
THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN NEPALI POLITICS

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Abbreviations

CPN:	Communist Party of Nepal
FM:	Frequency Modulation
FPTP:	First-Past-the-Post
HoR:	House of Representatives
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
NCP:	Nepali Congress Party
NGO:	Non-Government Organisations
NRN:	Non-Resident Nepali
NRs.:	Nepalese Rupees
SLC:	School Leaving Certificate
SPD:	Social Democratic Party
UK:	United Kingdom
UML:	Unified Marxist-Leninist
USA:	United State of America

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Sincerely,
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Executive Summary

This report explores the complex dynamics that inhibit political accountability in Nepal. It argues that self-interested political parties with little regard for ideology, expedient coalitional politics, patronage networks, and institutional limitations have contributed to the lack of accountability in Nepali politics. With the aid of a political economy framework and drawing from interviews with political leaders, civil society leaders, and voters in different parts of Nepal, the study identifies structural, institutional, and ideational factors that shape the behaviours of political parties in Nepal. Structural challenges like high unemployment, low income, and limited educational attainment that make politicians highly dependent on their political career are compounded by institutional practices such as costly elections, coalitional politics, and politically motivated appointments. These factors together make politicians prioritize party power over public service. Additionally, ideational barriers including the lack of acceptance of the principal-agent relationship between voters and political representatives by political leaders and a sense of powerlessness and resignation among voters further undermine political accountability.

The report highlights the role of local government, civil society, voter groups, and independent bodies like the Election Commission in fostering change. It calls for reforms to enhance electoral processes, limit political co-option of civil society, and support voter education. The Election Commission, in particular, is positioned as a central actor capable of strengthening accountability mechanisms through electoral reforms. The study concludes that, while challenges are formidable, leveraging local government, civil society, and diaspora activism could gradually shift the political landscape toward greater accountability and citizen engagement.

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Introduction

Representative democracy and representative accountability are inextricably intertwined.¹ Take away accountability and democracy effectively becomes an oligarchy, where leaders of political parties (or the economic elite behind them) run the state on their own terms and in their own interest.² Representative accountability is not a given in a democracy, and therein lies the problem. Representative democracy is fraught with dangers relating to the capture and misuse of the state and its resources by self-interested politicians who deceive or bribe voters into voting for them. These dangers are heightened in the nascent stage of democracy as the system of checks and balances is usually not well-developed. However, if institutional mechanisms for ensuring accountability are made effective with the help of civil society, political parties can be made to act in the interest of citizens and representative democracy can indeed work well – as is evident in many advanced democracies.

In this section, we examine *conceptually* why and how political parties and representatives tend to eschew representative accountability and how civil society can play a key role in making political parties and representatives accountable to citizens through electoral threats. In the next section, we look at the context-specific political-economy factors including structural factors, institutional factors, and ideational factors behind the general lack of accountability in Nepali politics. These factors together illuminate the interests, incentives, and worldviews of politicians and

concomitantly point to the institutional and ideational changes that are needed and are possible to ensure greater accountability in Nepali politics.

Disillusionment with democracy

Multi-party democracy arrived in Nepal in 1990.³ However, there was already widespread disillusionment with multi-party democracy and political parties by the time King Gyanendra returned the country to absolute monarchy in 2002.⁴ Nevertheless, representative democracy got a fresh start in 2006 after the ‘Second People’s Movement’ overthrew the king and Nepal became a democratic republic for the first time in its 250-year history as a nation.⁵

After a brief period of hope for many following the entry of revolutionary and justice-oriented political forces (Maoists and Madhesi parties) into democratic politics and the promulgation of a progressive and inclusive constitution in 2015, disillusionment with democratic politics has returned to Nepal. Interviews conducted for this study revealed widespread frustration with politics and political parties not only among citizens and civil society actors but even among senior leaders and members of political parties. Virtually none of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with political parties or representatives with the exception of local government representatives, who were generally rated favourably. A common view expressed in the interviews was that political parties and their leaders

1 Craig T. Borowiak. *Accountability and democracy: the pitfalls and promise of popular control* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 3.

2 Hugo Drochon, ‘Robert Michels, the iron law of oligarchy and dynamic democracy’, *Constellations* 27, no. 2 (June 2020): 185-198.

3 Multi-party democracy had been briefly practised in the 1950s but ended with King Mahendra imposing direct royal rule in 1960; see John Whelpton. *A History of Nepal* (Cambridge University Press, 2005): xiv.

4 John Whelpton. *A History of Nepal* (Cambridge University Press, 2005): 189.

5 Krishna Hachhethu, ‘Role of Political Parties in the Democratization Process of Nepal,’ in *Rooting Nepal’s Democratic Spirit*, ed. Chandra Dev Bhatta (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nepal Office): 57-78.

are not accountable to citizens (or even their own members) and that their sole focus is on gaining power and distributing privileges to a select group of political and economic elites without much regard for ideology or democratic principles and irrespective of the consequences for the wellbeing of citizens and the future of Nepal.

Disillusionment and frustration applied equally to all the major parties in the interviews. The common transformation of Nepal's major political parties after entry into democratic politics seems puzzling. The major parties⁶ – Nepali Congress (NC), CPN Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML), CPN Maoist (Centre) – had all engaged in a long and arduous struggle for political or social reform on the basis of well-defined ideologies and values but, after entering democratic politics, they all transformed into power-oriented (rather than progress-oriented) establishments that effectively abandoned their political ideology and values and became interested primarily in securing powerful positions and distributing privileges, including by forming coalitions with ideologically incompatible parties and engaging in the spoils-sharing practice of 'bhabganda'⁷ with little regard for democratic principles.⁸

From political movement to political career

The common post-democracy transformation of the major political parties in Nepal regardless of their ideological background is, however, not a novel or localised phenomenon. At the turn of the twentieth century, the German-born political scientist Robert Michels noted a similar trend among European parties of the time, including the Social Democratic Party (SPD) he was a part of. Michels posited in his classic work, *On the Sociology of the Party System in Modern Democracy*,

that political parties are essentially oligarchic self-preserving organisations and that becoming a political party official tends to transform former activists and revolutionaries into career politicians concerned first and foremost with the survival and success of the party organisation rather than with the original ideology or purpose of the movement that gave birth to the party:

The party officials henceforth no longer belong to the same class as their former colleagues [of the movement] they claim to represent, meaning their interests will differ. Most importantly, their loyalties will no longer be directly with their past comrades, but now lie with the party itself, which provides them with a living...As such for them the survival of the party will always come first, over and above any demands from the regular members of the party, whether economic or ideological. The simple reason...is that the party is no longer a means but has become an end in itself.⁹

Michels' thesis has been broadly supported by research and is now widely-accepted.¹⁰ It helps explain the post-democracy transformation of formerly ideologically-driven political parties into materially-oriented oligarchic organisations focussed on securing power and privilege for their officials rather than ensuring Nepal's economic and social progress.

The principal-agent relationship

Representative accountability requires the acknowledgment and the acceptance of the principal-agent relationship. As Craig Borowiak notes, "the principal-agent model of accountability defines accountability in terms of hierarchical relationships between self-interested "agents" and the "principals" whose preferences they are supposed to serve. Accordingly, representative democracy is understood as involving a principal-agent relationship between

6 With the exception of Rastriya Prajatantra Party (National Democratic Party), perhaps the only major conservative party in Nepal with the goal of restoring constitutional monarchy and returning Hinduism as the national religion – see <https://rpp.org.np/about-us>

7 'Bhabganda' is a spoils-sharing practice among political parties. This practice, reminiscent of a cartel party system, entails political appointments and resource allocations designed to maintain power through clientelism. See the editorial, 'Divide to Rule' (15 March 2023) in the Kathmandu Post.

8 See p. 7 in the report on Nepal's Kleptocratic Network from the Niti Foundation (in Nepali): https://nitifoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Nepals-Kleptocratic-Network_Nepali.pdf

9 Hugo Drochon, 'Robert Michels, the iron law of oligarchy and dynamic democracy', *Constellations* 27, no. 2 (June 2020): 188.

