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AMANDA SNELLINGER

## THE YOUNG POLITICAL GENERATION TODAY, FIVE YEARS LATER

This past spring we observed the euphoria of young Tunisians, then of the young Egyptians as they pushed out governments that were failing them. The euphoria spread throughout the Arab world and defined last spring as the Arab Spring. Many welcomed the euphoria as a manifestation of people standing up for themselves, demanding their governments serve their needs. I, on the other hand, observed it with a bit of dread, wondering what comes next. Will their hopes be dashed, pushing them toward ongoing protests and strikes as they blame their new governments who don't have the institutional capacity to fulfill their demands? During my research in Nepal of student activists' political participation—their protesting the king's dismissal of elected parliament in the *pratigaman birodhi andolan* (movement protesting regression) from 2002-2005, coordinating a joint effort with the public to oust the king in the *jana andolan bhag II* in 2006, up through their campaigning for their parties in the constituent assembly elections in 2008—I learned of the euphoric infectiousness that comes from successful political movements. I know how young activists derive a sense of importance from their day-to-day protests that eventually break the governing power. Yet ultimately, their labor reinforces their place in the political spectrum. It is on the backs of their political protests that their party leaders regain their seats of power in Nepal. The euphoria of the second People's movement was a momentary precursor to reconstruction, the reigns of which their party leaders took. Many young Nepali activists have realized reconstruction is out of their control, and that they must move on and do something else for themselves.

When I returned to Kathmandu in the fall of 2009, the shift in the students' perspective was notably different from when I had departed right after the constituent assembly elections. This time, they wistfully made references to *jana andolan bhag III* (people's movement part 3) and told me that they were ready for it because the *andolan* (movement) was not finished. They were coming to terms with the fact that reconstruction could not fulfill all their aspirations

to make Nepal 'new Nepal,' especially not at a rapid pace that could mirror the pace of their protests. Their longing to be on the street also highlighted their political position; they had derived a sense of meaning from street protest because that is when they had the experience of contributing to nationwide politics in a palpable way. After the *andolan* (movement) was over, they were relegated to peripheral political tasks such as campus politics, which left them on the sideline of national politics. Along with the general public, they were watching their leaders bumble their way through the reconstruction process. Rather than euphoria, the students felt inertia as they waited to rally the troops once again.

This was at the forefront of my mind when I returned to Nepal this summer in order to get a sense of how these student activists are doing and what they are doing five years after their success during *jana andolan II* (people's movement part 2). The younger individuals are still involved in student politics, which lies in varying degrees of disarray depending on the student organization. In general these leaders indicated frustration with the student political scene, saying it is lackluster compared to the good old days of the *andolan* (movement). I was told that general students were not very interested in politics, in fact they were disgusted by it, considering what is happening at the government level. And those who are interested in becoming involved do it for the sheer opportunity, thinking of it as a profession. This latter observation was particularly unsettling for ANNISU (*Krantikari*)<sup>1</sup> student leaders who are becoming adjusted to the realities of multi-party politics. Nonetheless, this prospect of opportunism that disgusts Maoist student leaders has been a reality for other student organizations since the shift to multiparty democracy in 1990; in fact, it is central to their recruiting. After all, student politics is the professionalizing path into mainstream politics.

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1. All Nepal National Independent Student Union (Revolutionary).

Some other student leaders have moved on and others have moved up. Some are sitting members of the constituent assembly and parliament, while others are active in their parties at the national and local levels, and yet others have raised money from local and international donors to established NGOs and think tanks. Some of these young politicians feel stuck in limbo between student politics and party politics. They had positions of leadership in their student organizations and now they find themselves in a liminal space, again rejoining the ranks of burgeoning leaders, this time vying for positions in their parties. These leaders, while struggling to gain their footing in party politics, are looking over their shoulders, trying to micromanage action in their student organizations when they can. They are maintaining their spheres of influence by mentoring younger student leaders. Since my research began, I have observed the interlocking processes of mentoring and being mentored. Observing these ex-student leaders as they invest in current student leaders in order to retain a semblance of influence has given me a different perspective on what I have called micro-categories of emergence and waiting in Nepali politics. People invest in each other in order to maintain a central presence and hopefully garner some political capital through alliance and reliance amongst generations.

