

# The State–Society Relationship and Political Conflicts in Nepal (1768–2005)

Ali Riaz

*Illinois State University, USA*

Subho Basu

*Syracuse University, USA*

*Journal of Asian and African Studies*

Copyright © 2007

SAGE Publications

[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)

(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi  
and Singapore)

Vol 42(2): 123–142

DOI: 10.1177/0021909607074863



## **Abstract**

For nearly a decade, from the declaration of Maoist ‘people’s war’ in January 1996 to the formation of new alliance for the restoration of democracy in December 2005, Nepal has experienced a three-way power struggle between Maoist insurgents who want a republic based on egalitarian principles, elected politicians who want an unfettered role in policy making and a monarch bent upon a return to pre-democratic Nepal. This article attempts to explain this crisis from a structural-historical perspective and argues that fundamental to the understanding of this crisis is the state–society relationship. The article contends that the complex use of the constructed Hindu identity to provide cultural legitimacy to the monarchical political order, that has existed since the inception of the state in the 18th century to the democratic revolution in 1990, has contributed to the political alienation of substantial segment of ethnically, socially and economically marginalized population from the Nepalese state. By examining complex interactions among political and economic factors, this article further contends that the unrepresentative process of state formation and the tradition of governance have contributed to the alienation of the citizens from the state and created a political space for violent rebellion and state terrorism undermining fragile but emerging democratic institutions.

**Keywords** democracy • hegemony • Maoist insurgency • Nepal  
• state formation

## Introduction

Nepal has recently drawn the attention of the international media. Three factors have contributed to this; they are: first, the 'Royal Coup' initiated by the King on 1 February 2005 to re-establish monarchical absolutism by suspending the cabinet and clamping down on democratic procedures; second, the dramatic rise of the Maoist insurgency causing more than 12,000 deaths over the last decade; and finally, the lack of political stability in the country, reflected in the formation of 13 governments between 1991 and 2005. Barring a few exceptional moments, such as the 'People's Movement' for democracy in 1990, the massacre of the royal family in 2001, the intensification of the Maoist insurgency in 2004 and the signing of peace accord by the Maoists and political parties on 23 November 2006,<sup>1</sup> Nepal has not featured significantly in the western media. The coverage has been episodic in nature and driven by events without any in-depth analysis. However, we are on the verge of witnessing a significant departure from this pattern of media coverage, paralleled by a growing interest within academia. Over the last five years there have been a significant number of publications on Nepalese politics, especially on the causes of and conditions for the rise of the Maoist insurgency (Gellner, 2003; Karki and Seddon, 2003; Mark, 2003; Thapa, 2003; Hutt, 2004; Parajuli, 2004; Thapa and Sijapati, 2004; Lawoti, 2005; Mishra, 2005; Onesto, 2005). There is agreement within both popular and academic discourse that Nepal is caught in a three-way power struggle between Maoist insurgents who want a republic based on egalitarian principles, elected politicians who want an unfettered role in policy making and a monarch bent upon a return to pre-democratic Nepal. The question is: why is Nepal caught in this crisis?

In this article we argue that the crisis has been a long time in the making and that state formation in Nepal, especially the tendency towards centralization of power resulting in a disjuncture between the state and society, has contributed to the making of this crisis. Our central argument is that the crisis is intrinsically connected to two elements – the nature of the state and the rupture of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class of Nepal. The nature of a state is, as we know, greatly dependent on state formation processes. Therefore, the particular mode of state formation in Nepal has an important bearing on the current political situation. The article demonstrates that since its emergence in the late 18th century the Nepali state has remained an extractive patrimonial state representing a small segment of the society and therefore disconnected from the society it rules. In other words, there has been a lack of 'embeddedness' (Evans, 1995) of the Nepali state. Despite this disconnect, the state has succeeded in maintaining its hold over the population through a constructed Hindu identity and a complex connection between this identity and the cultural legitimacy of the social order. This constructed identity was designed to subsume ethnic and regional differences. This hegemonic ideology was ruptured in the 1990s, especially after the mass upsurge of 1990.

In arguing the case we will use two analytical tools: the extractive patrimonial state and hegemony. The article begins with a recap of the political history of Nepal, then analyzes the causes of and conditions for the present crisis using these two analytical tools. The concluding comments will try to offer some insights as to the likely future of the Nepali state.

### **Recapping the History**

Nepal, the world's only officially Hindu country, has been an independent kingdom since 1768. The country was virtually isolated from outside influence throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, although it remained a de facto British protectorate between 1816 and 1923. After 1846 the Rana family gained power as hereditary prime ministers, and reduced the monarch to a figurehead. This continued until 1950 when Nepali Congress Party formally decided to wage an armed struggle against the Rana regime. They were assisted in no uncertain terms by the reigning monarch, King Tribhuvan. King Tribhuvan, who had long been openly critical of Rana rule, escaped from the palace and sought asylum in the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on 6 November 1950. On 11 November Nepali Congress Party's Liberation Army (Mukti Sena) began military operations in the Tarai initiating a revolution in Nepal. As insurgency gained momentum, after prolonged negotiation with the government of India and King Tribhuvan, in a proclamation on 8 January 1951, Mohan Shamsher Rana, the hereditary Prime Minister, promised the restoration of the king, amnesty for all political prisoners, and elections based on adult suffrage no later than 1952. This accord contributed to the revival of the power of the King. Thus the era of a quasi-constitutional monarchy began in 1951. After about eight years, King Mahendra promulgated a new constitution followed by the country's first democratic elections. But the democratic experiment was short-lived. Eighteen months later the king dismissed the fledgling government, suspended the constitution and declared the parliamentary system a failure. The king promulgated a new constitution in 1962. The new constitution established a 'partyless' system of *panchayats* (councils). Political parties were banned but continued to exist with the tacit support of neighboring India, and Nepal witnessed periodic movements for the reintroduction of constitutional democracy. The situation did not witness any radical change when King Birendra, the Harvard-educated son of Mahendra, assumed the throne in 1972. Contradicting popular expectation of reform, King Birendra introduced an amendment of the constitution in 1975, which resulted in further centralization of power and stricter control of political parties. However, simmering political tension exploded in response to events elsewhere in South Asia. Monarchy faced trying moments in 1979 when police attacked students protesting against the execution of Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by the military regime of Pakistan. Soon, the student movement escalated into wider movements against the Nepali panchayat system. The government called the army to restore order but King Birendra also promised a referendum on the future of the partyless Panchayat system. The referendum

