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## The Changing Face of Nepal

MICHAEL HUTT

Over the past thirty years, Nepal has undergone radical political, social, and cultural transformations. At the beginning of 1990, it was a Hindu monarchical state; now it is a secular republic governed by a communist party that came to power through democratic elections. Between the decennial national censuses of 1991 and 2011, its population grew from 19 million to 26 million, and is now estimated to be around 30 million. In 1990, the three cities of the Kathmandu valley were still separated by expanses of green fields; they now form a single, highly congested conurbation. While temporary southward migration to seek work in India has been a tradition among young Nepali men for generations, probably a quarter of the country's male working-age population is now in longer-term employment overseas.

And the geopolitics of the region is shifting. Thirty years ago, Nepal lived in India's economic and political shadow. Now China is becoming increasingly involved in the development of Nepal's infrastructure, and Beijing's political influence in the country is growing.

The past three decades of rapid change cannot be fully understood without setting them in the broader context of Nepal's modern history, which is usually deemed to have begun in 1951, when 105 years of Rana rule came to an end. The Ranas, a group of interrelated courtier families, had usurped power in the mid-nineteenth century, reducing the monarch to a ceremonial figurehead. They proceeded to establish an extractive family autocracy, which did little to promote basic development in Nepal but was more than willing to provide the British colonial rulers of India with an unending supply of “Gurkha” soldiers and essential commodities, such as timber.

It was no coincidence that the Rana regime fell soon after the departure of the British from the subcontinent. Since that time, there have been three distinct periods of Nepali political history: the democratic transition of the 1950s, the Panchayat regime of 1962–90, and the period since 1990, which has featured both democratic politics and armed conflict.

Nepali students and political exiles in India formed new political parties during the twilight years of the Rana regime. The two largest were modeled on the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India. After the removal of the Ranas, these new parties, the palace, and the feudal landlords of the displaced old order jostled for power.

The Nepali Congress Party, led by the charismatic B.P. Koirala, appeared to have come out on top when it won a majority in the elections of 1959, under a constitution promulgated that same year. However, King Mahendra dismissed the Congress government less than two years later, invoking the emergency powers vested in him by the constitution. In 1962, he formally established a new political system of limited, guided democracy, the Panchayat, which was to last for nearly three decades. Under this regime, political parties were banned, the monarch held all executive powers, and development and nation-building were the all-encompassing aims of government programs.

Panchayat nationalism set out to homogenize Nepal's national identity around three pillars: the monarchy, the Nepali language, and Hinduism. The insistence on Nepali as the sole language of administration and education was problematic in a country where scores of other languages were the mother tongues of nearly half the population. The characterization of the nation as essentially Hindu ignored the presence of large communities that professed other faiths, most notably Bud-

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dhism. But the regime saw ethnic, sectarian, and other sectional sentiment as divisive, and political dissent was harshly suppressed. The government owned almost all of the country's news outlets and publishing houses, and allowed little space for public debate or activism.

Nonetheless, Nepal benefited during this Cold War period from its strategic location, and received massive quantities of aid from the West. Literacy rates and public consciousness of the wider world grew by leaps and bounds.

It was in 1990 that Nepal entered the present period of (ostensibly) participative, constitutional democracy. Since then, there have been many complex ebbs and flows in the country's still unfinished journey toward equality, inclusion, and social justice. In the past three decades, Nepal has gone through three constitutions (1990, 2007, 2015), two mass popular movements for democracy (1990, 2006), the massacre of its royal family (2001), a ten-year civil war (1996–2006), and a major earthquake (2015).

All of these events, coupled with the legacies of the Rana and Panchayat regimes, feed into the social and political environment in Nepal today. Thus, it is worth considering the history of the past three decades in more detail.

## RETURN OF DEMOCRACY

A combination of external and internal pressures led to the eventual collapse of the Panchayat system in 1990, when a popular movement broke out in opposition to the regime. The uprising was provoked by a political dispute with India that led to the closure of all but two of the 14 border crossings between the two countries, causing shortages of many essential commodities in Nepal. Huge public demonstrations and an increasingly violent state response, coupled with international pressure, forced King Birendra to dismantle the Panchayat system, lift the 30-year-long ban on political parties, and allow the reestablishment of multiparty democracy.

