

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF INDAGRU VDC¹

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ABSTRACT

Local governance and decentralisation are much talked about in Nepal, but we know little about how villagers actually experience the leadership of their VDC today, and how they feel the local government functioned under previous regimes. Especially in the Tarai, this knowledge is sorely missing. In an attempt to start addressing these questions, this article tells the political history of a VDC in Morang district from the pre-*panchayat* period up until present day. Its aim is to document and analyse continuity and change in the leadership patterns of this local area, and to understand how villagers perceive these different types of governance. The research is based on long term anthropological fieldwork, conducted in 2009, which consisted of participant observation and interviews with both leaders and other villagers, in order to establish different interpretations of the past and of change. The responsibilities of the village leaders, and the criteria on the basis of which they are (s)electd show remarkable continuity. At the same time, the VDC leadership structure has been democratised over time, especially with the introduction of elected ward representatives, including women. The transition from hereditary and appointed leaders to elected leaders was highly appreciated by the villagers. This became particularly clear in their evaluation of today's system, where leaders are again appointed; this time by the parties. Villagers feel that this has led to a serious lack of transparency and accountability. The current set up has in addition tightened political parties' grip on the local society. Indagru counts on the next local election to address today's imbalance.

Key words: Tarai; political history; local governance; leadership; local democracy; accountability

INTRODUCTION

This article tells the political history of Indagru, a VDC in Morang district, from the pre-*panchayat* period till today, with the aim of documenting and analysing the

changing character of the village. I focus on villagers' perceptions of the different types of leadership they have known over time, as this is an area we know little about, particularly with regard to the Tarai. I demonstrate how the criteria on the basis

¹ Indagru VDC, the wards, Indagru bazaar and Kholaghar, and all names of villagers are pseudonyms. Since villagers, when they speak about Indagru, often abbreviate 'VDC' to 'village', I will also use both terms interchangeably. I am grateful to Upendra Khawas for his support in Indagru. For useful comments on this article, I would like to thank Magnus Hatlebakk, Fraser Sugden and two anonymous reviewers.

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of which leaders are selected show remarkable continuity at the same time as the local leadership structure has been democratised. The fact that this trend has been reversed since 2002 explains why people in Indagru count on the next local election to restore the balance.

In selecting and sorting relevant information, I have focused on the leadership of the village. As all written documentation was lost during the Maoist insurgency, the text is based on villagers' eyewitness reports, stories and opinions. I have used interviews with leaders and others: elected politicians and voters, Maoists who fought the People's War and villagers who experienced the consequences, party leaders and general members. This will enable us to establish different interpretations of the past and of change, and also to challenge common myths in the Nepalese political context, like the one that people only supported the Maoists because they were forced to. I will take up the different systems in chronological order, starting with the pre-*panchayat* period.

PRE-PANCHAYAT

Before 1960, the government in Indagru was represented by the *jamindar*, and his assistant, the *patwari*. Both belonged to the same hill family, but were not locals, they lived in Biratnagar. They received a commission for collecting tax for the villagers' land and submitting it to the district.² It also fell on the *jimindar* to solve conflicts, and he offered loans. These were at high interest, and caused some families to lose land.

The predominant Khawas community in addition, had their own leader, the *gazdar*. He was a Khawas landlord of the community, who after his selection took on Gazdar as his surname. From then onwards, the title and function were hereditary. Indagru had two *gazdars* for the two large Khawas communities in the area. The Khawas in Kholaghar village described the *gazdar* as 'rich and respected'. Because the area at the time did not have a school, the *gazdar* had a teacher at home and was 'a bit literate'. He however developed techniques that did not require literacy – 'when people borrowed [rice] from him, he made a knot in a rope for every *maund* [40 kg] they borrowed'. Also these were high-interest loans.

In the Khawas community, the *gazdar* was the point of contact for the government. Before the Ranas came hunting in Indagru, for instance, government representatives told the *gazdar* to improve the road. The Khawas's respect for the *gazdar* was therefore mixed with fear: 'People respected him but they were also afraid to speak openly in front of him because he was powerful, he had a link with the government.' The *gazdar* was also responsible for conflict mediation. Khawas 'went to the *gazdar* first [with conflict issues] and if he couldn't solve it, then to the *jamindar*', including land related conflicts, which in theory were the *jamindar*'s responsibility. Also, 'when Khawas didn't obey the rules of the *gazdar*, [...] the penalty was to organise a feast for all the Khawas.' A party like that could, according to older Khawas, compare to a marriage celebration.

² For a more indepth analysis of the pre- panchayat agrarian structure, see Regmi (1976) and the Regmi Research Series on www.digitalhimalaya.com.

