2015 Nepal earthquake and COVID-19: A comparison of the politics of crisis governance

As Nepal marks the fifth anniversary of the devasting 2015 earthquake, the global crisis triggered by COVID-19 should be remembered not just as a moment of suffering. Here **(Nimesh Dhungana, LSE)** *argues how the earthquake prompted many forms of citizen-centric politics of governance – forms we can witness in the immediate response to the global pandemic.*

Five years ago, on April 25 2015, an earthquake of the of magnitude 7.8Mw (and its subsequent aftershocks) triggered a major humanitarian crisis in Nepal, killing over 8,790 people and injuring over 22,300. The socio-economic damage wrought by 'the Great earthquake' (*Mahabhukampa*) was unprecedented, from which the country is yet to recover.

With the COVID-19 outbreak, Nepal is engulfed in yet another unprecedented crisis. Indeed, the two crises are markedly different in terms of their origin, scale and impacts. The 2015 earthquake was a rapidly unfolding crisis, causing immediate deaths, suffering and social upheaval that were far more visible. The 2015 crisis was also limited to Nepal. By contrast, COVID-19 is a global crisis, and relatively slow in how its unfolding and impacting societies worldwide.

Nevertheless, the two crises have shared characteristics, when viewed through the lens of politics of governance of crisis.

Nepal earthquake and the invigoration of citizen-centric politics of crisis governance

Beyond the deaths and destruction triggered by the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the immediate aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake also triggered a range of citizen-centric initiatives, aimed at questioning, challenging and reversing the governmental and international actors' response to the crisis. From earthquake-affected communities resorting to protests and demonstrations to demand improved rescue and relief measures, journalists mounting scrutiny over the conduct of both the government and international aid actors, to civil society actors using online and offline petitions to make the government accountable to the alleged cases of corruption, the citizen-centric politics of governance took various forms. The initial phase of sporadic citizen invigoration was followed by several locally organised campaigns that sought to exercise closer oversight over the relief and recovery efforts. Such citizen-driven initiatives embodied 'politics of present' – to follow the thinking of Luc Boltanski – evoking a sense of urgency towards the well-being of disaster survivors. But they also combined a longer-term vision of democratic governance of crisis, attending to the voice of disaster affected communities , while also safeguarding them against the burden of 'second disaster', characterised by abuse of resources and exclusionary form of recovery.

The struggle to sustain citizen-centric governance of crisis

Despite igniting various forms of citizen-centric activism, these initiatives struggled to yield concrete political outcomes, amidst the State actors' efforts to erect and consolidate defence mechanisms against growing citizen-centric movements. Such defence mechanisms came in the form of policy measures, rhetorical exercises and programmatic interventions that undermined local efforts to hold powerholders accountable. Not only did State actors systematically disregard citizen-driven disaster response that took root in the wake of the earthquake but they also prioritised top-down modes of reconstruction under the command of National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), a constitutionally mandated reconstruction body responsible for overseeing longer-term recovery and reconstruction. In a clear departure from its original commitment towards participatory and accountable governance of reconstruction, State actors sought to instrumentalise and co-opt locally driven participatory initiatives, to realise their narrow goals of state-driven reconstruction.

Context of citizen-centric governance of crisis

Any attempt to understand the potential of citizen-centric governance of crisis must also consider larger political and democratic environment of the crisis-hit country. As one example, the 2015 earthquake struck Nepal when it was going through a major political turmoil. With a recent history of violent conflict, the local relations were marred by suspicion and mistrust that overshadowed localised efforts to hold local officials accountable. National politics was deeply polarised, primarily over the long-overdue constitution that, in turn, marginalised community-driven reconstruction efforts. While the country had an elected government, the local governments were devoid of elected representatives, a situation that had persisted for over two decades. Lack of democratic functioning at the local level further complicated timely and effective responses to public demands. While the initial aftermath saw an emergence of different types of civil society-driven accountability activism, such efforts failed to morph into targeted and sustained post-disaster social movements. At the same time, a renewed push by international aid actors to make longer-term reconstruction to meet the standards of 'good governance' distracted the State from its original commitment to participatory governance of reconstruction. These 'contextual factors' crucially impinged on the potential of citizen-centric governance of the post-earthquake recovery and reconstruction.

2015 earthquake and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: comparative perspective

The COVID-19 crisis in Nepal has ignited various forms of citizen-centric politics that is reminiscent of the post-earthquake political climate. Media scrutiny over the powerholders' (mis)-handling of the crisis has been unprecedented. One noteworthy recent story in the media involved an exposure of governmental incompetence and alleged corruption in purchase of medical equipment from China. Local civil society actors, like in the post-earthquake situation, are spearheading innovative, technology-enabled campaign to empower local communities with credible information, while dispelling rumours and misinformation surrounding pandemic governance. Civil society actors have submitted petitions, drawing the government's attention towards the immediate needs of the poor and vulnerable who are facing the brunt of the ongoing lockdown. Human rights activists have demanded that the constitutionally guaranteed right to information is not compromised in the guise of emergency response. A change.org petition that demands urgent governmental action to protect the welfare of the migrants who are stranded in the Indo-Nepal border, has managed to secure over 35,000 signatures. Some influential oppositional leaders and civil society actors have forged an alliance to draw government's attention to the urgent socio-economic demands of the affected communities and have proposed concrete socio-economic policy measures. To a large extent, these initiatives have, yet again, been successful at exposing the chronic problem of State governance. A critical concern, however, is whether or how these initiatives sustain in a manner they lead to transformative socio-political outcomes.

There is some reason for optimism, given the changed political context. Compared to 2015, existing democratic structures are more active, with the promulgation of new constitution in the wake of 2015 Nepal earthquake, and the subsequent implementation of federal system of governance. With the elections of local bodies, the democratic void at the local level no longer exists. These changed conditions offer an opportunity for civil society and media to launch a much more targeted accountability pressures upon elected representatives. At the same time, local representatives can also exercise their constitutionally granted rights, to question and challenge the Centre's tendency to impose top-down mode of governance of crisis.

There are also signs that civil society actors and media are trying to seize the opportunity to mount sustained pressure on the government. There has been talks about an independent, citizen-driven Ombudsman to oversee the immediate and longer-term response. Such Ombudsman, leveraging expertise of actors from various sectors, could monitor the mobilisation and use of funds, as well as the implementation of relief and recovery packages at the local level. Existing civil society campaigns could go further community-based, for instance, to monitor government budget and expenditure at the local level. Media scrutiny could be much more targeted, focused on the conduct and performance of officials who are handling the response both at the national and local level. These may prove to be important steps in the direction of pushing the State to assume fundamental responsibility to protect its citizens confronting a major crisis.

Disasters are known to trigger various forms of participatory and accountability politics that reveal fundamental weaknesses in the governance that may have been hidden from the public view. As we mark the fifth anniversary of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the earthquake should be remembered not just as a site of suffering but also as an event that prompted various forms of citizen-centric politics of governance. The longer-term socio-political potential of such politics, however, is impossible to grasp, without understanding what disaster sociologists have long termed 'principle of continuity', characterised by Nepali State's ingrained tendency to maintain and bolster status quo. Despite the uncertain outcomes, the absence of such politics may mean further entrenchment of what Dreze and Sen have long called 'complacent irresponsibility' of the State, which can make social recovery from the COVID-19 crisis further painful.

Read Nimesh Dhungana's previous blog for South Asia @ LSE.

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