

## The Changing Nature of Class Struggle in Nepal and the Ideological Divergence of Communist Parties: A Critical Study

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### Abstract

*This study critically analyzes the changing character of class struggle under the Marxist concept and the ideological deviations seen in the major communist components in the political transformation of Nepal. The Nepali communist movement, guided by historical uprisings such as the Jhapa movement and the Maoist People's War, is involved in parliamentary politics, and its revolutionary stream is becoming detached from the class struggle of the grassroot people. This study, which adopts a qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) method and a historical materialist approach, examines the contradictions of Nepali politics based on James Hartfield's crony capitalism and Milovan Dzilas' new class theory. It concludes that although direct feudalism has ended in Nepal, new and invisible enemies such as crony capitalism, political corruption and parliamentary opportunism have emerged in its place. The transformation of the communist leadership into a new exploiting class by using state power itself and the increasing influence of middlemen at the policy level have reduced the socialism-oriented constitutional goal to mere documentation. Therefore, for the renaissance of the communist movement, it seems inevitable that the parties should abandon their luxurious lifestyles and middle-class aspirations, chart a new course against crony capitalism, and re-engage with the real relations of production of the working class.*

**Keywords:** class struggle, comprador capitalism, ideological deviation, communist movement, social transformation

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### **Introduction**

Class struggle is the mutual conflict between different groups in society for control over resources, means, and power, which lays the foundation for social discontent and change due to the conflicting interests of the 'haves' and 'have-nots', divided on the basis of economic status. According to Marx & Engels (1848), the recorded history of human society to date is the history of class struggle, where society has always been divided into two main opposing classes: the bourgeoisie (capitalists), who own the means of production, and the proletariat (workers), who are forced to sell their labor. According to them, this continuous conflict, in which the capitalist class increases its wealth by exploiting 'surplus value' from the labor of workers, and the workers fight for fair wages and rights, is not limited to economic reform, but is ultimately directed towards the historical goal of establishing a classless and stateless communist society through a revolutionary change.

The nature of class struggle and the ideological journey of the communist movement in Nepal have been very ups and downs. Since the establishment of the Communist Party of Nepal under the leadership of Pushpa Lal Shrestha in 1949 with the goal of opposing feudalism and imperialism, there have been many attempts to bring about radical change in Nepali politics. Although the Jhapa movement of 2028 BS laid the foundation for armed rebellion through a militant trend to eliminate class enemies, this trend later revised its course of action and entered peaceful parliamentary politics.

In this development, the 'People's Multi-Party Democracy' (PMD) propounded by the people's leader Madan Bhandari democratized communist principles and paved the original Nepali path of capitalist democratic revolution, which enabled the communists to come to power through popular vote. On the other hand, although the Maoist People's War that began in 2052 BS challenged the centralized structure of the state and established the issue of federalism and republicanism, it also appears to be facing ideological divergence and organizational divisions as it is absorbed into the realm of parliamentary politics after the peace process. In this way, the communist parties of Nepal strategically changed the nature of the class struggle, but the decline in their revolutionary character and their inclination towards capitalist opportunism after coming to power have become the main theoretical challenge of the present.

While there have been extensive studies on the historical aspects of the Nepali communist movement, there is a dearth of academic research regarding the structural contradiction-in the contemporary context-between the parties' professed 'proletarian' ideology and their actual 'parliamentary' practice. Therefore, this study makes an original attempt to analyze the parties' political-economic transformation by objectively examining the gap between their ideological principles and the conduct of their leadership. The main

objective of this study is to objectively analyze how revolutionary currents, from the Jhapa movement to the Maoist rebellion, fell into reformism and ideological deviation, and to identify the true class character of Nepali communists in the changing global environment. The importance of this study is unique in the sense that it will provide intellectual and political guidelines for communist parties caught in the quagmire of power to correct their historical mistakes, reinterpret doctrines, and chart the right course by redefining the real class struggle of the people on the ground.

### **Literature Review**

Although Nepal's communist parties have regarded class struggle as the primary basis for political change since their inception, a stark contradiction is evident between their ideology and their practice. According to James Heartfield's (2005) concept of 'crony capitalism,' the local capitalist class in such a structure-rather than building a self-reliant economy-operates as 'agents' or intermediaries for foreign capital and multinational corporations. Although Nepal's communist parties champion the slogan of 'national capital,' in practice, their economic foundation rests on importers and commission agents, effectively turning them into patrons of crony capitalism. This deviation is elucidated by Milovan Djilas's (1957) theory of 'The New Class', which posits that the bureaucracy and political leadership seizing power after a revolution transform into a 'New Class' that appropriates state assets and privileges in the name of the proletariat. In Nepal, too, as former proletarian leaders have transformed into a new class that adopts a high-standard lifestyle through the exercise of state power, the genuine issues facing grassroots workers and the general public have been overshadowed.