HILL MIGRATION

From around 1950 onwards, many hill people migrated to Indagru. In the VDC today, almost half of the population originate from the hills. People moved for various reasons; some were posted in Indagru as government staff, like the Brahmin who administered the police station, while others came in search of employment, liked their new life, and stayed. Some of the earliest migrants moved from the eastern hills in 1950-51 because of the revolt of the Limbus against the high caste settlers there (see Whelpton, 2008, p.161-162). Several (Nepalese) families lived in Assam before moving back to Nepal, while others moved to Indagru from Bihar. A Dalit grandmother explained: 'We migrated from India 42-43 years ago, as a young couple. [...] Where we lived, there were no facilities to stay long term, no jobs, no roads, no hospitals. It was difficult to survive, while here we could raise our children well'

For the indigenous population, this in-migration implied a big change:

The hill people came and we gave them a place to stay in our community guesthouses. They didn't have anything to do so we let them work with us, and for their help, we gave them crops and a place to live. When they went to live separately, we gave them land as an *adhiya* contract³. But they were cleverer, and we were fools, so when we needed money, they said that they would provide. Our people went and got loans at a very high interest. We were cheated and lost our land.

Another man clarified that Khawas at the time only had crops, no money, which is why they took loans. They received very little information about the terms of the loans. When they were suddenly told that their loan had expired, they had to either 'pay or give land'. As one Khawas said, 'We had to agree with whatever the money lenders said; we had no idea'. These stories are in line with research on other Tarai districts. Many migrants bought land very cheaply, while the Tarai population lost a lot of land because of fraudulent money lending practices and debt foreclosures (Guneratne, 2002, p.91). In Kholaghar, there are consequently no Khawas landlords anymore. Some families still own some land, but most Khawas work on land that used to be their own but now belongs to non-Khawas.

This was however not the only change after the local community slowly became a mix of indigenous and hill groups. While Khawas and other groups lived in densely settled areas, hill migrants settled 'in the open field'. Khawas ceremonies and festivals changed over time as well. One of the few Khawas traditional healers left in Kholaghar explained that 'the new generation [wants] to change and become like the hill people.' Others illustrated this clearly. A Khawas grandmother described how, when she was a child, they did not celebrate Dasain: 'Only on the ninth day we sacrificed a duck in the temple, and ate it.' And with regard to Tihar, she said: 'We didn't celebrate the first two days of Tihar, only day three to five were special for the Khawas. The rest we learned from the hill people.'

³ *Adhiya* is a sharecropping contract whereby a farmer grows crops on a landlord's land, and half of the harvest goes to the landlord, and half to the farmer.

THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

With the introduction of the *panchayat* regime in 1960, the *gazdar* system ended and the descendents of the last *gazdar* in Kholaghar went back to using their own surname. Also the positions of *jamindar* and *patwari* were abolished. New posts were introduced instead: the *pradhan panch* from now on led the village *panchayat*, with the assistance of the vice *pradhan panch* and one representative from every ward or subdivision. For the first time, these local leaders were selected by the population. In the words of the son of Indagru's first *pradhan panch*, 'My father was selected in a group the first time, while the second time, he was elected'.

Over the 30 years that the *panchayat* system lasted, Indagru had four different *pradhan panches*. They belonged to a new, local elite. It is clear that it was literate landlords who were (s)electd. The last *pradhan panch*, a Khawas, had at the time more than 100 *bighaa* [67 hectares] of land, and the Newar *pradhan panch*, who served three terms, owned the mill. The latter's family was described as one of the richest in Indagru. The Brahmin woman whose late husband was the third *pradhan panch* said: 'The village leader decided everything before. He was a rich person, a landlord. [...] He did social work and solved conflicts. People went to him when they needed him.' Some poor families were indeed taken care of by the *pradhan panch*. A Tarai Dalit father said 'under the *panchayat*, the *pradhan panch* supported the poor'. Referring to the land on which he built a house, he added 'I don't get any support from politicians today, but I did from the *pradhan panch*- he gave us this place to live.' Through their so called social work, local leaders mustered support

and established strong patron-client relationships in the village. In practice, this implied a status quo, with the leaders maintaining their dominant position, as illustrated by a Brahmin woman who was known for her strong sense of justice: 'At that time the landlord made the decisions. The poor people were exploited and they couldn't get justice; the rich got it their way.'

For the village leaders, the importance of this type of patronage was clear. According to the Newar *pradhan panch*, people selected their village *panchayat* leaders by looking at 'the social work they did'. He stressed how roads, bridges and schools were constructed under his leadership: 'From every household a little rice was collected as a contribution to the building of the school and teacher salaries. [...] To encourage people, we gave the contributors a ticket for a charity show in the cinema hall in Biratnagar.' Another *pradhan panch* described his tasks as 'village development and solving conflicts'. Villagers confirmed that development started under the *panchayat* system: 'Before the *panchayat*, [...] the leadership collected taxes and solved conflict, but didn't do anything else. With the *panchayat*, development came.' They added that changes were still limited; most development came with democracy.

