Land Rights Movements in Nepal: Investigating Mobilization Strategies within a Political Landscape

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Abstract

This paper explores nations' political influence on social movement organizations. It focuses on the activities of National Land Rights Forum (NLRF), the largest land rights organization of Nepal. Effective mobilization of movement depends on organization's ability to align with the current political landscape, but is less emphasized by the global south social movement studies, which are focused on analyzing historical triggers and socioeconomic consequences with references to state policies. This paper takes survey-based open-ended interviews with 27 stakeholders, including the leaders and participants of NLRF's land rights movement. The NLRF's experiences on mobilization provided a strategic understanding of its adaptation to country's political milieu by leveraging the state-initiated major political events, which could be seen as opportunities to incorporate their concerns with state agendas. Furthermore, the Maoist-led insurgency in the past had fueled for the land rights movements, particularly the NLRF's priority in organizing and unifying individuals who had similar political and economic identities. The mobilization strategies for land rights movement highlight the contextual variation on how current political landscape shapes the adaptive systems and practices of movement organizations.

Keywords

social movements, national land rights forum, movement mobilizations, political environments, political opportunity structures

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A social movement functions as an entity dedicated to bringing about societal change through peaceful protests, constituted of shared grievances, organized individuals, collective action, and goal orientation, which aims to challenge unjust norms, values, and practices. However, effective mobilization strategies, social movement organization (SMO) develops and implies often rely on their mobilization objectives. While movement strategies remain crucial to any activism, the way SMOs mobilize effective movements always depends on the country's political environment.

SMOs originate from collective claims amplified by marginalized groups or communities, fostering shared means and spheres of communication and action (Diani 1992; Keating and Meils 2017; Tilly 1995). Without the deliberate establishment of SMOs, social movements often lack a rational societal foundation. SMOs, in this case, evolve often through purposeful political interactions with organized individuals (Foley and Anderson 2006). The political shifts, Keating (2020) highlights, such as changes in the nature of the state and increased people's political engagement outside the established institutional system, are primary influencing factors, in getting people to share interactions. Organized individuals and their shared interactions provide the way SMOs tailor their strategies and mobilization practices to the political climate of their respective countries.

Taking the NLRF, the largest land rights-based organization in Nepal, as an example, illustrates the interplaying linkage of political environments and mobilization strategies of a social movement organization. In the case of NLRF, the majority of its movement mobilization can be tracked during and post-popular Nepal's political movements in 2005/2006 (CSRC 2011). Considering it one of the key mobilizing strategies, NLRF's experiences provide an opportunity to examine the political process (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1995) it adapting, in terms of the development of strategies and tailoring them with land rights movements.

The political process model, developed by Doug McAdam (1982), conceptualizes social movements as processes originating at specific points in time and locations where group motivation takes center stage.

McAdam posits that social movements invariably interact with the political environments of their countries, shaped by elite alignments, the participation of these elites in mobilization, the openness of institutionalized political systems, and the strength and inclination towards state repression. Consequently, the success or failure of a social movement often hinges on how a movement organization capitalizes on political opportunities.

While this study delves into the organizational practices of the NLRF, comprehending mobilization strategies and practices of other social movement organizations remains pertinent. This article, however, provides empirical insights based solely on the NLRF's organizational experiences. Since movement mobilization serves as the medium for social movements, examining movement organization in relation to political opportunities is relevant in various social and political contexts. The implication here is that political opportunities alone do not guarantee support for movement mobilization. It depends on how a movement organization internalizes new political shifts.

This paper is organized into six primary sections, comprising a total of nine sub-sections. In the initial segment, we embark on a conceptual journey to explore the realms of social movements, movement organizations, and the mobilization of movements. Following this, the subsequent section undertakes a comprehensive examination of the contextual aspects of social movements. This section consists of five sub-sections that dissect the global landscape of land rights movements and the policies that underpin Nepal's land rights movement. It culminates with a succinct summary of existing research on social movements.

The third section of this paper delves into a detailed analysis of insights derived from prominent social movement theories, with specific emphasis on Doug A. McAdam's (1996) political process theory. This theory probes the intricate relationship between a nation's political environment and the organizations actively engaged in social movements.

The presentation of the study's results and ensuing discussions is reserved for the fourth section, which is further segmented into four additional subsections. The fifth section is devoted to a comprehensive

discussion of the study's findings, and it is succeeded by concluding section six.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT

In its broadest sense, social movements provide a platform for dissatisfied groups to transform their collective endeavors into organized struggles or negotiations, exerting pressure on relevant stakeholders, particularly the government, to enact substantial social reforms. The ultimate goal of collective action, McAdam (1982) elucidates, is to organize and mobilize individuals deprived of social justice and marginalized from enjoying fundamental rights. Collectivism does not merely organize groups marginalized of equality, it also involves making strategies and converting them into peaceful protests, collective expression of rational grievances, and attempts to negotiate with the state.

Collective action serves as the foundation for mobilizing a movement, that seeks to reform current social norms, values, and policies that cause deprivation. In these terms, Charles Tilly (2004) posits that none of the movement organizations can assert their demand upon others without these aims, which play a central role in entire social movements. Therefore, the trajectory and process of social movements frequently involve interactions between disaffected individuals and the state, where both parties engage in contentions over demands and resistance to societal adjustments. When social movements are confined to collective interactions, as described by Tilly, they involved numerous communications, inherently characterized by contention. Otherwise, they may fail to bring about change in an unjust society (Diani 1992), which limits the ability of social movement organizations to achieve their goals through strategic mobilization practices.

