Democratic Voice and the Paradox of Nepal *Bandhas*

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Abstract: *While protest in many ways epitomises the democratic principles of freedom of expression and association, it can simultaneously challenge other democratic ideals. This ability to both exemplify and undermine democracy results in a tension within the concept of 'protest,' which is tangible in the bandhas (shutdowns) favoured by protestors in Nepal. Ranging in scale from localised to nation-wide, the most effective and influential bandhas take the form of an involuntary, enforced general strike. Bandhas can be called by groups seeking a platform for their policies or grievances, but also by groups striving to boost their profile or support base within a political system perceived of as ineffective and weak. Despite allowing people a way to express their views on policy and other decisions, in circumventing processes of negotiation, curtailing the freedoms and choices of others, inflicting physical and emotional violence on the population and crippling fragile economies, bandhas can be seen to undermine the very essence of democracy. The article concludes with reflections on the reasons for the prevalence of bandhas, suggesting that the country's reliance on this protest mechanism stems from the contextual particularities of twenty-first century Nepal as well as from the country's problematic and incomplete transition to democracy.*

Keywords: *bandha*, democracy, Maoism, Nepal, protest, violence

Introduction

While protest in many ways epitomises the democratic principles of freedom of expression and association, it can simultaneously challenge other democratic ideals. This ability to both exemplify and undermine democracy results in a tension within the concept of 'protest'. This tension is especially apparent in the *bandhas* (general strikes) prevalent in many South Asian nations: they can empower and give voice to marginalised groups but can also unsettle the very system which enables this agency. '*Bandh*' is Hindi for 'closed' or 'to stop' – and as the name suggests, this form of protest disrupts daily life by shutting down vital services including transport and commerce. *Bandhas* can be called by groups seeking a platform for their policies or grievances, but also by groups

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striving to boost their profile or support base within a political system perceived of as ineffective and weak. Ranging in scale from localised to nation-wide, *bandhas* typically encourage large crowds of placard-waving, slogan-shouting protestors onto the streets, and as such exemplify the "fraught relationship" between crowds and political legitimacy (Chatterjee 2016, 295).

Although it is possible to interpret *bandhas* as an indispensable instrument in the toolbox of democracy because they give people a voice, using Nepal as a case study this paper argues that *bandhas* in fact cause substantial harm to democracy by circumventing processes of negotiation, curtailing the freedoms and choices of others, inflicting physical and emotional violence on the population and crippling fragile economies. The country's reliance on *bandhas*, the article further argues, stems from Nepal's contextual particularities and its problematic and incomplete transition to democracy.

Bandhas in Nepal

Bandhas are a frequent occurrence in Nepal, particularly in urban centres, in the Tarai region on the border with India, and in the country's eastern and western regions far from the control of the capital Kathmandu. For example, in 2010 it was recorded that Nepal experienced as many as 1205 general strikes (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2013, 4). In May 2012, amid the confusion and tension surrounding the deadline for the Constituent Assembly (CA) to complete the Constitution-drafting process, a Far West *bandha* was granted the "dubious honour" of being Nepal's longest shutdown, having lasted over one month (Himalayan News Service 2012b).

Such statistics need to be treated with some caution. The exact number of *bandhas* which take place across Nepal is difficult to determine because of uncertain and continually changing details such as when and where *bandhas* will occur and under whose auspices, whether *bandhas* will in fact go ahead as scheduled, with unsophisticated means of publicising *bandhas* (leading to a reliance on word-of-mouth) and varying degrees of *bandha* observance ranging from complete to minimal. The absence of accurate, up-to-date *bandha* information complicates an already complicated situation, as locals do not necessarily hear of a proposed *bandha*, rarely know whether a scheduled *bandha* will take effect, and can remain ignorant of the severity of the protest until they leave their homes.[1] The uncertainty surrounding the implementation of *bandha* varyingly results in frustration, stress or exhaustion.

