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Pursuing Democracy: Explaining Political Transitions in Nepal

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Nepal has been struggling to consolidate a democratic political system for more than a half-century yet still does not have a working constitution. This paper is the first step in a larger research project examining regime transitions in Nepal. We review the existent comparative literature on democratization and authoritarian reversals in order to isolate some potential explanatory variables. We also focus on making valid descriptive inferences along these conceptual lines. What caused the failure of democracy in Nepal in the past? What are the future prospects for democratic consolidation? The literature has been divided along two lines, which we label as the Weberian and Neo-Marxist research programs. The former focuses on modernization and institutionalization, while the latter emphasizes class structure. We propose a multi-method research design, combining qualitative comparative analysis of most-similar cases with a longitudinal study of Nepal.

Key words: Political transitions, democratization, modernization, class structure

India started a wave of democratization in South Asia, a region believed to have been inhospitable to the development of democracy. Roughly at the same time India freed herself from British colonialism, Nepal did away with the *ancien regime*, bestowing sovereignty for the first time in the hands of Nepali citizens. Political parties succeeded in bringing down the centuries-old Rana oligarchy, but after a decade, they proved unable to manage and consolidate democracy. Failure to institute democratic practices and the pursuit of narrow party interests reduced the people's faith in democracy, creating an opportunity for a return to an autocratic (Panchayat) system in 1960. It took thirty years for the public to regain faith in the party system, culminating in the ouster of the Panchayat system in 1990. However, a consolidated democratic system proved to be elusive once again. What was unleashed, instead, was one of the most destructive periods in Nepali history. The peoples' war (*jan yuddha*¹), launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), resulted in the deaths of roughly 13,000 Nepalis. Meanwhile, the dysfunctional post-1990 political system paved the way for a comeback of autocracy in February 2005. This proved to be short-lived, though, as all of the major parties, including the Maoists, came together to force King Gyanendra out of power in April 2006. The wave of South Asian democratization seems to have passed Nepal by.

¹ Michael Hutt, *Himalayan 'People's War'*, (2004), p. 5, n3. We are following Hutt's example in using the value-neutral term.

This paper is the first step in a larger research project examining regime transitions in Nepal. We review the existent comparative literature on democratization and political transitions in order to isolate some potential explanatory variables. We also focus on making valid descriptive inferences along these conceptual lines. Our conference paper is, therefore, exploratory in nature. We hope to explain past failures and future prospects for democratic consolidation in Nepal.

We begin with a review of the two main strands of literature and establish the theoretical basis for our research. In the next section, we propose a way to test these theories in a small-N qualitative research design comparing similar cases. Finally, we present some initial data on our variables. As the paper is still in the exploratory stage, most of the findings are tentative and readers are urged to interpret them with caution.

I. Literature Review

A. The Weberian Research Program

Modernization and Democracy

One of the major research programs on democratization built upon Weber's notion of the rationalization of social institutions. Modernization theory proposed a correlation between economic development and democratization (Lipset 1959; Jackman 1973; Bollen 1979; Bollen and Jackman 1985, Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Lipset (1959) argues that capitalist development is a pre-requisite for democracy. Development has a positive impact on four intervening variables. Wealth provides the material incentive for participation in the political process. Education contributes to democracy by increasing people's "capacity to make rational electoral choices" (Lipset 1959: 79). Industrialization leads to increased urbanization and greater social density, which requires democratic participatory institutions. Others found that modernization does not necessarily produce democracy. Instead, a democracy "survives if a country is modern" (Przeworski and Limongi 1997: 59). Development creates a larger middle-class, with a particular set of values conducive to democracy. Modernization built upon de Tocqueville's insight that a middle class is less receptive to extremist ideologies because "only those who have nothing to lose ever revolt" (de Tocqueville 1945: 258). Following this argument, we would expect Nepal's low economic development to account for its poor democratic performance.

Institutionalization and Democracy

Modernization may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a stable democracy. Stability depends on the "effectiveness and legitimacy of the political system" (Lipset 1959: 86). Effectiveness can be measured in terms of the capacity of the "bureaucracy and decision-making system to resolve political problems" (*ibid*: 86). This in turn is a function of the manner in which the bureaucracy is formed. We can then extend this idea of effectiveness to the party system. A party system is effect insofar as it addresses the issues of society at large. In other words, modernization increases participation and the demands that society places on the state. Authoritarian regimes are not receptive to the demands of the new middle class (Przeworski and Limongi 1997: 157). Legitimacy is the faith that society has in the existing political institutions. One way of maintaining legitimacy in emerging democracies is to preserve the traditional institutions during the period of transition. In Nepal, the lack of an institutionalized party

system² failed to provide for an alternative venue for the representation of social interests and allowed the monarch to regain absolute power.

