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# Youth Political Engagement and Democratic Culture in Republican Nepal

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Nepal's transformation from an autocratic monarchy to a democratic republic presupposes the development of democratic institutions, and the current generation of Nepali youth, particularly those in higher education, are uniquely situated in that process. As such, Nepali youth constitute a distinct generation. In the past, efforts to mobilize Nepalese youth have been aimed at integrating them as useful assets in the service of Nepalese political institutions, such as political student unions, but in this paper, based on fieldwork and interview data collected in 2013 and 2016, we argue that politically active youth today should be understood as an autonomous though heterogeneous constituent force that is in counterpoint with normative political institutions.

**Keywords:** Nepal, democratic politics, youth political engagement.

## Introduction

University campuses and the political student unions that flourish on them have long been arenas of political antagonism that both reflect and refract Nepal's political struggles. As an example, in May 2013 the high level political mechanism that comprised Nepal's four largest political parties proposed appointing Lokman Singh Karki to a six-year term as head of the Commission for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority (CIAA), an independent constitutional body charged with investigating private and public sector corruption. Karki had been a controversial figure since his entry into civil service where he occupied several key positions, eventually becoming a chief secretary in the last government of King Gyanendra. According to many students, Karki played a key role in the attempt to violently suppress the second people's movement and was himself an exemplar abuser of authority. Karki's candidacy was initially challenged by some of the government partners, but all four parties eventually approved him to head the CIAA. The student unions representing these political parties on campus did not, and called for a *bandh* (political strike) to protest the appointment. The planned strike showed remarkable cooperation between student groups that had been known to be sometimes violently antagonistic to each other. Students joined in protesting their opposition both to a controversial figure from the past and to the resolve of their superiors to pursue the politics of corruption and patronage as usual. The afternoon before the *bandh* was to go into effect, however, word came

down from the parties that Karki's appointment had been decided, and the university directed the student unions to call off the strike. Though the student unions were silenced, the incident showed that political antagonisms in Nepal persist not only between political parties with their ideologies, but also between youth and previous generations of their political elders.

Nepal's painful transformation from an authoritarian monarchy to a fledgling democracy has been marked by political antagonism, both within the state legislature and, frequently, outside of it. We take this antagonism as an essential feature of Nepali politics, drawing on Chantal Mouffe's insight (2000; 2005) that the struggle between competing hegemonies is a fundamental aspect of the political. Youth political engagement in Nepal is similarly antagonistic. They perform the political as cadres in student unions, in ethnic organizations, and as non-partisan actors in civil society. But, though they pursue diverse political goals, they constitute a distinct social field as a generation due to their historical location. Most Nepali youth today were born after the *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement) of 1990 ended the absolute authority of the monarchy and established a parliamentary democracy. They were children during the years of the Maoist 'People's War' that culminated in a *Loktantra Andolan* (Democratic Movement) in 2006 that established Nepal as a republic. Now, as young adults, they are being called on to engage with democratic institutions that are relatively new, unstable, and are rooted in the politics of the past. As we argue below, it is crucial that the institutions through which the political views of youth compete become normative, and protected by the state. This makes understanding youth political engagement in those institutions all the more important.

This paper is a collaboration between a cultural anthropologist with extensive experience with Nepali youth laborers, and two Nepali youths who are each engaged with forms of social activism. We conducted focus group research during fieldwork at Tribhuvan University (TU) in April and May 2013 with members from four student unions that represented branches of the major political parties that constituted the political mechanism governing the country (Communist Party of Nepal, Unified Marxist-Leninist; Nepali Congress; Communist Party of Nepal, Maoist; and the Madhesi People's Forum). Tribhuvan University is Nepal's oldest national higher education institution and is attended by students from across Nepal. Although the city of Kirtipur, where it is located, is part of the intensely urbanized Kathmandu Valley, TU students are not an urban elite, as they represent a select

