



# COVID-19 under Left-wing Populist Nepali Government

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Has left-wing populist Nepali government worsened Covid-19 situations in Nepal? While evidences suggest that right-wing populist leaders across the world have performed much worse, it is still unclear that how left-wing populist leaders have responded to Covid-19. Hence, drawing on critical narrative inquiry method, this study discusses the intersectionality of left-wing populist government and ongoing Covid-19 situations in Nepal. Data drawn from multiple sources, for example, opinion and editorial pieces, social media, government official documents, reports from non-government agencies, and personal communication, suggest that left-wing populist Nepali government has been detrimental to respond and manage Covid-19 in Nepal. Clearly more studies are required as Covid-19 is not over; notwithstanding, this study that was conducted within limited time of span found that left-wing populism poses a grave risk not only to manage Covid-19 but also to respond to the social, economic, and political impacts resulting from Covid-19.

**Key words:** *Covid-19; left-wing populism; critical narrative inquiry; politics; Nepal*

## Introduction

Covid-19, an ongoing pandemic, is testing the national governments across the world (Blofield, Hoffmann, & Llanos, 2020). There is a plethora of reporting on right-wing-led populist governments and their responses to the ongoing pandemic (Falkenbach & Greer, 2020; Gugushvili, Koltai, Stuckler, & McKee, 2020; McKee, Gugushvili, Koltai, & Stuckler, 2020). Nonetheless, lacking on this is a systematic understanding on left-wing-led populist governments – their responses and unintended current and future consequences. Hence, taking into consideration of current Nepali government as an example, this study critically narrates the intersectionality of left-wing populism and Covid-19, as well as what is its consequences.

A critical narrative inquiry (Pitre, Kushner, Raine, & Hegadoren, 2013; Rudman & Aldrich, 2017; Wells, 2011) informs the methodology of this study. It assesses opinion and editorial



pieces, social medias, government official documents, reports from non-government agencies, and personal communication with political activist and from their analysis critically narrates on the extent the left-wing populist Nepali government has exacerbated Covid-19 situation in Nepal. The findings suggest that the left-wing populist Nepali government has taken Covid-19 for the grant and thus has downplayed the situations in every possible way. Instead of taking Covid-19 as the matter of public health issue, the government has engaged in politicking; hence in other words, taking Covid-19 as an opportunity to criticise and curb opposition voices at one hand and strengthen its own populist image on the other. Although these are initial findings and more narratives are yet to evolve, the study establishes a nexus of pandemic, politics, and left-wing populist government in Nepal; and hence, is important to the fields of politics, public health, and policy.

### **A brief background of Nepali government and its response to Covid-19**

Sandwiched between two Asian giants, China in the North and India in the East, South, and West, Nepal is currently ruled by the Nepal Communist Party- left wing. Since its succession to the government in 2015, the Nepal Communist Party, more specifically one of its chairpersons who also serves as the current prime minister of the country, has rhetorically presented itself as the sincerest patriot and protector of Nepali nationalism. Similar to any other populist governments, for example in the United States of America in the West (Montgomery, 2017), India in South Asia (Gudavarthy, 2018), and Brazil in South America (Hunter & Power, 2019), the Nepal Communist Party led government has built its image of protector of Nepali nationalism through the normalisation of chauvinism, antisemitism, and exclusionism. The only way it however differs from its other populist counterparts in those nations is that it instead aligns to left-leaning politics drawing its ideologies mainly from communism, as well as boasts its past turbulent armed insurgencies (Lal, 2020; Lawoti & Pahari, 2009).

The first case of Covid-19 was reported on January 24, 2020 in Nepal. Unlike any other populist governments undermining Covid-19 (McKee et al., 2020), Nepali government showed an active response in tracing, testing, and treating the cases of Covid-19 as early as in January much before the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Devkota, 2020). Nonetheless, as the cases of Covid-19 began to rise, the Nepali government deviated its attention on populist agendas. Instead of utilising its limited resources and effectively responding to Covid-19, it infamously engaged in blaming India for its role as exporter of Covid-19 to Nepal; and thus sought to create a rhetoric that Covid-19 is an 'Indian virus' (Chaudhury, May 21, 2020) just as other right-wing populist have endeavoured to term Covid-19 as 'Wuhan virus' or 'Chinese virus' (Woods, Schertzer, Greenfield, Hughes, & Miller-Idriss, 2020).

