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Debating Civil Society: *Nagarik Samaj* and *Nagarik* Discourse in Nepal's People's Movement II

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INTRODUCTION

Civil society actors played crucial roles in Nepal's People's Movement II against King Gyanendra's direct rule in 2005–2006 (Shah 2008; Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari 2010; Bhatta 2012).¹ As I will elaborate later, King Gyanendra had assumed direct power in 2005 since a mass movement, popularly known as People's Movement I, established a constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy in 1990. The main goal of civil society activism in 2005–2006 was to restore the roles of the parliamentary political parties in national politics. Two types of civil society actors were active in the movement. First were the well-established non-government organizations (NGOs). As I discuss later, the NGOs were the first to initiate the civil society (translated as *nagarik samaj* in Nepali) discourse. In the course of the movement, other new groups, which bore the term citizen (*nagarik* in Nepali) in their names, also emerged. The most prominent of the latter groups was Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace

¹ For an account of the 2006 political change from a long-term macro-historical perspective, see Mishra (2015).

(CMDP, *Loktantra ra Shantika lagi Nagarik Andolan*), which was at the center of popular mobilization and media attention.² This paper examines how these two groups of actors struggled over the meaning of civil society and how *nagarik samaj* gained a new meaning in People's Movement II.

I conducted field research for this paper from May 2008 to July 2009 in Kathmandu, Nepal, and interviewed over a hundred journalists, political party leaders and activists. I similarly spoke to scores of ordinary people in informal settings. During the period, I also attended CMDP's meetings and protest events. In addition to interviews and informal conversations, I have also used promotion materials, meeting minutes, NGO reports and newspaper accounts.³ All pro-movement leaders and activists accepted that civil society played a major role in the movement's success, and the supporters of the monarchy were unhappy with the civil society activism. Similarly, ordinary people from diverse backgrounds said that *nagarik samaj* had motivated them to participate in the movement. In this paper, I refer to activists associated primarily with the established NGOs as "civil society" activists, while those associated with CMDP as "citizen" or *nagarik* activists.

While putting all the organizations and groups in a single basket of civil society, Shah (2008) has acknowledged their contributions to People's Movement II. He argued that civil society, an "imported" phenomenon in Nepal, played itself into the hands of foreign powers that succeeded in bringing down the "weak" monarchical state. In doing so, he, however, neglected the internal constitution of civil society and how the activists struggled over the meaning of civil society. Drawing on Spencer (2007), Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari (2010) have similarly focused on CMDP as a type of civil society,

² There were also influential professional organizations, discussed later, which straddled between these two types of organizations. For a detailed account of CMDP's formation and activism, see Basnet (forthcoming).

³ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am unable to access the archives to verify the news reports. Hence, I have left out a few newspaper citations.

where the authors have described CMDP as practicing different modes of politics—“apolitical counterpolitics” that involved a “cleansing of politics and the state.” They, like Shah, fail to problematize the internal constitution of the groups and their struggle over meaning. Besides, they overlook the manifold relations into which Nepal’s civil society is embedded. Similarly, other studies have searched for an apolitical and static “true” civil society in Nepal (e.g., Bhatta 2012).

In this chapter, I first briefly examine the emergence of the discourse and practice of civil society. Here, I show the enmeshing of Nepal’s civil society with global practices and internal political problems. The discourse of *nagarik samaj*, however, was not popular even at the end of the 1990s. The Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), in particular, gave it a new meaning.⁴ Next, I examine civil society activism after King Gyanendra’s takeover in 2005, and describe how civil society activists mobilized international resources and forces against the royal regime. I briefly dwell on the emergence of the Citizens’ Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) and its activism in 2005–2006. In the following section, I discuss the different meanings of *nagarik samaj* that NGOs and CMDP imagined.

A strand of liberal and “post-Marxist” political theory would recognize the organizations and groups I describe in this paper as the quintessential actors of civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). This conceptualization identifies civil society as one of the “autonomous” spheres of modernity, others being the state and the market. While I do not dispute social differentiation and the rise of new “modern” spheres, this conceptualization, however, appears as static if we view Nepal’s civil society phenomenon through this lens. What is at stake here is Nepal’s history of political struggle and the unique context of 2005–2006 which gave civil society a new meaning even if the closely related linguistic terms—*nagarik*, *nagarik samaj* and civil society, give an aura of the same civil society that has been widely discussed in the literature.

⁴ A voluminous literature exists on the Maoist insurgency; see, for example, Hutt (2004), Thapa with Sijapati (2004) and Lawoti and Pahari (2009).

While the NGOs did carry the contemporary dominant meaning of civil society, CMDP's self-understanding was different. When CMDP's citizen or *nagarik* activists invoked *nagarik samaj*, the idea was less about the liberal organizational sphere than what anthropologists call "key symbols" (Ortner 1973; Turner 1975). In the social movement literature, scholars have often termed such powerful symbolic expressions "master frames" (Snow *et al.* 1986; Snow and Benford 1992). As critics have pointed out, frame approaches in social movement studies often overemphasize activists' rational strategizing (Polletta 2006, 2008). Hence I underscore the importance of the context—the form of political struggle, the demographic composition of actors, the biographical experience of the actors, and their multiple embeddednesses with diverse networks. Collectively, the context provides an understanding of the narrative appeal of the symbol of civil society deployed. I conclude that the *nagarik samaj* discourse and practice in Nepal in 2005–2006 is better understood as a critical mobilizing symbol rather than an organizational sphere.

