

Federalism is the most significant ideological divide in Nepali politics

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Amid the the “de-ideologisation” of Nepali politics, the most consequential differences are on the system of provincial government. Three emergent parties throw the divisions into sharp relief.

After the federal and provincial elections in Nepal in November 2022, the rise of newer parties dominated the news. Kathmandu was especially buoyant about the surprise emergence of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) – a makeshift outfit set up six months before the elections by a bombastic television personality (in)famous for his sting journalism, Rabi Lamichhane. The subsequent controversy surrounding Lamichhane’s citizenship – it emerged that he had not completed the process of reacquiring Nepali citizenship as per Nepal’s laws – added more intrigue to his story. The RSP’s rise was paralleled by the ascent of two parties from outside Kathmandu, the Janamat Party (JP) and the Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP), but they were far less discussed.

The true winner of the 2022 elections was Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, the former Maoist guerilla leader and now chief of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). His party lost 19 seats from the last election, holding on to only 32 seats in the 275-member House of Representatives. Yet he managed to land the prime ministership with near unanimous support from parliament in his first vote of confidence. Dahal [cobbled together a coalition](#) with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) by breaking his party’s pre-election alliance with the Nepali Congress. The coalition also formed governments in all seven provinces of Nepal. Even the ostensible opposition, the Congress, voted in support of the government in parliament, with only two parliamentarians voting against Dahal. The near unanimity disguised the instability that has been inherent in Nepal’s polity. This became apparent when Dahal soon changed his tune and supported the Congress’s candidate for presidential election, instead of the preferred choice of his governing partners in the UML, effectively breaking the hastily put together post-election coalition. Dahal remains the prime minister now, but with the Congress as governing partner and the UML pushed out.

The convenient switching of alliances between parties despite ostensible differences in ideology has been a norm in Nepal’s competitive politics. The three major parties – the Nepali Congress, the UML and the Maoists, with their respective claims to social democratic, Marxist-Lenninst and Maoist doctrines – have played so much bait-and-switch with different political formations to gain power that their stated ideologies have stopped having any meaning. Even the new RSP, which rose rapidly with a strong anti-establishment stance before the election, has till now opted to support any formation of the ruling coalition. Its core ideology is unclear, and also, by their own claim, irrelevant.

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Several political commentators stretching back to the 1990s have credited the “de-ideologisation” of

Nepali political parties as one cause of the country's incessant political instability. The political scientist Krishna Hachhethu, speaking of coalition politics in the late 1990s, argued that "all parliamentary parties have, time and again, abruptly disregarded their own distinct political identity for the sake of power." This assessment is repeated even today by political analysts. The coalition put together by Dahal to garner a majority in the new parliament included leftists and communists of different persuasions, royalist-nationalists, sub-nationalists and the RSP, a party that does not even have a clearly stated ideology. This makes it easier for parties to switch between coalitions for power grabs and presumably makes Nepali politics more unstable.

This prevailing interpretation largely holds true because Nepali politics seems to be dominated by the narrow interests of a few leaders at the top of their parties. But one should not lose sight of the fact that there aren't a lot of positions that parties can take in order to differentiate themselves. Nepal's foreign policy options are too narrow for any substantive variation among parties, while the viable positions on development policy are even more restricted, limited to implementing the agenda of development donors.

This interpretation also restricts discussions on ideology into conventional left-right categories and fails to consider much more visible contours of domestic politics. In Nepal's case, the most important differentiator among parties has been their support, or lack thereof, for federalism. The country's push for federalism has been difficult to categorise along the left-right political spectrum despite its domestic importance, or perhaps because of it.

