

Policy Studies 34

Creating a “New Nepal”: The Ethnic Dimension

Susan Hangen



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East-West Center Washington

1819 L Street, NW, Suite 200

Washington, D.C. 20036

Tel: (202) 293-3995

Fax: (202) 293-1402

E-mail: publications@eastwestcenterwashington.org

Website: www.eastwestcenterwashington.org

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List of Acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development, UK
IPO	Indigenous Peoples Organization
ISP	Institutional Strengthening Project
JEP	Janajati Empowerment Project
JTMM	Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha (Republic Tarai Liberation Front)
KYC	Kirat Yakthung Chumlung
LSSM	Limbuwan Swayatta Sarokar Manch (Limbuwan Autonomous Concern Forum)
MMM	Madhesi Mukti Morcha (Madhesi Liberation Front)
MNO	Mongol National Organization
MPRF	Madhesi People's Rights Forum
NCARD	National Coalition against Racial Discrimination
NCDN	National Committee for the Development of Nationalities
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN	National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities
NGO	nongovernmental organization

NSP	Nepal Sadbhavana Party
RJP	Rastriya Janamukti Party
SPA	Seven Party Alliance
UML	Nepali Communist Party
UN	United Nations
VDC	Village Development Committee

Executive Summary

This study explores the emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal, focusing on the contributions of the indigenous nationalities movement to democratization. Although Nepal has made substantial progress toward regaining political stability since April 2006, it is facing a surge of ethnic conflict. Marginalized peoples, including the indigenous nationalities, are critiquing the ruling coalition for ignoring their demands. Efforts to bring about long-term political stability and to create a more democratic state must address ethnic demands. Otherwise, a large section of the population will remain excluded from political processes, and further conflict may result.

In Nepal's diverse population, the politically salient sociocultural groups include indigenous nationalities (*adibasi janajati*), high-caste Hindus from the hills, low-caste Hindus (Dalits), and peoples from the Tarai region, including both ethnic and caste groups (Madhesi). There are officially fifty-nine groups of indigenous nationalities. These culturally and linguistically diverse groups share an identity primarily through their opposition to caste Hindus.

High-caste Hindus from the hill region, including the Hindu monarchy, constitute the politically-dominant group in Nepali society. They have dominated state power since the emergence of the modern state in the late eighteenth century. Ethnic inequality began when indigenous nationalities were incorporated in the state-building process on unequal terms. They were burdened by taxes and labor obligations, and often lost land to high-caste Hindus.

From 1962 to 1990, the state sought to establish a homogeneous nation of Hindu Nepali speakers. The national culture supported the dominance of high-caste Hindus and further marginalized ethnic groups.

Although the 1990 Constitution moved toward redefining the nation as multicultural, Nepal remained a Hindu kingdom, the Nepali language held a higher status than other languages, and the king maintained a role in the government. Marginalized groups were thus dissatisfied with this constitution. Furthermore, despite the political reforms after 1990, the political exclusion of marginalized groups increased.

The indigenous nationalities movement aims to increase the social, economic, and political power of these people, revive their religions, languages, and cultures, and end the dominance of the high-caste Hindus. The movement has constructed a collective identity for this heterogeneous group as indigenous nationalities, enabling these people to take action to define and resolve their common problems. Mongol race is an alternative construction of this identity.

The indigenous nationalities movement began organizing in the 1950s and became a major political force after 1990. Three main types of organizations participate in the movement: indigenous peoples organizations representing single ethnic groups, a federation of these organizations called the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), and ethnic political parties. NEFIN, the dominant voice of the movement, and the indigenous peoples organizations initially focused on cultural revitalization, yet they have increasingly advanced political demands, such as the right to self-determination and a federal state. These organizations are slowly becoming more representative of the entire population of indigenous nationalities, as women and smaller ethnic groups become more active and these organizations expand work in rural areas.

Ethnic political parties have been marginal in the movement, but they could enable indigenous nationalities to increase their representation in the government. They have been denied registration by the Election Commission, and have not won seats in parliament. Yet one party, the Mongol National Organization, won seats in village governments in Ilam district. It also raised awareness about ethnic issues in some rural areas where other ethnic organizations were not as active.

