



Human rights, elections and young people

4 July 2007

I am very happy to be here today at this very important initiative. The Alliance for Peace are doing essential work in raising awareness, building capacity, and encouraging young people to participate in politics in a constructive, meaningful and peaceful way. So often images of youth in politics are presented very negatively.

The right to participation is one of the key principles with regard to electoral and political processes. Young people like yourselves will be the leaders of the future. You are among the stakeholders of the peace process, and you should have an important role in shaping the political agenda. But only too often young people are sidelined or marginalized. Participation of young people often risks being tokenism rather than meaningful. I wonder how many of you were consulted in the drafting of the CPA or the Interim Constitution.

At the same time, the question of participation of young people under 18 in political activities is a sensitive one. The right to participation is one of the core child rights. They have a right to hold opinions, though this is frequently not recognized by adults. But they must not be forced to do so, or be manipulated into participating in political activities through offers of food, money or other items. It must be a free choice, and with parental consent for the younger ones. Also on the question of young people under 18, we are concerned about how much education has been interrupted so many times over the past years, including now through *bandhs*. Taking children/young people from schools during the day, and closing schools to hold political meeting impinges on the right to education of the children. School activities and education must not be disrupted further because of political or electoral activities.

The principle of non-violence underpins all human rights. Youth wings of political parties have a very important role to play in the electoral

process: in raising awareness amongst young people about political issues and the electoral process; in advocating for issues affecting young people to be included on the electoral agenda and in the new constitution. But the temptation to resort to violence for young people to pursue their objectives is great. We have already seen clashes at times between the student wings of different parties. Resorting to violence, threats and intimidation to disrupt the political activities of others whose opinions one does not agree with is contrary to the rights of freedom of opinion, association and assembly. These are the methods of the old Nepal which should not have a place in the much talked about new Nepal. Such methods will do nothing to empower youth. They risk marginalizing young people further. As student activists and leaders, you can promote dialogue and trust to resolve differences; ensure that political leaders organizing rallies and demonstrations take responsibility for ensuring that their supporters do not resort to violence. The peace process is at a critical phase, with risks of further violence especially in the Terai. It is essential that young people are not drawn into that violence.

In this regard I would like to return to the question of young people under 18. As I have already said, they have a right to participate in political activities in principle. But they should not be put at risk and allowed to take part in rallies and demonstrations if they risk being exposed to physical harm. During the rallies in Gaur, we saw film footage of very young children heading the MPRF procession. One of the 27 CPN-M cadres killed that day was a 17-year-old girl. During the April 2006 Janaandolan, many of those injured by stones, batons and bullets were young people under the age of 18. The State has an obligation to protect those under 18. Adults, including you as student leaders, have a duty to protect them also. There also remains the challenge of helping those under 18 who were recruited into armed groups return and reintegrate into their communities.

The State, indeed, has the obligation to protect the rights of its citizens, including the rights to freedom of assembly, association and opinion and ensuring free and fair elections. Creating the conditions for the elections requires leadership, building trust and dialogue, including with young people. It requires addressing discrimination and promoting acceptable representation of the different sectors of Nepalese society. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement recognizes that no-one must be discriminated against on the basis of age. But I wonder whether anyone has put any thought into what that means and how the provision should be implemented. And what should be the mechanisms for ensuring the inclusion of young people in policy and decision-making process at government level?

Coming out of ten years of conflict is not easy and poses many challenges, including for young people who participated in or suffered

the impact of the conflict. The peace process, the electoral process and the drafting of a new Constitution by the Constituent Assembly should provide a unique chance for young people to help shape the Nepal of the future. Many young people will be voting for the first time and they need information to understand the process and what they are voting for. Young people like yourselves have a very important role in raising awareness and advocating for greater inclusion in the process. They should be given the opportunity by the Government, by political parties and others to express their views and be heard. In being given that opportunity, young people must nevertheless respect the rights and opinions of others.

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