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Political geographies of urban demarcation: Learning from Nepal’s state-restructuring process

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we use the case of Nepal to advance political geographic analyses of how, during moments of rupture, territory act as an important political technology in state restructuring, and how urban demarcation along with other territorial structures of the state will play a significant role in this process. Nepal has experienced more than three decades of state-restructuring characterized by consecutive political and constitutional crises, including close to ten years of violent conflict. Within the brief period between 2014 and 2017, more than 230 new municipalities were demarcated on top of the existing 58. In our analysis we unpack why and how the number of municipalities is quadrupled at that particular moment of time and how this is shaped by and have implications for re-configurations of Nepal’s territorial structures. This is achieved through a historical analysis of how the state’s politico-administrative system has been mapped, reasoned and challenged. The analysis is based on official documents, such as census data and reports, legislative acts, public debates and academic analyses of processes of administrative and political reforms and conflicts in Nepal since the early 1990s. It therefore engages with a rich literature on conflict, the post-conflict situation and the restructuring of the state. Based on our findings we argue that urban demarcation is an important part of a states’ political technology complex, and warn against trends in studies of urbanization to question the analytical bearing of differentiating the rural and urban. Showing that Nepal’s recent urban boundaries have been justified by the need to achieve a better geographical balance, we conclude by arguing for the need for studies of urban transformations that critically examine whether and how the new territorial structures in their implementation contribute to balance geographical and social inequalities.

1. Introduction

In this paper we use the case of Nepal to advance political geographic analyses of how, during moments of rupture, territory act as an important political technology in state restructuring, and how urban demarcation along with other territorial structures of the state play a significant role in this process. Nepal has experienced more than three decades of state-restructuring characterized by consecutive political and constitutional crises, including close to ten years of violent conflict. Within the brief period between 2014 and 2017, at a time when Nepal is finally approving a new constitution that made way for the demarcation of a federal state in 2015, more than 230 new municipalities were demarcated on top of the existing 58. The context for these new demarcations is a long and complex process of state-restructuring characterized by consecutive political and constitutional crises, including close to a decade of violent conflict (1996–2006). In this context, one of the key focal points of the continuing political crises has been widespread and multifaceted dissatisfaction with how Nepal, despite successive reforms, had not achieved a fair political and economic balance between geographical regions. Through an analysis of three decades of state restructuring and urban demarcation in Nepal, we want to unpack why and how the number of municipalities is quadrupled at that particular moment in time and how this is shaped by and have implications for re-configurations of Nepal’s territorial structures.

It is through a critical analysis of how the state’s politico-administrative spatial skeleton is mapped and otherwise communicated that we seek to understand how demarcation of the rural from the urban is positioned in this process. Our analysis asserts that before the process leading to the approval of Nepal’s new constitution and the final demarcation of federal states in 2015, urban demarcation is not closely

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associated with state re-structuring. The study shows, how the interim government’s delineation of many new urban units in 2014, followed by the publication of a drafted National Urban Development Plan (NUDS), signal that future infrastructural investments and redistribution of resources will be directed towards urban development. These changes and the complex circumstances of settling the demarcation of regional and local borders explain why urban demarcations explode between 2014 and 2017. We further show how Nepal’s new territorial structures breach with the existing politico-administrative structures while much of the foreign supported urban development planning is based on the old structures. Accordingly, the finally approved NUDS attempts to navigate between two ideologies for achieving a fair political and economic balance between geographical regions through urban development: one based on building strong economic centres in existing cities and urban growth corridors and one being more concerned with promoting economic growth all over Nepal. In this way urban development and urban demarcation can become a new platform where territorial structures will be contested.

Conceptually, the article also seeks to contribute to political geographic analyses of how, during moments of rupture, territory act as an important political technology in state restructuring and how urban demarcation along with other territorial structures of the state will play a significant role in this process. For the past decade, Brenner and Schmid’s (2014) thesis of planetary urbanization, that questions the feasibility and rationality of defining any outside (i.e. the rural) to the urban world, has gained prominence (Fox & Goodfellow, 2021). Basically, we agree that there exists no universal definition of what constitutes urban settlements. However, we want to argue that urban demarcation shall be critically explored to provide for a needed historical and political contextualization of urban development (Derickson, 2015, 2018; Fox & Goodfellow, 2021; Scott & Storper, 2015). To do this, we draw on three line of thoughts within political geography. Firstly, the role of state transitions related to larger political crises, what Lund has referred to as ‘moments of rupture’ (2016), and how these are accentuating and magnifying how spatial borders and the unity of people and territory are contested. Secondly, we make use of Elden’s notion of territory as political technology (2019, 2013, 2010), with its focus on geographic analyses of how, during moments of rupture, territory act as a political technology in state restructuring and how urban demarcations can become a new platform where territorial structures will be contested.

In 2015, we joined Nepalese researchers and policy advisers for a workshop on Nepal’s urban future.1 The main contributors to the then recently launched National Urban Development Strategy (Government of Nepal, 2015) were among the first presenters. Commissioned by the Government of Nepal, the report’s analyses and visions were primarily based on data and information on the 58 urban municipalities that existed before May 2014. While the recent demarcations of 133 new urban units were duly noted by the report, their implications were hardly mentioned. This non-engagement with reclassification sparked an intense discussion among the workshop’s participants, who questioned the rationales and political processes behind the report, but more explicitly the logic behind the new reclassifications. Our first attempt to explore the politics behind the 2014 declarations of urban units was presented in the form of a poster presentation with the title “Politics of urban re-classification in Nepal”, presented at the Urban Transitions Global Summit in Shanghai, China in September 2016. This preliminary analysis, however, was soon overtaken by the constitutional process in Nepal, including the demarcations of new federal (regional) borders, (new) rural-urban re-classifications, national and local elections, and other political and geographical dynamics.

