

ILAM BY-ELECTION: A TEST CASE FOR IDENTITY POLITICS

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SUMMARY

In the by-election held in Ilam-2, a constituency of the House of Representatives, 19 contestants participated in the electoral competition, including 12 candidates representing political parties and seven independents. Pre-election environment indicated that there would be a significant competition between Nepali Congress's Dambar Bahadur Khadka, Suhang Nembang of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) [CPN(UML)], Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP)'s Milan Kumar Yonghang Limbu, and an independent candidate commonly representing the ethnic identity movement groups, Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim). The main political parties and the groups espousing ethnic identity issues took the by-election to examine their political strength and the prestige they command over the masses. The promises of consolidating the agriculture and tourism sectors and the pledges of building physical infrastructure were duly prioritized in the election manifestos and pamphlets published by the candidates. Though many new candidates were contesting in the by-election, they repeated the same old agendas. Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), and RSP invariably voiced their support for identity issues to garner votes from people who believe in community identity. The parties did not adopt extravagant election campaign methods. The candidates used digital platforms for the election campaigns. The by-election was peacefully held on April 27, 2024, and 59.93 percent of voters turned out to poll. CPN (UML)'s Suhang Nembang won the election.

INTRODUCTION

The posts became vacant after the death of Subash Chandra Nembang, a member of House of Representatives elected from Ilam-2, and Prithvi Bahadur Singh, a member elected from Bajhang-1(1) of Provincial Assembly, Sudurpaschim Province. There is a constitutional provision that if a member's position is vacant with more than six months left in the term of the House of Representatives and the Province Assembly, that position will be filled through the same election process that was filled earlier.¹ In consultation with the Government of Nepal, the Election Commission of Nepal decided to hold by-elections in Ilam-2 and Bajhang-1(1) on April 27, 2024. Accordingly, the election has been completed and the results of which have now been declared. Ilam-2 constituency includes 42 wards spread across six local levels.² This constituency has a total of 115,889 voters including 56,869 women and 59,018 men and two transgenders. After the preceding elections, 547 voters were added in this constituency.³

A range of sources were consulted for the political context analysis. Interviews were conducted between April 17 and 24, 2024, with various stakeholders, including political party leaders, local level elected representatives,

¹ Article 84 (7) and 176 (8) of the Constitution of Nepal.

² Except for ward no. 10 of Ilam Municipality, all the remaining 11 wards, three wards (6, 7 and 8) of Mai Municipality, all the seven wards of Phakfokthum Rural Municipality, all the six wards of Mangsebung Rural Municipality, and all the six wards of Chulachuli Rural Municipality are incorporated in this constituency.

³ Setopati. 2081 B.S. Ilam-2 ma Thapiye Panch Saya 47 Matadata. Baisakh 4. Available at <https://www.setopati.com/social/327262>, accessed on April 22, 2024.

teachers, journalists, lawyers, voters, and government officials. DRCN team also observed the election campaigns activities in the constituency. Pre-published materials have been referenced for the analysis.

ELECTION PREPARATION

Election Commission Nepal published a timeline for the by-election on March 1, 2024.⁴ As per the schedule, the candidate nominations were registered on April 6, 2024. Twenty candidates, including 12 representing different political parties and eight independents, had filed their nominations. But after one independent backtracked, there were 19 contestants for the election. Election Commission Nepal published the final list of the contestants and distributed the election symbols on April 9, 2024.⁵ In addition, the Commission implemented the Election Code of Conduct in the entire district from April 10 till the end of the election processes.⁶

Two volunteers were deployed in each ward participating in the by-election from April 17 to 23, 2024, for voter education. Before the volunteers were deployed, they received a one-day orientation. In order to make voter education effective and fair, volunteers were instructed to give voter education in groups as much as possible in public places rather than through home-to-home campaigns.⁷ Per the instruction, a volunteer, Bedkumari Dulal, who was deployed to Ilam Municipality, Ward. No. 4 shared her experience of imparting voter education to the people gathered in teashops and *Chautaris*.⁸ She taught the voting process to the parents gathered in a program conducted by the Nepal government on April

⁴ Election Commission Nepal. 2080 B.S. Press Release: Upanirwahan Karyatalika Sabandhama. Fagun 14. Available at <https://election.gov.np/admin/public//storage/Press%20Release/2/press11-14.jpg>, accessed on April 29, 2024.

