

Antipolitics and Counterpolitics in Nepal's Civil Society: The Case of Nepal's Citizens' Movement

Celayne Heaton Shrestha · Ramesh Adhikari

Published online: 4 June 2010

© International Society for Third-Sector Research and The John's Hopkins University 2010

Abstract This article considers the relationship of civil society to the domain of the political from the actors' perspectives. It explores the attempt by a citizens' movement (CMDP) in Nepal to construct new political realities in the context of the autocratic regime of king Gyanendra and then during the democratic transition. This was, paradoxically, to be achieved through the construction of an *apolitical* space. Theoretically, this production of apoliticality by civil society actors shows that civil society is not only implicated in the expansion of what is understood as 'political' but also in setting its boundaries. The broader aims of the article are to contribute to the ethnography of civil society and to add to current understandings of the relationship of actually existing civil societies to the political domain. Practically, it argues that debates over whether civil society is or is not political in the Nepal case and normative positions within development circles that it should not be political are misconceived since civil society is a site for the production of both politicality and apoliticality.

Résumé Cet article examine le lien entre la société civile et le domaine de la politique du point de vue des protagonistes. Il décrit la tentative faite par un mouvement de citoyens (CMDP) au Népal pour construire de nouvelles réalités politiques dans le contexte du régime autocratique du roi Gyanendra, puis au cours de la transition démocratique. Cette initiative doit être réalisée, curieusement, par la construction d'un espace *apolitique*. En théorie, cette production de l'apolitisme par les acteurs de la société civile indique que celle-ci n'est pas seulement impliquée dans le développement de ce que l'on entend par «politique», mais aussi dans la

C. H. Shrestha (✉)

Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK
e-mail: celayne.hs@gmail.com

R. Adhikari

Marxism Study and Research Academy, Kathmandu, Nepal

délimitation de ses frontières. Les objectifs plus étendus de cet article sont de contribuer à l'ethnographie de la société civile et à la compréhension actuelle de la relation entre les sociétés civiles et le domaine politique. Il fait valoir, en quelque sorte, que les débats visant à savoir si la société civile est ou n'est pas politique pour l'exemple du Népal et concernant les positions normatives dans les cercles de développement, et qui portent sur le fait qu'elle ne devrait pas être politique sont erronés, puisque la société civile est un lieu de production d'actions à la fois politiques et apolitiques.

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag betrachtet die Beziehung zwischen der Bürgergesellschaft und der politischen Domäne aus der Perspektive der Akteure. Es wird untersucht, wie die nepalesische Bürgerbewegung für Demokratie und Frieden (Civil Movement for Democracy and Peace, CMDP) versucht, neue politische Realitäten im Rahmen des autokratischen Regimes von König Gyanendra und anschließend während des Wandels zur Demokratie zu konstruieren. Dies sollte paradoxerweise durch die Schaffung eines *apolitischen* Raumes realisiert werden. Theoretisch zeigt diese Schaffung einer Apolitizität durch die Akteure der Bürgergesellschaft, dass die Bürgergesellschaft nicht nur in der Ausweitung dessen, was als „politisch“ verstanden wird, verwickelt ist, sondern auch in seiner Eingrenzung. Der Beitrag zielt allgemein darauf ab, zur Ethnographie der Bürgergesellschaft beizutragen und das gegenwärtige Verständnis von der Beziehung der tatsächlich existierenden Bürgergesellschaften zur politischen Domäne zu vertiefen. In dem Beitrag wird konkret die Ansicht vertreten, dass in den Diskussionen darüber, ob die Bürgergesellschaft im Fall Nepal politisch ist oder nicht, und in den verbreiteten Auffassungen innerhalb von Entwicklungskreisen, dass sie nicht politisch sein sollte, falsche Vorstellungen vertreten werden, da die Bürgergesellschaft eine Einrichtung für die Schaffung von sowohl Politizität als auch Apolitizität ist.

Resumen El presente trabajo analiza la relación entre la sociedad civil y la política desde las perspectivas de los actores. Analiza los intentos de un movimiento ciudadano en Nepal (el CMDP) para construir nuevas realidades políticas en el contexto del régimen autocrático del rey Gyanendra y después durante la transición democrática. Paradójicamente, ello debía lograrse a través de la construcción de un espacio *apolítico*. En teoría, esta producción de «apoliticalidad» de los actores de la sociedad civil demuestra que la sociedad civil no solo está implicada en la expansión de lo que se entiende como «político» sino también en establecer sus límites. El trabajo tiene como objetivos más amplios contribuir a la etnografía de la sociedad civil y añadir los conocimientos actuales de la relación de las sociedades civiles existentes y al dominio político. En la práctica, argumenta que los debates sobre si la sociedad civil es o no política en el caso nepalí y las posiciones normativas dentro de los círculos de desarrollo que no deberían ser políticas están mal concebidos, ya que la sociedad civil es un sitio para la producción tanto de «politicalidad» como de «apoliticalidad».

Keywords Civil society · Politics · Nepal · Ethnography

Introduction

The term ‘civil society’ hardly needs an introduction today, so vast has been the literature dealing with the term (e.g. Keane 1988; Hall 1995; Hann and Dunn 1996; Van Rooy 1998). The concept of civil society is rich in meanings and history, a fact which has led some to reject the term as of little analytical value (e.g. Kumar 1993). Still some elements are consistently found across the definitions of civil society today, such as its autonomy from the state and the uncoerced and not-for-profit character of associations seen to inhabit this sphere (e.g. Diamond 1994). Writings on civil society in Nepal (e.g. Dahal 2006; Panday 2008) have not departed significantly from neoliberal formulations such as Diamond’s. However, public discourse has emphasised one component of the neoliberal version above all others, i.e. its voluntary, not-for-profit nature. Consistently, the identification of NGOs with civil society in donor discourse and literature (e.g. AIN 2007) has been rejected by Nepali intellectuals on the grounds that they are operated largely by salaried workers (e.g. Siwakoti 2000; Sangroula 2009). Understandings of ‘civil society’ in Nepal also strongly underscore its elite character: civil society is a society of ‘enlightened people’, academics, journalists, lawyers, human rights activists and so forth, expected to provide guidance to those in power (Hatchhethu 2006). The late Saubhagya Shah, a Nepali anthropologist, captured this expectation: ‘seen from within the Hindu tradition, civil society occasionally parallels the tension between the priestly class and the Kshatriya rulers in which the ecclesiastical critique challenges the temporal authority’ (2008, p. 11). The state–civil society opposition is reworked as a contrast between the temporal and the spiritual or the political and the moral realms. Accordingly, those that the Nepali press refer to as ‘civil society leaders’ are those in senior positions in their field: for example, the chairperson of the Association of College Teachers, the head of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists or the Nepal Bar association. The ‘civil society’ concept as generally understood in Nepal is, therefore, rather elitist and exclusive, and the many and varied forms of association that are ubiquitous features of social life in Nepal (e.g. Vergati 1995; Chhetri 1995; Messerschmidt 1978) are not considered as ‘civil society organisations’ in this context. The movement that is the subject of this article, on the other hand, is felt to fulfil these criteria, as indicated by the fact that ‘civil society’ and ‘CMDP’ (the movement’s acronym) were often used interchangeably by the media and the general public. When we write of civil society in this article, it is to this conception of civil society that we refer.

