Social movements
and inclusive peace
in Nepal

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Over the last two decades, a number of collective actions by different social groups have given rise to social movements as significant forces in the Nepali socio-political landscape. In their efforts to influence a new future for the country, these movements have explicitly challenged the prevalent political power structure in Nepal that has been dominated largely by males belonging to a section of the hill Bahun and Chhetri (‘high caste’) groups, while also contesting the imposition of symbols, rituals and meanings that legitimise inequality in the country.

Four major mobilisations have made significant strides in rallying their constituents to attract the attention of the state: by women; by Dalits (‘low caste’); by Madhesis (from the southern Tarai plains); and by Adivasi Janajati (indigenous peoples). Other social movements have protested against specific issues of injustice and discrimination, including anti-slavery movements opposing various forms of bonded labour – kamaiya, kamlahari and haliya – and the peasants’ movement led by landless farmers. More recent examples of mobilisation have reacted to and resisted inclusive change. These latter instances reflect an attempt to reassert the dominant ideology and institutions, and include the identity movement associated with the Khas Arya (‘upper caste’ Hindu groups with origins in the hills – see below), the pro-monarchy movement, and the ultra-nationalist movement.

The Second People’s Movement of 2006 heralded important changes in Nepal, particularly the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) later that year agreed between the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) of political parties, and the promulgation of an Interim Constitution in 2007. Nepali political parties agreed to the restructuring of the state and to electing a representative Constituent Assembly that would write a new constitution. Mobilisation by marginalised social groups was elemental in introducing issues pertinent to their respective interests in both the CPA and the Interim Constitution, including in relation to proportional inclusion in state structures.

This article outlines the evolution of the four major social movements mentioned above: their key agendas and strategies that led up to the 2006 People’s Movement and beyond; their successes and failures; the fissures among the different movements; and the challenges they face. The social movements’ calls for equality, justice and inclusion have had a positive role in deepening democracy and inclusive peace in Nepal, but there remains work to be done to prevent a slide back into acrimonious division.
Evolving social movements – agendas and strategies

Janajatis, Dalits, Madhesis and women have led the current wave of social movements. These groups participated in the First People’s Movement of 1990 that brought about the reinstatement of democracy and opened up space for organised collective action. Prior to that, when the autocratic monarchy was firmly in power and was severely suppressing dissent, social movements had been disparate. But after 1990, the articulation of their agendas against long-standing grievances and their mechanisms of mobilisation became more robust. Mainstream political parties at that time remained largely oblivious to the growing aspirations of these movements or viewed them as peripheral. They were focused primarily on regime change and opening up space for party politics, using the rhetoric of class liberation and development. The parties saw issues of language, gender, caste and ethnic equality as secondary and believed that social equilibrium would come automatically with modernisation.

Nevertheless, social movements in the 1990s were pioneering in transforming Nepal’s public debate and raised issues fundamental to deepening democracy: social and economic inequality, linguistic and cultural rights, secularism, caste- and ethnicity-based discrimination, and recognition of diversity and identity. The first victory of social mobilisation could be seen in the recognition of Nepal as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country in the 1990 Constitution. But despite this, the actual materialisation of the principle of diversity remained disappointing. The Janajati and Madhesi movements, therefore, demanded the federal restructuring of the state as a counter to centralisation and a guarantee of regional autonomy.

Strategies adopted by social movements over the past 25 years have gone from gentle pleading to nationwide strikes and acts of outright rebellion. While the different social groups share a common narrative and collective memory of marginalisation, their distinctive experiences and relationships with the state have translated into unique trajectories of resistance. The priorities, commonalities, variations, alliances as well as cleavages among different social movements are best understood in their respective historical contexts.

Women’s movement: gender equality and inclusion

The women’s movement began in earnest from the 1950s alongside the wider political push for democracy. It has now expanded to include a larger section of women and a broad-based agenda of gender equality and social inclusion. Over time it has also incorporated a sharper analysis of the persistent patriarchy in Nepal, as well as the intersection of differentiated experiences of women belonging to historically marginalised communities.

