Deepening Fault Lines: Leadership and the Future of Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Conflict in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Identity-based conflicts often emerge from deepening fault lines in ethnic, religious, and cultural contexts. Nepal has witnessed several identity-related incidents in recent years; however, these incidents were limited in scope and intensity, and were contained. At the same time, the country has demonstrated potential for strong ethnic, religious and cultural cohesion when genuine inclusiveness is practiced. Nevertheless, Nepal's diversity remains fragile, marked with fault lines that could trigger potential conflict in the future. The identity-related disputes that have emerged in the country stem from historically intertwined with emotions, institutional shortcomings, accumulated grievances and struggles over access to resources and rights. However, as demonstrated through the case studies, leadership emerges as a key driver in such conflicts. Nepal is likely to enter an era identity-based conflict rooted in ethnic, religious or cultural divisions if political leaders continue to undermine the state institutions, ignore genuine grievances and frame narratives for vested political interests.

Introduction

Identity is widely regarded as a key cause of political conflict (Sen, 2006). Such conflicts have become prominent since the end of the Cold War, often manifesting as "New Wars", in contrast to the primarily geopolitical or ideological objectives of earlier wars (Kaldor, 2012, p. 7). Nepal, characterized by complex identity and related increasing activisms, seem to have the potential for conflicts driven by ethnic, religious, and cultural identity dynamics.

Ethnicity, culture, and religion within the identity spectrum are interpreted differently, making identity a complex concept. For greater clarity, ethnicity can be defined as a "term used to identify specific communities on the basis of traditions, culture or language" (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2014, p.20). Ethnicity represents a significant dimension of identity issues and refers to "specific communities on the basis of traditions, culture or language" (IDEA, 2014, p. 25). Hence, ethnicity constitutes a form of identity and is often used interchangeably. The terms "ethnic group" and "nation" are

also frequently used interchangeably. Nations refer to "particular forms of collectivity that are constituted by a process of creating histories" (Suny, 2001, p. 869). Likewise, religion represents a set of beliefs and rituals, whereas culture primarily encompasses traditions and social practices.

Identity changes over time (Cornell, 2002) and encompasses broad range of meanings and interpretations. The issue of identity has become complex due to multiple interpretations and understandings. The sources for its complexity can be explained in several ways. Referring to identity in terms of "minorities" (Gurr & Harff, 1994, pp. 24-25) or "identity-based" groups (Licklider, 1995, p. 685) or by any other constituent categories such as ethnic, religious, or cultural groups has emerged as a trend.

Another issue contributing to the complexity of understanding identity, or a part of it, is the tendency to view it in combined form based on the context of its casual application. Ethnicity combined with other components of identity is often referred to as "ethno-religious", "ethno-political", "ethno-national" and even "ethno-regional", also indicating the interrelationship or causal linkages among identity categories. Ann Hironaka argues that such categorisations have rendered the concept of identity "nearly useless from an analytical standpoint" and that conflict identity-based conflict has "lost its utility as an analytical category" (Hironaka, 2009, p. 89). Such categorizations further add to the already existing complexity in defining the causes of identity issues.

Identity can function as both a cause of inclusion and exclusion in a country. When it is exclusionary in nature, it can become a source of political conflict. At one point, Taylor (1994) associates identity with recognition: "our identity is partially shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others." Additionally, tendency to stress "singular" or "exclusive" identity at the expense of multiple identities could be a source of political conflict (Sen, 2006). This is primarily because people and circumstances change overtime, so confining them within a single category may not be justifiable.

Nepal's ethnic activists and organisations harbour a univocal perception that they have been the victims of the state's exclusionary policy, and in the event of continued suppression, it could potentially lead to armed struggle. In such a case, problem identification emerges as the key issue. There are numerous factors that contribute to such conflicts. In this line of thought, this paper argues that weak state institutions, primordial issues, struggles for resources and rights and other factors, contextual factors may contribute to identity-based conflicts. However, in Nepal's case, as substantiated by the case studies discussed below, political leadership remains the key factor.