Huntington (1968) identified a problem created by economic development. The process of modernization increases demands placed on the state and destroys traditional political institutions. During these transitions, it is difficult to construct "new bases of political association and new political institutions combining legitimacy and effectiveness" (Huntington 1968: 5). If a balance between "the level of political participation and the level of political institutionalization" is not attained, political stability cannot be maintained (*ibid.* 79). The imbalance will create a "political gap" leading to political disorder. Thus, modernization alone is insufficient for political stability.

New democracies preserve their legitimacy through participation. Political institutions that provide an access for newly mobilized groups to participate in politics tend to be more stable (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005; Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005). Conversely, groups adopt extremist ideologies if political institutions deny them a participatory voice, leaving them with no options but to adopt violence as the legitimate alternative. In sum, an established party system provides the major route for political participation, positively affecting the consolidation of democracy. Both in the 1950s and in late 1990s, failure to institute democratic practices and the pursuit of narrow party interests reduced the Nepali people's faith in democracy.

B. The Neo-Marxist Research Program

Another line of research explains liberal democracy as the outcome of a particular class structure. Marx had at least one point in common with modernization theory, which was the assumption that there is only one path of economic development, England being the archetype and all others following accordingly. Moore (1966), on the other hand, argues that the relation between and relative strength of classes are decisive factors in the form modernization takes. He finds that variation in the relationship between lord and peasant leads to one of three different types of modernization: the democratic route, a revolution from above, or communist revolution. India represents an alternate path to democracy, one that is accompanied with non-modernization.

Moore identifies three preconditions to the development of modern capitalist democracies. One is a balance between the crown and the landed upper class, often realized through violent means. This entails both the dissolution of royal absolutism and the preservation of monarchical institutions, or its functional equivalent, enough to check the power of the nobility (Moore: 417). A second condition is the development of commercial traits among the landed aristocracy which form converging interests with a rising, "vigorous and independent class of town dwellers" to oppose the royal bureaucracy (Moore: 418). The third precondition of a pluralist, capitalist society is the elimination of the peasant problem.

A second route to the modern world is reactionary capitalism, which manifests itself by 'revolution from above'. Moore's case study of Japan exemplifies what he terms 'Asian fascism'. The defining structural feature was the 'symbiotic antagonism' between the samurai and merchant classes. The bourgeoisie was thus too weak relative to the state to carry out its own

² This is not the same as saying there were no political parties in Nepal, but rather that the parties in Nepal did not function democratically.

revolution. Moore points to three reasons for the absence of peasant revolution in Japan. One is the system of taxation, which allowed the ambitious peasant to accumulate his surplus production. A second is the feudalism lasted well into the nineteenth century. In contrast to China, the bond between lord and vassal was very strong in Tokugawa Japan. Its cultural system was infused with the value of honor and duty to authorities. Third, repressive mechanisms in society were able to adapt from the old order to the modern commercial economy. “All in all,” Moore states, “it proved possible to take over the old order from the past and incorporate a peasant economy into an industrial society—at the price of fascism” (255). This is not to say that there were not abortive attempts at peasant insurrection, but the level of repression was sufficient to prevent revolution from below.

Finally, Moore identifies three historical preconditions of communist revolutions. One is the absence of upper class transition to commerce “and the concomitant survival of peasant social institutions into the modern era” (Moore, 477). This is often brought about by the presence of a strong agrarian bureaucracy. A second precondition is the weakness of links between lord and peasant. In the case of China, the perception of upper class among the peasantry was one of exploitation, namely a lack of services performed by the landlord or priest “necessary for the agricultural cycle and the social cohesion of the village” (470). The third precondition is the “fusion between peasant grievances and those of other strata” (479).

Nepal clearly seems to most resemble the case of China. The lack of a bourgeois class, the weakness of links between lord and peasant, and the existence of an agrarian bureaucracy indicate that modernization in Nepal, such as it occurs, will take the form of a Maoist revolution, rather than liberal democracy. Moore’s theory seems to have provided an accurate prediction of recent Nepali history.

