Ethnic conflict or insurgency in nepal politics essay

Although the unification of Nepal began in the later-half of the eighteenth century, integrating many small principalities and emerging as a nation state of the Westphalian model, Nepal always remained a multiethnic, diverse country without having any core ethno-federal region.[1]While Nepal did not experience any significant ethnic problem for almost two and half centuries after it came into being, some of its ethnic groups enjoyed more privilege in the socio-politico-economic sector than others. Yet, after the establishment of a democratic system in 1990, grievances of underprivileged groups surfaced. As the ethnic grievances were burgeoning, the abrupt start of the Maoist insurgency in 1996 overshadowed all ethnic movements, assimilating them into the large-scale Maoist rebellion. Thus, it is difficult to classify the Nepalese ethnic problem and perceive it either as an ethnic conflict, ethnic violence, or a rebel movement. Prior to the initiation of the Maoists' armed movement, ethnic problems in Nepal were based on political, economic, social, and cultural issues, limited, to the level of ' conflict' but did not escalated to the level of ' violence.' However, with the beginning of the Maoist insurgency, the Nepalese conflict turned into an ideological based violent political power struggle against the existing government by a rebel organization. While there may be different interpretations and perceptions regarding whether the Maoist movement was successful or not; one thing is clear, it was successful in outmaneuvering the then governing regime becoming the largest political party bloc in the Constitutional Assembly election. The puzzle remains why the ideological conflict was successful despite the proclamation of ' end of the history' by Francis Fukuyama and a ' Clash of civilization' as a form of future conflict by the eminent political

scientist Samuel Huntington after the end of the Cold War.[2]My purpose in this paper is to analyze this divergent outcome in Nepal.

There has a been a nascent ethnic awareness after the establishment of a democratic system in Nepal, yet, the political mobilization of ethnicity by elites would not have been possible without the political incentives to activate it. I argue that the intervention by the Nepalese Maoists mutated the nature of the ethnic conflict into a " fusionist" one. Before addressing the core question, I attempt to analyze the Nepalese ethnic conflict through different theoretical lenses.

Nepalese Conflict from a Broad Perspective

Generally, any ethnic conflict can be explained in the light of three broad approaches -situational, instrumental, and primordial. While explaining the various motivations of conflicts in Nepal, the situational and instrumental approaches seems to be more convincing than a primordial one.[3]However, some dimensions of primordial force cannot be ruled out; especially a rise of grievances caused by " taking the lid off" after the collapse of the monarchy in 2006. When the authoritarian Panchayat system ended in 1990, it had created a power vacuum in Nepalese politics. When political and ethnic entrepreneurs rushed in to fill the void, namely vested, as well as parochial interests weakened the state and formed new democratic institutions. Manipulating these opportunities of political chaos and ethnic grievances, the Maoists came entered the scene with a strategic objective of establishing a totalitarian communist regime. They divided the country into their own administrative units and subunits to consolidate and advance their struggle

more effectively and efficiently. Their administrative division of the country based on ethnic lines validated their excessive reliance on ethnicity to achieve ideological strategic objectives.[4]According to Michael E. Brown, a single-factor explanation cannot fully explain the evolution and intensity of internal and ethnic conflict, rather he advances multiple arguments derived from in theory existing, causes of internal conflict. Therefore, the Nepalese conflict can also be analyzed by means of three main arguments – underlying factors, catalytic or proximate factors, and a role played by domestic elites.[5]

Underlying Causes of the Nepalese Conflict

Four underlying factors suggest why the Nepalese situation and its geography contributed to ethnic conflict. First, the structural factors explain the likelihood of ethnic conflict in terms of weak states, intra-state security concerns, and ethnic geography. While other symptoms of weak states are also more or less prevalent in Nepal, where the political institutions remained in a rudimentary state. Some of the reasons for such an existence of rudimentary political institutions in Nepal are explainable by unhealthy inter-party political rivalry after the establishment of the multiparty democracy in 1990, and the legacy of 104 years of the Rana oligarchic, political system from 1846 through 1950. Some other endogenous factors such as endemic corruption, administrative incompetence, and inability to promote economic development also have contributed immensely as precursors to the conflict.

