

## A Crisis in Nepali Student Politics? Analyzing the Gap between Politically Active and Non-Active Students

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### Introduction

The basic tenet of democracy is participation. In Nepal's current political context this is understood and emphasized by many sections of Nepal's population. Yet if one were to observe the current political protests for the restoration of democracy (or as politicians say *poorna prajaatantra* or complete democracy), one would ask, where are the people? This was my exact sentiment after observing the 2003 and 2004 seven-student organizations' joint student movement and then comparing this to the turnout of the current joint student movement.<sup>1</sup> Where are the students? Last year the joint student movement was able to bring both politically active (i.e., party affiliated) students and some non-active students from the public universities to the streets; at that time, the publicly perceived political gap lay between public university students and private university students. But today it is clear that only the student political party cadres, in smaller numbers, are protesting against the recent royal move.<sup>2</sup> The gap has widened between the politically active and non-active students, and this has become a

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<sup>1</sup> This fieldwork was possible due to a Fulbright Institute for International Education grant.

<sup>2</sup> On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, King Gyanendra announced that he was dissolving parliament, appointing a new government of which he would be the chairman, and instating a state of emergency. He justified his action by claiming that he was saving democracy from the corrupt, ineffective politicians who were more interested in inter-party politics than in securing peace and solving the crisis of the mounting Maoist insurgency. He then proceeded to detain mainstream politicians and active students, forcing people either to go underground or to be arrested. Some people were held up for five months, although most were released by the Supreme Court order under the *habeas corpus* law.

central factor in political analysts' articulation of the uncertainty of democracy's future.<sup>3</sup>

The risk involved in protesting this increasingly autocratic state may be cited as the most apparent reason why people are not struggling for their democratic rights on the streets. But as with most political issues, the public's lack of support to protest the King's political coup goes much deeper. The division between who is political (party activists who claim to be fighting for democratic rights) and who is not, may have become more obvious after the King's appropriation of state power on February 1<sup>st</sup> when one considers who was in jail or in hiding versus who was not, but this gap has been widening ever since the 1990 people's movement, which brought democracy. In this paper I will consider this widening gap between political and non-political students as a symptom of the larger political problem: political parties' disconnection from the general population, their constituents. Currently, very few people are invested in student politics as the necessary democratic exercise that student political activists ideally describe it as. By analyzing the changing historical role of student unions and their relationship with their mother organizations, the political parties, I hope to demonstrate the narrowing opportunity for student political organizations to be an effective political force due to their entrenched organizational set up, which is becoming anachronistic in the increasingly private educational environment that has developed since 1990.

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<sup>3</sup> The larger, more significant gap in the current political dynamic of Nepal is that between rural and urban experiences for Nepali citizens. Since this research was conducted within Kathmandu Valley with university students who represent about 5 percent of their generation, this paper will concentrate on the gap between politically active and non-active students, focussing on the dynamic within the universities, rather than address the more general urban and rural gap that a large literature on the Maoist conflict addresses (Acharya 2003; Fujikura 2003; Hutt (ed.) 2004; Lawoti 2003; Pettigrew 2003; Shneiderman 2003; and Thapa 2002 and 2003). The perspective of university students represents a small proportion of their generations' population but has a large impact on the success or failure of mainstream party politics, which I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

### **The Political Conception of Youth and Nepali Student Political Participation**

Nepali students have long had an integral role in Nepal's political development. Over fifty-five years ago, Nepali students began their struggle to establish state-wide democracy and students are still at the fore of making radical political demands, standing on the political ground gained by student activists before them. It is important not only to acknowledge this historical precedent and its impact on the shaping of student politics, but one must consider Nepali conceptions of youth and the youth generation's role in politics. When asked, older Nepali politicians<sup>4</sup> have articulated to me that the youth are at a liminal period in their lives in which their own hopes are based in tradition and aspirations of the previous generations but their flexible perspective allows them to conceive possibilities their parents did not. In other words, they embrace a politics of fulfilment, which imagines a future society attaining more adequately what present society has left unaccomplished (Benhabib 1986: 27). This, coupled with the determination to achieve and the daring of age to opt for action over the risks involved, has made the youth a valuable asset in the struggle for democracy in Nepal. The older political generation takes advantage of the youth's enthusiasm and idealism to mobilize the students' future-oriented ambitions in order to accomplish what they have not been able to achieve in the past. This may seem like a cynical analysis, but it is important to untangle the idealized discourse of youth and the forty-year dynamic of student organizations becoming sister organizations to the political parties. Within this dynamic there is a discursive play between autonomy and institutional culture. Autonomy and institutional culture coexist in tension with one another. It is the institutional culture of the student organizations that students must operate within in order to advance in politics, but it is

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that most Nepali politicians were active in student politics. Their responses to inquiries about the role of youth in politics both try to justify and give import to their own impact on politics as youth, as well as their interpretation of the role of youth today, who are below them in the political hierarchy.

through autonomy from the political parties that the students perceive of themselves having a larger impact (on an individual and group level) on society. This disjuncture is underscored by people's articulations of youth and their perceived roles and limitations in politics.

