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The Emergence and Rise of the Communist Movement in Nepal, 1949–1996

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Abstract

This article examines the structural conditions, transnational influences, and organizational dynamics that gave rise to Nepal's communist movement from its founding in 1949 through the declaration of the People's War in 1996. Drawing on historical sociological frameworks of political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1994), Gramscian hegemony theory, and comparative revolutionary studies (Skocpol, 1979; Goodwin, 2001), the article argues that the Maoist insurgency was not a sudden rupture but the cumulative product of four interlocking processes: the delegitimation of feudal-oligarchic governance under the Rana regime; the transnational circulation of anti-colonial and Marxist-Leninist ideologies through Indian exile networks; the persistent fragmentation and refounding of communist organizations through cycles of ideological dispute; and the failure of post-1990 parliamentary democracy to address deep structural inequalities. The article situates Nepal's experience within broader comparative debates on agrarian revolution, state-society relations, and the sociology of revolutionary movements.

Keywords

Nepal, Feudalism, Political Opportunity structures, Democratic transition, Revolutionary movement.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the origins of Nepal's Maoist insurgency requires attending not merely to ideological commitments but to the structural sociology of a society that had, by the mid-twentieth century, accumulated the conditions that theorists of revolution have identified as propitious for radical mobilization. Writing in a comparative framework, Theda Skocpol (1979) argued that successful social revolutions emerge not from voluntaristic acts of will but from the intersection of state crises, elite defection, and peasant grievances activated by structural transformation. Nepal on the eve of its communist formation displayed these features in concentrated form.

For one hundred and four years—from 1846 until 1951—Nepal was governed by the Rana oligarchy, an hereditary autocracy in which the prime ministership was monopolized by a single clan, the Shah kings were reduced to ceremonial figureheads, and the vast majority of the population was excluded from economic and political participation (Whelpton, 2005). The regime was, in Gramscian terms, a hegemony sustained primarily by coercion rather than consent: political parties were banned, civil liberties were nonexistent, and dissent was answered with imprisonment or exile (Hachhethu, 2002). Land ownership was heavily concentrated among Rana allies, and the countryside remained organized along feudal lines in which peasant households owed labour and produce to absentee landlords with close ties to the state. As Regmi (1978) documented in his seminal political-economic study, the Rana system of land tenure—characterized by *birta* grants, *raikar* state lands, and *jagir* assignments—institutionalized a form of agrarian surplus extraction that kept peasant producers in chronic poverty and political dependency.

The regime's insularity from international currents of modernization was not incidental but deliberate. British India's East India Company had established a residency in Kathmandu following the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, and the Ranas entered into a strategic accommodation with colonial power: in exchange for supplying Gurkha soldiers to the British Indian Army, the regime received diplomatic recognition and protection from external interference (Stiller, 1975; Whelpton, 2005). This relationship gave the Ranas a veneer of legitimacy while intensifying their internal authoritarianism. Paradoxically, it was the British-Indian connection that ultimately

undermined them: the children of elite families exiled by intra-dynastic power struggles received education in colonial India, where they encountered both anti-colonial nationalism and socialist thought, creating the intellectual cadres who would return to challenge the regime.

Nepal thus presents a case of what Goodwin (2001) has called a 'neopatrimonial' state—one whose exclusionary and corrupt character rendered it structurally unable to incorporate rising social forces, generating the preconditions for armed opposition. The following sections after research objectives and research methodology trace how this structural condition was activated through transnational ideological networks, internal organizational dynamics, and the partial opening and rapid closure of democratic space between 1951 and 1996.

2. Research Objectives

The research aims to explore the historical condition that contributed to the emergence and rise of the Nepal's communist movement by providing a wider structural context for its emergence through feudal agrarian relations, colonialism and semi-colonialism as well as the transnational flow of Marxist-Leninist ideology in South Asia during the mid-20th century. The research analyze the experience of 104 years of rule by the Ranas, including the systematic exclusion of peasants from political life, concentration of land ownership with a small elite, and the violent repression of any form of organized dissent, to show that the conditions that made possible radical political mobilization; were not created by ideological extremists but instead arose from deep structural contradictions within Nepali society.