Generally, the political aspects of civil society have preoccupied scholars and activists most. Much literature has focused on the kinds of political projects the concept has inspired and in support of which it has been mobilised by groups ranging from dissidents in authoritarian regimes to international development agencies (e.g. Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Davis and MacGregor 2000). Social movement analysts have explored the impact of movements on political culture itself, and shown how movements have expanded what is understood by ‘political’ to include actors and issues bypassed by formal political institutions (e.g. Escobar and Alvarez 1992). Apoliticality has received less attention in the literature on civil society, and it has generally been cast in a rather negative light—as a corruption of

what many consider an essentially political concept. For example, in studies of international development, civil society apoliticality is decried as the product of depoliticization by the development apparatus (e.g. Jenkins 2001; Lewis 2002; Davis and MacGregor 2000). Apolitical versions of civil society promoted by international aid agencies are described as ‘tame’, ‘a mirage’ (Jenkins 2001), ‘mistaken’ and at odds with ground realities (Chandhoke 2003). While these authors provide an important corrective to romanticised conceptions of civil society and rightly ask that we pay attention to the operations of power, inequality and oppression within the networks and associations of existing civil societies (e.g. Harriss 2007; Chandhoke 2003), we suggest that to dismiss apolitical readings of civil society as ‘mistaken’ is also problematic.

Less negative views of civil society apoliticality are found in studies of civil society under repressive military regimes. In the Asian context, for example, Aspinall (2005) explores forms of opposition during Suharto’s rule in Indonesia, including the apolitical ‘proto-opposition’ of NGOs and Jordt (2007) analyses the apolitical mass lay meditation movement in Burma. In both the cases, apoliticality is presented as a response, by civil society itself, to the politically repressive environment and as the search for a means to address social problems and bring about social transformation under these conditions. Jordt’s work distinguishes itself from Aspinall’s and the aforementioned literature, however, in one important respect: it does not, unlike the former, give primacy to the political, seen as a more authentic domain and present apoliticality as merely the product of downplaying, avoidance or hiding (the diversity of interests; conflict and disunity among civil society groups and organisations; enmeshment with the state; relationships with political parties). For Jordt civil society, apoliticality is not a ‘masquerade’. The author describes how this movement, through the assertion of moral frameworks for action constrained the government and coerced it into partial compliance. Though the movement’s actions had clear political effects, she rejects the notion that this mass movement might be a political movement ‘masquerading’ as an apolitical, religious movement. This is demonstrated, she argues, by the fact that the movement, a means to tackle social problems apolitically, directed its actions not at the political sphere, but rather, the cosmological. Thus, the movement performed functions expected to ‘civil society’—to keep the state in check—but without engaging explicitly and politically, with the latter. For Jordt, ‘apoliticality’ and ‘civil society’ are not contradictory terms.

This article seeks to build on work such as Jordt, which takes the possibility of an apolitical civil society seriously, rather than a ‘corruption’. We seek to do so by adopting a broad notion of the ‘political’. Whereas in Jordt, ‘the political’ refers to formal institutions of power; here, we will consider ‘the political’ as a dimension of social action, following political scientists such as Schmitt (e.g. 1996 [1927]). He defines ‘the political’ as a dimension of social life rather than a separate domain: it describes the intensity of an association or disassociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national, economic (p. 38). In Mouffe, similarly, ‘the political’ refers to “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human societies” (2002, p. 2). We further understand ‘politicality’ and ‘apoliticality’ as *ways of acting* that are more or less affected by the dimension of ‘the political’. Our

attention to ‘ways of acting’ is consistent with our focus on the ‘performance’ of civil society by non-state actors, following Eder’s (2009) approach. Civil society, he proposed, is best studied as a performance by actors become ‘civic’, a ‘script’ rather than a given group of actors. The analysis presented here also pays attention to the meanings and perspectives of civil society actors including their understanding of what counts as ‘political’. These understandings are outlined in “[Envisioning politics and apoliticality](#)”.

We will add to the literature on social movements by showing how the citizens’ movement sought to performatively limit—not just expand—the political. We build on existing work on civil society apoliticality, too, by showing how an apolitical space is produced by civil society actors and not, as in most studies, simply ‘inhabited’. Ultimately, this article proposes a more nuanced understanding of the relationship of civil society to the political, one that sees civil society itself as the site of the production of both the political and the apolitical.

The case presented is that of a citizens’ movement in Nepal during the last few years of a Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) that witnessed not only significant human losses but also a severe erosion of democratic values and human rights. The article is based on material collected as part of an ESRC funded research project. For details, see http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA/Research_projects/Default.htm. It draws on interviews with members of ‘civil society’, senior NGO representatives, human rights volunteers; notes from observations of events organised by ‘civil society’ in Nepal over the course of 13 months (April 2007–July 2008). The article begins with an outline of local understandings of ‘politics’ and provides working definitions of the two concepts of antipolitics and counterpolitics. This sets the ground for the third part of the article, which presents the case of CMDP. It is followed by a conclusion.

Envisioning Politics and Apoliticality

For social actors in this setting, ‘politics’ generally referred to activities (voting, campaigning) occurring in given institutional spaces (parties, parliament), and those relating to political parties in particular. This is in contrast with the much broader meaning of the term within disciplines such as social anthropology—where ‘politics’ has come to refer to the acquisition and transmission of power—or social movement theorists. Here, ‘politics’ was seen as the ‘private business’ of politicians, and the issues raised by parties to be their own, rather than the issues of ‘the people’.

Respondents conceived of ‘politics’ as calculated instrumentality, as indicated for example by the fact that talk about the nature and goal of ‘politics’ inevitably turned into a discussion of the motivations of individual politicians, the ‘prize’ they pursued, the tactics and manoeuvres and speculation about their next move. For instance, current discussion about whether or not the new constitution of Nepal will be written within the set timeframe revolves around the motivation of CA members to finish on time—and this is felt to be moot, given that this would bring to an end their enjoyment of generous facilities and allowances. As has been noted in both Bengal and Sri Lanka (by Ruud 2001; Spencer 2007, respectively), existing politics

was perceived as a ‘dirty business’. For actors in all three settings, politics was synonymous with ‘politicking’.

The suspicion that party politics was motivated purely by the desire for self-advancement and not, as proffered, for service, was widespread. During the period leading up to CMPD’s establishment, the changing lifestyle of party leaders (towards increasing displays of material wealth) together with worsening conditions for the majority of the people, raised the public’s suspicion that party politics was self-interested. This was confirmed by political developments in the early 2000s, notably the decision to dissolve parliament in 2002 (largely a consequence to squabbling within the then PM’s own party and paving the way for the king’s assumption of executive powers) and the seeming cover up by political parties of the royal massacre of 2001.¹ The ‘prize’ was seen to be acquisition of *political power*, evidenced by the access to formal positions in state institutions—colloquially referred to as ‘chairs’—and to the material trappings that accompanied ‘chairs’.

The label of ‘dirty business’ was also occasioned by the divisive and agonistic character of political practice. In Sri Lanka, Spencer (2007) found politics to be perceived as a ‘temporary collective malaise’, a source of moral disturbance and trouble opposed to the ideals of community and unity. Similarly, in Bengal, Ruud (2001) reports that politics was seen as a disturbance bringing disharmony to society and something that morally upright people would not touch (p. 10). In the research setting, too, the conflict and disunity engendered by politics was condemned while consensus among political parties seen not simply as desirable and achievable, but as the goal of (‘enlightened’) political activity by many. The general public criticised the lack of cooperation among, and also disparaged the disunity and factionalism within, political parties. The frequent splitting of mainstream parties was seen as the consequence of party leaders’ quest for self advancement rather than the outcome of differing political agendas. Most doubted that politics by consensus, concerned with policy making rather than politicking, would ever become the norm. Actually existing politics was primarily agonistic and divisive, though the possibility of non-agonistic ways of acting in the conduct of political affairs was acknowledged. This view differs somewhat from that of theorists such as Bailey (e.g. 1969) who stressed the regulation of antagonism in his model of politics as rule-ordered agonism. It departed, too from formulations by political scientists such as Mouffe, for whom ‘politics consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations...[and] the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity’ (2002, p. 2).