This paper focuses on ethnic, religious and cultural issues in general and examines how such identities are likely to drive future conflicts in Nepal. The first section analyses the causes of ethnic, religious and cultural identity formations. The second section explains why Nepal is moving towards "identity-based" conflict, while the third section explains leadership as a key driver in Nepal, taking the three case studies: the Nepalese labourer massacre in Iraq, considered the worst communal violence in the country; the Madhes Movement as a struggle for identity; and the Tikapur incident, which revealed a deep ethnic fault line.

Causes of "identity-based" conflict

Identity-based conflicts can result from a number of factors. Jalali and Lipset (1992) state that "given the variety of ethnic conflicts and their dynamic and fluid qualities, no one factor can provide a comprehensive explanation." Blagojevic (2009) provides a comprehensive list outlining the causes of ethnic conflicts. The first cause is the primordialist view, which is a historical memory of grievances infused with ethnic emotions. Mutual fear and distrust between elites and victim groups become a part of "hate dynamics", often manifesting in communal conflict (Posen, 1993).

The second cause of ethnic conflict is structural change leading to a prolonged transition in Nepal. In the west, the major structural change in politics results from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, followed by regime changes in the Eastern Bloc, in 1991. Eventually, the Eastern Bloc adopted democratic political system. Many of the countries, including former USSR republics, Yugoslavia and newly established countries, were not prepared outright for the adoption of the open political system. Moreover, groups with the status and privileges in the old system were often unwilling to relinquish their advantages, further intensifying tensions (Blagojevic, 2009).

The third cause of ethnic conflict has been outlined by Blagojevic (2009) is institutional shortcomings. Institutions can "both constrain behaviour and provide incentives for cooperation and compliance through norms, rules, and procedures for allocation, participation, representation, and accountability" (Crawford, 1998). In this line, Beverly Crawford argues that whether identity-based politics turn violent or not depends on the effectiveness of state institutions. Similarly, Huntington (2006) defines state institutions as those in a state with effective bureaucracies, organised political parties, intense popular participation in public affairs, sustained economic growth, and "reasonably effective procedures for regulating succession and controlling political conflict (p.1)." Effective state institutions practise devolution of power and allow evolutionary changes rather than setting the ground for a revolution.

The fourth cause of ethnic conflict stems from the struggle for "resources and rights" (Blagojevic, 2009). Disadvantaged groups find ways to express their resentment through ethnic mobilisation or even overt conflict (Williams, 1994). Economic and political inequalities along ethnic lines lead to what is known as the theory of "internal colonialism" (Yinger, 1985). According to this theory, economic development of the core at the cost of the periphery leads to the emergence of ethnic nationalist movements in the periphery. The extractive policy of the centre structural conditions conducive to conflict.

The final cause of ethnic conflict involves manipulation by political leaders. Politicians frequently exploit ethnic differences to advance their vested interests, contributing to ethnic conflict. As Kaufman (1996) argues, "belligerent leaders stoke mass hostility; hostile masses support belligerent leaders, and both together threaten other groups, creating a security dilemma which in turn encourages even more mass hostility and leadership belligerence." Politicians become framers of narratives and mobilise masses in their support. Bosnia's leader during the war, Radovan Karadzic, said that Serbs "have been betrayed for centuries", and hence, "they cannot live with other nations" (Zimmermann, 1995, pp. 20-35).

The causes of conflict based on identity are numerous. Blagojevic's comprehensive framework prepared exclusively for ethnicity can be useful in analysing the causes of identity. However, his argument that for an ethnic conflict to occur, all five causes – historical memories imbued with emotions, institutional shortcomings, grievances, political manipulations by leaders, and struggle over resources and rights, as explained above – "must be present" for ethnic conflict to occur (Blagojevic, 2009) appears too generic. In contrast, Gurr and Harff (2004) reduce this exhaustive list to two primary factors, emphasising discrimination and ethnic group identity as the key drivers of ethnic conflict. However, the relevance of these factors is context-specific, each becoming crucial based on the dynamics of ethnicity and several factors as discussed above.

Likewise, religion becomes a source of conflict when instrumentalized for political purposes. The tendency of categorizing people in a singular set of identities, such as the Hindu world, the Muslim world, and the Christian world, is conceptually flawed (Schetter, 2016). Political leaders often persecute the minority to win support of the majority. Illustrative examples include those of the Christian-majority Central African Republic against Muslims, the Buddhist-majority Myanmar against Muslims, and the Muslim-majority Nigeria, and other Islamic countries against minority Christians and other religious groups.

