The Stability Illusion: Why Directly Elected Executives Would Fail Nepal

Miraj Dhungana's central argument for Nepal's political reform rests on a seductive but fundamentally flawed premise: that directly electing executives would force even incompetent leaders to "deliver something" if they complete a five-year term, thereby solving Nepal's chronic instability. This theory fails on multiple grounds—theoretical, empirical, comparative, and contextual. The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that presidential systems exacerbate rather than resolve the challenges facing ethnically divided, developing democracies like Nepal.

Dhungana correctly identifies Nepal's instability crisis—ten governments in ten years since 2015—but misdiagnoses both the cause and cure. His proposed solution would likely deepen Nepal's problems by introducing winner-take-all politics into an already fractured society, concentrating power in ways that threaten ethnic accommodation, and creating institutional rigidity that prevents necessary adaptation. Parliamentary systems, despite their messy coalition politics, offer Nepal far better prospects for managing diversity, ensuring accountability, and building inclusive institutions.

Presidential systems destabilize divided societies

The academic consensus is unambiguous: **presidential systems perform worse than parliamentary systems on virtually every measure of democratic quality and stability**, with effects particularly pronounced in ethnically divided developing countries. Juan Linz's seminal work on the "perils of presidentialism" identifies four structural defects that make presidential systems vulnerable to breakdown: dual democratic legitimacy, temporal rigidity, winner-take-all logic, and plebiscitarian politics. Each poses acute dangers for Nepal.

The **dual legitimacy problem** creates constitutional crises when directly elected presidents and legislatures claim competing mandates from "the people." In parliamentary systems, this conflict cannot arise—the executive depends on legislative confidence, providing a clear hierarchy. Przeworski's comprehensive analysis of 135 countries from 1950-1990 found presidential democracies died at 2.5 times the rate of parliamentary systems (1 in 23 versus 1 in 58). Among 21 countries with continuous democracy post-WWII, only one was purely presidential—the United States, whose success reflects unique historical circumstances not replicable elsewhere.

The **rigidity of fixed terms** prevents removal of failing leaders short of crisis. Dhungana views this as a virtue, claiming even incompetent executives would be "forced to deliver." But the evidence suggests otherwise. Fixed terms create what Linz calls "exaggerated urgency," leading to "ill-conceived policy initiatives" as presidents rush to achieve goals within truncated timeframes. More critically, when presidents prove incompetent or corrupt, rigid terms entrench failure rather than compelling performance. Parliamentary systems offer flexibility—prime ministers can be replaced, coalitions reformed, confidence votes called—providing safety valves that prevent institutional breakdown.

The **winner-take-all logic** of presidential elections creates zero-sum competition particularly dangerous in divided societies. As Linz observes, "losers must wait at least four or five years without any access to executive power and patronage." In Nepal's multi-ethnic context, this guarantees permanent exclusion of significant groups. Presidential campaigns encourage forming ideologically extreme coalitions to secure the decisive electoral majority, whereas parliamentary systems foster "power-sharing and coalition-forming" with "incumbents accordingly attentive to demands and interests of even smaller parties."

Sri Lanka's cautionary tale: How executive presidency inflamed ethnic conflict

Nepal need only look next door for a devastating case study in how executive presidency exacerbates ethnic conflict. **Sri Lanka's 1978 switch from parliamentary to presidential system contributed directly to three decades of civil war** that killed over 100,000 people. Under parliamentary governance (1948-1978), Sri Lanka maintained democratic institutions despite Sinhalese-Tamil tensions. The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (1957) and Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact (1965) demonstrated parliamentary systems' capacity for negotiated ethnic accommodation.

The 1978 constitution's executive presidency transformed this dynamic catastrophically. Presidential elections became vehicles for ethnic outbidding, with Sinhalese candidates competing to demonstrate hardline positions against Tamil demands. The presidency's concentration of power enabled unilateral decisions—Emergency regulations, Prevention of Terrorism Act, anti-Tamil riots—that parliamentary checks might have moderated. The presidential system's inability to accommodate power-sharing made Tamil demands for federalism appear as threats to the unitary state's integrity. By contrast, India's parliamentary federalism successfully manages far greater diversity through coalition governments and regional autonomy.

Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya protests—youth-led movements demanding accountability, strikingly parallel to Nepal's 2025 Gen Z uprising—culminated in President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's flight from the country. The presidential system's rigidity prevented orderly succession, instead producing a chaotic power vacuum. This recent history should give Dhungana pause: Sri Lanka's youth demanded the same reforms he proposes, yet the system itself proved unable to deliver accountability despite mass mobilization.