The defining characteristic of the *panchayat* system was for the villagers, the 'ban on speaking openly': 'We didn't dare to speak against the government. If the administration came to know, we would be arrested'. A politician added that 'lifting our head to talk about our problems wasn't allowed, it was very strict, and we had to be under them'. Also young people knew stories, like the one of the man who scolded a *pradhan panch*: 'It was reported to the

police station that he had defamed a person in government, and he was arrested'

The *panchayat* regime did not allow political parties either. Both Nepali Congress (NC) and UML were however active underground in Indagru. Villagers who joined a party during the *panchayat* did so because of ideological reasons. A man who became a UML member as a student explained: 'I come from a hard working family of farmers. The communist party supports these families. UML gives equality for all' A woman who joined UML in 1979 had heard 'that NC was a capitalist party, an exploiter party that discriminated against the poor and Dalits [...], while UML looked at everybody equally [...] and supported the poor.' In order not to raise suspicion, party members reportedly 'went to meetings carrying agricultural tools like a spade or a sickle, pretending to be working in the field, because the police was active'. A female UML member especially remembered one police raid where 'some people got injured, others arrested. I went into a tea shop, and sat there quietly. I was safe there.'

Starting with the campaign for the 1980 referendum⁴, parties came more into the open (Burghart, 1996). Local candidates were, as a result, associated with a party. This explains why one of the ward representatives in the late 1980s could say that, 'three [ward representatives] were UML and the rest NC. The *pradhan panch* was NC.'

LOCAL ELECTIONS UNDER DEMOCRACY

With the re-introduction of democracy in 1990, the village *panchayat* was renamed Village Development Committee. NC and UML came above ground, and *Nepal Sadbhavana Party* (hereafter Sadbhavana) and *Rashtriya Prajatantra Party* (RPP) were established (ICG, 2007). All parties actively tried to increase their membership. As one UML member put it, 'If we didn't join a party, they tried to get us to join, so it was easier to get membership.' Another villager had similar experiences with NC leaders: 'Wherever we met, they continued to try to convince me.' In this phase, many villagers explained their choice of party with social rather than ideological reasons. An older farmer chose UML because 'people in the community and my friends were UML. [...] If you are the only NC member it's difficult to exist in that community. I don't know much about the principles, rules and policies of the parties; the community and friends are the most important.' Other villagers chose a party because of their family's involvement. A woman joined NC because 'my whole family [...] were NC members'. She added 'they said that UML didn't have good principles, that it was a communist ideology. I don't know, I haven't done any research, I believed what my father and grandfather said'.

⁴ In this referendum, the Nepalese were asked to choose between continuing the panchayat system, with certain reforms, and adopting multi-party democracy. In the urban centres and the Tarai, a majority voted in favour of multi-party democracy, but the nationwide result was a continuation of the panchayat system (Hutt, 1994).

Over time, also the considerable influence parties gained in different areas of daily life has encouraged people to join. This was illustrated by the fact that villagers in 2009 explained that they needed a recommendation from a politician in order to get a job, both in the public and the private sector. An NC politician explained that she usually gave people a written recommendation, although sometimes she went to see the employer in person. While she said that she recommended people for employment independent of party affiliation; villagers felt that they had to join, or at least openly support a party. A Dalit father demonstrated very clearly how patronage networks, not ideology, were the most important reason to join a party, 'My daughter got the job herself, because of her skills and talents. However, if, in the future, I would need the support of a politician, I would have to join a party.' This quote shows the remnants of the patriarchal society, in the sense that it is the father's and not the daughter's own party membership which would make the difference. Also a young teacher explained that he could not remain politically neutral:

To get a job you need a recommendation from a party. You need not only the letter, but also the support of a strong politician, since it's they who decide who gets the job in the end. [...] Even if you're not a member of a party, they connect you with the party your family or friends belong to. So if your family or friends are NC, you cannot get a recommendation from the Maoists, they would just say that you

are NC. That is one reason why people are encouraged to be involved in politics, it can give you jobs.

In Indagru, UML won the 1992 election and strengthened its majority in 1997. None of RPP's candidates were ever elected, and Sadbhavana never had any candidates. The same UML politician was VDC chairperson for 10 years. His reputation is a combination of respect and apprehension, among others because of his contacts at higher levels. The latter is also the reason why he is still involved in local politics today. According to one of his colleagues, he 'has good contacts with different organisations and in the district, we need his help to get the expected budget'.

