Democracy and Political Parties: A Brief Survey around the World and in Nepal
[Public Lecture]

Krishna Hachhethu, PhD
Visiting Professor

Corresponding Author: Krishna Hachhethu, Email: krihac@gmail.com

On October 19, 2024, this public lecture was part of a symposium organized in association with the Surya Ratna Shakya Foundation and the Department of Political Science at Prithvi Narayan Campus.

Abstract

Democracy, a political system that has experienced significant changes over time, existed before the rise of political parties. Samuel Huntington classifies the evolution of democracy into three primary waves. The First Wave, spanning the 17th to the 19th centuries, emphasized civil and political rights, establishing the foundation for liberal democracy and its related institutions. The Second Wave, following World War II, witnessed the dissemination of democratic principles to Asia, Africa, and Latin America as a result of decolonization. Nonetheless, this wave faced challenges, including ethnic tensions and ineffective governance. The Third Wave, during the late 20th century, saw a revival of democratic practices across multiple developing countries, highlighting the importance of inclusive governance. Nepal's path to democracy began in 1951 following the conclusion of the Rana regime; nonetheless, authoritarian rule and internal strife have impeded its advancement. At present, attention is directed towards establishing an inclusive democracy capable of effectively managing ethnic diversity and enacting governance reforms. Political parties, which were originally formed based on ideological principles, have significantly transformed into electoral organizations mainly aimed at securing power. These parties face challenges like centralization, insufficient internal democratic processes, and a growing gap between themselves and the electorate. Suggested reforms aim to improve representation, implement term limits for leaders, and enhance grassroots candidate selection.

Keywords: Constitution, democracy, ethnic identity, Nepal, political parties

Introduction

While democracy predates the formation of political parties, their relationship has become increasingly intertwined. Direct democracies, such as those of ancient Athenian city-states, operated effectively without political parties. Similarly, neither the Roman Empire nor the feudal systems of Europe required them. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, a pivotal moment in dismantling feudalism and empires (though some re-emerged), is foundational to the modern nation-state. This development subsequently elevated political parties to key roles in governing these modern states. Indeed, the rise of the modern state is linked to both representative democracy and the emergence of political parties. Three key historical shifts marked this transition: the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in the UK, the American Independence Movement of 1776, and the French Revolution of 1789. These events were significant for several reasons: First, they started a move away from monarchical rule towards representative democracies, employing various systems like parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential structures. Second, they transformed political parties from simple factions into more established political forces. Third, these revolutions helped to shape the cornerstone principles of liberal democracy, including civil and political rights. Finally, they enshrined fundamental democratic norms and values, such as "equality, liberty, and fraternity" and "the rights to life, liberty, equality, and positing happiness."

The evolution of democracy has been a gradual process, influenced by a range of factors across different historical periods. While essential features of democracy, such as equality, political engagement, and governance by the people, predate the modern state, early iterations often had significant limitations. For instance, exclusionary citizenship was a defining characteristic of ancient Greek city-states. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle articulated systems that excluded groups, such as women, farmers, artisans, merchants, and enslaved people from political participation. This notion of citizenship restricted to "free men" remained prevalent, persisting into the late 19th and 20th centuries, even within the United States and European nations. This historical reality manifested in the systematic denial of voting rights to groups, including women, Black individuals, Indigenous peoples, the impoverished, manual laborers, and the enslaved.

The *first wave of democracy*, centred on civil and political rights, swept across the Western world from the 17th to the 19th centuries. This period proved vital in establishing the cornerstones of democratic governance, such as popular sovereignty, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, civil liberties, and limited government. These were implemented through the separation of powers and corresponding checks and balances across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This era enshrined principles, including periodic elections, a representative Parliament, an elected government, majority rule, and guarantees for minority rights.