Quantitative evidence: Parliamentary systems outperform across all metrics

The empirical case against presidentialism is overwhelming. McManus and Ozkan's comprehensive study of 119 countries over 65 years (1950-2015) found **presidential systems grow 0.6 to 1.2 percentage points slower annually** than parliamentary systems, a compounding disadvantage that produces dramatic long-term divergence. In 1960, median GDP per capita in presidential countries was $1,428 versus $6,260 in parliamentary countries—a ratio of 1:4.39. By 2019, this gap had widened to $5,204 versus $24,659, a ratio of 1:4.74. Parliamentary countries didn't merely start wealthier; they pulled further ahead precisely because institutional arrangements affect growth trajectories.

On every governance indicator, parliamentary systems dominate. Gerring, Thacker, and Moreno's analysis of 155 countries across 14 governance dimensions found parliamentary systems scored significantly better on bureaucratic quality ($p<0.01$), rule of law ($p<0.001$), trade openness ($p<0.001$), telecommunications infrastructure ($p<0.001$), investment ratings ($p<0.001$), infant mortality ($p<0.001$), and life expectancy ($p<0.001$). Presidential systems showed higher inflation (4-6 percentage points worse) and income inequality (Gini coefficients 12-24% larger). Transparency International and World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators consistently show presidential systems scoring lower on corruption control and government effectiveness.

The mechanisms driving these differences are well-established. Parliamentary systems foster executive-legislative coordination through shared institutional incentives, reducing transaction costs in policymaking. Coalition requirements force negotiation and compromise, preventing the policy lurches common under presidential systems where executives govern against legislative majorities. Parliamentary systems develop stronger party organizations with longer time horizons, enabling sustained policy implementation rather than the start-stop pattern of presidential terms.

Consociational theory: Why Nepal needs power-sharing, not power concentration

Arend Lijphart, the world's leading theorist of democracy in divided societies, explicitly recommends parliamentary systems for countries like Nepal. His consociational democracy model identifies four essential characteristics for managing deep ethnic, religious, or linguistic divisions: grand coalition governments, segmental autonomy, proportional representation, and mutual veto rights. **Parliamentary systems facilitate all four mechanisms; presidential systems actively undermine them.**

Grand coalitions—oversized cabinets including parties beyond those necessary for majority—are natural in parliamentary systems where government formation requires negotiating among multiple parties. Presidential systems concentrate executive power in a single elected individual, making genuine power-sharing structurally difficult. Even when presidents appoint diverse cabinets, ministers serve at presidential suffrage rather than as representatives of parties with independent legitimacy. Nepal's ethnic composition—125+ distinct groups including historically marginalized Madhesis, Janajatis, Dalits, and Muslims—demands institutional arrangements that guarantee a voice for diverse communities. Presidential elections produce single winners; parliamentary systems with proportional representation ensure minority groups gain legislative seats and coalition bargaining power.

Segmental autonomy—Nepal's federal structure with seven provinces and 753 local governments—requires ongoing negotiation between center and periphery. Parliamentary systems, where the government depends on legislative coalitions, create incentives for accommodating regional parties representing provincial interests. Presidential systems create permanent executive-legislative conflicts, particularly problematic when presidents represent hill communities and parliaments include strong Madhesi or Janajati representation. The 2015 Madhesi uprising, triggered by constitutional provisions perceived as centralizing power, killed 45+ people and imposed a five-month border blockade. Any institutional arrangement that further concentrates central power risks reigniting such conflicts.

Veto player theory explains Nepal's gridlock—and why presidentialism worsens it

George Tsebelis's veto player theory provides analytical clarity on Nepal's instability. Veto players are actors whose agreement is required to change policy status quo. Nepal currently has multiple partisan veto players—each coalition party can potentially block policy or withdraw support, destabilizing the government. Adding a directly elected executive would introduce an additional institutional veto player, worsening rather than improving the situation.

In parliamentary systems, the executive is "absorbed" as a veto player because the government emerges from and depends on parliament. The prime minister controls legislative agenda through "positional and institutional advantages," enabling coordinated policymaking. Presidential systems create separate executive and legislative veto players with independent electoral mandates, producing gridlock when they disagree. Tsebelis's research across 21 European democracies found policy stability increased with veto player ideological distance—but in developing countries facing urgent reform needs, such stability often means paralysis. Nepal needs institutional capacity to adapt to crises (earthquakes, blockades, pandemics, economic shocks), not rigidity that locks in suboptimal policies.