⁵ Election Commission Nepal. 2080 B.S. Press Release: Umedwarko Antim Namawali Prakashan Gari Nriwahan Chihna Pradan Gariyako Sambandhama. Chait 14. Available at https://election.gov.np/admin/public/storage/Press%20Release/प्रेस%20विवरण_2080_12_27_1.pdf, accessed on April 29, 2024.

⁶ Election Commission Nepal. 2080 B.S. Press Release: Upanirwahan Prayojanka Lagi Nirwahan Aachar Samhita Lagu Hune Sambandhama. Chait 27. Available at <https://election.gov.np/admin/public//storage/Bi-election%202080/Press%20Release/Press%2012-27.jpg>, accessed on April 29, 2024.

⁷ Interview with Ilam's District Election Officer Devi Charan Phuyal conducted on April 18, 2024.

⁸ Interview conducted on April 20, 2024.

18 and 19, 2024, to give Vitamin A to the children. The election office sent request letters to the municipality and rural municipalities to offer their buildings, electricity, water supply, toilets, and furniture to conduct the election. According to the District Election Officer, the voter Identities (IDs) were not distributed. Those with their names on the final voters' list were asked to appear with government-issued original ID cards like citizenship cards, national ID cards, passports, Permanent Account Number cards, driving licenses, etc.

There were 149 polling booths in the 89 polling stations. Five government officials, including a Polling Officer and Deputy Polling Officer, and one volunteer were deployed in each booth.

COMPETITION FOR PRESTIGE

In numerical terms, the contest was for a single seat, however, it was a matter of prestige for political parties for variety of reasons. As stated above, 19 candidates were vying for the Member of the House of Representatives post in the by-election in Ilam-2 were men, while the constituency comprises 50 percent women voters.⁹ Even when the district committees of Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) recommended aspiring two women candidates each, the parties eventually fielded male candidates.

It was surmised that significant competition would be held among Nepali Congress candidate Dambar Bahadur Khadka, Suhang Nembang of CPN (UML), Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP)'s Milan Kumar Yonghang Limbu, and independent candidate Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim), who commonly represent identity-based groups of the region. This election's result will not significantly affect the headcount games often played in the House of Representatives. However, it is pertinent to take into account that political parties began campaigns to consolidate their organizational strength immediately after the results of the 2022 elections were held, aiming to

⁹ Rashtriya Prajatantra Party Nepal, Rashtriya Mukti Andolan Nepal, Nepal Communist Party (Unified Socialist), Nepali Congress, National Republic Nepal, Janamat Party, Mongol National Organization, Rashtriya Swatantra Party, Nepali Janata Dal, Rashtriya Prajatantra Party, Nepal Majdur Kishan Party, and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist).

gain victory in the 2027 elections.¹⁰ This election has been a litmus test for the political parties and those espousing community identity to examine their strength.

In the 2022 elections, including the elections for the House of Representatives, Provincial Assembly, and Local Levels, Nepali Congress was part of the five-party alliance.¹¹ In the last election, the same candidate, Dambar Bahadur Khadka, representing the Nepali Congress, had contested from this constituency. He was defeated with a slim margin of 114 votes by the CPN (UML)'s Subash Chandra Nembang. In the organizational proposal forwarded by Nepal Congress's General Secretary Gagan Kumar Thapa during the last Mahasmiti meeting of the party held on Feb 19-22, 2024, it has been stated that "it will be ensured that in the future elections, the party will contest the election based solely on its strength and the party sympathizers would be allowed to give their votes to the party's symbol tree and no alliance will be formed."¹² Since the party did not form any alliance, the by-election became an opportunity to test the proposal forwarded by General Secretary Thapa. During the election campaign, the Nepali Congress leader Shekhar Koirala also said that the result of the Ilam-2 by-election would prove that the party could contest and win the election without any alliance that would boost the morale among party supporters.¹³ Nepali Congress's district committee secretary, Purna Gautam, said that the entire party structure, including leaders and cadres, has been focused on winning the election, remaining true to the spirit of the Mahasmiti meeting's message and forgetting factional fissures.¹⁴ Even though the candidate Khadka is considered to be close to Party Chairperson

¹⁰ Democracy Resource Center Nepal. 2023. *The 'Organization Reform and Public Relations' Campaign by the Political Parties of Nepal*. Available at <https://www.democracyresource.org/reports/the-organization-reform-and-public-relations-campaign-by-the-political-parties-of-nepal/> accessed on April 27, 2024.

