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What Role do Local Elections Play for Societal Peace in Nepal?

Evidence from Post-Conflict Nepal

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Abstract

Can local elections introduced in a post-conflict context help to foster societal peace, or do they create new potential for conflict? The value of post-conflict elections has been the matter of controversial academic debates. However, this literature largely neglects to take into account the role of *local* elections. Based on the literature, we formulate three hypotheses on how local elections might impact societal peace, focussing on the periods before, during and after an election. The first focusses on the potential negative effects of identity-based mobilisation before an election, while the latter two lead us to expect positive effects – either through increased participation through the vote during an election, or improved responsiveness as a consequence after an election. We study each of these three mechanisms in Nepal, a country that experienced almost 10 years of civil war up until 2006 and where local elections were reintroduced in 2017. Combining 79 qualitative interviews at the national and local levels with insights from a large-n survey of 1,400 respondents, we find that overall the reintroduction of local elections had a clear positive impact on societal peace in Nepal. In particular, the results show that the elections increased participation and responsiveness, which has positively affected political trust and reduced (the potential for) political violence. Overall, this paper thereby contributes to the academic debate on the role of elections for peace, calling to attention the positive role local elections can play. It also demonstrates the benefits of moving beyond a narrow definition of peace in relatively stable post-conflict contexts to take a closer look at the effect of political institutions on societal dynamics.

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Bonn, March 2022

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Abbreviations

DIE	German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LGU	local government unit
NGO	non-governmental organisation

1 Introduction

Can local elections help to foster peace, or do they create new potential for conflict? The role of post-conflict elections has been the matter of controversial debates. Some argue that democratic elections offer important mechanisms for conflict resolution that can help to build peace, while others warn against the divisive effects that electoral competition can have (Brancati & Snyder, 2012; Carothers, 2007; Cederman, Gleditsch, & Hug, 2012; Diamond, 2006; Flores & Nooruddin, 2012; Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, & Gleditsch, 2001; Mansfield & Snyder, 2008; Paris, 2004). However, the debates mainly focus on national elections while neglecting local elections, even though arguments exist that the subnational level can play an important role in peace-building processes (Bermeo, 2002; Siegle & O'Mahony, 2010). Moreover, research investigating the relationship between elections and peace so far mostly uses a narrow, negative definition of peace as being the absence of violent conflict.

Nepal is a highly interesting case to investigate the relationship between local elections and peace. Nepal experienced a decade-long civil war, which ended in 2006, but like many post-conflict countries, it still struggles with political stability and overcoming the root causes of the conflict. A new constitution laying out a federal state structure – a key element agreed upon in the peace agreement – was not passed until 2015, and amid violent protests causing numerous deaths. Furthermore, the national political landscape, in which former rebels represent one of the main political parties, is highly volatile in Nepal: Between 2008 and 2021 the country has been led by 11 different prime ministers. At the same time, the reintroduction of local elections in Nepal in 2017 after their absence for more than 20 years represents a unique opportunity to investigate the effect of local elections on peace in post-conflict contexts,[1] leading us to our core research question: "*What effect have local elections had on societal peace in post-conflict Nepal?*"

We analyse our research question based on three hypotheses that specify different mechanisms for how elections could contribute to societal peace. Hypothesis 1 regards local elections as a process and examines whether the mobilisation before the elections ran along ethnic identity lines, with potential negative effects for societal peace. Hypothesis 2 is concerned with local elections as a choice and investigates whether participation increased due to the elections and how this affects societal peace. Hypothesis 3 analyses the consequences of the local elections by looking at responsiveness – what activities the elected representatives pursue – and how this has affected societal peace.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted 79 qualitative interviews at the national level and in selected local municipalities with 97 experts as well as stakeholders in order to gain in-depth insights on the dynamics around the local elections. These findings are complemented with perception data from the broader Nepalese population that was collected through a telephone survey conducted with 1,400 respondents across four purposefully chosen provinces in Nepal. Overall, the analysis reveals that the reintroduction of local elections had a mainly positive impact on societal peace in Nepal, especially through an improvement of state–society relations (vertical aspects of social cohesion) and a reduction of political violence, mainly driven by increased participation and improved responsiveness.

1 We use the term post-conflict contexts for situations where armed conflict or civil war has come to a clear end, which does not mean that they are free from minor or non-violent conflict more generally, however.

Our research contributes to four main literature debates. First, we contribute to the unresolved debate of whether decentralisation reduces or fuels conflicts in a country by investigating its political dimension: subnational elections. Second, by focussing on the local level, we bring a new perspective to the discussion on the role of post-conflict elections in post-conflict contexts. Third, we help to overcome the neglect of local elections in academic research more generally, which are largely overlooked as second-order elections. Fourth, by conceptualising social cohesion as part of societal peace (in combination with the absence of political violence), we conceptually and empirically contribute to the literature on social cohesion as well as peace and conflict by moving beyond negative peace.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The literature review (Section 2) introduces the different academic debates that are of theoretical relevance to our topic: decentralisation, elections and conflict, as well as the literature on local elections. Section 3 presents the research question and introduces key concepts. The ensuing theory section covers our three hypotheses (Section 4). Section 5 explains our case selection and portrays our case study Nepal in more detail, outlining the historic, societal and institutional context. After specifying our research design (Section 6), we present our analysis, which is structured along the three hypotheses (Section 7). Section 8 concludes.

2 Literature review

Three main strands of literature are relevant to analyse the question of how local elections in Nepal have affected societal peace: research on 1) the role of decentralisation in post-conflict societies, 2) (post-conflict) elections and peace and 3) the effects on local elections more generally.

2.1 Decentralisation – reducing or fuelling conflicts?

Local elections are a core element of political decentralisation.[2] As yet, there is no academic consensus on whether processes of decentralisation (or federalism[3]) reduce or fuel conflict, and the topic has not received extensive attention. Some authors highlight decentralisation's peace-building potential, arguing that it can contribute to ending a violent conflict,

2 Decentralisation more generally refers to the transmission of political authority, resources and responsibilities from the central government to the sub-national levels (Grävingholt & von Haldenwang, 2016). Three aspects of decentralisation are usually differentiated: 1) political decentralisation – the transfer of political authority, including local elections, 2) the fiscal decentralisation of resources and 3) administrative decentralisation of policy competences.

3 Decentralisation and federalism are closely related and intertwined. Federal states in particular involve a highly decentralised system of government in which the decision-making is distributed to sub-national levels involving provincial and local governments (Chaudhary, 2019). In contrast to decentralisation, federal arrangements have to be enshrined in a constitution that expressly confers powers to sub-national levels of government, provides for direct elections also to the lower-levels of government and guarantees each level of power to act independently in their respective spheres (Choudhry & Hume, 2011). Federal systems are considered as a constitutional choice, while decentralisation is viewed as a choice of policy (Blume & Voigt, 2011). However, since the debate on federalism and decentralisation are closely related, we use decentralisation as the overarching concept.

strengthening a peace process and preserving peace within a country (Bermeo, 2002; Hannum, 2004). Similarly, by transferring economic and political authority to regional entities while maintaining the territorial integrity of the existing nation-state, decentralisation is expected to meet the demands of different groups while preserving political stability (Keil, 2019). Due to these expectations, it has become an important instrument of conflict resolution since the end of the Cold War, especially in countries with ethnically diverse societies.

However, the positive impact of decentralisation is not uncontested, and other scholars warn of potentially destabilising consequences in countries marked by conflict. Several authors emphasise that new distributional conflicts may emerge from decentralisation (Hale, 2004; Keil, 2019). It may also boost ethnic conflicts and secessionism by promoting regional parties that highlight ethnic identities (Brancati, 2006; Kefale, 2013). Another major concern regarding decentralisation in ethnically heterogeneous societies is that it might underline intergroup differences, and thus boost the chances for intercommunal conflicts. Other scholars also fear that granting greater regional autonomy to certain groups might in turn lead to them discriminating against newly created minorities, again fuelling new conflict (Cornell, 2002; Roeder, 1991).

The relatively scarce cross-country as well as case study evidence on the impacts of decentralisation and federalism finds conflict-reducing as well as conflict-inducing effects, depending on a number of intervening factors (Brancati, 2006; Brown, 2008; Chemouni, 2018; Crawford & Hartmann, 2008; Siegle & O'Mahony, 2006; Wall, 2016). Most prominently, Brancati (2006, 2009) shows that if decentralisation enables the emergence of regional parties, this can contribute to the outbreak of conflict. At the same time, both Brancati (2006) as well as other authors show that if decentralisation increases the participation of minority groups, strengthens trust between groups engaging in local governance institutions and reallocates resources at the regional level, it can have conflict-reducing effects (Brancati, 2006; Schou & Haug, 2005; Siegle & O'Mahony, 2006). Other studies find that the effect is mediated by the degree of decentralisation, that is, how much actual power is transferred to the local level, and whether this is matched with capacities and resources. Tranchant (2008) also finds a conflict-mitigating effect of fiscal decentralisation, but only in cases with high state capacity. Siegle and O'Mahony (2006) in turn find that when accompanied by high levels of legitimacy, the monitoring of expenditures by local governments and efficient local government capacities, decentralisation can have conflict-reducing effects. However, higher pressure for self-financing through local taxes, unequal local sources of income and poor central government control over security in the provinces are related to conflict-inducing effects of decentralisation (Siegle & O'Mahony, 2006). Overall, the literature is therefore divided on the effects of decentralisation on peace.

2.2 Post-conflict elections – facilitator or threat for peace?

The introduction of local elections in a post-conflict context also strongly relates to the academic debate on elections and conflict. This debate concentrates on the question of whether and under what conditions elections strengthen peace or lead to new tensions, especially in post-conflict societies.

On the one hand, arguments exist that post-war elections can help to strengthen peace, as they constitute an important step forward in the peace process by providing crucial legitimacy for the new government (Reilly, 2002). As Sisk (2009, p. 219) points out, "[e]lections – for better or for worse – are an essential step in the process of reconstituting political order after civil war". Moreover, competitive elections provide peaceful mechanisms for the distribution and redistribution of power, which is the core contention in most civil wars (e.g. Burnell, 2006; Reilly, 2008). They can help to address grievances and dissatisfaction in a non-violent way, and thus work as a system of conflict management (Burnell, 2006). Moreover, by allowing different groups to participate in politics, they should reduce exclusion and thereby have the potential to directly reduce grievances that might lead to violence (Call, 2012).

On the other hand, various scholars argue and demonstrate that elections can increase the risk of conflict under specific circumstances. Most prominently, Flores and Nooruddin (2012) find that, in new democracies, early elections are particularly at risk to lead to renewed violence – a result very similar to the analyses by Brancati and Snyder (2012). Cederman, Gleditsch and Hug (2012) do not find a strong overall effect of elections on conflict, but they do find that elections can increase the likelihood of ethnic civil war, with smaller ethnic groups engaging in territorial conflicts after competitive elections. According to the literature, three causal mechanism can lead from elections to violence (Brancati & Snyder, 2012; Cederman et al., 2012; Flores & Nooruddin, 2012). First, the results of an unfavourable election are rejected, which is also known as the "sore-looser effect". Second, the ethno-nationalist mobilisation of constituencies that draw on group differences and loyalties and ethnic outbidding polarises society. Third, due to a lack of institutional constraints, the winner of the elections exercises exclusionary and repressive rule, leading to renewed fighting.

Based on these insights, there exists a debate regarding the ideal timing when elections should take place after the end of a civil war. Some scholars nevertheless argue in favour of early elections, as this would legitimatise leaders to spearhead democratisation processes (Diamond, 2006; Kumar, 1998) and appease demands of the people, elites and international actors (Carothers, 2007; Radin, 2013; Reilly, 2002, 2016). Others find later elections to be less destabilising, as they provide more time to mitigate the risk of renewed fighting by ensuring that favourable conditions can be created first (Brancati & Snyder, 2012; Flores & Nooruddin, 2012).

Local elections are largely neglected in this debate, except for recommendations on sequencing local and national elections in order to reduce the risk of national elections turning violent. Based on Kosovo as an illustrative example, Reilly argues in favour of earlier subnational elections by highlighting the potential of fostering strong democratic institutions while keeping the stakes of electoral struggles low (Reilly, 2017). Similarly, Diamond (2006) argues in the Iraqi case that, if local elections had been held before national elections, this would have helped strengthen the basis of democracy and been beneficial to the peace process (Diamond, 2006). However, no systematic empirical testing exists so far as to whether sequencing local before national elections indeed can contribute to maintaining peace.

Three studies more systematically deal with local elections and their relationship to conflict. Steele (2017) shows what negative, unintended consequences local elections may have by

demonstrating that the local elections introduced in Colombia during the civil war contributed to collective targeting and displacement. This was possible because counterinsurgent groups exploited the election results to deduce citizens' political loyalties, on the basis of which there was a political cleansing of civilians thought to be loyal to leftist insurgents. Also based on the Colombian case, Steele and Schubinger (2018) demonstrate that the local elections not only contributed to an escalation in violence against civilians, but furthermore led to local institutions being captured by armed or paramilitary groups, thereby providing additional funds and prolonging the conflict. Although both studies provide important insights into the potentially negative effects of local elections on conflict dynamics, they focus on the effects of local elections during, not after conflict. Focussing on post-conflict countries instead and analysing data between 1946 and 2010, Fiedler (2019) demonstrates that holding local elections is significantly and negatively associated with conflict recurrence. Fiedler (2019) thereby provides the first cross-country evidence of a positive relationship between local elections and peace. At the same time, she is not able to take a closer look at the causal mechanism behind this relationship and how these dynamics play out within a country. Additionally, all three studies apply a narrow, negative definition of peace, analysing increases or decreases in levels of violence. What effect local elections have on a broader understanding of peace – including the social ties in society – are not addressed in any of the three studies.

Overall, the literature on the conflict-mitigating or -inducing effect of elections hence almost exclusively focusses on elections at the national level. Empirical research on local elections in post-conflict contexts is still nascent, even though many countries struggling with conflict, such as Sierra Leone, Nepal, Mozambique and Indonesia, have introduced local elections as part of their efforts to strengthen peace. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the academic debate on post-conflict elections as a facilitator or threat to peace by explicitly focussing on the effect of local elections on peace.

2.3 Local elections – second-order or crucial for peace?

The primary focus on national elections is also true for the academic literature on elections in general, in which local elections receive significantly less attention (Berry & Howell, 2007). This stands in clear contrast to the political relevance of local elections. Even many autocratic states allow for local elections, despite pursuing a central regime ideology (Martinez-Bravo, Qian, & Yao, 2011; Reuter, Buckley, Shubenkova, & Garifullina, 2016).

Research explicitly addressing local elections mostly focusses on Europe and North America and investigates whether local elections are "second-order" (Heath, McLean, Taylor, & Curtice, 1999; Marien, Dassonneville, & Hooghe, 2015; Schakel & Jeffery, 2013), meaning whether they are perceived as less relevant and have a lower voter turnout as well as a higher susceptibility to protest voting (Marien et al., 2015). Recent research indicates that local elections are not purely second-order, and less so than supranational elections (Cutler, 2008; Heath et al., 1999; Marien et al., 2015; Rallings & Thrasher, 2005). Among others, personal ties to local politicians and concerns about local issues increase the relevance of local elections for constituents (Barberá, 2010; Fiva & Smith, 2017; Marien et al., 2015; Martínez-Fuentes & Villodres, 2010; Oliver, Ha, & Callen, 2012). Moreover, Hankla and Manning (2016) demonstrate for the case of Mozambique that subnationally elected governments can influence patterns of national politics. Furthermore, several

authors argue and empirically demonstrate that the public holds local politicians accountable – partly even more than those at higher political levels (Khemani, 2001; Lazar, 2004; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2011; Schraufnagel & Testriono, 2020).

In sum, local elections have clearly not received sufficient attention in the academic literature. This may be due to the fact that local elections have long been considered less important than national elections. However, the debates around decentralisation and post-conflict elections discussed above as well as the existing case studies suggest that local elections can play a central role for peace, especially in post-conflict contexts. The understanding of "peace" at this point should not be limited to the absence of violent conflict, but rather be extended to healthy societal relationships, that is, the social cohesion within society.

2.4 Social cohesion in post-conflict contexts

Social cohesion describes the quality of relations in society, both between individuals or groups as well as between these and the state.[4] Although the topic of social cohesion in post-conflict contexts is increasingly attracting scholarly attention, it is still nascent. There are two main strands of the literature to date. Firstly, there is an ongoing debate in the academic literature on how armed conflict affects different elements of social cohesion. In a recent literature review of 39 studies on the topic, Fiedler and Rohles (2021) come to the conclusion that, overall, the relationship has still not been fully explored, but that the majority of results so far mainly indicate that conflict harms social cohesion.

A second strand of literature looks into how social cohesion can be built in post-conflict contexts. Regarding government activities, Blouin and Mukand (2019), for example, show that the Rwandan government's radio propaganda was able to significantly change interethnic attitudes, and Wong (2016) shows that government responsiveness in Sierra Leone contributed to political trust. Focussing on interethnic relations, Svensson and Brounéus (2013) analyse a dialogue programme at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. They find that, although ethnicity became more salient for participants, some attitudes changed in a positive direction. An intervention that involved mixing Christian and Muslim soccer players in post-ISIS Iraq (Mousa, 2020), in turn, finds that "contact can build tolerant behaviors toward peers within an intervention, [but] building broader social cohesion outside of it is more challenging". Furthermore, there is some academic as well as evaluation work on donor interventions aimed at strengthening social cohesion in post-conflict contexts (Cox & Sisk, 2017; Fearon, Humphreys, & Weinstein, 2009; Sonnenfeld et al., 2021). The interventions that have been analysed so far mostly fostered horizontal relations across societal groups, for example through dialogue or educational efforts. A recent systematic literature review shows that such efforts can make a small, positive contribution to social cohesion (Sonnenfeld et al., 2021). However, these interventions have a preventative character, are usually of limited scope and are clearly not sufficient to address sources of conflict on their own. They instead require also addressing structural drivers of conflict and the vertical dimension of social cohesion – the relationship between the population and the state (Sonnenfeld et al., 2021). The effect of elections, either at the national or local level,

4 For the larger conceptual debate as well as the concrete definition of social cohesion used in this discussion paper, see Section 3.2.

on social cohesion has not received direct academic attention. More specific studies exist on the effect of elections on subcomponents – especially on participation in national elections and political trust – yet they mostly do not focus on post-conflict settings (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Hooghe & Stiers, 2016).

3 Research question and main concepts

It has become clear that there is hardly any scholarship that examines local elections in post-conflict societies. As new insights would be highly relevant for both research and political practice, this study aims to answer the following research question:

What effect have local elections had on societal peace in post-conflict Nepal?

In order to answer this question, we first briefly conceptualise the explanatory variable (local elections) and its different aspects. We then present our dependent variable – societal peace. One important contribution of this paper is that, with our conceptualisation of societal peace, we use a broader concept of peace that goes beyond the mere absence of political violence, which allows us to analyse the effect of local elections on a range of societal dynamics.

3.1 The explanatory variable: Local elections

Local elections are a formalised group decision-making process of the public through which voters select an individual or multiple individuals for public office at the sub-national levels of the political administration (Gibbins, Eulau, & Webb, 2020). Apart from local elections, other mechanisms to determine political representatives may exist (e.g. centralised appointments, internal elections, hereditary powers), which usually do not offer a possibility for citizens to influence the decision about who takes political office and limit access to compete for political power by running for office (Brown, 2006). For our own conceptualisation of local elections, considering the potential for change of local elections, we define three temporal dimensions, each focussing on one of the periods before, during or after an election:

1. *Elections as a process* refers to the political process aimed at influencing voters' electoral preferences. In our study, analysing this dimension means we focus chiefly on the mobilisation of voters before elections.

2. *Elections as a choice* describes the selection of choices a voter has in the election, including the one of running for office herself or himself. Therefore, in our study, "elections as a choice" refers to casting a vote or running for office during elections.

3. *Elections as a consequence* refers to the entirety of actions by those in political offices that can be observed after elections.

3.2 The dependent variable: Societal peace

Societal peace describes the quality of relationships and dynamics in society. We define societal peace as being composed of two core dimensions: the absence of political violence and the presence of social cohesion. Before clarifying the concept of societal peace further, it is necessary to briefly define the two sub-components.

Political violence

Although there is no established definition of political violence in the literature, most definitions focus on one or several of the following aspects, depending on the research interest: the objectives, the targets, the organisational structure and the repertoire of actions of political violence, though political objectives are most commonly focussed on (Bosi & Malthaner, 2015; della Porta, 1995; Krause, 2009, 2016; Valentino, 2014). Building upon the existing literature, we define political violence as *collective violence that fulfils at least one of the following three criteria: a) it is carried out by political actors, b) it is politically motivated, c) it targets a politically relevant social group*. This usually entails direct physical force with lethal weapons meant to cause death, injury or major damage to property, but it can also mean threats of such types of violence intended to inflict fear. According to this definition, political violence can be either spontaneous or organised, and thus it can range from smaller-scale incidents, such as rioting, to full-scale civil war. It furthermore comprises violent protests, the use of police force against protesters or other forms of state repression, electoral violence, communal conflict, one-sided violence and/or state-based armed conflict. This definition of *political* violence explicitly excludes organised crime and other criminal activities as well as individual/personalised violence such as gender-based violence.

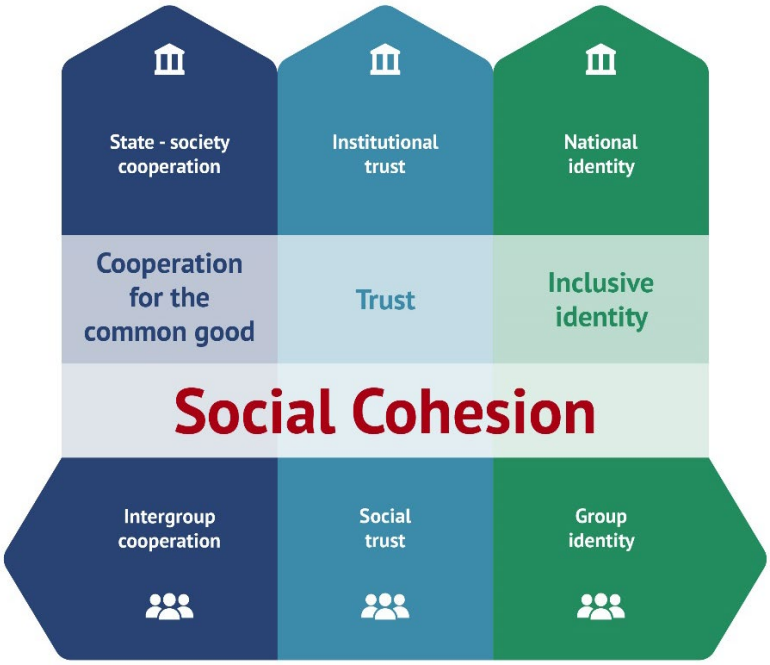
Social cohesion

Being a "descriptive, multifaceted and gradual phenomenon" (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 595), social cohesion is not yet consistently and consensually defined throughout the literature. As a rich and partly contested concept, it is not easily pinpointed and is oftentimes explained through abstract terminology such as the "fabric" or "glue that holds society together" (see Kushner & Sterk, 2005, p. 1). In a comprehensive literature review, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) identify three major dimensions that are key elements of most conventional conceptualisations of social cohesion: social relations, identification with a geographical unit and orientation towards a common good (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Chan, To and Chan (2006) conceptualise social cohesion in a way that can be described as foundational for a number of subsequent studies. They identify six categories of elements across two analytical dimensions that intersect with three columns: The first column includes factors pertaining to trust, the second comprises elements related to a sense of belonging and the third describes aspects of willingness to help and participate (Chan et al., 2006). All three categories of factors are analysed at the horizontal level (interactions among people) as well as at the vertical level (interactions of members of society with state institutions; Chan et al., 2006). Across all six categories, both ideational factors as well as manifested behaviour are analysed (Chan et al., 2006).

We use the conceptualisation of social cohesion developed by Leininger et al. (2021) at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), which strongly draws on research by Chan et al. (2006). We adopt this definition for our study, as

in our opinion, it best represents the quintessential common denominators across a wide range of conventional conceptualisations. Based on this conceptualisation, social cohesion is defined as the "vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state, which hold society together. Social cohesion is characterised by "a set of attitudes and behavioural manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good" (Leininger et al., 2021, p. 3).