The end of centralised control

Regional ethnic movements have surfaced time and again in Nepal throughout its history, which the state in Kathmandu (controlled by monarchs and hereditary prime ministers for 240 years with a couple of democratic interludes) managed through either retributive oppression or policy concessions. In 2007, in the wake of Nepal's civil war, the Madhesh, in the country's southern plains, which had been alienated under the discriminatory policies of a central unitary state, rose to demand a federal restructuring. At this stage the grip of the centre was substantially reduced after a simultaneous assault against it from the Maoists during the civil war, and a people's movement against monarchical rule led by the major traditional parties – the Nepali Congress and the UML. The critical juncture of political transition at the central government level at the end of the monarchy and the civil war was utilised by Madhesi leaders to foment a movement which made the mainstream political parties unwillingly concede to federal restructuring. The Maoists, who put down arms at the end of the war to join electoral politics, took ownership of this federal compromise as a victory of their own agenda for transforming the Nepali state.

The first death knell for centralised control would ring; but a viable federal compromise that would be broadly accepted was hard to reach for a country with diverse ethnicities that till then maintained disparate relations with the central state. When a new post-monarchy constitution was ultimately written, the Nepali Congress and UML, in support of the more pliant Maoists, structured the country into seven provinces based on "economic viability" and "geography" rather than ethnic concerns. A narrower segment of land than had been first demanded by Madhesis for a province of their own was carved out to appease them, while demands for a Tharuhat and other ethnicity-based provinces were ignored. Once the new constitution came into effect, with provisions for federalism but not meeting the more stringent demands and earlier promises on how the provinces were to be shaped and empowered, the strongest resistance to it came from the Tharuhat and Madhesi movements.

Since then, all of Nepal's major political parties, including the Nepali Congress, the UML and the Maoists, have supported the federal system and the creation of the provincial tier, but their commitment to this varies. The UML's support for the federal system has been lukewarm at best. Its

party chief, K P Oli, who led the first elected government under the federal set-up, delayed the implementation of the federal system and argued that the provinces are decentralised units of the central government rather than autonomous units of their own. The Congress and the Maoists have paid lip service to the federal system but have failed to advance its institutionalisation. Madhesh-based parties are federalism's staunchest defenders even if they protested the exact provincial borders of Madhesh at first. In the newer parties, there is a clear distinction in their support for or rejection of federalism in the provincial tier. The emergent parties are at two ends of the spectrum, with the Rabi Lamichhane-led RSP is on one end of the spectrum, and has stated that it is willing to reconsider the provincial structure entirely. The two rising parties from outside of Kathmandu, the JP and the NUP, are much more supportive of the provincial tier.

Leaders of the peripheries

On this point, the leaders of these two regional parties – CK Raut of the JP and Resham Chaudhary of the NUP – deserve closer attention. Key to their appeal is that they come, respectively, from Madhesi and Tharu ethnicities, both of which have suffered under Nepal's discriminatory state-building efforts. Madhesi and Tharus were historically the primary inhabitants of the Terai, Nepal's southern lowlands bordering India. The Nepali state encouraged the migration of people from the hills to the fertile and forest-rich lowlands, as these were key to extract resources for the ruling elites.

In the 1960s, the state began to encourage cultural homogeneity through the imposition of a singular "Nepali" national language and identity. Ethnic groups with their own languages and distinct cultures were made to suffer. The Madhesi and Tharu ethnicities were particularly impacted by this discrimination.

From Kathmandu's vantage point, the Terai has been a periphery from which it extracts resources, and its inhabitants' have been the means to produce those resources. To this day, the impact of state discrimination percolates into a cultural belittling of these two communities – for instance, through a comedy genre akin to blackface which has been mastered by Kathmandu comedians, caricaturing the culture and speech of these two ethnicities. After the civil war, the federal "political settlement" with the provincial tier as a compromise sought to reorient centre-periphery relations, undercutting the powers that lay with Kathmandu elites.

Kathmandu's centralisation of resources has meant that any aspirational young person in the Terai would seek to walk the corridors of power in Kathmandu or fly abroad in search of greener pastures as a student or migrant labourer. Raut and Chaudhary could have followed the same trajectory. Both showed talent and ambition: Raut forged a career in the West as an engineer and studied in major universities, including in Japan, while Chaudhary ran a regional radio station from his hometown, Tikapur. They grew up on two ends of the Nepali plains and lived very different lives, yet both reached the conclusion that the Nepali state had discriminated against their communities. Both men came to the national limelight as they demanded autonomy for their communities; Raut specifically raised a separatist call for an independent Madhesh, but has set that aside with his entry into electoral politics.

