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RISE OF THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS IN NEPALESE POLITICS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO GLOBAL POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The study is focused on the evolution of the middle class in Nepal from a political perspective. It is an interdisciplinary and mixed method of study. The new middle class in this study is defined in a multi-disciplinary approach specific to education, consciousness, and activeness. The study argues new middle class in Nepal is raised in politics for the fulfillment of the issues and interests of a new generation that are missed by the established political parties. It further argues it is raised with a specific time, and context favored by its size and issues. Their unique issues of politics, and tools of democratization favour to be an alternative political party but to be tested in their practices. The objective of the study is to shed light on the rise of the new middle class in Nepalese politics and its significance in global politics. The study is based on secondary sources and document analysis as well as non-participant observation methods are used. It concludes that emerging parties can be an alternative agency of the new middle class if the new groups come together on common departure, agency, and issues with loyalty on their agenda and practices consistently.

Keywords: new middle class, time, context, alternative political party, moneyed capital, human capital, global politics

INTRODUCTION

Nepal's politics over the decade is very much influenced by the new middle class and such class itself tried to organize politically as an alternative democratic political party crossing the ideological tag of

traditional socialism or democracy (Gidden, 2008; Wright, 2019). Moreover, they are trying to organize with the objective of delivery of service and good governance. Their declaration, official document, and attitude exhibit no serious objection to the existing political system, but they have a deep concern for the leadership. The rise of such a class with separate political parties is only the question of the leadership of the established political party, their governance pattern shift in electoral mode or growth of the new middle class and reflection of change, are academic concerns. Such political parties are emerging on the grounds of right-based, civil society, and anti-corruption movements. Such people within their political party pressured contemporary reform on one side and the other envisioned young, energetic, and popular persons organizing an alternative political party. The victory of Balendra Shah in Kathmandu metropolitan city, Harka Sangpang Rai in Dharan Sub-metropolitan city, and Gopal Hamal in Dhangadhi Sub-metropolitan city in the post of Mayor as an independent candidate in the Local election, 2022 and the victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party candidate in urban constituencies in parliamentary election 2022 reflect the change in Nepalese politics. These young people's activities, mobilization, and campaigning during this decade resulted in their success. The rise of such a class in the decade may correlate with its *size*, *time*, and *context*.

The term *middle class* is a modern concept that originated with the development of capitalism even though it was introduced by Aristotle in ancient times. Scholars have a consensus that the middle class is the product of capitalism. The middle class is defined differently in different disciplines. *Britannica concise encyclopedia* defines that the middle class includes the middle and upper levels of clerical workers, those engaged in technical and professional occupations, supervisors and managers, and such self-employed workers as small-scale shopkeepers, businesspeople, and farmers (2006 p. 414). The *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* defines the new middle class as a product of post-industrial society different from the traditional working class (2011, p. 274). It further signifies a self-aware collective subject, capable of pursuing their interests in the economic field as well as in the political arena. Dahrendorf (1959) defined the middle class as located somewhere between at least two other classes, one above it and one below it (p.52). Thus, the *middle class* by the term denotes the group of persons of the middle order other than the upper and lower classes. It has economic, sociological, anthropological, and political perspectives. As a political study, it adopts a perspective of political power. Such classes

evolved through upward and downward mobility (Luitel, 2018). Unlike the industrial capitalist countries, Nepal's urban middle class emerged to an extent through industrialization (Hoffmann, 2023) and much more through migration (Humagain, 2021). In the Nepalese context, it comes from three processes- first, from the ruling(powerful) class on the course of downward mobility, the second, from agrarian and peasantry base, and third, comes out of poverty by the course of upward mobility. Among them, the second and third categories of people were massively involved in the movements of the two decades with a broad interest in participation while the first category already participated in electoral posts (Meyer & Chalise, 1999). The study assumes class as a collective actor that shapes politics. It focuses on the middle class of the second and third category who possesses newness in terms of education, consciousness, and activeness.

