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Role of Political Parties in the Democratic Movement of 2006 in Nepal

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Abstract

The 2006 democratic movement in Nepal marked a pivotal shift in the nation's political landscape, culminating in the dissolution of monarchical rule and the establishment of a federal democratic republic. Political parties played a central role in organizing, mobilizing, and sustaining this movement through strategic alliances and grassroots engagement. This article explores the roles played by key political parties during the 2006 movement, drawing upon qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with academicians, activists, and civil society members. The analysis situates these findings within the broader context of Nepal's democratic history and the theoretical frameworks of democratic transition and political mobilization. It argues that while public pressure was decisive, the coordinated actions and ideological shifts within mainstream political parties were essential in achieving systemic change. The study contributes to understanding how party politics interface with popular movements in transitional democracies.

Keywords: Political Parties- democratic movement- maoist- seven party alliance- monarchy

1. Introduction:

1.1 Contextual Background:

The democratic movement of 2006 in Nepal marked a decisive rupture in the country's political history. Triggered by King Gyanendra's direct rule in February 2005, when he assumed absolute authority by dissolving the multiparty system and sidelining the constitution, the movement represented a culmination of widespread dissatisfaction with monarchical autocracy and aspirations for a more inclusive democratic order. Unlike previous struggles, the 2006 movement witnessed the convergence of various political forces, most notably the mainstream political parties and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which had waged a decade-long insurgency (1996–2006). The combination of armed insurgency and peaceful protest created a unique form of political momentum capable of challenging entrenched royal authority (Hachhethu, 2007).

This mass uprising was not merely a response to autocratic rule but a manifestation of long-standing grievances regarding exclusion, inequality, and lack of representation. Ethnic minorities, women, and marginalized communities joined forces with the urban middle class, trade unions, student federations and political activists to demand a radical transformation in the political structure. As Mishra (2010) notes, the movement emerged as

a polyphonic force, articulating diverse political aspirations within a single, anti-monarchical framework.

Scholarship on the 2006 movement has emphasized various dimensions: civil resistance (Ogura, 2008), the monarchy's decline (Thapa & Sharma, 2009), and the role of external actors like India (Jha, 2014). However, few studies have systematically analyzed the role of political parties using empirical, interview-based research. Most existing analyses treat parties as monolithic institutions rather than dynamic actors operating under internal and external pressures. Despite broad scholarly acknowledgment of the 2006 movement as a turning point in Nepal's democratic transition, the strategic, organizational, and ideological roles played by political parties in orchestrating the movement, negotiating alliances, and guiding the transition to a republic remain underexplored in empirical literature. There is a need to examine these roles with analytical precision, especially through the lens of the actors themselves.

Hachhethu (2007) argues that the consolidation of public discontent into a coherent movement was only possible because political parties regained their position as credible agents of change. Lawoti and Pahari (2010) point out that despite ideological divergence, political necessity compelled parties to cooperate with former adversaries, including the Maoists. In contrast, Ogura (2008) highlights the skepticism and ambivalence among ordinary citizens toward all political actors, pointing to the need for deeper reform. Baral (2012) suggests that the 2006 movement helped restore public faith in party politics but also imposed expectations of transparency and post-conflict reconciliation. These studies, while informative, often lack grounded, first-hand testimony from political actors and organizers. This study attempts to bridge this gap by relying on primary interview data.

Understanding the contribution of political parties to democratic movements is crucial for assessing the viability of democratic consolidation in transitional societies. Nepal's case is particularly instructive, as the mainstream parties had suffered legitimacy crises prior to 2006 and were under intense scrutiny from both domestic and international observers. Their ability to re-engage the public, form strategic alliances, and facilitate regime change offers important lessons on party-led democratic transformations. Moreover, the post 2006 period has shown that democratic struggles do not end with regime change; rather, they require sustained institutional development, often driven by those same political actors. Hence, this study not only addresses a historical moment but also contributes to ongoing debates about party legitimacy, reform, and democratic resilience. It also raises questions about the institutional maturity of political parties and their capacity to maintain democratic norms in the long run, as well as the limitations of their approach to coalition-building and public accountability (Baral, 2012). In the South Asian context, where many democracies face the challenge of reconciling elite political negotiations with grassroots expectations, Nepal's 2006 movement provides a unique case for comparative analysis. It highlights the tensions between short-term political pragmatism and long-term democratic values, and the critical role of parties in mediating that tension (Subedi, 2014).