This research also aims to provide a detailed understanding of the rise of communism from 1949 to 1996, including the historical development of the communist party in and out of Nepal from its founding in Calcutta in September 1949 through multiple phases and cycles of internal contradictions, ideological dispute, splits, and reorganization and cyclical development until its transition towards the beginning of the armed Maoist revolution in 1996. We do not treat these organizational histories chronologically; rather, we analyze historical sociological lens so as to provide insight into how each of these processes were negotiated, contested, and ultimately agreed to within the communist movement through initiatives towards a protracted people's war. Thus, this research will contribute to a broader comparative understanding of how revolutionary movements develop, consolidate, and radicalize themselves in the context of structural inequalities and institutional closure.

3. Research Methodology

Based on the analysis of secondary sources such as political parties' manifestos and major decisions, and other scholarly literature, the article

tries to analyze the emergence and rise of the communist movement in Nepal from 1949 to 1996. The study analyzes the historical political documents including the manifesto of the communist party and the list of 40 demands submitted by the then CPN (Maoist) to the Nepali congress led government. These documents help the study understand the ideological goal, mobilizing strategies, and organizational and ideological trajectory of the movement. The study also examine the organizational and ideological trajectory of the movement and the self-understanding and decisions of the leadership in different historical conjunctures between 1949 and 1996.

4. Geopolitical and Transnational Context

The mid-twentieth century presented a specific geopolitical conjuncture that proved decisive for South Asian radical politics. India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 represented seismic shifts in the regional order, and their ideological reverberations were felt acutely among Nepali political exiles concentrated in cities such as Calcutta, Varanasi, and Patna. Sidney Tarrow's (1994) concept of 'cycles of contention' – periods in which protest diffuses across social sectors and borders – aptly describes the moment: anti-colonial mobilization across South Asia created a dense network of organizational contacts, ideological conversations, and practical solidarities through which Nepali activists absorbed both the Gandhian repertoire of nonviolent mass protest and the Marxist-Leninist frameworks propagated by the Communist Party of India.

The founders of the Nepali Congress in 1947 – among them Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala, Subarna Shamsheer Rana, and Ganeshman Singh – had participated directly in the Indian independence movement and maintained personal relationships with Congress leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose (Rose & Fisher, 1970). Their political formation, shaped by the discourse of liberal nationalism and constitutional democracy, oriented the party toward a reformist rather than revolutionary path. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), founded on 15 September 1949 in Calcutta under the leadership of Pushpalal Shrestha, Nar Bahadur Karmacharya, and Manmohan Adhikari, represented a different but equally transnational intellectual genealogy. As Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999) have noted, the founding cadres were decisively shaped by the Chinese revolution's peasant-centered strategy and by the Naxalbari agrarian uprising then fermenting in West Bengal.

The theoretical framework adopted by the early CPN drew on Mao Zedong's analysis of 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial' formations to characterize Nepal's social structure – a characterization that, while analytically contested, had significant mobilizing power in a society where feudal land relations remained dominant and British imperial influence operated

through the Rana intermediary (Thapa & Sijapati, 2003). The CPN's founding program accordingly identified the abolition of autocracy, feudalism, and imperialism as the triple objectives of a 'new democratic revolution' – a formulation directly derived from Mao's 1940 essay 'On New Democracy'. This ideological inheritance would prove remarkably durable: the same formulation underpinned the Maoist insurgency launched nearly five decades later.

A sociologically significant feature of this early period is the class composition of the founding political elite. Both the Nepali Congress and the CPN were led by young men whose families had, paradoxically, been close to the Rana establishment before falling victim to the dynasty's internal power struggles. Exile had thus produced a specific kind of counter-elite: individuals with enough social capital to receive quality education in India yet with personal grievances against the very regime their families had served. This biographical pattern—of the disenchanted insider turned radical outsider—recurs throughout the sociology of revolutionary leadership (Pareto's 'circulation of elites'; Weber's analysis of charismatic authority) and is sociologically significant in understanding why Nepali revolutionary politics was led by educated elites rather than peasant communities who bore the greatest burden of structural exploitation.