Figure 1: Social cohesion – DIE conceptualisation



Source: Leininger et al. (2021)

The vertical dimension refers to relations between members of society and the state, and the horizontal dimension refers to relations between members of society. Trust, therefore, encompasses vertical trust (i.e. peoples' trust in political institutions) as well as horizontal trust (i.e. social trust, namely trust towards members outside of one's familiar circles); "inclusive identity" regards a peaceful coexistence of identities without any one identity dominating; and "cooperation for the common good" contains vertical, that is, state–society cooperation, as well as horizontal, that is, intergroup cooperation, for a common good, which is a good that transcends that of the single individuals involved (Leininger et al., 2021).[5]

Societal peace

As mentioned above, we define societal peace as being composed of two core dimensions: The absence of political violence and the presence of social cohesion. Both are taken to be necessary parts of societal peace, so that if one of the two is not given, we cannot speak of

5 For further reading on trust, see also Berg, Dickhaut and McCabe (1995), Rothstein and Uslaner (2005), Mattes and Moreno (2017); for inclusive identity, see Chan and Chan (2006); Chan et al. (2006), Jenson (2010), Acket, Borsenberger, Dickes and Sarracino (2011), Schiefer and van der Noll (2017); and for cooperation for the common good, see also Welzel, Inglehart and Deutsch (2005), Schiefer and van der Noll (2017).

societal peace. In turn, both conditions being fully met would constitute the positive extreme of an entirely peaceful society. However, this is very difficult, if not impossible, to reach in reality, which is why we use the concept in relational terms, considering a society to be more peaceful if there is more social cohesion and less political violence.

There are two reasons why it can be argued that a society marked by low levels of political violence and high levels of social cohesion can be considered peaceful. Firstly, political violence is a direct manifestation of defective societal relations, indicating that conflicting views could not be settled peacefully. Social cohesion, in turn, constitutes a more hidden quality and captures the presence of positive relations – both between social groups and with the state. Combining both sub-dimensions – social cohesion and political violence – therefore helps us understand not only whether there is overt confrontation but also, more generally, how well a society is equipped to deal with arising conflicts peacefully, and how healthy its internal relations are.

Secondly, there are good reasons to assume that the two dimensions – political violence and social cohesion – influence each other. The literature studying the social legacies of conflict so far indicates that political violence mostly harms social cohesion (for a review of the extensive literature, see Fiedler and Rohles (2021)). In particular, several studies show that although conflict might strengthen relations within social groups (bonding), it more often seriously strains relations across groups (bridging) (Bauer, Cassar, Chytilová, & Henrich, 2014; Hager, Krakowski, & Schaub, 2019; Mironova & Whitt, 2016; Rohner, Thoenig, & Zilibotti, 2013; Werner & Graf Lambsdorff, 2019; Whitt & Wilson, 2007). Furthermore, several studies indicate that this negative effect of violence on social cohesion can persist in the long term (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2014; Cecchi & Duchoslav, 2018; Grosjean, 2014). It is this interaction across societal fault lines that we consider to be key for peace in society (see e.g. the literature on social contract: Furness & Trautner, 2020). Although less well-researched, there are some indications that the absence of social cohesion, in turn, makes it more likely that conflicts escalate into political violence. In this vein, Cullen and Coletta (2000, p. 13) state that "[w]eak societal cohesion increases the risk of social disorganization, fragmentation and exclusion, potentially manifesting itself in violent conflict". Although this relationship still needs to be better understood empirically, Langer, Stewart, Smedts and Demarest (2017, p. 322) find that "countries with low levels of social cohesion in a particular year […] are more likely to experience a range of different violent conflict events in the subsequent year". A society in which people regularly interact and cooperate across group lines – where they trust each other and the state, and where diverse identities are respected – can be expected to be more peaceful than one marked by stark mistrust and where social interactions take place largely within secluded and mutually exclusive social groups.

We believe this concept of societal peace to not only be an important conceptual innovation in itself, but also particularly helpful for our research. Nepal's civil war ended 15 years ago and no major conflict has erupted since. If we want to study peace in Nepal, we think it is crucial to go beyond the absence of war – often described as negative peace. In this regard, we follow Diehl (2016, p. 7): "Rather than study the outbreak of violence between ethnic groups, a study of peace would examine how some groups have deep cooperation and integration with one another." The concept of societal peace, which entails the absence of political violence and the presence of social cohesion, allows us to do exactly this.

4 Three hypotheses on local elections and societal peace

To analyse the connection between local elections and societal peace in post-conflict societies, we focus on three mechanisms: voter mobilisation before the elections, electoral participation during the elections and political responsiveness after the elections. These represent different logics as to why and when we can expect local elections to increase or decrease the degrees of societal peace.

4.1 Hypothesis 1: Voter mobilisation along ethno-religious lines

A first core aspect of elections is political mobilisation, which can be defined as a "collective activity in pursuit of explicit political goals" (Alptekin, 2017, p. 2673). Local elections introduce competition to the political system, and it becomes necessary for candidates and parties to compete for voter approval, votes and – by extension – representation in locally elected political bodies. In order to do so, they engage in voter mobilisation strategies, especially campaign events, to call attention to their candidacy or party and persuade voters to vote for them. Depending on the kinds of strategies used – especially if drawing on group identities and catering to negative stereotypes – this can negatively affect societal relations. By taking a closer look at this dynamic, we analyse here *elections as a process* by focussing on the stage of political mobilisation prior to the local elections.

In their electoral campaigns, political parties compete for votes using strategies that they expect will bring them the desired electoral victory. Although the democratic ideal is that such mobilisation strategies are based on positions on policy issues, parties might also see the possibility to secure votes by appealing to group identities instead (Strijbis & Kotnarowski, 2013). This form of mobilisation may be of importance especially in heterogeneous contexts, where identities represent clear dividing lines in society. In this regard, research has particularly focussed on ethnic mobilisation, which "may be defined as the process of organizing collective actions based on ethnic identities" (Xue, 2018, p. 510) and may refer, for example, to joint history, language or customs, and through which ethnic members are aimed to engage in political activities. In research, ethnic parties or political leaders are predominantly seen as the main actors for ethnic mobilisation (Becher, 2016).

Various strategies exist that political actors and especially parties use to mobilise their electorate by drawing on identities. These strategies can theoretically be either unifying or divisive. Potentially unifying strategies invoke a common identity in the election campaign, proclaiming the overcoming of former enmities between (ethnic) groups and the lifting of the disadvantage of certain communities. The patronage strategy entails promises of local development or better public services to a specific identity group. However, if political parties adhere to ethnic pride, ethnic grievance and valence strategies instead (Gadjanova, 2021), these can be seen as potentially divisive mobilisation strategies. When using the "valence" rhetoric, the candidate addresses non-ethnic social groups such as women, professional groups, urban dwellers or other identities, while he or she questions the abilities of the opposing candidate and accuses the political opponent of mismanagement, corruption or other shortcomings. Potentially most divisive are the "ethnic pride" and "ethnic grievance" strategies emphasising the common heritage – or even the superiority – of one's ethnic identity to attract voters from that group or fuel the feelings of discrimination and exclusion of this group (Gadjanova, 2021).

Existing research has identified several explanations for why ethno-political mobilisation occurs in elections. Mughal (2020) emphasises that the sense of cultural and economic marginalisation of certain ethnic identity groups makes it more likely that political actors will focus on the interests of their own groups in political agitations such as election campaigns. It is also argued that, especially in regions where marginalised groups are concentrated, a higher degree of mobilisation on the basis of ethnic identity is to be expected, as the shared sense of disadvantage is well-suited as a means of voter mobilisation (Fjelde & Østby, 2014). Also, the use of an either divisive or non-divisive strategy depends on various factors. Unifying strategies across ethnic identity boundaries, which can be described as "ethnic bridging" (Xue, 2018, p. 511), are used especially in places where no ethnic identity is in the majority, and thus the candidate has to address voters of all ethnic identity groups in order to be successful. Opposition parties and groups excluded from the government, in turn, are more likely to use divisive ethnic strategies to challenge the dominant groups in elections (Gadjanova, 2021).

One could expect that such strategies are particularly prevalent in societies polarised from violent conflict. Interestingly, the analysis of election campaigns in countries struggling with conflict is still nascent, and little is known specifically on local elections. Gadjanova (2021) shows how local politicians in particular invoke regional ethnic identity in campaigns for national elections. One study on Kenya demonstrates that the same divisive ethnic strategies were used at the local level as at the national level (Elfversson & Sjögren, 2020). Thus, local elections that are introduced in ethnically diverse societies could also result in electoral mobilisation strategies that draw on identities in a potentially divisive manner.

How does ethno-religious mobilisation affect societal peace? We argue that three aspects of societal peace in particular might be influenced by mobilisation around local elections: inclusive identity, social trust and the absence of political violence. First, mobilisation strategies that emphasise group differences are likely to strengthen group identities at the cost of a shared national identity (Ishiyama, 2009). Second, if mobilisation occurs along identity lines, this risks stoking antagonism, exacerbating tensions and reinforcing societal cleavages, which could decrease the levels of trust between different societal groups. This risk is particularly pronounced in post-conflict societies, which are often characterised by high levels of mistrust and polarisation. Third, if political mobilisation for elections occurs along ethno-religious lines, this might result in political violence, as tensions created through the elections can be unleashed in conflict. Competition between ethnic and identity groups over economic and political resources can lead to violence among these groups, to ethnic riots or to nationalist movements, as examples in several countries have shown (Wilkes & Okamoto, 2002). Though it is disputed as to when mobilisation leads to political violence, certain circumstances are considered to contribute to new violent tensions. The emphasis on the features of ethnic identities in ethnically diverse societies bears a high risk of new violence in countries that have experienced a civil war (Becher, 2016). Moreover, if ethnic groups feel excluded from access to politics and executive institutions and they are politically mobilised, they are more likely to be involved in rebellion and violence (Buhaug, Cederman, & Rød, 2008).

Based on the literature outlined above, we therefore generally expect that a high degree of polarising mobilisation based on group identities prior to local elections will pose a threat to societal peace. Thus, our working hypothesis on the relationship between voter mobilisation along ethno-religious lines and societal peace reads as follows:

If local elections lead to mobilisation along identity group lines, we expect this to have a negative impact on societal peace.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: Political participation

A second core aspect of elections is political participation. Political participation refers to "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 2) and is a core component of democratic governance. The range of activities that can be subsumed under political participation encompasses a variety of activities, including voting, becoming a party member, signing a petition or joining a demonstration. These different forms of political participation (conventional and unconventional) promote interactions with the government and enable citizens to articulate their demands vis-à-vis the government (Åström, 2019; Van Deth, 2015). In representative democracies, one easy and relatively "cheap" way of participating in the political process is to take part in elections by voting (Debus, 2015). In addition, voting allows for more citizens' interests and opinions to be represented than any other participatory activity (Theiss-Morse, Wagner, Flanigan, & Zingale, 2018). Aside from voting, running for office is another essential form of political participation (Hooghe & Stiers, 2016). Although it might require substantially more time than voting, it allows citizen to directly take part in, and shape, political decisions. In the context of hypothesis 2, we are therefore interested in taking a closer look at *elections as a choice*, meaning casting a vote or running for office during elections, and how this affects the prospects for societal peace.

Local elections can be expected to increase participation when first introduced, as they provide citizens with further avenues for participation previously unavailable under a centralised system of appointments to political offices. Citizens now have the opportunity to choose candidates for a political post or to decide to stand for office themselves. Thus, they get the chance to directly influence, and participate in, political decision-making processes (Hooghe & Marien, 2014). In addition, local elections increase opportunities for political participation because they seem to be more accessible than national elections. This is the case especially in ethnically diverse countries, where certain ethnic identity groups may be minorities at the national level, but majorities in certain local contexts (Ruedin, 2009). Furthermore, quotas on political posts can be introduced to guarantee the participation of certain societal groups in the elections.

How does political participation affect societal peace? Here, we argue that three aspects of societal peace might be influenced through political participation in particular: political trust,[6] cooperation for the common good and political violence. First, taking part in electoral decision-making processes makes citizens more likely to approve of political institutions, leading to increased levels of trust in those bodies (Fishkin, 1991). Finkel (1987) claims that

6 The terms "institutional trust" and "political trust" are both used in the literature to describe this aspect of social cohesion. Political trust is more widely used, while scholars use institutional trust to emphasise trust in political institutions that is independent of the incumbent. Since our study is mostly concerned with trust in the locally elected representatives, we use the term political trust in this paper.

voting increases the level of political trust because it enhances the perceived legitimacy of the elected bodies and acquiescence to government authority. However, some scholars argue that the effects of elections on voters' level of political trust depend on the results of the elections, with those who voted for the winners becoming more trusting in the system and those who voted for the losing parties becoming more distrustful (Clarke & Acock, 1989). Yet, in multi-party systems, as is the case in Nepal, such a clear distinction in the winners and losers of elections is not always given. Hence, Hooghe and Stiers (2016) argue that elections in proportional systems boost political trust, regardless of whether or not one's preferred party or candidate wins the elections. It is rather the effect of having the opportunity to take part in fair and equal elections that increases the amount of trust in the political system. Second, political participation may also stimulate cooperation for the common good, as citizens might become motivated to engage more in their society after voting in local elections. There can be spill-over effects from having the opportunity to vote/stand for office to other forms of civic engagement, because by participating in the local elections, interest in other forms of participation can be fostered. Some authors point out that political participation increases the degree of citizens' interest in political decision-making and enhances attitudes and behaviours that motivate them for future participation, leading to more engaged and active citizens (Pateman, 1970; Tolbert, McNeal, & Smith, 2003). Third, political participation has been shown to decrease the level of violent intra-state conflict: in quantitative analyses, Walter finds that voter turnout is a significant predictor for the prevention of recurring civil wars, as citizens are able to voice grievances through non-violent means, incentives for enlisting in militias decrease and executive powers are kept in check (Walter, 2014). Local elections therefore offer at least two legal alternatives to using violence: First, they allow citizens to cast a vote for a candidate or party of their choosing, and second, they offer an opportunity to eligible citizens to stand for office themselves. Increased opportunities for political participation, in turn, have the potential to mitigate intra-state conflict by providing non-violent platforms to manage tensions and conflicts. This is especially important in a post–civil war context such as Nepal, where political participation is often a means to the peaceful management of political competition (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008).

Thus, our working hypothesis on the relationship between political participation and societal peace reads as follows:

> If local elections lead to more opportunities for political participation, we expect this to have a positive impact on societal peace.

4.3 Hypothesis 3: Responsiveness

Elections are also meant to enable responsiveness, which is given when a government "adopts policies that are signaled as preferred by citizens" (Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999, pp. 9-10). In order to be responsive, governments have to first and foremost *adapt* policies, that is, adjust their decisions in accordance with citizens' preferences. This can be done by implementing campaign promises that candidates received votes for. But responsiveness also concerns governments' actions once elected and includes *listening* – staying informed about citizens' opinions as well as *explaining* policies by providing credible accounts of governments' actions (Esaiasson, Gilljam, & Persson, 2013). Ideally,

responsiveness includes a feedback mechanism whereby adapting, listening and explaining lead to citizen reactions, which then again feed into responsive policies (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). With this hypothesis, we are hence especially interested in taking a closer look at *elections as a consequence*, meaning the activities the elected representatives pursue after the election and whether they positively affect societal peace.

Local elections can be expected to increase the degree of responsiveness because voters choose their own candidates instead of relying on centralised appointments. At the same time, more candidates can make bids for political office, which should make a variety of diverse candidates available to voters. There are three main mechanisms underlying this positive effect of local elections on responsiveness, namely the diversity of candidates, the local embeddedness of representatives and accountability incentives.

Voters are likely to take into account different factors when choosing a candidate and select candidates who they feel are best suited to understand and respond to their needs. Local elections might ensure a better "match" between constituents and candidates, since they can be expected to lead to more diverse candidates compared to national elections. For example, if concentrated geographically, groups that are considered a minority at the national level have higher chances of being politically successful majorities at the local level (Ruedin, 2009). Moreover, democratic bodies at the local levels might be the more accessible arena for minority members to engage in politics and win office (Pamies, Pérez-Nievas, Vintila, & Paradés, 2021; Ruedin, 2009). This is because local elections are usually less costly to compete in. The effect of the diversification of candidates in local elections can be reinforced through quotas (e.g. gender- or caste-based), by which candidates from specific groups that were previously excluded from political power will for sure hold political office (Htun, 2004; Ruedin, 2009). Although the effect of shared characteristics between voters and elected representatives is not undebated, some argue that a representative of a marginalised group tends to share life experiences, values and socialisation with other member of that group, and "thus will be more likely to bring perspectives/interests of the group to the political arena" (Bird, 2011). In turn, this is then expected by some to lead to better responsiveness (see also Celis & Childs, 2008; Phillips, 1995; Reynolds, 2006).

A second special feature of local elections is that usually local candidates are involved, that is, politicians residing in the same community as their constituents (Marien et al., 2015). The academic debate on localism was initiated by a seminal work of Key and Heard (1949), who identified a "friends-and-neighbours" system of electing local favourites. Indeed, many empirical studies have shown that voters may prefer candidates with local ties to their communities – even if those candidates do not belong to their preferred parties (see i.a. Blais, Gidengil, Dobrzynska, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2003; Evans, Arzheimer, Campbell, & Cowley, 2017; Fiva & Smith, 2017). This may be due to the fact that constituents expect local candidates to better serve their needs and wishes (Fiva & Smith, 2017). This is in line with Oates' (1972) famous decentralisation theorem underlining the role of locally elected governments in providing differentiated public goods in response to heterogeneous preferences. Moreover, as Barberá (2010) points out, local elections are characterised by a more personal type of representation, which means that the citizens feel closer to their local representatives and may even have personal contact with them. Speaking in terms of the communicative understanding of responsiveness, candidates with ties to the local community are likely to engage in repeated exchanges (listening, explaining, adapting) with

their respective constituency. Therefore, it can be expected that the local embeddedness of candidates prevalent in local elections increases the degree of responsiveness.

But even if local elections do not lead to more diverse or locally embedded candidates, the accountability mechanism provides an incentive for local representatives to act in a way that is desired by their constituents: The introduction of local elections makes local decision-makers also accountable to their constituents at the local level, and not just to the central government (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2011). In this regard, winning the next round of elections could provide an important incentive to raise the level of government performance, such as for the provision of public services.

In short, we expect local elections to have a positive effect on responsiveness due to more diverse, local candidates being elected to office and better incentives for local representatives to act in a way desired by their constituents.

How does political responsiveness affect societal peace? We argue that all four aspects of societal peace might be influenced through responsiveness: political trust, vertical cooperation for the common good, an inclusive identity and the absence of political violence. First, we assume that people are more likely to place trust in political institutions if they feel like their local representatives are responsive to their needs. The literature on political trust shows that government activities are a key determinant thereof (Hetherington, 1998; Levi, Sacks, & Tyler, 2009; Rothstein, 2009). Similarly, regarding post-conflict contexts, several studies show, for example, that satisfaction with government services is strongly and significantly associated with political trust (Askvik, Jamil, & Dhakal, 2011; Hutchison & Johnson, 2011; Sacks & Larizza, 2012; Stoyan, Niedzwiecki, Morgan, Hartlyn, & Espinal, 2016). In particular, Wong (2016, p. 773) shows in his systematic study of post-conflict Sierra Leone that trust is

> likely to be determined by the level of care that a government demonstrates towards its citizens, the degree to which a government engages its people in the policymaking process, and how responsive a government is to the demands of its citizens.

This could also affect vertical cooperation for the common good, since one can expect that people are more likely to take part in public life and consultation processes if they feel like they can influence policy-making decisions. In this instance, it might be particularly important that voters feel they can approach elected officials, and that those officials are willing to listen and adapt their policies.

Third, better responsiveness could also foster an inclusive identity. Research on the salience of ethnic identities shows that especially ethnic minorities tend to identify more with their individual group identities rather than a national identity (Elkins & Sides, 2007; Staerklé, Sidanius, Green, & Molina, 2010). This is because the national identity is often seen as primarily marked by the majority group(s) and strong inequality between different societal groups (Staerklé et al., 2010). However, if, through good responsiveness, people feel like their interests and needs are being taken into account in public policy-making processes, they might be more likely to feel part of that broader entity consisting of a sum of individuals with different identities (e.g. local community or even nation) instead of relying on smaller group identities, such as ethnic or kinship ties, to ensure their interests are represented. Fourth, better responsiveness could weaken the incentives to resort to violence by reducing one of the main reasons for conflict: socio-political grievances (Gurr, 2000). If responsiveness

and accountability lead to better performance, that is, better service provision or reduced levels of corruption, this could lead to a reduction in the economic incentives to pursue violence: As satisfaction with one's economic situation increases, the willingness or need to purse violent means to improve it decreases. Furthermore, peace and conflict research has shown that especially the political exclusion of pertinent societal groups is one of the main reasons for the onset of conflict (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013; Stewart, 2016).

Thus, our hypothesis on the relationship between responsiveness and societal peace reads as follows:

> If local elections lead to improved responsiveness by local governments, we expect this to have a positive impact on societal peace.

5 Case study Nepal: Historic, societal and political context

Nepal constitutes an interesting case for our research on the effect of local elections on peace for various reasons. First, Nepal experienced a major civil war between 1996 and 2006 and is one of the most recent examples of a post-conflict state introducing local elections. Being a post-conflict country, it thus represents a particularly challenging context, in which the potential positive and negative effects of elections are highly debated. Second, Nepalese society is extremely heterogeneous and marked by a multiplicity of cleavages that overlap. Against this background, it is particularly interesting to analyse if local elections fuel or mitigate conflict between the diverse societal groups. Third, the introduction of federalism and local elections is regarded as highly topical in Nepal. The concrete design of a new federal structure was one of the most contentious issues in Nepal's constitution-building process, contributing to the dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly in 2011 and violent protests including fatalities accompanying the ratification of the final constitution in 2015 (Grävingholt et al., 2013; Strasheim, 2019). Stability at the local level also seems particularly important in light of recurring political crises at the national level, most recently the repeated dissolution of parliament by the previous Prime Minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, who was replaced by Sher Bahadur Deuba based on a Supreme Court decree in May 2021.

By illustrating the diversity of Nepal's society (Section 3.1), Nepal's historic context (Section 3.2) as well as the institutional framework (Section 3.3), this section highlights the suitability and relevance of choosing Nepal as a case study for our research and provides relevant background information on the socio-political context.

5.1 The diverse fabric of Nepalese society

Nepal's population of 29.46 million people (Worldometer, 2021) is marked by a great level of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. The National Population and Housing Census of Nepal, last conducted in 2011, identified 126 ethnic/caste identity groups.[7] The largest

7 As of 2012, the Government of Nepal does not make a hard and fast distinction between the terms "caste" and "ethnic identity" (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2012).

ethnic identity/caste are the Chhetri, comprising 16.6 per cent of the total population, followed by Brahman-Hill (12.2 per cent), Magar (7.1 per cent), Tharu (6.6 per cent), Tamang (5.8 per cent) and Newar (5 per cent) (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2012, p. 4). They can be divided into Indo-Aryan groups (Khas-Arya – including Brahmin and Chhetri – Tharu and Madheshi, among others) as well as Sino-Tibetan groups (Newar, Janajati (Hill), Tamang and others). Across most Hindu-majority groups, one can distinguish between higher caste, middle caste, lower caste and scheduled caste groups (the latter being formerly placed outside of the Hindu caste system).

The diversity of ethnic identities is also reflected in the 125 languages and various local dialects in Nepal. The official language is Nepali, which is spoken by 44.6 per cent of people as their mother tongue. The second most widely spoken language is Maithili (11.7 per cent). All other languages are each spoken by less than 6 per cent of Nepal's population (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2012, p. 4). In regard to religious diversity, the majority of the population identifies as Hindu (81.3 per cent). Buddhism (9 per cent) is the second-largest religious identity, followed by Islam (4.4 per cent). In addition, there are also smaller religious communities such as Christians, Jainas, Sikhs, Prakriti and Bön, though small in number (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2012, p. 4). This ethnic and religious diversity in Nepal is the result of several waves of migration over the course of two millennia. Over centuries, communities from diverse regions settled in Nepal's plains, hills and high valleys, creating a variety of identities in a relatively small area (Pradhan & Visweswaran, 2011). Migration also happened within the Nepali territory, with some populations in Madhesh (province 2), for instance, tracing back their ancestry to the hills, while other local populations have been residing in the plains of Madhesh (the Terai) much longer.

Identity groups in Nepal may form around notions of ethnic identity (as with the Newar), religion (as with the Muslims) or caste (as with Dalit). It is important to note that caste and ethnic identity can intersect and overlap, and that a person might feel different degrees of affiliation with a certain minority religion and geographical area (e.g. Madheshi Muslim) or with a certain caste and ethnic group (e.g. Khas Dalit). This creates a complex pattern of various distinctive, converging and overlapping identities.

Aside from ethnic, religious and linguistic identities, the caste system is another societal structure deep-rooted in Nepalese culture. Since the promulgation of the National Code, or *Muluk Akin*, in 1854, the caste system has been a major determinant of social identity in Nepal (Hofer, 1979). The caste system is mainly associated with the Hindu ethnic groups of Khas-Arya, Madheshi and Newar. However, also various non-Hindu groups, such as the so-called Janajati/Adivasi, have been incorporated by the state into the pan-Hindu social structure of the caste system, leading to countless local variations and elaborations of the system in different regions of Nepal (Subedi, 2010). Since 1962, caste-based discrimination in Nepal is illegal. However, the caste system still creates social boundaries, and some ethnic identity groups experience structural marginalisation (Castillejo, 2014). This problem also became a divisive issue in Nepal's peace and constitutional process, as the following section outlines.

