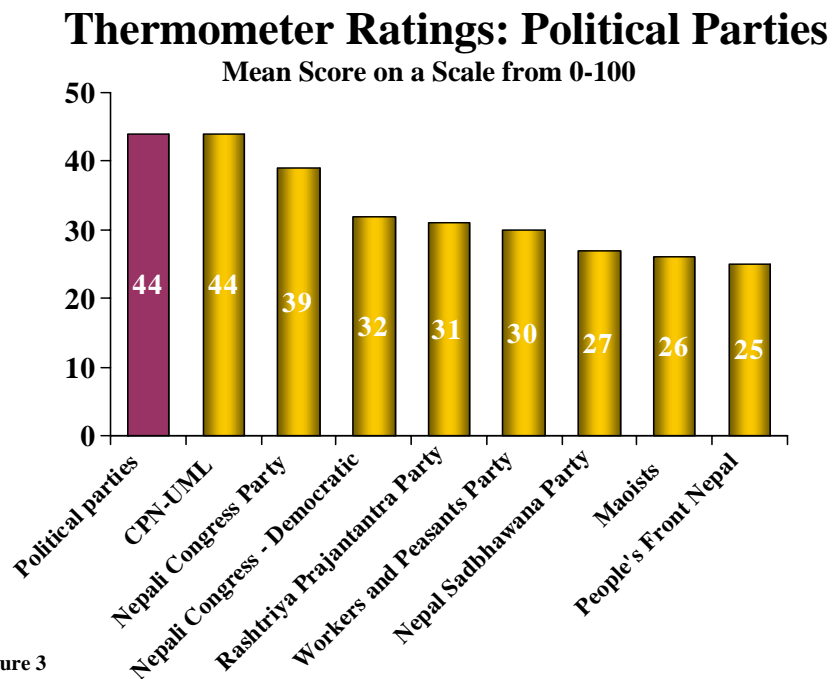


Figure 3

Nepalese have a long list of grievances with parties, however, namely a sense that they are driven by self-interest. We discuss this in greater detail below.

Faith in Democracy Persists

The deep dissatisfaction with conditions in the country and the lukewarm support for the government and political parties has produced disillusionment with how democracy is working in Nepal. The public believes that Nepal is far from democratic;

on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 meaning the country is fully democratic and 0 meaning it is not democratic at all, respondents rate the country's democracy a 4.2.

This is due in part to the King's removal of the prime minister and assumption of executive powers in November 2002. Most Nepalese (50 percent) disapprove of the King's action, including 34 percent who strongly disapprove. [Figure 4] Young men (63 percent) and those in the highest socio-economic levels (64 percent) are most opposed to the King's removal of the prime minister.

Removal of the Prime Minister

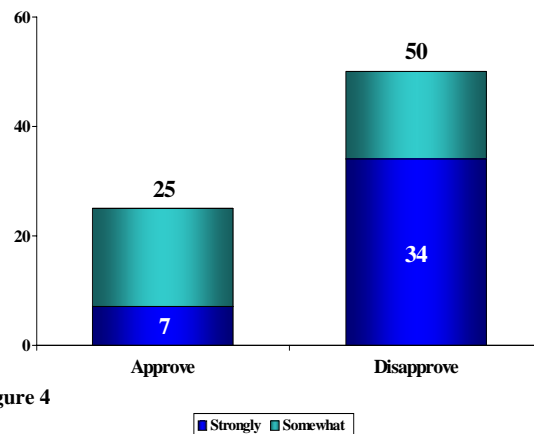


Figure 4

The comments by these young women in Katmandu are illustrative of the public's views:

The King should not have stepped on the country's democracy like that. I found this step very wrong. When I heard the declaration, I was shocked and could not believe that even in a parliamentary democracy the King could dissolve the Parliament like this. This was not right.

He snatched away the rights of the people by doing so.

In a place where there should have been democracy, the Monarch interfered.

To many people, the King's actions threatened to undermine any chance of establishing democracy in Nepal. As a young male in Chitwan said: "Yes, there is democracy, but it has been paralyzed. It is now in a coma and anytime it may die."

For some, the King's action was symptomatic of a deeper problem with democracy in Nepal, a sense that the country was living in democracy in name only.

