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Leiden
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Transforming Nepal's political system: party positions and public opinion (2004-2012)

Sen, P.K.

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About This Study

1.1 Political Developments in Nepal

This study aims to analyse the structure and dynamics of public opinion in Nepal with regard to the radical transformation of the principal features of the country's political system in recent decades, with a particular focus on the similarities and/or differences between the positions taken by Nepal's major political parties and the concerns and priorities of the general public. Nepal has been witnessing a historic political transition in the first decade of the twenty-first century, changing characteristics of the political system that were not only fundamental, but that still seemed impervious to reform only years before the transformation. The monarchy has been abolished, and so have the unitary state structure and the state's association with the Hindu religion. In place of a Hindu unitary kingdom, the country has been declared a secular federal democratic republic in the fourth amendment to the Interim Constitution of Nepal on 28 December 2007.¹ The first sitting of the elected Constituent Assembly ratified this statement by overwhelming majority on 28 May 2008. The Constituent Assembly also gave an official status to languages other than Nepali. With this ratification, then King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev (hereafter referred to as King Gyanendra) lost all perks and privileges except his rights as a common citizen. This was legally formalized by the new Constitution of the country promulgated on 20 September 2015 by the Constituent Assembly. Article 4(1) of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 has defined the 'State of Nepal' as *an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive democratic, socialist-oriented federal democratic republican state* (Constituent Assembly Secretariat 2015).

The promulgation of the new Constitution has not only ended the prolonged transition that the country had been witnessing, but also formally abolished the centuries-old Shah dynasty. The Constitution proclaims that sovereignty and state authority are vested in the people, not in the monarchy as stated in Nepal's previous constitutions. As written in its Preamble, the Constitution is determined to establish an egalitarian society on the basis of the principles of proportional inclusion and participation ensuring an equitable economy, prosperity and social justice. It has created a federal democratic republic with the introduction of seven provinces, ending all types of possibility of reinstatement of the monarchy and the unitary state. The form of governance of

¹ The fourth amendment guaranteed the republicanism, federalism and secularism by defining the 'State of Nepal' as an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive and federal democratic republican state in its Article 4(1) (Law Books Management Board 2012).

the country shall be a multi-party, federal democratic republic with the lower house of parliament elected on the basis of a mixed electoral system (first-past-the-post and proportional representation)².

So, passing the new constitution was not just a reform of some aspects of previous constitutions, but a radical overhaul of the fundamental principles of the country's political system. Apart from the election of the Constituent Assembly, this transformation took place without the involvement of the citizens, for example through a referendum on the new constitution. However, the new political system's legitimacy and sustainability depend not only on the majority support of the main political parties, but also, arguably primarily, on that of the general public. A study by Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005) reveals that non-violent civic resistance and changes in public opinion are major factors that contribute to the success and failure of transitions to democracy. They find that non-violent civic resistance during the period of transition has a significant effect on yielding sustainable freedom. Referring to a Freedom House study, Shin (2007) argues that the success or failure of the process of democratization largely depends on the role the general mass played during the transition. The study shows that the likelihood of a successful transition from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy is over four times higher if transitions are supported by strong and non-violent civic coalitions than if they are not. Doorenspleet and Shrestha (2013) pay particular attention to the interactions between the mass level and various elite levels, arguing that the lack of consolidation of previous attempts at democratization in Nepal was caused by different degrees of support for democracy at different levels. They focus on support for the principle of democracy rather than for concrete constitutional arrangements as in my study, but both studies share the same conviction that the relationship between elite actions and public opinion is crucial for the legitimacy of the political system. Similarly, in the context of Uganda, Moehler (2006) argues that although public participation in the constitution-making process is one the most recommended methods for enhancing constitutional legitimacy, consensus among the political elites is a must to enhance constitutional support.

This researcher is fortunate to have raw data of a series of public opinion polls conducted during the period of transformation that enable him to study the structure and the development of public opinion, and to compare this to the positions taken by the main political parties.