Nepal towards "Identity-Based" Conflict

The politics of identity formation in Nepal largely coincides with the rise of identity awareness in the 1990s throughout the world. It has been constructed and contested primarily through narrative framing, which has been further exploited by the political leaders to advance their vested interest.

The Politics of Identity Formation in Nepal

Nepal is a heterogeneous country, and it has long been a melting pot of people coming from all directions since time immemorial. Different waves of migration from both the north and the south have shaped Nepal's demographic composition (Subedi, 2010). In the context of Nepal, salient identity markers include language, religion, caste, costume and physical appearance.

The democratic movement in the country (1990) and the movement for the rights of the indigenous people thereafter gave some identity to many groups who were subsumed under a homogenizing nationalism (ICG, 2016). In the 1990s, the number of ethnic organisations increased significantly (Onta, 2006). Founded in 1990 by eight groups, the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) emerged as the most prominent umbrella organisation and a key interlocutor for the government and donors. The global discourse on indigenous rights was a major ideological and normative source of inspiration for the Janajati movement. These groups expected their demands to be addressed through the democratic process. However, the state struggled to accommodate many of the demands advanced by the various identity-based groups.

The country is yet to become a state-nation, where the state gives its various regions varying degrees of autonomy in order to preserve their sociocultural identities and keep them united by fostering a feeling of national identity from the top down. Nepal's constitution

recognises the plural character of the state, and provisions are enshrined to ensure rights and protection for the minority and marginalised groups. However, implementation remains a significant challenge as the identity concerns are socially constructed and politically contested.

Identity Constructed and Contested

Identity has been constructed through the framing of narratives and is contested in the spheres of ethnicity, culture, and religion. However, realising that identity-based federalism could exacerbate ethnic divisions in the country, the main political parties backed away from naming the provinces based on ethnic identity. As a result, a persistent narrative endures among many ethnic groups that their rights have been marginalised.

Moreover, Nepal's federal structure has yet to meaningfully devolve power to the provinces. On the one hand, the leadership of most of the political parties at the centre appears concerned that devolving powers and resources to the provinces will weaken their authority, and potentially intensify identity-based mobilisation, even raising fears of secession. On the other hand, those in favour of provinces believe that devolution of power would empower the people as envisaged by the constitution.

The current state of affairs reflects a widespread perception that Madheshis view federalism as their own, as it provided recognition and political identity. Madhesh is the only province named after identity; while other provinces are named after geography and river systems. Since the provincial structure gives them a distinct identity, they would not agree to any effort to abolish provinces as demanded by some other political parties. Any coercive move from the centre against federalism may be perceived as deeply disrespectful by Madheshis, who have long felt marginalized within the socio-political affairs of the state.

Affirmative action through reservation policies for marginalised groups constitutes another highly contentious issue. Six groups in Nepal have the reservation rights – women, Janajati (ethnic), Madheshi, Dalit, disabled, and backward classes. These encompass government services, including the security forces, higher education, and politics. However, the benefits of reservation policies are largely viewed to have been captured by elites within marginalised groups, leaving the poor and powerless relatively excluded.. Such elites have been described as the "creamy layer" by the Chief Justice of India, Bhushan Gavai, in his Supreme Court verdict (The Times of India, 2025). This "creamy layer" benefits from this categorisation, thus depriving the mostneedy people of the same group.

As pro-Hindu sentiments are being socially and politically constructed, and other religious groups in Nepal increasingly assert their identities, a growing contest for religious and political dominance has emerged. It is often claimed that mostly the Khas-Arya population, including the Madheshis, who make up more than 50 per cent, are considered in favour of a form of Hinduism, while the Dalits and ethnic groups are mostly in favour of secularism. The Constitution of Nepal defines Nepal as a secular state, while simultaneously ensuring the "protection of religion and culture being practised since ancient times and religious and cultural freedom" (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, art. 4). The last bit was added to placate the religious fundamentalists who wanted to safeguard the *Sanatana* Hindu dharma under the new secular order (Baral, 2025). Pro-Hindu sentiment is seemingly on the rise in Nepal.