Democracy is just for the namesake; nobody is able to live freely. People are still not able to vote wherever they like. They are forced to vote for certain persons because of fear and intimidation. (Young male, Chitwan)

It had been claimed that democracy was re-stored, but we couldn't feel where it was re-stored. (Older female, Godavari)

Not only is there a widespread sense that democracy has not brought improvements to Nepal, but most of the public (66 percent) thinks the country is worse off than during the Panchayat system. [Figure 5] Corruption and crime are the principal

areas that are seen to have worsened since the end of the Panchayat system. [Figure 6] Many people remain nostalgic about the Panchayat era. This dialogue among young women in Katmandu is instructive:

During the Panchayat system, we could move around freely. We did not have to fear anybody. It was safe to be out on the roads even at midnight. But today there is so much insecurity that it is unsafe to go out even during the day.

Thinking about all this, sometimes I feel like we should go back to the Panchayat system; but then again coming to think of the fact that we are in living in the 21st century I feel that this would be something wrong.

What we require today is a democratic government. If we are able to make strict laws and rules and run the country in a more organized manner hence stopping violence and establishing peace and security then why do we need to go back to the Panchayat system? But again, if this is not going to happen then I think we need to go back to the Panchayat system.

During Democracy vs. During Panchayat

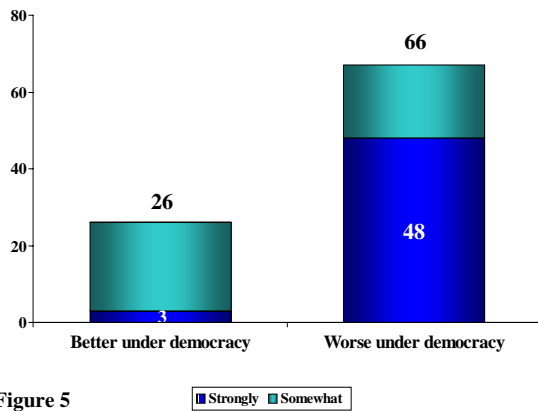


Figure 5

Problems with Democracy

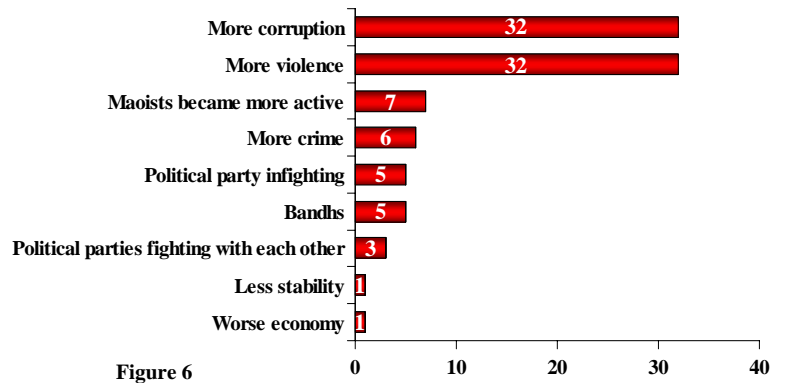


Figure 6

Few Nepalese in fact desire a return to the Panchayat system. On the contrary, there is strong support for maintaining the democratic system. A large majority (77 percent) believes that democracy with a constitutional monarchy (60 percent) or democracy without a monarchy (17 percent) would be the best form of government for Nepal. [Figure 7] Only 9 percent prefer the Panchayat system. Even among RPP members, only 21 percent opt for Panchayat.

What Nepalese most value about democracy are the greater personal freedoms that they enjoy. A majority (57 percent) of

Best Form of Government for Nepal

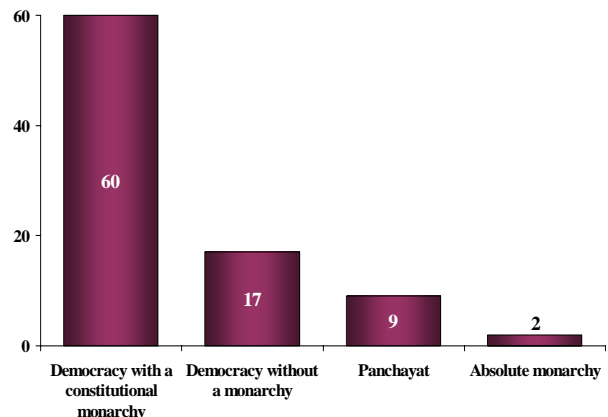


Figure 7

respondents cite greater personal freedoms as the best thing about democracy in Nepal. As figure 8 indicates, no other mention garners in this open-ended question garners more than 4 percent.