1.2 Focus of the Study: Four Reforms

Modern Nepal had been constituted as a unitary Hindu kingdom from its foundation until the recent past. The Nepali monarchy, an institution associated with the formation of the Nepali state in 1768, had a traditional affiliation with Hinduism. The Hindu high caste hill group (that consists of *Chhetri*, *Bahun* and *Thakuri*) had the highest social status, by which they were able to control the state's resources, and to enjoy all powers and privileges while excluding others. In addition, only Nepali, which is the mother tongue of the Hindu high caste hill group, had received recognition from the state as an official language. These four fundamental characteristics of the

² The electoral system qualifies as Mixed Member Majoritarian (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001), with 165 MPs elected by first-past-the post and 110 MPs elected by nationwide proportional representation.

Nepali political system - (a) the monarchy, (b) the unitary form of governance, (c) the state's official association with Hinduism, and (d) the recognition of Nepali as the sole official language - were regarded as indispensable and inseparable components of the state's structure. These four components were promoted as the four pillars of Nepal's political structure until King Gyanendra lost power in April 2006.

More was at stake than the political institutions as such. Nepali identity, in the past, was moulded out of these four components. Nepali identity had been constructed on the basis of the dominant culture, religion and language of the Hindu high caste hill group. But at the same time Nepali society has been ethnically, culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse since its existence. While the promotion of the four political institutions had been unsuccessful in decreasing this diversity, it had protected the domination of the culture, religion and language of the Hindu high caste hill group and it had marginalized and even excluded cultures, religions and languages of others from the state's structure. This is the main reason that this study focuses on these four components.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The fact that the structure of the Nepali state was inextricably linked to the cultural, religious and linguistic domination by the hill caste group makes it all the more important to examine and compare the positions taken by the political elites (i.e. top-level political leaders of major political parties, legislators and prominent political decision makers) and the decisions taken by the political parties on the one hand with the opinions of the general public and its various segments on the other hand.

From a normative democratic point of view, it may seem preferable that the elites and political parties listen to public opinion. In particular, when it comes to establish or reform the rules and institutions of democratic decision-making, it would seem desirable that political parties seek to translate the concerns of ordinary citizens into a new constitution. But in some respects this line of argument may be too simple. Empirical studies of elite attitudes in a variety of countries have shown that political elites possess higher democratic values than the general public. Elites are more tolerant with regard to minority rights and civil liberties than the general public, and they have more support for democratic institutions and principles (e.g. McClosky 1964; Barnum and Sullivan 1989; Sullivan et al 1993; Farag 2020). Samuel Stouffer (1955) was the first to demonstrate that community leaders in the USA generally were more supportive of democratic principles than ordinary citizens. These studies share a common argument that political elites develop these values due to a process of selective recruitment and due to their socialization, leading to differences in tolerance between political elites and their public (Jackman 1972: 753; Shamir 1991: 1020; Sullivan et al 1993: 52-53). More recently, public opinion surveys conducted in Tunisia between 2010 and 2016 showed that Tunisian elites were more democratic than the mass, and the mass had developed more authoritarian positions than the elites over time (Farag 2020: 553-559). This became the basis for 'the theory of democratic elitism': the principles of democracy are safer in the hands of political elites than in those of the general public.

However, later studies have questioned this argument of political elites as being attitudinally more tolerant. Jackman (1972), for example, reanalysed Stouffer's data and concluded that the elite-mass difference in tolerance disappeared once demographic differences and particularly level of education were controlled for. Similarly, Shamir (1991: 1020) argued that political elites seemed to be more tolerant than their mass public because of the selective recruitment in which people belonging to certain social strata are overrepresented in the elites: the more educated, those of higher social and economic status. Sniderman et al (1991: 369-370) accept that political elites have higher democratic values than the public, but they stress that such attitudes should be studied within political elites because political parties differ significantly in their attitudes. In addition, the evidence of democratic elitism becomes weaker when the focus shifts from civil liberties to other democratic values and in particular when elites are studied in other systems than well-established Western democracies (Peffley and Rohrschneider 2007). The latter finding is especially relevant in a study of democratic reform in Nepal.

