




Youth, politics, and youth-led political violence in Nepal

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Abstract

This article examines how participation and mobilization of youth in politics has led to an unintended consequence: youth-led violence. We define youth-led violence as a particular form of political violence that emerged from an interplay between political power, domination, and rent-seeking behavior. To elaborate on youth-led violence between 1990 and 2018 in Nepal, we identified and analyzed push and pull factors that explain the dynamics and dimensions of why youth participate in politics and how it creates a condition where political violence is accepted and normalized.

KEYWORDS

Nepal, political protection, political violence, rent seeking, youth-led violence

INTRODUCTION

The youth is one of the principal actors in political uprisings and resistance movements in Nepal. While the uprisings and resistant movements have aimed at inducing positive political change and transformation (O'Neill, 2016; Subedi & Bhattarai, 2017), the associated political mobilizations were not always nonviolent. This article aims to address a pertinent yet underresearched question in Nepal's recent political discourses: Why is violence, particularly youth-led violence, a predictable component of political uprisings in Nepal? To address this question, we investigate the role of youth, with respect to their violent and nonviolent behavior

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in political struggles that are aimed at bringing social, economic, and political transformation through the establishment of democratic systems, values, and practices.

Democracy, for the purpose of this article, is defined as a system that enables every citizen to express their opinion freely, participate in elections to elect their representatives, and have the ability to hold them accountable for government and governmentality (Dalton et al., 2007). The history of democratic experiments in modern Nepal dates back to the 1950s when the autocratic rule of the *Rana* oligarchy was replaced by a short-lived multiparty democratic system in 1951. In 1960, King Mahendra banned the political parties, imposed an autocratic *Panchayat* system, and the kings subsequently ruled the country until 1990 with support from the loyal political and feudal elites from “below” and the military generals from “above.” As “the third wave of democratization” (Huntington, 1993) swept across the world in the 1980s and 1990, Nepal also saw a powerful democratic struggle, famously known as *Jana Anadolan I*, which replaced the absolute monarchy by a constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy in 1990.

The optimism induced by the democratic change was high in the 1990s with people expecting that political change would bring social justice and social and economic transformations to the nascent democracy. However, people's hopes soon withered when political parties indulged themselves in opportunistic and patronage politics. The emerging patron-client mode of politics proved a platform in which political parties aimed at expanding the voter based and using electoral democracy to monopolize and consolidate their power. The polarized political culture led to frequent changes in government, which further created pessimism among the general population after 1990. In the face of rising socioeconomic inequalities, regional disparities, bad governance, and failed development, Nepal experienced the Maoists' armed insurgency from 1996 until 2006. What started as a class-based armed mobilization, the Maoist insurgency uncharacteristically combined identity politics with class conflict to revolutionize the masses against the state system (Subedi, 2018). The Maoist insurgency was fought on the basis of arguments that were claiming to liberate the people from autocracy and feudalism and bring social justice to marginalized people, including women, ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples (Adhikari, 2014; Hutt & Onta, 2017; Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). In other words, the Maoist insurgency sought to transform the state through the use of violence.

The insurgency ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006 and Nepal entered into the postconflict period, although nonviolent identity conflicts have continued today between the state and marginalized groups who are continuously demanding greater social and political inclusion. In the meantime, the country also witnessed massive political turmoil including two Madhesh movements¹ in 2007 and 2008 demanding for the establishment of federalism based on identity with self-autonomy (Mathema, 2011). During the same period, the proliferation of more than 109 smaller armed groups with a mix of political and criminal orientations continued to undermine safety, security, and social cohesion, especially in the southern and eastern parts of the country (Saferworld, I. D. A., NEMAF, & Small Arms Survey, 2011; Thapa & Ramsbotham, 2017). These armed groups engaged in extortion, kidnapping, and killing to gain economic benefits and expand their political capital (Adhikari, 2014; Carter Center, 2011). In this chaotic political environment and after the second constituent assembly held the election in 2013, Nepal finally promulgated a new Constitution of the Federal Republic in 2015 and is on a path to democratic consolidation.

The political forces, including promonarchy, prodemocratic, and pro-Maoist parties, have chosen to engage in political violence on several occasions, not only demanding political and



democratic reforms but also seeking control over state authority and resources (Subedi, 2018). Contributions that youth make in such violent movements are arguably avoidable (Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). However, evidence suggests youth involvement in political violence climaxed during the Maoist armed insurgency (Nepal et al., 2011; Subedi, 2018; Thapa & Sijapati, 2004). Youth-led political violence continued after the peace agreement, as youth wings of political parties patronized and nurtured youth groups. For instance, the Young Communist League (YCL) of the Communist Party Nepal-Maoists (CPN-Maoists), Youth Force (YF) of CPN-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), and Tarun Dasta (force) of the Nepali Congress (NC) were frequently involved in clashes to protect and promote their political influence (Adhikari, 2014).

In Nepal, youth are at the forefront of democratic struggles and political movements, both violent and nonviolent. Previous studies have examined why youth support armed insurgencies and what motivated them to participate in the Maoist armed conflict in Nepal (Eck, 2010; Subedi, 2013). Yet, the causes and factors that motivate the youth to engage in violence while aiming to participate in political actions are largely unknown in the Nepali context. In this article, we consider the context of the interface between political struggles and violence as an analytical template with which we examine the dynamics, causes, and drivers of, what we call, “youth-led violence.” We define youth-led violence as a particular form of political violence, which highlights the agency of the youth in political actions and behaviors that embrace violence, both desired and unintended, as a mechanism of social and political change.