5. The Praja Parishad and the Construction of Martyrdom

The founding of the Nepal Praja Parishad in 1939 in Kathmandu constituted an important precursor to the formally organized communist movement, and its fate illuminates the mechanisms through which political repression can paradoxically strengthen rather than extinguish oppositional consciousness. Formed by a small group of educated elites who had gained access to schooling at Darbar High School—itsself established in 1892 by Chandra Shamsher, primarily for the children of the ruling class—the Parishad represented the first attempt at organized political resistance from within Nepal's own borders.

In 1941, the regime responded to this nascent opposition with exemplary violence: four core members of the organization—Dharma Bhakta Mathema, Shukraraj Shastri, Dasharath Chand, and Gangalal Shrestha—were sentenced to death and executed. Rather than eliminating political dissent, this act of repression constituted what sociologists of social movements call a 'moral shock' (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995)—an event so morally outrageous that it radicalizes previously uncommitted individuals and generates symbolic resources for future mobilization. The four executed activists became martyrs in the nationalist memory of Nepal, their deaths functioning as founding narrative of the democratic movement. This dynamic illustrates Della Porta's (1995) argument that state repression,

when sufficiently brutal and directed at figures widely perceived as legitimate, tends to intensify rather than suppress radical mobilization.

The social sociology of Rana repression also merits attention. The regime's internal hierarchical ordering—which classified Rana family members into A, B, and C categories based on the caste status of their mothers, with corresponding differential access to power and resources—generated resentments not only among the dispossessed peasantry but within the ruling class itself. Those classified in the lower ranks of the Rana hierarchy found themselves politically marginalized within a system their own family had constructed. Subarna Shamsher Rana, one of the co-founders of the Nepali Congress, exemplified this pattern: a Rana by lineage but excluded from its highest privileges, he channeled elite frustration into democratic opposition (Nepali Times, 2020). This intra-elite fracturing was a structural precondition for the anti-Rana coalition's eventual success.

6. The 1951 Transition and Its Contradictions

The abolition of the Rana regime in 1951 was accomplished through a convergence of internal pressure and external geopolitical repositioning. India's new Congress government under Nehru withdrew its implicit support for the Rana oligarchy and facilitated the Delhi Agreement of 7 February 1951, which restored King Tribhuvan to substantive authority and nominally opened Nepal to multiparty politics (Rose & Fisher, 1970; Whelpton, 2005). For the CPN, this represented a partial opening of what Tarrow (1994) calls the 'political opportunity structure'—a shift in the institutional context that made certain forms of political action newly possible or more costly.

The post-1951 period was characterized by organizational expansion and popular consciousness-raising. Communist cadres dispersed across Nepal's districts, engaging in what Gramsci (1971) would have termed 'organic intellectual' work: articulating peasant grievances in the language of class analysis, connecting local experiences of landlord exploitation to structural dynamics of the feudal order, and building the organizational tissue of a revolutionary movement. In the western hills of Nepal, figures like Mohan Bikram Singh began systematic political education work in districts such as Pyuthan, translating Marxist concepts into the vernacular idioms of village life in ways that resonated with communities who had little or no formal education but intimate experience of economic marginalization and state indifference.

Yet the promise of 1951 was quickly circumscribed. The Delhi Agreement represented what analysts of democratic transition have called a 'negotiated transition' rather than a decisive rupture with the old order

(O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). The Rana elite retained substantial landed property and social influence; the king retained discretionary authority; and the structural conditions that had produced mass poverty – unequal land distribution, debt bondage, caste discrimination, ethnic marginalization – remained largely intact. For the CPN and its successors, this incomplete transformation confirmed the Marxist-Leninist thesis that formal political democracy was insufficient without the economic transformation of social relations, and it provided the empirical basis for future arguments that parliamentary means were inadequate vehicles for genuine social change.