II. Research Design

A. Constructing a Most-Similar System Design

In order to test the existing theories on democratization, we propose a small-N comparison of similar cases. First, it is necessary to determine which countries should be included in such a research design. One approach is to adopt an area studies method and examine other countries of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan). This method assumes that states in the same region share an array of cultural and socio-economic similarities. Another approach is more variable-driven, which is to look at countries with similar political histories. Specifically, we would want to examine monarchies without limiting our study to a particular region or time period. At the very least, Afghanistan and Bhutan are likely candidates for inclusion in our data set.

B. Economic development and democracy in Nepal

The modernization literature posits that there is a positive relationship between development and democracy. In this section we present a selection of economic indicators for South Asian countries. The comparison is limited to 1980 onwards due to data availability. Table 1 present data on GDP per capita for five South Asian countries. Table 2 does the same for urbanization data.

Table 1. GDP per capita (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka), 1980-2005.

	GDP per capita (constant 2000 US\$)				
	AFG	BTN	NPL	IND	LKA
1980	-	320.62	139.94	223.21	441.86
1985	-	391.95	158.45	260.35	523.7
1990	-	508.53	175.69	317.15	577.23
1995	-	654.97	200.03	372.46	704.4
2000	-	799.10	224.66	452.98	843.63
2005	-	1010.21	233.91	588.45	1009.69

Source: World Development Indicators

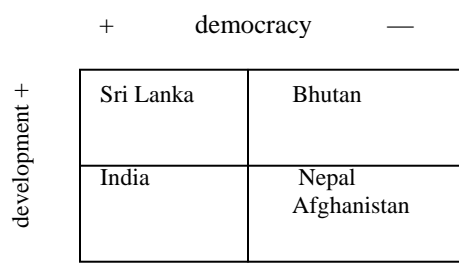
Table 2. Urban Population (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka), 1980-2005.

	Urban population (% of total)				
	AFG	BTN	NPL	IND	LKA
1980	15.7	5.3	6.1	23.1	18.8
1985	16.9	6.2	7.4	24.3	18
1990	18.3	7.2	8.9	25.5	17.2
1995	19.7	8.3	10.9	26.6	16.4
2000	21.3	9.6	13.4	27.7	15.7
2005	22.9	11.1	15.8	28.7	15.1

Source: World Development Indicators

Table 1 presents interesting contrasts between the five South Asian countries. Although Bhutan has never had a democracy, it is among the highest in terms of GDP per capita. Afghanistan is among the most urbanized but is also not a democracy. No single pattern can be observed from the available data in terms of a linear relationship between development and democracy. If modernization is the foundation of a stable democracy, Bhutan should be democratic. India has remained democratic and fairly stable for most part of the second half of the twentieth century but without any appreciable record of economic development. As shown, the annual average income was less than 600 US dollars by the end of 2005. These contrasts are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Development and Democracy in South Asia.



We can see that Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan follow the pattern described by modernization theory, while India and Bhutan appear to be outliers.

C. Institutionalization and Democracy in Nepal

Legitimacy

In this section, we examine the political parties in Nepal during the two democratic periods. The Ranas ruled for over a century using coercion, until the feudal regime was toppled by an alliance between the political parties and the palace in 1950. Both the Nepali Congress (NC) and the monarchy started competing for legitimacy after the downfall of the Ranas. Signs of instability were “inherent in the design” of the coalition government headed by a Rana Prime Minister, which assumed office in February 1951 (Joshi and Rose 1966: 87). What followed was a period of endless instability, beginning with a reshuffle of the interim cabinet in June 1951, followed by the resignation of the NC party from the government, and the eventual collapse of the coalition government itself in November of the same year.

King Tribhuvan, who was waiting for a chance to strengthen the legitimacy of the monarchy in Nepali politics, wasted no time in seizing the opportunity. Tribhuvan appointed Matrika Prasad as prime minister, instead of his more popular brother, B.P. Koirala. Differences grew between the two Koiralas and, as calculated by the king, Matrika Prasad resigned his premiership in August 1952. Unfortunately, the “institutional weaknesses of the government” and the NC party itself explain the lack of effectiveness and legitimacy of the government³. The King ruled the country for the next seven years, testing his own popularity against that of the political parties. His manipulation of politics and politicians continued until a general election was held in 1959 (Thapa and Sijapati 2003: 16). Although the NC returned to power with a two-third majority in the 1959 election, it could not survive for more than two years when the king dissolved parliament on December 19, 1960.

