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# **The Politics of Faith: Religious Nationalism and Nepal's Democratic Landscape**

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## **Abstract**

Religious nationalism is a significant force in politics that has a profound impact on a nation's democratization process. This research focuses on the case of Nepal and aims to explore the historical context of the country to understand the influence of religious identity on democratization. Instead of relying on public opinion surveys, the study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing historical records and case studies. The research examines the role of religious actors in shaping the political landscape and highlights the challenges posed by religious nationalism to democratization. It emphasizes the need for institutional resilience and legislative measures to protect pluralism and inclusivity. The research concludes that religious nationalism emerges as an ideology and an identity-driven political force that will shape the course of Nepal's democratization, requiring a deep comprehension of its consequences and actions to strengthen the country for the future.

**Keywords:** Democratization, ethnic identity, multiculturalism, pluralism, religious nationalism

## **Introduction**

Religious nationalism is a complex political ideology that combines the concept of national identity with a specific religious belief system. It advocates for the alignment of a nation's cultural and political aspects with the values and principles of a particular religion. Scholars often describe religious nationalism as the merging of nationalist sentiments with a unique religious identity, emphasizing the inseparable bond between the nation and its religious

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legacy. The collective identity of a political community is significantly influenced by a shared cultural characteristic, which is frequently grounded in religious aspects (Smith, 1991). Religion becomes an integral part of national identity. It creates a sense of solidarity and common purpose among the people. National identity rooted in religious nationalism is based on historical events that involve religious communities, injustice, and collective resistance (Breuilly, 1993). Political leaders strategically utilize religious symbols, ceremonies, and customs as powerful cultural symbols to garner support and further their political objectives. This phenomenon is emphasized in the analysis of the intersection of religion and politics (Juergensmeyer, 2023).

Democratization is a transformative process that involves the establishment and consolidation of democratic values, principles, and institutions within a political system, as well as expanding political freedoms, protecting individual rights, and developing inclusive governance structures. Democratization refers to the process of establishing or revising constitutions and electoral systems to ensure the inclusion and participation of different social classes. The promotion of democratic institutions necessitates the active participation of individuals, the protection of human rights, and the development of responsible and transparent political institutions. Hence, democratization is the process of empowering people through civil and political rights and strengthening democratic institutions. However, the success of democratization relies on several factors and actors' attitudes and behaviours, as well as a culture of constitutional values. In this connection, Diamond (1999) highlights in his book the significance of transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democratic governance and the obstacles that arise during the establishment of democratic institutions.

At the same time, the relationship between religious identity and political power is a thorn in the side of democratization. When religion is used as a political tool, it can lead to the marginalization of minorities and restrictions on freedom of speech, undermining the democratic principles that are at the core of democratization (Juergensmeyer, 2023). To him, the rise of religious nationalism threatens pluralism and inclusivity in democracies. Beech (2019) highlights instances where religious identity, especially in Buddhism, overrides pacifism principles, leading to exclusionary practices and conflicts. As the world continues to change and political dynamics shift, the relationship between religion and politics becomes a major topic of discussion, prompting an urgent examination of its impact on democratic development. It was J.S. Mill who famously said, "The value of a nation in the long term is the value of the people who make it up," and this study plunges into the core of a critical investigation—the interplay between religious nationalism and democratization in Nepal. Whether at a global, national, or local level, the relationship between religious identity and political activities shapes the parameters of governance, prompting us to explore the intricate web of Nepal's rich religious diversity. In today's global arena, the relationship between religion and politics is playing a crucial role in determining the future course of nations and their governing structures. In the midst of deep geopolitical shifts, the convergence of religious nationalism with democratic governance is a crucial topic worth exploring.

