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Populist Wave in Nepalese Politics: Communitarianism, Republic Citizenship, Utility and Personalization of Politics

Sanjeev Humagain, PhD 

MPhil in Political Science Program

Nepal Open University

Corresponding Author: Sanjeev Humagain, Email: humagain_sanjeev@hotmail.com

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Abstract

While populism is a recurring feature in Nepali politics, it has received limited academic scrutiny, particularly regarding its connection to the rise of left-wing movements. This paper investigates contemporary populism in Nepal, a subject primarily overlooked by academic research despite its prevalence in the political arena. Based on contextual analysis and conceptual generalization approach, this study examines the macrostructural conditions and demand perspective of populist politics in contemporary Nepal. The study draws the conclusion based on secondary data. Along with data and statistics from policy documents, reports and newspapers, this study focuses on political development since 2017 – mainly focusing on coalition politics, relations between leaders of political parties and their members, and political cooperation and competition. Indeed, the speeches of the political leaders and their gestures are important data for the analysis. Departing from prior assumptions regarding its relationship with the left, this study argues that Nepali populism is increasingly assumes a right-wing character. This is evident in two phenomena: a dominant political discourse prioritizing the ‘common good’ and a balancing of order and freedom, a shift from liberal citizenship commitments established in the Constitution of 2015 and earlier political accords (“populism as discourse”). Additionally, political actors predominantly engage in utility-based justifications for their actions, marginalizing ideological influences and personalizing politics (“populism as a political strategy”). These trends collectively signify a movement toward right-wing populism within the country.

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Keywords: Communitarianism, discourse, personalization of politics, populism, republic citizenship

Introduction

The concept of populism has been a prominent topic in Nepal's political discourse for quite a while. Ongoing debates highlight significant concerns regarding the rapid rise of populism and its effects on the political landscape and social interactions. The phenomenon is characterized by crowd-focused political strategies (Thapa, 2024), stunt politics (Gaire, 2023) and a rapidly moving trend towards unwarranted polarization and extremism (Wagle, 2024). Nepal's media is actively scrutinizing the rise and impact of populist politics, with the frequency of this term in news reports increasing significantly. The term "Lokrijhyai" refers to "lok" signifies public, and "rijhyai" conveys the notion of public satisfaction and is also translated as "Lokpriyatabaad." Frequently, attention is directed toward the challenges associated with expanding welfare policy, as highlighted by Bajagain (2022), along with concerns expressed by political leaders and activists.

Scholarly investigations primarily concentrate on the themes of populism and the emergence of leftist politics (Riley, Ketola, & Yadav, 2023), the ascent of left-wing populism (Yadav and Yadav, 2020; Chetri, 2018), and the increasing attraction to monarchy and Hindu nationalism within Nepal's political discourse (Pulami, 2023). Despite significant public discussion and media scrutiny, the characteristics of current populist politics in Nepal remain inadequately defined. This study outlines the fundamental traits of populist politics in Nepal following the inaugural federal election of 2017. To achieve this, the article begins with a theoretical overview, assesses comparative instances, constructs a framework to analyze the characteristics of populist politics in Nepal, and culminates in the presentation of significant findings from the analysis. A crucial aspect of this examination involves pinpointing the defining features of populist politics.

Methods

There are two approaches to populism study in political science: "one more attentive to the circumstances or social conditions of populism and one mainly interested in populism itself, its political nature and characteristics" (Urbinati, 2018: 115). This study is in the second category, where it aims to define the nature of populist politics in Nepal identifying the push and pull factors of populism. This study applies the democratic regime classification approach – where scholars define a particular democracy with different adjectives based on political practices – to define the nature of contemporary populist practice in Nepal. Collier & Levitsky (1997) have identified two significant approaches – analytical differentiation and conceptual validity (p.430) – in classifying the sub-types of democracy. As populism is not a regime, it is necessary to conduct a contextual analysis and conceptual generalization to properly understand populist politics (Urbinati, 2018). The studies of the context of populism focus on macrostructural conditions that favour or constrain populism, its impact on democracy and the demand dynamics of populism (Roch, 2024). Based on this framework, this study examines the macrostructural conditions and demand perspective of populist politics in contemporary Nepal. In the meantime, the research also gives equal priority to the generalization perspective.

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This research is based on secondary data. It concludes with two steps. First, it develops a conceptual framework to examine the major characteristics of populist politics in Nepal since 2017. Second, it examines the key dimensions of populist politics in Nepal.