few who continue their studies there based on their own merit. Such a student body is fertile recruiting ground for competing political parties not only because they are considered Nepal's best and brightest, but also because many will return to their regions with political as well as professional formation. We intentionally recruited students who were not leaders in these unions, and organized several mixed focus groups with students from different union groups. Interviews were also conducted off campus with members of the Association of Youth Organizations, Nepal (AYON), as well as from indigenous organizations in order to get alternative perspectives on campus politics. More recently, interviews were conducted with eighteen student union leaders and young civil society activists with Skype software in the summer of 2016. The spring of 2013 was a significant time for student political activists. With national elections to a new Constituent Assembly (CA) only a few months off and more immediate elections to the university student council imminent, the activity of unions competing for young supporters was at a fever pitch. By 2016, when the second set of interviews was collected, the CA elections had been held, producing a dramatic result. In addition, Nepal suffered a disastrous earthquake in the spring of 2015, and a newly elected CA promulgated a revised constitution later that year. The purpose of the research was, broadly, to understand the dynamics of youth political engagement in constitutional and issues of governance in Nepal as an emerging democracy. Youth political engagement is conceptualized here as a discrete phenomenon, distinguished from, but in counterpoint to, dominant, formal political processes in Nepal.

During our research, we interviewed young people about their participation in Nepal's politics, their understanding of current political processes, and their hopes for Nepal's future (O'Neill 2016). Some students were directly mobilized by the political parties, others were searching for alternatives to the dominant political culture, while others sought to ignore the political realm altogether, which is difficult as Nepal's divisive political culture permeates many educational institutions and professional organizations. One of the questions we asked them was to recall the first time in their lives that they were aware of *rajniti* (politics), a concept which we allowed students to interpret freely. Many students, both male and female, recalled being motivated by traumatic experiences during the political violence of Nepal's recent past, or the social injustice they encountered as caste or ethnic minorities, or charismatic political leaders who promised democracy and development. At the same time, it was clear that many regarded contemporary politics as 'dirty,' characterized

by patrimonialism, corruption, self-interest, and incompetence. Young people in Nepal today are torn between their idealism and the shortcomings of democratic institutions that have only recently claimed constitutional legitimacy.

Nepali youth constitute a distinct generation because of their shared experience of Nepal's recent turbulence. Karl Mannheim, in his formative essay: "The Problem of Generations" (1964 [1952]), understood generations as concrete groups that share an empirical reality as a demographic cohort. These then share "interpretive formative principles" that produce social and cultural innovation, including those in the political sphere (1964 [1952]: 306). Recently, Mannheim has been used as a starting point for understanding how young people's "fresh contact" (ibid: 293) with their cultural heritage may produce significant shifts in the dispositions of youth that may then shape their overall social and political development (Cole 2007; Ben-Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder 2009; O'Donnell 2010; O'Neill 2015; Kublitz 2016; Snellinger 2018a). Edmunds and Turner (2005) suggest that distinctions can be drawn between passive cohorts and active generations that are conscious of their critical role as youth. They argue that in the 1960s the mediated experience of television, which broadcast anti-colonial and civil rights struggles as well as the Vietnam war to millions of youth, made a 'global generation' possible. More recently Nigam (2012) argues that viral revolutions of youth, as exemplified by the Arab Spring movements which spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Syria and beyond in part because of their mediation through social media, were spread throughout the world because of youth rejection of the formal political institutions that oppressed them (see also Jeffrey 2013).

While youth have played an important role in the political transformation of parts of Africa and the Middle East, scholars have noted their relative absence in the established democracies of the global north, where youth political participation in normative institutions, at least, seems to be on the wane (Youniss 2009; Sloam 2012). Institutions like political parties then tend to ignore youth concerns, which only deepens their disaffection (Mycock and Tonge 2012). On the other hand, youth disengagement with normative politics may be due to their engagement with social movements that more accurately embrace their aspirations, which follows Ulrich Beck's argument that youth disengagement "actually produces the orientations and prerequisites which, if anything can, will put this society in a position to master the future" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 161; see also Banaji 2008; Farthing 2010). Other scholars suggest that political youth activism in social and/or protest movements may be an alternative to normative politics (Rheingans and Holland 2013).

In our view, politics necessarily involves the normative institutions—political parties, constituent assemblies, parliaments, and constitutional governance—through which social antagonisms are mediated. Ignoring these normative institutions and how youth are mobilized and engaged through them risks undervaluing the unique contribution that youth are making to Nepal's political development. Nepali youth played a major role in the series of movements that forced changes to these institutions. Currently, many Nepali youth claim a 'post-political' orientation that seems to turn away from formal government (Snellinger 2016; Hindman 2014), but they remain far more politically engaged than youth in the global north. The overall participation rates of 69% in the most recent national election (compared to much lower rates in most of the Global North) show that, despite demonstrations of frustration and protestations of a-politicism, many of them vote. As we argue, this political engagement does not mean that they accept the status quo; it means that they see these institutions as a pragmatic necessity in mediating political antagonisms in post-conflict Nepal.