Although interaction is vital, interactions lacking of specific and defined purposes may ultimately lack meaningful impact. To ascribe purpose as a primary motivating factor, movement mobilization must be, as Sidney Tarrow (1996) writes, seen as a collective contestation of established agencies, involving purposeful interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities. Any collective contestation often constitutes

Group solidarity and public politics that advocates for new values (Melucci 1996). However, strategies and practices of mobilization may vary relying on social issues highlighted by social movement organizations.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS AND MOBILIZATION

Social movements are distinct forms of organized political action, emerging with specific goals that often center on achieving a fairer distribution of wealth, status, and influence within society (Mathema 2017). The recognition of inequality is a leading characteristic providing a shared understanding of building expanded social networks, institutionalizing collective commitment, taking purposeful initiatives, and mobilizing peaceful protests (Jasper 2007). These are the utmost important elements for social movement organizations (SMOs) as they movement strategies and mobilize individuals.

For individuals seeking to make a meaningful impact, consistent political efforts are essential in confronting and reforming an unjust system. The effectiveness of these efforts depends on SMOs' ability to influence established social structures, which vary significantly across social contexts and time. The existing power dynamics within society determine what outcomes SMOs harness in these endeavors, as those benefiting from the current system vigorously defend it, while others advocate for change. In this conceptual framework, organization and mobilization emerge as critical prerequisites for any social movement.

The SMOs' existence often relies on specific historical periods and prevailing social contexts, driven by participants' motivation to bring changes (Magnusson 1994). However, the way SMOs utilize available financial or human resources in terms of propelling movement practices and implementing strategies. Resource mobilization can vary depending on the issues associated with the movements, including sociocultural resources as well as organizational and human, including material resources (Della Porta and Diani 2015; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977). In this sense, better SMOs mobilize resources, and more effective movement strategies

and practices influence the state's establishments.

Social movement organizations and mobilization processes play central roles in shaping the goals and plans of social movements, going beyond mere mobilization of individuals (Della Porta and Diani 2020; Kelly 1998; Politi et al. 2021). The synergy between resources, political opportunities, and strategies the SMOs build institutionalizes a process that motivates participants within the movement to effectively address inequalities. While collective mechanisms crucially depend on grievances of people deprived of particular rights and opportunities expressed, for effective movement mobilization, shared grievances not always be sufficient to achieve desired goals (Van Zomeren 2009; Walker and Smith 2002). The state's flexible attitude towards makes a remarkable meaning, which includes the elites' involvement and absence of the state repression (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN A GLOBAL-LOCAL CONTEXT

Social movements play a crucial role in bringing societal changes across a spectrum that spans global, regional, and local levels, with their strategies and goals shaped by diverse experiences and contextual factors. Although objectives may remain similar, issues and approaches to mobilization championed may vary in the countries. For example, Latin American social movements historically emerged in response to left-leaning governments and policy impacts on people's lives. Marxian ideology and its poststructuralist interpretation had leading influences on activism, which molded the SMOs' strategic evolution and the institutionalization of shared grievances (Munck 2020). The dominant number of activisms, in direct or indirect ways, had albeit motivation rejecting these colonial and neoliberal socioeconomic impositions, i.e., the 1950s to 1970s' massive and rapid resource accumulation. Most of the activism, like in Mexico, of that period was structurally constituted by Semi-rebellion mobilization championed by various organizations such as the Workers' Party of Brazil (Petras and Veltmeyer 2005). Despite violent activities, most of the mobilization concluded a negotiation with the state, (Bülow 2010).

The global north, particularly in America, movement activism

has high influences on neoliberal social and economic policies, which include issues of cultural, racial, gender, and human rights. Legal recognition and protection of these rights have always occupied central concerns in American social movements (Krausova 2020). These movements frequently emerged and evolved outside or in defiance of established political structures, emphasizing the institutionalization of their grievances while integrating traditional cultures and practices into new social paradigms.

In contrast to Latin American and North American experiences, Asian social movement activism has always emerged onset of authoritarian socio-political landscapes. Caste/ethnic tensions, gender discrimination, environmental deterioration, and human rights violations are the most championed issues by Asian Movement activism. "Authoritarian developmentalism," had a crucial role in the adjustment of the movement mobilization (Anugrah 2014; Parvanova and Pichler 2013). For Example, the 1960s' anti-war movements, protests against environmental degradation, and challenges to civil rights restrictions are the most remarkable movement mobilizations that often hold a central position in the South Asian social movement experiences, including Nepal.

Unlike the other countries in the world, Nepal's experiences on movement activism are much centered on rights issues, which pursue strategies of negotiation. Most movement mobilizations emerged at the local level and organized various protest campaigns at the national level to just get the state's attention. Policy reformations have been an ultimate movement orientation. Social movement mobilizations, as exemplified by the Tharu movement of 2008, have aimed to rectify unjust socio-economic practices such as landlessness, gender disparities, and identity-based discrimination (Kharel and Suji 2019; Onta 2006). These movements have persevered even during periods characterized by authoritarian governance, often utilizing the democratic political framework as a means to mobilize marginalized communities. Undergone multiple political transitions, with movements fueled by the aspiration to eliminate social inequities even in repression under autocratic regimes (Onta 2006). The movements of the 1990s ultimately led to the establishment of an institutionalized political system, serving

as a primary driver for organized movement activities.