We argue that youth-led violence in Nepal manifested with opportunistic and strategic dimensions. The opportunistic dimension, what we call, “rent seeking” political actions in the pursuit of material gain and incentives. The strategic dimensions are related to the manipulative actions of the youth in their “rent seeking” political behavior to maximize political access, power, and mobilization capabilities through the use of politically motivated violence. Although youth-led violence may also sometimes involve dimensions of criminality, in this article, we are mostly concerned with its strategic and opportunistic dimensions because of their significance in political actions and behaviors that could turn nonviolent. To elaborate on the two dimensions of youth-led violence, we also examine pull and push factors that facilitate young people’s political inspiration as well as participation in political parties, and subsequently, political violence. We maintain the proposition that an analysis of these factors sheds light on the changing nature of youth activism and political violence in contemporary Nepal.

This article has five sections. The introductory section provided a basic understanding of the youth, their nature, and an exploration of the possible reasons behind their violent engagement. The second section discusses the research methodology, including the criteria used for sample selection. The third section deals with the process and trends of the youth and political violence in Nepal. In doing so, the third section also focuses on youth recruitment and mobilization processes, as well as the nature of the expected dividends related to the political culture and trends in violence taking place in the country. The fourth section examines the push and pull factors that motivate the youth to participate in political violence. The concluding section summarizes the findings and examines their implications for politics in Nepal.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article emerged from a 3-year-long research project that examined the effects of youth-led political violence on community security and social cohesion in Nepal. It is based on primary information collected to cover what transpired after a multiparty political system was

introduced, focusing on the period 1990–2018. The basic rationale for selecting this timeframe was that it can provide insights into different aspects of youth involvement in politics and political violence in Nepal. Its analysis was primarily based on both primary and secondary data sources.

Secondary literatures was collected using several search engines, including those at the University of New England library, to locate relevant studies. Furthermore, to collect primary data, the participants for Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were selected by commissioning purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Accordingly, KIIs involved youth political actors, youth community members, civil society actors, personnel of security agencies, academics, political actors, and members from International Non-governmental Organizations, International government's development agencies (bilateral donors), and the United Nations (multilateral agencies). A total of 52 interviews were conducted comprising all sampling locations. Similarly, youth community members were included as a part of an FGD. The FGD participants were recruited in consultation with local stakeholders in the sampling locations. A total of eight FGDs were conducted across the country. As the researchers speak the native language of Nepal, this was an advantage for gathering information in an efficient and reliable manner with non-English-speaking participants.

Furthermore, the fieldwork was conducted between April and July 2018 in four out of seven provinces of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. Sunsari and Morang districts in Province 1, Bara and Parsa districts in Province 2, Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts in Province 3, and Banke and Bardiya districts in Province 5 were chosen as locations from which to collect primary data. The reasons for selecting Provinces 1, 2, and 5 were based on geographical location, as they are situated close to the Indo-Nepal border regions where youth-led political violence is leading to fragile social relations and hence places in which insecurities were reported to be high (Paudel, 2014; Saferworld et al., 2011; O. Shah, 2012). Province 3 was selected because it is an important economic and political capital of Nepal where there are many activities of political parties including the youth.

YOUTH, RENT-SEEKING AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: PROCESSES AND TRENDS IN NEPAL

Youth recruitment and mobilization

Before investigating how and why political parties have recruited and mobilized the youth to serve their political interests and why the youth were either willingly or in some situations forcibly mobilized, two aspects needed to be understood to broaden our knowledge about the relationship between the youth and political parties in Nepal. First, we must explore a “key” that potentially has the capacity to unlock a door between the youth and political parties. In Nepal, the youth has a certain degree of understanding of social conditions and political ideas, which connects them with political parties. Second, political parties survive and expand their political base through a process of youth recruitment and mobilization that serve as a force for political and social revolution. When the interests of the youth and the political party they serve are met, the youth put themselves on the streets in large numbers for a political cause, and they support the political party to which they belong to organize political struggles and rebellion. It is evident that none of the democratic struggles as well as insurgencies of the



past would have been possible without active youth participation. Hence, the youth are known to be “risk-takers” and drivers of rapid sociopolitical change (Adhikari, 2014).

Craig Jeffrey pointed out in his ethnographic research in Meerut, a city in Uttar Pradesh India, that spare time as a result of increasing unemployment due to economic liberalization and globalization have increased frustrations among the young generation toward the social and political systems of the day (Jeffrey, 2010). Similarly, in Nepal, the effect of unemployment frees the youth to be available for political parties to mobilize them. It plays an integral part in expanding political capital. Therefore, the youth places themselves in a vulnerable position, willingly exposing themselves to, and participating in, violence. This course of causes and effects is considered to be a means of encouraging the development of political culture, and the strengthening of democracy (Hutt & Onta, 2017). Such views are, however, debatable given that political violence could be more destructive than it is progressive.