Although exact *bandha* statistics are difficult to determine, it is undeniable that *bandhas* are commonplace in Nepal as a form of protest. Once the recourse solely of trade unionists (International Labour Organisation n.d., 3), *bandhas* are now unhesitatingly called by state and non-state actors including student unions, transport unions, civil society bodies, indigenous groups and especially political parties. As with many other phenomena in Nepal, *bandhas* have become politicised, largely in response to the particularities of a country which

has for decades been struggling to adopt and subsequently adjust to democracy. The political, religious, geographic, economic, cultural and social context of present-day Nepal impacts hugely on the country's ability to transition to democracy. Within this context, this paper argues that protestors' reliance on *bandhas* as a key political instrument can be construed variably as a response to the failure of democracy to fulfil the hopes and expectations of its supporters, an attempt to benefit from the opportunities which democracy presents, and a misinterpretation of the idea of democratic sovereignty. It is Nepal's context, which both causes and is caused by the country's relationship with democracy, which firstly alienates and disillusions groups and eventually incites them to call for and implement *bandhas*.

Bandhas in Context: Nepal's Path to Democracy

Understanding Nepal's *bandhas* necessitates an understanding of the country's context and of the troubled path to democracy which underpins it; over the last few decades, the country has witnessed periods of increased democratic activity interspersed with periods of regression. The first tentative step towards democracy was taken in 1950, with the overthrow of the Rana regime and the subsequent instalment of King Tribhuvan and his Council of Ministers (cf. Levi 1954). A decade later, and despite holding the country's first parliamentary elections in 1959, King Mahendra dissolved parliament and introduced a Panchayat (or 'no party') system which lasted three decades. Following *bandhas* and street violence in Kathmandu and elsewhere around the country throughout March and April 1990 – an action that became known as the 'People's Movement' (or Janaandolan) – King Birendra lifted the ban on political parties and instated K. P. Bhattarai of the Nepali Congress to head an interim government tasked with preparing a new constitution and holding a general election (Bharadwaj, Dhungana and Upreti 2004, 61), effectively introducing constitutional monarchism to Nepal.

The resulting political shift did not necessarily, however, generate development and benefits for the general population, especially people in rural areas (Routledge 2010, 1281). The persistent social inequity strengthened support for alternative political pathways, including the revolutionary visions espoused by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) – CPN(M). The violence underpinning the party's ideology eventually resulted in a decade of civil conflict (1996-2006) fought between the CPN(M) led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal (known by his *nom de guerre* Prachandra) and Baburam Bhattarai, and the forces of the monarchy. The Maoists had large-scale support from certain sectors of Nepali society, particularly the impoverished rural population which was disillusioned with unfulfilled promises of change via democratic means. The Maoists also consciously promoted the cause of ethnic minority groups (or Janajatis) and thus enabled them to mobilise politically at a national level (Ismail and Shah 2015, 115); without the conflict, it is unlikely that indigenous

issues would have become so central to Nepal's political agenda (Adhikari and Gellner 2016, 2024). Considering the appeal of Maoism in Nepal and India in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, one analyst determined three key reasons. Firstly, the movement is tactically effective in that small groups of ideologues can take control of isolated rural areas and have direct impact – in contrast to other forms of political reform (including democracy) which require compromise and time (DeBlieck 2006, 12-14). Secondly, Maoism both encourages extremism and can be moulded to suit contextual particularities, so that Maoist parties can emphasise issues of most concern to their loyalty bases. Thirdly, Maoism focuses on enabling the rural poor – who in Nepal had largely missed out on benefits from political and economic development prompted by democratic reforms (DeBlieck 2006, 2 and 35).