In line with the conception of ‘politics’ as relating to political parties, apoliticality in this context meant, principally, distance from political parties and their culture. The terms ‘antipolitics’ and ‘counterpolitics’ were not part of the vocabulary of civil society activists. We introduce these to deepen the analysis of CMDP apoliticality.

‘Antipolitics’ has been widely used in relation to development projects, starting with Ferguson’s seminal work (1990) in Lesotho. In such work, ‘antipolitics’ is

¹ Several of these points were acknowledged as mistakes committed by his own party, UML, by then general secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal in an article in the national daily *Naya Patrika*, 10 January 2009.

defined as a representation of economic and social life which denies ‘politics’ (see also Chhotray 2004; White 1996). The notion of antipolitics has also been used outside of the study of development, for instance in relation to the production of democracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Coles 2004). ‘Antipolitics’ is defined slightly differently in Spencer (op cit). For him, ‘antipolitics’ refers not to an obscuring of social realities in the service of power, but a cleansing of politics and the state. This project of cleansing involves the denouncing of politics, the attempt to separate the nation and its cultures from the realm of rational statecraft, and the adoption of a moral critique of political leaders (ibid, p. 142). Yet the antipolitical, remarks Spencer, is not outside of the political; it is the exploitation, for *political purposes*, of popular unease with the moral implications of actually existing politics. While there are differences between the two understandings of ‘antipolitics’, both speak to a *political* project of rejecting politics, either through critique or through the discursive concealing of its operation. This contrasts with the ‘counterpolitical’, which, in Spencer is located outside of ‘the political’. He defines ‘counterpolitical’ and ‘counterpolitics’ as the attempt to resist the logic of division and to defuse the effects of the political: ‘the counter-political aspires to avoid the divisive heart of the political altogether’ and ‘involves creating a relationship with the other, search for dialogue and cooperation’ (ibid, p. 176). In this article, we adopt the following definitions: ‘antipolitical’ and ‘counterpolitical’ are understood to refer to, respectively, the instrumental denial of politics, while the second is taken to mean the performative construction of a realm the logic of which is meant to contrast with that which guides politics. Politics, in turn, is seen as the primarily socially divisive activity of formal political institutions in the pursuit of power. All these are in keeping with local understandings of these notions.

We now turn to CMDP and the way in which it sought to go beyond the features of politics outlined above.

Nepal’s Citizens’ Movement 2005–2008

Background to CMDP

The emergence of CMDP comes against a background of considerable political turmoil in Nepal: the spread of a Maoist insurgency launched in 1996 and the erosion of democratic values and human rights. The years 2002–2006 witnessed an overturning of the gains of a democratic movement that had occurred just 12 years earlier, in 1990. After a period of increasing concentration of power in the hands of the ruler and repeated breakdowns in peace talks with Maoist insurgents, the king staged a coup on the 1st February 2005. Accusing the democratically elected Prime Minister Deuba of failing to make arrangements for parliamentary elections and of being unable to restore peace, the king seized effective control of all levers of power in Nepal. A state of emergency was imposed, and serious crackdowns on civil liberties ensued. Fundamental constitutional rights including the freedom of assembly and expression, the right to information and privacy, the right to property and the prohibition against arbitrary detention, were suspended. Restrictions on the

press were severe: within a few days of his coup, the King issued a directive prohibiting all media from issuing any statements criticising “the intent and spirit” of the state of emergency and the work of the security agencies, under threat of arrest. For a week after the takeover, media offices around the country were occupied by armed security officials, who in some cases directly intervened to censor news reports. All public gatherings became subject to strict licensing requirements. Restrictions and censorship did not abate drastically after the withdrawal of the Emergency in late May 2005. Arrest of political activists, human rights defenders including journalists, lawyers, trade unionists, women rights activists and students continued apace with more than 6,500 arrests reported between February 2005 and 2006 (Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development 2006). Force against demonstrators in rallies was routinely used, and increased in brutality in 2006. On the 7th of February 2006, the eve of municipal polls, the king’s administration was to issue its forces the order to shoot polls disruptors. Both covert (e.g. rumours of ‘death lists’ of activists and the use of informants in NGOs) and overt (mass arrests of potential instigators of protest prior to planned protests including activists and political leaders) methods of repression were used. After the coup of 2005, leaders of mainstream parties were placed under house arrest, while hundreds of party cadres and student activists were detained to prevent protests at the royal takeover; a travel ban was ordered for activists and eminent civil society figures as well as political leaders; communications including telephone services and television channels were cut.

Most observers found the response of political parties to be slow as well as inadequate, seemingly unable to even dent the regime’s determination to consolidate its own power and sideline democratic forces. The political party movement was criticised for being ‘insufficiently aggressive’ and in need of ‘intensification’ by well-regarded civil society leaders. The 9 months that followed the king’s coup saw two main periods of agitation by political parties. These occurred from mid-February to late April and then again in September, in the wake of a unilateral ceasefire by the Maoists. However, these were largely confined to party cadres and had little popular support (Shah 2008, pp. 14–15). The parties’ agenda, moreover, was seen as extremely limited by numerous groups. By that time, student wings of political parties had been rooting for a republic for almost 3 years, and intellectuals were warming to the idea, yet the seven major political parties were still demanding the revival of parliament and reforms to the 1990 constitution. Against this background, CMDP was launched in July of 2005. Over the next few years, it was to be part of momentous changes in Nepal’s history: the signing of a peace accord with the Maoist insurgents in November 2005; a people’s movement that ended with the king surrendering executive powers back to political parties in April 2006; the running of elections, in April 2008, for a Constituent Assembly; the declaration of Nepal as a republic, in May 2008; and in July of 2008, the election of the leader of the CPN-Maoists, Prachanda, as the first prime minister of republican Nepal.

CMDP’s core was and remains dominated by high caste and middle class professionals based in the capital, Kathmandu. It did, however, attract and mobilise a much broader constituency and established linkages with groups outside of the

capital, which began launching their own, no less daring, protest programmes. CMDP included, too, significant numbers of political party cadres, though these did not identify themselves as such but rather, as ‘citizens’. The elite character of the core of the movement did not appear to have become an issue prior to the period following the people’s movement of 2006, when a group of Dalit activists established their own, ‘Dalit Citizens’ Movement’, charging CMDP of ‘exclusivity’. CMDP was one of several alliances pursuing the cause of peace and democracy (e.g. PAPAD, CSPD), but none achieved the visibility of nor the ability to mobilise as large numbers as CMDP in 2005 and 2006. CMDP distinguished itself, too, by its comparatively radical agenda.

First of all, CMDP called for an overhaul of the constitution of Nepal, rather than simply the restoration of the dissolved House of Representatives and amendments to the 1990 constitution. Likewise, the possibility of a republican set-up in Nepal was supported by CMDP before political parties had themselves embraced the idea. They encouraged political parties to take up this agenda, claiming it had become ‘the nation’s agenda’ (September 2005). Another task CMDP set for itself was to ensure that ‘progressive forces in struggle with the royal regime’ did not enter into ‘a hasty compromise’ with the king, as had occurred in 2004 when, after a period of protests against the royal administration, Nepali Congress (NC) leader Deuba joined the king’s government. CMDP also, on occasion, united with other voices in the condemnation of specific incidents (e.g. the Nagarkot massacre of December 2005, when a drunken Royal Nepal Army soldier shot 12 civilians) or ordinances (e.g. 12 November 2005 demonstration demanding the withdrawal of ‘draconian’ media ordinance). More recently, CMDP’s agenda has included: full proportional representation in elections to the Constituent Assembly (2008); rehabilitation of those displaced in a major incident in the Tarai (Kapilbastu 2007); against allocating a budget to the king and his family (2007); against the government’s decision to allow the deposed king to stay at Nagarjun palace and permit his mother and grandmother to live inside Narayanhiti palace (2008); protesting the president’s move to reinstate Chief of Army Staff Katuwal after the latter was sacked by the government (2009).