Best Aspects of Democracy

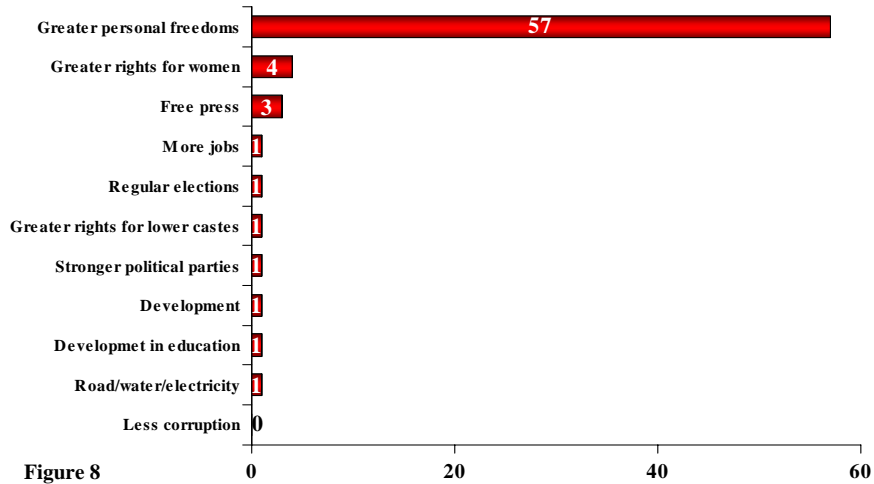


Figure 8

The most important action that can be taken to demonstrate democracy has not been derailed would be to hold new elections. More than 4 in 5 Nepalese (83 percent) favor holding national elections this year, although there is nearly universal agreement (94 percent) that elections should not be held until there is a cease-fire with the Maoists or at least a decrease in violence.

Opposition to Maoist Tactics, but Openness to their Goals

The sense that elections can only be held following a cease-fire or decrease in violence underscores the importance to Nepalese democracy of resolving the armed conflict. The war is taking a terrible human and economic toll, but it is also threatening to further slow or reverse the country’s democratic advances.

Unlike the public’s attitudes toward the government, there is little ambivalence about the Maoists. The Maoists’ thermometer rating is just 25 degrees, the second lowest of the 21 organizations and people we tested in the survey. Only 8 percent give the rebels a “warm” rating, over 50 degrees.

The Maoists enjoy considerably more backing among richer Nepalese, as support for the rebels increases as income rises. [Figure 9] A similar dynamic is at work among castes, as members of lower-level castes are less likely to support the Maoists. This could be

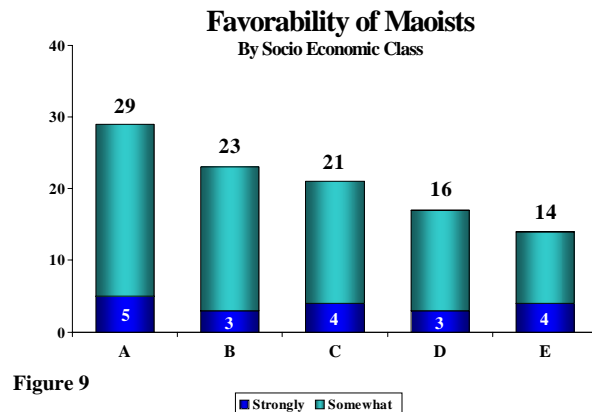


Figure 9

due to the fact that the Maoists’ war is much more likely to take a toll on the lives of poorer Nepalese, while wealthier Nepalese might be more approving in a theoretical manner.

The Maoists’ poor image is due largely to their violent tactics. Sixty-one percent disapprove of the rebels’ use of violence, including 43 percent that disapprove strongly.

The public also rejects bandhs, a favorite tactic of the Maoists, with 82 percent saying they are an ineffective way to promote a political agenda. Many Nepalese complain that the bandhs exacerbate the country’s economic troubles. As a young man in Godawari said, “Bandhs cause many difficulties to people, particularly to people like us, who have to feed ourselves on our daily earnings.”