The first attempts at resistance by women go back as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. The Nari Samiti [Women’s Committee] was formed in 1918 by the social reformer and religious ascetic, Yogmaya, is believed to have played a crucial role in the abolition in 1920 of sati – the tradition of Hindu women being burnt alive on the funeral pyre with their dead husbands. Yogmaya also advocated the abolition of untouchability.

Political parties established in the 1940s to fight against the autocratic Rana rule set up women’s wings and, although women’s participation in the parties remained largely nominal, their involvement in political struggle marked an important threshold. The big victory of voting rights for women was achieved in 1951, but these organisations also raised other important issues such as the right to education for girls, the end of child marriage and polygamy, and freedom for widows to remarry.

Like all movements, the women’s movement during the partyless Panchayat period remained tightly controlled. Many women leaders were simply co-opted by the state-sponsored All Nepal Women’s Organisation. After the 1990 political change, the women’s movement became divided along political lines. Also, practically all the women’s wings of the political parties and other state-supported women’s organisations were led by the wives and relatives of powerful politicians and bureaucrats, and predictably represented the ’upper-caste’ elites of Nepali society.

The work of women scholars and professionals nevertheless contributed substantially to raising the profile of the situation of Nepali women and the need for changes in government policies and programmes. The milestone 1981 study by Meena Acharya and Lynn Bennett, The Status of Women in Nepal, provided first-hand information on the role and status of women in households and society for developmental planning.

The availability of foreign funding led to the proliferation of NGOs after 1990, and, notwithstanding all the associated strengths and weaknesses, this external support became an important part of women’s mobilisation. Women’s groups were formed, and income-generating activities and awareness-raising were extended even to remote corners of the country. NGO activities also fostered research on and media advocacy for the rights of women.

Nepal ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
in 1992 without reservation, marking a landmark for women’s rights in Nepal. Increased engagement with the international human rights community helped to legitimise and expand the horizons of campaigning for women’s rights. The adoption of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was significant for both state and non-state actors. The subsequent UN mechanism for periodic review of CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration proved to be an important way of keeping up the momentum of the movement as well as monitoring progress on the promises made for promoting women’s empowerment.

The involvement of a substantial number of young women from rural Nepal in the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist’s (CPN-M) ‘People’s War’ was another significant point in the history of women’s mobilisation. Many Janajati and Dalit women joined the war in the hope of emancipation from gender-based oppression, but they were also attracted by the agenda of ethnic equality, the end of untouchability, linguistic and cultural rights and equal access to education, employment and development choices. Women’s participation in the Maoist movement helped alter the conventional view about Nepali women as lacking capacity to speak and fight for themselves [see interview with Lila Sharma on p.52].

Nepal’s women’s movement faces challenges, however, such as how to accommodate heterogeneity among women in terms of caste, ethnicity, culture and regions, and the different impact women’s social backgrounds have on their lives and prospects. For example, only recently has there been growing recognition of the fact that Dalit, Madhesi and Janajati women suffer from patriarchy as well as these other forms of discrimination arising out of their identity.

Adivasi Janajati movements: from anti-imperialism to self-determination

Adivasi Janajati, or ‘indigenous nationalities’, are also referred to as ethnic groups in Nepal and comprise around 40 per cent of the total population of the country. Mobilisation by Janajatis can be divided chronologically into four major stages of resistance along the timeline of state formation. The first anti-state movements by various Janajati groups came in response to the expansion of the Gorkha Empire from the mid-18th century, which used the land of native communities as grants to reward and support its political leaders and soldiers. Three attempts at rebellions around the turn of the 19th century can be seen as prototypes of Janajati social movements – to resist appropriation of their land but also to reclaim autonomy.

The second stage was during the Rana period up to the early 1950s, when, despite the brutality of the regime in suppressing any form of opposition, isolated incidents of rebellion by Janajatis often led by charismatic millenarianist leaders can be considered expressions of freedom from domination.
The third phase of resistance was during the autocratic Shah monarchy in the latter half of the 20th century. The Panchayat system introduced by King Mahendra in 1960 not only suppressed alternative voices but also proactively pushed the notion of homogenisation for the sake of ‘national unity’. Janajatis, like other groups, were expected to assimilate into the political and social mainstream, and to internalise the culture, religion, language and ethos of dominant groups in order to become ‘Nepali’.