In Indagru bazaar and Kholaghar, all the ward chairpersons originated from the hills. In 1992, the ward chairperson selected two assistants himself, while in 1997, villagers in each ward elected four ward members, a measure which led to the further democratisation of the system. Indagru bazaar, a ward dominated by hill migrants, voted in three hill people and one *Madhesi*⁵; while Kholaghar elected two representatives from its two largest indigenous groups, in addition to two hill migrants. In 1997, one in five ward politicians had to be female by law. While ward representatives usually defined their responsibilities as 'solving conflicts and implementing development programmes', the woman representing Kholaghar described hers as 'especially women's welfare'. In Indagru bazaar however, the two female ward members reported that such a gender based division of responsibilities did not exist.

⁵ *Madhesi* here does not include indigenous groups like Khawas and Tharu.

THE MAOISTS

The establishment of the Maoist party

The Indagru wing of the Maoist party was established in 1999, after a labour migrant from Indagru was asked by the Maoists in the Western Region to 'sow the seeds in [his] locality, and make them grow well'. Talking about the party's activities in Indagru during the conflict, he explained:

At the central level, they [...] told us to give trouble to rich people and to the exploiters by asking for money, to give priority to the poor, disturb the government offices and to aim to achieve equality, and cause no trouble for the others. [...] People also say that the Maoists gave trouble to politicians, but that was never a policy, on the contrary, politicians are important in society.

In practice, according to another Maoist leader, this meant that members

...went from village to village to convince people that the party is not for violence, it is for the support of the poor. We moved from *tole* [hamlet] to *tole* and didn't give trouble to the people. Only at the places of the rich people we had food, as well as at the homes of the people with a bad character, or those we came to know were exploiters. We organised gatherings [...] and told people about the policies and principles of the party- that the Maoists wanted to remove capitalism, and get equality and fulfil the requirements of the poor.

All the Indagru Maoist leaders whom I got to know were ex UML. Disillusioned, they

joined the Maoists around 2000. One such leader, Roshan, explained:

UML didn't have a communist ideology anymore. Earlier, UML was working for the poor; it was their support that sent them to the government. It was good for some time, but later, they became the younger brother of NC. NC is capitalist.

Again illustrating the importance of parties as patronage networks, he added: 'Everything is about relationships and friendship.' His colleague supported this strongly, stressing how the party misused its power, 'UML members became selfish; they only 'know' their own relatives, close relationships and not others.' For another, 'UML didn't follow the party policy' anymore. A clear example was the fact that 'the political leaders of UML are too close to NGOs [...]. I experienced that they used the money for themselves, they didn't do good work for the public anymore.' For these and other local Maoist leaders, the Maoist party's agenda was the same as UML's when they joined that party many years ago. I therefore agree with Shneiderman, who based on her fieldwork in Sindhupalchok district states that 'Maoist ideology was nothing new; it was simply attached to a new leadership structure who promised to follow through on their ideological promises in a way that the CPN(ML)⁶ had failed to do' (2009, p.305). In Indagru, a Maoist leader summed it up nicely: 'If the Maoists stop following their principles, again a new party may be formed, with the same principles.'

Maoists in Indagru who joined the party later did not necessarily mention the communist ideology when explaining why they became

⁶ CPN (ML) is the party that later became CPN (UML).

members. They however did share dissatisfaction with the established parties. One of them explained: 'Since my grandfather's time, we've seen [...] many different systems, some with many parties. NC was leading the country but that wasn't satisfactory for us. UML was the same. They didn't do good work for our communities. [...] When the Maoists came, I saw good policies and joined' A Maoist politician, who did not belong to any party before, put it this way:

Earlier there was UML and NC only. The rich people were close to the police [...]. The others couldn't speak with the police openly, not even under democracy. Because of the pressure of the rich, the poor had to say that they had made a mistake, even if that wasn't the case. That changed with the Maoists.

The YCL has in Indagru about 80 members, but they are not very active – most villagers did not know that the YCL existed in their VDC. The Indagru YCL leader defined his responsibility as 'to protect the party [...] and the people'. He also saw a clear link between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the YCL: 'During the conflict, there was the PLA- the Maoist army, but not anymore, so now the YCL has taken over'. Also other Maoists saw the role of the YCL as 'the police of the party' or 'half army'.

Villagers who voted for the Maoists had high expectations. Party members still seemed optimistic in 2009. A Dalit stressed that the Maoists were the only party that 'gives priority to the Dalits and the poor'. According to several other active members, it was the cooperation with other parties which made it difficult to implement the Maoist principles. People who had voted for the Maoists without joining the party seemed

less positive. As one man put it: 'We had hoped that the Maoists would be different, me as well [...]. But now they have become just like the other parties, so we are all disappointed'. Confirming this, a woman added: 'They [also] forgot everything when they came to power'. Several villagers expressed ambivalent feelings. A young Khawas man said that 'with the introduction of the Maoists, a lot of criminals were removed'. At the same time however, he felt that new types of crime had arisen. Another man said that he was not happy because the Maoist government had not done well. He concluded with 'we still support [the Maoists], but we have expectations'.

