

Diary from Kathmandu: Schoolboy Looks to Nepal's Army with New Pride. "Our Army Rescues the People"

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"I want to be in the army", replied Sophil quietly, responding to his father's urging to tell this visitor about his future goal. I had been introduced to the 9-year old child a week earlier as he sat in a place of honor inside his parent's home, accepting gifts and congratulations following completion of 'vratabandha', the Nepali coming-of-age ceremony for boys. His father Bhagwan Shresthra and I have been working on a teacher training project and I was again at their home to discuss the school's schedule and how we might address the needs of staff's and students' families most adversely affected by the earthquake.

Surprised by his son's new ambition, and with no history of military service in this family, the father pressed the lad on why this career interested him.

"Because our army rescues the people," explains the boy.

In time, Sophil's aspiration may change; meanwhile it's undeniable that his current ideal is an outcome of what he's seen and heard during these post earthquake weeks when the largely unheralded, heroes of the earthquake have indeed been members of Nepal's armed forces and police. They are visible everywhere:- clearing roads, dismantling damaged structures, rescuing families, ferrying the injured to helicopters, redirecting cars from danger zones, sifting through fragile piles of debris and supervising foreign rescue teams, clearing rubble brick-by-brick and providing security in neighborhoods and at sensitive government and holy sites. Unlike the million or more Nepalese who have temporarily fled their jobs, or given leave because of forced closures of retailers and factories, Nepal's security forces are currently doing double duty.

"They are the first line of assistance across the nation", a colleague asserts. "Army and police are posted everywhere, even in Nepal's most remote regions,

so they are the first to arrive at devastated areas, help the injured, and identify the needy. (Nepal's military hospitals are currently filled with earthquake injured citizens, many flown there by helicopter.) Although not equipped with heavy equipment that's essential to cope with a disaster like this, these men and women seem to be efficient, focused and dedicated. I myself noted their prominence on media reports and saw them at sites I visited. So I began to inquire further about the military's status, aware that, in contrast to the public's disappointment with the government's response to the crisis, I'd heard no criticism concerning military and police actions.

So selfish, inept and disappointing are Nepal's ministries and leadership that from the time of the quake to the present, they are the focus of universal dissatisfaction and disdain, the source of national shame. From the earliest days of the tragedy, private and international donors felt obliged to divert their energies and supplies away from Nepal's government. "It's the only way to assure fairness and to avoid delays, graft, and mismanagement", notes one agency staff. Because of mistrust of their government, citizens have mobilized privately to arrange relief for hard-hit areas, astonishing themselves by their generosity, swiftness of response and co-operation.

One former military officer argues that had the government immediately turned over food and shelter distribution to the army from the outset of the crisis, the entire situation would be different:—help would move more quickly and fairly, foreign assistance would be more efficiently put to use, and victims would feel more confident. (A minor item in today's [05.19.15] press —day 24 of the crisis— carries the first news of this <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2015/05/18/news/govt-to-deploy-nepal-army-for-disaster-mgmt/276372.html>) "So why didn't this happen on day one?" I ask.

"Ah, that would have been impossible; such a policy might steal the glory and credit away from our politicians. They can't give up their power." It seems that despite their history of ineptness, ministers want to be seen as leading the rescue of the nation; different parties that make up Nepal's feuding coalition of ministers compete with each other to show constituents that they and not

others have come to their aid. (The result is internal bickering, obstruction and paralysis.) But isn't the military part of the government and the Prime Minister its commander? (This status is not clear to some citizens, but my research revealed that the army's supreme commander is Ram Bahadur Yadav, Nepal's president, who has not been heard from all these weeks.)

The leadership would still get credit, I argue. "The prime minister (or president) might, but what about other politicians, and each of their parties all jockeying for the limelight? They can't let the prime minister prevail. They don't trust him; also his party (Congress) would take credit for any favorable outcome and thereby be to their advantage at election time. (Although no election is in sight because of a 9-year stalemate over defining a new constitution). A presidential action would, I'm told, also have political implications since although the post is theoretically neutral, Yadav is known to be a Congress party man.

Under the circumstances, and given the ongoing crisis of Nepal's administration, perhaps the military decides to assume control by force, at least temporarily to address the emergency. One professor I put this to replied that indeed, "some people are thinking about this alternative". However there's general agreement that this could not happen because of the traditional role played by the Nepalese army, dating back to the establishment of a unified nation in the 18th century. Since then and up to the removal of the monarch in 2006, Nepal's military has been independent of the administration (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nepalese_Armed_Forces). Up to the present the Nepal Army is known to be relatively protected from political manipulation, untainted by ongoing political scandals. "Our army leaders do not seek power. We are not like Pakistan or Egypt, or Turkey. Ours is a professional body with a standard that is reflected in the reputation of our Gurkha regiments" who also serve across the world, one example of which is former General Army Chief of Staff Katawal who is credited with preventing assassination of the deposed

king while peacefully facilitating his removal.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rookmangud_Katawal. That's quite a record. END

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