Since its inception, CMDP had sought to distance itself from party politics. However, in drawing on many of the notions (e.g. ‘absolute democracy’) and agendas pursued by political parties, as well as taking sides in these broader debates, CMDP has attracted criticism for being ‘too political’, commonly being dubbed a ‘wing’ of a political party (particularly Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, CPN-M). This aspect has, in part, been dealt with elsewhere (Heaton Shrestha 2010) and here, it is not its politicality, but its apoliticality that is the main focus of this article. In the section that follows, we describe CM organised events and provide quotations by CM activists. These excerpts represent elements of the performance and the narrative of a ‘civil society’ free from the agonism and divisiveness that were seen to plague institutional politics. These speak to a project to construct a civil society whose logic would be radically different from that of the political realm as envisaged by these activists (as seen in “[Envisioning politics and apoliticality](#)”). At the same time, elements of politics (as defined in “[Envisioning politics and apoliticality](#)”) can be discerned in the examples given, pointing to the difficulty of

separating the political and apolitical in CMDP. We comment on this at the end of “Nepal’s citizens’ movement 2005–2008”.

Apoliticality and CMDP

Power and CMDP

It was in relation to ‘the prize’ of politics, first of all, that the apoliticality of CMDP was constructed. This involved simultaneously endorsing ‘power’ as a valued prize and its practical and discursive rejection. We illustrate this point through an account of a sit-in programme held in June 2008, soon after the declaration of Nepal as a republic and the very day that the king of Nepal was to leave the royal palace of Narayanhiti, ending formally 240 years of monarchy. Members of CMDP had planned to gather and protest against the government’s decision to allow former king Gyanendra to stay at Nagarjun palace and permit his mother and grandmother to live inside Narayanhiti. Devendra Raj Panday, civil society leader and one time slated for the presidency,² commented to the press during the sit-in programme:

There is an underlying political message behind Gyanendra’s claim over both the palaces and the government’s nod ...Therefore, we launched protests against it as an unacceptable move by both the king and the government ...We are against providing any type of special royal privilege—be it security, vehicles, employees or anything else—to the former king and his family members...It is not necessary as the Shah family itself has more than enough wealth to fulfil its needs (*ekantipur*, June 11 2008).

The venue for the programme could hardly have been more unremarkable: a patch of dusty concrete on the corner of a major junction, bounded by metal railing on one side and rows of shops on the other. Besides the dusty corner, the tall building of the Standard Chartered Bank with its bright green and blue signs and across the road, the well-known Nanglo Bakery Café—a regular meeting point for CMDP activists and intellectuals. Diagonally opposite the programme venue, stood the grand, gated and now heavily guarded Birendra International Convention Centre (BICC), the seat of the CA. That day the CA was to be in session, and soon, CA members would make their way to the BICC via this very junction. A banner of white cotton was stretched out on the ground; the blue lettering read: “long live the democratic republic of Nepal-CMDP”. Along the banner were a row of persons known as civil society leaders, senior by virtue of their age as well as their position within their respective field—award winning artist Kiran Manandhar, director of Creative Designs Sundar Shrestha, physician Sundar Mani Dixit, literary figure Khagendra Sangroula, head of the well known NGO WOREC, Renu Rajbhandari among others. A crowd of younger individuals, some standing, some sitting on pieces of paper, framed this line of eminent figures. The highlight of the programme occurs when two activists, artistes from the troupe Gurukul, begin banging on empty

² He was, indeed, rumoured to be the choice candidate for the post of president by CPN-M. As we stood in the programme, comments were made by passers-by that here was ‘President Devendra Raj Panday’.

drums with an umbrella and soliciting donations from the assembled protestors as well as passers by, shoppers, taxi drivers, men pushing bicycles laden with goods to be sold on the market: ‘give beggars donations, don’t give them a palace!’ reads the improvised paper hat sported by one of the artistes. They succeed in raising over 375 Rupies, a sum which is to be sent to the government through the post. The press make an appearance, and proceed to interview some of CMDP’s leaders. Prachanda (the then PM) has apparently been summoned at the sit-in, and for some time, there is almost hope that he might respond to the request. But as politicians’ Pajeros on the way to the seat of the CA, pass the sit-in without so much as a glance at the protest programme, that hope vanishes. Finally, around 12 pm, the programme is declared closed. Participants stand up, and many seek relief from the scorching sun, all the while continuing their conversations, talking into mobiles, bidding goodbyes and finally scattering.

Symbolically, the most remarkable feature of the programme were the contrasts between the grandeur of the politicians’ meeting place (the BICC) and the dusty, commonplace, lowly junction of the sit-in; the fact that politicians were being ferried in air-conditioned 4 × 4 vehicles, while activists were sitting in the dust and the sun, without shelter; the isolation of politicians from the surrounding bustle and the engagement of activists with ‘the public’ including workers; the seniority of the front line activists (senior also to most politicians) and their willing ‘debasement’. These contrasts implicitly valorised ‘the prize’ of the contest for chairs: it suggested that power opened doors to grand buildings and luxury transportation; while its lack meant sitting in the dust and the sun, unremarkable and unnoticed. And yet, CMDP activists rejected the prize, demonstrating an apparent disregard for political power. This stand was a key principle of CMDP. At the outset of the movement, activists had demanded that their leaders publicly commit *not to take positions*.

And one clear thing was decreed, namely that the leaders of this movement would not take any political position. ...This campaign had not been organised to make their career, to give them some opportunity. So we demanded of them ‘you must make public commitment that you will not take any political position after being involved in this campaign’. They made their statement (B, core activist of CMDP, June 2007).

Many were praised for their disinterest in such positions. For example, a journalist for the national daily *Naya Patrika* commented about leading CMDP figure and former Speaker of the House Damanath Dhunghana:

Damannath Dhunghana is unique because he is not interested in power and money. He could have risen to a very prominent position but he didn’t choose to do so.

Later on, several were to reject the offer of a position by one or the other political party.

We decided not to do power politics. CMDP has friends who don’t have political ambitions. We could go in power very easily ... but we’ll not go.

People trust us because of this (Bimal Aryal, core organisor, CMDP June 2008).

The few CMDP activists that took up a position nonetheless justified their actions through the discourse of disregard for power, emphasising their role as mediators. Political analyst and CMDP activist Hari Roka, who was nominated as MP in the interim parliament and then appointed in the ‘civil society quota’ of CPN-M explains³:

For all political parties to come together, a few people were needed to manage meetings and to manage differences.... that’s why it’s necessary to have [civil society members] in power (May 2008).

Furthermore, rather than seeking to capture political power, CMDP ostensibly sought to galvanise that of political parties. The mass assemblies organised by CMDP (in the Kathmandu valley—5th August; 3rd September; 25th September; 25th November; 5th December 2005) had the explicit purpose of bringing political parties and the general public closer. In the ‘citizens’ assemblies’, political party leaders would be invited, and sat below the stage where speeches, poems, songs and dramas would be performed for an audience of thousands. The issues broached by these performances included: the making of an egalitarian, inclusive Nepali society and an accountable state; criticism of the current regime and support for a democratic republic; appeals to the general public to consolidate the movement and to political parties to be more aggressive in their agitation; welcome to the November 2005 agreement between the Maoist insurgents and the SPA; calls for the formation of a constituent assembly. The politicians, however, would not be allowed to take to the stage but were, rather, the subject of critique and chastisement. They were to come as listeners and on one occasion at least, compelled to regret their misdeeds (their focus on power plays, the United Marxist Leninist party (CPN-UML)’s decision to join the king’s government in 2004). One CMDP activist recalled the scene:

It was the 21st of July, Friday, at 3 o’clock. We had planned a discussion, a mass meeting in the street... And at that event, the leaders of the seven political parties... were invited as listeners, not as speakers. It was the first time that leaders of political parties came as listeners. For G P Koirala to come as participant, it’s not a joke. For Madhav Nepal to come as a listener, it’s not a joke. But all of them were ready... And there was heavy rain that day... And there was GP Koirala, holding an umbrella, 84 years old, listening like this. And in this way the entire Banaswore road was covered with people. Maybe 6000 or 7000 people.⁴

³ In the CA, 240 seats were allocated according to the First Past The Post system, 335 through proportional representation and 26 were to be allocated to ‘civil society members.’

