



Legacy of Conflict: Political Instability in Post-Insurgency Nepal

Ankita Singh¹, Krishn Kumar²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India. E-mail: ankitasinghchunar@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India. E-mail: krishnphd@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the enduring political instability in post-insurgency Nepal, focusing on the legacy of the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) and its ramifications for the country's democratic transition. It critically analyses how the conflict's aftermath—characterized by political fragmentation, ethnic tensions, and unresolved grievances—has obstructed Nepal's journey toward stability. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the research incorporates a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including government reports and scholarly articles. The findings elucidate key challenges related to governance, federalism, and transitional justice, providing valuable insights into the prospects for achieving political stability and fostering national reconciliation in Nepal.

Keywords: Maoist insurgency, political instability, federalism, post-conflict transition.

Introduction

Nepal's political trajectory has been profoundly shaped by its history of conflict, most notably the Maoist insurgency that spanned from 1996 to 2006, culminating in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord. This decade-long conflict not only resulted in substantial loss of life and societal disruption but also established a complex foundation for the persistent political instability in the post-conflict period. The insurgency, initiated by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), aimed to dismantle the constitutional monarchy and introduce a new socio-economic order. This movement was characterized by extensive violence, pervasive human rights abuses, and significant socio-economic upheaval (Thapa & Sijapati, 2004).

The legacy of the conflict is intricate, encompassing issues of governance, political accountability, and the reintegration of former combatants into civilian structures. Despite the formal cessation of hostilities and the peace agreement, Nepal continues to grapple with political instability manifested through frequent governmental changes, party fragmentation, and challenges in enacting constitutional reforms. Although the transition from conflict to peace was envisioned as a pivotal opportunity for democratic transformation, it has instead exposed entrenched social inequalities, ethnic divisions, and the limited capacity of state institutions to navigate these challenges effectively (Murshed & Gates, 2005; Lawoti, 2007).

Post-conflict political instability in Nepal is attributable to several interrelated factors. Domestically, political parties have faced criticism for internal factionalism, self-serving agendas, and a lack of accountability, contributing to governance that is often volatile and ineffective. Externally, the geopolitical interests of neighbouring states such as India and China, alongside the involvement of global powers like the United States, have significantly influenced Nepal's political dynamics, yielding mixed consequences for its internal stability.

This study aims to investigate the extent to which the Maoist insurgency's legacy has perpetuated political instability in Nepal. By examining the interplay between historical grievances, the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction, and the evolving dynamics of contemporary political power, the research seeks to elucidate how historical conflicts continue to shape present-day political structures. Furthermore, it will explore the intersection of these issues with broader concerns such as economic development, social justice, and the influence of international actors on Nepal's political landscape.

The Maoist Insurgency and Its Political Legacy

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996–2006) significantly transformed the nation's political and social structures, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to shape its governance and societal dynamics. Spearheaded by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the insurgency emerged from profound dissatisfaction with the monarchy and the entrenched socio-political order, which systematically marginalized large segments of the population, including ethnic minorities, Dalits, and rural communities. The Maoists' advocacy for land redistribution, social justice, and the dismantling of feudal hierarchies resonated deeply, particularly in rural areas where traditional power structures were most pervasive. The movement's ultimate aim was to overthrow the monarchy and establish a communist republic (Pattanaik, 2002).

The insurgency, though marked by extensive violence and societal disruption, was instrumental in dismantling the Nepalese monarchy. The Maoists' strategic alignment with democratic forces during the 2005–2006 popular "People's Movement" placed immense pressure on King Gyanendra,

ultimately forcing him to relinquish absolute power. This political upheaval culminated in the formal abolition of the monarchy in 2008, ending centuries of royal rule and ushering in a federal republican system (Thapa & Sharma, 2009). This transformation underscored the insurgency's impact in elevating issues of inequality, governance, and social justice within Nepal's political discourse.

Nevertheless, the political legacy of the insurgency is fraught with complexities. While the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic were landmark achievements, the transition of the Maoist party from an insurgent force to a political entity was riddled with contradictions. Upon assuming power, the Maoists struggled to deliver on their promises of radical transformation, often resorting to political pragmatism and coalition-building. These compromises led to political fragmentation and instability (Tamang, 2017). Despite their initial rhetoric of inclusivity and addressing the grievances of marginalized communities, the Maoists' governance was marred by inefficiency, corruption, and a failure to tackle entrenched social inequities. The constitutional drafting process, while a significant milestone, was contentious and exclusionary, provoking protests from ethnic and regional groups such as the Madhesi, who felt marginalized by the emerging political framework.

Additionally, the insurgency's legacy is burdened by unresolved issues of transitional justice. The conflict resulted in widespread human rights violations, with both Maoist and state forces implicated in atrocities. The inability to hold perpetrators accountable has perpetuated a sense of injustice among victims and undermined public trust in state institutions. This failure has hindered efforts at national reconciliation and the establishment of a credible framework for justice.

