

Oli-led Government-30: Laying Foundation Of Airport In Pokhara Siddhi B Ranjitkar

On the first day of Vikram New Year 2073 (April 13, 2016), Prime Minister KP Oli laid the foundation stone of the regional international airport in Pokhara. The Chinese government was to provide the required resources for this airport: 25% in grant and the rest in soft loan. Leaders of other political parties were present in the event. The airport would be ready within four years of the laying of the foundation stone if it were not to live with the fate of other nationally important projects in the past. No matter who laid the foundation stone the destiny of the previous huge development projects had been either never taken off or had taken unimaginably long time to complete.

On April 13, 2016, Prime Minister KP Oli laid the foundation stone for the construction of the Pokhara regional international airport. In his foundation-stone-laying speech, Mr. Oli said that unlike the previous nationally important projects this project would complete within the project period. Thus, he hinted at most of the projects were not completed in time. He was confident in completing the project within the four years of the estimated project period. His dream might come true if he would be in power for the coming four years in view of the history of the past projects.

However, this time, the destiny of the project might be different from that of the previous projects, as leaders of other political parties also were present in laying the foundation stones of the projects. Every one of them laid a brick to the foundation. They had apparently taken the ownership of the project in other words they would not work against this project, as did the former leaders to the earlier projects. They would be held accountable for the completion of this project.

Speaking at the foundation-stone-laying event, Chairman of UCPN-Maoist Prachanda said that he had requested the Chinese leaders for this project when he visited China as the first Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal in 2008. Thus, Prachanda took great pride in this project. So, he would put his own efforts on making this project a success.

Other leaders such as former Prime Minister Jhalanath Khanal of CPN-UML, newly elected to the office of the general secretary of NC Shashank Koirala, President of RPP-Nepal and Deputy Prime Minister Kamal Thapa, and Chairman of MPRF-D and Deputy Prime Minister Bijaya Gacchedar after each one of them adding one brick to the foundation spoke favorably for completing the project in time. These leaders also would take the responsibility for the completion of this project.

Newly elected General Secretary Shashank Koirala said that his party was not a hurdle to development, large development projects had been politicized in the country in the past, it needed not happen, the news in 'gorkhapatra' of April 14, 2016 stated. Hopefully, newly elected NC leaders had reached the maturity in the politics, and his party would not indulge in the dirty political game in the development projects. Judging from his public statement after getting elected the general secretary, Shashank Koirala had shown the political maturity, as he did not talk anything that looked senseless.

Probably, the project would not suffer at least from the shortage of the funding. Exim (Export-Import) Bank of China would provide Nepal with NPR 22 billions in loan following the agreement reached between China and Nepal when Prime Minister Oli visited China in March 2016, according to the news in 'gorkhapatra' of April 14, 2016. China would provide 25% of the project cost in grant.

The local people had been demanding this airport for forty years. The forty years of the demand of the local people for this airport would be met in four years, as almost all the political leaders had directly or indirectly committed to the success of the project. So, this project was probably destined to complete in time. Hopefully, anybody like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi would not stand in the way of the project work.

Now, let us take a look at the history of the fate of the large projects in the past. The regime change and even the government change had to do with the destiny of the large projects, as the succeeding regime or the government simply did not continue the development projects initiated or launched by the previous government. This had to do with the fear of common folks giving credit of the success of the projects to the discredited regime or government no matter how useful the projects had been for the nation.

For example, the then King Mahendra scraped the north-south road project connecting Kathmandu with Terai launched by the first democratically elected government of NC led by BP Koirala and Ganeshman Singh. BP was the first elected prime minister and Ganeshman was the Minister for Transport and Public works in 1960. The Regional Transport Organization (RTO) started off the digging of the road. In fact the jeep-able road had reached Kavre. Anybody could see the remnants of this road in Kavre even today. RTO was the joint organization of American, Indian and Nepalese governments set up for implementing the infrastructure projects. After murdering the democracy on December 15, 1960, the first thing the democracy-Killer Mahendra did was to cancel the road project, and dissolved the RTO. This was only one of so many people-oriented projects Mahendra truly destroyed.