Nepal's formalized struggle for democracy is marked by the revolution of 1950, a political manoeuvre coordinated between the Nepali Congress and King Tribhuvan (an ineffective figurehead) to overthrow the Rana regime, which had monopolized political power since 1846. Multi-party democracy with a constitutional monarch was established after the King fled to India for refuge and the Nepali Congress conducted a military assault on the Rana state infrastructure. Many of the participants in this rebellion were students who had been exiled to India in 1947 for participating in the student movement *Jayatu Sanksitam* ('Victory to Sanskrit'). This student movement was the first recorded organized protest by students against the Rana regime. At the time, Sanskrit was the only subject offered at Nepal's only university. The students organized themselves in order to demand that the curriculum be expanded to include mathematics and science. This movement occurred despite massive risk to the students; historically, any political or anti-Rana activity was severely repressed. Three years previously, three individuals were hanged for employing the *Bhagavad Gita* as a public metaphor to criticize the regime. It was surprising to students that the Rana regime submitted to their demand for an expanded curriculum, which encouraged them to continue their struggle to include the humanities as well. But the authority of the Rana regime had tolerated enough; they ordered raids on the campuses, imprisoned students while others were exiled to India. Many of these exiles were the founders of the Nepali Congress and later the Communist Party of Nepal. They participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India movement, which greatly influenced these future politicians' struggle for democracy in Nepal (Hoftun, et al 1999: 5).

During the decade of “multi-party democracy” that was to follow,<sup>5</sup> students at the university level began to move away from politics. They created a Student Federation that focussed on the wellbeing of students. This collaboration was based on the notion that students should not be involved in party politics but rather in forming a national consensus, and that the best way to do that was to raise the issue of students’ rights in a unified voice (Hoftun, et al 1999: 38). The student federations were organized according to the different zones of Nepal; they represented students of different regions rather than varying political ideologies. During this time, student activities were “norm-oriented,” concentrating on specific goals such as curriculum enlargement, campus facilities, and the quality of education (Altbach 1967: 87). Concurrently, the tenet of protecting students’ rights and interests became one of the justifications for the student organizations’ right to exist. The claim of protecting students’ rights established the student organizations as the representative of the students, which has since been articulated as one of the main roles of student organizations and used to validate their mandate.

The student organizations were in an interesting position in the post-democratic era of the sixties and seventies.<sup>6</sup> Since they had already been established as officially non-partisan, they were allowed to continue during the Panchayat rule. But the autocratic nature of the Panchayat government inevitably made any dissent

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<sup>5</sup> The era was a democracy only by decree, not by practice. It was mainly a decade of intrigue, inquiry, meddling from India, odd coalitions, and attempted coups, as the struggle for power between the palace and the Nepali Congress oligarchy continued. The main tenets of the 1951 India-engineered Delhi agreement that was signed by King Tribhuvan and the Nepali Congress were a constituent assembly and free and open elections. The constituent assembly never took place. The elections did take place in 1959, one year before King Mahendra, Tribhuvan’s son, declared a one party Panchayat system (government run by his appointees, in cooperation with him) in which all other political parties were illegal.

<sup>6</sup> The history that I am laying out here is compiled from interviews (in May and June 2004) with Narahari Acharya (Central Committee Member of Nepali Congress), Ganesh Shyam Bhushal (CPN-UML Theory and Ideology Training Department), and Shribhadra Sharma (who had served both as General Secretary of the Nepali Congress of 1960 and as a Panchayat Minister).

political. During this time all of the student movements that occurred began as “norm-oriented” but quickly developed into “value-oriented”<sup>7</sup> movements that took an ideological stance in reaction to harsh Panchayat suppression. It was at this time that student organizations became the activity of student politics, rather than a broader activity in which some politicians happened to participate. Ideological squabbles between students arose due to the priority of students’ partisanship with underground political parties and differences of opinion on how to depose of the Panchayat government and reinstate democracy. The All Nepal National Free Students Union (ANNFSU), which was originally developed in reaction to the formation of the Panchayat-backed National Student Forum, had become a Communist stronghold around 1968. In reaction to this, in 1970, the Nepali Congress formed its sister organization, called Nepal Students Union, for its students. Together, all the students’ organizations held campus elections within the Free Student Union. These elections came to symbolize political possibilities and served as proxies for democratic elections that could not occur at a national level. The changing nature of student organizations’ activity no longer allowed the students to rally around pragmatic reform within the university context; now everything the students would want to fight for had to be fought on the basis of regaining the rights of free citizens. This marked the beginning of a historical trend that the monarchy has yet to realize. While Nepali citizens have their rights, most citizens, including the students, are satisfied to concentrate on material reform. But when fundamental rights are curbed, they become overtly political and ideological, which emboldens their tactics of dissent and protest.

In 1971, the Panchayat government tried to ban independent student organizations, but the Supreme Court declared that they were not political organizations and therefore could not be constitutionally banned. This incident further

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Altbach distinguished between a “norm-oriented” movement, one concerned with specific goals and generally the product of a specific limited issue, and a “value-oriented” movement, which is concerned with broad, ideological issues (1967: 87).

cemented the historical relationship between the banned parties and student organizations. The student organizations could then serve as the legal wings of the parties in order to keep democratic politics alive through tactics of dissent and political indoctrination. But between 1975 and 1979, student politics was deeply impacted by the new educational policy, one of the clauses of which argued that student organizations were detrimental to the new policy and would therefore be prohibited.<sup>8</sup> It has been explained to me that this policy, which was heavily funded by American development dollars, was actually a ploy by the Panchayat government to secure its position by crafting a curriculum that made students favourable to the state. Many politicians and students still regard that education policy with suspicion as a Panchayat machination that did not address the needs of the people, but rather implemented policy that eliminated dissent. At an objective level, the new educational policy introduced a semester system with regular exams. This left little time for politics, and student organizations became inactive during the era of the new education policy (1975-1979).

