

The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins

by Susan Hangen.

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Reviewed by Amanda Snellinger

On 28 May 2012 the prime minister of Nepal dissolved the Constituent Assembly (CA). His actions were in response to the Supreme Court ruling that overruled a fifth postponement of the CA deadline. The main obstacle that kept the CA from completing a constitutional draft was how to organise the federal state structure. Consensus had become impossible. The two major political parties of the 1990s, Congress and United Marxist Leninist (UML), could not bring themselves to support the ethnic federal structure agreed upon by the Maoist party, the Janajati CA caucus, and indigenous groups. The way the dissolution of the CA unfolded demonstrates the status quo attitudes prevailing in organised politics. This development has caused many to wonder wistfully if it could have been otherwise. What if ethnic parties were able to institute themselves in mainstream party politics in the 1990s? Would this have sustained the momentum to actualise ethnic federalism?

Susan Hangen's book provides an interesting perspective from which to consider these questions. It focuses on one of the three ethnic political parties that participated in elections during the 1990s, the Mongol National Organization (MNO). It provides an overview of how indigenous activism unfolded in the post-1990 democratic era and why more indigenous people's organisations (IPO) did not transition into organised party politics. Her analytic focus is on a party that never succeeded in party politics beyond a few districts in Ilam (East Nepal), and why this was the case. The MNO's choice to work within national politics was unorthodox because under Article 112(3) of the 1990 constitution, the Election Commission barred registration of parties formed on the basis of communal identity (Hangen 2010: 44). Therefore, the MNO struggled for Mongols' rights in party politics without official status. Rather, their candidates ran as independents without a permanent party symbol on

election ballots. Despite the MNO's grim position, Hangen believes the ethnicisation of politics to be productive. She pushes back against the dominant literature critical of ethnic politics, contending that ethnic parties allow citizens to assert a particular subjectivity in political practice, making it personal. In Nepal, ethnic activism has forced the state to deal with the heterogeneity of its citizens.

Hangen's support for ethnic activism is in part a result of her empirical focus: democracy in the margins. In order to grasp how democratisation occurs in practice, we must look beyond democratic ideals to the disjunctures in the system, how people perceive them, and in turn how they shape political action. This, Hangen argues, is best understood by focusing on where ordinary citizens find space to engage with politics. The MNO presents an ideal case study. Its stronghold was based in a few districts in rural Ilam rather than the political centre of Kathmandu and other urban areas. This is perhaps Hangen's main contribution to the existing literature. She provides a detailed ethnographic view of organised politics in rural Nepal during the 1990 post-democratic period. The existing political literature tends to be quantitative political science or focuses on the impacts of Maoist politics in the countryside. Hangen alternatively looks at how villagers in eastern Nepal negotiated the opening up of democratic space in which ex-Panchayat actors, underground Congress and communist activists, and new ethnic activists transitioned into multi-party politics. Her analysis demonstrates the impact this rural democratisation had on the local social landscape, as well as its roles in religious change such as the boycotting of Dasain and Gurung communities' return to Buddhist traditions. What emerges from her analysis is a complex agonistic dynamic in democracy; a dynamic in which people are experimenting with the opening of political space, yet are deeply ambivalent about how to integrate this new freedom into everyday village sociality.

What counts as organised democratic practice in rural Ilam differs from urban spaces in Nepal. There are no bandhs, chakka jams, or political declarations made through press releases to the media since there is no commerce or traffic to interrupt and no media observing the MNO's political agenda. Rather, the MNO party actors built their support by walking from village to village, politically educating villagers, organising mass assembly programs, and maintaining local political networks. This

approach was by no means efficient, and only minimally effective. Hangen notes that the party was fuelled by the charisma of its top two leaders, Gopal Gurung (the party founder and president) and Kiran Atkin, (the head of the Central Assembly), who provided few directives while discouraging autonomy. Local party organisers expressed a desire to conduct more robust party activity but did not know how to do so without guidance from the leadership. Hangen's main argument regarding party organisation is that the MNO's choice to do oppositional politics in organised politics positioned them between a political party and social movement. She engages with social movements literature, particularly from Latin America, to prove this point. However, it would have been beneficial if she had engaged more substantively with the literature on party organisation and practice in Nepal. Doing so would have allowed her to draw comparisons with disjunctures in other parties. For example, comparative analysis with work on the personalisation of politics in political organisations would have provided a perspective on the degree to which personality and ideology dictate party discipline and organisational consistency (Hachhethu 2002, 2006; Gellner & Karki 2008; Snellinger 2010). Furthermore, the intertwining of social movements and party politics is not an uncommon trend in Nepali politics. As I have argued, the historical struggle for multiple party democracy through the *andolan* has imbued party politics with a social movement agenda and activists consider their political activities to be social service (Snellinger 2007). Had Hangen connected her empirical data to the existing literature, she could have provided a more robust commentary on trends of democratic disjuncture in 1990s multiparty democracy that could have elucidated reasons for its erosion in the early 2000s and the compulsion to fight for its return in 2002-2006. Despite not having done this, her analysis of the MNO's disjunctive practice is a great source for others to do such comparative analysis.