The nature of the regime meant that resistance by different Janajati groups became clandestine. Many of their activities on political and cultural rights were disguised in the form of cultural celebration, religious service or underground political organising. Resistance was mostly framed in a vocabulary acceptable to the authorities. Paradoxically, despite its promotion of ‘Nepaliness’, the Panchayat system also recognised cultural diversity through its promotion of the notion of Nepal as a ‘garden of all castes’, and through state-sponsored cultural programmes that celebrated songs, dance and music of different ethnic communities. Janajati activists often disguised their movement under this ‘garden’ rubric, and several Janajati organisations were established during this period to ostensibly provide social services to their respective constituencies.

The fourth stage began with the restoration of democracy in 1990. Janajati leaders and activists played an important role in the 1990 People’s Movement. The Nepal Federation of Nationalities, later renamed the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), was established in 1991 and brought together various Janajati organisations under one umbrella. The pre-1990 movements had been sporadic and restricted to specific ethnic groups, and so NEFIN opened up the possibility of a pan-Janajati solidarity. NEFIN was also instrumental in defining various indigenous peoples. And, in 2001, 59 groups were codified as Adivasi/Janajati by the Act to set up the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities.

Between 1990 and 2006, the Janajati movement demanded recognition, reparation and justice for inequality and discrimination based on caste and ethnicity while also calling for more proportionate representation. The movement further campaigned for the right to self-determination for Janajatis. Activists used meetings, seminars, workshops, rallies, demonstrations, and research and writing to engage their rural constituencies as well as the government. They also became part of international networks such as the Asian Indigenous People’s Pact and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
Dalit movement: from fighting untouchability to dissolution of the whole caste system

Dalit refers to the part of the population that had been categorised as ‘low-caste untouchables’ in Nepal. Dalits make up about 13 per cent of the total population. In the late 1930s various protests were organised against the practice of untouchability. These were mostly localised events and did not gain much traction nationally. Dalit mobilisation took a different turn following the advent of democracy in 1951, with an especially significant episode in 1954 when more than 1,000 Dalit men and women tried to enter the famous Pashupati Temple in Kathmandu. The government tried to suppress the demonstration and 750 protesters were arrested, including more than 400 women. But after three months of campaigning, the government agreed to remove the notice at the entrance of the temple that declared: ‘No Entry for Untouchables’. The term ‘Dalit’ (‘oppressed’), having been used for the first time in Nepal during the Pashupati temple mobilisation, gradually gave rise to a unified Dalit movement in the country.

Dalit students organised against the Panchayat system and submitted suggestions to the 1975 Constitution Reform Commission, that the practice of untouchability be outlawed and that Dalits be given quotas in education and jobs. But the Dalit movement generally achieved greater leverage in eliminating untouchability through attempts to enter Hindu temples, demanding access to drinking water taps and springs, and organising feasts that included different caste groups.

New strategies of mobilisation emerged after the reintroduction of democracy in 1990, particularly through the establishment of a number of Dalit NGOs. These looked beyond untouchability to encompass broader economic and political aspirations, such as the right to land, access to employment, quotas in education and the civil service, and, above all, the right to dignity. Many Dalit activists saw the perpetuation of state-sponsored Hinduism as a key cause of their continued subjugation, and joined the movement to demand secularism and religious freedom.

With the remarkably high participation of Dalit youths in the Maoist movement, the Dalit agenda spread to the remotest corners of the country. Backed by the Maoists with their call for an egalitarian society, atrocities based on untouchability were radically challenged in a way never previously experienced in Nepal. Although tangible positive change remained negligible in the post-1990 era, the broader agenda of Dalit emancipation was still encouraging in terms of raising Dalit awareness and the strong articulation of Dalit concerns: socio-economic equality, political participation and religious freedom; and the healing of past wounds caused by centuries of oppression in the name of untouchability.