Until now, at the time of writing this research report, the government has conducted a total of 494613 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and 312402 rapid diagnostic test (RDT) testing. Of



them, the government data shows a total of 25,551 have been tested positive for Covid-19 in Nepal. Likewise, a total of 14638 people have been placed in quarantine and a total of 7375 people is in self-isolation. A total of 17077 people have been tested negative after treatment. The government also reports a total of 99 people lost lives due to Covid-19 in Nepal. Amongst other, the most affected is Province 2, which is also relatively underdeveloped and politically underprivileged in comparison to other provinces in the country (Government of Nepal, 2020b).

Apart from testing and treating, the government has also formalised a number of protocols and guidelines to effectively manage Covid-19 in the country (Government of Nepal, 2020a), which, according to experts, are neither enough nor effective to deal with Covid-19 in the country. ‘The government has been slow to adopt the right guidelines and strategy... [t]he current guidelines should have come...’ much earlier, said an expert who has been part of the government’s policy and strategy to manage Covid-19 in Nepal (Poudel, August 3, 2020, n.p.).

Undergirded by the populist nationalism, it latter also involved in border dispute against India when it was supposed to engage constructively in preparedness, prevention, and treatment of Covid-19 in Nepal (Shakya, 2020). Internally, the government also saw the pandemic as an opportunity to amplify internal political and ethnic divisions. In the wake of pandemic, the Nepali government intentionally sought to introduce ordinance, albeit it failed, intending to curb the power of opposition parties (Pyakurel, May 8, 2020). Alongside, it introduced a new, gendered citizenship bill that affects foreign women marrying Nepali men. Critiques, for example Lal (June 24, 2020), argue that the new citizenship bill has been mainly targeted to discourage male Madheshis – an ethnic minority in Nepal – marrying women of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of Indian states. And thus, the government has notoriously acted in oblivion manner with its populist rhetoric during the pandemic legitimising the process of ‘othering’ whereby it paints the opposition parties as an ‘elite’ and minority ethnic groups as a ‘silent enemy’. Government’s such positionality is detrimental especially given Nepal entered to republican systems more recently after decades of political instability, while government does not have strengthened public health infrastructures. Such unwanted, untimely, and uncritical discourse weakens government ability to fight against Covid-19 in Nepal.

### **On a methodological note**

A critical narrative inquiry informs the methodology of this study. ‘Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures’ (Bell, 2002, p. 207). The addition to critical worldview to narrative inquiry means that,

... narrative researchers examine the stories that were told to locate experiences within personal, symbolic, structural, and ideological worlds... storytellers view themselves and interpret their agency within their world, as well as identify and name sources of



power and alienation... stories are examined with the intention to recognize expressions of resistance and emancipation and to highlight and expose the invisible, silenced, or taken-for granted historical, structural, and ideological forces and conditions that lead to or perpetuate social injustices (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 122)

Thus, the use of critical narrative inquiry in this study does not refer to mere text or talks, although the authors have examined both, but rather to a left-wing populist agenda that Nepali government continues to enforce during Covid-19 despite resistance persists from Nepali people, leaders, and media. More specifically, the sort of critical narrative inquiry that this study illuminates is based on constitutive view of Nepali government's left-wing ideology and the strong manifestation of this through action during Covid-19. In other words, narrative has not been seen as a mere story reflecting on 'what' and 'how' of government responses to Covid-19. Rather, considering narrative as social and political discourses embedded within historical, structural, and ideological contexts, this study responds to 'why' left-wing populist ideology upheld by Nepali government has exacerbated Covid-19 situation in Nepal. By using critical narrative this way, this study also intends to create a site of reproduction or challenge the meta-narrative of left-wing populism in relation to Covid-19, as well as utilise the narrators' narratives '...in social action through "speaking out [to] invite political mobilization and change' (Riessman, 2008).

