Political parties, old and new

Sujeet Karn

Nepal’s political parties were handed a mammoth task following the restoration of democracy in 1990, having been sidelined by the monarchy for three decades. There were high expectations that the parties would work towards a united and prosperous Nepal with the guarantee of freedom and equality for all citizens.

But it soon became apparent that they were ill-equipped for such a responsibility. Erratic politics post-1990 and the Maoist insurgency from 1996 encouraged the king of Nepal to assert himself politically. The country reacted with the April 2006 People’s Movement, the second such uprising against the monarchy in a generation. The movement was able to oust the king and re-establish the supremacy of the people.

The most potent symbol of the political parties’ return to power came on 18 May 2006, when the restored House of Representatives issued a declaration that essentially eliminated the king’s influence. In November 2006, the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) of major political parties and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA). This paved the way for the enactment of the Interim Constitution and elections to a Constituent Assembly (CA), and the explicit exclusion the monarchy from the political system. Given that the palace had had at least a nominal role in all the previous five constitutions of Nepal.

This article traces the evolution of political parties after 2006. Given the large number of active parties in Nepal, with 25 represented in the first CA and 30 in the second, and many more that did not qualify, it deals with only the major parties and others that are significant in some way to the post-war transition. It does not look in depth into the factionalism that has been prevalent in almost all of the parties, and which has led to frequent splits and subsequent mergers among them, because these schisms have mostly been caused by personality clashes and opportunism rather than by ideological differences.

One exception has been the CPN-M, which has undergone numerous divisions since 2006, with all splinter groups accusing the main party of having deviated from the ideals that underpinned the ‘People’s War’.

The discussion divides the parties into two groups: ‘old’ parties that existed before the 2006 transition, and ‘new’ parties that have been founded since then.

Old parties

Democratic politics in Nepal has its roots in India. The Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) – the progenitor of all of Nepal’s communist factions, including the two currently main ones, the CPN–Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML), and the CPN-Maoist Centre (CPN-MC) – were both founded in India in the late 1940s. With the impetus provided by a sense of political awakening in a newly independent India, Nepali political activists behind the parties had the express objective of overthrowing the Rana oligarchy and establishing democracy in Nepal.

Following the success of the anti-Rana movement in 1950–51, a number of other parties emerged to take...
advantage of the more open political atmosphere. But it took until 1959 before the first elections were held, in which the NC won a two-thirds majority and formed Nepal’s first democratic government. In less than two years, however, the king ended the democratic exercise and ushered in 30 years of direct monarchical rule under the partyless Panchayat system.

The advent of multiparty democracy in 1990 opened up space once again for political competition and a number of new parties were formed, including the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), established by monarchists associated with the Panchayat system. The three general elections held in the 1990s, however, proved to be largely a two-party tussle between the NC and the UML.

**Nepali Congress (NC)**

Due to its long history of democratic struggle, the NC claims the mantle of chief protagonist of multiparty democracy in Nepal. With a stated ideology of ‘democratic socialism’, the NC has in fact adhered to liberal centre-right policies, even after 2006. Despite having been thwarted twice by the monarchy, in 1960 and again in 2002, and marred by continuous infighting, the NC has made a significant contribution to Nepal’s political transformation towards a secular, republican polity. Many NC leaders have expressed scepticism towards federalism and secularism, but the party has been flexible since the 2006 transition, and has, at least in principle, embraced progressive agendas such as proportional representation and positive discrimination for marginalised groups.

The NC came second (to the Maoists) in the first CA (2008–12), but made a comeback as the largest party in the second CA (2013–15) and led the government until the promulgation of the new constitution in September 2015. During the drafting of the constitution, the NC allied with other elite powers to protect their traditional power bases and backtracked from many of the progressive commitments stipulated in the 2007 Interim Constitution.

**Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML)**

When it was formed in 1991 through the merger of two major communist factions, the UML was seen as advocating radical change. In 1993, it adopted the ‘People’s Multiparty Democracy’ policy programme to create a space for an ostensibly communist party within a multiparty system. This contrasted with its earlier, more established communist ideal of a ‘New People’s Democracy’. The UML has since behaved more like a social democratic than a communist party, while retaining its name for the sake of historical legacy.