took place in 1980. The government imposed many restrictions on direct party political propaganda and used both financial and coercive tactics to intimidate the opposition. International monitors were not allowed in the country and opposition alleged rigging of votes in many places. Yet it proved to be a hollow victory for the government as 45 percent of the population still voted against the system in an election where 66 percent turned out for voting. Realizing the intensity of the opposition, King Birendra introduced three constitutional amendments: direct elections to the Rashtriya Panchayat to be held every five years on the basis of universal franchise; the Prime Minister would be elected by the Rashtriya Panchayat; the cabinet would be appointed by the king on the recommendation of the Prime Minister and would be accountable to the Rashtriya Panchayat. Thus Nepal slowly limped towards formal democracy but the government reformed only in response to mass movements at grass roots level. Since 1980 the Panchayat system has continued to exist but in much changed form. Yet external factors impinged on Nepali politics in 1989 again when India arbitrarily closed all but two trading points with Nepal. As economic hardship increased, movement against autocratic rule slowly resurfaced. Indeed, the news of the collapse of the communist regimes in the eastern block nations triggered the mass upsurge of 1990 called the *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement). This brought about a return to the multi-party system and rule by elected governments.

The new era of democracy has been marked by political turbulence and a high degree of instability. Over the last 14 years, three parliamentary elections have been held and 13 governments have come to power (Table 1). Since October 2002 with the king's intervention in the political system, the country has been ruled by various appointees of the king rather than elected by the parliament.

During this period a Maoist insurgency swept through the rural areas of the country. The parliamentary communists, who gained power through the second general election in 1994, were forced out of power within a year as other political parties refused to extend support to the minority Communist government. However, parliamentary Communists elected to operate within the institutional structure of the state provided by the constitution of 1990 and thus remained part of the newly emerging party political establishment. In contrast to parliamentary Communists, Maoists faced concerted repression of the state as they were seeking to organize land reforms in a remote western region of rural Nepal where they had a powerful base. Their anger at the concerted repression of their activities by the state and the plight of the rural poor prompted them to take up arms. From a group of less than a dozen in 1996 the rebels now command an army of 4000 fighters and have established influence over two-thirds of the rural areas rendering the state virtually ineffective. Negotiations between the government and the Maoists have failed. In addition to continuing military support from India, the Nepali government has received enormous military aid since 9/11 from the USA and Britain, yet it has not been successful in containing the insurgents. It is in this context that the 'Royal Coup' was orchestrated in February 2005. Since then the

**Table 1**  
**Governments in Nepal since 1990**

Prime Minister	Participating parties	Duration	Dates
K.P. Bhattarai (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress +ULF Interim	13 months	4/19/90–5/25/91
G.P. Koirala (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress Majority	43 months	5/26/91–11/28/94
M.M. Adhikari (UML)	UML minority	9 months	11/29/94–10/09/95
S.B. Deuba (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress- NDP-NSP coalition	18 months	9/11/95–3/11/97
L.B. Chand (NDP)	NDP-UML-NSP coalition	6 months	03/12/1997–10/7/1997
S.B. Thapa	NDP-Nepali Congress	6 months	10/7/1997–04/15/1998
G.P. Koirala (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress minority	5 months	4/15/98–8/25/98
G.P. Koirala (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress- ML-coalition	4 months	8/26/98–12/22/98
G.P. Koirala (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress- UML-NSP coalition	5 months	12/23/98–5/31/99
K.P. Bhattarai (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress	10 months	5/31/99–3/22/00
G.P. Koirala (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress	28 months	3/22/00–7/26/01
S.B. Deuba (Nepali Congress)	Nepali Congress	14 months	7/23/01–10/4/02
L.B. Chand (Former monarchist- Panchayati figure) Leader of NDP Faction	NDP (Chand Faction) [appointed by the king]	7 months	10/11/02–05/30/03
S.B. Thapa (Former monarchist- Panchayati figure) Leader of NDP Faction	NDP (Thapa Faction) [appointed by the king]	11 months	06/04/03–05/07/04
S.B. Deuba Nepali Congress (Democratic)	NC (Democratic) [appointed by the king] and UML	8 months	06/02/04–02/01/05
King Ganyendra Chairman of the Cabinet	Tulsi Giri and Kirti Nidhi Bista (Former Prime Ministers during Panahcyat era) Vice Chairmen of Council of Ministers appointed by King. King held the position of the Head of the government as the chairman of the ministerial council	Continued until the popular uprising	02/14/05–

**Abbreviations of Party Names**

Nepali Congress – Nepali Congress Party founded by socialist leader B.P. Koirala.

United Left Front – formed to fight the *Panchayat* system in 1989 and dissolved when the three ULF ministers left the interim government.

(continued)

**Table 1 Continued**


---

UML – Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) originally professed revolution but now operated within parliamentary system.
NDP – National Democratic Party (known in Nepali as Rastrya Prajatantra Party: party of former supporters and activist of pre-1990 <i>Panchayat</i> regime.
NSP – <i>Nepal Sadbhavana Party</i> (Goodwill) Party small regionalist party of <i>terai</i> , primarily associated with people of 'Indian descent'.
ML– Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist–Leninist) splinter group from UML in March 1998, rejoined in 2002.
Nepali Congress Democratic – A faction of Nepali Congress headed by Sher Bahadur Deuba. On 22 May Prime Minister Deuba dissolved the HoR and recommended a mid-term poll to which King Gyanendra agreed. This recommendation angered G.P. Koirala, his archrival in the Nepali Congress Party. On 26 May 2002, under the leadership of Koirala, Nepali Congress suspended PM Deuba from party membership for three years. On 16 June 2002, Deuba faction of the NC formed a new party, NC (Democrat), with Sher Bahadur Deuba as party president.