One of the most significant trends on the world stage is the revival of identity politics based

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on religious beliefs. Nations are struggling to redefine their national identities, and religious stories are often at the core of political discourse. The complex relationship between religion and the state, especially in the realm of secularism, complicates the global context. The debate about whether or not religious values should be mainstreamed in public life raises issues that are relevant to many different cultural and political settings. One of the trends that we have noticed is the rise of political movements that have a clear religious focus. These political movements, which combine religious identity with political aspirations, have a significant impact on governance models. The global trends are resonating in Nepal, reinforcing their importance in the national and local context. As Nepal struggles with its own socio-political dynamics, the relationship between religion and politics becomes more complex. Examining these nuances in the Nepalese context adds value to the wider discussion on the nexus between religious nationalism and democratization around the world. Navigating the intersection of religious identity politics and democratization raises a thorny question: How does religious identity intersect with political processes to shape Nepal's democratization journey?

The goal of this study is to unravel the complex dynamics of religious identity politics, better understand the challenges of religious nationalism, and identify strategic interventions for sustainable democratization in Nepal. The primary goal is to provide nuanced insights on the relationship between religious identity politics and democratic governance to gain a better understanding of Nepal's political landscape.

### **Literature Review**

Nepal is on the verge of democratization. A careful examination is necessary to comprehend the intricate relationship between religious nationalism and the process of democratization in Nepal. According to Pfaff (1993), religious nationalism in Nepal is deeply rooted in the nation's history: in the power of the monarchy, and raises fundamental questions about how religious identity affects the social and political fabric of the nation. Pfaff-Czarnecka's comprehensive examination of Nepal's history reveals the development of religious nationalism, shedding light on the close connection between Hinduism and the monarchy, which has served as the fundamental pillar of the country's socio-political framework. Nevertheless, this historical basis stimulates a critical evaluation of the dual role played by religious nationalism in Nepal's political arena, acting as both a unifying and divisive influence.

Another scholar discusses the difficulties of reconciling a heterogeneous religious culture with a secular state in Nepal (Sakya, 1990). It raises the question of how to promote inclusion without compromising religious liberty. Likewise, the study of political movements in Nepal by Gellner (1997) highlights the influence of religious identity on political dynamics. In this connection, this study examines how religious identities act as powerful levers for political mobilization, influencing the process of democratization. Such analysis leads to an examination of the possibility of political exploitation of religious feelings, which in turn raises questions about the moral nature of political movements. Bhattachan's (1995) paper on local governance provides a systematic analysis of how religious dynamics affect local governance at the grass-roots level.

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Scholars on identity and belonging argue that religion is at the core of religious nationalism because it seeks to create a sense of belonging within a particular religious community. In this context, the nation is not only seen as a nation-state but also as a society of people with a common religious faith. This religious identity becomes an essential part of national identity, creating a sense of solidarity and unity. In the words of Anthony Smith (1991), national identity is a mental image of a political community that is both sovereign and common in its cultural attributes. This mental image is deeply influenced by religious elements, as in the case of religious nationalism.

Observing from a historical perspective, the development of religious nationalism is significantly influenced by the historical context. The narrative of religious nationalism is often shaped by historical events that involve religious communities. The formation of a collective identity is influenced by various factors, such as perceived historical injustices, triumphs, or a shared history of resistance against external forces. The historical aspect grants a feeling of coherence and validation to the religious nationalist storyline, which in turn shapes the self-perception of communities within the framework of the nation. John Breuilly (1993), in his work on nationalism, emphasizes the historical aspect by asserting that nationalism frequently involves 'a claim to historical continuity and a common descent'. This concept of historical continuity is essential for constructing a national identity that includes religious roots.

According to political mobilization theory, political leaders and movements use religious nationalism as a tool to mobilize their followers. They frame political programmes in religious terms to win the support of religious communities. This political use of religious identity is most effective in areas where religion has a strong influence on the population. The political elite combine religious fanaticism with nationalist fanaticism to hold on to power and rally the masses. Juergensmeyer, in his book, highlights how religious nationalism becomes a dynamic force in political mobilization. He argues that religious symbols and narratives are used strategically to advance political agendas (2023).