The UML has avoided taking a conclusive stance on federalism beyond broad endorsement. But it took a rigid position against using identity as the basis for delineating federal boundaries, which led some senior leaders, mainly belonging to Janajati (indigenous) groups, to desert the party following the dissolution of the first CA in 2012. However, this approach did not hurt the UML electorally and in fact seemed to contribute to a much better performance in the 2013 CA elections, in which it emerged as the second largest party.

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**Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP)**

True to its origins as the pro-Panchayat party, the RPP remains the epitome of conservative politics in Nepal. It fought both the 2008 and 2013 CA elections as two separate factions. The more conservative RPP-Nepal came fourth in the 2013 ballot, just behind the Maoists. The RPP has sporadically stood for the return of the monarchy, and the RPP-Nepal was the only party to vote against the motion to declare Nepal a republic in May 2008. But while it has vacillated on the monarchy, it has been unambiguous and persistent in its calls for Nepal to revert to a Hindu state, which seems to have been a major resource for the RPP-Nepal’s electoral success in 2013. The two factions merged in November 2016.

**CPN-Maoist Centre (CPN-MC)**

The former CPN-M is now known as the CPN-MC. It is the latest name of the party that emerged after 1990 as the CPN-Unity Centre through the merger of two major factions of an influential strand of Nepal’s communist movement. While the party itself remained underground, it contested elections through the United People’s Front Nepal, and came third in the 1991 poll. By 1994 the CPN-Unity Centre had split. The more radical faction adopted the name CPN-Maoist in 1995, and launched the ‘People’s War’ a year later. After the end of the conflict in 2006, the CPN-M re-entered parliamentary politics and joined the Interim Legislature-Parliament and later the government. It took part in the 2008 CA election advocating a platform of radical change and became the largest party in the first CA.

In January 2009, the CPN-M merged with a faction of the earlier CPN-Unity Centre and became the Unified...
CPN-M (UCPN-M). Like other parties, the Maoists were riven by factionalism – divided between pragmatists, and the hardliners who continued to call for radical steps to transform Nepali state and society. Soon after the first CA was dissolved in 2012, a number of influential leaders, including the Vice-Chair, left the party to (re)form the CPN-M – the latest in a long line of such splinters, as previous splits since 2006 had usually involved a fairly prominent leader walking out to form what they claimed to be the ‘real’ CPN-M, in protest at the mother party deviating from its original, revolutionary rationale. But the 2012 split was far more consequential, since it drew away the cadre of committed party hardliners, who then campaigned against the UCPN-M in the 2013 CA election (even while boycotting it), contributing to the poor showing of the main party.

The breakaway CPN-M, which began calling itself the CPN-Revolutionary Maoist, underwent a further split in 2014 with an even more radical faction claiming to be the CPN-M. Meanwhile, the UCPN-M suffered a major blow when one of the most visible faces of the Maoist party, former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, quit the party just days after the promulgation of the new constitution in September 2015. He has since established a new political party, which became the CPN-Maoist Centre. This included some of the biggest leaders of the CPN-Revolutionary Maoist, although the latter also continues a separate existence and, along with the CPN-M, remains one of two main Maoist factions outside the CPN-MC [see article on the transformation of the Maoists for a detailed discussion of Maoist policies and programmes after 2006, p.37].

New parties
In the period after 2006, the older parties have been through substantial changes in their organisational structures, policies and programmes, electoral support bases, geographical spread and functioning. For instance, most have set aside seats for different excluded groups in various tiers of their parties. But they have also had to contend with new parties that emerged through appeals to regional and ethnic identity groups. A number of these new forces have been instrumental in shaping the post-2006 political landscape, introducing alternative discourses for the state and how it should be restructured.

Most prominent among these are the parties based in the southern Tarai plains. The Nepal Sadbhavana Party was the sole party advocating the rights of Madhesis throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, but since 2006 a plethora of Madhes-based parties have come to the fore. Madhesi parties secured 87 out 601 seats in the first CA to form a powerful bloc, particularly compared with the NC and the UML, which had just over 100 seats each. In the second CA, the Madhesi parties performed very badly and won only half as many seats – partly due to the splits that had appeared in every Madhes party in the interim.

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Madhesi Janadhikar Forum Nepal
(MJF-N – Madhes People’s Rights Forum, Nepal)
The MJF-N started out as an advocacy movement to raise awareness of Madhesi issues in the early 2000s. By 2007 it had developed a functioning network of grassroots activists, and it led the first Madhes Movement in 2007 [see article on social movements, p.97]. It registered as a political party just before the 2008 CA election and was able to attract a number of Madhesi and Tharu leaders from the bigger parties. The MJF-N won an impressive 54 seats in the election, the largest return among the Madhesi parties.

