

# THREE FACES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

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This article consists of an ethnographically informed analysis of the 'logic' guiding civil society activism in Nepal at three distinct points in its recent history. The paper details these 'logics' ('service logic' (1990-2000), a 'peace logic' (2001-2004) and a more radical and egalitarian logic (2005-2006)) and then relates the corresponding types of civil society (civil society I, civil society II and civil society III, respectively) to broader political developments in the country. It is argued that the changes in the logic underpinning civil society activism can clearly be attributed to the changing patterns of macro power configurations and to distinct challenges faced by the urban literate class over the previous two decades.

## INTRODUCTION

Drawing on different strands of classical civil society thought, developed in the Western historical context, most scholars consider civil society as self-propelling "things" that are against the state, as formations that are equivalent to or against the market, or as other forms of associational life outside direct state and market patronage.<sup>2</sup> In addition, debate about civil society theory and practices centres on the normative implications of civil society for liberal democratic practices. The proponents and opponents of civil society in Nepal have largely followed this trend. In particular, most recent studies in Nepal, as elsewhere in the world, have focused on formal voluntary and nongovernmental organisations as self-

contained entities. Although these concepts and theories have been helpful in analysing aspects of the phenomenon of civil society, they take civil society discourse, practices and identities for granted, or dismiss civil society as a "foreign" concept. They thus do not go far enough in explaining the characteristics of civil society activism. In this paper, I argue that three forms of civil society, with their distinct logic and practices, emerged in three distinct periods in Nepal's recent history—civil society activism I, II and III, which correspond to the three periods 1990-2000, 2001-2004, and 2005-2006 respectively. In contrast to the existing approaches, I attribute these changes to the changing patterns of macro power configurations

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<sup>2</sup> I do not dwell on the historical origin of the idea of civil society. For detail. see Calhoun (1993); Chandhoke (1995); Cohen and Aarato (1992); Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001); Somers (1995a, 1995b); Taylor (1990).

and to the distinct challenges the urban literate class have faced during the past two decades. By presenting three forms of civil society activism, I do not, however, mean that they are exclusive categories and that the three forms could not or did not co-exist in a single historical period. They clearly did. My aim is rather to show that different types of logic prevailed in different periods.

This paper is based on my research among three civil society groups—professional organisations, local NGOs, and "autonomous" citizen groups—that claimed their public identity as members of civil society in different periods of Nepal's recent history. Although these groups have been globally identified as the epitome of the "civil society" actor in the contemporary literature, in focusing on them, I do not mean to present them as the privileged actors or objects of analysis. Rather I attempt to break into the global-national-local web of relations. I will thus incorporate several levels of analysis as mediated through these groups.<sup>3</sup> Data in this paper comes from interviews, documents, and newspapers. I conducted interviews with the 2006 Movement supporters and opponents in Kathmandu during 2008-2009. The supporters, which included civil society activists and leaders from the major political parties, made up the bulk of my interviewees. Among those who supported the monarchies were journalists, political party leaders, and security officials. Documents I reviewed included protest reports, pamphlets, press releases, and a few meeting minutes and reports. In most cases, I examined

Nepal's largest selling daily newspaper, *Kantipur* and its sister publication, *The Kathmandu Post*, but I also examined newspapers professing loyalties to different parties and specialised journals that focused on "civil society" activities.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM I (1990-2000)

Associational life outside the direct patronage of the state and market that is often referred to as "civil society" has a long history in Nepal. In fact, the 1980s saw a remarkable surge of formal organisations even if the monarchical *Panchayat* regime tried hard to control citizens' independent organising. Here, the key to our understanding is the fact that formal organisations, such as the Human Rights Organisations of Nepal (HURON) and the Forum for Protection of Human Rights (FOPHUR), emerged under the patronage of the then banned political parties—the Nepali Congress and Nepal Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)—in the course of struggle against the *Panchayat* regime.<sup>4</sup> These organisations were also part of the international human rights movement and politics at the end of Cold War. Western donor countries increasingly linked foreign assistance to human rights rhetoric in the 1980s (Apodaca and Stohl, 1999; Carleton and Stohl, 1985, 1987). In turn, at the end of the Cold War, many Third World governments perceived the ratification of international treaties as politically inconsequential, thus endorsing human rights principles without actually implementing them. The *Panchayat* regime in Nepal thus started

<sup>3</sup> In Nepal's context, Mishra (2005) has advocated such a relational approach to sociological research.