Two kinds of political mobilization of the youth are evident: The first results from an argumentative political environment that is expressed through riots, protests, strikes, and civil disobedience campaigns, and the second is large-scale mass mobilization for violent endeavors in pursuit of controlling political, economic, and social status, including armed violence (Jackman, 2019; Özerdem & Podder, 2015). Both types of mobilizations have occurred in Nepal, which provides evidence of how important the youth could be in the process of attaining goals for political parties as the main mobilizer. The youth played a pivotal role in strengthening political parties and political revolutions that Nepal experienced at certain times, for example, in the 1950s there was the struggle against the Rana regime, then the rebellion from 1960 to 1990 against the party-less Panchayat administration, the Maoist armed insurgency that stretched from 1996 to 2006, and several other ethnopolitical uprisings that took place from 2006 onwards continuing through to the present day (Joshi & Rose, 1966; Mishra, 1994; Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). Henceforth, all major political parties in Nepal have their own youth wings, which they are mobilizing to widen their influence or protect and promote the party through demonstrations or engaging in violent activities toward groups that hold rival political ideologies (Watson & Crozier, 2009). Many times, the youth are manipulated and often mobilized in conducting forced donations, a kind of organized extortion (Carter Center, 2011; Subedi, 2014b). For instance, an unverified source claimed that YCL of Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) (CPN-(M)), YF of CPN-UML, and Tarun Dal of NC have a million, half million, and 1.2 million youth members, respectively (Carter Center, 2011). Furthermore, the engagement of political parties in the manipulation of the youth population and overt youth mobilizations that have taken place in Nepali democratic upheavals (Samuel, 2017).

Political parties in Nepal have formal and informal mechanisms in place to entice the youth and thereby lure them into their party activities. Political patronage is distributed by major political parties through their various wings such as student unions, YFs, peasant groups, trade unions, and teachers' unions, which facilitate to mobilize political clients at the local level. More importantly, political parties have used student unions to expand their political base by orienting them with their respective political ideologies (O'Neill et al., 2020). The use of formal mechanisms has a clear strategy to attract and mobilize the youth. Party leaders, teachers, local cultural and religious leaders, and youth leaders play informal roles to facilitate the invitation of the youth into a party's activities through cultural programs, mass gatherings, political speeches, and one-on-one conversations. An academic specializing in peace and conflict studies in Province 3 stated in an interview that, “student wings are massively mobilized to recruit new cadres to cover the political vacuum that is created due to the absence of local elections for two decades.”² Similarly, a conflict and political analyst in Province 3 said that, “informal party

representatives facilitate the recruitment process through mass gatherings and other forms of political programs.”³

In Nepal, additional recruitment or mobilization strategies were employed during the Maoist armed conflict. They adopted issues relating to caste/ethnic-based discrimination as a strategy to attract the youth into their movement. Some argued that selected members from among upper caste people of hill origins have been dominating Nepal's social, economic, and political affairs since its formation as a nation-state, particularly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Bhattachan, 2003; Bista, 1991). Although the relationships between caste, ethnicity, and state power are significant in Nepal, one should not forget that feudalism exists within certain ethnic groups, which is central to social and political exploitation. Nonetheless, the marginalized ethnic minorities have long-standing grievances and feelings of hate toward the ruling classes/castes who have held and, in some contexts, continue to hold power and therefore control over economic and political resources. Maoists adopted a clear strategy to recruit cadres from destitute sections of Nepali ethnic groups through political indoctrination, making them a powerful insurgent group within a single decade (Eck, 2010; Sharma & Donini, 2010; Subedi, 2013).

Politics, youth, and violence

The youth are the mirror of socioeconomic and political conditions of any society (Özerdem & Podder, 2015). They are players who have a real potential to create violence, terror and conflict (Özerdem & Podder, 2015) but also lead the path toward peace. The level of terror and violence are much higher in contexts where the presence of political instability associated with structural discrimination exists in conjunction with a “youth bulge” (Urdal, 2004). Given that the youth, who are officially defined in Nepal as people between 16 and 40 years old, constitute 40% of the population, Nepal's demography has a significant youth population. Persistent socioeconomic inequalities intersect with this youth bulge in ways that renders the risk of violent conflicts and contentious political movements involving youth. This phenomenon must be contextualized in accepting that there has been autocratic rule in Nepal for several hundred years, which has created vast gaps between rich and poor, higher and lower ethnic/caste groups, and cities and villages in terms of levels of development and wealth accumulation. These forms of gaps are the reasons for people's misery, which exposes them to political manipulation and violence in the name of emancipation (Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). Consequently, Nepal's complex political history is filled with terror, violence, and killings (Griffin, 2015) as well as peaceful regime change through a people's revolution as seen in *Jana Andolan I* and *Jana Andolan II*.⁴

The formation of political parties back in the 1940s in Nepal suggested that the major aim of political party formation was to overthrow autocratic regimes namely the *Rana* Oligarchy and the party-less Panchayat system, by employing violent as well as nonviolent protests (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2013; Pokharel & Rana, 2014). The youth formed and led these political parties. Since then, enormous affrays occurred as part of these political parties' developing process. For instance, the youth played an active role in the 1990 democratic movement (*the Jana Andolan I*) and subsequently during the decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 (Acharya, 2009; S. Shah, 2008). Some forms of violent resistance were part of the revolutions aimed at transforming the political system in the 1950s, 1990s, and also during the Maoist insurgency. And, unlike other age categories among citizens, the youth has invested enormous



amounts of time and energy in executing politically motivated violent events. The phenomena of youth participation and mobilization at the hands of political parties for purposes of gaining political power and causing regime change or using it as a political bargaining tool has been an inevitable feature in fighting against autocratic regimes in Nepal's political history.

The state's inability to respond to people's grievances is often related to extensive social and political inequalities in society that can promote the cultivation of violence (Özderem & Podder, 2015; Sharma & Donini, 2010). The Nepali state has faced considerable challenges of not being able to address people's frustrations mainly about equitable economic development and sociopolitical inclusion despite frequent changes in the political system in the recent past. Post-multiparty democratic political arrangements are seen to be related to political instability, power abuse, and political parties' minimal answerability to citizens (Griffin, 2015). Weber in his essay, "Politics as a Vocation," describes a condition in which an individual or group of people are forced to disobey the law and adopt a violent path to fight against the state because the state is no longer listening to the genuine voices of the people. Rather, they monopolize power to suppress the citizens through illegitimate procedures (Gerth & Mills, 2014). In other words, a feudal attitude is still playing a significant role in running the state apparatus within the current Nepali democracy.