The Maoists adopted ethnic issues and established ethnic liberation fronts. Many indigenous nationalities participated in the Maoists' People's War, and the Maoists pressured the political center to take ethnic demands more seriously. However, indigenous nationalities leaders question whether the Maoists will continue to prioritize ethnic issues.

The indigenous nationalities movement has pressured the government to create institutions to address ethnic issues. The state established the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities in 2002, signaling the legitimization of ethnic politics. International donors

also began supporting indigenous peoples organizations. Whether the movement's extension into these powerful arenas will limit its capacity to define its own goals remains a concern.

The indigenous nationalities movement has contributed to democratization by transforming the dominant political discourse, creating awareness of ethnic issues in society, and pressuring the state into addressing ethnic inequality. It has challenged restrictions that remained in the post-1990 system, such as the limitations on ethnic parties and the lack of religious freedom. The movement has also implemented some new rights that were granted in the 1990 Constitution but were not supported by state programs, such as the right to primary education in one's mother tongue. The political changes the movement demands, a redistribution and wider sharing of political power and the freedom to express political and cultural diversity, are necessary for further democratization.

The indigenous nationalities movement will play an important role in current efforts to create long-term political stability and democracy. The interim government, composed of the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists, addressed some ethnic issues in their peace accord and the Interim Constitution, yet indigenous nationalities have rejected these documents for failing to fulfill their demands for ethnic federalism and proportional representation. They have not been well represented in the decision-making process, and they should build coalitions with other marginalized groups to identify common ground and achieve their political demands.

To create political stability and strengthen democracy, the state should adopt policies that create an inclusive political system. Indigenous nationalities must be adequately represented in all decision-making bodies, through appointments, reservations, or a proportional electoral system. A proportional election system would ensure that small parties are given a voice in the legal political system and are dissuaded from taking up arms. Legalizing ethnic political parties could also help achieve this goal. Opposition to these parties will fuel resentment, leading to violence. The diversity of Nepal should be recognized in representations of the national identity. The democratizing contributions of the indigenous nationalities movement must be recognized so that indigenous nationalities will be acknowledged as rightful political leaders and participants.

Creating a “New Nepal: The Ethnic Dimension

Since April 2006, Nepal has made substantial progress toward regaining political stability. In that month, a popular movement led by an alliance of seven major political parties forced the king to relinquish his control of the government and to reinstate the parliament that he had dissolved in 2002. The decade-long conflict between the Maoists and the state officially ended when the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) signed a peace accord in November 2006. In addition to making headway on arms management, this coalition formed an interim government, drafted the Interim Constitution, and planned for elections to a constituent assembly, all steps on the road to creating a “new Nepal.” In January 2007, however, a new wave of political conflict took the leaders of the Nepali government and the international community by surprise. Denouncing the ruling coalition for ignoring their demands, ethnic groups including Madhesis (people from Nepal’s southern Tarai region) and indigenous nationalities (a coalition of marginalized ethnic groups from across the country) embarked on their most widespread and vociferous protests yet. Extensive violence erupted in the Tarai, disrupting business in this key economic region and stalling the plans for constituent assembly elections. It is now clear that there will be no durable solution to Nepal’s political problems without addressing ethnic demands.

This study addresses the ethnic dimension of Nepali politics, a critical issue that has received little international attention. It focuses on the

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progress toward regaining
political stability***

indigenous nationalities movement, and explains its significance for the democratization process and resolving Nepal's political crisis. Political leaders and policy makers will have to attend to the demands of this and other identity-based movements, including Madhesis and Dalits, in order to achieve long-term political stability and a democratic political order.

After the reinstitution of a multiparty system in 1990, identity politics became a major force in Nepali politics. Ethnic groups that now call themselves indigenous nationalities (*adibasi janajati*) mobilized to demand greater inclusion within the political system as well as social and cultural

rights. Other marginalized groups such as low-caste Hindus (Dalits) and caste and ethnic groups hailing from the southern region (Madhesi) also formed movements. These groups all argue that high-caste Hindus from the hills have dominated the state since its inception in the late eighteenth century,

and that this has created political, economic, and social disadvantages for others. These groups seek to end this long-standing inequality and create a state that recognizes diversity and allows for a wider range of the population to participate more fully in governance.

