

Student Political Activism in Nepal: Vanguard of Democracy or Powerless Pawns?

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Abstract

Student political activism declined in the Global South after the 1990s. However, it has remained strong in Nepal despite the fact that it has undergone similar socio-political changes. This paper demonstrates that the main reason for the distinct nature of Nepali student political activism lies in the patron–client relationship between student organizations and political parties. Undoubtedly, the contribution of student organizations in the establishment of democracy in the three major democratic mass movements in Nepal is incomparable. However, the nature of their relationship with their mother political parties transformed from a semi-autonomous to a subordinate relationship after the institutionalisation of a multi-party democracy in 1990. This interdependent relationship is maintained and consistently solidified through the mutual exchange of resources, both material and non-material. This paper concludes that student political activism in Nepal is not expected to decline in the near future, because these patronage-dispensing political parties are perceived to be part of the state by the general Nepali society—one that controls state resources and institutions, including universities and public campuses.

Keywords: student political activism, political parties, higher education, university governance, patronage, democracy

1. Introduction

Student political activism declined in most countries in the Global South after the 1990s. Scholars argue that the institutionalisation of pluralistic politics, spread of democracy, massification of higher education and increase in the number of other social and political organizations have contributed to this declining pattern (Aspinall & Weiss, 2012; Kongkirati, 2012; Lipset, 1964; McRae, 2001). However, student political activism prevails in Nepal despite the establishment of a multi-party democracy in 1990. Prior to this, higher education institutions proliferated with the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s (Regmi, 2007). Consequently, other social and political organizations emerged after the 1990s (Dahal, 2006; Hachhethu, 2002). The current research illustrates that the primary reason for the continued strong presence of student political activism in Nepal is the interdependent relationship between student organizations and political parties, which has evolved into a patron–client relationship over the years.

Student political movements are instrumental in driving changes in national policies or even in toppling governments (Kitamura, 2013; Lipset, 1968). In Nepal as well, student organizations have been pivotal in the establishment of democracy throughout the country's history. Oppositional in nature, students have been in the vanguard of all three democratic mass movements that occurred in 1950, 1990 and 2006 (Khadka, 1993; Neupane, 2005; Pherali, 2013). Students who were enrolled or exiled in India and those who were studying at the only higher education institution in Nepal at that time, the Tri-Chandra College, joined the first democratic mass movement in 1950, which overthrew the 104-year-old *Rana* oligarchy (Weiner, 1973). As political parties were banned in 1960 by the autocratic *Panchayat* regime, student political activists were at the forefront of the second democratic mass movement of 1990 (Hoftun et al., 1999). Later on, by leading radical protest movements to dethrone the monarchy and establish a “People's Republic”, student organizations mobilized millions of students across the country in the 2006 mass movement, which was a determining factor in abolishing the monarchy (Ojha, 2012). Nonetheless, despite students' unparalleled contributions to the establishment of democracies, the existing literature predominantly credits the political parties for their achievements. This article attempts to fill

the literature gap by examining the role of students in the three major mass movements mentioned above.

In the absence of a clear political opponent after 1990, student organizations began to struggle in justifying their *raison d'être* in the new democratic context. As a way of legitimising their existence, they started to become entrenched in the political parties (Snellinger, 2005). As a result, they became subordinates of the parties with whom they were associated. Student organizations are perceived simply as student wings of the political parties and are used to produce future party leaders, recruit new members, conduct party activities (including protests and election campaigns) and control higher education institutions (Dhakal et al., 2019; Gautam et al., 2019; Snellinger, 2018). These partisan groups have replaced grassroots student organizations, whose presence can hardly be felt in public universities and campuses.

Using the concept of “mutual exchange of resources” (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999), this paper attempts to explain how the interdependent relationship is maintained and solidified between student organizations and political parties. As experts on higher education in Nepal, Mathema (2007) and Misra (2003) argue that such a relationship has not only highly politicized universities and public campuses across the country, but is also considered the primary problem causing low-quality education and poor university governance. However, only a few studies have been conducted thus far to reveal this intricate relationship. The originality and value of this paper lie in its contribution to the literature by addressing this research gap.

This article is based on an extensive review of the scholarly literature on the topic covering over six decades (1960s–present). Given the limited number of scholarly articles on the topic, various original materials written in Nepali language were carefully examined, such as the constitutions of political parties and student organizations, documents from Tribhuvan University (TU) and Free Student Union (FSU) and party manifestos. In-depth online interviews with three current student leaders, three politicians, two senior bureaucrats and four others from different backgrounds were also conducted in November and December 2020.