According to contemporary Marxist theory, the nature of today's class struggle and dialectics has become more multidimensional than in the traditional industrial era; the dialectical dynamic appears to have shifted from the tangible setting of the factory to the abstract contradictions of information, networks, and virtual spaces (Castells, 2010). In this new context, the classical boundary between the economic base and the ideological superstructure has dissolved, leading to their mutual overlapping, wherein digital technologies and media outlets themselves operate as a vast economic base (Gramsci, 1971). Similarly, alongside the expansion of social plurality, identities based on ethnicity, gender, region, and culture-not just class-are emerging as intertwined vehicles of political consciousness (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). On the other hand, while the expansion of multinational capital has created a 'global class,' the development of platform capitalism, gig labor, and artificial intelligence (AI) has given rise to a new, precarious 'digital class' comprising freelancers and digital workers who operate outside traditional organizational structures (Cortes et al., 2023). Therefore, to understand the contemporary communist movement objectively, it appears essential to analyze it based on this evolving dialectic, the

plurality of identities, the blurring of the base-superstructure distinction, and the emergence of a new digital working class.

From a Marxist perspective, ownership of the means of production determines the exploiter and exploited classes, whose mutually antagonistic interests drive class struggle. In Nepali academia, however, the analysis of class struggle appears largely confined to outdated frameworks characteristic of the industrial or feudal eras, whereas contemporary Nepal's remittance-based economy, the rise of digital labor (gig work, freelancing), and platform capitalism have fundamentally transformed the traditional class structure. Therefore, there appears to be a clear research gap regarding the critical analysis-from a contemporary Marxist perspective-of this changing nature of production relations and the rise of a new digital class in the context of the import-oriented 'crony capitalism' and practical deviations of Nepali communist parties; addressing this gap is the primary objective of this study.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative Secondary Data Analysis (SDA) method based on the framework established by Ruggiano and Perry (2019). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research, the materials were validated through data triangulation-involving the systematic selection of peer-reviewed journals, organizational documents, and historical sources-and subsequently interpreted using coding and thematic analysis. Although this methodology provides a solid basis for the theoretical explanation of historical continuity, its limitations lie in the lack of primary sources and the reliance solely on secondary data. To ensure procedural transparency and a defined scope, this study includes only those communist parties represented in the Federal Parliament; this is because these parties-having secured a legitimate public mandate through elections-play a direct role in policymaking and state governance, whereas non-parliamentary communist groups have been excluded from the study's scope as they do not exert a direct influence at the policy level.

### **Results and Discussion**

The Communist Party of Nepal was established in 1949 with the aim of ending feudalism and class exploitation and establishing a socialist system. Building on this foundation, leader Pushpalal characterized Nepali society as semi-feudal and drafted the ideological framework for the 'New Democratic Revolution,' which served as the mainstay of the leftist movement for a long time (Pokhrel I. , 2024). Refining his views over time, leader Madan Bhandari linked the communist movement to multiparty competition, democratic elections, and constitutional governance in 1993 through the concept of 'People's Multiparty Democracy' (PMD) (Dhakal, 2023; Pahari, 2024). Meanwhile, the CPN (Maoist Centre)-which had launched an armed class struggle in 1996-also eventually integrated into

parliamentary politics following the 2006 peace process (Pokhrel I., 2024). Thus, regardless of their historical revolutionary backgrounds, the major parties-CPN (UML) and Nepali Communist Party-while formally appearing committed to socialism, are in practice focused on election-oriented competition, alliances, and the parliamentary game of managing power; this highlights the gap between their declared principles and contemporary practical politics.

Nepal's communist parties have been limited to 15 percent in the 2082 BS periodic elections. The main reason for this is the ideological deviation and institutional decay that have occurred while in power. Despite leading the government repeatedly, these parties have been losing public trust because they have forgotten their basic principles and the issues of people's livelihood and focused only on the game of power. The failure to manage the internal contradictions within the political system and to modernize itself in line with the changing social environment inevitably leads to the decline and contraction of communist power (Sakwa, 2013). In the context of Nepal as well, communist parties have not been able to maintain their mobilization power and grassroots relations. When the party's institutional structure fails to address the aspirations of the people and the leadership that holds the reins of power loses its legitimacy, then communist power declines rapidly (Walder, 1994). Thus, the Nepali communist movement suffered this serious electoral setback by favoring crony capitalism and power struggles over ideological loyalty.