⁴ The late GP Koirala was a four-time elected prime minister and the president of Nepali Congress at the time; and Madhav Kumar Nepal, currently prime minister of Nepal was then the general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist).

A core activist of CMDP explains the purpose of these events, paraphrasing discussions CMDP held with political parties in the early days of the movement:

We can assist you. ... we want to make you stronger. ...So you have to be there to listen to people. And if you come among people to listen to [them], then slowly people will think about political leaders, about the political system and maybe you can gain their trust and belief again.

He further explains the reasons for the political parties accepting to come as participants rather than leaders of these mass programmes:

We had the confidence to do this because there were some people involved, Dr Panday, Krishna Pahadi, [who] are very well known and trusted by people.... We would explain ‘...this is not by an NGO, this is not by a donor, this is to make people aware against the king, and these are the speakers at that event’...and those speakers were also known to the political leaders, and they could guess what they would say. So in this way they were convinced ...

CMDP, then, would draw on its own resources—social as in key personalities, artists, intellectuals, journalists, cartoonists, and so on, and symbolic, namely the moral authority of leading figures of the movement—in order to galvanise political parties’ power by reconnecting them with the source of strength, ‘the masses’. The stated aim was to empower political parties to take up leadership of the democratic movement, as they had done in 1990. CMDP, in other words, organised and mobilised in order to act as a *generator* of political power, but not in order to capture it. Through such events, they also performatively placed themselves beyond politics (defined in relation to the capture of ‘political power’ in this setting). This is not to suggest that CMDP members were disinterested in power altogether. Indeed, if we revisit the event at the beginning of this section, it was clearly also the occasion for the manifestation and construction of their own power. Here they made visible the difference between the motivations that purportedly animated politicians and that which motivated activists, as well as the basis of their own power. The material simplicity of CMDP, made to contrast with the materialism of politicians and their concern with displays of their own elevated status were both a statement about the moral superiority of the protestors as well as a critique of politicians.⁵ Also, the cultural inappropriateness of seniors in such a lowly position was a powerful challenge to those targeted by the act—namely, politicians sitting in parliament that day and who could not but be aware of the outrage taking place on their doorstep. A call to act by playing on the moral sentiments of the powers that be, it was also revealing of the nature of the power of CMDP, as perceived by its leadership; it was, principally, moral power. That this was perceived to be so, and that CMDP sought to constitute itself as morally powerful was indicated, also, by comments about the ‘purity’ of the movement. The achievement of such ‘purity’, a

⁵ This tactic bears resemblance to that employed by students in opposition to the partyless panchayat regime that ended with the movement of 1990. Indeed, Burghart (1994) recalls how students would conduct ‘clean up campaigns’ across the capital, highlighting the negligence of the regime and its failings towards ordinary people.

contrast to the ‘dirt’ of politics, was a deliberate aim of CMDP activists. One for instance recalled:

[We felt] any logo, any blame should not be there for our movement, it should be pure.... We wanted to make it a campaign of civil society, pure (Core CMDP activist, June 2007).

A central guarantor of this purity was the ‘clean’ background of CMDP leaders and figureheads. Many were approached to lead the movement with this consideration in mind:

At the time many political parties leaders had corruption cases running against them. Devendra Raj Panday and others in civil society had a clean background; he is known for being an uncorrupted person and slowly people started to support the movement (*Naya Patrika* journalist June 2008).

We thought we needed people who didn’t suffer from an image problem (Columnist, CMDP activist July 2007).

Again, displays of moral rectitude, and thereby the constant reminder of the moral nature of CMDP power, were common features of CMDP actions. This might be expressed for example, through a concern for the victims of political violence neglected by politicians, as occurred in the aftermath of a communal incident in Kapilbastu during September 2007. Following the killing of Mohit Khan in Kapilbastu, the district became prey to rioting, arson and vandalism, and large numbers of people fled their homes. Troubled by government inaction, CMDP was to mount a visit to the affected area, and to report to the PM and at a press conference, upon their return. In preparation for and during the press conference, the seriousness of tone and the frantic pace of work underscored the expressions of concern and caring for the victims by CMDP team. The contrast with the silence of government and political parties out of government could not have been more stark; at the same time, the moral capacity and thereby the moral power of CMDP found itself once again highlighted, this time in the context of a press conference.

Factionalism within CMDP

One central feature of understandings of politics in this setting was divisiveness and agonism. A second way in which CMDP constituted itself as apolitical was through strategies that strove to avoid manifestations of factionalism or groupism, both of which were seen to plague both the NGO sector and the political parties.

Among these strategies was an emphasis on individualism. This was expressed first of all, through a rejection of ‘banners’, a term which bore pejorative connotations within the CMDP circle. Literally, it referred to the piece of cloth upon which a institution’s name and logo would be printed and displayed during public programmes. It also referred to the practice of getting funded to do advocacy, of claiming to represent a marginalised or ‘voiceless’ group, cynically expressed as ‘selling that group’s name’ (implying that this was done for personal and institutional benefit, rather than that of the ‘voiceless’ group itself). This practice,

seen to be characteristic of NGOs and political parties, was condemned within CMDP.

When started the movement, we repeatedly said we are not representative of ‘civil society’ we are citizens, we have come on the street to fight for our rights, everyone can be part of it (Core CMDP activist and organiser May 2007).

Writer Khagendra Sangroula further recalled:

We said anybody can participate in CMDP in their individual capacity, but not as a member of an organisation with a flag (June 2007).

CMDP encouraged participants to ‘come as individuals’; in meetings, individual names and occupations would be recorded in registers, rather than institutional affiliation as was common in NGO settings. In some CMDP events, the term ‘*nagarik*’ (citizen) was used to identify speakers (e.g. in programme schedule of CMDP citizen assembly, September 25th 2005 in Kirtipur, the assembly chairperson and assembly moderator are referred to as ‘*nagarik* Devendra Raj Panday’ and ‘*nagarik* Shiva Gaunle’.) Commonly, it was used in the expression *nagarik aguwa* or ‘citizen leader’ to refer to the leading figures of CMDP; the choice of the term *aguwa* (informal leader) was also part of CMDP’s efforts to distinguish itself from political parties, whose leaders were described with the word *neti* (leader of a formal institution) rather than *aguwa*.

In interviews, CMDP activists would describe participants as originating from ‘all walks of life and ideologies’ or ‘communities’ rather than from a specific institutional sector. When persons from NGOs were invited to CMDP events, they were asked to abide by this principle, as Hari Roka recounts:

NGOs are business sector; we invited them to early meetings; we said leave your agenda in your office and don’t come from your NGO name, just come single and give your advice and suggestions according to your own thinking (8 May 2008).