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first, we focus on youth political engagement as it has unfolded in Nepal's transformation to democracy, and argue that their political engagement with normative democratic institutions is crucial to Nepal's political sustainability. The second section explores how that engagement has been objectified in national youth policy as a transformative force. The next section describes the patrimonial political culture that characterizes normative institutions, and the final section discusses youth engagement in identity politics as they played out in constitutional debates. Overall, we argue that the critical distance youth maintain from traditional political culture is potentially transformative.

### Youth and Democratic Politics

Youth have played an important role in democratic movements throughout Nepal's history. During the *jayatu sanskritam* (Sanskrit school) movement in 1947, a student demonstration against the autocratic Rana regime contributed to its overthrow three years later (Dahal 2001). A student uprising against the absolute rule of then King Birendra forced further reforms in 1980, and youth participation was key in the people's movements of 1990 and 2006 that led to the establishment of Nepal as a democratic republic (Einsedel, Malone, and Pradhan 2012). Democratic institutions are imperfect, evolving and subject to manipulation by powerful elites, but they provide a framework for progressive change. The critical distance that Nepali youth bring to bear on democratic institutions has the potential to transform them from within, and

even the avowed a-politicism of many youth is a silent interlocution into normative political debate. But, each time the regimes that emerged following these protest movements tended to reproduce the political structures of the past. In contemporary Nepal, political elites continue to be drawn from what some scholars call a “caste hill Hindu elite” of *brahmin* and *chhetri* castes that provided soldiers and administrators for the previous autocratic regimes (Lawoti and Hangen 2012: 9). This continues to fuel the resentment from Nepal’s untouchable castes and ethnic communities that have been exploited by Maoist insurgents, who have mobilized them against the government, and which recently led to sporadic violence among the linguistically distinct *madhesi* peoples in the south of the country. Nepal’s indigenous peoples, the *adivasi janajati*, have also been excluded from political decision making, and have been culturally discriminated against by its elites (Hachhethu 2003).

When the Republic of Nepal was finally established in 2007, the hegemony of the past was swept aside, and various counter-hegemonic visions of how to renew Nepal came into contention. Youth have been mobilized by all of these contentious groups through student unions that represent the political parties, including those championing *madhesi* and *adivasi janajati* minorities, as well professional organizations, paramilitary groups, and other partisan agencies. These groups are mobilized to pursue their broader political goals, rather than the interest of youth themselves. Their primary aim is to cultivate youth as political cadres and future leaders. Political youth activists are also relied on to participate in demonstrations, and may also serve as muscle power to enforce coercive tactics such as strikes, forced ‘donations,’ and the intimidation of political opponents. Many political parties, even those representing minority interests, are riven by patrimonial figures who demand an almost blind loyalty from their followers, ensuring that political antagonism that exists between groups are also a factor within them (Hangen 2010; Pandey 2012). There is a growing conviction among Nepali youth that the political culture of the past needs to change.

Democracy is crucial for reforming these structures of domination, and has been demanded, repeatedly, by the people of Nepal. Democratic institutions are symbolic spaces where agreements on how to resolve political antagonism can be brokered. Chantal Mouffe argues that antagonism as an essential feature of politics, as the struggle between competing hegemonies is a fundamental aspect of that which she describes as the political (2000, 2005). Youth in Nepal become political through youth organizations mobilized by political parties which are keen to spread their power and influence over the electorate in

anticipation of general elections. At the same time, many youth appear to be suspicious of these normative institutions, and are looking for alternatives. They share this skepticism with many contemporary scholars, who argue that parliamentary democracies fail to empower citizens because dominant elites monopolize these institutions in their own interests. Nira Yuval-Davis, for example, argues that “there is no real power-sharing in parliamentary democracies in which people give up their sense of political power, the ability to affect political decisions, to a detached grouping of supposed representatives” (2011: 51). This view is representative of a broader trend that argues that political activists should withdraw from the institutions of modernity in order to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive global transformation. Mouffe (2013), however, insists on the importance of democratic institutions. She is particularly critical of theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2000) and Virno (2004), who advocate abandoning modern political institutions, because the chaos that ensues too often leaves the field open for non-progressive forces to reassert themselves.