5.2 History: Monarchy, civil war and democratisation

In light of the diverse fabric of society, questions of inclusion and political representation have been pivotal for the political disputes and historical developments of Nepal, and its

influence can be traced through almost every step of the transition, from monarchy to democracy. This section will outline Nepal's historic context, focussing on the civil war as well as on the peace- and democratisation process.

Nepal became a hereditary monarchy under the Shah Dynasty following the unification in 1768 (Dahal, 2010), until the 1990s mass democratic movement (Jana Andolan I) led to the introduction of a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy (von Einsiedel, Malone, & Pradhan, 2012). However, these subtle steps towards more democratic rule were not enough to address factors such as widespread poverty, tackle centuries of social inequalities based on gender, religion, ethnic identity, caste and regional provenance, or remedy the dissatisfaction with the weak Nepalese state's unresponsiveness to the grievances of the population (Dahal, 2010; Lawoti, 2010; von Einsiedel, Malone, & Pradhan, 2012).

As a result, Nepal descended into a civil war in 1996 that lasted 10 years (Dahal, 2010), claimed around 13,000 lives and led to the internal displacement of 150,000 people, particularly affecting poor rural communities (Harrowell & Özerdem, 2018). In the war, Maoist guerrillas were pitted against the government and demanded the abolishment of monarchy in favour of a "People's Republic" (Thapa & Sharma, 2009).

Initially, the spread of the conflict was slow, with the police fighting the Maoists in rural areas, producing a small number of casualties. These dynamics changed in 2001 when the new monarch brought in the Royal Nepalese Army, which quickly resulted in escalating violence, rising numbers of casualties and the institutionalisation of the Maoist military wing, with the People's Liberation Army mobilising marginalised groups especially. King Gyanendra proceeded to re-establish the absolute monarchy by dissolving the parliament in 2002 and declaring a state of emergency in 2005, dismissing the coalition government and suspending civil liberties, which alienated him from political parties as well as reduced popular support for his rule. United against a common opponent and locked in a military stalemate with the Maoists, the main political parties united into the Seven Party Alliance, which then approached the Maoists for negotiations.

In 2006, the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists signed a 12-point agreement to abolish the monarchy and form an all-party government. This gained political traction and was accompanied by weeks of mass protests against the monarchy (Jana Andolan 2), ultimately forcing the king to reinstate the parliament. The Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists then proceeded to sign the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, stating their commitment to establishing a competitive, multiparty democratic system by conducting free and fair elections for the Constituent Assembly (Wakugawa, Gautam, & Shrestha, 2011), drafting a new constitution and improving the inclusion of previously marginalised groups by transforming the political structure (Harrowell & Özerdem, 2018).

In April 2008 the Constituent Assembly was elected but ultimately failed to deliver on their main task of negotiating a constitution due to a political deadlock between the Maoists (who had surprisingly gained the largest share of votes) and other political parties, resulting in the dissolution of the parliament in 2011 and new elections being scheduled for 2013 (Grävingholt et al., 2013; von Einsiedel et al., 2012). The second Constituent Assembly, elected in 2013, seemed to face similar troubles as their predecessor but managed to set their differences aside after two devastating earthquakes in April 2015 turned the post-conflict

setting into a post-disaster one as well, exacerbating the country's physical and socio-economic challenges (Harrowell & Özerdem, 2018).

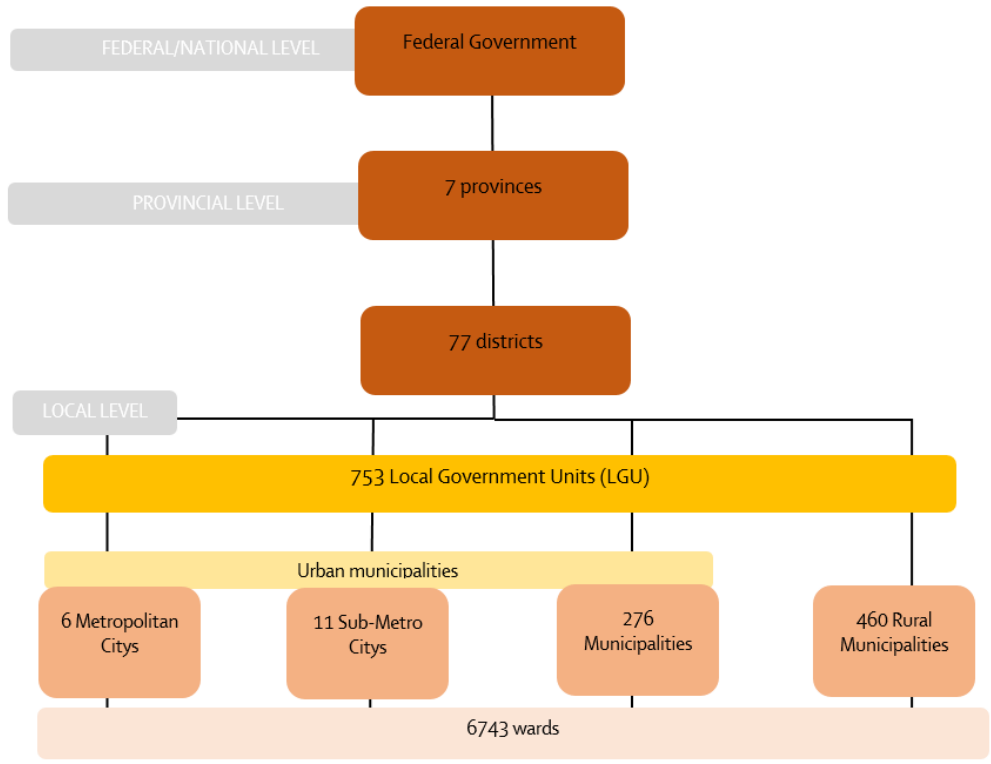
In September 2015, the long-awaited new constitution, which introduced a federal system, was adopted. Demands for more autonomy and self-governance for minorities at the local level were already stated in the Maoists' memorandum justifying their uprising in 1996 (Thapa, 2003). Thus, the transfer of power to sub-national levels has been of great relevance for many years in the Nepalese context.

However, a lack of inclusion and representation continued to be a key problem, even after the end of the civil war, as highlighted by the violent and widespread protests (particularly from the country's large minority communities, such as Madheshi and Tharu) accompanying the promulgation of the new constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Nevertheless, the following historical election year of 2017 then saw both national and local elections, officially bringing federalism to life with local elections being held for the first time in two decades (Sharma et al., 2019).

5.3 Institutional framework and electoral system

Today Nepal is a federal, democratic republic with a multi-party system. The 2015 constitution initiated Nepal's transition into a federal state consisting of three tiers of government: federal, provincial and local, with powers of the state divided accordingly (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Federal structure of Nepal



Source: Authors, based on Government of Nepal (2015)

Beyond the national level is the second federal level, comprised of the seven provinces, which are subdivided into 77 districts. The districts are further subdivided into a third level (local level): urban municipalities (metro-cities, sub-metro cities, municipalities) and rural municipalities. Each of the 753 municipalities is divided into wards, which are the smallest administrative units in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015).

After being suspended in 1997 due to the instability caused by the civil war, local elections were reintroduced through the 2015 constitution. In local elections, representatives are elected for municipal assemblies in urban municipalities and for village assemblies in rural municipalities. For municipal assemblies, one Mayor, one Deputy Mayor, one Ward Chair and four Ward members are elected. Likewise, for village assemblies, one Chair, one Vice Chair, one Ward Chair and four Ward members are elected. The (Deputy) Mayor and (Vice) Chairs are representatives of the urban and rural municipalities, whereas the Ward Chair and Ward members are elected for each ward. The terms for representatives on the local level are for a total of five years (Government of Nepal, 2015; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2017).

To foster better representation for women and the multiple ethnic identities in Nepal, the constitution mandates a specific system of quotas for the specific government bodies. On the local level, out of the four elected Ward members (for both urban and rural municipalities), two must be female, whereby one has to identify with the Dalit community. Also, in regard to the candidate list, a specific gender quota is put in place, as parties have to ensure that one of the two candidates for the position of (Deputy) Mayor and (Vice) Chair is female.

In 2017, local elections took place in Nepal for the first time in two decades. In response to massive protests – in particular by Madhesh-based parties due to unresolved issues of contention regarding the federal design and electoral system – the elections were conducted on three different dates, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Local election dates 2017 in Nepal

Date	Provinces
14 May 2017	Bagmati province (provinces 3) Gandaki province (province 4) Karnali province (province 6)
28 June 2017	Province 1 Lumbini province (province 5) Sudurpashchim province (province 7)
18 September 2017	Province 2

Source: Authors

The introduction of a federal government structure with the new constitution adopted in 2015 strengthened local autonomy by not only introducing local elections to form the new local governments, but also by transferring substantial executive and legislative powers to the local level (Sharma et al., 2019). The newly introduced federal system under the 2015 Nepali constitution equips the local governments with 22 exclusive powers for local-level legislatures (Government of Nepal, 2015). These include, among other responsibilities, basic and secondary education, the management of local services, development projects, local roads, basic sanitation and health, distribution of real estate ownership certificates, disaster management, livestock and agriculture management, and local taxes (Timilsina,

2020). Moreover, the constitution mandates the implementation of a three-member Judicial Committee in each LGU to conduct conflict mediation. At the same time, local governments were provided with more financial resources and administrative staff from the national level to fulfil these functions (Chaudhary, 2019). Overall, the new constitution hence equipped the local level in Nepal with the political competencies and financial resources to make elections for these new posts potentially important enough to have an impact on societal peace.

5.4 Summary

Overall, the three hypotheses are not only firmly rooted in the academic literature, but they also speak to mechanisms that can be explored particularly well in the Nepalese context.

Studying voter mobilisation and responsiveness is particularly relevant in light of the highly diverse fabric of Nepalese society. Nepal is a multi-ethnic federal state with diverse religious and linguistic communities. Their coexistence has always been a contentious topic in Nepal: Socio-political discrimination of different societal groups was one of the root causes of the civil war, and political and economic inequality between groups remains a contentious topic in Nepalese society and politics to this day. After the civil war, the new constitution introduced quotas based on gender and caste at every political level to foster the diversification of candidates. But indications of mobilisation along group lines nevertheless continue to exist. For example, in 2013, 19 out of the about three dozen political parties with ethnic, religious, caste or regional affiliations in Nepal were elected to the Constituent Assembly (Humagain, Aryal, & Pandey, 2019). Furthermore, a considerable minority of respondents of the Survey of the Nepali People (The Asia Foundation, 2018), held shortly after the local elections, considered top-down ethnic, caste or religious mobilisation as a major factor in the country's worsening intergroup relations. Whether the local elections increase or decrease the degree of group cleavages – and how this affects peace in the country – is therefore a highly relevant question for the Nepalese context.

Studying the effect of electoral participation and responsiveness is particularly interesting in the Nepalese context, as the new constitution in 2015 paved the way for the first local elections in Nepal to take place after almost two decades – offering citizens a new avenue to address their grievances in local politics. The high voter turnout speaks to the importance that Nepalese citizens attach to voting at the local level. There were also very clear expectations for the introduction of a new government structure as well as for local elections to lead to a significant increase in public service provision (The Asia Foundation, 2018).

It is therefore highly relevant to investigate in the Nepalese context how local elections affect societal peace in a post-conflict society with a diverse social fabric after heading to the local polls for the first time following the civil war.

6 Research design

To investigate the effect of local elections on societal peace in Nepal, we conducted qualitative interviews in Kathmandu and selected municipalities. The assessments from selected experts and stakeholders were complemented with insights from a large-n survey to gain more insights into the general perceptions of the population. The following section

provides further information on the qualitative interviews and details the sampling strategy both for the qualitative interviews at the subnational level as well as the survey respondents.

6.1 Qualitative interviews

The semi-structured interviews allow for asking open-ended questions about the effects of local elections on societal peace. This helps with tracing the mechanisms specified in our hypotheses. Interviewees were elected officials and political party members, journalists, academics, bureaucrats and representatives of marginalised groups and civil society organisations. Since the DIE research team was not able to travel due to the pandemic, 42 interviewees in Kathmandu, where internet access did not pose a barrier and the interviews could be conducted in English, were contacted via video call. At the local level, however, this was not feasible. After assessing the COVID-19 situation and taking adequate precautions, another 37 interviews were conducted at selected localities by our partner, the Centre for Social Change (CSC). These interviews took place in two LGUs in each of the four provinces also targeted by the quantitative survey. The two locations per province represent one urban (provincial headquarters) and an adjacent rural municipality, the former mostly displaying relatively high levels of political violence, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and the latter low levels or no violent events since 2017 (Raleigh, Linke, Hegre, & Karlsen, 2010). Interviews at the local level were mostly held with elected representatives of local governments, but several other interviewees had similar backgrounds as on the national level (civil society representatives, journalists, academics). The interviews were conducted in Nepali or Maithili and held with up to three interviewees. All interviews were transcribed, and those at the local level were translated to English. All transcriptions were coded and analysed using Atlas.ti. In total, we thus conducted 79 interviews with 97 interviewees at the national and local levels in April/May 2021 (see Appendix A for a complete list of interviewees and their backgrounds).

6.2 Quantitative survey

To complement the qualitative interviews, we conducted a large-n survey to learn about the perceptions of the general Nepalese population regarding the dynamics around the 2017 local elections and the state of social cohesion in Nepal. For this purpose, we developed a standardised questionnaire for a large-n phone survey based on the mechanisms hypothesised in the theory part. The questionnaire was designed in close consultation with the survey firm that implemented the survey (Solutions Consultant) and our (Nepalese) partners to ensure context sensitivity. Interested readers can find the complete questionnaire in Appendix B. The survey is representative at the provincial level regarding gender, age, urban/rural municipalities and ethnic identity. The basis for this is the most recent 2011 national population census (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2012).

Sampling strategy

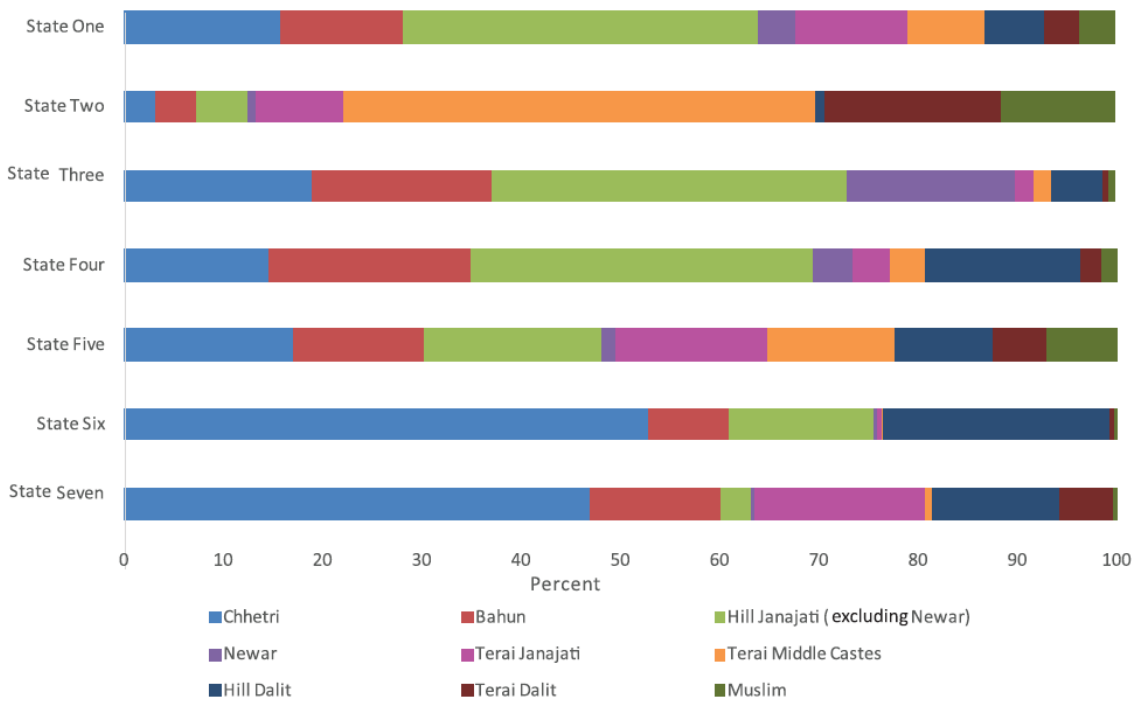
The survey consists of 1,400 phone interviews of around 25 minutes each. The target group of Nepalese adults was selected in a three-step sampling strategy: Firstly, we purposively select provinces, secondly, we randomly select clusters (first LGUs and then wards) within these selected provinces, and thirdly, we randomly select our respondents in these clusters.

In order to generate a sample frame for the telephone survey, Solutions Consultant conducted a face-to-face listing exercise in four out of Nepal's seven provinces. We selected these four provinces purposefully based on particularly relevant factors for our research question, namely the composition of ethnic identities as well as the legacy of the civil war. Nepal is divided into seven provinces (split up into 77 districts). As of the new constitution of 2015, the provinces (second tier) are further divided into 753 LGUs (third tier), our primary sampling units, which can then again be divided into 6,743 wards.

After having grouped the provinces according to similar compositions of ethnic identity, we selected four provinces that each represent a different composition (see Figure 3 below for the ethnic composition per province). By doing so, we make sure to include all sizeable marginalised groups in our survey. This is important for our research question, since it shows the complexity of cleavages in Nepalese society. Based on both qualitative and quantitative sources – namely the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020), the Ethnic Power Relations Core Dataset 2019 (Vogt et al., 2015), and the Survey of the Nepali People (The Asia Foundation, 2018) – we identified four groups that can be considered marginalised or historically disadvantaged:

1. Janajati, indigenous people living mostly in the hills and terai (ethnic identity)
2. Madheshi, a regional identity including groups with Indian ancestry who mainly live in the Terai (partially overlaps with ethnic identity)
3. Dalit, a group traditionally placed below all other groups in the Hindu caste system (overlaps with different ethnic identities)
4. Muslim, a religious minority

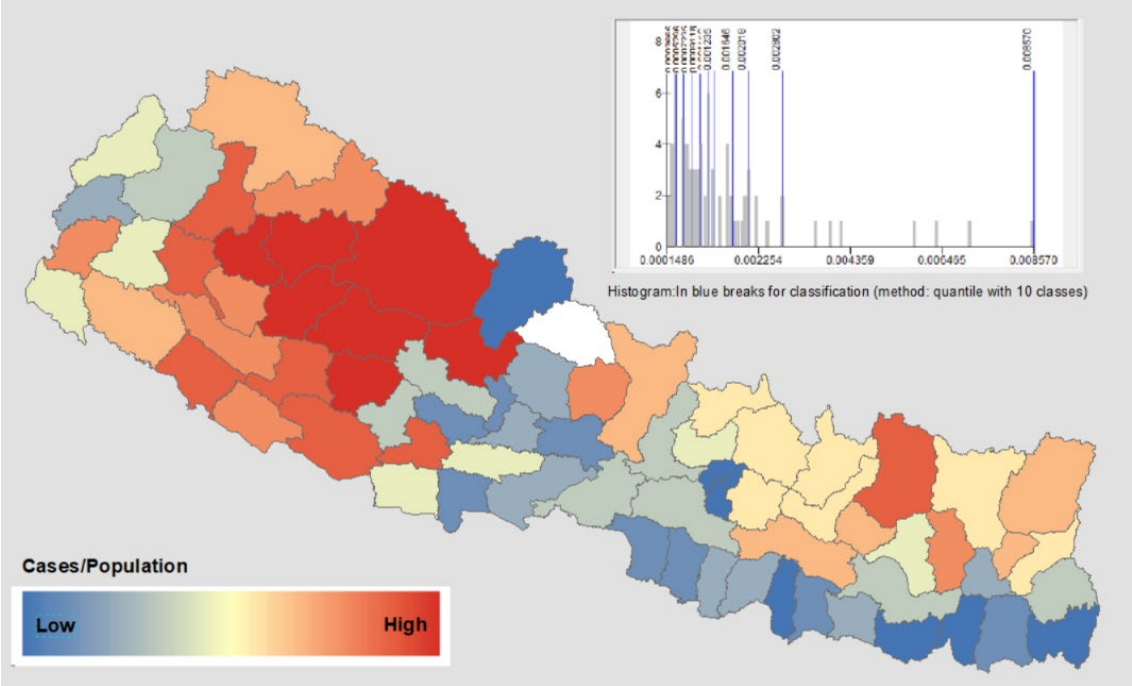
Figure 3: Percentage distribution of the 2011 census population by major caste/ethnic groups per province



Source: United Nations Population Fund (2017, p. 12)

Because Nepal is a post-conflict country and due to the fact that there might still be grievances connected to the civil war, we also made sure to select two provinces that experienced a high degree of violence during the civil war. We therefore purposefully selected province 6, which experienced the most violence during Nepal's civil war, as can be seen from Figure 4.

Figure 4: Civil war casualties per population size for each district in Nepal



Source: Own compilation, based on replication data by Do and Iyer (2010)

Finally, we checked that the provinces are geographically diverse, meaning that they include more and less remote areas and the mountains, hills and Terai regions. Table 2 summarises the criteria. Combining the different criteria reveals our final selection: provinces 2, 3, 5 and 6.

Table 2: Selection criteria for sampling

Provinces	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Composition of ethnic identities	A	D	B	B	A	C	C
High share of groups that can be considered marginalised		x	x		X		
Highly affected by civil war				1	1	1	1
Remoteness		x				x	x
Region	Mountain/ hill/Terai	Terai	Mountain/ hill	Mountain/ hill	Terai/ hill	Mountain/ hill	Terai/ hill

Source: Authors

Within the four provinces, we randomly selected 70 LGUs. Because the provinces differ considerably regarding the number and types of LGUs, we first chose the 68 LGUs proportionally to the number of LGUs per province (with 12 LGUs in province 6 being the minimum, and 22 in province 2 the maximum). Second, we then selected – proportionally to population size – different types of LGUs (rural, urban and major cities). Due to its large population, Kathmandu was selected three times. Within each LGU, four wards were then randomly chosen. Within each ward in turn, a random starting point was selected for the random walks used to identify respondents and collect phone numbers of potential participants using the "last birthday" method. Because of the extreme remoteness of some mountainous areas of Nepal, which are very difficult to reach and offer sparse mobile phone connectivity, we needed to replace a limited number of LGUs and draw new, more accessible ones.[8] While this is not ideal, we consider it justifiable since only 7 per cent of Nepal's population live in the mountain region (43 per cent in the hills and 50 per cent in the Terai). The collection of telephone numbers took place in March 2021.

This face-to-face listing exercise might have raised certain ethical concerns in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Those were addressed in two ways: Firstly, because of COVID, we did not conduct full face-to-face interviews, which would necessitate a much longer interaction, and hence pose a greater hazard to interviewers and respondents than the listing exercise that we used to collect phone numbers. Secondly, the listing exercise took place during a period with relatively low infection rates. Thirdly, the survey firm ensured strict health measures to protect interviewers and respondents and decrease the risk of the listing exercise contributing to the spread of the virus.

The telephone interviews were conducted between April and May 2021. The interviewers of Solutions Consultant applied a Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique for realising the survey interviews. In doing so, they used the software "Survey Solutions" from the World Bank. Questions were asked in Nepali and in Maithili, which is the second most widely spoken language in Nepal and particularly prominent in the Terai region, in which two of our four selected provinces lie.

7 Analysis

To understand the relationship between local elections and societal peace in post-conflict societies, we first assess the state of societal peace in Nepal. Then, we analyse the effect of the reintroduction of the local elections on societal peace, guided by the three hypotheses we stipulated in the theory section. For each hypothesis, we first analyse whether local elections did in fact impact on the theorised mechanism (i.e. led to divisive ethno-political mobilisation, improved political participation and increased responsiveness) and if so, whether this affected societal peace in a second step. To do so, we combine insights from our qualitative interviews with descriptive insights from the survey data.

8 This was based on the criteria that reaching the locality would not take more than 12 hours from the provincial capital.

