



Workshop on the Political Crisis & Environmental Governance in the Himalayas

Workshop jointly organised by Pembroke College, Cambridge, Newcastle University
and Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge

Date: Thursday 7 May 2026

Venue: Seminar Room, Mond Building

Taking the recent 'Gen Z revolution' in Nepal as part of a moment of political upheaval and a surge of ethnonationalist rhetoric across the Himalayan region, we will first address the recent results of the Nepali elections, Gen Z activism in Nepal and beyond, and the politics of belonging in the Himalayan border areas that are both 'periphery' and critical points of exchange and geopolitical stakes. The day will begin with a keynote talk by Nepali journalist Amish Raj Mulmi, author of *All Roads Lead North: China, Nepal and the Contest for the Himalayas* followed by discussion and talks on the political crisis. In the afternoon, we will consider resource management, environmental crises and the social consequences of climate change within this broader political context, and end with a roundtable discussion. The following morning, we will host a screening of *No Monastery, No Village*, and a conversation with its filmmaker, Nepali climate justice activist Tashi Lhazom.

Programme:

09:15 | Welcome by Hildegard Diemberger and Beth Turk

09:30 – 10:15 | Keynote talk by Amish Raj Mulmi, 'A Place Where No One Lives': The Himalayan Borderlands from a Nepali perspective'

10:15 – 11.00 | Discussion by David Gellner. Q&A chaired by Charlotte Ramble.

11:00 | Tea/Coffee Break

11:30 – 12:45 | Panel 1 chaired by Andrew Sanchez

***Subina Shrestha**: 'From Memes to Mobilisation: Digital Culture, Gen Z, and the Rewiring of Political Power in Nepal'

***Sudip Pokharel**: 'Towards a new, inclusive political settlement or recycled politics of change? Nepal after the March elections'

***David Gellner and Krishna Adhikari**: 'Who or What is Gen-Z in the Nepalese context? Remarks on Generations and on a Comparison with Madagascar'

13:45 – 15:15 | Panel 2 chaired by Michael Bravo

***Astrid Hovden**: 'Limi's environmental and cultural heritage: thoughts on its challenges and political relevance'

***Kelly Fagan Robinson**: 'Making Local Conditions Legible: Limi Valley and co-curricular education for youth opportunity, civic engagement, and heritage conservation in Nepal and the UK'

***Ben Campbell**: 'Slow Violence, Infrastructural Injustices, and Misaligned Sustainability Transitions: Thinking About Language and Environmental Change among Tamang and other Indigenous Groups in Nepal'

***Iona MacDuff**: 'When the border is a climate frontline: environmental activism, state power, and indigeneity in the Himalayas'

15:15 | Tea/Coffee Break

15:30 – 16:45 | Panel 3 chaired by Christian Sorace

***Alice Millington**: 'Biosecure Borders: veterinary disease and human displacement along the Sino-Nepal frontier'

***Samira Patel**: 'From Drones to Phones: Mobile Futures at a Crossroads in Ladakh'

***Salina Dolmo Lama**: 'Can gen Z protests transform Nepal's political futures?'

17:00 – 18:30 | Extract from Subina Shrestha's BBC film and Q&A. This is followed by Roundtable discussion chaired by Michael Hutt.

ABSTRACTS

*Subina Shrestha (Filmmaker and Journalist)

'From Memes to Mobilisation: Digital Culture, Gen Z, and the Rewiring of Political Power in Nepal'

This presentation reports on the rapid rise of a Gen Z–driven political movement in Nepal, tracing how a wave of online expression evolved into a decentralized force capable of reshaping the country’s political landscape. Drawing on journalistic accounts and field observations, it shows how young activists used platforms like Discord to coordinate, amplify narratives, and mobilize at a pace that outstripped both legacy media and established political institutions. The analysis highlights a widening gap between digitally native forms of participation and traditional structures of power, revealing how networked youth movements can redefine civic engagement in real time. By documenting this shift through a journalistic lens, the presentation offers insight into how emerging media ecosystems are transforming both politics and the way it is reported.