Dhungana's core error is assuming stability automatically produces accountability and delivery. Tsebelis demonstrates that systems with many veto players experience policy stability but potential regime instability—inability to adapt leads to system breakdown. Presidential systems in Latin America and Africa repeatedly demonstrated this dynamic: fixed-term presidents facing legislative opposition cannot govern effectively, leading to coups, emergency rule, or constitutional crises. Nepal avoided such outcomes precisely because its parliamentary system allows government changes without regime collapse.

The false promise of "forced delivery"

Dhungana's claim that even incompetent directly elected leaders would be "forced to deliver something" if completing five-year terms contradicts all empirical evidence and logical analysis. What mechanism would compel delivery? The claim assumes electoral accountability—that voters punish non-performing executives—but this operates identically in parliamentary systems through periodic elections. The difference is parliamentary systems allow interim accountability through confidence votes, while presidential systems require tolerating failure for years.

Consider concrete examples. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro, Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Turkey's Recep Erdoğan—all directly elected executives who completed or extended terms while delivering economic collapse, human rights abuses, and democratic backsliding. Fixed terms didn't force delivery; they enabled entrenchment. By contrast, parliamentary systems routinely remove underperforming leaders: Britain replaced Liz Truss after 49 days; Italy has changed governments 68 times since WWII while maintaining democratic stability; India's coalition governments fall and reform without constitutional crisis.

The **accountability deficit in presidential systems is well-documented.** Presidents can govern against legislative majorities, implement policies lacking parliamentary support, and evade responsibility by blaming legislatures for failures. Parliamentary systems concentrate accountability: if a government fails, the entire coalition faces consequences. Coalition partners monitor each other, providing internal checks. Belgium's system of "watchdog ministers"—junior ministers from one party monitoring departments controlled by another party's ministers—illustrates sophisticated accountability mechanisms impossible under presidential concentration.

Nepal's instability stems from coalition management, not constitutional structure

Dhungana correctly identifies Nepal's government turnover—eight coalitions since the 2015 constitution, average tenure nine months—as problematic. But he misdiagnoses the cause. **Nepal's instability reflects political culture, not constitutional design.** The same parties that form and break coalitions opportunistically would behave identically with directly elected executives, except conflicts would produce constitutional crises rather than government changes.

Evidence: Nepal's seven provinces experience similarly rapid government turnover despite having parliamentary systems at provincial level. Koshi Province has seen frequent chief minister changes; Madhesh Province experienced instability as coalition partners shifted. If parliamentary systems inherently caused instability, all parliamentary democracies would suffer Nepal's pattern. Yet Germany averaged governments lasting over four years since WWII; Netherlands regularly sustains coalitions for full terms; India's coalition governments under Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) achieved two consecutive five-year terms implementing major economic reforms.

The critical variable is coalition management practices, not system type. Countries with stable coalitions employ mechanisms Nepal lacks: detailed written coalition agreements specifying policy commitments; coalition committees monitoring implementation; constructive votes of no confidence requiring parliament to elect replacements simultaneously with removing incumbents; binding dispute resolution procedures. Belgium and Netherlands achieve remarkable stability despite highly fragmented party systems through such mechanisms. Belgium's inner cabinets (prime minister plus deputy prime ministers from each coalition party) make consensus decisions on sensitive issues; coalition agreements running hundreds of pages specify precise policy commitments, reducing scope for defection.

Nepal could adopt these practices within its current constitutional framework, requiring no amendment. The July 2024 Nepali Congress-UML coalition agreement represents a step toward this model but lacks enforcement mechanisms and institutional infrastructure (coalition committees, watchdog ministers, binding arbitration for disputes). **Strengthening coalition governance practices would deliver the stability Dhungana seeks without the dangers of executive presidency.**

Alternative mechanisms for stability: Constructive votes and coalition agreements

International experience offers proven mechanisms to enhance coalition stability without constitutional upheaval. **Constructive votes of no confidence**, pioneered by Germany's 1949 constitution and adopted by Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Israel, require parliaments to simultaneously elect replacement prime ministers when removing incumbents. This deters frivolous motions and forces opposition to unite behind alternatives, dramatically increasing government duration.

Quantitative analysis of 679 governments across 21 countries found constructive vote mechanisms significantly reduce discretionary government termination. Germany used it only once (1982, Helmut Schmidt replaced by Helmut Kohl), demonstrating its deterrent effect. Spain's 2018 application—Pedro Sánchez ousting Mariano Rajoy—showed a smooth transition without power vacuum. The mechanism works by raising the coordination costs for opposition: rather than merely voting against the incumbent, they must agree on a replacement commanding majority support.