The new education policy slowly started disintegrating due to lack of support from students and teachers. It saw its fall in 1979 when a movement broke out nationwide over a minor incident. Approximately a thousand students were marching to the Pakistani embassy to protest the unjust execution of J. A. Bhutto. The police would not let the students through one of the main thoroughfares because their procession would block traffic at a time when the King was scheduled to be travelling in the area. The students demanded to be allowed to proceed but were refused and clashes broke out between the students and policemen. By this time the students' gathering was no longer about the execution of Bhutto, it was also about suppression. In the days that followed there were protests throughout the country that resulted in police brutality and several deaths. Such an escalation had not been

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<sup>8</sup> Despite a Supreme Court ruling, the Constitutional Reform Committee passed this bold reform. Some say that this was possible due to the regional climate of authoritarianism caused by Indira Gandhi's state of emergency in India. (Hoftun, et al 1999: 86)

expected on a nationwide scale, so King Birendra<sup>9</sup> ordered a royal commission to investigate the students' demands. The student action committee, which consisted of three students, Bal Bahadur K.C. (Nepali Congress affiliate), Shai Lak Karki (pro-Moscow affiliate), and Tanka Karki (United Marxist Leninist affiliate), reached an agreement with the commission, which ended the new education policy, abolished entrance exams to university (which made university entrance accessible to all those who had passed the National School Leaving Examination), allowed for independent unions on a national level, and abolished the *Rastrabadi Bidhyarthi Mandal* (National Student Forum), the pro-Panchayat student organization accused of orchestrating attacks against student protesters. This was a victory for the student movement: they had achieved significant reform at the university level, but they were still unable to effect change at the state level. The next day, May 22, 1979, as these three representatives were reporting the outcome of the talks, an outcry arose among the students that they had not addressed the ultimate spirit of the movement. They painted two of the student negotiators' faces black<sup>10</sup> and paraded them through the streets. The demonstration accrued about twenty-five thousand protestors and culminated in the burning of a government newspaper office and the destruction of public vehicles in front of the Royal Nepal Airways Corporation office. The next day, May 24, 1979, King Birendra announced that he would allow a nationwide referendum whereby the people could choose between a multi-party system and the Panchayat-style government. He allowed the underground parties to campaign in preparation for the referendum. Ganesh Man Singh, the general secretary of Nepali Congress at that time, claimed,

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<sup>9</sup> Birendra's rule began in 1972 and his style was quite different from his father's. Though when he began his rule he planned to enforce his father's constitution of 1962, he was open to reform, working with liberal Panchayat ministers and at times with illegal political parties.

<sup>10</sup> In the context of the political struggle for democracy, black is equated with regression. As a political tactic, protesters will often hold black flags, particularly on April 8th, which marks King Mahendra's dissolution of democracy in 1960, and October 14<sup>th</sup>, when his grandson Gyanendra (the current king) dissolved parliament in 2001.

“Only foolish men can believe that a free and fair referendum will be possible under Panchayat Rule” (Hoftun, et al 1999: 91). Many other leaders were suspicious of such a move, though eventually the parties worked together to campaign for the national referendum. Ultimately, the government won the referendum.<sup>11</sup> Many are cynical of the reasons for the Panchayat system’s victory, and believe the issues range from access to resources to vote rigging.

For the next decade the parties were officially banned but operated in a liminal space not sanctioned by the authorities. They were visible, they had offices and political programs, but they were not legally allowed to do so. The student organizations, on the other hand, were legal entities that could operate in their official capacity. It was at this time that the student organizations became established as the limbs of the political organizations. Previously, while they may have assisted political parties as affiliates, they exercised some degree of autonomy due to the constraints under which the parties worked. But after the national referendum, the parties’ existence was vindicated and they gained the clout to organize political dissent. If the students wanted to participate, they did so in cooperation with the parties. In other words, the student organizations’ role as sister organization to the parties became entrenched. Their responsibilities included hosting political programmes and arranging logistics and publicity, as well as conducting political indoctrination on the campuses. Due to their legal status, the student organizations had rights their parties did not which appeared to give them autonomy but also cemented their relationship with political parties as sister organizations. In other words, student organizations were the vehicle through which the parties exercised influence.

The combination of being organized together with the parties and their perceived autonomy from the parties served the students well during the 1990 people’s movement, but that was not what defined the success of this movement. Unlike movements in the past, this was not merely opposition from the elite political

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<sup>11</sup> Of the 7,111,000 registered voters, 2.4 million voted for the Panchayat system and 2 million voted for the multi-party system (Hoftun, et al 1999: 93).

leaders backed by party cadres or a student movement; it included the urban public, nationwide. Over the course of the movement there were mounting protests, sit-ins, strikes, torch rallies, blackouts, and signature campaigns run by every type of professional, political, and communal organization. After 80,000 people protested in the city of Patan they were able to seize control of the city and cut it off from Kathmandu by digging trenches at all points of access. They declared their city to be a zone free from the historical suppression of the Panchayat government. At the movement's peak, an estimated half million people congregated in the centre of Kathmandu which is thought to be the largest gathering recorded in Nepali history (Hoftun, et al 1999: 131).