Democratic institutions are, in theory, legitimate forums for voicing antagonism in a struggle for political hegemony, yet in Nepal these institutions lack this legitimacy because until recently they failed to contest alternative models for political organization in the post-conflict period. Amanda Snellinger (2018a) argues that democratic institutions in Nepal have always been tentative, unfinished, and resistant to sharing power with those marginalized by powerful elites. In opposition to the constitutional consensus that the leaders of political parties have attempted to broker, she argues that youth activists are engaged in a generative dissensus that will eventually lead back to political movements and away from formal institutions. But, after suffering a ten-year civil war in which 17,000 people lost their lives, and with simmering ethnic tension between Nepal’s marginalized *madhesi* and *adivasi janajati* communities and its dominant elites threatening even more violence, a constitutional consensus that provides a framework for legitimating political adversity seems worth working towards. Nepali youth have been assigned a role to play in this nation making, but many are choosing to play this role in opposition to the ways of their masters.

### Nepal’s Youth Policy

Generations are patterns of relations between the young and the old, and a category analogous to gender, class, race, and ethnicity for social analysis because they play an important role in social and cultural reproduction. Youth as a category must be understood as intersecting with others. Jennifer Cole (2007: 78) warns that “emphasizing the

concepts of both youth culture and youth agency...runs the risk of fetishizing and reifying the category of youth, separating youth from the families and communities in which they live.” The goal here is not to separate, but to draw out the distinct features of youth engagement with the emerging Nepali state. Also, the reification of youth as a category is not merely academic, as Nepal’s political actors are aware that youth as a demographic is ripe for mobilization.

The introduction of a National Youth Policy and Youth Ministry in 2010 was a blueprint for that mobilization. The first few sentences of that policy make it plain that youth are to play a critical role in the new Nepal:

The youth force is an invaluable asset of the nation. The youth is not only a vital source of the state but also a change agent. The youths are pioneers of economic, social, political and cultural transformation and change driving force. This class remains as an important asset of the nation because of courage, innovativeness, inquisitiveness and high level of self-confidence, which is also considered to be a main source of nation building. (National Youth Policy 2010).

The 2010 youth policy covers a lot of ground. It set goals for youth entrepreneurship along with social justice objectives such as the elimination of caste, class, and gender discrimination. It proposes a number of initiatives aimed at promoting employment and innovation in agro industries, including the establishment of cooperatives in urban as well as rural areas, and proposes programs to assist Nepali youth working abroad. It also hints at measures of positive discrimination that would bring Nepal’s marginalized into the mainstream, and broaden access to secondary and post-secondary education that still remains practically closed to many youths today. Finally, it establishes a new government body to implement the policy: the National Youth Council that will include leaders from the Ministry of Youth and Sport, as well as youth leaders from all of the political parties and the proportionate representation of women and from the *madhesi*, *adivasi janajati*, and *dalit* communities.

For all of its ambition, the National Youth Policy lacks specific outcome measures and offers no coherent priorities by which its vast agenda could be realized. At numerous points, for example, the document refers to “various programs” that will be launched to meet the policies objectives, but there is no description of these, no timeline in which they will be implemented, and few concrete ways by which program success could be assessed. In addition,

meeting many of the Youth Policy objectives would be dependent on broader governmental reforms in other legislative sectors. For example, both of the objectives to make secondary education free and compulsory, or to ensure equal pay for equal work would require policy change beyond the mandate of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The shortcomings of the previous policy were well known to the committee drafting the 2016 revision, but any policy needs to be proposed within a climate in which its implementation is a clear possibility (Snellinger 2018b). In the uncertainty generated by a prolonged constitutional crises after the Constituent Assembly was disbanded in 2012, that climate was changed.