1.1 Trends of Student Activism in the Global South

As a phenomenon, student political activism is highly complex and multi-faceted, making it difficult to explain and even more problematic to predict (Altbach, 1991). Owing to the unique history of each country, wide range of social structures, economies and variations in student political activism persist in the world. Despite significant empirical evidence on student political activism, little theoretical or comparative research has explored the determinants and impacts of student activism (Weiss et al., 2012). Therefore, this research does not attempt to make any generalizations about student political student activism in the Global South. Nonetheless, to elucidate the situation of student political activism in Nepal, this study considers student political activism in a comparative context to observe the pattern of student political activism within its regional context.

Until the late 1960s, student movements increased sharply in the Global South, followed by a decline in the late 1970s and 80s. Student activists were pivotal in many national independence movements in Asia and Africa (Altbach, 1984; Luescher & Mugume, 2014; Munene, 2003). Usually, students from the social sciences and humanities backgrounds tended to participate more in student activism (Lipset & Altbach, 1969). Students studying these subjects abroad, especially in European universities, initiated student liberation movements in Indonesia, Malaysia, Ghana and other countries (Oanda, 2016; Weiss, 2012). Since democracy has failed to last long in most of the countries in the Global South as a result of power seizure by dictators or semi dictators (Levy, 1989; Soares, 1989; Weiss et al., 2012), student organizations protested against those authoritarian regimes until the third wave of democracy in the early 1990s.

Student activists exhibit a complex set of attitudes and values that contribute to activism, such as idealism and a higher moral sense than their uninvolved peers (Altbach, 1991). A strong sense of nationalism can be observed in student activists, particularly Asian students, such as the passionate patriotism of South Korean students (Park, 2012) and the urge to serve the people, known in Thailand in the early 1970s as *nakseuksa* (Aspinall, 2012). During the same epoch, student activism in Latin America was guided by national socialism. Usually leftist in ideology, the international diffusion of Cuban, Vietnamese and Chinese revolutionary fervour in the 1960s–70s also had a significant influence on student political activism.

Similarities in the characteristics of student activists can be found in many countries in the Global South. Generally, student leaders of mass movements were elites who belonged to high social and economic classes (Hennessy, 1967; Sugden, 1971). With close connection to the ruling class, these student leaders clearly understood conditions in their countries and the opportunities democracy could bring.

Typically, governments respond to student political activism in three ways: ignoring student activists, engaging and negotiating with them, or repressing movements to various degrees (Altbach, 1991; Luescher, 2015). Even

though governments in the Global South used all three forms of responses, repressive measures were undertaken when the regimes felt threatened. The draconian response against student protest in 1971 by the South Korean government (Park, 2012), outright banning of the University Students' African Revolutionary Front (USARF) by the Tanzanian government in 1970 (Oanda, 2016) and the killing of 300 students in Mexico in 1968 (Levy, 1989) are some of the critical incidents where student activism was harshly repressed.

By the 1990s, student political activism had declined significantly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Even though Nepal experienced similar socio-political changes to those of other countries in the Global South, the available literature fails to explain why student political activism still prevails in Nepal. The current study attempts to elucidate the unique nature of student political activism in the country by critically analysing the formal and informal relationships between student organizations and political parties.

2. Methodology

This article is part of a doctoral dissertation on student movement and higher education governance in Nepal, which applies a qualitative research approach with the use of various data collection methods such as interviews and official documentation. Since there has been virtually no research at all on the student political activism in Nepal, various original materials written in Nepali language were collected and carefully examined. These include the constitutions of political parties and student organizations, pamphlets, party manifestos and official documents from Tribhuvan University (TU). In-depth interviews with fifteen experts namely five current student leaders, four former student leaders, five politicians and one political analyst were conducted between November, 2020 to April, 2021 (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of 15 interviewees and their affiliations

Interviewees	Current affiliation
Student leader	Central Committee Member (CCM), Socialist Student Forum (SSF)
Student leader	CCM, All Nepal National Independent Student Union (ANNISU)
Student leader	CCM, ANNISU
Student leader	CCM, Nepal Student Union (NSU)
Student leader	CCM, NSU
Former student leader	Mayor
Former student leader	Social worker
Former student leader	Senior bureaucrat
Former student leader	Provincial Planning Commission member
Political leader	CCM, Nepal Communist Party (NCP)
Political leader	District Committee Member, NCP
Political leader	CCM, Nepali Congress Party (NC)
Political leader	CCM, People's Socialist Party
Political leader	CCM, <i>Bibeksheel</i> Party
Political analyst	Researcher

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The first part of this research attempts to shed light on the nature of student activism and its contributions in establishing democracy in Nepal from 1945 until the present by applying Philip Altbach's theoretical understanding of student activism. Even though Altbach (1991) has argued that there is no overarching theoretical explanation to predict the rise of student activism, Luescher (2015) has challenged Altbach's notion by formulating a "comparative theoretical understanding" of student movements based on the latter's own pioneering work on student activism. Altbach's framework of student activism is essentially guided by the following four questions:

- Under what conditions does student activism emerge?
- What are the typical characteristics of student activists?
- What are the typical characteristics of student organizations/movements?
- What are the effects of student activism?