7. Organizational Fission

One of the most sociologically striking features of Nepal's communist movement between 1951 and 1996 was its persistent tendency toward organizational fragmentation. The CPN underwent a series of splits that produced, by the mid-1990s, more than a dozen distinct communist formations with varying ideological orientations, organizational cultures, and strategic lines. Understanding this pattern requires moving beyond the simple narrative of individual leadership failures to identify the structural and ideological forces that made unity persistently difficult.

The first major rupture was precipitated by the royal coup of December 1960, in which King Mahendra dissolved parliament, banned political parties, and instituted the partyless Panchayat system. The coup exposed a fundamental strategic disagreement within the CPN leadership about the relationship between communism and nationalism. The then-General Secretary Kesharjung Rayamajhi took the position that the king's assertion of sovereignty against an 'elitist' parliamentary system represented a 'progressive' nationalist step, aligning with a strand of thought that perceived Indian influence over Nepali democracy as a form of neo-colonialism requiring resistance. This position – characterized subsequently as 'Rayamajhi Tendency' in the movement's internal discourse – reflected a real tension within anti-colonial and nationalist politics about the appropriate relationship between class struggle and national self-determination, a tension that had also roiled communist movements elsewhere in Asia and Africa.

Against Rayamajhi's royalist accommodation, Pushpalal Shrestha's faction argued for the restoration of parliamentary democracy and broad-based mass mobilization, while Mohan Bikram Singh's group advocated for a constituent assembly – a demand that would later become central to Maoist politics. The organizational consequences of this three-way split were to produce separate party formations that carried on parallel organizational work, each claiming authentic communist credentials while condemning rivals as deviationist.

From a sociological perspective informed by organizational theory, these splits can be analyzed through at least three lenses. First, they reflect the structural problem of maintaining organizational coherence in conditions of illegality and repression: the Panchayat-era ban on political parties forced communist organizations to operate underground or in exile in India, creating conditions in which face-to-face ideological contestation was difficult and personal networks became the primary basis of political loyalty (Scott, 1990). Second, the splits reflect genuine strategic uncertainty about the appropriate revolutionary path in a society where rapid social change was producing new social groups—an urban educated class, industrial workers in the Tarai plains, a growing diaspora labour force—whose political interests did not map neatly onto the peasant-centered strategy inherited from Maoist theory. Third, the pattern of splits and re-unifications reflects the logic of factional competition within a constrained organizational field, in which each sub-group had an interest in maintaining its distinct identity as a basis for claiming resources, prestige, and leadership positions (Bourdieu, 1991).

The formation of CPN (Fourth Convention) in 1974 under Mohan Bikram Singh, the subsequent split producing CPN (Mashal) under ‘Kiran’ (Mohan Baidya) and CPN (Masal) under Singh, and the eventual convergence of multiple factions into CPN (Unity Center) in the early 1990s, all followed this general pattern. Each organizational reconfiguration was justified in ideological terms—disputes over the evaluation of the 1990 democratic transition, the appropriate relationship to parliamentary elections, the timing and strategy of armed struggle—but was simultaneously shaped by the organizational interests and personal networks of competing leadership groups.

8. The Rise of a New Revolutionary Leadership

The formation of the CPN (Unity Center) in the early 1990s brought together three leaders who would collectively define the trajectory of the Maoist movement: Pushpakamal Dahal (‘Prachanda’), Baburam Bhattarai, and Ram Bahadur Thapa (‘Badal’). Their convergence in a single organizational structure represented a generational transition in the communist movement—from the founding intellectuals of the 1949 generation to a cohort shaped by the experience of the Panchayat period, the 1990 democratic opening, and the perceived inadequacies of parliamentary politics.

The sociological composition of this new leadership is analytically significant. Prachanda, born into a peasant family in Kaski district, had been active in Marxist study circles as a student at Rampur campus and rose within the party through organizational work rather than the intellectual credentials that had distinguished earlier leaders. Bhattarai, by contrast, had received a doctorate in Planning from Jawaharlal Nehru University in

New Delhi—one of India’s premier institutions for left-wing intellectual life—and entered radical politics through journalistic and intellectual engagement with the urban educated public. Thapa came from a Magar ethnic community in western Nepal and a military family background, embodying the ethnic and regional dimensions of marginalization that the Maoist movement would later make central to its mobilizing appeal. Together, the three represented a combination of organizational capacity, intellectual legitimacy, and social breadth that gave the movement a degree of reach and credibility that earlier communist formations had lacked.

