Nepal and Bhutan in 2015

Shifting Ground

ABSTRACT

Nepal faced massive earthquakes, which killed, displaced, or traumatized thousands of people, but it also ratified a new constitution and elected its first female head of state. Bhutan celebrated the legacy of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, made advances in its hydropower infrastructure, and strengthened political relationships with its neighbors.

KEYWORDS: earthquake, constitution, female leadership, hydropower, India, China

NEPAL

The defining event of 2015 was the disastrous wave of earthquakes that shook Nepal, beginning the final week of April. The first earthquake, registering magnitude 7.8 on the Richter scale, occurred shortly before noon on April 25, with an epicenter in the central-Nepal district of Gorkha. Over 8,000 people were reported killed by the quake and ensuing avalanche, and over half a million homes (approximately 10% of the country’s housing) were damaged or destroyed. After two weeks of relentless aftershocks, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck the same fault-line again, followed minutes later by a 6.3-magnitude one; these two quakes were felt as far away as Chennai in South India, and caused buildings to be evacuated in Delhi. Numerous structures that had been damaged in the first earthquake toppled completely during these later earthquakes, but casualties were significantly lower, only approximately 200 people, as most people in affected regions were still staying in tents or the open air. In the first month after the April 25th quake,
Nepal experienced 42 aftershocks of magnitude 5.0 or higher, and six months after the quake, continued to record earthquakes of 4.0 or stronger on a weekly basis, over 400 in total at the time of writing.\(^1\)

While international news coverage lingered over destroyed buildings and weeping faces, creating the impression of total destruction the length and breadth of the country, the actual impacts of the earthquake have been more complicated and variable. Just within the Kathmandu Valley, for example, the town of Sankhu was obliterated, and the city of Bhaktapur and the area of Gongabu were very badly damaged, but most of modern Kathmandu and even the ancient sections of Patan survived intact. Similarly, even within districts quite close to the epicenter, some villages experienced upwards of 90% home loss, and some were wiped out entirely by landslides, while other communities had most or all of their buildings still standing afterwards.

This last category has been an important, if underreported, aspect of the earthquake. Throughout the affected regions, in addition to the many leveled buildings, there were also thousands of buildings that were merely damaged, and the people who live and work in them remain (months later) uncertain about their safety. In accessible regions, teams of engineers have examined structures and advised owners, but many people remain nervous about their dwellings—yet do not qualify for the aid or attention that has (rightly) been concentrated on the thousands of fully displaced people.

The international aid community reached out swiftly and generously to Nepal after the earthquakes, and Nepalis themselves did enormous work reaching out to affected people within their communities and across the country. The earthquakes happened in the existing contexts of poverty and unjust systems of access, though, and the deployment of engineers and aid organizations was inflected by local politics and realities; thus, for instance, communities easily reached by roads received aid more swiftly and efficiently than remote communities, and many communities’ needs continue to go unmet. Additionally, much earthquake funding was expended on short-term relief and recovery, deferring issues of the earthquake safety of future buildings and rural Nepal’s continuing need for permanent infrastructure projects.

\(^1\) For continuing updates on Nepal’s seismological situation, see the “Recent Earthquakes” page of the National Seismological Center website, <http://www.seismonepal.gov.np/index.php?action=earthquakes&show=recent>. 
The New Constitution and the Contentious Federalist System

Nepal’s Constituent Assembly has been working toward a new constitution since 2008. While the legislative body’s initial mandate was to ratify a new constitution by May 2010 (to replace the 2007 Interim Constitution that helped overturn monarchy in the country), the process dragged on far longer, largely due to persistent disagreement over whether and how to restructure Nepal into a federalist system. Maoists have, for most of that time, been advocating dividing the country into ethnically based federal regions; other major parties gradually came to support the devolution of political power into federal zones, but have generally resisted identifying and governing those territories along ethnic lines.

These conflicts led to the collapse of the first Constituent Assembly in 2013, and contributed to the dissolution of multiple administrations. Some hope was raised in late 2014 that the assembly might meet its self-imposed deadline in January 2015, but January passed without a finalized document. Finally, in June, the government announced that it had completed a draft constitution and would be fast-tracking the process for its implementation.

In July, the government released the draft to the public, and scheduled a week of public “listening” meetings to permit input. Government offices shut down, and members of the cabinet and the Constituent Assembly presided over meetings across the country. The draft constitution was finalized over the next few weeks, and promulgated by President Ram Baran Yadav on September 20.

Despite widespread relief that a constitution was finally completed, discontent has continued to surface. Conservative groups agitated throughout the summer asking that the country be redeclared a Hindu nation, while many liberal groups criticized the constitution for inadequate provisions to promote gender equity, particularly regarding citizenship. Most important, while the new constitution committed to implementing federalism, the actual states have not been finalized, and many groups remain dissatisfied with the proposed six-state model. There have been protests and riots across the southern Tarai region, where ethnic Madhesis and Tharus (long politically dominated by hill communities) object to plans that would split regions of the Tarai across all six states, instead of consolidating Tarai communities. Over the course of August and September, 45 people were killed in clashes with police.
Madame President

In the last week of October, Nepal’s parliament elected a new president. The presidency was created in 2008 to handle ceremonial duties the king had previously fulfilled as head of state; when Ram Baran Yadav was elected as the country’s first president, he was expected to fill the role for only two years, pending the ratification of a new constitution. The constitutional process dragged on for seven years, though, and Yadav remained the head of state through multiple administrations.