When the Nepalese state became weak, the power struggle between and among various political parties increased. The two major political parties, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), and other political parties formed different alliances to claim paramount state power. Most of the time, during the multi-party democratic period, the Nepali Congress was in power; nevertheless, it could not complete even single full term of its tenure in the government following a split in the party. Because of this power struggle among the major political forces, ethnic groups such as Rai, Magar, Limbu, Tamang, Sherpa, Newar, Tharu, and Madhesi, which formerly had been oppressed by the center, were able to assert themselves politically. The weakening state structure also resulted in a less effective control of the Nepal-India border. Such a less effective control rapidly increased cross-border movements of arms, ammunitions, explosives, and other smuggled goods. This was a fertile environment for the Maoists to launch their violent ideological struggle. Many people from rural areas moved to neighboring India for greater security and employment. This situation also created a huge number of Internally Displaced People (IDP) within different parts of Nepal

When the state grew further weaker, different groups and individuals started arranging for their own security. This also provided incentives to the Maoists for military preparations. The establishment of a Maoist Militia to defend themselves and fight against their enemies threatened the state's security apparatus and other groups at community level, resulting in doubling the size of Nepal's military and lead as well to the formation of anti-Maoists community defense forces at the local level. This again galvanized an

upsurge of the Maoists' military structure and a resulting armed violence creating a vicious cycle of ' security dilemma.' At times, community defense forces exhibited offensive capabilities, even if they were formed for defensive purposes. This intensified the security concern caused by the Maoists.[6]

Nepal was a multi-ethnic fabric woven by a thread of a common language, religion, and tradition obtained through the unification process. During some thirty years of authoritarian rule, from 1960 through 1990, the Panchayat system was relatively successful in consolidating a nation-state based on a single language, religion, and culture; intermingling various ethnic groups throughout the country. However, the " melting pot" did not completely melt everything in the pot and Nepalese leaders were unable to produce a homogeneous mixture. Some ethnic groups such as the Brahmins and Chhetries intermingled with other ethnic minorities throughout the country while some other ethnic minorities existed in a separate ethnic-geography. Many ethnic groups did not raise secessionist demands; whereas other ethnic non-integrated groups were on and off raising their secessionist demands. At times, these secessionist demands weakened because of the some effects of intermingling with other ethnic communities. After establishment of the multi-party democracy in 1990, as a result of a third wave of democratization, ethnic minorities started to demand their rights in a now more liberal political, social, and economic environment. Among various ethnic groups, the Magars in the western part of Nepal became more aggressive and consequently were effectively utilized by the Maoists to initiate their armed struggle.

Second, political factors such as the dimensions of discriminatory political institutions; exclusionary national ideologies; inter-group politics; and elite politics serve to explain the Nepalese conflict. The closed authoritarian Panchayat system generated much resentment over time because many minority ethnic groups viewed the system serving primarily the interests of higher caste groups, such as Brahmins and Chhetries. The perceived disproportionate representations of ethnic minorities in government, the military, the police, the political parties, and other state and political institutions created substantial grievances in them. The ethnic conflict grew especially during the political transitioning from authoritarian rule to democracy in the early 1990s. The state's repressive attitude during the democratic transitioning as well contributed to propagate insurgency in Nepal.

While there were no exclusionary national ideologies per se, the lack of pragmatic implementation of egalitarian principles enshrined in the constitution and civil code contributed the outbreak of the conflict. Although the Nepalese people usually demonstrated civic-nationalism while protesting against foreign interference, the ethno-nationalism prevailed when the institutional vacuum occurred due a drastic political change. But, so far, the ethno-nationalism has not progressed towards an intense secessionist movement. It is pertinent to mention here that the Nepalese exclusionary practices were based on the caste system rather than on religious or ethnic grounds. Occasionally, Nepal experienced inter-group politics especially between Madheshi and non-Madheshi groups, but elite politics played a dominant role most of the time. Desperate and opportunist politicians always

tried to take advantage of political and economic turmoil. For instance, the Maoists took advantage of fragile political and economic situations to start their armed revolution.

Third, economic and social factors also played important roles in initiating conflict in Nepal. Nepal remains an agrarian society and lacks an infrastructure for a market-based economic development in most parts of the country. Tourism is one of the important sources of income and employment, after agriculture. Over the last decades, foreign employment and remittance have become the main sources of national revenues. After the establishment of a democratic system in 1990, the aspirations of people for economic development went up astronomically. Nevertheless, people's aspirations could not be met because of the lack of political stability, clear vision, commitment, and political consensus. Rather, unemployment, inflation, and resource competition provided the breeding ground for the conflict. Failure to jump start economic development by the new political elites contributed to an ever deepening political crisis. The failure to adopt an all-inclusive economic policy widened the gap between rich and poor. Peoples from the oppressed community, scheduled caste, and minority ethnic groups did not have a stake in the country's economic activities. Corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, and bribery moved the economic situations from bad to worse. Although there was no profound discriminatory economic policy, unequal economic opportunities, unequal access to resources, and vast differences in the standard of living were seen as unfair and illegitimate by the disadvantaged members of the society.