This study focuses on the indigenous nationalities movement, arguably the most developed identity movement in the country. Compared to the Dalit and Madhesi movements, the indigenous nationalities movement has a stronger network of organizations and has advanced its demands in a more coherent fashion. It has received greater recognition by the state, and more scholars have analyzed it. In 2007, the Madhesi movement captured the attention of the Nepali media because of the extensive violence accompanying its protests throughout the Tarai, but until this time it had not received state attention, and scholarship on this movement is still nascent.

This study demonstrates that the indigenous nationalities movement has made substantial contributions to democratization. It analyzes the activities that ethnic organizations and parties have undertaken, and the political meanings and effects of these activities. Ultimately, the changes that activists in this movement seek are necessary for the further democratization of Nepal: a redistribution and wider sharing of political power, and the right to the freedom of expression of political and cultural diversity.

One of the greatest achievements of the indigenous nationalities movement is that it has changed the political discourse in Nepal: there has been a dramatic shift in how the state and the politically dominant

***identity politics [is]...a major
force in Nepali politics***

groups regard ethnic political demands. Historically, the state has either viewed these demands as subversive or dismissed them as peripheral to the real problems of the country. Suggesting that ethnic inequality existed was considered politically contentious throughout the authoritarian Panchayat era (1962–90) and most of the 1990s. During the Panchayat era, the state promoted the “myth of inter-group harmony,” the idea that conflicts between Nepal’s myriad ethnic groups were nonexistent (Bhattachan 1995). It maintained that the state had celebrated cultural pluralism from inception, yet at the same time it pursued strategies of assimilation and homogenization in its nation-building efforts. Ethnic organizations were perceived as a threat to ethnic harmony and democracy because they raised issues that were divisive or “communal” (*sampradayak*). Although ethnic demands were once considered radical and illegitimate, they are now accepted as legitimate political concerns. The current debates about the future of the monarchy and the restructuring of the state originated with ethnic activists.

Although identity movements have succeeded in changing the political discourse, they are struggling to get political leaders to take concrete steps to end ethnic inequality. These movements seek to create a more inclusive and representative polity. If these changes are not made, a large section of the population will remain excluded from political processes and may seek to address their grievances outside the structure of the state. Without serious efforts to resolve ethnic inequality, conflicts centered on ethnicity, rather than class, are likely to continue in Nepal.

Ethnic Diversity and Inequality in Nepal

Ethnic Diversity

Ethnic diversity in Nepal is highly complex: there are multiple and overlapping categories of identity, and specific ethnic labels have shifted over time. Ethnicity, caste, religion, language, and region are salient axes of identity. The 2001 census recorded data for one hundred ethnic and caste groups and tabulated a total of ninety-two languages and at least seven religions (Gurung 2003). Regional divisions between the mountain region (*himal*) in the north, the hill region (*pahad*) across the center, and the plains (*tara*) stretching along the south further fragment the population.

***ethnic demands...once
considered radical...are now
accepted as legitimate***

In contemporary Nepal, the most politically salient sociocultural groups are the high-caste Hindus from the hills, the low-caste Hindus (Dalit), ethnic groups (indigenous nationalities, or *adibasi janajati*), and the Madhesi (peoples from the Tarai region, including both ethnic and caste groups). None of these groups forms an overwhelming majority of the total population. As table 1 illustrates, the high-caste hill Hindus comprise 30.89 percent of the population, Dalits 14.99 percent, indigenous nationalities 36.31 percent, and Madhesi, including Dalits and indigenous nationalities from the Tarai region, 32.29 percent. All of these groups