A generation of politicians who had struggled for decades under the Panchayat regime, with many spending long spells in jail, felt that their time had come. A new constitution reined in the king's authority, but allowed him to retain emergency powers and effective control of the army. In 1991, the Nepali Congress party won the first general election conducted under this new dispensation. The parliamentary opposition was dominated by parties espousing various strands

of communist ideology, alongside more conservative groupings disgruntled by the constitutional changes.

The early 1990s saw a major liberalization of the economy, in step with reforms being implemented on the other side of the Indian border. Nepal's new constitution granted complete freedom of expression and publication, prompting the emergence of independent newspapers and privately owned FM radio stations and television channels. These years also saw a major upsurge in civil rights claims by marginalized sections of the population—notably the Adibasi Janajati (“indigenous nationalities”), Madhesis (the people of the southern Tarai lowlands), Dalits (the former “untouchables” of the Hindu caste hierarchy), and women—whose grievances and concerns had been stifled for three decades.

But the new democratic order failed to deliver on its promises. The political parties spent most of their time and energy competing with one another for power, patronage networks, and commissions and kickbacks from externally funded development projects and business contracts. They showed much less interest in implementing the pledges in their manifestos.

## MAOIST WAR AND PALACE MURDERS

Communism has been a potent political force across much of South Asia since the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. After the Moscow-Beijing split of the early 1960s, Nepal's communist movement fragmented. Maoist factions took the most radical revolutionary line.

Support for the Nepali Maoists was fueled by growing discontent across the country, particularly among a new generation of school-educated youth in hill districts. (Compulsory schooling was introduced during the Panchayat period, but the education provided in government schools was of a low standard, and very few young people from marginal hill districts progressed to further or higher education.) Their consciousness of the failure and inequitable outcomes of the government's development programs, the lack of opportunity for their own advancement, widespread corruption in high places, and the continued dominance of a high-caste Hindu male elite made the prospect of rebellion attractive.

Armed conflict broke out between the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) and the Nepali state, at first on a small scale. The rebels staged attacks on police posts and other government facilities in the

midwestern hills in the mid-1990s. Due in part to the state's often brutal and clumsy response, the conflict had spread to almost every district of Nepal by 2003. (At the end of the war, the United Nations Mission to Nepal reported the presence of 19,000 former Maoist combatants in the cantonments it supervised.)

Halfway through the war, on June 1, 2001, King Birendra and his family were massacred in the Narayanhiti Palace in Kathmandu. The official account of this appalling event blamed Crown Prince Dipendra: he was portrayed as a frustrated young man who went on a killing spree while highly intoxicated. Many Nepalis remain unconvinced by that explanation to this day. Public distrust of King Gyanendra, who succeeded his brother to the throne, played greatly to the rebels' advantage.

The government mobilized the Royal Nepalese Army against the Maoists in November 2001 and declared a succession of emergencies that allowed the state security forces to act with impunity. The new king suspended the parliament and secured international funding and support for what he and his government characterized as an extension of the US-led "global war on terror." Over 16,000 lives were lost during the ten years of this war. Both parties to the conflict committed severe human rights abuses, including numerous cases of torture, extrajudicial execution, and disappearance.

As the war continued to escalate, King Gyanendra attempted to wrest back executive control, but failed in his attempt to mount a royal coup in 2005, which would have returned Nepal to the Panchayat system. Within five years of his succession to the throne, the new king had succeeded in alienating both the mainstream political parties and Nepal's growing civil society to such an extent that they came together to make common cause with the Maoists against him. These combined opposition forces launched a second people's movement for democracy in 2006. They forced the king to bow to their demand that he restore the suspended parliament.

The Maoist "People's War" came to a negotiated end that year. The agreement was signed in New Delhi by the Maoists and the main parliamentary parties. In 2007, an interim constitution was promulgated and a new national anthem was adopted—a bright, folksy song celebrating Nepal's di-

versity, cultural richness, and unity. It replaced the paean of praise for the monarchy that had served as the Nepali anthem for 82 years.