Literature Review

Cas Mudde has defined populism as “an ideology that considers society to ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *Volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

This method is also called the ideational approach. Populist leaders often claim that the current corrupt officials are the main causes of the prevailing social, economic, and political issues. Furthermore, the resolution lies with leaders who embody the collective will, particularly those who criticize current leaders for corruption. These individuals view the prevailing systems and institutions as substantial barriers to development and demonstrate a lack of trust in the potential for institutional and organizational reform.

The populist leaders assert that me, the ideal leader, can manage the situation and implement significant transformations. They frequently emphasize values such as morality or meritocracy, similar to the concepts of class in Marxism and nation in nationalism (Mudde, 2017). The ideology-based classification is the most widely used method for classifying populism among the four primary traditions or methodologies. According to Mudde (2004), populism as a thin ideology, claiming it is a thin-centred ideology. “Populism can be easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies, including communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism” (Mudde, 2004, p.544). Contemporary discussions focus on the debate of center-to-right and center-to-left populism, as highlighted by Berman (2021), Venizelos & Stavrakakis (2022), and Zulianello & Larsen (2021).

The second approach examines the supply and demand aspects of political parties, focusing on their nature and citizen support. Guiso et al. (2017) have identified the demand and supply sides of voting for populist parties. Zulianello and Guasti (2023) studied the supply and demand aspects of populism linked to COVID-19. On the demand side, the authors analyze the relationship between populist sentiments and COVID-19 measures, focusing on conspiracy theories, social media, and alternative news outlets. From the supply perspective, they examine the similarities and differences in global populist reactions. Economic variables play a crucial role in explaining the demand and supply approach of populism (Benczes & Szabó, 2023). Berman (2021) identifies economic and sociocultural grievances as key factors in the demand side of populism in the West, while the decay of political institutions is a key factor in the supply side.

The third and most prevalent approach in the contemporary context emphasizes the influence of populism on democracy. It argues that it can both positively and negatively influence it, facilitating the development of broader political identities and contributing to the internal democratization of liberal systems (Laclau, 2005).

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Most literatures argue that populism poses a challenge to democracy, as it undermines the constitutional dimension and allows political discussions without constraints, ultimately weakening democracy. As Akkerman (2003, p. 158) states, “Without constitutional constraints, democracy becomes weaker, not stronger”. As Galston, (2018, pp. 14-15) claimed:

...sometimes the populist challenge does directly threaten liberal democracy. Left unchecked, moves to undermine freedom of the press, weaken constitutional courts, concentrate power in the hands of the executive, and marginalize groups of citizens based on ethnicity, religion, or national origin will undermine liberal democracy from within.

Recently, ethno-populism, a discourse and political approach that merges ethnic identity with populist rhetoric, has gained significant academic interest due to its potential to contribute to a decline in democratic norms. Populism is a political strategy that blends ethnic and populist appeals, as explained by Madrid (2018). Connecting the functionality of democracy, Vachudova (2020:318) defines ethno-populism as a political ideology that focuses on the unique characteristics and experiences of a particular group or community. It is

... “an elite strategy for winning votes and concentrating power – a common playbook for the erosion of liberal democracy that is empowered and justified by a companion playbook of ethnopopulist and majoritarian appeals.”

Research on ethno-populism can be divided into two main groups. The first examines the rise of ethno-populism in developing countries, analyzing the support received by ethno-populist leaders and parties and the mechanisms they use to increase ethno-racial awareness among the population (Madrid, 2018; Dulay, Hicken, & Holmes, 2022). The refugee crisis is a significant factor in the rise and persistence of populism in Europe and other global regions. Numerous studies have identified the refugee crisis as a pivotal factor contributing to the growth of right-wing populism in Europe, highlighting its impact on political dynamics (Campo, Giunti, & Mendola, 2024; Hameleers, 2019).

Global Wave of Populism

Hawkins et al. (2019) analyzed a global database comprising data from 66 countries and confirmed that “populism in Western Europe and North America has increased to about the same level as Central Europe and Latin America, but that most populists are still only moderately”, p.1). Numerous comparative studies assert that populism is a worldwide phenomenon (Moffitt, 2016; Norris, 2020). Norris and Inglehart (2019) also demonstrated the global proliferation of populist movements.