### **The changing class structure of Nepali society**

The class structure of Nepali society is rapidly transforming from traditional caste-based divisions to modern, economically based class formation. Historically, the state itself, through the Muluki Ain 1854, institutionalized caste hierarchies and social divisions, which for a long time controlled the distribution of power and opportunity (Pokharel, 2020). However, the neoliberal policies and globalization adopted by Nepal in recent times have led to changes in the traditional structure. In particular, while the expansion of education and awareness has increased social mobility, unequal access to education seems to be making class divisions more complex and reinforced (Chalaune, 2023). As a result of this process, a new middle class has emerged in Nepali politics and society, which has begun to challenge the traditional elite and exert significant influence on the balance of political and social power (Lamsal, 2024). Overall, Nepali society is now shifting towards a new class structure due to the accumulation of capital, commercialization, and the expansion of middle-class culture, where neoliberalism is giving a new direction to the process of class formation (Pokhrel K.D., 2024). Historically, Nepali society was thus divided along the lines of 'caste', where the upper caste people were the rulers and the lower caste people were the ruled. However, this structure has now changed and is based on class or economic status. Now, a person's identity is determined more by their income, education, and occupation than by their caste.

The changing class structure has shifted from a traditional agrarian and feudal base to a service sector and remittance-based economy, which has replaced rural economic self-reliance with dependence on the market and foreign employment. With this economic transition, the traditional landowner-peasant conflict of yesterday has changed into a new and complex relationship between 'crony capitalism and the working class', where commission and intermediary mechanisms seem to dominate more than the productive sector. As a result of this process, a powerful new middle class has emerged in society, whose growing aspirations and consumerist culture have also deeply influenced Nepal's communist politics. The communist parties, which stood on the foundation of yesterday's proletarian revolution, are now forced to modify their revolutionary agendas to gain the support of this middle class, gravitating towards parliamentary competition and reformism.

### **Factors of Ideological Deviation**

- a) **Parliamentary obsession and power-centered politics:** When analyzing the historical and organizational realities of the Nepali communist movement, it appears that the growing obsession with the parliamentary system has weakened the party's core revolutionary thrust. Unhealthy alliances and power-sharing have reduced principles to bargaining for power. The weakening of internal democracy within the party and the centralization of power in the leadership have led to a decline in principled commitment (Puri, 2025). The tendency to sacrifice principles for the sake of power has made the party ideologically fragmented.
- b) **Impact of neo-liberalism and deviations in economic policy:** There has been a major contradiction between the economic policies adopted by the communist parties and the guiding principles they have adopted while in power. Although the People's Multi-Party Democracy (PMP) attempts to address the challenges of globalization and liberal economics, in practice communist governments have continued the neo-liberal framework (Rijal, 2025). This has led to the dominance of capitalist character, overshadowing the party's class interests and the goal of a socialist-oriented economy.
- c) **Cultural erosion and bourgeoisification of lifestyle:** The luxurious lifestyle and moral decline seen at the leadership level are the most visible forms of ideological deviation. The decline in the mobilization and ideological training of communist cadres and the rise of a 'bourgeois' lifestyle among leaders have distanced the relationship between the party and the people. As Puri (2025) points out, these social realities in the party's organizational structure have created a situation where cadres are used only as electoral tools and the leadership class is immersed in luxury.

### **Changes in the nature of class struggle**

In Nepal, the traditional class struggle between 'Feudales and peasants' is gradually transforming and restructuring into a conflict between the broker-capitalist and the working class (Proletariat). According to (Pokhrel K. D., 2024), the impact of neo-liberal policies and

globalization has alienated rural independent farmers from the means of production and transformed them into the working class, due to which they are forced to sell their labor to earn a living. The growing influence of the capitalist structure on the relations of production has weakened the middle and small farming class and established a monopoly of the broker-capitalist class over economic resources and means of production. This seems to have shifted the class structure of Nepali society away from traditional land-based agricultural struggle and towards a direct economic contradiction between capital and labor.