Ostensibly, the Maoists were fighting for the establishment of a People's Republic of Nepal and for greater equality in a country with huge social, economic and political disparities. Characterised by gross human rights violations committed by both sides, including rape, torture, the abduction of children for soldiering and forced disappearances, the conflict's tensions fluctuated depending on decisions taken by political elites. Some of these key decisions included King Gyanendra's deployment of the Royal Nepalese Army against the CPN(M) in 2001 which resulted in vastly-increased numbers of casualties and internally displaced peoples, his decision in June 2004 to reinstate certain political parties, and his subsequent dismissal of government and issuing of a state of emergency on February 1, 2005. This final action prompted increased cooperation between the political parties of Nepal, which in November 2005 produced the 12-Point Agreement signed by the CPN(M) and other parties calling, among other demands, for the instatement of a Constituent Assembly. Following a successful attempt to boycott local elections called by the King in February 2006, momentum for reform continued to increase throughout March and April culminating in the 'Second People's Movement' (or Janaandolan II), a 19-day mass protest. In response, on April 24, the King reinstated the parliament he had dismissed four years earlier.

The conflict ended in November 2006 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Nepal's return to peace has spurred the latest development in its quest for democracy: in May 2008, the country's first Constituent Assembly voted to instate the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. The decision eliminated the Kingdom of Nepal and brought centuries of monarchical rule to an end, and in name clearly declared the country as a democracy. Despite these decisions, the CA proved unable to finalise a constitution even after four deadline extensions – in large part because it was unable to agree on how to structure Nepal into federal states (with the issue of states based on and named for ethnicity and identity proving particularly divisive; Adhikari and Gellner 2016, 2011) – and was subsequently dissolved in May 2012 by then Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai. Elections for a second

CA were held nearly eighteen months later, in which the Nepali Congress (NC) and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) – CPN(UML) – relegated the CPN(M), which had dominated the 2008 elections, to opposition (Adhikari and Gellner 2016, 2011).[2]

Pushes for democratic change in Nepal, whilst stemming largely from the educated elite, have relied on the power of mass demonstration and been driven by thousands of people marching in the streets, with the two People's Movements most notable in this regard. As one researcher has recognised, in order to challenge unjust political situations, Nepalis have been required to contest and physically occupy urban space (Routledge 2010, 1294). Hence, just as public protest is currently defining the country's relationship with democracy, so too has public protest been central to Nepal's gradual and hard-fought transition towards this political system. While mass demonstrations can on the one hand be interpreted as differing markedly from the violence inherent to the revolutionary ideals of groups like the CPN(M), *bandhas*, on the other hand, possess the inescapable potential for – indeed, even expectation of – violence. In fact, the combination of public participation and the undercurrent of violence has led one analyst to argue that *bandhas* actually constitute a means of fundamentally legitimising violence as a force for political change (Chatterjee 2016, 295).

Bandhas in Context: Inequalities in Nepal

Of Nepal's many barriers to democracy, one of the most serious is the inequality resulting from its multi-tiered social structure, in which identifiers like gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, language, geographic location and region hugely affect individuals' lives. Non-elites have long been discriminated against and excluded from accessing Nepal's resources and power, including in recent times. According to one analyst, the period between 1990 and 2002 was one of 'exclusionary democratisation' during which the political participation of marginalised groups actually declined, despite advances in democratic practice (Lawoti 2008, 364-366). Political developments since the end of the conflict seem to have helped reverse this trend, but truly meaningful incorporation of minority groups into Nepali politics is yet to be achieved.

In terms of gender, cultural and religious norms attribute particular characteristics to notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' (and alongside this conceptualisation, distinct demands, expectations, behaviours and roles) which in turn feed the country's norms in a continually self-perpetuating cycle. Whereas women tend to be viewed as homekeepers and mothers, men fill leadership positions within both the private and the public spheres. This social positioning means that Nepali boys and men often receive greater access to opportunity, education, employment, healthcare and representation than their female counterparts. Gender-based violence, a symptom of this inequality, remains a problem in Nepal, although there are some signs that the situation is

improving (Paudel and Pedro de Araujo 2017, 334). Several positive steps have been taken towards gender equality in recent years, for example the introduction of a gender quota of 33 per cent women within the Constituent Assembly, which indicate that government policy is becoming more gender-inclusive. Yet while policy may be changing, it will take a long time for cultural norms and stereotypes to keep pace.[3]