---

constitution remains suspended, political leaders are being persecuted and the Maoists, after intensifying their campaign, have declared a ceasefire.

### **Nepal as an Extractive Patrimonial State**

If we are to understand state formation as those processes that lead to the centralization of political power over a well-defined continuous territory, and with monopoly of the means of coercion (Schwarz, 2004: 1), the state formation process in Nepal is interesting on two counts. First, the process has followed a classical pattern of state formation, including the violent nature of it. Second, this process has taken place in a peripheral society where the classical model of state formation is scarce, if not non-existent. Drawing on the European experience Charles Tilly (1975, 1985, 1992, 1994) has rightly noted that 'war made states'. According to the Tillyian model, state formation involves four stages: state making by war making (that is, to neutralize rivals outside the territory); state making by elimination (that is, to eliminate potential challengers within the territory); providing protection to the supporters (that is, to create an environment for continued existence of the new structure); and finally, extraction of resources (that is, to subject the population and territory to continuous taxation for the maintenance and/or expansion of the territory) (Tilly, 1985: 182).

The genesis of the Nepali state lies in the war making of Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723–75), the ruler of the tiny Gorkha principality, in the 18th century. For 26 years, he organized blockades, sieges and assaults that ultimately enabled him to conquer the 60 local kingdoms in the region. Prithvi Narayan and his successors did not stop at this formidable achievement and went on to further expand their kingdom, incorporating the Himalayan foothills as far as Sikkim in the East and the Kangra Valley in the West (Pradhan, 1991). This is what we know as Nepal today.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the formation of the Nepali state, at least in its rudimentary form, followed a classical pattern, which, as we have seen, is very unusual for a peripheral society. In the 18th century South Asia experienced the eclipse of earlier Mughal imperial political formations and the rise of new principalities and empires, but many of these princely polities collapsed under the sway of British imperial rule within a short span of time. Those that survived

were frozen into a time warp by the British through indirect colonial control. Nepal remains an exception.

Generally speaking, in peripheral societies, states are mostly imported entities, at least on two counts. First, the material basis upon which they rest is not a product of indigenous evolution, and second, the structures of the state have been (largely) imported through colonial expansion. There is no denying that capitalism serves as the material basis of states in peripheral societies and that the present form of capitalism has been implanted in the periphery due to Western capitalism's need to expand its geographical sphere and the scale of its accumulation. Additionally, historical accounts show that the origins of the state in peripheral societies are either colonial, or, where they are not (for example, Thailand, China, Russia or Turkey), they are engaged in a conscious attempt to modernize based on the European model. Notwithstanding the fact that these states have their own local peculiarities, 'they have been "parachuted" by colonial rule and then taken over, lock, stock, and barrel, i.e. in their territorial claims, administration, and legal structures, by "independence movements"' (Shanin, 1982: 315). The Nepali state does not conform to this generalization despite the fact that the British Empire in India has influenced its contours. The treaty of Sagauli signed by the Gorkha monarch with the East India Company in 1816, after a brief Anglo-Gorkha War (1814–16), defined the outer parameters of the monarchical polity. This treaty stopped the process of expansion of the Gorkha Kingdom, therefore limiting the war making aspect of state formation. However, this has not made the Nepali state a 'colonial state'.<sup>3</sup>

This twin-exceptionalism of the Nepali state has not wiped out one of its fundamental characteristics: extraction from a larger population as an agent of the rulers to perpetuate other activities of the state. 'The relationship between the state and extraction has been clear since the beginning of European state formation' (Theis, 2002: 4) and has remained unchanged throughout the centuries. 'Taxation, or extraction, is thus a central task for the state to master before pursuing any other goals' (Theis, 2002: 4). Although extraction remains a fundamental and perhaps a universal character of the state, not all states can be characterized as 'extractive states' because in an ideal situation the extraction also produces a contract between the rulers and the ruled. In the early phase of state making that contract involves protection from external rivals, and where external rivals are absent, the maintenance of law and order in the face of potential or real internal contenders for power. In modern times, the state is expected to provide, in addition to human security, 'positive political goods' such as an independent judicial system to adjudicate disputes, to enforce the rule of law and to protect the most fundamental civil and political rights; a functioning educational and healthcare system; and transportation infrastructure (Rotberg, 2003). In the absence of all or any of these, the extraction of resources can be described as 'banditry' and the state can be characterized as an 'extractive state'. The Nepali state, since 1816, has assumed this role and very few changes have taken place in almost a century up to 1951 and even after that



it retained many features of the earlier state. Here Mancur Olson's (1993, 2000) explanation of how the state emerges out of anarchy, especially the tale of roving and sedentary/stationary banditry, is instructive in understanding the Nepali state. Olson insisted that under anarchy, what happens is 'uncoordinated competitive theft' by groups of 'roving bandits'. This destroys the incentive to invest and produce. It makes sense for one of these roving bandits to destroy the competition, set himself up as dictator, and 'rationalize theft in the form of taxes'. The state, therefore, is the 'stationary bandit'. But the Nepali state has never gone through this dramatic, yet necessary, transformation. Although geographically speaking over time the Nepali State had become 'stationary', it essentially remained the 'roving bandit'. It is roving in the sense that the Nepali state has failed to demonstrate that it has stake in long-term development of the country. The lack of infrastructural development bears testimony to the fact. In similar vein Murshed and Gates (2003: 9) have noted, 'corruption and rent-seeking politicians have replaced the former feudal tax farmer'.