Once the 2015 constitution was completed, however, two major candidates stood for the presidency: Bidhya Devi Bhandari of the moderate UML (Unified Marxist–Leninist) party, and Kul Bahadur Gurung of the center-right Nepali Congress. Both nominations further distanced the country from the residual elitist Hindu nationalism of the country’s panchayat period (1960–1990): Bhandari is a woman, and Gurung is a member of one of Nepal’s major ethnic minorities. Either candidate would promote a new message about who represents the country, and either candidate could potentially push state-level religious ritual (which forms a major portion of the president’s duties) to expand beyond its design for a high-caste Hindu male.

In a 237–214 vote, the parliament elected Bhandari, who was duly sworn in as the nation’s first female head of state. Bhandari is fifty-four, and the deputy leader of the UML. She served as defense minister from 2009 to 2011, and has actively campaigned to increase the representation of women at high levels of government.

Economic Situation and Tensions with India

Nepal has faced an exceptionally challenging year economically. While the GDP (estimated at US$ 19.64 billion in 2014) has risen steadily in recent years, this year will likely reverse that trend. Despite massive influxes of emergency aid money, the earthquakes caused enormous damage to livelihoods and infrastructure, and in particular left the rural poor of Nepal’s mid-hill region even more vulnerable. The initial damage from the earthquake was estimated by the World Bank at US$ 5.15 billion, and perhaps 3% of the population that had not previously been classed as poor are estimated to have been pushed into poverty.²

Nepal also came under intense economic pressure from India late in the year. Nepal relies heavily on India for energy and food imports, and after the passing of the new constitution in September, the Indian government implemented an informal boycott of petroleum products, apparently to signal disapproval of the handling of Nepal’s Madhesi population.

By early November, gasoline shortages were acute across the country, and have continued to be excruciating into early 2016. Nepali protesters in various places were reported to have burned effigies of India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi; Nepali media distributors boycotted Indian television and movies; and Nepali border police shot and killed an Indian national trying to cross into the country. These tensions may have significant economic and political repercussions in the region.

BHUTAN

Bhutan celebrated 2015 as the sixtieth birth anniversary of the fourth king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, whose 34-year reign (1972–2006) brought Bhutan happiness, prosperity, and a peaceful transition to democracy. A year-long celebration was marked by a series of events and activities: one hundred people honored his environmentalism by planting 49,672 tree saplings in one hour, setting a Guinness world record, and experts from around the world gathered for an international conference on Gross National Happiness, a development philosophy he authored to guide Bhutan’s modernization processes.

Bhutan took another step toward “10,000 megawatts by 2020” with the construction of 600-megawatt Kholongchu Dam in eastern Bhutan, the first of several joint-venture hydropower projects between Bhutan and India. In 2014, Bhutan generated 7,147 million kWh of electricity, out of which 72.5% was exported; this earned 10.7 billion ngultrum (US$ 163 million) in revenue, but the cost of fuel imports from India alone was 8.9 billion ngultrum (US$ 135 million). The country’s GDP increased to 119.5 billion ngultrum (US$ 1.8 billion) in 2014, but hydropower debt forms 69% of the 118.5 billion ngultrum (US $1.8 billion) total debt, and there has been parliamentary and popular critique of the mounting national debt and the possible problems of economic overreliance on hydropower. Bhutan also experienced deflation (–3.10% in August 2015), and continues to see high youth unemployment.
As if the answer to the secret of happiness lay in statistics, the nation reacted with alarm to Bhutan’s being ranked 144th out of 145 countries in the 2014 *Country Well-Being Rankings* report and questioned its credibility, but welcomed Bhutan’s ranking of 71st out of 189 countries (first in South Asia) for the ease of doing business.

After ratifying the UN Convention against Corruption, the government showed its anticorruption commitment by forcing the foreign minister to resign for misusing public property while he was a civil servant.

The 23rd Bhutan–China border talk in Thimphu produced an agreement to conduct the final phase of the joint technical field survey of the western sector. China invited Bhutan’s participation in the One Belt, One Road initiative and in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to seek common development.

When a disastrous earthquake struck Nepal, the king of Bhutan sent Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay there to show Bhutan’s solidarity, contributed US$ 1 million toward relief and reconstruction work, and sent medical teams to help the victims. This suggested an easing of tensions between Bhutan and Nepal, which have long been divided over the resettled ethnic population Nepal calls “Bhutanese refugees” and Bhutan calls “people in the camp.”

During her state visit to Bhutan in October, West Bengal’s chief minister agreed to renew the construction of a railway from Hashimara to Bhutan, which had been stalled due to land acquisition problems in West Bengal. The railroad’s impact will be known only when the first train crosses the border, but this visit was overshadowed by India’s alleged blockade of fuel exports to Nepal. Bhutan shares the same geographical constraint and dependence on India’s transport infrastructure for its third-country trade, and fears a similar blockade in the event of a worsening relation between the two countries in the future.