NEPAL'S DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN OF 1960: SYSTEM, SEMI-SYSTEM AND ANTI-SYSTEM ACTORS

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Abstract:

Nepal started its democratic journey in 1951. However, King Mahendra ended the journey in 1960. Based on the political actor model of democratization, this article concludes that the monarchy acted as the semi-system actor from 1951 to 1960, as it did not abide by constitutional frameworks and took advantage of weak system actors to terminate democracy. Despite the peaceful participation in the politics during and after the democratic movement, the Communist Party of Nepal wanted to replace democracy with communism and was the anti-system political actor. The party was not politically significant, as it had just five seats in the parliament and was organizationally weak. Therefore, this article also finds that the party did not play an important role for the democratic breakdown of 1960.

Keywords: Nepal, democratic breakdown, political actors, political pressure, political significance

1. Introduction

Nepal began its first democratic journey on February 18, 1951. Shah kings absolutely ruled Nepal from its unification in 1768 by Prithvi Narayan Shah until the rise of Rana autocracy in 1846. Founded by Jang Bahadur Rana, a junior courtier at the Royal Palace, the autocracy was a family rule of the Rana clan in which hereditary Rana Prime Ministers held absolute power. Shah kings continued to be the head of the state in the Rana regime, but merely as prisoners of the Ranas (Hachhethu & Gellner, 2010; Whelpton, 2005). The Nepali Congress Party (NC) launched an armed struggle against Rana autocracy November 11, 1950. While the armed struggle was the main factor behind the arrival of Nepal's first democratic system, King Tribhuvan's goodwill and India's

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support were also important (Brown, 1996; Whelpton, 2005). Nepal's first democratic journey, however, came to an end on December 15, 1960 with King Mahendra's takeover.

The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) actively participated in the democratic movement (Chamlagai, 2024; KC, 1995). The party also participated in all the elections held in the 1950s. However, the party denounced the democratic system as bourgeois and clearly stated that it would attempt to replace it with a communist system (Communist Party of Nepal, 1949, 1951, 1954, 1957). Therefore, the participation of the CPN in the democratic system was to dismantle it from within rather than consolidate it.

This article seeks to explain why democracy broke down in Nepal in 1960. The specific research questions this article seeks to answer are: What motivated the monarchy to dismantle democracy? Was the CPN strong enough to contribute to Nepal's democratic breakdown of 1960? The findings suggest that democratic parties were weak because of their disunity, unmanageable party factionalism, political instability, ethnic exclusion, and weak civil society so that as system actors, they could not put the monarchy, the semi-system actor, under political pressure due to which the monarchy was able to dismantle democracy on December 15, 1960. As the anti-system actor, the CPN did not play a major role in the breakdown of democracy because it was not strong enough to challenge the existing democratic system.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. While the next section reviews the literature on the democratic breakdown of 1960 to figure out the research gaps, the following section introduces the theoretical model, classifies political actors and presents the arguments. Another section is a brief overview of Nepal's political development from 1951 to 1960 to put significant political events into context. The subsequent section examines what makes system actors weak. The penultimate section enquires whether anti-system actors had acquired political significance when democracy broke down in Nepal 1960. The final section synthesizes the findings.

2. Literature on Nepal and Research Gaps

Three explanations have been advanced to explore Nepal's democratic breakdown of 1960. One of them is about the conflict about traditional and modern values as argued by Chauhan (1971). Nepal continued to be economically feudal and culturally conservative even after the emergence of democracy in 1951. The monarchy led these traditional values. The democratic political parties, on the other hand, attempted to introduce modern values such as liberties, secularism, land reforms, elected officials, independent judiciary, and merit-based public administration. The clash between the two sets of different values simmered after 1951; however, it became more acute after King Mahendra took the throne in 1955 due to his ambition to be active in politics. The King wanted to engineer a coup before modern values got rooted in Nepali society through progressive measures such as land reforms. Therefore, he "*struck the final blow and brought to an end the constitutional structures*" on December 15, 1960 (Chauhan, 1971, p. 162).

Gupta (1990) contends that the nature of the political change of 1951 was itself the cause behind the breakdown of democracy in 1960, as the change was not "a *revolution but a restoration*" of the power of the monarchy lost to the Ranas in 1846 (p. 52). In other words, the 1951 political change re-established the monarchy as the true power holder. The constitutional frameworks of 1951 and 1959 required the kings to be the head of the state without executive power.[ii] However, they frequently violated the constitutional frameworks throughout the 1950s to increase their role in politics. The failure of the elected government (1959–1960) to "*revolutionize the economy, laying foundations of a new administrative system and initiating great social reform*" aided the monarchy in restoring its power (Gupta, 1990, p. 237).