THE FIELD OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A few ethnic and non-government organizations existed in Nepal during the monarchical Panchayat system (1960–1990). Still, the Panchayat tightly controlled the activities of these organizations as voluntary organizations were thought of as an encroachment to the king's duty towards his subjects (Burghart 1994). This situation, however, began to change after the 1980 referendum over the fate of the Panchayat.⁵ Many ethnic organizations started raising their voices publicly, and most importantly, activists who were close to the then-banned political parties, established a few human rights NGOs such as the Human Rights Organization of Nepal and the

⁵ The late King Birendra called a referendum asking people to choose between a reformed partyless Panchayat and a multi-party system in 1979. For the politics of the referendum, see Baral (1984) and Shaha (1990). The Panchayat won by a narrow margin in the elections that were believed to have been rigged.

Forum for the Protection of Human Rights in the 1980s. Similarly, several professional organizations, including those of teachers, doctors, lawyers and journalists, also became active and supported the banned political parties (Ismail 2017). These organizations actively participated in the 1990 movement for democracy. Nepal's 1990 Constitution went on to guarantee the freedom of expression and organization. Furthermore, barring a few fringe groups and parties, Nepal's major political forces, including the monarchy and the popular communist parties, accepted liberal democracy. The participation of the few NGOs and professional organizations in the movement gave them a new legitimacy in the 1990s. The very birth of the NGO sector and professional organizations was thus enmeshed with Nepal's democratic struggle and party politics. NGOs and professional organizations continued to remain close to the political parties, and this closeness created its distinct dynamics within the field of civil society, as we will see later.

Following the civil resistances against the socialist and military regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Cohen and Arato 1992), a renewed interest in the discourse of civil society in academia began in the 1980s, and quickly caught the imagination of the United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-government organizations, and multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank (Chandhoke 2002; Mercer 2002). In this liberal reading, civil society was viewed as one of the "spheres" of modernity along with the state and the market. This sphere itself was thought of as populated by "intermediate" non-government and civic organizations and groups. Further, these organizations were imagined to fuel economic development, and consolidate and safeguard democracy (Diamond 1994).⁶

⁶ International aid agencies aggressively searched for local development "partners" in Nepal in the 1980s. One United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-commissioned study on NGOs in 1987 regretted overlooking the "NGO potential" in Nepal in the previous decades. Overlooking the Panchayat's tight political control, the report said even those NGOs that wanted "autonomy" and "systemic changes" confirmed patronage from the

As is the case elsewhere in the developing world, Nepali NGOs received a large sum of financial aid for their development and democracy projects. The educated class had been expanding rapidly for the previous few decades, and many of them found meaning and livelihood in the NGO sector. These global and local developments propelled the rapid growth of the NGO sector in Nepal, often described in the mass media using the metaphors of “explosion” and “mushrooming.” Many large NGOs such as the Informal Service Sector (INSEC) and Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN) worked throughout the country. Not surprisingly, in the years immediately after the 1990 political change, the goal of the NGOs was to contribute to economic development and nurture the newly established liberal institutions.

In 1991, these NGOs established an NGO Federation of Nepal with branches in every district of the country. The Federation said its goals were to promote and protect “social justice, human rights and pro-poor development.” Amidst the global rise of civil society discourse, around the mid-1990s, academics, donors and international NGOs gradually introduced the discourse in Nepal that the NGOs quickly adopted. Over the years, the identification of civil society with the NGOs in Nepal has been so widespread that authors frequently use them as synonyms, as evident through the use of phrases such as “NGOs/civil society” or “civil society/NGO” (Shah 2008; Bhatta 2012). Thus the field of civil society, with the globally validated material practices and ideas, emerged in earnest after the 1990 political change.

The local “interpretive community,” however, was not impressed. The media routinely accused the large NGOs of corruption and nepotism; NGOs were also charged with covert politics on behalf of the political parties, while the discourse of civil society itself was

Palace. It recommended the promotion of “mixed types” of organizations that would provide traditional charity work as well as development. NGOs were hailed as “social engineers.” But the report hardly found many NGOs in Nepal in the 1980s.

condemned. Historian Pratyoush Onta (2058 v.s.), for example, criticized the widespread adoption of civil society discourse and identity by the NGOs without “anybody defining the term precisely.” He wrote, “... most users think that modern NGOs are the bastion of civil society. At a time when the NGOs are flooded with criticism, it appears that the new term was invented to represent the same NGOs” in order to divert criticism against them. Political scientist Seira Tamang (2002) denounced civil society (the NGOs) for their lack of internal democracy, accountability and transparency. She further blamed them for exacerbating class, caste, ethnic, gender and regional inequalities and proposed to “civilize” the civil society. Anthropologist Saubhagya Shah (2002) criticized civil society for promoting Western domination while overshadowing local social movements. The well-known public intellectual Devendra Raj Panday (2001), who would become a key leader in CMDP later in 2005, in a scathing article titled “*Nagarik Samaj: Kun Samaj? Kasko Samaj?*” (Civil society: Which society? Whose society?), questioned the “ubiquity” of the discourse of civil society. He asked the donor communities to define what they really “wanted to achieve by talking too much about civil society.” As late as the early 2000s, it thus appeared as if the discourse of civil society and its major carriers, the NGOs, were in trouble.