The way the MNO focused on identity difference also made their politics marginal. In Nepal, identity politics revolves around caste and ethnicity. Hangen provides a wonderful background on this history and its development through the democratic era. She categorises the MNO as an Indigenous People's Organisation (IPO); however, its approach was quite different from that of other janajati organisations. The MNO focused on racial categories, positioning itself to represent the Mongol race against the high-caste Hindu state. The MNO focused on the shared

blood and biological relation of Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus. Hangen's analytical approach to ethnicity very much reflects a Barthesian theoretical understanding that distinct groups do not emerge because of any innate difference, but rather, cultural differences become markers of group identity within a shared political and social circumstance. The MNO chose to focus on racial difference. They produced their political culture in the form of cultural artefacts like songs, calendars, and festival practices that they used to reinforce their distinct identity as Mongols. For the most part, Hangen takes the MNO's racial position as a pan-indigenous approach that makes particularly quirky racial claims. Her analysis is fitting for Nepal's context and the debates in which the MNO found itself immersed. However, it would have been interesting if she had pushed deeper into their racial claims. The reader does not get a sense of whether Gopal Gurung or his party's supporters understand the history of race in the west and colonisation. Were they aware that racial categorisation has created similar histories of marginalisation that caste and ethnic discrimination have? I would have liked to better understand why the MNO chose racial distinctions over ethnicity, beyond Hangen's assertion that they opted for the modern universal, scientific categories of difference rather than local ones embraced by the state (p. 55). Was this a purely strategic choice meant to resonate with global indigenous movements or a unique approach to pan-indigeneity in Nepal? Since this is not engaged with, we do not know whether the MNO understood the potential dangers that racialising can take, and how it could have left their politics vulnerable to the Balkanising critique of identity politics. If they made their choice despite these risks, does this mean they had some faith in the durability of the Nepali state, believing that its unity could survive despite its citizenry being racially distinguished in politics? This is ethnographically interesting because it allows us to grapple with the productive and agonistic dynamics that identity politics insert into democratic process.

Rather than focusing on the dangerous implications of their racialising approach, Hangen instead focuses on the difficulty that the MNO faced in trying to embrace a culturally heterogeneous representation of its constituency. In chapter five she analyses the production of material culture such as MNO party calendars, songs, and holidays. What her analysis demonstrates is that in their struggle to be inclusive, they must

make choices that pull them away from specific identity markers. For instance, should they rely on Nepali or English as the lingua franca to avoid favouring one of their own languages over others? In the case of the calendar they decided to use Nepali, the state language. And they used the Gregorian calendrical system, which Hangen argues was not seen as a global homogenising force, but as an 'empty sign that could be incorporated anywhere' (p. 117). She demonstrates the inherent limits that kept their cultural production from providing people with a sense of Mongol identity beyond the party. The one distinguishing feature the MNO's targeted demographic shares beyond being Mongol is 'being not Hindu.' In chapter six, Hangen examines this identity marker and its effect on social transformation. She analyses the Gurung community's return to Buddhism and the Dasain boycott. The MNO supporters embraced the common janajati articulation of democracy, 'hamro bhasa, dharma, sanskriti' (p. 111). Both of these chapters demonstrate which ideals people associated with democratic freedom and how it helped construct and articulate meaningful identities. What is conclusive about Hangen's analysis is that the assertion of Mongol racial identity was a political act.

In her conclusion, Hangen analyses the 2008 CA election results, focusing on ethnic party participation. In 2008, the Election Commission was more lenient on party registrations, which allowed more identity-based parties to compete. Eleven ethnic parties participated, compared to three during the 1990s. Furthermore, the mixed electoral system and inclusion quotas created a more diverse CA than any democratically elected government during the 1990s. Nonetheless, the MNO failed to win any seats. Hangen's conclusive analysis demonstrates the impact that the emergence of new political subjectivities in post-1990 democratic Nepal had over the last decade, making this book a useful source to analyse possible trends of ethnic party organisation in the future, providing insight into the pitfalls that should be avoided.

I recommend this book for the classroom, particularly courses that focus on democratisation, social movements, and ethnic studies. Its straightforward analytic style makes the arguments accessible to an undergraduate level. Hangen convincingly demonstrates that we cannot dismiss the democratic transition as a failure because of its shortcomings. Rather, this book provides a view into the practical and discursive possibilities multiparty democracy has offered rural Nepal.

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