Prachanda’s elevation to General Secretary of CPN (Mashal) in 1989 came through a process that illustrates the intersection of organizational logic and individual agency in political transformation. The ‘Sector Action’ of 1986—an attempt to disrupt Panchayat elections through coordinated attacks on police posts in Kathmandu—had proven strategically disastrous, resulting in the dismantling of the party’s urban network and widespread arrests. The party undertook a formal ‘self-criticism’ exercise that resulted in the demotion of leaders associated with the decision, while Prachanda—who had not been involved in the failed action—emerged as the primary beneficiary of this organizational reckoning. This episode demonstrates how organizational failure, processed through the internal disciplinary mechanisms of a Leninist party, can paradoxically produce new leadership configurations and strategic reorientations.

9. The 1990 Democratic Transition, Structural Failure and Radicalization of the Left

The Jana Andolan of 1990—a mass movement that successfully ended the Panchayat system and restored multiparty democracy after thirty years of royal-authoritarian rule—presented Nepal’s communist movement with both opportunities and dilemmas that would prove decisive for the subsequent turn to armed struggle. The restoration of democratic politics expanded the political opportunity structure, creating space for legal party activity, electoral competition, and open organizing. Yet the movement also ended through an elite bargain between King Birendra and the major political parties—Nepali Congress and the communists organized in the United Left Front—that left the monarchy intact, excluded the most radical elements of the left from the settlement, and produced a constitution that the future Maoists condemned as insufficiently transformative.

The United National People’s Movement Committee (UNPMC), in which the precursor formations of the CPN (Unity Center) participated, had called for the complete abolition of the monarchy and the election of a constituent assembly—demands that were not incorporated into the 1990 Constitution. The leaders of what would become the Maoist party thus entered the post–1990 democratic period with a fundamental objection to

its constitutional foundations, an objection that shaped their strategic calculations about the utility of electoral participation.

The formation of the United People's Front Nepal (UPFN) as the electoral wing of the CPN (Unity Center) for the 1991 general election represented a tactical rather than strategic commitment to parliamentary politics. The UPFN's electoral performance—nine seats and 4.39 percent of the popular vote, making it the third-largest parliamentary force—was treated by the Maoist leadership not as evidence of the viability of the parliamentary path but as confirmation of its limitations. The dominant parliamentary success of the CPN (Unified Marxist—Leninist)—formed by the mainstreaming of the former Jhapali movement and other communist factions—was viewed with particular alarm, as it demonstrated the capacity of the parliamentary framework to absorb and domesticate radical communist politics. The CPN (UML)'s 1993 adoption of 'People's Multiparty Democracy' as its ideological program, incorporating the full framework of liberal democracy, was characterized by the Maoists as ideological 'revisionism' and confirmed their conviction that the parliamentary road led not to socialism but to its permanent deferral.

State violence against UPFN activities during the electoral period provided further experiential evidence for this assessment. Cadres of the Nepali Congress and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party physically attacked UPFN campaign events, frequently with police protection or acquiescence. The government's violent suppression of a general strike on 6 April 1992—in which seven people were killed including a four-year-old child—became a constitutive moment for Maoist political identity, cited repeatedly in party literature as evidence of the 'fascist' character of parliamentary democracy. These experiences of state violence, analyzed through the framework of Piven and Cloward (1977) on poor people's movements, illuminate how repression can radicalize movements by demonstrating the limits of institutional channels and the willingness of the state to use lethal force against peaceful dissent.