Detailed, enforceable coalition agreements provide another proven approach. Belgium and Netherlands achieve stability through written agreements specifying policy commitments for the full term, monitored by coalition committees and enforced through multiple oversight mechanisms. Research by Timmermans and Moury documents rising government stability despite high electoral volatility in these countries, directly attributable to strengthened coalition management practices.

Confidence and supply agreements—where minority governments receive guaranteed support on confidence votes and budgets while supporting parties retain independence on other issues—enable stable minority governance. New Zealand's experience since adopting proportional representation in 1996 is instructive: every government except one lasted full terms despite none commanding outright majorities. Canada's 2022 Liberal-NDP agreement guaranteed stability through 2025 while preserving both parties' distinct identities. Nepal could employ this model, with major parties forming core government and smaller parties (Madhesi parties, Janajati parties) providing confidence support in exchange for specific policy commitments.

These mechanisms share crucial characteristics: they enhance stability while preserving flexibility, require only parliamentary rules changes rather than constitutional amendments, and maintain proportional representation that ensures diverse group inclusion. **All are more appropriate for Nepal than the rigid, exclusionary presidential system Dhungana proposes.**

Anti-defection laws: The wrong lesson from India

Some Nepali politicians advocate anti-defection laws modeled on India's Tenth Schedule, hoping to prevent floor-crossing that destabilizes governments. India's experience offers cautionary lessons, not a model. While the 1985 law reduced the epidemic of defections that brought down 16 state governments in 1968 alone, it came at severe democratic cost.

India's anti-defection law stifles legitimate dissent by disqualifying members who vote against party whips on any issue. Supreme Court judgments uphold this despite concerns about curbing freedom of speech. The result is "puppet MPs" unable to represent constituents when party positions conflict with constituency interests. Parliamentary oversight mechanisms—committees scrutinizing executive actions—are neutered because government MPs cannot vote against their party. Recent cases (Karnataka 2020, Madhya Pradesh 2020) show members circumvent restrictions through mass resignations, then contest by-elections for opposition parties—defeating the law's purpose while increasing instability.

Bangladesh's even more restrictive version (Article 70) disqualifies MPs for voting against a party on ANY matter, making it "the most absolute form of anti-defection law" globally. This transforms the legislature into an executive rubber stamp, enabling authoritarianism masked as "stability." Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, and India are the only countries where MPs have no right to vote against party positions—hardly company Nepal should seek.

If Nepal adopts anti-defection provisions, they should be sharply limited. Pakistan's Article 63-A offers a better model, applying only to prime minister/chief minister elections, confidence/no-confidence votes, and money bills. For ordinary legislation, members retain discretion to follow conscience. This balances party discipline on core matters with legislative independence on policy debates. Even better would be relying on coalition agreements and constructive votes rather than rigid anti-defection rules that privilege party leaders over democratic representation.

Ethnic accommodation requires parliamentary flexibility, not presidential winner-take-all

Nepal's constitutional preamble commits to building an "inclusive, democratic, and prosperous nation" that ends "all forms of discrimination and oppression." This requires institutional arrangements ensuring **continuous negotiation and accommodation across ethnic, regional, linguistic, and caste cleavages.** Parliamentary systems excel at this; presidential systems fail catastrophically.

Madhesi communities—18-20% of the population concentrated in the Tarai—have mobilized repeatedly (2007, 2008, 2015) demanding fair representation in state institutions, recognition of identity, and genuine federal autonomy. The 2015 uprising left 45+ dead and imposed a five-month economic blockade, demonstrating that Madhesi grievances can paralyze the entire country. The current parliamentary system enables Madhesi parties to join coalitions, securing cabinet positions and policy concessions. Under the presidential system, Madhesi candidates would rarely win national elections dominated by hill communities, and Madhesi parties would become permanent opposition.

Janajati communities (indigenous groups including Newar, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Tharu) constitute significant populations across Nepal's hills and Tarai. Their demands for linguistic rights, cultural autonomy, and economic opportunity require ongoing policy accommodation. Parliamentary coalitions naturally incorporate Janajati parties; presidential systems would marginalize them except during rare elections when coalition arithmetic requires their support. But post-election, presidents govern independently, unaccountable to supporting coalition partners.

Dalit communities (13-15% of population) and Muslims (5%) face systemic discrimination that requires active state intervention—quotas in civil service and education, protective legislation, resource allocation. Parliamentary systems, where coalition arithmetic rewards parties representing marginalized groups, create incentives for such policies. Presidential systems, where candidates build winning coalitions through elite bargains, historically neglect the most marginalized. US history is instructive: despite African Americans being a pivotal voting bloc, systemic racism persisted because winner-take-all electoral colleges made their votes taken for granted in safe states.