¹¹ The alliance had the Nepali Congress, Nepal Communist Party (Maoist Center), CPN (US), Loktantrik Samajbadi Party, and Rashtriya Janmorcha.

¹² Thapa, Gagan Kumar. 2024. *Organizational Proposal Presented by the General Secretary in Nepali Congress's Mahasmiti Meeting*. Lalitpur: Nepali Congress.

¹³ Kantipur. 2081 B.S. Upanirwahan Le 'Congress Eklai Ladna Sakchyam Chha' Bhanne Sandesh Didaichhaun: Koirala, Baisakh 3. Available at <https://ekantipur.com/news/2024/04/15/by-elections-are-sending-a-message-that-congress-is-capable-of-fighting-alone-koirala-40-50.html>, accessed on April 24, 2024.

¹⁴ Interview conducted on April 19, 2024.

Sher Bahadur Deuba, leaders of other factions - General Secretary Gagan Kumar Thapa, Shekhar Koirala, Pradip Poudel, and others - went to Ilam to support him.¹⁵

This constituency has been the strongest forte for the CPN (UML) since the general election held in 1999.¹⁶ The party put efforts into continuing the stronghold in the constituency. CPN (UML) fielded Suhang Nembang, the son of the deceased leader Subash Chandra Nembang, in the by-election. Before this election, Suhang had no contribution to the party. Thus, the leadership was accused of upholding the dynasty system in the party. Suhang's nomination was criticized because those who contributed considerably more extended periods in building the party were not given the opportunity.¹⁷ However, in Nepali society, political legacy and a sense of sympathy also wield considerable influence in electoral success, there are instances where political parties prefer candidates from family members following the death of their leaders. In the past elections political parties have given candidacies to the deceased's family members. Most of them have often won the elections.

Compared to other political parties, CPN (UML) has more number of provincial assembly members in Koshi Province.¹⁸ Groups espousing identity-based politics have accused CPN (UML) of playing a pivotal role in the provincial assembly in naming the province Koshi and avoiding any identity-based names for the province. These groups have also been obstructing CPN (UML) from conducting

¹⁵ Kantipur. 2080 B.S. Nepali Congress Candidate Preferred by Deuba. Chait 23. Available in <https://ekantipur.com/news/2024/04/05/deubas-preferred-candidate-in-congress-28-48.html>; accessed on April 24, 2024.

¹⁶ The House of Representative Constituency no. 2 of Ilam was last won by Nepali Congress in 1991. At that time, Ilam had three constituencies. While CPN (UML) grabbed the other two constituencies, Congress leader Kul Bahadur Gurung became victorious in Ilam-2. With Subash Nembang's victory in 1996, Nepali Congress could never make a comeback in this constituency. Subash Nembang had won all the consecutive e

¹⁷ Shilapatra. 2080 B.S. Pratistha Ko Ladaima Ilam-2 ko Upachunav: Virasat Jogauna Suhang Lai Dhau-Dhau, Milan Ko Kandhma Ravi ko Bhavisya ! Chait 25. Available at <https://shilapatra.com/detail/134142>; accessed on April 22, 2024.

¹⁸ Democracy Resource Center Nepal. 2023. *Pradesh Sabha Nriwahan Pachi Koshi Pradesh ma Sanghiyata Karyanwayan*. Kathmandu: DRCN Available at: <https://www.democracyresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/DRCN-Status-of-Federalism-Implementation-in-Koshi-Province-after-Provincial-Assembly-Member-Electin-2022-September-2023.pdf>; accessed on April 27, 2024.

its regional organizational activities. It was also believed that the Janajati cadres and sympathizers were unhappy with the party's role in avoiding an identity-based name for the province.¹⁹ It was immensely challenging for the party to become victorious amid all these difficulties.