The contemporary wave of populism is often attributed to demand-side factors stemming from the global financial crisis of 2006-07, the pandemic, and military conflicts, along with the involvement of major powers in these crises. However, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the specific characteristics of this current wave. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, there is widespread acknowledgement of the dominance of right-wing populism in today's global landscape (Leung, 2022). Goodwin, (2019: 105-107) delineates four distinct waves that characterize the emergence of a new generation supporting right-wing extremism. The initial

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wave comprised various neo-fascist and neo-Nazi factions that emerged during the post-war period. Subsequently, rising unemployment, economic instability, and a growing anti-migration sentiment across Europe significantly contributed to the ascent of a populist wave. The latest, fourth wave of populism in the post-2008 financial crisis is linked to the global democratic recession, as Diamond identifies four reasons for the recession;

“First, there has been a significant and, in fact, accelerating rate of democratic breakdown. Second, the quality or stability of democracy has been declining in several large and strategically important emerging-market countries, which I call “swing states.” Third, authoritarianism has been deepening, including in big and strategically important countries. Fourth, the established democracies, beginning with the United States, increasingly seem to be performing poorly and lack the will and self-confidence to promote democracy effectively abroad” (Diamond,2015, p. 144).

Nepalese Context

The examination of populism in Nepal necessitates consideration of five principal inquiries. Firstly, has Nepalese politics transitioned into a populist era? Secondly, if it has not, what is its current state? Thirdly, what central concepts drive Nepal's political landscape toward populism? Fourthly, is there a discernible trajectory or common pattern that characterizes Nepali populism? Lastly, how does this phenomenon correlate with global trends? A thorough analysis of the third, fourth, and fifth questions is essential to effectively address the first two inquiries. This article specifically focuses on the fourth inquiry; however, a foundational understanding of the fifth question is necessary for a comprehensive discussion.

Nepal's political evolution from the 1950s to the 1990s followed global patterns, including attempts to establish democracy in the 1950s, unlike many transitioning nations. In the 1970s, the regime became increasingly autocratic. This was common in Asia and Latin America during that same period. However, Nepal experienced democratization in 1990. This transition was part of a larger global trend, with Huntington (1991) highlighting the unprecedented number of countries that democratized in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to global developments, Nepal has experienced a markedly different trend since the 1990s. The Journal of Democracy has published articles indicating that global freedom generally saw a gradual and consistent increase from 1990 to 2005, following improvements in the late 1970s.

According to Freedom House, global freedom peaked in 2005, registering a score of 3.22 (where 1 represents the highest level of freedom, and 7 is the most repressive). This figure was 3.85 in 1990. From the mid-1990s onward, Nepal faced significant challenges regarding freedom and the rule of law. Freedom House assigned Nepal a score of 5 for both political rights and civil rights in 2004 and 2005, indicating that, unlike many other countries experiencing democratic consolidation between 1990 and 2005, Nepal did not follow this trajectory. In 2015, Larry Diamond asserted that the globe has been experiencing a significant democratic recession since 2006, a claim supported by scholars like Francis Fukuyama. These discussions frequently use "democratic retreat" to describe three related phenomena: the retrenchment of democracy in Western states, the growth of authoritarian influence, and the lack of democratic advancement in middle-income countries.

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As the global community grappled with maintaining and strengthening freedom and the rule of law, Nepal embarked on a unique journey. This involved concluding its peace process through dialogue, forming a republican state, introducing inclusive political structures incorporating non-majoritarian principles (known as Loktantra), and laying the foundation for a socialist-leaning state. Nationally, the focus was on operationalising John Rawls' (1971) second principle of justice, specifically the concept of accepting unequal policies to achieve greater equality for the least advantaged through democratic means.

In this sense, this study of populism in Nepal will investigate the willingness, preparedness, and attitudes toward the institutionalization of Loktantra, as these factors reveal crucial aspects of the state, nature, and causes of populism. Importantly, the democratic quality of political actors and institutions and their interactions will also be assessed. To facilitate this analysis, the article adopts the five-dimensional model of populism developed by Moffitt and Tormey (2013), which encompasses ideology, political logic, discourse, strategy, and political style.

Data Presentation

Communitarianism and Republic Citizenship: Populism as Discourse

Contemporary Nepali politics is driven towards populism by two significant political agendas and discourses. Firstly, a strong emphasis is placed on communitarian values across various levels of political engagement. Communitarian leaders often prioritize community over individual freedom, aiming to achieve "a balance between social order and freedom" (Bell, 2005: 227 & 230, italic in original). Their focus is not on universal principles, but rather on specific, localized concerns. This communitarian approach, as characterized by Etzioni (2014:241), stresses the importance of the common good, the delicate balance between individual rights and social obligations, the establishment of social order, and the necessity for meaningful moral conversations.