Joshi and Rose (1966) posit that the end of Nepal's first experiment with democracy was the product of King Mahendra's ambition to be an active ruler. What Nepal saw in 1951 was not merely "*a modification of the traditional political system but a brand-new innovation*" (Joshi & Rose, 1996, p. 487). In other words, the change was a great systemic and revolutionary event in Nepal's political history, as it replaced a family autocracy with a political system "*whose basic systematic linkages were with the emerging political structure in independent, democratic India*" (Joshi & Rose, 1996, p. 487). However, the systemic change could not last long because of King Mahendra's political ambition, as he wanted to find a political system with "*a dynamic role for the Crown*" to modernize Nepal since he became King in 1955 (Joshi & Rose, 1966, p. 515). Therefore, the King carried out a coup and introduced absolute monarchy on December 15, 1960.

As the literature review shows, there are studies that have explored the causes behind the breakdown of democracy in Nepal in 1960. But the studies fail to say more systematically how the actions of democratic actors motivated the monarchy to end democracy. This article fills this gap. In addition, this article points out why the CPN was not strong enough to play an important role in the democratic breakdown of 1960. These articles also contribute to the comparative literature on democratic breakdown, as it argues that political actors with ambivalent commitments end democracy by cashing in on the weaknesses of the political actors who are explicitly committed to democracy. The other contribution of this study to comparative literature is concerned with when anti-democratic actors acquire political significance and how they contribute to a democratic breakdown.

3. Political Actor Model, Classification of Political Actors and Arguments

This article uses the political actor model to explain why democracy broke down in Nepal in 1960. The political actor model suggests that political actors, including political parties, monarchies and leaders, determine the fate of democracy through their tactical and strategic actions (Capoccia, 2005; Diamond *et al.*, 1999; Huntington, 1991; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Linz & Stepan, 1978; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013; Schmitter, 2017).

[ii] Nepal promulgated two constitutions in the 1950s. The interim government formed after the arrival of democracy promulgated the Interim Government of Nepal Act in 1951. The Royal Commission promulgated the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1959.

This model posits that structural conditions such as development and political culture are not the decisive factors for a democratic breakdown, although they can function as the background conditions.[iii] This model further argues that people are less likely to shift their loyalty toward a non-democratic system even amidst dismal economic, political, and social performance if they are assured that the system is still operating within a democratic framework and capable of solving the existing crisis (Diamond *et al.*, 1999).

Dozens of democracies have survived in societies which are neither rich nor have a political culture of tolerance. India, Botswana, Benin and Mongolia are some of such outstanding cases. These democracies have weathered structural odds due to capable political actors such as the National Congress Party and Jawaharlal Nehru in India. Thus, the survival of democracies in structurally odd conditions demonstrates that the actor model is still useful to explain why some democracies die and others do not. The other testimony to the relevance of the actor model comes from contemporary democratic backsliding even in developed societies. The backsliding, which is the erosion of democratic qualities (Burmeo, 2016; Carothers & Hartnett, 2024; Diamond, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Walden & Lust, 2018), is the outcome of elected authoritarian leaders and the failure of political parties to keep them in control (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Based on ideological commitments and actual practices, political actors can be classified as system, anti-system, and semi-system. Public ideological commitments to democracy and actual democratic practices such as peaceful competition for people's votes, formation of government through a majority votes, willingness of peaceful transfer of power after electoral defeats, defense of democratic systems when they go through crisis times and opposition of the government instead of the existing democratic system itself while in opposition are the main characteristics of system actors (Gunther *et al.*, 1995; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013; Linz & Stepan, 1978; Sartori, 1976).

The NC was a system actor in Nepal between 1951 and 1960. While the party was formed on April 11, 1950 to overthrow the Rana oligarchy of 104 years and establish democracy (Nepali Congress, 1950), it reiterated its commitment to democracy throughout the 1950s (Nepali Congress, 1952, 1956, 1960). When Kings Tribhuvan and Mahendra assumed direct rule, it went against the rules (Gupta 1990; Joshi & Rose, 1966). The NC did not use violence to change the government after the arrival of democracy in 1951. The party, in fact, was the only dominant system actor between 1951 and 1960, as it played the major role in establishing democracy and won 74 out of 109 seats in the parliament in the first general elections held in 1959 (Gupta, 1990).

The Gorkha Council Party, which was formed in 1952, was another important system actor. [iv] The party was established to consolidate democracy and preserve nationalism (Gautam, 2017). It organized big rallies and protests, especially in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, and around its periphery. The Gorkha Council Party became the second largest party in the parliament from the first national elections of Nepal held in 1959 with nine seats. Other political parties disparaged the Gorkha

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[iii] For development model, see (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Lipset, 1959; Przeworski et al., 2000). For political culture model, see (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Seligson, 2000).
[iv] It was called the Gorkha Organization until 1952. For uniformity, this article uses the Gorkha Council throughout it.

Council Party as anti-democratic, given that most of its prominent leaders from the past were autocratic rulers or associated with them. However, the party never advocated for the restoration of the Rana family rule and worked peacefully to popularize its agendas among the people since its formation (Whelpton, 2005). The party neither asked the kings to remove the elected government. Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala, the Prime Mister of the first elected parliament, who always called the party a reactionary, later realized his wrong characterization of the party (Koirala, 2019). Despite being an authoritarian successor party,[v] The Gorkha Council Party established itself as a system political actor through its commitment to democracy not only in principle but also in practice.