The rejection of banners was not welcome by all within the NGO sector, leading to the creation of a separate movement by members of NGOs. Arjun Karki, president of the NGO Federation of Nepal explains:

There are two different ways of doing things. When we mobilise we tell people to come with their identity, their banner, everything... [CMDP] didn’t like that, they wanted individual... there were some discussions. We said let organisations come with their own identity. One of the reasons why later in the day... CMDP was not able to mobilise large numbers of people is because people wanted their identity, their image, everything... another reason why we created this alliance, is because we wanted people to express their identity. We must not hide (June 2008).

This prescription held, by and large, for most events. One exception was the use of one organisational name in the accounts of a series of CMDP programmes. It was explained that this was in recognition of the outstanding contribution of the

organisation (in terms of manpower and office facilities), to the said events. Generally, there were no banners to compete with that of CMDP.

The internal cohesiveness of CMDP was further emphasised through performative expressions of unity and the downplaying of status differences within CMDP events. To illustrate this point, we will recall a CMDP event organised in June of 2007. The event itself was to be a 24-h sit-in on a large roundabout in the centre of Kathmandu (Maitighar Mandala). The demands put forward at the sit-in included the announcement by parliament of a democratic republic of Nepal; the setting of a date for and adoption of a pull proportional representation system for the CA elections; that talks be held with all currently agitating groups. The occasion sees the Mandala in a usual guise: a brightly coloured canvas tent shelters red woven cotton mats lain over blue plastic sheets. Later that day, at night fall, the sheltered area will host mattresses for the score of participants that will stay overnight on the Mandala. For the moment, it accommodates clusters of protestors, exchanging pleasantries and anecdotes or sitting in silence, individuals perusing newspapers English and Nepali. Young students call over well-known intellectuals to their cluster, and the latter obligingly 'share their experience' with the younger participants. A little further, one cluster begins to sing about *ganatantra*—the republic—and for some time, the noise of traffic as Kathmandu goes to work almost fades away. It is 11.30 am. And so the day passes, as participants take leave from their places of work in order to sit in *dharna* for a short while; according to the register kept by the organisers, by the next day a total of more than 500 people will have at one point been in *dharna*. They will have included journalists, artists, lawyers, human rights activists, students, architects as well as MPs—only visible, however, by their 4 × 4 vehicle parked on the edge of the Mandala. Neither are they offered the space to make a speech nor is their presence highlighted through any kind of special welcome ceremony. There is, in fact, no privileged speaker during most of the 24 h; no apparent structure or schedule, no order. At one point, one of the figureheads of CMDP exclaims: 'it's a sit-in and everyone is standing!'—half bemused, half frustrated. But no efforts are made to force those standing to sit down. As night falls, participants are offered another scrap of paper with the word '*khana*' (food) scribbled on it. It is a coupon for an evening meal in a nearby eatery, paid through the contributions of participants. During the day, besides the register, a constant feature was the '*chanda bakas*'—donations box. The smell of burning anti-mosquito coils fills the air, soft lighting warms works of art put on display along the stepped wall lining the eastern side of the Mandala. The traffic has died down. Numbers thin after dark, but those that stay report the next day of a night of entertainment, singing and dancing, in spite of the cold and rain—'but the cold is nothing compared with getting peace!' exclaims one of the overnights. The next morning many participants that had gone to their respective homes for a decent night's sleep return for the closing ceremony; a performance of a play by one of the troupes associated with CMDP, and the recitation of poems by well known and popular poets in front of a semi-circle of standing protestors. Finally, Shyam Shrestha, who is 'chairing' the ceremony, reminds the assembly of the demands of CMDP and the programme before declaring the *dharna* closed.

The most striking aspects of the event were: its informality, namely the apparent lack of a structure, an identifiable chairperson leading the programme and a distinct schedule of activities (during most of the proceedings); the diversity of activities taking place during the sit-in (chatting, singing, reading papers, painting, making collages); the diversity of occupations and professions represented; the simplicity of arrangements (the makeshift *chanda bakas* and ‘khana’ tokens; the lack of ‘bucket chairs’ that would have been expected in NGO programmes); the contrast between the simplicity of the arrangements and the status of many of the participants (including MPs); the lack of obvious markers of status within the space of the Mandala (the vehicles are parked on the edge of the Mandala; uniformity of arrangements for all participants).⁶ While diversity was evident and even celebrated, no single group, be it professional or social, was given more significance than any other. Here, divisiveness was avoided through efforts to preclude evidencing differences in status and ‘position’ (characteristic of the political field).

A further divisive factor was political affiliation. Again, CMDP organisers went to some length to ensure that no one political party would be seen to dominate the movement. One of the main organisers of CMDP explained:

We have Jana Morcha, Maoist, NC... my role was to make sure NC is not visible, that UML is not visible, I would ...work with them all equally... If one political party is more visible then there will be problems It has to be equal, proportional. That’s an on-going challenge (February 2008).

This statement is also a reminder that what was targeted was the evidence of difference and the attribution of more status and importance to one group or individual rather than the other. It explains the attention, as in the 24-h sit-in, that was given in CMDP to minimising evidence of status and also the refusal to have defined positions within CMDP (chairperson etc.). Devendra Raj Panday himself was keen to stress he was not *leader* of CMDP, correcting time and again the press’ tendency to label him as such. The individual signature at the bottom of CMDP statements, furthermore, would always be followed by the phrase ‘on behalf of CMDP’.

Building Solidarities Across the Non-State Sector

As well as desiring to avoid divisiveness within CMDP, CMDP sought to banish it from the entire realm beyond the king’s administration. CMDP would thus frequently call for *solidarity* and their public statements would contain expressions of support for other movements. For instance,

Press release 9th September 2005, CMDP:

⁶ This is not to say that there was no sense of difference or hierarchy—indeed there were significant differences between the ‘clusters’—youth and senior persons, for example, although they did mix, a sense of difference based on seniority was evident. But these were less accentuated than in other settings, e.g. NGO, governmental programmes.

We would also like to express our solidarity to the United Forum of Democratic Creators in their protest programme scheduled on the same day at 3.30 pm, at Bhotahiti.

Press release 26th November 2005, CMDP:

We pledge our support to all democratic initiatives that can transform this ceasefire [of CPN-M, unilateral ceasefire late 2005] to permanent and just peace.

Given that civil society had till then been a highly fragmented realm, in which groups would compete for visibility and funds, seldom sharing information, and only occasionally entering into fleeting alliances, and where, furthermore, the adjective ‘collective’ was considered radical—CMDP’s stance was a remarkable one to take. CMDP declarations of support for the political parties movement were also notable considering the vast distance between political parties and the general public that was to last well into December 2005⁷:

Press release 9th September 2005, CMDP:

We are happy that the ongoing movement of the alliance of the seven political parties is gathering a new momentum. We condemn excessive and inhuman use of force by the illegal regime against the leaders and workers of the political parties engaged in a peaceful demonstration.

While CMDP could easily have capitalised on feelings of alienation from political parties to attract greater numbers to their cause in a manner reminiscent of Spencer’s *antipolitics*, they chose not to do so. Rather, unity and solidarity with political parties were stressed and efforts turned towards bridging differences among political parties as well as between political parties and the public. One question that preoccupied CMDP activists early on was how they might bring the political parties together. Through their programmes they sought to pressure on one side to listen to the other and bring ideologically divergent forces (Maoists, parliamentary parties, ‘liberal commoners’) together for a common cause. In other words, they sought to banish divisiveness—a key characteristic of politics—out of the non-state domain altogether.