The conflict as experienced in Indagru

It took time before Indagru was directly confronted with the Maoist insurgency. Many rumours spread from other VDCs, but there was little concrete evidence of what was going on. In the words of a Khawas grandmother:

We were afraid of the Maoists. [...] We had never seen them and we heard that they harmed people, killed and kidnapped. We were wondering how they were: were they demons? Did they really use masks in the jungle? We heard that they only moved at night, that they were monsters. Later, when they came out in the open, we came to know that they were people like us.

Especially young people were afraid, because they heard that one person from every household had to join the Maoists. A young man recounted:

We didn't sleep well, we were afraid. [After a shooting incident] many friends left their house and stayed the whole

night in the field. [In my family] we stayed inside and would run if somebody entered from the front. We didn't have grills in the windows so we could jump out of the window at the back of the house. [...] We all slept in one room. We had some relatives in the Maoists and we asked them to tell us if there would be a movement taking young people from our community, then we would run away. [...] It was difficult to say if they would do so though.

Because of this fear, young men started to migrate to the city or work abroad- a movement which is still growing, albeit because of other reasons. Nobody in Indagru was, however, forced to join the Maoists. Especially after the declaration of the state of emergency⁷, some of the non-Maoists who were arrested and jailed by the police and the army joined the Maoists. A handful of people chose to join the PLA, sometimes attracted by (false) promises. One of them is now a Maoist leader in the VDC, while another returned to Indagru disillusioned. For months, he worked in the jungle, slept under the open sky, and had to beg for food. 'We only got 25 rupees per month pocket money, which we used to phone our family. [...] The 8,000 rupees we had heard about wasn't true'. His conclusion was: 'I learned nothing, except to use weapons, and I earned nothing'.

More well off villagers regularly had Maoists staying with them. For some, like this UML politician, that was a positive experience: 'They helped us on the farm, were very

polite, and talked about sacrificing for the nation. [...] I was surprised how talented and skilful they were. They were knowledgeable, [...] educated and spoke impressively.' Others joined the party based on similar experiences: 'They came here to live, they talked about the Maoists, and I learned that the Maoists support the poor and other backward groups. So I started supporting them.' For others, these visits were scary: 'The Maoists came here with a group of five to ten people and told us to cook food for them. They stayed for one or two nights and we had to provide for them. They also kept things in the house, probably weapons, for a long time. We were afraid.'

Many people wanted to stay neutral, but could not do so because of instances like the ones just described. A Khawas family explained this feeling of being caught in the middle very clearly:

It was difficult to come out of the house, because we lived on the roadside. The Maoists and the army asked nonsense questions. The Maoists suspected that we supported the army, and the army suspected us of supporting the Maoists. When we answered a question with 'I don't know', they said 'why don't you know?' and they could charge if we became nervous. We were always afraid, of the Maoists *and* the army. We answered honestly to the army but still they could charge. And they would enter the house to investigate.

A young Khawas man confirmed this, saying:

⁷ In November 2001, following Maoist attacks on the police, and for the first time, also on the army, the government declared a state of emergency. This implied the full deployment of the army (Whelpton, 2008, p.218) and led to an escalation of the conflict.

When the Maoists were in our village [...] we kept our distance, we were afraid that they would kidnap us [...]. But also the police were cruel. It was not allowed to make groups at that time. When we were 5-10 people, the police beat or arrested us, without investigation, because they thought that we were allied with the Maoists. We tried to be in groups of twos and threes in the evening and not alone, because we were afraid of the Maoists *and* the army. Both sides charged without investigation.

The richest families had to contribute to financing the Maoist movement. Some were told to give tractors of rice, others cash or services. The owner of a private clinic explained: 'I had to pay the Maoists to secure my life. And I had to give free treatment and medicine to them.' These demands were often supported by threats: 'They also threatened to murder me. Then I talked to other Maoists and coordinated with them. I had to pay some money and we made a compromise.' I later learned that it was the local Maoist leader Roshan who helped him out. This was his side of the story:

I was against asking money from the rich. [...] I tried to stop it. This gave me a good reputation in the VDC, I gave protection. The doctor⁸ was told that he had to give 2 *lakh* [200,000 Nepalese rupees] or he would be kidnapped. He came to me and asked me what to do, how would I protect him? I said not to worry, I was with him, and nothing happened. His family will always remember me.

This protection mechanism worked both ways. Roshan was well respected in the VDC. He was known as a UML member and a real social worker:

I was underground for only 21 days. I could move openly because I was involved in so many organisations, they saved me. I wasn't known as a Maoist, the police didn't have any proof. I protected people, and they protected me. There would have been more violence if I hadn't been here.