Then, again Nepalese people reinstated the multi-party democracy tearing down the no-party panchayat system Mahendra introduced in 1990. By that time, Mahendra had gone forever, and his son Birendra had been in the throne. Birendra surrendered the power to the leaders of multi-party political leaders particularly the NC and the CPN-UML leaders. Birendra went to hibernation, as did his ancestors in the past during the Rana family rule.

The interim coalition government of NC and CPN-UML and some representatives of the palace led by Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai had floated the idea of large multi-billion rupees projects in 1990. One of them was the Melamchi Drinking Water Projects. Mr. Bhattarai had even said that he would bring water from the Melamchi River and wash the streets of Kathmandu when Nepalese had not much water for even drinking not to mention for washing clothes and so on. The comedian pair called 'Maha' had correctly and nicely depicted in a comedy the shortage of water in Kathmandu.

The Melamchi Project had failed in bringing water to Kathmandu even in 2016: the latest deadline for the delivery of water to the residents of the Kathmandu Valley. Only the half of the 27 km tunnel had been done so far. When the other half would be done not known yet in the country that was plagued with the Indian blockade, earthquakes and corruption in the State bureaucracy and national politics. This project had lived through the coalition governments of NC, CPN-UML, UCPN-Maoist and currently living under the coalition government of more than a half dozen political parties, and led by the CPN-UML, and UCPN-Maoist leaders.

The preceding NC and CPN-UML coalition government had set the target to complete the project at the latest in the mid 2016 but the current government had pushed it for the next year to complete it giving the reason for the quakes and the Indian blockade that had paralyzed the entire nation. The Oli government could have used 1.2 million liters of petrol China had provided Nepal with gratis for this nationally important project but the corrupt brain of the Nepalese politicians did not work for the good purposes.

This project as other similar large projects had been delayed because in the past (most probably even now) every government and the concerned minister had focused on what and how things could be extracted from the projects rather than doing the job sincerely for completing it as soon as possible.

The destiny of another large project called the Kathmandu-Hetauda fast track highway had been worse than the fate of the Melamchi Project. At least the Melamchi Project had been working and advancing even at the snail's pace but the Kathmandu-Hetauda fast track highway never took off.

The second democratically elected government this time led by Girija Prasad Koirala conceived the idea of the Kathmandu-Hetauda fast track highway in 1991.

The idea of the Kathmandu-Hetauda fast track highway was not entirely new, as the Swiss engineers had recommended such a fast-track highway between Kathmandu and Hetauda that would made vehicles possible to travel from Kathmandu to Hetauda in two hours in the 1950s but the then government opted for the very long highway called 'Byroad' built by the Indian army gratis. The two-hour journey became the daylong journey for the vehicles that also passing through the numerous blind curves risking the lives of passengers and drivers. In fact, many travelers had lost their lives traveling on this road in the initial period of opening this road.

It seemed that this 'Byroad' had been built at no cost to Nepal but the nation had paid tremendously high prices in terms of the fuels, vehicles' wear and tear, long hour journey, and risk to the lives of travelers and transport workers until China built a new Kathmandu-Pokhara highway, and then a Mugling-Narayanghat road that connected the Kathmandu-Pokhara highway to the east-west highway in Terai.

In this context, the Kathmandu-Hetauda fast track highway had drawn the attention of economist, engineers, civil society leaders and sociologists to claim the financial, economical, technical and social benefits of this project even though it cost about NPR 50 billions in 2010 prices. However, none of the government did take any serious action rather even destroyed the private initiative of constructing this highway.