Other ex-student leaders have been quite resourceful, leveraging their positions in the Constituent Assembly or seeking opportunities where they can secure them rather than relying on their parties to sanction and support their projects. This is particularly striking amongst Nepal Student Union ex-leaders. Anil Bhattarai addressed what he called the “Congress Conundrum” in his op-ed in the *Kathmandu Post* on August 29<sup>th</sup> 2011, in which he encouraged Congress to move beyond the talking points of *bikas* (development) and devise a political agenda that addresses people’s contemporary problems. What I found is that a number of NSU ex-leaders are doing just that, only they are not doing it under the banner of the Nepali Congress. In some cases they cannot because they have secured funding from international donors that avoid overtly supporting party activity. But the reason they originally moved outside the party for support may have to do with the way Nepali Congress and NSU are structured. Nepali Congress is a conglomerate group of political factions, which rarely works from the top down. These ex-student leaders have learned that in order to get ahead in the party, they need to scale laterally, garnering external and internal influence from where they can, and using their influence in multiple spheres in order to bolster their positions in Nepali Congress. For instance, one young female politician explained to me that if she runs a program in Solokhumbu district on domestic violence and pro-women laws that are being debated in the Constituent Assembly, she is simultaneously informing the public and cultivating herself as someone who cares about these issues, and that helps Nepali Congress because people see her as a party member who is doing something about domestic violence. What she did not mention, but which is implicit in this equation, is that by traveling to multiple districts to run these programs she is

gaining visibility both within and without the party. And visibility is key in politics.

This young generation of politicians knows this because they grew up leveraging their visibility to establish themselves in a reluctant political hierarchy. During the political movements, they strived to get their faces, names, and words into the domestic and international newspapers and television channels. They have developed their coterie of journalists on whom they rely for coverage as much as these journalists rely on them for the inside scoop. With this coverage, they don’t fret as much about being sidelined. In fact, their marginalization becomes the story, adding to the larger narrative of power politics amongst and within the parties. Facebook has also allowed them to shift their networking and political image manufacturing into cyberspace, transcending the limitations of traditional media. Having grown up in the spotlight of their own making, they are very aware of the importance of their image and the issue of consistency and they are trying to keep their actions (both personal and public) in line with their agenda. For the Maoists, this is a position of ideological consistency, but for others it is an issue of political savvy. For instance, when I observed that one young politician had stopped smoking he said to me, “how can I smoke while sponsoring a bill that bans smoking in public? Will the bill be taken seriously if I do not take it seriously?” Many in this generation recognize that they do not have private lives, and in order to gain the public’s respect they need to live according to the words of their speeches and policy agendas. In fact, they see this as a simple thing that can set them apart because it has rarely been taken to heart by previous generations of politicians who were not as schooled at containing their actions within a frame that can be packaged and displayed.

So has change arrived with this generation? Perhaps it has, in small ways that are unfolding at a pace in step with the political process. One ex-student leader told me that during these years after the movement she has come most to understand what the older politicians meant when they say things happen slowly. She wistfully observed, “I used to be an idealist and think we can completely restructure Nepali society and have a positive impact on people’s lives. Now I realize that change comes slowly and it does not happen in one *andolan* (movement) or even one generation.” Nonetheless, many people, including these young politicians, still invoke the new generation or the young when I ask them what the solution to the current political impasse is. People are trained to look toward tomorrow and wait for things to come as they simultaneously say the movement continues.

*Amanda Snellinger is a political and legal anthropologist who is writing a book on student activism and politics in Nepal. She is currently a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Oxford’s School of Geography and the Environment, where she is doing joint research on unemployment amongst educated youth in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.*