10 Ibid.

citizens and their political representatives".¹¹

As Borowiak points out, there are, however, inherent problems with a principal-agent relationship that will need to be addressed for the relationship to work as intended and for there to be representative accountability towards citizens:

PA [principal-agent] problems arise when the interests of the principal and the agent do not coincide, when the principal cannot easily determine if the agent is serving the principal's interests, and when the principal's capacity to reward and punish the agent is limited. As our agents, we expect...our political representative to respect our wishes and look out for our best interest. They might, nevertheless, also have competing incentives to minimize their effort or their costs, to take greater or lesser risks than we might like, or to misrepresent their capabilities in order to win our support in the first place. We may have the authority, but our agents have informational advantage. Because of information asymmetries, monitoring difficulties, and different payoff structures, we simply can't be certain that our agents are doing as they should.¹²

All this might suggest that multi-party democracy is bound to fail citizens but we know, of course, that this is not necessarily the case. While representative democracy has often not lived up to its promise of delivering material and social progress for all, especially in the Global South, there are also many success stories – mostly in the Global North but also in the Global South. Political representatives may become self-interested career politicians, political parties may become an end rather than a means to progress, and information asymmetries between voters and self-interested political representatives may thwart representative accountability and progress. Despite these perils of representative democracy, however, political parties and representatives can be made accountable to citizens through institutional means.

The centrality of elections

The main institutional mechanism in representative democracy for ensuring that political agents act in the

interest of their citizen principals is the election process. As V. O. Key noted in his seminal work, *The responsible electorate: Rationality in presidential voting 1936–1960*, “the only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power”.¹³ Key argued that, besides the possibility of the defeat of less accountable parties at elections, the *threat* of electoral loss can also help ensure that political representatives act in the interest of citizens rather than pursuing their own self-interest. As Borowiak puts it:

Removing errant officials is only one side of electoral accountability's controlling potential. Elections' greater utility may, in fact, lie in their deterrent effects upon officials during the inter-electoral period. Elections control for moral hazard by disciplining elected officials with the threat of electoral sanctions in the future. They operate as a “contingent renewal” mechanism in which the renewal of authority is contingent upon an official's ongoing performance in office. Politicians interested in retaining their offices must worry not about the meaning of past elections but about their fate at future elections.

However, certain conditions must be met if pre-election threats against political parties and representatives are to be effective in raising representative accountability. These involve addressing the information asymmetries between political representatives (agents) and citizens (principals). For electoral threats to be effective, (1) voters must be informed about the performance and behaviour of different political parties, (2) voters must vote (or signal that they will vote) on the basis of past performance and behaviour, and (3) political representatives and would-be candidates must believe that a sufficiently large number of voters will vote on the basis of past performance and behaviour.

The role of civil society

While individuals may take it upon themselves to be informed and to vote on the basis of the past performance and behaviour of electoral candidates, they cannot be relied on completely to do so. As we found out during our interviews, voters are often busy

11 Craig T. Borowiak. *Accountability and democracy: the pitfalls and promise of popular control* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 53.

12 Craig T. Borowiak. *Accountability and democracy: the pitfalls and promise of popular control* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 57.

13 Valdimer Orlando Key. *The responsible electorate: Rationality in presidential voting 1936–1960* (Harvard University Press, 1966): 76.

with their own lives, including paid and household work, to pay attention to developments in politics. Even when they do pay attention, voters may not have the ability to distinguish facts from false or biased claims, especially in the age of social media where ethical journalistic standards are notoriously difficult to impose and in a time when most media establishments in Nepal have been co-opted by political parties (detailed in a later section).¹⁴ Moreover, interviews indicated that many voters, especially in rural settings, are not capable of distinguishing good candidates from bad ones because of the lack of appropriate information or the lack of the ability to find relevant information. This is where civil society can play an important role.

Civil society organisations and actors can act on all the three conditions outlined above by

(1) giving voters accurate information about the past performance and behaviour of political representatives and electoral candidates,

(2) educating voters about their democratic rights and duties including a good understanding of the principal-agent relationship and the importance of enforcing representative accountability (through elections), and

(3) mobilising citizens against less accountable political parties in ways that present a credible and significant threat of future electoral defeat.

Civil society actors have played crucial roles alongside political parties in challenging oppressive governance structures and championing the rights and aspirations of citizens throughout the history of modern Nepal, for example, during the BS 1998/2004, 2007, 2015, 2036, 2046, and 2062/63 movements respectively.¹⁵ At present, following the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, the challenge for civil society actors has shifted from fighting alongside political parties for multi-party democracy and republicanism to ensuring that the promises, aspirations, and mandates embodied in the constitution are put into practice by political representatives. Civil society organisations can play a central role in the success of representative democracy by disciplining self-interested political parties and officials through electoral threats and ensuring that

political parties prioritise their duties towards citizens and become more accountable.

The system of checks and balances that is supposed to make political representatives accountable to citizens in Nepal has thus far been largely compromised by political appointments to important state agencies including constitutional bodies and judicial bodies that are supposed to be independent from the executive and legislative branches of government.¹⁶ This makes the role of civil society actors – and the few remaining (relatively) independent state actors like the Election Commission – even more critical for ensuring representative accountability and the success of democracy.

14 James E. Katz and Kate K. Mays, eds. *Journalism and truth in an age of social media* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

15 John Whelpton. *A History of Nepal* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

16 <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/02/04/appointments-to-constitutional-bodies-receive-widespread-criticism>

Understanding the Nepali Context

So far, we have *conceptually* explored why political parties in representative democracies generally eschew representative accountability and how civil society actors could generate credible electoral threats to discipline political parties and ensure greater representative accountability. In the next sections, we focus on the specific context of Nepal. We first examine how structural, institutional, and ideational factors that are specific to Nepal shape the lack of representative accountability among political parties in the country – these would be in addition the conceptually-derived factors discussed in the above sections. Doing so also illuminates the specific challenges of bringing greater accountability to Nepali politics. Given the need to examine context-specific factors, we use a political economy framework based on historical institutionalism to both design our interview questions and to analyse and organise the findings. After identifying the factors behind the lack of accountability in Nepali politics with the aid of the political economy framework, we analyse, on the basis on our field research (including interviews), what key actors including civil society organisations, independent state actors (e.g., Election Commission), local government representatives, and different voter groups are doing and can do to address the identified factors behind the lack of accountability to bring greater accountability to Nepali politics (this is detailed in a later section in the report).

Political economy framework

The analysis in this report that identifies the factors behind the lack of accountability in Nepali politics is grounded in both historical institutionalism and the relatively newer approach of discursive institutionalism in political science.¹ Analysing the reasons behind the lack of accountability in Nepali politics in this way gives us a good sense of what is realistically achievable in the short-to-medium term when it comes to making political parties and representatives more accountable to citizens. Some types of factors are easier to change than others in the short-to-medium term (explained below). Moreover, change often requires different kinds of strategies for different types of factors. The aforementioned categorisation factors can thus help in designing effective and efficient strategies for raising accountability in Nepali politics through the key actors identified in the next section.

Structural factors refer to the state of things (i.e., physical and social conditions) including the state of the economy, the level of human development (standard of living, education levels, health, etc.), the state of technology, the degree of urbanisation, the state of infrastructure, the availability of resources, budgetary limitations, and so on. Structural factors also include the distribution of power among different groups and actors, which is key to identifying the levers of change.

1 See Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, "Political science and the three new institutionalisms." *Political studies* 44, no. 5 (1996): 936-957; Schmidt, Vivien A. "Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 303-326.

While humans can influence structural factors and while structural factors are usually the consequences of human actions, most structural factors cannot be changed at will.² Structural change (as intended) often requires collective effort, the mobilisation of scarce resources, know-how, and even luck. State policies, programs, and institutions and even international aid and assistance can help in this regard but desired change is far from guaranteed.

