

Violation of the Social Contract and Gen-Z Movement in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines whether Nepali political parties are violating the social contract that underpins the legitimacy of the federal democratic republic. Drawing on the classical theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, it outlines normative benchmarks for political legitimacy, which are order and stability, protection of rights, and inclusive participation. Nepal's political course from monarchy to republic is reviewed through key historical milestones: the 1990 Constitution, the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the 2015 Constitution, and recent Gen Z Movement. Despite some achievements, evidence suggests recurrent breaches of the social contract. Declining accountability, elite and party capture, incomplete inclusion of youths and marginalized groups, systemic corruption, manipulation of constitutional processes, and weak internal party democracy are violations of the contract. The political parties have delivered notable gains by ending the decade long insurgency, adopting an inclusive constitution, expanding representation through proportional system, and maintaining regular election. However, these are undermined by their practices that prioritize private or factional interests over public welfare. The analysis concludes that Nepal's current situation reflects a significant violation of the social contract resulting to a violent Gen Z Movement. Without substantial reforms to strengthen accountability, meaningful inclusion, and responsiveness, public trust may continue to weaken, threatening further to the stability and legitimacy of Nepal's democratic governance.

Keywords: Social Contract, Political Legitimacy, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Democracy, Gen Z Movement

INTRODUCTION

The social contract theory is a foundational concept in political philosophy that has been a great interest of state affairs till date. It explains the origin of the state and its legitimacy, which is the fundamental debate in political philosophy. With the Enlightenment era of 17th and 18th century Europe, the religious beliefs gave away to rational and logical thoughts. The social contract explains why a compact is drawn between state and the people and Why individuals grant authority to political institutions and under what conditions that authority remains legitimate.

Nepal was a monarchical system until 1990s. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990 constitutionally established multiparty democracy with king as the head of the state with limited power. The philosophical transformation from monarchical system to a federal democratic republic of Nepal through a Second people movement and promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 has been founded on popular sovereignty.

Despite decades of democratic struggle and constitutional reform, Nepal's political parties today face growing criticism for recurrent instability, elite capture, exclusion of marginalized groups, and systemic corruption resulting to the Generation Z (Gen Z) movement on September 8 and 9, 2025. Demographically, Gen Z represents the generation of young people born between 1981 and 1996 (Dahal, 2026). This raises an urgent question: Have Nepal's political parties violated the social contract that underpins the legitimacy of the federal democratic republic? The general objective of this paper is to seek answer to this question. To attain this objective, this paper explains the social contract theories propounded by three legendary political philosophers: Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and explores how the Nepalese political parties are upholding the democratic social contract.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Thomas Hobbes (1651) in *Leviathan* argued individuals surrender freedoms to an absolute sovereign to escape the anarchy of the "state of nature," where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Chapter XI). Hobbes used the Latin word *bellum omnium contra omnes*, which means "war of all against all," to characterize this natural state in another book, *De Cive*. Legitimacy arises from the sovereign's ability to maintain order. He further mentions

They can create a common power that will be able to defend them from foreign invasion and harm from one another by giving all of their strength and power to one man or group of men who can reduce all of their wills, by plurality of voices, to one will—that is, to designate one man or group of men to bear their person. This will protect them so they may use their own labor and the produce of the land to feed themselves and live happily. And, everyone should own and admit that he is the author of everything he does or causes to be done in matters pertaining to the general peace and safety; everyone should submit their wills to his will and their judgments to his judgment. This goes beyond agreement or consent. I grant this guy, or this group of men, permission to control myself, provided that you grant him the same authority and consent to all of his activities,"would be the equivalent of every man saying to every other man. (p.64).

Hobbes proposes a "Leviathan" as an

"Authority, bestowed upon him by each individual member of the commonwealth, has given him so much strength and power that, by fear of it, he is able to carry out their collective wishes for peace at home and mutual assistance against their adversaries abroad. And in him resides the essence of the commonwealth, which is characterized as a single individual whose actions, through mutual covenants with one another, have made themselves all the author, to the end that he may use everyone's strength and resources as he sees fit for their mutual defense and peace. This power is referred to as 'sovereign' and is thought to have 'sovereign power.' (P.84).

Thus, Hobbes argued that individuals surrender freedoms to an absolute sovereign (i.e. Leviathan) to escape the anarchy of the "state of nature," where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (p.64). Legitimacy arises from the sovereign's ability to maintain order.

John Locke' Limited Government

John Locke (1821) offered a more optimistic view than Hobbes: individuals hold inalienable natural rights, which are life, liberty, and property, and form governments by consent to protect these rights. If rulers violate this trust, citizens retain a right to resist.