It is significant that the 1950s, during the first democratic experiment in Nepal, were dominated by endless conflict both within the major political parties and between the parties and the monarchy. The main beneficiary of the inter-party conflict, of course, was the King. He told the Nepalis that multiparty democracy is a “clumsy Western imposition incompatible with Nepal’s traditions, history, and objective conditions” (Joshi and Rose cf.: 395). Attempting to put a stamp of legitimacy on his actions, Mahendra promulgated the Panchayat constitution in 1962 and ruled the country for the next thirty years. The general mass was frustrated enough to accept the monarchy as a relatively stable institution. The palace recognized this willingness of the people to acquiesce even before the political parties did.

It took thirty years for the major political parties to win back the support of the people to oust the monarchy from power on April 9, 1990. The irony is that the parties did not seem to have learned the importance of party unity, as they ended up making the same mistakes during the 1990s as they did in the 1950s. Following an interim government, general elections were held in May 1991 under a new constitution. A total of 47 political parties participated in the election, which the NC was victorious, mustering 38 percent of the total votes. Once again, the NC party was chosen as the legitimate representative of the people. However, factionalism within the party soon resurfaced, largely due to dissatisfaction over the way Girija Prasad Koirala handled the

³ The first messages of distrust against the NC came on ground when the communist-supported candidates got the majority votes in the municipal election of 1953, which “assumed national importance” (Joshi and Rose 1966: 112).

day-to-day affairs of the government. Division between Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai faction of the NC party took an ugly turn in July 1994 when the former dissolved the parliament and asked the king to announce the dates for mid-term elections. This was followed by a period of instability in Nepali politics that continues today. The November 1994 mid-term elections resulted in a hung parliament and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) — CPN(UML), which won the largest number seats, being asked to lead the government. The fact that the NC failed to garner a clear majority in the mid-term election is an indicator that people started to lose faith in the legitimacy of the political parties.

Meanwhile, the opposition NC called for a vote of no-confidence against the minority government in May 1995. Knowing that he would be defeated in the vote, Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari recommended the dissolution of parliament and called for fresh elections. This move was challenged by the opposition in the Supreme Court, which ruled against the Prime Minister. This was followed by a series of political dramas; five coalition governments and four premierships were produced during this period. All of the major political parties, except the NC, split into different factions. Nepali Congress won the 1998 general election with a clear majority. However, within a year, G.P. Koirala replaced KP Bhattarai as the PM setting in motion another period of political instability, culminating in the assumption of executive authority by King Gyanendra in October 2002.

Table 3. Election results during the 1990s

Parties/years	1991		1994		1999	
	Seats won	% total votes	Seats won	% total votes	Seats won	% total votes
Nepali Congress	110	37.75	83	33.38	113	36.14
Nepal Communist Party (UML)	69	27.98	88	30.85	68	30.74
Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Chand)	3	6.56	-	-	-	3.33
Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Thapa)	1	5.38	-	-	-	-
Rastriya Prajatantra Party	-	-	20	17.93	12	10.14
Nepal Sadbhawana Party	6	4.1	3	3.49	5	3.13
Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party	2	1.03	4	0.98	1	0.55
Samyukta Janamorcha, Nepal	9	4.83	-	1.32	1	0.84
Communist Party of Nepal (Democratic)	2	2.43	-	-	-	-
Rastriya Janamorcha	-	-	-	-	5	1.37
Independent	3	4.17	7	6.68	-	2.83
Voters Turnout Percentage	65.15		61.86		65.79	

Source: Election commission of Nepal

As can be seen from Table 3, there was a big shift in the choice of the voters among the political parties. Of particular significance is the percentage of votes garnered by the pro-monarchist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP). The party went from winning four seats in the 1991 general election to becoming the third largest winner in both the 1994 and 1999 elections. This can be taken as an indication that people were largely frustrated with the behavior of the political parties. People had seen ten prime ministers enter and exit the Singh Durbar in ten years.⁴ Lack of unity among the political parties and their failure to establish as an effective and legitimate alternative led to general frustration with the party system. A few demonstrations started appearing in the streets of Kathmandu asking for the king to come back and save the nation. King Gyanendra did come back in February 2005 but his move was rejected by the civil society as illegitimate. Gyanendra fell victim to his own misreading of the people's sentiment that has largely been wiped out by the Royal Massacre of June 2001. King Gyanendra tried to legitimize his action by conducting the municipal elections in 2006 but this proved to be futile.