Having arrived at this point of our analytical journey we must investigate the causes as well as consequences of the avoidance of this transformative phase. Or in other words, we need to ask: why has the Nepali state evaded this phase of state formation? How has this impacted upon the politics of Nepal, especially on recent developments?

The fundamental reason for the absence of this transformation is due to the lack of embeddedness of the Nepali state. The configuration of the society where the state is located is seen as one of the predicated factors of the nature of the state. The state, in general, is understood to be 'a historically contingent creation' whose properties depend on, among other things, 'the character of the surrounding social structure' (Evans, 1995: 35). But the Nepali state remains a striking exception, for it has not reflected the social structure on which it is based. The Nepali society is divided along various caste, linguistic, and geographical residency lines while the ruling bloc has been comprised of a small segment (Table 2). At its formation, the ruling class was composed of the military hierarchy of Gorkhas (Thakuri and Chetri) and Brahmin attendants and advisors. Lacking the skills to control the expanding kingdom, these rulers became dependent on the administrative and financial skills of Newars who became members of the new ruling bloc. These high castes supervised the political system and extracted surplus both in kind and labor from low-caste artisans (Gellner, 1997: 8). Therefore from the outset the ruling class has been narrowly based. Mahendra Lawoti (2003) shows that to date it has remained unchanged:

High caste Hindu elite males from the hills (Caste Hill Hindu Elite – CHHE) overwhelmingly dominate power positions in politics, administration, the judiciary, parliament, academia, civil society, industry/commerce, local government, and education. Jointly the CHHE and Newar constitute 37.2 percent of the population, but in 1999 they held more than 80 percent of leadership positions in the important arenas of governance. (p. 52)



**Table 2**  
**Major ethnic and caste divisions based on the Census of 2001**

<b>Total percentage of high-caste population including Terai<sup>1</sup> people</b>	<b>31.57%</b>
Parbatya <sup>2</sup> High Caste	
Hill Brahmin	12.74%
Chhetri	15.80%
Thakuri	1.47%
<b><i>Terai High-caste population</i></b>	
Brahman Terai	0.59%
Baniya	0.56%
Rajput	0.21%
Kayastha	0.20%
<b>Total percentage of major Janjati<sup>3</sup> population including Newars</b>	
Hill Janjati population	35.37%
Newars <sup>4</sup>	5.48%
Magars	7.14%
Tamangs	5.64%
Rais	2.79%
Gurungs	2.39%
Limbus	1.58%
Sherpas	0.64%
Yakkha	0.08%
<b><i>Terai and Inner Terai<sup>5</sup> Janajati population</i></b>	
Tharus	6.75%
Chepang	0.23%
Kumals	0.44%
Majhis	0.32%
Danuwars	0.23%
Darais	0.07%
Raji	0.01%
Raute	negligible
<b>Total percentage of major Dalit<sup>6</sup>/occupational communities in Nepal</b>	<b>10.37%</b>
Hill Dalits	
Kami	3.94%
Damai/ Dholi	1.72%
Sarki	1.40%
Badi	0.02%
Gaine	0.03%
Dalit Groups in Terai	
Tatma	0.34%

(continued)

Table 2 Continued

Khatwe	0.32%
Chamar	1.19%
Dushad	0.70%
Mushahar	0.76%
Batar	
Dhobi	0.32%
Dom	0.04%
Halkhor	0.02%
Other identified Dalit	0.76%
<b>Other pure castes</b>	<b>6.43%</b>
Yadavs/Ahirs (herdsmen)	3.94%
Kurmis (cultivators)	0.94%
Mallahs (fishermen)	0.51%
Kewats (fishermen)	0.60%
Kumhars (potters)	0.24%
Haluwai (confectioners)	0.22%
<b>'Impure', but touchable</b>	<b>2.17%</b>
Kalwars (brewers/merchants)	0.51%
Dhobis (washermen)	0.32%
Telis (oil-pressers)	1.34%
<b>Other religious groups enlisted under caste and ethnicity</b>	
Muslim	4.27%
Churaute ( Hill Muslims)	0.02%
Sikh	0.02%
<b>Other linguistic and ethnic groups</b>	
Bangali	0.04%
Marwadi	0.19%

*Notes:*

- 1 Terai refers 'moist land' in Indian and Nepali languages. Terai area contains the submontane strip of marshy but highly fertile land stretching beneath the lower ranges of the Himalaya in northern India and southern Nepal. This strip extends approximately from the Jumna river on the west to the Brahmaputra on the east.
- 2 Parbatya literally means 'hill people'. It refers to high-caste Hindus from the middle hill region of Nepal who have dominated the modern Nepal society for the last 200 years.
- 3 Janjati is an umbrella term recently popularized by non-Hindu, primarily Tibeto-Burman language speaking hill groups who used the term Janjati to indicate their status as indigenous people. Historically they constitute a relatively marginalized social group placed in the middle of the caste hierarchy.
- 4 Newars constitute a substantial section of the population Kathmandu valley. They were the rulers of the valley before the advent of Gorkha rule. Newars have their own complex internal caste systems which even included several former 'untouchable' Newar occupational castes. Many Newars are also Buddhists. However, Newars were claimed as part of the Janjati despite their relatively high social ranking in terms of access to government jobs.

*(continued)*

**Table 2 Continued**

- 5 Inner Terai refers to river valleys that lie between Sivalik and Mahabharat hills in Nepal.
- 6 The term *dalit* (literally meaning oppressed) has increasingly gained prominence in India through the activism of former untouchable political workers. However, the term's application is not free from political debates. Many scholars prefer value-neutral term such as occupational castes. There also exists debates among scholars and political activists in reference to which community can be included in this category. In this table we have followed the identification produced in Dilli Ram (2002: 15).