A deep-rooted narrative is apparent in Nepali society, suggesting that justice or rights can only be achieved through force. This narrative has partly emerged out of people's frustration with democracy and peaceful social change (Subedi, 2018). It is accepted that seizing power requires strengthening political capital through the use of violence. The youth is central in implementing such violent programming; and henceforth, their spontaneous participation in attempts to bring about change through the application of force is becoming rather predictable. Their narration about the justification of using violence is tremendously influencing the value system of political parties, and this can be seen in both the pre- and postdemocratic eras in Nepal. Several informants in all the research locations that were visited conveyed a common message: the actions of the youth were purposefully done "to use violence to bring about the desired change". This common perception has aroused political parties to form "aggressive youth fronts."⁵ Walking along these same paths, the Maoist party organized an insurgency to overthrow the existing social, economic, cultural, and political system through conflict. This remains a moot point, as the extent of their success in realizing such ambitious goals is questionable.

Politics at one level is all about formulating policy; all such policies are expected to influence society. Good policy is essential for establishing social justice through social change, the eradication of all forms of discrimination, protection of sovereignty, and upholding democratic norms and values. It is observable that the youth's involvement in violent activities in Nepal is associated with negative connotations despite their sacrifices and contributions toward peaceful social and political change (Hutt & Onta, 2017). The youth involved in political violence is recognized as the fuel that continuously fires-up political parties (Hutt, 2004; Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). A microlevel analysis of violence proximity in a comparison of youth behavior and that of elders/leaders revealed that the youth were more likely to have face-to-face interactions with violence than older leaders (Acharya, 2009; Bleie & Shrestha, 2012). This is because the youth is always at the forefront, executing acts of violence on the ground. But this is because they got directions from elders and senior political leaders who remained at a safe distance operating behind the scenes (Snellinger, 2010). As a result, a general perception is constructed of the youth being troublemakers. The strong negative image of youth was also seen in the extensive violent activities that it instigated after the Maoist war ended. Postwar

Nepal saw massive youth involvement in crime either done under political cover (Watson & Crozier, 2009) or carried out as opportunistic acts (Subedi, 2014a). These forms of youth-led violence are a challenge to less-developed democracies like Nepal where politics is an instrument abused to acquire financial and material resources.

Trends of youth-led political violence in Nepal

Context is important to understand how and why people organize political violence. The repressive nature of the *Panchayat* system offered limited space for civic engagements in politics and thus the power of the autocratic system controlled and suppressed youth-led political violence. This points to a tentative conclusion that youth-led violence is less likely to occur under an autocratic regime because the state excessively monopolizes the use of force to contain such violence. By contrast, a democratic system provides relatively open space for people to articulate their grievances and organize political activism. This is because democratic checks and balances prohibit the excessive use of force making it possible for opportunistic and strategic political forces to resort to violence in articulating their demands. This explains why insurgencies did not survive under the autocratic *Panchayat* regime, but the Maoists' insurrection sprung up and grew only after the country became a multiparty democratic system. Our findings further supported this view, as we noted that youth engagement in political violence, including opportunistic and strategic orientations, increased drastically after 1990, even though it well known that democratic systems are far less violent than autocratic ones.

To explain how youth-led violence increased in a more open political environment, we analyzed political events 1990 and 2018 to reveal trends in youth-led political violence. Based on primary data, four political contexts were identified that reveal different characteristics regarding the nature of youth-led violence in Nepal.

First, the period between 1990 and 1996 was the beginning of the journey of increasing political violence in the country. The strategies that political parties adopted to increase membership revealed fundamental reasons for elements of criminality entering into various activities in which political parties were engaged. For instance, there were no mechanisms in place to check the backgrounds of members while integrating them into a political party. The parties' strategies motivated the youth with criminal backgrounds to join a party of their choice through which they could easily execute wrongdoings in the name of politics and during certain political events. For the party, these youth could be mobilized to uphold party supremacy, a behavior often observed just before and during elections. Such scenarios began to form and nurture horizontal relationships between political actors and the youth for mutually beneficial outcomes. However, the number of deaths associated with political violence was often negligible and hardly noticeable, that is, as far as the general public were concerned (Dixit, 2006).

Second, the Maoist' insurgency completely altered the traditional tactics, methods, and trends in the occurrence of violence in Nepali society. They introduced sophisticated arms and ammunition along with an organized armed force, which resulted in the killing of more than 13,000 people (Acharya, 2009; Saferworld, 2010). By articulating the narrative that change is only possible through the barrel of a gun, the insurgency normalized violence as a foundation of social and political change. However, a section of the Maoists themselves has since rejected this radical ideology of "rebuilding the state system through war."⁶



Third, in postwar Nepal, especially between 2006 and 2013, there was a fragile political and conflict situation because of political bargaining at the national polity as a consequence of which the frequent making and breaking of governments followed. Youth wings of political parties were massively engaged in youth-led violence of both opportunistic and criminal orientations. For instance, extortion, kidnapping, oppression, killing of people who supported an opposite ideology, and forced collection of cash donations with the help of small arms and light weapons (SALW) were reported (Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019). The nexus between crime and politics as a means of accumulating economic and political power flourished (Saferworld et al., 2011). The horizontal relations between the youth and political actors began to consolidate with the introduction of democracy in Nepal and strengthened in a way that now appears to be unbreakable. However, it is now understood that youth-led violence is an unintended outcome of the interconnections between political parties and their youth wings.