This situation, however, changed once the Maoist insurgency escalated and spread with rapidity. In 2001, the Maoists overran an army barrack in western Nepal for the first time, and the government declared a state of emergency. The country grappled with a series of constitutional crises. In 2002, the newly instituted king after the infamous Palace massacre,⁷ dismissed an elected government and started to rule through his hand-picked prime minister. In the period, the discourse of civil society got a new layer of meaning and, with it, a new lease of life. At this stage, many small organizations and “neutral” actors emerged proposing to broker dialogue and

⁷ For accounts of the Palace massacre, see Hutt (2017), Lecomte-Tilouine (2017).

peace between the king, the parliamentary parties and the Maoists. International actors such as the UN, a few Western universities, countries such as Norway and Switzerland also joined the “peace process.”

In the meantime, journalists protested against what they said were the “excesses” of the Maoists and the Nepal Army, then called the Royal Nepalese Army. In April 2004, six professional organizations—the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, the Nepal Bar Association, Nepal Medical Association, Nepal Teachers’ Association, Nepal University Teachers’ Association and Nepal Engineers’ Association—formed the Professional Alliance for Peace and Democracy (PAPAD) to pressure for dialogue between major actors and re-establish peace and democracy.⁸ The organizations that were active in this period often bore terms such as peace, civil, civic, and *nagarik samaj* in their names. The media called them civil society, and the actors also presented themselves as members of civil society. The idea was that an “independent” civil society could and should help, just like its role in democracy and development, the peace process and bring back the derailed democracy to life.

The Maoists also started to invoke civil society for their strategic reasons. The discourse of civil society and the actors associated with it thus got entangled deeper into the country’s political crisis, where civil society became a new framework through which many imagined possible “way-outs.” Even though this civil society contributed to the discourse of the restructuring of the state, inclusiveness, and dialogue, it continued to work within the framework of the 1990 Constitution.⁹ Civil society took upon itself to repair the liberal institutions devastated by the Maoist insurgency and the king’s interference in the 1990 Constitution. This idea of civil society as

⁸ According to one insider, this organization was formed at the request of journalists. The aim was also to help the political parties.

⁹ For example, in a statement titled “Basis for the National Consensus,” issued in April 2004, PAPAD reiterated its faith in the 1990 Constitution and called on the king, the political parties, and the Maoists to work for peace and democracy.

an organizational field remained, but new groups such as CMDP advanced a different kind of imagination as the political crisis took new twists and demanded novel responses.

KING'S DIRECT RULE AND NEW CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM

As discussed above, Nepal had been in a constitutional crisis due to the Maoist insurgency, compounded by King Gyanendra's interference in the 1990 Constitution. On February 1, 2005, the king went a step further and started his direct rule. He declared a state of emergency that severely curtailed political and civil rights. Soon after this move, political parties called for a protest but received a lukewarm response from ordinary people.¹⁰ An environment of fear had persisted, and prominent political leaders were either imprisoned or put on house arrest. Subsequently, civil society actors became active in the following weeks and months.

Civil society actors, i.e., the NGOs, particularly activists associated with the human rights sector, activated their global networks and started mobilizing international forces soon after the king seized power. Often calling themselves "human rights defenders," they portrayed the king's rule as a military regime. In part because of this mobilization, most influential international actors opposed the royal regime,¹¹ and the Government of Nepal was forced to sign an agreement with the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) in Geneva to establish an office in

¹⁰ Human Rights and Peace Society (HURPES) organized a demonstration on February 10, 2005. Krishna Pahadi, the president of the HURPES, who would later become a key CMDP figure, was arrested on February 9, 2005. Minor protests did occur, but they were small, sporadic and ineffective.

¹¹ India, Britain and the United States halted military aid to Nepal, whereas European countries suspended their financial aid. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, protesting the creation of the Royal Commission on Corruption Control (RCCC), threatened to block the agreed installments of loans.

Kathmandu on April 10, 2005.¹² According to activists, they were also able to lobby to appoint Ian Martin, former General Secretary of Amnesty International (1986–1992), as the mission’s head in Nepal. Martin, a “friend of Nepal,” had been long known to Nepali activists. Eventually, the king lifted the state of emergency on April 29, 2005. This condition considerably eased the prospect of street demonstrations.