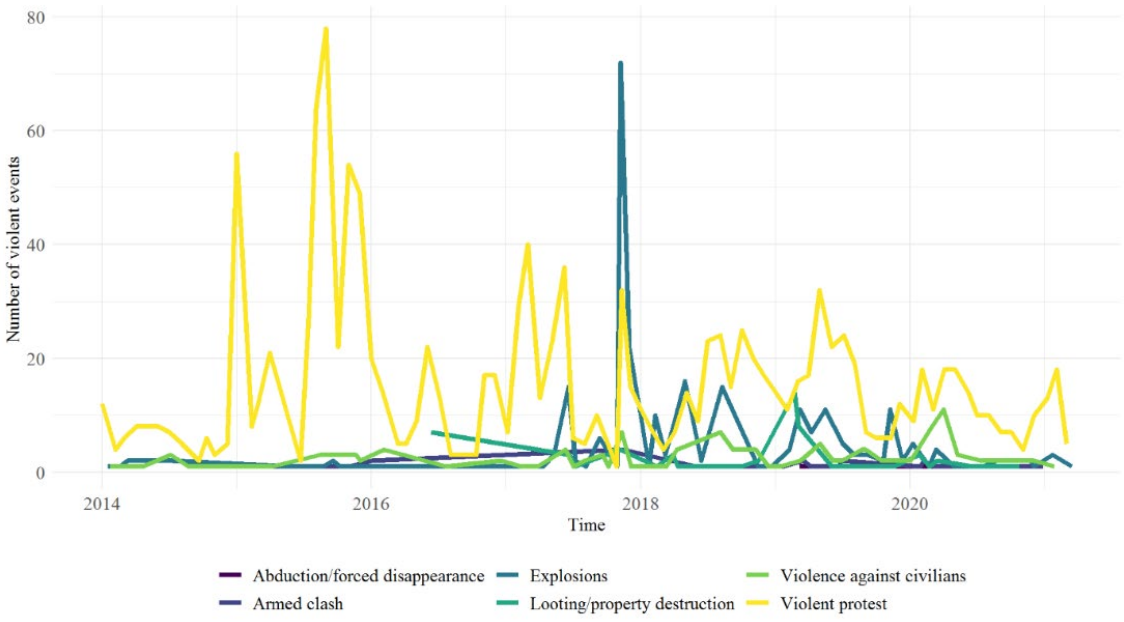
7.1 Societal peace in Nepal

To better understand the current state of societal peace in Nepal, we analyse both core components – political violence and social cohesion – using available objective data on political violence, academic literature and our survey results. While we are thereby able to compare how political violence has developed over time, we can only analyse social cohesion statically in 2021 based on our survey data. The two existing studies that have analysed elements of social cohesion in Nepal so far focus on the effect of the civil war, finding that the experience of violence improved what we term cooperation for the common good (Gilligan, Pasquale, & Samii, 2014), while reducing the level of trust in the national government (De Juan & Pierskalla, 2016).

7.1.1 Recent trends in political violence

Violent protests are the most common type of political violence in Nepal, often pitting protesters from political parties or minority groups against police forces (see Figure 5). Occasionally (but not very recently), interreligious conflict has occurred between Muslims and Hindus, whereas intercommunal conflict is practically non-existent in Nepal (The Asia Foundation, 2017). Explosives are often used by armed groups. The exact number of armed groups in Nepal is unknown, and many of the attacks cannot be ascribed to specific groups. In 2009 (relatively shortly after the civil war), the Nepalese government estimated that there were 109 active armed groups in Nepal, most of which were based in the Terai, but also some in eastern Nepal as well as in the Kathmandu valley. However, these groups "have perennially splintered, merged and dwindled and so it is impossible to know exactly how many there have been" (Thapa & Rambotham, 2017, p. 108). Over time, many have agreed to peace agreements (most recently in March 2021, see Sharma, 2021) or simply ceased to exist. Although some armed clashes do occur, this is the least common type of violence in Nepal.

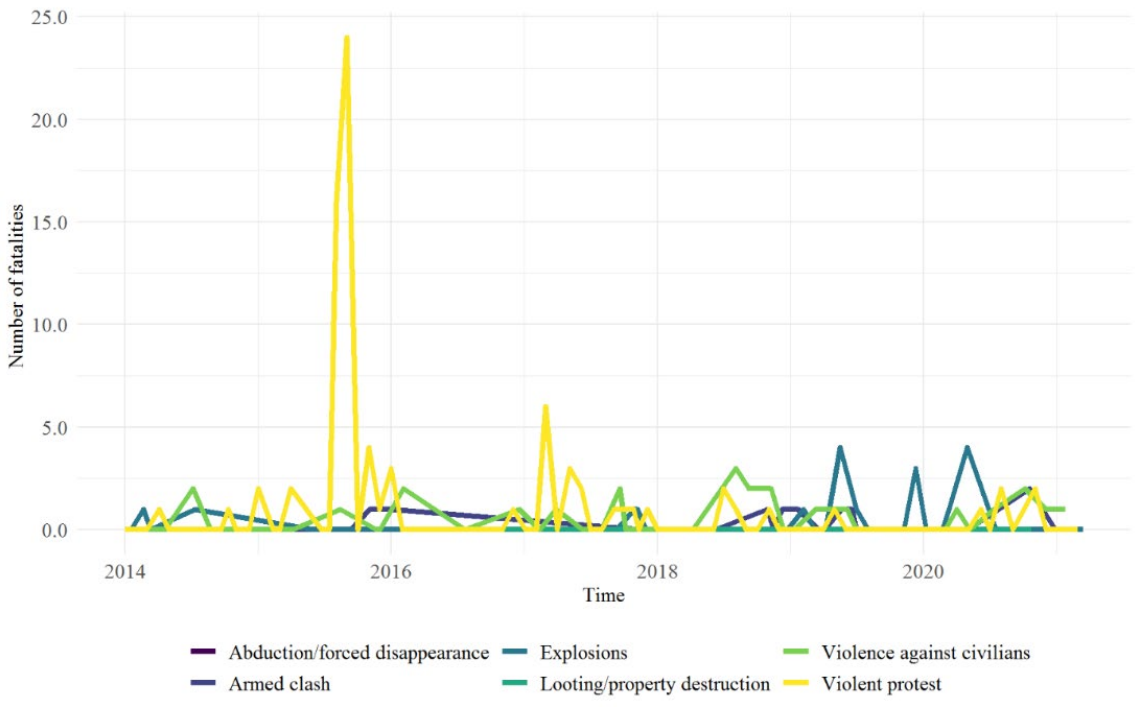
Figure 5: Types of political violence in Nepal (2014-2020)



Source: Authors, based on ACLED data (Raleigh et al., 2010)

Regarding the intensity of violence, Figure 6 shows that political violence in Nepal does not usually include a very high number of fatalities and that a first clear spike in violent events occurred in 2015. This can be explained by the writing and promulgation of a new constitution, which was accompanied by widespread protests and clashes. Almost all of the violent protests around the constitution took place in the Terai region, where the Madheshi in particular have been calling for better representation and an autonomous province (The Asia Foundation, 2017). A new constitution had been in the making in Nepal since 2008, with the structure of federalism being a key point of contention that contributed to the failure and dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly (Grävingholt et al., 2013). Spurred by the earthquake in September 2015, a political compromise was reached and geography-based federalism[9] agreed upon in the new constitution. "The constitution was endorsed by 537 of the 598 Constituent Assembly members. Of the 61 members who boycotted the vote, 58 belonged to Madhesi parties" (Strasheim, 2019, p. 89). Already before the promulgation of the constitution, protests had erupted and this dynamic later escalated to a blockage of the Indo-Nepali border in the Terai region. By January 2016, almost 60 individuals had died in clashes resulting from protests against the constitution. It was also in the Terai where multiple violent clashes, including several deaths, occurred in the run-up to the local elections in the spring of 2017. As a reaction, local elections in province 2 were postponed and held only in September 2017 (Strasheim, 2019).

Figure 6: Number of fatalities from different types of political violence in Nepal (2014-2020)



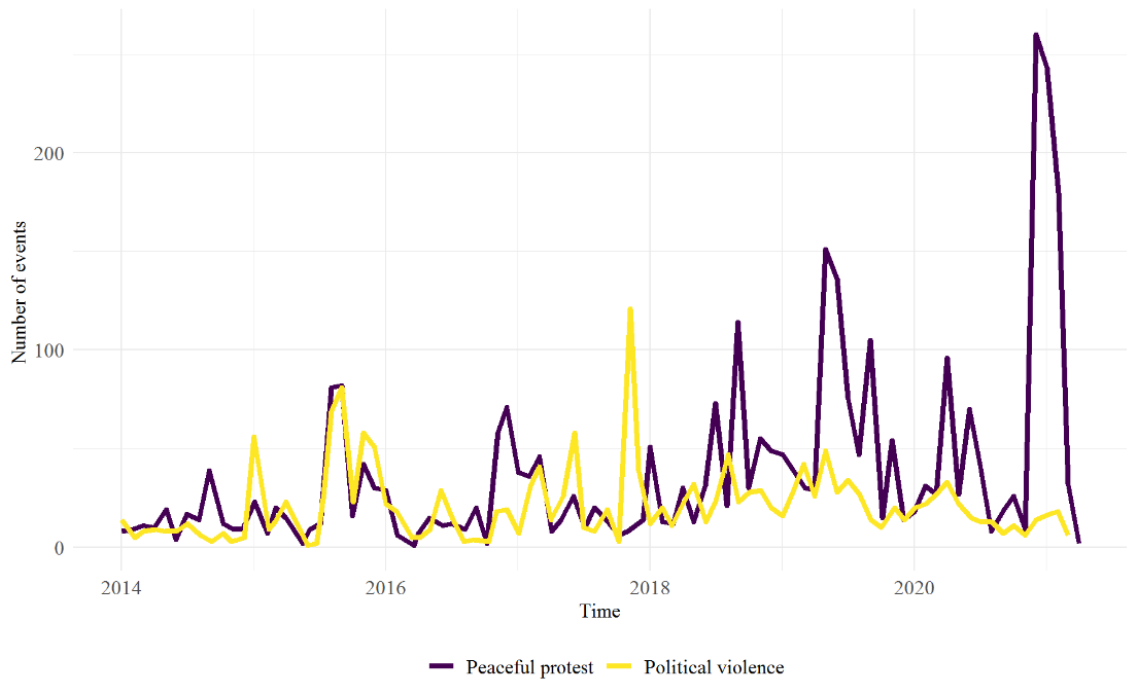
Source: Authors, based on ACLED data (Raleigh et al., 2010)

9 This means that the boundaries of federal units were not drawn on an ethnic but rather a geographic basis. This, for example, led to the fact that there is no region where the Madheshi have a clear majority.

Electoral violence is common in Nepal, though not at very high levels. It also occurred in the context of the local elections in 2017. Taking a closer look at violent incidents that occurred before and during the local elections (which took place on three different dates in 2017: 14 May, 28 June and 18 September) shows that most violent incidents were driven by inter-party clashes. Other violence was caused by boycotting or dissenting parties that protested against how the elections were conducted (in particular the Communist Party Nepal and Madhesh-based parties), as some open issues of contention regarding the electoral system had not been solved. During election days, incidents of violence occurred when a party (allegedly) engaged in fraud, such as booth capture (Democracy Resource Center Nepal [DRCN], 2017).

Overall, Nepal is hence still struggling with diverse forms of political violence, but it can be seen as relatively stable, with fatalities being relatively low. Interestingly, the number of peaceful protests, in turn, have clearly increased since 2014. As of 2018, they clearly outnumbered violent political events.

Figure 7: Peaceful protests in Nepal (2014-2020)



Source: Authors, based on ACLED data (Raleigh et al., 2010)

We also measured political violence through our survey data by asking respondents whether they supported the statement that "using violence is legitimate for a just cause, such as securing equal rights for all citizens". As is to be expected from a relatively sensitive question, a clear majority (62 per cent) of respondents disagree with the statement. However, a not unsubstantial share (36 per cent) of the respondents somewhat or fully agree

that sometimes using violence can be legitimate. We do not find stark provincial differences, but that support for political violence is lowest in province 3.[10]

Although we do not find any differences based on gender, the data does show to a certain degree that more respondents from marginalised groups, especially people who identified as Madheshi or Muslim, think that violence can be legitimate. When asked about *bandhs* – a specific form of strike that often has violent elements – respondents from marginalised groups are clearly more supportive, especially Muslim and Madheshi and to a lesser extent Dalit. Although this suggests that the continued marginalisation of certain societal groups bears a certain potential for violence, overall there is a medium to low level of willingness to support political violence in Nepal.

7.1.2 The state of social cohesion

Trust

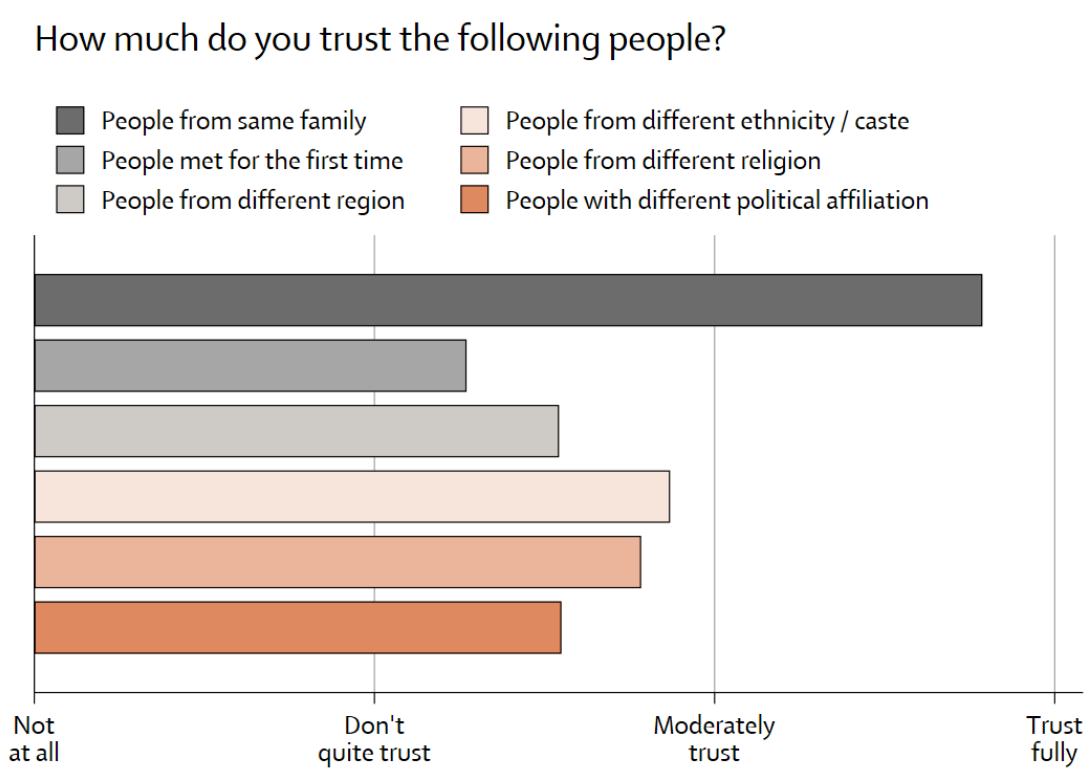
Regarding the degree of social trust between individuals and groups, the survey data shows that people trust their family the most (98 per cent trust fully or moderately), but clearly have less trust in people more generally (48 per cent trust fully or moderately). Regarding out-group trust, we can see that the level of trust in people with a different political affiliation or from a different region is lower than the level of trust in people from a different religion or of a different ethnic identity/caste (see Figure 8). Overall, men and women show similar patterns of trust, but the level of women's social trust in general is a little bit lower. We do not find big regional differences regarding trust, but province 2 shows the highest levels of trust across all measures, except for trust towards people from another political affiliation. We also do not find extreme differences in levels of trust among different ethnic/caste groups. The fact that respondents indicate that their level of trust towards people of a different ethnicity/caste is the highest among different types of out-group trust is somewhat surprising. One explanation might be social desirability, with respondents being aware that ethnicity/caste is a topic of political contention and therefore reluctant to voice their honest opinion about it. A second one might be a high degree of interaction between different ethnicities and castes: When asked about how often they interact with different societal groups, respondents mentioned ethnicity/caste most often, with 95 per cent of respondents indicating they interact somewhat or very often beyond this specific group line (for a similar argument see also Interview N25).

The level of trust in political institutions at the local level is rather high, with 80 per cent indicating they trust them fully or moderately. Particularly the Ward Chair and Ward members are highly trusted, with 28 per cent indicating they trust them fully (compared to 22 per cent answering the same with regard to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor positions). We do see some interesting variations across caste/ethnicity, with Newar trusting locally elected officials the least, followed by people who identified as Madheshi, Muslim or Dalit. Overall, trust in institutions at the national level is slightly lower than at the local

10 Province 2: 45 per cent, Bagmati Province: 22 per cent, Lumbini Province: 37 per cent, Karnali Province: 40 per cent.

level,[11] which might be driven by the fact that respondents are rather sceptical of political parties at the national level (only 63 per cent trust them fully or moderately) (see also Interview N19).

Figure 8: Survey responses on social trust



Source: Authors' survey

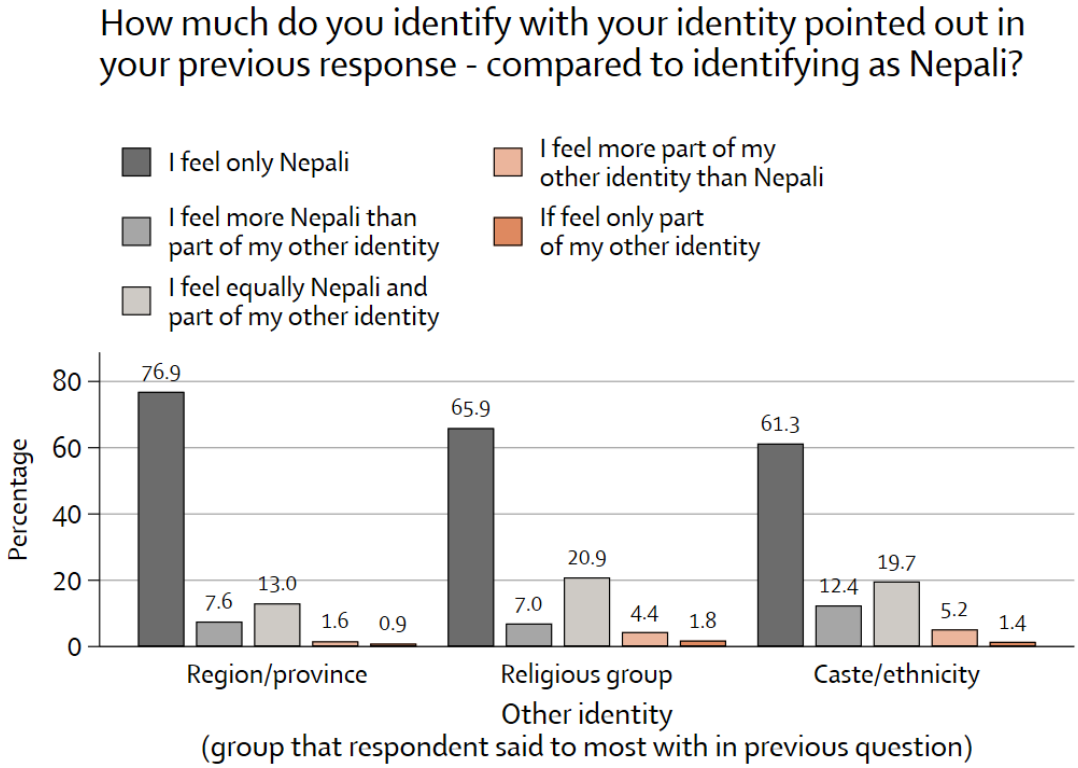
Identity

Second, we assess the degree of a joint national identity among our survey respondents. When asked about the importance attached to different social identities, the region or province is named most often (37 per cent), followed by caste/ethnicity (29 per cent) and religion (25 per cent), with Madheshi identifying most with the region and Dalits with caste. When comparing their different identities to the national identity, an overwhelming majority of respondents indicate that they only feel Nepalese (70 per cent) or primarily do (9 per cent), which can be interpreted as very conducive for social cohesion; as one interviewee stated, "Our identity as a Nepalese. That is a uniting factor" (Interview N8). At the same time, the question also displays one of the highest non-response rates, with almost 10 per cent of respondents indicating they do not want to answer or "don't know". This indicates a certain sensitivity concerning the question and might point towards social desirability bias at least partially explaining the very positive result. Disaggregating this question across the different types of

11 Which is similar to findings by Askvik et al., who also find higher levels of trust in local government institutions than in the national government and argue that political trust is mainly driven by performance (Askvik et al., 2011).

identities reveals interesting heterogeneity, with 77 per cent of respondents identifying primarily with region/province feeling only Nepali, but only 61 per cent giving the same response among those that say caste/ethnicity is most important to them.

Figure 9: Identification with Nepali vs. group identity



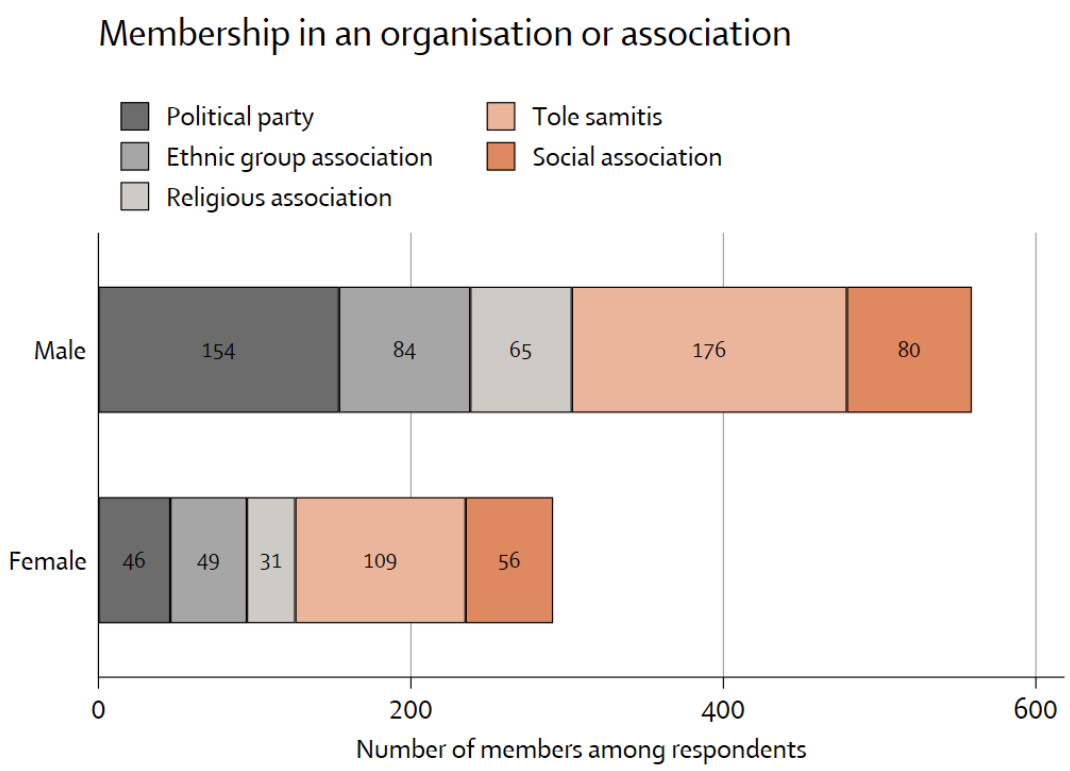
Note: Other identity refers to group that respondent said they identify most with in previous question
Source: Authors' survey

Cooperation for the common good

Finally, we look at the degree of cooperation for the common good, both on a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Regarding cooperation with the state, the survey shows that respondents are relatively politically active, with political parties (18 per cent) and *tole samities*[12] (23 per cent) being the groups that have the most members among the respondents. However, women are much less politically active in organisations and associations compared to men (see Figure 10). As for other forms of engagement, contacting a politician (28 per cent) and attending community meetings (52 per cent) stand out as often named forms of political engagement. Regarding cooperation across societal groups, we find that almost half of respondents are involved in social associations, help others at least once a month and occasionally volunteer. In their daily lives, people interact most with people from other ethnic groups (95 per cent), religions (92 per cent) and regions (83 per cent) and least with people from other political parties (72 per cent).

12 These are local community groups concerned with social development activities.

Figure 10: Membership in an organisation or association



Source: Authors' survey

7.1.3 Conclusion

Overall, Nepal is hence still struggling with diverse forms of political violence, but it can be seen as relatively stable, with fatalities being relatively low. Interestingly, the number of peaceful protests, in turn, clearly increased after 2014. As of 2018, they clearly outnumbered violent political events. The discussion on the different elements of social cohesion shows that there is a relatively high degree of social cohesion in Nepal. Most clearly, a majority of respondents identify primarily with being Nepali. Regarding cooperation across groups and with the state, at least half of the respondents at least occasionally engage in activities for the common good. Finally, there seems to be a medium level of social trust and a high level of political trust, especially in local institutions.