Huntington's Third Wave Theory (1993) outlines the global phenomenon of democratization that swept across various regions in the late 20th century. The framework suggests that democratization occurs in waves, and Huntington identifies three waves up to the 1990s. In the case of Nepal, the democratization process in 1990, marked by the end of absolute monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, aligns with the global trend described by Huntington. This phase set the stage for increased political pluralism and aspirations for democratic governance in Nepal. However, Huntington's subsequent work, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" (2011), introduces a different dimension by emphasizing cultural and religious fault lines as potential sources of conflict in the post-Cold War era. It suggests that cultural and religious identities would become primary sources of conflict, and nations would align based on these identity lines rather than ideological or economic considerations. In a country characterized by a diverse religious landscape, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and others, religious nationalism becomes a significant factor. The clash of civilizations in Nepal is not necessarily a confrontation between major world religions but rather a competition for recognition and

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dominance among diverse religious communities within the nation.

Scholars on religious symbols maintained that the use of religious symbols, rituals, and traditions is a powerful tool of cultural markers. These symbols not only reinforce a sense of shared identity but also serve to distinguish the nation from others. The cultural dimension of religious nationalism is intertwined with religious symbolism, contributing to the creation of a distinct cultural identity rooted in a specific religious tradition. Smith (1991) emphasizes the role of cultural symbols, including religious elements, in shaping national identity and establishing a shared identity that distinguishes nations.

Similarly, ethnic and cultural homogeneity maintain that religious nationalism advocates for a homogeneous society, often leading to exclusionary practices against minority religious groups. This pursuit of a unified religious and cultural identity is driven by the belief that it is essential for the stability and coherence of the nation. Anderson (2020), in his seminal work "Imagined Communities", explores nationalism and social construction, highlighting shared culture and identity within religious nationalism, which is closely tied to a specific religious tradition. Another element that contributed to the emergence of religious nationalism is closely linked to geopolitical dynamics, which are shaped by factors such as territorial conflicts and historical engagements with neighboring countries. The perceived threat from external forces may intensify the need for a unified religious identity. The geopolitical dimension complicates religious nationalism, as external factors and historical conflicts shape the narrative and shape a collective religious identity. Nationalism emerges from social and economic changes, often as a response to external pressures and threats, thereby consolidating a national identity (Gellner, 1983).

The study analyzes the impact of religious nationalism by taking into account variables such as community involvement and decision-making. This methodology calls for an examination of how local governance structures strengthen or weaken existing power structures based on religious identity. By scrutinizing these elements, the study aims to uncover the intricate dynamics through which religious nationalism influences and shapes community interactions and decision processes at the local level.

### ***Antidemocratic Religious Nationalism and Democratization***

Antidemocratic religious nationalism, the fusion of religious identity and political authority, has a profound influence on the democratization process and multicultural societies. This phenomenon poses numerous challenges, primarily in terms of undermining democratic values. A key outcome is the emergence of a dominant religious identity, which marginalizes minority religious groups and undermines fundamental democratic principles such as religious freedom and equality (Philpott, 2007).

According to Huntington (1993), the involvement of religious identity in politics can lead to a decline in democratic values, resulting in a hierarchy of citizenship based on religious affiliation. Additionally, the presence of antidemocratic religious nationalism may limit freedom of expression, particularly for those who express dissenting views against the prevailing religious ideology (Kuru, 2009). This restriction hinders the open exchange of

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ideas, which is essential for a thriving democratic discourse. Kuru highlights the evident conflict between religious nationalism and the promotion of free expression.

Furthermore, the presence of antidemocratic religious nationalism exacerbates the already existing ethnic and religious divisions, fostering a divisive mindset of "us versus them." This exacerbation of polarization poses significant obstacles to the establishment of inclusive and multicultural societies, as highlighted by Gurr's (1994) study on ethnopolitical conflicts. Moreover, religiously motivated violence and conflicts are closely associated with antidemocratic religious nationalism, leading to instances of persecution, discrimination, and intercommunal violence (Toft, 2010). Toft's research examines the role of religion in escalating conflicts, which presents substantial challenges to both peacebuilding efforts and the process of democratization.