As the movement unfolded, the students exercised autonomy and this became integral to the movement's momentum. Many party leaders were arrested either before the movement began, or soon after during periodic sweeps that were conducted in anticipation of the programme announced by the joint parties. This programme was a reaction to the palace ignoring their ultimatum to introduce major political reform. The lines of communication and influence that were established between the parties and their sister organizations over the last decade allowed the students to be able to carry out the work that party leaders were unable to do, primarily getting people to the streets.<sup>12</sup> Though everyone was coordinated toward one goal, the students did gain autonomy at this point, because they needed to rely on their own ability to strategize protest from hour to hour over the chaotic two-month course of the movement. This combination of commitment to their parties' ideals and situational autonomy during the movement served the student activists in another way beyond the success of democracy. For the first time since the 1950 movement, their actions secured the possibility for positions of power in the multi-party government that followed. They were heroes in previous movements, but all they gained were

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<sup>12</sup> This also meant that students were the bearers of the brunt of most of the police violence. When captured, they were brutally tortured, which did not happen as routinely to party leaders, and of the approximately fifty people who died during the movement, two thirds were students.

illegitimate positions in the parties that the Panchayat government had banned. But from 1990 onwards, the students invested themselves not only in their political ideology, but also in a legitimately sanctioned political career.

In the post-1990 democratic era, student organizations had a co-dependent relation with the parties. In fact, for the first time in political history, it was possible for one's tenure as a student to be the beginning of a guaranteed political career. But also during this period, the students returned to the campuses. Their movements at this time once again became norm-oriented and they contested issues like tuition increases, facility improvement, and petrol and transportation price decreases.<sup>13</sup> They did not have reason to fight on ideological grounds, so they agitated for issues that concerned the student population and general public. The nature of these student movements according to the students' convenient description—that they are social movements that served the larger public good—worked on a number of different levels that benefited both the students and the politicians. The process of student movements and the discourse around them were exploited as general categories that attempted to perpetuate public commitment to party ideals regardless of whether the parties were presently following those ideals. The movements allowed the youth to stir things up, which they were traditionally assumed to do in the name of justice. From the positive and negative sentiments concerning post-1991 student movements that I gathered from students, politicians, and general citizens during interviews, it seems that the student movements fulfilled two purposes. First, it provided the students a forum in which they felt they made a difference; it allowed them to feel personally invested in the political process, but within a controlled sphere that did not

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<sup>13</sup> There were two movements that went beyond pragmatic demands and which could be considered calls for justice. The first was the march to the border in 1994. The ANNFSU (All Nepal National Free Student Union) students marched from Kathmandu to the Indian border carrying Nepali flags. They did this to oppose the encroachment on the border by the Indian government. The second was the 2001 signature campaign that demanded that the prince, Paras Bikram Shaha (now the crown prince), be charged with manslaughter for killing of a prominent Nepali pop star. Over one million signatures were collected for this campaign.

challenge their mother organizations, which were running the state. Second, publicity was a strong motivator, which kept the parties in the limelight, just one step removed from the students, because their future generations were being represented in the media to be on the streets fighting for the rights of the common man. These movements also served as performances that allowed Nepali citizens a glimpse of the coming generation that had identified and would change all that was wrong with Nepal, despite the fact that their mother organizations were not currently doing so. More specifically, the movements exhibited the ability of budding young politicians to run an organisation. There was also a trend that the students affiliated with the parties who had parliamentary rule tended to be the instigators of these movements. This dynamic allowed the ruling party to have fixed demands put upon them that they were then able to fulfil, which portrayed the party as heeding the voice of the people by either giving in to or compromising with the students' demands (Snellinger, forthcoming).

It was not until after 2002 when King Gyanendra interfered in the parliamentary process that the role of student movements returned to a value orientation. The students assisted the five political parties, who were carrying out a joint movement against regression (from democracy), by fulfilling their traditional roles: arranging the logistics, advertising of political programs, and being on the front lines of protest. Since 2003, the students have undertaken two joint movements independent of the parties. The first was in April 2003, in which their objective was to decrease the petrol prices. During this movement they spoke about the need to reinstate parliament and declared their support for the five-party joint movement against regression, but most people admitted that this movement was norm-based and focussed on their agenda. It was not until Devi Ram Poudel, a student of the Butwal Multiple Campus, was shot dead by policemen on April 8, 2003 during a staged traffic jam in protest of the oil price hikes that this movement took a new turn. The students immediately demanded the resignation of the King's appointed Prime Minister and the reinstatement of the parliament. Lokendra Bahadur Chand, then Prime Minister, did resign, but was replaced by another appointee

of the King. And the petrol prices were decreased. A student leader said to me, "It was at this time that we realized what was at risk. The issue was no longer the price of petrol but the principle of protesting the price of petrol. Our democratic rights were at stake and that changed the nature of the movement. It had to change. There was so much at risk, including the honour of a martyr." After this, as sister organizations, the students stepped up their support for the movement against regression.<sup>14</sup>