Other Prominent instances of social movements within Nepal's multiparty democratic framework include the Kamiaya Liberation Movement of July 17, 2000 (Fujikura 2001). Human rights organizations and caste/ethnic associations were major organizations that institutionalized movement activism, prioritizing negotiation strategies with the state.

LAND RIGHTS-BASED MOVEMENTS

Movement activism limits none of the issues including varieties of collective concerns. Rights-based movements are common activism that has gained global popularity in movement mobilization. Land rights movements, one of them have a central mission, which is to establish an effective organization capable of mobilizing individuals who have been deprived of unequal access to land (Keating 2017). These movements, relying on shared identities of landlessness or inappropriate access to land, Keating (2017) argues, aim to ultimately challenge existing the state's land management practices and demand reform land management policies (Goodall 1990).

Land rights movements as divisive political entities always operate outside established political institutions. The state's response to demands, raised by marginalized groups, determines how the operations of activism go further into action. The capability of converting activism into action relies on the way land rights organizations unite groups deprived of various land rights issues (Mitchel 2022). Regardless of context and causes, these movements invariably constitute and are involved in the complex interplay of the state and its citizens. Respective international laws, in term of land rights activism, provide various land rights-related provisions declared by the United Nations and provides a logical foundation that consistently influences and shape land rights activism in the world.

Studies examining Latin American land rights movements establish connections between various challenges and their social, political, and economic contexts. Researchers delve into how financial opportunities, social arrangements, and policy outcomes intersect, shedding light on the impacts of policy deprivation on cultural

practices and living conditions (Oxfam 2015). These movements place great emphasis on scrutinizing land distribution and its relationship to political and economic frameworks. In contrast to this, South Asian land rights movements have emphasis much on identity-based activism in relation to unequal land ownership. Discriminatory land management systems are viewed as sources of land rights activism in the region (Agrawal 1994). South Asian studies, in this sense, highlight the intricate relationship between land rights, social status, and food production (Wijeyesekera 2017), which includes land rights mobilization practices of all developing South Asian nations, including Nepal.

In experiences of land rights movements, Nepal's land rights activism can be traced back to 1886 when ethnic communities in eastern Nepal were forcibly integrated into unitary politics. The shift from the traditional Kipat (i.e., land owned and managed by a community for agricultural purposes) system was converted into Raikar (i.e., land management system under direct state's ownership but cultivated by ordinary people against payment of agricultural levies) tenure system marked a pivotal moment in the contentious history of land rights movements (Jones 1976; Caplan 1970; Upreti 1975). Deprivation of access to land management was a dominant cause, which formed collective discontent with the state's new policy enforcement on land, introduced by new land settlement strategies following the political unification of various caste and ethnic groups and their independent and autonomous land ownership system in 1743. These changes were significant for the organized land rights movements, placing economic and cultural stress on people's lives, however, they were not recognized by the regime of the period (Caplan 1970; Pandey 1985). The Limbus of eastern Nepal initiated one of the earliest land-based social movements during the 1930s, although progress was slow. This movement gained momentum in 1948, just one year after India's independence, but it failed to secure lasting land rights for the people.

All land-based social movements in Nepal, whether aimed at abolishing the Kipat system or reforming land management in the mid-hills, share a common goal, reshaping the relationship between

people and land. The Tharus in western Nepal experienced first-hand the consequences of the state's land management policies in the 1960s, as their property was seized due to a lack of official ownership claims (Rose 1977; Uprety 1992). The organized land-based movement mobilization in Nepal was driven by legal loopholes and land reform legislation. While landlords benefited from these laws, certain groups were denied access to land and agricultural opportunities, sparking public outrage in the 1970s (Rose 1977; Shrestha 1987). Although these developments, in terms of movement activism failed to institutionalize their respective demands with the state, movements related to various land rights played a crucial role in shaping Nepal's entire course and history of land rights-based activism.

After the 1950s, an organized land rights movement emerged, with political parties like the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party actively participating. The land was redistributed from local landowners through farmer-led collective action. The "Land Examination Commission" of 1952 and the "Land Reform Commission" of 1953 served as sources of inspiration for farmers and political parties (Karki 2002; Shrestha et al. 1999). The "Tamsuk Fatta Andolan" (Destroying Bondage Papers) in Rautahat in 1952 marked a significant land-based social movement in Nepal's history. The same land rights movement resurfaced in 1970 as the Jhoda Andolan (Rawal 1990; Seddon 1987). Even after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the landless population continued to occupy public land and assert their rights, driven by increased hopes. The military response, involving the destruction of thousands of homes and farms in 1995, 1996, and 1999, was a stark and tragic outcome of this struggle.

Based on experiences of significant or unnoticed movement events, Nepal's land rights movements are not linked only to access to land. Land rights and related issues, in their distinct cultural and social contexts, are also closely intertwined with social status and political influence (Regmi 1977; Karki 2002). Changes in state land management policies since the 1780s have redefined the dynamics of land-people relations (Bishop 1990). The state and its various governments have used land to redefine or reform the people-state relationship. The political transformation of the 1990s, along with constitutional provisions for

socioeconomic and political equality, had one key factor- land that reshaped public expectations regarding land distribution and resource management by the state. These changes illuminated the intricate relationship between people and land, influenced by factors such as caste, ethnic group, and gender (Adhikari 2010). Various land-related issues are now an integral part of movement activities, including the historical Birta and Guthi tenure systems that persisted until the 1950s following Nepal's political unification.