Fourth, the period from 2013 to 2018 was marked by relatively fewer incidences of political violence and youth criminality. A major reason for the shift in this trend was the reluctance of political parties to encourage criminality in their bid for political gain, as it had already created enough and more trouble in the eyes of the general public (Carter Center, 2011; O. Shah, 2012). Besides, enhanced law and order was another major reason because it created the perception that “those who commit crimes cannot escape the law,” which undoubtedly led to a reduction in criminality.

Ideology, youth, and rent seeking politics

With limited income-generating opportunities available in the country, political leaders found that monetary incentives were effective in sustaining the loyalty of followers, most of whom are mainly the youth. This helped political parties to maintain their power. A move toward gaining access to state resources was instigated after multiparty democracy. Under the liberal facade that democracy provided an important milestone in understanding emerged when ideology-based politics was altered into a more rent seeking political culture. Widespread poverty at this political juncture led to a question that was raised among the majority of impoverished people—who cares about ideology when one is striving to manage the sourcing of two-square meals a day to stay alive? A civil society actor in an interview in Province 3 said that, “a barometer for gaging successful political leaders is based on the ability to offer monetary assistance to their cadres as well as political protection for their wrong doings.”⁷

The primary data collected from informants suggest that the restoration of democracy in 1990 saw a shift from ideology-based politics into a new rent seeking political culture. Before 1990, an individual's guiding principle in joining a political party was the party's ideology, which was a means of representation backed by faith. But, after 1990, political affiliation was to serve individual interests rather than collective interests. Hence, the postdemocracy period marked the beginning of the trend toward cultivating rent gaining expectations in the political arena. Based on the primary data collected for this study, we identified five factors that facilitated this change process.

First, frequent changes in government prompted instability—a political environment in which the governments could not build strong pillars to strengthen democracy. The deteriorating rule of law and increasing impunity encouraged political leaders to indulge in accumulating state resources to serve their personal and party interests rather than the interests of the general population. *Second*, the decentralization policy the government embraced in the

mid-1990s allowed Village Development Committees (VDC)⁸ to receive development grants from the central government. Although receiving financial assistance was a positive step in fulfilling context-specific local needs, exploitation of these grants through corruption, something the government could not control. This was possible because the government was not maintaining regulations and monitoring mechanisms at the local level before disbursing funds. *Third*, in the postwar period, a system was established to provide a budget to the constituent assembly members in the name of the “constituency development fund.” Although it was meant to channel funds to elected representatives for them to develop their constituencies, it led to the beginning of the systematic exploitation of resources to meet individual wants for personal gain, which amounted to nothing less than corruption and blatant misuse of funds. *Fourth*, the postwar government introduced a procurement policy with the mandatory requirement that the development budget must be channeled through a local users’ group. This was aimed at reducing resource mismanagement, inefficiencies, and speeding up development activities. Also, it was to encourage the community to meaningfully participate in the development process. However, political parties identified this as a means of providing opportunities for their cadres, making them members of the users’ committee. As a result, another form of resource misuse took place. *Fifth*, the Maoist insurgency established a notion that “armed politics can be a source of income generation which can be used to satisfy individual needs and aspirations.” This established a relationship between the youth and political actors for acquiring resources that benefited them mutually.

When public accountability is limited and civilian oversight is undermined, mobilization of local development resources leads to corruption often sustained via an alliance between local political elites, youth wings of political parties, and local businesses involved in service delivery. Violence is often used in such circumstances to capture resources. We noted during fieldwork that leaders of youth wings of political parties are considered as key players in hijacking the tender bidding process for development activities. In Morang and Sunsari districts, reported clashes between youth groups who were vying to control tender bidding processes, and, according to our interviewees, these trends are also replicated across the country. This is an example of how pacts among political elites, the youth, and businesses triggered youth-led violence.

A political leader in Province 1 stated in an interview that:

Whenever there is a government tender opening to execute development work. Contractors connected to different political parties spends millions of rupees to mobilize youth in order to receive the tender. Whoever has more youth with the capacity to act violently would generally win the tender. This is an act of criminalisation of politics.⁹

On a broader scale, this trend has affected the governance in Nepal. According to the 2017 Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, Nepal is placed as the 122nd least corrupt nation out of 180 countries in the world. Also, Nepal is the second-highest ranked nation after Bangladesh in South Asia for corruption.¹⁰ In spite of this, it is hardly the case that anyone responsible for misdeeds is charged with corruption. Who then if not the government could take them to courts for justice? It does not happen for fear of facing violent repercussions. The data suggested that the mentality among citizens is constructed in such a way that it does not demand transparency for the activities in which political actors are involved. For instance, no one is really digging to find out the answer to “how” these political actors can afford a



sophisticated lifestyle despite being unemployed and when it is known that the lavish properties they currently own were not inherited from their ancestors. Where did these people get the money to live an excessive lifestyle and own property that did not belong to their forebears? The youth are witnesses to how political actors in Nepal have uplifted their material lifestyles after acquiring power and gaining resources illegally from the state. This understanding has guided the youth into forging strong connections with political actors to gain personal benefits and material incentives either peacefully or through the use of political violence.