Different political parties emerged in different historical moments. Some parties emerged in the decade as they claimed an *alternative political party*. The Rastriya Swatantra Party, Bibeksheel Sajha Party, Naya Shakti Party (now Nepal Samajwadi Party), the Janamat Party, and the Nagarik Unmukti Party are major parties that emerged in the decade. Among them, the Janamat and Nagarik Unmukti parties are much more based on ethnicity than class. The other parties explicitly and implicitly represent the middle-class concern. Nepalese middle class is more covered in sociological (Liechty, 2003; Luintel, 2018; Gallagher, 2018;) and economic perspective (Tiwari, Shidiq & Balcázar, 2016) and a few in political perspectives (Lamsal, 2022). However, middle class by its size, time, and context became a scholarly concern of the contemporary Nepalese politics and concern of regional as well as global. So, the study aims to fill the gap. It is a broad question of this study- why the middle class is relevant for shaping the Nepalese politics today? How much do the size, time, and context correlate for its rising in politics while the established political parties explicitly or implicitly represented different classes. The central question of this study is- how the new middle class of Nepal emerged as an alternative political force today. Does its size, time, and context matter for its emergence? Why is it relevant not only in domestic but also to global politics? The objective of this study is to shed light on the emergence of the new middle class in Nepalese politics with distinct political values and orientations to other established political parties and its relation to global politics. It also aims to shed light on the values and orientations of the new parties and whether their values and orientations are compatible with the middle classes.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study employed a mixed method of research. It is based on document analysis and observation methods. It focused on the values and orientation of the newly formed political parties. Emerging parties' declarations, statutes, and official documents were used as primary sources. Published books, Journals, and newspapers that are collected through the library and online depository were consulted as secondary sources of information in the study. Such sources were used for considering the size and growth of the new middle class. Non-participant observation of the political activities of the groups is also used for the purpose.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Time and Context

Time and context in political science denote a certain moment of structure that is shaped by the activities of the actors. Within two decades, two major movements took place for political change. The first, people's movement was based on the 12-point agreement between seven parties and the Maoist party for peace and full democracy. The second is the identity movement for representation and federalism. In both movements, the oppressed classes massively participated for their rights to inclusive representation, and equitable opportunities for their livelihood. But in practice, representation and opportunities are centered on the elite. Political parties are becoming power seeker groups rather than consolidation of new practices. They serve a narrow circle of political elites and vested interest groups (Hachhethu, 2022). Trust towards political parties decreased in recent years (Pyakurel, 2022). People's frustration is increased due to nepotism and favoritism networks entrenching in all spheres of governance (Baniya & Gautam, 2022). The old ruling class and their supporters are opposing the system lobbying for Hinduism and monarchy. The context of Nepalese politics at present is the consolidation of democracy after the regime change one after another; Rana, Panchayat, constitutional monarchy, and republic as well (Bhatta, 2022). The former two regimes symbolize feudalism and the latter two towards capitalism. In such a transition, different classes played different roles according to their class interest in historical moments. Nepali Congress (elite-based) played a vital role against the Rana rule while Nepali Congress and left parties (peasant-based) jointly and separately played the role against the party-less monarchial Panchayat

rule. The professional middle class played a vital role in this movement. The Second Peoples' Movement 2006 was initiated by the alliance of seven parliamentary parties and the Maoist party that launched 10 years of armed struggle. In this movement, collectively all the classes except the incumbent ruling class were involved. These earlier two movements were either for the adoption or restoration of democracy, but the last movement was for full democracy or the end of Monarchy. In other words, such movements were in the interest of the capitalist classes against feudalism.

The new middle classes especially in the south, from the Philippines, Thailand, Burma in Southeast Asia, India, and Nepal in South Asia, the Arab region to Africa and Latin America revolted against the existing model of representation and distribution of opportunities (Kurlantzick, 2013; Wietzke, 2019). In these regions, the new middle classes demanded their representation in governance and claimed the state should be for the bottom. The rise of the Aam Admi party (APP) in the Delhi legislative election in 2014 (Singh, 2014) inspired Nepali new middle classes for their political participation. At the same time, the global trend of making alternative parties based on social issues of the environment, rights of minorities, and sustainability encouraged organizing alternative political parties based on governance, service delivery, and inclusion of the poor. So, the present time and context is of consolidation of democracy. Consolidation of democracy in a developing democracy depends upon the redistributive mechanism and participation of the new middle class in governance. The elite bargaining approach of the established party is a major obstacle in Nepal.