*Sudip Pokharel (Independent Consultant)

'Towards a new, inclusive political settlement or recycled politics of change? Nepal after the March elections'

This presentation examines Nepal’s political landscape following the March 2026 elections, in which the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) secured a near two-thirds majority. The election took place in the wake of the Gen Z mobilization of September 2025 - a nationwide uprising that toppled the previous government after nationwide violence and loss of life. The mobilization reflected long-standing grievances over political impunity and the unequal distribution of authority and resources across caste, ethnic, geographic, and partisan lines. In this context, the RSP replaced the three major parties that had alternated in power since the republic’s establishment in 2008.

The new government differs significantly from its predecessors in composition and background: younger, more socially diverse, and largely drawn from outside the political class that designed the federal secular republic but struggled to meet public expectations of equality, justice, and economic opportunity. As the party most closely associated with the protest movement, RSP now faces exceptionally high public expectations. Citizens across varied constituencies anticipate that their own, often divergent, understandings of “change” will be realized under the new administration.

The transition has rendered established patterns of political authority and influence over resource allocation open to renegotiation. The talk explores whether this moment and the early actions of the new government signals the emergence of a new and inclusive political settlement or is it just an initial phase of another cycle in Nepal’s long-running politics of change.

*David Gellner (University of Oxford) and Krishna Adhikari (University of Oxford)

'Who or What is Gen-Z in the Nepalese context? Remarks on Generations and on a Comparison with Madagascar'

Even now both participants and observers are even now puzzling over what happened in Nepal on September 8 and 9th 2025. Plenty of conspiracy theories, simplistic explanations, and instant analyses are on offer: Was it a monarchist plot? Could it have been organized by a distant or neighbouring foreign power? Was it just a nihilistic expression of fury from a social-media-saturated youth angry at the banning of Facebook and WhatsApp and furious at the images they had seen of Nepokids (the children of politicians and the business elite) cavorting in ski resorts while they battled with unemployment? What was the role of the Army, of India, and of the monarchists? How was it possible for life to go back to 'normal' so quickly?

While it has been possible to reconstruct what happened on the first day, the events of the second day remain mysterious. What can be said with more certainty is who those who died as martyrs in the 'revolution' were.

It is possible also to make some preliminary comparisons with Madagascar, a country of similar population size and equally chequered history, which also had a Gen-Z revolution, though much more drawn-out.

*Astrid Hovden (University of Oslo)

'Limi's environmental and cultural heritage: thoughts on its challenges and political relevance'

*Kelly Fagan Robinson (University of Cambridge)

'Making Local Conditions Legible: Limi Valley and co-curricular education for youth opportunity, civic engagement, and heritage conservation in Nepal and the UK'

High-altitude Himalayan villages such as those in the Limi Valley are often framed as marginal or exceptional within national and international policy discourse. While empirically accurate, this framing risks misrecognising their analytic significance. The conditions shaping life in Limi—climate volatility, educational intermittency, health precarity, and uncertainty about collective futures—are not anomalies but intensified convergences of dynamics increasingly evident elsewhere, including in the United Kingdom. This talk treats Limi as an analytic foreground and positions citizen social science upskilling programme *Anthropology By Children* (ABC) as a key intervention through which these convergences are rendered legible. ABC is approached not as a participatory add-on, but as a capacity-building civic infrastructure that enables children to think with and communicate the conditions shaping their lives in forms that can circulate within policy, education, and governance systems. From this detailed case, implications are drawn for emerging and less-recognised challenges in the UK.

*Ben Campbell (University of Durham)

‘Slow Violence, Infrastructural Injustices, and Misaligned Sustainability Transitions: Thinking About Language and Environmental Change among Tamang and other Indigenous Groups in Nepal’

The language for talking about people’s relationships with the non-human world has undergone some massive changes in the nearly four decades of my work in Nepal. The pressure of population on resources was an initial dominant framing from the 1960s and 70s (the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation), which spawned a host of environmental conservation institutions, removing agency in environmental governance from indigenous communities. The sustainability paradigm introduced participatory approaches, and community forestry emerged into the 1990s as the major initiative of political importance for local environmental governance. Concerns about infrastructure impact and rights to energy access have dominated the last two decades, but the livelihood consequences of roads, cable connections and hydro-power need to be understood holistically, in the round, with attention to meanings as well as changes in rural labour migration. This paper will explore the slow violence of what is neglected when a place is described as ‘having no infrastructure’ (ignoring multi-species livelihood resilience systems), and consider efforts at indigenous worlding of sustainability transitions to counter extractive paradigms of supposedly renewable infrastructures.