In 2007, the UN established a mission in Nepal to monitor and support the peace process. In the following year, a Constituent Assembly was elected to draft a new constitution for a secular, democratic, federal state. The Maoists, who had renounced armed struggle, confounded all expectations by becoming the largest party. At its first meeting, in May 2008, the Assembly voted to abolish the Shah monarchy, making Nepal a republic. In June, King Gyanendra, the nation's last monarch, departed from the palace.

## AFTERSHOCKS

Due to a mixture of direct "first past the post" elections and proportional representation, the Constituent Assembly elected in 2008 was probably the most representative legislative body ever established in South Asia, in terms of its inclusion of hitherto marginalized sections of the population. However, it was unable to agree on a range of key issues, including the structure of the new federal state, which the Maoists and their supporters insisted should be determined by the geographical distribution of minority ethnic groups.

Having failed to deliver a constitution despite four extensions of its original two-year term, the first Constituent Assembly shut down in May 2012.

After a long and fractious hiatus, a new Constituent Assembly was elected in November 2013. No party won an overall majority in these elections, but the Nepali Congress emerged as the largest contingent and quickly formed an alliance with the second largest, the Nepal Communist Party (Unified Marxist-Leninist), producing a majority. This coalition government, headed by Prime Minister Sushil Koirala of the Congress party, was in power when an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 struck central Nepal on April 25, 2015.

The earthquake, and the hundreds of further tremors and aftershocks that followed over the next few months, killed almost 9,000 people and destroyed nearly 900,000 homes across 31 of the country's 75 districts, as well as many of Nepal's most precious heritage sites. The immediate response to the disaster came from citizens (particularly the young), the army, and the Indian government. International agencies and donor countries

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quickly pledged \$4.4 billion in emergency aid to enable rescue and relief in the short term and reconstruction over a longer period.

For their part, the leaders of the four biggest political parties decided that completing the constitution should now be prioritized and fast-tracked. In contrast, the government's National Reconstruction Authority came into being much more slowly. The earthquake had clearly provided an opportunity for a deeply divided political leadership not only to save its collective face over its failure to decide on a new constitution, but also to face down minority demands. As a consequence, the constitution promulgated on September 20, 2015, was more conservative than it might have been had the earthquake not occurred. Although it was greeted with celebrations in the hills, it provoked protests in the plains.

The political leadership of the Madhesis, the people of Nepal's southern lowlands, protested that the new constitution had not delivered on the long-held promise of a fairer deal for their region. Regarded by many hill people as essentially being of Indian origin, successive generations of Madhesis had struggled to secure equal rights to citizenship and social and political inclusion in Nepal. The new federal structure did not meet their demands for the demarcation of purely Madhesi provinces that would encompass the whole of their population. The ensuing protests, and the state's response to them, led to violent clashes and over fifty fatalities.

In order to put pressure on the government, Madhesi political organizations, with at least some measure of Indian support, blockaded the main arterial road to Kathmandu. The blockade caused severe shortages of key commodities in the capital, particularly fuel. Clear parallels could be seen between this situation and the one that arose in 1989–90, leading to the first People's Movement.

But this time the government, now led by Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli of the Nepal Communist Party (Unified Marxist-Leninist), asserted that the Indian government was orchestrating the blockade in support of Madhesi demands. The government whipped up Nepal's latent hill nationalism, which centers on the Nepali language, Hindu religious identity, and the cultures of the hills, to support its claims. This led to a serious deterioration in relations between New Delhi

and Kathmandu, which took some time to repair, and also between the peoples of Nepal's hills and plains.

Despite this turbulence, the government forged ahead with the establishment of a new federal structure. In 2017, candidates were elected through both first-past-the-post and proportional representation voting systems to local, provincial, and national bodies. The new federal system comprised seven provinces, delineated on the basis of a set of "identity and capability" criteria. (The five criteria of identity were ethnicity/community, language, culture, geographical and regional continuity, and history. The four criteria of capability were economic interrelationships and capacity, the potential for infrastructural development, the availability of natural resources, and administrative feasibility.) The newly elected provincial assemblies each embarked on the process of deciding the name of its province and choosing its capital city.

