



*Editorial*

# Decline in the Moral Foundations of Nepali Politics



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## Highlights

- Latest political development in Nepal prominently displays sheer deviation from the minimum political ideology, values and morality.
- Rise of the government has sublimed the morality dimension, especially with a tapering sense of political morality of the head of the government.
- Nepal has been influenced by its neighbours and vice-versa in terms of missing an important consideration to keep people's concerns before the interests of the politicians.
- When the party leaders avoid listening to and addressing reasonable disagreement (even from within the party), the morality of the government starts slithering.
- Often, the 'coterie of cronies' stands defensively of the government decisions irrespective of their own moral judgement of right or wrong.
- The key players in the government live with an illusion that their 'inner circle' are the only people with good faith and they wonder whether critical voices from within the party and government reflect a position bias.
- What Nepali politics needs urgently now is to chalk a return path to inclusive and participatory politics.
- The lost morality in Nepali politics can be revived and rejuvenated by adopting some apt measures.

The quotation from the 19th-century British politician John Edward Acton "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" turns out to be true vividly, like everywhere else, in Nepali political discourse as well, time and again. An advisory note for the

readers is that the word 'corrupt' here refers to the deviant character and/or behaviour from the minimum political ideology, values and morality. This has become more prominent in the latest political development in the country, which has, as media persons citing

political analysts and critics put it, not only shifted the focus of the government away from the COVID19 pandemic (Gyawali, 2020; Pradhan, 2020; Giri & Pradhan, 2020; Pradhan & Giri, 2020) but largely led to the public hatred towards the so-called ‘stable’ communist government (Bhattarai, 2020; Giri, 2020, Ranjitkar, 2020). Though there are many causes, one candidly expressed in social media and ‘mainstream’ media is the tapering sense of political morality of the head of the government (Gyawali, 2020; Giri, 2020, Chaudhary, 2020; The Record, 2020a), which has produced distrust at all levels. Moreover, it should not be ignored that the desires of the oppositions or in-groups, who are not given a respectable share in the power-sharing, can find this murky space fertile. Whatsoever might be the consequence – often political resettlements are possible with some ‘give and take’ within the party or some ‘neighbourly counsel’ (to use a soft term) from China and/or India, the current scenario reflects a sharp decline in the moral foundations of Nepali politics.

Political morality is “the practice of making moral judgments about political action, and the study of that practice” (Thompson, 2019, p. 1). In fact, morality

has become a constant political problem across the globe, and thus morality politics generally is a far-cry. However, like in every field, there are certain minimum moral foundations as norms of political morality that govern a political course of action (Bhargava, 2019). Every political action is supposed to take place within a moral framework of ethical ideals and moral considerations (Wax, 2015). Therefore, scholars (e.g. Miles & Vaisey, 2015; Mitchell-Yellin, 2019; Simpson, 2017) have always rummaged on the possible relationship between politics and morality and largely resorted to Haidt and Graham’s (2007) moral foundations theory that outlines five core psychological intuitions (i.e., care vs. harm, fairness vs. cheating, loyalty vs. betrayal, authority vs. subversion, and sanctity vs. degradation). Likewise, some eastern scholars advocate using eastern values based on Hinduism – covering four primordial embodiments (i.e. *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kaam* and *Moksha*) and five practices (i.e. *Satya*, *Ahinsa*, *Astaya*, *Aparigraha* and *Brahmacharya*) (Gupta, 2016, Parihar, Parihar, & Sharma, 2018 ). Though not firmly grounded on moral foundations, Chanakya’s four-fold path for governance (i.e. *Saam* (appeal / persuade), *Daam* (incentivize / purchase), *Dand* (punish/penalise) and

*Bhed* (discriminate/exclude) (as cited in Venkatesh, 2013) and the witty saying “The ends justify the means” are also popular political guidelines, which seem to supersede all other moral foundations in the conduct of a government. Whatever might be the ‘principled’ foundations of morality, everyone has a set of socio-politically accepted minimum norms that bind that individual together with the group – in a given political context.

Unlike popular expectation that with the rise of the government, morality should increase, in recent Nepali political stage, the rise of the government has sublimed the morality dimension. In fact, this idea holds true across governments (Dorn, 1996). When we observe the political scenario surrounding our neighbours in South Asia, we can understand how ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ are sacrificed to achieve political gain – and which in turn has become part of the political culture (Rana, 2017). In Nepal, political parties are ‘too’ springy in making coalitions (electoral or governmental), even with political forces that stand in stark contrast in terms of ideology and are obnoxious to each other at ordinary times. Moreover, even the major political parties (that were expecting to rule the country after the election) also

fielded some candidates with certain taints (e.g. convicted of murder and facing trial). In the Indian political context, leaders often engage in name-calling and finger pointing on the weaknesses of the other party and use the language of politics which is the lowest of the lows instead of discussing the agenda of public concerns (Thakur, 2019) and thus the decline of political morality is the main disease of the Indian political system (Srivastava, 2013). Similarly, politicians in Pakistan are, like elsewhere, morally weak, who are instead deeply submerged in mutual hatred and infighting over petty matters and keeping Pakistan wobbly (Raja, 2018). Fazli (2018) observes that the Bangladesh government’s moral authority is also declining. In such a political environment, one should not be taken by surprise when they observe an increasing trend of impunity, moral decay and people with certain blemishes getting political backing. This indicates that Nepal has been influenced by its neighbours and vice-versa in terms of missing an important consideration to keep people’s concerns before the interests of the politicians.