The People's Council Party was also a system actor during this period for its unflinching commitment to democracy. It was the oldest political party of Nepal, originated in 1936 to remove the Rana rule. The party carried out underground activities to end the Rana regime. The party participated in the democratic movement of 1950–51, although it was weak due to the ruthless repression of the Ranas (Gautam, 2009; Shah, 1990). With the emergence of democracy, the People's Council Party became active, especially in Kathmandu. The party also led a government in 1956 for a brief period and gained two parliamentary seats in the general election of 1959.

Anti-system actors make public and categorical commitments to non-democratic systems, oppose the government as well as the existing democratic system, and use violence to achieve political scores (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Sartori, 1976). When they participate in the democratic process, including elections, their main goal is to dismantle the democratic system from within rather than to consolidate it (Capoccia, 2005).

The CPN established in Kolkata of India on April 15, 1949 was the anti-system actor between 1951 and 1960, as it wanted to replace democracy with a communist system (Communist Party of Nepal, 1949, 1951, 1954, 1957). The party wanted to establish a one-party communist regime called the People's New Democracy (PND) through the guerrilla war (Communist Party of Nepal, 1949). The PND was the concept developed by Mao Tse Tung to carry out the communist revolution in China through a guerrilla war (Mao, 1940). PND was practiced in China after the communist revolution in 1949.

The PND denies the peaceful transformation of society but celebrates revolutionary violence. In the PND, the dictatorship of the peasants and the workers is used to contain potential counterrevolutions. Only the communist party is allowed to function, as it is the vanguard of the peasants and the workers (Mao, 1940). The CPN did not use revolutionary violence between 1951 and 1960. Yet, it was an anti-system actor in this period due to its commitment to one-party communist political system.

In the middle of the spectrum lie semi-system actors. Their main characteristic is ideological ambivalence (Gunther *et al.*, 1995; Linz & Stepan, 1978). To put it another way, semi-system actors publicly pledge to abide by democratic systems rather than rejecting them openly as anti-system actors. While ideological opportunism is the main character

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[v] An authoritarian successor party is the one which is from the past autocratic regime or is formed by the leaders associated with the autocratic past regime. Such parties could be democratic or non-democratic in the new democratic regime depending on their actions. For details, see Loxton and Mainwaring (2018).

of semi-system actors, the others include teaming up with anti-system actors, non-cooperation with the elected government, and rejection of peaceful transfer of power.

The monarchy under both Kings, Tribhuvan and Mahendra, was the semi-system actor between 1951 and 1960, as it did its best to disrupt and dismantle the democratic process. King Tribhuvan supported the democratic movement of 1950–51 and agreed to be a constitutional monarch. But against the democratic commitment, he assumed direct rule and declared himself as the sovereign source of executive, legislative and judiciary powers in 1954 (Gupta, 1990). The actions show that his commitment to democracy was opportunistic and that his political ideology was non-democratic. Despite his commitment to democracy over and over (Shah, 1967), King Mahendra assumed direct rule in 1955 and 1958 but also dismantled democracy in 1960.

As the Nepal army remained loyal to the Kings rather than acting independently, it was a subservient semi-system actor in the 1950s. Looking back in history, the Nepal army was organized by the founder of the modern state of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah. The army remained loyal to the kings until the rise of the Rana autocracy and shifted its loyalty to the Ranas after they seized political power. The Nepal army came under the control of the civilian government in 1951 through the interim constitution of 1951 and the constitution of 1959. Both constitutions accorded the position of the Supreme Commander of the army to the king due to their position as the head of the state as practiced in a monarchical parliamentary democracy. Although both constitutions put the army under the government, the ground reality was that the army had been loyal to the king all along since 1951(Adhikari, 2015; Joshi & Rose, 1976). Their support of the royal coup made it clearer. Since the army followed the dictates of the king rather than acting independently (Joshi & Rose, 1966), it was not an independent political actor. The army in the 1950s was, thus, a semi-system actor subservient to the kings, the semi-system actors.

Based on the political actor model and political actor types, two arguments have been developed to explain why democracy broke down in Nepal in 1960. The first argument relates Nepali system actors in the 1950s with their inability to put semi-system actors under control through political pressure. The second argument, on the other hand, looks at whether the CPN as the anti-system was strong enough to play a role in the democratic breakdown.

4. Historical Description

With the arrival of democracy in Nepal on February 18, 1951, an interim government of the Ranas and the NC was formed to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly in 1952 to write a constitution for the country. However, the government was terminated just nine months later on November 16, 1951. Another government of the NC and independents also collapsed on August 10, 1952. Neither government was able to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly.