LAND LAWS AND POLICIES

Whatever the forms and nature, policy exclusion or marginalization is an ultimate factor that nurtures movement activism. National and international law and policy interventions play crucial roles in bringing people's grievances against the state's policy as collective protests or various movement campaigns. Although social movements prevail non-violent, in some cases they may go through rebellion practices too. Social movements, in this sense, engage with various international legal frameworks, such as the Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personal Landmines in 1997, corporate social responsibility in 2000, and the International Labor Organization that recognized respective countries (ILO) in 1987 and 1957. These international legal structures are specifically crafted to address the impact of various global policies on local communities and societies. In principle, these policy commitments reflect a genuine stand that secures human rights, rights to social well-being, and recognition of cultural diversity (Rajagopal 2003). Essentially, these international laws serve as a foundation for individuals to legitimately voice their protests against policies that encroach upon the rights of specific groups.

Whether land policies the state reforms and imply to people or land-related activism, they are (direct or indirect) outcomes of international laws and policies (Rajagopal 2003). In this sense, it is obvious that there would be no prevalence movement activism, which raises demands for land reform or redefinition and remodeling of accessing land that is not connected with international laws. This shows land rights, land policies, and mass activism are intricately intertwined, focused ultimately on having a negotiation with the state. Mass protests often

compel national authorities to enact laws that align with international norms (Bishop 1990). Consequently, national laws and policies not only meet the minimum criteria set by international legislation but also facilitate the engagement of marginalized individuals in protests and advocacy for their rights (McCamant 1981). Thus, mass mobilization and international law are interconnected, enabling the incorporation of social considerations into both national and global legal frameworks. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the consequences and impacts of international laws can vary depending on the context, as they can influence perceptions and practices in diverse ways.

Within the framework of Nepal's Constitution (2015), particularly Article 16(1), citizens are guaranteed the fundamental right to lead a dignified life. Additionally, Article 25 ensures equal rights concerning property, which are crucial for meeting basic human survival needs. However, the article does not explicitly outline the state's responsibility to ensure equal property rights for all citizens. Constitutional directives, such as Article 51, envision land use policy encompassing aspects like management, commercialization, industrialization, diversification, and modernization of agriculture. These directives have led to the development of the "Land Use Policy, 2015," which emphasizes the zonal utilization of land (MoLRM 2015). Nevertheless, this policy may inadequately support landless individuals due to a lack of coordination between policy intent and implementation.

LAND RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN NEPAL

The state's denial or equivocal policy on individuals (i.e., most of the states in the world guarantee the right to land is confined to the individual that does recognize neither family nor the other form of human prevalence) of land rights is not limited only with immediate impacts and experiences. It has far-reaching societal implications which include a range of social changes such as a crisis in livelihoods, erosion of social status, and loss of personal agency. Adding to the list of long-term effects, there are other crucial issues such as sexual exploitation, deprivation, disenfranchisement, statelessness, and limited access to education and employment opportunities that would

be caused by the deprivation of land rights. In the mentioned societal landscapes, individuals or groups deprived of land rights may resort to various crimes just for survival (Mathema 2017). Mathema further argues that all of the economic challenges marginalized individuals or groups may emerge in deprived experiences within their negotiating power. This underscores the central role of land in defining the relationship between the state and its citizens, emphasizing the state's responsibility to its people. The significance of land as a primary source of power is closely linked to people's living conditions. While organized resistance may be viewed as a last resort, movements like the Nepal Land Rights Forum (NLRF) become crucial for instigating change in the face of systemic land rights deprivation and its associated societal consequences.

However, the NLRF is [has been] the prominent land rights-based movement organization, there other two significant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as ActioAid, Nepal, and Community Self Reliance Center (CSRC) have excelled in various organizational activities that reflect close characteristics of land rights activism in Nepal. For example, ActionAid, Nepal has played a significant role in the abolition of various marginalized practices that exclude individuals or groups from accessing land, despite their years-long engagement in agricultural activities in the land. The significant change it brought through land rights activism was the abolition of Kamaiya (bonded labor) in the Tarai districts of Mid- and Far-Western Nepal (Gurung 2003). Agrarian policy reforms and land use policy reforms are two major outcomes the ActionAid, Nepal's land rights-based activism introduced in Nepal (Poudel et al., 2004). Although there are [were] other partnering non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CSRC is one that has been working on land issues and facilitating groups and individuals deprived of land rights. Its organizational effort to secure landless people's rights to land is an exemplary activism it has been carrying forward for more than 30 years. Empowering landless people to achieve rights over land is its major contribution to land rights-based mobilization in Nepal (Uprety 2004). However, CSRC has adopted various approaches of mobilizing people in land rights activism, lobbying, and advocacy for landless people's justiciable access to land

is a crucial issue that heralds its land rights-based various protests and other campaigns (Deuja and Khatiwada 2011).

