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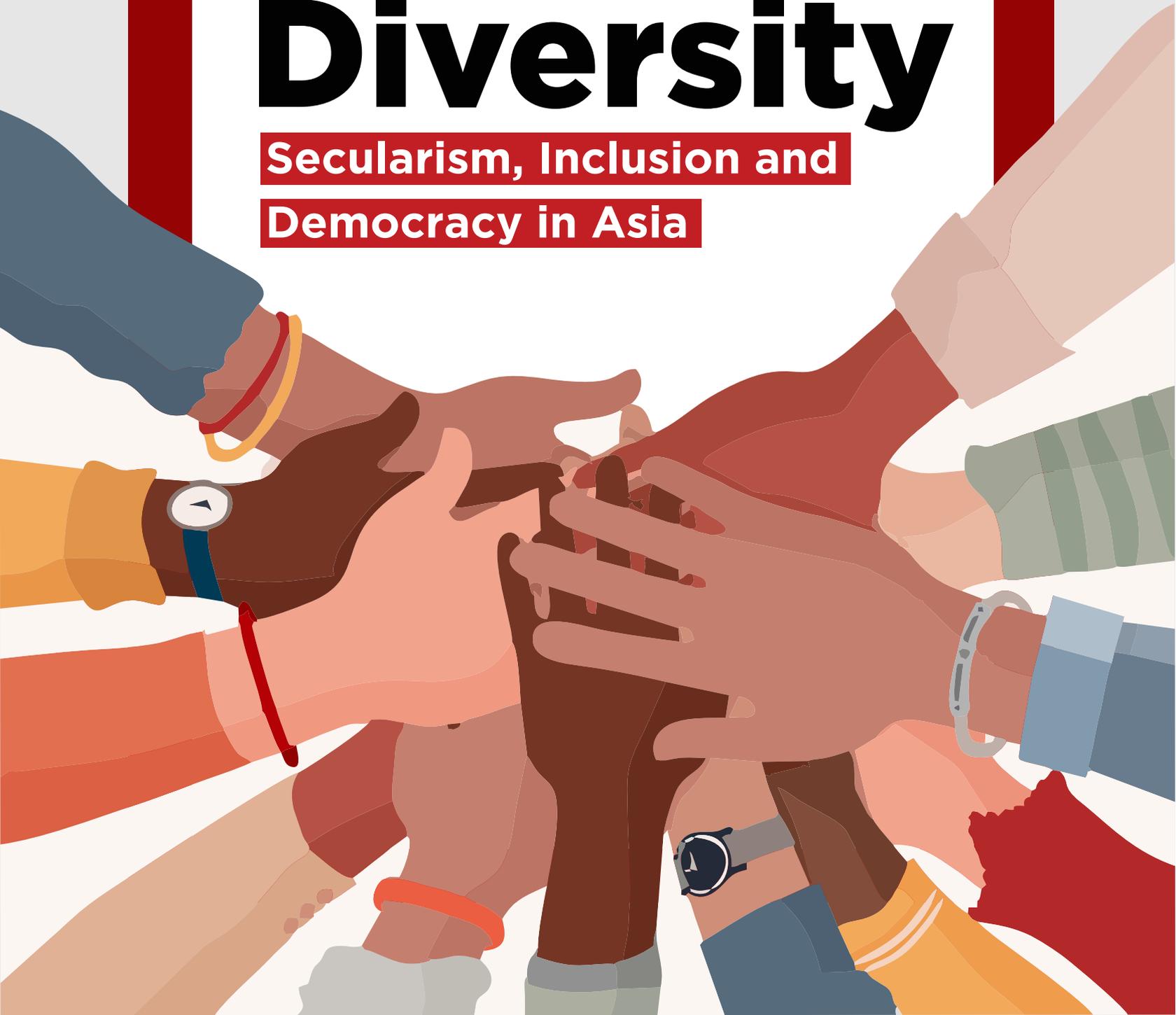
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Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and
Democracy in Asia





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By: Kamal Dev Bhattarai

Nepal's Secularism Faces Challenges

Nepal achieved multi-party democracy in 1951, ending the 104-year-long Rana regime. There was no mention of religion in the new democratic constitution that was promulgated in 1959 after the years of political squabbling. No doubt, the majority of Nepali people have followed Hinduism since ancient times, but it was only in 1962 that King Mahendra declared the country as a Hindu state (Kainee 2016). According to the National Census 2011, 81.3 percent of the population identify themselves as Hindu, followed by Buddhism, which is at nine percent.