On the other hand, antidemocratic religious nationalism poses a significant obstacle to the fundamental values of multicultural societies, especially in promoting the peaceful coexistence of various cultural and religious groups. The essence of pluralism, a crucial aspect of these societies, is undermined when religious nationalism promotes a single religious or cultural identity, as pointed out by Modood (2007). The scholar emphasized the idea that this degradation hinders the natural growth of inclusive and diverse societies, emphasizing the need to maintain cultural and religious variety to promote social cohesion.

Kymlicka (1995) highlights the apprehensions surrounding minority rights due to the presence of anti-democratic religious nationalism. This ideology tends to prioritize the dominant religious group while disregarding the needs and interests of minority communities, leading to their marginalization. Kymlicka emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and protecting the rights of minority groups as a fundamental component of the triumph of multiculturalism. Thus, religious nationalism hinders intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding among diverse cultural and religious groups, highlighting the importance of fostering a shared sense of citizenship through bridges (Banks, 2008).

### **Methods**

This study employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to analyse the influence of religious nationalism on the political landscape in Nepal, deviating from traditional research methodologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Instead of conducting interviews or surveys, the research solely relies on secondary data sources. By utilising secondary data, the study is able to thoroughly examine historical events, political advancements, and the intersection of religion and politics in Nepal. The qualitative aspect of the research involves a meticulous analysis of existing literature, historical records, and relevant reports, including scholarly articles, books, and archival materials that shed light on the intricate development of religious identity in Nepal (Gellner, 1992; Guneratne, 2002).

In addition to qualitative insights, the study utilizes quantitative secondary data analysis to identify patterns, trends, and correlations pertaining to religious nationalism and political dynamics in Nepal. This involves examining various sources, such as existing datasets, reports, and statistical information from government records, international organizations,

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and academic studies (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019). By solely relying on secondary data sources, the research is able to access a wealth of pre-existing information and insights, thereby enhancing the analysis of the political landscape and the impact of religious actors in Nepal. By synthesizing and critically evaluating this diverse secondary data, the study aims to contribute significantly to the scholarly comprehension of the complex interplay between religion and politics in Nepal.

### **Data Presentation**

Nepal, a country with a varied geographical landscape located in the Himalayas, possesses a vast array of religious and cultural customs. The development of religious identity in Nepal is intricately intertwined with its historical, social, and political progressions. The evolution of religious identity in Nepal has undergone numerous significant phases.

#### ***Early Religious Syncretism***

During its early history, Nepal experienced a harmonious fusion of Hindu and Buddhist customs. The Kathmandu Valley, renowned for its cultural and spiritual significance, served as a melting pot for various religious practices. From the fourth to the Eighth centuries, known as the Licchavi period, both Hinduism and Buddhism thrived, receiving support from different rulers. This syncretic approach laid the groundwork for a distinctive religious landscape where Hindu and Buddhist beliefs coexisted in harmony. John Locke's (1980) work on Nepal's religious history shed light on this syncretism, emphasizing how the blending of Hindu and Buddhist traditions during the Licchavi era contributed to the religious diversity that defined Nepal.

#### ***Period of the Shah Dynasty and Hindu Monarchy***

The consolidation of Nepal under the rule of Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah during the mid-18th century brought about a significant transformation in the religious landscape of the country. Through their conquests, the Shah dynasty played a crucial role in establishing Hinduism as the official religion of the state. Prithvi Narayan Shah's well-known declaration, "Hindu kingdom, the garden of four castes," exemplified the monarch's endeavors to centralize power by aligning the state with Hindu principles (Whelpton, 2005). In his research on the Shah dynasty and the construction of Hindu identity, Gellner (1992) sheds light on the political aspects of this process. He argues that the Shah Kings strategically utilized Hinduism to legitimize their reign and cultivate a sense of national unity.

#### ***Secularism and Religious Dynamics***

The political landscape of Nepal underwent significant transformations during the latter half of the 20th century, resulting in the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of Nepal as a secular state in 2006. This transformation was largely shaped by the People's Movement of 2006, which sought to meet the needs of different ethnic and religious communities through inclusion. However, the intricate relationship between religion and politics remained a complex issue as various groups competed for recognition and

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representation. Whelpton's analysis of Nepal's political evolution illuminates the challenges of transitioning from a Hindu monarchy to a secular state and navigating the complexities of managing religious diversity within a political framework (Whelpton, 2005).

