

## NEPAL'S NATIONAL INTERESTS PROJECT – Part 5 Challenges to Secularism in Nepal

religious violence has altered from arsons and looting to open usage of weapons. "Hence, inter-religious conflict is likely to remain a potential challenge to the country's social harmony", she said.

The final paper on "**Maintaining Religious Harmony: Issues and Recommendations**" by Nishchal N. Pandey, Director of the CSAS said that the proof of how several faiths lived side by side enjoying trust and mutual respect in Nepal is in the fact that there had rarely been a civil disturbance in the name of religion in the past. Hindus regard Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu as it is customary for many Buddhists to visit Hindu temples. There was absolutely no animosity between Hinduism and Christianity. Missionary schools – St. Xavier's and St. Mary's opened in the 50s produced the country's most successful doctors, engineers, businessmen, Army Generals and even journalists and these are still regarded as respected institutions of learning. Politicization of religion and regular addiction of politicians to provoke tension among various religious groups for vote bank politics is a tendency that has to be nipped at the bud and the pluralistic culture of the Nepalese needs to be nurtured.

Pandey however was concerned that the entire South Asian region was in no shortage of various forms of religious fundamentalism such as Hindu militancy, Christian assertiveness, Sikh identity, overly nationalist Buddhism and Wahabi brand of Islam. He reminded the audience that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic and President S.W.R.D Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk. In Pakistan, a Governor has recently been assassinated for trying to uphold the rights of minorities and in Bhutan and Bangladesh too, there have been instances of vandalism of religious shrines of minorities. In Afghanistan, the Taliban vandals destroyed the

famous Bamiyan Buddha because they viewed it as 'un-Islamic'.

Despite being located in this fanatical neighborhood, harmonization of religious practices and methods of worship in Nepal had been a factor of great admiration over the years [but] things are changing swiftly and politicization of religion is making rapid in-roads. Contours of secularism remains ambiguous, Hindu extremism is on the rise, Christians and Muslims have been subjected to violent attacks hence they are also asserting their rights. This has led to friction and tension in the otherwise peaceful society, Pandey opined.



The Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organized a one-day conference on 'Challenges to Secularism in Nepal' on April 1, 2011 in Kathmandu. It was part -5 of the Nepal's National Interests project that the CSAS is undertaking with the support of the KAS since 2009. First of its kind to be held in the country, the conference had five well analyzed academic papers provoking alternate thinking and free and frank discussions on the newly introduced secular credentials of Nepal since 2006. About 50 participants representing the universities, academia, strategic community, security services and the media were part of the intellectual exercise.

Presenting his paper on 'Secularism in Nepal:

**An Assessment of Future Challenges'** Prof. Rabindra Khanal of the Department of Political Science, Tribhuvan University briefly outlined the background of the evolution of the secular ideals which was first declared by virtue of the Interim Constitution of 2006. "It came as a surprise to many people because the concept was new for them even though the discussion was going for sometime among the ethnic communities and the liberal activists in Kathmandu. Ethnic groups and minority religious groups who had legitimately felt alienated by the Hindu character of the state rejoiced over it. It was a political decision made by parliament but the decision was made in



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haste without adequate public debate and discussion", he said. While talking about secularism in the past, the country was never officially declared as 'secular' but always practiced religious tolerance. Despite the implementation of Hindu laws, other religions always

received considerable respect. The Lichhavi King Mandev for example was a devotee of Lord Vishnu but he erected Buddhist stupas and took their guardianship. The Malla Kings were also