Institutional economics: Building inclusive institutions, not extractive presidencies

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's institutional economics framework distinguishes **inclusive institutions**—pluralistic political systems with dispersed power, secure property rights, open economic participation—from **extractive institutions** that concentrate power and resources in elite hands. Their analysis of development trajectories demonstrates that inclusive institutions generate sustained prosperity, while extractive institutions produce either stagnation or unsustainable boom-bust cycles.

Presidential systems, particularly in developing countries, tend toward extractive institutional patterns. Concentration of executive power enables elite capture: presidents distribute patronage to narrow coalitions rather than providing broad public goods. Weak legislative oversight allows corruption to flourish. Fixed terms mean incompetent or corrupt presidents cannot be removed short of crisis, entrenching extractive patterns. Parliamentary systems with coalition requirements disperse power more broadly, increasing difficulty of elite capture and strengthening accountability mechanisms.

Nepal faces a critical choice between institutional paths. Centuries of centralized monarchy created deeply extractive patterns—Kathmandu-centric power concentration, caste-based hierarchies, economic exploitation of periphery, exclusion of indigenous and Madhesi communities from state institutions. The 2006 People's Movement and 2015 constitution attempted to pivot toward inclusive institutions through parliamentary democracy, federalism, and guaranteed representation. The presidential system would reverse this trajectory, reconcentrating power in a single executive likely to emerge from traditional elite communities.

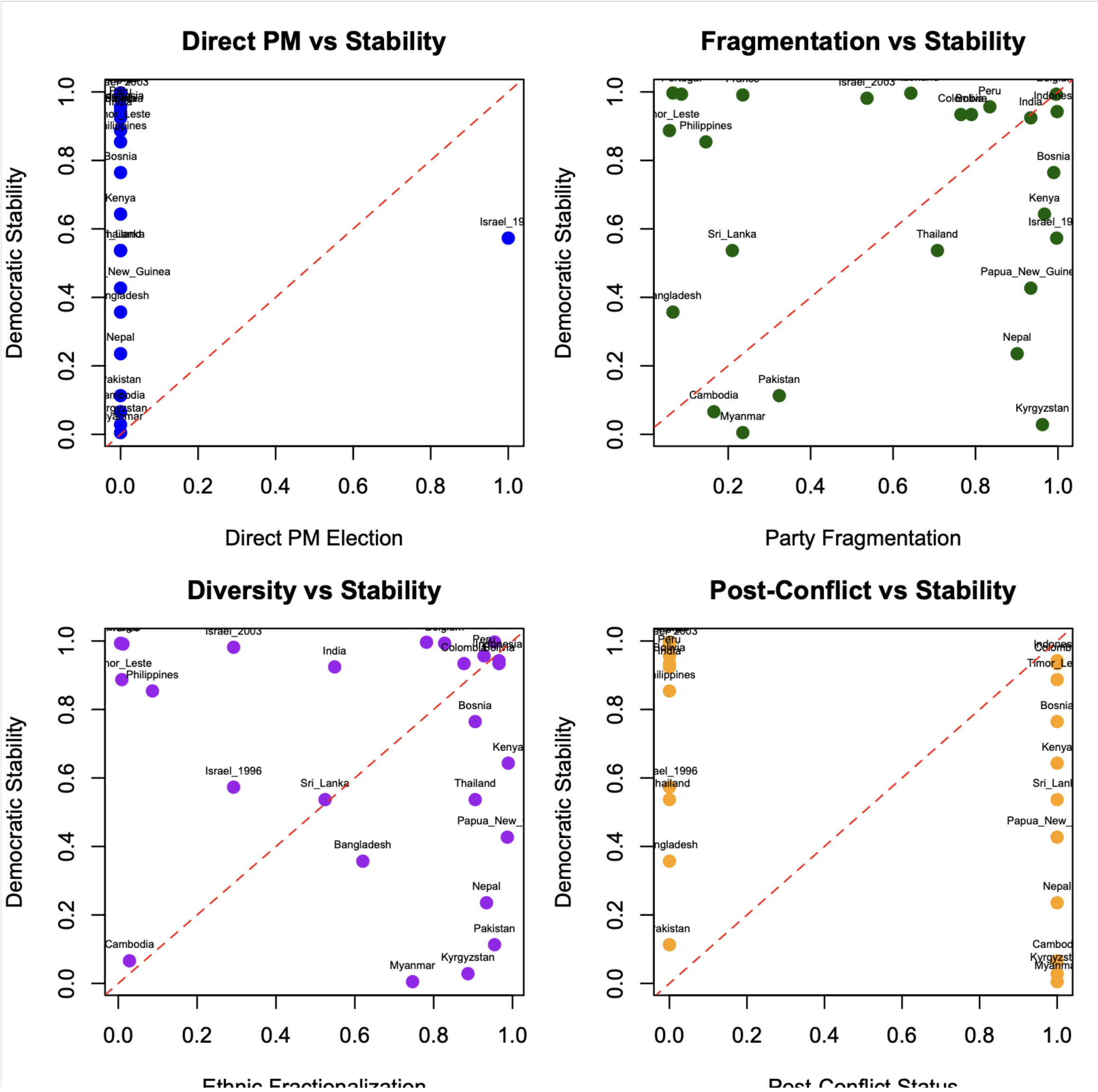
Acemoglu and Robinson emphasize **path dependence**: institutional choices have long-term consequences that compound over time through virtuous or vicious circles. Inclusive political institutions → inclusive economic institutions → broad prosperity → reinforcement of inclusive politics. Extractive political institutions → extractive economic institutions → elite capture → reinforcement of extractive politics. Nepal's youth migration crisis—20.8% unemployment driving millions abroad, remittances constituting 26% of GDP—reflects failure to build inclusive economic institutions. Presidential concentration of power would worsen this by reducing accountability and enabling elite capture of development resources.