Consistent with critical narrative inquiry, data was collected using a multitude of approaches and sources to establish a shared narrative on left-wing Nepali populist government and its responses to Covid-19. Pitre et al. (2013, p. 118) argued that '[s]hared stories ultimately are fundamental to individual meanings, knowledge, and identity. They reflect narrator's underlying reality in light of the broader context of life'. Hence, a shared critical narrative in this study was drawn from opinion and editorial pieces, social media, government official documents, and personal communications. In drawing narratives, the study utilised theoretical sufficiency instead of theoretical saturation (Dey, 2012) as the goal was to critically illuminate the temporal notion of left-wing government and Covid-19 given the fact that the effects of Covid-19 are ongoing and the narratives on this topic are evolving, which further may change as this event unfold in the future. Data analysis sought to capture the patterns across multiple sourced narratives on Nepali left-wing populist government and Covid-19. Then, relevant patterns were pieced together through narrative making to make sense of the left-wing populist government and its responses during Covid-19 in Nepal. This study, of course, has its own limitations in the sense that narratives were collected within a short span of time, as well as the making of narrative has collided against authors' own experiences, discourses, and self-understanding. These authors identify themselves as the critiques of the current government. However, similar to Marcus (2009) argued elsewhere, the authors have sought to minimise their voices and have given all possible priorities to narrators' voices by ensuring – not who authors are, but when, where, and how authors are?

## Findings and Discussion

This study found two emerging, but critical, narratives on Covid-19 and left-wing Nepali populist government. First, the critics comprising health professionals, journalists, political leaders, and civil society members, only to name a few here, perceived Nepali left-wing populist government as culprit acting non-ethically, and meanwhile eroding citizens' trust and confidence in relation to the government's responses to Covid-19 in Nepal. Second, Covid-19 is continuously worsening Nepali social, economic, health, and political sectors; and yet, the left-wing populist Nepali government has sought to deal with the crisis more rhetorically than rationally.

### *Left-wing populist government as culprit*

Critics narrate that Nepali government's left-wing populism is detrimental to respond to Covid-19; and therefore, the Nepali government itself is culprit for the worsening Covid-19 situations in the country. Prasai (July 16, 2020), a Nepali journalist, argued that left-wing populism undergird the current government during Covid-19 crisis. The current government engages on discourses seeking to essentialise Nepali nationalism, ethnocentrism, Hindu religion and its caste classification, supremacy of Nepali language, and paternalism while the need for the government is to take Covid-19 seriously and invests on assessing its impacts and interventions, opined Prasai (July 16, 2020).

Adding to such populist discourse was that government orchestrated, as well as involved into a number of conspiracies and controversies. For instances, without scientific facts and evidences, not only the government declared Nepal a 'coronavirus free zone' (Prasain, March 2, 2020) but also exaggerated on its preparation and Nepali geography and peoples' immunity. The prime minister claimed,

... Nepal's preparation will meet the challenges because Nepal's result is satisfactory among some [of the developed] countries that are badly hit hard by the pandemic... Some early measures, like lockdown, restriction of international flights, and closing down the border, have put Nepal in a relatively safer position compared to some other [developed] countries (Giri, May 25, 2020, n.p.)

Undermining and delegitimising the scientific facts, evidences, and expertise, the Nepali populist government insubstantially promoted the rhetoric that Covid-19 is just like any other ordinary flu and Nepali populations are immune to Covid-19 because of Nepali geography. The prime minister claimed that '[c]orona is like the flue.... If contracted, one should sneeze, drink hot water and drive the virus away' (Panday, June 19, 2020, n.p.). And again, bragging to Nepali populations' immunity and geography, the prime minister addressed the parliament stating,



[a] parliamentarian just asked me who said Nepali[s] have greater immunity powers.... Could you not hear me? I said it, just a while ago...Majority of Nepalis breathe fresh air [that slams into Nepali Himalayas] and have ginger, garlic and turmeric as integral part of their daily diet... those who eat such medicines everyday definitely have better immunity [against Covid-19] (Ghimire, June 10, 2020, n.p. )

Historically, Nepali politicians have invoked anti-Indianism, which quite often also informs the public's nationalism discourse (Mishra, 2004). The current prime minister, also a champion in harbouring anti-Indian propaganda for domestic political support, saw this ongoing Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to vilify India. And thus, the prime minister not only untimely engaged in border dispute against India but also as mentioned above blamed India for increased rate of Covid-19 in Nepal. The prime minister thus blamed India arguing,

[t]hose who are coming from India through illegal channels are spreading the virus in the country... It has become very difficult to contain Covid-19 due to the flow of people from outside. Indian virus looks more lethal than Chinese... More are getting infected [in Nepal] (Chaudhury, May 21, 2020, n.p.)