It was not until December 2003 that the students declared their independent movement. After a protest programme on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003 acknowledging 'Democracy Day,'<sup>15</sup> three student leaders were arrested and charged with sedition for publicly demanding a republic during their speeches. Such a charge had been unheard of in the post-1990 political era. To many activists this not only indicated the current state of stalled democracy but a step backwards to Panchayat autocracy in which free speech was also curtailed. The mayhem of the following days discouraged the government from officially charging the students with sedition, and they released them. This turn of events further emboldened the students. Since the government was unable to bring itself to enforce sedition charges, the students used the opportunity to take out their own joint movement of seven Free Student Union (FSU) organizations. Their mission was to radicalize the discourse of the political parties' movement against regression by taking the risk to make political demands that their more conservative mother organizations (the political parties) did want to take. The students not only saw this as a move against the King's autocratic actions but also as an opportunity to carve a space of political autonomy for themselves. The following quote from one of the student leaders who was arrested sums up the change in the students' role after 2002:

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<sup>14</sup> It was at this time that I arrived in Nepal for my fieldwork, so all accounts from this point forward are based on my field observations, analysis, and interviews.

<sup>15</sup> Democracy Day marks the anniversary of the day King Mahendra formally proposed that national elections will occur on February 18, 1959, one year before he dismissed the elected parliament and instated the Panchayat system of government.

Yesterday the student organization's role was only to powerfully assist the parties. They were treated as nurseries, which used to supply plants for the parties. In the nursery the seeds used to be watered and fertilized. The role of the student organizations was limited to this. It was not considered in a broader perspective than this. Our work was to make Nepali Congress win the election and to make the college students and school students familiar with Congress's theories, by making them educated in congress theories and to produce cadres for Nepali Congress. We did not have the situation to conduct struggle within Congress. But now because of the students' movement and the faith that we have obtained (from public), our role is not limited to that. In the overall construction of the country our role is to be the prime mover. We are the force with most potential; the student organizations have realized this during this situation. Therefore the mainstream politics should not be driven only by the political party but we must also interfere in it. Yesterday we did not interfere in it; we did not take part in how the state was run. The parties used to fight but we did not care. In twelve years of parliamentary democracy a lot of defects came and we never spoke. Our opinion is that we were limited—"your work is to do politics in the campus, your work is to take part in Free Student Union elections, your role is to assist the parties in the elections," this is what was said to us. And we said yes, we understood in a wrong way. But today we are interfering. To be able to point a finger at the parties saying that you cannot compromise with the King in an inappropriate way means we are also in the mainstream of politics.<sup>16</sup>

Another student leader from ANNFSU, All Nepal National Free Student Union, (Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist

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<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted on January 28, 2004. The translation from Nepali was done by the author.

Leninst affiliate) articulated this sentiment by claiming that the public support their political movement more than they do the parties' movement. His reasoning was that the political parties were at fault in their governing practices during multi-party democracy and that their incompetence brought about this political crisis. The students, on the other hand, had committed no injustice upon the public and were aware of the mistakes of their leaders, which they would therefore avoid committing. Ultimately, he believed that the students were in a unique position between the public and the parties. They believed that their political position allowed them to fight for the true priorities of the public.

The ideals stated above give purpose to the students' struggles, which allows them to have the conviction that they need to sustain the dedication and passion for a protracted movement. But, all too often, ideals hover over reality and sometimes they fail to coalesce within the structural limitations of the political system. In the spring of 2004, the King's second appointed prime minister resigned. He then asked the original prime minister whom he had dismissed, Sher Bahadur Deuba, to resume his position and form a coalition government.<sup>17</sup> The CPN-UML was the only party of the joint five parties who agreed to join Deuba's coalition government. The students from the CPN-UML's affiliate, ANNFSU, viewed this as a compromise and did not agree with their mother organization's move. Since the UML works on an intra-party process of consent, they create a platform with no dissenting voice. This policy is also followed by their student organization, unless they are strategically mobilizing their voice as an independent

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<sup>17</sup> At the time Deuba had originally been dismissed from the position of prime minister, he was a member of Nepali Congress. But the dismissal turned out to be the last scuffle that he and the President of Nepali Congress, Girija Prasad Koirala, were willing to have. A split in the party resulted and Deuba became the president of the newly created Nepali Congress (Democratic). The Nepali Congress (Democratic) was not a participant in the five party joint movement against regression due to the refusal of Koirala. Rather, they took out their own protests with their student organization, Nepal Student Union (Democratic).

voice of dissent.<sup>18</sup> I recall more than a few sombre moments of frustration in the ANNFSU party office over their mother organization's decision. Even though ANNFSU was unable to continue to participate in the joint student movement, their presence was noticeably absent as they lingered on the roof of their party office staring down longingly at Ratna Park<sup>19</sup> immediately below them as their fellow students continued their uncompromised struggle against the King's aggressive move. One student begrudgingly admitted that the other student organizations were in no better position than they were. They were still on the streets only because their parties were still there. It just happened that in this situation, they were the ones to bear the shame of compromise. But these students were also the CPN-UML's most vocal critics when it became obvious that the Deuba coalition was not working.