Lastly, cultural or perceptual factors also had a considerable impact on the evolution of ethnic problems. Cultural discrimination against minorities was one of the principal, contributing cultural factors for ethnic conflict. The people from different ethnic groups found the educational opportunities inequitable; especially, teaching in minority languages became problematic because of lack of resources and investment. The Madheshi felt the compulsory Nepali language in school as languistic colonialism. Ethnic groups such as Magars, Gurungs, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Newar, Maithili, and Bhojpuri wanted teaching in their own languages. Group histories and group perceptions also played a role in triggering conflict. Brahmin, Chhetrie, Thakuries and some other martial castes considered themselves the creators of a unified Nepal and took great pride in their nationalist feelings; whereas, other ethnic groups such as the Newar, who were defeated and subjugated during the unification process, considered themselves apart from such glory.

Proximate Causes of the Nepalese Conflict

While the aforementioned underlying factors have been essential to explain what situations and conditions led to ethnic conflict in Nepal, the proximate causes of internal conflict are more convincing in explaining the ultimate triggers. One of the major proximate causes of Nepalese conflict was the persistent, internal problem of governance after the establishment of democracy in 1990, such as rampant corruption. The power vacuum created by removing the king from the center of state power galvanized many political parties to rush for power. The political parties created various alliances to remain in power in order to serve their personal or partisan interests. This situation made the government unable to cope with societal

demands and ameliorate peoples' stark challenges. However, a threatening '
security dilemma' did formerly not exist in Nepal; however, as Nepal was not
created from the rubble of a larger entity or gained independence from a
colonial power. Rather, the government deemphasized the military structure
inherited from the previous Panchayat system, considering it unimportant in
the new democratic environment. The government clearly showed
skepticism to take ownership of the military. The deemphasizing of the
military on one hand, and the emergence of a power struggle between, and
among, elites on the other hand, triggered the initiation of ethnicity-based
movements all over the country by desperate and opportunistic politicians
thereby, preparing the ground for insurgency. As there was a lack of
coordination and cooperation between the civilians and the military, the
growth of ethnic movements and ineffectiveness of state's mechanisms
provided the breeding ground for the onset of the insurgency. The Maoists
were able to transplant their communist ideology effectively into the ethnic
movement. Thus, the energy created by the ethnic movement proved to be
a force multiplier for the Maoists to advance their communist agenda. The
issues, especially related to the inequality, exclusiveness, and discrimination
formed basic grievances for different ethnic groups.[7]Despite the global
declining trend of ideology as a source of conflict, the Maoists were
successful in creating a fusionist violent movement by ingeniously combining
ethnic conflict and communist ideology. Social and economic problems such
as sharp competition for the scarce resources, the increasing divide between
the poor and rich, and social, caste-based, inequalities and exclusiveness
were the catalyst for the initiation and the growth of the internal conflict in
Nepal.

The Roles of Elites in the Nepalese Conflict

While social and economic problems provided the underlying causes, the internal and external elite-level and mass level factors were more responsible to trigger the conflict.[8]External mass-level factors influenced especially the Terai region of the country. The many people of Indian origin that migrated to the plains area of Nepal along the border compounded ethnic tensions with the other non-Terai population. Although there were bad domestic problems and some bad neighborhood effects, the elite-level factors seemed more responsible than mass-level factors. Internal elite-level factors such as power struggles between different political parties; power struggles between political parties and the king; and ideological contests over how to manage the country's political, economical, and social conditions among different political parties, played important roles in escalating the conflict. The " bad leaders" problem, created, in turn, an ethnic problem and subsequently lead to open conflict between, and among the government and different minority, ethnic communities. The major political parties were in the government most of the time, yet they could not lead the country towards a positive direction. Instead, the political leaders split the parties to fulfill their vested interests. The political opportunism led to the creation of many undesirable alliances. Such alliances kept on making, and breaking, government power. Some alliances lasted about a year, where some lasted just a few months. This situation created a fertile environment for an insurgency.