In addition to gender divisions and inequalities, the Nepali population is divided into castes and ethnic groups, which are further divided into clans. High-caste Bahun and Chhetri Hindu men from the Hills region have traditionally controlled the country's resources (Lawoti 2008, 366)[4]; however, in recent years, in parallel with Nepal's move towards greater democratic freedoms and equality, groups previously oppressed because of their caste, ethnicity or religion have begun to vocalise and assert their demands in challenge to the past system (cf. Sharma 2014). It has been suggested that in some cases these identities have been actively created by individuals seeking a shared group connection in response to the changing socioeconomic and political context of Nepal, and the changing needs of its people, instead of emerging organically long ago (Fisher 2007, 158-159). Some researchers have even claimed that the recent emphasis on identity politics in Nepal – and the resulting challenge posed to the traditional political elite – has prompted people of the Bahun and Chhetri castes to publicly assert their identity (Adhikari and Gellner 2016, 2014). Attempting to appease all these rising voices – many of whom resort to *bandhas* as a means of indicating their disillusionment – is proving a major challenge for the Government of Nepal.

The Madheshi ethnic group from the Tarai region constitute one major case in point. Whilst changes proposed after the Second People's Movement promised improvements for several disadvantaged groups (cf. Paudel and de Araujo 2017), it was not clear how Nepal's reinstated democracy would benefit the Madhesh (or indeed, other Janajati). In response, large numbers of Madhesh participated in an uprising in January-February 2007 which lasted for 21 days. This protest condemned 'hill' politics (a reference to the political primacy of the hill region of Nepal over the Tarai and mountain regions) and promoted, among other demands, regional ethno-nationalism and self-determination as the basis for the post-conflict restructuring of Nepal. In this way, protestors both challenged traditional conceptualisations of Nepali nationalism (for example, the pre-eminence of Nepali over other languages) and sought greater political inclusion for their hitherto-marginalised community. The protest was so effective that the government was obliged to amend the interim Constitution (only promulgated on January 15, 2007) to declare federalism as central to its political agenda (cf. Hachhethu 2006). However, despite this commitment, and despite continued agitation from the various Madheshi political parties over the years, the practice of instating federalism has proven elusive in Nepal – not least because people's region-

based identities do not necessarily correspond with their ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and other identities.

Compounding the divisions within Nepali society is the fact that people living in different regions, and in rural versus urban areas, have immensely different opportunities in terms of access to and distribution of education and wealth. As a result of these opportunities, there is a constant influx of people into the cities, where traditionally-defined gender, caste, ethnic and religious roles are starting to change. Kathmandu – home to the majority of Nepali political and civic elite, students and international aid workers – is rapidly changing, with social change appearing alongside physical and economic change such as increasing food and rent prices, incessant traffic and constant construction.[5] In villages, however, where customs are much more closely observed (and where the majority of Nepal's predominantly agriculturally-based population live), traditional identifiers still delineate an individual's place in society. This urban/rural divide, complicated by Kathmandu-centric policies and businesses and by the geographic inaccessibility of much of rural Nepal, seriously challenges the ability of the Government of Nepal to implement democracy.

As one of the poorest countries in the world, perhaps the most insurmountable hurdle in Nepal's path to democracy is its crushing poverty.[6] Circumstances which might be considered fundamental to democracy and to the development which democracy requires – such as universal education, universal health care, sustainable farming practices, the planning and construction of infrastructure, and environmental care – are far removed from the daily reality of most Nepalis. Only with the eradication of immediate challenges (especially the procurement of food and fuel for survival), can thought and energy be spared for abstract concepts and long-term projects. In this way, while poverty is obviously a key development challenge, it also restricts the progress of democracy.

