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State and society in transition: Nepal in times of Covid-19¹

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When the government imposed a restrictive lockdown on Nepal on 24 March 2020, there were not even 50 proven Covid-19 infections. At the time, it was said that this measure was intended to prevent a possible spread of the virus, as Nepal did not have the medical capacity to cope with a nationwide outbreak of the pandemic.

Two and a half months later, after increasing pressure from the population and the economy, the government has relaxed its policy. However, it has not been able to prevent the increasingly rapid spread of the virus. So what went wrong?



Easing of the lockdown (Nagarik, 13 June 2020)

Inadequate planning of the lockdown

The growing number of cases is partly explained by the increasing number of tests. Although these are still relatively small compared to Western European countries, if only because there are not enough test kits, up to almost 700 new infections are reported daily. Worse still, however, is the lack of laboratories where the tests taken can be analysed. At the moment, with more than 30,000 samples not evaluated, test persons have to wait up to 14 days before they know the results of the

¹ A strongly shortened German version of this article is going to be published in issue 40/2 of the journal *Südasiens*

tests. During this time the virus has plenty of time to spread further. The Ministry of Health therefore now expects at least 40,000 infections to occur by mid-July.

On the other hand, the Oli government has done just about everything wrong that it could do wrong. The most serious thing was that the government believed that all problems would be solved at a blow if people were confined to their homes and allowed to buy some essential food in the immediate vicinity for two hours in the morning at most. The economic aspect alone did not receive any attention. From one day to the next, people could no longer pursue their professional activities. In a country like Nepal, where many people are not able to build up large stocks and financial reserves, this meant that they quickly fell into need.

Particularly hard hit were the numerous day labourers, who not only had nothing to eat but were also unable to pay for their mostly meagre accommodation. They were also unable to return to their often far-flung home villages because of the curfew and the complete suspension of transport. If they still tried to return, they got into trouble with the police. At the same time, the government did nothing for a long time to provide these people with at least the most basic necessities. Private organisations, which in turn asked foreign agencies for help, had to take on this task.

Another problem was caused by the cessation of international air traffic and, in agreement with the neighbouring country, the simultaneous closure of the border with India. Desperate labour migrants who were willing to return were denied entry to their own country. Although quarantine camps were set up for the initially few who were allowed into the country, there was often a lack of infrastructure. Since tests for Covid-19 infections were often not carried out or only half-heartedly, these quarantine stations increasingly developed into breeding grounds for the virus. It was not uncommon for people from these quarantine stations to be released into their home villages without a thorough final check-up. Moreover, instead of reliable PCR tests, considerably more rapid tests (RDT) are still being carried out, although these are known to have an error rate of up to 50 percent. There have been repeated reports that people who were released from quarantine camps on the basis of rapid tests as not infected were diagnosed with the virus a few days later.



Demonstrations against the duration of the unimaginative lockdown (The Kathmandu Post, 10 June 2020)

Many people stopped at the Indian border crossed the border secretly at night and set off on foot to their distant villages. Since the pandemic was spreading more and more in India, these returnees were a further guarantee for the spread of the pandemic in Nepal. In the meantime, numerous migrants from India were officially allowed to cross the border. Some work has also begun on the repatriation of migrant workers stranded in other countries. All these people were supposed to be placed in quarantine at first, but this did not really work due to a lack of thorough organisation.

Almost the entire Nepalese economy was stripped of its foundations. Since the workers could no longer get to their workplaces, most of the factories stood still. Agricultural activities were officially allowed, but hardly any transport to the markets and shops was maintained. Only the import trade from India was still functioning to some extent, which damaged the local economy even more.

With the increasing duration of the lockdown, the dissatisfaction of the people and the business community grew. Although Prime Minister Oli admitted at some point that his attempt to keep the pandemic away from Nepal had failed, the government had no choice but to extend the lockdown again and again.

Due to increasing pressure from the public and the business community, the lockdown on 11 June was eased a little, albeit repeatedly with restrictions. Although interurban traffic continued to be prevented, private vehicles were again registered in urban areas, alternating on a daily basis between vehicles with odd and even number plates. In addition, motorcycles were not allowed to carry pillion passengers. Although it was said that all businesses should reopen, many workers were still unable to reach their workplaces regularly due to traffic regulations.