The fall of the government led to the direct rule of King Tribhuvan on August 10, 1952. His direct rule was assisted by a council of royal advisors. King Tribhuvan's direct

rule also ended without conducting the elections for the constituent assembly. The government of the Nepal Democratic Party was formed on June 15, 1953. Like previous ones, the government also failed to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly. The government of the Nepal Democratic Party, the Nepali National Congress, the People's Council, and All Nepal People's Congress came into the existence and was terminated on March 2, 1955 leading to the direct rule of King Mahendra, who had become the new king after the death of his father, Tribhuvan.

King Mahendra had promised to form an all-party government to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly as soon as possible after "*due consultations with the top leaders of the political parties in the country*" (Shah, 1967, p. 50). But he neither formed such a government nor conducted the elections for the constituent assembly. Instead, he formed the government of the People's Council Party in September 1955. The government was terminated in October 1957. King Mahendra then formed the government of the United Democratic Front.

The United Democratic Front government not only refused to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly, but its Prime Minister Dr. K. I. Singh also advocated the active role of the king in politics (Chauhan, 1971; KC, 1995). The NC Party and other system actors strongly condemned the government's statement and agitated across the country to form an all-party government to conduct the elections for the constituent assembly. King Mahendra became ready to conduct the elections for the parliament instead of the constituent assembly and promulgate the constitution through an appointed commission. Though the constituent assembly had been the demand since the emergence of democracy, the NC agreed to hold the elections for the parliament to start the administration through an elected government (Koirala, 2019). Other political parties also accepted King Mahendra's proposal to hold the elections.

The elections for the House of Representatives were held in 1959 between February 18 and April 2. The first-past-the-post electoral system was adopted to award the seats. The number of parliamentary seats across the country was 109. The NC gained a clear majority with 74 seats and formed a new government led by Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala.[vi] It was the first elected government in the entire history of Nepal. However, King Mahendra terminated it along with the parliament on December 15, 1960 and assumed executive power, stating that the government had (a) set aside the interests of the country and the people and wielded authority in a manner designed solely to advance party interests; (b) attempted to disclose and paralyzed the administrative machinery; (c) encouraged corrupt practices; (d) proved incapable of maintaining law and order; (e) produced a disturbed and vitiated atmosphere by pursuing impractical measures; (f) encouraged anti-national elements (quoted in Joshi & Rose, 1966, pp. 384–385).

[vi] For the details of the 1959 parliamentary elections, see Gupta (1990).

5. Political Pressure of System Actors upon Semi-System Actors and Democratic Breakdown

Political pressure, which refers to the ability of system actors to control semi-system actors, is taken from Stepan *et al.* (2014). The study finds that monarchies and parliamentary democracies in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Japan have been able to co-exist due to political pressure exerted upon monarchies by "*societies and parliaments*" (p. 38). While the conceptualization of political pressure is an important contribution to democratization discourses, the role of political parties is missing in the study. This article contests that democratic parties play the central role in putting semi-system actors under check through political pressure for being the vehicle of democracy (Schattschneider, 1964). Therefore, this article considers political parties as important political actors and emphasizes that they play an important role in saving democracy by putting semi-system actors under control through political pressure. It also lays down six conditions that could have weakened system actors in Nepal in the 1950s. The conditions include disunity of system actors, unmanaged party factionalism, governmental instability, ethnic exclusion and weak civil society.

5.1 Disunity of System Actors

Disunity of system actors was a central feature of Nepali politics between 1951 and 1960. The disunity can be attributed to the NC mainly because it considered the Gorkha Council Party as an anti-system actor. In a similar vein, the NC undermined the role of other smaller system actors in the democratic process. As mentioned above, the Gorkha Council Party was a system actor despite its leaders being associated with the outgoing regime. However, the NC consistently perceived the Gorkha Council as a threat to democracy throughout the 1950s without any evidence of anti-system activities. Home Minister Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala, the team leader of the NC in the government, arrested the leaders of the Gorkha Council Party on April 11, 1951. The arrest of the leaders, mainly Bharat Shamsher, incited an uprising in Kathmandu as thousands of their supporters took to the streets. They stormed the prison, freed their leaders, and attacked Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala at his office (Joshi & Rose, 1966). The uprising was immediately suppressed, and the party was outlawed. Even though Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala had no evidence about the Gorkha Council Party conspiring to overthrow democracy, he arrested the leaders just to please the critics in his party (Koirala, 2019).

The arrest of the Gorkha Council leaders, however, proved to be a critical juncture for the failure of Nepal's first democratic experiment (Gupta, 1990; Joshi & Rose, 1966; Koirala, 2019). Until the Gorkha uprising, the major force of the army was placed at the Central Secretariat in which the Office of the Prime Minister was located. After the uprising, the force was shifted to the royal palace, suspecting that Ranas, including Prime Minister Mohan Shamsher, were involved in the uprising and that they could use the army to restore the Rana autocracy in future (Koirala, 2019). King Tribhuvan used this opportunity to secure the loyalty of the army to the monarchy, presenting it as the

guardian of the army and increasing salaries and other favors (Gupta, 1990), even if the army had to be loyal to the government as required by the 1951 interim constitution (Government of His Majesty, 1951).[vii] One of the motivations for King Mahendra to carry out the takeover on December 15, 1960 was the loyalty of the army to the monarchy that had continued even after the death of King Tribhuvan on November 7, 1955.