Student activism is more likely to have an impact on society when it is traditionally accepted as a legitimate

element of the political system (Altbach, 1991). The origin of such student political activism is influenced by diverse ideological backgrounds, such as nationalism, democracy, leftism and opposition to authoritarianism of various forms, (ibid). Students from the social sciences and humanities are generally the ones at the frontline of student movements. In terms of type, student movements are distinguished between norm- and value-based movements. Norm-based movements are particularistic [and] reformist in nature and generally aim at the correction of specific grievances or at a particular goal, whilst the value-based student movements are more concerned with broader ideological issues or those that are more revolutionary in nature (Altbach, 1964). Finally, the pattern of government response largely determines the nature and future of student movements.

In the second part, using the theory of patron–client relationship, the current research elucidates the interdependent relationship between student organizations and political parties as clients and patrons, respectively. In a patron–client relationship, the patron provides economic support and protection against the legal and illegal manifestations of authority, whilst the client returns such support in more intangible forms, such as “strong loyalty to the patron” (Kenny, 1962, p. 136), “political support” and “becoming a member of the faction of the client” (Wolf, 1966, p. 17). Furthermore, using the logic of mutual exchange of resources proposed by Schmitter and Streeck (1999), that has been used by Jungblut and Weber (2012), Klemenčič (2012) and Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014) in the context of student political activism in Germany, Europe and Africa respectively, the current research attempts to explain how the patron–client relationship between student organizations and national political parties is maintained through mutual exchange of resources in Nepal.

3. Student Political Activism as the Vanguard of Democracy in Nepal

Students have played an important role throughout Nepal’s political history. They were particularly instrumental in the success of democratic mass movements of 1990 and 2006. The following section of this article analyses the nature of student political activism and their contribution to the establishment of democracy in Nepal by encapsulating in the following two phases: the party-less *Panchayat* regime (1961–1990) and the multi-party democracy and People’s Republic (1991–present).

Table 2. Pattern of student movement in Nepal from 1960 to the present

		Party-less <i>Panchayat</i> regime (1960–1990)	Multi-party democracy and People’s Republic (1990–present)
	Political regime	Absolute monarchy	Multi-party democracy, absolute monarchy, Republic
Origin of student movement	Higher education system; location of institutions	Regulated; capital city and major cities	Less regulated; all major cities, district headquarters and towns
	International diffusion	Chinese cultural revolution, USSR Communism	Peru’s Shining Path Maoists
Characteristics of student activists	Faculty, discipline	Social science, humanities	Social science, humanities
	Family background	High caste, high socio-economic class, middle class	High caste, other castes, high socio-economic class, more middle class
	Ideological background	Democracy, leftism, anti-Indian expansionism, anti-American imperialism	People’s Republic, leftism, anti-Indian expansionism, anti-American imperialism
Characteristics of student organizations/ movements	Movement type	Mostly value-based, less norm-based; oppositional in nature	Mix of value and norm-based; less opposition, more pro-party
	Autonomy; political affiliation	Semi-autonomous; political affiliation began in the 1960s	Subordinate; strong and entrenched political affiliation
	Relation with other social groups	Increase in relation in the 1980s	Strong relation with social groups affiliated to the same political party
Effects of student political activism	Government response	Repress, engage and negotiate	Ignore, engage and negotiate
	Massification of education; higher education enrolment	Privatization began in 1980s; second university established, 110,329 enrolled in 1990	Rapid privatization, 13 new universities established; 441,819 enrolled in 2020

Source: Table prepared by the author by referring to Aspinall and Weiss (2012) and Luescher (2015).

4. Rise of Student Activism During *Panchayat* Regime (1961-1990)

Just a decade after the establishment of democracy in 1951, King *Mahendra* imposed a party-less autocratic rule called *Panchayat* in 1961, effectively banning the activities of all political parties in Nepal. As an exception, and in consideration of the non-partisan nature of student organizations, they were given limited freedom to conduct student activities, including union elections (Weiner, 1973). In 1963, the government succumbed to the strong demand of students to be given the right to establish an Independent Students' Union in every educational institution, which eventually became a launching pad for students' political activities (Baral, 1975). Recognising the political opportunities that opened up at Tribhuvan University and in other colleges, underground political parties established their own student wings through which they sought to conduct political activities pushing for democracy. The Communist Party of Nepal (currently Nepal Communist Party or NCP) established its student wing, the All Nepal National Independent Student Union (ANNISU, formerly known as ANNFSU) in 1965, whilst the Nepali Congress Party (NC) founded the Nepal Student Union (NSU) in 1970. The rise of semi-autonomous political student wings eventually wiped out the non-partisan nature of student political activism.