Three months after the CPN-UML joined the government, the Nepali Congress dissolved the central committee of Nepal Student Union. Since 1990 there have been nine central committee administrations of NSU; eight have been dissolved by Nepali Congress, despite the supposition that it is technically against the constitution of the Nepal Student Union. Some of the dissolved leaders and other party cadres have speculated that this move was made because the leadership of the Nepal Student Union central committee was not under the proper influence of the Nepali Congress leadership, and in order to curb any rogue activity—despite its success in terms of the number of participants in the

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<sup>18</sup> At various times this has been both an independent strategic move by the ANNFSU, and a strategy in cooperation with CPN-UML with larger *realpolitik* considerations.

<sup>19</sup> Ratna Park is a major thoroughfare a few thousand yards from the palace. It has gained its reputation as the nexus of political agitation in Kathmandu, flanked by the Democracy Wall. On the opposite corner is the ANNFSU office and a police barrack is situated on another corner. Many political protests begin and end at this point with speeches given there. This location is also a prestigious place for a political protester to be arrested. On a number of occasions I have observed negotiations between protesters and police, where the police ask the protestors to come quietly and the protestors respond, "There is only one place I will allow you to arrest me. Take me to Ratna Park and then you can arrest me."

street agitations—it was better to have central committee-appointed students who would follow Nepal Congress Party command. Many people say that it is issues like this that highlight the weakness of both the student organizations and the parties. It also further cements the students' roles as cadres who are politically oriented within party ideals. And although one of their articulated motives in their movement is autonomy, or the power to change the system, they are ultimately beholden to the political parties. This relationship not only limits them but also makes them vulnerable to increased political suppression in the current environment.

Due to the continuing political crisis, the students have continued their movement. It has ebbed and flowed as one would expect with any protracted movement, but the dedicated few have sustained and reacted according to what the political context has dictated. The recent palace appropriation of the democratic process in February 2005 has drastically changed the political playing field. The fact that the students were tracked down and arrested just as the mainstream politicians were, prior to the King's public announcement,<sup>20</sup> is testament to the lack of ambiguity in their role; the students are officially a political threat. During the state of emergency there was a prioritized list circulated among the security forces of whom to arrest regardless of whether there was any legal reason to do so. Category A contained activists who could incite the masses, Category B contained central committee members and elites of the political parties, and Category C contained common cadres who were disobeying state of emergency statutes. This situation gave the arrest of particular student politicians priority over seasoned elite politicians, depending on their charisma and ability to convince the masses to oppose the state of emergency. The majority of political detainees,

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<sup>20</sup> During this announcement, the King claimed that in order to save democracy from the corrupt, ineffective politicians who were more interested in inter-party politics than in securing peace and security, and in order to save the country from the mounting Maoist insurgency, he was dissolving parliament, appointing a new government of which he would be the chairman, and instating a state of emergency.

who have been charged under the Public Securities Act,<sup>21</sup> have been students. Many analysts consider the recent events to be history repeating itself irrespective of established international discourse that claims democracy is a right to dignity. This sentiment of historical repetition needs to be acknowledged but due to the students' evolving role in democracy, they need to navigate this historically perpetual event differently than they have in the past. Their struggle right now is a value-oriented struggle for the rights of the people and for the possibility that they can exist as political entrepreneurs. Since February 2005 even their discourse and appeals have changed. They are now adopting the human rights discourse of international justice, as well as expanding their scope of appeal beyond their Nepali constituents. Throughout their history, the students have been challenged by constraints and taken advantage of opportunities through tactics of adopting, adapting, and inventing, in order to declare, *Andolan jarichha* - 'the movement continues'.

I have briefly detailed the history of student political activity and the nascent relationship between the student organizations and their mother organizations, the political parties, in order to demonstrate the limitations and the ideals attributed to students' roles in politics by the students, the politicians, and the public. All of these actors draw on student politics' historicity to either apply substance to their role or to dismiss it as contrived political tactics. But within these articulations it is clear that the youth are perceived to have political capital and that has been co-opted by the parties, in turn curbing its potential to effect change.

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<sup>21</sup> This act was ratified in 1951 soon after democracy was instated. It claimed that someone could be held in jail for up to nine months if they were a threat to society. At that time it was used by the Nepali Congress to silence its opponents (Hoftun, 1999: 33). Since 1951, it has been used by whatever regime was in power. During the first years of democracy it was not used but after the Maoist Insurgency of 1996 its usage has been increasing as the state has tried to curb "terrorism." Since 2003, King Gyanendra's government has used it regularly to suppress dissent from the parties. In its current form, someone can be held up for three months without a charge, and it can be renewed on a three month basis.

**Politics of Exclusion: Post-1990 Politics and the Public**

In addition to the issue of student politics being incorporated into mainstream party politics, there are three other key factors that have influenced the gap between politically active students and non-active students. One consideration is that while there were no MA or PhD students in Nepal in 1950 and there were just 250<sup>22</sup> students at bachelors' level then the number of students just at Master's and PhD levels was as high as 207,211 in 2004.<sup>23</sup> With this increased participation of students in the Nepali higher education system has come a larger and more diverse constituency that the student political organizations are able to represent. After all, student politics, like mainstream politics, largely remains an endeavour of high-caste, educated men. There may be more diversity on the university campus levels, but the central committees of the student organizations more or less directly mirror the central committees of their mother parties. Without the representation of students from all different backgrounds, it has been increasingly difficult for general students to believe that the student organizations represented their interests. Rather, the student organizations are a force with which one must negotiate in order to achieve administrative tasks like university admission and department enrolment. Furthermore, the sense of political exclusion that operates on a national level (see Lawoti 2005) is reflected on the campus level, because even though student politics can be perceived as an opportunity to enter into politics, it has become a reserved opportunity for those who are bred by the party leaders. As with many causes that struggle for the higher intentions of justice, once the opportunity for advancement becomes a valid possibility, the processes of streamlining competition and advancement are cultivated, which inevitably taints the ideological articulations that once gave weight to the struggle for 'justice'.