Politically, Nepal is also extremely divided. The major political parties have vastly differing histories, policies and ideals, ranging across the political spectrum from the CPN(M) on the far left, to the CPN(UML), to the centrist Nepali Congress. The persistence of pre-conflict political interests into the post-conflict era (Rasaratnam and Mara Malagodi 2012, 300), as well as intra- and inter-party tension and distrust, further polarise the parties and hinder their ability to compromise and even dialogue. Without the possibility to seriously and effectively debate, political parties have resorted time and again to *bandhas* and other forms of protest to simultaneously demonstrate their disapproval for others' policies and emphasise the level of public support for their own. Not surprisingly, these tactics have been especially employed at times of particular crisis, such as in the lead-up to and following the dissolution of the first CA in May 2012 after its inability to finalise the Constitution. The challenges of domestic Nepali politics are further complicated by weak state institutions and

by the presence of many external actors in Kathmandu, which each espouse their own views regarding Nepal's transition to democracy (Bhatta 2013, 170).

Another serious issue facing Nepal is corruption, particularly among the country's political, military and economic elite, with the country ranked 131 of 176 countries on Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International). Such practices prevent the Government of Nepal from properly implementing democracy, with the country's already-limited wealth diverted from public funds into individual pockets. Much of this money is pilfered from international aid donations, which have been flowing into Nepal for over fifty years. Despite receiving one of the highest aid budgets in the developing world, the country has proven unable to effectively manage these funds, demonstrating poor aid absorption capacity and a lack of commitment to true political reform. Weak governance lies at the heart of Nepal's failure to successfully distribute aid, as donations are most effective in countries with mechanisms in place to encourage investment and entrepreneurship (Sharma 2011, 96-97). Such mechanisms are not guaranteed in Nepal, and the general lack of transparency and accountability allow mismanaged aid programmes to go undetected.

The contextual particularities of Nepal in the early twenty-first century both fuel and compound the country's troubled relationship with democracy. In a country of widespread poverty; entrenched gender, social, cultural and religious inequality; political hostility, incompetence and dishonesty; and chronic shortages of food, drinking water, petrol, cooking gas and other basic necessities, innumerable issues prompt groups to protest. Rather than seek solutions through dialogue, however, these groups tend to resort to the use of general strikes. The appeal of *bandhas* lies in both the perceived ineffectiveness of dialogue in Nepal as well as in the visible success of *bandhas*. In an effort to normalise life as quickly as possible and with minimum disruption, the Government of Nepal usually agrees to meet with *bandha* organisers – and often grants their demands. According to a USAID report, this concessive behaviour is largely due to the fact that the Government responds to the threat and use of violence (Michel, Walsh and Thakur 2008, 7-8). Nepal's current dependence on protest over dialogue is evidence of the country's incomplete transition to and adoption of democracy. This political system entitles people to voice their concerns; in resorting to *bandhas*¸ however, agitators actually challenge the processes of negotiation through which democracy functions.

The Impact of *Bandha*

Despite the effectiveness of *bandhas* as a tool of political empowerment, voice and manipulation – and the unintended improvements in air quality resulting from restricted vehicular movement (cf. Fransen et al. 2013 and Pudasainee et al. 2010) – the repercussions of general strikes are immensely damaging. Most obviously, *bandhas* negatively impact the economy. On a personal scale,

shutdowns directly affect all wage earners, but particularly small-time entrepreneurs and agriculturalists whose businesses suffer with each day of closure. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal can ill afford the negative consequences of *bandhas* at the national level, either. According to the 2010-2011 Nepal Rastra Bank report, general strikes were one of the fundamental 'non-economic' factors contributing to the country's less-than-expected 2009-2010 growth target (Khatiwada 2010, 3). Similarly, a 2013 report from the Nepal Rastra Bank estimated that, at a cost of 1.8 billion Nepali rupees per strike day, *bandhas* negatively impacted GDP growth rates (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2013, 11-12).

In addition to the immediate implications of *bandhas* on Nepal's economy, there are also long-term economic consequences, most notably in the tourism and investment sectors. Particularly in today's difficult economic climate, Nepal's political instability, of which *bandhas* are the most obvious physical manifestation, deter would-be foreign investors (WFP Nepal 2009, 1) – although Nepal Rastra Bank determined that *bandhas* were not the "primary repelling factor" in this regard (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2013, 15). Without external financial support and skills, the country has little hope of effectively capitalising upon its potential (particularly its natural resources) and improving livelihood opportunities for its population. *Bandhas* are in this way detrimental to the country's future; without the infrastructure and employment generated by investment, Nepal's people are unlikely to experience the economic benefits which democracy can bring.