Hindus but their dealings with Buddhists were not discriminatory. Prithvi Narayan Shah banished the Christian missionaries not because of his hatred to the religion but due to his fear of British Imperialism. But now that we are already an officially declared secular country, Prof. Khanal felt that the concept in the Nepali context faces challenges from two fronts simultaneously:- Externally imposed secularism and a reactive Hindu nationalism that claims to be based on indigenous political culture but they too get support from groups outside the country. While suggesting some concrete suggestions in order to make secularism work in the country, Prof. Khanal stated:- A Common Civil Code acceptable to all citizens throughout the country is the prime need of the hour. Since these laws in the past were codified and implemented from the Hindu religious literatures, these have to be nullified and new laws based on secular aspects as well as natural laws need to be implemented. Similarly, school

curriculum needs to be based on secular principles. Traditional cultural and moral values from a particular religious brand need to be revised. All Newari rituals and festivals are somehow connected with the head of state, particularly with the Shah Kings. The presence of the head of state is required while worshipping Gods and Goddesses during several festivals of Kathmandu. It is yet to be seen what happens if a Muslim or a Christian becomes the President of this country, Prof. Khanal queried. He also questioned the rationale of providing Dashain allowance for Hindus and grant for Haj pilgrimage after we have already become secular, otherwise the state needs to support religious activities of all the religions. Second paper on 'Secularism and the Challenges Faced by Nepal' by Mr. Prakash Rimal, Deputy Editor of *The Himalayan Times* introduced some theoretical understanding of secularism i.e. deep respect even for individuals and small groups, equality of all the people, rational approach to problem solving through examination of facts and a society without a common ideal type of behavior. However, for the first time in Nepal, the majority Hindus are becoming aware and self-conscious about their identity because of the slow decline of their population from 88.8 percent of the total population in 1952/54 to 86.5 percent in 1991 to 80.6 percent in 2011. "The Census being carried out this year [2011], will surely have more startling revelations to make in terms of change in religious demography", he said. Assessing the dangerous rise of fundamentalism in Nepali society, Rimal quoted several scholars that viewed it as "arising from a sense of alienation on the one hand and resentment against unfair exclusion, whether political, economic or social."

Militant groups, weak policing or lack of intelligence on their real intentions, diverse ethnic groups and often changing demands



pertaining to protection of their culture and religion, role of political parties which although cautious for now could be incited in the future to make an impact on vote bank politics together with the role of proselyte movements - all need to be watched very carefully by the state in order to ensure that secularism is not hijacked to serve interests of a particular section. Journalist Rimal however was optimistic of the role of the judiciary in the country together with the role of the media which has restrained itself from instigating ethnic or religious sentiments.

Another paper on 'The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and Hinduvta in Nepal: Challenges and Future' by Amish Raj Mulmi, Features Editor of *The Kathmandu Post* provided a lot of useful information on the structure, recruiting process, cross-border linkages and growing influence of an extreme right wing organization such as the HSS which has the sole agenda of promoting Hindu nationalism in South Asia. The HSS's chapter office according to Mulmi was set-up in 1992 in Nepal and has today opened up offices in 35 districts (mostly in the terai) with known networks in 53 districts. It could try to make militant Hindu nationalism palatable to groups that have felt alienated by 'New Nepal' and perhaps even reinvent itself radically and use religion as a tool for political mobilization as its parent organization did in the 80s in India. However, according to Mulmi, as of now it is still an incipient organization while its proposed design to rouse fanaticism is also at a nascent

stage. "The state has to be aware of the disconnect between the new secular state and the old pillars of Hindu culture that permeate Nepali society", he said.

The fourth paper on 'The Nepali Society, Secularism and Minority Religious Groups' by Lecturer Monika Timsina of the Padma Kanya Campus said that the history of Christianity dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a few Catholics from Rome came to Nepal, met with Malla kings and started evangelism. About 600 Newars were converted and churches were established in Kathmandu valley. However, according to available historical accounts from 1768 until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslims along with Christians were treated as virtual outcasts both socially and politically as they were viewed as foreigners. Ms. Timsina also informed that after the declaration of secularism in the country, a group of Christians have established a FM radio station to spread religious message to the people. "They probably felt the need to establish such a station because the state controlled Radio and t.v. stations overwhelmingly broadcast Hindu religious



programs and messages. Since there are no laws for the registration of Churches, more than 309 Churches in the valley and Christian organizations are having to register as NGOs.

Like other speakers, she also opined that religious conflict in Nepal is rising and the form of inter-