With the restoration of democracy in 1990, a new democratic constitution was introduced through an expert panel, thus setting the course for a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democracy. This charter retained Nepal's status as a Hindu state, despite some protests from ethnic minority groups who wanted a secular state. Although prefigured from the 1950s onwards, serious and more mainstream demands for secularism emerged only in 1990 after the fall of the party-less Panchayat regime (Letizia 2017).¹

Between 1990 to 2007, the discussion on secularism was at the margins of national discourse. During this period, the monarchy took a

slew of measures for the promotion and preservation of Hinduism through different state institutions and various Hindu organizations. It was the erstwhile Nepali monarchy that established Hinduism as a state religion. This was done as the monarchs wanted to propagate the myth of their holy Hindu lineage, with the reigning monarch being no less than an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and as such, was above the law.

In 2005-2006, Nepal underwent a big political change. The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) — an alliance of mainstream political parties — and Maoist rebels, joined hands to overthrow the autocratic monarchy of King Gyanendra, which he established in February 2005 through a political coup. Bowing down to the demands of people, then King Gyanendra agreed to restore Parliament which was dissolved by democratically elected Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2001.

Secularism was not the prime agenda of the 2006 people's movement or by the Maoist rebels. But Nepal was abruptly declared a secular state in 2006 by the reinstated Parliament through a House proclamation. Such provision was adopted by the Interim Constitution in 2007 — a compromise document of the SPA and the Maoist party.

¹ The panchayat (assembly) is the oldest system of local governance in Nepal. In December 1990, King Mahendra dissolved the Parliament, and declared all political parties as illegal. He then created a new political system wherein the people can elect their representatives through the various panchayat which were organized at the village, town, district and national level. However, real power remained in the hands of King Mahendra who ruled in an authoritarian manner — *the editor*.



Image: www.trtworld.com

“It was the erstwhile Nepali monarchy that established Hinduism as a state religion. This was done as the monarchs wanted to propagate the myth of their holy Hindu lineage, with the reigning monarch being no less than an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and as such, was above the law.

Still, many raise questions about the opaque process that the Parliament had adopted to declare Nepal as a secular state since there were no adequate public consultations. Later, it was endorsed during the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly (CA) in 2008. From 2008 to 2015, there was not much public discourse on religion as the major parties remained committed to secularism. During the drafting process of the Constitution in 2015, the people's opinion was sought on this contentious issue. According to pro-Hindu forces, the CA did not publicize its report because majority of the respondents were in favor of having a Hindu state.

With the initiation of the voting process on each and every article of the draft constitution, the pro-monarchist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) led by Kamal Thapa registered a proposed amendment, urging the House to vote in favor of a Hindu state. But the CA overwhelmingly voted down the proposal to reaffirm Nepal's secular status. Of the 601 CA members, only 21 members voted in favor of the proposal, as the major parties stood against the revival of a Hindu state. This was a rare occasion when a Nepali parliament had voted on a religious matter.

In the final days of the drafting process, the issue of religion emerged as a bone of contention among the top leaders of the major parties, primarily among the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre. Eventually, the parties agreed on the issue of secularism, incorporating an explanatory provision assuring that secularism will not hurt Hinduism. Article 4 of the 2015 Constitution states: “Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican State.” The explanation further says that “for the purposes of this Article, 'secular' means religious, cultural freedoms, including protection of religion and culture handed down from time immemorial.”

Hindu Sentiments Within the Major Parties are Rising

After the country adopted secularism in 2007, there was not so much visible dissatisfaction within the major parties. None of the parties used religion as a political tool to advance their objectives. But after a decade and a half, the situation is gradually changing as more and more leaders are leaning to the Hindu agenda.



Image: www.thediplomat.com

“New political forces are embracing the Hindu agenda in order to advance their agenda, though Nepali society is not yet polarized along religious lines.