The fsQCA evidence: System type combines with context to determine outcomes

Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), developed by Charles Ragin, examines how combinations of conditions produce outcomes rather than testing single-variable effects. This methodology is particularly appropriate for constitutional design questions where system type interacts with ethnic diversity, development level, party system characteristics, and historical legacies.

Studies applying fsQCA to democratic outcomes consistently find **presidential systems interact negatively with conditions characterizing Nepal**: high ethnic fractionalization, low-to-middle income levels, post-conflict status, and fragmented party systems. Pennings's study of 43 parliamentary democracies found constitutional control of executives depends on specific institutional configurations—simply having a parliament is insufficient; mechanisms for oversight (constructive votes, coalition agreements, checks and balances) matter enormously.

Research on ethnic conflict and governance shows **power-sharing institutions (proportional representation, federalism, consociational arrangements) work in parliamentary systems but fail under presidentialism.** The mechanisms are clear: parliamentary systems allow minority parties to enter coalitions and influence policy through bargaining; presidential systems make minority parties permanent losers who can only hope to influence future presidential elections. Bosnia's consociational presidential arrangement (rotating tripartite presidency) demonstrates the contradiction: formal power-sharing cannot overcome structural incentives for non-cooperation when executives are directly elected by ethnic constituencies rather than emerging from parliamentary negotiation.



For Nepal specifically, fsQCA would likely identify the following necessary conditions for democratic stability and inclusive development: (1) parliamentary system, (2) proportional representation or mixed electoral system ensuring minority representation, (3) genuine federal autonomy for provinces, (4) coalition management mechanisms, (5) investment in state capacity at all levels, (6) economic development reducing zero-sum competition. The presidential system contradicts conditions 1, 2, and 4, making success highly unlikely regardless of other factors.

The flawed premise: Stability is not sufficient for accountability

Dhungana's central logical error is **assuming stability automatically produces accountability and good governance.** This conflates distinct concepts.

Authoritarian regimes achieve extreme stability—China's Communist Party, UAE's hereditary rulers, Rwanda's Paul Kagame—while offering minimal accountability. Stability is neither necessary nor sufficient for good governance; what matters is institutional quality and responsiveness to citizens.

Parliamentary instability in Italy (68 governments since WWII) and Belgium (541 days without government 2010-2011) coexists with advanced welfare states, high human development indices, and citizen satisfaction. Conversely, presidential stability in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, Venezuela under Chávez/Maduro, and Philippines under Marcos delivered economic collapse and human rights catastrophes. The relevant question is not how long leaders serve but whether institutions channel power accountably, respond to citizen needs, and enable peaceful change when governments fail.

Nepal's current instability is not the disaster Dhungana portrays. Government changes reflect coalition partners responding to constituent pressures, policy disagreements, and performance failures. No coalitions have been overturned through violence; all transitions followed constitutional procedures. This is **democracy working in a diverse society**—messy, contentious, unsatisfying, but fundamentally legitimate. Presidential systems offering apparent stability would actually suppress this democratic responsiveness, forcing citizens to endure failing leaders for fixed terms while frustration builds toward violent rupture.