Although historically communist parties mobilized peasants as the main force of the movement with the slogan of ‘tillering the land’, in the present, neo-liberal agricultural policies and the wave of foreign employment have brought about a profound change in the rural class structure. Foreign employment, labor migration, and a market-oriented economy have led to a shift in peasants away from traditional land-based production relations and towards industrial and wage labor (Sugden, 2009). This process has reduced the contribution of the agricultural sector and transformed formerly independent farmers into dependent laborers in the labor market, thereby weakening the traditional ‘peasant base’ of political parties. In the current socio-economic context, the nature of the class struggle has changed and is developing into ‘broker-capitalist versus worker’. Such a transformation illustrates the deep inequality in the distribution of economic power and labor in Nepali society and the growing dominance of capitalist production relations.

### **Electoral system and class representation**

The statistics confirm that, despite the success of communist parties in electoral politics, the representation of the lower classes has declined. In the last decade, the number of representatives from the working or lower classes in the parliamentary system has steadily decreased, while the majority of highly educated and professional politicians has increased. This trend is also evident in Nepali communist or leftist parties; where parties have increasingly focused on selecting socio-economically well-off and highly-educated candidates. This has reduced the chances of genuine working-class representatives winning elections and the party’s candidate selection process has become a barrier to promoting the working class as ‘safe’ candidates (Elsasser & Wenker, 2026), leading to class inequality in overall representation.

Looking at the socio-economic background of the representatives who reached the parliament and government, it is seen that the middle and upper classes are in the majority. This shows that as the communists were integrated into the ‘bourgeois parliamentary system’, they were forgetting their original class (working class) and adopting a policy of class collaboration. As Elsasser and Wenker (2025) argue, the internal party selection process and electoral structures have increasingly prioritized competition and ‘careerism’, leading to a

dominance of individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds in parliament and government, marginalizing direct representation of the working class.

### **Crony capitalism and policy deviation**

Various studies show that the economic policies adopted by the communist-led governments of Nepal are fundamentally neo-liberal and geared towards crony capitalism. According to Gumisiriza (2019), the introduction of neo-liberal policies in developing countries has led to the shrinking role of the state and the dominance of crony capitalists by placing public service sectors under the market. Similarly, class bias has also been observed in the internal structure of political parties. The parties' nomination strategies have prioritized highly educated and financially strong 'professional politicians', marginalizing the working class Elsasser and Wenker (2025), which has made the representation of the working class in parliament unequal and low.

The promotion of privatization in sensitive sectors such as education, health, and water resources exposes a deep contradiction between the 'socialist' constitutional goals of communist parties and their actual governance practices. Gumisiriza (2026) mentioned that the traditional issue of class struggle has become weaker as the state withdraws from social responsibility due to the impact of neoliberalism in developing countries. The fact that the very parties that raise the loud slogans of class struggle fall under the economic siege of the crony capitalist class can be considered a kind of 'ideological ejaculation'. When parties consider only resourceful candidates as safe for electoral victory, the voice of the working class is lost at the level of parliament and policy-making, and the policy of Class Collaboration comes to dominate. Thus, due to policy divergence and lack of class representation, Nepal's politics seems to be gradually focusing on the protection of the capitalist class rather than the interests of the working class.

### **Organizational structure and cultural transformation**

According to various studies, the organizational structure of political parties is changing from traditional ideological cadres to mechanisms based on professional staff and 'networking'. According to Karsen and Saglie (2017), the mobilization of staff and cadres in modern parties is now more focused on personal careers, professional opportunism, and internal networking than on rigorous ideological training. This has created a class within the party that is more interested in the party's administrative positions and prestige than in public relations. As a result, the parties have now come to look more like a bunch of 'professional political employees' than 'representatives of the people', which has displaced the original ideological foundation of the party.

This change in the organizational culture of the parties has created a huge gap in the lifestyle of the leaders and their relationship with the masses. The increasing luxury among

the leaders and the aversion to traditional 'proletarian culture' have clearly increased the emotional distance between the party and the general public. As Karlsen and Saglie (2017) notes that the growing professionalization and 'control' within the party has reduced class struggle from being focused on the streets or in the production sectors to an internal struggle for position, power and prestige within the party. This kind of cultural transformation has transformed the party from an ideological movement into a purely electoral machine or interest group, where power and access take precedence over policy and loyalty.