The king’s direct rule further polarized national politics. The Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Nepali Congress (NC)-Democratic, which had earlier joined a government nominated by the king, returned to the opposition coalition and formed the Seven Party Alliance (SPA). In the first week of May, the SPA declared that they would fight for “total democracy” and a “progressive leap” forward. The SPA also agreed on their “common minimum agendas.” Media reports were rife with speculations about a possible alliance between the Maoists and the parliamentary political parties.¹³ This political polarization further encouraged civil society activism.

With the emergency lifted, many self-exiled leaders, intellectuals, and activists returned to Nepal from India and abroad and started discussing new strategies. Activists associated with the NGOs followed the political parties’ lead. A group of “independent” intellectuals and activists, who would later form the core of CMDP, however, took a more proactive approach in advocating an alliance between the Maoists and the SPA and drafting a new constitution via a Constituent Assembly (CA).¹⁴ These activists believed the Maoists would return to peaceful politics once their “bourgeois demands”

¹² According to activists, over one dozen activists had reached Geneva during the meeting. All these activists were sponsored by international agencies.

¹³ European countries silently supported the possible alliance between the Maoists and the political parties, but the United States opposed it. Consequently, James F. Moriarty, the then US ambassador to Nepal, became the target of activists’ ire.

¹⁴ Indeed, “independent” activists such as Devendra Raj Panday, Krishna Pahadi, Daman Nath Dhungana and Padma Ratna Tuladhar had been battling for

were met. Many of them had met the Maoist leaders in secret locations in India. On the other hand, many were suspicious of and worried about a possible new alliance between the political parties and the king. The Nepal South Asia Centre (NESAC) became a venue for discussions in June 2005 where well-known urban intellectuals, activists, academics, artists and writers participated.

Housed in the same building as NESAC was Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), led by the young activist Dinesh Prasai. COCAP had a large number of young volunteers. Martin Chautari (MC), the country's best known academic NGO, was also nearby, and Human Rights and Peace Society (HURPES) were also located in the vicinity. Subsequently, several young activists associated with these organizations joined CMDP.¹⁵ These young scholars and activists had previously worked on local social movements, and many of them had also participated in the 1990 movement for democracy. These activists were perturbed by the king's action because any curtailment in civil rights could jeopardize their spirit of volunteerism, their livelihood and the well-being of their institutions. Following the king's takeover in 2005, MC had, for example, taken off political issues from its weekly discussion series.

This group of activists eventually formed the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) in the third week of July 2005. CMDP did not form a committee or hierarchical organization. According to activists, Devendra Raj Panday, a well-known public intellectual and a former minister, and Krishna Pahadi, an equally well-known human rights activist, would "sign" the press statements and appeals on behalf of CMDP. CMDP held its first protest on July 25, 2005 in Ratna Park in downtown Kathmandu and another on August 5, 2005 in Baneshwor at the eastern corner of Kathmandu. It is

a Constituent Assembly since 2004. Their views did not become the mainstream before the takeover, however.

¹⁵ These activists included Anil Bhattarai, Dinesh Prasai, Bimal Aryal, Ramesh Parajuli, Anubhav Ajeet and Bhaskar Gautam. Similarly, Sarala Gautam, Priyanka Budhathoki and Sunita Roka were involved in the core activities.

estimated that approximately 10,000 people attended the Baneshwor meeting, and was the biggest ever mass gathering after the king's takeover in February. According to activists, the Baneshwor protest "demonstrated" that CMDP could mobilize the masses "without" the direct involvement of the political parties.

The Baneshwor and Ratna Park meetings gave much-needed visibility to these activists, and CMDP was on its way to becoming a brand name as *nagarik samaj* in popular imagination and media discourse. According to activists, soon, CMDP was flooded with invitations from around the country. A promotional material circulated in the first week of October claimed that CMDP had "spread throughout the country." Accordingly, activists associated with CMDP participated in dozens of programs outside Kathmandu. These events brought together well-known writers, painters, performers, singers and poets. Similarly, they also appeared in countless public programs and interactions. CMDP protests took place amidst contentious issues such as media freedom, the independence of the judiciary, and the proposed codes of conduct for NGOs. My respondents and media reports said a "huge" number of people gathered wherever these activists organized mass meetings. The Nepali media lionized *nagarik samaj*; hardly a day passed without the media referring to civil society or *nagarik samaj* during the period.

After sustained activism for several months, *nagarik samaj* contributed to the creation a favorable environment for a coalition between the Maoists and the SPA. One senior political party leader admitted to me that they had "keenly" followed the *nagarik samaj* to understand and gauge the public mood. In part inspired by civil society activism, on November 22, 2005, the SPA and the Maoists inked a "twelve-point agreement" to end the "autocratic monarchy" through a mass movement. Political parties organized several huge mass meetings throughout the country. The media started getting interested more in the political parties and the Maoists rather than "non-political" civil society groups.