Now, there is a growing appetite for Hinduism inside the major political parties, particularly inside Nepali Congress — the grand-old democratic party. The key leadership of the major parties still adheres to the principle of secularism, but their gradual leaning to the Hindu agenda can be observed. In 2018, the Nepali Congress convened its Mahasamiti meeting, the party's second-most powerful decision-making body, where over 40 percent of the delegates petitioned the party leadership to amend the party's charter to stand in favor of a Hindu state.

Advocates of the cause within the party argue that people were not consulted or asked on it during the writing of the Constitution. Of the 1,600 party

delegates assembled in Kathmandu for the meeting, around 700 (over 43 percent) supported a signature campaign to press the party leadership to re-establish a Hindu state.

As prime minister from 2018 to 2021, CPN-UML Chair KP Sharma Oli took a series of measures to placate Hindu sentiments, including installing a golden *jalhari* at the Pashupatinath Temple.² In 2021, PM Oli worshiped the idols of Lord Rama and Sita at his official residence in Baluwatar before sending them to keep in Madi Ayodhyapur in Chitwan District. Through such initiatives, Prime Minister Oli was able to win the goodwill of the Hindu constituency.

New Pro-Hindu Forces are Emerging

With the passage of time, new political forces are embracing the Hindu agenda in order to advance their interest, though Nepali society is not yet polarized along religious lines. Some pro-Hindu political parties have already emerged since the country became a secular state in 2007. Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) is the only notable political force that is campaigning for the restoration of the monarchy and the Hindu state. Recently, there was a split in the party when its former president, Kamal Thapa, formed a new party called Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal whose ideological line is same to that of the mother party.

Over the past few years, some of the new political forces have tilted towards the Hindu agenda to gain political strength. Rabindra Mishra, a veteran journalist who now leads the Bibeksheel Sajha Party, has proposed dismantling Nepal's federal structures and holding a referendum on secularism. His proposal attracted fierce criticisms from advocates of secularism inside the party leading to a split.

The then Sajha Party had, through its national convention in 2020, unanimously passed a resolution demanding a referendum to decide the fate of secularism. At around the same time, Mishra, in his political document 'Changing Course: Nation above Notion', argued that in a country with 80 percent Hindus, the result of a referendum is a foregone conclusion in favor of the Hindu state.

As he asserts: “In the past one decade, scores of Hindu outfits have emerged in Kathmandu. In 2020, a series of protests took place across the country and in capital Kathmandu demanding the restoration of Hindu state” (2021).

²Pashupatinath Temple is a Hindu temple in Kathmandu dedicated to the god Pashupati, Nepal's national deity — *the editor*.

In his essay for the magazine *The Caravan*, Vishnu Sharma wrote, “While civil and political protests are a strong and regular feature of Nepali politics, these recent developments assume significance because of the coming together of various fringe groups on two broad demands: the restoration of the monarchy and the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra” (2021). But compared to the past, the numbers of participants in those protests are gradually increasing.

Recent public polls also show that the number of Hindu sympathizers is increasing. The survey conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal, a non-governmental organization, found that 51.7 percent of their respondents are in favor of declaring Nepal as a Hindu state. On the other hand, 40.3 percent said they are in favor of secularism, while 8.1 percent withheld their views.

According to the survey, the support for a Hindu state, at around 70 percent, is highest in Janakpur province (Subedi 2021). Pro-Hindu forces argue that secularism has become a fertile land for religious conversion, threatening the Hindu religion. But as Dipendra Jha argues, “if Hindu groups fear that Christians are forcing people to convert, they can follow the proper channels and ask the police to monitor and investigate such alleged instances” (2014).

“Or,” he further adds, “they can even pressure the Nepal government to bring forth an appropriate legal policy. Instead, these groups are issuing statements in favour of a Hindu state, which are aimed at weakening confidence and creating psychological terror among religious minorities. Secularism provides legal and psychological protection to religious minorities against majoritarian hegemony.”

External Influence

In 2014, India's Hindu-nationalist party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power with a thumping majority. Due to the close political, cultural and civilizational affinity between the two countries, political development in one country obviously affects the other. BJP, through its various frontal organizations, is pushing the agenda of a Hindu state in Nepal. More than that, BJP has adopted a policy of building party-to-party relations with the political parties in Nepal. Though BJP leaders are not advising Nepali leaders directly to establish a Hindu state, they do not mince words to say that Nepal should become one.