*Sources:* This table covers major caste configurations in Terai and Hills. There are several minor configurations which are excluded here. This table is prepared on the basis of data provided in the *Population Census 2001, National Report*. Kathmandu: National Planning Commission Secretariat, Central Bureau of Statistics, June 2002, p 72. However, various columns and classificatory terminologies are used from different sources. The terms *dalit* and caste categories under *dalit* are collected from Dilli Ram (2002: 15). The term Janajati and communities listed under Janjatis are collected from Nepal Federation Indigenous Nationalities Web board. For different categories used here we have followed both traditional caste categories and new political categories used by political activists to indicate the process of community formation from political perspective.

The disjuncture between the state and society is also reflected in the political economy of the governance and reproduced through the patrimonial nature of the state.

Nepal has been administered through a complex tenurial system of 'state landlordism'. This allowed the ruling class to usurp the territorial domains of the indigenous population and reapportion them as private entitlements to the army and loyal government functionaries. For example during the Rana regime, a fourfold classification of this tenurial system was created. They are: the Raikar,<sup>4</sup> the Birtta,<sup>5</sup> the Gunthi,<sup>6</sup> and the Kipat<sup>7</sup> (Rose and Fisher, 1970; Seddon, 1987). Despite variations these tenures actually supported the upper-caste elites but the elites were essentially a class of *rent-receiving* functionaries because the state remained the possessor of the land and these 'land grants' were temporary and alienable entitlements. Another significant impact of this system has been that most of the peasants throughout the kingdom were reduced to the status of share-croppers which furthered their alienation from the state.

The tenurial system has been consistent with the predominant patron–client relationship between the state and its functionaries. As we know, the 'patron–client relationship means a mutually obligatory arrangement between an individual who has authority, social status, wealth, or some other personal resource (the patron) and another person who benefits from his or her support or influence (the client)'. Following Weber (1947: 347–58) we underscore the point that loyalty and relationships are important to an understanding of the relationship between state and society. In the absence of structured institutions, the political leader plays a critical role in structuring the modes of governance and the nature of fiscal management. Under such circumstances, the political leader selects administrative personnel based on personal loyalty. In such a polity, political rights and economic rights converge, in the sense that political power claims ownership of all resources. Property rights or political rights for any group independent of

the leader (or state authority) do not exist. In such a system, the 'chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage' (and) 'relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system' (Bratton and van de Walle, 1994: 458). In the case of Nepal, the political system has always evolved around the royal palace apart from a period of Rana rule, between 1846 and 1951, when self-appointed hereditary Prime Ministers (or Ranas) were predominant. During Rana rule the political system revolved around Rana rulers who distributed resources among a hierarchy of political elites through a strong patron–client network extending from the palace to remote villages. The political culture evolved in such a manner that fierce factional competition for resources among elites simply served to bolster the palace's hold over them. In a society where the patron–client relationship is the dominant mode of interaction the system is organized along a vertical line of subordination. It is also prone to corruption and subject to the personal whim of the patron(s) as reflected in post-1990 Nepal when the country experienced the exuberant growth of patron–client relationships:

The political leaders, especially the top leadership, can exercise unrestrained power, appointing sycophants to administrative posts, ignoring party rules and procedures, and often governing on their personal whims. The leaders nominate at least half of the central committee members, often relatives (such as the NC), friends, and/or caste brethren (as in the CPN-UML). The appointees, in turn, remain personally loyal to the leaders. Leaders also appoint party candidates for parliamentary, local and organization[al] elections. (Lawoti, 2003: 52)

But the political leaders themselves are also subject to this unequal relationship, as clients of the palace because the palace has been the only 'fountain of privileges'. This mode of state formation and associated political culture encountered a great deal of resistance and faced periodic revolutionary upsurges but on each occasion changes produced compromises, either externally induced or internally worked out, that posited the palace as a natural ruling authority and a symbol of unity. In so doing, it perpetuated the patrimonial state.

A patrimonial state with limited resources and an extractive agenda akin to roving banditry is bound to create inequality within the society:

Where governments behave like roving bandits, they are unlikely to have a development agenda that can be shared with those that they seek to govern. Improvement in the citizen's quality of life would therefore be accidental. Under the roving bandit form of government, the evolution of development policies is also unlikely, considering the absence of clear goals for the future. Such forms of government cannot encourage the evolution of clear rules and enforcement mechanisms through which private interests for the benefit of the community can be encouraged. On the contrary, self-seeking governments tend to stifle the developmental outcomes of atomistic behaviour (sic). Such governments also encourage the birth of parallel systems of micro-governance that find expression in parallel activities which undermine broader development efforts. (Kimyu, 1999)

Nepal is an embodiment of this phenomenon. With more than half of its population living below the poverty line Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. This raises the question: how have the ruling elites maintained their hold over the socially and economically deprived population without any challenges? What has provided the legitimacy to this blatantly unequal social order? Answers to these questions require an understanding of the role of ideological hegemony of the ruling classes.

### **Hegemonic Ideology and the Legitimization of the Monarchy**

Hegemony, according to Gramsci (1971), is characterized by:

The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; the consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (p. 12)

The question of hegemony, however, is not merely material, it is also a politics of moral and intellectual leadership. To assert its hegemony, the ruling class must be able to defend its own corporate interests by universalizing them, by ensuring that these interests can at least apparently ‘become the interests of the ... subordinate groups’ (Gramsci, 1971: 181). To this extent, hegemony implies consent rather than domination, integration rather than exclusion, and co-optation rather than suppression. Gramsci further reminds us that consent and coercion co-exist in all societies. The coercive elements inherent in a hegemonic system are laid bare, if, and when, the ability of the ruling classes to organize consent weakens. Under normal circumstances, the elements of coercion are kept latent, concealed. The ruling classes seek and, of course, prefer the active and voluntary consent of the subordinate masses. But when the masses ‘do not “consent” actively or passively’ or the consent is not sufficient to reproduce capitalist relations, the apparatus of state coercive power ‘legally enforces discipline on those ... who do not consent’ (Gramsci, 1971: 12). That is why the ruling classes, in any society, attempt to impose a general direction on social life through their ideology and ensure social conformity to that ideology. If that fails, coercion becomes the principal tool to rule the masses.