### ***Emergence of Religious Nationalism***

Following the political changes and the introduction of a new constitution in 2015, there was a surge in discussions regarding the secular nature of the state. This period witnessed the emergence of religious nationalism, particularly among specific Hindu factions advocating for Nepal to be reinstated as a Hindu state. These movements, characterized by passionate appeals to Hindu identity, challenged the secular principles that were ingrained in the constitution. The confluence of religion and politics in Nepal continues to be a multifaceted and dynamic occurrence. Even political parties that align with Marxist-Leninist ideologies find themselves navigating a delicate balance, recognizing the significance of religious sentiments while also maintaining the foundational tenets of a secular state. The situation is further complicated by the rise of ethno-religious identity politics within various communities, adding layers of complexity to the intricate web of religious dynamics (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

In Nepal, the political arena is characterised by the interplay between religious entities and political dynamics, which reveals a complex and varied relationship between religion and politics. Religious establishments and leaders possess considerable sway in shaping political discussions and policy choices. It is worth mentioning that Hindu nationalist organisations strive for the restoration of Nepal as a Hindu nation, capitalising on religious sentiments to amass support and influence public opinion. This involvement of religious figures in political movements blurs the boundaries between what is deemed sacred and secular, fundamentally altering the landscape of political participation in Nepal (Bista, 1991).

Religious movements have had a significant impact on shaping the priorities of political parties, specifically in advocating for the restoration of Nepal as a Hindu state. This particular demand has influenced the political agendas of major parties, compelling them to negotiate a sensitive equilibrium between secularism and the affirmation of religious identity. The alignment or divergence of political parties with religious movements extends beyond electoral politics, affecting policy choices and the structure of governance. The interaction between religious diversity and governance structures is exemplified in the constitutional discussions surrounding Nepal's secular identity.

In the Terai region, which is renowned for its substantial Madhesi population, religious nationalism distinctively manifests itself. The complex tapestry of identities in the Terai region leads to the emergence of religious nationalism, wherein Buddhist communities play a significant part. These communities assert their distinct identity and advocate for the recognition and preservation of Buddhist cultural traditions (Bista, 1991). This localised manifestation of religious nationalism explains the complex relationship between religion, regional identity, and political representation.

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### ***Erosion of Secularism***

The erosion of secularism in Nepal can be traced back to its historical origins, which are deeply intertwined with the country's governance and national identity. In the 18th century, Prithvi Narayan Shah's declaration, proclaiming Nepal as a "Hindu kingdom, the garden of four castes," solidified Hinduism as the official religion of the state and laid the foundation for the intricate interplay between religion and governance.

This historical alignment with Hindu identity, while acknowledging the diverse cultural and religious landscape of the country, has also laid the foundation for continuous debates and obstacles concerning secularism in Nepal. The constitutional changes that took place in the latter part of the 20th century were a significant turning point, as they led to the abolishment of the Hindu monarchy and the establishment of a secular constitution in 2006. Nevertheless, this constitutional transformation did not completely eradicate the challenges faced by secularism. The People's Movement in 2006 played a vital role in advocating for inclusivity and secular values, but subsequent events revealed an ongoing struggle to fully embrace the principles of secular governance (Whelpton, 2005). The post-2015 Nepali constitution aimed to establish a secular state, but religious nationalism emerged, challenging the secular principles and highlighting the convoluted relationship between religion and politics as factions advocated for a Hindu state.

### ***Elite's Disunity and Political Instability***

Towards the latter part of the 20th century, significant political movements emerged, one of which was the People's Movement in 2006. This particular movement played a crucial role in advocating for inclusivity and political transformation. It aimed to address the aspirations of various ethnic and religious groups, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the monarchy. However, the transition towards a secular state presented its own set of challenges, particularly in terms of representation, governance, and striking a delicate balance between acknowledging religious sentiments and upholding a secular framework (Whelpton, 2005).