The space of the new middle class in the last decade was mostly taken by the left parties but ignored the new middle class's changing values and orientation. The left parties have no clear understanding of the changing class structure of Nepal (Pokhrel, 2023). The rightist parties are indifferent to class politics. Moore's (1966) theses suggest that without the participation of the middle classes in politics, democracy cannot be consolidated. The established parties are neither eager to increase their involvement nor interested in distributing opportunities to the proper level. They are unable to address the demand for comprehensive participation. In such a condition, some political parties are rising with middle-class values and agendas for a developing and transitional democracy. However, it will take some time and course to institutionalize their orientation towards left-right-center orientation.

Evolution and Size of New Middle-Class in Nepal

Land reforms and the continuous process of social transition have changed the agrarian class structure (Adhikari, 2008; Regmi, 2014) towards modernity. The political transitions of 1950, 1990, and 2006 gradually opened the route of upward mobility through widening political participation and middle-class formation. Some called the 1990s movement a middle-class movement (Hachhethu & Gellner, 2010) whereas Mishra called it a petite bourgeoisie urban movement, and the 2006 movement as class coalesced (Mishra, 2015). Liechty (2003) indicated that the growth and diversification of tertiary activities, the flow of international aid, the rise of NGOs and INGO, and the occupational shift during the 1950s are the key factors for the rise of a new middle class in Kathmandu (p. 47).

Scholars of the Marxist tradition argued that the class structure is affected by center-periphery relations. They opined that the change in class structure transformed by the relation with British India as the center-periphery relation obscures the pattern of Nepalese class structure (Blaikie, Cameron & Seddon, 2014). Sharma pointed out the transformation process and key factors in the making of the new middle class (Sharma, 1992). Neupane (2003) with a broader view, pointed out the growth in professional employment and expansion of computer and information technology in a sector of business and production as the factor of evolution (Neupane, 2003 p.295) of the new middle class (he termed new petty bourgeoisie). Hachhethu and Gellner (2010) argued rapid progress in infrastructural developments...education, health, road transportation, and communications which in turn produced a critical mass of educated middle-class (2010 p.134). Riaz and Basu (2010) described class formation in Nepal as the result of urbanization, partial economic modernization, and expansion of educational opportunities from the 1950s. They pointed out that pursuing land reforms, ending the autonomy of principalities (Rajya) in western Nepal hills eroded the hold of the former aristocracy over the economy and favored an emerging intermediate class encompassing rich peasants, urban traders, and service elites (Riaz & Basu, 2010 p. 45). The ascendancy of the middle class fostered the oppositional movement and erosion of the legitimacy of the monarchy (feudalism) in Nepal (Gallagher 2018). Highly monetized economy by the formation of the new rich, for whom the elite education plays a vital role in their making, self-construction reshaping Kathmandu's (urban areas) socio-economic landscape (Wallenius, 2023).

However, other people come from rural areas for employment and their children's education in Kathmandu and other city areas reshaped urban politics.

Middle class matters in competitive politics to protect their interest and to be decisive in a transitional phase of politics. The size and relative income of the middle class also matter for democratic transition and consolidation (Leventoglu, 2014 p.827). The account of an educated and employed or self-employed person based on education and skill rather than *moneyed capital* is regarded as a new middle class. Nepal's new middle classes evolved during the 1950s due to the growth and diversification of tertiary activities and related occupations (Liechty, 2003; Neupane, 2003; Riaz & Basu, 2010, Blaikie *et al.*, 2014). During 1950-59, there were only 150 engineers, 200 doctors, one dozen scientists, and another dozens of experts in Nepal (Leo & Rose, 2004 p.517). Only 5500 professionals were registered out of ten thousand eligible as graduate voters under the provision of graduate constituency in 1967 (Gaije, 1975 p.159) and today around half a million students are studying higher education in and abroad in a year. Some of the studies projected and presented the size of the middle class in Nepal. Chun (2010) estimated 22.89% and Tiwari *et al.*, (2016) estimated the same size. Giri *et al.*, (2020) estimated the size of 33.6% (2020), a survey of the Nepali people in 2022 estimated 31.2 based on survey data (survey estimate is based on 20 to 40 thousand monthly incomes). Brandi and Buge (2014) estimated the middle-class size as 47.2% based on the relative economic development level. The study by Administrative Staff College (2020) estimated the size of the middle class as 64% based on the self-perception of the sample. The size is different in each study due to their approach and methodology.