According to Locke, all men are inherently in “a condition of complete freedom to organize their activities and dispose of their belongings and people as they see appropriate, within the confines of natural law, without requesting permission or relying on the will of other people.” (Second Treatise of Government, 1821, p. 189).

In the natural condition, everyone is equal and free. Nobody has more rights or a higher standing than anyone else. According to Grayling (2019), p. 225, it claims that every man has a right to self-preservation and, as a result, a corresponding responsibility to respect each other's right to self-preservation and, in fact, to actively care for the welfare of others.

Locke notes that it is challenging to guarantee the defense of natural rights in the condition of nature. It is even worse to establish an absolute sovereign since there is no way to prevent a sovereign from preying on and even waging war on its citizens. Locke proposes civil society based on universally understood laws with independent courts to enforce them because he believes it is immoral to cede power to such a sovereign.

As he further states

It has been demonstrated that a man cannot submit to the arbitrary power of another; in the state of nature, he has no arbitrary power over another person's life, liberty, or possessions other than what the law of nature has granted him for the preservation of himself and the rest of humanity; this is all he does or can give up to the commonwealth and, through it, to the legislative power, so that the legislative can have no more than this. In its broadest sense, their authority is restricted to the welfare of the community. (p.304).

If a government run contrary to the interests of its subjects and try to stay illegitimately in power, the people has not merely right but the duty to overthrow it.

Rousseau's General Will

In 1762, Rousseau published book *The Social Contract*, which opens with the famous line,

“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.” State of nature is a primate condition without law and morality. Men are ignorant and innocent born with potential goodness. As humanity emerge from state of nature people no longer meet their needs from each other and inequality is prompted. This threatens instability and conflict and established authorities merely would “favor those with wealth and power exposing the poor and powerless thereby to exploitation” (Grayling, p.253).

In the Social Contract, Rousseau propose ‘the general will’ for ensuring that benefits the social life with individual freedom for all, asserting that legitimate laws must reflect the collective interest through participatory self-rule. He disapproved of the Hobbesian notion of a sovereign

person or entity chosen or elected by the people, as well as what is now known as "representative democracy" with an elected legislature. He believed that such agreements constituted a sort of slavery as they included the alienation of one's right to self-govern (Grayling p.253).

He is against 'representative democracy' because he thinks that in the near future, governments will no longer be subservient to the people but would instead wield authority over them. So, he supports 'direct democracy': government does not form law but people make themselves directly; government just implements law.

Hobbes' state of nature held that civil law did not exist. The individual cedes to a common sovereign all of his rights, including the right to self-preservation and defense. A commonwealth and a sovereign (one, few, or many) are established by the social compact.

According to Locke, the rule of nature is a moral code founded on reason that governs human behavior rather than a representation of natural urge. Man has intrinsic rights to life, liberty, and property. Men make a social compact that establishes a state with a shared agency for interpreting and applying the natural law. People give up some but not all of their rights. Government is a limited in authority and not absolute.

Rousseau's rule of nature is not grounded in reason, but rather in the sociability of emotion. In the natural condition, man is free and has all personal rights. A compact between people acting in their individual capacities and people acting in their corporate capacities creates the state.

Despite their differences, proponents of the social contract theory concur that a mutual understanding between the ruling class and the ruled is necessary for political legitimacy.

Social contract and Nepalese Political parties

In *Political parties and the social contract in fragile states*, Castillejo (2015) argues

“The social compact is shaped in large part by political parties. Parties' capacity to shape state institutions and executive power, establish policy agendas, mediate elite-constituency relations, link citizens to the state at different levels, aggregate and represent citizens' interests in state-society bargaining, and build a more inclusive political society makes them unique among political institutions. Political parties help create a solid social compact and a peaceful society when they carry out these functions.” (p.1).

Nepal's political parties played an important role in ending a decade long civil war and successfully agreeing on new constitution (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). However, the ability and internal democracy needed to handle complicated issues are lacking in the major political parties. and have instead become prone to power struggle and internal conflict.

Castillejo (2015) further argues that Parties have opaque finance, are highly centralized, lack representation of underprivileged people, and utilize patronage and state resources to consolidate their dominance. They suffer from ongoing factionalism and divisions because they are unable to handle the interests of a variety of members, which frequently leads to the fall of administrations. Nonetheless, diverse policies and programs are offered by Nepal's parties, especially when it comes to matters of federalism and identity. In Nepal, ethnicity, caste, and regional identity are now the main focal points of political activism. Marginalized groups now have a voice thanks

to this, and some of them have started their own political parties, such the Madhesi political parties. Nevertheless, Nepal's major parties—which are still controlled by privileged identity groups—have not shown themselves to be useful for communicating and negotiating this new identity-based politics. Although the mobilization of underprivileged communities is a good thing, identity-based extremism may flourish if mainstream parties are unable to include them in a more comprehensive national vision. (p. 3).