Formal institutions like laws and policies, on the other hand, can potentially be changed at will – i.e., at the will of those who are in charge of creating and maintaining *formal institutions* – though there may be social resistance to such changes. Institutions are socially constructed ‘rules of the game’ that shape individual and collective behaviours of social actors. They can be divided into *formal institutions* like laws and regulations and *informal institutions* like social norms and standard operating procedures. Unlike formal institutions, informal institutions are generally difficult to change, however, as they are usually deeply-ingrained in society (or within specific social spheres) and internalised in social actors through the long process of socialisation.³ Informal institutions generally change slowly with broader structural and cultural change.⁴ Ideational factors relate to how humans perceive the world, their normative sense of appropriateness in a given situation, and their understanding about how the world works. Humans view the world (‘objective reality’) through certain ideational lenses or “interpretive frameworks” that are shaped by their upbringing, experiences, and social influences.⁵ Such *subjective*

framing of situations, problems, events, and people can lead different individuals to take divergent courses of action when faced with the same ‘objective’ facts. In other words, *ceteris paribus*, ideas guide behaviour.⁶ Ideas can be divided into *descriptive ideas* – ‘how the world *is*’ – and *normative ideas* – ‘how the world *ought to be*’.⁷ Descriptive ideas, which are based on one’s understanding of how the world works, can change more easily and more quickly than normative ideas, which are, by contrast, based on a deep-seated sense of morality and fairness acquired through socialisation in a similar manner to informal institutions.⁸ Descriptive ideas can change with contradictory experiences, conflicting evidence, or a subjectively compelling alternative explanation of how things work.⁹

In short, while structural, institutional, and ideational factors all influence human behaviour, structural factors, informal institutions, and normative ideas are harder to change in the short-to-medium term whereas formal institutions and descriptive ideas are relatively easier to change given the right strategies and conditions. Therefore, strategies to bring greater accountability to Nepali politics should focus on changing formal institutions and descriptive ideas outlined below. It has to be noted that certain factors defy neat categorisation as they are a combination of different types of factors and have been put under the most appropriate category. Accordingly, certain aspects of ‘harder to change’ factors might be amenable to change, which will be elaborated when discussing such factors.

All political parties and individuals are embedded in the

2 John Searle, *Making the social world: The structure of human civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2010); 90-122. Note that Searle calls structural factors ‘third-person fallout facts or ‘fallouts’ for short.

3 See the discussion on ‘practical consciousness’ in Anthony Giddens, *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (University of California Press, 1984): 41. See also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Penguin Press, 1967): 63-109.

4 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Penguin Press, 1967): 147-182.

5 Mark Blyth, *Great transformations: Economic ideas and institutional change in the twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 2002): 11.

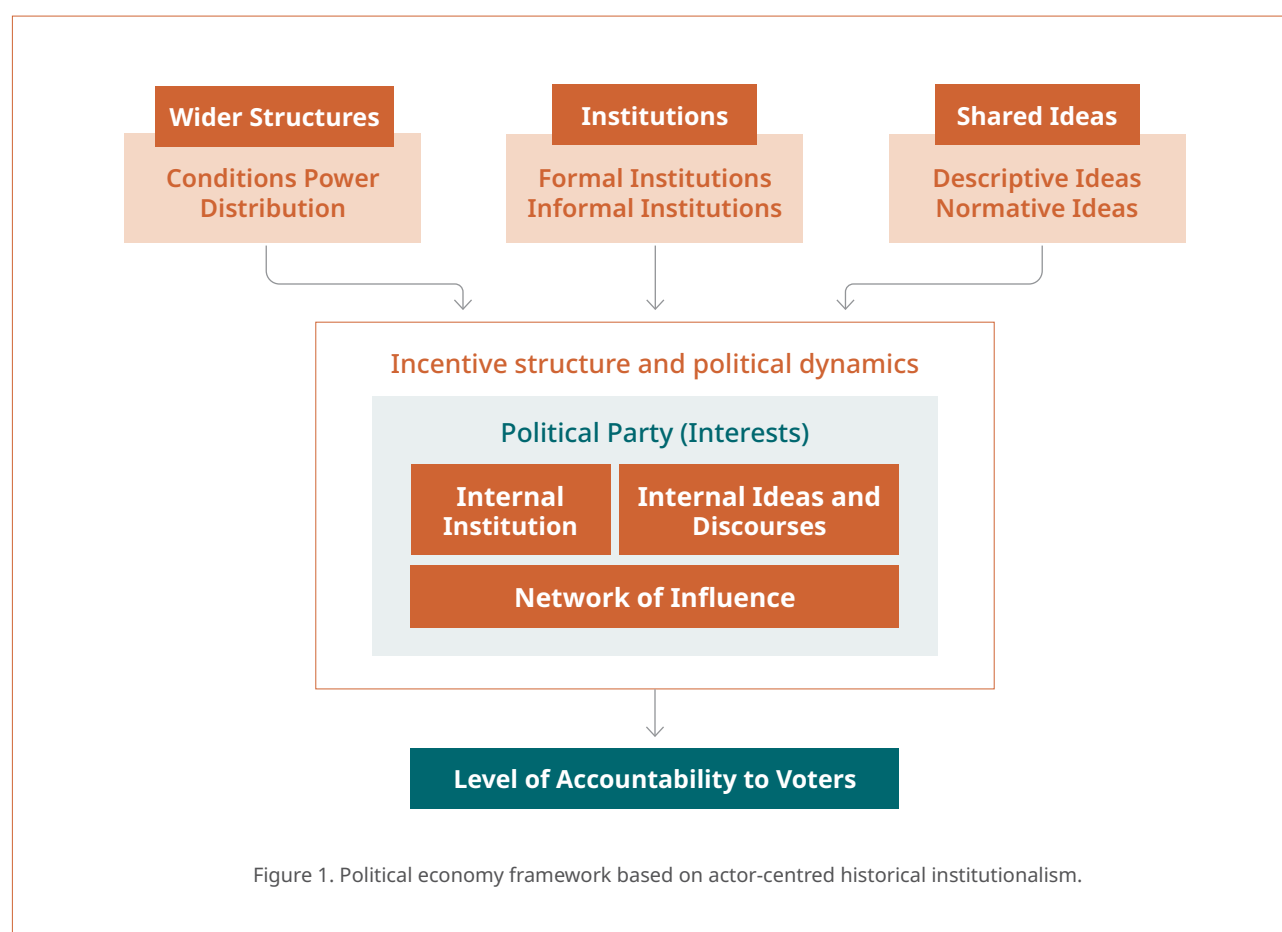
6 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Penguin Press, 1967): 147-182.

7 Vivien A. Schmidt, “Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 303-326.

8 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Penguin Press, 1967): 147-182

9 Mark Blyth, *Great transformations: Economic ideas and institutional change in the twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

political economy that consists of wider structures (social and economic conditions including power distribution), institutions (formal and informal), and shared ideas (descriptive and normative ideas). These together shape the incentive structure facing political parties and the political dynamics between different parties and other stakeholders (including the state). Thus, political parties in Nepal are embedded in the Nepali political economy. At the same time, political parties also have their own internal dynamics besides the external political-economic dynamics that shape their interests. These internal dynamics are shaped by their internal institutions (i.e., party rules and norms), internal ideas and discourses (including ideological positions and biases), and their network (e.g., donors, trade unions, cadres, and power brokers). In this way, both the political-economic setting that political parties are embedded in and the internal dynamics of political parties shape the level of representative accountability in Nepali politics – see Figure 1 below. In the next section, we identify these external and internal factors shaping the level of accountability in Nepali politics with the help of interview and observational data. The research method is briefly described below.



Research method

Besides secondary sources such as news articles, government document, and reports from NGOs and INGOs, we relied on semi-structured individual and group interviews for empirical information given the exploratory nature of the study. We visited 4 rural settings, 2 each in Bagmati province and Madhes province, where we interviewed citizens in largely group settings. We conducted 8 sets of interviews in rural settings in total, including two group interviews in the offices of ward chairman including interviews with the ward chairman. We conducted 9 interviews in urban settings. We interviewed 4 individuals in Kathmandu including 3 senior leaders of separate major political parties and 1 activist and former head of a minor party. In Janakpur, we interviewed 4 current and former officials of 4 separate Madhes-centric parties including 2 leading activists of the Madhes *andolan* (uprising). We also conducted group interviews of 3 media personnel including heads of media associations and 1 activist professor and 1 medical doctor with deep historic links to a major political party.

Explaining the lack of accountability

This chapter identifies the structural, institutional, and ideational factors behind the lack of representative accountability among the major political parties of Nepal, as confirmed by interviews with senior leaders and officials of six major parties including Madhes-centric parties. In so doing, the chapter also gives a sense of the incentives facing political parties and politicians, whose interests and constraints are shaped by the structural, institutional, and ideational factors that make up their social environment.

