

Civilian Supremacy Need for broader public security

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The current discussion and political activism on the civilian supremacy proceeds interestingly: developing from politics to the street, the magnitude of energy and activism on the subject remains remarkable. Overall this is a good start for Nepal, beginning a lively discussion (with one provision: that people agree to disagree) on this critical case of civilian supremacy.

However, the word “civilian supremacy” sounds awkward from an academic perspective. Supremacy means “the state or condition of being superior to all others in authority, power or status.” So what does civilian supremacy mean? In the context of today’s Nepal political arena, civilian supremacy suggests that ‘civilian’ is superior to ‘military’. A simple concept to understand, yet what constitutes such a supremacy? The frequent utterance of the word makes it more of a mere platitude and plausible argument can go unquestioned. The real question to ask here is not one of superiority or supremacy per se, to military, but rather how civilians control the military in a democracy. Vice versa, what is the role of military in a democratic society. The word civilian supremacy is confusing in this regard and may be replaced with “civilian control” of military, as appears in general academic work on the subject.

In this light, I would like to introduce a classic work of Samuel P. Huntington, “The Soldier and the State,” not to stir the current political discussion but to add constructiveness to the public debate.

According to Huntington, civil-military relations is one aspect of national security policy. It aims to develop on the institutional level “a system of civil-military relations which will maximize military security at the least sacrifice of other social values.” Hence the question of civil-military relations is how to balance the power between civilians and military on the basis that military power in the hands of political officials and political power in the hands of military officers can be a precarious recipe. Establishing the balance between them is the responsibility of the government and society.

Writing at the height of the Cold War, Huntington believed that the core function of a military – its *raison d’être* - was to protect a nation state to ensure its survival and this province remains universal. Without a nation state the military does not exist, the same applying to its citizens. Simple fact — the primacy of nation states. The military institution serves society and its people just like any other civil service fulfilling the greater goods of the society. Consequently, loyalty and obedience are the highest military virtues, a professional military serving the state and its democratic institutions, not one particular group in the society.

In the environment of the Cold War, it was easy for Huntington to see that the stronger the military, the more chance of survival of the nation-state, that is a stronger military poses a threat to a nation for possible military coup followed by military dictatorship. This was how he saw that civilian control of the military becomes important for democracy. Ideally, civilians should govern the military establishment to maximize its effectiveness while reducing the chance of military superceding the civilians.

So who are the civilians controlling the military? Huntington suggests “a military officer as the servant of the state is the servant only of the legitimately constituted authorities of the state.” (Huntington, 77) In the democratic tradition, the legitimately constituted authorities of the state is

an elected government. As Nepal is experiencing, the discussion of the civilian control of military stems from this institutionalised structure. Within the government, there are different agencies involved in the governance of the military and the security sector, and the final form of the power structure is fought out among them, across the Executive branch and Congress, Ministries and military services. This fundamental issue is universal and according to Huntington such power relationships “are continuously redefined but never resolved.” (Huntington, 2)

The US was Huntington’s main focal point and he points out that although the Constitution of the United States appoints the President as the Commander in Chief (Article II on The Executive Branch, Section II), interestingly what the Constitution does not provide is formal civilian control as a constitutional provision. The concept of civilian control existed at the time of Constitution writing in 1787, however the framers of the Constitution had rather subjective approach to civil-military relations then.

The heart of civilian control is an explicit distinction between political and military responsibilities and the institutional subordination of the military to the civilians. The practice of civilian control should be strengthened by establishment of oversight mechanisms. A developed military institution requires equally developed policy organs for its oversight as ultimately the quality of such oversight determines the quality of the civilian control of the army.

Nepal, in the midst of the constitution writing and finding the equilibrium in civil military relations, hopefully attains the quintessential end result based on vibrant discussions by a well-informed public as well as policy makers. Security is a public good and its provision must include the broader public security needs of the Nepali people, and it should not be overshadowed by the current ‘supremacy’ debate.

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