These student groups expanded their organizations throughout the country and grew so strong that they compelled the king to hold a constitutional referendum in 1980 (Khadka, 1993). In other words, student activism opened an opportunity for the political parties to become a strong voice in the national referendum, in which the people were to choose between the *Panchayat* rule and multi-party democracy. Following the referendum, the *Panchayat* won by a slim margin and continued imposing a ban on political parties. However, in 1990, students and political parties once again led a mass movement to re-establish multi-party democracy. As many political leaders were either arrested before or soon after the movement began, the students were the ones serving in the frontline of the movement (Snellinger, 2005).

At that point, most of the student activists still came from upper castes and higher socio-economic classes. Soon, they were joined by middle-class students and even those from lower castes who participated in student movements. This was partly due to the fact that higher education institutions were located only in large cities and some district headquarters. During the *Panchayat* regime, most student activists belonged to the humanities and social science fields. They also followed the same political ideologies as their mother political parties (Baral, 1975). For example, the ANNFSU was aligned to leftism and frequently made Indian expansionism and American imperialism its opposition targets, whilst the NSU favoured democratic values. Certainly, any changes or conflicts in the mother political parties directly affected the affiliated student organizations as well. When the Communist Party of Nepal split, the ANNFSU also split into pro-Moscow and pro-Peking student wings (Phadnis, 1981). The rising politicization of student organizations illustrated that student activism during this period were primarily guided by value-based principles.

Wary of the oppositional nature of student movement, the regime used repression, engagement and negotiation tactics to crush student political activism. In particular, in 1971, the *Panchayat* attempted to curb student political activism systematically by adopting a new National Education System Plan (NESP), which introduced semester and attendance systems (Bista, 1991; Khadka, 1993), thereby limiting students' time for movement. As part of the new system, students were required to spend a year in less-developed areas of the country before receiving a college degree (Hayes, 1981). However, the programme concomitantly produced a reverse effect, as the student activists utilized this opportunity to raise political awareness amongst villagers and expand their organizational networks nationwide. Furthermore, many communist politicians adopted the profession of teachers and were conducting political activities under the guise of their status as teachers, thus facilitating the rapid growth of the party's student wings in many parts of the country (Hachhethu, 2002).

During the 1990 democratic mass movement, other occupational and professional affiliated organizations of political parties, such as teachers' and professors' associations, bar associations and other social organizations, joined student activists and political parties. Notably, all the student organizations protested jointly during the final hours of the movement, irrespective of their differing political affiliations (Khadka, 1993). Nevertheless, when the time for negotiation arrived, the regime chose to negotiate only with the political parties, overlooking the student activists despite their vanguard role during the mass movement. In turn, the student activists' tacit acquiescence to this way of dealing with the political parties demonstrates their deepening entrenchment into the activities of the political parties.

5. Party Control of Student Activism During Multi-party Democracy

The mass movement of 1990 transformed the country from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democracy (Khadka, 1994). After fighting for nearly three decades, the students' mission had been

accomplished. With their mother political parties in power and the *Panchayat* regime vanquished, student organizations started to search for ways to prove their *raison d'être* in the changed socio-political context. Unsurprisingly, independent student union elections at TU and its affiliated colleges nationwide became a new battleground through which they showcased their popularity and power. They also focused on norm-based activities, such as frequent protests against increased tuition fees, against Indian border encroachment in 1994, a signature campaign against the prince for manslaughter in 2001 and protests against petroleum price hikes in 2003. Nonetheless, when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) started a decade-long civil war in 1996, which was partially inspired by Peru's Shining Path Maoist rebel group, its student wing, the ANNFSU (Revolutionary), began to echo the same politico-ideological demands as its mother party: abolishment of feudal monarchy and establishment of a People's Republic. While the Maoists fought in the jungles, the ANNFSU (R) helped the party spread its political agenda in schools and campuses throughout the country (Pherali, 2013).

Aside from the ANNFSU (Revolutionary), other student organizations also shifted their movements towards value-based orientation after King Gyanendra intervened in the parliamentary system by dismissing the politically elected prime minister in 2002. This event marked the beginning of students' radical movement against the monarch, which intensified in 2005 when the King took over all state power and imposed an absolute monarchy similar to the *Panchayat*. Although student organizations had different political affiliations, all of them—including ANNFSU (Revolutionary)—were united in their fight against the common opponent, the monarch.