Most of the Nepali youth we have spoken to were not familiar with the 2010 Youth Policy. While there was some awareness about the existence of the policy, and also of the fact the government has produced a recent revision of the document, few knew of any measures taken that are consistent with the original policy. Even leaders of political student unions who had representatives on the National Youth Council were unfamiliar with it. One aspect of the policy, well-known and problematic, was the definition of youth as comprising those between the ages of sixteen and forty. Amanda Snellinger (2018b) argues that the members of the National Youth Council, many of whom were over thirty years of age, favored this expanded age range in order to assert their own authority in a socio-cultural context in which their elders maintained a monopoly on power. Many of the younger student union members complained in focus group discussions that the category was so widely defined as to become meaningless, as both parents and their own children could be defined as youth under the policy. This expanded age range also allowed older student union leaders to maintain their grip on campus unions that were stepping stones to higher positions in party hierarchies, something that many of them resented. One student activist with AYON complained: “how can a leader who is ten years older understand the problems of a student who is ten years younger at the university?” Recently, the Youth Council itself has come under attack due to the perception that it had failed to understand the needs of youth and had become monopolized by cadres from one party to the exclusion of others (The Kathmandu Post 2016).

Meaningful youth political mobilization is a prominent objective of the policy, but, as with the document overall, there are few suggestions as to how this will be achieved. There is no mention of specific youth organizations, political youth wings, or student unions. The policy seeks to establish new ways of participation, and interestingly section six part ten reads: “various programs shall be

launched to prepare conscious youth force free from distortions noticed in the economic, social, cultural and political fields” as if admitting that existing institutions are problematic, and placing the onus on younger generations to repair them. On these new, undistorted means of national mobilization the policy is notably silent, and existing youth political institutions sometimes reproduce the less-than-democratic ways of their parent party.

In the period after the *Loktantra Andolan*, and particularly after the collapse of the Constituent Assembly in 2013 due to the political impasse over the nature of the new constitution, democratic institutions were viewed in an increasingly critical light and efforts to mobilize youth in traditional ways have proved less effective. This new critical awareness has been amplified by the relative freedom by the vernacular press in Nepal, the proliferation of information broadcast by independent FM stations (Kunreuther 2014), and through social media, all of which provide alternative sources of information from which youth can draw upon to develop their own lines of deliberation. Although student union members often fell into line with party positions regarding the constitution, federalism, and post-conflict development in focus group discussions, it was not uncommon to hear alternative views about political institutions once outside the earshot of union leaders. In one focus group that included loosely affiliated members from various unions, one student remarked:

Where the problem lies in student politics is, for example, I was in student politics when I was a student in the university but I gave it up for academic career. What I realized that time was—it’s true that politics is a dirty game [chuckle]. We came to know that can one deal with political situation but the question will be raised—who patronized you? Who is the political leader that patronized you? In terms of patronizing, people believe that an individual climb higher and get promoted in their political careers through foul play. So, since our childhood, we heard politics is a dirty game.

The failure of the National Youth Policy to effectively mobilize youth reflects several problems of governance that have plagued Nepal since the *jana andolan* (first people’s movement). First is a rapid turnover in governments led by coalitions of at times antagonistic political parties that tend to stall the implementation of policies as new governments pursue different priorities and the business of gaining and maintaining political power becomes a central concern. The policy, for example, was introduced by a Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) led government, but this was replaced a year later by the government led by the

Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai which collapsed two years later. Second, and even more problematically, is the highly centralized nature of the state and its bureaucracy, which is the cultural legacy of the patrimonial Panchayat regime and the earlier autocratic Rana era. Policy decisions are made by political elites at the center, that is, in Kathmandu, and disseminated to lower levels of governance to be implemented, with those levels effectively excluded from decision making processes. Finally, the Youth Policy was intended to be a vehicle for the inclusion of the young political activists who played a front line role in Nepal’s recent struggles, but those activists have aged, leaving them out of touch with an emerging generation of youth.

### Youth and Political Culture

The political practices of the past paradoxically remain part of the repertoire of student union leaders. As an example, only a month after completing research at Tribhuvan University, the planned election of new representatives to the Free Student Union (FSU) (the council on which politically affiliated unions compete for seats) was suspended by the administration after it was found that many of the unions had inflated their rolls with fraudulently obtained memberships. Student leaders anxious to prevail in the FSU election did not wish to leave the outcome to chance, or to the choice of individual student voters. This was a direct reflection of the antagonism between the political parties, for, despite the power sharing agreements at the highest levels, they were also preparing for planned elections to a crucial second Constituent Assembly that would determine the content of a new constitution. Extending their influence among students in anticipation of those elections was a priority for the leadership, but the methods with which they attempted to accomplish this appeared to contradict the frequently voiced student denunciation of political corruption.