Just as *bandhas* disrupt everyday life for Nepalis, so too do they impact upon people holidaying in Nepal. Shutdowns thus negatively affect a key source of income: tourism. Although 'Tourist only' transport is supposedly guaranteed safe passage during *bandhas*, the closure of shops and attractions and severe travel restrictions colour visitors' experiences. In reaction to the particularly disruptive shutdowns of May 2012, sources reported a 40 per cent drop in tour bookings and significant declines in hotel booking.[7] Nepal Rastra Bank also reported that *bandhas* have impacted tourist numbers (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2010, 16). Direct causal links exist between Nepal's *bandhas* and declining tourist numbers, constituting a harmful revenue loss for the country. In recognition of the potential damage of *bandhas* to the tourism industry, major political parties committed in early 2011 – Nepal Tourism Year – not to call general strikes; this promise was not, however, upheld (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2010, 5).

The impacts of *bandhas* on tourism are particularly detrimental given that the industry is in the process of reinventing itself following the socio-political changes of post-civil war Nepal. The abolition of the monarchy is gradually dispelling the distinctive international image of Nepal as the 'Himalayan Kingdom' or the 'Hindu Kingdom,' which has the potential to damage the country's tourism industry (for example through declining numbers

of Hindu pilgrims). In parallel with the shift from monarchy to Federal Democratic Republic has been the rise in calls for ethnic and regional autonomy, challenging the supremacy of Nepal's highly centralised bureaucracy. With tourism operating almost exclusively out of Kathmandu, the possibility of de-centralisation poses a further threat to the industry. Tourism in Nepal is thus undergoing a radical self-appraisal and marketing to maintain tourist demand in the face of fundamental changes to its image (cf. Bhandari 2010 and Bhandari and Bhandari 2012). The disruption of tourists' holidays due to *bandhas* complicates and challenges these attempts.

With their ability to absolutely halt all travel and business, *bandhas* generate many serious problems besides economic concerns, primarily because services are closed and essential items can be neither delivered nor obtained. People are restricted from accessing even the most basic provisions. Services such as rubbish collection and banking are halted, and in some instances paper and ink shortages have forced local media outlets to stop printing newspapers, restricting people's access to information (Pariyar 2012). The cost of the few available supplies often increases sharply due to high demand and the augmented price of transportation. General strikes tangibly affect people's daily lives – most drastically, the lives of Nepal's poorest – especially in terms of basic needs and security (WFP Nepal 2009, 1). In this way *bandhas* threaten the basic tenants of democracy, people's fundamental human rights.

The health repercussions of *bandhas* can also be serious. Firstly, doctors and patients are prevented from travelling to hospitals; although ambulances are often exempt from travel restrictions, movement is hampered by the unavailability of petrol and diesel (INSEC Online Desk 2012b). Secondly, medical supplies diminish, as illustrated by the urgent call in late May 2012 for blood donations in Kathmandu, following two weeks of on-off *bandhas* and demonstrations in the capital which prevented people from reaching donation centres (Himalayan News Service 2012c). In the most serious cases, people have died because of travel restrictions or lack of medicine.[8] In a country where mental health is largely ignored, the psychological and emotional trauma inflicted by *bandhas* has not been researched; yet the isolation, fear and violence which shutdowns engender undoubtedly have significant repercussions on the population's mental well-being. In exposing the population to immediate and long-term health risks, *bandhas* harm the very people whose rights their organisers allege to protect.