Identity politics, which encompasses religious identity, has played a significant role in fostering political instability within Nepal. The task of managing the diverse religious landscape while upholding secular principles has posed an ongoing challenge for political entities. In a contemporary setting, the correlation between religion and politics continues to be a complex and constantly evolving matter. The emergence of identity politics based on ethnicity within various communities further adds to the intricacies of the political arena. As governing bodies strive to navigate the shifting dynamics of religious nationalism, the task of promoting stability in governance becomes increasingly challenging.

Few scenarios elucidate situations where political leaders face backlash for allegedly endorsing a specific religious belief, resulting in criticism and concerns about potential political consequences. The incidents spark broader discussions on issues such as religious freedom, secularism, and the ethical responsibilities of public figures in maintaining societal harmony. The overarching theme revolves around the delicate balance required when navigating religious sensitivities within a diverse and multicultural context, emphasizing the

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need for leaders to prioritize communal harmony and goodwill.

Nepal's political parties encounter the task of striking a delicate equilibrium between recognizing the various religious sentiments within the country and upholding the principles of secularism. The ongoing discussions surrounding the secular nature of the state, combined with the rise of religious nationalism, have introduced additional intricacies to the agendas of different political parties. As these parties strive to garner support from a wide-ranging and diverse electorate, they must navigate the complex religious landscape of the nation, thereby intensifying the complexity of this balancing act (Lawoti & Hagen, 2013; Whelpton, 2005).

### ***Obstacles to Democratization***

Religious nationalism in Nepal can hinder democratization by undermining secular governance (Juergensmeyer, 2023), marginalizing minority groups, and restricting freedom of expression, as it can conflate religious and political spheres (Hurd, 2015). Political discourse can lead to laws favoring a specific religious group, potentially limiting the rights of others (Juergensmeyer, 2010).

The emergence of religious nationalism presents possible risks to the values of diversity and inclusivity in democratic societies. There are instances where religious affiliation, specifically in Buddhism, has superseded the ideals of non-violence, resulting in practices that promote exclusion and give rise to conflicts (Beech, 2019). Religious nationalism promotes an 'us versus them' mentality, compromising equality and diversity essential for a thriving democracy (Chatterjee, 1993; Nussbaum, 1994). Barker's (2008) historical context on religious nationalism in modern Europe highlights the persistent challenges to pluralism due to the intertwining of religious identity and political power.

Democratic values, including individual freedoms, the rule of law, and minority rights, can be compromised by religious nationalism, which can lead to restrictive laws and policies, suppressing dissent, and limiting individual liberties (Juergensmeyer et al., 2015). Religious identity, when harnessed for political advantages, has the potential to ignite conflicts that erode the stability of democratic institutions (Huntington, 1993; Toft et al., 2011). Soper and Fetzer (2018) highlight the interconnectedness of religion and nationalism, emphasizing their impact on political and social structures globally.

### ***Effectiveness of State Institutions***

State institutions are governmental institutions. They play a crucial role in reducing or amplifying the influence of religious nationalism (Van der Veer, 1994). State-controlled media and educational systems can either promote inclusivity and tolerance or contribute to the propagation of exclusive religious narratives (Juergensmeyer, 2023). Alfred Stepan's "twin tolerations" concept emphasizes the significance of mutual respect and autonomy between religious institutions and the state. According to Bielefeldt, (2012), legislation, including constitutional provisions, anti-discrimination laws, and hate speech regulations, is crucial in combating religious nationalism and its misuse for political purposes. Edwards (2003) explores how constitutional frameworks can either accommodate or suppress

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religious diversity, impacting the prevalence of religious nationalism. Witte's (2000) study on religious human rights offers valuable perspectives on the legal strategies that can be utilised to safeguard the rights of religious minorities and mitigate the potential for one religious group to exert dominance over others. Legislative initiatives aimed at safeguarding equal rights and opportunities for every religious community play a crucial role in cultivating an atmosphere that resists the fractious impact of religious nationalism. The inclusion of these legal protections is crucial in thwarting the implementation of biased policies that have the potential to undermine the fundamental principles of democracy. Laws can be formulated to govern the participation of religious organizations in political affairs, thereby striking a harmonious equilibrium between freedom of speech and the safeguarding of democratic ideals (Sullivan, 2015).