The voters interviewed in Ilam-2 hinted at the growing support for the independent and RSP candidates. It was said that the RSP candidate garnered more support in urban areas than in villages. Tharsingh Limbu, a farmer based in Deumai Municipality-5 Kyabung, noted that the traditional voting pattern is disturbed. RSP emerged shortly after the 2022 elections, as their candidates were elected from Chitwan-2 and Tanahu-1. The party has presented itself as an alternative to the traditional political parties. It has geared all the organizational activities towards becoming victorious in the upcoming general elections 2027. However, the by-election was held when RSP's chairperson, Rabi Lamichhane, was accused of embezzlement of funds from some microfinance by the opposition Nepali Congress. As Lamichhane has been repeatedly questioned for his involvement in the microfinance embezzlement, the votes received by this party's candidate could reflect voters' perceptions towards the party chair. The by-election is also a basis for one to gauge RSP's influence in the future.

Following naming the province as Koshi, groups espousing community identity organized protests in the region. Those voting for the name Koshi and those who supported speaking for the name faced criticism from these groups. At the moment, the protests for discarding the name Koshi have subsided, apparently to sit in dialogue with the province government. A journalist reporting for *Setopati*, Raju Adhikari, says, "CPN (UML) could successfully conduct its Jhulaghat-Chiwabhanjyang party campaign from November 30, 2023, and in the course of the campaign, it organized big mass meetings in Panchthar, Taplejung, Tehrathum districts. Identity activists organized sporadic protest programs, but the participation of the general masses was conspicuously low

in those protests. CPN (UML) has been emboldened while identity-espousing groups have become defensive."²⁰ However, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung's general secretary, Niranti Tumbapo, has a different opinion. According to Tumbapo, filing candidacy for the by-election vocally supporting the identity-based name for the province is the continuation of the agitation against the Koshi name.²¹ The by-election is also a test case for understanding whether identity movements have addressed the concerns of the general masses or have been limited to affecting the activists involved in them. The number of votes received by identity-supporting independent candidate Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim) speaks volumes.

| ELECTION AGENDAS

In the pamphlets, letters of pledges, and manifestos published by the candidates, agendas of constructing physical infrastructures and consolidating agriculture and the tourism sector were duly prioritized. During the interviews, citizens from the constituency said that despite many new candidates in the by-election, they have repeated the same old election agendas. The professors expressed concerns about the delayed processes of building infrastructures related to education, health, roads, and drinking water in the group discussion held in Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus, Ilam. The professors said that though the agriculture and tourism sectors have massive potential, the worsened conditions of roads have been left untended, and citizens have been devoid of any benefit from these sectors.²² One transport laborer stated that the parties have no new election agendas, saying, "Nepali Congress always says constitution, democracy, and peace. CPN (UML) would repeat the aging allowance provisioned by the Manmohan Adhikari-led government in 1994."²³ CPN (UML), which has been winning elections in the constituency since the 1999 general elections, listed 36 points in its pledge letter describing the significant progress made in the region. Of those, 13 points were

¹⁹ Democracy Resource Center Nepal. 2023. *Emergence of Identity Movement After the Naming of Koshi Province and Its Potential Implications*. Available in <https://www.democracyresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/DRCN-Emergence-ofIdentity-Movement-after-the-Naming-of-Koshi-Province-Implications-Political-Situation-Update-1-Nepal-September-2023-2.pdf>, accessed on April 26, 2024.

²⁰ Interview conducted on April 24, 2024.

²¹ Interview conducted on April 22, 2024.

²² Group discussion was conducted on April 19, 2024, in Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus; Gangaram Poudyal, Ganja Bohora, Kamal Adhikari, Kendra Khatri, Raju Neupane, Madhur Gadtaula, Yuvraj Khatiwada, and Jeevanmani Dulal participated in the discussion.