The following analysis is based on official documents, such as census data and reports, legislative acts, public debates and academic analyses of processes of administrative and political reforms and conflicts in Nepal since the early 1990s. In addition, the paper engages with a rich literature on conflict, post-conflict situations and the restructuring of the state in Nepal grounded in different academic disciplines and approaches and in the more limited scholarship available on urbanization in Nepal.2 In addition to our own readings, we draw on Shneiderman et al.’s (2016) critical and extensive review of the post-2006 literature on conflict, the state, identities and environments, and on how the authors situate these dynamics in historical and disciplinary ways. We also attend to critical analyses of state-restructuring by Nightingale et al. (2018), Dongol and Neumann (2021) and Rankin et al. (2018). Important framings that have inspired our analysis are: 1) the role of anti-elite (Maoist) and ethnic politics and how they have exerted a political influence on territory nationally and locally (De Sales, 2017; Gellner et al., 1997; Hangen, 2007; Lawoti, 2014; Lawoti and Hangen, 2012); 2) constitutionalism and the significance of political consensus-making (Bren, 2018; Snellinger, 2015, 2018; Strasheim, 2017, 2019) and, related to the latter, the central role of the legacies and practices of local politics in challenging and moulding constitutional politics and public authority (Byrne, 2018; Nightingale et al., 2018; Nightingale & Rankin, 2015); 3) how Nepal’s electoral geographies are based in local politics involving kinship, patrimonial relations and long-standing party affiliations (Dahal, 2001, 2016, p. 23; Holmberg et al., 2009); 4) changing Nepalese governments’ interactions with and political navigation between its two big neighbours, India and China; and 5) the impact of decades of the receipt of development aid, for example, for purposes of infrastructural development (Murton, 2017; Murton & Lord, 2020; Paudel et al., 2020; Rankin et al., 2017, 2018). Added to this are the many accounts of how the complex political landscape was further breached by the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015 (see: Le Billon et al., 2020; Liechty, 2026; Murton & Lord, 2020; Paudel et al., 2020). Common to most of the scholarly analyses mentioned above, however, is their relative lack of focus on urbanization. On the other hand, most analyses of Nepal’s urban structures have hardly addressed the political geography of urban demarcations but have centred instead on descriptive characteristics such as population size, growth and distribution, and the socio-economic characteristics of municipalities (Bastola, 1995; Sharma, 1989; 2003; Subedi, 2010). Changing criteria for defining and delineating municipalities and/or urban areas, such as demographic and distributional revisions, have usually been treated as “technical issues”, while the arbitrariness involved in designating urban areas at particular times has only been touched upon in passing (Sharma, 2003; Subedi, 2014). This scholarly neglect, however, is countered by the increasing interest in urbanization and related developmental potentials by the international aid community (Choe and Pradhak, 2015; Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013).

In the sections that follow, we first outline our conceptual framework followed by our empirical analysis of the reconfigurations of territorial structures and state restructuring divided into four periods: historical background; the multi-party politics reform and insurgency period; political resurgence and the drawn-out constitutional process; and the clarification of Nepal’s federal geography. Based on this analysis we discuss how urban reclassification and state restructuring intersect. In conclusion we seek to condense important insights on political geographies of urban reclassification.

1 The theme of the workshop was ‘Livable Urban Futures in Nepal’, at which those attending discussed how to develop joint research between Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University, the University of Copenhagen and Aarhus University. The workshop was supported by a grant for university collaboration from FFL, the research wing of the development aid department of the Danish Foreign Ministry, Danida, called ‘Building Stronger Universities’.

2 We are grateful for the suggestions for further readings of the literature on Nepal’s conflict and post-conflict political geography provided by the paper’s three anonymous reviewers.
2. The politics of drawing spatial boundaries

Our engagement with scholarship in political geography and how it can contribute to an understanding of the role of politics in demarcating the urban from the rural is based on the recognition that territories are not fixed, immovable or unchanging entities (Agrawal, 2015; Elden, 2010; 2013; Newman, 2010). Most administrative boundaries are drawn in accordance with the state’s territorial strategies, whereby they also come to define places (Elden, 2010; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995). However, larger political crises and reforms are challenging these strategies and their political legitimacy (Kulcsár & Brown, 2011; Lund, 2016).

Re-classifications of spatial boundaries within state borders are imperative dimensions of state restructuring (Cox, 2012; Sack, 1986). Larger political crises, conflicts and war all potentially contribute to the upheaval of the state and its functions, what Lund has termed “moments of rupture … when opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcome widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected” (2016, p. 1202). Such moments offer profound opportunities for taking stock of underlying geopolitical conflicts and the legacies of socio-spatial unevenness (Dwyer, 2014). Thus, during longer periods of political instability, important lessons can be learned about how spatial borders and the unity of people and territory are contested and how power relations unfold and are instituted. This is acutely evident in transformative democracies where the formation of a liberal electoral democratic state interacts with patrimonial, clientelist and semi-democratic political institutions (Carothers, 2007; Stokke, 2014). Thus, moments of rupture may imply processes of both state-making and state-unmaking. This comes out strongly in the case of Nepal, where one of the Maoists’ powerful strategies for undermining the sitting government was the symbolic and de facto institution of a parallel state (Dongol & Neumann, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2018). Likewise, Nepal’s state-restructuring should be seen in the context of the prevailing geo-logics of power (Paudel & Billon, 2020), such as first, the country’s economic and strategic position due to its location between two powerful neighbours, China and India, and the imperative role of international donors and a myriad of non-governmental actors (Dongol & Neumann, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2018; Smadja, 2013); and secondly, its geographical location in the geologically active zone of the Himalayas stretching from the Tibetan Plateau to the Indian subcontinent, which implies geological instability, and environmental and infrastructural challenges (Paudel & Billon, 2020).