Structural factors

High unemployment and low income

Career politicians are by no means unique to Nepal or even to poor countries. They have existed ever since the arrival of representative democracy and they still exist in large numbers in mature democracies like those of the US, the UK, and Western Europe.²⁶ Career politicians are defined by their narrow experience in politics and related work that makes it difficult for them to find meaningful employment outside of politics. When such narrow experience is combined with a lack of good employment opportunities outside of politics, however, there is likely to be an even heavier dependence on a political career. The unemployment rate in Nepal for 2023 (latest data) sat at 11 percent (a relatively high figure) and this is despite high rates of outmigration for work.²⁷ Moreover, gross national income per capita for Nepal is just above US\$1,000 per year.²⁸ Considering this, it is likely that politicians in Nepal are heavily dependent on their political career,

which provides them with opportunities to secure a level of income and wealth that would rarely be possible outside politics. This may also help explain why Nepali politicians often forego ideological and ethical considerations to secure political positions and power – the means of economic advancement through politics in Nepal.

Low levels of education

As many of our interviewees pointed out, politicians in Nepal, on average, do not have high levels of formal educational attainment, which means that the chances of finding employment with good income outside politics would be even slimmer for the average politician. In fact, many interviewees, especially in the Madhes province, were of the opinion that there should be minimum educational qualification levels for candidacy at elections because many politicians with little formal education were getting elected. As a tertiary-level student in a village near the Indian border complained: “Peons need SLC [School Leaving Certificate] these days but why don't politicians need any minimum educational qualification?”

Interviewees also suggested that candidates with low levels of formal education were getting elected partly because many voters themselves have little to no formal education. Interviews in a village in Madhes province, for example, indicated that a lack of education among voters in the area made it easier for election candidates to make unrealistic promises and win elections. The interviews also suggested that poor

26 Nicholas Allen et al., 'What is a career politician? Theories, concepts, and measures', *European Political Science Review* 12, no. 2 (May 2020): 199-217.

27 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=NP>

28 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.KD?locations=NP>

voters with little formal education were more easily pressured by community leaders into voting for certain political parties and candidates. The adult literacy rate in Nepal is still only 76 percent; for comparison, the Asian regional average is almost 90 percent.²⁹ Plus, Nepal is one of the lowest-ranked countries in the region when it comes to educational attainment among the population.³⁰ Only half of the population has educational attainment beyond primary education and less than a quarter of the population has passed year 10.³¹ Having said that, this is changing as the expected years of schooling for a child born today now stands at 12.3 years.³²

Costly elections

In an ideal form of representative democracy, high dependence on one's political career would result in greater accountability among political representatives for fear of being voted out at the next election. However, given that the very opportunity to contest elections is contingent on securing a ticket from the party and on obtaining an inordinate amount of campaign funding that is well beyond the capacity of an average Nepali – as many of the politicians indicated in interviews – accountability will have already moved down the list of priorities come election day. As a current political representative and former activist pointed out in an interview in Janakpur: “Who gets the ticket is the one who has the most money, whichever party”. Another politician pointed out that “the need for a lot of money means that good people [without sufficient money] are not being given tickets for elections”. This is likely because of how extraordinarily expensive election campaigns have become in Nepal.³³ Political parties

are likely handing tickets to those with the ability to meet the high expenses of elections because party leaders believe that higher campaign funds improve the chances of electoral victory, which would secure more parliamentary seats for the party. Indeed, as the Election Observation Committee of Nepal reports based on its research on election financing during the 2017 elections, “data shows that the candidates that spent more money on the election were more likely to win the election”.³⁴

The link between campaign financing and electoral victory means that those from the economic elite or those financed by the economic elite are more likely to get a ticket and be elected. A report from Niti Foundation on “Nepal's Kleptocratic Network” indeed notes a rising trend of wealthy businesspeople and contractors (*thekedar*) getting into parliament and government.³⁵ While businesspeople and contractors are likely to prioritise their own economic interests once elected, those financed largely by others will likely be compelled to return favours to donors in the form of political appointments, government contracts, and rent-generating licenses following their electoral victory.³⁶

While the entry of businesspeople and contractors into politics is hard to regulate (and may also be counter to the principle of liberal democracy), campaign financing can be capped at a substantially lower sum by the Election Commission as the powers given to the Commission by Article 24 (1) of the *Election Commission Act 2017* allows for this.³⁷ The current upper limit is set between NRs. 2,500,000 and NRs. 3,300,000 (depending on the electoral location) for federal HoR elections,

29 <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/literacy>

30 <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/nepal/education#tab-all>

31 <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/literacy>

32 <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/nepal/education#tab-all>

33 Election Observation Committee Nepal, *Study on the Election Campaign Finance of Local, Provincial, and Federal Elections in Nepal, 2017* (<https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Study-on-Election-Campaign-Finance-Election-Observation-Committee-Nepal.pdf>)

34 Ibid: 8.

35 Niti Foundation, *Nepal's Kleptocratic Network*, https://nitifoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Nepals-Kleptocratic-Network_V4.pdf

36 Ibid.

37 See The Election Commission Act 2017, Art 24(1): <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Election-Commission-Act-2073-2017.pdf>

which is well beyond the average annual income in Nepal of NRs. 162,000 (for 2022; latest data).³⁸ However, even this will not be enough for real change without strong enforcement as “most candidates spend well beyond the government ceiling”.³⁹ The Election Observation Committee of Nepal reports that “[t]he average expenditure made by the winning candidates in the [2017] federal election [was] Rs. 2.13 Crores [NRs. 21,300,000]”, which is much higher than the currently specified ceiling.⁴⁰

Information asymmetry

Another structural factor that seems to constrain representative accountability is the spatial separation between federal and provincial political representatives and their electoral constituency and the resulting information asymmetry between citizens and the representatives – one of the main reasons for the breakdown of accountability identified by Borowiak.⁴¹ Representatives in the federal parliament in particular tend to be away from their constituency most of the time, residing in Kathmandu, where the federal parliaments are and also where most political parties have their headquarters. Being updated about the changing needs and interests of citizens, especially over the usual five-year parliamentary term, is an important part of being accountable in terms of the principal-agent relationship with citizens. However, interviewees in rural areas in particular complained that they rarely get visits from their political representatives in the federal parliament. On the flipside, this also means that voters will not be able to regularly monitor their provincial and federal political representatives including their actions and inactions in relation to law-making and policymaking – unlike how they can monitor their political representative in the local government (detailed in the next section). These information asymmetries could, however, be narrowed with the use of information and communication technology (ICT) coupled with policies that promote greater transparency in government and parliament, which is, of course, easier said than done given that

this depends on political representatives agreeing to be transparent in the first place and on the government funding ICT upgrades despite budget limitations.

Lack of capacity and resources

As a member in the House of Representatives who represents a relatively new party told us in an interview: “Even parliamentary committees can do very little to keep the government accountable [in Nepal]. The lack of capacity – especially technical expertise – and the lack of support including advisors and assistants are the key reasons the parliament does not work like it is supposed to. The parliament is supposed to keep government accountable in democracy even more so than civil society, but as long as parliament is dysfunctional and ineffective, how can there be accountability?” Budgetary constraints and the scarcity of (affordable) experts likely contribute to the lack of capacity and resources in parliament and parliamentary committees to help members of parliament keep the government and political representatives accountable. Although this was not brought up in the interviews, the same likely applies to the judiciary as well, which is another branch of government that is supposed to keep the executive and legislative branches in check and ensure the accountability of political representatives. Besides the lack of capabilities and resources, the prevailing norm of political appointments is, of course, also key to the blunting of the judiciary and other state enforcement agencies when it comes to keeping political representatives accountable (this is addressed later, under the sub-heading of ‘political appointments’).

Institutional factors relating to political parties

Coalitional politics

The common practice among all major political parties of frequently moving in and out of different political coalitions based not on ideology or values but rather purely on securing power and government

38 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CN?locations=NP>

39 Election Observation Committee Nepal, *Study on the Election Campaign Finance of Local, Provincial, and Federal Elections in Nepal, 2017*: 8.

40 Ibid.

41 Craig T. Borowiak. *Accountability and democracy: the pitfalls and promise of popular control* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 57.

positions – i.e., ‘bhagbanda’ – has greatly complicated accountability in Nepali politics.⁴² Political parties go into elections with a specific list of promises based on ideology, values, or class interests but when they get into coalitions with parties with opposite or incompatible ideologies, values, or class interests, which is not uncommon, then they become greatly constrained when it comes to delivering on their election promises. Add political instability on top of this that results from frequent reconfigurations of coalitions and governments and the ability to fulfil election promises is further compromised. The practice of frequently changing coalitions with little regard to ideology or values has contributed greatly to political instability and the lack of representative accountability in Nepali politics.