Nepalese also doubt the Maoist’s commitment to democracy. Only 19 percent say they have at least some trust in the Maoists to establish a multi-party system if they come to power.

Despite the rejection of the Maoists’ tactics, our research suggests that the Maoists would enjoy considerable support if they lay down their arms and enter the political process. One out of three Nepalese supports the Maoists’ goals overall [Figure 10], and men are particularly supportive (42 percent).

There are varying degrees of support in the country for each of the Maoists’ objectives, from 61 percent for a Constituent Assembly to write a new Constitution to just 28 percent for a Maoists People’s Republic. [Figure 11]

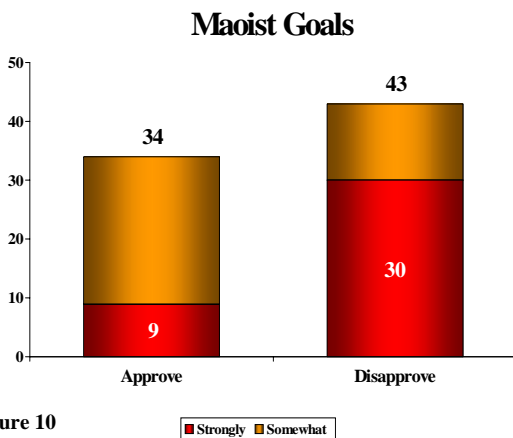


Figure 10

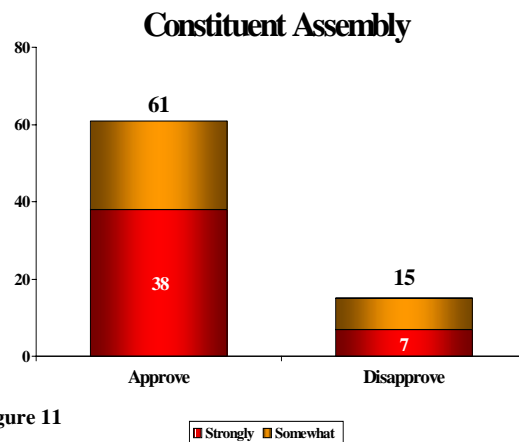


Figure 11

Overall, the survey suggests that the Maoists have a base of support of about 20 percent based on the responses to a series of questions on the rebels. They may not reach that share of the vote if they participate in elections, however, primarily because many of the people who sympathize with the Maoists are UML voters. Among the respondents who indicated whom they would support in national elections, 16 percent select the Maoists, placing them third behind the UML and NC.

Strong Backing for Peace Talks

Nepalese are dissatisfied with the government's handling of the conflict with the Maoists, with about half (48 percent) disapproving of its efforts and only 27 percent approving. The public believes the government should place much greater emphasis on a negotiated solution rather than try to defeat the Maoists militarily. Given a choice between negotiating with the rebels or defeating them militarily, 96 percent prefer the former.

There is overwhelming support for bringing all the central stakeholders (the King, the political parties and the Maoists) into negotiations; 96 percent support that idea.

Ideas with a militaristic component are roundly rejected. Only 16 percent approve of the program piloted by the government to provide weapons to citizens in rural areas so they can defend themselves against the Maoists.

Most people are not necessarily looking for concessions from the Maoists or any form of accounting or punishment; they just want the fighting to stop. They feel caught in the middle between the Maoists and the Royal Nepal Army.

The condition is becoming worse day-by-day, violence and murder is increasing. This problem has to be solved as soon as possible. ... It is difficult for us because during the day we have to face the Royal Nepal Army and at night we have to face the jungle army (Maoists). (Young female, Chisa Pani)

We feel that the Nepali citizens have become sandwiched between the Maoists and the Army. Maoists come to our houses and force us to cook food for them. They ask for a donation. It is not risk-free if we do not cook food for them or do not give them a donation. We are forced to do whatever they say. But the Army men do not understand our constraint. They think that we are Maoist supporters as we are helping them by cooking food for them and giving them donation. Whereas we are helpless, and we remain nowhere. We are treated badly by both the parties. (Older women, Dhankuta)

A plurality of Nepalese (42 percent) trust neither the Royal Nepal Army nor Maoists to protect their community. One-third think the Royal Nepal Army (RNA), which receives a decent 50 degree rating, would better protect them, while just 4 percent say the Maoists would.