This study is situated at the intersection of political sociology and democratization studies. It interrogates how party structures adapted to shifting political contexts, how they negotiated coalitions across ideological divides, and how they reconciled competing visions of democracy in the heat of a national crisis. The research focuses on both strategic decisions

and the ideological transformations that accompanied them. To address these objectives, the study asks the following key questions:

- I. What roles did political parties play in organizing the 2006 democratic movement, and how did they manage ideological differences to form coalitions?
- II. What are the long-term impacts of their involvement on Nepal's democratic development?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of political parties in democratic transitions, using Nepal's 2006 movement as a critical case.

2. Method and Methodology:

2.1 Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on thematic analysis of primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the need to understand subjective experiences, political strategies, and the dynamic interactions between political actors during the 2006 movement. This method is particularly suitable for exploring political behavior in transitional contexts, where formal documentation may not capture the full scope of actors' motives and perceptions.

2.2 Data Collection:

Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 12 participants, including:

- Leaders from major political parties (Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and Maoist representatives)
- Mid-level party organizers and activists involved in street mobilizations
- Members of civil society who were in close contact with political leadership during the movement

Interviews were conducted in-person and via secure digital platforms over a span of three months (April to June 2025). Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Nepali, later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Interview protocols were designed to explore key themes related to political strategy, alliance-building, public mobilization, and inter-party trust.

Note: All personal communications cited in the study refer to anonymized interviews conducted by the author between April and June 2025. Due to confidentiality agreements and ethical considerations, participants' names and affiliations have been withheld. These interviews are cited as (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025) throughout the article, in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines.

2.3 Sampling Strategy:

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of multiple perspectives from within and outside formal political party structures. Selection criteria included:

- Active involvement in the 2006 movement
- Willingness to provide detailed, reflective accounts
- Political affiliation or documented contribution to democratic activism

This approach enabled the researcher to gain deep insights into the practical and ideological decisions made during the movement. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional informants based on referrals from key participants.

2.4 Data Analysis:

The transcribed interviews were analyzed thematically. Codes were developed inductively, and themes were refined through iterative review. Key themes included:

- Strategic alliance formation
- Street mobilization and grassroots engagement
- Negotiation with Maoists
- Public trust and legitimacy
- Influence of external actors (e.g., India and international organizations)

Coding was conducted using manual coding and comparison of themes across different political affiliations. Triangulation was used to validate findings through comparison with secondary sources and media coverage of the events.

2.5 Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and identifiable information has been removed. Interviews were securely stored in encrypted formats, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

3. Discussion:

3.1 Political Parties as Strategic Agents in Democratic Transition:

According to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), the Seven Party Alliance and Maoist convergence represented a “pacted” route to regime change in which erstwhile adversaries banded together to reduce uncertainty and curtail bloodshed. By providing the Maoists with a negotiated path into competitive politics and the Seven Party Alliance, a statewide mobilizational reach they alone lacked, the alliance recalculated the benefits of collaboration rather than a simply instrumental ceasefire (Przeworski, 1991; Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). In contrast to repression or civil war impasse, players embrace procedural democracy when it optimizes expected benefits, as highlighted by interviewees' emphasis on survival and relevance (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025). This coalition also fits a broader regional pattern where constitutional openings hinge on elite bargains that redefine veto points and guarantee post-transition contestation within rules rather than through arms (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2006).

3.2 Mobilization and Grassroots Engagement:

As meso-level “mobilizing structures” that convert macropolitical prospects into street-level action, parties mobilized dense organizational infrastructures, such as professional organizations, women's wings, and student unions (Tarrow, 2011). Resource-mobilization tales of effective high-risk protest under repression are reflected in interviewees' statements of locally performed but centrally planned logistics (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025). Importantly, parties were acknowledged by civil society actors for offering a cohesive interpretative framework that merged various grievances: constitutionalism versus authoritarianism (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025). This frame alignment allowed for prolonged protests in spite of curfews and police presence by reducing coordination issues between unions, non-governmental organizations, and community organizations (Hachhethu, 2007).

3.3 Internal Party Transformation and Democratic Legitimacy:

Although revisions were inconsistent and frequently rhetorical, interviews indicate a tentative incorporation of youth and underrepresented voices (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025). This is consistent with research on “instrumental internal democratization,” which holds that when office or favors are at risk, parties revert to hierarchical practices after indicating openness during the transition (Hachhethu, 2007; Whelpton, 2005). A legitimacy paradox is indicated by mid-level activists’ observations of entrenched leaderships and factional bargaining: parties that facilitate democratic openness may later impede deepening when organizational incentives favor clientelism and leader-centric control. The first democratic impetus runs the danger of evaporating into elite circulation rather than renewal in the absence of formalized intra-party elections, transparent finance, and merit-based advancement (ICG, 2006; Lawoti & Pahari, 2010).