A well-known columnist and also an ardent critique of the current government, CK Lal wrote in a national newspaper that the government's anti-Indian position is absolutely necessary not only to maintain its own image of nationalist but also to deviate people's attention from its failure to manage Covid-19 in Nepal (Lal, May 26, 2020). However, he noted that government's penchant to engage in such discourse at time of Covid-19 is just a manifestation of demagogic populism that is '... doggedly obdurate, stubbornly bigoted, spiritedly jingoistic in tone, tenor, and intent' (Lal, May 26, 2020, n.p.).

Amongst other, the government's unproductive and untimely expenditures on luxury for its cabinet members and bureaucrats at the time of Covid-19 has raised concern over this government's seriousness and willingness to combat Covid-19 in Nepal. Widespread criticism, notwithstanding; the government unconstitutional decision also allowed corruptions to take place during Covid-19:

[w]hile citizen are living in anxiety and facing a difficult situation, the government... [and its two] ministers have been accused of corruption... the government ... signed a contract worth Rs 1.24 billion with ... [a private company] to import pandemic-related medical equipment[s]... at a very high price... the quality of these materials ... [however, are]... unreliable (Pyakurel, May 8, 2020, n.p.)

The Nepali Times (April 21, 2020) likewise reported that the current government is guilty of using the pandemic as an excuse to stifle dissent and abuse emergency powers to punish opposition parties. Instead collaborating with opposition parties and rowing in the same



direction to fight Covid-19, the government introduced an ordinance with an intention to legally split the opposition parties. The prime minister, as the Nepali Times (April 21, 2020, n.p.) further reported, valued ‘his own political longevity... more than the country’s ability to survive the pandemic and its economic fallout’.

Baburam Bhattarai, an ex-prime minister who belonged to the same party of the current government in the past, has summed up that this left-wing populist government is suffering from Dunning-Kruger effect:

*this prime minister suffers from Dunning-Kruger effect. He keeps on pontificating the same thing in the parliament that everything is alright while the reality is just opposite. The quarantine is absolutely mess; there is lacking testing; and the cases of those returning from abroad is chaos* (Bhattarai, June 10, 2020, translated from Nepali)

#### ***Unintended consequences: Should the left-wing populist government be blamed?***

Cronyism, corruption, and poor governance so central to the current left-wing government are worsening the effects of Covid-19 in Nepal. And yet, what this government has cared for is all about its populist agenda and controversial actions amidst Covid-19 (Nepali Times, April 21, 2020). The current government has utterly disregarded exacerbating social, economic, and political situations in the country amidst Covid-19, a young political leader and activist P. Bam (August 14, 2020, personal communication) claimed. He also claimed that,

the current government is capital-city-Kathmandu-centric. It has no regards for the people who reside outside of the Kathmandu... people in other places are suffering ... they do not have jobs, they do not have food... they are deprived of proper testing and treatment of Covid-19 ... [and yet] what this government care is its populist agenda... *sukhi* Nepali, *samridh* Nepal [that is, happy Nepali, prosperous Nepal]. Given such populist character of the current government, the key question for us is – is this a government of people who voted for it? (P. Bam, August 14, 2020, personal communication,)

Khatri (June 28, 2020) reported the rate of suicide, rape, and criminal activities have increased in the wake of Covid-19. Nationwide 1482 people committed suicide and at least 402 rape cases have been reported to police since the first lockdown that started in March 24, 2020. Likewise, an NGO, Women’s Rehabilitation Centre, confirmed 176 cases of domestic violence against women, which is expected to rise well above annual average of cases of domestic violence this year in Nepal (K.C., Ghimire, Pokhrel, & Timilsina, 2020).



Caste-ethnicity-based discrimination is a historically embedded issue in Nepal (Yadav, 2019). The ongoing pandemic, as Chaudhary (August 11, 2020, n.p.) reported, is forcing Dalits to live with double discrimination and humiliation:

The non-Dalits in the quarantine used to get hot water, lunch, and more food than ... [Dalit]... Now out of quarantine, but jobless, deep in debt, and facing double discrimination and humiliation, ... [several Dalits have] suicidal thoughts.