The National Unity Convention held in Madi, Chitwan district, in November 1992 represents a critical juncture in the sociology of the Maoist movement—a moment at which accumulated organizational learning, ideological commitments, and strategic assessments crystallized into a definitive political line. The path of 'protracted people's war' proposed by Prachanda at the convention drew explicitly on Mao's military and political writings, particularly the thesis that in agrarian semi-feudal societies, revolution must begin in the countryside, gradually encircle the cities, and culminate in the seizure of state power through a combination of military and political means (Mao Zedong, 1938; Thapa & Sijapati, 2003).

The sociological assessment embedded in the Maoist strategic doctrine is worth examining carefully, as it reflects a coherent, if contested, analysis of Nepal's social structure and its political implications. The CPN (Maoist) characterized Nepal in the early 1990s as a 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial' formation in which a feudal landowning class allied with comprador and bureaucratic capitalist classes exercised power under conditions of Indian expansionist domination (Thapa & Sijapati, 2003; Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2023). This structural analysis led to the conclusion that the conditions for revolution were objectively present: a large, impoverished, and politically excluded peasantry; a state apparatus that functioned primarily to reproduce elite interests; and an international context in which Indian hegemony foreclosed the possibility of genuine national sovereignty through parliamentary means.

The convention's decision was not unanimous: approximately half the delegates opposed the armed struggle resolution, arguing that Nepal's conditions were not ripe for protracted people's war and advocating instead for continued mass mobilization and urban-based political work. This internal disagreement produced a subsequent organizational split in 1994, when the opponents of the armed struggle line quit the Unity Center, leaving Prachanda's faction—which formally adopted the name CPN (Maoist) in 1996—to pursue the revolutionary path independently. The sociology of organizational schism here follows a pattern identified in the comparative study of revolutionary movements: once a definitive strategic line is adopted, moderates who cannot commit to its implications exit, leaving a more ideologically cohesive and militant core capable of sustaining high-risk collective action (McAdam, 1986; Della Porta, 1995).

10. Mobilization Resources: Ideology, Culture, and Military Preparation

The preparation for armed struggle between 1992 and 1996 involved the assembly of what McCarthy and Zald (1977) call 'mobilization resources'—the organizational, material, cultural, and human resources necessary for sustained collective action. The CPN (Maoist)'s approach to resource assembly was comprehensive, encompassing political education, cultural production, military training, and weapons procurement in an integrated strategy.

Political education formed the primary medium for consciousness-raising and organizational development. Regular party classes introduced cadres to the fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory and linked abstract doctrinal content to concrete local experiences of exploitation and discrimination. This pedagogical practice drew on what Paulo Freire (1970) termed 'conscientization'—the process by which oppressed groups come to

understand their social situation not as natural or inevitable but as the product of historically specific power relations that can be challenged and transformed. The emphasis on developing each cadre as simultaneously a political actor, military fighter, and cultural producer reflected the Maoist conception of total revolutionary commitment: revolution was not merely an organizational project but a transformation of individual consciousness and collective identity.

Cultural production occupied a central place in this mobilization strategy. The party developed songs, poems, plays, and visual art that gave affective expression to the revolutionary project and built collective identity among dispersed rural communities. This approach drew on the Maoist cultural theory derived from Mao's 1942 Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art, which argued that cultural production in class society was inevitably a terrain of political struggle and that revolutionary art must serve the masses by representing their experiences and aspirations. The cultural strategy also served practical organizational functions: cultural performances provided occasions for political education, collective solidarity, and the identification of potential recruits in villages where formal organizational structures were absent or vulnerable to state surveillance.

The third expanded meeting of the CPN (Maoist) in Gorkha in 1995 identified Nepal's specific structural features as conditions that would sustain protracted guerrilla warfare: the mountainous terrain that facilitated guerrilla mobility; the ethnic and caste marginalization of large sections of the population; the absence of direct external military intervention; and the existence of a large Nepali migrant labour force in India that could provide logistical support and a safe rear base. These assessments drew on both Maoist military doctrine and the specific lessons of the failed Jhapa uprising of 1971, which the party subjected to critical analysis to identify the organizational and strategic errors that had led to its defeat.