<sup>4</sup> In their early days, these organisations formally or informally received financial and other supports from international agencies, expats in Kathmandu and other "like-minded" individuals.

adopting human rights rhetoric nationally and internationally even as it denied civil and political rights to its people and severely suppressed the human rights movement. The major political parties, however, found a new cause to contest the regime, increasingly turning to human rights organisations, rhetoric, and discourse. Other forms of organisation that became influential during the period were professional organisations, ethnic organisations, and the *Panchayat* regime-sponsored nongovernmental organisations.<sup>5</sup>

In sharp contrast to the narrow interpretation of contemporary civil society scholars, it is important to note here that civil society organisations and activists in the 1980s hardly understood themselves as "independent" or "autonomous" from political party patronage. The early civil society organisations contributed to a political movement, popularly known as the First People's Movement, which in 1990 ended the *Panchayat* system and established a multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy. The connection of civil society activism with macro-political forces and institutions was thus very much evident at the very birth of "modern" civil society activism in Nepal. As I will describe shortly, this logic influenced the development of the civil society movement in the subsequent periods.

In the years following the 1990 movement, Nepalis started becoming increasingly assertive in public life. If the growth of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) is any indication, what was distinct about the 1990s was a public

"associational revolution" that liberal civil society theorists have celebrated. In the 1990s, these NGOs were the major "civil society" actors. As I argued above, the character of Nepal's civil society activism cannot be understood without understanding macro-politics and the particular challenges the urban literary class faced. The fact that the political parties were still at the helm of state affairs, that the monarchy was still not visible as a major public political actor, and that the political parties needed to deliver development for their legitimacy, meant that they did not conceptualise their roles as public political activists (Basnet, 2010). Civil society activists, who came from the well-educated and upwardly-mobile classes and who were well-connected to the political parties, thus devoted themselves to the state goals of development and the institutionalisation of nascent democracy. Hence service logic guided the field of civil society activism. In addition, the connection between NGOs and the international agencies deepened ever more as the Nepali government increasingly sought foreign assistance in diverse forms and adopted neo-liberal economic policies, further increasing the subordination of civil society organisations and activists to state (and market) goals (Tamang, 2002).

Unlike many Western societies, as critics have rightly pointed out, Nepal did not have a discourse of civil society available for public activism. It is around the mid-1990s that the term civil society entered Nepal via diverse sources including international financial

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the then political parties had already penetrated several formal organisations including university teachers, students, and journalists since the 1970s (Baral, 1977). Student agitation played a crucial role in forcing then King Birendra to declare a referendum in 1980.

agencies, activist networks, and academicians well-versed in Western academic practices. The response to the new discourse of civil society has been varied. Academicians and activists often claimed that Nepal has always been "rich" in civil society (Dahal, 2001).<sup>6</sup> Despite the growing use of the term civil society, it did not, however, gain a unanimous and respectable place in the imagination of the local interpretive community. Devendra Raj Panday, who went on to become one of the key "civil society" leaders in the 2005-2006 movement, for example, criticised the new discourse and identity of civil society vigorously. In a scathing article titled *Civil Society: Which Society? Whose Society? (Nagarik Samaj: Kun samaj? Kasko samaj?)*, he questioned the "ubiquity" of civil society discourse.<sup>7</sup> While praising the growth of "good" and "nationalist" organisations and citizens, he asked donor communities to define what they really "wanted to achieve talking too much about civil society."