One factor that has facilitated frequent coalitional changes in Nepali politics is the familiarity of the political leaders of the major political parties with one another. The three largest parties – the NCP, the CPN-UML, and the Maoists – have had the same leader since 2016 and they have called on each other multiple times for the formation of a new coalition when tensions arise in existing coalitions. Indeed, these leaders together, over the years, have established a culture of coalition shifting to gain political advantage.⁴³ This calls attention to the lack of term limits – formal or tacitly enforced – for the political leaders of these and other major parties.

Lack of term limits

Party leaders in most advanced democracies have either formal term limits dictated by their time in political office – like in the U.S. presidential system – or tacitly understood limits based on success and failure in the election cycle – as in most Westminster systems.⁴⁴ Smart and Sturm find that term limits tend to enhance electoral accountability, even though intuitively term limits may seem to promote short-termism on the part of politicians. In Nepal, however, there is neither an

enforced term limit within the major parties nor do the leaders voluntarily give up their leadership of the party even when their party suffers heavy electoral losses – like some of the major parties did in the November 2022 elections.⁴⁵ This lack of a formal or informal limit on leadership tenure means that leaders are unlikely to feel the need to be accountable to citizens or indeed party members.

Political appointments

Appointments to the judiciary, university leadership teams, and ‘independent’ state agencies are all highly politicised in Nepal in that the political parties in power tend to appoint people affiliated with their party or people who have aided the party in some way – i.e., patronage rather than merit.⁴⁶ As the report on Nepal’s ‘kleptocratic network’ from the Niti Foundation elucidates, such political appointments are a form of clientelism, which facilitates unethical and unaccountable extractive practices by providing impunity to political and economic actors at the centre of a vast kleptocratic network involving multiple political parties, members of the economic elite, leaders of state enforcement agencies, and political brokers.⁴⁷ Such shielding of extractive practices through political appointments is, of course, only possible through collusion between major political parties (otherwise, change in government would break and disperse the network). The enormous challenge of breaking this entrenched network with numerous protective linkages within the broader state apparatus can only be addressed by electoral means – i.e., by the replacement of political actors that are deeply embedded in this network by new or reformist political actors who are not part of the network and are unlikely to become a part of the network. This is because it is unlikely that the norm of political appointments in Nepali politics would be changed voluntarily by established political parties as the kleptocratic network is also key to their continued political power given its involvement in

42 <https://kathmandupost.com/editorial/2023/03/15/divide-to-rule>

43 <https://kathmandupost.com/editorial/2023/03/15/divide-to-rule>

44 Michael Smart and Daniel M. Sturm. “Term limits and electoral accountability.” *Journal of public economics* 107 (2013): 93-102.

45 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Nepalese_general_election

46 Niti Foundation, *Nepal's Kleptocratic Network*, https://nitifoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Nepals-Kleptocratic-Network_V4.pdf

47 Ibid: 5.

funding political parties and their election campaigns and securing the support of community leaders who play a key role in obtaining votes for candidates during elections.⁴⁸

Institutional factors relating to elections

First-past-the-post elections

The electoral system in Nepal, where a majority of seats in the federal and provincial parliaments are contested through the first-past-the-post (FPTP) method (with the rest being decided through party-list proportional representation method), also plays a role in shaping electoral (representative) accountability. Many interviewees, including politicians, citizens, and media personnel, pointed to the practice of buying votes through 'masu raksi' (meat and alcohol), especially in rural areas where the partaking in such events is seen to oblige voters to vote for the candidate providing them with such benefits. Given the high levels of poverty and generally low income throughout much of Nepal, rare opportunities to indulge in such luxuries are hard to resist for many and the sense of obligation is also hard to avoid in the voting booth. Indeed, as poor villagers near the Indian border pointed out, the obligation to vote for those providing them with 'masu raksi' is reinforced by direct community pressure.

The FPTP system facilitates such buying of votes as local candidates have a strong incentive to compete through whatever means necessary for the votes of specific communities. In contrast, a proportional voting system takes away the incentive and significantly raises the cost for candidates of targeting specific communities. The former Election Commissioner, Neel Kantha Uprety, stated in a recent interview that he supports a move to a full proportional representation system citing the ease of buying votes in FPTP contests.⁴⁹ The buying of votes compromises electoral accountability both because of the selection of candidates for the wrong reasons and because the principal-agent relationship is compromised as the exchange of benefits for votes may be seen by political candidates as having nullified their obligation and accountability towards voters.

Identity-based voting

Another common practice relating to elections that compromises electoral accountability is candidates taking advantage of ethnicity- or caste-based votes. Interviews with citizens in villages near Janakpur and with politicians in Janakpur revealed that many Dalit communities tended to vote for Dalit candidates regardless of their record in office, character, or ideology. As one voter near the Indian border put it in a group interview: "In Dalit communities, there is a lot of societal pressure to vote for a particular party or person". It was noted by experienced politicians and political observers that this is common in other parts of Nepal and with other minority groups as well. Such block voting based on identity markers, while perhaps good for representativeness in government and parliament (also an important consideration), goes against electoral accountability as such votes are taken for granted by elected candidates and a key mechanism of maintaining accountability in representative democracy – the threat of electoral loss – becomes ineffective. As another voter in the same group interview complained: "There is not enough done in the village despite community pressure to vote for a particular party or person. There are a lot of problems for people now, especially for the poor. There is no one to hear the voices of the poor. Instead, they get financially exploited including demands for bribes, *meter byaj* [high interest on loans], and so on".

Lack of overseas voting

Yet another issue relating to the electoral system is the inability of Nepalis abroad to vote in national, provincial, and local elections. Nepalis abroad, especially those residing in advanced democracies, are likely to be more conscious of the principal-agent relationship between citizens and politicians and thus more likely to demand accountability. Indeed, politicians pointed out during interviews that the Nepali diaspora had played a big role in the 2022 local and general elections by encouraging their family members in Nepal to vote for new independent candidates like Balen Shah (the current mayor of Kathmandu) and parties like the Rastriya Swatantra Party (National Independent Party) and Janamat Party that had promised to improve

48 Ibid: 5-6.

49 See <https://kathmandupost.com/interviews/2024/04/15/i-am-for-a-fully-pr-system-with-a-five-percent-threshold>

governance, promote meritocracy, fight corruption, and prioritise accountability. However, as the current provisions do not allow for voting by Nepalis residing abroad, the effect of the protest vote in raising representative accountability was likely not as strong as it would have been otherwise.

Ideational factors

Lack of acceptance of the principal-agent relationship

From an ideational perspective, there does not seem to be strong awareness or acknowledgment among political party leaders of the principal-agent relationship between citizens and political representatives that is key to representative accountability and a healthy democracy. Senior leaders of major political parties noted that party leaders (representatives) struggled to identify themselves as 'agents' of citizens and thought of themselves as being above both party officials and citizens. In other words, they saw themselves as elders or leaders rather than as agents and they barely felt the need to justify their actions or assess them against the interest of citizens – or indeed the interest of the party members.

The major political parties of today all emerged essentially as political movements that were not necessarily bound to any principal-agent relationship and the party leaders appear to be struggling to ideationally transition to their new role as elected representatives of citizens who are ultimately agents of citizens. Furthermore, it has been less than two decades since Nepal abandoned monarchy and many of today's political leaders (and voters) grew up and were socialised into a political system where the monarch was not bound to a principal-agent relationship with citizens and where the conception of political rights was fairly alien to most.

Voters being perceived as impatient and ungrateful

Moreover, there is a view among political leaders –

picked up in the interviews – that the Nepali people lack patience and do not sufficiently appreciate the progress that has been made, especially on issues relating to inclusion and social justice. There is also the perception that this impatience is driven by a lack of understanding of the intricacies and the realities of government and parliamentary processes. While this may be true to some extent, these perceptions also give leaders of political parties an excuse to put aside or postpone much-needed governance reforms, development efforts, and legal changes and focus on the game of power politics.