In addition to the paralysis engendered by *bandhas*, there is also the more immediately harmful violence which often accompanies the strikes. Clashes sometimes occur between representatives of different political or ethnic groups, or between protestors and state security forces. The majority of violence, however, is perpetrated by '*bandha* enforcers' who through implicit or explicit threats ensure people adhere to the imposed shutdown. The price for *bandha* defiance can be high, with the most common retribution being physical assault

of individuals combined with vandalism or arson of their property. This state of quasi-lawlessness similarly facilitates opportunistic crime. The volatility of the situation and its accompanying violence adds to many *bandhas* an element of danger and unpredictability. This latent violence suggests on the one hand social dissatisfaction and a perceived lack of alternatives for self-expression, but on the other hand perhaps also points towards some inherent aggression within Nepali culture and society.

Occasionally, *bandha* enforcers have inflicted punishment on people including medical staff, journalists, INGO staff and human rights activists who have generally been exempt from movement restrictions. Doctors travelling to their jobs were threatened, detained and beaten by police during the general strike called in early April 2006 by political parties against the monarchy, resulting in the doctors holding their own protests for the reinstatement of democracy in the country (Pandey 2006). Similar instances occurred during the riotous three-day Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) shutdown of May 2012, which demanded identity-based federalism as the basis for the new constitution. In response to the threats and interrogation of its staff and the vandalism of its vehicles, on 24 May the Ambulance Operators' Association (AOA) refused to operate (Sapkota 2012). On the same day, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued a statement demanding state authorities protect journalists in their quest to provide the public with information (INSEC Online Desk 2012f).

Such comments underscore the risks inherent in providing essential services during *bandhas*. According to some researchers, although the majority of political parties view the media as fulfilling an essential 'watchdog' role, journalists and their work have at times been targeted during strikes because of their ability to influence public opinion (Miklian and Tveite 2007, 854). For example in preparation for a 2007 *bandha*, the separatist Madhesi Tigers of Nepal issued a press release – apparently without irony – demanding that journalists cease operations for the duration of the planned four-day shutdown, and indicated their prerogative for violence should this demand be ignored (Miklian and Tveite 2007, 856). Given that freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of democracy, particularly the attacks on media personnel illustrate how *bandhas* challenge democratic ideals.

The security situation during general strikes is especially alarming as police are generally unable to control *bandha* violence, hindered by both its widespread scale and its accompanying mob mentality. Additionally, many security personnel, particularly those in isolated regions with little chance of back-up support, are reluctant to conduct arrests, having themselves often been attacked and intimidated (Michel, Walsh and Thakur 2009, 4). As a result of police fear and ineffectiveness – and undoubtedly also of police corruption and sympathy for protesting groups – acts of violence and destruction which occur during *bandhas* are rarely punished. This seeming lack of accountability

contributes to the negative impact of *bandhas* upon the population, and also demonstrates how the use of general strikes undermines democracy and the rule of law.

Conclusion

Nepali and foreign NGOs, as well as economic bodies like Nepal Rastra Bank, have recognised the need to change the current *bandha* culture in order for Nepal to further its development. For example, in May 2012 the highly regarded Nepali human rights organisation Informal Service Sector (INSEC) released a statement in response to the ongoing *bandha* in the Far West urging, "Since dialogue is the only medium to resolve a dispute, we call on the Government to immediately begin dialogue with various groups which have called for *bandhas*" (INSEC Online Desk 2012c). The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in response to the same strike, declared that while every citizen is entitled to publicly express their demands, the rights of others should not be compromised in the process (INSEC Online Desk 2012a). It further suggested that the government prepare a law to regulate *bandhas*, not as a message of acceptance but because the situation had become so serious that action was required (Himalayan News Service 2012a). Such organisations have a difficult task ahead, however, if they are to try and alter Nepal's *bandha* culture: the power of general strikes is seared into the nation's conscience.