The Impossibility of Opposition

Here, as in any field understood as agonistic, a central element of politics was the constitution of an ‘us’ in opposition to a ‘them’. CMDP denied both the possibility of opposition to its agenda; as well as the legitimacy of the king as potential competitor to CMDP in terms of embodying and safeguarding the ‘interests of the Nepali people’. The words of CMDP activists and chief of editorial team of *Naya Patrika*, Jhalak Subedi are revealing. These speak simultaneously of the politics and counterpolitics of CMDP:

⁷ The turning point was the concluding of a 12-point understanding between the seven main parties (Seven Party Alliance or SPA) and the Maoists in late November 2005. In its wake, the political party movement began to attract larger numbers of people outside the ranks of party cadres with some of the largest street demonstrations since 1990.

What we are talking about is abolish the monarchy, establish the republic! Halt the guns, Maoist! Make an alliance, seven parties and Maoist! All these things were politics... But our politics was based on the logic of our judgment. We supported the Tarai movement when the mainstream political parties were against that. Why did we do so? Because the movement was logically, historically right. There were different factors in that movement; some positive and some negative. Some separatists were also there, but [even as we acknowledged that] we couldn't ignore the logical demands of the Tarai people. Parties did that [ignored the latter's demands], but we supported [the movement].

In the claim to be doing 'what is right' he was denying the political nature of CMDP's stance. Such a denial was explicit at times. Krishna Pahadi, one of the most popular figures of the movement explained:

We are beyond power politics, we are addressing peace. That's not politics, it's a democratic issue (February 2008).

The possibility of opposition was further rejected through the continual efforts by CMDP to delegitimise the king as a contender. They sought to achieve this through press releases, first of all, for example:

CMDP Press release, 9th September 2005

The royal regime headed by king Gyanendra is illegitimate and devoid of any political or popular support.

Press release 9th November 2005, CMDP

We also condemn the terrorisation of media-persons engaged in their lawful professional work of collecting and reporting news.

CMDP would organise programmes to publicly question the legitimacy of the king's regime. For example, in September 2005, a protest in New Banaswore appealed to the international community not to recognise emissaries of the king at the upcoming UN General Assembly. After the king cancelled his plans to address the UN General Assembly, CMDP claimed vindication: '[this] is telling evidence that the king and his regime have lost all claims to legitimacy' (Press release, 9th September 2005). CMDP repeated the effort prior to the planned the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) council meeting in November that year. On this occasion, however, the trip was not cancelled, and the king was to address the Thirteenth Summit of the Heads of State or Government of SAARC as Nepal's representative in Dhaka. These denials of legitimacy would culminate, 2 years later, to the startling situation where, in a NEFIN⁸/CMDP organised event in the capital the symbolic 'jailing' of a cardboard figure of the king would not be considered a *political* act. Here, set upon a stage, were a cardboard figure of the king surrounded by metal bars and the tag 'prisoner number 1'; a little further were cardboard representations of the royal insignia placed behind the label 'national museum'; a representation of the palace with a sea of people at its gates completed

⁸ The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities is an umbrella organisation comprising 54 indigenous organizations widely distributed throughout the Terai, Hills and Himalayas of Nepal.

the exhibit.⁹ At one point of the programme, the audience was invited to ‘lock up the king’ by placing padlocks onto the metal grill surrounding the figure. Incredibly, the event received modest press coverage, and was not denounced as ‘political’ as CMDP events would later on.¹⁰

Overall, this amounted to a denial that CMDP was involved in politics with the king. CMDP refused the possibility of divisiveness within the entire social and political realm of Nepali society, including the state; there was no longer any outside position that could legitimately be held. The last example also suggests that this view had become widely held: indeed, within the public domain, notably the press, there was no suggestion that CMDP was ‘meddling in politics’.

In this section, we provided accounts of CMDP events and quotations by CMDP activists. Referring to the working definitions outlined in “[Envisioning politics and apoliticality](#)”, we can discern both a politics and counterpolitics in the words and actions of the movement. Their slogans and demands were, on the one hand, political acts in that they marked CMDP as intervening in public debates and agendas normally pursued by political parties and over which formal political institutions were divided. Their actions—mobilising people against the king—can also be seen as being socially divisive. At the same time, CMDP’s actions, their choice of venue, the performative expressions of unity and solidarity, the rejection of ‘positions’ indicated efforts to construct a realm with a logic different from that of formal politics. They were, in other words, acting in the sphere of formal politics while trying to performatively transform the public domain by banishing ‘politicality’ from it. These actions can be labelled as ‘counterpolitical’ according to the definitions of “[Envisioning politics and apoliticality](#)”. At times, the material is ambivalent and it becomes difficult to distinguish between counterpolitics and antipolitics: for instance, when civil society activists claim a disinterest in power while accepting positions in formal political institutions (parliament), these acts can be read cynically as a form of antipolitics, i.e. the rejection of politics for political purposes. Similarly, the denial of the possibility of opposition—that ‘democracy’ is not a political matter—may be read as a political strategy, though at the cost of rejecting CM’s own understandings and interpretations of their acts.

‘Antipolitics’ received rather little treatment in this section. Overall, scrutiny of CMDP’s apoliticality revealed few instances that could unambiguously be termed ‘antipolitical’. Even the public critiques and chastising of political parties do not lend themselves to being read as instances of ‘antipolitics’ given the real support that CMDP sought to extend to parties. It was antipolitical in the sense that it sought a *cleansing* of politics (asking for political parties to reform and compelling them to admit to and regret their mistakes) but not in the sense of the exploitation, for *political purposes*, of popular unease with the moral implications of actually existing politics, nor in the sense of dissimulating political realities and the

⁹ The demands put forward at this people’s assembly were: the conducting of CA elections in November that year; the adoption of full proportional representation in the CA elections; ending the monarchy and the establishment of a federal democratic republic of Nepal; holding talks with all agitating groups and the punishing of those responsible for crimes against protestors during the people’s movement of 2006.

¹⁰ In 2009, notably in relation to the sacking of chief of army staff Katuwal by the then Prime Minister, Prachanda.

operations of power. The lesson we might derive from this is that CMDP acted both politically and counterpolitically, at the same time; acting both with the reality and with the logic of the public domain while also trying to transform it by expelling politicality from public life.

Conclusion

In this article, we focused on performance by civil society actors in the construction of an apolitical space. This ‘apolitical’ space—meaning a space in which the dynamics of politics, notably their divisiveness, and the pursuit and capture of power would not apply—was the product of continual efforts by CMDP at the level of practice as well as discourse. This space was to extend beyond civil society and encompass the entirety of the non-state domain and even the entire Nepal polity. Its construction involved the rejection of political power by CMDP while galvanising that of political parties through ‘reconnecting’ them with the broader public; emphasis on individuals and individual identity in CMDP (rather than group affiliation); minimising of status differences within CMDP events and any other means for any single person to pool power (e.g. formal position); overcoming the factionalism and rivalries across the entire non-state realm through expressions of solidarity; denying the partiality of its agenda or possibility of (reasoned, legitimate) opposition to it through public statements and appeals. Some of the strategies described here—such as the informality of CMDP—may be familiar to social movement analysts and hold quite a different meaning in other contexts. For instance relative ‘disorganisation’ which has been found to be characteristic of many social movements (e.g. Byrne 1997) may itself constitute a political statement about egalitarianism; here, however, analysed through the lens of local understandings of politics and also referring to the activists’ own discourse, these acquired a different meaning altogether and represented, rather, a desire for apoliticality. The same applied to many other CMDP practices.