Redistricting and drawing new regional boundaries take centre stage in most state transitions (Kulcsár & Brown, 2011), often cemented in constitutional reforms that provide for or limit the relative autonomy and self-determination of districts or regions and their population (Carothers, 2007). Understanding how re-configurations of the state relate to the political geography of territory raises the issue of what such a territorial analysis should entail. According to Elden (2010), territorial analyses need to focus on the genealogical specifics that constitute state territory. While ethnographic studies of struggles over land and resources have explored these constructively through the lens of internal territorialisation (Dongol & Neumann, 2021; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995), Elden argues that the making of borders within the boundaries of the state “is not best understood through territoriality, but through an examination of the relation of the state to the emergence of a category of ‘space’” (2013). This implies an analytical focus on territory as political technology, which includes the economic, strategic, legal and technical dimensions of how the state’s territory is produced, and among these, the techniques for defining and delineating territorial elements such as land, borders and other categories. For the very same reasons, the political techniques used for controlling areas and their populations are also open to contestation. In most democracies, these are connected to explicit arguments for securing justifiable links between popular representation and the territorial space of constituencies (Forest, 2018). The ideologies behind political technologies and their construction and uses by those who have definitional power take place under the influence of additional actors and institutions at multiple levels and scales (Cox, 2012; Nightingale et al., 2018).

Boundaries and boundary making that separate geographical areas within the state function thus as important political technologies during state-restructuring as the specific powers, rules and regulations that come to define the room for manoeuvre in everyday politics are formed by the associated territorial structures.

Analysing the state’s territorial structures is a way of examining the state’s organizational form and how these behave territorially and a-territorially (Cox, 2012). Territorially, reorganization takes place through boundary-making at various scales, including zoning and infrastructural projects that both connect and divide (Elden, 2019), as well as territorial determinations of voting districts, metropolitan governance, redistributions of state revenues etc. (Cox, 2012). The a-territorial organizational forms, or at least forms not cast as territorial, provide the social basis for party support, elections, lobbying over financial and legal interventions, and state agencies. Analysing how political changes in territorial structures result in subdivisions into demarcated entities at different levels (Cox, 2012; Elden, 2019) should include what happens to urban classification; being aware that these are sometimes clearly defined as parts of a neat hierarchical structure and at other times defined more arbitrarily (Elden, 2019). It is through an analysis of the territorial structures of the state that the ideologies and politics of rural-urban demarcations can be revealed.

3. Reconfigurations of territorial structures and state-restructuring in Nepal

In this first part of our analysis, we connect aspects of the reconfiguration of Nepal’s territorial structures, in particular urban demarcations and the consecutive declarations of urban municipalities, to Nepal’s long process of state-restructuring. For this purpose, we focus primarily on the period since the re-introduction of democracy in 1990 during the first people’s movement (Jana Andolan I), while also acknowledging that Nepal’s political geography and its associated conflicts have a much longer history (Shneiderman et al., 2016; Smadja, 2013). Thus, before embarking on an analysis of the past thirty years, we provide a short sketch of the birth of Nepal as a modern state and the early drawing of spatial borders within the Nepalese state’s territory.

3.1. Historical background

After its establishment in the late eighteenth century, the Nepalese state remained relatively isolated, its central power residing with the dynastic prime ministers and aristocracy. Nepal’s political transformation and modern state-building process started to take shape when “Nepali democratic activists allied with the exiled King, Tribhuvan Shah, in 1951 led a successful revolution against the autocratic Rana regime. Shortly thereafter King Tribhuvan issued a royal proclamation calling for [the] election of a Constituent Assembly and the establishment of multi-party democracy” (Shneiderman et al., 2016, p. 2049). Multi-party governance did not materialize at that time. Instead King Tribhuvan’s son, King Mahendra, introduced a form of panchayat democracy inspired by India, that is, a guided democracy based on local elections but without direct elections to parliament and with political parties being banned. Along with this new system of governance, the country’s policy of isolation was gradually abandoned, and new ideals of...
modernization and development (bikash) were introduced (Snelllinger, 2018). This formation of a developmental state occurred in close collaboration with western donors that involved the opening up of frontier regions and heavy investments in infrastructure (discussed in Dongol & Neumann, 2021).

To support this modern system of state-building and governance, the government introduced a development planning process following the Indian ideal of the bottom-up identification of needs for state investments and services. In April 1962, new territorial demarcations for the country, 75 districts and 14 zones, were declared and soon adopted in the Second Periodic Plan (1962–65). A vision for achieving regional balance was presented for the first time in the Third Periodic Plan (1965–70), which did not, however, present a clear framework for its implementation. Such a framework was developed in the report on “Regional Development Planning in Nepal”, issued by the National Planning Commission in 1970.

The late geographer Dr Harka Gurung, who was appointed to the NPC in 1968, is often credited for bringing regional development into practice (Levison & Murton, 2020; Rankin et al., 2017; Subedi, 2020) by connecting districts in a development-region framework with regional headquarters and pursuing the idea of regional centres as growth poles along the corridors of a north-south growth axis. This implies a vision for regional integration through land-use planning, infrastructural development and settlement growth that responds to Nepal’s complex topography, ecology and demography (Rankin et al., 2017; in Levison & Murton, 2020). Fig. 1 provides a common map showing Nepal’s territorial structure with the five ecological zones stretching from the high mountains in the north of the country to the plains in south (most analyses and policies, however, refer to three zones: Mountain, Hills and Tarai) and the major administrative divisions (75 districts and five development regions). While previous administrative outlines had also referred to Nepal’s physiographic characteristics (Levison & Murton, 2020), what was new about this specification and mapping of the geo-logics of Nepal’s territorial structure was its references to the Himalayan materiality.