In January 2006, ahead of the local elections announced by the king and on the anniversary of the king's takeover, Krishna Pahadi and Devendra Raj Panday were arrested and the leadership of CMDP went to Mahesh Maskey, a medical doctor, and Krishna Khanal, a professor of political science. The much-awaited April 6, 2006 finally arrived. The People's Movement II—also called the April Movement, the April Uprising, or the April Revolution—was formally launched by the SPA and the Maoists. CMDP and NGOs became active in the streets. In interviews, they specifically told me that they were the ones who were at the forefront to defy the curfews imposed by the royal government. Millions participated in the nineteen-day long mass demonstration, where thousands were arrested and about two dozen killed by the royal regime. Finally, the king surrendered on April 24, 2006, promising that he accepted the “roadmap” offered by the political parties. A newly elected Constituent Assembly would later in May 2008 abolish the monarchy peacefully.¹⁶

NGOS, CMDP AND NAGARIK DISCOURSE

Even if academics, the media, and ordinary people continue to label all the groups discussed in this chapter as *nagarik samaj* or civil society in English, activists associated with the NGOs and CMDP had contestations over the meaning of civil society. While the NGOs thought of themselves as the “real” civil society, validated by global ideology and practices, to CMDP activists, their name—*Loktantra ra Shantika lagi Nagarik Samaj*—quintessentially expressed their identity and mission. They said they were foremost citizens or *nagarik*, which they often qualified by using adjectives such as “conscious,” “critical,” and “responsible.” In interviews, activists, particularly the younger ones, continuously tried to distance themselves from the civil society identity by making, for example, satirical references to

¹⁶ CMDP continued its activism after the king surrendered to the political parties. I will not cover this phase. For a brief discussion of their activities after the success of the movement, see Shah (2008) and Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari (2010).

the NGOs as the “so-called civil society.” Some in CMDP partially accepted their civil society identity but often stated that they were a “different” *nagarik samaj*. Panday explained:

... not everyone in civil society agrees with what we think or do, nor are they expected to. We should note that the media often uses the term *nagarik samaj* casually, without always understanding or thinking about what it really means. (Nepal Monitor 2006)

As Panday narrated, people did not always *understand* the meaning of civil society and CMDP was wary of the *quality* of civil society. In their formal announcements and through pamphlets distributed during the movement, the term *nagarik* was emphasized and highlighted with large fonts at the center. The day before the Ratna Park protest, Panday, in his article in the *Kantipur* daily, had used the language of “citizens” rather than “civil society.” The title of the article read “citizens’ movement for democracy” and the very first sentence invoked the *nagarik* identity: “Citizens of the country who have rarely got relief from the growth of the state have doubly suffered after February 1 ...”¹⁷ Dr. Mathura Shrestha addressed participants at the Baneshwor meeting as “*priya nagarik*” (dear citizens), an uncharacteristic way of addressing mass meetings in Nepal.¹⁸ In the meeting minutes, many had introduced themselves as *nagarik* rather

¹⁷ The article did vaguely mention *nagarik samaj* once. Panday also used the traditional representation of the people as *janatas* (the ordinary people) in many occasions, hinting that citizens were “conscious” or “aware” whereas the *janatas* may have been “backward” and preoccupied with everyday life. As the movement progressed, the frequency of the use of the term *nagarik* increased dramatically.

¹⁸ The usual way of addressing people gathered in a mass meeting is *upasthit jana samudaya*, which is roughly equivalent to “the audience/people present here,” or if someone chaired a meeting, the speaker would begin by addressing the chairperson. I am thankful to Shrestha for making available the full text of the speech to me.

than with their organizational identity. Further, CMDP activists insisted that people should participate in mass meetings as citizens.

Although civil society activists and CMDP often cooperated against their common enemy, the disagreement between them eventually led to an overt conflict that reached its zenith on December 10, 2005, on UN Human Rights Day, celebrated every year with much fanfare by activists in Nepal.¹⁹ The Day acquired an added significance in the context of King Gyanendra's takeover and the curtailment of civil rights. The activists felt compelled to show a united face to the royal regime, international actors and ordinary Nepalis. Mindful of these needs, CMDP and NGO activists agreed, in principle, that they should organize a single program. According to one NGO activist, the CMDP activists then insisted that nobody should "flaunt their organizations," using organizational banners in the planned public demonstrations. In other words, everyone must participate as "pure" citizens.

Not willing to abandon their hard-earned organizational identity and their "legitimate" status as civil society, NGO activists rejected the proposal. Ultimately, they held two separate programs. Thus, two types of *nagarik samaj*—one premised on the logic of *citizen* (CMDP) and the other on *organization* (NGOs)—became evident and public. How can one understand this struggle over the meaning of *nagarik samaj*? It is even more puzzling if we consider that most CMDP activists worked in relatively small NGOs as salaried researchers or volunteers. Some of the scholars who had been critical of the new discourse of civil society, had actually been founders of their own brands of NGOs. It is here that we must examine the embeddedness

¹⁹ CMDP and NGOs often organized programs separately, but the third parties often bridged the gap. Many programs, for example, were organized by the professional organizations. In addition, several new groups bearing terms such as *nagarik* and *nagarik samaj* in their names sprung up in urban areas and small towns throughout the country. In such programs, leaders from both groups participated. Pahadi and Panday, unlike their radical younger peers, often took pragmatic views. Obviously, the common enemy—the "autocracy"—helped them bury the differences.

of different civil society actors into their diverse social and political networks.