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Madhes uprising: for autonomy and dignity

‘Madhesi’ is the term used to refer to people with origins in the region of Madhes or Tarai, the southern plains of Nepal. More specifically it connotes the people from the plains who are under the fold of the Hindu caste system, but in a broader sense it also encompasses Tarai Janajatis, Muslims (almost all of whom live in the Tarai) and other linguistic minorities in the region. Madhesis have endured persistent and deep discrimination in the history of modern Nepal.

Although the Tarai has geographically been a very important part of imagining the Nepali state as a bounded entity, Madhesis have often been stereotyped as alien and inferior. More dominant groups refer to Madhesis through terms intended to be derogatory such as ‘dhoti’, ‘bhaiya’, ‘Indians’, or simply ‘non-Nepali’. Dhoti is a garment worn by male Hindus in Northern India and southern parts of Nepal, consisting of strip of cloth tied around the waist and extending to cover most of the legs. It is used in Nepal as marker of ‘othering’ Madhesi. Bhaiya is a Hindi word which means ‘brother’ but is now considered derogatory since it is used to symbolise Indianess. Madhesi appeals for rights, including full recognition as Nepalis, are often labelled as ‘secessionist’, as provoking ‘communal
conflict’, or as instigated by India, all of which serve as pretexts to dismiss Madhesis’ grievances.

Little is known about historical Madhesi resistance movements, but Madhesis have been at the forefront of political mobilisations since the 1940s. The history of the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) shows that a good number of Madhesi activists and cadres joined the struggle for democratic change. The first organised platform specifically for the Terai, however, was the founding Nepal Terai Congress in 1951. The demands of the Terai Congress included an autonomous Terai region, the use of Hindi as an official language, and the inclusion of Madhesis in the civil service. The movement did not gain much ground and fizzled out following the takeover by the king in 1960, with the founder of the Terai Congress entering the Panchayat system.

Two incidents that took place in the Terai in the 1960s help in understanding Madhesi resistance against the state today. The first followed the seemingly progressive land reforms introduced in 1964. These were in fact detrimental to poor farmers in the Terai, since land that exceeded the stated maximum area was transferred to new cultivator-owners, including migrants from the hills, and many of the new owners evicted existing tenants who had been cultivating the land for a living. In September 1966, a crowd of around 4,000 protested against government officials in the headquarters of Nawalparasi district in central Terai. Nine people were killed in the government crackdown.

The second incident took place in 1969 in the districts of Kapilvastu and Rupandehi to the immediate west of Nawalparasi. The government had introduced a compulsory saving scheme, according to which each farmer was required to deposit a portion of their harvest with the government every year to be loaned back to the community. Although the government had promised to return the savings with interest at the end of five years, for subsistence farmers the proposed saving was simply another form of taxation as they did not believe that the grains would be returned. Violent protests erupted in the two districts for three weeks, and 23 people were killed by government gunfire in villages.

During the Panchayat era two politicians kept the Madhes movement alive. Ram Raja Prasad Singh upheld the Madhesi cause while also advocating Nepal’s transformation into a republic. In 1983, Gajendra Narayan left the Nepali Congress, a party he had been part of since the late 1940s, advocating autonomy for the Terai and recognition of the Hindi language, and formed the seemingly apolitical Nepal Sadbhavana Parsihad (Nepal Goodwill Council). After 1990, the organisation transformed into a political party called the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Nepal Goodwill Party). Although its electoral success was limited (gaining a maximum of four per cent of the popular vote and six seats in the 205-member House of Representatives in 1991), the party represented Madhesi aspirations throughout the 1990s and was part of various coalition governments.

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As with all other movements, a major agenda of Madhesis was claiming both identity and dignity. Madhesis’ participation in various movements boosted their collective confidence to resist state discrimination, including the 1990 People’s Movement and the ‘People’s War’, and various other civic movements. In 2006, wall paintings started appearing on the main streets of Kathmandu, declaring: ‘Speak with pride that you are Madhesi: not a foreign fugitive, but a son of the soil.’ With such campaigns, activists were able to finally establish Madhesis as a legitimate politico-cultural category that needed serious attention from the state.