The NC continued to consider the Gorkha Council Party as an anti-system actor even after its pledge to democracy in principle as well as in practice. The first national convention of the Gorkha Council Party was held in January 1952. The convention made it clear that Nepali people needed a democratic party alternative to the NC to avoid the dictatorship of the party in power (Gautam, 2017). In other words, the Gorkha Council Party was established to keep democracy by providing an alternative voice to the Nepali people. The party held its second convention in 1956, in which it repeated its commitment to democracy (Gautam, 2017). But the NC continued to consider it as an anti-system party and never asked it to be part of the front of the system actors formed to oppose the direct rule of Kings Tribhuvan and Mahendra.

The Gorkha Council Party further clarified its democratic commitment through the election manifesto of 1959 and after becoming the main opposition in the parliament. As stated in the manifesto, the party was fully committed to democracy (Devkota, 1970). The party participated in the general elections held in February–April of 1959 and accepted the electoral outcomes. The democratic commitment of the Gorkha Council Party became even clearer after it became the main opposition in the parliament as it did not take to the streets but instead acted as the loyal opposition within the parliament (Chauhan, 1970; Gupta, 1990; Joshi & Rose, 1966). More importantly, it neither asked King Mahendra to interfere with the government nor accepted his invitation to lodge a vote of no confidence to oust the government (Gautam, 2017). The NC had ample information that King Mahendra was conspiring not only against the government but also against democracy itself (Gautam, 2017; Koirala, 2019). However, the NC did not take the initiative to make an alliance with the Gorkha Council Party to prevent King Mahendra's potential takeover.

Despite the NC being the major actor to end the Rana autocracy, other democratic parties had also contributed to it. But the NC neither included other parties in the negotiation process to end the Rana regime nor in the interim government. The opposition parties then took to the streets against the government and asked King Tribhuvan to intervene for the formation of an all-party government (Chauhan, 1971; Gupta, 1990; Joshi & Rose, 1966). One of the reasons for the direct rule of the Kings and the governments without the NC was the failure of the NC to forge a unity with democratic parties. Instead of learning a lesson from the past, the NC continued to undermine smaller parties even after the general elections of 1959. King Mahendra, on the other hand, tried to take them at his side to ensure the failure of the government. Despite being aware of it, the NC never tried to engage these smaller parties to maintain

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[vii] The constitution placed the executive power with the interim government in which the King was just the head of the state as in parliamentary democracies. So, the army was also put under the government. The essence of the interim constitution seems to be that the interim government was treated like an elected government.

democracy by putting pressure on the King. Such behavior of the NC weakened the unity of system actors and encouraged King Mahendra to end democracy.

The unity of system actors was very important to compel the Kings to stick with democracy. Two instances stand out. After assuming direct rule in 1952, King Tribhuvan consistently refused to form a government of political parties. The NC, then, realized the value of the unity of system actors and extended a hand to other system actors for a unity against the King. This effort led to the emergence of the united front called the League of Democrats that consisted of the NC, the Nepali National Congress, and the People's Council Party (Chauhan, 1971). As the League began a united struggle, King Tribhuvan became ready to constitute an all-party government. The NC was offered three ministers in the government to be headed by Matrika Prasad Koirala of the Nepal Democratic Party. The party accepted the offer without consulting other parties of the League of the Democrats, leading to the breakdown of the League (Joshi & Rose, 1966). Consequently, King Tribhuvan formed the government without the NC. After becoming the King in March 1955, Mahendra either ruled directly or formed the governments without the NC to create a situation in which he would be able to end democracy. The party then concluded that the unity of system actors was necessary, formed the Democratic United Front and launched protests across the country against King Mahendra's conspiracy to end democracy (Koirala, 2019). The unity of system actors compelled King Mahendra to hold the elections for the parliament in 1959.

5.2 Unmanaged Party Factionalism

Another feature of Nepali politics after 1951 was the inability of system actors to manage factionalism. The government, led by the NC in 1951 after the fall of the interim government, was the revolutionary government, but it faced a challenge from its own party. Factionalism had occurred even before the formation of the party. Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala was popular in the party. So, the majority of the NC leaders wanted him to become Prime Minister, but the King did not accept him as Prime Minister (Chauhan, 1971; Gupta, 1990). The party, then, reluctantly accepted Matrika Prasad Koirala to lead the government. After the formation of the government, the NC suffered from bitter factionalism. Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala asked Matrika Prasad Koirala to resign from the post of the President of the party, arguing that having the same person as the party President and the Prime Minister would lead to authoritarianism in the absence of the elected parliament (Gupta, 1990). Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala did not resign from the post of the President but helped Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala to become the President of the party unanimously from the National Convention of the party held in May 1952 (Gupta, 1990).

