

Nepal joins regional wave of revolt as popular anger at repression and inequality spreads across South Asia

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Since 2022, a wave of movements that originated in Sri Lanka has spread across South Asia. In Bangladesh, the anti-quota movement sparked widespread protests in 2024, prompting the Sheikh Hasina government to respond with severe repression. In retaliation, individuals from various backgrounds took to the streets. As calls for an uprising against the government intensified, Hasina was forced to flee the country, despite her efforts to suppress the popular movement.

This wave of protest has now reached neighbouring Nepal. Politically, left and right factions have offered differing interpretations of the situation. However,

both sides attribute the mass movement in Nepal to the influence of US imperialism. While there is currently no concrete evidence of direct US involvement, it would be premature to rule out any such sleight of hand.

But we can reasonably assert that imperialist conspiracies are not the sole cause of Nepal's uprising. Rather, it was driven by growing discontent among ordinary Nepalis, which has been escalating for nearly two decades due to political manoeuvring at their expense. The recent ban on social media served as a catalyst. Similar to the quota protests in Bangladesh, which reflected deep public dissatisfaction, the undemocratic act of shutting down social media in Nepal may have been the tipping point that brought down an anti-people government.

After decades of bloody struggle, the establishment of democracy in Nepal in 2008 marked a historic milestone. At a time when Communist parties globally were experiencing setbacks, the seizure of state power in Nepal under Communist leadership ignited renewed hope for the left. A mass uprising in Nepal effectively toppled the existing regime, leading to high expectations in the newly-formed government. However, in recent years, Nepal's three major political parties — the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), and the Maoist Centre — have engaged in a game of musical chairs for power. This effort resulted in no significant improvement in the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Before delving into this issue further, it is essential to briefly revisit the history of Nepal's anti-monarchy movement, as understanding this movement is crucial for grasping the context of the current wave of protests.

Anti-monarchy movement in Nepal (2001–08)

In June 2001, a tragic massacre occurred in the royal palace of Nepal, resulting in the deaths of King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya, heir Dipendra, and nearly the entire royal family. Following this event, King Gyanendra Singh ascended to the throne. However, his reign soon led to widespread public discontent. In February 2005, Gyanendra dissolved parliament and assumed executive power. A state of emergency was declared, newspapers were suppressed and political parties were effectively banned. The international media characterised this move as an authoritarian step.

In this context, political parties and the Maoists signed the significant “12-point agreement” in Delhi in 2005, aiming primarily to overthrow the monarchy and establish a democratic framework. In April 2006, the People’s Movement-2 commenced. For 19 consecutive days, millions defied curfews and took to the streets. Workers, students, women and rural peasants all participated in this movement. Under mounting pressure, Gyanendra was compelled to reinstate parliament, marking the onset of the monarchy’s decline.

In December 2007, the interim parliament officially passed a resolution to abolish the monarchy, laying the groundwork for declaring Nepal a republic. International media reported, “Lawmakers formally approved … to abolish the centuries-old monarchy and declare the country a republic” (Dawn). On April 10, 2008, elections for the Constituent Assembly were held, with the Maoists securing the most seats. Following the election, they announced the monarchy would cease to exist.

Finally, on May 28, 2008, during the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly, a vote was conducted that officially ended Nepal's monarchy. Of the representatives, 560 voted in favour, while only four were opposed. Consequently, Nepal was declared a Federal Democratic Republic. On the same day, the royal flag was lowered from Narayanhiti Palace, and the national flag was raised; the palace was subsequently converted into a museum.

Post-2008 Communist rule and controversies

With Nepal becoming a federal democratic republic, many hoped that a stable and progressive government could lead the country forward. However, Nepal's Communist-led governments have faced accusations, instability and fragmentation, resulting in unfulfilled aspirations among the populace. From the outset, internal conflicts within the Communist parties became evident.

The party that emerged from the Maoist armed rebellion had promised to draft a new constitution upon gaining power; yet in practice, they used parliament and the government to consolidate their authority. There were allegations of corruption, nepotism and excessive control over the state apparatus against the Maoist leadership. The Maoists consistently delayed the constitution-drafting process, creating ongoing conflicts in parliament concerning the *balance* of power, which ultimately fostered a growing sense of uncertainty among the people.

Another powerful political current in Nepal was the Unified Marxist-Leninists, or CPN (UML). Sometimes they allied with the Maoists; sometimes they

opposed them. In 2018, a major event occurred when the CPN (UML) and the Maoist Centre united to form the Nepal Communist Party. Then-Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli and former Maoist leader Prachanda came to power with joint leadership. Many people believed this unity would lead to long-term stability. But internal tensions soon became apparent. Oli was accused of trying to monopolise power, weakening constitutional institutions, and using the judiciary and the president's office for his own interests. He was also accused of bypassing parliament through executive decisions and suppressing critics.