In order to put an end to this predicament, many citizens are prepared to welcome the Maoists into the political process. A plurality of the public (41 percent) would allow the Maoists to participate in national elections, under any circumstances, though nearly as many (37 percent) think the rebels should not be allowed to participate in elections under

any circumstances. A clear majority (59 and 57 percent) think the Maoists should be allowed to participate if they commit to a ceasefire or lay down their arms.

The public is wary about foreign involvement in the peace process. Only 47 percent of respondents approve of having an international delegation to assist in peace talks, and just 16 percent endorse a presence of international peacekeepers.

Parties Seen Driven by Self-Interest

Most Nepalese feel alienated from the political parties. Almost half of the public does not identify with any of the parties [Figure 12], although that is common in many developing countries.

The parties have a fundamental image problem – the sense that they have little concern for the public. Eighty-five percent of respondents think the parties govern on behalf of themselves, including 69 percent who think this strongly. Only 9 percent believe that parties govern on behalf of the people. As we heard in our focus groups, much of this resentment toward the political parties is driven by a belief that the parties engage in corruption. Between 44 and 57 percent describe the major individual parties as “corrupt.”

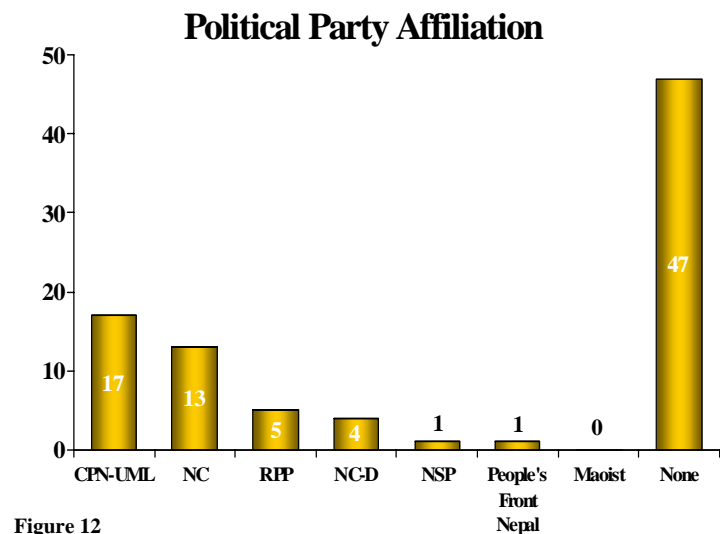


Figure 12

Political infighting has also turned off many voters. The internal battles signal to voters that party leaders are more concerned about their own standing and are ill-prepared to tackle the country’s problems. A plurality of Nepalese think “too much infighting” describes three of the top four political parties well.

In spite of their serious image problems, the parties are not without support. In fact, two in particular – the United Marxist-Leninist Party and Nepalese Congress – have decent ratings: 44 and 39 degrees, respectively.

The UML and NC are the two dominant parties. Among those who say which party they would vote for in national elections, 43 percent say they would cast ballots for the UML and 27 percent for NC. With the Maoists in the race, the vote totals would drop to 31 and 24 percent, a 12-point drop for the UML.

In order for political parties to improve their images, they need to convey three things in particular to voters: that they will govern honestly and fight corruption; that they

care about people and have good ideas to improve people’s lives; and that they know how to get things done. The three most important attributes in a political leader for the Nepalese are “honesty,” “concern for the people” and “has good ideas for the country.” [Figure 13]