In the Nepalese context, the ruling class universalized their interest through careful creation of various layers of myths that present the monarch as the descendent of the Hindu God Vishnu and the true protector of the Hindu religion. The divine lineage provides the monarchy with the divine right to rule, which has been sanctified and legitimized through complex religious rituals. The blessing of the king by the ‘living goddess’ *Kumari* is a case in point. Prithvi Narayan Shah used the latter to gain instant legitimacy, when he sealed his conquest of Kathmandu during the *Indra Jatra*, a royal festival of the indigenous Newar population of the Kathmandu Valley, and placed himself before the *Kumari*

to receive immediate sanctification as the ruler of Nepal. The Hinduization of the culture was further consolidated during the Rana regime, especially through the *Muluki Ain* (law of the land) which established a legally sanctioned hierarchical social order based on Hindu caste ranking (Höfer, 1979). We are aware that such reading of Nepali political history could be seen as overtly state centric.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, religious rituals and practices among subjugated ethnic minorities did indicate organized resistance to such construction of hierarchy (Cameron, 1998). More importantly, from an empirical perspective it could be further asserted that many clauses of *Muluki Ain* had never been implemented into practice. The state also accommodated various regional and local authorities into the power structure through selective provisions of autonomy for local elites and the distribution of patronages to powerful entrepreneurs. Yet it is undeniable that such projection of political authority was articulated through an ideological framework of caste hierarchy codified in *Muluki Ain*, if not always implemented in terms of details of its prescriptions. Indeed, the concept of hegemony does not preclude the possibility of resistance. Rather, resistance could always be part of the function of hegemonic political ideology. Thus the hierarchy of caste provided an ideological legitimacy to the process of extraction of revenues and labor by the state and elite groups in the eyes of many despite resistance from below.

However, this hegemony of the ruling class, particularly of the monarchy, faced a series of challenges throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. The popular uprising of 1990 signaled the rupture of the ideological hegemony. This does not mean that the *Jana Andolan* of 1990 brought revolutionary changes in the Nepali state structure; on the contrary, it maintained the hierarchical and centralized political system that is riddled with conspiracies and dominated by a patron–client nexus (Sharma, 2005: 4). Indeed what was gained through battles on the street was slowly surrendered through palace negotiations. Democratic pluralism opened up new avenues of political mobilization and led to new assertiveness of lower castes against the constructed Hindu ethno-religious order, which underpinned the monarchical system of governance and acted as the basis of the legitimacy of the Monarch. With the intensification of ethnic activism *Janajati* movements evolved into a mass movement and opened up new debates concerning their status in Nepali society. Religion had been integrally related to cultural linguistic identity since Nepali and Sanskrit are both languages identified with elite Hindu culture. These languages were promoted at the expense of the distinct cultural heritage of ethnic groups. The *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh*, formed in 1990 as a coalition of indigenous groups, agitated against the continuation of Sanskrit as a compulsory subject in schools. In the 1991 census, many people refused to identify Nepali as their mother tongue. Further, in Nepal the census of 2001 reported that less than 50 percent claimed Nepali as their first language and the distant second was *Maithilli* – a dialect of Hindi. The census also reported nearly 32 languages spoken in Nepal.<sup>9</sup> The 1990s also experienced the rise of Madhesi movement among Tarai communities with

ethno-regional demands. The assertion of these identities had so profoundly shaken Nepalese polity that all established political parties, and particularly parliamentary Marxists and Maoists, had to articulate the grievances of ethnic minorities. The language of class had to recognize and incorporate a language of distinctive ethnic cultural heritage. Democratic Nepal experimented with an ethnic pluralism that sought to address the historical wrongs committed by the Hindu patrimonial state.

The rupture of the dominant ideology of Hinduism and the dawning of the democratic era in 1991 also heralded a period of factional wrangling among the political parties, acrimony between various factions of the parties and political instability.

While the new democratic era brought limited changes to economic and social systems it added new claimants to the limited resources of the state contributing to the further deprivation of the already marginalized ethnic and caste groups. More importantly experiments with open democratic political structure also made such transactions visible to the state. Here it is necessary to reiterate that the nature of the post-1990 Nepali state is no different from the state under the tight control of the Monarchy. The disjuncture between the state and society remains the defining feature, as the state has not become embedded in the society.

What is of further significance is that it started to take a heavy toll on certain geographical areas. The economic policies of the government had already impacted adversely on the mid and far western regions of the country; resource constraints now worsened the situation. For centuries these regions had been neglected. With rapid population growth, massive migration to Terai, over-extraction of natural resources, land degradation and stagnant land productivity the Nepalese economy in general had been facing bleak prospects, but the situation was far worse in the mid and far western regions. These regions, mostly inhabited by the members of marginalized ethnic and caste groups, bore the brunt of the unequal economic system for quite some time. In the 1990s, while the high politics of Nepal was revealing its fractious nature, the political leaders in Kathmandu were engaged in intra- and inter-party squabbles, and the King Birendra, the monarch, was acting as an aloof spectator except for his controversial decision of not deploying army against Maoists despite the request from the Prime Minister. His successor, King Gyanendra, assumed more direct role from October 2002 and soon indulged in hiring and firing Prime Ministers contributing further to the growing political instability. The Nepali people became disenchanted and hopelessness took hold over these regions. The distress of these regions on the one hand highlights the fact that inequality in Nepal is not only social but also spatial (Murshed and Gates, 2003; Bhurtel and Ali, 2006), while on the other hand demonstrates that the Nepali state is weak, limited and absent in certain geographical areas. The state is not only absent in remote areas but also in various other sectors as noted by Lawoti (2003: 52): ‘the state’s reach and influence in development, service delivery, administration, and security is



severely limited. The state does not have any effective presence in many sectors and regions’.