Former president of FNCCI (Federation of Nepal Chambers of Commerce and Industry) Kush Kumar Joshi took the bold initiative to build this highway. He set up a private company with the name suiting to this project. He tried hard to mobilize the resources for this project. He traveled to East Asian countries to meet the billionaire Nepalese and asked them to purchase the shares in the company for building this highway. He even laid the foundation stone for building the highway project, as did Prime Minister Oli for building the airport in Pokhara. Ultimately, Mr. Joshi gave up the idea of building the fast-track highway that had gone to hibernation once again for how long it was hard to predict judging from the corruption prevailing so rampantly at the high level of political parties and the government they set up.

Former Prime Minister Madhav Nepal had laid the foundation stone for building a republic memorial tower at Tundikhel in Kathmandu in 2010 against the decision taken by the previous government led by UCPN-Maoist Chairman Prachanda on building it on the premises of the Narayanhity palace. During the two-year tenure of his government, Madhav Nepal did nothing to build it. Then, the succeeding government had made a decision on building it in the Narayanhity palace compound, according to the media reports. However, nothing had been known about the status of building this republic memorial tower from the media or from the concerned agency.

Another example of never-ending project was the Terai postal roads that had been the subject of discussions at the high level of development experts, economist, and politicians since a long time ago. These roads were called postal roads but they were primarily for connecting the pockets of the agricultural development areas for the farmers to move expediently their products and bringing in the seeds and other agricultural inputs including the light machinery, equipment and tools.

The media reports had been that when Prime Minister KP Oli visited India at the invitation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and after unofficially lifting the blockade imposed on Nepal both the prime ministers had agreed on building the postal roads but the recent news reports were that India had imposed certain terms and conditions on building the postal roads in other words they had been in limbo again.

Nepal had numerous examples of agricultural projects including irrigation, highways, railways, ropeways, hydropower, health, and education projects that had either failed or had been delayed for decades due to the renting-seeking ministers. Probably, this was what Shashank Koirala called politicization of the development.

India did not implement the Karnali Hydro Project even after 18 years the agreement Nepal had reached with India to build it. Prime Minister KP Oli had said that he would raise this issue with his Indian counterpart before leaving Nepal for India but the Nepalese and Indians had nothing to say about it when KP Oli was in India during his State visit and even after return from India, too. India also blocked the building of large hydropower in Nepal with the foreign investment not buying the hydropower even though the Indian States adjoining Nepal had the huge power shortage.

Obviously, India did not want to see Nepal built a large hydropower probably because Indians must have thought that those power potential would fall on the Indian lap as the time passed. So, India simply needed to wait and see. India had already done so to Bhutan. India built huge hydropower plants in Bhutan giving only meager revenue. Bhutan had practically lost its power wealth to India.

When Girija Prasad Koirala became the prime minister in 1991 first thing he did was to fire the senior civil servants charging them as the remnants of the panchayat, and hired the persons with the dubious credentials: many of them were Madheshi Nepalese. Not only that he sent a team of State employees to distribute citizenship certificates to Madheshis that had been Nepalese even quite recently but also he hired them for the police and the State civil services.

Then Girija Koirala went on dismantling the State-owned enterprises in the name of privatization. He sold a brand new Boeing aircraft belonging to Nepal Airlines and rented a very old one only to grab commissions on selling the aircraft and then taking another one in lease. He torn apart the trolley buses running between Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, and the Sajha Bus services to let run the private bus services publicly known as owned by his daughter or relatives. He sold the Bansbari Leather and Shoes Factory to an Indian individual. We did not know what commission he pocketed from selling the factory. Probably, this was the politicization of development what Shashank Koirala meant.

However, Girija Koirala did many good things, too. The private companies flourished. Many unemployed Nepalese went to work in the foreign countries bringing millions if not billions of foreign money to the country and to their families. Freedom of speech and expression had been ensured. Private FM radios, TVs, and newspapers flooded in Nepal. Development process had been conspicuously fast after the fall of the panchayat and its patron the king.