In 2020, the political crisis reached its peak when Oli abruptly announced the dissolution of parliament. Opponents labelled this act as not only unconstitutional but overtly anti-democratic. Eventually, the Supreme Court reinstated parliament. During this tumultuous period, large protests erupted on the streets, further eroding confidence in the government. The unity of the Nepal Communist Party was short-lived as well. In 2021, the court annulled its legal existence due to registration errors and unresolved internal conflicts. Consequently, the Maoist Centre and CPN (UML) split again. This division weakened leftist politics in Nepal and diminished their credibility in the eyes of the public.

The government's activities faced significant criticism, particularly due to various corruption scandals. Accusations were levelled against the government for irregularities in large development projects, and for providing financial benefits to party leaders and wasting public funds. Newspapers and civil society organisations consistently reported that Communist leaders were exploiting state resources to consolidate their power rather than addressing the challenges faced by ordinary citizens. A key factor contributing to the erosion of public trust was the government's evident incompetence and weak

management during the pandemic. Inadequate health services, a poor vaccine procurement policy and corruption in relief distribution angered the population throughout Covid-19.

There were allegations regarding the suppression of dissenting voices. Lawsuits targeting critical journalists, threats directed at civil society leaders, and police crackdowns on protests significantly undermined Nepal's democratic practices. In 2019, Khem Thapaliya, editor of the online portal Jhaljhaliya, and Sajjan Saud of Ijhjalco were arrested for purported connections to a rebel Communist group. Additionally, Deepak Pathak, a board member of Radio Nepal, faced arrest for criticising a former prime minister on social media.

In March 2025, during a pro-monarchy rally in Kathmandu, police employed force — including tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons — resulting in two fatalities, alongside numerous other anti-democratic occurrences. Human rights organisations have consistently accused the government of using force against peaceful demonstrators. Furthermore, the government's failure to safeguard the rights of minority ethnic groups and Dalit communities became increasingly apparent.

Another significant weakness of Nepal's Communist movement was internal factionalism. Oli, Prachanda and Madhav Nepal, who when on to lead the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), a later split from the CPN (UML), each used the party to bolster their influence. Consequently, there were frequent changes of government. From 2008 to 2025, Nepal experienced over a dozen changes, primarily involving leftist or left-led administrations. However, this instability did not result in consistent development or

democratic progress for the populace. Instead, ordinary citizens perceived Communist leaders as preoccupied with power struggles.

Apart from internal conflicts, Nepal’s foreign policy also attracted controversy. The government has repeatedly struggled to manage its relations with India, navigate the growing influence of China, and address pressures from international donors. Critics argue that Communist governments have at times capitulated to Chinese influence and, at other times, succumbed to Indian pressure, thereby limiting Nepal’s capacity for independent decision-making. Consequently, the situation led to a rise in support for nationalist movements and pro-monarchy groups.

The primary failure of the Communist-led government has been its inability to ensure political stability. The process of drafting a new constitution was excessively prolonged, the implementation of the new provincial structure proved ineffective, and economic inequality remained unaddressed. The absence of consensus among political parties, coupled with ongoing power struggles, has heightened public frustration. Many analysts believe that Nepal’s political landscape is caught in a cyclical pattern: left parties ascend to power, falter due to corruption and repression, and subsequently, a new alliance emerges, only for the same issues to arise again.

The 2022 Kathmandu mayoral election

In the 2022 mayoral election in Kathmandu, the triumph of independent candidate Balen Shah triggered an important change in Nepal’s political landscape. For an extended period, Communist parties had maintained a

strong grip on the politics of both the capital and the country. Many believed that the Nepal Communist Party's influential role in local elections would persist, even following its split. However, Shah's victory challenged this assumption, acting as an early warning signal to Nepal's Communist leadership.

Shah gained popularity primarily as a rapper and an independent cultural figure, remaining unaffiliated with any political party. He emerged as a symbol of protest against the established political system. When he contested the Kathmandu mayoral election, many viewed his candidature as a symbolic challenge. However, the election results demonstrated that voters were not merely seeking to send a symbolic message; they elected him as a means of rejecting the existing political system altogether.

The Communist parties failed to hold on to a central position like Kathmandu in this election. Their candidates could not gain voters' trust, because long-standing rule, allegations of corruption, internal splits and power struggles had tired the people. Shah tapped into this frustration during his campaign. He promised a clean city, better services and accountable administration, which attracted voters.

Shah's victory not only opened new doors in Nepal's political landscape but also highlighted the shortcomings of the Communist parties. It is evident that Shah's success was not merely a triumph for an independent candidate; rather, it reflected the public's diminishing trust in established political forces. The faith in leftist politics, which had been evident during the 2008 fall of the monarchy, began to wane in this election. The defeat of the Communist candidate in a strategically significant city such as Kathmandu served as a

clear indication of their organisational weaknesses.