The absence of the state is one of the keys to understanding the rise of the Maoist movement, especially their success in establishing control over various parts of rural areas in a short span of time. The absence of the state either in certain geographical areas (e.g. rural areas) or in regard to certain social services (e.g. security), obviously accentuates the crisis of governance and is bound to create a void, which, in turn, leads to the establishment of a parallel structure of authority. In Nepal, a parallel structure of authority came from the Maoist movement, while elsewhere it has given rise to warlords or vigilante groups (Riaz, 2005, especially the conclusion). It is no surprise that the Maoists chose the mid-western hills of Rukum, Rolpa, Salyan, Jajarkot, where the state was absent – both as the facilitator of development (reflected in the low per-capita income of these districts<sup>10</sup>) and as an administrative unit, as their first points of insurgency. Bhurtal and Ali (2006), in their exploration of the environmental roots of the Maoist movement, concluded that:

the ecological degradation widened resource scarcity especially in the form [of] people’s access to sufficient fertile lands in the Mid- and Far-western regions. When the resource is limited and widespread deprivation is prevalent, other socio-economic variables – such as land tenure issues, resource capture by local privileged few, gender, caste and ethnic equations – intervene. Such gradual loss of livelihood made people vulnerable to the exploits and rhetoric of Maoists, who offered an alternative (albeit violent). (p. 18)

## Conclusion

We can never predict accurately what the future holds for any country. This is as true for Nepal as for any other nation. Conflicts and contestations, struggles and the resistance of social forces mediate socio-structural change and political development. Thus, there is no inevitable trajectory of history. What is obvious, however, is that this resilience of the absolute monarchy as a governing institution and increasing disenchantment with constitutional processes has led to more violent activities producing a further stalemate in the political situation. While we recognize the stalemate, it is equally important that we take note that the present crisis has brought the question of the Nepali state to the forefront. This discussion is long overdue. In recent days, concerns have been expressed in the global media that the Nepali state has failed. Over the decades in Nepal the gradual erosion of the state’s capacity to deliver is matched by the rise of a militant movement and the failure of constitutional political parties to offer a solution to the problems faced by the nation. These are often considered as the defining features of a failed state. Whether we should use the ‘failed state framework’ to understand the crisis in Nepal is a matter of a debate and beyond

the scope of this article. But it is our contention that this debate cannot be postponed for long.

### Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference on Religious and Social Fragmentation and Economic Development at Cornell University in October 2005. We greatly appreciate the comments of the panelists and participants of the conference. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for perceptive comments on the draft of the article.

### Notes

1. This article covers the period between 1768 and 2005 from the inception of monarchical state in Nepal to the royal coup on 1 February 2005. Events taking place after November 2005, when Maoist insurgents entered into an understanding with seven major political parties for the restoration of democracy in Nepal, are not discussed. These developments initiated a new phase of Nepali politics: the monarchical state had to face the combined opposition of political parties and the alliance of seven major political parties. This led to the second people's movement in April 2006 and the signing of the peace accord on 23 November 2006. The latter paved the way for power sharing between Maoists and political parties. Recent developments demand a separate treatment and are outside the purview of this article. Nonetheless, we believe that that this transformation further confirms the central thesis of this article.
2. We are obviously aware of certain limitations of applying the idea of territorial sovereignty to the pre-capitalist polity of Nepal. In most pre-capitalist polities, political power was parceled out among various actors. More importantly, as Winichakul (1994) has demonstrated very effectively the idea of state as the sovereign power within bounded territory was very much product of the Asian encounter with European colonizing power, it would be no doubt wrong to overemphasize the idea. In the context of Nepal the very idea of territorial sovereignty was contingent upon the British assistance in mapping territories. Even the idea of Nepal as a signifier of a country primarily applied to the Kathmandu valley in the minds of the inhabitants of the Shah kingdom. Yet the Nepali state that came into existence in the late 18th century survived in the 20th century and initiated a process to convert Nepali kingdom into a nation state. We thus use the term rudimentary to indicate this process of transformation.
3. The treaty allowed a British resident to be placed in the royal court of Kathmandu to supervise the process of governance. The resident played a crucial role in local politics. In a situation of externally imposed restrictions on political dynamism for an expanding princely polity, the very power of the monarch as a military leader had been curbed; this substantially contributed to the weakening of the monarch's hold over the court. The monarchical crisis deepened as a series of minors succeeded to the throne. Many of these new rulers had little ability or desire to rule. Not being able to engage in wider military conquests, courtiers now concentrated on orchestrating intrigues, factional fighting and coups. Not surprisingly, after 1816 the monarchy as an institution was gradually weakened by internal squabbles. As elsewhere in South Asia the British resident's presence and his occasional dabbling in court politics further contributed to growing factional squabbles among courtly elites.
4. Land from which the state directly received revenue but in which the state was divested of ownership rights in favor of an individual on conditional contracts.
5. Under the *Birta* tenure, tenure holders enjoyed direct control over land in return for part payment of revenue to the state.

6. Under the *Gunthi* tenure, tenure holders enjoyed direct control over land in return for part payment of revenue to the state. The *Gunthi* lands were donated by the state or individuals for religious or philanthropic purposes, exempted from tax.
7. Kipat is a form of communal tenure prevalent in the Eastern Hills regions for Limbu minorities.
8. For a powerful critique of such views and resistance from below see Holmberg (2000).
9. While some *Janajatis* have distinct languages, like the *Rai* and *Tharus*, others have broad geographic diffusion, like the *Tamang*. Many other caste and ethnic groups also have their own languages that are not recorded in the census. These diversities have thus made it difficult for the articulation of any homogenous Nepali identity based on a national language. However, at the same time, it would be wrong to identify minority coalitions premised on ethnic allegiance as homogenous and harmonious. As in any society such identities are plural and open to contestations. The complicated arrangement of linguistic and ethnic identities made this alliance more fragile.
10. Murshed and Gates (2003: 6) inform, 'Mid-Western districts such as Rolpa, Jajarkot and Salyan had 25, 19 and 17 percent respectively of the average income of Kathmandu. ... [T]he HDI for Rolpa, Jajarkot and Salyan were only 45, 44 and 35 percent respectively of the Kathmandu level in 1996'.