Historian Pratyoush Oonta was even more explicit. Referring to the growing use of civil society in public discourse without "anybody precisely defining the term," in an article titled "Civil Society: Absence of the Organised Culture to Promote Trust" [*Nagarik Samaj: Bishwas badhaune sasthagat sanskri ko ababh*], he wrote, "[...] most users think that modern NGOs are the bastion of civil society. At a time, when the NGOs are flooded with criticism, it appears that the new term was invented to represent the same NGOs" so that the criticisms could be

diluted or the people's attention diverted.<sup>8</sup> Thus the local interpretive community often equated civil society with NGOs, which were criticised for their dependence on foreign money and lack of autonomy vis-à-vis political parties. Subsequently, the discourse and identity of civil society did not gain a widespread currency in the 1990s. This situation gradually changed after 2000.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM II (2001-2004)

Beginning in 2001, civil society activism exhibited a different character. Its public visibility increased dramatically and in more positive ways than in the previous period (1990-2000) as activists faced new political challenges and opportunities. Nepal plunged into a deep political crisis, as the monarchy, the parliamentary political parties, and the Maoists fighting for a communist republic since 1996, jostled for power. Beginning in 2000, the Maoists successfully launched massive attacks on the security forces. In June 2001, following the infamous Palace Massacre in which the whole family of the reigning king was killed, Prince Gyanendra was crowned the new King of Nepal. As the Maoist insurgency escalated, the army was mobilised to fight the insurgency. This was for the first time that the army became visible in national politics. Most importantly, King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government in October 2002 and started ruling through his

<sup>6</sup> While these claims are valid to the extent that political organising can take on varieties of forms, in this paper, I begin with the assumption that "civil society" is a distinct sphere of modernity. Second, to the extent that I am interested in the discourse of civil society, I include organisations and activists who claimed themselves as members of civil society or who were labeled civil society by the media.

<sup>7</sup> DR Panday, Kantipur, March 8, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Pratyoush Oonta, Haka Haki, 4(10), 2058 VS, pp.14-16.

puppet governments. Another crucial development in early 2001 was that the Maoists officially adopted the policy of "dialogue." While there were conflicting interpretations of the Maoists' move and their motives (Basnet, 2010), the Maoist policy opened up room for new activism in Kathmandu. The massive violence that ensued from the army mobilisation gave rise to the consensus that "nobody can win this war" and "it is between the two guns." It was at this point that a new breed of "civil society" activism emerged in urban Nepal.

Subsequently, new forms of activism appeared in public life, but the goals of this activism was as uncertain and conflicting as Nepal's national politics had become. My interviews with the activists and the relevant documents, for example, showed that despite their displeasure with the sidelining of the political parties by the King, activists held conflicting views about the monarchy and the status of the 1990 Constitution of Nepal. Many activists actually believed that something good might come out of the increasingly assertive monarch. Finally, these activists came into contact with international peace organisations and academicians like never before. Global developments such as the one in Sri Lanka where Norway, with the help of local "civil society" activists, could successfully broker a truce between the Tamil fighters and the government further offered a model for the activists in Nepal.

Activists imagined their roles as members of civil society as being in-between warring factions and took upon themselves the task of mediation and "facilitation," leaving aside their previous goals of development and democracy. However, they also became part of complex political maneuvers

involving the royal palace, the Maoists, and the major political parties. Many activists, for example, played the role of the "messengers." "Peace rallies" became the characteristic form of their public expression. They spoke the language of objectivity, neutrality, and dialogue. This civil society, which I have termed "peace publics" elsewhere (Basnet, 2010), was organised by a peace logic. Here, civil society meant "independent" initiative and activism, but activists also imagined a "civil" society that was free of violence.