Roshan got support for this vision from other Maoists in the VDC. One of them said: 'My friends didn't let me know about violent activities. They knew that if I would be there, [...] I would try to stop them.' In his usual thoughtful way, he added: 'During the conflict, [many people] sacrificed for the party, they became martyrs. But [we] did the work well, in an intelligent way. We should do good work for the party but it's not compulsory to die for the party.' He added that he did not agree with the burning of government buildings either. These ideas were however not appreciated by higher levels of the party, as he illustrated:

[When they came], they asked if I didn't know the policy of the party? We want to make a new Nepal by destroying the government property. I said that we can't destroy everything, we have to keep something; it could be used. We could burn the papers in the office [instead of] the building. I explained very well what I meant, but these are the party policies. They should however listen to the people's opinions as well.

⁸ Medical staff are often referred to as doctors, even when they are not.

Also in the party at VDC level, such views did not seem popular. After the peace agreement, Roshan continued to focus on development work, saying 'we should follow the Maoist principles and policies, but in other ways, not violently.' This has certainly earned him a good name in the area, where even villagers who are strongly anti Maoist respect him and his work. Roshan however does pay a price for this within the party: 'It's therefore that I don't have a high post in the Maoists, that I'm not being promoted [...]. But it's better this way, because of my principles I have a good reputation, and I want to do social work.'

In 2002, the state bodies shut down in Indagru to a certain extent. Because the VDC secretary worked from Biratnagar until after the peace agreement, he asserted that: 'we didn't get so much work done in the VDC; it was difficult to have contact with the people'. Also the police moved elsewhere. Schools however remained open, and so did the health station.

THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY ELECTION

In the constituency of which Indagru is a part, the 2008 election was won by UCPN(M), who defeated UML with a small margin. In Indagru, according to UML, their party however had more votes than the Maoists: 'We can know because of the election booths, they are counted separately by VDC.'

While UML in 2009 was still a strong party in Indagru, it had lost many members to UCPN(M). I noted earlier that the Maoist leaders in the VDC were former UML. Another ex UML member added: 'When I joined the Maoists, under my coordination,

90 other [UML] people joined as well.' According to UCPN(M)'s VDC leader, towards the end of 2009, the party had between 125 and 130 active members and about 500 general members. *Madhesi Janadhikar Forum* (hereafter referred to as Forum) had about 100 active and 200 general members. According to the local Forum leader, supporting his party was not yet generally accepted: 'Some people support the party but ask me not to tell anybody.' They are among other business men who are afraid that their business will suffer. The membership lists of NC and UML were, because of the aforementioned party changes, outdated. Indagru's NC leader said: 'With the Maoist movement, many people were puzzled; it's difficult to know who is still an NC member.'

The support for the Maoists was interpreted in different ways in Indagru. As at the national level, threats and violence were a common explanation. An independent older politician said 'the Maoists only won because they threatened the people to vote for them, they made them afraid'. Within UML it was said that 'UML members joined the Maoists by threat'. A Forum leader added that 'the Maoists had weapons, and the other parties didn't'. A Khawas woman illustrated, however, that things had been expressed more subtly during the election campaign: 'The Maoists said that they would give peace and facilities if they were elected, and that there would be war again if they were defeated'. A UML social worker confirmed this: 'People wanted peace and that's why they voted for the Maoists. [...] People said, let's see, even if we don't get any benefits, if we get peace, that's enough.' The fact that people voted for the Maoists because of a combination of hope and fear was also

Tamang's (2009) conclusion, based on his fieldwork in Kavre district. Their strength and possible use of violence was according to some villagers also what attracted people to the Maoists:

When people have enemies among relatives or friends, or are disappointed with them, they join the Maoists [because] they are involved in violence, and the people are afraid of their name if the person is a Maoist. So to take revenge they become a member of the Maoists, like my nephew for example. Amongst us brothers we have a case of property division, and because of that we don't have a good relationship. So he joined the Maoists to give me trouble.

Many people would agree with this middle aged non-politically active woman: 'We voted for the Maoists. We had seen the government run by many parties; we wanted to see the government run by the Maoists now.' She in fact paraphrased the Maoist election slogan: 'You've tried the others time and again, try the Maoists this time' (Gellner, 2009, p.2). I can of course not rule out that there have been threats, but I feel that this is too easy an explanation for the success of the Maoists in the VDC. As mentioned before, many people made an informed decision and have well articulated reasons for joining or supporting the Maoists. There has, in addition, not been any election related violence in Indagru.

Other local explanations for the Maoist victory in the constituency focused on why the other parties did not do well. This was the NC VDC chairman's analysis:

NC [...] didn't select a good candidate. This person had to write the constitution, they also had to be from

other ethnic groups, but NC selected a Brahmin, that was a bad choice. That caused a lot of trouble, and no good confidence.