11. The Declaration of People's War

The formal declaration of the People's War on 13 February 1996, launched through coordinated attacks on police posts in Rukum, Rolpa, and Sindhuli districts, marked the culmination of the organizational and ideological trajectory traced in this article. The immediate political context included the government's violent suppression of Maoist political activities through 'Operation Romeo' in November 1995 – which involved arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and documented human rights violations against members of left-wing parties in Rolpa district – and the government's failure to respond to a forty-point memorandum of demands presented by Maoist leaders to Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on 4 February 1996 (Berghof Foundation; Thapa & Sijapati, 2003).

The forty-point demands themselves are a sociologically rich document: they articulate a comprehensive critique of Nepal's political order addressing national sovereignty (the abolition of the 1950 Nepal-India Treaty, rejection of the 1996 Mahakali Treaty); democratic representation (election of a constituent assembly, full subordination of security forces to civilian authority); and social equity (land reform, protection for Tarai landlords and indigenous communities). The demands reflect the multi-class coalition that the Maoists sought to assemble: nationalist appeals to those concerned about Indian dominance; democratic appeals to those excluded from elite politics; and redistributive appeals to the rural poor and marginalized ethnic and caste communities.

From the perspective of social movement theory, the declaration of People's War represents what Sidney Tarrow (1994) has called the transformation of 'repertoires of contention': the replacement of legal protest, electoral participation, and petitioning with armed insurgency as the primary modality of political action. This shift was not simply an ideological choice but a response to the perceived closure of institutional channels — the experience of state violence, electoral marginalization, and constitutional exclusion that had accumulated over the preceding decades. The Maoists' own analysis framed the shift in terms of the exhaustion of legitimate options: it was the state's refusal to engage with their demands, they argued, that made armed struggle not merely permissible but necessary.

12. Conclusion

This article has traced the emergence of Nepal's communist movement from its founding conditions in the late 1940s through the organizational, ideological, and strategic processes that culminated in the People's War of 1996. Several analytical conclusions emerge from this examination.

First and the foremost, the Maoist insurgency was not a product of ideological extremism or organizational voluntarism but of structural conditions—concentrated land ownership, state violence, ethnic and caste marginalization, and the systematic exclusion of large populations from political and economic participation—that had accumulated over more than a century of Rana oligarchy and its aftermath. These conditions constituted what Goodwin (2001) has identified as a 'revolutionary situation': a state perceived by significant sectors of the population as illegitimate, corrupt, and incapable of reform through institutional means.

Second, transnational ideological networks played a decisive role in providing the theoretical frameworks through which Nepali activists interpreted their structural situation and organized collective action. The Indian exile networks, the influence of Chinese Maoist thought, and the organizational ties to international communist movements all shaped the

ideological repertoire available to Nepali communist leaders. Yet this ideological transfer was not mechanical imitation: Nepali communists adapted, contested, and reformulated imported frameworks in light of the specific conditions of their society.

Third, the persistent organizational fragmentation of the communist movement reflects both the structural difficulties of organizing under conditions of repression and illegality and the genuine ideological disagreements about revolutionary strategy that divided a politically sophisticated movement. The pattern of splits and reunifications was not merely an organizational pathology but a mechanism through which strategic and ideological questions were worked through in practice, ultimately producing a formation—the CPN (Maoist) under Prachanda—that combined organizational discipline, ideological clarity, and social breadth sufficient to sustain a decade-long insurgency.

Fourth, the failure of the 1990 democratic transition to address structural inequalities was a proximate cause of the insurgency. The partial opening of democratic politics simultaneously raised expectations and revealed the limits of parliamentary means as vehicles for substantive social transformation. The Maoists' strategic assessment—that the parliamentary framework served primarily to reproduce elite power while managing popular discontent through procedural democracy—proved compelling to a significant portion of Nepal's rural and marginalized population.

The People's War that began in 1996 would last a decade, claiming approximately 13,000 lives and transforming Nepal's political landscape in ways that neither its architects nor its opponents fully anticipated. Its sociology—rooted in the structural conditions and organizational dynamics examined here—illuminates not only Nepal's specific trajectory but also the broader conditions under which agrarian societies produce revolutionary movements that challenge the established order.

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