



Transforming Nepal's Political System: Party Positions and Public Opinion (2004-2012)—A Summary

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Summary of the PhD thesis for the purpose of obtaining the Degree of Doctor at Leiden University, the Netherlands

The study analyses the structure and dynamics of opinions of the general public of Nepal (based on random sampling surveys, 'Nepal Contemporary Political Situation' conducted with the support from The Asia Foundation Nepal between 2004 and 2012, and 'People's Perception of Safety and Security' conducted with the support from The Saferworld UK between 2007 and 2010) with the radical transformation of the country's political system in the recent past, with a particular focus on the four major state restructuring issues (i.e. four major political reforms): *republicanism*, *secularism*, *multilingualism* and *federalism*, and compares these with the positions taken by Nepal's major political parties on these reforms.

These four reforms together made up the transformation that was eventually codified into the new Constitution of the country in September 2015. However, even when the new Constitution was promulgated, the public opinion had not preferred to all four reforms. This researcher's access to raw data of public opinion polls conducted during the period of transformation, have enabled him to study the



structure and development of Nepal's public opinion on issues of transformation, and to compare this to the positions taken by the main political parties. The researcher has also been able to study a considerable body of literature concerning quantitative and comparative research on political transformations in Nepal and other countries, particularly empirical research on the relationship between political parties and public opinion.

This research reveals that there is a dominant role of political elites from the major political parties in the transformation of the country's political system. However, the research has also shown that a new political system's legitimacy and sustainability depend not only on the strong (and non-violent) support of the main political parties, but also—despite findings supporting the theory of 'democratic elitism'—primarily on that of the general public or citizenry—even if the latter has not been directly involved in shaping this transformation through for example a referendum on a new constitution (such a referendum did not occur in Nepal, though the people did elect the Constituent Assembly).

Amongst the four reforms discussed in this study, on only one reform i.e., from monarchy to republic, the latest public opinion (April 2012) showed majority support (i.e. 50 percent) for a republic, with a substantial minority of 39 percent still supporting the monarchy. On the issue of Hindu state vs. secular state, there was more public support than opposition for retaining of the Hindu state instead of a secular state. The latest finding (April 2012) showed that 55 percent would have preferred to maintain the identification of the state with Hinduism while only 37 percent agreed with the adoption of a secular state. On multilingualism, the latest survey in which the question was asked (July 2009) revealed



only 40 percent support for recognition of other national or foreign languages as official languages against a majority of 55 percent preferring a Nepali-only language policy. In both cases, the proportions of the population that agreed with the reforms are substantial, but remain minorities nevertheless. With regard to the reform of the unitary state into a federal state, there was more public support for federalism (28 percent) than for the unitary state (14 percent) in the latest survey (April 2012), but more importantly, a majority (58 percent) could not express any choice definitively—i.e. either they had not heard about the issue, or did not understand it, or didn't know what to think of it.

Looking at the pattern of support for the reforms across regions, ethnic groups, religious groups, political affiliation, educational status etc., the survey data revealed the supports for obvious expectations: the supporters of the Maoist party who first demanded these reforms tended to agree with them; the groups in Nepali society that had been negatively affected by the centuries of domination by the Hindu high caste hill group and the attempts to homogenise Nepali society were mostly in favour of reforms that introduced a republic, secular state, multilingualism and federalism. What is interesting, however, is that these relationships between groups and preferences for reforms are far from deterministic: for example, in all surveys over 60 percent of Hindus preferred maintaining the Hindu state, but between a quarter and a third of this religious group actually preferred a secular state.

Meanwhile Buddhists, the largest non-Hindu religious group, showed clear majority support for a secular state in most surveys, but also sizeable minorities (of up to 35 percent) wanting to keep Nepal as a Hindu state. In addition, there are interesting exceptions to what one



would expect. Given the long association of the Nepali state with efforts to assimilate other groups into the culture of the Hindu high caste hill group, it would not be surprising if support for retaining the monarchy was strongest and declined least and latest among members of that group compared to support among more marginal groups, such as Dalit, people living in the Tarai, and indigenous groups. But the data showed that, if anything, support for the monarchy declined earlier and more among members of the hill high caste group.