He was supported by another NC leader, who said: 'The NC candidate wasn't liked. The Koirala family gets the candidate, but others are also capable, why don't they get a chance? It was selfish of the Koirala family, that's why people went against the candidate.' He went on about the UML candidate: '[He] had been elected [...] before, but we could not see good work, so he wasn't liked and thus defeated'. Forum in Indagru, established only just before the election, is hopeful to do well next time, when there is more time for campaigning.

In addition to these party political reasons, other explanations were also given. A Khawas former PLA analysed the election campaign by comparing it to previous elections:

In this community, a candidate got close to [...] one leader of the community, and provided the community with alcohol and meat through him. They did that before the election, and got votes from the whole community. [...] Today it's very different. Wives don't even follow their husbands' advice anymore. [...] It is difficult to say who the *tole* voted for, there are many small groups. [...] During the campaign, NC and UML looked for the leaders, for the big people, the rich in the community and tried to convince them, while the Maoists went to individuals, to everybody.

This Maoist attention to the individual has definitely played a role. Maoist election promises seem to have been more targeted,

often at groups that had not received much attention earlier. One young Khawas woman had heard the Maoists say 'that they would provide food to the poorest people', and another said 'I am a member of a religious group and they promised us loudspeakers'.

THE FUNCTIONING OF THE VDC TODAY

At the height of the Maoist conflict, the local government in Indagru had difficulties functioning. One important reason was that the VDC secretary, as mentioned earlier, worked from Biratnagar after a Maoist attack on the VDC office. This implied that VDC meetings, which were now held outside Indagru, were irregular for about four years. Besides, the national government decided not to extend the term of the elected local bodies, which ended in July 2002. Instead, based on instructions from the government, a committee was formed consisting of the civil servant in charge of the health station, the veterinary in charge of the area, and the government appointed VDC secretary. The medical officer described his role as limited: 'My task was only to support the decisions by the VDC secretary. The proposals came from the political bodies to the VDC, then I was called- to agree if it was good and to propose suggestions when needed' The then VDC secretary confirmed that it was difficult to work this way.

In 2004, after new instructions from the government, a committee consisting of one representative each of UML, NC, RPP and Sadbhavana, the four political parties registered in Indagru at the time, was formed instead. According to the VDC secretary, this

worked quite well and 'compromise was reached easily.' The ongoing conflict however complicated the work: 'Sometimes we had to make decisions secretly because of the Maoists.'

Today, the VDC secretary makes decisions after consulting the Multi Party Committee, which consists of three representatives of each of the five political parties registered in Indagru: Forum, NC, Sadbhavana, UCPN(M) and UML. The Multi Party Committee was introduced in 2006 and is chaired by a senior NC politician, although at least one member meant that 'the VDC secretary is the chairperson'. While the seniority of the NC politician is given as the main reason why he was selected as chairperson, also ethnicity and inter party dynamics played a role. In the words of the UML chairperson:

Firstly, he is senior in many different ways. Secondly, in Indagru, [there are many] Khawas. They would think that they were dominated [if he wasn't the chairperson] [...]. And thirdly, the Maoists didn't want a UML chairperson, and UML didn't want a Maoist chairperson. Both parties thought it was better to give that post to NC.

The Multi Party Committee meets when called by the VDC secretary. In the second half of 2009, there was however no meeting for several months after some of the members signed a Maoist initiated agreement to boycott the meetings. Some say this was because of a disagreement about road construction, while according to others it was because one of the members misbehaved at a meeting. According to a

UML member, there was at that time ‘a committee consisting of all the parties trying to find a compromise.’ Discussions in the Multi Party Committee are in general often heated, especially between Maoist and UML representatives. According to one member, when they do not agree, ‘fight is [always] a possibility’.

According to the VDC secretary, the cooperation with the Multi Party Committee poses one of the biggest challenges in his job: ‘The political activities make my work difficult because the different parties have different ideas. [...] Some political parties threaten the VDC for contributions.’ Many villagers do not know how the VDC works today. Those who do, agree that the structure with elected representatives worked better. According to an experienced politician, referring to the fact that there is no VDC chairperson and vice chairperson, ‘without parents it’s difficult to run a family.’ A teacher put it this way: ‘When we had elected representatives, they did good work because they had promised the people to do so, and they were thinking about the next election. Now they aren’t.’ An older social worker agreed, saying ‘the members of this committee [...] have occupied the post that earlier was occupied by the VDC chairperson, which otherwise is difficult to get. They now have the power and therefore support this system.’ And while a retired UML politician was of the opinion that ‘corruption had increased, now that there are no elected people at the VDC level’, a current Forum member of the Multi Party Committee thought that there was less corruption because five parties were involved instead of two. He, however, did

not think that the Multi Party Committee was working better than the previous system. Putting his right hand flat on the table, fingers spread, he pulled every finger in a different direction, saying:

In the VDC today, all parties are pulling in different directions. It’s difficult to work, we are unable to unite. Earlier, when there was a VDC chairperson, he was pulling in one direction [showing how one hand pulled the other, fingers closed, in one direction].