This mapping of Nepal’s territorial structure provided the framework for official planning and policy until the new constitution was adopted in 2017. The effects of this framework are visible in changing governments’ efforts to develop and modernize the nation, often supported by foreign aid and loan agreements, not least the continuous development and settlement growth that responds to Nepal’s complex topography, ecology and demography (Rankin et al., 2017; in Levison & Murton, 2020). Fig. 1 provides a common map showing Nepal’s territorial structure with the five ecological zones stretching from the high mountains in the north of the country to the plains in south (most analyses and policies, however, refer to three zones: Mountain, Hills and Tarai) and the major administrative divisions (75 districts and five development regions). While previous administrative outlines had also referred to Nepal’s physiographic characteristics (Levison & Murton, 2020), what was new about this specification and mapping of the geo-logics of Nepal’s territorial structure was its references to the Himalayan materiality.

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3.2. The multi-party political reform and insurgency period

Between 1981 and 2001, the growth rate of the country’s population was consistently over 2.0 percent per annum, while the number of municipalities increased from 23 to 58. With the total population count of 26.5 million in 2011, the annual growth rate declined to less than 1.4 percent (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2003; 2012). Although mainly the result of bureaucratic revisions (Ertur, 1994), four reclassifications took place during this period: four in 1982, six in 1986, three in 1992 and 22 in 1997, and no further reclassifications took place until May 2014. Politically, the 1980s were characterized by the rise of a democratic movement. During the spring of 1990, the movements’ demonstrations culminated in the King accepting the demands for a new constitution based on the principles of a multi-party democracy (Hutt, 1991). The preparations for the multi-party parliamentary elections took a concentrated period of less than a year. This is probably why the elections of 1991 were mainly based on existing territorial structures, including the constituencies dating from the panchayat period (Gurung, 1997).

Politically, the 1991–2001 intercensal period was characterized by increasing unrest. Growing disagreements were expressed in power struggles between the now legal parties, as well as within them (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004). During these first ten years of democratic state-building, Nepal had ten different governments and conducted three national elections (1991, 1995 and 1999) (Gelner, 2007). During this period, the parties and politicians spent much time on the politics of redistricting electoral constituencies in preparation for future national and local elections, a process in which the political elite played an often unscrupulous and self-serving game (Dahal, 2001, 2010, p. 23). The widespread discontent with the 1990 democratic reforms also spurred general social unrest as the representation of historically marginalized ethnic, caste and religious groups in politics, elections and other state structures declined compared to their representation during the panchayat period (Shneiderman et al., 2016). This elite capture became a central element of enduring political conflicts, as these developed during the Maoist insurgency that began in February 1996, commonly referred to as the second people’s movement (Jana Andolan II). However, it is important to note how decentralization reforms, strongly supported by international donors, have been instituted as one of the governments’ powerful political technologies in response to these pressures.

The Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) of 1999 sets out the details of the reforms to governance and the related territorial structures that implemented this delegation of power. Of interest to our analysis is how the Act sets out an official politico-administrative definition of urban areas. According to the Act, urban areas (i.e. municipalities) are defined by population thresholds of 20,000 in the Tarai and 10,000 in the Hills and Mountains, and multiple other criteria (Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013) (see also overview in Table 2 below). At the same time, the urban hierarchy is further specified using population thresholds for metropolitan and sub-metropolitan areas. Formally, these principles of urban classification remained unchanged until the proclamation of the Local Government Operations Act (LGOA) in October 2017. However, the LGOA hardly came to effect, the decentralization process stagnated, and plans

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4 For purposes of census administration, in 1952–54 the Statistics Department of the Government of Nepal had divided the country into 33 administrative units. In fact, there is evidence of territorial divisions as early as 1915 in the identification of 28 Tahasils in the Hills and 13 in the Tarai (Gurung, 2006).

5 As noted by Shneiderman et al. (2016), a burgeoning literature on Nepal’s political economy has shown how development aid and increasing remittances returned by the growing numbers of international migrants played an important role in financing the Nepali state and in decreasing poverty both during and after the violent political crisis; see also the discussion in Nightingale et al. (Nightingale et al., 2018, pp. 862–863).
for the devolution of power to local-level governing institutions was met with opposition from different political positions (Nightingale et al., 2018). The state’s neglect of disadvantaged groups and remote (distant) areas was an important driving force for the Maoist insurgency and people’s support for the Maoist agenda (Shneiderman et al., 2016; Thapa & Sijapati, 2003). While it may seem counterintuitive, it is the Maoist movement that puts “identity-based inequality” at the forefront of their policies by including it in their 1996 forty-point programme (Shneiderman et al., 2016, p. 2078). Demands for inclusion and citizenship for underprivileged groups and ethnic claims to territory from indigenous groups were united in a common interpretation that the core of the conflict was between the elite located in different centres of power and the people living in remote and peripheral areas. By implication, one may argue that the demand for state-restructuring was also generated by the rural-urban divide. However, we find no evidence that this became a strong part of the political rhetoric surrounding the territorial conundrum of conflict-resolution and peace-building.

### 3.3. Political resurgence and the drawn-out constitutional process

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (November 2006) led to the Maoists joining the government, which promulgated an interim constitution that interestingly did not make any reference to federalism, “which was a long-standing demand of both Madhesi and indigenous activists” (Shneiderman et al., 2016, pp. 2053–2054; see also; Hutt, 2020). The government later gave in, and federalism was written into the interim constitution before the elections for the first Constituent Assembly (CA) in 2007. The Maoists became the single largest party in the first CA. However, together with the three Madhesi-based parties, they were not able to muster the required majority to secure clear principles of identity-based federalism. In 2012, attempts were made by the major parties, including the Maoists, to reach a compromise. However, this compromise was met with protests by the Madhesi organizations, and soon thereafter the Maoists also backed away from the agreement.