Then, Girija Koirala lost the majority of his party to the CPN-UML in the parliament after the general elections held in 1994. Man Mohan Adhikari became the prime minister but his deputy Madhav Kumar held most of the power. They totally stopped the privatization process. They brought back the life to some of the ailing State-owned industries. Deputy Prime Minister Madhav Nepal launched 'let us build our village ourselves' campaign, and he went on doing the business in the style of 'back to village' campaign launched by the panchayat king. These comrades tried to turn the clock back doing everything possible going against what Girija Prasad and his party had done in three years but the country had reached the point of no return.

After nine months the power went back to the NC and its partner RPP. Sher Bahadur Deuba became the prime minister. This new coalition government did not venture to launch any new large project. Former panchayat people called panchas turned into democrats got the power back in about five years after they lost it. What they needed was money not the services to the people. The development process suffered very much.

The power play went on between the three major political parties such as CPN-UML, NC, and RPP. None of these three political parties had the required majority in the parliament to form a government. RPP had just enough number of votes in the parliament to make one of the two major political parties to have a majority. Only the two of these political parties could garner a majority in the parliament to form a government. CPN-UML leaders had been waiting for its turn to grab the power.

Then, one of the CPN-UML leaders Bamdev Gautam formed a new coalition of his party and the RPP tearing down the coalition government of the NC and the RPP. He set up a new coalition government of CPN-UML and RPP making the former pancha Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand the prime minister of new democratic Nepal. Ignoring the protest of the colleagues against forming a government with CPN-UML, Chanda rode on the shoulder of his deputy Bamdev Gautam and went to the direction Gautam took him. They did not care about the development process but they mainly focused on how to keep the power and how to make money to have sufficient funding for the next elections.

After another general election, the NC got the majority in the parliament. This time, not Girija Prasad Koirala but Krishna Prasad Bhattarai became the prime minister. Bhattarai became the victim of the power play of Girija Koirala. Bhattarai quit the office in favor of Girija not even in year after he became the prime minister. Thus, Girija became the prime minister again.

Then, unfortunately for Girija, somebody destroyed the royalties in the palace. The king, queen, crown prince, and other members of the royal members lost the lives to the killers but the blame went to the crown prince. A very few people believed that the crown prince did the murders' job.

Prime Minister Girija Koirala neither could use the police nor the army to surround the palace to stop the killers from escaping, and to stop any activities that could erase the evidences of the massacre. Rather Girija surrendered everything to the palace people stating it was the business of the palace. Thus, Girija turned over the prerogative of the democratically elected prime minister to the palace, and he weakened the democracy.

How could the prime minister that could not protect the king, queen, and the crown prince, would protect the common folks? Girija had to quit the office. For the second time, Girija lost the power to his subordinate Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Sher Bahadur Deuba became the prime minister for the second time. By this time, Gyanendra became the king and he had been wearing the million-dollar crown in the country of millions of poor people.

Gyanendra had been looking for the opportunity of trying to play the trick of his father Mahendra played in 1960 to seize the power. Deuba became the victim of the conspiracy of Gyanendra to destroy democracy. So, he dissolved the parliament apparently on the advice of Gyanendra opting to hold fresh polls for a new parliament. Naively, Deuba went to the place for postponing the general elections stating the conflict with the Maoist rebels was hardly an environment conducive to holding general elections. That was a great chance for Gyanendra to grab the power, and he fired Deuba stating Deuba was incompetent for holding the polls. The dream of Gyanendra came true. He became a real king. He had everything while millions of Nepalese starved.

First thing what king Gyanendra did was to grab at the State treasury setting aside all development activities. He doubled the budget for his palace from NPR 360 millions to NPR 750 millions. Every large project came to halt. Who could speak against such a mighty king? If anybody dared to speak out against the king s/he had to serve the immediate jail term. Gyanendra sent his army to forcibly take the laptops, PCs, and radio TV equipment of any media company that defied the order of Gyanendra muzzling the press. Thus, Gyanendra became the real king, and the people became his subjects that needed to sing songs in praise of the king. How any large-scale development process could survive when the king was made for ruling the people not for serving them.