Consequently, this period saw the emergence of new forms of organisation, other than large bureaucratic NGOs and professional organisations. Many of these organisations bore the terms "civil society" and "peace" in their names. In addition to the usual language of human rights (a legacy of the very emergence of modern civil society organisations in the 1980s in Nepal), these new organisations invoked peace, neutrality, and objectivity. They visualised their roles as peace brokers between the Maoists and the Royal Palace, as the major political parties were increasingly considered to be irrelevant. Small organisations such as Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), the Civil Society for Peace and Development (CSPD), and Civic Solidarity for Peace (CSP), repeatedly made the headlines during this period. The media often labeled activists such as Padma Ratna Tuladhar and Daman Nath Dhungana, who participated in various groups and "campaigns," as members of civil society. It should be noted that many activists actually came from the established NGOs in Nepal, and the new challenge demanded a jettisoning of their older identities. Others were splinter groups from the

existing large, bureaucratic NGOs. In addition, many individuals from the business sector found room in this new civil society space.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that divergent actors were involved in the space of civil society, they made little substantial impact, as the failure of the peace talks showed. This activism, however, ushered in a new ethos as activists debated radical reforms to bring the Maoists into the political mainstream. The discourse of "inclusion" and "restructuring of the state", for example, became heightened during this period. Most importantly, at the end of the period 2001-2004, the discourse of civil society became widespread and somehow respectable. As I describe in the following section, a new political configuration altered the very character and meaning of civil society.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM III (2005-2006)**

Civil society as a powerful force and public identity appeared only in 2005-2006 under a new political configuration. King Gyanendra declared himself the chairman of a self-appointed government in February 2005. Moreover, the increasingly unpopular army became an active and visible participant in the new Kathmandu-centric ruling class. In the months following the King's take over, ordinary citizens did not protest against his rule despite the call from the major political parties. In fact, many journalists told me that when they interviewed "ordinary" people in the immediate aftermath of the King's

move on February 1, 2005, they were surprised that most supported the King. It is at this juncture that the new incarnation of civil society emerged in Nepal. What was interesting is that once these urban activists, whom the media labeled "civil society" activists and at times simply "civil society," called for protest, ordinary citizens began to participate in thousands.

The form, discourse, and identity of civil society activism in this period, however, were qualitatively different from the previous periods. The Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) was a key organisation that championed a new civil society and subsequently, mobilised the masses. CMDP core activists, when interviewed in 2008-2009, called themselves a "loose group" or a "movement." The very name of the group, formed in July 2005 and led by Dr. Devendra Raj Panday and Krishna Pahadi, includes the term *Nagarik* (citizen). According to core activists, CMDP consciously tried to practice ideals such as democracy, equality, and participation in their organisational culture. Many young members remembered that they were given "equal" voice in the decision making process. They came from recently-established new types of NGOs<sup>10</sup> that had been striving to carve a distinct identity vis-à-vis large NGOs.

In addition to identifying itself as a 'citizens' group' CMDP re-signified democracy as *Lokatantra* [commoners' democracy] as opposed to *Prajatantra* [subject's democracy], the term that had been in use for the past five

<sup>9</sup> Industrialist Rajendra Khetan, for example, supported and actively participated in these initiatives. Private school organisations, tourism entrepreneurs, and other organisations too found meaning in this civil society imagination.

<sup>10</sup> These NGOs included Martin Chautari, Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), and Human Rights and Peace Society (HURPES).

decades. CMDP's protest strategies were highly-expressive and theatrical in nature. Many civil society activists, termed forerunners [*Aguwa*] rather than leaders [*Neta*, a term reserved for politicians], became celebrities. In other words, CMDP imagined a new type of sociability and a radical restructuring of the state and society (Basnet, 2010). How can we understand the rise of this new type of civil society activism?