In its 'Civics Education' online unit, Nepal Democracy, a website launched by the Nepal Office of the German NGO the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, asked under its 'Activities for individual and group work': "Is the calling of a *bandha* an act that adheres to democratic principles? Or are *bandhas* a violation of the rights of the majority of people to carry out their daily lives in a peaceful way?" (Nepal Democracy n.d.). This article has argued definitely for the latter suggestion; while *bandhas* can undoubtedly support democratic principles by providing agency to groups otherwise marginalised within Nepali politics and society, they can also cause irrevocable physical, economic and emotional harm and thus challenge democracy's very foundations. Yet would-be protestors are drawn to *bandhas* because in the divisive and tense political environment of early twenty-first century Nepal they lack alternatives to express their opinions, and because past experience has demonstrated that the demands of *bandha* organisers are often granted. Nepal's current preoccupation with *bandhas* is an obvious manifestation of the country's failure to fully implement and understand democracy; the culture of general strikes appears to have developed in part from a distorted interpretation of democratic freedoms. The most concerning outcome of Nepal's reliance on *bandhas*, however, is that the feelings of fear and demoralisation engendered by strikes are increasingly discouraging people from trusting in the democracy for which they originally took to the streets in protest.

Nepal has many serious crises to address before the country can be considered wholly democratic – not least the repercussions of ten years of civil conflict and the pressures of entrenched gender, caste and ethnic divisions, extreme poverty, inter-party tension and impasse, and endemic bureaucratic corruption. The issue of ethnicity politics, in particular, remains problematic; the argument over dividing and naming federal states may be symbolically important but ultimately diverts attention from the real issue of fair division of resources among Nepal's peoples (Ismail and Shah 2015, 119). Until Nepal's most vulnerable populations benefit from the reforms and development which democracy can engender, it is likely that groups will continue to use *bandhas* as a vehicle for expressing their discontent – and will, in doing so, further prolong the country's transition to functioning democracy.

Notes

[1] There are several websites and Facebook pages which try to keep Nepalis with internet access informed of current *bandha* trends. These sites are not necessarily overly useful, however; for example, the URL of one prominent website (www.nepalbandh.com) is no longer valid, and a Facebook page called 'Routine of Nepal banda' (https://www.facebook.com/officialroutineofnepalbanda/) devotes itself to "useful information, social awareness posts, quotes and funny trolls" when there is no *bandha* information to report (https://www.facebook.com/pg/officialroutineofnepalbanda/about/?ref=page_internal accessed 18 July 2017).

[2] The 2013 elections were deemed as having been "remarkably well conducted" by election watchdog the Carter Center (2013).

[3] As one example of the distinction between democratic principles codified in Nepali law but not followed in practice: In December 2011, a Dalit ('untouchable') man was beaten to death, ostensibly for touching the oven belonging to someone from a higher caste. The incident was well-reported in the Nepali news; see for example, "Dalit Killed for Touching Oven of Hotel in Kalikot," *News in Nepal*, December 13, 2011. The caste-related murder directly violated the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Crime and Punishment) Bill passed on May 24, 2011, prohibiting caste-based acts of discrimination in both public and private arenas. Nepal also has a National Dalit Commission, whose objectives are to increase Dalit participation in the mainstream community and improve conditions for Dalits (National Dalit Commission 2017).

[4] Having analysed participation in electoral and other forms of political activity in the aftermath of the royal massacre in 2001, Wagle determined that economic power was a key motivator for participation (Wagle 2006, 391).

[5] The influx of international aid workers to Kathmandu has resulted in inflation and a two-tiered economy in which many Nepalis cannot participate (Bhatta 2013, 174-175).

[6] World Bank figures indicate that 25.2% of Nepal's population lives below the national poverty line (The World Bank).

[7] According to the Sales and Marketing Director of Kathmandu's most famous hotel, the Yak and Yeti, 375 room-nights were cancelled over the last two weeks of May 2012. The Annapurna Hotel, another of Kathmandu's five-star accommodation options, recorded a loss of 150 room-nights over a similar period (nmn 2012).

8 For example, on 14 May 2012 a 70-year-old woman with anaemia, Jaumati Swar of Siddeshwor Village District Committee in Achham, died because she could not be taken to the District Hospital for treatment (INSEC Online Desk 2012d). Ten days later, a four-year-old boy died in Pyuthan, Sari VDC-3, after an accident because no ambulance was able to reach him in time (INSEC Online Desk 2012e)

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