This study's comparison of the positions of elites and parties with those of the general public in the context of the recent transformation of the Nepali democratic system may thus contribute to the ongoing discussion of the elitist theory of democracy. For that purpose, this study will also review the empirical literature on the relationship between political parties and public opinion and distil from this literature three positions – parties represent public opinion; parties take decisions without taking public opinion into account; and party decisions and public opinion influence each other reciprocally – and compare these positions in the context of the four political reforms with the available evidence from the case of Nepal. Therefore, the study is basically a comparative case study of the four major political developments that recently took place in Nepal.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

The core question in this study is about the relationship between Nepali public opinion and the transformation of Nepal's political system. There can be little doubt that the political parties of Nepal have been the primary decision-makers in this constitutional transition, but this study seeks to ascertain to what extent the concerns of the Nepal's ordinary citizens have been addressed by the political parties.

Research questions that come to the fore in this context are:

1. Are Nepal's recent political changes, which are formalized in the new Constitution with regard to issues such as republicanism, federalism, secularism and multilingualism, reflecting the opinions of the general public?
2. During the transition process, have the positions of the political parties come closer to those of the general public, or conversely: have the opinions of the general public approached the positions of the parties?
3. To what extent can any difference between political parties and public opinion be explained by a composition effect, particularly by different levels of education of elites and ordinary citizens?

In order to answer these questions, the immediate objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse what longitudinal opinion surveys reveal about the concerns and priorities of the general public with regard to the four major constitutional reforms, and about any changes in these concerns and priorities over time.
2. To analyse what the decisions of major political parties and elite opinion surveys (as far as they are available) reveal about the concerns and priorities of the political elites of Nepal.
3. To compare the positions of the political parties with the concerns and priorities of the general public

1.5 Data on Public Opinion and Elite Opinion

Longitudinal opinion polls based on random (probability) sampling, titled 'Nepal Contemporary Political Situation' or NCPS, were conducted with the support from The Asia Foundation Nepal between 2004 and 2012, and this author was one of the principal researchers. In addition, other longitudinal opinion polls (also based on random sampling) called 'People's Perception of Safety and Security' or PPSS were conducted with the support from The Saferworld UK between 2007 and 2010, in which this author has also been involved. The availability of these longitudinal public opinion polls at such a crucial period in Nepal's history means that it is possible to measure and track people's perceptions, choices and priorities during the momentous historical transition and detect the continuities and changes in people's opinions toward the same topics and issues over the period. It would not be possible to do so if such longitudinal public opinion polls had not been conducted. Such longitudinal polls are very rare outside western established democracies. Conducting public opinion polls is even more challenging in a third world country like Nepal due to the paucity or poor quality of roads. In addition, an armed conflict between the state security forces and Maoist rebels increased the risk of collecting data in field. In addition, administering questionnaires at sampling sites in face-to-face mode was sometimes very difficult due to the low literacy of respondents because some questions phrased in the standard Nepali language were not easily understandable to them. Despite these challenges, we were able to conduct these opinion polls without compromising their quality. So, the public opinion data used in this study already constitute an important value in itself.

Ideally we should be able to compare the opinions of the citizens with those of members of the political elite. Fortunately, there is a study called *Nepal Democracy Survey* conducted in 2007. This survey not only measured the opinions of the political elites (i.e. members of the parliament [MPs]), but also compared them with the opinions of the general public. This was the first survey in the country that gauged the opinions of both the elites and the general public using the same instrument. Unfortunately, it was undertaken only once which means that this survey does not allow us to map any changes, any convergence or divergence, between the opinions of the two segments of society over time. However, the first decisions in the transition, taken by the elected Constitutional Assembly in 2008, were in line with the views expressed by the political elites

interviewed in 2007. The decisions of the political parties during the transition period are therefore examined in this study to determine the continuities and changes at the elite level.

1.6 Diversity at the Level of Both Parties and Society

So far, ‘the’ political elite or ‘the’ political parties, and ‘the’ general public or ‘the’ ordinary citizens have been referred to as if they are monolithic blocs or unitary actors. If they are such blocs or actors anywhere in the world, this is definitely not the case in Nepal. In fact, a considerable part of this study is devoted to analysing the differences of opinion on the four main constitutional reforms at both the mass and elite level. To help understanding those analyses, I briefly discuss the diversity at both the level of political parties and society.