The rise of democracy was significantly influenced by transformative conditions in Enlightenment Europe. This era witnessed a clear separation between religious and governmental power, the weakening of feudal structures, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of a powerful middle class. The intellectual contributions of Enlightenment thinkers—John Locke, J.S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith—were pivotal in defining the principles of democracy, a system distinct from conservatism, authoritarianism, dictatorship, communism, and theocracy. The assertions that "men are born free" and "men are inherently equal and law" underpin the concept of popular sovereignty, directly contradicting notions of divine right, hereditary rule, and state-

controlled religion.

Following World War II, a *second wave of democracy* brought the promise of self-governance to newly independent nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This period also saw the rise of human rights and welfare states, encompassing social security, justice, and the recognition of social, cultural, and economic rights. However, the sustainability of these democratic transitions proved to be challenging. Only a handful of nations, such as India, Sri Lanka, and Japan, successfully maintained their democratic systems. During the Cold War, the trend reversed in many Third World countries, with many nations succumbing to various forms of dictatorship. These included.

- Green dictatorships: It is characterized by military rule, and found in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, and several African nations.

- Red dictatorships: Led by communist regimes in countries such as China, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba, and various Eastern European states.

- Civilian dictatorships: That prevalent in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, South Korea, and many Latin American countries.

- Authoritarian monarchies: Nepal is a notable example of it.

Many dictators, whether benevolent, believed that economic progress must precede political liberalization. The lack of attention to ethnic diversity within these nations compounded challenges to democracy. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 demonstrates how ethnicity influenced the creation of modern states, particularly by establishing many European nation-states around shared language and ethnic identity. This crucial historical lesson was ignored following the second wave of democracy. When newly independent Third World countries adopted Western liberal models, they failed to account for their own heterogeneous populations, characterized by diverse races, languages, cultures, religions, regions, and ethnicities. These nations, while embracing democracy, socialism, nationalism, and developmentalism, did not effectively address ethnic inequality or the marginalization of certain groups. Ultimately, this led to regimes that appeared democratic on the surface but lacked the genuine foundations for legitimacy, causing widespread disillusionment with liberal democratic principles.

Huntington observed that the late 20th century witnessed a third wave of democratization, which strengthened democratic institutions in various developing countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Simultaneously, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ethnic fragmentation of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia contributed to a perception of an "end of ideology." This notion was further bolstered by earlier separations like Pakistan's and subsequent ethnic-based divisions in Indonesia and Sudan.

Western societies experienced a renewed emphasis on ethnic identity, alongside a strengthening of democratic values that broadened to encompass new areas. These areas included women's rights, rights for gender minorities, protections for vulnerable groups, minority and ethnic rights, and the rights of marginalized and indigenous populations. This era stressed good governance based on principles of accountability, responsiveness, transparency, equity, efficiency, participation, and consensus.

Following the *third wave of democratization,* inclusion and effective governance have become cornerstones of democratic systems. Learning from the failures of post-second wave

democracies, especially their disregard for ethnic concerns, nations transitioning to democracy after the third wave acknowledge that traditional liberal democracy falls short in ethnically diverse societies. These nations are placing greater emphasis on incorporating inclusive principles into their governing structures. The push for inclusive democracy has spurred the development of innovative ideas and frameworks, such as state-nations, consociationalism, multiculturalism, differentiated citizenship, and asymmetric federalism, as championed by many academics.

The global stage is currently witnessing a troubling phenomenon: "democracy backsliding." The very foundations of democratic systems are under attack from the growing influence of populist movements, majoritarian ideologies, and conservative forces. We are also seeing a resurgence of right-wing political parties and the emergence of elected autocrats across Europe, America, Asia, and Africa. This dangerous trend marginalizes the essential principles of inclusive democracy and protecting minority rights. Examples of elected authoritarians, both currently in power and those who have held it in the past, include: Trump (USA), Bolsonaro (Briazil), Chavez (Venezuela), Peron (Argentina), Fujimori (Peru), Putin (Russia), Garbashvili (Georgia), Orban (Hungary), Duda (Poland), Erdogan (Turkey), Duterte (Philippines), Modi (India), Imran Khan (Pakistan), Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh), Rajapaksa (Sri Lanka), and Ahmend (Ethiopia).