The first CA was eventually dissolved, and the result of the elections

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Time of announcement</th>
<th>No. of new urban municipalities between two periods</th>
<th>Total no. of urban municipalities</th>
<th>Urbanization rate according to latest census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partyless Panchayat regime</td>
<td>Until 1981</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The period of multi-party political reform</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The period of political resurgence</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014 (May)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014 (December)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015 (September)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the Nepalese Federal State*</td>
<td>2017 (February)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for the second CA in 2013 was a defeat for the Maoists and the Madhesi parties. Combined with the major parties not agreeing to cross-party alliances between representatives of ethnic or other marginalized groups, the support for identity-based federalism was weakened, and even openly rejected by the two ruling parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and United Marxists and Leninists (UML) (Hutt, 2020). Instead, the two parties sought to minimize the number of provinces, and insisted that these would have to be based on ‘geography, historical continuity and economic viability’ and preferably carved out along north-south lines so that they included both hill and Tarai districts, which was precisely the opposite of what the Madhes-based parties were demanding” (Hutt, 2020, p. 385). While the power struggles between the positions of the Maoists and Madhes-based parties on the one hand and the old elite, the NC and UML, on the other, over the principles for delineating regional borders continued, three consecutive administrative declarations of new urban municipalities were made (see Table 1). Interestingly, these were not accompanied by the usual practice of publishing reports showing how urban criteria were being interpreted and implemented.

Some expressed optimism, such as the then Chairman of the Municipal Association of Nepal (MUAAN) (Kathmandu Post, September 19, 2015), others raised criticisms rooted in dissatisfaction with the naming of the new urban municipalities and the geographical locations of their headquarters. However, the potential implications for the disrupted constitutional process and elections yet to be fought were also mentioned, such as the reduction in the number of constituencies and political posts that the mergers would involve (Strasheim, 2017, 2019). In response to these criticisms, a second reclassification took place in December 2014. Again, there were some disagreements related to issues of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, while the broader political debates on state-restructuring were concerned with whether to pursue a model of identity-based or capability-based provinces or to come to a compromise between them, the government continued to declare more municipalities along with a reshuffle of the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) in September 2014. From, this point, one can trace an official change in urban visions and strategies, presented in the National Urban Development Strategy (NUDS) of 2015 (Government of Nepal, 2015). The ethos of the strategy is to make urban development the spearhead of economic development in Nepal through an integrated urban system approach where MoUD shall coordinate national investment strategies, infrastructure investments, land use policies etc. The strategy focuses on upgrading the existing vision of strong North-South axes of urban development but, in line with the new urban announcements, also introduces new layers of urban units such as new towns (Dahal & Timalsina, 2017).

It was this vision for Nepal’s new urban geography that was presented in the workshop mentioned in the introduction to this paper. What provoked many of the participants of the workshop was, in particular, how the growth pole philosophy in support of existing (at that time) development zones, took that political geography as a given, and how in the presentation of the report, the visions for major infrastructural investments in urban growth corridors and valleys overshadowed the new instruments of the strategy. For instance, ten ‘sahar’ (towns) had been located in the Hill region as pearls on a string along a sketched Mid-hill highway, two in each development region. Likewise, 15 ‘Hulaki’ (towns) were projected in the Tarai region and small towns of different kinds were stipulated and connected to the potential instrument of Census Towns. However, as Fig. 2 shows, the majority of the remaining new municipalities of the 2014–15 announcements are located along the East-West highway and in the Kathmandu Valley, thus, in locations with comparatively high population densities (Government of Nepal, 2015, p. 4).

### 3.4 Clarification of Nepal’s federal geography

Although the NUDS was scheduled for adoption by the Cabinet in August 2015, its approval was postponed due to the ongoing constitutional process and only approved after considerable amendments in 2017 (Government of Nepal, 2017b, 157). Nepal’s new constitution was drafted and promulgated in the aftermath of the major earthquakes that struck the country in late April 2015 and was finally agreed by the majority of the second CA on September 20, 2015. The earthquakes were quickly framed as a national crisis and a cause for political and social unity and have thus been highlighted as causing this sudden agreement (see discussions in Hutt, 2020; Liechty, 2020). As Hutt’s analysis shows, the pre-earthquake political process had gone far in drafting the constitution, and “in all probability Nepal would have received a new constitution in 2015, even if the earthquakes of that year had not taken place” (2020, p. 393). The earthquakes nevertheless contributed to changes in the political and economic environment of constitution-building. Many politicians were concerned with the excessive and rapid foreign investments in disaster management and the paradigm of “Building Back Better”, and argued for the necessity of unity in securing the continued independence of the Nepalese state (Paudel & Billon, 2020).

Fig. 3 shows the final demarcation of Nepal’s seven provinces. When comparing this map to the maps in Figs. 1 and 2, it becomes clear that the new territorial structure breaches with the existing parallel North-South extending regions (development zones): Province 2 is a Tarai-only province encompassing some of the most populous and urbanized districts, and Province 5 encompasses many Tarai districts and the urbanizing Hill districts of the Dang Valley (and no Mountain districts). These overall changes in the territorial structure led to the announcement of another 76 urban units (Table 1) and an addition of five Metropolitan and 11 Sub-Metropolitan cities (Table 2).