Bringing together insights on political violence and social cohesion shows that while Nepal can be considered relatively peaceful, the situation cannot yet be described as societal peace. This is firstly because Nepal is still struggling with different types of political violence. Secondly, even though the degree of social cohesion is relatively high, several crucial dividing lines still exist that hold the potential for further political violence in Nepal. These have firstly become clear through the differences detected in the survey on the basis of regional identity, ethnic identity/caste and gender. They are also highly evident in our qualitative interviews, in which interviewees identified a series of main dividing lines characterising Nepal. These include, firstly, the social discrimination against marginalised groups, particularly Madhesh-based groups and Dalits; secondly religion, as there is a

continuing discussion on whether Nepal should be a Hindu state rather than the secular country agreed upon in the new constitution; and thirdly, political parties that stress divisions for political purposes (Interviews N5, N7, N8, N10, N21, N27, N37). This is particularly worrying since these groups most strongly perceive political violence as a legitimate tool, clearly indicating that the risk of them fuelling new violence remains. As one interviewee put it:

> The current harmony could be disrupted any time if there is a next level of the agitations by the political parties […], if our esteemed institutions do not seriously implement the inclusive policy adopted by the constitution. And if we fail to address some dissatisfactions that still prevails, despite dissatisfactions, people are living in harmony. Because living in harmony doesn't mean that they are happy […]. We shouldn't think that they always live in harmony even if we continue discrimination. (Interview N25)

7.2 Local elections, political mobilisation and societal peace

Electoral competition starts when political parties present their manifestos and campaign to convince voters to support them before being translated into votes at the ballot box. In a heterogeneous post-conflict society marked by socio-political exclusion based on ethnic/caste identities such as Nepal, parties may be tempted to use such identities to mobilise their constituents. In Nepal, caste hierarchy created disadvantages among caste groups and scheduled castes, leading to "ethnic" fronts that were used for political mobilisation during and after the armed conflict. During national and provincial elections, political parties have repeatedly resorted to ethnic identities to mobilise voters, raising the question of whether such mobilisation strategies are also employed in the local election campaigns and what effect they have on societal peace.

7.2.1 Effects of local elections on ethno-political mobilisation

During the 2017 local elections, political parties engaged strongly in motivating voters to cast their vote (Interviews N26, L24, L9). The most pronounced mobilisation strategy was door-to-door campaigning, during which the candidates and the party programme were presented (Interviews N10, N17, N31, L3; DRCN, 2017). Many reported that material incentives were widely used to influence voters (Interviews N2, N11, N21, L4): "Leaders of the parties tried to win the votes from the locals by providing them lunches, drinks, pamphlets, money" (Interview L21). Furthermore, some of the interviewees spoke about mass events, election processions with motorbikes and festivals (Interviews N2, N10, N31).

The main topics addressed during local level election campaigns were mostly unrelated to ethnic or caste identities. Instead, candidates mainly tried to convince voters by promising local development projects. Thus, promises dominated the election campaign that infrastructure and access to public services such as electricity, drinking water and education would improve (Interviews N6, N30, N32, N37, L2).

However, ethnic/caste identities also played an important role in voter mobilisation, even if they were not the dominant factor (Interviews N4, N14, L26). One interviewee stated, for example, that "as the election propaganda spreads, the issue of castes and ethnicity comes into

play" (Interview L21; see also Interviews L22, L24, L25). Another interviewee generally observed: "Leaders tend to provoke the issue of cast and ethnicity" (Interview L25).

Various interviewees from all four provinces in which we conducted the interviews (provinces 2, 3, 5 and 6) observed that political parties engaged in negative campaigning against particular ethnic/caste groups and used – or at least tried to use – ethnic sentiments for political benefit (Interviews N14, L10, L16). In province 2 and the Terai, various interviewees specifically mentioned strong political mobilisation based on Madheshi identity (Interviews N3, N6, N7, L24, L25): "The Madheshi-based parties had a strong slogan. [...] I think in the Madheshi areas, there was a strong movement during the election days to have an ethnicity-based vote" (Interview N12). Similarly, another interviewee stated:

> In Terai province, there was a strong voice to vote for only Madheshi. […] There was, yes, a clear visible type of campaign not to vote for another caste. […] In my home village in the eastern hills, there was also that type of campaign. […] It was used by the candidates at local level in many places. (Interview N14)

Interviewees reported that caste and ethnic identity were sometimes used in an explicitly divisive manner to attract voters: "Issues of cast, race and region were used as divisive strategy. […] Some parties have collected their vote by provoking on castism, region and community" (Interview L24; see also Interviews L27, L42). One interviewee argued that such negative campaigns against Pahade (people from the hills) or the Brahmin community helped parties to secure votes in one municipality and even reports that hate speech was used against these groups (Interview L10). Mostly, however, interviewees agreed that hate speech did not play a (major) role in the 2017 local elections (Interviews N4, N18, N24, L37).

Electoral violence in the run-up to elections can be understood as an extreme form of negative mobilisation. By its nature, it is geared *against* someone and generally aims to influence voting behaviour. Electoral violence is common in Nepal, though not at very high levels. It also occurred in the context of the local elections in 2017. However, neither the interviews nor reports on electoral violence give an indication that such incidents were related to ethnic-/caste-based voter mobilisation or targeted specific identity groups.

Interestingly, perceptions regarding the extent of divisive strategies based on ethnic/caste identities varied, indicating that the use of such strategies differed between localities, reconfirming that it was not the most pronounced feature of the local elections. Various interviewees found that divisive mobilisation along ethno-political or caste lines played only a minor role in local elections (Interviews N6, N7, N11, N25, N31, L1). Others, especially from municipalities in provinces 3 and 5, explicitly stated that they did not perceive any mobilisation based on ethnic/caste identities during the local elections (Interviews L9, L18, L28, N27). One interviewee stated that "campaign slander has not really happened along gender or ethnic lines" (Interview N11), another that "I would not say those elements were not important, but I would say that they were not the deciding elements in the local elections" (Interview N24).

At the same time, some interviewees pointed out that parties and candidates sometimes used *unifying/bridging* strategies with regard to ethnic or caste identities (Interviews N2, N7, N21, L1). Some interviewees emphasised that the concerns of all groups, especially marginalised groups such as Dalits, were addressed in the election programme, promising them more inclusion in society (Interviews N7, N15, N21). Asked whether there was also

campaigning aimed at overcoming divisions, one interviewee stated: "Yes, of course. There were candidates who were sort of doing that. And particularly in districts that were very affected by ethnic strikes" (Interview N24). One interviewee reported that leaders of political parties tried to win the votes from the locals by attending services of the different religious communities (Interview N14). Two experts observed that candidates broke caste-based conventions during their campaigns (e.g. that higher caste members ate at the same table with Dalits), although they noted importantly that this was short-lived and that caste hierarchies played a role again after the election campaign (Interviews N2A, N2B).

Much agreement exists regarding the observation that mobilisation along ethnic/caste lines is less of a problem in the context of the local elections than in the national and provincial elections (Interviews N24, N27, L27, N35, N29).

> Usually, in the local elections, local issues were raised. From, for provincial and parliamentary elections, the issues of language, creed, caste, culture were raised many [times], but in local elections, people were much concerned about their local development. So, the issue of language discrepancies or the issue of cultural discrepancies were not raised much. (Interview N6)

Overall, the analysis shows that ethnic-/caste-based mobilisation was an issue during the 2017 elections, yet varied in scope and intensity between localities. It seems that the choice about whether political parties use the ethnic/caste card in their mobilisation strategies depends at least to some extent on the societal structure of a municipality and whether it appears politically advantageous (Interviews N23, L7, N24). As one interviewee pointed out: "In politics, people talk about what benefits them. If the caste thing benefits him, he raises issues related to it" (Interview L7). Similarly, another interviewee observed: "About ethnic agendas, such agendas are created when the ethnic group having a majority would vote" (Interview L20).

Even if ethnic-/caste-based mobilisation was not perceived as a problem everywhere, it becomes clear from the interviews that the campaign period was not very harmonious, and harsh political struggles and divisive rhetoric occurred very frequently *between political parties*. As one interviewee described it: "Hate speech and defamation by one political groups to another party is very general. It is prevalent in every political party" (Interview L36; see also Interviews L31, N33, L18). Another interviewee stated:

> I think the conflicts have increased after the election. Before there was no election for 18 years, people did not care about the politics during that time. Now after the election, people have stated to identify themselves as a member of a political party. Some people lost the election. Now the feeling of revenge exists. (Interview L16)

Such conflicts even extended to ordinary citizens who were seen in the company of political party members and then associated with them (Interview L27). This increase in polarisation is also due to the interlacing of economic interests and politics, which increased the stakes of winning the elections, as one interviewee explained:

> So when parties sort of venture out to seek votes, you have to understand that one of the central ideas that lies in the political culture is vengeance. Revenge. Because you have to monopolise not just the method of violence or means of violence, but also the economy. […] Therefore, you have to unleash violence. Because there is a high

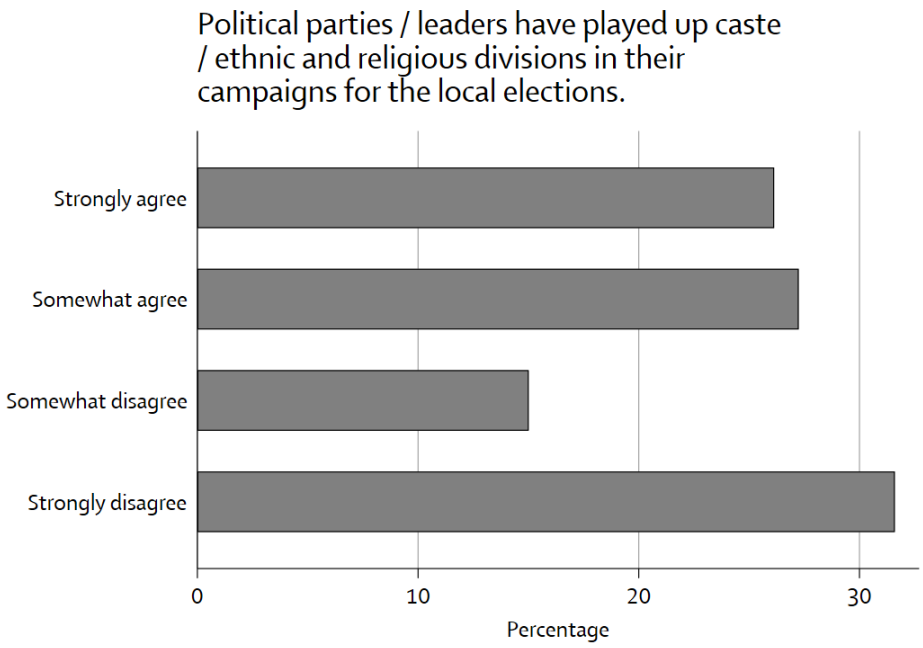
> certainty that if you lose, you'll be out of power and, therefore, out of resource. And you don't have any other ways in which you can make a living. (Interview N24)

However, one interviewee perceived an opposite trend:

> We had developed a culture where a political party much criticised any work done by the opposition party. […] Today the political culture has changed for good. Even the Mayors who did not win are consulted for their agenda. The winning person may have the feeling that I must do more, but they do not have the feeling of cancelling all their opponents. (Interview L17)

The representative survey conducted in four provinces mirrors the assessment and range of perceptions of the qualitative interviews very well. Almost 30 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that politicians and parties have played up ethnicity or caste in their election campaigns (see Figure 11), confirming that these topics played a role in voter mobilisation. Nevertheless, slightly more than 30 per cent of the respondents reported the opposite perception and strongly disagreed with the statement. This disparity could stem from two factors – geographical variation in the use of such strategies, or differences in the perception of such strategies. Most probably, the answer is a combination of the two. The qualitative interviews at the local level indicate that divisive strategies were more prevalent in some municipalities than in others, which some explained as being connected with the ethnic makeup of a community. Disaggregating the responses per province does not show large differences between the four regions, although respondents clearly perceived that "parties played up ethnic/caste divisions" in their mobilisation efforts most strongly in province 2. The picture is thus very much in line with the insights from the qualitative interviews, namely that divisive mobilisation was an issue in the 2017 local elections, though more so in the Madhesh region.

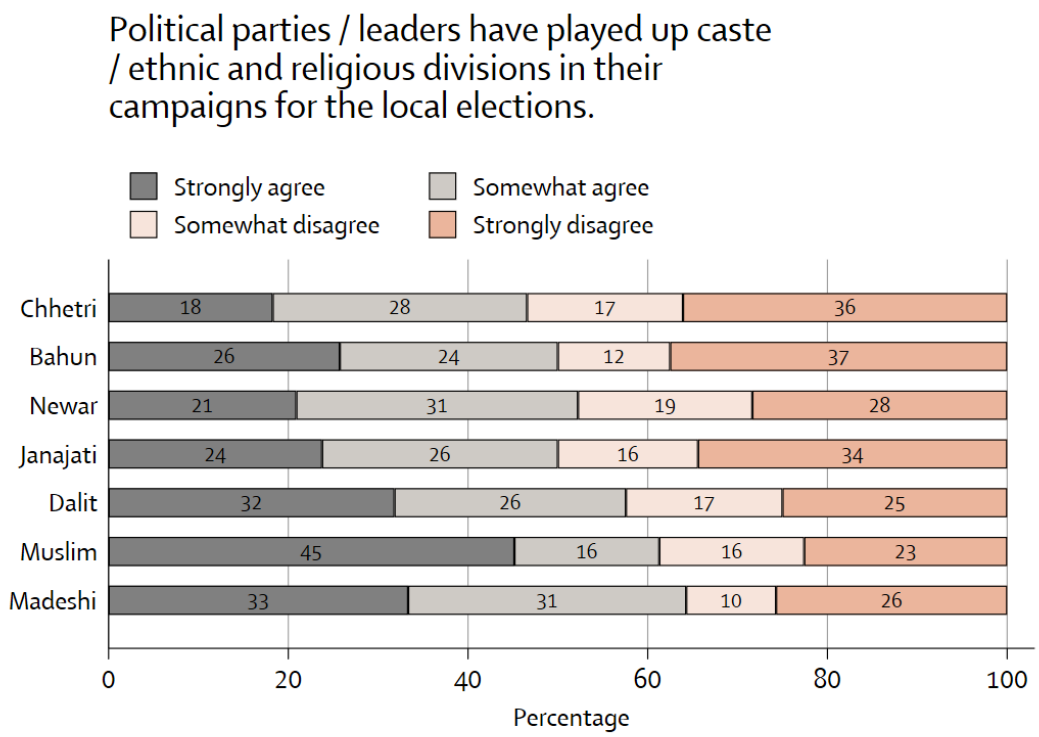
Figure 11: Divisive electoral campaigns



Source: Authors' survey

Differences in perception might also be explained by the ethnic/caste background of the respondents themselves. Taking a closer look at the responses, clear differences exist between identity groups (see Figure 12). Higher caste groups (Chhetri and Bahun) clearly perceived ethnic/caste issues to be less of a topic in the elections than Madheshi, Dalits or Muslims, who rated the importance significantly higher on average.

Figure 12: Divisive mobilisation perception according to ethnic/caste identity of respondents



Source: Authors' survey

In sum, the local elections of 2017 featured ethnic-/caste-based voter mobilisation, though it varied in intensity and scope. It was not the dominant topic during electoral campaigns and did not include high levels of hate speech and violence, but nevertheless ethnic/caste identities and divisions were drawn upon by political parties in a divisive and exclusionary way.

7.2.2 Effects of ethno-political mobilisation on societal peace

The previous discussion shows that ethnic-/caste-based voter mobilisation took place during the local elections of 2017 but varied in intensity and scope. Various interviewees who reported negative campaigning along group lines found that these strategies reinforced divisions and affected community relations negatively (Interviews L16, N23, L37). In the words of one interviewee, local political leaders "tend to provoke the issue of cast and ethnicity. Consequently, people follow them and emphasise on differences brought by caste. Ultimately division occurs" (Interview L25). Overall however, the interviews do not provide strong evidence that ethno-political mobilisation around the local elections harmed societal peace.

Rather than ethno-political polarisation, others noted the negative effects of political polarisation that created divisions between supporters of different political parties and also spilled into society (Interviews N26, L27). As one interviewee stated:

> When you talk about the local elections, you polarise the society based on ideological lines rather than uniting them as a personal and social entity. […] When I visit my society right now, people are fragmented in line with the politics. (Interview N26)

Similarly, another interviewee observed: "So a political division also creates the social divisions, the class divisions. So in that sense, the local elections divide the social relations, social communities, social groups" (Interview N23). Violent clashes between political parties that occurred in the campaign period or on election day and caused numerous injuries signal the intensity of this polarisation (DRCN, 2017). However, again, the perception is not universally negative. Compared to local elections conducted in the past, others noted that the level of polarisation has significantly declined:

> I remember during my childhood […] a person from one political party did not talk with the person of other party. But today that sorts of thing has changed. We do not have that. […] The situation has changed a lot compared to before. (Interview L29; see also Interview L26)

Others point towards heightened tensions during election time, tensions that are not long-lasting however, since the candidates are locally embedded and well-known (Interview N35; see also Interview N38). According to one interviewee, even the opposite is observable: "As compared to earlier days, the conflicts have reduced. These days we do not see any conflicts that are done by any political party" (Interview L31).

Introducing local elections also meant that, as of 2017, local posts would be filled competitively. This competition has had some negative – albeit weak – effects on societal peace. Mobilisation partially ran along ethno-political lines, and some see that this has exacerbated societal divisions. If parties increasingly rely on identity politics, such dynamics could escalate and have a destabilising effect, but so far one cannot trace a very clear increase in the degree of violence or decrease in the degree of social cohesion back to the introduction of the local elections.

7.3 Local elections, political participation and societal peace

The actions of voting and standing for elections are among the most important pillars of a democracy, as they allow citizens to actively take part in political processes. After almost two decades of limited possibilities to influence political decisions at the local level, the reintroduction of local elections in 2015 was supposed to offer Nepali citizens new opportunities for political participation. This section assesses whether the local elections increased political participation and how this affected societal peace.

7.3.1 Effects of local elections on political participation

This section explores the effects of the (re)introduction of local elections on opportunities for political participation in Nepal. For this purpose, this section is divided into two parts.

Firstly, we analyse voters' perspectives, outlining that the local elections stimulated citizens' expectations of and hopes about local government. Secondly, we show that local elections have created the opportunity for individuals to stand for election at the local level, albeit not without certain limitations. Although new actors have entered the playing field, established elites continue to exert influence, at times disproportionally so. The second part of this section therefore highlights the role of quotas and selection criteria for candidates in the context of shifting power dynamics between traditional and "new" actors.

Participation through voting in the elections

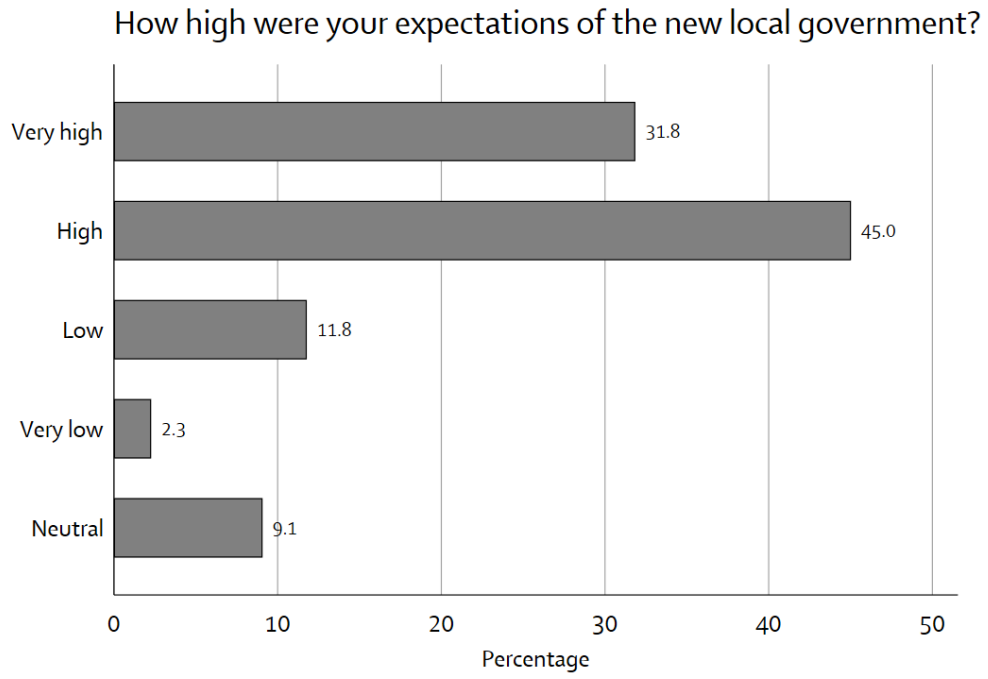
The reintroduction of local elections in 2017 was mostly marked by a very high level of "excitement to participate in the local elections" (Interview N18; see also Interviews L13, L37). Several interviewees described people as being "enthusiastic" about being able to vote (Interviews N13, N14, N18, N28) and "be part of democracy" (Interview N9), depicted voting day itself as a "festival" (Interviews L27, L39) and stated that this level of positivity was unprecedented: "Looking at the political history of Nepal, people were never as delighted and excited for voting as in the 2017 local-level election" (Interview L39). And indeed voter turnout, at 74.56 per cent, was particularly high in the local elections, indicating a high value attached to local-level participation by Nepali citizens (DRCN, 2017). This is further supported by our survey: When asked about the most important reason for voting in the local elections, 39 per cent of respondents stated that they feel it makes a difference in their life. In addition, 37.6 per cent explained that voting is their civic duty, which points towards a high level of political awareness and commitment to local democracy.

Several factors explain why voter turnout and the degree of importance being attached to the local elections was so high. Firstly, the majority of the interviewees quoted the long absence of local elections as being one major reason for the excitement (e.g. Interviews N5, N9, N11). Secondly, the adoption of a new constitution in 2015, which introduced a federal system with three tiers of government, had raised awareness about the topic and stimulated the hopes of citizens (Interviews N4, N5, N10, N17, N34). Thirdly, the experience of an armed conflict, in particular at the local level, created political awareness in society about the relevance of a democratic process and the importance of (local) elections (Interviews N10, N30). Compared to the protracted conflicts Nepal had experienced before, "local elections were expected to be the alternative for Nepal" (Interview L33) and "people happily participated in the election because they believed that they could utilise their fundamental rights, which were obtained through struggling from people's movement II" (Interview L39). Fourthly, the fact that quotas for female and Dalit representatives were introduced enabled citizens to vote for candidates they could identify with (Interviews N16, N17, N31, N24, N18, N9, N35). As one interviewee put it: "That made people feel that 'oh, the election is all about us'" (Interview N27).

Fifthly, there were very high expectations that being able to elect local leaders would translate into better responsiveness: After almost 20 years with minimal local development and service delivery (Interviews N2, N25), citizens expected the new local government to better address their needs than the previous one (Interviews N4, L11, L32): "People were very eager […] to cast their vote. […] For a long time, they were waiting that someone will come and address their problems" (Interview N12). More specifically, voters expected generally better development and service delivery (Interviews N13, N4, N29, L30, L31); specific services such as health, education, drinking water and roads (Interviews N5, N6,

N10, L4, N23, N34); as well as better administrative services (certificates, property registration, etc.) (Interviews N17, N24, N30, L34, L41). As the candidates were from their communities, voters expected that they could access them more easily (Interviews N32, L9), and that they would represent the local population better, as they are familiar with their needs (Interviews N12, N30, L19, L25). As one interviewee put it: "They were so enthusiastic: Now we will be having a government in our own area. We will not be depending on Kathmandu. […] We will have our own representative" (Interview N13). Citizens also hoped that, due to the federal system, the new local government would have more power and autonomy, especially in decision-making and budget-making processes and in developing policies for the needs of specific local communities (Interviews N17, N32). Overall, the fact that there were "huge expectations coming from the people's side" (Interview N10) is also mirrored in our survey, with more than 70 per cent of respondents indicating that they had high or very high expectations towards the new local government.

Figure 13: Expectations of the new local government



Source: Authors' survey

Finally, the technical aspect of the electoral process is also important for explaining the high voter turnout, as the effect of local elections on increasing participation not only depends on citizens' willingness to cast their votes, but also on a smooth electoral process that enables participation. Overall, the elections were perceived as being free and fair (Interviews N26, N35, L17) and relatively well-managed (Interviews N33, L11, L12, L37, L41).

What was viewed by the interviewees as being most critical was the expansive and difficult to understand ballot paper (Interviews N6, N31; DRCN, 2017). One interviewee outlined:

> The kind of ballot paper they had was so comprehensive and complicated. Like a long list of towel-sized ballot papers with loads of candidates with their respective election symbols and who had to vote for what. It was so complicated. (Interview N31)

This was especially problematic because voter education programmes did not reach certain regions in the first place or started too late (Interviews N7, N16, N26; DRCN, 2017).[13] The complicated ballot paper, combined with partially low voter education, resulted in many invalid votes, impeding participation (Interviews N4, N18, N21, N31, N33). In the first wave (which included provinces 3, 4 and 6), overall 17 per cent of votes had to be excluded because they were invalid, and more generally local observers noted "very high invalidation rates in individual races" reaching up to 60 per cent (DRCN, 2017; Mishra, 2017).