A sense of resignation and powerlessness

Many of the voters we interviewed appeared to subscribe to the idea that all politicians are the same and that nothing will change no matter who you vote for. For example, the head of the local women's cooperative in Konjyosom rural municipality in Bagmati province complained: "All politicians behave as if they were the king. Nothing has changed. It does not matter who you vote for, it is all the same". Similar sentiments were expressed by a group of journalists in Janakpur as well. In fact, virtually none of the interviewees – politicians included – expressed enthusiasm or hope towards politicians with the exception of local government representatives, who were generally praised. Such widespread defeatism regarding federal and provincial politics is likely to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy if it translates into a lack of desire to discover and promote new promising candidates. Indeed, if this widespread sentiment combines with the idea that one's vote does not really matter, which is not uncommon in democracies and is considered a typical 'collective action problem'⁵⁰ in political science, then there is little hope for significant change to come via the polling booth.⁵¹ This can, of course, undermine the creation of credible electoral threats against unaccountable political parties that is central to a disciplinary framework for political accountability. However, as this common attitude is based on an erroneous understanding of the world – it cannot be

50 Aldrich, John H. "Rational choice and turnout." *American journal of political science* (1993): 246-278.

51 Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, *Half of those who aren't learning about the election feel their vote doesn't matter* (Pew Research Centre, March 4, 2016), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/03/04/half-of-those-who-arent-learning-about-the-election-feel-their-vote-doesnt-matter/>

true that all political candidates are the same and one's vote very much matters in a collective sense – it can be corrected via voter education and information (this will be elaborated in the final section on strategies).

In summary, several structural, institutional, and ideational factors have contributed to the accountability deficit in Nepali politics. Structural factors, informal institutions, and normative ideas are harder to address, at least in the short to medium term. However, formal institutions like elements of the electoral system (e.g., FPTP voting and overseas voting) and term limits for party leaders and descriptive ideas like the perception of voters among politicians and the belief among voters that 'all politicians are the same' can be changed with the right strategies and given the right conditions. Changing formal institutions depends on the ability to get access to and persuade decision-makers who have the power to change the relevant laws and regulations (e.g., the Election Commission and office-holders of political parties). Changing descriptive ideas

is a matter of reaching the target audience (i.e., voters or politicians) in person or through media platforms – including social media – and providing information, education, effective evidence, and/or persuasive narratives to change perceptions.

While this section has highlighted and dissected the *problems* that need to be – and can realistically be – addressed to bring greater accountability to Nepali politics, we also need to identify where the solutions to these problems could come from. More specifically, we also need to (1) take stock of what is currently being done by different actors when it comes to putting pressure on political parties and representatives to be accountable and (2) identify the key actors who can contribute to addressing the problems identified in this section through appropriate means and with support where necessary. The next section delves into relevant actors when it comes to making political parties and representatives accountable through electoral means.

Key actors and what they can do

Civil society and independent state agencies have been key actors historically and in other representative democracies when it comes to demanding accountability from political leaders.⁵² This section delves into the current role of not only these key actors but also local government leaders and key segments of the population (e.g., women, men, youth, and the Nepali diaspora) in pressuring political parties to be more accountable to citizens via electoral threats. It also elucidates the constraints these actors currently face. Importantly, this section identifies, based on current constraints and enablers, which actors can potentially help make parties and representatives more accountable if provided with the right support. In other words, it identifies which actors can play a key role in constructing an effective disciplinary framework for representative accountability in Nepal that is centred on electoral pressures. The independent Election Commission unsurprisingly sits at the centre of the disciplinary framework that is founded on elections and electoral threats. Towards the end, this section highlights both the substantive and the coordinating role the Commission could play and the attendant actions it could take to ensure greater accountability in Nepali politics. The section is based largely on information obtained from interviews with the key actors and with senior figures of political parties.⁵³

Civil society: media and educational institutions

A key theme emerging from the interviews with activists, politicians, and media personnel in particular is that political parties have co-opted much of civil society through political appointments and direct influence over media organisations and educational institutions, which are generally understood to be the key civil society actors capable of maintaining accountability in representative democracy.⁵⁴

Most media outlets are affiliated with specific political parties and besides the bias this already brings that undermines accountability, they often consult political leaders and officials for editorial input. As a prominent journalist and media association leader in Janakpur told us in a group interview with civil society actors: “If we try to say anything against the Madhes government, we have to watch over our shoulder as the political parties put in ‘bouncers’ in media organisations”. Moreover, political parties can silence journalists through their control over positions in media organisations and associations. A leader of the Dalit press association voiced his frustration: “In the last two years there has been a lot of violence against Dalits including rape and murder but there has been no justice. We cannot speak openly in the media about this, however, because political parties will take away our access to the media”.

52 Aurelian Craiutu, “From the social contract to the art of association: A Tocquevillian perspective,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 2 (2008), 263-287.

53 The study relied on interviews and field observations rather than on secondary sources to gauge the level of involvement of civil society and citizen groups because active on-the-ground involvement of these entities as perceived by local observers rather than their formal existence and reported past activities were considered to be of greater value to this study.

54 Craig T. Borowiak. *Accountability and democracy: the pitfalls and promise of popular control* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

While it is true that media outlets criticise politicians from parties that they are not affiliated with, providing the general public discourse with some form of scrutiny, party affiliation naturally elicits dismissal or at least suspicion from the public on the basis of partiality and bias, making politically-affiliated media organisations less effective in informing and mobilising citizens to put electoral pressure on political parties. As the chair of the journalist association (*patrakar mahasangh*) put it: “Every political party has its own press organization. Then how can you expect them to write about the problems of political parties. We need to get rid of the politicization and co-optation of the media first and foremost [if we are to bring greater accountability to Nepali politics]”.

Moreover, experienced media personnel who have long been involved in media associations reported in interviews that the traditional media sector including print, radio, and television is currently experiencing severe financial difficulties, partly because of the intense competition among media outlets and partly because of the rapid rise of social media. The Madhes province chair of a prominent national press association reported, for example, that “there are 150 media organisations in the Madhes province and it is difficult to sustain them financially. There were 108 FM stations and 24 of them have closed recently. There is currently very little advertisement revenue and there is a lot of competition for it”.

Research-based educational institutions like universities tend to be stacked with political appointments to the extent that the impartiality and neutrality that is so critical to academic research and publication is greatly compromised and the credibility of university professors suffers, rendering them largely ineffective in playing the role of the guardian of democracy. The fact that the prime minister remains the chancellor of most universities and can thus dictate major administrative and executive appointments within universities has hampered the independence of universities and undermined academic freedom to the extent that this important civil space is no longer a forum for critical discourse and impartial questioning of government. This is, of course, only exacerbated by the fact that most universities largely rely on the government for their funding.

Relatedly, given the importance of political affiliation

for appointments and promotion, many university professors and researchers have become affiliated with political parties and many are perceived to be affiliated (due to the common practice of political appointments) even if they are not actually affiliated. This means that a traditionally key group of intellectuals – i.e., the academia – has suffered a credibility deficit due to the perception of bias by the public and fellow intellectuals. In this sense, political parties have both co-opted and undermined the intellectual class. As a prominent activist and member of a Madhes-based party told us in Janakpur: “Intellectuals have gone quiet. They would have the collective power to change things but they are not speaking right now, including the media because political parties give them money to keep them silent”.

Civil society: NGOs and community groups

Local associations and non-government organisations, which had much presence in rural areas in the past, also appear to be on the wane. As a ward representative in rural Lalitpur put it: “After 1990, there haven’t been many associations arising in communities besides political parties. There are no civil society organisations here currently. Civil society has faded away in all fields including agriculture, education, etc. Everyone is about going abroad, from a very early age, and this is taking away focus from improving the country that was there before”. On NGOs, the leader of the local mother’s group noted: “NGOs had a key role in forming associations before but now that NGOs have a smaller presence, there are fewer and weaker associations. Also, because there are means of earning income now, time has become more precious, which means they have less time for civil society activities”.

We discovered in our field visits that there are active associations in rural areas: these mostly tended to be associations of women – mothers’ groups, women’s groups, and women’s cooperatives. These associations are discussed later in the section on the role of women in politics.

Local government representatives

While many local government leaders hail from established political parties, observations during field

visits suggest that they can potentially maintain a degree of independence from their party organisation. As a ward chairperson from Lahan in Madhes province who belong to a major party noted: “We have a good deal of freedom from the party when it comes to doing our work as local government”. They can even apply pressure on political parties and their leaders to be more accountable and act in the interest of their constituency. This is due to several reasons.

First, there tends to be a direct connection between local government leaders and locals and they tend to be more popular than provincial or federal representatives, which gives them some structural power over political party leaders. As a village farmer in Lahan put it in an interview at a local park: “The local government has done a lot of good work but provincial and federal governments are alien to us”.