The land rights movement in Nepal can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century but gained momentum after King Prithvi Narayan Shah's political consolidation in 1769. A significant catalyst for this movement was the shift from the Kipat tenure system to the Raikar land tenure system (Caplan 1970; Jones 1976; Pandey 1985; Upreti 1975). This transition had a profound impact on indigenous communities such as the Limbus, Tharus, and Chepangs, who were dispossessed of their land rights (Gurung 1989). Despite persistent protests, the Nepalese government abolished all tribal land management systems in 1968, significantly affecting land ownership and the socio-political status of marginalized groups (Rose 1977; Uprety 1992). Privileged groups exploited loopholes in the altered land administration system (Cox 1990; Rose 1977; Shrestha 1987).

The complex political landscape surrounding land issues in Nepal led to the formation of various land reform commissions, including the Land Reform Commission (1953) and the High-Level Land Reform Commission (1994), alongside frequent amendments to land acts. In response to these shifts, various forms of land rights movements emerged, including the "Tamsuk Fatta Andolan" (Destroying Bondage Papers) in 1952 (Karki 2002; Shrestha 1977), peasant movements in 1954 (Singh 1992), tenants' protests in 1961, Jhoda Andolan in 1970, and peasant protests in the latter half of the 1990s (Rawal 1990; Seddon 1984). These movements are deeply intertwined with issues of social status and political power, firmly rooted in the historical context of land-people relations and the state's interventions in these relations.

RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movement research has been a fascinating topic to most of the social sciences scholars, including political scientists and sociologists. Most social scientists' emphasis typically on studying the causes and consequences of movement activism, covering a wide range of issues (Bosi and Uba 2009). In the case of sociological research, the majority of the studies uncover the factors that contribute to the

emergence and development of movement mobilization that includes particularly study strategies and practices of activism ending racial disparities, gender inequality, caste, and ethnic marginalization, as well as ecological and environmental issues (Thakur 2011). These are the common experiences of social movement studies in the world; however, the issues and contexts of the studies may vary in the countries and disciplines.

In the domain of social movement studies in the global north, there is a distinct emphasis on elucidating systematic processes, often in the context of political transformations. Analyzing causes and outcomes serves as the predominant analytical framework in Latin American studies, while American movement studies place significant focus on issues of racial injustice and their intersections (Bosi and Ubi 2009). Nonetheless, both Latin American and American social movement studies highly prioritize the examination of movement formation and mobilization processes. In Latin American studies, resources, particularly land and others, hold substantial significance, which may not be as pivotal in North American movement studies.

The scope of social movement studies covers a myriad of topics, ranging from land rights and gender equality to climate change, all intricately linked to the state's policies on various issues. These studies often delve into the social and cultural contexts, frequently exploring the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups (Thakur 2011). In the context of Indian movement studies, topics such as ethnoreligious mobilization, tribal movements, and peasant uprisings receive extensive scrutiny (Singh 2001). These issues are typically categorized under the umbrella of caste/ethnic identities and other social dimensions, aligning with the experiences and emphasis of Nepalese social movement studies.

Within Nepal, social movement studies predominantly fall into two distinct categories. The majority of these studies focus on issues related to caste and ethnic dynamics and their intricate interplay with state institutions. The remaining studies place a strong emphasis on the multifaceted intersections of human experiences, such as those related to gender and disabilities (Chamlagai 2020). Both orientations heavily incorporate historical references, socio-political systems, the attitudes

of regimes towards socio-economic structures, and the evolution of policies, including their impacts on the lives of ordinary individuals (Stiller 1973). The backdrop of democratic political transformations serves as a common reference point for comparative social movement studies, shedding light on collective grievances among diverse caste/ethnic and gender groups (Shah 1990; Whelpton et al. 2008).

Beyond the political regimes in Nepal, Nepalese social movement studies have been significantly influenced by various political upheavals, including the Maoist insurgency from 1995 to 2006, and the political Movement in 2006. These studies extensively explore issues of poverty, inequality, and marginalization, with a primary focus on the identity-related challenges faced by marginalized caste/ethnic groups and other intersections of human diversity (Müller-Böker 1999). The conclusions drawn from these studies often stem from historical considerations of socio-cultural marginalization and its far-reaching economic implications.

ARGUMENTS AND APPROACHES

The dominant number of studies highlight Nepal's land rights movements and issues they have been carrying forward, however, most of the social scholars from diverse backgrounds analyze or examine activism have often been remarkably fragmented. While some researchers, such as Karki (2002), Lawati and Pahari (2010), and Panday et al. (2021), have delved into the historical foundations of these movements within the context of political shifts and policy reformations, there has been a noticeable dearth of attention given to the mobilization strategies and methods employed by these movements. Much of the works of literature offer merely analytical descriptions of land rights movements, their historical backgrounds, and institutional consequences they yielded, which overlooks the organizational mechanisms (i.e., strategies and practices) developed and adapted by land rights movements.

To address this significant gap in the literature, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, conducting open-ended interviews with 27 key stakeholders affiliated with the National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) in Nepal as the primary data source. The information

collected from these interviews is then systematically organized into thematic frameworks, guided by McAdam's (1982, 1996) political opportunity structure framework. This research utilizes various sources of knowledge that include primarily journal articles, books, reports, and bulletins to enhance further in-depth discussions.

This research, in terms of data collection and finings-discussion, is framed within the key theoretical insights of the political opportunity structures perspective, developed by McAdam (1996). Findings and discussions are sustained under theoretical components such as the openness and closure of the institutionalized political system, the alignment of elites within the polity, the engagement of elites within movements, and the strength and likelihood of state repression (McAdam 1982). According to McAdam, social movements are essentially political processes aimed at rectifying social injustices, with the organizational and mobilizational aspects playing a pivotal role in their success. Effective navigation and utilization of political opportunities are crucial factors for movement organizations to mobilize and expand their movements. Consequently, this paper delves into an exploration of how the various components that constitute political opportunity structures influence the mobilization of land rights movements in Nepal, shedding light on how movement organizations navigate these structures to achieve their overarching objectives.