A civil society member interviewed in Province 3 expressed it thus:

People have seen the changing lifestyles of politicians. A political leader who used to ride a bicycle with bare feet now owns an expensive car. This environment enabled youth to form a close bond with political parties as they thought that it is morally acceptable to gain resources by accumulating wealth through the abuse of power.¹¹

Monetary benefits that reinforce the youth's power have the capacity to alter election results. It is not unusual for a political leader to spend much more than the expenditure ceiling that the election commission sets. The election commission limits each candidate's expenditure. In the 2017 election for the Federal House of Representatives, it was 2.5 million rupees; however, it is believed that they spent more than 21 million to secure the win (Election Observation Committee Nepal, 2017). When asked: What are the sources of income for a candidate to spend in an election; the majority of research informants ended up reporting that, exploitation of state resources and forced donations are primary sources of income.¹² Many also spent personal resources as a form of investment, which they aimed to recover through misusing state power and resources once elected.

YOUTH MOTIVATIONS

Motivations and aspirations of the youth participating in political violence were varied, this was because they are heterogeneous with respect to caste, ethnicity, political ideology, gender, age, economic and social status, and also individual needs (Özerdem & Podder, 2015; Sharma & Donini, 2010). Each individual's unique experience of stigmatization, discrimination, geographical isolation, and land deprivation, as well as social and political marginalization played an inspirational role in urging each person to pursue justice for themselves in terms of minimizing negative effects on their social status and recovering or being compensated for lost property (Bohara et al., 2006; Griffin, 2015). The collected data revealed that social issues, economic factors, various effects of modernization, and political conditions are integral to understanding the push and pull factors for youth, as per their willingness or not to engage with political violence that is predominantly seen among youth to be a means of emancipation in Nepal. Social factors included educational levels, family environment, peer pressure, the urge for revenge, caste hierarchy, and the extent of discrimination they experienced. Economic issues included shrinking livelihood possibilities and geographical conditions such as the insularity of living in remote places and forced separation from mainstream society, which consequently caused conditions of poverty. Modernization included learning to use and apply new technologies and information systems and the effects the absence of these commodities

had on the lives and livelihoods of people in rural areas, as opposed to urban populations where such technologies were conventional. Political reasons were inequalities in resource allocations, considerations of being or becoming the class enemy, political-ideological differences, and past atrocities of the state and its current manifesto. Understanding these pertaining push and pull factors is primary before gaining a better understanding of youth motivations for carrying out political violence in Nepal.

A small portion of the higher caste elite population has always ruled Nepal. They constructed social, economic, and political environments that favor meeting their needs and concerns, and they have done this through the utilization of state resources. In doing so, they could and perhaps never had any intentions of treating all ethnic and linguistic populations equally (Bista, 1991; Hachhethu, 2007). Disparities were embedded in the social, economic, and political fabric of Nepal—based on caste hierarchy (social-cultural structure), gender, and economic status. The inability to accommodate the needs of the diverse population has always been a part of the political agenda that continues to encourage and support the desire for political revolution. Political parties organized large followings since such mass movements possess a capacity to alter the system using force or through the ballot box or to change it completely. For example, the Maoists' slogan of “eradication of all forms of discrimination including caste-based prejudice, poverty, suppression and misery” inspired the youth to participate in violence and become a vehicle for transformation in a bid to create a new Nepal in which such discrimination is absent (Hutt, 2004). Furthermore, the Maoists' vision for a new Nepal laid the foundations for radical change upon which the youth was inspired to instigate political violence, as part of their struggle for emancipation. Likewise, ethnic political organizations and their discourses on identity have recently encouraged many of the youth to participate in ethnic identity uprisings in post-war Nepal (O'Neill et al., 2020). The youth, despite the situation in which they found themselves, had extreme desires for system change in hope of receiving equity and justice that they genuinely believed could deliver prosperity and development for citizens without prejudice. For these reasons, the youth participated in political parties and their violent activities; they see it as a means of effecting positive social change for themselves and their futures (Shrestha & Jenkins, 2019).

Previous understanding of caste and class suggested that they were means of acquiring status and honor in Nepal. This has been replaced to some extent with a new trend where political affiliation and education status are means of upward social mobility. In terms of political affiliation, being close to the monarchy was meant to be, at least for some people in the past, a means of obtaining social status and honor but that was before the dawn of democracy in 1990. This changed when forming a new alliance and affiliation with political parties to effect democratic reform became the desired trend. A civil society member in Province 3 expressed that the right kind of “political affiliation is like bathing in the holy Ganga (River)¹³ which would clean all sin. Also, having political party membership would give prestige and glorification in social settings.”¹⁴ The social understanding of the notion of “status and honor” in Nepali society contributes significantly to motivate the youth to engaging in politics, and subsequently, committing political violence.

Age factor and youth motivation

Social construction explains how age influences one's ability to exhibit behavior in social relations that are highly context-specific (Özerdem & Podder, 2015). In Nepali society, age is



crucial as it is associated with certain expectations, behavior patterns, and social obligations. Specific age brackets determine when an individual is expected to enter into marriage, associate in social and political institutions, or bear duties and fulfill obligations toward family and society. It is also a factor that heavily influences an individual's ability to participate in political activities that are more often than not related to politically motivated violent incidences. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal is a pertinent example where the majority of members belonged to the People's Liberation Army. This was also the case for other political cadres belonging to similar politically inspired youth groups (Bleie & Shrestha, 2012; Hutt, 2004; Saferworld, 2010). Most, if not all of these youth were unmarried with minimal obligations and responsibilities toward family and society, which provided them with a free mind to indulge in organizing and participating in incidences of political violence. Youth were brainwashed into believing that "no one will be left behind to cry in the event of your death,"¹⁵ which highly motivates youth to be involved in violent activities with fearless convictions. This youth mindset was a social accelerator that increased the Maoist party's political influence during the insurgency. A political leader in Province 3 stated that, "political parties want to recruit youth because most of them are unmarried individuals who bear few responsibilities towards family. And thus, they can provide their fulltime efforts for party activities".¹⁶