A local health staff described eloquently how the current system affected the villagers:

Earlier, [...] there was the elected ward chairperson, and people knew ‘we elected him’. [...] He led the whole ward, he informed, gave messages. [...] Today it’s very different. Who is responsible? Some people know and some don’t. [...] The politicians at the VDC level have decided who is responsible for each ward, but the people don’t know and we don’t see results. Before we were informed, we could just talk to the ward chairperson and get information. That’s difficult today.

The post 2002 situation is, in other words, characterised by a lack of transparency and accountability. While elected ward representatives earlier formed the link between the villagers and the VDC leadership, power today is concentrated in the hands of appointed party members at VDC level. It should be added that the Multi Party Committee apparently works relatively well in Indagru. According to several of its members, the VDCs in the area ‘all look towards Indagru as a good example’.

It is important to note that all of the five parties have three representatives each in the Multi Party Committee, even though there are large differences when it comes to their support in the VDC. UCPN(M) and UML have similar numbers of supporters in Indagru. Until 2002, NC however, had only two representatives at the VDC level, while UML had the nine others. Sadbhavana today has a decision power it has never had before, since the party never had elected representatives in Indagru. According to its VDC leader Forum enjoys growing support in a number of wards. What is important though is that Sadbhavana and Forum look at themselves as 'the same'. According to the VDC Sadbhavana leader, 'they are both Madhesi parties, there is no difference; they are just established with different names'. The Forum leader sees the only difference as 'when you slap Sadbhavana on the right cheek, they will ask you to slap the other cheek as well. If you slap Forum, they will fight back'. With regard to the Multi Party Committee, this means that Forum and Sadbhavana together control more than one third of the votes, which is more than the strongest party in the VDC.

In addition to the Multi Party Committee, there is still a smaller higher level committee which takes over 'if the Multi Party Committee can't do the work, or solve the situation'. In the end of 2009, this committee consisted of the five party leaders.

Until 2002, the elected representatives at VDC and ward level decided on the use of the yearly VDC budget. Today, a council is formed every year to take on this role:

The council is a group consisting of intellectuals, representatives of

government offices and organisations, political parties, and the VDC secretary, who is the secretary of the council. The council has at least one person from every ward. It's not compulsory to have all the parties represented. When the budget comes, we invite people for a gathering where the council is formed. There is no limit on the number of members. [...] After discussion, its proposal is passed on to the Multi Party Committee and implemented. [...] We started forming the council this way after the 12 point agreement [in November 2005].

CONCLUSION

Looking at 50+ years of leadership and politics in Indagru, both continuity and change become apparent. Because of the absence of local elected bodies since 2002, we can distinguish between a pre and a post 2002 period. Regarding the former, the most striking change since the Rana years was the increase in the number of village leaders. Villagers pointed at the introduction of ward representatives as the most important element of local governance, showing very clearly that to bring decision making processes closer to the people, this aspect should be strengthened. Other aspects of local leadership and the associated relations of authority remained relatively unchanged, even after the reintroduction of multiparty democracy. Elected ward leaders defined their responsibilities as development and conflict solving, in much the same way as in the village *panchayat*. They often termed their tasks 'social work', a concept which has clear links with the political parties' role as patronage networks, representing a new

set of unequal power relations. Concerning the role of politicians in mediation practices, both elected representatives and other villagers however expressed reservations, and more research is required on this issue (see also Hachhethu 2008). Also the combination of fear and respect for elected politicians was still in place in the 1990s, even though the balance had changed. Since the element of fear was linked to the contacts these politicians had at district and national level, it was absent with regard to ward politicians.

The post 2002 situation is, however, very different. Until the signing of the peace agreement, the Maoists obstructed the functioning of the alternative governmental bodies put in place by the central government. Today, the party is one of the five parties represented in the Multi Party Committee that leads Indagru VDC. In contrast to the pre 2002 situation, villagers have however not been involved in the selection of today's VDC leaders. They feel that this has led to a lack of accountability.

While they previously would go to the ward chairperson with any questions, today, they do not know whom to approach. The current system tightens the political parties' grip on the local society – even giving certain parties a power they have never had before and most probably will never have in the future. It also increases villagers' party dependence. Villagers feel that they will only have an accountable local government when they themselves will have elected the ward and VDC representatives. They are, in other words, waiting for local elections. The state restructuring process, in which local elected representatives should play an important role, may take time. After almost ten years without elected representatives, there is an urgent need to restore local democracy through the organisation of local elections before the planned federal structure is in place. This should preferably be by the spring of 2012. That way, in the words of an older Khawas, 'there will be an elected chairperson and we will again have a guardian of the VDC.'

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