On research paper *Social Contracts: A Pathway for More Inclusive Societies*, McCandless (2021) explains

“In the past, the social contract has been defined as a voluntary or implicit agreement that reflects the rights and duties of governments and society, or people and groups within society, as well as the inevitable trade-offs that these agreements imply. The connection between the ruler and the ruled in maintaining an agreement intended to generate peace and stability, as well as the methods necessary to do so, was a fundamental issue of the classical ideas accepted by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Critical theorists have worked to make the idea more inclusive throughout time. For instance, Marx and Hegel contended that the social compact must serve the interests of both people and the capitalist class. Others aimed to address racial justice or put fairness and identity⁷ to the forefront of the conversation, for example from a feminist standpoint.” (p.5).

From the cases of South Africa, Tunisia, Colombia, and South Korea, McCandless (2021) reveals that:

- Corruption is the root cause of inequality and exclusion, which erode the foundations of durable and inclusive national social contracts, such as public confidence in the government and the willingness of society to accept challenging policy decisions;
- Protest is increasing as official election participation is decreasing, suggesting a lack of trust in current political systems and institutional structures for settling disputes and promoting cooperative politics; and
- More assistance should be given to civil society movements in and throughout the world that are promoting more inclusive social contracts that address risk and vulnerability through a range of creative strategies..

Historical overview of Political development

Nepal adopted the first people-mandated constitution in 2015 A.D. There were many different movements participating in the fight for democracy, from nonviolent demonstrations to bloody battles.

Originating from the Rana oligarchy that governed Nepal from 1846 to 1951, the country went through periods of absolute monarchy and democracy. The *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement) of 1990 ended absolute monarchy, leading to the Constitution of 1990 that introduced multiparty democracy and fundamental rights. Sovereignty was formally transferred from the king to the

people, and political parties became central actors expected to uphold democracy and the rule of law (Constitution of The Kingdom of Nepal, 1990). After that, there was a ten-year Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), which turned into the People's Movement II, a national uprising that resulted in the monarchy's fall. The 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) promised to restructure the state to end exclusion and violence. This journey continued with the drafting of an interim constitution in 2006 with the provision of inclusive democracy and other some transitional management.

Nepal became a federal republican democratic state with the adoption of the current 2015 Constitution (Constitution of Nepal 2015). Movements focused on identity were crucial to this change. While the Madhesh region's struggle was crucial in determining the federal agenda, the Dalit, Madhesh, Indigenous, and women's rights movements all contributed to the fight for an inclusive democracy (Siwakoti, 2024, p.1).

The Constitution declared Nepal a federal democratic republic, introduced proportional representation and affirmative action, and guaranteed fundamental rights and social justice. A number of political and socioeconomic rights are acknowledged as fundamental rights. Now recognized as fundamental rights are the following: the right to social justice (Article 42), the right to social security (Article 43), the right to the environment (Article 30), the right to live in dignity (Article 16), the rights of Dalits (Article 40), the rights of women (Article 38), the rights of the elderly (Article 41), etc. In cases where these fundamental rights are violated, the Constitution also protects the right to constitutional remedies to seek their enforcement.

Therefore, by "resolving to build an egalitarian society" based on inclusion, the current Constitution has paved the way for change (Preamble, The Constitution of Nepal). It seeks to uphold social justice by acknowledging diversity, putting a stop to all types of discrimination, and guaranteeing a fair distribution of resources, including the advantages of economic growth. In order to effectively execute these fundamental rights and objectives, the three levels of government have been striving to transform them into concrete legal and policy formulations through periodic and annual plans and policies as delivering promises of the social contract. Together, these milestones reflect Nepal's evolving social contract: a promise by political elites to govern in citizens' interests in exchange for democratic legitimacy.

Research on politics in Nepal is expanding, but few studies explicitly examine the social contract theory in connection to the recent Gen Z-led protest movements. The majority of the material now available is on the theoretical aspects of the social contract in a democratic state, which leaves a gap in our knowledge of how has the social contract being upheld by the ruling parties in Nepal with relation to recent movements.