Narratives surrounding the spread of Christianity in Nepal are also prone to generating religious tensions and conflict.   As per the World Christian Database, the fastest-growing Christian community is in Nepal (Bownas, 2023). Nepali Hindus fear that the alleged systemic proselytisation of Hindus to Christianity will one day make them a minority in their own country, where they had Hinduism as a state religion once. Weaponising religion for political gains may give rise to ultra-radical Hinduism.

Leaders Weaponising Identity

Leaders in Nepal have increasingly weaponized as a means to advance their political interests. This tendency was particularly prominent during Nepal's internal armed conflict (1996-2006). During the period, the Maoists strategically moved beyond their class struggle to exploit ethnic and gender issues for the purpose of mobilisation for their cause (Lawoti & Pahari, 2012, p. 14). This process contributed to the deepening of ethnic fault lines, which later influenced proposals to restructure the federal system along ethnic lines.

Madheshi leaders likewise mobilised claims centred on identity and rights. They argued that they were being denied the rights and privileges by the state dominated by the hill people. Leaders of the Madheshi People's Rights Forum (MPRF) allegedly confronted Maoist cadres in Gaur, Rautahat District, on 21 March 2007, in a violent clash that resulted in the deaths of 26 Maoists and one unidentified individual. The clash reflected the deep resentment between the Madheshis and Pahades (hill people), though on the surface it gave appearance of conflict between two political parties. A similar confrontation later occurred between Tharus and Pahades in Tikapur, Kailali, in August 2015, exposing a deep-seated ethnic fault line.

The political and religious leaders have provoked violence or remained silent, depending on what best serves their interests. One of the worst communal violence against the Muslims and their properties by the Hindu hardliners, occurred following the brutal killing of 12 Nepali workers in Iraq in August 2004. Similar communal violence has occurred between Hindus and Muslims in Nepalgunj, in the mid-western region, and between Hindus and Christians in Dharan, in the eastern region. More recently, communal violence erupted in Janakpur during a Durga immersion ritual associated with the Dashain festival. Communal violence escalates when leaders fail to address religious tensions within their communities. Chalise (2025) notes that a lot of Madheshi political leaders who have been quick to criticise Kathmandu and demand more federal decision-making authority have been less willing to deal with the religious friction in their communities.

In this manner, ethnic, cultural, and religious fervour is seemingly on the rise, with one community blaming the other. These are largely driven by political mobilisation and activism.. Such politicisation may further exacerbate existing tensions. Thus, whether through the deliberate construction of narratives to consolidate power or through an inability to manage the rapidly changing landscape of ethnicity, religion, and culture, Nepal's leadership bears significant responsibility for whether the country transitions peacefully or is driven toward identity-based conflict in the future.

Leadership as a Key Driver of Conflict in Nepal

Conflicts frequently occur as a result of leaders' vested political and strategic interests. Three brief case studies have been presented here in the case of Nepal to substantiate this argument. These case studies were selected not only for the intensity of their ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions, but also for the deep societal fault lines they reveal. They are representative cases, and numerous lesser-scale identity-related incidents have also occurred frequently across the country.

The Killing of Nepali Labourers in Iraq: Catalyst for Nepal's Worst Communal Violence

Nepal witnessed its worst communal violence following the killing of twelve Nepalese migrant labourers by the extremist group Ansar al-Sunna in Ramadi, Iraq, on August 31, 2004. In a graphic video, two militants were shown slitting the throat of one hostage, displaying his severed head, and subsequently shooting the remaining eleven. The militants gave the reason for the killing, saying that they "came from their country to fight the Muslims and to serve the Jews and the Christians" (BBC, 2004).

As a result, the capital of Nepal saw the worst communal violence in recorded history as Hindus exacted retribution on the nation's approximately million-strong Muslim minority. Mob violence in Kathmandu and other parts of the country targeted mosques and Muslim businesses, manpower agencies and press houses. Seven people were killed, four as a direct result of mob violence. The national airlines of Muslim countries – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan – were also attacked by demonstrators (Adhikary & Rohde, 2004). Numerous Muslim-owned businesses across the country were targeted.