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It is easy to notice from Raut and Chaudhary's speeches and writings that they were deeply affected by the discrimination faced by their people. The constitution-building phase after the war, from 2006 to 2015, was an opportune time for mobilising their communities against this discrimination, and

that is when they cut their political cloth.

Raut's separatist movement garnered support within his village, but in the larger Madhesh other parties' demands for a Madhesh province outshone it. Once the constitution was promulgated, Raut decided to join mainstream parliamentary politics instead. He raised several agendas that resonated in the Madhesh. In the 2022 election, his party won six seats in the national parliament and 13 provincial assembly seats, crossing the threshold for being recognised as a national party.

Chaudhary led a significant Tharuhat movement, fighting for an ethnic province in the south-western plains. The movement had a head-on collision with the Akhanda Sudurpaschim movement, another sub-national movement based on geographical demarcation, presumably mobilised by elites from the southernmost part of Nepal to counter the Tharuhat movement. In Tikapur, on 24 August 2015, these two movements clashed, leading to the death of several policemen and a child. What ensued was a violent reaction, one either propagated or overlooked by the state, that led to the burning and destruction of the houses and businesses of Tharu leaders, including Chaudhary's radio station. Several *badghars*, traditional community leaders in Tharu villages, fled to India to avoid persecution, and numerous other Tharus have been in jail or hiding ever since. Chaudhary was convicted as a mastermind of the violence in 2019 and is serving a life sentence in prison.

Chaudhary was elected to the parliament from Tikapur in 2017, while he was in hiding, with overwhelming support from Tharu voters. He lost his seat after his conviction. Yet in 2022 his party won four seats in the parliament and 12 seats in the assemblies of two adjoining provinces, between which is divided the larger Tharu belt. The extent of Tharu disenchantment with the state and the popularity of Chaudhary among his community is clear from the rise of his party.

Raut and Chaudhary's local popularity stands in contrast to their relative obscurity in Kathmandu, where they remain seen as outsiders. For much of their political careers they have been projected as criminals rather than insurgents with justifiable grievances. The demonstration of their popularity in the elections came as a surprise to Kathmandu.

The support for Chaudhary in the districts of Kailali and Bardiya, in the south-west of Nepal, stands out. It demonstrates that his party is the first "sub-national" party outside of Madhesh to gain national prominence. This is also the first party in parliament coming out of the Tharu plains, despite the Tharus' long history of organising.

Middle-class politics

The other fledgling party, the RSP, won a total of 20 seats in parliament and garnered 10 percent of the popular vote, mostly from urban locations including Kathmandu. Tellingly, the party did not contest seats for any provincial assembly. Lamichhane fashioned his party to be one of independents (his party's name roughly translates to National Independent Party), riding on a wave of successes for independent candidates in local elections that preceded the national vote.

Lamichhane projects the RSP to be a moderate centre-right party. Its manifesto says it follows "socialism-oriented constitutionalism". The party's electoral campaign played up themes of anti-corruption and good governance, which resonated in urban centres and convinced voters to take a chance on a new outfit. A seasoned commentator has branded the party's rise a "middle-class revolt" against the traditional major parties, perceived as being deeply inept and corrupt. However, the RSP's good-governance agenda is limited to the idea of efficient service delivery. One of its oft-cited examples of disarrayed governance was the difficulty Nepalis face in acquiring driving licenses and passports. This is not an unimportant issue, nor does it only affect the middle class. But the narrowness of having service delivery as a top agenda exposes the limits of the RSP's political

programme thus far, even if its leaders might have individually raised agendas beyond this. Contrast this with CK Raut's agenda of raising farmer's issues and increasing literacy in Madhesh – something much more political in nature.