The September 2025 Gen Z protests illustrate the point. Youth mobilized against corruption, nepotism, and governance failures, forcing Prime Minister Oli's resignation. In the parliamentary system, this popular pressure produced government change and appointment of the first woman prime minister. Under the presidential system, equivalent mobilization would produce only violent confrontation—protests demanding early removal of a directly elected president constitute a constitutional crisis, not legitimate democratic politics. Sri Lanka's Aragalaya showed this dynamic: Gotabaya Rajapaksa's flight resolved the immediate crisis but created a dangerous power vacuum because the presidential system lacked orderly succession mechanisms.

Economic evidence: Presidentialism undermines development

Nepal's development challenges—43.4% public debt as percentage of GDP, 4.9% non-performing loans in banking sector, FATF grey-listing for money laundering concerns, persistent poverty affecting one in five citizens—require effective economic governance. The quantitative evidence is unambiguous: **presidential systems perform worse on every economic indicator.**

McManus and Ozkan's analysis of 119 countries over 65 years found presidential systems experiencing more volatile growth, higher inflation, greater income inequality, and lower long-run development. The mechanisms are clear: Presidential systems produce policy discontinuity as new executives repudiate predecessors' initiatives; concentration of power enables elite capture of economic resources; executive-legislative conflicts create policy uncertainty deterring investment; fixed terms mean failed economic policies continue rather than triggering government change.

Parliamentary systems facilitate superior economic performance through several mechanisms. Coalition requirements force compromise, producing more moderate, sustainable policies rather than ideological lurches. Executive-legislative coordination reduces transaction costs in implementing reforms. Party-based governance creates institutional memory across government changes, maintaining policy consistency. Coalition partners monitor each other, reducing corruption. Proportional representation ensures diverse economic interests are represented in policymaking rather than winner-take-all capture.

International financial institutions consistently warn against presidential systems for countries in Nepal's situation. World Bank governance indicators show parliamentary systems score higher on government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption—all crucial for attracting investment and sustaining growth. Nepal's FATF grey-listing stems partly from governance failures; presidential systems would worsen: concentrated power enables elite protection of money laundering networks; weak legislative oversight allows regulatory capture; fixed terms prevent removing leaders compromised by corruption.

Provincial governance demonstrates the wrong lessons

Dhungana might point to Nepal's directly elected mayors and rural municipality chairs as evidence that direct election enhances accountability. The actual evidence suggests otherwise. **Provincial and local governments experience instability patterns similar to national level**, with frequent coalition reshuffles and leadership changes demonstrating that direct election of executives does not solve underlying coalition management challenges.

More critically, research on Nepal's federal system identifies serious accountability deficits in local directly elected executives. Mayors and chairs possess "unprecedented powers"—formulating laws, preparing budgets, implementing programs—with limited checks on authority. Patronage and corruption concerns are widespread. MPs interfere in local projects, with one-third of Madhesh Province budgets allegedly lost to kickbacks. Capacity gaps, fiscal dependence on central transfers, and politicization of local administration undermine service delivery.

The lesson is **not** that direct election creates accountability but that **institutional framework and capacity matter more than election method.** Local executives are directly elected but lack: independent audit mechanisms, clear separation from legislative interference, adequate fiscal resources, trained personnel, transparent procurement systems, and citizen participation mechanisms. Creating a directly elected national executive without addressing these capacity issues would simply reproduce problems at a larger scale with higher stakes.

Better alternatives: Strengthening what works

Rather than abandoning Nepal's parliamentary system for the demonstrably worse presidential alternative, **reforms should strengthen coalition governance within the current framework.** Multiple proven mechanisms require no constitutional amendment:

Constructive vote of no confidence: Amend parliamentary rules to require naming and electing replacement prime minister simultaneously with removing incumbent. This would raise coordination costs for opportunistic government changes while preserving flexibility to remove failing governments.

Detailed coalition agreements: Mandate written agreements specifying policy commitments, cabinet portfolios, power-sharing arrangements, and dispute resolution procedures. Belgium and the Netherlands provide models. Agreements should be public documents enabling citizen oversight.

Coalition monitoring mechanisms: Establish coalition committees (representatives from each party) meeting regularly to resolve disputes. Create an inner cabinet (prime minister plus deputy prime ministers from each coalition party) for consensus decisions. Appoint "watchdog ministers" from one party monitoring departments controlled by another party.