Populist diversionary tactics



Nepalese territory in the west of the country claimed by India (The Kathmandu Post, 5 June 2020)

At the same time, the Oli government did not miss any opportunity to distract from its failure through political action. One such opportunity was, for example, the adoption of the annual budget in parliament, where the ruling party had a substantial majority. Although international institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the Asian Development Bank had recently lowered their forecasts for the country's economic growth to at best just over two percent, Finance Minister Khatiwada had assumed in his budget that growth would be 7 percent. Given the collapse of such

important economic sectors as tourism and labour migration, this expectation had to be described as pure populism. At the same time, experts considered the budget to be completely inadequate to at least somewhat mitigate the consequences of the Covid 19 crisis.

Another cause for populist measures was the border dispute with India over the narrow strip between Kalapani and Limpiyadhura. Although the leaders of all parties had incorporated the border line, which had also been marked on Nepalese maps for decades, into the 2015 constitution that they eventually created, according to which this area belongs to India, they were now willing to react with indignation to the fact that an Indian road was being built across this area. They could be sure of the support of large sections of the population. Nepal's politicians, however, did not say a word about why they had for decades tacitly accepted this territory, which belongs to Nepal on the basis of the Treaty of Sugauli (ratified in 1816), as Indian, and all Nepalese maps showed it as such. A correction of the error in the present constitution was now tackled and as a second constitutional amendment unanimously adopted by both houses of parliament.

It would have been at least as important to combine this constitutional amendment with better consideration of the concerns of the country's numerous ethnic groups (Janajati) and the Indian-born population of the Tarai (Madheshi). Since the adoption of the constitution in September 2015, these groups have been struggling to make up for the promises and agreements often repeated by the major parties since the Peoples' Movement of 2006 (Jana Andolan II). This is what the riots and blockades of 2015/16, which were often sold as an Indian economic blockade, were all about. But the causes then lay in the renewed refusal to include these groups, India was more of a free-rider. Significantly, the then Nepalese Prime Minister was also KP Oli.

Conservative thinking and disregard for human rights



Use of water cannons against young protesters (Khabarhub, 11 June 2020)

Since taking office Oli has been turning the screw on human rights time and again. He seems not to be interested in the right of people to information at all. He often seems like an autocrat who believes that he doesn't have to involve anyone in his decisions, sometimes not even his own cabinet. The media are also badly affected. Oli reacts particularly sensitively when he or the weak and increasingly detached President Bidya Devi Bhandari, who belongs to him, are criticised in the

social media. Both often behave as if they saw themselves as the legitimate and accordingly untouchable heirs of the monarchy.

The adherence to old Hindu-based social thinking and behaviour is gladly taken up by correspondingly oriented social circles, for example by violent actions against women or Dalits. Such a situation escalated at the end of May in the district of West-Rukum newly created in 2017, which belongs to the Karnali Province. A group of so-called high-caste Hindus prevented the love marriage of a young Dalit with a girl from a Chhetri caste by driving the groom and some other young men into the river Bheri. Seven Dalits were killed.

Since 10 June, young people took to the streets in many cities of the country independently of political parties. They peacefully demanded accountability from the government for the poor pandemic management and, more specifically, the immediate resignation of Oli. Like all helpless autocrats, he responded with water cannons, tear gas and the use of batons. It was advantageous for him that many people at this time were concentrating on the territorial dispute with India and the constitutional amendment. After their adoption, displeasure with Oli now also returned to the ranks of the ruling party NCP.

With the protests of young people without party ties, civil society is attracting attention for the first time in 15 years. Although the opposition Nepali Congress offered itself as a free rider to the movement, it is out of place there. The top politicians of the Nepali Congress were just as responsible for the numerous undesirable developments after the popular movement of 2006 as those of the current ruling party.

It seems that Nepal is facing very difficult times. In addition to the escalation of the pandemic, the country is virtually on the brink of economic bankruptcy. Due to pandemic and lockdown, important areas of work have been lost. As a result, expected tax revenues are missing. The government is threatened with imminent insolvency. There are also areas with increasing supply shortages. As always, this is especially true for the far west of the country. On June 15, it was reported that already 23 percent of the country's households are no longer adequately supplied with food.

All this could give the youth movement a further boost. It is possible that Oli will have to leave soon after all. But what comes after him? A charismatic light figure is unfortunately not in sight, only the old familiar lame ducks.