



Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

YEAR 02 | ISSUE 04 | MAY, 2025

DEMOCRATISATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN NEPAL*

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The fundamental norm of democracy is equality. In reality, we might not be equal, but it is an aspiration nonetheless, and when it comes to the question of opportunity, it becomes a necessity. Whether you look at the question of equality through the lens of Marxist perspectives, a social deviant perspective, or even a political economy perspective, inequality in the long run does more harm than good. In a democracy, the manifestation of equality is at the ballot box. The state's unequal treatment—or even the society's unequal treatment—vanishes; the ballot becomes colorless and casteless. The democratic innovation of rights is merely the result of inequality.

Nepal has always been an unequal country. Even today, we are in the process of achieving equality. Because Nepal was an unequal state, the genesis of political parties was social transformation. This is evident insofar as the impetus for the 1950s revolution was the need to secure personal freedom. The revolution of the 1990s, although it took shape within the larger context of international movements, was nonetheless a moment for a

liberal democratic framework. Nepal's transition has always been driven by personal agendas; that is to say, both the 2007 and 1990 revolutions were demands to secure individual autonomy. The 2006 revolution was slightly different to the extent that it was based on the collective agenda of the nature of the state itself and its governance structure. Regardless of the agenda, it cannot be denied that political parties did play a vital role in social transformation.

But there is today a visible difference between the words and deeds of the political parties. That is to say, what is preached ought to be practiced, and this applies to political parties and leaders as well—especially regarding democratic norms and values. There is also the question of what values and norms a particular society ascribes to democracy and where these values come from. Those are larger questions, but the fundamental norm is that any person, organisation, political party, or political leader who positions themselves as champions of democracy ought to be ready to answer questions about whether their internal practices are democratic or not.

Today, political parties are no longer interested in dialogue or conversations. I distinctly remember a time when it used to be quite the opposite. Perhaps it may come as a surprise to many, but

* The text is an abridged and translated version of the May 2025 edition of Sambad @ Samriddhi. Sambad @ Samriddhi is a monthly discussion on contemporary issues held on the last Friday of each month. In this edition, Hari Sharma shares his insights on Democratisation of Political Parties in Nepal. The discussion was moderated by Deependra Chaulagain.

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I have seen B.P. Koirala spend many afternoons answering questions—from the nature of socialism to the meaning of democracy and even foreign affairs. Today, the culture of conversation is missing. I would argue that this has happened because political leaders have forgotten about their constituencies. Rarely do we see a political leader going back to their constituency—at least consistently—post-election. The crucial question today is: How do we link ourselves to the political leadership, and also how do we link ourselves with leaders who represent us in the name of political parties? The inevitable conclusion is active citizen participation. Because the internal democracy

requires first extending the benefit of the doubt, and it can only be embodied within the framework of recognition and civilised conversation. However, today there is a growing belief in crowd justice rather than democratic institutions, which in turn has undermined these institutions.

There is a notable difference between substantive and procedural democracy. Procedural democracy is about benchmarking certain features of democracy, which include periodic elections, freedom of association, and so on and so forth. If one were to look at these features and analyse the Nepali democratic framework, it's a fantastic democracy. But substantive democracy goes beyond



of a political party affects who gets to be on the ballot paper, it has implications for citizens as well. The internal democracy of any political party affects individuals to the extent that it affects the functioning of democratic institutions. It would therefore also follow that any individual who is interested in the internal functioning of a political party is justified in doing so; democracy and, by extension, its institutions depend on individuals not just voting periodically but also being interested in the functioning of political parties.

These would, however, require civilised conversations. Many would claim that the rise of social media has led to an increase in opposition. That isn't entirely true. There is a difference between opposition and dissent. Opposition

the procedures and focuses more on the underlying social and economic inequalities. One way to think of it would be in terms of the accountability of political parties, which is visibly absent in Nepal. There is, however, one thing worth noting here—i.e., the local governments and their functioning. Nearly everyone would agree that public service delivery has improved drastically because of local governments. It is also true that local government representatives are more accountable than federal government representatives. The space for innovation in democratic institutions clearly exists at the local level and at the federal level, but such a space is shrinking. Within this framework, then, strengthening of substantive democracy can only be achieved through local politics—i.e., local



governments exercising all powers conferred to them by the Constitution of Nepal and resisting the federal government.

Political parties operate like a mafia; they operate based on patronage. To that extent, the democratisation of political parties is always going to be something to aspire to. Considering the fact that any person engaged in a political party depends on the leader of the political party to get a ticket for election, the democratisation of political parties is always going to be an aspirational goal. A political party's primary role is to aggregate collective interests, but because social movements in Nepal lack synergy and aren't able to gain traction, political parties have started aggregating narrower interests. What is also worth noting here is that political parties have different social bases—that is to say, they have different compositions and different agendas. It is evident insofar as studies of political parties around the world recognise the distinction between political parties and their social bases. In Nepal's case, this is visibly not the case. The social composition of political parties is nearly identical; to that extent, their agenda is also identical. Because there is a visible lack of difference in the social composition of political parties, politics in Nepal—although initially driven by the need for social transformation—has now become subsumed by narrower interests and patronage networks. Even the newer political parties today lack this social base; theirs was only the case of

capitalising on the dissatisfaction that the general citizenry felt. Any conversation surrounding the democratisation of political parties in Nepal to that extent, must start from whether or not political parties have a social base and whether they work towards aggregating collective interests.