It is unclear how any of these new parties will channel their agendas into a coherent and effective political strategy. But when it comes to the first step of setting an agenda, the sub-national parties are far ahead of the electorally more successful RSP. It's unclear to what extent the RSP's popularity was driven by its own political platform as opposed to popular frustration with the major traditional parties or the relentless coverage given to the party by Kathmandu-centered media.

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In this context especially, the party's declaration that it is willing to reconsider the provincial tier is an important ideological statement. This stance on federalism aligns the RSP with the monarchist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which wants Nepal to revert to a Hindu kingdom and is the only other party committed to getting rid of the provincial system. The resurgent RPP, relegated to just one seat in parliament in the last general election, has acquired 14 seats this term. Ironically, it also contested provincial elections and won 13 seats in Bagmati Province, with most of its support coming from Kathmandu.

The RSP's decision to contest only at the federal level seems to have been as much due to its political stance as the young party's lack of organisation and grassroots presence beyond urban centres. The regional parties, on the other hand, have not only gained significant seat tallies in parliament but are also more influential in provincial assemblies, suggesting that their party organisations might be much more rooted. The contrasting platforms of the RSP and regional parties show how the narrowness of urban-centered agendas might not account for the many broader challenges facing the country. These are being raised by the regional parties, even if the RSP is more salient in the parliament.

Political equilibrium

Coming back to the argument that Nepal's continuing political instability might be due to the erosion of ideology in politics, we should not ignore the fact that party ideologies are not limited to what they put in their manifestos. As studies from elsewhere show, the conventional left-right axis is too simple to describe all variations in political belief. This is certainly true when it comes to variations of belief on issues like federalism, driven by complex sets of historical forces, popular movements and elite compromises.

A more useful categorisation of political parties in Nepal would be to map them along the spectrum of their political beliefs on federalism. While this too might not encompass all policy projects and positions, federalism (and the politics of identity and proportional representation closely allied to it) has been the main driver of Nepal's political transformation from a centralised kingdom to a republic of seven provinces, and it remains the most important political project for the country in the last few decades.

The parties emerging out of the Madhesh and Tharu heartlands appear to be in support of this political project, while the RSP's inclinations on this question seem to lean more towards the RPP as well as the UML. This, more than anything, reflects the true polarisation in Nepali politics.

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Dahal and the Maoists have been calculated drifters in this paradigm. Their support for federal restructuring was crucial, but so was their abandonment of the demand for ethnicity-based federal restructuring, which made the promulgation of the constitution possible after fierce disagreements on what the basis for new provinces should be. The Maoists were also instrumental in the making and breaking of all coalitions to form a government after the federal constitution was shaped. Even today, when the Maoists’ arithmetic weight in parliament would seem insufficient to form a government, Dahal is still central to Nepal’s political process, having convincingly branded himself as a champion of sub-national concerns but also convinced the royalists of his nationalist credentials. But even as he seeks to keep this delicate balance, the space for Dahal is constantly shrinking, as shown by his party’s declining electoral fortunes.

The provinces, which are the most consequential tier of the federal system, appear to be crucial to the foothold of sub-national parties, even as their agendas become secondary in the cacophony of central politics. With only a handful of seats in parliament, both Raut and Chaudhary’s parties have low influence at the federal level, but they can exercise the deciding votes in the Madhesh and Sudurpaschim provincial assemblies – which ought to provide them space to contest central overtures. However, the “weak” provincial structure created during the federal restructuring process was a compromise, and the true federalists have only accepted it after great reluctance. The provincial tier might not be an orphan in Nepal’s politics, but it certainly is the child of an inconvenient marriage, with its parents either willfully disregarding it or abusing it for petty ends.

The RSP’s scepticism on federalism stems from it seeing the provincial system as a useless burden on the economy. This is a sentiment typical of the urban middle class, even if it is yet to crystallise even among that group. The newer sub-national parties might champion federalism for its potential to break central control and correct historical injustices, but these parties are younger than the provinces themselves. Amid all of this, the major parties’ support or lack thereof for federalism will be crucial to the provinces’ evolution. The stability of Nepal’s federal system, and with it the country’s political stability, hinges on this ideological battle.

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