Although they were not very grave, there were also some problems regarding the process of voter registration and accessibility to polling stations. Firstly, in some regions, the challenging geographical conditions and long distances made it difficult to reach the office responsible for registration or the polling stations for voting (Interviews N7, L31), which affected voters with disabilities in particular (Interview N21). Secondly, some voters simply did not know they had to register or had problems getting their voter ID and therefore could not vote (Interview N7; DRCN, 2017), which some see as particularly problematic for people from indigenous communities (Interviews L11, L35). Others had registered but could not find their names on the voter list (Interviews N26, L29, L34). In addition, a large amount of citizens were left out of the register due to national and international migration flows (DRCN, 2017). Evidence of these technical constraints concerning the electoral process, especially regarding voter registration, is also supported by our survey. One-third of those respondents who stated that they did not vote (which however total only 33 per cent compared to those that did) indicated that they could not find their names on the voters' register.

To sum up, the local elections in 2017 provided citizens with the opportunity to cast their votes for the first time in 20 years. The levels of expectations and excitement around the local elections were exceptionally high, especially concerning the opportunity to elect representatives, and the anticipation of increased responsiveness of the local government as well as accessibility to services and representatives. This resulted in high levels of participation, enabled by a technically rather smooth electoral process. Constraints in the voter registration process as well as the complicated nature of the ballot paper negatively affected the opportunities for voting, but only to a limited degree. Overall, the introduction of local elections therefore increased the opportunities for political participation in Nepal substantially by enabling a large share of the population to cast their votes.

Participation through standing for election

Elections should offer citizens opportunities to participate not only because they can then vote for whom they would like to be represented by, but also because one can stand for elections and be voted for as well. Who was able to stand for elections is hence an important question in assessing whether local elections increased opportunities for participation.

Candidate selection

In general, the 2017 local elections in Nepal saw a mix of traditional elite groups as well as women, Dalits and other formerly underrepresented demographics running for, and obtaining,

13 Although several other interviewees did mentioned well-managed voter education campaigns by the electoral commission or political parties (Interviews N6, N31, N35).

local posts. Although some former bureaucrats as well as traditional elites took part in the elections and were able to secure posts, the absence of local elections for so many years, the sheer number of new posts being created and the quota system enabled a number of new faces to occupy political posts so that, overall, a majority of interviewees (and especially those at the local level) stated that there were many new faces among the candidates for local posts (Interviews N26, L6, L5, L9, L11, L13, L23, L24, L27, L28, L29, L30, L36, L38, L42). A number of factors were often mentioned by the interviewees to help explain which candidates were selected to stand for office. Overall, the most often named selection criteria for local candidates included the individual's ties to political party leadership, their financial resources, social networks and ethnicity as well as newly introduced constitutional criteria in the form of quotas for more disadvantaged groups.

First, good connections within their party – and especially to party leaders – were often named as a central explanation about who was able to stand for office (Interviews N4, N10, L14, L16, L32). This is because, across major political parties in Nepal, there seems to have been a general tendency towards applying hierarchical decision-making in the selection of candidates, rather than democratic bottom-up processes with transparent guidelines: "In the nomination process, there is no democracy, it is really the party leaders in Kathmandu who decide who should run in the different constituencies" (Interview N22; see also Interviews N7, N12, N16, N22, N30, N4, N28). Although there were instances reported in which parties requested that municipal committees recommend names for candidacies (Interview L9), it was especially the candidates for the posts of Chief and Deputy Chief who were often selected through the party centres and province committee leaders (DRCN, 2017). Generally, candidates did not tend to stand in the local elections independently of political parties, as competition with party-affiliated candidates seems to have discourage them (Interviews N6, N7, N22).

Second, being well-equipped with financial resources was mentioned by almost every interviewee as an important characteristic of candidates (e.g Interviews N24, N29, N9, L5, L9, L14, L25, L33). As one interviewee observed:

> You need finance to run for the elections no matter how good the agenda or the policies are […]. Although there are ceilings for how much you can spend in a local election, but there are a lot of sources who say that many candidates spend way beyond that. (Interview N7)

In a similar vein, many interviewees noted that it was particularly individuals with stronger financial backgrounds, such as local businessmen, contractors (mostly engaged in the construction sector) and real estate brokers, who stood for local posts (Interviews L7, L26, N24, N26, N33). They were able to run costlier campaigns (Interviews N3, N16, N25), which was in turn one reason why parties decided to choose them as candidates (Interviews N12, N16, N25, N31).

Third, social networks and community ties were also often named as important factors for a candidacy (Interviews N28, N34, L31). If candidates were not already political party members, they were instead often from civil society organisations or more generally described as "social leaders" (Interviews N33, L13, N26). As social networks of individuals often revolve around, or include, their families, they also tend to be hereditary. Therefore, interviewees pointed to candidates mainly stemming from political families (Interview N2).

This also holds true for women, as men with a history of political influence encourage their wives, daughters or daughters-in-law to run as candidates (Interviews N2, N16, N27, N17, N6).

Fourth, ethnicity and caste were also mentioned by some interviewees as important reasons why certain candidates were chosen to stand for elections (Interviews N4, N14, N18, N26, L19, L20, L26, L30). One interviewee, for example, noted that "they [political parties] are quite sensitive to provide the ticket to who is representative from a certain ethnic group" (Interview N4), and another that, "for example, the candidate's ethnicity, candidate's sex, even candidate's caste matters for the local elections" (Interview N26). It is important to note, however, that it was also mentioned that the relevance of a candidate's ethnic or caste identity may differ across districts and provinces (depending on the local ethnic composition and community dynamics in different LGUs) (Interviews N31, N14, N27).

Overall, candidate selection in the 2017 local elections was mainly based on top-down processes within parties choosing candidates with strong financial resources, good social ties and the right ethnic or caste profile. Although the large number of posts created ensured that many new faces were able to enter local-level politics, the overly strong importance of financial resources especially must be seen as a critical factor when assessing the question of whether the introduction of local elections enhanced broad-based participation. As expressed by one interviewee: "What is happening in the local government is that people who have the money or who can spend the money are running the elections, this is the tragic thing for us" (Interview N25). One important measure to counter this were the fixed quotas for certain marginalised groups, discussed in detail in the next section.

Quotas for women and Dalit candidates

Constitutional criteria also heavily influenced candidate selection, as a fixed quota of posts for women and Dalit candidates was introduced at the local level. According to the 2015 constitution, one of the lead positions in each municipality must go to a female candidate (either the Mayor/Chair or the Deputy) and so do two out of the four Ward seats, of which at least one must additionally be from the Dalit community (Government of Nepal, 2015). This was meant to counterbalance the fact that, historically, these groups have been marginalised socially and have had limited access to finance, significantly decreasing their opportunities to stand for public offices, despite their large numbers in society (Interviews N3, N7, N8, N21, N22).

Interviewees overwhelmingly judged the quotas as being highly important for increasing participation across different segments of society, and they thought it was positive that numerical representation of women and Dalits was constitutionally ensured (e.g. Interviews L9, L37, L40, L21, N2, N3, N20, N21, N27, N31, N32, N37).

> The major good aspect that we saw was the inclusion aspect. In the governance system, the people of the community never had the access to it. Dalit communities and other conflicting communities, women and socially excluded groups of people got to have their representation in the election of 2017. (Interview L8)

Already the mere increase in the numerical representation of Dalits and women is seen as an important step towards "social inclusion" (Interview N2), and many think that, without the quotas, it would have been almost impossible for women and Dalits to stand for and

gain political posts (Interviews L34, L36). A female representative at the local level stressed the importance of the quotas in this regard:

> I have been doing politics for a long time but I was only able to run for the election with the help of quota system. If the constitution had not said either the Mayor or Deputy Mayor should be a woman then it is 100 per cent sure I would not have gotten the ticket. (Interview L29)

However, important limits to the positive effects of the quota system also exist. Firstly, political parties have been quoted as generally preferring to give candidacies to males (Interviews L13, L17, L33, N8, N11). Overall, 38 per cent of candidates in the 2017 local elections were women, 61 per cent men and two persons were third gender, which is then also reflected in the ratio of those elected, whereby 59 per cent were male and 41 per cent female (Shrestha & Phuyel, 2019; Sijapati, 2020). Secondly, it is clear that the preferential treatment of male candidates was especially pronounced for Mayoral positions (see also Interviews N11, N21, N31, N37):

> Nepal is still primarily a patriarchal society. That really speaks to how party tickets are handled or handed out. And you can see that in the municipal elections […] we saw the Mayor's position primarily being given out to male candidates. (Interview N11)

This has resulted in a clear imbalance regarding the distribution of posts: Of the 753 chief positions in the LGUs (i.e. Mayor or Chair), only 18 are occupied by a woman, whereas in more than 97 per cent of the cases, women occupy the Deputy position (Shrestha & Phuyel, 2019). Moreover, 99 per cent of the Ward Chairperson's posts, for which there is no women's quota, are occupied by men (Shrestha & Phuyel, 2019). Resemblance would require that gender ratios be balanced at all levels of political power, including the Mayor or Chair positions in the municipal and village assemblies. This clearly has not yet been achieved at the local level in Nepal.

It was also criticised that although the quotas ensure that certain minorities can participate, they do not ensure that the different segments within these groups are represented. For example, one interviewee mentioned that, due to the design of the quota system, the "representation of Dalit men is actually fairly null" (Interview N17). Furthermore, several of our interviewees stated that the (Dalit) women candidates often come from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds and political families, whereby they again represent the elite among the marginalised (Interviews L21, N2, N4, N28, N35).

> It was the more privileged among the marginalised who got the representation. […] So they don't truly represent the predicament backwardness, and they don't truly fight for the rights and opportunity growth for the right and equality of the downtrodden and marginalised group. (Interview N28)

Furthermore, various interviewees stated that there should also be quotas for other marginalised and indigenous groups so as to be represented at the ward level and reflect the demographics (e.g. Interviews L6, L31, L37, N4, N14, N15, N23). Unlike at the national level, quotas do not apply to marginalised groups other than (Dalit) women, for example to Janajatis or Muslims. Although some are critical that this would be feasible – "In the five-member [ward] committee, you cannot have representation of every ethnic community or every minority group" (Interview N7) – it remains unclear whether minorities more broadly

benefitted from being able to participate at the local level. Furthermore, several interviewees reported cases in which positions remained unfilled because there were no Dalit candidates available in the municipality, in which case it would be particularly sensible to fill these positions with members of other marginalised groups (Interviews L34, N14).

However, despite these weaknesses, most interviewees did not seem to find the quota system per se problematic, but rather appreciated the new "diversity in the local government offices" (Interview N27). The quotas introduced under the 2015 Nepali constitution overall should therefore be seen as a key factor in assisting especially women and Dalits to gain access to political posts, as their mandatory representation in the local government bodies created new opportunities for the participation of many Dalits and women with no prior political experience. Therefore, the quotas can be considered important for countering the effects from the perpetuation of the traditional elite and patriarchal dynamics.

Summary

To summarise, the analysis suggests that the introduction of local elections significantly increased political participation. The elections were accompanied by widespread excitement in the population, and voter turnout was exceptionally high. An overall relatively smooth electoral process facilitated widespread participation, despite some technical difficulties (particularly regarding registration). A more mixed picture emerges when analysing the opportunities to stand for election. On the one hand, financial resources, gender and ties to political party leadership play an extremely important role in candidate selection, inhibiting broad-based access to political posts. On the other hand, many new posts were created, bringing new faces into local government, and the introduction of quotas ensured the substantial participation of women and Dalits. Overall, the 2017 local elections thus can be seen as having provided significantly improved opportunities for local political participation across all regions of Nepal that had not existed for the preceding decade and a half.

7.3.2 The effects of increased opportunities for political participation on societal peace

Have the increased opportunities for political participation impacted societal peace in Nepal? Several interviewees stated that by providing people the opportunity to participate and vote in the local elections, the level of overall societal peace in Nepal was strengthened (Interviews N18, N23, N34). One interviewee noted, for example: "They wanted to choose their own representatives from their local level. […]. That's why the local election was one of the most important events for the […] building of peace at local level" (Interview N35). Another underlined the importance of enhancing participation though the quotas, stating that due to the elections,

> a lot of underrepresented groups, historically underrepresented groups, like women, and then Dalits, and also, these people (are) there in the government, this is contributing to peace, societal peace. So this election has very much contributed to the societal peace. (Interview N38)

The following sections trace the impact of the participation aspect of the local elections on the different elements of societal peace.

Political violence

When looking at political violence, local elections have been assessed positively by interviewees in the context of the consolidation of the Nepali peace process:

> I think local elections in Nepal are really very important to sustain the whole peace process because that conflict originated from the local bodies because it came to the centre very late, it started in 1996, but it was kind of simmering before the 1990s in the local bodies, means, in villages, rural villages, in the western hinterlands, it was simmering because there were many issues around discrimination, caste discrimination, religious discrimination, cause discrimination and definitely the lack of political representation. (Interview N30)

This is because standing for election or supporting election campaigns may provide a more suitable alternative for actors at the local level than voicing their grievances in violent ways (Interviews N10, N16). As one interviewee expressed:

> After local representatives are elected, such conflict issues have decreased so far due to awareness and empowerment programmes. The engagement of people from national political parties are so unitary, centralised and dynastic that they no longer serve the interest of Nepalis, right? And so the sooner we can support local communities who are politically organised to be more mindful, to participate peacefully, to express non-violently, I think the better for Nepal. Otherwise, they will be driven towards a violent expression. (Interview N16)

Such a positive effect was noted, for example, as being especially important in the Madhesh region: "That's why the number of occurrences of protest and demonstrations is comparatively less. There is more likelihood of political violence if there was no Madhesh-based government" (Interview L40).

Political trust

Furthermore, several interviewees mentioned a positive relationship between the increased degree of diversity of politicians and political trust, tracing this positive effect back to the fact that the political presence of historically marginalised groups, such as (Dalit) women, increased due to the quota system (Interviews L29, L37, L39). This increased numerical representation led citizens who identify with those groups to trust the local government, mainly because the quota system facilitates access to representatives with shared characteristics (see also Interviews L18, L39).

> I mean, we can say definitely that if people from my caste or my ethnicity are in the office, definitely, I have the courage to go to them and talk to them, which I might be afraid [to do] if someone of the higher social just hierarchical system is in the office. (Interview N32)

At the same time, what was partially viewed critically with regard to political trust was the fact that money played such a large role and candidates were often local business men. One interviewee thought this already inhibited the level of trust (Interview N38), and another explained that it was likely to do so in the long run (Interview N14).

Identity

The quotas have also been mentioned as being an important aspect of participation that helped foster an inclusive identity in Nepal (Interviews N13, L29):

> The women who were Maoist, who were with the gun earlier, now they can become Deputy Mayors. Young women, married women, […] a Tharu women, women from different diversity are in the political forefront. That has really given us a message to become unity and one country. So this is something very special. (Interview N13)

Several interviewees, for example, noted an increase in different identities being accepted and marginalised groups themselves (especially Dalits) being more comfortable with their own identity (Interviews L18, L32, L35): "Due to quota system […] there has been a feeling in the Dalit community that they are not the lower class and they are equal to other humans" (Interview L37). While some others did not see signs of change (Interviews L5, L27, L40) and noticed that many still hide their caste or ethnic identity (Interview L33), overall a relative positive picture emerges whereby the quotas were able to contribute to the strengthening of an inclusive identity in Nepal, although challenges with regard to discrimination remain prominent in the country.

Conclusion

Overall, local elections being reintroduced in 2017 after a 15-year hiatus can be seen very positively with regard to strengthening participation in Nepal. As one interviewee noted:

> A formal mechanism participation exists. I would say the local election at least built the institutions, provided opportunity for the people to participate in the election, and to select their local leaders, so that was very positive, and that needs to be really protected. (Interview N30)

The analysis suggests that indeed being able to participate in the elections – either through voting or through standing for elections – positively impacted societal peace. On the issue of standing for elections, it was the introduction of quotas that was particularly important, as they have resulted in the de facto political participation of more women and Dalit individuals compared to before 2017, albeit not without limitations. Being able to vote has also increased the level of political awareness, which is an important precondition for political participation: "I think people now have higher expectations, aspirations with the candidates they have elected. And also, they are more politically aware now about their rights, about their needs and what the government needs to do for them" (Interview N7). Overall, the 2017 elections have provided opportunities for political involvement and filled an important gap in the democratic set-up of the 2000s and mid-2010s in Nepal, and seem to have fostered an inclusive identity, political trust and the peaceful expression of grievances. At the same time, the aforementioned shortcomings of the electoral process, candidate selection and some limitations of the quota system may have restrained the overall positive impact of the elections, therefore addressing them in future elections may provide additional benefits for sustained societal peace.

7.4 Local elections, responsiveness and societal peace

One major aim of local elections is to have a government that is close to the people, well connected in the community and acts on their behalf. With their introduction in 2015 in Nepal, hopes were raised that federalism and local elections would enhance responsiveness, leading to better service provisioning, improved governance and reduced levels of corruption (Adhikari, 2018; Chaudhary, 2019). This section looks at whether the local elections were able to improve responsiveness at the local level. We thereby examine how well local political leaders listen to citizens' opinions, explain their actions, and adapt policy decisions to the needs and wishes of the populations.

7.4.1 Effects of local elections on responsiveness

Listen and explain through improved accessibility

Almost all interviewees mentioned the increased accessibility to representatives as being a major improvement in terms of responsiveness brought about through the local elections (e.g. Interviews L10, N3, N10, N25, N27, N30, N31, N33). With the local governments in place, "people feel it is easier to approach the local government" (Interview N10), resulting in citizens being "in direct contact with the representative" (Interview N17; see also Interviews L24, N5, N7, N10, N32, N27). As one interviewee describes it:

> In the local level, people seem to be very happy because they have their representatives. They can go to say their problem directly. They know the situation of the representatives. They know what they are doing, and what they are not doing. They can ask the representative, the local government. (Interview N35)

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

> We have selected our candidates and we can go and shout at them. Kathmandu is too far away for them to go and meet the ministers, but to local candidates, local bodies, local representative, they can always say, "We need this." (Interview N28)

An interview with a local government representative illustrates how listening and explaining is also taking place from the side of those elected: "We first visit the ward, talk with people from the community and estimate the potential sector – and then only do we send our budget priorities" (Interview L34).

The increase in accessibility can mainly be traced back to the local embeddedness and perceived (geographical) closeness of many representatives (e.g. Interviews L27, L35, N7, N12, N18, N26, N28). Moreover, several interviewees suggest that resemblance also plays an important role in this regard, since many local women and members of marginalised groups find it easier to approach a representative with whom they share certain characteristics (e.g. Interviews L15, L22, N2, N15, N20). The local representatives, in turn, have to engage with the local population to lay out their policy responses: "People come to the ward office for regular monitoring and inspection […] At that time, I must be able to tell the reason properly if works are delayed or incomplete" (Interview L34). It has also been criticised, however, that there are too few institutions and public consultations where citizens can articulate their dissatisfaction and wishes on the local level (see also Interview N14): "The

mayor and chairman together prepare papers and pass it based on a majority. Neither the people, people's representatives, opposition parties nor social organisations were called upon for their presence" (Interview L19).

More generally, a lack of transparency in policy-making at the local level was noted by several interviewees (Interviews L7, L8, L37). For example, one interviewee described the budgeting process as follows: "Representatives perform without any consultations from [civil society organisations] and the public. We are unaware about the budget expenses of the local units. The accountability and transparency of local units are less than acceptable" (Interview L42).

But despite these limitations, the large majority of stakeholders and experts interviewed hold that local elections provide significantly better accessibility.

Adapt through improved public service delivery

Overall, public service delivery is clearly seen to have improved after the local elections by most of our interviewees (e.g. Interviews L4, L9, L17, N5, N7, N25, N28, N35). Specifically, it was praised that it is much easier and quicker to request administrative services that were previously the responsibility of the more distant district governments (e.g. Interviews L4, L16, L37, N7, N25):

> Before people have to go the district centre but nowadays, their administrative works are carried out at the ward offices. So Singhdurbar has come to their door. […] Thus, compared to the past, due to difference in structure, services and facilities are easily accessible to the people. (Interview L35)[14]

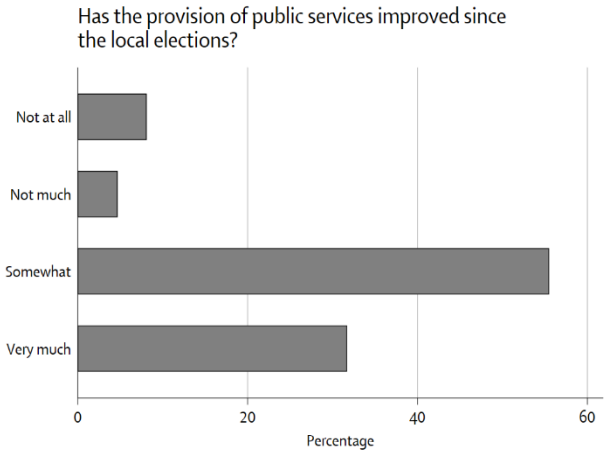
But also development more broadly (Interview L17) and specific activities such as the building of roads (Interview N20) and improved access to drinking water (Interviews L9, N20) are noticeable: "Every house was provided with drinking water facilities. The road is blacktopped. So, people felt the presence of the local level. […] Thus, taking big decisions, drafting policies that are connected to the people is a very positive achievement" (Interview L9).

At the same time, a majority of interviewees were critical of the fact that the LGUs' strong focus on physical infrastructure development occurred at the expense of social development, including education, health and unemployment (e.g. Interviews L2, L24, N7, N11, N31).

Nevertheless, our survey likewise confirms that people are more satisfied with public services since the 2017 local elections, as nearly 90 per cent feel that they have somewhat or very much improved (see Figure 14). Also, around 77 per cent of the respondents think that their needs are being addressed somewhat or much better by the elected local governments compared to the previous administration (see Figure 15). However, people who identify as being Dalit or Madheshi tend to be slightly less satisfied with the public service delivery (Dalit 85 per cent, Madheshi 80 per cent) and the addressing of their needs by the local government (both groups 71 per cent), although again a majority do see improvements in both regards.

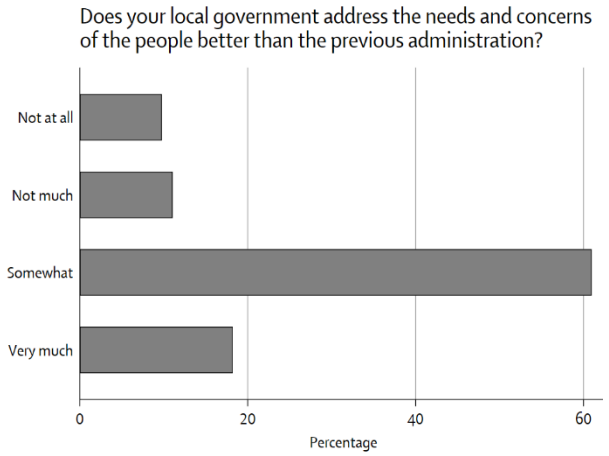
14 Singhdurbar is the palace in Kathmandu housing the federal parliament.

Figure 14: Provision of public goods



Source: Authors' survey

Figure 15: Addressing the needs and concerns of the population



Source: Authors' survey

Overall, both the qualitative interviews and the survey indicate that service delivery and development at the local level have improved, which can be explained through several factors. Strengthened decentralisation is one important explanation in this regard. Compared to the situation before 2017, in which "service delivery was kind of chaos" (Interview N10), the local governments now have an institutionalised and broader mandate as well as more resources to deliver public services (e.g. Interviews L17, L22, L28, N4, N7, N10, N37).

The local elections also have contributed to the improvement of service delivery. According to our interviewees, the local embeddedness of the newly elected representatives has led to better adaptation of the provision of public services to the actual needs at the local level (e.g. Interviews L1, L29, N5, N6, N27, N35): "Local governments or their representatives are quite familiar with [the local development] problems already" (Interview N7) and can use this local expertise for efficient policy responses (Interview N27). This knowledge advantage is reinforced by the intrinsic motivation of many locally embedded candidates who "are also very excited to do something and bring some changes" (Interview N5). Additionally, it was pointed out that since the elections replaced the all-party mechanism, it has made it easier to implement policies, as decisions no longer have to be taken jointly (Interview L34).

Furthermore, some see the first signs of an accountability mechanism at play that could explain why service delivery has improved since the introduction of the local elections. Local citizens take on the role of "watchdogs" (Interview N6), critically evaluating the representatives' work, for example with respect to the spending of resources or the delivery on campaign promises (see also Interviews N10, N14, L25)[15]: "They [voters] are concerned with what's happening in local bodies, what the representatives are doing […] If the development work is (…) in a good quality, then the people are raising voices on their elected representative" (Interview N6).