While the new constitution draws boundaries between provinces, Article 295 makes provision for the formation of a Federal Commission that shall steer a process for demarcating local-level units. Thus, in March 2016, the Commission for Restructuring of Village, Municipalities, and Special, Protected and Autonomous Areas (commonly known as the Local Level Restructuring Commission or LLRC) was constituted. The LLRC was commissioned to determine the boundaries and the number of local government units, and was given a mandate to restructure and merge existing spatio-political entities into fewer ones. The Commission’s work resulted in dramatic changes in the size and

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Name of the Metro/sub-metro</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Province 1</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Biratnagar</td>
<td>214,663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ithari</td>
<td>140,517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dharan</td>
<td>137,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 2</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Birganj</td>
<td>240,922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Janakpur</td>
<td>162,172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kaliya</td>
<td>123,024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jitpur-Simara</td>
<td>117,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 3</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Lalipur</td>
<td>284,922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>975,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bharatpur</td>
<td>280,502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-metro</td>
<td>Hetauda</td>
<td>152,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 4</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Pokhara</td>
<td>402,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 5</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Butwal</td>
<td>138,742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tulsipur</td>
<td>141,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ghorahi</td>
<td>156,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-metro</td>
<td>Nepalgunj</td>
<td>138,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 6</td>
<td>Sub-metro</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province 7</td>
<td>Sub-metro</td>
<td>Dhangadi</td>
<td>147,741</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The considerable urbanization that had taken place since the 2001 census did not lead to any urban re-classification in relation to the 2011 census. In preparation for the census, however, a committee drafted 41 new announcements, though the report was never made public and the plans never materialized (Muzetini & Aparicio, 2013)."
number of local administrative units. From the previous 3449 local units (3157 VDCs, 217 municipalities and 77 districts), the new structure was reduced to 753 units (293 urban municipalities – including 6 metropolitan and 11 sub-metropolitan cities – and 460 rural municipalities) and 77 districts (see various Gazettes published by the government of Nepal). These demarcations were the precondition for the organization of the local government elections (May 14, June 28 and September 18) and the elections to the national government and provincial assemblies (November 26 and December 7) in 2017. The final amendments were made between the second and third rounds of the local elections in 2017, resulting in the addition of 76 (urban) municipalities (Table 1).

Fig. 4 shows the current distribution of municipalities in Nepal. When comparing this new pattern of municipalities (2017) with that of 2015 (Fig. 2) it becomes clear that the units now cover larger areas, but also that the 76 new municipalities (urban) are located in the Hills and Mountain regions. While the 2014–15 announcement of new towns should secure a balanced urbanization through a more equal distribution of municipalities between the five development regions, this new announcement shall secure the same but now between the seven provinces. This arithmetic is illustrated in Table 3 that also shows population densities of the provinces. While 39% of all municipalities are urban, only one province has a much higher rate of urban municipalities, namely Province 2. Thus, in all provinces more than 30% of all municipalities are urban and if using population densities as an indication of demographic urbanization potentials, this is only partially reflected in the distribution of rural and urban municipalities, the Karnali Province being an extreme example of very low average population densities. Exactly, such tendencies to favour of size-of-territory over size-of-population when designating number of municipalities (rural and urban) in each province was highly contested by populous provinces such as Province 2, because it would impact the number of political representatives to the provincial parliament (the political balance within the province) but also the number of representatives in the upper-house of the federal government as the Chair and Vice-chair of rural municipalities and Mayor and Deputy Mayor of municipalities form part of the Electoral College for electing members of the National Assembly (see also discussion of the complicated process in Strasheim (2019).

While the role of urban demarcation during the finalization of the Federal Geography of Nepal became a balancing act of political representation, the distribution of rural and urban units is also reasoned in economic considerations. Firstly, because municipalities would obtain almost three times the size of grants from the government compared to rural municipalities. Thus, having a high degree of municipalities in provinces with relative low population densities would secure some sort of economic levelling of federal funds. Secondly, the appointment of Metropolitan and Sub-metropolitan city status mattered because this pointed to the future priorities in national investments in urbanization and infrastructure. Thus, the final location of cities and the resulting pattern of urbanization in the seven provinces can well illustrate how rural-urban demarcation became an important political technology in Nepal’s constitutional process.

3.5. Consolidation of the territorial structure

While Nepal was still under the jurisdiction of the second CA, two political procedures added to reinforcing the role of urban demarcation in forming Nepal’s territorial structures: The Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) and the final approval of the National Urban Development Strategy (NUDS). The LGOA came into force in October 2017. Just like the LSGA of 1999, it introduced a whole new framework for political and administrative functions, and importantly new criteria for urban sub-categories – municipality, sub-metropolitan and
The LGOA sketches a new geography of urbanization, in particular at the lower end of the urban scale illustrated in Table 4 that presents a comparison of both the previous and the new population thresholds. First, the municipality category has been further subdivided according to eco-geographical regions, with population thresholds now ranging from 10,000 in mountain districts to 75,000 in the Tarai and 100,000 in the Kathmandu Valley. This also means that, compared to the old ones, the population thresholds have been increased, with the exception of those for the Mountain region. Second, the Tarai region has been subdivided into Inner Tarai and Tarai, the urban population threshold for the Tarai region (bordering India) being 50 per cent higher than that for the Inner Tarai and almost double that of the Hill region. Third, population thresholds for metropolitan cities have been increased from 300,000 to 500,000. For sub-metropolitan cities, the population threshold has been set at 200,000.

In addition to the population thresholds, the LGOA specifies a long list of “other criteria” to be fulfilled in order for, in the future, a rural municipality to be reclassified as urban or for any municipality to jump up the ladder and become sub-metropolitan or metropolitan. Compared to the LSGA of 1999, the LGOA adds as criteria, the need for a much higher revenue base, and the availability of market facilities, health services, infrastructures (such as roads, the water supply, power and waste management), recreational spaces, city-hall area and not least an urban development plan. For sub-metropolitan and metropolitan cities, the lists are supplemented with criteria such as tourist facilities, museums etc. Beyond these, even more criteria are specified as applying to certain urban categories and their role in local governance. If one adds to this the specifications for how urban reclassification should be preceded by a new census survey, it becomes clear that future reclassifications of administrative units to urban status or to higher status in the urban hierarchy have been made very difficult.