Political Leader Attributes

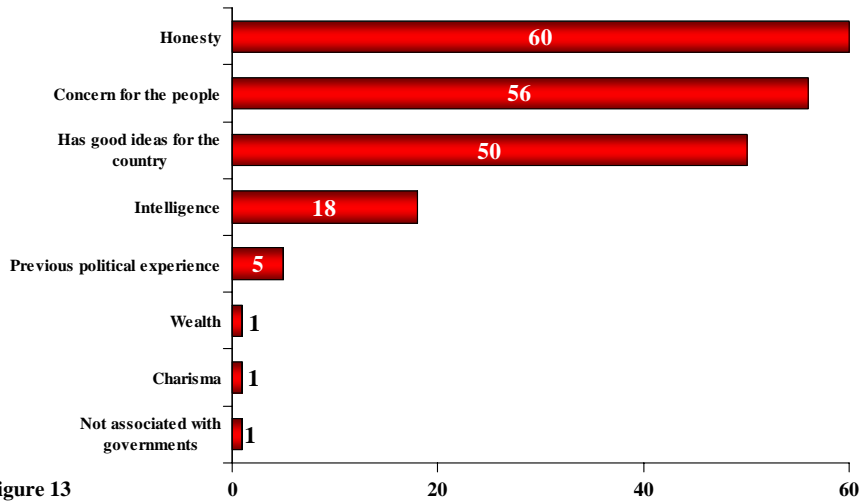


Figure 13

There is still an opportunity for the parties to burnish their images with the electorate. Many are undecided (13 percent) about how they would vote in the elections, and there are probably many undecided voters among the 36 percent who did not want to say how they would vote.

The parties’ images, moreover, are not fully formed. Large shares of people (up to 65 percent) say they did not know enough to rate the parties on various attributes.

Most of the voters whose views have yet to harden about the parties are women, with a disproportionate share under 35 and not employed outside the home. Geographically, there are large shares of undecided voters in Eastern Tarai, Central Hill and Mountains. Outreach efforts by the parties, therefore, can focus on these sectors of the country, though given the nascent state of Nepalese democracy, it is probably premature for the parties to focus too exclusively on particular demographic groups. Each should aim to establish a broader, national standing.

Political Party Messages: Jobs, the Maoists Conflict, and Corruption

The first step for the parties to improve their images is to focus on the issues of greatest concern to the public -- job creation, the Maoist conflict, and corruption. The first two in fact can be dealt with in tandem. The public believes that ending the conflict with the Maoists is essential to revive the economy. A message that links these two issues and urges a negotiated settlement to the conflict was the most effective that we tested in the survey.

We urge all parties to put aside their difference, stop attacking each other, and develop a common plan to end the conflict and solve the country's economic and security problems.

We call on the government, other parties, and the Maoists to begin negotiations immediately to end the conflict and agree on a plan to create jobs and increase economic and physical security.

Likely voters say that they are 70 percent much more likely to support a political party that adopts the first statement as policy. This message also performs particularly well among young men and the E socio-economic level.

Sixty-four percent of likely voters are much more likely to support a political party that uses the second statement. This message is the strongest among urban respondents, and the Dalit, Newar, Yadov and Magar castes.

A simple appeal for national unity and political cooperation has near universal appeal (88 percent):

We will not resolve our present difficulties until political parties stop fighting with each other and unite to solve Nepal's problems.

The survey shows that parties need to place their proposals in a broader strategic context, along the lines of the messages above. Stand-alone proposals in the survey did not test as well as broader messages. Voters want a vision, beyond some popular initiatives.

The parties also need to deal directly with their principal vulnerability – corruption – and convince voters that they are serious about combating it, including within their own ranks. That means putting forward a comprehensive and credible agenda to detect and prosecute corrupt officials.

Progressive Attitudes Toward Gender and Caste Developing

As the parties reach out to voters, they will also need to take into account the increasingly progressive social attitudes among Nepalese, particularly among the younger generation. Although Nepal is considered a traditional society, public views on gender and caste are becoming quite liberal.

For example, an overwhelming share of Nepalese (84 percent) thinks that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. [Figure 14] Among those over 59, 76 percent hold this view.

When it comes to women’s role in politics, however, views are somewhat less enlightened. A bare majority (54 percent) thinks women should be as active as men in politics. Although only 10 percent think that men should play more of a leading role in politics than women, about a third of the respondents are unsure what they think of the relative political roles of men and women. [Figure 15] Again, there is a generational