Being scrutinised by their electorate, the representatives, in turn, seem to be making an effort to deliver public services: "They have to show that 'After I got elected, I'm doing

15 Some also see opposition members or the other ward members taking over a similar role.

this. I have done this.' They have to show some tangible changes" (Interview N18). Some interviewees additionally described an informal accountability mechanism conditioned by the local embeddedness of the representatives. Since the representatives often are part of the local communities, they want to avoid damaging their reputations and standing and therefore strive to be able to present development outputs (Interviews N12, N16, N27). Moreover, it is easier for the citizens to hold people accountable who they personally know (Interviews N16, N27). At the same time, this also meant that the local governments chose the "easiest way" (Interview N11) to demonstrate their capability by investing in highly visible and tangible infrastructure projects, such as roads. This resulted in a "very low budget […] to solve issues in the social sectors" (Interview L2; see also Interviews L10, L17, N4, N28 N31). This also means that many projects were criticised for not being planned in a sustainable way, leading to the waste of resources and environmental damage in the construction of infrastructure, for example (Interviews L21, L29, L31, N34).

One specific new task for local governments, as per the constitution of 2015, is resolving local-level disputes through so-called judicial committees. Chaired by the Deputy from the respective assembly, the judicial committees are responsible for resolving disputes at the local level, for example regarding land boundaries, water distribution, unpaid wages, provision of decent food and road construction (Government of Nepal, 2015; Timilsina, 2020). In addition, the committees can play a mediating role in divorce disputes, minor physical assaults, defamation allegations and other litigations (Timilsina, 2020).

The institutionalisation of local dispute settlement in the judicial committees was positively highlighted by a large number of interviewees (e.g. Interviews L18, L27, L34, N2, N18, N24, N29, N32, N38) and even ascribed "a crucial role in mediating cases of conflict" by one (Interview L12). This is especially because they ensure better access to justice:

> So in that sense, judicial committees seem to be resolving some local-level disputes quite easily and within the reach of people because they have to listen to both parties. They have to come under socially acceptable resolutions. So in that sense, I personally feel that they have been able to largely contribute to convenient and cheapest means of mediation and resolving disputes at the local level. (Interview N18)

Nevertheless, there were interviewees who were less positive regarding the effectiveness of the judicial committees (Interviews L37, N36). Most clearly, there still exists a capacity gap whereby a lack of knowledge and training often also prevents their effective functioning (Interviews L7, L24, L25, L40, L9, N36). Two interviewees further pointed to unjust judgements or solutions, and that the judicial committee sometimes rather serves to perpetuate elite interests (Interviews N19, L40). It seems that although the judicial committees have been able to contribute to conflict resolution in some communities, they have been less effective in others, which at least to a certain degree varies depending on capacity (Interview N24).

Remaining challenges to responsiveness

Despite clear improvements in accessibility and public service delivery since the introduction of the local elections, several challenges to responsiveness remain. These regard a) the fact that the quotas have not been able to achieve inclusive decision-making, b) a lack of expertise and resources at the local level, c) institutional design flaws as well as d) persistent corruption and patronage.

Non-inclusive decision-making despite quotas

The previous section showed that the quotas increased the de facto representation of women and Dalits, however it is less clear whether this has led to decision-making that is more responsive to the needs of marginalised groups.

On the one hand, many judged the quotas as being important for increasing the significance of marginalised groups' opinions in local-level policies. Several interviewees perceived that women and Dalit representatives are raising their voices and are thereby bringing the issues and concerns of marginalised groups into local-level politics (Interviews L22, L24, L25, L32, L35, N20, N37).

> By quota, a woman who is marginalised, poor and discriminated got the chance to be represented and utilise the power given by the constitution. Being Dalit women, Dalit issues are raised. A ward and municipality is present to hear their voice. Due to their representation, they are able to put their community issues at ward offices and municipality. Thus, representation has done well. (Interview L35)

Furthermore, some interviewees noted that these representatives are better at understanding the specific problems these communities face (Interviews L29, L32) and that they function as a "bridge between the government and the public" (Interview L11), as they increase the amount of responsiveness through listening and explaining:

> Those people who are now on the decision-making level, even in the ward, at least they can communicate to that particular group well that what is happening in the state, what are the provisions, how they want to – what kind of budgets they are receiving, what kind of development programme is coming to your ward. (Interview N34)

> Yes, it's going well. After the election we women as well as Dalit women have started to raise our voices, which didn't happen before the election. People have started to talk with us in the Ward office. They bring their problems regarding citizenship, school for the children, roads […]. (Interview L15)

On the other hand, many interviewees pointed out that, despite the quotas, severe barriers to inclusive decision-making at the local level remain. The great majority of interviewees raised the question of how meaningful the current representation is, criticising that marginalised groups' de facto involvement in decision-making processes is still very limited (e.g. Interviews L8, L37, N5, N16, N18, N37):

> So very few candidates, very few representatives who have been elected have been able to ask questions, have been able to raise issues of their communities or social issues what they have observed in their society and in their local community. (Interview N18)

Several reasons were named as to why non-inclusive decision-making is still a major problem. Firstly, many of our interviewees addressed the issue of women "just" gaining Deputy posts (e.g. Interviews L2, N1, N5, N12, N17, N25, N27). They criticised that these Deputy positions, predominantly held by women, are those with less influence and less executive power (e.g. Interviews N1, N12, N25, N32, D38). One interviewee summarised the problem as follows:

> But what parties did is they gave them a space only as a Vice, Vice-Chairman of the municipality as well as village assembly, and the Vice-Chair or Vice-Mayor is like a ceremonial one, they don't have the executive power. […] Their position is ceremonial […] because Chairman [i.e. Mayor or Chair] always tries to impose his own decisions or his own policies. (Interview N25)

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

> Now, if you see the complaints of the Deputy Mayors, or the Dalit members of the executive council of the local government, most of them are frustrated there because their voices – despite the fact that they are elected officials – their voices are not heard. So it is still the same old society where elites, especially male and people who belong to typical high-class groups, dominate the government from here to there. (Interview N29)

The fact that women almost exclusively received Deputy positions is the most visible demonstration that the representation of marginalised groups at the local level so far has a rather symbolic character regarding the increased number of (Dalit) women representatives. Beyond the gender imbalance of Mayor/Chair vs. Deputy positions discussed above, "Dalits and women and other minorities continue to be relegated to minor roles in decision-making in government, regardless of the weight of the numbers" (Interview N16). Their role is also often reduced to providing "signatures only" (Interviews N1, N25, N5, N31). Especially in important decisions, such as the allocation of the local budget, women are excluded by male representatives or marginalised in the decision-making process, which makes meaningful representation much more difficult (e.g. Interviews L27, L31, L34, N20, N29). They do not get authority (Interview N30), are only being assigned "minority topics" (e.g. women- or Dalit-related) (Interviews N13, N16), or given the most challenging tasks with a high likelihood of failure (Interviews N11, N13, N16).

Additionally, marginalised groups such as Dalits and women continue to face historical discrimination once they are elected to local bodies (e.g. Interviews L2, L6, N7, N16, N32). There are cases in which Dalits are still regarded as "untouchables" – despite the official abolishment of the caste system – and face open and direct discrimination, such as not being allowed into office spaces or getting tea served in separate cups (Interview N17). The highly patriarchal society also makes it difficult for women, just like Dalits, to raise their voices, especially to stand up to influential leaders (e.g. Interviews N5, N11, N31). If they do so nonetheless, they are often ignored (Interviews N8, N31). As one interviewee stated, "and when we raise questions, then they enter into a non-transparent mode of decision-making" (Interview N31).

Third, a majority of interviewees pointed to the lack of education (including illiteracy), expertise or experience, which reinforces marginalised groups' exclusion from meaningful involvement in decision-making (e.g. Interviews L1, L15, L33, L41, N6, N12, N17, N25, N36). This also regards a lack of knowledge about their roles and responsibilities, which hampers the meaningful involvement of marginalised groups (Interviews N5, N27).

> This issue will not be resolved by participation only. Since most of the women and Dalit representatives have been elected for the first time, they lack adequate capacity. Neither government nor the political parties have taken initiative to enhance their capacity. So, empowerment is crucial together with participation. (Interview L5)

Furthermore, the division of labour based on perceived gender roles makes political work more difficult for female representatives: It is more strenuous for them to establish contacts in male-dominated networks, and they are expected by their families to take care of the household despite also serving a political office. This puts them at an additional disadvantage compared to their male colleagues (e.g. Interviews L6, L13, L22, N13, N26). Others noted more generally that many female candidates are highly influenced by male family members, often not taking decisions themselves, but rather implementing their husband's or father's political preferences (Interviews L21, L26, L30, N5, N27).

Overall, these factors make it extremely difficult for women to fulfil their envisaged role. One interviewee described the challenge as follows:

> Therefore, sometimes it looks like women are not performing well in comparison to men. It is not the issue of woman as a sex, it is an issue of our social, cultural, economic structure and society's reflections towards females and Dalits. (Interview N26)

Another interviewee summarised:

> But the elected female representative does not have any authority. They are there just for the sake of requirement. They also lack the knowledge about the laws and policies. It is because of the patriarchal thinking that exists in our society, the male Mayor and Chairman thinks that women cannot do anything. […] To the outside world, it seems like female representatives do not have the capacity to work but that is not the case. (Interview L37)

Thus, the de facto inclusiveness in local decision-making processes remains problematic, and some people generally question whether responsiveness has increased due to the quotas. This means that the needs of marginalised groups are not catered to particularly well sometimes (Interviews L6, L15), which is why some are critical towards the fact that there is no dedicated budget for marginalised groups (Interviews L33, L37):

> A lot of these local representatives, they just say […]: The road will be used by all these marginalised people also, even women, even everybody, everybody. So why should we need different budgets for these different groups? Why should we need different provisions for these marginalised groups? (Interview N37)

Nevertheless, many see the numeric representation of women and Dalits, enforced by the quotas, as a necessary first step for the gradual empowerment of marginalised groups, and especially of women. Accordingly, almost all interviewees believe that quotas are an important base for achieving the substantial representation of women and Dalits (e.g. Interviews N2, N11, N25, N27, N30, N32). Additionally, many are optimistic that these problematic dynamics will change over time, and they already see some tangible improvements (e.g. Interviews L6, L24, L37, N11, N25, N29):

> They have shown that, if given the opportunity, then they can empower themselves and can perform the given task and responsibility. They have fulfilled the opportunity that was given to them. There was the feeling that women are not capable, that they cannot do anything even when they are given the opportunity, but after the local election they have proved everyone wrong. (Interview L32)

Women are seen to be continuously gaining more experience and stepping up to their new roles and responsibilities (e.g. Interviews L26, L30, N11, N18, N31). One interviewee, for example, stated that women "are gradually empowered and they are gradually prepared to fight" (Interview N25), and another that they have started "questioning the authority in their locality" (Interview N31). This is said to have also been facilitated by numerous capacity-building programmes provided by the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), (international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and international donors (Interviews L37, N12, N37). However, overall, although the new quota system for women and Dalits provides avenues for increased levels of political representation, there are too many factors that still severely limit its effectiveness.

Lack of experience and resources

Another remaining challenge at the local level regards the lack of experience of local representatives. The limited expertise of some local representative, for example regarding budget management, is seen as a critical factor by many and has partially led to problems with the efficient provision of public services (e.g. Interviews L11, L23, L29, L33, N17, N23). More generally, setting up local governments initially posed a significant challenge, as a completely new structure had to be created (see also Interviews L21, L23, L28, L29, L34, N13, N23). One interviewee, for example, noted: "In the beginning we had many issues. We didn't have enough offices, there was no data, many things were unmanaged. The elected as well as the staff had to bear a lot of problems in the beginning" (Interview L28). Another added: "Huge money was spent not in development works in the first year [but in] establishing offices, recruiting the employees" (Interview N6). Although the situation is improving and representatives are "gradually becom[ing] experienced" (Interview L23), capacity does pose a challenge to an effective functioning of local-level government (see also Interviews L12, L26, L29).

Another problem regards resources and the funding of local government (Interviews L24, L26, N6, N7, N13). Some criticise the budgets as still being too low (Interview N23). Others point out that, although the local units have the authority to levy some taxes (including property and business taxes, for example), the revenue from these local tax bases is insufficient, meaning that overall "most of them are resource-starved" (Interview N30). Some local governments have therefore raised their taxes, however these are then "so high that for local people, it's a very difficult thing to run their businesses" (Interview N17). In addition, several interviewees reported that the willingness to pay taxes is very low, and that the local government is becoming increasingly unpopular with parts of the population because of the levies (Interviews L9, L24, L36, N24, N30). Due to the limited tax base, all local units have to rely on financial support from the central government. This limits the LGUs' independence and the flexibility in their decisions with regard to development issues such as public service delivery (Interviews N7, N11): "In order to make local bodies more independent with regard to taking decisions, they need to be financially independent" (Interview N30).

Institutional design problems

Regarding institutional design, persistently unclear roles for the local governments were criticised by several interviewees (e.g. Interviews L3, N2, N12, N26, N27). "Clear instructions are not given by the upper level. Still dilemma and confusion exist among the representative, which have impacted on the representation system" (Interview L34). This is

also one of the reasons why the central government continues to exert a great degree of influence on the political agenda of local units, which are supposed to be independent under the constitution (Interviews L28, N4, N23, N28, N29, N36).

> Where do local bodies stand? Where do provincial governments stand? Where does the centre stand? There is tremendous overlapping of jurisdiction, and the centre has enough leverage to sabotage the autonomy and independent functioning of the local bodies. (Interview N28)

Similarly, another interviewee noted that "it is a centralised type of federal system. All the political as well as administrative powers are kept in the centre. So the centre dictates the provincial and the local government" (Interview N23). Another adds more generally that Ward members "lack designation power and authority. Thus, there is no change" (Interview L12). At the same time, it was also criticised by some interviewees, especially at the local level, that too much power has been vested in the leading posts, resulting in a "monopoly of power" (especially compared to the all-party mechanism in place before the introduction of the local elections) (Interviews L13, L21, L40). Furthermore, several interviewees bemoaned that infighting between the different local posts often takes place, especially between the Mayor and Deputy Mayor (Interviews L16, L17, L24, L26, L27, N20): "The constitution has a clear idea about the power-sharing. But there are some areas where there exists the problem of power-sharing. The Mayor and Chairman wants to have all the power. So there conflict arises" (Interview L16).

Corruption and patronage

The provision of public services is further hampered by corruption and patronage. Compared to the previous system, along with the increased amount of duties and competences of the local bodies, there has been a clear increase in the amount of resources, with partially negative effects:

> There was a huge amount of transfers to local bodies without having proper checks-and-balance mechanisms in place. So suddenly, huge amounts were going there, and they were overwhelmed by that heavy inflow of money. (Interview N14)

However, these funds are not necessarily distributed very equally. Firstly, party affiliations can bias public service delivery and budget allocations since representatives are bound by loyalty to their party (e.g. Interviews L1, L3, L9, L27, N5, N12). One interviewee described the situation as follows:

> Once they are elected, they are people's representatives. They are not representatives of any political party. […] That's in theory, but in practice, things are not so easy. […] Let's talk about building roads. […] To build a road in a specific section in a specific place, sometimes it has a double meaning. So there is some favouritism after they get elected. (Interview N7)

Furthermore, elected representatives may need to repay their campaign financing debts, and thus focus on the interests of their sponsors (e.g. Interviews L40, N11, N14, N24, N37). In many cases, public services were provided on the basis of political patronage, and tenders for public works projects go to the influential supporters of the representatives.

Finally, it was also noted that the level of corruption more generally had increased, as elected representatives exploit their positions to enrich themselves (Interviews N23, L19, L28, L38). This is also due to a lack of oversight:

> There is no one to monitor how they spend the budget, and the elected representatives or even mayors at the local level have a mentality of doing whatever they want. Due to this reason, there are many corruptions and irregularities seen in the local level. (Interview L41)

Again, this might also be due to the high campaign costs. As one interviewee describes it, "They spend the money during the election, now they are in the process of getting that money back. We can see that in every political party" (Interview L42). While the amount of corruption is clearly a problem at the local level, it is less clear that it has necessarily increased due to the local elections. The survey results on perceived corruption at the local level are ambiguous – while 41 per cent of respondents felt that there is more corruption, a majority of 59 per cent indicated that they either thought the level of corruption stayed the same (30 per cent) or had even decreased (29 per cent).

Summary

Although important challenges to meaningful representation and equitable and efficient service delivery remain, the common tenor from the survey and interviews is that public service delivery at the local level has clearly improved since 2017. The same holds for accessibility, which also decisively increased due to the local elections. Overall, the introduction of local elections in Nepal has hence strengthened responsiveness at the local level. Local embeddedness as well as an accountability mechanism can explain why local representatives try their best to act responsively, that is, to listen, explain and adapt. This stands in stark contrast to the previously centrally appointed bureaucrats who "would usually serve for two years and then get transferred to another municipality. Or their ultimate goal was of getting reposted back to Kathmandu at the centre" (Interview N11).

7.4.2 The effects of increased responsiveness on societal peace

The previous section showed that the local elections have substantially improved the responsiveness of the local governments. This, in turn, has had clear positive effects for societal peace in Nepal. This positive effect can mostly be attributed to improved accessibility, better service delivery and direct conflict mediation by the elected representatives. More specifically, improved responsiveness has positively affected political trust and vertical cooperation and helped to reduce conflict and political violence. To a lesser degree, horizontal societal relations have also been improved due to better responsiveness.

Political violence

The improved responsiveness promoted by the local elections has directly reduced political violence. This can mainly be attributed to improved (inclusive) service delivery, better accessibility to local representatives and mediation provided through the judicial committees.

First, local governments have contributed to sustainable peace and a reduction in the root causes of the civil war by improving service delivery and local development:

> The cause of conflict is development/infrastructure, and its solution is development. If the development is not as per the demand of the public, then conflict arises. […] The work done by all the local government in all the 753 local bodies is helping to reduce the conflict for the coming years. One of the issues raised by the Maoists was development and inclusion. Development was not happening. The local bodies have been minimising the conflict, and we can say that the conflict is not coming soon. (Interview L29; see also Interview L24)

Second, the accessibility to and interaction between local representatives and citizens were also highlighted as positive factors:

> Local elections were very helpful … are very helpful in reducing conflict, violence. […] If you have any problem, then you can go over there and talk to them about it. In the past, it was not possible. So it was the centre which would decide. So it is a local government who can decide now. So whatever problem arises, it can be solved quickly. (Interview N27; see also Interviews L24, N10, N31)

An interviewee engaged in youth work sees that groups of marginalised youth who repeatedly engaged in politically motivated violence in the past now often meet with elected representatives and discuss community problems and needs instead of becoming violent (Interview N10). Along the same lines, another interviewee stated:

> Local elections have definitely contributed to resolving conflict because the people have a representative body to express their dissatisfaction now. […] People get easy access to their representatives now, and they express their frustration, and then it reduces the chances of conflict. (Interview N30)

Being embedded locally, they are also better able to allocate limited resources according to one interviewee:

> They have the ability to distribute resources in the locality. They raise taxes and redistribute it to people over there. […] So the kind of resource conflict they can mitigate. They can also maintain community harmony in different ways. So it's quite important, I think. (Interview N18)

Third, the positive impact of the judicial committees – introduced with the elections as local mediation institutions – was also frequently mentioned with regard to reducing political violence (Interviews N10, N27, N31, L1, L3). Regarding their importance for conflict resolution, one of the experts summarised:

> Political violence has also decreased. And the arrival of local government has also helped to decrease the violence because earlier there was no one to solve the issues, but today minor fights are solved in the ward level. (Interview L30; see also Interviews N31, L13)

The combination of judicial committees and having local representatives more generally have a strong effect on reducing violent conflict, according to one interviewee:

> There are judicial mechanisms set up in all municipalities. So this also addresses the local-level violence. […] Therefore, that is where you can feel that, although many splinter factions of the former Maoist rebels have been formed, they have not really been able to mobilise people and raise conflict now. It is because local people are not interested now because they have their local representatives […] to express their frustration. Therefore, I think it has definitely reduced the chances of conflict. Also because, I said there are formal mechanisms set up at the local level, like judicial committees. (Interview N30)

Political trust

Almost all respondents emphasised that better responsiveness of the elected local representatives – in particular with regard to service delivery – has strengthened political trust (e.g. Interviews N7, N6, N11, N12, N16, N25, N27, N31). More specifically, many interviewees stated that trust in local governments increased because the representatives were well-known, approachable and selected from their localities. In particular, it seems that trust increased due to the possibility to contact and criticise the local representatives:

> Elected representatives have now been closer to people. And people have now someone to quickly reach out to at the ward and municipal level, which was not there earlier when elections did not happen. […] And people's trust over local government has improved to some extent. (Interview N18)

Comparing the different levels of government, one interviewee stated:

> People are happy with the local government because […] people can meet their representative in the doorsteps. And now that anytime if they want to go to their representative they can. So that every time they can get opportunity to ventilate the dissatisfaction, and they always put the demand in front of the representative. (Interview N4)

Similarly, another interviewee observed:

> People somehow trust the local representatives and local government because they are receiving door-to-door service, and they have the people to whom they can make the complaint, and there is a person who is capable of resolving their problems unlike in the past. (Interview N25; see also Interviews N24, N35, L29)

This sense of trust due to increased accessibility is also related to administrative services that are now available at the local level:

> People have trust in their local governments because they are doing a lot of good things. Before 2017, even for a small thing, you would need to travel, you would need a long time to have your thing done because the institutions are quite far from you. But we have now local bodies, local institutions quite near to you […] these kinds of things have created trust among the local representatives and the common people. (Interview N7; see also Interview N23)

More generally, trust has been built by the provision of tangible results, "also in terms of infrastructural development, […] road construction or other kind of infrastructure development – we could see the changes, right? So yes, these kind of things have created trust among the local representatives and the common people" (Interview N10). Two

interviewees noted that the newly elected representatives also had proven their worth and thereby gained trust especially during the pandemic, when they quickly provided health services and financial assistance to their communities (Interviews N27, N16):

> Trust in the local government and positive appraisal of the local government have been tied to the delivery of certain kinds of public goods and services that have mattered, number one. And number two, in this last year, the response to crisis, the pandemic, has been exceptional by local government. […] So the responsiveness aspect has created a measure of trust that local government will be responsive in the next thing, if it's an earthquake or a flood or a snowstorm. (Interview N16)

Moreover, one interviewee mentioned that also the conflict mitigation efforts in the judicial committees have had a positive effect: By handling "the local conflicts in their own community through mediation, [local representatives] have gained a lot of trust among the common people" (Interviews N10).

Nevertheless, it was also pointed out that the positive effect of local elections on political trust is reduced if the local representatives do not deliver and instead seem to be more occupied with pursuing their personal interests. Interviewees noted that corruption and patronage led to a waste of public money after the elections, which strains the trust in the respective municipalities towards their elected representatives (Interviews N2, N7, N12, N31). As one interviewee stated: "Due to the negligence of such mayors and chief budget officials, the people seem to have lost faith in their representatives" (Interview L21). Also, where service delivery is hampered by conflicts between local politicians about competences (especially the Mayor vs. Deputy Mayor), it reduced political trust (Interviews N7, L26, L27). One interviewee explains that people are frustrated and

> do not want to vote in the coming election. It is useless. […] We voted for them to make a difference in our livelihood and society, but now they are fighting with each other. Thus, people have hatred towards the existing government and politics. (Interview L27)

Various interviewees noted negative effects in cases in which service delivery has not been inclusive, which caused considerable frustration and reduced trust in local governments: "The relationship is bad. […] Better road and drainage system have been created where there are rich and powerful people. But the area of poor people has not seen any development" (Interview L16; see also Interviews L20, L35, L37). If people feel neglected, they do not trust the government anymore to fulfill its tasks and take care of their needs:

> When an individual or particular cluster of people is continued to be discriminated and abandoned by the state in terms of region, segment, public services and benefits from local government, then individual/people or community will be unhappy and dissatisfied definitely. Under this context, they might think the existing local government is not their government. (Interview L35)

Despite these limitations, however, the majority of interviewees agreed that trust has been significantly strengthened due to the improved responsiveness resulting from the local elections.