²³ Interview conducted on April 18, 2024.

related to roads. Since the conditions of all these roads have worsened and reparations are necessary, CPN (UML) pledged to work towards this end in the letter. Apart from this, the party promised to resolve the farmers' problems related to agriculture, tea, and dairy businesses, and the party pledged to provide quality health service in Ilam.

Other parties' manifestos also promised to repair roads and support the agriculture and tourism sectors, among other progress pledges. The manifestos also committed to solving the problems faced by farmers involved in tea and dairy production. The promises made during election campaigns remain unfulfilled, say the voters. The farmers of Barbote, Ilam Municipality-4, said that the quality of tea has been affected due to the lack of rainfall this year. In the last election the candidates promised to install irrigation pipes to mitigate but they never fulfilled the stated commitment.²⁴ In addition, the farmers also complained that they did not get appropriate return on the tea production based on investment. Dairy farmers informed the leaders about the problems of not getting paid by the companies that buy milk from them. Voters from Ektappa of Phakpokthum Rural Municipality expressed concerns over water overflow from roads to their homes as the contractors did not repair the roads on time. The professors at Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus, Ilam explained the lack of clarity in the new political parties like RSP as they cannot flesh out the nitty-gritty of broader agendas like corruption and good governance. They asked, "How do they check corruption? What are the ways to ensure good governance?" The transportation laborers interviewed expressed concerns over the involvement of the RSP chairperson in microfinance frauds even though he had sloganeered on good governance; in addition, they pointed out how Lamichhane, as a home minister, showed reluctance in punishing those involved in gold smuggling. They said that the voters' hopes in RSP have started dwindling.²⁵

After the provincial assembly of Province-1 named the province Koshi, groups espousing community identity staged protests in Koshi province. One of the protest leaders, Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim), filed his candidacy in the Ilam-2 by-election, voicing the identity

agenda. If the election is interpreted solely based on an agenda, the independent candidate Thegim was the only candidate with a clear agenda, said senior advocate Jas Bahadur Lungeli.²⁶ "The identity agenda has a significant influence on the Limbu community and relatively considerable in the Rai community; other communities have largely been untouched by the issue," he added. Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus's Anthropology Professor, Jivanmani Dulal, had almost the same argument as Lungeli.²⁷ This by-election allowed the identity movement to pursue its agenda of discarding the name Koshi among people. Even the Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), and RSP said they were never against identity to appease the voters who have faith in identity issues. Nepali Congress candidate Dambar Bahadur Khadka, in his election pamphlet, claimed that he was the one to write to all the chairs of the 14 district committees of the Nepali Congress, the party's provincial executive committee, and to the provincial assembly stressing that the identity movement was a common agenda of everyone to create a conducive environment for the dialogues. He also pledged that the Nepali Congress would stand firm on the issue of identity. In his pamphlet, the province was not indicated as Koshi Province; he instead used the name Province-1. Similarly, CPN (UML) candidate Suhang Nembang claimed that his party, CPN (UML), has always been working towards ensuring the rights of Adivasi and Janajati, and he wanted people to remember the fact that CPN (UML) played a vital role in declaring Mahaguru Falgunanda a national legend.²⁸ Likewise, in the promise letter published by RSP candidate Milan Yonghang Limbu, he expressed a commitment to end religious, ethnic, regional discrimination while promising to preserve *Sanatan* civilization and cultural identity. In the audio-visual promotional material that he produced before the election, he stated this: "I am a meeting point (Milan) of identity and development ... Born

²⁴ Interview conducted on April 19, 2024.

²⁵ Interview conducted on April 18, 2024.

²⁶ Interview conducted on April 18, 2024.

²⁷ Interview conducted on April 19, 2024.