Even after the National Convention, factionalism continued in the NC. Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala pressured the government to conduct radical programs such as land reforms, but the government could not do it, as King Tribhuvan was against such reforms before the general elections (Joshi & Rose, 1976). The Central Committee of the NC asked Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala to reshuffle the cabinet by dropping independent ministers to include the ministers recommended by the party. The NC ousted Prime

Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala from the party after he refused to reshuffle the cabinet. Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala resigned on August 10, 1953. Thus, factionalism within the NC led to the fall of its own government. The fall of the government led to the direct rule of King Tribhuvan. The other fallout of the fall of the government was the end of the possibility of the elections for the constituent assembly.

Like the NC, the People's Council Party also could not manage factionalism when it formed the government in 1956. The clash between Prime Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya and other ministers became intense. One of the reasons for the termination of the government was factionalism in the party. The fall of the government led to the government of the United Democratic Front, whose Prime Minister denied the need for the constituent assembly and also advocated the active role of the King (KC, 1995). In other words, the fall of the government gave King Mahendra an excuse to prepare the ground for his active role in politics.

As mentioned above, two governments broke down due to the inability of the governing party to manage factionalism. The fall of the governments delayed the transition, a period spanning between the emergence of democracy and the formation of the government after the first general elections (Bunce, 2003; Carothers, 2002; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Rustow, 1970). Both Kings used the transition to legitimatize the role of the institution of the monarchy in the eyes of the people through direct rules or the governments of their choice. The main implication of the inability of system actors to manage factionalism was the delay of the transition in which system actors became weak because they could not put political pressure on semi-system actors, i.e., the kings.

5.3 Governmental Instability

Governmental instability was a defining characteristic of the democratic politics of the 1950s, as there were nine governments in nine years.[viii] System actors had promised to deliver goods and services when they launched a movement against the Rana regime. They continued to do so after the arrival of democracy. However, people did not receive such a delivery. The result was the loss of popular faith in system actors (Basnet, 2017; Chauhan, 1970; Gupta, 1990). While system actors lost faith in people, the monarchy emerged as the hope of people as both Kings faulted system actors for misrule. Therefore, people did not come out on the streets when the Kings assumed direct rule and continuously declined to form an all-party government to hold the elections for the constituent assembly to write a democratic constitution.

The elected government introduced land reforms to distribute land to the landless and the land-poor. The government recruited civil servants based on meritocracy. Road construction and expansion of schools across the country took full swing as well. However, people did not come out on the streets when King Mahendra ended democracy in December 1960. The people of Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, instead welcomed the royal takeover by lighting candles. It was because the monarchy had established itself

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[viii] The governments include 1) Interim Government, 1951 2) Nepali Congress, 1951 3) Royal Council, 1952 4) National Democratic Party, 1953 5) National Coalition, 1954 6) Council of Rayal Advisers, 1955 6) Nepal People's Council, 1956 7) United Democratic Party, 1957 8) Council of Ministers, 1959 9) Nepali Congress, 1959. (Joshi & Rose, 1966)

as the only power that could provide stability and public goods due to the political instability in the post-Rana system (Chamlagai, 2024). Governmental instability, thus, weakened system actors so that they could not put political pressure on semi-system actors, which led to a democratic breakdown of 1960 in Nepal.

5.4 Ethnic Exclusion

Despite Nepal being a multi-cultural society, Nepali polity in the 1950s was ethnically exclusionary due to the dominant representation of the Khas Arya group in various structures of the state.[ix] In most governments formed during the 1951–60 period, the representation of non-Khas Arya groups was severely low (Shrestha, 2017; Shimkhada, 2017). Non-Khas Arya groups in the parliament were under-represented relative to their population in parliament as well. The representation was just about 40% in the House of Representatives and the National Assembly, although they constituted about 69% of the population (Shrestha, 2017). The judiciary was not an exception. The supreme court, known as the High Court until 1959, was overly represented by Khas-Arya groups, although the first chief justice of the court in 1951 was Hari Kumar Pradhan from non-Khas Araya groups.

Although the democratic process of the 1950s was a great revolution, as it replaced the Rana family rule with democracy, excluded groups remained in the periphery in terms of their participation in state structures. Their representation in state structures was very marginal. Since such marginalized groups are often alienated from the system (Lijphart, 1977, 1999), they are more likely to be used by non-democratic actors against democracy (Lawoti, 2008). King Mahendra is believed to have been the main hand behind the formation of the League of Kirantis.[x] The League formed in 1957 and openly advocated for the active role of the King in Nepal (Chauhan, 1971; Joshi & Rose, 1966). King Mahendra organized a national meeting of marginalized groups after the formation of the elected government in 1959 to mobilize them against democracy (Joshi & Rose, 1966). It shows that King Mahendra and the Kiranti leaders had a tacit understanding to end democracy. Thus, the exclusionary nature of the Nepali state in the 1950s became a factor to make the system actors weak.