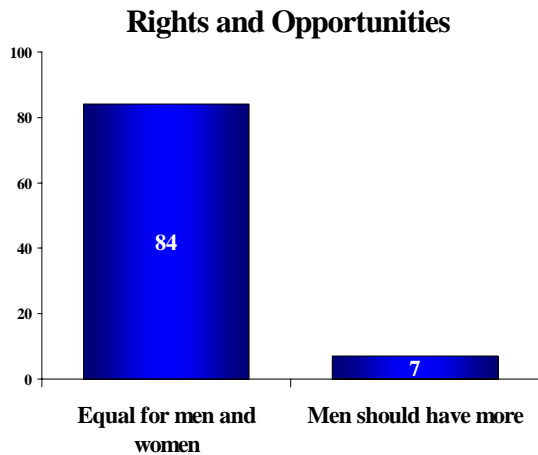


Figure 14

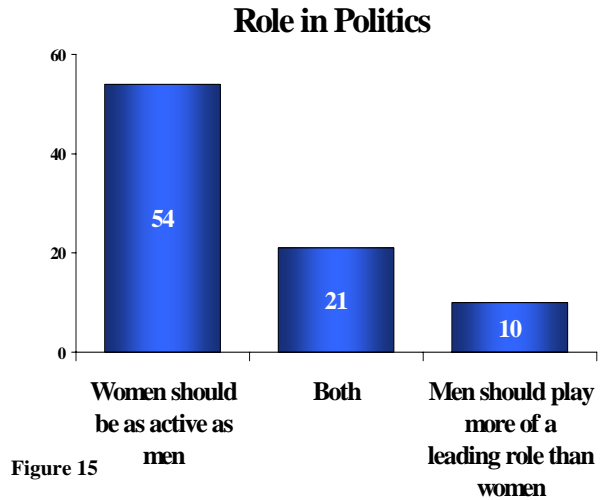


Figure 15

divide, with 38 percent of Nepalese over the age of 59 believing that men should play more of a leading role in politics.

It is worth noting that among undecided voters, between 65 and 71 percent thinks women should be as active in politics as men. Political parties could potentially make gains among these undecided voters by presenting women candidates in the next election. The mid-western and far-western regions are also much more progressive on this issue with 86 and 74 percent, respectively, believing that women should be as active as men in politics.

Despite these more progressive views, many women remain dependent on men for their political decisions. [Figure 16] A little more than half of our female (52 percent) respondents acknowledge that her husband or another male in the household decides how she should vote. In our focus groups, some women acknowledge that they vote in accordance with their husband’s wishes out of fear.

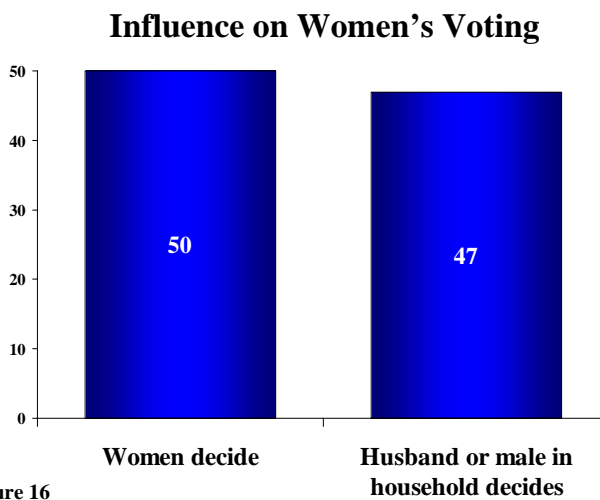


Figure 16

Since we cannot make our decision ourselves, we are being suppressed. If we start making our decision ourselves, right from the next day, we will

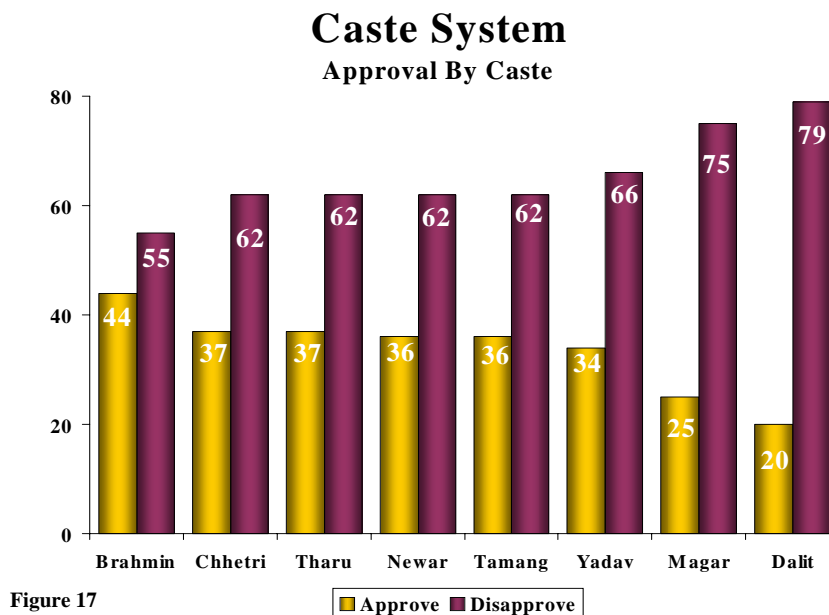
*not be allowed to enter in our husband's house. So, then where to go?
What to say? So, it is better to keep quiet. (Young female, Banke)*

