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The Politics of Nepal

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Introduction

Nepal, often described as a nation of breathtaking landscapes and cultural diversity, is equally notable for the complexities and dynamism of its political journey. Nestled in the dramatic embrace of the Himalayas, Nepal's political evolution has been marked by profound transformations—shifting from centuries of monarchy through revolutions and civil war, eventually embracing federal democratic republicanism. The journey from autocracy to democracy, and from a centralized state to a fledgling federation, has deeply shaped the political consciousness, institutions, and aspirations of the Nepali people.

The roots of Nepal's political system can be traced back to its monarchic and feudal past, where competing dynasties, powerful ministers, and hereditary rulers vied for control over the country's rugged lands. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the rise of the Rana oligarchy, which concentrated power in a hereditary class of prime ministers and relegated the king to a ceremonial role. The Ranas implemented modernization initiatives, but their rule was marked by repression and isolation from the broader currents of global political change. The 1951 pro-democracy movement represented a dramatic break with this past, opening the door to multiparty politics and a revived monarchy, although political freedoms remained tenuous.

Over the subsequent decades, Nepal's politics oscillated between bold experiments with democracy and periods of intense autocracy. The introduction of the Panchayat system in 1960 reasserted royal authority and restricted political parties, stifling dissent and political participation. Yet, the desire for representative governance, social justice, and public accountability remained strong. With the People's Movement of 1990, these aspirations erupted into the streets—resulting in a new constitution, multiparty democracy, and reduced powers for the monarchy. However, inherent weaknesses in the new political setup—chronic instability, corruption, and exclusion of marginalized groups—led to public disillusionment and the rise of armed insurrection.

The ten-year Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), with its devastating toll, forced the political establishment to reckon with the nation's deep-seated inequalities and flaws. The Comprehensive Peace Accord of 2006 ended the civil war and charted a new course: the abolition of the monarchy, the promise of federalism, and the quest for a genuinely inclusive democracy. The ensuing years saw intense negotiations, constitution-making, and fresh commitments to pluralism and secularism. The Constitution of 2015 stands today as the foundational document guiding Nepal as a federal, secular, inclusive, and democratic republic.

Yet, the path to consolidated democracy is fraught with challenges. Nepal has

experienced frequent government changes, coalition wrangling, and ongoing disputes over the meaning and practice of federalism. Corruption undermines trust and efficiency, while efforts to ensure the meaningful participation of women, Dalits, Janajatis, and other marginalized communities remain a work in progress. Transitional justice and accountability for conflict-era crimes linger as unresolved legacies. Implementing the promise of inclusive governance, equitable development, and stable democratic institutions is an ongoing process, shaped by the resilience and determination of Nepal's people.

This book, *The Politics of Nepal: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Nepal*, offers a comprehensive exploration of Nepal's political system—past, present, and future. Through historical analysis, examination of institutions, and discussion of ongoing debates, it aims to equip readers with the context and knowledge necessary to understand, engage with, and appreciate the remarkable, turbulent, and hopeful story of Nepali politics.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Nepal

Nepal's political story is inextricably linked to its dramatic geography and the rich tapestry of its people. This landlocked nation, squeezed between two Asian giants, China to the north and India to the south, east, and west, is a place of staggering contrasts. Within its relatively small area, roughly 800 kilometers long and 150 to 250 kilometers wide, Nepal encompasses a range of altitudes and climates that would take you across a continent elsewhere.

Imagine a country where you can swelter in tropical heat in the lowlands and shiver in arctic conditions on the world's highest peaks, all within a short distance. This is Nepal. The country is broadly divided into three main geographical belts, running east to west: the Terai, the Hilly region, and the Himal.

The Terai, in the south, is a fertile plain that is an extension of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. This region, with its subtropical to tropical climate, is the breadbasket of Nepal and is culturally more akin to parts of neighboring India. It's a lowland area, though it does include some hill ranges.

Rising north from the Terai is the Hilly region, which covers the largest portion of the country's area. This belt includes the Churia foothills, the rugged Mahabharat Range, and the mid-mountain region. Here, the climate is more temperate, and the landscape is characterized by hills, valleys, and forests. The Kathmandu Valley, where the capital city is located, is nestled in this region.

Further north lies the majestic Himal region, home to the towering peaks of the Himalayas, including eight of the world's ten tallest mountains, such as Mount Everest. This is a land of perpetual snow and ice, with an Arctic climate at the highest elevations. The inner Himalayan valleys, like Mustang and Dolpo, are cold deserts that share characteristics with the Tibetan Plateau.

This diverse geography has profoundly shaped the settlement patterns and ways of life of the Nepali people. The fertile plains of the Terai and the valleys of the Hilly region are the most densely populated areas. Life in the high mountains is much more challenging, with settlements becoming sparse at higher altitudes.

Nepal's population is a vibrant mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures, reflecting centuries of migration from both the north (Tibet) and the south (India). According to recent estimates, the population is around 29 to 31 million people. This diversity is one of Nepal's greatest strengths, but it has also been a source of political and social complexity.

Major ethnic groups include the Chhetri and Brahmin, who have historically held significant influence, particularly in government and administration, due to their Indo-Aryan and Hindu backgrounds. Other significant groups include the Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, and Kami, among many others. Each group has its own distinct traditions, languages, and customs, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of the nation.

The Newar people, the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, have played a crucial role in Nepal's history and culture, known for their artistry, architecture, and vibrant festivals. The Tharu people are the indigenous inhabitants of the Terai region, with their own unique culture and traditions adapted to the lowland environment. In the mountainous regions, groups like the Sherpa are renowned for their mountaineering skills and distinct Tibetan-influenced culture.

This ethnic diversity is mirrored in the linguistic landscape of Nepal. While Nepali is the official language, spoken as a mother tongue by a significant portion of the population and as a second language by many others, over 120 languages are spoken throughout the country. These languages belong to various language families, primarily Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan. Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Tharu are among the other prominent languages spoken in different regions. This linguistic diversity is a testament to the many different communities that call Nepal home.

Religion is another important aspect of Nepal's identity. The country was historically a Hindu kingdom, and Hinduism remains the dominant religion, practiced by over 80% of the population. Nepal is home to important Hindu pilgrimage sites, including the Pashupatinath Temple. Buddhism is the second-largest religion, with a significant following, particularly among certain ethnic groups and in the northern regions. Hindu and Buddhist traditions have often intertwined in Nepal, with many people practicing elements of both. Islam, Kirat Mundhum (an indigenous religion), Christianity, and other faiths are also practiced by smaller populations.

The interplay of these geographical, ethnic, linguistic, and religious factors has created a complex social fabric that is fundamental to understanding the politics of Nepal. The distribution of different groups across the varied landscapes, their historical interactions, and their distinct cultural practices all contribute to the dynamics of power, representation, and identity that have shaped the nation's political journey. Understanding this intricate backdrop is essential before delving into the historical and contemporary political landscape of Nepal.

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