In fact, some NSU and ANNFSU student leaders had already started demanding a People's Republic even before their mother political parties dared to do so publicly (Student leader, CCM of NSU, interview with author, 12/10/2020; Student leader, CCM of ANNISU, interview with author, 12/09/2020). Thus, once again, the student organizations were in the vanguard of this third democratic mass movement, eventually compelling the King to reinstate parliament in 2006, which, in turn, decided to abolish the monarchy in 2007. Student organizations and political parties were joined by many other social groups, most of which, like the student wings, were affiliated to the political parties. Meanwhile, major political parties had their own sister organizations similar to student organizations, which encompass virtually every occupation, such as professors, teachers, bureaucrats, peasants, farmers, women and traders. Given that all these sister organizations function under the same umbrella of the mother political party, they support one another during protests and major events.

In response to the students' movements, elected governments largely used engagement and negotiation tactics, while the monarchy ignored and occasionally applied repressive strategies during its four-year reign. At that point, most of the student leaders hailed from the middle and upper classes as well as the higher castes. For example, out of 18 presidents of the NSU since its establishment, 16 of them were from upper castes (*Brahmin* or *Chhetri*), two were from *Vaishya* and none were from *Shudra*, the lowest one. A similar trend can be observed in other student organizations.

Aside from these political wings, various indigenous student organizations also emerged. Just as during the *Panchayat* regime, the majority of student leaders came from the humanities and social science disciplines. The World Bank-led neo-liberal policies became the economic mantra (Regmi, 2017) that accelerated the proliferation of private and public colleges all over the country. Thirteen new universities were established, with 1,407 affiliated colleges nationwide. After the establishment of democracy in 1990, the total enrolment in higher education institutions increased four-fold to 441,819 in 2020 (University Grant Commission, 2020). In contrast to the widely accepted argument that democracy and massification of education decreased student political activism in the Global South (Aspinall & Weiss, 2012), student organizations in Nepal still remain a powerful force.

However, without a clear opponent, the oppositional nature of student organizations eventually waned, particularly after the 2006 mass movement. In other words, student organizations faced an identity crisis, which facilitated their further entrenchment into the political parties—transforming them into 'cadres' of the political parties (Former student leader, currently Provincial Planning Commission member, interview with author, 12/14/2020). In the present context, it is difficult to imagine student organizations opposing government policies when their mother political parties are the ones in power. This implies that they have surrendered whatever remaining autonomy is left into the hands of their mother political parties. At present, even though these student organizations rarely represent the vanguards of change, they remain the largest political organizations in the country. According to their respective leaders, both the ANNISU and the NSU have over one million members to date. The following section elucidates how the nature of the deeply interdependent relationship between student organizations and political parties has given the former the power and the new *raison d'être* after 2006.

6. Interdependent Relationship Between Student Organizations and Political Parties

After 2006, the relationship between student organizations and political parties can be characterized by the continuation of the same trend that has existed since the dawn of the multi-party democracy in 1990. If anything, student organizations have become further entrenched in their affiliated political parties, further deepening their patron–client relationship. Even though the political parties established student organizations, such as the ANNISU and the NSU, to propagate their values and further ideals in the late 1960s (Baral, 1975), the latter have also significantly contributed to the development of these parties throughout history (Hoftun et al., 1999). The establishment of the People’s Republic of Nepal in 2008 finally extinguished the declining oppositional nature of student organizations (Political economy expert, interview with author, 11/24/2020). This can be partly attributed to the transformation of the nature of their relationship with political parties from semi-autonomous to subordinate (Mayor, formerly ANNISU leader, interview with author, 12/14/2020). Thus, from being vanguards of democracy and justice, student organizations have become pawns of the political parties. Student organizations opposing the government are now a thing of the distant past, especially because their mother parties now constitute the government. Consequently, such organizations have lost the trust and faith of students and society altogether (CCM of Bibeksheel Party, interview with author, 12/15/2020). The primary reason for this is the transformation of their mother parties. From being devoted to the party’s ideological goal in the pre-democracy era, they turned into mere “patronage-dispensing parties” wherein the party leaders sought “power, position and privileges as payoff for their struggle and sacrifice” after 1990 (Hachhethu, 2002, 238). Previously, political parties used to routinely train and discipline student wings according to their party ideologies; however, erosion of ideology, intra-party factionalism and lack of internal training have derailed student organizations from their original mission of representing the student community (Former student leader, interview with author, 11/24/2020). Thus, in the absence of a concrete political or educational agenda, student organizations are now deliberately seeking to create their identities by being directly involved in factionalism in their mother parties. Ironically, this further reinforces the patron–client relationship.