1.7 Nepal’s Major Political Parties

Nepal clearly has a multi-party system: currently over 70 parties are registered with the Election Committee of Nepal, but some of these parties are only represented at the provincial or local level. Here, I focus on the most important political parties at the national level.

Most of them were founded in the late 1940s in India since political parties were banned in Nepal at the time. Thus, political parties have had over 70 years of history in Nepal. The first democratic revolution they carried out in Nepal was in the late 1940s to the early 1950s to overthrow the Rana regime³. It was a part of a larger wave of decolonization and democratisation developed across the Indian subcontinent (Taras 2006: 52). So, their genesis was closely associated with the democratic movement against the Rana regime. Political parties have had a chequered history since then: from joining with the monarchy to oust the Rana regime in 1950 to participating in the election in 1959 (i.e. the first election to form an elected parliament in Nepal), leading an elected government and introducing multiparty democracy between 1959 and 1960, being banned by the monarchy between 1960 and 1990 (i.e., the period of the party-less authoritarian *Panchayat* regime⁴), reintroducing multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy in 1990

³ The Rana regime was an oligarchic system always headed by a premier belonging to a particular family group called Rana. Nepal was ruled under this regime for 104 years (from September 1846 to February 1951). The regime had maintained total isolation from the rest of the world.

⁴ *Panchayat* was the political system of Nepal from 1960 to 1990. The system was introduced by King Mahendra (who reigned 1955-1972) after overthrowing the first democratically elected government of Nepali Congress Party under the premiership of Bisheswor Prasad Koirala and dissolving the parliament on 16 December 1960. The parliamentary system was immediately abrogated and political parties were declared illegal. The King took back all executive powers proclaiming that the Nepali Congress government had failed to maintain a balanced foreign policy and had encouraged ‘anti-national elements’ (Joshi and Rose 1966: 385; Rose 1971: 231). The *Panchayat* system was formalized by promulgating a new constitution in December 1962, which introduced a party-less guided democracy giving all executive powers to the monarch. It outlawed all the political parties and their activities, and prohibited fundamental civil rights such as the right to express opinion and organize against the establishment. The *Panchayat* regime moulded Nepali national identity along the Nepali language, Hindu religion, loyalty to the monarchy and *daura suruwal* (a typical kind of costume worn by hill men). Nepali nationalism was often defined as anti-Indianism (Upadhyaya 2002: 57). The system lacked genuine people’s participation and was highly centralized thus preparing the ground for another crisis of legitimacy (Hachhethu 2002: 29).

with the successful end of the people's movement of April 1990 (commonly known as *Jan Andolan I*, which literally means 'the first wave of the people's movement'), governing the post-1990 democratic governments, fighting Maoist rebels, being dismissed by the king in February 2005, and recently abolishing the monarchy.

The Nepali Congress Party

The Nepali Rastriya Congress Party was formed in October 1946 in the Indian city of Banaras and the Nepal Prajatantra Congress Party was created in August 1948 in Calcutta (now renamed Kolkata), India by educated middle class Nepali who were living in India either in exile or to earn their living. Both parties had a common goal of ousting the Rana regime and instating a multiparty democracy with a constitutional monarchy. They were united in April 1950 under a new name of Nepali Congress Party (NCP). The party called for an armed revolt during the Baigania Conference in Baigania, India in September 1950. It erected its own *Mukti Sena* (which literally means 'liberation army'), which succeeded in controlling more than fifty percent of the country's territory (Hachhethu 2002: 31). The NCP was one of the three parties which signed the Delhi Accord in February 1951 in Delhi, India with Rana representatives and King Tribhuvan. The accord formally abolished the Rana regime, terminated the armed revolt of the NCP, lifted the ban on political parties and allowed them to engage in political activities openly.