Not surprisingly, women in urban areas and from higher socio-economic groups are more likely to say they decide whom to vote for on their own.

It would be politically advantageous for parties to aim to improve women's standing in society. The second strongest proposal that we test in the survey is giving more college scholarships to women so they will have greater job opportunities. About three-quarters (74 percent) say they would be much more or somewhat more likely to vote for a political party that promised to do that.

Nepalese also hold fairly progressive views about the caste system. Almost two out of three (63 percent) disapprove of the caste system. Men (67 percent) are slightly more opposed to the caste system than women (60 percent). Younger Nepalese are much more disapproving of the caste system than older citizens. Three quarters of respondents between 18 and 25 disapprove of the caste system, while only 40 percent of those over 59 disapprove.

Not surprisingly, lower castes are much more opposed to the caste system than upper castes. [Figure 17]



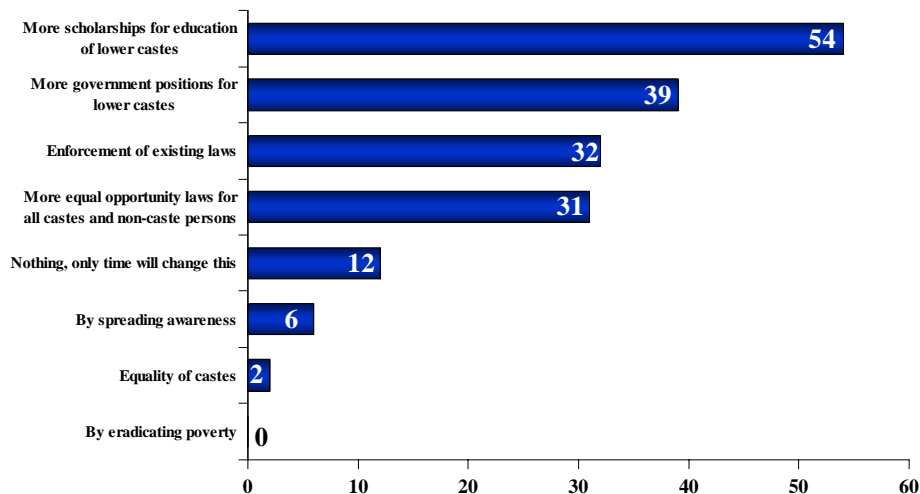
The high figures showing opposition to the caste system may in fact overstate the level of disapproval. In some of the focus groups, participants said that while they disapprove of the caste system, they still practice it in their everyday lives.

Although we say yes [castes should be treated equally], such equality might not be occurring. Although we do not hesitate to talk with them, let our children to play with them, it's a fact that we cannot take them to our kitchen. (Young female, Chisa Pani)

Although we say we are not discriminating, practically it is not being practiced. We still cannot marry Dalits - lower caste girls. If we get married with lower-caste girls, our family won't let them enter into our house. (Young male, Chitwan)

Nepalese see education as the key to changing the caste system. Among the respondents who disapprove of the caste system, 54 percent think the best way to change the system is to offer “more scholarships for education of lower castes.” [Figure 18] The second strongest policy proposal among Dalits is to “provide low-income families with vouchers to pay for school clothing and books.” Seventy-seven percent of Dalits say they would be much or somewhat more likely to support a political party that proposed that.

Changing the Caste System



The public finds appealing the idea that the country’s development depends upon creating opportunities for all castes and ethnic backgrounds. Eighty-five percent of respondents say they are much or somewhat more likely to vote for a political party that adopts this message:

We believe Nepal cannot succeed without creating air educational and employment opportunities for people of all castes and ethnic backgrounds.