Citizens who did not see any opportunity in the political system took advantage of what was available to them in the post-1990 democratic era: economic opportunity within the developing free market economy. This economic environment included a burgeoning private school industry. Today there are over 25,599

schools in the country and 8,547 of them private.<sup>22</sup> The private school industry boomed with the demand of an increasingly privatized economy that was filling the gaps where government facilities were lacking. The state of government schools at all levels is poor and vulnerable to regular political strikes and machinations. One of the key selling points of private schools is that the student organizations' influence did not reach into private campuses. So those who did not perceive or were not interested in political opportunity, and could afford private education, paid not to have their lives interrupted by politics. Rather, people invested in quality private education in order to get ahead economically. This too has widened the political gap between the developing middle class, which is becoming technically and educationally oriented towards private sector jobs, and the political class, which often comes from the bottom ranks of poor public universities and are often improperly trained to pursue the political goal of public office.

A lack of political or citizenship consciousness is often cited as another reason why people are passively observing the current political crisis. A few reasons may be suggested to explain this. First, during democracy the parties and the students concentrated only on political party indoctrination, which was dismissed by many as another form of power politics. The student organizations would extend their influence in the direction of the government secondary schools, higher secondary schools, colleges, and universities. But usually the student organizations gain access to the lower level government schools through connections with the school administration that is affiliated with their political party, so the political indoctrination that the young students receive is that of contrived partisan politics. They do not necessarily get cross-platform inculcation into political ideologies from which they can choose their party affiliations. Rather, there is a continual campaign of extending political influence that is often a predetermined game of location to which students are vulnerable. The colleges and university campuses are the battlefields (both figuratively and literally) of student organizations. Student

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<sup>22</sup> Education Statistics of Nepal Education Ministry 1999, cited in Dahal (2001).

organization strongholds on campuses indicate the extent of influence the parties have on the campuses, and through the student politicians the parties constantly struggle for this access. Second, this style of party indoctrination has not been balanced with social studies courses that teach the students what the democratic state does and what they should expect of it, a course on cultivating citizenship that is common in the curricula of many other modern democratic nation states. The democratic state education systems never properly filled the void left by the removal of a Panchayat education system, which was very nationalist in tone. Today, Nepal's political history is taught in the context of eras of leadership and coups that do not prepare students to think of themselves as the citizens for whom the state is being run and who determine the mandate of government. Furthermore, with the Sanskritic learning style of rote memorization entrenched in the Nepali education system, there is no opportunity to engage or question the type of nationalist history that is being taught.

According to the 1990 constitution the King remains the chancellor of Tribhuvan University and Mahendra Sanskrit University, which involves rubber-stamping all official activity, including appointments and curriculum on all Tribhuvan-affiliated campuses. Although the position of chancellor was meant to be purely symbolic, so was the position of constitutional monarchy, yet the monarchy's role has been easily manipulated, with the justification of Article 127 of the constitution, to become active twice since 2001. The proposal to make the King the chancellor of all other Nepali universities, including Kathmandu University, the one private university in the nation, is of concern to some university professors. They perceive this to be a tactic to entrench the King's influence over the universities. The 2005 new National Education Act of the *rajparishad* (the governing counsel appointed by the King) has also raised eyebrows among those suspicious of the King's desire to refill the vacuum of patriotic influence that was set in the curriculum, of which the political parties never took advantage in order to build a solid understanding of what it means to be a democratic citizen. These manoeuvres are a testament to the vulnerable position of educational institutions.

With all of these political machinations for influence that are wrapped up in the notion of civic consciousness in Nepal, it should be mentioned that to all the generalizations that I am posing here there are exceptions. One prominent exception that I have observed in Kathmandu among college-educated youth is that there is a notion of citizenship consciousness but it is not necessarily connected to a political consciousness. They understand that the current political situation adversely affects them and that their rights are directly at stake. And even though it might not necessarily impact their daily lives, they know that they need a free and open political environment for the development of the country. Their impasse is over how to make a difference. The parties are offering a space on the streets to protest but they are perceived as a sector in this tripartite political debacle in which people see no benefit in participating. Many of the students have told me that they might be willing to participate, but ask, "How do we join the party protests?" They are unable to conceptualize how they can make a difference, especially if politically active students who seem to be capable and have gained popularity with the general public are being stymied by their mother organizations due to internal party politics. Ultimately, it is an issue of empowerment. If the general student population observes students who are dedicating their lives to politics being personally obstructed by their mother organizations, then how can they conceptualize making an impact? Many have presented this, and the lack of a clear agenda that people can support, as reasons for why there seems to be no room on the streets for the public to join with the political parties and student organizations.