Reliance on Prominent Political Occurences

The nature and functioning of the established political system significantly shape the mobilization strategies of social movements (McAdam 1982). However, collective grievances are the primary requirements, and the state of openness or closure of the institutionalized political system remains crucial to whether movement mobilization emerges. Series or particular historical political events often serve as catalysts for effective movement activism.

The National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) provides evidence of its adaptability to both restrictive and liberal political environments of the country. NLRF actively participated in the land rights movement within an open democratic system, employing a range of documented

strategies. Concurrently, NLRF navigated a state environment marked by restrictions due to the Maoist insurgency. Despite the state's suppression of Maoist movements, NLRF adjusted its organizational scope from the local to the national level. Interviewee 17, a 42-year-old female from Rasuwa District, emphasized that people were more inclined to join movements when they perceived the state as tolerant, fostering unity.

Leaders and members of NLRF recognized democracy as a conducive political environment for advocating land rights. They engaged in numerous land rights movement activities in conjunction with popular political movements, mainly of 2005/2006 in Nepal. Interviewee 23 from Sindhupalchowk highlighted the persistence of land rights issues and the state's evolving stance, emphasizing the need for activists to adapt to new political developments. NLRF, as stated by one of its leaders interviewed on July 17, 2022, in Kathmandu, terms this strategy as "tracking the situation." Rather than constant mobilization, they disseminated information through district land rights forums and local-level discussions, explaining the significance of these developments to their movement. The interviewed leaders share their opinion:

> "Maoist movements went beyond participating in political events, successfully liberating bonded laborers but failing to secure land rights for Kamaiyas, tenants, and squatters. This forced landless individuals to join the movement when peaceful activism wasn't an option for them. We must acknowledge the political changes political parties and civil society brought in 2062/2063 (v.s.). If there was not this political transformation, we would have no hopes of bringing land rights activism in current ways and level."

NLRF leaders adeptly navigated Nepal's intricate political terrain, managing the threat of the Maoist insurgency to landlords alongside state repression. Their initial focus was on addressing the concerns of the landless, particularly tenants, during the insurgency. In the midst of the insurgency and state crackdown, NLRF successfully organized its land rights activities, presenting them as peaceful human rights advocacy. Even with landlords avoiding villages due to the insurgency,

tenants still lacked land rights despite the abolition of the tenure system. NLRF meticulously documented their actions to avoid security interference and mobilized tenants at the grassroots level.

Thriving Grassroot Movements Independent of Elite Alighments

The formation of elites' alignments plays a significant role in making movement mobilization effective and successful as elites hold the ability and socio-political influences to undermine policies that marginalize or deprive certain groups or communities (McAdam 1996). The socioeconomic networks and their direct or indirect link with political parties, governments, and even policymakers provide critical support for enhancing organizational movement strategies and increasing their influence in the state's policy stands. McAdam (1982) argues that it would almost be impossible to actualize movements and address grievances effectively without the elite's engagement in any collective activism.

NLRF's journey in advancing the land rights movement unfolded without aligning with elites. Most of its mobilization efforts were initially organized at the grassroots level before expanding to the national level, with various protests held in the capital city, Kathmandu. Local political and community leaders spearheaded the land rights movement, choosing not to seek alliances with established elites. Nonetheless, participants in the movement often received training from professionals, including lawyers. Rather than prioritizing partnerships with socially and economically influential groups, local leaders within the land rights movement focused on inviting political leaders from the capital to conduct orientation programs at the local level. Their intention was to garner moral support from influential figures while avoiding potential manipulation that could divert the course of their mobilization.

A participant in the land rights movement emphasized the significance of solidarity and cooperation within the movement. They recounted various activities such as sit-ins in front of political party headquarters and mobilization efforts at key political leaders' residences. The participant believed that seeking moral support from influential individuals, rather than forming alliances with

them, represented the most effective approach to prevent potential manipulation while preserving the movement's strategies and practices.

Elites were not actively pursued as preferred allies, even though their importance lay in exerting pressure to initiate negotiations. Local state institutions served as the primary channel for demanding land, with campaigns occasionally employed to generate collective pressure. As shared by a field coordinator from NLRF (who interviewed her on July 28, 2022, in Kathmandu), a cycling campaign spanning seven days was organized in western Nepal to identify public land for landless settlement. However, no support was received from established or privileged groups. In the course of land rights movement mobilizations, community leaders, including people elected ward chairman were most pivotal in driving the movement forward, with NLRF favoring the assistance of political leaders over established groups.

NLRF placed its trust in elected ward representatives within local government, many of whom were tenants themselves and had limited access to policy influencers. The organization was initially founded to combat unimplemented land policies, with early strategies focused on organizing local landless individuals with the assistance of external experts.

Weighed Down by Political Ideology

Any social movement, whether it experiences success or failure often relies on the committed involvement of activists as well as the constant participation of deprived individuals, including influential elites (McAdam 1996). Although elites might not necessarily be political ideologues who are affiliated with particular political parties. It is not a prerequisite that social movement can only be thrived with class ideologies. Shared problems and collectivisms are the primary requirements of effective activism where the elites employ negotiation and structural pressure to drive social policy reforms, enabling movement activists and participants to adapt their strategies (Broadbent 1985).