Confidence and supply framework: Develop procedures enabling stable minority governments with guaranteed support from smaller parties on confidence votes and budgets while maintaining independence on other issues. New Zealand's Cabinet Manual offers codified procedures adaptable to Nepal's context.

Limited anti-defection provisions: If adopted, restrict to confidence votes, no-confidence motions, and budgets only—not ordinary legislation. Ensure members retain conscience rights on policy debates while preventing opportunistic floor-crossing on government survival matters.

Strengthen parliamentary oversight: Enhance committee systems, question times, and legislative scrutiny of executive actions. Parliamentary systems work best when legislatures actively monitor governments, creating accountability that augments electoral accountability.

Fixed coalition terms with review mechanisms: Agree coalition duration with structured reviews at 18-month intervals, enabling renegotiation if needed while providing more stability than current practice.

These mechanisms address Nepal's actual problems—weak coalition management, opportunistic partner switching, inadequate monitoring—without introducing the structural flaws of presidential systems. They work within Nepal's constitutional framework while building institutional capacity for effective governance.

The path forward: Inclusive democracy requires parliamentary flexibility

Nepal stands at a critical juncture. The Gen Z protests of September 2025 demonstrated both democratic vitality—youth mobilizing peacefully to demand accountability—and system fragility—violent outcomes and uncertain transition. The temptation to pursue "strong executive" solutions is understandable but historically disastrous. Every presidential system in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Pakistan under military-backed presidencies, Bangladesh under presidential military rule) produced worse governance, greater instability, and deeper conflicts than parliamentary alternatives.

Nepal's diversity is its greatest asset and its central governance challenge. One hundred twenty-five ethnic groups, 123 languages, multiple religions, and sharp regional differences require institutions enabling continuous negotiation and accommodation. Parliamentary systems with proportional representation, federal structures, and coalition governance provide these institutions. Presidential winner-take-all systems guarantee permanent exclusion of minorities, ethnic outbidding in elections, and suppression of regional voices.

The theoretical frameworks—Lijphart's consociationalism, Linz's perils of presidentialism, Tsebelis's veto player theory, Acemoglu and Robinson's institutional economics—converge on the same conclusion: **parliamentary systems offer Nepal far better prospects than presidential alternatives.** The empirical evidence is overwhelming: parliamentary systems outperform on democratic stability (2.5 times higher survival rate), economic growth (0.6-1.2 percentage points faster annually), per capita income (4-5 times higher), corruption control, governance quality, and human development.

The comparative evidence is instructive: India's parliamentary federalism manages diversity far more successfully than Sri Lanka's executive presidency; Germany's constructive vote mechanisms deliver stability without rigidity; Belgium and Netherlands achieve coalition stability through management practices; New Zealand demonstrates minority parliamentary governments can function effectively. Nepal should learn from these successes rather than repeating the failures of presidential systems in ethnically divided developing countries.

Conclusion: Stability through accommodation, not concentration

Miraj Dhungana's frustration with Nepal's political instability is justified. His proposed solution—directly elected executives—is not. The theory rests on false premises (that fixed terms force delivery), ignores overwhelming evidence of presidential system failures, and would exacerbate precisely the problems it purports to solve. Nepal's instability stems from weak coalition management practices and political culture of opportunism, not from parliamentary constitutional structure. The cure is strengthening coalition governance mechanisms—constructive votes of no confidence, detailed coalition agreements, monitoring committees, confidence and supply frameworks—not abandoning parliamentary democracy for the demonstrably worse presidential alternative.

The evidence is decisive: presidential systems destabilize divided societies, perform worse economically, concentrate power extractively, enable authoritarianism, and fail to deliver accountability despite offering superficial stability. Parliamentary systems, despite messy coalition politics, better manage diversity, enable flexible adaptation, disperse power inclusively, facilitate economic development, and maintain democratic accountability. Nepal's path forward requires deepening parliamentary democracy through institutional development, not abandoning it for executive concentration that theory, evidence, comparison, and context all demonstrate would fail catastrophically.

The Gen Z protesters demanding accountability, the Madhesi communities seeking inclusion, the Janajati groups asserting identity, the Dalit populations fighting discrimination—all require institutions responsive to their diverse voices. Parliamentary democracy with proportional representation and coalition governance provides such institutions. Presidential winner-take-all systems would silence these voices, transforming legitimate demands into permanent grievances and democratic contestation into violent conflict. Nepal has traveled too far on the path toward inclusive democracy to reverse course now. The answer to coalition instability is better coalition management, not authoritarian presidential concentration masquerading as stability.