After 2022, Nepal's political and social landscape gradually became more complex. Shah's victory in Kathmandu highlighted public frustration; however, in the ensuing years, the central government continued to wallow in the mire of outdated politics instead of heeding this message. As a result of administrative failures, corruption and political instability, Nepal's governance system fell into a deep crisis.

In the 2022–23 fiscal year, youth unemployment for those aged 15–24 reached 22.7%, a significant increase from 7.3% in 1995–96 (CESLAM). Concurrently, overall unemployment stood at 12.6%, up from 11.4% in 2017–18 (CESLAM). Consequently, frustration among unemployed youth grew, accompanied by a rising disillusionment with the government.

Economic inequality has continued to rise, with an increasing gap between urban and rural areas. In the 2022–23 fiscal year, the poverty rate for those living below the cost of living threshold was 18.34% in urban areas, compared to 24.66% in rural areas (Asia News Network). The urban elite have monopolised most of the wealth and benefits, leaving rural populations neglected. The agricultural sector has fallen into crisis, leading to a decline in productivity.

Many young people have sought to migrate due to a lack of domestic employment opportunities. Although remittances from migrant workers have kept the economy afloat to some extent, they have not succeeded in reducing internal economic inequality. According to *World Bank* data, 20% of Nepal's population lives below the poverty line. The same report notes that the

income of the richest 10% of the country is more than three times that of the poorest 40%. This highlights the substantial income gap between the upper and lower classes.

Ongoing protest movement and present scenario

Today’s anti-government mass movement in Nepal did not emerge spontaneously. Instead, it developed as a result of two decades of ineffective and unproductive politics by Communist parties. Regardless of the narratives surrounding US imperialism that may circulate, the reality is that democratic space in Nepal has been diminishing. For an extended period, extreme repression, a failure to decentralise power, and the establishment of a bureaucratic system have fostered a climate in which power is perceived as might, making the system’s collapse inevitable.

While the right may concoct various tales to suggest a conspiracy by the US against India, it is disheartening to witness the left overlook the political awareness of the working class. It is undeniable that, in the name of establishing democracy and peace, the US has conducted imperialist invasions in numerous countries, including in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iraq. It is the duty of the left to stand in solidarity with the people of these nations, prioritising internationalism. However, this does not imply that every struggle for democracy should be dismissed as an imperialist conspiracy — such a dismissal merely exposes a form of unrealistic arrogance.

The demands for food and democracy are not mutually exclusive; rather, when the left attains power, one of its primary responsibilities, along with

addressing inequality and unemployment, is to democratise the governance system to ensure that the voices of the most marginalised are heard within the state administration. Should there be attempts to centralise social power through dictatorship and the establishment of a bureaucratic class, a rebellion among the people is inevitable. The outcomes of such a rebellion will likely be seized by whichever forces are most organised within the movement at that time, whether on the right or left.

In Nepal's case, a positive indication is the presence of various leftist forces actively participating in the streets and leading segments of this movement. If they are able to maintain leadership, they will be able to challenge the right and achieve victory. Furthermore, parties such as the Nepali Congress have rejected the proposal to establish US military bases. It remains uncertain how effectively the US can *leverage* this movement to sustain its influence in Asia. However, if the demands of workers and peasants are overlooked in the struggle for democracy, and individuals are viewed merely as puppets of imperialist forces, they are essentially reduced to "passive objects" manipulated by external powers.

It is evident that Nepal's political system, along with the succession of leftist governments, has failed to meet the expectations of the working masses. The promise of reform that began after the end of the monarchy has devolved into a pattern of unpredictability, intra-party conflicts and widespread dissatisfaction. This failure has eroded the credibility of political leaders, allowing emerging social movements and self-governing organisations to challenge the dominance of mainstream political entities.

While reestablishing some form of political stability is likely, the critical and

unresolved question remains: can the left regain its footing? Historically, when revolutionary periods are halted — failing to move beyond superficial reforms aimed at achieving deeper social change — they can have significant repercussions for the working class and the disadvantaged. Consequently, such outcomes often lead not only to disappointment but the rise of reactionary alternatives, a decline in progressive forces, and a weakening of the democratic spaces that the revolution sought to create.

Today, Nepal finds itself at a pivotal juncture. The left's inability to consolidate its achievements and transform the revolution's aspirations into sustainable structures of democracy and social justice has created a precarious void. Should autocratic or self-serving forces fill this vacuum, the original goals of the 2008 Republican revolution may face serious delays and compromises. The pressing issue is not whether stability will return — it is highly likely that it will — but under whose leadership it will manifest and what form that stability will take.

For the left, the challenges are substantial. To regain its credibility, it must establish an integrated organisational framework and undergo a genuine transformation towards accountability, inclusivity and a true democratic process. Without such a shift, the historic significance of the revolution risks being remembered increasingly as a missed opportunity that fostered lasting resentment among those it aimed to empower.

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