The level of youth participation in violent activities reduces with age. For instance, marriage is about taking up an important responsibility to meet social norms and expectations in Nepali society. In Nepal, the married youth rarely engage in extreme forms of violent politics. The marriage registration act sets out the age of 18 for both men and women to marry with parental consent. A civil society member in Province 1 stated that, "Love, affection, duties and a youth's responsibilities towards family and community are always attributed with the loss of aggressive energy. Aggressiveness normally decreases as one gets older (age/wisdom)."¹⁷ But most, importantly, note here the association of decreased aggressiveness with marriage. In short, when the youth in Nepal get married or want to marry, they are considered to be less likely to participate in political violence or take risks that could threaten their lives.¹⁸

Unemployment, political protection, and youth violence

Educational levels among the youth is rapidly increasing in Nepal. However, job opportunities are shrinking in the labor market. Also, the youth is progressively materialistic with unlimited wants and desires. In this set of circumstances, they are prone to violence and open to radicalization (Dahal & Chapagain, 2017). Full of aspirations and desires, they only expect a minimal assurance of employment and financial gain in return for their sacrifice in organized violence. Unable to meet these expectations, they tend to take an unlawful path to acquire financial resources through their affiliations with political parties, this is despite their realization of becoming puppets in the hands of political leaders (Dahal & Chapagain, 2017). A clear link in Nepal connects politically affiliated youth with organized crime in society (Steenkamp, 2014). There was no doubt that the Maoists had political motives to organize a long war in the country. However, their armed movement had installed two clear perceptions in Nepali society. These were: (a) violence was the necessary instrument through which to seize state power—that provides all kinds of benefits including economic benefits, and (b) violence was justifiable for a political cause—inequality and repression—which were blamed on elite groups. These changed perceptions acted partly as motivational factors for youth participation in criminal activities that promised to deliver economic rewards. In postwar Nepal, increasing

youth involvement in criminal activities to gain financial resources and power, remain unabated. Politics gradually became recognized as a profession after democracy entered the political arena in 1990, as economic conditions started determining political access and state power. Senior security personnel in an FGD expressed that,

Political parties require financial resources to strengthen their power-base; such financial resources can be accommodated through illegal activities. Hence, political parties always protect youth and encourage them to organise criminal activities, as it provides large sums of money and other resources to the party.¹⁹

The absence of elected political representatives in the local councils for almost two decades led to the nurturing and promotion of nepotism and corruption in Nepal's political landscape. Political parties organized an informal syndicate to manage, mobilize, and implement a local development budget, as well as other state service deliveries during this period. As discussed, groups of local users were formed to grant development aid to their close associates for the implementation of projects that benefited a few. The youth had to get involved in a political party to receive financial benefits through these local development budgets. Visibility was all about showing their dedication and motivation in front of senior political leaders. Such presence was often seen in the way the youth was participating openly in violent events that political parties organized, such as demonstrations and other forms of agitation. Inspired youth, enticed with economic incentives and expectations of material rewards, willingly joined the violent actions that political parties organized.

There was a rapid expansion of armed groups in postwar Nepal. Impunity, a volatile political environment, and a security vacuum that existed during the Maoist rebellion, and soon after it ended, contributed to an increment in the number of armed groups in the space of a relatively short time. Maoist insurgents were the major reason for the increasing numbers of armed groups in Nepal (Saferworld et al., 2011; Thapa & Ramsbotham, 2017). For instance, a security report that the Ministry of Home Affairs published in 2009 claimed that 109 armed groups were operating in Nepal's southern plains and eastern hills (Saferworld et al., 2011; Thapa & Ramsbotham, 2017). Many of these armed groups recruited former Maoist combatants as they were skillful in making, supplying, and using firearms (Bleie & Shrestha, 2012). A former child soldier in an FGD explained that,

Former Maoists' People's Liberation Army (PLA) cadres have spent much of their youth in the battlefield. During the peace process, they did not secure good employment as they lack the required academic qualifications. Hence, there was mounting frustration, and in the name of securing a livelihood, many former PLA fighters have been engaging in criminal activities.²⁰

The expansion in criminal activities was seen when the country began the long journey toward peace. At this time, the morale of the security forces was diminishing, whereas morale among political forces (those parties who were stakeholders in the war) was increasing as a result of the end of the war. This is associated with general perceptions that the Maoists had gained the upper hand in the war effort. Also, the war basically limited the mobility and ability of security forces to provide security in all parts of the country. The Nepali police in charge of providing security to communities were confined to district headquarters, as many of the offices were destroyed in the war. A situation was created where political leaders were heavily



influencing security forces²¹ in dealing with day-to-day security concerns. Civilian supremacy in controlling security forces is fundamental in a democracy. However, the intensive supremacy of civilian strength may challenge the very aim of these security forces in terms of their ability to maintain security. This is precisely what happened in postwar Nepal. Crime and criminal activities were increased under the protection of political actors. A reason for this is that political parties became the legitimate force in the new democracy, but were not yet in a position to directly capture state resources. In these circumstances, the only means through which they could capture state resources was to rely on agitation, crime, and the soliciting of forced donations, as means of acquiring financial resources to fund political violence. Hence, a working relationship was established among actors involved in crime and politics, but of course this was not open or visible to everyone. What was apparent in the country was extensive corruption. It enabled an environment where criminalization processes gradually and steadily become part of the “normal” functioning of political parties.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the political participation and mobilization of the youth in Nepal leading them to commit youth-led violence, which we defined as a particular form of political violence organized through political parties, which manipulated the youth to act willingly with expectations of gaining various incentives. We identified and analyzed youth-led violence with two and sometimes overlapping dimensions: opportunistic and strategic. We also used the concept of “rent seeking” to identify the pull and push factors for youth participation in politics and political violence.