3.4 Role of External Actors:

Interview accounts of discreet Indian facilitation align with documented regional diplomacy that sought to end the insurgency and restore pluralism while limiting instability along the open border (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025; ICG, 2005). Such involvement illustrates the “neighborhood effect” in South Asian transitions, where proximate powers shape bargaining space, sanctions credibility, and security assurances. The ambivalence voiced by civil society – appreciating leverage yet fearing sovereignty dilution captures a common tension: external guarantees can lower transaction costs for settlements, but they risk domestic contestation if perceived as overreach (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025).

3.5 Implications for Democratic Consolidation:

Interviewees correctly worry that factionalism, clientelism, and weak internal democracy continue to tax performance legitimacy. Comparative evidence shows that post-conflict polities consolidate when parties institutionalize programmatic competition, deliver core public goods, and maintain credible commitment to constitutional rules (Przeworski, 1991). In Nepal, periodic governmental instability and coalition churn reflect unresolved incentive problems within and across parties. As some party insiders noted, reform agendas stalled when short-term electoral calculus trumped organizational renewal (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025). Consolidation therefore depends on three linked reforms: (1) routinized intra-party democracy (candidate selection, finance transparency), (2) civic-party linkages that keep movement-born accountability alive between elections, and (3) continued integration of former insurgents through rule-bound competition and security-sector oversight (Hachhethu, 2007; ICG, 2006; Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). Absent such steps, the trust accrued in 2006 may erode, narrowing the system’s capacity to mediate conflict nonviolently (Interviewee, personal communication, 2025).

4. Conclusion:

The 2006 movement illustrates how democratic openings in post-conflict settings are rarely spontaneous; they are engineered by political parties that recalibrate interests, reframe contestation, and construct organizational bridges between elite bargains and mass participation. The Seven party Alliance–Maoist pact converted a mutually hurting stalemate into a bounded pathway for regime change, channeling insurgent energies into constitutional politics while expanding the opposition’s reach beyond Kathmandu. Parties

then activated meso-level infrastructures- student unions, women's and professional fronts, PAPAD to sustain disruptive but disciplined protest under repression. This combination of elite coordination and grassroots capacity explains why mobilization was broad-based, persistent, and ultimately successful in compelling monarchical retreat.

Yet the very organizations that midwived transition have struggled to consolidate it. Interviews and secondary scholarship converge on a core paradox: parties embraced democratic rhetoric and occasionally opened internal deliberation, but leadership centralization, factional bargaining, and clientelistic distribution remained resilient. These legacies weaken programmatic competition, shorten governing time horizons, and risk reducing coalition politics to transactional arithmetic. The resulting instability—frequent government turnover, policy drift, and public disillusionment—erodes the performance legitimacy that young democracies depend on after a breakthrough.

Moving from transition to consolidation therefore requires institutional repair inside parties and credible delivery outside them. Internally, routine leadership turnover, transparent finance, rule-bound candidate selection, and meaningful roles for youth, women, Madhesi, Janajati, and Dalit cadres are not cosmetic reforms but preconditions for durable legitimacy. Externally, parties must recommit to constitutionalism not only in moments of crisis but in everyday governance: protecting civil liberties, stewarding security-sector oversight, and prioritizing public goods—employment, infrastructure, education, and local service delivery—over patronage. The integration of former insurgents should remain anchored in competitive rules and accountability mechanisms rather than ad hoc bargains, preserving the movement's original promise of politics without arms.

The role of external actors—particularly Indian facilitation—was consequential in lowering transaction costs during the transition, but democratic durability cannot be outsourced. Sovereign legitimacy ultimately rests on whether Nepali parties can translate the moral capital of 2006 into institutional reliability. The central lesson is thus double-edged: parties are indispensable agents of democratization, but without self-binding reforms they can become its principal constraint. For scholars, this case underscores the importance of studying parties as organizations—how incentives, rules, and networks shape post-conflict trajectories. For practitioners, it points to a practical agenda: invest in intra-party democracy, build stable coalition procedures, and hardwire citizen accountability between elections. Only by institutionalizing these routines can Nepal convert a historic popular victory into an ordinary, sustainable democratic normal.

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