*Iona MacDuff (University of East Anglia)

‘When the border is a climate frontline: environmental activism, state power, and indigeneity in the Himalayas’

*Alice Millington (University of Oxford)

‘Biosecure Borders: veterinary disease and human displacement along the Sino-Nepal frontier’

This paper considers how post-COVID biosecurity interventions have reconfigured sovereign power, mobility, and territoriality at the Sino-Nepal border in Eastern Nepal. Focusing on the Biosecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China (2021) and its uneven implementation, I draw on my ethnography with yak-herding communities in Taplejung and Sankhuwasabha Districts, conducted during (2021–2022) and after (2025) China’s ‘Zero COVID’ regulations were enforced in border settlements. Residents indicated that livestock trade bans have eliminated local pastoral economies, leaving a large number of herders planning permanent outmigration. I frame these herders as “COVID-19 migrants” that embody a new form of displacement produced through health securitisation. I argue that biosecurity has become a spatial technology of depopulation in a geopolitically sensitive Himalayan borderland, which may present territorial opportunities for neighbouring states. The persistence of biosecurity restrictions at the Sino-Nepal border aligns the PRC’s longstanding political ambitions – of nomadic resettlement, securitising its vulnerable southern border, and deepening its extraterritorial influence in Nepal – with global discourses of disease control. Ultimately, I demonstrate how biosecurity has facilitated a durable reordering of life and land in the Himalayan borderlands.

*Samira Patel (University of Cambridge)

'From Drones to Phones: Mobile Futures at a Crossroads in Ladakh'

Ladakh is a region where a myriad of mountain ranges meet – the Karakorum to the north, the Tibetan Plateau to the east, it lies nestled within the Western Himalayas. It is also situated at the crossroads of three countries – China, India and Pakistan – and at two contested borders. This talk will explore the socio-political context of two events that occurred during my 13-months of fieldwork in Ladakh. The first was a drone war between India and Pakistan in May 2025. The second was a youth-led protest for Ladakhi statehood that resulted in the deaths of 4 people and the torching of the local office of PM Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in September 2025.

These two events reveal how national, regional, and global politics unfold simultaneously in a local context. The technological milieu of this militarized region – from drones to phones – has transformed on the ground realities of Ladakhi people, particularly the youth who are more digitally connected even as their pastoral families struggle to gain basic access to internet. Much like living with animals, Donna Haraway suggests that living with technology is a “relational practice” (1991), in which man and machine, much like man and animal are not distinct categories, but ones that form hybrid and often asymmetrical relations.

As such, these events highlight a deeper transformation in Ladakh that affects changing pastoralist traditions across generations. On the one hand, elder Changpa pastoralists claim many younger Changpa do not have the skills or the fortitude to manage pastoralist traditions, which require 24/7 attention and animal care and herding in extreme and variable weather conditions. On the other hand, younger generations believe the way to revitalize pastoralist traditions is to increase connectivity, social media presence to create tourist packages that align with pastoralist livelihoods and fill gaps through technologies like drones and sophisticated fencing where human capital is increasingly lacking. This talk will explore what the generational gap says about the ways in which pastoralist community breaks down and is refashioned into other forms of connection and mobile community.

*Salina Dolmo Lama (University of British Columbia)

'Can gen Z protests transform Nepal's political futures?'

In September 2025, Nepal was shaken by youth protests against corruption and nepotism, state violence that left at least 76 people dead, and widespread destruction of infrastructure. The government was dissolved, an interim government was appointed, and elections were called for March 2026. This essay explores how social media became a lifeline for young people in a context of high labor emigration, creating a platform for new political claims, especially a demand for more inclusive access to the state. It also considers the relational dynamics of corruption and asks to what extent the Gen Z movement can transform old hierarchies within its own platform for change.