To conclude, despite their faults, Nepalis accepted the political parties as the legitimate institution of representation. The paradox is that the political parties were given mandates to lead the government during the democratic periods at the same time that they were losing their legitimacy.

Effectiveness

One of the major indicators of effectiveness is the autonomy of the bureaucracy in terms of its insulation from social pressures. In this respect, the Ranas and the Shahs were able to keep the *hakims* (bureaucrats) happy by giving them several incentives. However, they were not legitimate because both the regimes did not represent the people. Finally, they had to make way for a more legitimate system. On the other hand, although they had a high score on legitimacy, the democratic governments formed in 1959, 1991, 1994 and 1999 proved to be weak due to lack of unity within the party itself or pressure from exogenous sources such as the palace and later the Maoists. As shown in Figure 2, their score decreased substantially on the legitimacy front when they failed to provide access to the larger social forces in the country.

Figure 2. Legitimacy and Effectiveness of Political System in Nepal

		+ effectiveness -
+ legitimacy	None	Democracies
-	Ranas Shahs	Failure

Considering their limited time in office, and the challenges they faced from remnant sectors of earlier feudal periods, the democratic governments should be given credit for their achievement in the 1950s. To begin with, Nepal embarked on a planned economic path by issuing the first of several five-year plans. The interim government announced one of the most

⁴ This is not counting the ones appointed by King Gyanendra after assuming executive authority in October 2002

ambitious land reform programs in the history of Nepal (Thapa and Sijapati 2003). It decided to convert the tax-free land (*Birta*), into government land (*Raikar*), and abolished the traditional base of the feudal economic power (Joshi and Rose 1966: 160). It also introduced several administrative reforms and the annual budgetary system.

However, the NC government did very poor in responding to the demands of the working class, both when it was in the coalition with the Ranas and in a majority government after 1959. The NC also remained antithetical to the interests of the elites in Kathmandu. Instead of taking them into confidence, NC leaders discounted the contribution of Kathmandu residents in the 1950 revolution and contributed in widening the gap between party and local elites. Consequently, the political elites who had suffered during the Rana regime “openly opposed” the new government and the Nepali Congress party (Joshi and Rose cf.: 125-126). To the king’s advantage, distrust grew further in subsequent years. The monarchy was able to win the confidence of the business elites in Kathmandu. The regime survived for the next thirty years mainly due to the backing of the army and the Rana elites in Kathmandu.

Compared to the 1950s, the democratic governments did tremendously better during the 1990s. Several reforms were introduced, including a liberalized economic policy in 1991, the introduction of a land reform policy in 2001, and the abolition of the bonded-labor practice in 2000. Nonetheless, most of these initiatives never materialized, and the countryside remained virtually unchanged since the 1950s. One of the significant differences between the two democratic periods was that in the 1950s a fragmented party system resulted in a conservative backlash, whereas the 1990s saw an additional force, the Maoists, contend the legitimacy of the party system.

Conclusion

The Weberian research program indicates two paths to democratic consolidation, economic development and institutionalization. A system becomes stable when it is effective and legitimate at the same time. A regime which is relatively low in effectiveness but has a high degree of legitimacy can survive longer than an ineffective and illegitimate regime. The Neo-Marxist research program, on the other hand, contradicts the idea that modernization always leads to democracy. The particular class structure of Nepal seems to be more conducive to ‘revolutions from below’ than the establishment of liberal democracy.

Several patterns can be observed from the modern political history of Nepal. Our findings, which at this stage are very tentative, raise the following questions. What is the effect of class structure on the linkages between civil society and the party system? What explains the fragmentation within parties? What has been the role of external international actors in political transitions in Nepal?

Both Lipset and Huntington warn that gradual transitions rather than abrupt ones strengthen the legitimacy of new political systems. Doing so mitigates the sense of insecurity among conservatives and prevents them from using extra-constitutional means to abort the transition process. The implication is that the present haste to declare Nepal a republic without waiting for the decision of the Constituent Assembly may prove to be counterproductive.

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