In the eyes of CMDP activists, established NGOs represented status quo, timidity, and lack of autonomy since most large NGOs were—and are—close to the political parties, and they even function as the parties’ “sister organizations.” As I described above, this closeness had to do with the way Nepal’s democratic struggle had evolved since the 1980s. It is widely perceived that the country’s large NGOs are close to the CPN-UML (Ismail 2017). CMDP’s Panday and Pahadi had become celebrities in mainstream media. The NGO activists felt that the NGOs—and along with them, the CPN-UML party—were being overshadowed. A senior NGO activist told me that NGOs felt the “pro-Nepali Congress elements” had received “undue” attention from the media at the cost of the “progressives.”²⁰ Moreover, NGO activists said that, as registered “legal” entities, they had “limitations” regarding how far they could go against the royal regime. Many pro-king NGOs were members of the NGO Federation of Nepal and pro-movement NGOs had to take that fact into account, according to senior NGO activists. Not surprisingly, NGO activists claimed that “even pro-king NGOs had helped the movement.”

In contrast, CMDP maintained a relative distance from the political parties. Devendra Raj Panday and Krishna Pahadi, the two *de facto* leaders of the group—were not members of any political parties in 2005–2006, although NGO activists perceive them as being close to the Nepali Congress. CMDP’s relative distance from the political parties meant that they were perceived as “neutral” and “independent” by the media as journalists told me in interviews. CMDP activists thus could afford to take a critical attitude towards the political parties whereas NGO activists thought that CMDP was “abusive” towards the political parties. Moreover, since CMDP did not have to think about the survival of their organization, they easily

²⁰ In my interviews in 2008–2009, neither were the NGO activists ready to accept that CMDP was the main driver of mass mobilization. Instead, they gave credit to the political parties.

could afford to be radical in their political demands, as demonstrated by their strong advocacy for a Constituent Assembly, an alliance with the Maoists, and even a republic.

In addition to the NGOs' relations with the political parties and CMDP's relative independence, NGO and CMDP activists came from different organizational cultures, and they had different biographical trajectories. Larger NGOs were bureaucratic and hierarchical, whereas, in contrast, most young activists in CMDP worked in innovative and small NGOs such as COCAP, Martin Chautari and NESAC. These NGOs were different from most professional NGOs I visited during this research. For example, small NGOs were far less hierarchical, where young men and women were respected, and interactions were informal. These "democratic" and "participatory" practices and aspirations fitted well into the evolving CMDP culture.

At CMDP, these young activists found friendship in leaders like Devendra Raj Panday, Krishna Pahadi and Khagendra Sangroula, a left leaning writer. Pahadi was in his 40s, and Panday and Sangroula had publicly expressed their faith in young leaders and the younger generation. These CMDP leaders had long been outside formal organizations and routines. Pahadi had been espousing an egalitarian organizational culture in his Human Rights and Peace Society. Thus, the key CMDP leaders embraced these young activists and their sensibilities. Khagendra Sangroula joked that the secret of his good health was that he regularly "shook hands and intermingled" with young people. Devendra Raj Panday called his generation "criminals" for not doing much for the country.

I also observed these senior public figures intermingling informally in a way uncharacteristic of the hierarchical Nepali society. Many CMDP meetings I attended were participatory and open, even if most activists looked up to Panday and Pahadi for important decisions. NGOs and CMDP differed in their ways of the decision-making process. According to one NGO leader, they had wanted to make the decision-making process more "orderly" in the early phase of CMDP. CMDP activists refused such proposals since the orderly

process might have meant formation of a “committee” of seniors, which would have excluded the young activists from participating in the decision making process. What CMDP activists thought of as “democratic” was perceived as “abusive” and “disorderly” by the NGO leaders. A well-known NGO activist, who was present in one of the early meetings, told me he once heard a young woman activist yell “NGOs out.” He later withdrew from the group.²¹ In this sense, the citizen discourse and identity allowed young activists to frame issues in their terms. One can justifiably argue that the CMDP’s “loose organization” meant that the young activists could voice their concerns and participate in equal terms. This experience and imagination further made sense in the ongoing political struggle, which I explore in the next section.

CMDP activists claimed that they had repeatedly asked the journalists *not* to call them a civil society. In interviews, senior editors who had supported the movement were surprised to hear from me that the CMDP activists did not consider themselves a *nagarik samaj*. These editors immediately associated the Nepali linguistic term *nagarik* (citizen) with *nagarik samaj* (civil society). They saw their participation in the movement as a “duty” of citizens or *nagarik*. This concept of civil society was not different from the one advocated by CMDP. What is important here is that journalists, like the politicians I spoke to, were hardly interested in the “correct” academic definition of civil society and that all they had wanted was a potent symbol that could inspire people to participate in the movement. Since the mid-1990s, the discourse of *nagarik samaj* (civil society) had been there. The journalists may have picked up the familiar discourse unconsciously or simply through some pragmatic linguistic association.