Democracy and Political Parties in Nepal

A review of global democratic history, juxtaposed with the Nepali experience, underscores a singular developmental path. The initial surge of democracy, confined to Europe and the Americas, found Nepali society unprepared for its concepts. Nepal's governance during this time was preoccupied with state formation, started in 1768 by Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification campaign. This was followed by an extended period of autocratic rule under the Shah dynasty, culminating in the hereditary Rana oligarchy that governed from 1846 to 1951.

From 1950 to 1951, a revolutionary movement led by the Nepali Congress Party, with support from exiled King Tribhuvan and post-independence India, successfully overthrew the Rana regime. This marked Nepal's first entry into democracy, aligning it with the surge of new democracies after World War II. However, this initial phase of Nepalese democracy was short-lived, lasting only ten years from its beginnings in 1951. This stands in contrast to the more consistent democratic development seen in India (excluding the 1975-1977 emergency period) and Sri Lanka. Nepal's experience, however, resembled the trajectories of Pakistan and Bangladesh, where military intervention frequently destabilized democratic rule.

Nepal's democratic system was overthrown in December 1960 by a royal coup led by King Mahendra, who replaced it with an authoritarian monarchy disguised as a decentralized, partyless Panchayat democracy. This system endured for three decades, from 1960 to 1990. Subsequently, in 1990, a pro-democracy movement, fueled by the global third wave of democratization, emerged. This movement, a collaboration between the Nepali Congress (NC) and the United Left Front (ULF), a group of seven splinter leftist parties, successfully reestablished a multi-party parliamentary system under a constitutional monarch.

The second attempt at democracy in Nepal faltered between 2002 and 2006 because of a resurgence of royal power, a period that overlapped with the protracted Maoist insurgency (1996-2006). The Maoists' goal was to establish a New Democracy patterned after China.

This complicated conflict between the monarchy, the Maoist insurgents, and established political parties ultimately paved the way for the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy with a new constitution ratified in September 2015. The mainstream parties and the Maoists initially worked together to dismantle the monarchy. Previous studies have emphasized that Nepal must move towards inclusive governance that acknowledges its ethnic diversity. Presently, Nepal is poised to begin its third experiment in democracy, focusing on restructuring the state to create an inclusive democracy based on secularism, pluralism, republicanism, and federalism.

Nepal's political parties present a complex paradox in their relationship with the country's democratic development. They have played crucial roles in establishing democracy in 1951, restoring it in 1990, and reinstating it in 2006. Yet, they have also been implicated, along with other factors, in undermining the legitimacy and credibility of democratic governance, notably in 1960 and 2002. To understand this dual nature—political parties as both champions and hindrances to democracy—we must first examine the multifaceted definition of political parties and their historical evolution in Nepal.

Initially, political parties emerged as informal clusters of independently elected legislators within a national governing body. These individuals were brought together by their similar viewpoints on particular matters and events. As the first wave of democracy gained momentum, political parties evolved into formal organizations. These formalized parties then: (a) rallied public support around well-defined objectives; (b) competed with other parties for positions of power; (c) acted as representatives of the populace within elected bodies as parliaments and governments; and (d) advocated for and defended the values of liberal democracy, including equality, liberty, and freedom. In this sense, a political party can be understood as a group of individuals unified by shared goals and interests. This definition sharpened further during and before the second wave of democracy.

Over time, political parties developed into ideological groups, each identifiable by distinctive labels such as capitalist, communist, socialist, rightist, leftist, Centrist, liberal, and conservative. Early sociological research focused on these parties as ideological communities. However, following the third wave of democracy, often characterized by the concept of the "end of ideology," these familiar ideological labels have largely become symbolic markers, primarily expressed through branding, signs, and slogans.