Communitarians advocate for the revival of informal institutions, specifically the value systems that were effective prior to the dominance of individualistic liberalism. They argue that the emphasis on individual freedom and rights-based policies is a primary cause of socioeconomic problems, as it undermines established value systems. While not necessarily opposed to individual freedom, they prioritize balancing rights with responsibilities. Furthermore, their emphasis on the common good can ultimately limit the complete expression of individual freedom.

Dagger, (2004: 167) identifies communitarianism and republicanism as closely related schools of thought.

Contemporary Republicans call for a more active citizenry and more extensive popular involvement in political activity than the liberal consensus on limited government, electoral representation of interests, and consent of the governed. Rather than either a politics of bargaining among interests or the expression of a collective will, they emphasize the deliberative interpretation of the common good (Honohan, 2017: 83-106).

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According to the republican perspective, citizenship encompasses both legal standing and a sense of ethical responsibility (Dagger, 2002:149). In contrast to the liberal emphasis on individual rights, the civic republican tradition highlights the importance of promoting the common good through active political engagement, arguing that such participation is essential for true freedom (Kartal, 2001:101). Similar to communitarianism, republican citizenship stresses the need for a balance between individual rights and civic duties. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal, along with political agreements forged after the 2006 Jana Andolan II people's movement, reflects an aspiration to implement Rawlsian liberalism. A key aspect is the adoption of individual positive freedom, coupled with a shared understanding of the need for empowerment programs aimed at marginalized communities. The fundamental idea of positive freedom, understood as the self-governance of free agents (Christman, 1994), is central to this framework. These shifts have emphasised rights-based citizenship, favouring a liberal approach over a republican model.

Ironically, many contemporary politicians focus on communitarianism and republican citizenship, often citing "social chaos" as their justification. They frequently blame social disorder on a lack of citizen discipline, particularly among young people. The recent social media platform bill in the National Assembly illustrates this thinking. Strikingly, both ruling and opposition parties have been largely silent on it.

Instead of addressing citizen grievances, they often frame people's demands and activities as problems. The use of aggressive and even threatening language is increasingly prevalent in contemporary Nepali politics.

A second issue is that Nepali leaders and political parties excessively emphasise economic growth, neglecting more comprehensive development goals. Although they frequently use the term "Bikas" (development), their actions prioritize economic growth. Political discussions predominantly revolve around macro-level data such as GDP per capita and inflation. Critically, Nepal has not yet developed internal indicators to measure its progress based on the new constitution and corresponding political changes.

There is a growing trend of senior leaders criticizing the lack of adherence to party policies and plans among junior and local leaders. Prime Minister KP Oli, who heads the ruling CPN-UML, has consistently aired his grievances publicly since 2021. Furthermore, Prachanda, the leader of the main opposition, regularly critiques the daily routines of his party's members. Additionally, NC General Secretary Gagan Thapa has recently begun to frequently question the actions of his party's leaders and members. These internal conflicts highlight a concerning crisis in intraparty democracy (Sangroula, 2021; Gelal, 2022).

In conclusion, contemporary Nepali politics is characterized by a growing focus on values and ideas contradicting the constitution. Instead of directly challenging the constitution, political leaders often promote new political discourses and agendas inconsistent with its core principles. This indirect opposition highlights the rise of populism as a pervasive rhetorical strategy in Nepali politics today.

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Utility and Personalization of Politics: Populism as Political Strategy

Populist strategies are not confined to discourse alone; political leaders actively employ them, as evidenced by two significant trends. Firstly, offering immediate and populist solutions has become a widespread characteristic of Nepali politics. Existing research has already established that a "charismatic typology of leadership has long been dominant in Nepal (Chaudhary, Shrestha, & Sapkota, 2023: 43)." Frequently, leaders treat political and social issues as personal matters, providing highly individualized responses and solutions. Furthermore, the recurring tension or conflict between elected leaders and bureaucracies is another common feature of the Nepali political landscape (Gupta, Poudyal, & Shrestha, 2019).

Political actors often employ a utility-based strategy to legitimize their policies. Elected officials frequently justify their actions by referencing public demand, while the bureaucracy emphasizes process and effectiveness. This manufactured dichotomy highlights the growing populism in Nepali politics. The repeated formation and collapse of coalition governments illustrate the misuse of the utility concept in the country's politics. Ideology and policy considerations seem secondary to political calculations in the forging, switching, and breaking of alliances in contemporary Nepal (Gelal, 2024).

Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist Centre), along with small political parties, have formed an electoral alliance Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist Centre) joined forces with minor parties to contest Nepal's federal election on November 20, 2022. Although the CPN (Maoist Centre) secured only thirteen percent of the seats, becoming the third party, they ultimately broke their alliance with Nepali Congress. On December 26, 2024, they aligned with their major electoral rival, the CPN-UML, to form a new government.

The initial coalition proved short-lived. Two months later, in late February 2023, the Maoists switched allegiances and backed the Nepali Congress (NC) presidential candidate, Ram Chandra Poudel. This led to the collapse of the year-long Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist Centre) coalition by March 2024. A new alliance then emerged, led by the CPN-UML and the Maoists. The CPN-UML supported Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the CPN (Maoist Centre) chairperson, as prime minister, but this partnership also lasted only a few months. By July 1, 2024, the NC and CPN-UML, two major federal parliament parties, agreed to a new coalition to form a new government and amending the constitution. However, the stability of this new "super coalition" has been a point of intense political debate since its inception.

Forming alliances and coalitions frequently is not a common occurrence in natural settings. However, political parties and key political figures responsible for creating and dismantling these coalitions often fail to provide solid reasoning for their strategic decisions. Instead of offering a clear and coherent logic for their political choices, they tend to prioritize immediate political needs, such as the recent coalition's push for constitutional amendment by the NC and CPN-UML.

Moreover, political actors often adjust their reasons or logic for utility changes when engaging in coalition-building and breaking. Instead of focusing on long-term policies and visions, they tend to concentrate on current political agendas. This shift from traditional economic ideologies has

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significantly influenced competition and cooperation in modern Nepali politics. The declining impact of ideology in Nepal's political sphere is often attributed to the "end of ideology" or "ideology crisis" in the country.

This consistent utility-based logic and political practice has fueled the personalization of politics. Personalization, as defined by Rahat and Sheafer (2007, p. 65) is a trend where individual political actors gain more influence, while the importance of political groups, such as political parties, weakens. Consequently, individual decision-makers become more dominant in both political parties and the government.

Coalition politics in Nepal have strengthened the personalization of power, leading to a situation where leaders act with increasing autonomy. The frequent formation and dissolution of coalitions empower key figures to make decisions, often bypassing internal party processes. Consequently, major party leaders often announce final decisions without prior discussion and consultation among party members. This decision-making approach, dominated by a select few, has detrimental consequences at the national level and impacts local political functions.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the major characteristics of populist politics in contemporary Nepal. The main purpose of this examination was to examine the nature of the practice of populist politics in contemporary Nepal. Personalization of politics and use of utility logic are common characteristics of populism around the world, mostly in the right-wing, and populism was rampant in Nepali politics. Most importantly, it is found that the promotion of anti-constitutional values and ideas, mainly the emphasis on the common good, a balance between freedom and development and republic citizenship, by many, if not most, political leaders and parties have played key drivers for right-wing populism in contemporary Nepal.

The existing scholarly investigations primarily concentrate on the themes of populism and the emergence of leftist politics, the ascent of left-wing populism and the increasing attraction to monarchy and Hindu nationalism within Nepal's political discourse. On the one hand, the comprehensive nature of populist politics has been overlooked. These studies focused on a single or few events and actors. This study found that populist politics is rampant in contemporary Nepal. On the other hand, this study identified that the rise of anti-constitutional discourse and personalized politics have accelerated Nepal's shift towards right-wing populism.

The interesting part, a major concern as a student of political science, is the lack of a strong opposition voice toward these populist practices in contemporary Nepali politics. There is wide acceptance of the utilitarian logic, personalization of politics, communitarian values and republican citizenships – which are far from the basic proposition of Nepal's Constitution 2015 and political movements since 2007.

Conclusion

This study unequivocally demonstrates that Nepal is on a trajectory toward right-wing populism, a path fraught with peril. The nation's political landscape is increasingly dominated by anti-

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constitutional undercurrents, masked by superficially appealing yet ultimately divisive discourses centred on communitarianism and a selective interpretation of republican citizenship. This populism, fueled by the pragmatic utility of coalition politics and the personalization of power, is not merely a passing trend but a deeply ingrained strategy. The alarming absence of robust opposition to this brand of politics serves as a critical point of concern. We must recognize that this right-wing populist wave, with its inherent skepticism toward individual liberty and its embrace of negative political rhetoric, threatens the very foundations of a stable and progressive Nepal. Further proactive academic scrutiny and, more crucially, active civic resistance are essential if Nepal is to navigate away from this dangerous course.

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