
AdvocacyNet
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NEPALIS ABROAD DEMAND THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN JUNE ELECTIONS

March 12, 2007, Washington DC: The North American Nepali diaspora has launched an online petition demanding that Nepalis living abroad be given the right to vote in key constituent elections in Nepal this June.

The petition is addressed to the Prime Minister of Nepal, Girija Prasad Koirala. It describes the forthcoming elections as a “crucial moment” in Nepal’s history because the elected assembly will write a new permanent Constitution and so “pave the way for an inclusive and full-fledged democracy.” But, it says, Nepalis abroad are unable to vote under the existing electoral regulations.

“This is unfair and unjust. The right to vote is a fundamental right that should be given to all Nepali citizens, regardless of where they live,” says the petition.

The initiative comes at a time of uncertainty in Nepal itself. Last year’s peaceful revolution held out great promise to minorities, indigenous groups, and communities like the Dalit, which suffer from social exclusion.

But the interim political structures are too weak to accommodate their demands. This became clear in January after the local (Madhesi) population launched protests in the impoverished Terai region bordering on India. The protests were suppressed with violence and catapulted the Madhesis into the front rank of those demanding a greater say in Nepal’s political future. Advocates for the Dalit also demonstrated recently in front of the Prime Minister’s residence, demanding greater participation.

Advocates for minorities feel that the new constitution is more likely to ensure their rights if they are fully represented in the new assembly. They are concerned that only 205 of the 425 members will be elected by proportional representation.

Disagreement over the assembly has delayed a new election law, and there is concern that the election may even be postponed – putting further strain on the fragile political consensus. After pledging to work within the political process, the Maoists have caused anger by appearing reluctant to hand in their weapons and demobilize. King Gyanendra further enflamed public opinion with a recent speech justifying his dictatorship.

The elections would certainly be harder to organize if the vote is extended to hundreds of thousands of Nepalis living abroad. But Dinesh Tripathi, a lawyer who lives in Baltimore and took the lead in organizing the petition, described the right to vote as “sovereign.” He added that many internationally-supported elections - most recently those in Iraq - have encouraged foreign voting in an effort to build legitimacy.

Others point out that the petition is drawing support from across the spectrum of Nepalese society. It is co-sponsored by the [Nepali-American Society for Oppressed Community \(NASO\)](#) which represents Dalit in America, and by a prominent student organization (the Society of Ex-Budhanilkantha Students-North America (SEBS)).

As well as seeking signatures the petitioners will lobby the United Nations, which is supporting the June elections. The UN Mission in Nepal hopes to deploy a team of specialists and 140 UN Volunteers during the elections. But the Mission recently had its budget reduced from \$10 million to \$9.5 million.

UN officials also say that Nepal's traditional donors have yet to make significant pledges, beyond offering ballot boxes, and the diaspora advocates are calling for a much greater political and financial commitment from the international community. Otherwise, they say, Nepal's experiment in democracy may collapse.

The Advocacy Project has been asked to recruit several interns this summer by its two Nepalese partners, the Collective Campaign for Peace and the Jagaran Media Center, which will both be actively involved in the elections.

- To sign the petition, visit <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/323/504/904/>
- To contact Dinesh Tripathi email dineshtri@gmail.com
- For the NASO website, visit <http://nasocommunity.org/>
- For news about civil society in Nepal visit the International Dalit Solidarity Network <http://idsn.org/country-information/nepal/>

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