The NCP formally adopted democratic socialism as its ideology in 1956. A multiparty parliamentary democracy, periodic elections, non-violence, the guarantee of fundamental human rights and a constitutional monarchy were the party's basic political ideals. The party won a two-thirds majority (74 of the 109 seats) in the first parliamentary elections in 1959 and formed a government under the premiership of Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala. The NCP government took some important steps towards the modernization of Nepal. It introduced some progressive policy measures such as the nationalization of *birta* lands (tax exempted lands), the abolition of the *raja rajauta* system (small feudatory principalities), the abolition of *jamindari* (big land holdings) and the imposition of a ceiling on land holdings, distribution of land to poor and landless peasants, the introduction of a property tax, and increased provision of education, health and communication services in the country (Hachhethu 2002: 33). It was this party which led the *Jan Andolan I* to overthrow the Panchayat regime and reintroduce multiparty democracy in April 1990. A faction of the party split away in September 2002 with the name Nepali Congress (Democratic), but it again merged with the NCP in September 2007.

The Communist Parties

The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was formed in Kolkata, India, in September 1949. Like the NCP, the CPN was founded with the main objective of overthrowing the Rana regime. However, its ideology of class-struggle and republicanism distinguished it from the NCP. The party participated in the anti-Rana movement with the NCP from the beginning. However, it did not embrace multiparty democracy and monarchy. In its first official handout published in April

1949,⁵ the party declared that Nepal should strive for establishing a Chinese model people's republic and, if necessary, an armed insurgency should be launched to achieve this goal (Upreti 2006: 36). It condemned the 1951 Delhi Accord as a 'betrayal' and demanded the election of a constituent assembly. But its demands were not heard at that time. The influence of the CPN at the public level proved to be very weak when it won only 4 of the 109 seats and received only 7 percent of the popular vote in the first democratic parliamentary elections in 1959. In the post-1960 period, the CPN split into a number of factions. Seven communist parties out of these factions formed a coalition called United Left Front in February 1990, which launched the *Jan Andolan I* movement for the restoration of multiparty democracy, together with the NCP, in April 1990. It was the first time in the history of Nepal that two political camps agreed on common objectives and methods (Sharma 2001: 15). After the successful conclusion of *Jan Andolan I*, and just before the 1991 elections, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (CPN [UML]) was formed in January 1991 by unifying two communist parties – CPN (Marxist) and CPN (Marxist-Leninist). The party adopted multiparty democracy as part of its ideology and is against armed struggle since its existence. The CPN (UML) was united with another communist party called CPN (Maoist Centre) in May 2018 forming a new party named the Nepal Communist Party. However, it split again after a judicial decision that this label was already taken by another party.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN [Maoist]) was formed in 1994 under the leadership of Pushpa Kamal Dahal (commonly known by his guerrilla name 'Prachanda') after splitting away from one of the communist factions - Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre). The CPN (Maoist) went underground immediately after its formation to begin preparations for an armed struggle, which they called the 'People's War'. They announced the 'People's War' against the Nepali state on 13 February 1996, demanding the formation of a constituent assembly and the declaration of a republic. The party basically adopted the philosophy of Mao Zedong. They were also inspired by the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and Peru's left wing guerrilla movement 'Shining Path'. It is generally believed that the Maoists' armed struggle prepared the ground for the eventual establishment of a republic in Nepal. It also increased political awareness among the general public. After waging the 'People's War' for ten years, the CPN (Maoist) entered into a 12-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA)⁶ in November 2005 in which they agreed to establish a lasting peace in the country, expressed their commitment to hold elections for a constituent assembly, and agreed to end the 'autocratic monarchy' through a nationwide mass movement (which they called *Jan Andolan II*). The party signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) with the government in November 2006 ending the decade-long armed insurgency. The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord paved the

⁵ It was published by an organizing committee of Nepali leftists which was to become the Communist Party of Nepal in September 1949.