Right-wing Hindu groups seized the moment through provocative actions and played a leading role in unleashing the violence (Ramesh, 2004). Their involvement in the riots was the key catalytic factor in the escalation of the riots. The then government was compelled to warn these groups that they would be held accountable for any further bloodshed (Perry, 2004). The hardline Hindu organisers who incited the communal violence, were ultimately forced to retreat.

Like ethnicity, religion has been a central axis of political conflict based on identity. When political and social identities become subsumed under religious identity, the likelihood of political conflict increases (Sen, 2006). The Hindu hardliners capitalised on the country's fragility   during the Maoist insurgency that advocated for ethnicity-based federalism. They not only sparked communal violence but also demonstrated their capacityto further deepen religious fault lines in the country in the future.

This episode stands as one of Nepal's most brutal instances of communal violence, not only because of the killings abroad but also due to leadership-driven provocation at home, which severely damaged the country's long-standing image of religious coexistence.

Madheshi Movement: Struggle for Identity

The Madhesh Movement was "the most politically influential, socially rooted and simultaneously most controversial and divisive of the new movements" (ICG, 2016, p.4). The Madhesh movement was an expression of genuine historical grievances related to identity

and representation by the country's Madheshi population. This movement established key parameters of identity politics and formalised the basis of Madheshi identity in modern Nepali society (Gautam, 2064 BS; Yadav, 2054 B.S.).

Many Madhesi leaders portrayed themselves as champions of Madheshi causes, while leaders of the major hill-origin political parties at the centre were widely perceived as insensitive to Madheshi grievances and more focused on securing their own political interests. Addressing the Madheshi demands required "changing attitudes and policies in Kathmandu" (ICG, 2007, p. 32).

When the communal violence sporadically broke out between Madheshi and Pahades (residents of hilly regions) during the Madhesh Movement, the political leaders from the major political parties, the media and the civil society offered little public reactions . Senior party leaders in Kathmandu did not involve their Madheshi leaders, who might have helped address the conflict.

A prominent Madheshi leader, Upendra Yadav (2054 BS), writes that the primary driver of the Madheshi movement (Magh 2063 BS) was to secure social justice. He further notes that untouchability, gender discrimination, and superstitious beliefs remain widespread. Groups designated as "untouchables" – such as Dusadh, Dome, Halkhor, Chamar, and others – are discriminated against in patterns of longstanding social issues (Yadav, 2054 BS).

However, Hatlebakk (2007) writes that the Madhesh Movement was largely driven by the landlord class, seeking political positions rather than being guided by social and economic reform. Reports in the Kathmandu media indicated that Madheshi leaders were linked to communal tensions involving people of hill origin (Dhakal, 2015; Adhiraj, 2015; Neupane, 2015).

Even after an agreement was signed between the government and the Madheshi leaders, sections of the Madheshi leadership remained dissatisfied. They took a hard stance and decided that peaceful movement alone would not achieve the aspirations of the Madheshis. These leaders engaged in armed action against the government in Kathmandu, which they considered dominated by Pahades. In this process, armed actors further exploited existing mistrust between Pahades and Madheshis.

Later, some free Madhesh activists relinquished protests and demands after getting the assurances from the government that the Madheshi People's grievances will be addressed with priority. The rebel leaders' effort for armed and separatist movements did not materialise and the country was spared from another major ethnic conflict.

While there are still looming dissatisfactions in Madhesh, some Madheshi leaders appear more focused on aligning with the political centre in Kathmandu than on addressing the substantive issues facing the Madhesh. Main political leaders in Nepal likewise, have shown limited engagement with Madheshi demands for identity recognition and representation

The Tikapur Incident: Revealing a Deep Ethnic Fault Line

The Tikapur incident took place in Tikapur of Kailali district on August 24, 2015, in which eight policemen, including a senior officer, and one infant were killed in an attack by some

armed groups, which exposed a deep ethnic fault line between two cultural groups – the Tharu community, an indigenous group in the Terai, and the Pahades, the hill people.