²⁸ Nembang, Suhang. 2081 B.S. 'UML Kahile Pani Pahichan Birodhi Haina' (interviewed by Parbat Portel). *Kantipur*, Baisakh 12. Available at <https://ekantipur.com/interview/2024/04/24/interview-uml-is-never-anti-identity-11-01.html>, accessed on April 25, 2024.

here and raised in this very ground, the one who studied the Mundhum of ancestors, identity, and of civilization."²⁹

ELECTION CAMPAIGN

In the general elections 2022, the Election Commission granted 17 days for the campaign, while for the by-election, 15 days were allotted for the campaigns. The candidates continued old-fashioned events like mass meetings, corner meetings, home-to-home visits, etc. But compared to the past elections, the frequency of these events was minimal, and, as per the locals, the events were not as extravagant as they used to be. Candidates used digital media for the promotion. The cadres of the Nepali Congress had nominated the representative at the ward level to campaign for their candidate. CPN (UML) had formed campaign groups incorporating cadres from allies like CPN (Maoist Center) and Communist Party of Nepal led by Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) at the ward levels. Since RSP's organizational structure has yet to be formed in the constituency, it deployed the leaders from the neighboring districts like Panchthar, Jhapa, Taplejung, etc., allotting separate local levels to each individual. Various indigenous groups, social and cultural organizations, and mechanisms worked for the election campaign of the independent candidate Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim) as he espoused identity as his primary election agenda.

Central-level leaders were making rounds in Ilam for the election campaign. KP Sharma Oli, the chairperson of CPN (UML), participated in the campaign rallies organized in Deumai Municipality's Mangalbare and Chulachuli. Nepali Congress's general secretary, Gagan Thapa, participated in a home-to-home campaign in Sankhejung of Ilam Municipality and addressed a mass meeting organized in Chok Bazar of Ilam. Gyanendra Shahi, the spokesperson of the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party, participated in home-to-home campaign in Ilam Bazar, Deumai Municipality's Mangalbare, and in the corner meeting organized at Gajurmukhi of Mangsebung Rural Municipality.

Purna Gautam, the secretary of the Ilam District Committee of the Nepali Congress, said that unlike in the past, the party did not spend resources on gathering a large number of sympathizers in mass meetings to showcase its strength.³⁰ However, as per Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus professors, parties could not gather many people in the mass meetings because of people's disenchantment towards the parties.

The political party representatives and general voters noted that the use of digital media in this by-election has considerably increased compared to previous elections. Since the mass meetings and rallies are expensive, the candidates have taken to digital platforms, said the party representatives and those who managed the digital media of the candidates. As digital media allows the candidates to reach the voters easily compared to other means, they have chosen these platforms for the campaigns. To conduct the election campaign on digital platforms, the Nepali Congress and RSP brought tech-savvy, skillful people from Kathmandu. Nepali Congress deployed half a dozen people, including content creators and camera persons, for the election campaign, said District Committee Secretary Gautam.³¹ RSP deployed 12 people, including two strategists, four camera persons, three video editors, a content creator, a manager of social media platforms, and a driver, for the election campaigns on the digital platforms.

Voters, too, said they learned about electoral activities and candidates' expressions through social media platforms. Though the masses' access to the internet and digital platforms is limited, senior advocate Jas Bahadur Lungeli said that they could be influenced by those who have access to these media.³² In addition, several people said in interviews that Nepalis living abroad could access digital media and influence their relatives and friends back home to vote for a particular candidate. The use of digital media is likely to increase in future elections.

²⁹ Limbu, Milan. 2024. Ilam-2 Ka Schet Nagarikharuma Hardik Apil. Aafno Matadhikarko Sadupayog Garnu Hola. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/officialmilanlimbu/videos/484389027246696/>, accessed on April 24, 2024.

³⁰ Interview conducted on April 19, 2024.

³¹ Interview conducted on April 19, 2024.

³² Interview conducted on April 18, 2024.

ELECTION CODE OF CONDUCT

Citizens said that the campaigns in the by-election were less extravagant. The candidates promoted themselves by using sound systems in their vehicles and did not breach the code of conduct imposed by the commission. Unlike the past, this election did not see the profuse display of election symbols, flags, T-shirts, and caps during the campaign. The number of election rallies was considerably low. The flags, banners, and election symbols were used on a limited scale following the code of conduct. Per the Ilam District Election Officer Devi Charan Phuyal, as of April 19, two complaints of the breach of the code of conduct were registered. Of those, a party used a banner bigger in size than allowed by the code of conduct. Thus, the party was asked for clarification and was asked not to use the banner. After receiving a complaint about the use of misleading content using Artificial Intelligence, the content was removed. As the campaigners profusely used social media platforms, the election commission published a press release cautioning against the breach of the code of conduct on these platforms.