Every youth in Nepal has their own sociocultural background that stimulates them to participate or not in political violence. Such stimulation can be received through an individual's exclusive experience of deprivation, discrimination, and associated hardship. Social and economic modernization, certain traditions and political conditions are important factors that influences the youth. Within the state, ethnocentric political ideologies have immensely inspired the youth population to involve themselves in political violence in postwar Nepal. Both spontaneous and forced youth participation and mobilization have occurred in Nepali political uprisings. In recognizing that identity can be a driving force, the general population viewed the youth as agents of social change as well as troublemakers. A few explanations emerged to shed light on the unlawful acts that Nepali youth carried out in the post-1990 period, whether for upholding political domination, struggling for equity, or for obtaining monetary capital and resources. Materialistic concerns and unemployment are what we see as the ultimate causes that may push the youth to be involved in crime and violence in exchange for gaining financial recompense through illegal avenues that pay substantial material dividends. At present, it is promising that the political climate is changing with the formation of a more stable government.

Youth-led political violence reached its peak during the Maoist insurgency. However, political parties in Nepal could do more to discourage dishonesty and exploitation of state resources, and minimize criminality, corruption, and youth violence in the future. It requires great effort to connect the youth with the productive endeavors that enable them to fulfill individual needs for education and health and future prosperity. There is a growing perception that politics is not a profession through which to acquire resources and ill-gotten gains from involvement in crime. Also, there is a realization among the youth today that as members of a

society, they have certain duties and responsibilities. As most Nepali people envision, efforts from both the state and its citizens are central to finding a durable path to peace, stability, and prosperity. Many challenges remain to reform the youth and deal with their insecurities about inequality and ethnocentrism, which remain present in Nepal's diverse and traditional society. To change such complex conditions such as caste dominance is extremely difficult even in a democratic society because of its strong links to religion. Can modernization and education alone reduce inequity and prevent identity politics from causing violence in Nepal? Can the creation of provinces based on ethnic boundaries mitigate conflict among social groups in Nepal to address ethnic grievances in postwar Nepal? These are questions for future research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this article are available on request from the author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations that require protecting the identity of the research participants.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Madhesh/Tarai is situated on the plain lands of Nepal. The two movements in 2007 and 2008 were organized by the Madheshi political parties to end historical discriminations against them.
- ² KII with an academic, Province 3, 13/07/2018.
- ³ KII with conflict and political analyst, Province 3, 26/06/2018.
- ⁴ 1990 revolution, popularly known as *Jana Andolan I* forced decades of an absolute monarchical rule to end and brought multiparty democracy. And, the 2006 people's revolution, popularly known as *Jana Andolan II* paved a way for the federal democratic republic in Nepal.
- ⁵ KII with political leader, Province 3, 29/06/2018; KII with political leader, Province 5, 17/05/2018; FGD with the youth, Province 5, 16/05/2018; FGD with civil society members, Province 2, 08/07/2018; FGD with civil society members, Province 1, 20/07/2018; KII with political leader, Province 5, 16/05/2018; KII with a security provider, Province 2, 06/06/2018; KII with political leader, Province 1, 16/07/2018; KII with political leader, Province 1, 18/07/2018; KII with civil society member, Province 1, 19/07/2018.
- ⁶ The Communist Party of Nepal led by Netra Bikram Chand (Biplov) was formed in 2014 after splitting from the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists led by Mohan Baidya; this eventuated after citing the armed revolution as not being over yet. They are conducting armed activities at present.
- ⁷ KII with civil society member, Province 3, 15/06/2018.
- ⁸ VDC was a lower government unit before the new constitution was promulgated in 2015. The new constitution recognized rural municipalities as the lowest government unit. These rural municipalities are formed after merging more than one VDC.



- ⁹ KII with a political leader in Province 1, 17/07/2018.
- ¹⁰ See https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017 (accessed on December 1, 2018).
- ¹¹ KII with civil society member, Province 3, 07/05/2018.
- ¹² KII with civil society member, Province 3, 06/05/2018; KII with civil society member, Province 3, 06/05/2018; KII with civil society member, Province 3, 08/05/2018; KII with civil society member, Province 3, 26/06/2018; KII with civil society member, Province 5, 15/05/2018; KII with journalist, Province 5, 17/05/2018; KII with political leader, Province 2, 18/07/2018; FGD with the youth, Province 2, 07/06/2018; FGD with former Maoist combatants, Province 3, 11/06/2018.
- ¹³ In Nepal, more than 80% population are Hindu. In Hindu mythology, Ganga is a holy river. Bathing in the Ganga (River) will clean all sins one has committed.
- ¹⁴ KII with civil society member, Province 3, 15/06/2018.
- ¹⁵ A proverb in Nepal that “*eklo manche ko marda rune manche kahi hudaina* (unmarried people do not have anyone to cry in his/her death).” This perception has also partly played a role in facilitating youth involvement in political violence.
- ¹⁶ KII with political leader, Province 3, 28/06/2018.
- ¹⁷ KII with civil society member, Province 1, 16/07/2018.
- ¹⁸ KII with political leader, Province 1, 16/07/2018.
- ¹⁹ FGD with security providers, Province 3, 14/07/2018.
- ²⁰ FGD with former Maoist combatants, Province 3, 11/6/2018.
- ²¹ Nepal has three security forces, namely, Nepal Army, Armed Police Force, and Nepal Police.

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