The external, elite-level contentions, also played an important role in generating ethnic tensions. The foreign power's attitude towards Nepal,

intermingling with domestic politics, covert cooperation with disgruntle political parties triggered the conflicts. These countries always had an interest in Nepal for their own security and not least for the vast water resources available in Nepal. The external powers also wanted to maintain their market monopoly in Nepal to pursue their own economic interests. Although they advocated promotion of democracy in Nepal publicly, claiming themselves as promoters of democracy in the world, democracy never remained a real priority in the face of their own national interests. Their indirect interventions became successful because of the attitude of the pro-foreign power political leaders in Nepal. They overtly did not support the Maoists, but the proxy war launched by them effectively paralyzed the state's mechanism and contributed to the conflict intensification. The " bad neighbor" effects may not have happened without the discrete and deliberate support by these countries.

Although neighboring countries' meddling in the Nepalese domestic affairs played an important role for the conflict, without the decisions and actions of the Nepalese domestic elites, the conflict could not have been sparked. The domestic elites' conflicts were mainly power struggles and were ideological in nature. However, before the emergence of the Maoist Party, the conflict that erupted between competing elites was in effect only a struggle for power. The burgeoning political parties in the new democratic milieu contended for power and forged alliances between one another for one purpose – to become the principal national power. Even within the political parties, the leaders competing and forging alliances were numerous, which contributed frequently to making and breaking of governments. This led to

aspirations and grievances of underprivileged and minority ethnic groups, to go unheard and unaddressed, causing serious frustrations and dissatisfactions among these groups. These frustrated ethnic groups as well as some political opportunists unable to grasp power through democratic elections, started movements for the rights of ethnic minorities to gain power by another venue.

Analysis of ethnic conflict in Nepal

At some point, the ethnic self-images and the images of others played important roles to shape ethnic conflict in Nepal. During the monarchical period, the different ethnic groups co-existed because they shared the mutual history of unification of greater Nepal, and converged into a unified language and national character.[9]The Chauvinist mythmaking by the Shah dynasty was a hallmark of civic nationalism that contributed to overshadow the ethnic nationalism to some extent.

Until the state was strong, no significant ethnic conflict existed in Nepal; however, the ethnic groups started devising mechanism to protect their groups after the state became weak. In certain degrees, the rise on the ethnic conflict was the result of the self-help mechanism employed by ethnic groups to protect their groups' interest when the state failed to provide security. However, the decision to adopt a federal system in Nepal by amending the interim constitution acted as an important confidence building measure to promote the rights and positions of minorities' by mitigating the strategic dilemma that would have produced violence.[10]

The third wave of democratization changed the Nepalese political system and institutions as it swept throughout the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. The establishment of a liberal democratic institution and globalization changed the social structure in many of the countries around the world. The drastic change in political and economic structure broke existing social contracts resulting in resentment as well as opportunity, and provided fertile ground for the Nepalese political entrepreneurs to mobilize support around ethnic and sectarian identities leading to ethnic conflict. [11]Before the beginning of democratization, the ethnic issues were weak and limited among the people at large in Nepal. The political transitioning and democratization in 1990 provided elites ethnicity as a tool to harness popular energies for securing state power as more voters began to play a larger role in politics.[12]This led to ethnic conflict when contested elections were held and varieties of political groups criticized the government–and each other. Although the new constitution addressed the issue of minority rights, they did not feel their rights guaranteed because the privileged groups showed reluctance to surrender real political authority enjoyed by them versus that of the average Nepali citizen. Thus, initial steps in the rocky transition to democracy increased the risk for ethnic conflict when the immature political parties indulged simply in parochial party politics.

Although many ethnic groups were demanding an ethnically-based federal state, only some sections of Madheshi had occasionally demanded an autonomous state with the right of self-determination. This section of the Madheshi people felt that the control of Terai region ensures their survival by protecting group identity. Since the Terai region was populated with

Madheshi people and was considered their homeland, they launched a violent conflict when their interests clashed with those of the Maoists.' Yet, some of the non-Madheshi groups and some factions within the Madheshi community heavily criticized this idea. Also, for the state, the control of territory was vital for physical survival.[13]However, after realizing the state would oppose their sovereignty demands with violence if necessary, these Madheshi backed down from their demand and contended for an autonomous region. It appears that Indian interests also might have played an important role to forgo the right for self-determination, because such an action might lead to an intensification of a similar demand in an already contested situation in India. The Terai region being the breadbasket and strategically vital Nepal tract of land, the State was likely to use any means and level of violence to secure its control.