Table 1. Population of Major Ethnic and Caste Groups, 2001

Group	Population	%
Caste hill Hindu elite (Bahuns and Chhetris)	7,023,220	30.89
Indigenous nationalities	8,271,975	36.31
Mountain	190,107	.82
Hill	6,038,506	26.51
Inner Tarai	251,117	1.11
Tarai	1,786,986	7.85
Unidentified indigenous nationalities	5,259	.02
Dalits	3,233,488	14.99
Hill Dalits	1,611,135	7.09
Madhesi Dalits	1,622,313	6.74
Unidentified Dalits	88,338	.76
Madhesi*	3,778,136	16.59
Caste Madhesi	2,802,187	12.30
Muslims	971,056	4.27
Churaute Muslims	4,893	.02
Others	265,721	1.16
Total	22,736,556	100.00

Sources: Lawoti (2005: 99).
Note: * Most Muslims are from the Tarai area so they are counted as Madhesi. The total percentage of the Madhesi population is 32.29 percent when Madhesi who are also Dalits and indigenous nationalities from the Tarai and Inner Tarai are included.

are composed of smaller groups. Gender and class, which have also been the basis of political mobilization, also cut across these categories. They differ from the other forms of identity listed here, however, because they are not perceived as being rooted in cultural differences.

Castes are groups of people who follow Hinduism and speak Nepali or another Indo-Aryan language. They are hierarchically ranked on the basis of ritual purity and include Brahman, the highest-caste group; Chhetri, the second-highest group; and several low-caste groups such as Kami, Damai, and Sarki. Low-caste groups (Dalits) have been mobilizing against caste discrimination.

All of these castes have homelands in both the hill and Tarai regions, though they are represented in small numbers everywhere. Regional origins are related to differences in political power among the highest castes. High castes from the Tarai region identify as Madhesis and are underrepresented at the state level. Different terms are used to refer to members of the highest caste from these two regions: the term Brahman includes members of the highest caste from both the hill and Tarai regions, while Bahun refers to the highest caste members specifically from the hill region.

Ethnic groups, currently known as indigenous nationalities (*adibasi janajati*), have ancestral homelands in all three regions of Nepal. The official number of such groups stands at fifty-nine. These culturally and linguistically diverse groups include well-known peoples such as Gurungs, Sherpas, and Magars. It is through their opposition to caste Hindus that these groups share a common identity. Many of these groups have historically spoken Tibeto-Burman languages rather than the Indo-European Nepali language that is the ancestral and current language of caste Hindus from the hills. Although these groups argue that they are not part of the Hindu caste system, the distinction between ethnic group and caste is often blurred in practice. As these ethnic groups were incorporated into the Hindu state, some began taking on characteristics of caste groups, treating other ethnic groups as higher or lower than their own. Furthermore, the Newar ethnic group has its own internal caste system.

The ethnic groups that are organizing as indigenous nationalities are internally extremely diverse. As much variation exists within groups that share an ethnic label as exists between groups with different names. For example, the Tharu, Nepal's fourth largest ethnic group according to the 2001 census, share neither a common culture nor a language; rather, many different groups of people across the Tarai began to see themselves as sharing a Tharu ethnic identity after some Tharu elites began a

***indigenous nationalities
are...extremely diverse***

political movement to promote this idea in the mid-twentieth century (Guneratne 2002). Many Tharu share languages with other groups that are not labeled Tharu, such as those in eastern Nepal that speak Maithili (Guneratne 2002).

Ethnic labels lack historical depth and have often shifted over time. The appearance of a people as a coherent ethnic group reflects a group's particular historical relationship with the state more than its cultural distinctiveness (Holmberg 1989; Levine 1987). The state played a key role in the formation of ethnic identity by categorizing diverse groups of people under the same ethnic label and treating them as a single group, as is clear for the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous Rai ethnic group. During the state-building process, Shah kings applied the term "Rai," which merely meant "chief," to the headmen of linguistically disparate groups residing in eastern Nepal. Eventually this term came to be used to refer to the people as well as their leaders, and the various groups came to be regarded as a single group (Gaenszle 1997: 355–56; Hofer 1979: 142).

The state has also reclassified groups to reflect changes in their political importance. The internally diverse Tamangs, for example, became known as a singular ethnic group because the state used these people as a source of forced labor due to their location near the Kathmandu Valley. Before the 1930s the state had called these people "Bhote" or "Murmi"; it later reclassified them as Tamang to reflect their increasing economic importance (Holmberg 1989: 30). People also claimed new ethnic labels for themselves as their place in the political economy shifted. Tibetan-speaking peoples seeking higher status for themselves in the eyes of the state and in society often refer to themselves as "Tamang" (Campbell 1997; Holmberg 1989; Levine 1987: 80).