Second, the relatively high degree of fiscal and administrative independence afforded to local governments by the 2015 Constitution that is already being put into practice enables local government leaders to put pressure on governing coalitions.⁵⁵ The ward chairman from Lahan indeed confirmed that “local governments are a lot stronger now in terms of authority”.

Third, local government leaders tend to be aware of urgent local problems and the needs of local citizens and often find ways of addressing them. As a ward chairman in Konjyosom rural municipality in Lalitpur told us: “I have made many plans and programs like bringing water and different types of produce and economic development statutes to this area such that people can now earn much more through agriculture here now”.

Fourth, citizens tend to have relatively easy access to local government leaders and are thus able to voice their concerns and pressure leaders to solve local problems and invest in local development – especially if other local governments in the region are doing so. According to the ward chairperson from Lahan: “Local government is the closest to the people so local governments tend to be the best performing and the least corrupt”. The ward chairperson from Konjyosom rural municipality said: “I’m a very receptive ward

representative and when people come with problems, I smile and welcome them and I explain things to them”.

Moreover, many government leaders are independent and some prominent independent local government leaders (e.g., the mayor of Kathmandu) have shown that they can pressure federal and provincial governments and the political parties and coalitions running them both through discursive confrontation and by serving as an example of accountable leadership and revealing what is possible to voters.

Over-politicised (older) men

Besides civil society organisations, the civic space itself, especially in rural settings, has become the domain of political parties – at least as far as men are concerned. We found through interviews in rural settings that most men in villages belong to one party or another and, combined with the lack of youth due to mass migration, there is hardly any space for independent movements or citizen formations demanding greater accountability from political parties. A relatively young person remarked in a focus group meeting in Devichowr village in rural Lalitpur that when it comes to a lack of accountability in Nepali politics, “citizens are also to blame, not just politicians; everyone wants to become a politician and an elected official”. A similar sentiment was also expressed by the local school principal in the meeting.

Interviewees implied that widespread affiliation with political parties is partly to secure resources and benefits and partly to attain a position of importance within the community. Regarding the former reason, the high degree of politicisation in Nepal means that political representatives are more likely distribute benefits and resources to people affiliated with their party (or coalition) and, given the scarcity of resources in rural areas in particular, non-affiliation may leave people empty-handed, which is a major opportunity cost in rural settings. As a senior leader from the National Independent Party (Rastriya Swatantra Party) told us: “

We got the sense from our interviews with people affiliated with political parties, including political leaders

55 Breen, Michael G., and Iain Payne. “The concept and uses of hourglass federalism: a comparative study.” *Regional & Federal Studies* (2023): 12-13.

themselves, that there is hesitancy when it comes to openly criticising one's party and demanding greater accountability, which is not surprising, of course. Interviewees involved in political parties criticised internal processes they deemed unfair, especially in relation to their own political opportunities, and some even criticised party leaders to some degree (mostly indirectly) but they rarely questioned the party that they were a part of. In many ways, the individual interests of people affiliated with parties relating to political-economic opportunities generally crowded out the public interest despite obvious concerns about the state of politics in Nepal. This is a classic collective action problem, whereby everyone sees problems that could be addressed through changes at the individual level but few are willing to take the first step in fear of losing out.⁵⁶

The role of women

Our interviews also revealed that women are less involved in politics despite being relatively more empowered structurally, institutionally, and culturally compared to the past. The women we interviewed said that this is partly because many of them are not allowed to do so by their households and partly because they are too busy with work – both paid and household work – to organise for (further) political reform. As one local woman leader told us plainly at a school in Devichowr village in Lalitpur: “Women don't have a voice in politics”. The leader of the village's mothers' group further expanded on this: “Men don't allow women access to political positions and hence not many women enter politics. Hence, politicians aren't into women's issues, which women feel aggrieved by. Women are however more empowered now, so we don't do what men ask us to do in politics”. This was also echoed in the Madhes province. A former activist who played a key role during the Madhes uprising (Madhes *andolan*) told us that “women have had great difficulty in entering politics in Madhes”.

Women were generally involved in associations such as mothers' groups and women's groups but these associations appear to focus on social and economic

rather than political activities. Relatedly, women were also often involved in financial co-operatives that loan out money to aspiring entrepreneurs. The leader of the mothers' group in rural Lalitpur observed that “there has been great material improvement for women through women's associations including cooperatives”. Such entrepreneurship has made women not only busy but also focussed on self-generated economic advancement. The leader of the local women's cooperative in Konjyosom rural municipality remarked: “There was a lot of volunteering before because people had time but now people have to work and earn and there is little volunteering now”.

Having said that, there does appear to be the potential for a movement among rural women as many of them expressed frustration at the lack of attention to issues affecting them, including the (still) strong hold of patriarchy and related institutions. The fact that many of them are economically active through entrepreneurship and are deeply invested in the education of their children also means that they are keenly aware of the effects of politics on the economy and on their children's education and employment prospects. All these factors together (including the relative lack of political affiliation among women) make women – especially in rural settings – more inclined to be involved in mounting electoral threats to unaccountable political parties. As the former activist who was at the centre of the Madhes uprising (Madhes *andolan*) recalled in an interview: “Madhes *andolan* would not have happened without women – their role was key”, indicating that women can play a central role in political change even if they have not been politically active previously. Given the busy schedules of women these days, however, especially in rural areas, such a movement would have to come in a form that does not require a high investment of time and effort.

Disappearing youth

It was also clear through interviews and observations that the trend of emigration among the youth is pervasive in Nepal – as is already being reported widely through news media and government reports.⁵⁷ As a

56 Michael Taylor and Sara Singleton. “The communal resource: Transaction costs and the solution of collective action problems.” *Politics & Society* 21, no. 2 (1993): 195-214.

57 https://moless.gov.np/storage/files/post_files/Nepal%20Labour%20Migration%20Report_2022.pdf

farmer observed in rural Lalitpur: “youngsters below 30 have all gone abroad”. These days, young people are leaving Nepal to work abroad immediately after finishing secondary school – and often even earlier – as we observed in rural areas in both Bagmati province and Madhes province. This was also confirmed by school principals in multiple areas we visited. This means that not only are there fewer younger people in Nepal but there are also fewer activists. As a youthful politician from Janamat party complained in an interview in Janakpur: “Lots of youth have gone to the gulf countries from this region, so how is political change going to come?”

Indeed, it is students, usually at university level, who generally have the time and the lack of responsibility relating to dependents, who are the most likely to challenge the political status quo as they have the least to lose. Dwindling number of young people in Nepal, who are also generally are not affiliated to political parties, means that the potential for such movements has become more limited. Moreover, among the youth that remain, we found through interviews and observations that there was a lack of organised groups of youth that might mobilise against the lack of accountability of political parties.

A disenfranchised but active Nepali diaspora

The non-residential Nepali (NRN) community has been involved in Nepali politics through social media and communication with family despite (or perhaps because of) their inability to vote from abroad. A senior leader from the ascendant Rastriya Swatantra Party (National Independent Party) noted that NRNs telling their family members in Nepal to vote for them had played an important role in the party’s unexpected landslide win in the by-election in Tanahaun and in their unexpectedly good performance nationally in the 2022 general election, where they became the fourth largest party in the federal parliament despite having only registered as a party a few months before the election.

Given increasing migration abroad and the growing role of social media in the media landscape in Nepal, the involvement of the Nepali diaspora in electoral politics is likely to grow. This presents an opportunity

for organisations concerned about the accountability deficit in Nepal to leverage this group through social media efforts to challenge the status quo through electoral pressure, as they did in the 2022 elections. As a teacher from Konjyosom rural municipality noted, “activism has to come from people who have gone abroad convincing their family members”.

The central role of the Election Commission

The Election Commission appears to have largely maintained independence from established political parties, perhaps due to the strong international interest in ensuring free and fair elections in democratic countries. The independence and active involvement of the Commission is, of course, critical for a strategy to raise political accountability that is centred on elections and electoral threats. Although its effectiveness in enforcing certain electoral regulations could be questioned, especially in relation to campaign financing, it has made various efforts to address the lack of accountability in Nepali politics. These include Nepal-wide grassroots campaigns to educate voters about their rights and duties relating to representative democracy and elections – something that could be expanded and made more effective with support. It has also endeavoured to empower community groups at the local level and pair them with local governments. Moreover, the Commission has plans to, and has already taken concrete steps towards, ensuring that political parties make genuine efforts to uphold the promises made in written election manifestoes. Such efforts can be supported by concerned actors to ensure their fruition and effectiveness.