**Table - 1***Summary of Analysis*

| Indicator         | Revolutionary Period (Past)        | Current State (Present)                 |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Main Enemy        | Feudalism and foreign intervention | Crony capitalism and corruption         |
| Main Force        | Poor farmers and laborers          | Middle class and businessmen            |
| Means of Struggle | Movement and People's War          | Elections and Parliament                |
| Economic Goal     | Land reform and nationalization    | Investment attraction and privatization |

*Source:* Developed by the author

Although Nepal's communist parties have upheld class struggle as their core principle for the past seven decades, its nature has undergone a complete transformation in contemporary politics. While major parties like the CPN (UML) and other communist factions speak of socialism on paper, in practice, they prioritize the games of winning elections, retaining power, and forging alliances; consequently, they appear to have strayed from the revolutionary path and become mired in parliamentary and reformist tendencies (Limbu, 2020). Although they speak of Marxism and class-based politics in theory, a significant discrepancy between their words and actions is evident, as they stoke issues of caste, region, and identity in practice to secure vote banks (Magar, 2025). Since the UML adopted 'People's Multiparty Democracy' and the Maoists abandoned armed struggle to join the peace process, both have forsaken the path of traditional revolution and made elections and the constitution their primary instruments; consequently, there is a need to re-evaluate their ideologies from a fresh perspective (Ayadi, 2018). Overall, ideological ambiguity, institutional weaknesses, the attachment of veteran leaders to power, and a widening gap with the younger generation have emerged as major challenges for today's communist movement; furthermore, as the traditional slogan of a revolution for the poor fades-replaced by power-centric and self-serving politics-the chasm between the communists' principles and

practice appears to be deepening (Puri, 2026). The traditional form of class struggle in Nepal has undergone a profound transformation, where not only economic inequality but also social and cultural oppression have become its main link. From a Marxist perspective, the structural discrimination and struggle for self-respect experienced by Dalits and marginalized communities in Nepali society represent the real proletariat through the characters of the so-called lower castes (Sharma, 2023). Historically, although a 10-year armed insurgency challenged the feudal state, the post-Maoist transition period saw a shift from class struggle to a focus on power structures and state restructuring, which did not lead to substantial improvements in the economic conditions of the grassroots (Guragain et al., 2024). This confirms that Nepal's class struggle is currently at a crossroads between identity and rights.

Although the Nepali communist parties have put forward the slogan of a 'classless society', in practice they have become increasingly entangled in the circle of parliamentary politics. Especially after 1990, the game of gaining power and balancing power seems to have dominated the political parties of Nepal rather than ideological clarity and class issues (Thapa, 2024). Another key aspect of this divergence is its proximity to crony capitalism, where the unholy alliance between the political leadership and a small business elite serves the interests of a certain group rather than the interests of the working class (Prasai, 2017). The emergence of a new ruling class within the parties has weakened the practical basis of communist theory.

In principle, the Nepali communist movement has attempted to address multifaceted issues, but serious flaws have been observed in its management. While indigenous and tribal issues were initially made an integral part of the class struggle, they were later reduced to mere political bargaining chips and strategic tools for gaining power (Ismail & Shah, 2015). Ultimately, although such political transformations brought about some changes in the superstructures of the state, they did not bring about any fundamental changes in the daily lives of the oppressed classes and their access to the means of production (Shneiderman et al., 2016). Therefore, the Nepali communist movement is currently in the throes of a serious theoretical crisis and practical deviation, which requires a return to the original class ground to correct.

### **Conclusion**

This study confirms that the Nepali communist movement is caught in a profound structural contradiction between its historical revolutionary legacy—specifically the Jhapa Uprising and the People's War—and contemporary, power-centric parliamentary opportunism. Although traditional land-based feudalism has ended in Nepal, class struggle has not ceased; rather, it has undergone a qualitative transformation, with 'crony capitalism,' neoliberal market mechanisms, and institutional corruption emerging as the new class

enemies. The very communist leadership that represents the ideology of the proletariat has today become the protector of comprador capitalists and middlemen. Due to this policy deviation and embourgeoisement, the 'socialism-oriented' goal enshrined in the Constitution has been reduced to a mere formality within official documents. Cultural degradation within the party structure, a consumerist lifestyle, and a growing proximity to the middle and merchant classes—rather than the working class—appear to have alienated the movement from its fundamental class-based foundation. Therefore, to revitalize the Nepali communist movement and achieve genuine socio-economic transformation, it is imperative to break free from crony-capitalist networks and the lust for office. The historical necessity of the present lies in establishing genuine ownership of the means of production by the working masses at the grassroots level—accompanied by a ruthless self-critique of past errors—and reconnecting deeply with their fundamental issues.

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