With transformations in the state and the rise of identity politics since 1990, identities in Nepal are further in flux. Diversity has been increasing, as the changes in the census data between 1991 and 2001 indicate. Whereas the 1991 census collected data on sixty-two caste or ethnic groups, the 2001 census included data on one hundred such groups (Gurung 2003: 3). The 2001 census data also reveals that linguistic diversity appears to be increasing, as ninety-two languages were recorded compared with only thirty-one in 1991 (Ibid.: 11). Although Nepali remained the dominant language, the percentage of speakers of other languages increased. Furthermore, many ethnic groups have increasingly identified themselves as members of non-Hindu religions over the last decade. For example, between 1991 and 2001 the population of Buddhists grew by 69.7 percent, while the population of ethnic groups that are characterized as Buddhist increased by only 24.9 percent (Ibid.: 24). These shifts in

social identification reflect the political efforts of various sociocultural groups to renegotiate their place in the state.

Since 1990, new collective identities for marginalized segments of society, indigenous nationalities (*adibasi janajati*), Madhesi, and Dalits, have emerged. It is important for both activists and policy makers to recognize the internal diversity of these categories, as well as the fact that the Madhesi category overlaps with the other two categories. The next section examines the patterns of inequality that make these categories politically salient.

The Emergence and Persistence of Ethnic Inequality

Ethnic inequality has been a persistent and pervasive feature of the modern state, even though it was not widely discussed or acknowledged until the 1990s. The high-caste Hindus from the hill region constitute the dominant group in Nepal. They gained the upper hand in the political arena during the period of state formation in the last half of the eighteenth century, when Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of a principality called Gorkha, conquered and annexed the numerous small kingdoms that existed throughout Nepal. Since this “unification” of the state, the Shahs, high-caste Hindus who claim to be descendants of royal clans from India, have reigned as Nepal’s monarchy.¹

The process of state building resulted in ethnic stratification as different groups of people were incorporated in the state on unequal terms. Many high-caste Hindus benefited from interactions with the emergent state and succeeded in sharing political power with the rulers. High-caste Hindus residing in Nepal’s central hills were closely aligned with the state from the beginning and have continually held positions of power (Whelpton 1997: 41). They include the Khas people, living in the hill region since as early as the second millennium B.C., as well as the Thakuri, who are members of the landed gentry, and Bahuns, both of whom supposedly emigrated from India around the twelfth century.

Along with these high-caste Hindus, some members of the Newar ethnic group, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, have also been an integral part of the “ruling coalition” in Nepal (Gaije 1975: 160). They are classified as indigenous nationalities, yet they differ substantially from other groups in this category both socially and economically. Newars have an elaborate caste system and have maintained a complex urban society for centuries. After Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the Kathmandu Valley in 1769, high-caste Newars became closely allied with the hill

***Ethnic inequality has
been a persistent...feature***

Hindu rulers and the monarchy, serving as bureaucrats in the palace. These Newars have continued to hold positions of importance in the political sphere, and their historical role as traders was enhanced by their relationship with the state (Gellner 1986).²

While the process of state formation benefited high-caste Hindus and some Newars, it created economic hardship for others. High-caste Hindus who supported the state's expansion efforts were rewarded with land grants, the state's primary way of building alliances and mobilizing human resources during this period.³ The state secured the loyalty of groups of peoples who lived in territories near Gorkha, annexed early on in the state-building period, by giving them places in the army, accompanied by land grants. However, peasants throughout Nepal were burdened with land taxes, compulsory labor obligations that supported the military complex, and occasional levies to meet the needs of the royal household (Regmi 1971: 64).

Among the peoples who came under the control of the state ruled by these high-caste Hindus from the hills were the many ethnic groups from the mountain and hill regions, and a range of peoples who lived in the Tarai, the southern plains region of the territory. Although some of these plains people were high-caste Hindus, historically, they have had limited access to state resources and power (Gaige 1975). Low-caste Hindus, whether from the hills or the plains, have also been excluded from state resources and power.