In the national elections held in November and December 2017, the two Communist parties campaigned on a common ticket, despite their virulent rivalry during the years of war. Together they won commanding majorities in the national House of Representatives and in all but one of the seven

provincial assemblies; after the elections, the two parties formally merged. Although nominally communist, the government's agenda is seen as primarily nationalist and pro-development: *samriddha Nepal*, or "prosperous Nepal," is its guiding slogan.

## UNCERTAIN HARVEST

In at least one sense, then, Nepal's postwar political transition is at an end. The new state structures are in place, and their bodies are populated by elected representatives. Of course, it is too early to say whether this new dispensation will enhance the quality of life for ordinary Nepalis. As a friend told me during a recent stay in the country, *sanghiyata euta khet matrai ho*: "federalism is just a field." What it yields will depend on what people plant in it.

Many postconflict issues remain unresolved. Hundreds of torture victims and the families of over 1,000 people who disappeared without a trace during the war have waited a long time for justice. But redress still appears to be a distant prospect.

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In recent months, individuals with cases of alleged human rights abuses pending against them in the courts have been appointed to senior political positions.

There are also aspects of the new constitution that will surely be contested, in addition to the Madhesi grievances. The continued overrepresentation of men from higher Hindu castes in all branches of government is one. Gender inequality in the acquisition and conferral of citizenship is another. Under the 2015 constitution, the power of a Nepali to confer citizenship on his or her spouse depends on that citizen's gender. Similarly, a Nepali woman married to a foreign man can only secure naturalized citizenship for her child, whereas a Nepali man married to a foreign woman can pass down citizenship by descent.

Meanwhile, post-earthquake reconstruction has been a slow process. Four years after the establishment of the National Reconstruction Authority, fewer than two-thirds of the houses destroyed by the earthquake have been completely rebuilt. Many people are still living in the temporary shelters they erected near the ruins of their homes in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 quakes.

The huge disparity between the well-resourced, cosmopolitan capital, Kathmandu, and the still very basic living standards in other parts of the country remains glaring. The lack of opportunity across the country has provoked spectacular growth in labor migration. At least 1,500 people are said to leave Nepal for work overseas every day, double the number ten years ago.

The 2011 census recorded an absentee population of nearly 2 million, of whom 87 percent were male. Most are unskilled and semiskilled workers who migrate, mainly to Malaysia and the Gulf states, to work in trades such as construction and truck driving. In the 2017–18 fiscal year, Nepal received remittances worth over \$6.5 billion from its citizens employed overseas. This amounted to some 30 percent of gross domestic product, the fourth-highest proportion in the world, and three times the national income from tourism.

Although their country has been radically transformed during the past thirty years, the people of Nepal continue to face many challenges—economic, social, and environmental. An increasing proportion of the population lives in towns and cities, and agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the country's economy. Indeed, young men have been conspicuous by their absence from many rural areas for much of the past twenty-five years—first because they were fighting in the internal conflict, and more recently because they are working overseas.

Nepal's state education system is grievously underresourced, especially outside the towns, and every family that can afford to sends its children to private English-medium schools. Climate change, most glaringly apparent in the shrinking of Himalayan glaciers, is bringing additional challenges. Water shortages are ubiquitous, especially during the dry winter months. The unpredictability of the monsoon weather system is a major problem for an agricultural sector dominated by the rain-fed cultivation of rice.

The present Nepali government clearly sees tourism as a potential growth area—the country's spectacular landscapes and rich cultural heritage are among its greatest assets, and its people are welcoming to foreign visitors. It also views China as a powerful new development partner, and seeks the economic benefits that it believes would flow from greater connectivity with its northern neighbor via both road and rail. But there is some public suspicion of China's political influence on the government, especially with regard to its treatment of Tibetan dissidents and refugees.

Young Nepalis are, overall, healthier, more likely to be literate than they have ever been, and increasingly networked with a global Nepali diaspora. They are critical of their leaders, and demanding of them. The longer-term sustainability of Nepal as a nation-state may well depend upon those leaders' ability to generate enough employment opportunities for the young to make staying in Nepal a more attractive option than going away. ■