Two separate studies by ADB have estimated 22.89 % of the middle class on 2005 PPP using an absolute approach (Chun, 2010 p.13; ADB, 2010 p.8). Tiwari *et al.*, (2016) adopted the synthetic panel methodology, using three rounds of Nepal's life standard survey estimated 22% middle class with an upward mobility trend. In caste/ethnicity, Newar has the highest share 51%, followed by Bahun Chhetri 33%, Hill Janajati 20%, Terai middle caste 15%, Terai Janajati 12%, Muslim 10%, and the lowest share the Dalit 8% (Tiwari *et al.*, 2016 p.19). Administrative Staff College presents a similar but a little different figure in Nepal's national governance survey report 2017/18. The report presents the respondent's economic

status as 2% rich, 64% medium, and 34 % low based on their self-perceived notion. Survey research conducted in 2017, 2018, and 2020 shows some of the key data relating to the middle-income group (the middle class is not defined therein). The research estimates the size of the middle-income group as 23% in 2017, 28.2% in 2018, and 33.6 % in 2020 (Giri *et al.*, 2020).

Middle-Class Politics in Nepal

The two centuries' debates on the democratization of either the bourgeoisie or working classes shifted in the two decades of the 21st century towards a new middle class (Boulding & Holzner, 2021). It is considered the role of the middle class is a new wave of democratization in the globe with contemporary political issues of inclusion, equitable justice, and environmental concerns (Standing, 2011). In the context of developing countries like Nepal, the issues of intra-party democracy, governance, service delivery, depoliticization of bureaucracy, inclusion, and equitable distributional justice are prominent. The new scenario promoted an alternative notion of political participation through a new type of party rather than established left-right-tagged parties. For this purpose, different groups of young, educated people during this decade tried to organize themselves as an alternative political party. Among them, the Naya Shakti now Nepal Samajwadi Party (NSP), the Bibeksheel Sajha Party (BSP), and the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) emerged one after another. The NSP and the BSP Separately contested in the general election of 2017, but they did not qualify as a national party. On the same ground, in local polls in 2022, independent candidates were elected as Mayors of Kathmandu, Dhangadhi, and Dharan Municipalities defeating major parties' candidates. Such a victory inspired the youth to organize an alternative political Party. RSP registered just after the local election in 2022. It contested in urban constituencies in the 2022 general election securing 20 (one additional seat in a by-election in Tanahu) seats out of 275 in the House of Representatives with 10.7% party votes becoming the fourth party of parliament. These parties documented different ideas, ideologies, guiding principles, and orientations than established parties. They claim themselves as an alternative and new political party aiming to take the space of the middle class. Their philosophy, guiding principles, political issues, and uniqueness are similar which are compared in Table No. 1.

Table 1

Middle-Class Centric Alternative Parties and Their Values

Values and fundamentals	Rastriya Swotantra Party	Bibeksheel Sajha Party	Nepal Samajwadi Party
Philosophical commitment	Constitutional socialism	Welfare democracy	Dialectical Materialism/Enhance Socialism
Guiding principles	Constitutionalism, Constitutional socialism, Direct inclusive and participatory, Federalism without provincial level, No sister organization, Anti -corruption, Immune from over politicization, / Digital Democracy	Participatory democracy, Coordinative market economy, Welfare state, Social Justice System, Transparency, Integrity, Meritocracy-STIM.	5Sha 1. Equitable Prosperity, 2. Proportional inclusive participation 3. Good governance/ Good conduct, 4. Enhance socialism, 5. Independence / Sovereignty,
President	Nonpolitical elected from the Electoral College	Constitutional	Constitutional
Intra-party democracy	Uniform membership, right to recall and reject, Electronic Ballot, Polling in the station	Uniform membership, right to recall and reject, Polli ng in the station	Uniform membership, right to recall and reject, Polling in the station
Political issues	Gender gap, election reform, zero tolerance on corruption, good governance, and public service without cumbersome, Right man right place, Meritocracy, result-oriented	Meritocracy, Gender gap, election reform, good governance, and public service without cumbersome,	Meritocracy, constitutional reform, citizen's ombudsman, governance and easy public service, proportional / inclusive parliament, directly elected executive.
Uniqueness	Primary election, No sister organization, No cadre, young majority, limited tenure leadership, sovereign member, transparency, no exploitation of state funds.	Right to recall and reject, immune from classical ism and based on contemporaries, No exploitation of state fund, No politicization of professionals, Non-violence.	No cadre, young majority, limited tenure leadership, sovereign member, transparency, right to recall and reject, no exploitation of state funds.
Governance model	Two-tire federal republic	Three-tire Federal republic	Three-tire Federal republic
Approach	Center to right	Dynamic centrism	Center to left