Covid-19 has also adverse impacts on Nepali economy that mainly depends on remittance, tourism, and agriculture. The Asian Development Bank projects that Nepali economy will be one of the five worst amongst developing Asian economies affected due to Covid-19 (Takenaka, Villafuerte, Gasper, & Naryanan, 2020). In worst case scenario, Nepal can experience a fall of 28.7% in its remittance. Since remittances contribute to 27% of Nepali GDP, Nepal will face severe economic crisis in the future (Takenaka et al., 2020). Also, given many Nepali households depend on remittances, there is possibility that they will fall into poverty facing extreme challenges in meeting their basic needs in the future (Prasain, August 4, 2020).

A recent study by the United Nations Development Programs concluded that Covid-19 is going to significantly impact temporary and daily-wage laborers in Nepal. Of notably, it will impact daily-wage women laborers severely as they are typically employed in low-paying, informal, and insecure job sectors (United Nations Development Program, 2020). The dire situation of daily-wage laborers has been already reported but the government thinks it is media conspiracy:

The lockdown has heavily affected the life of the commoner, especially the poor people ... [who are] daily-wage workers, who are now out of work, and without any earnings to survive in the city... However, the government, especially the Prime Minister of Nepal, has reacted to the situation as if no one is facing hunger. He termed the news coverage as “media conspiracy” (Pyakurel, May 8, 2020, n.p.)

Tourism and agriculture are other hard-hit economic sectors in Nepal. Nepali tourism sector generated Rs 240.7 billion revenue and provided jobs to 1.05 million people in 2018 (Poudel & Subedi, 2020). With the called off Visit Nepal Year 2020, which aimed to attract about two million tourists into Nepal, the tourism sector and those solely relying on it are going to face extreme financial difficulties in coming years. The lockdown has also impacted farmers such that they are compelled to dump their products due to closure of markets (Poudel & Subedi, 2020).

New forms of cleavage and conflict are emerging in Nepali politics in the backdrop of Covid-19. Since its restoration of multi-party democracy system in 1990, Nepal has witnessed several political upheavals including a decade long Maoist insurgency that claimed about 15000 Nepali



lives. With the departure of monarchy and the beginning of the federal, democratic, and republic system in 2006, there was an expectation for stable politics in Nepal. On contrary, this government, especially its ill political intentions and populist agenda during Covid-19, has invited untimely and unwanted political chaos. Not only this government has exacerbated internal political parties' rivalry but also has been trapped into quadrangle geopolitics of Nepal, India, China, and the USA (Chaudhury, June 15, 2020). This new political instability coupled with ongoing effect of Covid-19 pose a grave risk to Nepali development in the future.

### ***'Enough is enough'***

An 'Enough is Enough' campaign is ongoing against the left-wing populist government's negligence and its failure to manage Covid-19 in Nepal. The campaign demands effective '... testing, timely results, safer quarantine facilities, full protection for frontline health workers, transparency in medical procurements, [and] increased ICU capacity' (Nepali Times, July 30, 2020, n.p.). One of its organisers, P. Bam (August 14, 2020, personal communication) said,

the campaign demands not only this government takes Covid-19 and its responses seriously but also it aims to uncover the left-wing populist's empty promises. We will continue to fight against this government until it comes out of its rhetoric populism and acts as a responsible government.

Lal (August 5, 2020) further captured the essence of 'Enough is Enough'. He argued that the left-wing populism of the current government was akin to a neo-religion that draws its faiths and ideologies from *pancha devta* of communism (literally five gods of the communism) – Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. It promises proletarian ideologies and caters socialist dreams; nonetheless, at the time of crisis like Covid-19, it 'combine[s] the worst of all systems: culturally regressive, economically oligarchic and socially conservative' (Lal, August 5, 2020, n.p.).

To this end, the left-wing populism manifests counter public, counter politic, and counter democratic sentiments amidst Covid-19. Its leaders with low morale are distracted, who further keep themselves busy in making rhetoric rather rationally responding to Covid-19. Critics anticipate that this left-wing populism will not only force Nepal into instability but also in *longue durée* will hamper Nepali democratic norms and constitutional practice (Nepali Times, April 21, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

This study presented a critical narrative of the left-wing populist Nepali government and its response to Covid-19. The study found that the left-wing populist Nepali government has aggressively engaged in populist politics instead effectively managing Covid-19 in Nepal. The



left-wing populist Nepali government such negligence at the time of Covid-19 has insidious impacts on Nepali social, economic, and political sectors, which may also lead Nepal toward political instability hampering its democratic norms and practices in the future.

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