Table 3. Major student organizations and their political affiliations

Student Organizations	Political Affiliation	Ideology
ANNISU (<i>Akhil</i>), All Nepal National Free Student Union	Nepal Communist Party (NCP)	Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, Communism
NSU, Nepal Student Union	Nepali Congress (NC)	Social Democracy
Nepal Student Front	<i>Rastriya Janata</i> Party	Regionalism, Social Democracy
Socialist Student Forum (<i>Samajwadi Vidyarthi</i> Forum)	<i>Samajwadi</i> Party	Democratic Socialism, Ethnic Federalism
National Democratic Student Union	National Democratic Party (NDP)	Hindu Nationalism, Constitutional Monarchism
Nepal Revolutionary Student Union	Nepal Peasants and Workers Party	<i>Juche</i> , Scientific Socialism
ANNFSU (ML), All Nepal National Free Student Union-Marxist Leninist	Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist Leninist (CPN-ML)	Far left, Communism, Marxism, Leninism

Source: Table compiled by the author.

The top-down organizational relationship between political parties and partisan student organizations is formally validated by legally binding clauses in their constitutions (All Nepal National Independent Student Union 1965; Nepal Student Union 1970; Nepal Communist Party 2018; Nepali Congress Party 1960). In fact, the constitutions of student organizations were formulated based on the respective constitutions of their mother parties. A closer analysis of the NSU, ANNISU, NC and NCP constitutions demonstrates that student organizations are subordinate organizations of the political parties and were created with the sole purpose of propagating the parties’ political interests in schools, campuses and universities. On the one hand, Article 42, Section 4 of the constitution of the NC states that it can dissolve or re-form any affiliated organizations, including NSU. Furthermore, the constitution strictly instructs affiliated organizations to function in line with the party’s objectives, policies and activities as well as following the instructions of the party unconditionally. On the other hand, the NSU constitution acknowledges the NC as the mother party in Section 3, Article 4 and on Article 38. In fact, any changes in the NSU constitution require the ratification of the mother party. Thus, it is obvious that the NSU is so powerless, given that out of 13 NSU central committees, the NC president has dissolved 11 of them since 1990.

At the same time, the ANNISU and NCP share a similar legal relationship. Article 11, Section 1 of the NCP constitution states that the party has the right to appoint in-charge and deputy in-charge officials of its affiliated organizations, including the ANNISU, and the persons in-charge are required to report to the party on a regular basis. The ANNISU also clearly acknowledges the NCP as its mother party in Article 6, Section 4 of its constitution. Furthermore, several articles and sections in its constitution require the leaders of the ANNISU to read the manifesto of the party, study Marxism and Leninism and follow the party instructions unconditionally. Thus, both the NC and the NCP have kept their respective student wings under absolute control through these legally binding clauses in their constitutions.

It has been pointed out earlier that student organizations serve as a nursery for future leaders of the mother parties (CCM of SSF, interview with author, 11/30/2020; CCM of ANNISU, interview with author, 12/09/2020; CCM of NSU, interview with author, 12/10/2020). These organizations are highly controlled by the central committee members chaired by the president or the chairman, and all the political parties rely heavily on student organizations for party building and cadre recruitment. Furthermore, the central committee members of student organizations are often appointed as personal secretaries of the ministers (DCM of NCP, interview with DCM of NCP, 12/13/2020). The heavy presence of former student leaders in the central committees of both the NC and the NCP is highly apparent. For example, the current president and both vice presidents of the NC had served as presidents of NSU in the past. Likewise, seven ministers of the current NCP government were once ANNISU leaders. This “promotion” can be attributed to the emphasis placed on long party apprenticeship as an eligibility requirement for leadership positions, as stated in the constitutions of both parties. According to the constitutions of student wings, students above Grade 8 are eligible to become members. Previously, there was no age or grade limit to becoming a member of student organizations. As becoming a member of the student wing is equivalent to becoming a member of the mother political party, student leaders obviously have longer party apprenticeship experiences compared to those coming from non-student backgrounds (see Figure 1). During the interview, the CCM of NCP, aged 51 years, proudly claimed that he had contributed to the party for more than 40 years, starting from his political career as a member of ANNISU while he was just 11 years old (Interview with author, 12/18/2020).