## References

- Bhurtel, J. and S.H. Ali (2006) 'The Green Roots of Red Rebellion: Environmental Degradation and the Rise of the Maoist Movement in Nepal', working paper. Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International Studies.
- Bratton, M. and N. van de Walle (1994) 'Patrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa', *World Politics* 46(4): 453–89.
- Cameron, M.M. (1998) *On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Dilli Ram, D., Y.B. Gurung, B. Acharya, K. Hemchuri and D. Swarnakar (2002) *National Dalit Strategy Report: Analysis of Dalits in Nepal*. Kathmandu: National Planning Commission.
- Evans, P. (1995) *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gellner, D.N. (1997) 'Introduction', in D.N. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka and J. Whelpton (eds) *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, pp. 3–32. Amsterdam: Hardwood Academic Publishers.
- Gellner, D.N. (ed.) (2003) *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. New York: International General.
- Höfer, A. (1979) *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner.
- Holmberg, D. (2000) 'Derision, Exorcism, and the Ritual of Production of Power', *American Ethnologist* 27(4): 927–49.
- Hutt, M. (ed.) (2004) *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. London: C. Hurst and Co.
- Karki, A. and D. Seddon (2003) *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. Delhi: Adroit.

- Kimyu, P. (1999) 'Development Policy in Kenya: Which Way Forward?', *Wajibu* 15(2). Available at: [http://web.peacelink.it/wajibu/7\\_issue/p1.html](http://web.peacelink.it/wajibu/7_issue/p1.html), accessed 1 September 2005.
- Lawoti, M. (2003) 'Centralizing Politics and the Growth of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal', *Himalaya* 13(1): 49–58.
- Lawoti, M. (2005) *Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society*. New Delhi: SAGE.
- Mark, T.A. (2003) *Insurgency in Nepal*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.
- Mishra, P. (2005) 'The People's War', *London Review of Books* 27(12), 23 June 2005. Available at: [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n12/mish01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n12/mish01_.html), accessed 19 November 2006.
- Murshed, S.M and S. Gates (2003) 'Spatial-horizontal Inequality and the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal'. Study Commissioned by the DFID of the UK. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/research/inequality/June18Papers/NepalConflict.pdf>
- Olson, M. (1993) 'Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development', *American Political Science Review*, 87(3): 567–76.
- Olson, M. (2000) *Power And Prosperity*. New York: Basic Books.
- Onesto, L. (2005) *Dispatches from People's War in Nepal*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pradhan, K. (1991) *The Gorkha Conquests: The Process and Consequences of the Unification of Nepal with Particular Reference[s] to Eastern Nepal*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.
- Parajuli, R. (2004) *Maoist Movement of Nepal: A Select Bibliography*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari Center for Social Research and Development.
- Riaz, A. (2005) *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh*. Ontario: de Sitter Publications.
- Rose, L. and E. Fisher (1970) *The Politics of Nepal: Persistence and Change in an Asian Monarchy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rotberg, R. (2003) *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*. Cambridge, MA: World Peace Foundation.
- Seddon, D., P. Blaikie and J. Cameron (1980) *Nepal in Crisis: Growth and Stagnation at the Periphery*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Schwarz, R. (2004) 'State Formation Processes in Rentier State: The Middle Eastern Case', paper presented at the Fifth Pan-European Conference on International Relations, ECPR Standing Group on International Relations, 9–11 September, The Hague.
- Seddon, D. (1987) *Nepal: A State of Poverty*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Shanin, T. (1982) 'Class, State and Revolutions: Substitutes and Realities', in H. Alavi and T. Shanin (eds) *Introduction to the Sociology of the Developing Societies*, pp. 308–31. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Shrama, H. (2005) 'Political Conflict in Nepal and Quest for Autonomy', Calcutta Research Group Seminar, July 2005.
- Thapa, D. (ed.) (2003) *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari Center for Social Research and Development.
- Thapa, D. and B. Sijapati (2004) *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2004*. London and New York: Zed Books.

- Theis, C. (2002) 'State Building, Interstate and Intrastate Rivalry: A Study of Post-Colonial Developing Country Extractive Efforts, 1974–1993', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, 24–7 March, New Orleans.
- Tilly, C. (ed.) (1975) *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tilly, C. (1985) 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skopold (eds) *Bringing the State Back In*, pp. 169–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, C. (1992) *Coercion, Capital, and European States, 1990–1992*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tilly, C. (1994) *Cities and the Rise of the States in Europe, AD 1000–1800*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Weber, M. (1947) *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Winichakul, T. (1994) *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

**Ali Riaz** is Associate Professor of Politics and Government at Illinois State University. He has previously taught at Claflin University in South Carolina, Lincoln University in England, and Dhaka University in Bangladesh. He also worked as a Broadcast Journalist for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in London. Dr Riaz has served as a consultant to various national and international organizations and has to his credit more than ten books in Bengali and four in English. His publications include *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) and *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh* (Ontario: de Sitter Publications, 2005). His forthcoming book is *Paradise Lost? State Failure in Nepal* (co-authored with Subho Basu; Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007) His current research projects include Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, and Madrassahs in South Asia.

**Address:** Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, Campus Box 4600, Normal, IL 61790-4600, USA. (ariaz@ilstu.edu)

**Subho Basu** teaches South Asian History at Maxwell School, Syracuse University. He has widely published on labor history and contemporary South Asian politics. His monograph entitled *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal (1890–1937)* was published by the Oxford University Press in 2004. His other works include co-edited volumes with Suranjan Das entitled *Electoral Politics in South Asia* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1999) and one with Crispin Bates entitled *Rethinking Indian Political Institutions* (London: Anthem Press 2005). His forthcoming publication, *Paradise Lost: State Failure in Nepal*, is co-authored with Ali Riaz.