Post-2006 struggle for a constitutional guarantee of inclusion

The 2006 second People’s Movement was a landmark event in terms of bringing all forms of social and political movements together, and demanding an end both to the violence wrought by the Maoist war and also to the
autocratic rule of the king. The CPA and the Interim Constitution affirmed commitments to multiculturalism, declaring that the state would be restructured in order to end all forms of discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, gender and region.

A number of legal provisions were enacted around this time to reflect the state’s commitment to inclusion. The most significant of these was the Act to Amend Some Nepal Acts for Maintaining Gender Equality, 2006, which resulted in 56 changes to discriminatory provisions in Nepal’s legal regime with regard to gender. It also led to other progressive steps such as granting statutory status to the National Women’s Commission and the enactment of the Nepal Citizenship Act, 2006, considered the most liberal among the country’s citizenship laws thus far, in granting equal rights to both mother and father to pass on citizenship to their children.

The Election to Members of the Constituent Assembly Act, 2007, laid out procedures to make the Constituent Assembly more inclusive. Likewise, the Civil Service Act was also amended to set aside 15 per cent of all seats to women, 12 per cent to Janajatis, 10 per cent to Madhesis and four per cent to Dalits – along with two per cent for the disabled and two per cent for 10 districts identified as ‘backward’.

Similarly, in September 2007 in a highly symbolic move, Nepal voted to adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The very next day it ratified the International Labour Organisation’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), which not only acceded to a long-standing Janajati demand but also made Nepal only the 20th country and the only one from Asia to do so thus far. Further major achievements included: for women, the Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act in 2009, and for Dalits, the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2011.

These developments did not unfold smoothly, however. A spontaneous uprising took place in the Tarai soon after the adoption of the Interim Constitution in January 2007, protesting its failure to recognise some of the main Madhesi demands – regional autonomy and federalisation. Tens of thousands of people joined this First Madhes Movement and a general strike was enforced. Markets, educational institutions and industries in the regions were shut down and the highway linking India and Kathmandu valley was closed for several days. Clashes between protestors and government security forces took place across towns in the Tarai region, and more than 40 people were killed in incidents related to the uprising.

The 21-day-long movement came to an end after Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala provided assurances that the Interim Constitution would be amended to federalise the state. Accordingly, the first amendment of the Interim Constitution in April 2007 inserted ‘federal’ in Article 138.1, which dealt with the Progressive Restructuring of the State: ‘To bring an end to discrimination based on class, caste, language, gender, culture, religion and region by eliminating the centralised and unitary form of the state, the state shall be made inclusive and restructured into a progressive, democratic federal system’.

This constitutional undertaking to federate Nepal was a remarkable victory for the social movements led by the country’s marginalised communities. The Madhes Movement of 2007 can be credited with ensuring federalisation, the demand for which, along with regional autonomy, also has a long and shared history with the Janajati movement. The desire for autonomy encompasses several other aspirations besides decision-making at the political level. Both Madhesis and Janajatis expected the restructuring of the state to allow them the use of their languages in local administration, the courts and schools, education, increased representation in the administration, and the opportunity to preserve and promote their culture. The desire for political and cultural autonomy is captured by one of the enduring slogans of the Madhes Movement:  

\[ \text{Apana prant, apna shasan, apni sanskriti, apna prashasan} \]
\[ \text{Apna police, apna nyayalaya, apni bhasa me apni bidyalaya} \]
\[ \text{(Our province, our rule, our culture, our administration} \]
\[ \text{Our police, our court, education in our language in our schools)} \]

Identity groups’ agreements and strategies for inclusive change

All of the movements in Nepal, including the women’s movement, adopted inclusion as a common agenda, and separate agreements reached with the state by respective social movements negotiated inclusive policies for all marginalised groups. For instance, the agreement reached with two Janajati groups in August 2007 stated that a ‘fully representative task-force will be formed immediately to conduct a study in order to ensure inclusive participation and proportional representation of all castes, ethnicities, groups, communities, genders and regions in all bodies and levels of the state’.