5.5 Civil Society

The number of civil society organizations increased hugely in Nepal after the end of the Rana rule in 1951. During the Rana rule, most civil society organizations were of a non-political nature (Bhatta, 2012; Dahal, 2012; Hachhethu, 2006). Gunthis and Pancha Bhelas (meetings of five elderly in villages) were the prominent examples of such organizations.[xi] The Committee for the Citizens' Rights and the Society for Sanskrit Language, established in 1937 and 1947 respectively, were civil society organizations that participated in the

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[ix] The ethnic groups include Khas Arya, indigenous ethnicities, Madheshis and Dalits. For details, see the 2021 CENSUS National Report at https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/caste-ethnicity.

[x] Kirantis are ethnic groups such Rais and Limbus from the eastern part of Nepal.

[xi] Gunthis were the ethnicity-based organizations to carry out rituals for birth and death. Pancha Bhelas were the meetings of five seniors at a locality to carry out the social work for the locality

democratic movement of 1950–1951. The Society of Volunteers for Providing Peace, the Committee for the Citizens' Rights, the Organizations for Brave Actions, the League of Kirantis and the Pro-People Organization were some of these civil society organizations active in the period (Chauhan, 1971; Gupta, 1990; Joshi & Rose, 1966).

Strong civil society organizations hold democratic elites accountable to people. Democracy gains popular legitimacy through accountable elites and such legitimacy helps a democratic survival (Howard, 2002; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Tocqueville, 2003; Way, 2014). On the contrary, when civil society is weak, it fails to hold elites accountable to people, a democratic system then does not gain popular legitimacy and the likelihood of a democratic breakdown increases. As mentioned above, civil society in Nepal made a huge rise after the end of the Rana regime in 1951; however, it was weak throughout the 1950s. Thus, weak civil society organizations made system actors weak and contributed to the breakdown of democracy in 1960.

6. Political Significance of Anti-System Actors and Democratic Breakdown

As mentioned above, anti-system actors attempt to replace democracy with non-democracy. However, they cannot do so unless they remain "*a handful of dissidents on the fringes of a polity*" (Gunther *et al.*, 1995, p. 8). To pose a challenge to democracy, they should acquire political significance, which refers to the "*political power*" of anti-system actors. To quote Gunther *et al.* (1995), anti-system actors become politically significant when they are strong enough to disrupt a democratic system. Linz and Stephan (1996) use the concept of "political significance" to demonstrate when democracy consolidates by being the only game in town.

Despite using the concept, Linz and Stephan (1996) do not lay down the indicators to empirically determine what constitutes it. Neither do Gunther *et al.* (1995). Capoccia (2005) takes into account parliamentary seats of anti-system actors when he explores strategies employed by European governments in the inter-war period to defend democracy. However, he does not figure out the threshold of parliamentary strength that anti-system actors require to be politically significant. To fill the gaps, this article argues that electoral performance, and organizational strength should be used as the indicators to determine the political significance of anti-system actors. More clearly, anti-system actors acquire political significance when they gain the largest percentage of seats in the parliament, and their organizations become strong. Germany offers a good illustrative case in this regard. When democracy broke down in Germany in 1933, the largest party in the German parliament was the Nazi Party with 43.9% of parliamentary seats (Lepsius, 1978). The party was organizationally strong as well. It had strong civil and military organizations (Lepsius, 1978). Therefore, the Nazi party was able to bring Germany to a standstill just at a call of Hitler.

6.1 Electoral Performance

Nepal held its first general elections in February–April 1959. The CPN participated in the elections and won 4 out of 109 seats with a popular vote of 7.2% (Gupta, 1990). The party was expected to do well in the elections due to its populist agendas. One of the agendas was land reforms. In the 1950s, the land was unevenly distributed.[xii] Most of the peasants were either small landholders or landless, as the landlord captured most of the land. The CPN was born to liberate the poor from the shackles of a handful of the rich, particularly the landlords (Communist Party of Nepal, 1949). It had massively mobilized for land reforms and carried out the peasant movements since its formation in 1949. The peasant movement was strong in some places. The central agenda of the communist party in the parliamentary elections of 1959 was land reform (Communist Party of Nepal, 1959).

Another agenda that the CPN adopted in the 1950s was related to ethnic groups. The party advocated protecting the languages and cultures of different ethnic groups. When the government made Nepali the only language of instruction in educational institutions by removing Hindi, pro-Hindi organizations carried out pro-Hindi agitation (Gaige, 1967; Jnawali, 2024). The CPN supported it (Communist Party of Nepal, 1959). Most importantly, the party stood for the autonomy of different nationalities (Communist Party of Nepal, 1951, 1954, 1957). The popular agendas gave the CPN 6 out of 18 seats and about 50% of the popular votes in the election of the Kathmandu municipality held on September 2, 1953 (Gupta, 1990). Therefore, the party was expected to do well in the general elections. However, its electoral performance was very poor.