In order to protect democratic values from the influence of religious nationalism, it is imperative to establish and maintain institutional safeguards. These safeguards serve as a protective barrier, ensuring that the principles and foundations of democracy remain intact and are not compromised by the encroachment of religious nationalism. Regional institutions like ASEAN can promote human rights and protect minority communities from religious nationalism through cross-national collaborations and agreements. There seems to be an importance of international institutions and legal frameworks in establishing a normative basis for protecting democratic values when examining freedom of religion or belief through a human rights lens. International human rights conventions and treaties create a framework that reinforces the principles of equality, freedom, and non-discrimination in the face of religious nationalism (UN Office of the High Commissioner, 2014).

### **Prospects of Democratization in Nepal**

The prospect of democratization in Nepal presents a multitude of aspects, encompassing both obstacles and advantages. Nepal has encountered intricate interactions among political, social, and religious aspects, which have significantly impacted its path towards democracy. Analyzing the current situation and considering strategies for the future is essential for fostering sustainable democratization. Transitions, conflicts, and the establishment of a federal democratic republic have marked Nepal's journey towards democratization. The political transformation in Nepal, which was a result of the Maoist insurgency, began with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006. This agreement served as the foundation for the subsequent developments. In 2015, a new constitution was promulgated to resolve longstanding political grievances and foster a more inclusive and democratic era.

It is of utmost importance for Nepal's democratic future to effectively address and mitigate the adverse effects of religious nationalism. Strategies should include addressing issues related to identity, citizenship, and religious freedom. Educational reforms that promote tolerance, diversity, and religious coexistence can play a pivotal role (Frydenlund, 2017). Strengthening interfaith dialogues and encouraging religious leaders to advocate for peace and inclusivity are essential (Juergensmeyer et al., 2015). Legislative measures should focus on protecting religious minorities and ensuring that laws uphold democratic values. For instance, enacting and enforcing anti-discrimination laws can safeguard the rights of

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individuals irrespective of their religious affiliations (Bielefeldt, 2012).

International cooperation and engagement with regional organizations can provide support in developing effective strategies to address the divisive impacts of religious nationalism. The establishment of inclusive democratic institutions serves as the bedrock for achieving sustainable democratization. Enhancing local governance frameworks, guaranteeing the inclusion of diverse communities in decision-making processes, and advocating for women's active involvement are essential measures (Neo, 2017).

Institutionalizing "twin tolerations" allows religious institutions to operate autonomously from the state (Stepan, 2000), promoting democratic values. Reforming the judiciary is crucial for upholding the rule of law, protecting individual freedoms, and building trust in democratic institutions (Scheppelle, 2004). Transitional justice mechanisms play a vital role in addressing historical grievances, thereby fostering social cohesion and consolidating democracy (Hibbard, 2010). In order to achieve sustainable democratization in Nepal, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach. One crucial aspect of this approach is the enhancement of civic education programmes, which aim to instill democratic values among the younger generation (Barker, 2008). Additionally, the active involvement of civil society organizations, media, and religious leaders in promoting democratic ideals plays a significant role in cultivating a democratic culture (Sullivan, 2015).

Nepal's democratization greatly relies on international support and collaboration. The global community plays a crucial role in providing technical assistance, resources, and diplomatic engagement to tackle challenges and strengthen democratic governance (Toft et al., 2011). To ensure the effectiveness of democratization efforts, it is essential to conduct regular assessments, monitoring, and capacity-building initiatives. By addressing the adverse effects of religious nationalism, establishing inclusive democratic institutions, and implementing sustainable democratization recommendations, Nepal can successfully navigate the intricate path towards a resilient and long-lasting democracy.