It enjoined upon the government to ‘make a serious effort to reach an agreement for addressing the demands of various groups and communities, including Madhesis, women and Dalits through talks and discussions with the respective groups’.
Likewise, the first Madhes Movement led to an agreement later that month that committed to ensuring ‘balanced proportional representation and partnership of Madhesis, Janajatis, Dalits, women, backward classes, disabled people, minority communities and Muslims who have been excluded for generations, in all organs and levels of government and in power structures, mechanisms and resources’. The agreement following the Second Madhes Movement in February 2008 was instrumental in getting the government’s agreement on ensuring ‘inclusive proportional representation of Madhesis, indigenous nationalities, women, Dalits, [people from] backward regions and minority communities in all state bodies’.

The March 2009 agreement with the Samyukta Muslim Rastriya Sangharsha Samiti (United Muslim National Struggle Committee) stated that the ‘Government of Nepal shall take necessary initiative to ensure political, economic, social, cultural and educational rights of all Adivasi, Janajati, Madhesi, Tharu, Dalit and minority communities of the country, including Muslims’.

In terms of mobilisation strategy, the Madhes movement has stood out as having been able to muster mass rallies and instigate strikes, whereas the Janajati and Dalit movements did not resort to mass demonstrations as their primary mode of protest. The Madhes movements also forced engagement by established Madhesi leaders in the mainstream political parties. A number of these joined the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (Madhesi People’s Rights Forum), which had been instrumental in the First Madhes Movement. Other leaders quit their parties to form the

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Tarai-Madhes Loktantrik Party. Janajatis had made attempts to form political parties since the 1980s but there have been very few examples of ranking leaders quitting their mother parties to start something new. A notable exception was in 2012 when senior leaders from both

the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal–United Marxist-Leninist (UML) left their parties to establish the Federal Socialist Party, which would cater specifically to Janajati concerns.

Women, Dalit and Janajati movements also used other means to advance their rights, including activities by NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and caste, ethnic and other civil society organisations. Madhesis tended not to use such tactics, although lately, as their movement has matured and the struggle has been carried out in multiple fronts, similar organisations have emerged calling for the rights of Madhesis as well.

With the election of the first Constituent Assembly (CA) in April 2008 and the beginning of the arduous journey of constitution drafting, the whole focus of all the social movements turned to ensuring their rights in the new constitution. The issue of inclusion was the primary area where the different movements were able to speak with one voice. Women CA members from different political parties came together as a caucus and, working in concert with women’s activists and professionals, campaigned for issues such as non-discrimination on the basis of gender, equal citizenship rights and fulfilling commitments under various international instruments that Nepal is party to.

The Janajati movement called for restructuring of the state to include identity-based federalism that would recognise people’s history and autonomy, as well as respect for collective rights and rights over land and natural resources. CA members from Janajati communities also came together in an informal caucus that cut across party lines and proved effective in pressuring the political parties. In the run-up to the termination of the first CA in May 2012, following days of unrest, Janajati CA members managed to get government agreement on identity-based federalism. But the agreement fizzled out with the end of the first CA, and Janajatis were never able to build the same momentum in the second CA, while the caucus did not materialise either [see article on the constitutional process, p.59].

Dalit CA members were equally active in the first CA, alongside the struggle carried out by Dalit activists and organisations outside the CA, around three key issues: ending the practice of untouchability in both public and private spheres; ensuring representation of Dalits in federal, provincial and local level bodies; and including Dalits in the private and semi- or non-government sectors as well. However, Dalits, were never able to exert the same kind of pressure as Madhesis and Janajatis.

As the term of the first CA was coming to an end with agreement on a constitution not yet in sight, 416 CA
members from different marginalised groups launched a signature campaign in an attempt to force a vote. But the leaders of major political parties could still not agree either on a constitution or on voting for it.

**Conservative pushback and intra-identity group splits**

The period from the dissolution of the first CA, the election of the second CA, and the promulgation of the new constitution in September 2015 has been characterised by a strong conservative backlash. The conservative forces, which include royalists, sections of the traditional elite, and top leaders of the NC, UML and CPN-MC, have denounced the agenda of change and aggressively pursued the maintenance of the status quo. This has included the assertion by the dominant group of its own identity – terming themselves the ‘Khas Arya’, this counter-movement has adopted the rhetoric of ultra-nationalism and signalled an intolerance towards diversity and the spirit of inclusion.