The leaders of the main political parties supported the demand for the "United Far West" province, *Akhanda Sudurpaschim*, which rejected proposals of dividing the hills from the plains. The leaders on all sides used populist rhetoric that possibly appealed to ethnic sensitivities (HRW, 2015).

A Human Rights Watch report states that the turning point of the incident as seen by the local government was the hate speech given to a gathering on August 24 in Tikapur by the Madheshi political leaders from the eastern plains which provoked the Tharus for confrontation. (Chaudhary, undated). Such incendiary remarks by the leaders of the agitating parties disrupted societal harmony and fueled inter-community hostility, including through social media platforms (NHRC, 2015).

The Tharu community perceived the movement as being instigated by the Pahades. However, the key political leaders portrayed ethnic mobilisation as an anti-national or secessionist act. They failed to acknowledge Tharu rights adequately or implement effective mechanisms for managing diversity. The political leadership triggered, directed, and ultimately ruptured a profound ethnic fault line via the Tikapur incident.The Tikapur incident highlighted challenges in national leadership beyond the local context. The response of authorities was perceived as insufficient in addressing ethnic concerns.

Findings

Religious fanatics, ethnic chauvinists, and cultural supremacists have always relied on their leaders, who have provided both diagnosis and prognosis. The underlying causes remain dormant till the elites articulate the idea and encourage the masses to follow (Scott, 1979). The multiple existing factors, such as primordialism, structural and resource issues and rights issues, were brought to the surface by the leaders through strategically framed narratives to advance their political agendas.. The Nepali leaders succeeded in aligning their objectives with the dominant classes and sectors of society.

Where the Nepali leaders largely failed is in addressing the country's structural shortcomings. In their book, *Why Nations Fail* Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) make a case that "institutions" are the primary determinant of national success or failure. When nations create "inclusive" political and economic structures, they prosper; conversely, when these structures become "extractive" and concentrate opportunity and power in the hands of a small number of people, they fail. While structural shortcomings persist in Nepal, political leadership remains critical in steering the country out of crises (Devkota, 2025). Leaders will have to rise above personal ambitions and foster public trust and confidence by building inclusive institutions.

State legitimacy depends on meaningful inclusion, which extends beyond mere numerical representation to encompass social justice, inclusive democracy, equitable economic distribution, and political participation (Aditya, 2007). Above all, it requires honest and committed leadership, a quality that was notably absent in the three case studies discussed earlier.

Conclusion

Given the identity dynamics and ever-changing context, no single factor can fully explain identity-based conflicts. Instead, these conflicts are generally driven by multiple interacting factors. Depending on the circumstances, identity can serve both as a catalyst for positive social change and as a source of intergroup conflict. It can escalate into political conflict, particularly when it undermines the pluralistic character of the state. The actions and strategies of political leaders often play a decisive role in triggering political conflict (Gurr & Harff, 1996). In Nepal, arguably, the political leadership is the prominent driver of identity-based conflict alongside other factors such as structural, institutional, and other deficiencies, which also impact at different levels.

The key causes of identity-based conflicts are often identified as historical memories imbued with emotion, institutional shortcomings, socio-economic grievances, and struggles over resources and rights. However, it is the political leaders who shape the emerging context resulting from the structural change, frame narratives to exploit grievances, and, remain central to most of the causes that are seen as important in driving political conflicts. Where the leadership is accountable, and the state structure is inclusive, most of the issues related to identity politics have largely been managed or contained.

The future of Nepal—and by extension, its state institutions—cannot be assured unless political leaders envision the country in a forward-looking and innovative manner. Nepal faces challenges in fulfilling the aspirations enshrined in the constitution, primarily due to gaps in implementation. This is primarily due to a shortage of necessary structures, but more so due to the lack of will on the part of the leadership. Identity issues play a critical role in mobilising masses, with political leaders often framing narratives to incite support and secure political advantage. The political leadership is where the future conflicts on identity in Nepal will likely revolve around. The article may seem alarmist, in the sense that it highlights the tensions simmering under the surface; however, the same tensions can be valuable in the lessons they impart for the future. The road to harmony and prosperity can only be paved if the Nepali society, collectively, takes stock of the challenges and unites to move against the faultlines.

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