### **Discussion**

The complex interaction between religious belief and political affairs in Nepal's democratic framework offers a diverse range of challenges and opportunities. The amalgamation of religious fervour with nationalist ideologies, notably championed by Hindu and Mongol nationalist groups, reshapes the dynamics of political engagement. Beyond mere political maneuvering, the active involvement of religious leaders in political movements blurs the lines between the sacred and the secular. The demand for reinstating Nepal as a Hindu nation, emanating from various religious groups, intricately interweaves with the political landscape, exerting profound influences on party agendas, internal dynamics, and alliances. The negotiation of religious identities within political entities affects the broader challenge of reconciling diverse religious sentiments within the framework of democratic governance.

Religious intolerance in Nepal takes on different forms, often resulting in conflicts and tensions between religious communities. The historical alignment of the state with Hinduism and subsequent debates surrounding secularism have contributed to religious

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tensions. Attempts to establish Hinduism as the state's official religion in different eras have often marginalized minority religious groups, leading to incidents of intolerance.

Gellner's (1992) research on Newar Buddhism highlights the hierarchical structure of religious practices. When coupled with political power, this structure can contribute to the marginalisation of certain religious communities. The undermining of secularism in Nepal has significant political implications, influencing the dynamics of governance, representation, and national identity. Recognising religious sentiments while upholding secular values remains a persistent challenge in Nepal. This challenge contributes to political turbulence and the fragmentation of political parties, as noted by scholars such as Whelpton (2005) and Lawoti and Hangen (2013).

Managing the complexities of religion in the political sphere is a challenging task for governance. The influence of religious actors, along with demands for religious nationalism, adds layers of hurdles to the political landscape. Lawoti and Hangen's research on nationalism and ethnic conflict in Nepal highlights the challenges of managing diverse identities within political parties, contributing to political instability (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013; Whelpton, 2005). In Nepal, such political instability is deeply intertwined with historical transitions, identity politics, and the intricate dynamics of managing religious diversity in a secular context. The delicate balance between acknowledging religious sentiments and upholding secular values remains a challenge, leading to periods of uncertainty and instability in the political landscape.

Religious nationalism in Nepal can be seen as a response to the dynamics introduced during the third wave of democratization. The demand for recognition, political representation, and protection of religious identity becomes pronounced, leading to tensions and negotiations within the democratic framework. It reflects the need to consider both the global trend of democratization and the specific challenges posed by religious diversity in Nepal.

In the Terai region, which is a microcosm of identity complexities, citizenship issues, and religious affiliations, religious nationalism is a significant concern. The connection between religious identity and political power in this region poses a potential threat to the secular principles that are essential for effective democratic governance. This issue brings up concerns such as the marginalization of minority groups and constraints on freedom of expression, which highlights the profound implications of allowing religious identity to dominate political discourse. The 'us versus them' mentality that is fostered by religious nationalism poses a direct challenge to the foundational principles of democracy, which leads to exclusionary practices and conflicts that fundamentally challenge the inclusive ethos integral to democratic ideals. The twin tolerations principle, which emphasizes mutual respect and autonomy between religious institutions and the state, is integral to this discussion. Legislative measures, constitutional provisions, and international collaborations are tools that can be used to address the multifaceted challenges posed by religious nationalism, but they require continuous evaluation. It is essential to scrutinize how these mechanisms navigate the delicate balance between legislative control and religious freedom, ensuring that constitutional frameworks genuinely protect minority rights, and addressing the role of media and educational systems in shaping narratives, which become crucial

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aspects of this analysis. Institutional safeguards, both at the national and international levels, play a critical role in fortifying democratic values against the encroachment of religious nationalism, requiring continuous vigilance and adaptability in the face of evolving political landscapes.

### Conclusion

The resurgence of religious nationalism in Nepal is a complex issue that comes amidst the country's democratization process. It has historical, cultural, and political roots and is characterized by movements advocating for a Hindu state, localized expressions among Buddhist communities, and the Mongol religious and ethnic agenda. This resurgence highlights the challenge of reconciling religious identity with secular and inclusive principles. However, it poses risks such as the erosion of democratic values, limitations on freedom of expression, and increased ethnic and religious polarization. Therefore, addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring sustainable democratization in Nepal, as anti-democratic religious nationalism presents a formidable challenge to the process.

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