²¹ Similarly, one young CMDP member told me that once, one well-known NGO leader was proposed as a speaker for an upcoming mass meeting. Sensing that the senior CMDP members might agree to the proposal, he interrupted and rejected the proposal; his friends joined the chorus. The NGO leader’s name was then removed from the list of speakers.

If CMDP activists were not happy with the media for calling them a civil society, NGO activists were furious that the civil society honor was extended to CMDP—and at times CMDP alone. Similarly, the media's depiction of Panday and Pahadi as “spearheads of civil society” (*nagarik aguwa*) provoked strong reactions among the members of the established civil society, since senior NGO leaders thought that they were the real civil society. One NGO activist told me: “Ask the *Kantipur* daily to know who represents civil society in Nepal.”²² It is not difficult to see that much confusion arose because of the Nepali term *nagarik*. It was as if *nagarik samaj* was lost in translation. Whereas the NGOs subscribed to the idea of civil society endorsed by donor agencies, it was the citizen or *nagarik* discourse that found a powerful expression in CMDP. It was the identity of *nagarik* that made the *nagarik samaj* discourse a powerful mobilizing symbol and narrative. As a human group, perhaps, *nagarik samaj*, as espoused by CMDP, can be better expressed as a society of citizens rather than the dominant idea of civil society as an organizational entity in its own right.

THE NAGARIK DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE

To understand why the *nagarik samaj* (literally, society of citizens) identity and discourse, as championed by CMDP, is better understood as a mobilizing symbol in 2005–2006, we further need to understand the broader political context and the movement dynamics. The *nagarik* or citizen discourse was not an entirely new phenomenon. Activists had first used it against the central authority during the struggle against Rana family rule (1846–1951). For example, one *Nagarik Adhikar Sangharsha Samiti* (The Struggle Committee for the Rights of the Citizens) was formed in the 1930s (Joshi and Rose 1966). The Nepali Congress also used the language of citizens' rights

²² Both Panday and Pahadi were aware of the issue. In one public meeting in July 2009, Pahadi said to the journalists that “CMDP was only a part of the civil society.” He further said that “friends” [in the large NGOs] had become “furious” over the media's depiction of CMDP spearheads as the leaders of civil society.

in the 1940s. Similarly, citizenship rights were encoded in legal books in 1956 (Shivakoti “Chintan” 2004). Citizen identity and discourse eclipsed after the rise of the monarchy during the Panchayat (1960–1990). Since the Panchayat regime was premised on the idea that the monarchical “substance” pervaded the people and places (Burghart 1994), no such identity was recognized and encouraged by the state. The Panchayat regime then exhorted for duties and obligations towards the nation, which was equated with the monarchy. The rights discourse did enter the public sphere after the 1990 political change, but it was soon eclipsed by the Maoist insurgency and the resulting political chaos.

The king’s direct rule in 2005 gave the people an opportunity to re-imagine their identity in Nepal’s politics and society. King Gyanendra had never been a popular figure before he abruptly became the king after the infamous Palace massacre in 2001. To make the matter worse, conspiracy theories accusing the king of engineering the massacre of his family members proliferated (Hutt 2017; Lecomte-Tilouine 2017). The Maoists had taken the radical political ideas to faraway places. The insurgency had affected and sensitized a large swath of the population. The phenomenal growth of media, particularly the FM radio stations, had promoted democratic values throughout the country (Onta 2006). Intellectuals have long portrayed the army as the “king’s army” in Nepal. Following the king’s move on February 1, 2005, the king-army symbiosis became public when, for example, the army marched on the streets and guarded the newsrooms. It was clear that the king had wanted to put himself at the apex of political, social and cultural life.

Not surprisingly, activists also imagined a new identity, discourse and practice of *nagarik* that was equally ubiquitous and powerful. According to CMDP activists, they sought to break with the king’s “hierarchical” regime, just like they had wanted to break with the “feudal practices” of the NGOs and the political parties. The home for *nagarik* was imagined in an inclusive *loktantra* (commoner’s democracy), a new term for democracy in the place of decades-

old *prajatantra*. During the movement, king's *praja* (subjects) were contrasted with *nagarik* (citizen). The king too spoke the language of *prajatantra* (subject's democracy), which according to the activists' new interpretation, implied subservience. Until then, the term *prajatantra* was used to connote liberal democracy. In the movement for democracy in 1990, for example, political leaders and activists had demanded *prajatantra*. Nevertheless, in 2005–2006, the term *prajatantra* was accorded a negative meaning, and it virtually disappeared from the activist and media discourse. Some have even argued that democracy was “mistranslated” as *prajatantra* in the 1990 Constitution (Dixit 2006).²³ “Let's act as citizens, not subjects (*praja nagarik banau*)” thus became one of the major slogans during the movement. By grafting inclusive, rural-connoting *loktantra* with “modern” *nagarik* discourse, CMDP activists imagined the project of a “new Nepal.”²⁴ CMDP's name brought together these key symbols at the heart of the 2005–2006 movement. CMDP consequently became the most radical group in the movement. This anti-monarchical radicalism eventually helped create a basis for the alliance between the political parties and the Maoists, as this radicalism offered a barometer of the public mood to the political parties.