Source: (<https://rspnepal.org>, <https://bibeksheelsajha.org/>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170620041858/http://nayashaktinepal.org/documents>)

The participation of the new middle class in Nepal is incipient and taking shape. These political parties are embryonic but decisive in national politics. They have no more differences in political issues and objectives in their party document (Table 1). They synthesized some new norms based on their own domestic experiences and international observations. Each of them is free from the tradition of being left and right tag and intent to be centered, but some of them have a legacy of history, i.e. Baburam Bhattarai and his party. The other people organized in the BSP and RSP emerged either from social voluntarism or social movement and some of them from NGO-based activities. They used to protest corruption, disorder, and impunity, and for social justice. These parties emerged with a series of urban revolts of new classes in Delhi India, Thailand, Philippines, Taiwan, the Arab region, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Wall Street movement in the USA (Kurlantzick, 2013) with the intent to reform existing condition of life and political system. They incorporated some major issues of intra-democracy, recruitment of leadership, and governance.

These parties documented primaries for the selection of the candidates, right to recall and reject, limited-term leadership, no sister organization (but BSP and NSP have limited such organization), meritocracy, depoliticization of bureaucracy and public institution, and non-hierarchical membership. They applied a people-centric election campaign rather than the elite-centric of the mainstream major political parties. Such issues reflect the difference between these newly emerged and established political parties.

Relevance of The Middle Class in Politics

Several pieces of literature analyzed Nepalese politics and political parties either overlooking class or dichotomous patterns (Basnet, 2021; Pokharel, 2023). Class-based parties have failed to analyze the changing structure of class specific to the new middle class (Poudel, 2023; Gurung, 2023). So, in the decade some middle-class-based political parties emerged to take the middle-class space with increase its size. In other words, these types of parties emerged from the crisis of neoliberal policy and the failure of socialists to cope with the challenge at the global level (Giddens, 2008; Markoff, 2015; Sandri & Seddone, 2021). Markoff (2015) argued this process has never been just about a particular set of institutions but is subject to change and unending struggles of people for political influence are never altogether containable within institutions (p.186).

The structural change of class power relations after the 2015 constitution promulgation (product of elite bargaining) focused on caste, ethnicity, and gender rather than class. The mainstream political parties' reluctance on governance, public service delivery, and broad participation issues of the new generation inspired the young and educated people to take an alternative course of politics. The new generation of political parties raised new issues as mentioned in Table 1, but such issues are yet to be legitimized due to less strength. Such issues are not only for domestic politics but also regional and global concerns, and a part of the 21st century's democratization process as explained by Markoff.

CONCLUSION

The new middle class in this study is taken differently from the old middle class. Overall development of the economy, technology, and the spread of education shifted the class structure. The rising consciousness and activeness of the young generation also shifted the priorities and landscape of Nepalese politics. The newly emerged parties are trying to adopt the new generational issues by incorporating them into their manifestos, parties' documents, and public practices. These parties emerged in the same decade to occupy the same space but with different backgrounds and philosophies of the initiators they could not be unified.

These parties claim themselves as alternative political parties and are trying to challenge the traditional leadership pattern, outlook, and orientations. Their issues seem new and have gained popularity, especially among the new generations. These parties are on the stage of getting the shape of a political party and reshaping the national political scenario. It is a notable concern on the global level. The new middle class is growing and trying to reshape contemporary politics, issues like inclusion, proportional representation, and recently the delivery of public service and governance as well as its organized form. Some of them attempting to organize a political party as an alternative to the conventional political parties. The candidacy and success in the election in 2022 in the urban constituencies as party candidates and Municipalities as independent in the major cities is a political success of the class. They can be alternative political parties to the conventional ones if these new political parties agree on common departure, agency, and agendas. Peoples are observing their commitment to their agendas.

The study attempts to overview the emergence of the new class and new parties in Nepalese politics. It is beneficial to the academics, politicians, and readers of politics in class dynamics. The study opens some issues on the class specific to the middle class as an agency for democratization, governance, and service delivery. In this context, does the middle class have a uniform political orientation? Where do these parties stand- in the center or right, or left? Do they have a common outlook concerning socialism, reformism, or conservatism? Can it be a ruling class while it stands in the middle? So, it opens the future research in many respects on political perspectives in Nepal.

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