The apoliticality generated here emerged not just the product of *hiding*, but of practices that sought to actively overcome the limitations of politics—namely its divisiveness and concern with position—by rejecting opportunities for acquiring ‘position’ and establishing cooperation with ‘the Other’, namely, other movements and political parties. Of course, such attempts were only partly successful—the case of NFN/NGOs shows that division was present within the democratic movement at certain points in time; but these differences were significantly minimised and ‘invisible’ compared with other sectors. Similarly, hierarchy and status were not banished altogether as we suggested above, but their expressions very much reduced. In many ways, CMDP was a remarkable departure from existing civil society practice. The time in which it emerged was of course equally unusual—a period of growing authoritarianism, intensifying insurgency and loss of political power by non-state actors. It was also a departure from existing thinking about social movements, namely that they contribute mostly to expanding the political

domain. To be sure, CMDP broadened participation in the democratic movement which was till then dominated by political parties; in this sense, and from an etic perspective, it expanded the political domain to include a wider range of actors in political activity. From the insiders' perspective, however, what mattered most was not this broadening and expansion, but the setting of limits to politics and politicality, i.e. ways of acting considered to be divisive and ultimately unable to address the crisis facing Nepal at that time.

We showed how a movement acted not just to limit the incursions of the state and the state institutions (a classic civil society function) but how they sought to limit the incursions of 'the political' as the agonistic dimension of social action. The article therefore reinforces the view that apoliticality is not just a 'corruption', but can be the grounds for the effectiveness of civil society to act in ways expected of it in the theoretical literature. The material further suggested that apoliticality may provide the grounds for effective public action not just—as in Burma or Indonesia—when overt political acts are repressed but also when main political forces such as political parties have acquired a very negative image and lost the capacity for effective public action.

The apoliticality of CMDP was mostly *counterpolitical*. It was counterpolitical in the sense that it aspired to 'avoid the divisive heart of the political altogether' and to 'creat[e] a relationship with the other, search for dialogue and cooperation' to quote Spencer again. As far as research agendas for the future are concerned, the present case study suggest that future studies of civil society tends to its *antipolitics* and *counterpolitics* as well as its *politics*. Also, the conclusions relate to an elite movement. Future research could highlight how other civil society actors relate to the political and whether apoliticality is a viable and effective way of engaging in public action for less advantaged groups.

One of the implications of the foregoing observations is the need, for those working with civil societies (donor agencies, etc.) to appreciate the complexity of the relationship of civil society to politics and the significance of its actions for the very existence and the very nature of 'the political game' in any society. Clearly, here, civil society was not just 'politicised' (a fact deplored, inter alia by Hatchhethu 2006) but also involved in resisting and shaping this politicisation. Here, we rejoin voices such as that of Jenkins in arguing that donors should think again in placing limits on civil society's engagement in politics for it can impact not just the realm of civil society but also the nature of political society itself. In the case at hand, it is clear that such limits would have severely weakened political parties. Our hope is that this article will contribute to such an appreciation and the formulation of more considered policies in relation to projects involving civil society in the future.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to acknowledge all those who gave their time to share with us their experiences and opinions about the democratic movement in Nepal. We are also grateful to the UK's ESRC, members of the NGPA programme and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex, UK for their generous support in bringing this work to fruition. Also, the authors would like to acknowledge all respondents for their insights and patience, and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions.

References

- AIN. (2007). A discussion paper on donor best practices towards NGOs in Nepal ODC/IDMS, Nora Ingdal, NCG March 2007.
- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development. (2006). Nepal under Royal Regime: One year of dictatorial rule deepening the national crisis. http://www.forum-asia.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=158. Accessed January 10, 2009.
- Aspinall, E. (2005). *Opposing Suharto: compromise, resistance, and regime change in Indonesia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bailey, F. G. (1969). *Stratagems and spoils: A social anthropology of politics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Burghart, R. (1994). The political culture of panchayat democracy. In M. Hutt (Ed.), *Nepal in the nineties: Versions of the past, visions of the future*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Byrne, P. (1997). *Social movements in Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Chandhoke, N. (2003). *The conceits of civil society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chhetri, B. (1995). Rotating credit associations in Nepal: Dhikur as capital, credit, savings and investment. *Human Organization*, 54, 449–454.
- Chhotray, V. (2004). The negation of politics in participatory development projects, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh. *Development and Change*, 35, 327–352.
- Coles, K. A. (2004). Election day: The construction of democracy through technique. *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 551–580.
- Dahal, D. R. (2006). *Civil society groups in Nepal: Their roles in conflict and peace-building*. Kathmandu: Support for Peace and Development Initiative, UNDP.
- Davis, P. R., & McGregor, J. A. (2000). Civil society, international donors and poverty in Bangladesh. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 38, 47–64.
- Diamond, L. (1994). Rethinking civil society: Toward democratic consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 5, 5.
- Eder, K. (2009). The making of a European civil society: 'Imagined', 'practised' and staged'. *Policy and Society*, 28, 23–33.
- Escobar, A., & Alvarez, S. E. (Eds.). (1992). *The making of social movements in Latin America: Identity, strategy, and democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ferguson, J. (1990). *The anti-politics machine: 'Development', depoliticisation, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, J. A. (Ed.). (1995). *Civil society: Theory, history, comparison*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hann, C., & Dunn, E. (Eds.). (1996). *Civil society: Challenging western models*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Harriss, J. (2007). Antinomies of empowerment: observations on civil society, politics and urban governance in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42, 2716–2724.
- Hatchhethu, K. (2006). Civil society and political participation. In L. R. Baral (Ed.), *Nepal: Quest for participatory democracy*. New Delhi: Adroit.
- Heaton Shrestha, C. (2010). NGOs and activism in Nepal. In D. Geller (Ed.), *Varieties of activism in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Jenkins, R. (2001). Mistaking 'governance' for 'politics': Foreign aid, democracy, and the construction of civil society. In S. Kabiraj & S. Khilnani (Eds.), *Civil Society: History and possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jordt, I. (2007). *Burma's Mass Lay meditation movement: Buddhism and the cultural construction of power*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Kaviraj, S., & Khilnani, S. (2001). *Civil society: History and possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keane, J. (Ed.). (1988). *Civil society and the state: New European perspectives*. London, New York: Verso.
- Kumar, K. (1993). Civil society: An enquiry into the usefulness of an historical term. *British Journal of Sociology*, 44, 375–395.
- Lewis, D. (2002). Civil Society in African contexts: Reflections on the usefulness of a concept. *Development and Change*, 33, 569–586.
- Messerschmidt, D. A. (1978). Dhikurs: Rotating credit associations in Nepal. In J. F. Fisher (Ed.), *Himalayan anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan interface*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton Publishers.

- Mouffe, C. (2002). Which democracy in a post-political age? Abstract of talk at Dark Markets Conference, Vienna, October 4, 2003. <http://nonstop-future.org/txt?tid=136ebee4fd88bfd45a1e63f9a1ce51>. Accessed August 15, 2009.
- Panday, D. R. (2008). Social movement, civil society and regime change in Nepal. *Development Review Quarterly*, XX, 7–15.
- Ruud, A. E. (2001). Talking dirty about politics: A view from a Bengali village. In C. J. Fuller & V. Bénéï (Eds.), *The everyday state and society in modern India*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Sangroula, K. (2009, March 14). Je dekho, je bolyo. *Naya Patrika*, 328, 2.
- Schmitt, C. (1996 [1927]). *The concept of the political*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Shah, S. (2008). *Civil society in uncivil places: Soft state and regime change, policy studies* (Vol. 48). Washington: East West Centre.
- Siwakoti, C. G. (2000). foreign intervention in politics through NGOs: A case of the left in Nepal. In J. Vartola, M. Ulvila, F. Hossain, & T. N. Dhakal (Eds.), *Development NGOs facing the 21st century: Perspectives from South Asia*. Kathmandu: Institute for Human Development.
- Spencer, J. (2007). *Anthropology, politics and the state: Democracy and violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Rooy, A. (Ed.). (1998). *Civil society and the aid industry*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- Vergati, A. (1995). *Gods men and territory: Society and culture in Kathmandu valley*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- White, S. C. (1996). Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice*, 6, 6–15.