Some ethnic groups were enlisted to meet the bulk of the expanding state's need for labor. Magars and Gurungs were recruited into the army. Tamangs, residing in territories directly surrounding the Kathmandu Valley, the seat of state power, endured heavy taxation and compulsory labor requirements (Regmi 1976: 18; Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999).

During the state-building process, many ethnic groups lost land to high-caste Hindus, as was the case for the Limbus of far eastern Nepal in the nineteenth century. The state encouraged the immigration of high-caste Hindus to eastern Nepal, and instituted land tenure policies that favored these Hindu settlers. These settlers also acquired Limbu land by lending them money, eventually gaining titles to their lands (Caplan 1970).

The economic and political position of the indigenous nationalities has been affected by their widespread recruitment by the British army since the nineteenth century and by the Indian army after India's independence. Of the hundreds of thousands of Nepali men who have been recruited into these armies, most have been Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus, as the British regarded these peoples as forming a "martial race" with superior innate fighting abilities. From 1914 through 1945, the high-caste Hindu

rulers maintained sovereignty and received payments from the British government in exchange for facilitating this recruitment process (Des Chene 1993: 68–73). Through the World Wars, these peoples were occasionally forced to join foreign armies (Ibid.: 71). Later, they actively sought employment in the British army in particular, believing it to be a path to great wealth. This proved to be true, however, only for some soldiers (Ibid.: 77). Former soldiers have benefited their communities by taking leading roles in village politics and by promoting education (Caplan 1995: 45–50). Some contemporary ethnic activists surmise that army employment has made these people less willing to confront inequality and the lack of political opportunities in their home country (Gurung 1994b).

High-caste Hindus from the hills have long held the majority of positions in the government and administration. In both the parliament in 1959 and the national-level Panchayat in 1969, high-caste Hindus from the hills held more than 50 percent of the seats (Gaige 1975: 164). Brahmans, Chhetris, and Newars formed the overwhelming majority of officers in the national-level administration in 1854, 1950, and 1965 (Ibid.: 166), and comprised 92 percent of high officials in the bureaucracy in 1973 (Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon 1980: 95).

This pattern of ethnic inequality persisted even after the democratic reforms of 1990. Table 2 shows the extent to which high-caste Hindus from the hills continued to dominate every sector of the government, and the leadership of most nongovernmental sectors such as civil society and education. For example, this group has comprised 60 percent of the upper and lower parliament combined. Compared to the Panchayat years, the political exclusion of marginalized groups actually increased under the post-1990 political system: fewer indigenous nationalities were represented in the parliament, cabinet, administration, and judiciary, and the “near total exclusion” of Dalits in these sectors persisted (Lawoti 2005: 19). This trend is linked to the exclusionary set of institutions and policies that were implemented after 1990, including the unitary structure of the state and the first-past-the-post electoral system (Ibid.: 20).

Discussions of ethnic inequality in Nepal concentrate on issues of the control of the state and access to state resources. However, ethnic inequalities are also reflected in a wide range of other socioeconomic indicators. As a recent study by the World Bank demonstrates, Brahmans and

***political exclusion of
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under the post-1990
political system***

Institution	CHHE ^a		Dalit		Madhesi		Newar ^b		IN ^c		Other		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Judiciary: supreme-district	181	77	0	0	18	7.7	32	13.6	4	1.7			235
Constitution commissions	14	56	0	0	3	12	6	24	2	8			25
Cabinet	20	62.5	0	0	5	15.6	3	9.4	4	12.5			32
Parliament: lower, upper	159	60	4	1.5	46	17.4	20	7.6	36	13.6			265
Civil and security forces, elite	190	77.6	0	0	9	3.7	43	17.6	3	1.2			245
Central committee, national parties	97	58.8	0	0	26	17.8	18	10.9	25	15.2			165
District development committee chair/vice, mayor/deputy	106	55.5	0	0	31	16.2	30	15.7	23	12			191
Industry/commerce leadership	7	16.7	0	0	15	35.7	20	47.6	0	0			42
Educational leadership	75	77.3	1	1	7	7.2	11	11.3	2	2.1	1	1	97
Cultural leadership	85	69.1	0	0	0	0	22	17.9	6	4.9			123
Science/technology leadership	36	58.0	0	0	6	9.7	18	29	2	3.2			62
Civil society leadership	41	75.9	0	0	4	7.4	8	14.8	1	1.9			54
Total	1,011	66.5	5	0.3	170	11.2	231	15.2	108	7.1	1	0	1,520
Percentage (a)		66.5		0.3		11.2		15.2		7.1		0	100
Population % (b) ^d		31.6		8.7		30.9		5.6		22.2		0.1	100
Difference % (a - b)		+34.9		-8.4		-19.7		+9.6		-15.1		-1	
Domination ratio (a/b)		2.1		0.03		0.36		2.71		0.32			