POLLING, VOTE-COUNTING AND RESULTS

The by-election was peacefully conducted on April 27, 2024, between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. A total of 69,449 voters participated in the process, 59.93 percent of the total voters in the constituency. Of those, 35,334 were males, 34,113 females, and two transgenders. After the voting concluded, all the ballots were collected at the Gautam Buddha Hall situated in Ilam Municipality. The all-party meeting was held on April 28, 2024, and the counting was decided to begin by 11 a.m. on the same day. A wire net fenced the counting space. It was also agreed that any dispute arising during the counting would be resolved by internal meeting and consensus.

In the by-election of Ilam-2, CPN (UML) candidate Suhang Nembang won the election with 27,772 votes. The runner-up candidate, Nepali Congress's Dambar Bahadur Khadka, garnered 21,942 votes, while Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim) received 11,457 votes. All sixteen other

candidates' deposit amounts were confiscated except for these three because they could not obtain the required votes. Of the votes cast, the candidates who fail to receive 10 percent of the ballots would lose the amount deposit. Of the total 69,374 votes, 68,472 votes were valid. Thus, a candidate must receive at least 6,847 votes to save their deposit. 902 votes were considered invalid.

CONCLUSION

None of the 19 contestants in the Ilam-2 by-election are considered influential in national politics. The result of this election would not affect the House of Representatives headcount game. However, the by-election invited sustained concern from the media and citizens. The increased number of votes cast also reflects the voters' enthusiasm.

All the contestants in the by-election were males. Due to the lack of concern shown by the political parties towards the spirit of the inclusivity upheld by the constitution, the female candidates on the first past the post system would be negligible. Even in the draft of the election act submitted by the election commission to amend the existing election law, the proportional inclusion of women has not been ensured. The election commission must focus its attention on this lacuna. On the other hand, the undemocratic practice of party leaders manipulating the candidate selection process must be corrected. The internal primary election could be one of the alternatives for the candidate selection in the party. However, other provisions to ensure inclusivity must be incorporated.

Immediately after the conclusion of the 2022 general elections, political parties conducted organizational activities aiming to become victorious in the 2027 general elections. This by-election was a litmus test for the parties to examine the impact of their organizational activities. The election allowed the parties to understand the reception of the policies they had put forward, and based on the reactions, they could make a course correction. The election has helped the groups espousing identity politics to take their agendas among the masses. Parties like Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), and RSP also tried to convey a message to attract voters that they are not against ethnic identity issues. The votes obtained by the

independent candidate Dakendra Singh Limbu (Thegim) can provide a basis for the formation of a separate party in the future for the ethnic identity supporters in Koshi province. Thus, this election was also a battle for prestige for the political parties and ethnic identity supporters.

The agendas of the political parties were not new, and neither were they different from each other. Though the past promises have yet to be fulfilled, almost 60 percent of voters turned out in the by-election. Despite the disenchantment with political parties, citizens cast their votes peacefully, which has helped strengthen democracy. Another point to be noted is the loyalty shown by the

political parties towards the election code of conduct by making their campaigns less extravagant. Digital media has been used profusely in the by-election, and the use of digital platforms will likely increase in future elections. Thus, it is necessary to study the multidimensional impacts that the use of digital media in election campaigns might have on voters with relatively less cyber literacy. Such a study could be a solid basis for developing codes of conduct. It is necessary to prompt a discussion to explore the ways to curb the spread of fake information, personal libels, and verbal abuse and how those involved in such misdeeds could be punished.



Founded in 2014, Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN) is a national non-governmental organization dedicated to the study and research of social and political issues. Since its establishment, DRCN has consistently undertaken in-depth and evidence-based research into various aspects of Nepal's transitional political landscape, including the implementation of federalism, local-level restructuring, and election observation. The outcomes of these studies are shared with stakeholders, fostering discussions and debates. DRCN's overarching objective revolves around advancing efficient governance within Nepal's federal framework through these rigorous research endeavors and thoughtful discourse.



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