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Lost on democracy's mountain pass

Nepal stands at a critical juncture in its democratic journey — what is missing is political will

Nepal, renowned for its majestic Himalayan landscapes and rich cultural tapestry, is at a pivotal moment in its political history. Having had to grapple with major earthquakes over the last decade and more recently severe floods and landslides that have claimed hundreds of lives and caused widespread devastation, the country faces an urgent need for effective governance amidst ongoing political instability. While labelled as 'world champion of political instability' by *Le Monde* and a 'failed state' as noted by *The Economist,* the fact remains that despite government instability, Nepali society is vibrant, well-functioning and ready for democratic advancement. But the pressing question is: will it be able to realise that potential?

Nepal has long been characterised by political volatility that has intensified in recent years. Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008 and the promulgation of the constitution in 2015, the nation has seen eight different governments. A clear reflection of political instability. But there are reasons for cautious optimism — the latest coalition government, formed in August 2024 with five parties of varying ideologies, claims it can provide the stability necessary for democracy.

One must keep in mind, that in the past, each new government often tailored its policies to its own interests. The current administration has proposed constitutional amendments aimed at addressing perceived shortcomings in the electoral process and federalism — issues viewed as sources of political instability. But it must be clearly said that the constitution itself is not the root cause of the instability; but rather, it is the political culture on a governmental level that has developed over the years. These proposed amendments may do more damage than good and could open Pandora's box as well as face significant resistance.

Not all is lost

The future of Nepal's democratisation process hinges not solely on constitutional amendments but on the development of constitutional

behaviour. The current government, composed of the two largest and three smaller parties, has the potential to quell public disenchantment if it can translate hope into tangible action. Enhancing democratic culture and creating economic opportunities for the growing youth population are crucial. Failure to do so will erode trust in politics and diminish public expectations.

The effectiveness of this government will be judged by its ability to navigate internal disagreements and implement coherent policies. The challenge lies in moving beyond political infighting to pursue substantive reforms that address economic development, climate change, corruption, social inequality, and meaningful inclusion.

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Despite its political challenges, Nepal is not a failed state. This classification typically refers to countries where governmental institutions have collapsed, leading to a complete breakdown of law and order. While Nepal faces significant challenges, it continues to function with operational institutions and a degree of stability.

Nepal has a vibrant civil society and media that play crucial roles in advocating for reforms and holding leaders accountable. The nation has a long history of elections and upholding adult franchise, with power consistently transferring smoothly through electoral processes. This level of electoral activity demonstrates a commitment to democratic practices and public participation.

Additionally, the resilience and adaptability of Nepali society is exceptional. The nation's social diversity fosters democratic pluralism, which enhances democracy and accelerates development through various economic opportunities. This dynamic also creates space for international support during crises. Furthermore, despite its challenging geography, Nepal has adeptly navigated international relations, positioning itself to potentially benefit from new geopolitical and geoeconomic opportunities rather than viewing itself as a prisoner of geography.

Addressing outstanding issues

While there are functioning democratic elements within the country's history as well the society there are still many road blocks. As Nepal navigates its political landscape, several priorities must be addressed to strengthen democracy and promote stability. Constitutional stability and adherence to its principles are crucial. Frequent amendments to the

constitution, without fully implementing or respecting its spirit, may prove counterproductive. Instead of changing the constitution every decade, there is a pressing need to bolster a democratic political culture for lasting stability.

Economic reforms and development initiatives are essential for the improvement of living standards and reducing poverty. Investment in infrastructure, particularly in disaster-prone areas, is crucial for long-term ecological stability and growth, thereby supporting the democratisation process. The recent floods highlight the urgent need for effective disaster management and resilient infrastructure to safeguard communities against climate change impacts.

Recent floods and landslides have underscored critical deficiencies in Nepal's infrastructure, which is essential for effective disaster management and climate resilience. Frequent changes in government and a lackadaisical approach of political parties have hindered the implementation of sustainable policies to address these urgent needs, raising concerns about effectiveness, especially as many citizens struggle to recover.

Political reconciliation is also overdue. Nepal's long-awaited transitional justice, to provide justice to the victims of ten years of Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006), will finally advance with a new law endorsed by the lower house of parliament on 14 August 2024 and the formation of the search committee to serve as members in the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappearance Persons (CIEDP). This law aims to provide justice to conflict victims and enhance reconciliation, although it must align with directives from the Supreme Court of Nepal. However, human rights organisations have criticised the TRC bill, questioning its adequacy and effectiveness.

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Building consensus among diverse political factions and fostering cooperation will be vital. This collaboration is essential for creating a stable governance environment and enhancing the capacity and transparency of government institutions, which are crucial for restoring public trust.

Addressing social and economic inequalities, ensuring the inclusion of marginalised communities, promoting gender equality, and protecting minority rights will further enhance social justice. A socially just society can thrive both economically and politically.

Central to achieving these goals is the political will of Nepal's leaders to implement reforms effectively and uphold democratic values. This commitment is essential for guiding the country through its current difficulties toward a more stable and prosperous future.

Chronic governmental instability impacts political stability and could have consequences for the broader democratisation process. While there is a genuine commitment to democracy within Nepali society, political parties sometimes fall short or introduce policies that benefit some but not all. Under such circumstances, democracy may not flourish as it should. Therefore, Nepal must maintain its vibrant civic sphere, which has served as an 'island of civility' during times of crisis and continues to promote democratic values.

All said, Nepal stands at a critical juncture in its democratic journey. The impact of recent natural disasters has significantly affected the country, highlighting the urgent need for effective governance and infrastructure development. Success will depend on how well political parties and their leaders adhere to the spirit of the constitution and address pressing challenges. While political instability has been a recurring theme, Nepal's resilient institutions, active civil society, and ongoing democratic processes reflect a nation far from being a failed state. By focusing on economic development, political reconciliation, and institutional strengthening, Nepal can navigate its current challenges and continue on its path toward stability and prosperity.



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