Importantly, the Commission can also make or initiate changes to the electoral system that might promote greater electoral accountability, especially given their considerable power over such matters as delineated by the *Election Commission Act 2017*. First, the Commission can act to ensure that Nepali citizens can vote from abroad. The disenfranchisement of overseas Nepali citizens is not only a serious democratic problem but also an impediment to a potentially key electoral means of raising political accountability. The Commission could also review the emphasis on first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections in Nepal’s electoral system given how FPTP elections may be conducive to vote-buying

and blind support for candidates based on identity-markers, which has important implications for political accountability.

Furthermore, when it comes to promoting ideas that can help raise political accountability through discursive intervention, the Commission could enlist the help of relatively independent media organisations and intellectuals to promote the idea of the principal-agent relationship in representative democracy in a way that it becomes part of the vocabulary of political discourse. Interviews made it clear that leaders of political parties continue to think of themselves as revolutionary leaders and wise elders rather than as agents in the hierarchical principal-agent relationship

with citizens. This also needs to change if party leaders are to take accountability more seriously.

Summary

This section has elucidated the roles being played by key actors when it comes to political accountability. Besides pointing to the constraints faced by many of the key actors including those related to their co-optation by the political establishment, the section also helped identify relatively independent state actors and segments of the population that can play an important role in making political parties and representatives more accountable, given the right support where necessary. The next section concludes the report.

Conclusion

In closing, the examination of Nepal's political landscape reveals a complex interplay between institutions, socio-cultural dynamics, and the influence of entrenched power structures that continues to thwart political accountability more than three decades on from the arrival of multi-party democracy. Despite significant strides in securing political rights since the turn of the century, the elusive nature of political accountability remains a pressing concern, with the promise of the 2015 Constitution to bring accountability to Nepali politics continuing to fall short in practice, perhaps due to the fact that the various state-based institutional mechanisms for ensuring accountability are borrowed from a system that developed in a distinctly different socio-cultural and political-economic setting.

A central theme emerging from the analysis is the capture of accountability mechanisms by political parties, facilitated by patronage networks and clientelism. The collusion among ideologically divergent parties has undermined the foundational principles of democratic governance relating to political accountability, eroding trust and exacerbating political instability. Moreover, the extensive co-option of civil society and even the adult male population by established parties further limits avenues for independent scrutiny and oversight.

Amidst these challenges, there are nevertheless promising signs of change. Segments of the population, including women, youths, and the Nepali diaspora, along with independent candidates, have demonstrated the potential and a growing capacity – especially via the platform of social media – to challenge established power dynamics and promote electoral accountability. The recent emergence of fresh faces and alternative voices in local government and federal parliament signals a shift towards greater citizen engagement and empowerment.

Crucially, certain state actors, such as local government representatives and the Election Commission, retain a degree of independence and could serve as key catalysts for reform. Their efforts, bolstered by support from civil society and international stakeholders, offer a pathway towards strengthening accountability via electoral means.

The Election Commission in particular is central to raising accountability as elections and electoral threats remain the principal means of addressing the accountability deficit in Nepal, especially given the capture and ineffectiveness of other state actors. With support from concerned actors, the Election Commission could initiate the reform of certain formal institutions including aspects of the electoral system. The Commission could also partner with local governments and community groups, including mothers' groups and women's groups, to educate citizens about their position in the principal-agent model of representative democracy and their critical role as voters in ensuring political accountability through voting. Further, the Commission could enlist the help of relatively independent media organisations and intellectuals to promote the idea of the principal-agent relationship in representative democracy in a way that it becomes part of the vocabulary of political discourse.

The report showed that, although the challenge of overcoming the entrenched power and impunity in Nepali politics may appear daunting, the collective action of citizens and accountable state bodies presents a real opportunity to realise the democratic aspirations enshrined in Nepal's Constitution.

Annex

List of Stakeholders Consultative Meetings with Stakeholders

March - April 2024

S.N.	Stakeholder's Name	Position/Organization	Location	Stakeholder Category
1	Badri Narayan Choudhary	Ward Chair, Ward 12, Lahan Municipality	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
2	Ram Sewak Yadav	Principal at Local School	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
3	Baidyanath Shaha	Local Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
4	Maheshwar Thakur Danuwar	Local Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
5	Mamata Kumari Choudhari	Local Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
6	Pramila Devi	Local Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
7	Suprekha Sadaya	Ward Member, Ward 12, Lahan Municipality	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
8	Birendra Prasad Choudhari	Social Worker/Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
9	Srikanta Choudhari	Social Worker/Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
10	Pradip Choudhari	Social Worker/Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
11	Nimakanta Choudhari	Social Worker/Leader	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
12	Dr. Rajesh Chandra Das	Medical Professional	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
13	Rajesh Karna	Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
14	Prof. Hare Krishna Shaha	Human Rights Activist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society

15	Birendra Raman	TV Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
16	Kailash Das	Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
17	Sudip Jha	Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
18	Birendra Raman	Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
19	Rajesh Karna	Journalist	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
20	Rajan Nepal	Executive Director, Janaki Women Awareness Society	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
21	Jibendra Jha	District Chair, Loktantrik Samajwadi Party	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
22	Surendra Kumar Mandal	Central Member, Janamat Party	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
23	Indrajeet Yadav	Central Member and District Coordinator, Janamat Party	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
24	Puja Ram	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
25	Renu Devi Ram	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
26	Saildevi Mahato	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
27	Subita yadav	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
28	Anita Devi Ram	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
29	Dipu Kumar Mahato	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
30	Binaya Jha	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
31	Satis Chandra Yadav	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
32	Harikrishna Yadav	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
33	Aram Kumar Das	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
34	Yogendra Kumar Das	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
35	Rameshower Yadav	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
36	Ratis Kumar Yadav	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society

37	Hiralal Sahani	Community Member, Mukhiyapatti-2, Dhanusha	Madhesh Field Visit	Civil Society
38	Bibha Thakur	Central Member - Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
39	Chameli Devi Das	Central Member, Janata Samajbadi Party	Madhesh Field Visit	Political Leaders
40	Lekhnath Bajagai	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
41	Narayan Dhakal Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
42	Indra Prasad Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
43	Meena Devi	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
44	Subhadra Bajagai	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
45	Prem Bajagai	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
46	Surendra Sapkota	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
47	Laxman Bajagai	Former Teacher, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
48	Nabin Ghimire	Cooperative Representative, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
49	Bishowmani Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
50	Chatra Kumari Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
51	Radhika Poudel	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
52	Binita Nepali	Ward Chair, Ward 7, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Political Leaders
53	Indra Prasad	Local Farmer, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
54	Uttam Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
55	Devendra Prasad Timilsina	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
56	Rama Bajagai	Community Member, Devichour, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
57	Hari Choun	Principal, Devi High School	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
58	Giri Prasad Timilsina	Former Ward Chair, Godawari Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Political Leaders
59	Tilak Bahadur Bomjan	Ward Chair, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Political Leaders
60	Pashupati Khadka	Teacher's Group	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society

61	Raju Timilsina	Teacher's Group	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
62	Purushottam Bajagai	Teacher's Group	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
63	Laxmi Timilsina	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
64	Sharashowti Dahal	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
65	Meena Sanjal	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
66	Renuka Sapkota	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
67	Bhakti Dahal	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
68	Makhamali Dahal	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
69	Purnima Ghalan	Janachetana Mahila Sahakari, Konjyosom Rural Municipality	Lalitpur Field Visit	Civil Society
70	Dilli Ghimire	Managing Director, Nepal Energy Foundation	Meetings at Kathmandu	Civil Society
71	Kala Timilsina	Chairperson, Women Network for Energy and Environment (WoNEE)	Meetings at Kathmandu	Civil Society
72	Ram Kumari Jhakri	Former Member of Parliament, Party Secretary of NCPS and Former Minister of Urban Development	Meetings at Kathmandu	Political Leaders
73	Ganesh Shah	Former Member of Parliament and Former Minister for Environment, Science and Technology	Meetings at Kathmandu	Political Leaders
74	Dr. Keshav Man Shakya	Former Member of Parliament and Former Minister for Science, Technology and Environment	Meetings at Kathmandu	Political Leaders
75	Prakash Man Singh	Member of Parliament and Former Deputy Prime Minister	Meetings at Kathmandu	Political Leaders
76	Shishir Khanal	Member of Parliament and Former Minister for Education, Science and Technology	Meetings at Kathmandu	Political Leaders