⁶ It was an alliance formed by the seven agitating parliamentary political parties on May 2005 to protest against the King's take-over of 1 February 2005, when the incumbent King Gyanendra dismissed the appointed Deuba government, declared a state of emergency and took all executive powers. The seven parties included in the alliance were Nepali Congress, Nepali Congress (Democratic), CPN (UML), Nepal Workers Peasants Party, Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Anandi Devi), United Left Front and People's Front. The United Left Front mentioned here is different to the one formed in the eve of the *Jan Andolan I* of April 1990. This one is a front of five fringe Nepali communist parties formed on 3 October 2002 to mobilize the mass against the king's takeover.

way for holding elections to a constituent assembly by mid-June 2007, among many other things. Since then, the CPN (Maoist) became a mainstream political party and accepted multiparty democracy with periodic free and fair elections. It was renamed as the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in January 2009 and as the CPN (Maoist Centre) since May 2016. The party briefly merged with the CPN (UML) in May 2018 but they split again in 2021.

Janamorchha Nepal, literary People's Front Nepal, was founded in 2002 as an electoral front of the CPN (Unity Centre-Masal). It was formed by the merger of Samyukta Janamorchha Nepal, literally Joint People's Front Nepal, an electoral front of the CPN (Unity Centre) and Rastriya Janamorchha, literally National People's Front, an electoral front of the CPN (Masal). Janamorchha Nepal and its affiliated party - the CPN (Unity Centre-Masal) - merged with the CPN (Maoist) to form the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in October 2008.

Nepal Majdur Kisan Party (NMKP; literally Nepal Workers and Peasants Party) is one of the factions split from the Communist Party of Nepal in January 1975. It was a part of United Left Front formed in February 1990 – just before the April 1990 mass protest movement (i.e. *Jan Andolan I*).

Madhes-based Parties

Nepal Sadbhawana Parishad was founded in 1985 as a socio-political organization for equal rights of the *Madhesi* people (i.e. Nepali people who live in the plains situated in the southern part of Nepal spread from East to West, and whose languages and cultures are similar to those of the people in Northern India). Its main aim was to strengthen the voice of the *Madhesi* people for citizenship and equal identity, and to introduce Hindi as the second national language.⁷ The organization also played an important role in the people's movement of April 1990 (i.e. *Jan Andolan I*). After the restoration of multiparty democracy, this organization transformed itself into a political party named Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP) in 1990. This was the party which pushed for federalism prior to *Jan Andolan II* of April 2006 (Baral 2009: 2). The party merged into the Rastriya Janata Party along with other Madhes-based political parties in 2017. In 2020 this party joined the leftist Samajbadi Party to form the Janata Samajbadi Party.

The Right

Finally, Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) is a rightist political party formed by political elites of the Panchayat era in May 1990 (i.e. just after the successful end of *Jan Andolan I*). The party's main stances are pro-monarchy and pro-Hinduism. The party split and re-united numerous times, but one of the factions has always retained the original name - RPP. Although the party still

⁷ In or around the same time, Bahujan Samaj Party was established in India in 1984 to attract scheduled caste voters (literally Dalit voters) which has been quite successful in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh where, it is believed that, inclusion of scheduled caste elites was very low in broad-based dominant parties due to unwillingness of upper-caste elites to share power (Chandra 2004).

ideologically stands for monarchism and a Hindu state, it has ratified Nepal's current constitution in September 2015, which guarantees that Nepal is a republican and secular state.