The legacy of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal is thus a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it dismantled the monarchy and set the stage for significant political change. On the other, the inability to fully implement inclusive reforms and address historical grievances has left the country grappling with political instability and social fragmentation. The insurgency's influence continues to permeate Nepal's political discourse, particularly on issues of equity, justice, and reconciliation, highlighting the enduring impact of this transformative yet tumultuous period in the nation's history.

The Post-Insurgency Political Landscape

The conclusion of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, marked by the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in 2006, signalled a transformative juncture in the nation's political trajectory. However, the subsequent transition from conflict to peace has been fraught with multifaceted challenges, resulting in a complex post-insurgency political landscape characterized by frequent governmental changes, persistent instability, and contentious struggles over constitutional reform (Upreti, 2006; Adhikari, 2017). Political instability, a hallmark of Nepal's post-conflict period, is rooted in a fragmented political landscape where power struggles among numerous parties have undermined the implementation of the CPA. Political actors have frequently prioritized their pursuit of power over addressing the structural inequalities and grievances that fuelled the civil war, rendering the peace process largely inoperative (Cottle & Thapa, 2017). These dynamics have stalled efforts at reconciliation and state restructuring, leaving the goals of the peace accord unfulfilled.

The legacy of the Maoist insurgency continues to manifest in Nepal's governance challenges, particularly during critical moments such as the 2015 earthquakes, which exposed vulnerabilities in disaster response and governance in a post-conflict setting. The contradictions between humanitarian imperatives and state-building efforts during this period underscored how deeply the insurgency's effects were embedded in the nation's political and administrative structures (Melis, 2022). Ethnic and identity politics have further complicated the post-insurgency landscape, with the failure to adequately address these issues during the constitutional drafting process leading to widespread protests. Marginalized groups, particularly the Madhesi, highlighted ongoing exclusion and systemic discrimination, transforming the 2015 constitution from a milestone of democratic governance into a focal point of social and political contention (Sharma, 2017). These unresolved tensions reveal the difficulties of restructuring a state historically defined by feudal hierarchies and social inequality (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010).

Governance challenges have been compounded by the rise of coalition politics in the aftermath of the monarchy's abolition in 2008. Frequent leadership changes, involving figures like K.P. Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), reflect the fragmented and unstable nature of Nepal's political system. Despite the promise of a federal republican structure, the constitutional reforms have faced strong opposition, particularly from the Madhesi community, who argue that the new political framework fails to provide adequate representation. The protests in the Terai region, accompanied by an economic blockade at key border crossings with India, deepened Nepal's socio-economic crisis and strained its diplomatic relations with its southern neighbour. Accusations of Indian interference and support for the Madhesi protesters further exacerbated nationalist sentiments and highlighted Nepal's precarious geopolitical position (Krishn, 2024).

The socio-economic disparities that were both a cause and consequence of the insurgency persist, particularly in rural areas where poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to basic services remain endemic. The aspirations of marginalized communities for greater representation and equity remain largely unmet, with political power continuing to concentrate among elite groups, perpetuating traditional hierarchies. Additionally, the resurgence of militancy in the form of splinter Maoist groups underscores the persistence of unresolved grievances that fuelled the original insurgency (Adhikari, 2019). These splinter factions, occasionally engaging in violent activities, challenge the state's authority and highlight the fragility of post-conflict stability.

Geopolitical dynamics involving India and China have further influenced Nepal's internal conflicts and governance challenges. While India's economic blockade in 2015 demonstrated its capacity to impact Nepal's socio-economic stability, China's growing influence through initiatives like Mandarin education, Confucius Institutes, and Buddhist diplomacy has created a new layer of strategic complexity. Nepal's geographical and cultural proximity

to India, coupled with China's financial and technological investments, necessitates a careful balancing act to derive benefits from both neighbours while safeguarding its sovereignty (Pandey, 2017).

Nepal's post-insurgency political landscape reflects a persistent interplay of political fragmentation, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic disparities, rooted in the unresolved legacies of the Maoist insurgency. Despite significant milestones, such as the CPA and the drafting of the 2015 constitution, the country continues to grapple with governance challenges, ethnic divisions, and external pressures that undermine its stability. Achieving long-term peace and development requires addressing these systemic issues through inclusive reforms, equitable development policies, and a balanced geopolitical strategy that prioritizes Nepal's strategic autonomy and sovereignty.