One of the reasons for the poor electoral performance was the factionalism that arose in the party after 1954 (Communist Party of Nepal, 1960; Gupta, 1990; KC, 1995; Rawal, 2007). The party held its first national convention on January 30, 1954 and reiterated its commitment to create a communist rule through the armed struggle in the long run (Communist Party of Nepal, 1954). But most of the politburo members elected from the convention wanted to accept the constitutional monarchy and the peaceful transformation of society as the only viable option even in the long run (Communist Party of Nepal, 1957). To sort out the differences, the CPN held the second national convention in May–June 1957. The convention rejected the policy of the constitutional monarchy and the peaceful transformation of society presented by the politburo (KC, 1995). But most politburo members still stuck to the policy and factionalism in the party continued. As the party had to deal with factionalism, its organization remained weak (Communist Party of Nepal, 1960; Gupta 1990; KC, 1995; Rawal 2007).

The other reason was the propaganda related to caste systems and religions spread by the NC. The CPN performed well in the elections held for the Kathmandu Municipality and was able to massively mobilize people through its street protests (Chauhan, 1971; Gupta, 1990). In fact, the party had emerged a formidable challenger to the NC all along after the arrival of democracy in 1951. More importantly, it was in a position to perform well in the parliamentary elections due to its popular agendas about

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[xii] There is no data for land distribution between 1950 and 1960. But the data of 1961 shows that 1.43 % had no land, and 73.89% had either less than 1 or 1–4 hectares. As the data was after land reforms in 1959, land redistribution was more uneven between 1951 and 1960. (Joshi & Mason, 2007).

peasantry and ethnicity. On the other hand, the NC was ready to use every issue that would weaken the CPN. More precisely, the party reiterated throughout the electoral campaigns that communists were against caste systems and would not allow people to observe religions as in the Soviet Union and China. Nepal was very conservative with low literacy rate in the 1950s. Therefore, the CPN could not get the votes from conservative people, who constituted the majority population.[xiii]

6.2 Organizational Strength

After its formation in 1949 by five leaders, the CPN held its first National Convention in 1954. The organizational reports presented at the Convention show that the party had 750 party members (Communist Party of Nepal, 1954). As stated in the second National Convention in 1957, it had more than 2000 party members (Communist Party of Nepal, 1957). The peasant organization claimed that it had 143,000 members with 103 village committees (Gupta, 1990, p. 203). Despite the claim of a huge number of memberships in the party and the peasant organization, the CPN was organizationally as shown by its candidates and popular votes in the parliamentary elections of 1959. The party was able to field candidates in just 47 out of 109 constituencies and received about 7% of popular votes in the elections.

The CPN was not the largest party in the parliament nor was its organization strong. Therefore, it was not politically significant and was not a factor for the breakdown of democracy in 1960.

7. Concluding Remarks

King Mahendra ended Nepal's first democratic experiment by taking advantage of the weakness of system actors. The disunity among system actors was one of the weaknesses. The disunity occurred soon after the formation of the interim government and continued until Mahendra's takeover. The system actors also became weak due to factionalism, governmental instability, ethnic exclusion in state structures and weak civil society. Of all the factors that made Nepal's system actors weak in the 1950s, disunity among system actors was the most significant for several reasons. First, semi-system actors gained the loyalty of the army. Second, Nepal suffered from political instability. Third, the transition became protracted, giving semi-system actors a chance to gain power. Fourth and most importantly, system actors lost the trust of the people. Therefore, people welcomed the royal takeover.

As an anti-system actor, the CPN was not powerful enough to replace democracy with the communist regime when democracy broke down in Nepal on December 15, 1960, because it had just four out of 109 seats in the parliament. Neither did it have strong

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[xiii] I have drawn this conclusion from my interaction with voters from 1959. I interacted with the voters from my hometown and other places where I worked at different time periods. As the Nepali Congress did the same after 1990, the communist parties had less support in the elderly and conservative strata of the society until the formation of the communist government in 1994.

organization outside the parliament. Therefore, the role of the CPN in Nepal's first democratic breakdown was not significant.

From the analysis of democratic breakdowns in Europe and Latin America, Linz and Stepan (1978) conclude that semi-system actors play the decisive role in the process of democratic breakdown and become the immediate beneficiaries of the regime change. The analysis of Nepal's democratic breakdown supports the conclusion, as King Mahendra dismantled democracy and assumed executive power of the state. The analysis also shows that the survival of democracy lies with system actors because semi-system actors cannot demolish a democratic system despite occupying important positions, such as the kingship in Nepal, unless system actors are strong enough to keep them in control. Therefore, system actors must stay strong by forging minimum unity, among others, for the continuity of a democratic system. In addition, strong system actors will be able to democratize the undemocratic forces and prevent them from winning over the loyalty of neutral people (Linz & Stepan, 1978; O'Donnell, 1992).

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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