Source: Lawoti (2005: 104–05), adapted from Neupane (2000: 82).

Notes: ^a CHHE = Caste hill Hindu elite
^b Newars are members of the indigenous nationalities category, yet they are analyzed as a separate category here because of their high socioeconomic status
^c IN = Indigenous nationalities
^d The population percentage (b) is based on the 1991 census

Chhetris as a whole, as well as Newars, have higher health indicators, longer life expectancy, higher rates of school attendance, and lower levels of poverty than other sociocultural groups in Nepal (World Bank and DFID 2006: 18–29).

While there is a clear pattern of hill high-caste Hindu dominance, not all individuals from this group are privileged, and this group does not have a monopoly on political and economic power. For example, many Thakalis have been successful in business, and some Limbus and Sherpas have acquired considerable political power. Yet throughout Nepal’s history, high-caste Hindus have dominated the apparatus of the state and have maintained a particular advantage in gaining access to state resources. Those visiting government offices or receiving services from the government will most likely interact with high-caste men from the hills. In this context, critiques of the state have taken the form of critiques of high-caste Hindus.

Nationalism and Ethnic Inequality

The state’s construction of nationalism reflects the dominance of hill high-caste Hindus, as it upholds their cultural values and practices as models for the nation. Official representations of the Nepali nation have evolved, but overall, the state has promoted the idea of a unified nation by downplaying or eliminating cultural differences within its population. Ethnic activists challenge this representation of the nation, yet are committed to the concept of the Nepali nation.

***the state...promoted the
idea of a unified nation***

The creation of Nepal’s first comprehensive legal code, the Muluki Ain of 1854, established the groundwork for ideas of the Nepali nation during the era of Rana rule in the mid-nineteenth century. This document classified the peoples who dwelled within the state territory and positioned them in a Hindu world order according to the principles of caste hierarchy (Hofer 1979; Levine 1987; Sharma 1977). It ranked groups of people into five categories on the basis of their relative purity. At the top of the hierarchy were the high-caste Hindus, referred to as wearers of the sacred thread (*tagadharī*). Next were the *matwali*, or alcohol drinkers, divided into groups of unenslavable and enslavable peoples. This *matwali* category united diverse groups of peoples; today these people call themselves indigenous nationalities (*adibasi janajati*). At the bottom were the impure but touchable castes, followed by untouchable caste groups, with whom other groups could not share water (*pani na chalne*). Especially for those placed in the enslavable *matwali* category, one’s ranking in the hierarchy of the Muluki Ain had political and economic significance. By subsuming all peoples within a caste hierarchy, the Rana state

represented Nepali society as fundamentally Hindu. The adoption of caste as the basis of the country's legal system served to buttress and sustain high-caste Hindu dominance.

During the Panchayat era (1962–90), the state solidified the idea of Nepal as a Hindu society and sought to create a culturally homogeneous population. The state promoted the Hindu religion, the Hindu monarchy, and the Nepali language as signifiers of the national community. The Panchayat-era slogan “One language, one form of dress, one country” (*Ek bhasa, ek bhesa, ek desh*) reflects the state's efforts to create cultural uniformity.