My contention is that we need to examine the macro political structure to understand this new civil society. The identity of citizen was constructed directly against the monarchical order as the monarchy—or rather the King-army coalition—was increasingly interpreted as treating "people" as subjects. The King-army coalition was increasingly framed as "autocracy" intent on imposing a traditional Hindu monarchical subject-hood on the people and on reversing the political gains made through the 1990 political moves. Under such conditions, it made sense for CMDP and other activists that did not have a formal political identity to imagine their identity as an "autonomous" collection of citizens. Here civil society meant a collection of citizens. Elsewhere, I have termed this phenomenon a "citizen society" (Basnet, 2010). But the citizen discourse was also constructed against the political parties and the big NGOs as journalists and activists thought that the political parties and NGOs were too unpopular to mobilise the masses. In CMDP mass meetings, for example, political party leaders were asked to sit on the ground

among the masses, not on the podium as had been the common practice. Activists associated with well-established NGOs identified themselves as citizens even if they were reluctant to abandon their organisational identity.<sup>11</sup>

But were all those strategies enough for popular mobilisation for several months? The key here again is the connection of CMDP activists with the political parties. Most young activists associated with CMDP had been friends with young members of the political parties. Popular student leaders such as Gagan Thapa and Ram Kumari Jhankri were continuously in touch with the CMDP activists and had frequented new NGOs such as COCAP and Martin Chautari. In fact, student leaders associated with the political parties, played crucial roles in mobilising the masses and managing logistics. The fact that many CMDP core leaders had not been formal members of the political parties greatly helped the mission of CMDP. For one, because of their relative autonomy from the mainstream political parties, CMDP core leaders could make the radical demand of republicanism much more vociferously than other civil society groups and the political parties. This "autonomy" could bring the political parties closer to the students aligned with the major political parties. A section of the student organisations had already been raising the slogan of republicanism following the King's dismissal of the elected government in 2002.

Ultimately, the King-army coalition was forced to surrender to the movement in April 2006,

<sup>11</sup> Several big NGOs were initially involved in CMDP, but they later some how dissociated themselves from CMDP. Whereas the reasons for this were complex, including the role of the media which did not view big NGOs favorably and the relative attachment with the political parties, activists associated with big NGOs told me that it was CMDP's insistence on a citizen identity and negation of organisational identity that led to the friction (See Basnet, 2010; see also Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari, 2010).

variously named the People's Movement II, the April Movement, the April Uprising, or the April Revolution. To be sure, the outcomes of the last movement—the surrender of King Gyanendra to the movement in April 2006 and the subsequent abolition of the institution of the monarchy in May 2008—were determined by a confluence of forces including the formation of a coalition between the parliamentary political parties and the Maoists; and the international arm imbroglio and suspension of foreign aid to the royal government. Even then when I interviewed over 100 political leaders and activists in 2008 and 2009, the leaders across the political spectrum accepted the fact that civil society activists had galvanised the masses and the activists proudly claimed that they were the ones who initiated the mobilisation of the quiescent masses.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that civil society activism in Nepal cannot be understood as an essentialised category; neither can it be dismissed as a "foreign" concept (Shah, 2008; Tamang, 2002). The notion that Nepal had always been "rich" in civil society is not helpful either (Dahal, 2001). The discourse and practice of civil society was neither imported in a wholesale way, nor was it indigenously created by local activists in the context of a beleaguered "weak" state (Shah, 2008). It does however

signify an "associational life" that many contemporary theorists advocate and celebrate. More than anything else, civil society in Nepal has been a massive cultural construct that has found a powerful expression in different moments in Nepal's recent history. While using a language that has a global valence, activists also made sense of their social missions, their own biographies, and the specific problems the country has faced. It has been a collective project, strategy, and imagination all rolled into one.

My point here is not to argue for or against civil society; the implication of civil society activism for a liberal democracy or radical politics can be a separate project, and others have done so elsewhere (Bhattachan, 1997, 2001; Mishra, 2001; Shah, 2002; Tamang, 2002). My point here is that civil society in Nepal has grown in tandem with national politics. This is perhaps true everywhere else (see Skocpol, 2004), but that is even more so in Nepal since the very emergence of "modern" civil society activism was rooted in the country's macro-political processes. In short, forms and outcomes of civil society activism cannot be determined by theoretical and normative fiat about how civil society should behave. The field of civil society is simultaneously shaped by a plurality of relational fields and historical narratives at particular moments in history.

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