Then, Nepalese realized that the king was the main hurdle in the way to the development of the common folks. The only way to remove this mighty wall of obstruction was to tear down the monarchy, as did the people to the German wall in 1989. People's representatives demolished the monarchy and gave 15 days to Gyanendra to vacate the palace in 2008. Gyanendra wisely went to live in the bungalow in the Raniban in Kathmandu leaving behind his mini palace built probably by the public money grabbing the land from the common folks paying peanuts or even nothing for the land currently worth billions of rupees. Thus, Gyanendra saved his life and his family members' lives, too quietly leaving the palace.

After seven years of meticulous work, the representatives of the people gave birth to the people's new constitution. Common folks thought that the political fights had been over; now the task of development process was to begin. Denial of the political rights, economical and social rights had been a thing of the past. So, Nepalese had been free to work hard following the constitution and other laws. Nobody had any chance to take away the power from the people's hands.

Unfortunately, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had been fighting a proxy war against the newly born constitution either through the Nepalese Madheshis or through the international association called EU demanding to make the constitution inclusive ignoring how inclusive his Indian constitution had been that had failed to protect the religious minorities, that made the denial of the fundamental rights of the people to eat beef the constitutional.

Even after the fall of the monarchy and with so much of the perpetual bickering among the political leaders, Nepalese private companies had made tremendous achievement in their businesses. The fast development of the private retailers, of the teaching hospitals, nursing schools, engineering schools, and poultry farms to name a few had the examples of how private companies had flourished within the few years of democracy and the people's power. These were only the beginning of the development. Nepal had to develop very fast and

implement the development projects faster than used to be no matter whether they were of the national priorities or not.

To this end, the government needed to work fast, push the State bureaucracy harder, and minimize the corruption if it were not totally eliminated at the political level, in the governance system and in the State bureaucracy.

Existing rules and regulations and even laws might be the hindrances to the quick enforcement of the government decisions, as the home minister complained that he could not deliver the relief materials to the quake victims fast while following the government rules and regulations. So, he said if the government were not to adopt a fast-track approach by amending the rules and regulations then the relief delivery would be delayed for a year, the news in the mycrepublica.com stated.

<http://myrepublica.com/politics/story/40463/home-minister-blames-legal-procedures-for-delay-in-relief-distribution.html#sthash.G3dgeoE1.dpuf>

The home minister needed to say that he was part of the government responsible for the service delivery. He would be held accountable for the delayed delivery of relief materials and money to the quake victims. He needed to work on an immediate amendment to the rules and regulations to fit the need for the disasters: man-made such as the blockade or the nature-made such as the quakes in 2015, management. That was why he was a minister, and Nepalese had paid him so high prices for his upkeep.

Another news item in thehimalayantimes.com gave the example of how the development project financed by a multilateral donor agency had the cost overrun and time overrun. The foreign contractor setting up the new system of baggage carriage at the arrival terminal of the Tribhuvan International Airport at the cost of NPR 8 billions (\$ 80 million), which was sufficient to build another international airport at Nijgadh halted its work on installing the conveyer belt demanding the immediate payment of NPR 17.9 million for removing the crash-landed Turkish plane from the runway even though the Indian plane voluntarily removed it.

<http://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/incomplete-adb-project-hits-baggage-handling-tia/>

The contractor must have paid huge commission to the decision makers so the contractor did not care about the time overrun and the cost overrun of the project while the donor agency in this case Asia Development Bank had been a mute witness. Probably, his demand would be met. This might be what Shashank Koirala meant the politicization of the development? Everything could happen in this country where the hospital officials certified the installation of a x-ray machine in the remote area the auditors found it never existed, the Auditor General's report for 2015 presented to the President of Nepal stated. Such open corruption and abuse of authority had been the national disgrace.

April 16, 2016



Prime Minister KP Oli laying the foundation stone following the Vedic rituals
Behind Oli standing left to right: Jhalanath Khanal, Kamal Thapa, Bijaya Gacchedar and Prachanda.

(Source: Gorkhapatra of April 2, 2016)