Federalism became controversial only late in the transformation, largely because of political action in the Tarai. Yet, both awareness of and support for federalism fluctuated among groups living in that part of the country. A composition effect offers only a partial explanation on the abolition of the monarchy, Hindu state and unitary state because though the preferences of the higher educated were closer to those of the elites but not identical. On the issue of multilingualism, the higher educated were less supportive of the reforms. Majority of them supported the Nepali-only policy.

By examining the relationship between the decisions of the political elites and public opinions, it is possible to distinguish three main positions or perspectives: 1) the decisions by the political elites reflect public opinion; 2) the decisions by the political elites reflect their own judgement; and 3) the decisions by the political elites and public opinion are in a reciprocal relationship, adapting to each other. The literature shows support for each of these three positions. Which of the three positions actually applies seems to depend on various sources of variation. For this study of Nepal's political transformation, issue salience seems particularly relevant. If reforms are not or less salient to the



general public, the probability increases that the decisions taken reflect the agenda of the political elites. In this case over time public preferences are likely to move closer to the decisions already taken. If reforms are more salient, public opinion and elite decisions reciprocally influence each other, and over time public preferences and elite decisions converge. At first sight, however, this study does not empirically support these expectations.

It might be argued that on some of the issues the parties also moderated their positions to some extent. This is clearest on the abolition of the Hindu state. The elites maintained their decision to move to a secular state, but added to the constitution a definition of 'secularism' that included protection for traditional religious practices. In addition, a law against proselytisation was adopted in 2017. Article 158 of the National Panel Code (2017) prohibited proselytisation to allay the fears of the Hindu majority. With regard to language policy, the eventual implementation of multilingualism in which Nepali remains the administrative language at the national level and other languages can be recognised as administrative languages in each province, can also be interpreted as a concession to public opinion. However, even such a more nuanced assessment does not deny the gap between elites and public opinion, and there is no evidence that such concessions have led to more public support. Still, it may be too early to reach a conclusion about the legitimacy and consolidation of the new political system of Nepal.

There are occasional calls for a return to a Hindu state or even for a restoration of the monarchy, but so far they do not seem to mobilise significant movements. The right-wing *Rastriya Prajatantra* Party (RPP), for example, has been organising mass demonstrations demanding the restoration of both the monarchy and the Hindu state. They argue that



these two things are necessary for protecting democracy and bringing political stability in the country.

Finally, the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution formally concluded one of the most radical transformations of a political system in the recent history: from a monarchy to a republic, from a Hindu state to a secular state, from a unitary state to a federation, and from one official language to a multilingual state. The political elites of Nepal proved themselves to be the benevolent guardians of political tolerance and minority rights. Nepal has always been characterised by great cultural diversity, but from the foundation of the Gorkha Empire in 1768, Nepal's history can be summarised as a long attempt at political and cultural unification modelled after the culture of the dominant Hindu high caste hill group. The new constitution abandons that project and seeks to embrace and formally acknowledges the country's diversity.

Dr. Pawan Kumar Sen, a frequent contributor to this journal, has become its newest associate editor. He leads his own research company Himalaya Comprehensive Research established in 2016. He received his PhD in 2025 from Leiden University, the Netherlands, for his work Transforming Nepal's Political System: Party Positions and Public Opinion (2004-2012). He completed his first Master's degree in Statistics at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1995 and a second Master's degree in Water Resources and Environmental Management at the International Institute of Geo-information Science and Earth Observation in Enschede, the Netherlands in 2004. His academic training is augmented with short courses on Philosophy of Science and Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis at Leiden University in 2012, and on Survey Data Analysis at the



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Postscript



P.K. Sen (middle) & C.T. ten Dam (left)

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Pawan Sen successfully defended his PhD thesis and received his Doctor degree on April 24, 2025 in the Great Auditorium of Leiden University before a five-member examination committee (one present online, and another represented by Sen's supervisor Prof. Dr. J.J.M. van Holsteijn, who asked this examiner's questions in his stead). Caspar ten Dam, the executive editor of this journal, assisted Pawan Sen during and after his defence as a so-called 'paranymph' according to the Leiden academic tradition—including announcing Sen's so-called Lay Talk, a 10-minute-long

introduction of the thesis to a physical and/or online audience prior to the defence (a new element added to the Leiden PhD defence ceremony since September 1, 2024). Pawan's thesis may come out via a recognised publisher in the near future—perhaps first and foremost in the Nepali language.