Political cooperation

Since local representatives are locally elected, and thus also more accessible, vertical relations between state and society have been strengthened (Interviews N6, N11, N12, N16, N30, N32, N18). People have become politically more engaged and actively scrutinise the activities of government officials. As a consequence, interviewees emphasised that there is "much more frequent interaction between those who are elected and those who did the electing. These have all resulted in a closeness to government that did not exist before" (Interview N16; see also Interviews N6, N11, N12, N16, N30, N32). The improved vertical cooperation is particularly strengthened by better accessibility to the local governments:

> We have always seen kind of a centralising tendency for Nepal, the central government making decisions. And we really saw a lack of state legitimacy at the local level. And two decades of a vacuum of that legitimacy at the local level was the chance for citizens to now re-engage with the state, especially at the local level. (Interview N11)

Other interviewees similarly emphasised that the levels of political awareness and engagement have increased: "Due to elected people's representatives and the system, policies and rights given to the local level have increased the public's interest over the local government" (Interview L8). An interviewee from the Madhesh region explained:

> Because earlier for 25 years, as you say, we did not have any local elected bodies. So there was not much concern from the people for the people. So now the Madheshi people, they are concerned with what is happening in local bodies, what the representatives are doing, good or bad, and how they are allocating the budgets for development, regarding the road, regarding education, regarding health. (Interview N6)

Horizontal societal relations

By being able to address local needs, the elected governments have made an important contribution to improving societal relations in Nepal, as the following quote illustrates:

> What is important is that if we want to have social harmony or peace in Nepal, then the governance should be by representative people, representatives that can understand the local needs and aspirations of the people. I think […] the local government in this regard is very effective in Nepal. (Interview N35; see also Interview N31)

One interviewee highlighted in particular the better accessibility that facilitates direct communication between local representatives: "The feeling that I could elect somebody who will be there tomorrow to hear me, is one contributor to what you call social harmony" (Interview N16). Also the quotas and the thereby improved resemblance of the local governments have contributed to healthy societal relations – as one interviewee describes:

> I think it has helped to increase social harmony in a sense that now every community in the society has their say in the politics. They can raise their issues in politics. So in a way, that has helped to have good coordination and cooperation between societies or between the communities. (Interview N7)

Another factor strengthening the horizontal societal relations are the judicial committees. Many interviewees emphasised that solving conflicts locally through mediation instead of going through a litigation process contributes to peaceful societal relations, with the effect

that "social harmony has increased today as compared to before" (Interview L30; see also Interviews N24, N20, N29, L6, L12, N27, L18). As two interviewees emphasised, the judicial committees are helpful, in particular to improve the situation for marginalised people, reduce discrimination and create a common identity: "Before, the discriminated and backwarded people had no place to put their complaints and issues, but after the formation of local government, people prefer to go to judicial committee and file cases. […] Hence, the discriminatory cases have declined" (Interview L22A[16]), and "Decreasing discriminatory behaviour binds the society, giving us feeling among each other" (Interview L22B).

However, several other interviewees were more critical regarding the development of community relations. More specifically, when service delivery has not been inclusive, this has had negative effects and might even cause conflict:

> Social harmony in the LGU is degraded. Most of the successful candidates like Mayor or Deputy Mayor belong to the particular caste/ethnic groups having the majority of population. So, they generally give more focus to their community benefits only. As a result, minority people residing in those communities felt neglected, backwarded and left behind from equal treatment in terms of development and service deliverables. (Interview L40; see also Interviews L20, L35, L37)

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

> A lack of economic transparency has divided people. If public services are not effectively delivered, then conflict arises. […] A difficult situation will be created when the distribution of public services is carried out in terms of brotherhood and nepotism. (Interview L24; see also Interview L20)

The resulting frustration can easily be exploited politically, causing further societal divisions (Interview L35). Thus, while overall the perception of responsiveness and its effects on societal relations is positive, the challenges to equitable service delivery discussed in the previous section have negative consequences and need to be addressed in order to avoid creating new sources of conflict and foster societal peace.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis strongly indicates that the local elections helped to improve societal peace by making local governments more responsive to their citizens. Political trust has improved significantly because people were able to elect their own representatives, had close access to them and perceived that services have improved. Improved responsiveness also positively affected vertical cooperation in terms of political awareness, interest in local politics and political engagement. Moreover, better responsiveness has also improved horizontal societal relations. Importantly for a post-conflict context, it contributed to reductions in conflict and political violence. Again, next to improved service delivery, accessibility was a major factor in this regard, with people being able to directly voice dissatisfaction. Conflict mediation through the judicial committees also played an important role.

16 The quotes stem from two interviewees interviewed jointly.

7.5 Findings: The effect of local elections on societal peace

Assessing the state of societal peace in Nepal, we find an overall positive picture for a post-conflict country. Although still struggling with political violence, examples of such activities have decreased in recent years, accompanied by an increase in the number of peaceful demonstrations. The degree of social cohesion in Nepal seems to be relatively high, with a strong national identity shared by an overwhelming majority of the population, a relatively high level of cooperation for the common good among citizens and a high level of political trust, especially in local institutions. However, the level of social trust is only at a medium level, especially across societal cleavages, which remain pronounced.

Overall, the analysis reveals that the reintroduction of local elections had a positive impact on societal peace in Nepal. With regard to political violence, the analysis indicates that the local elections have helped to reduce (reasons for) political violence, rather than fuelling new incidences. As expressed by one interviewee, "This practice of general election and the local election has not totally eradicated the political violence. […] But definitely to a significant level, this system is helping the sustainable peace, and it has maintained the local peace" (Interview N36). Improved opportunities for participation have reduced incentives to engage in violence by providing new avenues to voice grievances and advocate for change. Moreover, better responsiveness has helped to reduce violence by alleviating grievances through improved inclusiveness, service delivery and accessibility as well as the mediation of local conflicts provided through the judicial committees.

Regarding social cohesion, the analysis most clearly reveals that the local elections have had a positive effect on political trust. The degree of trust has firstly increased through the better representation of the diverse population in the elected governments, which has been facilitated by the quota system. Secondly, local elections have strengthened political trust through improved responsiveness. Local representatives have become more approachable, and tangible improvements with regard to local service delivery are notable.

Vertical cooperation for the common good has also improved after local elections, as the following quotes illustrate: "What local elections did is create a mechanism that allowed the elector and the elected to interact on a daily basis, an institutionalised mechanism" (Interview N16), and "After the local election the general public has become active in local development. They are engaged in every committee that is active in the local area" (Interview L32). This can be attributed to the fact that representatives are locally elected and accessible, which facilitates interaction, political awareness and engagement.

Societal relations have been diversely affected by the local elections, although overall the analysis does not indicate a very strong relationship. There is evidence that ethno-political mobilisation did have some, but weak divisive effects, thus negatively affecting horizontal societal relations. At the same time, the mediation practiced by the local governments has made an important contribution to peaceful community relations: "Social harmony has increased since the local-level election. […] Of course, there are minor conflicts among people, but such conflicts are resolved by local units and civil society organisations. I haven't seen any major conflicts that disturb social harmony" (Interview L42). Yet, challenges to responsiveness such as unequal service delivery and non-inclusive decision-making limit the overall positive effect of local elections on horizontal relations.

It is least clear whether the inclusive identity component of social cohesion was affected by the introduction of local elections. There are some indications that the local elections seem to have made a positive contribution: "Yes, I think the social harmony has improved after the local-level election. The local-level election has tried to unite people of all castes, groups and community in accordance with the law comparatively more than before" (Interview L41). This could especially be seen through the effect of the quota system, which facilitated broad participation across societal groups, thereby partially helping to increase their standing and acceptance in society. Beyond this, however, we do not find strong evidence linking the local elections and an inclusive identity.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the (re-)introduction of the local elections strengthened societal peace in Nepal, in particular by increasing political trust and reducing violent conflict. This is particularly important given Nepal's history of civil war:

> We have really seen a vacuum of local leadership, which, again, impeded state–citizen relations in Nepal and, of course, the larger social fabric and social cohesion that ultimately led to a decade of conflict between 1986, all the way up to 2006 with kind of the peace accord. (Interview N11)

The local elections that were introduced and successfully held for the first time in 2017 have clearly begun to fill this vacuum.

8 Conclusions

Elections are the most fundamental element of any democracy, but whether they should be conducted in post-conflict contexts remains highly debated. Therefore, we provide new in-depth insights on the relationship by analysing how local elections affected societal peace in post-conflict Nepal. Nepal is a highly interesting case to study the effects of local elections on peace: As a post-conflict country that only emerged from civil war in 2006, it adopted a controversial new constitution in 2015, giving the country a federal structure and reintroducing local elections, which were held in 2017 for the first time in 20 years. Moreover, the society is highly heterogeneous, and ethno-political cleavages have been closely linked to political violence during and after the civil war.

Based on the literature, we identified three main mechanisms for how we expect local elections to impact societal peace: 1) identity-based mobilisation as a process before an election, 2) increased participation as a choice during an election and 3) improved responsiveness of the local governments as a consequence after an election. In focussing on the effect of local elections on societal peace, we go beyond the relatively limited notion of negative peace. Instead, we analyse societal peace, which is composed of the absence of political violence and presence of social cohesion. This allowed us to take a close look at the strengths of relationships in Nepalese society, both between the different societal groups as well as towards the state.

To answer our research question, we conducted 79 qualitative interviews with experts and stakeholders at the national level and in selected local municipalities. In addition, we drew upon insights from a survey conducted with 1,400 respondents in order to capture the

perceptions of the Nepalese population in relation to the local elections as well as the dynamics within the society.

We find the strongest support for hypothesis 3, namely that local elections have helped to improve responsiveness, which in turn strengthened societal peace in Nepal. The analysis of hypothesis 2 reveals positive effects on participation, in particular on political trust but also on reducing political violence. Regarding hypothesis 1, we find evidence that ethnic-/caste-based voter mobilisation did take place during the local elections, yet it varied in intensity and scope, with limited negative consequences for societal peace.

Overall, our findings suggest that the reintroduction of local elections had a positive impact on societal peace in Nepal. With regard to social cohesion, the analysis clearly reveals that the local elections had a positive effect on political trust, in particular by providing new opportunities to participate as well as better responsiveness. As to political violence, the analysis indicates that the local elections helped to reduce (reasons for) political violence, instead of fuelling new violence: Although there was some divisive mobilisation, improved opportunities for participation reduced incentives to engage in violence by providing new avenues to voice grievances and advocate for change. Moreover, better responsiveness helped to reduce violence by directly addressing grievances through improved service delivery as well as better accessibility, allowing citizens to have a direct influence through peaceful means.

Further research is required to examine the generalisability of these findings to other contexts. This regards, for example, how the introduction of local elections affects dynamics in authoritarian contexts or societies where ethnic cleavages are the primary wartime dividing line and still dominate and polarise politics. However, if certain framework conditions are given, it is plausible to assume that the concrete mechanisms traced in this paper will hold in other contexts. Thus, if local elections are free, fair and well-organised, they are likely to have similar effects on participation and, consequently, societal peace, while other factors such as historical structures of discrimination and corruption will likely reduce the positive effects. Similarly, in cases where local elections are able to fulfil expectations concerning increased responsiveness – whereby locally elected representatives do better with regard to listening, explaining and adapting to the needs and concerns of their electorate – this most likely will positively affect societal peace.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of interviewees

No.	Background	Date of interview	
Local level			District
L1	Academia		Surkhet
L2	Elected representative		Surkhet
L3	Elected representative		Surkhet
L4	Interviewee A: Elected representative Interviewee B: Other		Dailekh
L5	Interviewee A: Elected representative Interviewee B: Party member Interviewee C: Other		Surkhet
L6	Interviewee A: Journalist Interviewee B: Other Interviewee C: Party member		Surkhet
L7	Other		Rupandehi
L8	Party Member		Rupandehi
L9	Interviewee A: Academia Interviewee B: Elected representative		-
L10	Elected representative		Kaplivastu
L11	Interviewee A: Journalist Interviewee B: Elected representative		Dailekh
L12	Government/administration		Rupandehi
L13	Interviewee A: Government/administration Interviewee B: Political party member		Rupandehi
L14	Political party member		Dhanusha
L15	Government/administration		Sarlahi
L16	Other		Sarlahi
L17	Political party member		Makwanpur
L18	Political party member		Makwanpur
L19	Political party member		Sarlahi
L20	Journalist		Sarlahi
L21	Journalist		Dhanusha
L22	Other		Sarlahi
L23	Political party member		Rupandehi
L24	Interviewee A: Elected representative Interviewee B: Elected representative		Rupandehi
L25	Political party member		Dhanusha
L26	Political party member		Dhanusha
L27	Other		Makwanpur

L28	Journalist	12. – 16.04.	Makwanpur
L29	Interviewee A: Government/administration Interviewee B: Government/administration		Makwanpur
L30	Political party member		Dhanusa
L31	Interviewee A: Other Interviewee B: Other		Makwanpur
L32	Elected representative		Makwanpur
L33	Interviewee A: Political party member Interviewee B: Elected representative		Makwanpur
L34	Elected representative		Makwanpur
L35	Other		-
L36	Journalist		Makwanpur
L37	Other		Dhanusha
L38	Interviewee A: Other Interviewee B: Other		Dailekh
L39	Elected representative		Sarlahi
L40	Other		Dhanusha
L41	Political party member		Dhanusha
L42	Interviewee A: Other Interviewee B: Other Interviewee C: Other Interviewee D: Other		Rupandehi
National level			
N1	Academia	30.03	
N2	Interviewee A: Other (political foundation) Interviewee B: Other (political foundation)	08.04.	
N3	NGO	09.04.	
N4	Interviewee A: Bilateral agency Interviewee B: Bilateral agency	12.04.	
N5	Academia	14.04.	
N6	Political party	15.04.	
N7	NGO	15.04	
N8	Civil society	15.04.	
N9	Bilateral agency	15.04.	
N10	Civil society	16.04.	
N11	INGO	16.04.	
N12	Interviewee A: Bilateral agency Interviewee B: Bilateral agency	16.04.	
N13	Multilateral agency	20.04.	
N14	INGO	20.04	

N15	Civil society	21.04.
N16	NGO	22.04.
N17	Other	22.04.
N18	INGO	23.04.
N19	Bilateral agency	23.04.
N20	Civil society	24.04.
N21	Civil society	27.04
N22	Academia	27.04
N23	Academia	27.04.
N24	Academia	27.04.
N25	Journalist	28.04
N26	Academia	28.04.
N27	NGO	28.04
N28	Journalist	28.04
N29	Former government / administration	29.04.
N30	Government/administration	30.04
N31	NGO	30.04.
N32	Academia	30.04.
N33	Bilateral agency	03.05
N34	Bilateral agency	04.05
N35	Government/administration	07.05
N36	Government/administration	07.05
N37	NGO	14.04.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Hello, my name is ……. I am calling from Solutions Consultant Pvt. Ltd., a market research, survey, and data collection firm based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Our organization is conducting a survey with 1,400 individuals such as yourself on behalf of the German Development Institute, an independent research institute based in Germany. The goal of this study is to learn about the views of Nepali citizens on the local elections as well as broader societal dynamics. The findings will help us to better understand and learn from these societal and political dynamics.

This survey should take no more than 25 minutes to complete. Your participation in this survey is of course voluntary. If you do not want to answer a question, you may skip it or even stop the survey at any time. However, your participation in this survey is highly important because it is one of the few ways available for getting truly representative opinions on these highly relevant topics. Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. The information you provide will be used in summary form only and will not identify you as a participant of this survey.

If you have questions or need assistance in any way, please e-mail or call (Person Name), (Position) at Solutions Consultant Pvt. Ltd., at (Email address and Telephone number) so that we may assist you. Thank you very much for your participation.

(consent) Do you agree to participate in this survey?

Yes [SKIP TO Q1]

[Only ask if Consent=No] If you are comfortable, would you please explain why you would not like to participate in the survey? _____END SURVEY

Questions	Answering options
To start with, we have a few questions regarding your personal background.	
A1. How old are you?	**open**
A2. What is your nationality?	Do not read out answer options • Nepalese • Other
A3. What is your caste/ethnicity?	• Chhetri • Bahun • Newar • Janajati • Dalit • Muslim • Madheshi • Other
A4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?	• No education • Primary • Some secondary • SLC • 12 pass • University
A5. Does your household have a 1) TV 2) computer 3) smartphone	For each • Yes • No
A6. How interested would you say you are in politics?	• Very interested • Somewhat interested • Not very interested • Not interested at all
A7. In talking about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were sick or they just didn't have the time. How about you. Did you vote in the last national election in November and December 2017?	• Yes • No • [Do not remember] • [Do not want to say]
A9. Did you vote in the last local election for municipality and wards in [May/June/September] 2017?	• Yes • No • [Do not remember] • [Do not want to say]
Participation	
B1. If yes: What is the most important reason why you voted in the local elections in 2017?	• So that my favourite candidate or party wins • Because I feel it makes a difference for my life • Because others expected it of me • Because voting is my civic duty • Because I received an incentive (e.g. petrol, beer, cash) • Because I was forced to vote • Other

B2. If no, what were the reasons why you did not vote?	• Could not vote (no time/transportation/ not a citizen, illness, not in Nepal at that time) • None of the candidates/parties represented my interest • I was concerned for my safety • I did not vote because it does not make a difference for my life who is elected • I was prevented from voting • Could not find my name in the voters' register • I found it too complicated to register for voting • Other
B3. If there would be local elections again next week, would you vote for the same or different party that you voted for in 2017?	• Same • Different • [Don't know]
B4. Do you plan to vote in the next local elections?	• Yes • No • [Undecided] • [Refuse]
B5. When comparing national and local elections, which elections are more important for you – elections at national or at local level?	• Local elections • National elections • Equally important • Both are not important • [Don't know]
B6. Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties?	• [Name of party] • Prefer not to say • [Don't know]
Mobilisation	
C. To win votes, candidates and political parties mobilise voters through election campaigns. Please try to remember the months before the local election of 2017 and answer the following questions:	
C1. How much do you agree with the following statements: C1.1. Parties were very active in trying to convince people to vote for them e.g. through rallies, knocking on doors, giving out t-shirts etc. C1.2. Political parties/leaders have played up caste/ethnic and religious divisions in their campaigns for the local elections C1.3. Overall, the run-up to the local elections on XX.XX.2017 created division among the people in my area.	• Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
Representation	
For the following questions, I would like to ask you to think about the people elected to the local government bodies in 2017 and what they have done for your municipality so far.	
D3. How well does your local government address the needs and concerns of people in your ward?	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]

D4. Compared with the previous administration, does your local government elected in 2017 address the needs and concerns of the people in your ward better?	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D5. Since the local election in 2017, do you think the provision of public services (e.g roads, building of schools, access to drinking water, health) has improved?	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D6. Do you think there is more or less corruption in the current local government than before 2017?	• More • Less • The same • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D7. How satisfied are you with how the elected officials in the current local government handled the COVID pandemic in the past year?	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D8. Which of these characteristics matter most for you when asking someone in the local government for support (if they were represented)? a) Someone from the same religion b) Someone with the same gender c) Someone who speaks the same mother tongue as me d) Someone from my ethnic group/caste e) Someone I personally know f) Someone from the political party I feel close to g) Whoever seems most competent	• None of these matters for me • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D9. When the local elections were reintroduced, what were your expectations from the new local government? I had	• Very high • High • Low • Very low • Neutral (I did not have any specific expectations) • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
D10. Taking stock, do you think the current local government's performance has exceeded, met, fallen short of these expectations?	• Exceeded, elected local governments performed better than expected • Met, elected local governments performed just as I expected • Fallen short, elected local governments performed worse than expected • [Don't know] • [Refuse]

Political violence	
E1. Coming to a different topic. Sometimes people use violence to achieve their political goals. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements:	
E1.1. Using violence is legitimate for a just cause, such as securing equal rights for all citizens. E1.2. Participating in a *bandh* is legitimate when pursuing political goals.	• Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
E2. To what extent have you feared that the following events take place in your municipality in the past 12 months? E2.1. Violence during public protest E2.2. Violence by the police or military E2.3. Violence among different political groups E2.4. Violence among different ethnic groups	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
Social cohesion	
I would now like to ask you about your view on social relations and interactions in Nepali society.	
F1. Suppose you lost your mobile phone and it was found in the street by someone you do not know. How likely do you think it is that they would return it to you?	• Very likely • Quite likely • Not very likely • Not at all likely • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F2. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted?	• Trust fully • Moderately trust • Don't quite trust • Can't be too careful • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F3. And how much do you trust the following people? Do you trust [ITEM] fully, moderately, not quite, not at all? F3.1. …family F3.2. …people you meet for the first time F3.3. …people from different region (e.g Far-west/Far-east/Kathmandu/Madheshi) F3.4. …people from a different ethnicity/caste F3.5. …people from a different religion F3.6. …people with a different political affiliation than you	• Trust fully • Moderately trust • Don't quite trust • Not at all • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F4. I would now like you to tell me how much do you identify with F4.1. your region or Province F4.2. your religious group F4.3. your caste/ethnicity	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]

F5. Which of the three identities is the most important to you?	• Region/province • Religious group • Caste/ethnicity • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F6. How much do you identify with being [previous choice identify most] compared to identifying as Nepali?	• I feel only Nepali • I feel more Nepali than [other identity]. • I feel equally Nepali and [other identity]. • I feel more [other identity]. • I feel only [other identity]. • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F7. In your daily life, how much do you interact with the following people? F7.1. People from another region F7.2. Members of another ethnic group F7.3. Members of another religion F7.4. Someone who supports a political party I do not feel close to	• Not at all • Not much • Somewhat • Very much • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F8. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: It makes me proud to be called a Nepali.	• Strongly agree • Agree • [Undecided] [Don't read] • Disagree • Strongly Disagree • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F9. Coming back to elected officials at the local level. Can you please tell me how much you trust each of the following local officials? F9.1. Ward (members + Chair person) F9.2. Mayor F9.3. Deputy Mayor F9.4. Local bureaucrats (non-elected)	• Trust fully • Moderately trust • Don't quite trust • Don't trust • [Don't know] • [Refuse]
F10. Now can you please tell me how much you trust each of the following *national* political institutions: F10.1. political parties F10.2. national government And how about? F10.3. justice system/ courts F10.4. Police F10.5. Nepal army	• Trust fully • Moderately trust • Don't quite trust • Don't trust • [Don't know] • [Refuse]

Now we would like to ask you a few questions about activities and interactions in your daily life.	
F11. In an average month, how often do you engage in the following activities: F11.1. Volunteering for the community (e.g. labor donation or participating in community cleaning) F11.2. Helping others (e.g organizing community festivals, attending to fields) F11.3. Engaging in social organization/association (only if asked explain: e.g. sport, youth, women, religion, environmental, economic, charitable/humanitarian)	• Several times a week • Once per week • Once a month • Less than once a month • Not at all
[Only ask if in previous question answered with at least once per month]: F12. In these activities do you interact with people….? F12.1. …from another region F12.2. …from another ethnic group F12.3. …from another religion F12.4. …affiliated to other political parties	• Yes • No
F13. I am going to read out some forms of political engagement/ action that people can take. For each one of them, please tell me if you have done this in the last 12 months: a. Signed a petition (a document signed by a large number of people asking for some action from the government or another authority) b. Contacted a politician c. Attended a community meeting d. Attended a demonstration e. Participated in a strike/*bandh* f. Engaged with or for a political party (only if respondents ask e.g. attended rally, donated money to a party, attended a party meeting) g. Got together with others to raise an issue	• Yes • No
F14. Are you a member of an organization/association? a. Member of a political party b. Member of an ethnic group association c. Member of a religious association d. Member of your *tole samitis* e. Member of social association, if yes which one?	• Yes • No
F15. If answered yes – which one?	• Member of youth and student association • Member of women association • Member of a trade union/farmers association • Humanitarian/charitable • Others (please specify)
Victimization **Trigger warning:** From 1996 to 2006 a 10-year-long civil war pitted the Nepalese government against the Maoists. The war caused a lot of suffering and cost 16,000 people their lives. **May I ask you about violence you may have experienced during the Maoist conflict?**	• Yes • No

G2. Were you personally injured as a result of the Maoist conflict?	• Yes • No • [Refuse]
G3. Was someone close to you injured or killed as a result of the Maoist conflict?	• Yes, a family member • Yes, a friend • Yes, a neighbour • Yes, a community leader • No, nobody close to me was killed as a result of the conflict
G4. Did your household have to flee your home as a result of the Maoist conflict?	• Yes • No • [Refuse]
Second demographics Introduction: Now I would like to ask you a few very last questions relating to your person to complete the survey.	
H1. What is your gender?	• Female • Male • No say
H2. What work did you primarily do in the last 12 months**?**	• Student • Agriculture • Own business • Salary/wage • Unemployed • Household work • Migrant family
H3. In which municipality do you live? H4. In which ward do you live?	• [Municipality/ward]
H5. How long have you lived in this area?	• Less than 5 years • More than 5 years • More than 20 years • My whole life
H6. What is your religion?	• Hindu • Buddhist • Muslim • Christian • Kirat • None • Other • [Refuse]
H7. Which language is your mother tongue?	• Nepali • Maithili • Bhojpuri • Tharu • Tamang • Newari • Magar • Urdu • Abadhi • Doteli • Other

H8. Approximately how much was your household income in the last year per month?	• < 20k rupees • < 40k rupees • < 60k rupees • > 60k rupees • [Don't know] • [Refuse to answer]
H9. Finally, if you are comfortable, would you be willing to share with us which party did you vote for: a. in the last national election b. for the position of mayor at LGU level c. as your ward chairperson	1. Nepali Congress 2. UML 3. NCP-Maoist 4. Nepal Samajwadi Party 5. Rastriya Prajatantra Party 6. Others.....(please write the name) 7. Don't remember/ Don't know 8. Refuse to answer
Thank you very much for your participation. In doing so, you have made a very valuable contribution to science.	