Like the decision to call off the popular *bandh* against the appointment of Lokman Singh Karki earlier that spring, the fabrication of membership rolls was a practice that originated in a union leadership that answered primarily to party hierarchies rather than their membership. Campus-level unions report to a student Central Committee that reports, in turn, to the party itself. Even local-level union leaders were generally advanced students with many of years of political experience, and appeared to be on political career paths. A leader from one of the Communist Party unions told us that after obtaining a Bachelor of Law, an MA in Education, and completing his PhD in Linguistics, he will return to his district to take up politics full time. Union leaders from other parties were in some cases part time faculty members, and it was sometimes not clear that they were students at all.

In the summer of 2016, we spoke to a number of youth leaders with the traditional political party campus unions, the Maoist Young Communist League (YCL), the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON), and the new youth-oriented party *Bibiksheel* Nepal, or 'Responsible Nepal' (Hindman 2014). In the aftermath of the recent promulgation of the 2015 constitution, many of these youth leaders were pessimistic about the future and pointed to an underlying political culture that influenced the behavior of most political institutions regardless of their ideology. By political culture, they meant the patterns of patrimonialism and corruption through which party positions and resources were allocated in political institutions. A young YCL cadre and member of the National Youth Council lamented:

Nepal is a country of possibility, but the political parties are not able to utilize this opportunity. Political parties are blamed for corruption and are using resources to recruit their cadres rather than give good governance to the people. Political parties should leave this kind of political culture behind.

The perception that previous generations of political leaders put their own interests and those of their clients before the needs of national development was widely held by both youth leaders and by student union members. Section 6, paragraph 10 of 2010 Youth Policy, that reads that conscious youth must be "free from the distortions" that plague social political and economic fields reflects that generational view. The patrimonialism and nepotism of leaders in the past as indexed by the contemporary global category of 'corruption' was, however, a feature of Nepal's pre-*jana andolan* period. Calling this 'corruption' obscures the deep roots that patrimonialism has in Nepal's political culture. Mahesh Regmi's historiographic accounts of the rent-seeking behaviour of tax collectors, and village headmen in Nepal's past showed that patronage has long been a feature of state administration (Regmi 1971). It is this cultural heritage that youth identify and question.

Despite the widespread influence of political parties on the lives of young Nepalis, there is growing anti-political or counter political sentiment that reflects a deepening distrust with formal political institutions. Young Nepali student activists must reconcile the legacy of patrimonialism in formal political institutions to a democratic ethos that, they have been told, values accountability, transparency, and individual merit. Though belonging to a political party is a near requirement for university students, there is a growing trend among some of the educated to forgo party activism. One activist with *Bibiksheel* Nepal, which is a non-partisan organization, told us that "there is a saying;

people do politics if they cannot do anything else," that is, youth who have ability and talent are more likely to pursue them outside of formal political institutions. Even those still engaged with political parties sometimes openly question the direction their leadership is taking them.

### Constituent Assembly, Constituent Power

A politics of identity in Nepal that pits a dominant hill *brahmin* and *chhetri* elite against subordinated peoples has become increasingly prominent since the early 1990s. Tensions between caste and ethnic groups became amplified by international discourses of indigeneity, NGO campaigns for social inclusion and, not least, the mobilization of nationalities by the Maoists during the People's War (Shneiderman 2013). Identity thus played a dominant role in the debates about Nepal's republican constitution after the war (Lawoti 2012; Shneiderman and Tillin 2015). Some students on the Tribhuvan University campus articulated their desire for justice for Nepal's marginalized communities and the view that restructuring would move the new republic away from the centralizing tendencies of the past, but for others there was a fear that constitutional restructuring would unleash deeper animosities and ultimately lead to the dissolution of the state. The contest between these views was passionate, adversarial, and partisan.

The politics of identity, framed very much by constitutional debates, crept into student politics. In addition to the unions established by the dominant political parties, competing ethnicity-based unions and the potential for ethnicity-based antagonism emerged. A student leader of the *Madhesi Jana Adhikar* Forum union suggested:

This year student union elections are going to be held and there may be definite chances of fighting, quarreling, strikes, violation, loss of lives, etc. among the students. The present student union revolution was based on *Madhesi Andolan* to prevent the country from more deterioration and also for the unification of all student unions which were in crisis due to the Nepali Congress and UML affiliated student unions. All along, we took the stand for the best unification along with indigenous student groups and also [reached out to] students who live in remote mountainous areas where they do not have access of radio and TV and motor vehicles for day to day news about the elections.