In these ways, the LGOA signals the importance of instituting a territorial structure that will maintain the number of administrative units and their status in the future, as these have been agreed when finalizing the new federal structure of the state. With this format, the LGOA also outlines the contours of an urban system, which in the NUDS 2015 was presented as a central foundation for how Nepal can achieve regional balance through urban development. The NUDS was finally approved in January 2017, however in a somewhat changed format. The strategy was published in two parts and a digital annex: Part A, called the main document (Government of Nepal, 2017a), is a short version, that includes summaries and introductions in Nepali, and Part B, called a detailed document (Government of Nepal, 2017b), is the comprehensive plan. At first sight, the detailed version is almost identical with the 2015 version: it contains the same overall structure, focus areas, narrative and background material, including the many maps and figures that portray Nepal’s (future) urban landscape. However, changes have been made to some strategic parts of the report. Not least, the report has been streamlined to address the new territorial structure:

The federal restructuring of the country will have implications for the national and sub-national (provincial and regional) urban system for basically three reasons: first, the urban centres designated to be provincial capitals will attract priority investments in infrastructure and urban development in general. The political and administrative functions of these centres will most likely promote economic functions including the location of small and medium enterprises based
on the mobilization of provincial/regional resources. Second, the provincial strategy of the development and prioritization of basic intra-province road infrastructure can affect the existing urban hierarchy in so far as it would redefine the locational advantages of small towns and market centres. Third, the policies of provincial government with respect to the development of agriculture, industries, bio-diversity and hydro-power (in the hills) will also impact the functional role of provincial urban centres and to that extent influence the regional urban system’ (p. 66).

This focus stands out much clearer in the main document, that is the shorter version used by most politicians. The main document, however, does not contain any of the telling illustrations and the stirred documentation for the need of securing cities as centres for economic agglomeration, investments to support urban growth corridors etc. The citation above is just one illustration of how concerns for the new federal structure is written into the strategy, while most of the original philosophy of urban development is kept in the detailed document. This suggests that when politicians had to adopt the NUDS, they were forced to weigh the arguments for geographical balance, contained in the new territorial structure with seven regions, against the original territorial framework and its focus on achieving a fair balance between the five North-South extending regions. As we have shown above, the territorial framework of the latter vision can be traced back to the 1960s, and also shapes the vision of agglomeration-driven development, which, for some time already, had been promoted by large economic donors to Nepal. As observed by Dahal and Timalsina (2017, p. 150) in their analysis of these (new) co-existing (and competing) visions for how urban development can direct a fairer geographic balance, urban development has become more political at the same time as new

Table 3
The distribution of rural and urban administrative units in Nepal’s seven provinces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Urban municipality</th>
<th>Rural municipality</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Urban municipality as % of total municipality</th>
<th>Population density of province – people/km²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NEPAL</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>460</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>460</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from data obtained from CBS 2012.
4. Urban reclassification and state restructuring in Nepal

In the previous sections, it has been shown how reclassifications of administrative entities from rural to urban were few during the past decades of state-restructuring. However, this changes dramatically in 2014–15, before the promulgation of Nepal’s new constitution in September 2015, and again in 2016, when local units are demarcated in connection with the major redistricting of the country towards national and local elections the same year. In this section, we discuss how this long period of near-absence of urban demarcation is followed by a large number of urban demarcations over a very short time, and how this relates to how territory has functioned as a political technology and appeared in changing territorial reconfigurations.

It is during the first decade of development planning in Nepal that the mapping of the country’s territorial structures, including the geopolitical zoning (Fig. 1), is developed. Accompanied by visions for achieving regional balance, these structures come to act as an overall template for planning and distribution of power and resources up to the new constitution in 2015. Considering, that competing ideologies concerning a fair political and economic balance between regions have been at the heart of political conflicts, this representation of territorial structures has been very resilient. This is illustrated by how, after Andolan I, the new political parties accepted the old territorial borders drawn up under the panchayat system. Hence, in spite of some readjustment of political constituencies in response to pressures from politicians and parties seeking better representation, village and district boundaries remained almost unchanged. Likewise, the LSGA of 1999 came to act as a reinforcement of the structures rather than an alternative to them. Although the insurgency disrupted the immediate impacts of the reform, it came to set the direction for local politics during the period of resurgence (as illustrated in Dongol & Neumann, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2018), not least through its measures to strengthen decentralization and local governance, and related to this the detailing of the legal and administrative functions of the territorial system.

These enduring territorial structures have also framed the principles for urban delineations and reclassifications. Shifting governments have considered municipalities to be nodes for economic activity fitting into the overall infrastructure, as well as just centres for the administration and service provision of their respective districts. These ideas can be traced back to the report on “Regional Development Planning in Nepal” issued by the National Planning Commission in 1970. These principles are slightly moulded by the LSGA of 1999, when specifications made way for urban demarcation processes to start from below, based on different thresholds and criteria for the geo-physical regions. Such a process is never implemented and although the enduring territorial structures of the state became highly contested in connection with the Maoists’ deliberate unmaking of the state and a peace agreement based on the compromise that the “new” state should consist of a number of identity-based federal states or regions, questions about rural-urban demarcation did not reach the debates of state restructuring during the 2000s. Hardly any of the prominent political actors presented any visions for urbanization, nor was urbanization central to the many political processes made by shifting governments and political parties. Given this political environment and theakening collapse of the political coalitions of the first CA, the lack of urban announcements in 2011 makes sense.