Over the course of the first CA, however, the party suffered two major splits – into the MJF-Democratic (MJF-D) in 2009 and the MJF-Republican (MJF-R) in 2011 – and was reduced to just 12 seats. A further split followed the dissolution of the first CA, as another leader walked out to form the Rastriya Madhes Samajwadi Party (National Madhes Socialist Party). The different factions of MJF-N were able to garner a combined total of just 27 seats in the second CA, and, in an even bigger blow, the MJF-N itself won fewer seats than the breakaway MJF-D.

Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party
(TMLP – Tarai Madhes Democratic Party)
To align with the larger identity struggle of Madhes, some prominent Madhesi leaders from established parties came together to form the TMLP in December 2007. The party performed relatively well in the first CA, winning 21 seats. In 2010, a faction of the party split to form the Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party-Nepal (later renamed the Tarai Madhes Sadbhavana Party), leaving the TMLP considerably weakened. In the Second CA, the TMLP won only 11 seats.
Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP – Nepal Goodwill Party)
The other major party in the Tarai is the NSP, or rather the various factions that it has now split into. It has an older history than the new parties, and was beset by factionalism following the death of its founding leader, Gajendra Narayan Singh. Like the other Madhesi parties, these different factions saw their share of seats decline between the first and second CAs, from 12 to seven. Following various splits and mergers, there are currently three strands of the party: the NSP, the Sadbhavana Party (SP) and the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Gajendra).

Other parties
Other parties formed since 2006 include the Sanghiya Samajwadi Party (Federal Socialist Party), established by Janajati leaders disenchanted with the UML’s position on federalism. It performed dismally in the second CA election, winning just five seats. In June 2015, it merged with the MJF-N and the little-known Khas Samabesi Party (Khas Inclusive Party) to become the Sanghiya Samajwadi Forum-Nepal, bringing a section of Madhesi and Janajati political activists under a common platform, particularly on the issue of inclusion and identity-based federalism.

Some parties have the specific goal of creating homelands for particular Janajati groups, among the more prominent of which are: the Tharuhat Tarai Party Nepal, which stands for a separate Tharuhat state for Tharus in the western Tarai; the Tamsaling Nepal National Party, for a Tamsaling state for Tamangs in the central Nepal hills; and the Khumbuwan National Front and the Kirat People’s Workers Party, looking to establish Khambuwan as a homeland for the Rais in the eastern hills of Nepal. The struggle for Limbuwan, historically the homeland of the Limbus further east, is led by the Federal Limbuwan State Council (FLSC), arguably the strongest among the Janajati movements, but which, too, has split into a number of factions. At present, an alliance called the Federal Limbuwan Party-Nepal is active in that part of the country.

The curse of factionalism has also affected small parties. For instance, the oldest Janajati party, the Rastriya Janamukti Party (National People’s Liberation Party), had failed to win any seats in any of the three parliamentary elections of the 1990s. It managed to get two seats in each of the CAs, but in the second, both CA members abandoned the party and formed the Rastriya Janamukti Party-Democratic. Likewise, during the first CA, a number of Janajati parties had formed the Federal Republic National Forum. But, even with just two members elected in the CA, the party still split into two.

Political parties have entered alliances at a particular junctures to amplify their voices. The most effective of these has been the Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha, or United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF). Formed in early 2008 by the MJF-N, TMLP and SP, leading up to the second Madhes Movement, the UDMF was a vehicle for the three parties to collaborate as and when required. The UDMF spearheaded the protests in the Tarai against the promulgation of the constitution in 2015. It has since expanded to include breakaway factions of the three parties as well.

Alliances have always dissolved and regrouped, and any attempt to list them in full is doomed to be almost instantly out-dated.

Sujeet Karn obtained a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Hull. His research focuses on the anthropology of violence, death and bereavement, borderland livelihoods and security in South Asia, and everyday religion in the Himalaya. He has worked as a development professional for various national and international NGOs, and is currently a researcher for an ESRC-funded research project being conducted by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and Martin Chautari, Kathmandu. He is also a visiting lecturer at the Social Work Programme at the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.