This speaker's prediction of campus violence was not born out as the FSU elections he was referring to were canceled by the university administration for the reasons we gave earlier, but it shows that many students were sharply

critical of the caste hill Hindu elites that controlled the dominant political parties. Some, like this speaker, were drawn to alternative ethnicity-based student unions that arm ethnicity-based political parties such as the Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum. But, the Congress and UML student union groups we conducted focus groups with also had participants from *madhesi* and *adivasi janajati* communities. Even in those discussions, both a critical distance towards Nepal's main democratic institutions and an awareness of the domination of political elites was present.

The view that political leaders exclude grassroots participation in party decisions is widespread, but the exclusion of those marginalized by caste and ethnic minorities is even more structurally determined. This speaker should also be understood in the prevailing context as of May 2013. The Constituent Assembly (CA) that was elected in 2008 following the demise of the monarchy failed to agree on a new constitution for the country. In 2012, CA members attempted to vote an extension of the CA term, which the Supreme Court overturned because it violated the interim constitution. The CA was then dissolved and replaced with an all-party mechanism that was to plan elections to a new CA. Some students questioned whether those elections would be held, noting that most other democratic institutions, such as on municipal and village levels, had been dormant since the period of the Maoist people's war. There was much doubt that the all-party mechanism would ever devolve decision-making power to democratic institutions that political elites could not overtly control, which had been the case during the thirty years of party-less, 'guided' democracy of the *panchayat* regime. Students feared a return to authoritarianism.

Fortunately, that pessimism appeared to be unfounded. Elections to a second CA were held, relatively peacefully, in 2013, and the long-delayed election for local bodies was held a year later. The newly-elected CA promulgated a revised constitution after the 2015 earthquake, setting off several months of chaos during a blockade of the Indian border organized to force more political representation for the *madhesi* community. The new constitution also laid the groundwork for the recently-concluded elections to a new National Assembly to replace the CA, as well as seven new provincial legislatures. In this context, there is a more expanded capacity for youth engagement with normative politics, as well as a need for the critical distance they bring.

The diffusion of political power from the center to Nepal's formerly-peripheral provinces, regions, and municipalities represents a departure from established patterns of political authority, provided that the new structures are not subverted by the same interests that dominated political

institutions in the past. The blockade of the Indian border showed that the new constitution had overlooked the linguistic, cultural, and territorial interests of the *madhesi* and *adivasi janajati* minorities that previous constitutional proposals had attempted to accommodate. The rise of caste and ethnicity-based political organizations offers youth alternative political identities and vehicles for mobilization.

The debates that produced this new constitutional context were conducted both within the Assemblies and during the elections that produced them. Nepali students rehearsed these debates within and between their own organizations, or on the streets during the frequent strikes that were called to protest the various models of federalism that were being proposed. The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), for example, insisted on a fourteen state model that consisted of many of the ethnic 'autonomous zones' that had been established during their insurgency, and it was a deadlock over this proposal that led to the demise of the Constituent Assembly in 2012. Knowledge about this proposal, which was modified repeatedly by the Maoists before it was finally abandoned three years later, was widespread among students. *Madhesi* and *adivasi janajati* organizations embraced the model as it was seen as the best way to assert their claims to greater equality against the dominant elites, while students in mainstream organizations warned that the model would lead to communitarian violence and an inequitable distribution of natural resources. The elections of the new CA in 2013 reduced the Maoists to the political opposition and their proposal for ethnicity-based provinces was abandoned. Despite this, Nepali youth remained openly engaged with a confrontation of counter-hegemonic visions of how their country should be structured. Sometimes that confrontation became a feature in the political subjectivity of individual youths. In one focus group discussion held with students from mixed political backgrounds, one young man responded to another speaker who had just criticized the Maoist federalism proposal:

I do partially agree with previous speaker and to some extent I do not agree with them. The Maoists have raised the issue of identity, but they raised this issue in negative way. As Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-cultural country, all ethnic groups and classes should be identified. The Maoists are proposing single-ethnic identity in their federal structure rather it should be multi-ethnic identity. Power shouldn't be given to a single ethnic group in a federal province. All ethnic groups should be able to live freely without any domination of a single ethnic group.