Image: www.vina.cc

“Though BJP leaders are not advising Nepali leaders directly to establish a Hindu state, they do not mince words to say that Nepal should become one.

On the other hand, Nepali leaders are keen to learn from BJP's success in winning elections. Prime Minister and Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba who was in India for an official visit in April 1-3 visited the party office of BJP.

Nepal-India relation expert Nihar. R. Nayak observes: “This was the first time a Nepali prime minister officially visited the party office of the ruling Indian party. It suggests a deep level of relationship as well as political maturity of the Nepali Congress and the BJP, both of which strongly believe in multiparty democracy, democratic values, norms, and constitutionalism” (2022).

Similarly, Prime Minister Deuba also visited India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh which is currently ruled by BJP leader Yogi Adityanath and offered puja there. Uttar Pradesh shares a border with Nepal and has close societal, cultural and religious connections.

As Nayak points out: “Uttar Pradesh has a special relationship with Nepal given its geographical contiguity, cultural linkages. Most Hindu Nepalis believe that taking a holy dip in the Ganges in Varanasi could help them achieve salvation. The only Nepal study center in India is located at Banaras Hindu University” (2022).

This is probably the first time Nepal's Prime Minister interacted only with the BJP, breaking the tradition of meeting with a wide range of politicians in New Delhi. Earlier in October 2021,

a team from Nepali Congress led by Prakash Sharan Mahat visited New Delhi at the invitation of BJP. Along with meeting BJP leaders, the NC delegation also visited Uttar Pradesh to meet with Adityanath, which reflects growing closeness between the two sides. In the meeting, Adityanath reportedly told the NC delegation to embrace cultural nationalism, a veiled reference to the Hindu agenda. The NC and BJP have agreed to expand their cooperation through exchanges and visits.

“Arguably, the Hindu agenda is likely to become more prominent in the days to come.

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Over the past few years, BJP leaders are becoming more vocal in their demand to protect the Hindu religion and check rampant conversion in the rural areas. For the same purpose, BJP is building a network with Nepal's political parties. In fact, Adityanath, who has a strong emotional attachment with Nepal, is openly pushing for the revival of the Nepali Hindu state.

Writing for the online newspaper The Print, Sharat Pradhan and Atul Chandra observed: "That secularism is not his cup of tea has been expressed quite explicitly by Adityanath in his article penned under the headline, 'Antar-raashtreey saazishon ke jaal me phansta Himalayee Rashtra Nepal' ("The Himalayan state of Nepal has been caught in international conspiracies")... Describing 18 May 2006 as a 'Black Day', when the country's kangaroo parliament passed an 'unfortunate and unexpected' resolution declaring Nepal a secular state, Adityanath blames Maoists, Islamic militants, and Christians for the 'unconstitutional' decision" (2022).

BJP Spokesperson Vijay Sonkar Shastri, who was in Nepal in November, predicted that Nepal would sooner or later become a Hindu state (*People's Review* 2021). Speaking to media reporters in Pokhara, he said Nepal was a Hindu nation and it will remain so. BJP leaders are cautioning their Nepali counterparts to take measures to curtail religious conversions that are allegedly occurring under the new secular dispensation.

Conclusion

Though pro-Hindu voices are gaining ground, the chance of any changes in the current secular state is unlikely in the near future, as the major parties remain fully committed to the current Constitution. Though the Constitution allows a referendum on a matter of national importance, the road to one is not easy. Two-thirds of the members of Parliament need to back the proposal.

Article 275, which envisages referendums, declares: "If a decision is made by a two-thirds majority of the total number of the members of the federal Parliament that it is necessary to hold a referendum concerning any matter of national importance, the decision on that matter may be taken by way of referendum. Matters relating to the referendum and other relevant matters shall be as provided for in the federal law."

Additionally, there is not so much polarization of Nepali society in terms of religion. Still, some political parties want to advance their position through the Hindu agenda like what BJP is doing in India. And arguably, the Hindu agenda is likely to become more prominent in the days to come. ■

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