Elaborate visions for urban development as the backbone of Nepal’s economic recovery, nevertheless, find their way to government planning during the period of the second CA. These are presented in the drafted version of NUDS in 2015, as a comprehensive plan for how to develop an urban system based on agglomeration dynamics in existing urban centres and populous transport corridors. The draft plan also introduces categories of emerging urban centres and stipulates their locations and roles together with the plan’s key focus on urban agglomeration and the need for developing the necessary infrastructure to the benefit of such centres. When contextualizing the three reclassifications in 2014–15 in the philosophy of the report, it becomes clear that the second CA, seconded as it is by foreign donors, bases urban demarcation on the existing template for planning and visions for balance between the five North-South stretching development regions. The consecutive new announcements, however, show that this vision was contested: many local actors were anxious of being left behind in the restructuring process and others questioned how the new announcements would influence the still unresolved demarcation of federal borders.

The final demarcation of federal states (the seven regions) did away with the old model of regions and thus the outlined rationale for reaching economic and political balance through urban development. This contributes to explain, that 76 additional urban centres are demarcated in relation to the LLRC’s delineation of local units under their mandate of reducing these from 3447 to 753. Besides being of symbolic importance, urban status comes with privileged access to government funds and future investment as stipulated in the NUDS. Urban demarcation thus becomes an important part of how the new territorial structures secure a fair economic and political balance between federal regions. The importance of reaching an agreement and securing such a balance through urban demarcation is confirmed by at least three factors. Firstly, data (Fig. 3) confirms how all seven regions have a comparable level (above 30 per cent) of their local units being urban, independent of population densities, while the original philosophy of the NUDS, of stimulating economic growth in major population centres, is secured by the additional announcement of more sub-metropolitan cities (Fig. 2). Second, the LGOA further cements this political compromise by limiting future urban reclassifications, including the increase of existing cities in the urban hierarchy, making these conditional on meeting high population thresholds and countless additional criteria. Thirdly, the approved NUDS (2017) in its renewed form and with its two versions, expresses how urban development has become a domain where two logics of reaching a fair economic and political balance between regions shall be balanced.
5. Political geographies of urban reclassification

Through the preceding analysis of three decades of state restructuring and urban demarcation in Nepal, we have explored why and how the number of municipalities quadrupled in 2014–17. Specifically, we have focused on how rural-urban demarcation has been embedded in state-restructuring and the related (re)configurations of territorial structures. In the following, we will condense crucial insights into the political geographies of urban reclassification that this analysis provides.

Firstly, even though rural-urban reclassification became an important part of the state- restructuring, it hardly took precedence in the visions and discourses of key political actors’ (institutions, parties, individuals) regarding how the state should be restructured. The focus on how state borders should be changed was primarily based on other territorial concerns, such as the principles of federalism. Nevertheless, urban classification became a central political technology in the last phase of the drafting of the Constitution: In the beginning, when the provisional government in 2014–15, strongly supported by foreign donors, had attracted many more urban units, but also in the second round of urban classification. Since the final demarcation of the federal regions breaches with the existing regional borders, based on which the first reclassifications where intended to ensure a fair political and economic balance between geographical regions, additional urban classifications are needed if some sort of balance shall be reached.

Secondly, during consecutive moments of rupture, when existing territorial structures, such as spatial boundaries and the overlay of geologies, were contested and attempts made to unmake them, the very same structures proved very enduring. This was not only because most political actors were positioned in them, or because minor reconfigurations became part of the strategies of the old sitting elite to oppose the opposers, but also because they made an important role of the game in respect of which the political opposition could act. The final demarcation of federal regions testifies to a showdown with this model. However, as our analysis has shown, the old territorial architecture lives on in the dominant plans for urban development and infrastructural investments.

Thirdly, while Nepal’s state-restructuring has been informed by domestic politics, for many decades the geo-logics of power related to the country’s geo-political and physiographic contexts have had an enormous impact on state- restructuring. The continuous role of international donors (state and non-state) and other investors and their shifting geo-political and economic interests in the region, including Nepal, have played an important role in the state- restructuring. This was vividly illustrated when foreign actors almost swamped the country during and immediately afterward the 2015 earthquake and made many domestic actors anxious that Nepal’s independence was in danger. Likewise, with their strong engagement in designing the NUDS, foreign donors and development banks’ have played an important role in promoting urban investment as a vehicle for development. With their strong commitment to invest in infrastructure and climate resilience in cities and city regions, and with China and India’s continued geo-political investments, not least in road infrastructure and border regions, visions for growth of small towns and decentralised urbanization might have poor conditions. Eventually, such geo-logics of power may strongly limit Nepalese governments’ ability to strike the balance between the two logics of reaching a fair economic and political balance between regions through urban development and thus their chances of putting a lid on decades of political conflict.

In conclusion, we suggest that a political geography analysis of rural-urban demarcation along the lines we have set out here can contribute to a better understanding of how urbanization is embedded in power struggles both nationally and locally. By using a historical approach, it is possible to unpack how urban reclassification connects with other processes of border-making within the fixed territory of the state and how these borders are manifested in the territorial structures that make up the framework for governance and planning at all levels of the state. Insights into these processes are imperative for any future planning of sustainable urbanization, that in the case of Nepal needs to take stock of a paradoxical over-the-top degree of urban demarcations and twisted visions for urban development. In asserting that rural-urban demarcation is an important part of the political technology complex, we warn against abolishing the rural and urban categories as proposed by e.g. advocates of the planetary urbanization, as it would deprive urban analyses of important insights into the significant role of territorial policy. However, the wider implications of the entwined processes of declaring many new (larger) urban municipalities, the implementation of Nepal’s new territorial structures and the changing geo-logics of power point to the need for analysis of Nepal’s urban transformations that critically examine whether and how the new territorial structures in their implementation contribute to balance geographical and social inequalities.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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