1.8 Ethnic Diversity

The population of Nepal is characterised by significant cultural diversity, due to historic waves of immigration from both the North and the South. According to the 2011 census, we can discern 125 caste or ethnic groups (excluding other unidentified groups), 123 languages, and 10 religious denominations. Ethnicity, language, religion, and region, are intertwined. Here we focus on the ethnic diversity and we follow the practice to simplify matters by combining ethnic groups into eight broad categories. The hill caste group includes upper caste Hindus of the hills: *Chhetri*, *Bahun*, *Thakuri* and *Sanyasi*); this is the group that long dominated Nepali politics and society, as mentioned above. The hill indigenous group includes non-Hindu Mongoloid communities of the hills: *Magar*, *Tamang*, *Rai*, *Gurung*, *Limbu*, *Sherpa*, etc. The hill *Dalit* includes lower caste Hindus of the hills: *Kami*, *Damai*, *Sarki*, etc. The *Newars* constitute a category by themselves: they are the indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley, many of them Hindus, some Buddhists). The *Madhesi* caste group includes upper and middle caste Hindus of the Tarai region: *Yadav*, *Teli*, *Koiri*, *Kurmi*, *Brahmin*, *Rajput*, *Kayastha*, etc. The Tarai indigenous group includes Hindu Mongoloid communities of the Tarai: *Tharu*, *Dhanuk*, *Rajbansi*, *Danuwar*, *Dhimel*, *Meche*, *Koche*, etc. They prefer to identify themselves as Tarai indigenous group rather than *Madhesi* group).⁸ The *Madhesi Dalit* includes lower caste Hindus of the Tarai: *Chamar*, *Musahar*, *Paswan*, *Dhobi*, *Bantar*, etc.; and finally, the Muslim category includes both the Tarai and the hill Muslims).

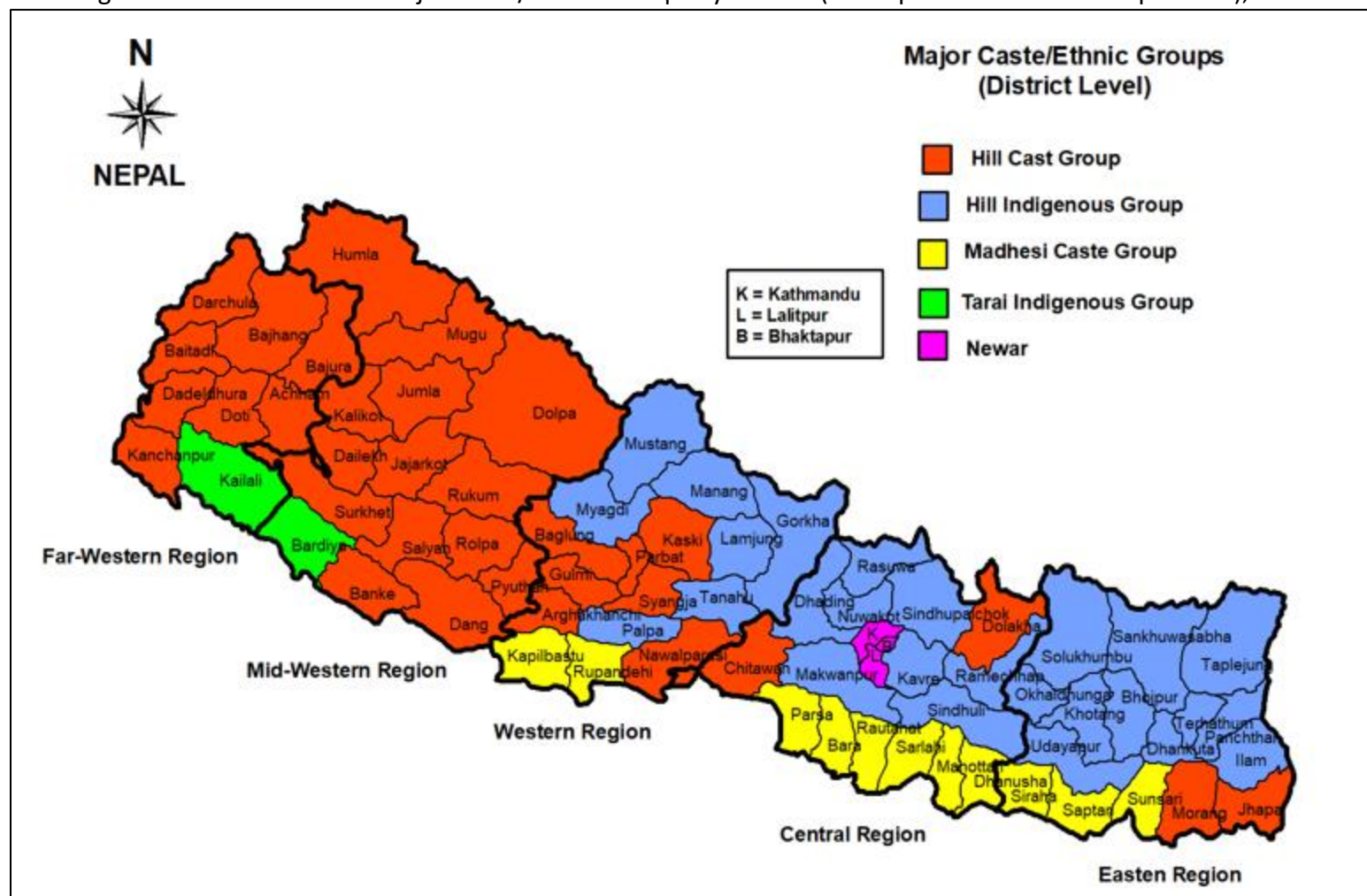
Any Nepali man or woman can be categorized into one of these eight ethnic categories. According to the 2001 National Census (i.e. the nearest census to the years the series of polls were conducted), their proportions to the total population of Nepal were: 31 percent hill caste group; 23 percent hill indigenous group; 8 percent hill *Dalit*; 5 percent Newar; 16 percent *Madhesi* caste group; 9 percent Tarai indigenous group; 4 percent *Madhesi* *Dalit*; and 4 percent Muslim. It is important to know the broad categories of ethnicity and their proportions because public opinions on the four major reforms will also be analysed across these groups in the subsequent chapters.