Given the scenario above, it is not uncommon that when a person with legitimate authority cannot save

themselves from the abuse of authority, “it fills them with destructive pride” (Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely, n.d.). When this happens with the key players in the national politics, the consequence is atrocious in two major ways: a) their thus-far earned credibility and images are dirtied, and the entire country suffers due to likely political liquescency. In fact, governing rules do give space for the authority to do wrong (Osiel, 2019) and stepping on this premise, the authority may “employ them in an undesired fashion widely deemed reprehensible” (p. 6) and that more often than not the ruling party (and currently, the head of the Council of Ministers) seems to be the key player in misusing them (The Record, 2020). However, it is the responsibility of the ruling party leaders to listen to critics more seriously. When the party leaders avoid listening to and addressing reasonable disagreement (even from within the party), the morality of the government starts going downhill. In this situation, the government still enjoys political legitimacy but sans morality. Here, it is to be noted that in some morally conflictual situations, politicians do wrong in order to do right – which leaves them with ‘dirty hands’ (De Wijze, 2019). It appears that the rulers have tried to change the political course

in accordance with their ease, whims and fancies. Moreover, the ruling party or a few power elites perform such actions usually to protect their power. However, when self-protection becomes more important than the work for the public good, their credibility, connections with people, and risk-taking ability all collapse (Ely, Meyerson, & Davidson, 2006). This seems to be the current reality of Nepali rulers, who have largely failed to show that politics was a selfless service to the masses. This reflects the sharp decline in political morality, in other words, political morality is in its deathbed. In such a situation, when the cabinet members, the ruling party and the opposition leaders cannot speak candidly, the worst is bound to happen – entire political landscape suffers, which inevitably dwindles the moral foundation of Nepali politics.

In retrospect, De Wijze (2019) raises a relevant question: are politicians so stupid that they are in fact not aware of the public views of their actions and thus they continue acting in ways that the general public perceives as irrational, irrelevant, ill-timed, and deeply problematic? The answer should be ‘no’. However, we have observed that the seemingly good politicians have often turned more power monger, self-serving,

and 'legitimacy seeker' (although they already have it) once they are in power. In totality, they lose "political honesty" and thus they rarely, if ever, accept responsibility for their bad actions (De Wijze, 2019) – leading to the loss of the sense of accountability as well. This has led them to devise secret strategies within the party, sometimes in counsel with their small 'coterie of cronies' to garner support for the protection of their position. The practices of influencing the heads of key constitutional bodies (at best, trying to fill these with those who toe the line of the party in government or those who can donate a substantial amount to the party/leaders are not new to Nepali state governance. Similarly, the tradition of having a small 'coterie of cronies' (with selected party leaders and pro-party advisors) is as old as democracy in Nepal. Independent critics equally blame that cronyism is the best word to describe current Prime Ministers' legacy in office (Gyawali, 2020). When the 'kitchen cabinet' (council of select ministers) and their counsel room are full of 'yes-people', the cabinet head is prone to be 'autocratic' and thus deliberate abuse of power and disregard to the rule of law become their new moralities.

As of today, we have observed that the 'coterie of cronies' (also the 'close circle') are compelled to live with a false sense of morality and that they are bound to dovetail with the party leaders to get the latter's support (The Tablet, 2019) for their career growth. And thus, the 'close circle' always stands defensively of the government decisions irrespective of their own moral judgement of right or wrong. They often have to shout out that the 'wrong' is right until they can resist the public critic or critical voices from within. In fact, they have some kind of temporary legitimacy to use force (Bhargava, 2019) against valid critical voices, but that is counter-effective in the long run. This temporary legitimacy also entices those key players to mistake that they have all the right to do wrong as long as that seems to benefit them; derailing them from practising democratic politics which requires "collective decisions that are legitimately binding on all citizens" (Thompson, 2019, p. 6). In such an intricate political conspiracy, "The internal moral compass that normally guides individual behaviour will no longer function" (Dorn, 1996, p. 3). This further illusions the key players in the government that their 'inner circle' are the only people with good faith and that they wonder whether critical voices from

within the party and government (but out of the close circle) reflect a position bias. Moreover, they see public comments as opposition-led or sponsored by foreign donors, and thus try to see the distorted reality and also consider it a 'single reality'. In the current context where the alleged tension between politics and morality are spreading in Nepali politics, it can safely be argued that there's hardly any inner connections between politics and morality now.

At this juncture, the question arises: what next? The answer is not straightforward, but it unsurprisingly involves that the ruling party should be disillusioned that the government is not someone's 'personal fiefdom' (Mendus, 2009) and that it must not undermine parliament (Rana, 2017). Moreover, what Nepali politics needs urgently now is to chalk a return path to inclusive and participatory politics, which respects the rule of law for the benefit of people, not a few politicians, and a refocus on the central agenda of the people (as of now, it is fighting the COVID19) rather than pluses and minuses in party politics. Similarly, executive head's counsel room should be filled with people who are reflective and critical, rather than those who tend to respond defensively on every single occasion. Moreover, when a

leader's moral goodness is questioned, they should give space for thoughtful dialogue than being irrationally defensive.

I conclude this editorial with an affirmative note that "ethics in politics is possible – and it pays off" (Girardin, 2012, p. 10), so morality politics do exist. Although we may not expect morality politics from the existing heads of major political parties, revamping the party structures, meritocratic selection in the constitutional bodies, empowering the parliament, and strict adherence to the rule of law and 'evidence-informed policymaking' (Dhakal, 2019) will ensure that the lost morality in Nepali politics can be revived and rejuvenated.

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## Editor Biosketch

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