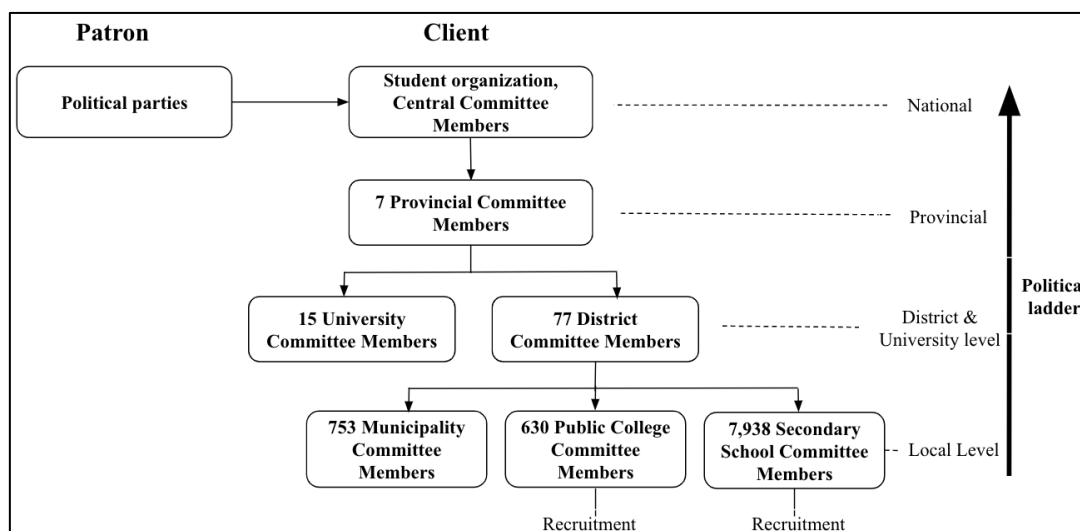


Figure 1. Party-linkage and organizational structure of major student organizations in Nepal

Source: Created by the author based on constitutions of student organizations and political parties.

Student leaders were also elected in local, provincial and even national elections in the last election of 2017. For example, the then ANNISU president became a parliamentarian while she was still a student leader. In this way, student leaders use student organizations as a political ladder to jump into the mainstream party. Therefore, just as in India and some Latin American countries (Altbach, 1984), maintaining one’s status as a student for many years, with the sole aim of consolidating one’s political career, is quite common in Nepal as well. The current president of the NSU, who is 46 years old, started his student political career in 1991. Given that the ultimate goal of student leaders is to become political leaders of their mother parties in the future, which is not possible without the patronage of current factional political leaders (CCM of SSF, interview with author, 11/30/2020; Mayor, formerly ANNISU leader, interview with author, 12/08/2020), they are strongly aligned according to

their patrons' factions. This further solidifies the claim that student organizations in Nepal hardly represent the voices of students at all.

7. Exchange of Resources Between Student Organizations and Political Parties

The mutual exchange of material and non-material resources also plays an indispensable role in maintaining cordial relationships between student organizations and political parties (Luescher-Mamashela, & Mugume 2014). In Nepal, the exchange of resources, both tangible and intangible, occurs mostly between central party leaders and senior student leaders. This is due to the fact that, similar to the political party structure (Hachhethu, 2002), the organizational structure of student wings is also built in such a way that each student member is under a committee, where each lower unit is under its immediate higher unit, and all members and organizations are under the authority of the central committee (All Nepal National Independent Student Union 1965; Nepal Student Union 1970). While the parties provide "ideology" without which student wings will have an existential crisis, the student wings, in turn, help political parties win the elections (CCM of NSU, interview with author, 12/10/2020; CCM of NCP, interview with author, 12/15/2020). Out of over 15 occupational and professional affiliated organizations of each political party, student wings are, by far, the largest ones. Thus, having student wings ensures access to a vast resource of over one million student members from every village and hamlet across the country, who play an instrumental—if not—the decisive roles during local, provincial and national elections (CCM of ANNISU, interview with author, 12/09/2020; Former NSU leader, interview with author, 12/19/2020). Student organizations have a presence in every public secondary school and every public campus, which heightens their efficiency in meticulously executing party instructions and activities nationwide.

In addition to being voters themselves, student political activists lead election campaigns for the candidates of their mother political parties (Pherali, 2013). Political parties also largely depend on their student wings while conducting events, protests or mass movements, as the latter arrange the logistics, advertise political programmes and populate the frontlines during protests (Snellinger, 2005). When asked about the importance of student organizations to political parties, a student leader explained it in this way:

We are the lifeline of the party, because students are the most active and passionate cadres towards party activities. As we carry the party's election manifesto, pamphlets, ideology and policies and publicize them nationwide, winning elections will be extremely difficult without the mobilisation of students. As a matter of fact, our party is organising a nationwide protest against the government next week. The upcoming mass protest will not be effective unless students from every school and campus actively participate. It's not just about the number; students are perceived to be the most elite ones in their villages who have the capacity to persuade local people and make them understand the party ideology. The NSU leaders also play an important role in the selection of party leadership during the party's national conventions. In addition to the five voting rights allocated to the NSU leaders, many student leaders also get selected from the party's district conventions, thereby winning the right to cast votes during the party's national conventions. Moreover, these elite student leaders influence representatives from their respective districts. (CCM of NSU, interview with author, 12/10/2020).