As is already evident from the labels given to the ethnic categories, ethnic groups have their basis in different parts of the country. As can be seen in Figure 1.1, the hill caste group constitutes a majority in the Far-Western and Mid-Western mountain and hill districts of the country. Also, they form a majority in some hill districts of the Western region. They are in majority in some Tarai districts of the Far-Western, Mid-Western, Western, Central and Eastern regions. Hill indigenous group forms a majority in the Western, Central and Eastern mountain and hill districts of the country. In a mountain district located in the Central region of the country, hill caste group is a majority. Newars are the major ethnic group in three districts of the Kathmandu Valley. The *Madhesi* caste group is the major community in most of the Western, Central and Eastern Tarai

⁸ The Tharus - the largest ethnic group scattered east to west in the Tarai - disassociated themselves from the *Madhesi* identity in 2009 and demanded the recognition of a distinct Tharu identity (Pandey 2022: 98-99).

districts. The Tarai indigenous group is the major community in two districts of Tarai: one in the Far-Western Tarai and another in the Mid-Western Tarai.

Figure 1.1: Distribution of Major Caste/Ethnic Groups by District (as Proportion of District Population), 2001



Source: Sharma, 2008

1.9 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains three parts: An introduction to political developments in Nepal and to the theory, methods and data used, followed by the analysis of public opinion on each of the four major reforms, and finally a comparison of public opinion and the positions taken by the political elites.

In the introductory part, Chapter 2 discusses Nepal's political history and transformation. It highlights the country's political history since the eighteenth century (when the Nepali state was founded) in the context of Nepali identity. Furthermore, major political events and transformations taken place in the country in the most recent three decades are described chronologically in this chapter. Chapter 3 presents a review of the literature relevant to this study. It discusses three positions with regard to the relationship between political parties/elites and public opinion. Chapter 4 describes methods and data used in this study.

In the second part, Chapter 5 analyses the general public's views on the issue of monarchism vs. republicanism in detail. The relationship between public opinion and various independent variables such as demographic variables and party affiliation is also investigated by using multiple regression analysis. Similarly, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 analyse public opinion on the issues of a Hindu state vs. secularism, monolingualism vs. multilingualism and a unitary state vs. federalism respectively. Chapter 9 investigates the underlying relationship between the opinions on the four reform issues through a factor analysis.

In the third part, Chapter 10 compares the general public's opinion and the political elites' opinion on the state restructuring issues in detail. It also compares public and elite opinion with the decisions by the major political parties.

Finally, Chapter 11 concludes the study by summarizing the key findings and formulating answers to the research questions. It discusses the implications of the key findings, data and methods for political science and society. It also recommends some suggestions for further research.