In contrast to the model favored by development agencies and NGOs, the National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) primarily sought

support from left-leaning political parties due to their close ties to movement leaders and communist party figures. Most movement participants were recruited based on their alignment with class ideology rather than direct connections to their daily life issues. While visible support from political leaders was limited, communist party leaders played a pivotal role in initiating and nurturing the land rights movement. They elevated land-related issues on the political agenda and pressured the state to establish a land reform commission during their government tenure. This sentiment was echoed by a 51-year-old woman from Rasuwa districts (an interview conducted on June 17, 2022) conveyed her experience:

> "The Congress party also did not take concrete action on landlessness. They ideologically favor landlords, not peasants. If we do not have the support of communist parties, however, we do not discriminate against other participants from different political ideologies, there would be no one helping us to politicize our problems. In contrast, UML leaders played a crucial role in forming land reform commissions and were consistently active in addressing land rights issues, resulting in gains for tenants."

Based on the experiences of the research participants, whether they denied the stronghold of class ideology in mobilizations, the elites or participants and leaders from other political ideologies were considered as barriers to their movement activism. In this context, particular political parties were viewed as more supportive of land rights, while other actors and privileged groups offered limited assistance. Left-leaning political leaders were interpreted as the most reliable allies for NLRF. Respondent 5 emphasized that sustained and intensified movements could compel the state to introduce policy reforms which is almost impossible without political support that is only prone from left-leaned political parties as they raise the voices of peasants. It was clear that not all political parties were regarded as movement supporters where left-leaning political leaders a primary concern of NLRF. The organization maintained a clear stance on the class identity of its movement participants. One respondent expressed this view, stating:

"Our movement stayed confined to the local level. We established the 'Mohi Tatha Bhumihin Sarkar Samaj' in the presence of political leaders who were also involved in international development organizations. Certain peasant leaders, affiliated with international development organizations and UML's sister-wing peasant association, visited our village and provided training on mobilizing the movement, coordinating with peasants from other districts" (Interview 12, May 27, 2022, Dalit Male, 37 years old).

Leaders and participants in the land rights movements held a degree of skepticism toward individuals of privilege with national influence, harboring concerns that they could potentially manipulate the activities of the movement. Instead, the NLRF actively sought support from left-leaning intellectuals to help raise awareness among local communities and articulate their grievances to influential stakeholders.

The Presence and Absence of State Repression

The state's political nature (repressive or supportive) plays a crucial role in whether social movements remain effective and successful. Without dealing with the state's institutionalized political stance, it would almost be difficult for any social movement organization to herald activism in an expected way. Successful social movement organizations tend to devise and implement effective strategies when the nation's political environment remains tolerant and refrains from suppressing activism (McAdam 1996). Even though, social movement organizations also excel in mobilization within the repressive political contexts.

In numerous cases, participants in local land rights movements organized and mobilized to reclaim public land they had inhabited for an extended period, even as the state deployed armed forces to forcibly evict them. This ongoing struggle by squatters to regain their land, which had been appropriated by the state for national parks, breached the informal agreement between the state and slum-dwellers, compelling them to organize and engage in highly charged protest actions. In this sense, Challenges faced by land rights movements

are context-specific and contingent on their location. For instance, a 61-year-old male, a local movement leader in Rasuwa provided a firsthand account (retrieved from an interview conducted on June 29, 2022) illustrating this.

> "I was not personally upset with the landlords, just wanted to claim rights assured legally. The police attempted to arrest me on charges of assaulting local landlords. Despite the risks, my colleagues and I voluntarily went to the Chief District Officer's office. However, upon arrival, most of our friends were too frightened to sit down".

The state's control over political insurgency had a significant impact on land rights movement strategies, prompting the NLRF to adapt during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The Maoists posed challenges to the land rights movement, particularly at the local level, while tenant-led efforts against landlords required different approaches. Amid the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, NLRF struggled to mobilize openly, but it forced landlords not to collect levies, which was a turning of entire land rights activism. As explained by a 48-year-old male Informant from Sindhuapalchowk (Interview conducted on May 11, 2022), the Maoist movement facilitated, however, it was the unintended situation, facilitated them in two ways. First, the ongoing Maoist insurgency threatened the local landlords to continue levies collection that reduced the physical presence of land tenants cultivating. Second, Maoists' political consciousness activities helped people become aware of their life situation, facilitating the landless to be united at the local level. As a result, the Nepal Land Rights Forum (NLRF) shifted its organizational strategy from local to national, concentrating efforts primarily in the capital city. This shift allowed NLRF to engage with international development agencies and draft organizational legislation aligned with the government's social organization policy. Accepting financial support from funding agencies that came with government collaboration, according to a 45-year-old female (interview, May 21, 2022), risked making social movements passive and diverting their focus from core issues and problems. She states:

"We persisted in employing strategies of activism during the drafting and until the promulgation of the constitution in 2015, despite the ever-changing political and legal landscape within the state. It presented the opportune moment to integrate our concerns into the state's agenda and expand people's expectations. This was the most motivating factor driving our movement's practice."

