



Supporting Citizen Participation in Nepal's Peace Process

December 2006

For 19 days in April 2006 massive public demonstrations filled the streets of Kathmandu, bringing dramatic, historic change to the mountain kingdom of Nepal. The country had been ruled as a monarchy since the 18th century in spite of several attempts at democratic reform. Then, from the mid-1990's, 10 years of civil war ensued between Maoist rebels and an increasingly repressive state, causing the deaths of more than 12,000 people. As the result of the April demonstrations, the King of Nepal gave up absolute rule and the Maoists agreed to seek a political solution to their grievances. In November the Maoists and the seven major political parties from the previously deposed parliament signed a peace accord, agreeing on a process for creating an interim government and a new constitution as well as a popular referendum on whether the country should become a republic or a constitutional monarchy.



Street demonstrations in April 2006

Together, they invited the United Nations to monitor the collection of arms and to support the second round of democratic elections in 65 years, currently scheduled for June 2007.

Karuna Center was present at the start of the people's demonstrations in April, working with HURON, the Human Rights Network of Nepal, on strategies for peaceful change. We returned in August and again in December at the invitation of the Canadian Cooperation Office to work with their Nepali NGO partners from all five regions of Nepal on the theme of citizen participation in the new constitutional process and on reconciliation. Workshops were held in Kathmandu, but also in the eastern city of Bhiratnager and the western city Nepalganj, in order to have as broad a reach as possible.

Of the 200 national constitutions that currently exist worldwide, over half were written or rewritten in the last 25 years, and often after violent conflict. Recent experiments in Africa and Latin America have demonstrated that constitution-making can be an important post-conflict peacebuilding tool if it becomes a truly participatory process reaching out to all groups, including the most marginalized. In South Africa thousands of town meetings were held throughout the country to invite citizen input on critical issues for the new constitution. Eritrea used street theatre to reach out to the illiterate. Nepal must find its own means to ensure that after years of repressive rule and marginalization — particularly of low caste groups and ethnic and religious minorities — all citizens can participate in forging a new national identity. Given that many groups live in remote mountain villages without road access, this will be no easy task.

Our participants in each workshop were leaders in a variety of NGOs with diverse missions, including rural development, the empowerment of women, and human rights

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education. Also present were several newspaper and radio journalists, as well as a documentary filmmaker. All were eager to explore the potential role of their organizations in educating the public about the constitutional process and in finding creative ways of fostering active participation. Plans were made for radio soap operas, youth mobilization campaigns, public forums and debates, and

advocacy campaigns to ensure an open and transparent process full of opportunities for public comment. Participants also examined ways their organizations could be more effective in including and reaching out to still marginalized groups.

Our workshops also explored practical approaches for reconciliation at the community level, where atrocities by both government forces and Maoist insurgents have caused undue suffering to a civilian population frequently caught in the middle. The process of rebuilding relations and promoting social healing will of course take years. Participants recognized, however, that a political process alone will not heal their country, and they see clearly how much must be done to reweave the social fabric that has mediated community life for generations.



In January 2007 Karuna Center will launch a year long advanced peace leadership program with our new Nepali partner, the Institute for Conflict Management Peace and Development. Participants will come from diverse sectors and communities of Nepali society to form an active learning community that together can initiate creative programs to support social healing after the years of violence and to bring about the development of a peaceful, democratic Nepal.



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