METHODS

This study is conceptual; it employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in political philosophy and historical analysis to examine whether Nepali political parties have violated the social contract. The analysis draws on classical social contract theories, including: Thomas

Hobbes's (1651) argument for order and sovereignty, John Locke's (1689) concept of government by consent to protect natural rights and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1762) notion of the general will and participatory legitimacy.

These frameworks provide normative criteria to evaluate the legitimacy of political authority and practices. The paper contextualizes Nepal's political course by analyzing three critical constitutional moments: The 1990 Constitution (restoring multiparty democracy), the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (ending civil war and promising inclusion), the 2015 Constitution (establishing a federal democratic republic), and the recent Gen Z movement of September 8 and 9, 2025. Through historical interpretation, the study examines how these milestones created an evolving social contract between political parties and citizens (or, the ruler and the ruled). To assess party practices against constitutional promises, the paper reviews various published and unpublished secondary data, such as books and journal articles by various scholars, constitutional texts and peace agreements, reports by national and international organizations, scholarly literature on Nepali politics and media reports on recent political events and scandals etc. These sources were mostly accessed through Google Scholars, and other various reliable search engines available on the internet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Conceptualization

The social contract is a compact or agreement between the rulers and ruled. People give political legitimacy to the rulers through voting, movement or consensus. The earlier society was unorganized and unmanaged (even wild according to Hobbes), which threat to human security and individual freedom. The social contract is necessary for the legitimacy of the rulers. However, the contract is not by forces. It should be in consent between the rulers and the ruled. The rulers are subject to the sovereign authority of the people according to Rousseau.

Furthermore, people have the right to reject not only to legitimize (right to revolt as the vied of Locke). Nepali people in 1950s rejected the Rana regime and established democracy. There are also various popular movements in Nepal and which eventually overthrow the Monarchy system and the country shift to democratic republic in 2015.

Hobbes talks about strong leadership ("Leviathan" as absolute sovereign), whereas Locke emphasis on strong institutions. Hobbes and Locke emphasized on individual rights, whereas Rousseau focuses on the 'general will' i.e. the collective self-rule of the people. The Constitution of Nepal incorporates both ideas as the compact among the various political and social institutions. Hobbes wrote in the context of English civil war proposing strong leadership of Biblical character as with Leviathan. In the Nepalese context, these principles imply legitimacy requires:

- Safeguarding citizens' rights and welfare (Locke).
- Maintaining stability and order (Hobbes).
- Ensuring inclusive participation and sovereignty of the people (Rousseau).

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's explanations of the social contract theory do not explain how the state came to be. This idea is not supported by any evidence. There is no evidence to support

these thinkers' claims. Hobbes brought absolutism to the field of political philosophy. Locke acknowledged the notion of limited government. Popular sovereignty gained popularity thanks to Rousseau.

Rothstein (2021) states that the social contract is “one the oldest theories in the political philosophy going all the way back to Epicurus, Socrates and Plato.” The social contract idea, in its simple form, is an implicit or explicit mutual agreement about what the state can expect and from its citizen and what the citizens can expect from the state. It’s about how and why citizens perceive about laws and system of taxation, policies of governments regarding their legitimacy.

Promise vs. practices

The practice of social contract and its violations are discussed as below:

- I. **Declining Accountability and Elite Capture:** According to Locke, a government that fails to protect rights or pursues private interests breaches the social contract. Nepal faced 30 governments in its 35 years of democratic history. None of the single party government has completed its 5-year complete tenure. Frequent changes in government used to be mostly driven by elite negotiations rather than policy coalition. It undermines stability and effective governance. Leadership often remains within narrow elite circles as one top ranking ruling party leader (recently elected as the party's chairperson) claimed broker’s accessibility into the "Prime Minister’s bedroom"). Thus, it limits the meaningful participation of parliamentarians/representatives in important issue. Public trust is low; the Asia Foundation (2021) found widespread belief that political parties serve themselves rather than the people. Though social media ban seems to be the immediate cause of the protest, the aggression towards the corrupt political and bureaucratic leaderships are undercurrent of the general phenomena due to perception of the bad governance, especially by Gen Z youths. Thus, it triggered the protest (Ministry of Finance/Tribhuban University/Central Department of Economics Study Report, 2082).
- II. **Incomplete inclusion and marginalization:** Rousseau emphasises that legitimacy depends on laws reflecting the general will. Despite constitutional guarantees, youths are mostly alienated and marginalized. The real power remains centralized to certain political leaders and their closest allies. The 2015 protests in the Terai region and dissatisfaction over the present constitutions. Various issues regarding deepening of social inclusion and even regime change (from republic to back into Monarchy) in various ways and events illustrate feelings of exclusion from decisions affecting federal design. Such exclusion undermines Nepal’s social contract.
- III. **Corruption and patronage:** Corruption diverts resources meant for public welfare, contradicting the contract’s promise to protect citizens’ interests (Locke, 1689). Nepal rank poorly (ranked 109th in 180 countries scoring 34 out of 100 being least corrupt) in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2025). Dozens of scandals, including the 2023 fake Bhutanese refugee scam implicating senior leaders, highlight systemic corruption in the country. Rothstein (2021) argues that a society with a well-functioning social contract where citizens receive public goods, various social insurances,