The emergence of the NLRF did not directly challenge state repression but rather responded to the declining repressive capacity of the state, influenced by various factors such as political changes, the Maoist insurgency, and the introduction of a new constitution. While the NLRF's protests did not consistently result in concrete policy reforms, they effectively utilized the reduced state repression as a platform for advocating change. These political shifts should be regarded not only as instances of repression but also as opportunities for promoting democratic reforms.

DISCUSSION

The National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) is an example of a social movement organization that carefully adapts to the prevalent political environments, particularly the open institutionalized political system (McAdam 1982), in terms of movement activism. However, any social movement organization like NLRF claims to design movement strategies autonomously. NLRF provides evidence that none of the movement mobilization and development of required activism strategies remain apart from the country's political landscapes. However, it is remarkable that the primary concern of movement organizations places negotiation with the state at first.

Shreds of evidence illustrate that whether it is land rights or other movements, none of their organizational strategies remains idle. Each of their strategies and practices of mobilization was strongly influenced by various political factors. Besides the adaptation of a nation's current political setting, movement organizations also remain close to certain political ideologies, mainly to organize people deprived of certain rights issues. It is unlike making an alliance with the established social groups (McAdam 1982). Since movement

organization, guided by particular political ideology inherently stays often aware of the disadvantages of building alliances of elite and people deprived of any form of social justice. Potential misguide mobilization often occurs as a primary barrier. Despite their negligible interest in working together with privileged social groups, movement organization frequently finds institutionalized political system favorable to organizing and mobilizing people in activism (McAdam 1982). Thus, the state's flexible approach to repressing social protests and the openness of the institutionalized political system had a significant impact on the development and deployment of primarily urban-focused land rights-based movement mobilizations.

Analyzing NLRF's movement strategies illustrates an understanding of Doug McAdam's (1982) theory of political opportunity structures, emphasizing the importance of an entrenched political system favorable to movement activism. NLRF's experiences in movement mobilization emphasize the significance of an open institutionalized political system for the emergence, organization, and mobilization of social movements. NLRF predominantly adapted its strategies to the country's open political system while remaining cognizant of periods of political closure. Evidential instances highlight key catalysts such as the Maoist insurgency, people's movements, various elections, and constitution-writing periods for NLRF's mobilization activities.

This evidence underscores that movement mobilization often originates from grassroots grievances but may not necessarily seek alliances with elites at higher levels. While NLRF was open to collaboration with professionals like lawyers, its primary focus remained on local leaders and community members. NLRF's approach to movement mobilization contrasts with McAdam's (1982) theoretical insights on political opportunity structures. Unlike McAdam's argument, NLRF's movement mobilization strategies demonstrate a preference for grassroots engagement and building alliances with established social groups. They sought moral support from influential individuals instead of forming formal alliances, believing this approach would preserve the integrity of their movement. NLRF's movement, guided by a class-based ideology, primarily addressed land-related

issues faced by rural peasants.

NLRF's adaptation to state repression emerges as a key theme in the text. They navigated a complex political landscape marked by both state repression and insurgency. NLRF adjusted its strategies during the Maoist insurgency and seized opportunities to mobilize openly during favorable political developments, highlighting the paramount role of the political environment in shaping movement practices. The NLRF also resisted collaboration with the government or NGOs to maintain independence and focus on policy reform.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the dynamics of social mobilization are intrinsically linked to the political landscape of a country, which dictates the strategies employed by movement organizations. While the political environment exerts a significant influence on the strategies of mobilization, it is crucial to note that movement organizations aren't always inclined to forge connections with the societal elite. They often find it more advantageous to rally individuals who share a common political ideology, rather than relying on alignment with established social groups. The experiences of the National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) offer valuable insights into the complexities of social movement mobilization, particularly when examined within the framework of Doug McAdam's (1982) theory of political opportunity structures.

The NLRF consistently showcases its ability to navigate the prevailing political landscape of the country while orchestrating and mobilizing social movements to advance its cause. NLRF's adaptability within the institutionalized political system underscores its awareness of political opportunity structures, a fundamental concept in McAdam's theory. McAdam's theory underscores how the openness or closure of political systems significantly shapes the trajectory of social movements. In NLRF's case, the organization exhibits a profound understanding of the political openings and closures within Nepal's political context. It proactively seizes opportunities during periods of democratic openness, such as the people's movement of 2005/2006 and national elections, to mobilize landless individuals

and advocate for land rights. This strategic alignment with political events highlights NLRF's capacity to function within the political opportunity structures presented by Nepal's ever-evolving political landscape.

Moreover, NLRF's ability to achieve its goals without a strong alignment with established elites challenges the traditional notion that elite engagement is a prerequisite for the success of social movements within McAdam's framework. While McAdam's theory emphasizes the influential role of elites in shaping political environments and affecting policy outcomes, NLRF's grassroots-driven approach prioritizes solidarity within the movement over forming alliances with elites. This approach underscores NLRF's dedication to upholding the integrity of its cause and its strategic decision to focus on mobilizing local leaders and gaining support from left-leaning political parties.

Nonetheless, NLRF's reliance on a class-based ideology and alignment with specific political parties also resonates with McAdam's theory. McAdam posits that social movements often emerge within specific ideological and political contexts. In NLRF's case, its alignment with left-leaning political parties and its emphasis on class-based struggle reflects the organization's understanding of the political opportunity structures within Nepal's political landscape. This alignment was deemed essential for exerting pressure on the government to address land rights issues and harmonize with the broader socio-political dynamics of the country.

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