Even though student politics is espoused as, and at times in history has actually served as, a symbolically necessary democratic exercise, very few people are invested in it as such. Today, when it again needs to be at the forefront of the political struggle, students do not see a place for themselves in the political system. A former finance minister who studied in America in the late 1960s explained to me that politically active students in Nepal did not seize the opportunity of multi-party democracy to create democratic culture on the campuses. There was not the same urgency to be active because democracy had won; people had their

rights. He pointed out that the universities may have become the training grounds for politics, but they should have simultaneously been the training grounds for active citizenship that holds the elected responsible to their actions. He summarized the problem in the following statement:

When people think of democracy in Nepal, they think of party politics, something they are not a part of. Democracy needs to be owned by all, it needs to be a culture of ownership, and with ownership comes responsibility to hold the system accountable. During democracy in Nepal, the politicians never compelled the citizens to own their democracy, of course not; they did not want to be held accountable. But the politicians can't get upset. For fifteen years they treated the public as a side note. Now the public is treating them as a side note. What the public does not understand is that democracy is more than the parties. Democracy is the economic opportunities that have become possible for them, and democracy is their right to do more than just protest. When they start losing this part of democracy, then they will begin to understand and take a more active role.<sup>23</sup>

This sentiment was expressed to me by a number of student activists when I pushed them on this issue of student political participation. They said that those who have benefited most from democracy are those who have done the least to secure democracy. They were referring to the citizens who have been able to take advantage of the private education system and improved their economic opportunity as a result. Those who actively participate are participating in a politics that has failed to include the public. This lack of conceived space has caused the public to become ambivalent to the political system, and their ambivalence is now being manipulated as a mandate to the monarchy, which is slowly closing the political space to everyone. So rather than a democratic

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<sup>23</sup> This is a translation of an informal interview I had with the informant on June 23, 2005.

culture, a culture of disjuncture has developed between the public and the political parties that has directly threatened the democratic political system.

**Transfiguration: Politics and the State of University**

In closing, it is important to consider the popular question in Marxist, Leninist, Maoist theory: what is to be done? When I asked people for solutions, most do not suggest revolution but many agree that the ultimate end of democracy has become convoluted and therefore the means need to be re-evaluated in order to secure a more comprehensive form of democracy. Can we call this a crisis of student politics? Perhaps not, but rather there is a crisis of politics, of which the students are but one component. Student politics may not yet be anachronistic, but at a time of political crisis its institutional culture seems to be limiting its ability to fulfil the possibilities that many attribute to its political capital. In order to survive as a relevant political force the student organizations, like their parties, need to re-evaluate their role in the state, in society, and in the universities. Rather than being trapped by others' definitions of who they are and what role they serve as a political entity, perhaps the student politicians need to reconnect with their own generation, the mass of people in the country whom they claim to represent. This approach must include the larger youth population that has not had the opportunity of education; the students must learn to communicate and represent the needs of those who have been left behind by the era of democracy and development. By creating an environment of inclusive politics that incorporates all sectors of their generation, they can demonstrate the ideals of democracy at work and be an example to the generations before and after them. Instead of adopting a politics of fulfilment, they can practise a politics of transfiguration, which emphasizes emergent needs, social relations, and modes of association, "which burst the utopian potential within the old" (Benhabib 1986: 27). This would be a more proactive, critical approach to the political impasse of democratic development, which would allow them the flexibility to uproot their institutional culture and transfigure it to be contemporarily relevant.

Another responsibility that all students have is the bettering of the state university environment. All sectors have taken advantage of the benefits the university has to offer, but no sector—the monarchy, the state, the parties, the students, or the public—has actively invested in it so that it can provide each with the quality for which it has the potential. An ex-vice chancellor of Tribhuvan University eloquently addressed this issue in a speech to the Public Administration Association of Nepal when he said:

This university...has served Nepal over the past 45 years...This premier national university has produced scholars, poets, ministers, artists, politicians, generals, and even rebels. If this institution were a woman, she would have been now in the full bloom of her life, happy, contented, and blessed. But, just for a few seconds imagine a woman sitting in that corner; her face as wrinkled as a walnut. Her wasted body bent over a baby she is holding in the folds of her *sari*. Her sunken cheeks bathed in tears. A woman in utter destitution....Ladies and Gentleman, this is what we have made Tribhuvan University today....but how would one describe the pain and agony of an institution...for institutions do not cry....this proud institution with such a glorious history is now without many friends. Everyone has used her, misused her for his or her personal gain or political benefit. It has been the victim of both rampant trade unionism of teacher and administration, and political activism of the students...Thus while the country's premier national university continues to suffer, responsible public officials take satisfaction out of the proliferation of more efficient and market oriented institutions of higher education in the private sector. But are national universities beyond redemption?...We cannot let this happen in a country like Nepal where only 5 percent of the university going age population attend universities or colleges.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Speech given by Dr. Kedar Bhakta Mathema addressed to the Public Administration Association of Nepal (PAAN), August 28, 2004.

For Nepal to secure democracy, it needs education and educated citizens. If politics needs to be inclusive for democracy to strengthen, then education must also be inclusive. If 95% of the student age population still needs to be incorporated into the higher-educated class, then there is need for quality state education. This is the responsibility of all; people need to hold the state accountable to provide quality education to all. Until quality education is more than privilege, then democracy will always be fragile and vulnerable to the power politics that we have seen thus far in Nepal's democratic history.

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