The recognition that Nepal had been dominated by a single dominant group in the past is recognized by many, but ethnicity-based federalism inspired the fear that bare ethnic majorities would be able to, in turn, dominate the provinces that take their name. This view was widespread among many students except those belonging to *madhesi* or *adivasi janajati* organizations, but it reflected a misunderstanding of the federalism proposal as it had evolved in the Constituent Assembly (Adikhari and Gellner 2016). Politically, the Maoists lost the fight for their vision of a new Nepal in the 2013 Constituent Assembly election and the sometime violent madhesi blockade that followed the introduction of the new constitution in 2015 failed to produce the amendments that the movement was seeking. The project of accommodating Nepal's cultural diversity in its political structures is not complete.

Street activism continues to be a frequent political tactic for pressing for minority rights, and a resort to the battlefield is still possible, but so far most confrontations take place within imperfect constitutional bodies developed at great cost in the past. Normative democratic institutions, according to agonistic theory, are symbolic spaces on which these confrontations are carried out and where, despite their antagonism, these visions can be legitimately voiced (Mouffe 2005). Youth were at the forefront of the street movements that played such a critical part in Nepal's recent history, but translating the successes of those movements into institutional forms has proven more difficult. In that process of translation, older generations and older models of 'political culture' may reassert control. At the same time, policies on education, health care, infrastructure development, and employment that concern youth cannot be determined in street movements.

The struggle to build democratic institutions in Nepal is, as in all democratic polities, an uneven process that shifts between traditional political practices and the potential for ideal democratic deliberation. Having a voice in normative political institutions in Nepal is still very new, and that tension is a much more recent experience. Youth are becoming political agents at a time when political agency is being transformed. This places them at a critical juncture between the past and future. Though the 2015 constitution prescribes a new institutional framework, there is still much to do. Local political bodies need to be empowered, new provinces need to be named, new ministries created and, perhaps most importantly, the critical political process of development and national identity need to continue. Democratic institutions are imperfect, evolving, and subject to manipulation by powerful elites, but they provide a framework for progressive change. The critical distance that Nepali youth bring to bear on democratic institutions

has the potential to transform them from within, and even the avowed a-politicism of many youth is a silent interlocution into normative political debate.

## Conclusion

One of the assumptions of representative democracy is that constitutional consensus on a form of government is grounded in the constituent power of the peoples being governed. This constituent power is evident along a continuum of political practices through which people demand and debate those forms, from civil violence, unrest, demonstrations, and strikes, through social and political institutions of governance. Legitimate constitutional forms, assuming that they are not dictated by elites in a coercive manner, are not independent from the constituent power that produces it. In the years following the Loktantra Andolan, Nepal has striven for constitutional consensus amid stark ideological and political identity differences in an attempt to set the republic along a new path that breaks with its oppressive past. Even with the controversies surrounding the current republican constitution, it is a radical departure from the Hindu monarchy that authorized elite domination in the past. This search for constitutional consensus is an antagonistic contest between ideological and identity-based interests that would mean that any consensus is necessarily contingent on the shifting political practices that produce it.

Nepali youth have contributed disproportionately to this constituent power through their political practices. Nepali students and youth participated with alacrity in street level demonstrations, strikes, and political campaigns; they were a crucial resource for the 'People's War,' in the madhesi as well as adivasi janajati movements, and are articulated into political party structures that produced several generations of democratic political leaders. In the past, efforts to mobilize youth have been aimed at integrating them as useful assets in the service of Nepalese political institutions, but as we have argued above, politically active youth today should be understood as an active constituent force that is in counterpoint to normative political institutions. The National Youth Policy can be understood as yet another attempt to harness this resource for the purpose of nation building, but its lack of impact on Nepali youth reveals the uneven capacity the Nepali state to mobilize it. The Nepali youth we have spoken to are drawn into what they identify as the political culture of the organizations they belong to, but at the same time many are critical the corruption, nepotism, and domination of earlier generations. That critical awareness has long been a factor in Nepal's political transformation, and may yet produce the political and social change that youth imagine and desire.

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