It was in this spirit that they enthusiastically narrated to me what happened at the famous Baneshwor meeting on August 5, 2005. In what appeared to be an extremely theatrical event, where all major leaders, including former Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala,

²³ A few columnists and most notably Nepali Congress leader Narahari Acharya and Professor Lok Raj Baral had been using the term *loktantra* in their writings since the late 1990s, but the term did not gain widespread currency and a radical meaning until CMDP adopted it in its name. These columnists used *loktantra* to contest the meaning of democracy with both the Royal Palace and the Maoists.

²⁴ CMDP activists said that many, particularly those who were NGO members and close to the political parties, objected to using *loktantra*. They debated the meaning of *loktantra*, but, the effort to reach a consensus was abandoned, deliberately keeping the meaning of *loktantra* vague. For core CMDP activists, *loktantra* was a code name for *ganatantra* (republic).

President of the NC, and Madhav Kumar Nepal, CPN-UML General Secretary and also a former Deputy Prime Minister, were invited, but not allowed to speak or sit at the dais. Instead, the leaders sat cross-legged with the audiences on the ground and were asked to “confess” their past mistakes and promise that they would not repeat the same in the future. This event can be interpreted as an ultimate act of citizens’ performance—a reversal of the traditional hierarchical roles of leaders and their followers. The momentary and vicarious pleasure these activists drew from this event was noticeable in the interviews given to me about two years after the event. The invocation of the *nagarik* or citizen identity can thus be understood as a search for equality and a claim of agency by the ordinary Nepalis and the younger generation in the changing Nepali society.

Anthropologists often term powerful and popular symbols such as *nagarik* as “dominant” or “key” symbols (Turner 1967, 1975; Ortner 1973). These symbols operate by bringing together an otherwise disparate set of meanings; they condense many references, unifying them in a single “cognitive and affective field.” Such symbols transcend social differences and orient people to act in particular ways (Emirbayer and Sheller 1998). These key symbols worked as “master frames” for mass mobilization. Master frames condense a number of concerns and ensure their ideological congruence. As I have shown elsewhere (Basnet forthcoming), they are also crucial for coalition-building as well as diffusion and innovation of new ideas and tactics (Snow *et al.* 1986). CMDP could bring together diverse sections of society through the new identity and discourse of *nagarik* and mobilize the masses much earlier than the political parties could do. To be a *nagarik* in *loktantra*, in short, was to fashion a new way of being; a new relation with the state, society, and each other; and a new mode of action. By deploying powerful symbols such as *nagarik*, CMDP thus played a significant role in mass mobilization as a *nagarik samaj* (society of citizens).

CONCLUSION

The distinct field of liberal civil sphere emerged in earnest in Nepal in close cooperation with the political parties in the context of democratic struggle in the 1980s. Subsequently, NGOs and professional organizations proliferated after the 1990 political change. I showed that the NGOs were the first to appropriate the global discourse of civil society around the mid-1990s. Neither the NGOs nor the civil society discourse, however, became popular in the 1990s. As Nepal plunged into a series of political crises with the escalation of the Maoist insurgency, the discourse of civil society started getting attention as the activists seemed to offer way-outs, or so the activists imagined. After the royal takeover in February 2005, the discourse of civil society got a new meaning as demonstrated above. The embeddedness of civil society actors into different networks, particularly the political parties, in part, explains the struggle over the meaning of civil society during People's Movement II in 2005–2006. But I also argued that the character of the political struggle, the demography of the actors as well as the biographical experience of different actors in the movement made the discourse of *nagarik* significant and meaningful.

What is often lost is that as Nepal found itself mired in new problems, the meaning and mission of civil society changed accordingly. In this sense, the civil society phenomenon in Nepal was not merely a “mimetic articulation” of the West (Shah 2008). As a formation “outside” formal politics and market, a strand of contemporary civil society theory would surely recognize Nepal's NGOs as well as CMDP as members of civil society. However, I also showed that during People's Movement II, *nagarik samaj*, as powerfully represented by CMDP, added a new meaning—or reconfigured the existing meaning. Here *nagarik* in *nagarik samaj* meant radical anti-monarchical agenda. Whereas Western powers did assist the movement (Shah 2008), it was also the moment when the Nepali *janatas* (people) claimed agency invoking the discourse and identity of *nagarik* and defeated the powerful monarchy. In this

sense, the *nagarik* discourse and identity became a dominant symbol and mobilizing narrative against King Gyanendra's direct rule. It will be a mistake to equate this *nagarik samaj* uncritically to the usual organizational sphere of civil society, observed elsewhere in the world and even in Nepal in the previous decades. This study shows that academics should be alert to the local context and nuances while theorizing lofty concepts such as civil society.

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