Prospects for Political Stability and Reform

The political landscape of Nepal has remained volatile since the conclusion of the Maoist insurgency in 2006, despite its transition to a federal democratic republic. Persistent challenges across institutional, economic, and social dimensions have impeded the country's progress toward political stability and meaningful reform. A central mechanism for achieving stability, as envisioned in the 2015 constitution, is the effective implementation of federalism. Designed to decentralize power, address ethnic and regional grievances, and foster inclusive governance, federalism's implementation has been uneven and fraught with challenges. Political disagreements, inadequate resources, and limited administrative capacities at provincial and local levels have hindered effective devolution, leading to tensions between different tiers of government (Gyawali, 2018). While the constitution provides a framework for federal governance, the resistance to genuine power-sharing has undermined its transformative potential. The dynamics within Nepal's political parties further exacerbate instability. The political arena is characterized by fragmented parties and unstable coalition governments that frequently realign, resulting in leadership changes that sometimes occur within months. These frequent disruptions reflect deep-seated ideological and personal rivalries among party leaders, preventing the formulation and execution of cohesive governance strategies. Although greater political unity could mitigate this instability, achieving such consensus remains elusive in Nepal's polarized political environment. Economic challenges are intricately intertwined with political instability. Nepal faces persistent structural issues, including high unemployment, a heavy reliance on remittances, and an unfavourable trade balance, all of which contribute to socio-economic grievances and unrest (World Bank, n.d.). Targeted reforms, such as investments in infrastructure, economic diversification, and the creation of a business-friendly environment, could reduce these grievances and support political stability by addressing economic disparities. Social inclusion remains a critical yet insufficiently addressed dimension of Nepal's post-insurgency landscape. Despite the peace process's intention to resolve ethnic tensions and issues of exclusion, progress has been slow. Challenges such as the contentious integration of ex-combatants and unmet demands for equitable representation highlight the inadequacies of existing policies. Implementing reforms to enhance representation and participation in politics and public services could reduce marginalization and foster a more inclusive society. Another significant barrier to societal healing and stability is the unresolved issue of transitional justice. Mechanisms established to address human rights violations during the conflict have yet to be effectively implemented, leaving victims and marginalized groups with unresolved grievances. A transparent and equitable transitional justice process would not only address these historical injustices but also help mend social divisions and build trust in state institutions (ICTJ, 2014).

Nepal's geopolitical positioning between India and China adds further complexity to its efforts toward stability and reform. Balancing relations with these regional powers while safeguarding sovereignty requires astute foreign policymaking. Managing foreign aid and investment, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, demands careful navigation to avoid economic dependencies that could translate into political vulnerabilities (Muni, 2012). Ensuring that foreign assistance aligns with Nepal's long-term development goals rather than short-term expediencies is crucial for maintaining both stability and autonomy.

Despite these challenges, Nepal's prospects for reform are not without hope. Proposed constitutional amendments addressing grievances from marginalized communities, such as the Madhesi, offer opportunities for more inclusive governance. Nepal's youthful population presents another potential force for change, as youth engagement could invigorate political reform and demand greater accountability. A vibrant civil society and independent media, although operating within a contentious political climate, serve as vital mechanisms for oversight and advocacy. Constructive international support, focused on capacity-building and sustainable development, could further bolster Nepal's reform efforts and contribute to its stability. Nepal's journey toward political stability and reform is marked by considerable challenges but also holds potential for progress. Achieving these goals will depend on strengthening institutions, advancing social inclusion, implementing sound economic policies, and managing complex geopolitical relations. Ultimately, success will hinge on political will, inter-party cooperation, and the capacity to navigate Nepal's intricate socio-political landscape.

Conclusion

Nepal's post-insurgency trajectory reflects the enduring complexity of its political, social, and economic landscapes. While the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) of 2006 marked the official end of the Maoist insurgency and initiated the transition to a federal democratic republic, the path to stability and development has been riddled with challenges. Political fragmentation, exacerbated by frequent changes in government and coalition politics, has undermined governance and policy continuity. Furthermore, the uneven implementation of federalism has generated friction between different tiers of government, preventing the fulfilment of its intended goals of decentralization and inclusion.

Ethnic and regional tensions remain deeply rooted, with the 2015 constitution sparking significant protests among marginalized groups like the Madhesis. These grievances, alongside persistent socio-economic disparities and the unmet aspirations of rural and disadvantaged communities, continue to fuel social unrest. Additionally, the slow progress of transitional justice mechanisms has perpetuated a sense of injustice among victims of the insurgency, impeding societal reconciliation and trust in state institutions.

Nepal's geopolitical positioning further complicates its internal dynamics, as the influence of regional powers like India and China shapes its economic and political environment. Managing these relationships while preserving sovereignty is a delicate balancing act that requires nuanced policy strategies.

Despite these challenges, Nepal holds significant potential for reform and stability. Strengthening institutions, fostering inclusive governance, addressing socio-economic disparities, and advancing transitional justice are critical pathways toward a more cohesive and resilient political framework. Promising avenues, such as constitutional amendments to address marginalized groups' grievances, youth engagement in politics, and the proactive role of civil society and media, provide opportunities for transformative change. Furthermore, constructive international support focused on capacity-building rather than short-term aid can bolster Nepal's reform agenda.

In conclusion, Nepal's legacy of conflict continues to cast a shadow over its democratic transition. However, with concerted political will, inter-party cooperation, and a commitment to inclusivity and accountability, the country can overcome its entrenched challenges. Achieving sustainable peace and stability will require not only addressing historical grievances but also navigating the complexities of Nepal's socio-political landscape with determination and vision.

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