and services in what they perceive to be fair and even-handed manner in exchanges for their taxes, can be seen as the opposite of corruption (p.20). In Nepalese context, the corruption Perception Index shows that citizen's perception on governance is not as expected thereby resulting aggression towards political leaderships and bureaucratic structure. Recent unpublished survey report prepared by Tribhuvan University (Central Department of Economics) with collaboration of Ministry of Finance, (Government of Nepal), brought that, about ninety percent of the respondents all over the seven provinces believe that the Gen Z movement was caused mainly by corruption and bad governance. (from an unpublished study report "Understanding Gen Z Movement: Main Cause, Reality and Roadmap for Nepal")

- IV. **Manipulation of constitutional processes:** Hacchethu (2022) writes... “When they first join competitive politics, political parties are organizations dedicated to a "particular mission or ideology," but they eventually transform into "power houses" that primarily serve a small set of political elites and special interest groups.” (p.59). Efforts to dissolve parliament in 2020–2021, later overturned by the Supreme Court, reflected attempts to use constitutional mechanisms for short-term political advantage. Various political appointments based on sharing of spoils among ruling political coalition damage meritocracy and fairness. Such actions undermine constitutional and institutional trust. It proves political parties see constitutions as tools for power rather than limits to power. Violation of constitution by letter and spirit for vested interests are proved by such activities.
- V. **Weak internal party democracy:** Most of the major parties lack transparent internal elections, and leadership transitions rarely happened in this period of time or if happened, often blamed to be occurred through informal deals. This contradicts democratic commitments and limits responsiveness to the citizens. Deep ethnic, linguistic, and caste diversity complicates inclusive policy making. Geopolitical pressures incentivize political parties to prioritize stability. Limited fiscal capacity encourages patronage to maintain coalitions mostly in federal and provincial governments.

Thus, the results of the study shows that Nepal’s political reality is best described as violation of the social contract between the political parties and the citizens. Though constitutional procedures remain intact, democratic practices (i.e. accountability, inclusion, and responsiveness) often fall short.

Locke’s theory suggests that when rulers consistently prioritize private interests, the citizens can reform or replace them. Among 420 Gen Z respondents represented from all provinces, 48 percent are unsatisfied with the actions of the rulers, whereas, 30 percent are unsatisfied with the regime itself (Ministry of Finance/Tribhuvan University/Central Department of Economics, 2082), causing to form a massive protest, previously in social media and in the streets. Although the media, civil society, and grassroots movements act as watchdogs to pressure parties to realign with constitutional ideals, parties’ failures not only weaken but nullify legitimacy, risking growing public alienation and Gen Z Movement of September 8 and 9, 2025 with violent actions claimed

77 human lives and physical damages costing billions of Nepalese rupees (Total physical damage is Rs. 84.45 billion according to the National Planning Commission's Report Damage, 2082 BS).

CONCLUSION

Nepal's political transformation from monarchy to a federal democratic republic represents a historic shift towards popular sovereignty, with the 2015 Constitution enshrining fundamental rights and social justice. However, the social contract, as conceptualized by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, demands more than legal structures. It requires rulers to act in the collective interest, safeguard civil rights, ensure inclusion, and maintaining public trust. The study finds that while Nepal's political parties have successfully managed decade-long internal insurgency, constitution-making, and expanding representation, these gains have not been sustained due to the issues of elite capture, corruption, youth alienation and marginalization, and manipulation of democratic processes, resulting to a violent movement and overthrow of the ruling majority government.

The overall assessment is that Nepal's democratic governance reflects significant violations of the social contract. Although constitutional frameworks remain functional, gaps in accountability, transparency, and lack of meaningful inclusion weakened the legitimacy of political authority. Sustaining democracy will require political parties to realign with the principles of the social contract. Only by institutionalizing internal democracy, addressing systemic corruption, ensuring equitable inclusion, and prioritizing the public good over factional interests ensure sustaining and deepening democracy.

Conflict of Interest

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