Modern political parties function primarily as electoral machines, aiming to secure state power through the legitimacy of elections. This has positioned them as linkage institutions, meant to connect government policies to societal needs. However, their transformation from ideological movements into catch-all parties has resulted in a troubling focus on acquiring power at the expense of policy goals. Parties that rely heavily on selective incentives—patronage, where votes are traded for favors—risk losing their ability to engage the broader public in meaningful ways. This is particularly concerning in South Asian nations, where a significant decline in ideological resonance with the general populace is clear.

A critical step in addressing the current challenges is the reconceptualization of political parties as inclusive platforms. Such platforms should welcome individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, actively engaging in the negotiation and reconciliation of varying interests among these demographic groups. This approach prioritizes the cultivation of inclusivity, accommodating diversity in terms of gender, language, religion, race, and culture. Political parties serve as crucial components of democratic systems, and their effectiveness and conduct significantly influence the trajectory of democratic development.

In many developed nations, the relative stability and security of democracy owe much to the established institutional frameworks that regulate political parties, notwithstanding the emergence of some parties that do not strictly conform to pro-liberal ideologies. The characteristic features of political parties in these contexts typically include: origins within parliamentary structures, organic development through grassroots initiatives, decentralized management in their internal organization, a commitment to democratic principles within the party itself, the primacy of elected representatives with public support over party leadership, and a focus on functioning as institutions geared toward achieving specific policy objectives.

It is common for political parties in many Third World countries to exhibit specific patterns. These parties often originate outside formal political institutions, stemming from larger social movements and coalescing around a strong leader. They operate under a centralized, top-down structure. This centralized approach strains relationships between party officials and elected representatives, and the lack of internal party democracy is a significant concern. The characteristics of Nepali political parties, which follow a similar pattern, can serve as a case study to illustrate these common features of parties in developing nations.

Leaders are the primary drivers of organizational creation, preceding and shaping the organizations they form. The Nepali Congress, for example, owes its existence to B.P. Koirala, who established it in 1947, while P.L. Shrestha played a similar founding role in the Communist Party of Nepal in 1949. However, the latter party operated primarily as a movement during the three-decade Panchayat system (1960-1990), when electoral competition was absent. This prolonged period without a competitive electoral environment ultimately hampered the party's institutional growth.

The party's early development was characterized by a focus on a dynamic leader, a role embodied by B.P. Koirala within the Nepali Congress. Similar leadership dynamics were observed with Nehru in the Indian National Congress, Jinnah in the Muslim League of Pakistan, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Awami League of Bangladesh. While the party may no longer have a central charismatic leader, its functioning continues to be heavily influenced by authoritarian figures such as Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress, Khadga Oli of the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). These leaders maintain significant control over resources and exert considerable power, notably in candidate selection for elections and the allocation of patronage, including positions and privileges. This evolution highlights the oligarchic tendencies inherent in political parties, a concept explored by Robert Michels.

The National Committee (NC) operates under a highly centralized hierarchical structure. Although lower-level party organizations can voice their opinions, final decisions are made by higher-level officials. This strong centralization is characteristic of communist parties, such as the UML and MC, which adhere to Lenin's principle of democratic centralism. This principle dictates that every party member is answerable to the party structure, and each lower unit is accountable to its immediate superior. In reality, the 'centralism' aspect often dominates the 'democratic' aspect.

Internal relations between the Nepali Congress (NC) and communist parties are frequently strained, exhibiting conflict mainly in two ways. First, there are tensions between party office-bearers representing the organizational wing and elected officials representing the electoral wing. Second, there is discord between the established faction and dissenting groups. The first type of conflict is less prevalent because the leader of the organizational

wing often also controls the electoral wing, as seen with Deuba in the NC, Oli in the UML, and Dahal in the MC. However, across all Nepali political parties, factions commonly form around the personalities of party leaders, rather than from ideological or policy disagreements. Consequently, the transition of Nepali political parties from movements or revolutions to competitive parties focused on broad appeal and power has led to an increasing disconnect between them and the general population.