“A significant section of the mainstream media, which is also largely controlled by ‘upper caste’ hill communities, has also come out openly in support of the status quo and succeeded in presenting a distorted picture of the social movements and their demands. Recognition of identity, a cornerstone of Dalit, Madhesi and Janajati demands, has been presented as a divisive agenda that promotes national disintegration or ethnic conflict. The demand for equal citizenship rights for women has been characterised as the recipe for mass immigration of Indians into Nepal. Fears that commitments to inclusion would be further diluted induced the Tarai-origin communities to forcefully denounce the promulgation of the new constitution, and protests by Madhesis and Tharus (a Janajati group spread across the Tarai) lasted months from August 2015 and resulted in the deaths of 50 people.

It is not surprising that existing elites would resist sharing power, but their success in denying change can partly be attributed to the social movements’ own shortcomings. Specifically, the social movements failed to persuade and educate political parties and a wider section of Nepali society of the need to create equality and dignity for all, with failure resulting largely from the lack of a workable alliance among them. Each movement focused on its own priorities rather than identifying a point of convergence to carry out a united struggle. Janajatis were preoccupied with issues of culture, identity and the right to self-determination. Madhesi focused on regional autonomy. Women and Dalit stressed gender equality and the removal of untouchability.

Indeed, there were conspicuous cleavages among the different movements. Dalits and women did not support identity-based federalism and autonomy, and even expressed outright reservations. Similarly, Janajatis, Dalits and women from the hills did not show solidarity with Madhesis from the plains; Madhesis were generally blind to concerns of Dalits and women, and also tended to view all hill-origin groups as a homogenous category of oppressors.

There were also splits within individual social movements. Women, Dalits, Madhesi and Janajatis are not uniform but consist of multiple cross-cutting strands defined by political ideology and internal hierarchies. Sub-groups have associated with different political parties, while leaders from each movement have been co-opted by the political mainstream. Despite decades of organisation and mobilisation, the women’s movement is still effectively in its infancy in dealing with the intersectional questions relating to Dalit, Madhesi, Muslim and Janajati women. Dalits are divided according to their provenance: between the hills and the Tarai plains, but also by their own internal caste hierarchy. Janajatis are also divided into hill and Tarai communities and the highly affluent Newar, as well as among larger and smaller population sizes. Madhesis are divided along the caste hierarchy, including Tarai Dalits, and Tarai Janajati and Muslim groups sometimes prefer to forge an identity independent of Madhesis.

**Conclusion**

Collective action by historically excluded groups in Nepal has been an important force in advocating innovative and fundamental democratic change. The social movements of Dalits, Madhesi, Janajatis, women and others have evolved with and for democracy, seeking to transform
the existing social order in relation to the ideology of caste and ethnic hierarchy, discriminatory values, and prejudices towards marginalised communities and women.

A salient feature of the social movements in Nepal is that all have aspired to reconfigure the state to better reflect the country’s socio-cultural diversity and to provide for equality in its legal framework, policies and practices. This distinguishes Nepali social movements from ethno-nationalist groups that aim for secession or from political movements that try to come to power.

Over the last quarter of a century, Nepal’s social movements have contributed to bringing substantial changes in society. Their different histories mean that each has had a relatively isolated evolution with their own priorities and strategies. All have faced individual failures, and they have not managed to build an effective alliance among themselves. Nevertheless, they have been able to rally collectively around the agenda of inclusive change and have helped to force it onto the national agenda. The contribution of social movements is reflected in the preamble to the 2015 Constitution, which recognises:

the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and diverse regional characteristics, resolving to build an egalitarian society founded on the proportional inclusive and participatory principles in order to ensure economic equality, prosperity and social justice, by eliminating discrimination based on class, caste, region, language, religion and gender and all forms of caste-based untouchability...

The social movements still face grave challenges, the most serious of which is the current upsurge of conservative resistance to inclusion and equality. But, if the agenda of inclusion is rejected or watered down to the level that it loses its true meaning, the continuation of exclusion and discrimination risks pushing Nepal towards a new round of violent conflict.

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