Meanwhile, the top factional leaders of political parties are always looking for strategic ways to gain control over the leadership of student wings through the distribution of patronage (CCM of Bibeksheel Party, interview with author, 12/15/2020). This is most conspicuous during the selection of student leaders through national conventions. Each faction of a party supports its student candidate against the candidates of other factions, and these party leaders do everything in their capacity, including providing monetary support, to ensure that their candidate wins the election (Senior bureaucrat, formerly FSU leader, interview with author, 11/30/2020). One may wonder why party leaders invest so much in student leaders. The political economy expert explained that the reason lies in the party leaders' deep belief that having the youth on their side ensures their own political future, as it signifies their popularity (Interview with author, 11/24/2020). Be it in support of the mother party, especially of the party faction one belongs to or protesting against other political opponents—including international powers at times—student wings are mobilized according to the interests of the party leaders. Recently, the idea of a "Cyber Army" conceptualized by the ANNISU to support its government and counteract those who opposed government policies in social media made national headlines. Student leaders are also often seen in the residences or party offices of their factional leaders. In a nutshell, party leadership expects absolute loyalty from the student leaders, whilst the student leaders leave no stone unturned to ensure that those expectations are met. As argued by Wolf (1966), student leaders have clearly understood that demonstrating such loyalty to party leadership is the gateway to a successful political career in the future. Nonetheless, if the party faction becomes weaker and is unable to provide enough incentive to the student leaders, the latter may switch their loyalty to another more powerful faction within the party, where they can perceive a better political future (Provincial planning commission member, formerly FSU leader, interview with author, 12/14/2020).

Against the backdrop of a patron–client relationship between student leaders and factional political leaders, the exchange of material resources also occurs between student leaders and other stakeholders, namely, businessmen and bureaucrats (Social worker, formerly student leader, interview with author, 11/24/2020). Due to the erosion of ideology, lack of concrete agenda and the inability to represent students' voices, just like their mother parties, student wings also rely on other sources of vote maximisation, such as money, power and patronage, during their national conventions (Senior bureaucrat, formerly FSU leader, interview with author, 11/30/2020). Having come from middle class or lower middle class socio-economic backgrounds, most of the student leaders are in dire need of financial aid to win the elections for key positions. During these times, businessmen step up to support student leaders who have the potential to become future political leaders. For one, their proximity to top political leaders gives student leaders the political power to extract financial resources from business houses (Political economy expert, interview with author, 11/24/2020).

Furthermore, people perceive political parties, especially the ruling party, as part of the state (Hachhethu, 2002). In other words, political parties have their tentacles everywhere, including the bureaucracy that largely operates on the basis of personal connections, bribes or recommendations of persons in power (ibid). By solving complicated legal or financial problems related to the state and by granting projects involving state resources using the political power of their party patron, student leaders help business persons who then return the favour by constantly offering gifts, including cars and houses, to the student leaders (Social worker, formerly student leader, interview with author, 11/24/2020). This is how a nexus amongst student leaders, businessmen and bureaucrats is established, which is further intensified once the student leaders become elected political leaders.

8. Conclusion and Further Work

Despite the establishment of a multi-party democracy in 1990, the massification of education and the large presence of socio-political organizations, student political activism remains strong in Nepal. This article has identified the interdependent relationship between student organizations and political parties as the major cause of this distinct trend. Without a doubt, the contribution of student organizations in establishing democracies throughout the country's history is irreplaceable. However, after the autocratic *Panchayat* regime was vanquished in 1990, the student organizations no longer had any clear purpose to continue political activism. Political parties took this as an opportunity to completely embed student organizations into their party structure (Snellinger, 2005) and began to utilize them as platforms upon which to produce future leaders, conduct party activities and further consolidate political power in universities, public campuses and schools (Dhakal et al., 2019; Gautam et al., 2019). The legally binding relationship between student organizations and political parties is maintained and constantly reinforced through the “mutual exchange” of material and non-material resources. As political parties are largely perceived to be part of the state (Hachhethu, 2002), formal affiliation to the parties has given student organizations a new *raison d'être*, which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Experts on higher education in Nepal assert that the patron–client relationship between student organizations and political parties is “retarding the whole education system” (Misra, 2003, 143). Future works may investigate how the all-encompassing political nature of student organizations influences the quality of education and university governance.

Notes on contributor

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