The Madheshi uprising gained momentum after the Maoists entered the political main stream. The uprising was widely believed to be covertly backed by India primarily for two reasons. First, India wanted to counter the Maoists' growing influence over the Terai region. Second, India wanted to exert its influence and control on the Terai region so that it could influence Nepal's internal politics. When the Maoists tried to counter the Madheshi activities in the Terai, they faced fierce opposition, and violence broke out. Hostilities targeted the non-Madheshi people living in the Terai region, and many people fled to other areas leaving their homes. The mix of Madheshi and non-Madheshi populations raised the risk of inter- communal conflict during the violent Terai movement started in Gaur.[14]However, the rejection of secessionist demands by Madhesh-based political parties and

patience from non-Madheshi groups, controlled violence from spreading further. The risk of communal violence was not observed in other multi-ethnic parts of the country.

The two centuries of cordial intermingling among diverse ethnic groups and three decades of consolidation of civic nationalism under the Panchayat system based on single language and tradition, hardly left any room for a bottom-up demand for ethnic mobilization in Nepal. Certainly, there was ethnic awareness in Nepal, but it would, most likely not have evolved into organized political competition without being capitalized on by the political elites. As Jessica Pimbo asserts, " Enduring ethnological cleavages were not likely to occur in the absence of political parties that attempt to mobilize ethnicity."[15]

The dynamics of massive mobilization of ethnic groups for group-level purposes is not very clear. Altruistic and chauvinist leaders identified with specific groups seem to forgo their individual self-interests while seeking group interests. The subjective identity seems to go along with group identity rather than objective identity, which may only deal with an individual's life history. According to the logic of collective action, the group interests and the personal interest cannot progress concurrently, and most of group-oriented activities do not commensurate with group interests. Thus, alignment of group and self-interest leads to spirals of violence, and a group's betterment comes only at the cost of others. This leads invariably to zero-sum, or even negative-sum, situations in which nobody gains from the conflict.[16]

The presence of rightist, centrist, and leftist ideologically-based political parties, such as the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), the Nepali Congress (NC), and various Communist Parties created tension over the organization of political, economic, and social affairs in Nepal. The ideological tensions existed between hardline communist parties and other political parties. The ideologies were mainly based on economic and class terms, creating struggles over how political, economic, and social affairs should be organized to create a New Nepal.[17]Although class-based movements with communist agendas were dwindling in many parts of the world, the Nepalese rebel movement transplanted into the political agendas of indigenous people and ethnic minorities was burgeoning. The Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) emerged because of political, economic, and cultural discrimination; widespread dissatisfaction, inequitable distribution of resources and disproportionate economic development. The Maoists effectively and efficiently utilized the energy and momentum gathered by the different ethnic groups' political movements and gave voice to those ethnic minorities' agenda with their own. As the amalgamated movement was progressing under the leadership of the Maoists, the government started repressing the movements rather than addressing the underlying causes for the conflict. This approach further propagated the movement and finally resulted in political negotiations; and, ultimately resulted in establishing the Maoists as a largest political party in the country. This movement attempted to shift civic-nationalism to ethno-nationalism in Nepal, and provided the political elites with powerful incentive to play the " ethnic card."

The mounting economic problem constituted the main reason for people to initially follow an ethnic movement and subsequently as well, a Maoists' agenda which in turn had successively taken over many ethnic groupings. Although there were some traces of inter-group grievances, yet the existence of significant antagonistic group histories did not exist. Existing economic problems such as unemployment, increased inflation, and intensifying resource competitions forced more people to join the armed movement for a radical change in the country's political course. It is evident that the emergence of elite competition was a major proximate cause, where as the socio-economic problems constituted the core for conflict in Nepal.

Intensifying elite competitions and mounting economic problems played a crucial role promoting a strong political movement in Nepal; nevertheless, the movements would not have been successful, had there been homogenous populations and fewer ethnic grievances. In other words, had there been economic advancement like in Malaysia, Indonesia, or Thailand, which had ethnic grievances with a similar intensity as in Nepal, the ethnically energized Maoist conflict would not have occurred or succeeded so easily. Michael E. Brown and et. al assert: " Sustained economic growth, which gives groups, even relatively disadvantages groups, incentives to avoid conflict and destruction of a system that is bringing more and more economic benefits."[18]

With the Maoists' armed movement causing the death of more than 13, 000 human lives, and the ethnic mobilization as part and parcel of the Maoist insurgency, the Nepalese conflict graduated from an ' ethnic conflict' to a ' hybrid conflict.' It was a fusion of ethnic grievances of various ethnic groups

and the ideological movement of the Maoists. This hybrid conflict was successful mainly because of the Maoist's stratagem to combine ethnic movement with their ideological precepts acquiring the energy of a fusionist movement to fuel their ideological movement. Since this marriage of convenience was primarily focused on achieving success for the Maoists rather than to take on seriously solutions to existing ethnic issues.