The evolution of political movements into competitive parties aiming for widespread appeal and the acquisition of power has distanced Nepali political parties from the general populace, transforming them into entities primarily focused on power dynamics. This trend is clear in long-established parties like the Nepali Congress (NC) and various communist factions; however, even newer parties and those based on specific ethnic or regional identities seem to be driven by ambitions for power, status, and privileges. Several negative effects have emerged from this shift, including excessive politicization of professional organizations along partisan lines, a rise in political corruption, persistent governmental instability, and deteriorating governance.

There are positive aspects to the challenges faced by Nepal's political system. The party system shows an ability to self-correct and improve. Since 2008, Nepal has experienced a series of hung parliaments and coalition governments, raising concerns about governance instability. In response to these challenges, the new Constitution, enacted in September 2015, includes several measures aimed at promoting stability in both parliament and government. One notable provision is that the Prime Minister cannot unilaterally dissolve parliament. There are restrictions on introducing no-confidence motions against the Prime Minister. Such motions cannot be proposed during the first two years of a government, and if a no-confidence motion fails, another cannot be presented for a full year. As a result, the political framework currently in place in Nepal is viewed as a refined version of parliamentary democracy rather than a traditional model. However, certain vulnerabilities still exist. For instance, if there is a split within the Prime Minister's party or if a coalition partner withdraws support, the Prime Minister is required to start a confidence motion within one month.

The solution to this issue is straightforward and requires an amendment to the constitution that includes two main provisions. First, the Prime Minister should be elected from the largest party within a coalition government rather than from a smaller partner. Second, if a vote of confidence is necessary, the timeframe for holding that vote should be extended from the current one month to one year. Some advocates argue that to enhance governmental stability, we should eliminate representatives from the Proportional Representation (PR) system and raise the threshold for a party to qualify for seats in the national parliament via PR from the current 3 percent to 10 percent. However, this trade-off between governmental stability and the inclusive representation provided by the PR system could ultimately undermine democracy in Nepal.

The state of intra-party democracy among Nepali political parties is significantly lacking, a situation common to many countries in the Third World, particularly in South Asia. However, Nepal has a relative advantage compared to its South Asian neighbors because of specific provisions in its new constitution. These provisions include: (1) mandates for including diverse gender and ethnic representation among party office bearers, as well as proportional representation in national and provincial parliaments based on population size,

with a fixed quota of 33 percent for women; and (2) a requirement for the periodic election of party office bearers every five years during the party's national convention.

Despite the manipulation of certain provisions to maintain Khas Arya dominance within party structures, both organizational and elective, those provisions have still been enacted. This contrasts with other South Asian nations, which lack such constitutional measures and frequently experience hostile inter-party relations. Nepal, conversely, fosters political collaboration and reconciliation. Though political parties adopt diverse ideological labels (e.g., democrat, communist, nationalist, or ethnic-regional), these differences do not prevent alliances and coalitions. To improve functionality within Nepali political parties, significant reforms focused on intra-party democracy are necessary. Three simple strategies could facilitate notable progress.

First, to deter elite dominance and encourage leadership rotation, term limits for party officials are crucial. For instance, the President of the Nepali Congress should be limited to two terms, potentially along with age restrictions (similar to the former UML rule).

Second, candidate selection should shift away from a top-down, leader-driven process toward a bottom-up model. The nascent Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP) has already committed to a primary system for selecting candidates.

Finally, political parties must refrain from politicizing professional organizations and imposing party ideologies upon them. If these straightforward reforms are implemented earnestly, Nepali political parties could revitalize themselves within the next decade, leading to a significantly more robust democratic future for Nepal.

Note *Prof. Dr. Krishna Hachhethu's address is based on his extensive teaching and research experience at the Central Department of Political Science and The Research Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), Kirtipur, Nepal.*