Though Nepali nationalists suggest that Nepal has been a land of Hinduism since Prithvi Narayan Shah unified the country in the late eighteenth century, it was only later, during the Panchayat era, that this Hindu category became a prominent way of imagining the nation. Nepal was proclaimed a Hindu kingdom in 1962. The Hindu identity of the nation was performed through daily broadcasts of ritual music and sermons on Radio Nepal, and by government funding of Sanskrit schools. Hindu holidays became national holidays. National symbols promoted during the Panchayat era, including the color red, the cow, and the flag, are drawn from Hinduism, and other national symbols relate to the active Hindu monarchy (Tamang 1999: 13).

Nation building was the primary objective of the education system after the end of the Rana regime. The education system worked to assimilate Nepal's diverse population into a unified nation by using the Nepali language as the sole medium of instruction. In 1956, the National Education Planning Commission recommended that only Nepali be used in schools, a plan explicitly intended to reduce the currency of the many other languages spoken in the country (Gaige 1975: 108–09). Similarly, one of the main goals of the 1971 New Education System Plan was “harmonizing diverse multi-lingual traditions into a single nationhood” (HMG 1971: 2).

State-published school textbooks, the backbone of the national education curriculum, delivered nationalist ideology to children. These books excluded the cultures, histories, and languages of Nepal's ethnic groups (Ragsdale 1989: 119–20 and 194–95; Tamang 1999). History textbooks presented a unifying national history, highlighting high-caste Hindu heroes while excluding narratives about noteworthy individuals from other communities (Onta 1996). The Hindu bias of these books reflects the state's efforts to promote the Hindu identity of the nation and the fact that the authors of these textbooks were overwhelmingly high-caste Hindus and Newars (Tamang 1999: 20).

Another means through which the state sought to depict a homogeneous Nepali nation was the census, taken first in 1911 and then every ten years thereafter. The census obscured the diversity of the population because even though the census schedules included questions about caste and ethnic identity, the state did not process or publish this data. From 1952–54 until 1991, citizens were enumerated on the basis of linguistic and religious affiliation as well as caste and ethnicity, yet only the data on religion and language was made public (Gurung 2003: 1). The linguistic and religious data suggested that the nation was relatively culturally unified, and subsequent censuses conducted during the Panchayat years showed the number of Nepali speakers and Hindus as increasing. The census represented a majority of the population as Hindu. In 1952–54, 88.9 percent of the population was Hindu, increasing to 89.5 percent by 1981 (Gurung 1998: 95). Furthermore, the 1952–54 census showed that nearly half of the population, 48.7 percent, spoke Nepali as their mother tongue, increasing to 58.35 percent in 1981 (Sonntag 1995: 112).

This homogenizing form of nationalism and the unequal power relations upheld and concealed by it became central issues of public debate after the People’s Movement of 1990. With the restoration of a multiparty democracy, people expected that the representation of the nation would become more inclusive. During the crafting of the 1990 Constitution, fierce public debate raged over the shape that the nation should take under the new multiparty political system. The Constitution Recommendations Committee was formed in May 1990, and the majority of suggestions to the committee concerned issues of regional, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identity (Hutt 1994: 35–36). These suggestions challenged the Panchayat model of a homogeneous nation, critiquing the privileged status of Nepali in relation to other languages, the lack of religious freedom, and the designation of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom.

Overall, indigenous and marginalized groups were dissatisfied with the 1990 Constitution. Although it proclaimed that Nepal was a multi-ethnic, multilingual state, it did not completely abandon the older model of nationalism, as Nepal remained a “Hindu kingdom” (HMG 1990: Article 4(1)). Religious conversion was still banned (Article 19) in an attempt to keep Nepali citizens from being wooed away to Christianity or other non-Hindu religions. Nepali retained its dominant status as the

***indigenous and marginalized
groups were dissatisfied with
the 1990 Constitution***

“language of the nation of Nepal” and the language to be used in all official state business, although other languages were granted a modicum of recognition as “national languages” (HMG 1990: Articles 6 (1) and (2)).

Organizing around issues raised in the drafting of the 1990 Constitution helped identity-based movements to coalesce and gain visibility. Ending the dominance of the state by hill high-caste Hindus is the goal of the Madhesi movement, the Dalit movement, and the indigenous nationalities movement. The next section examines the goals and organizations of the latter.

The Indigenous Nationalities Movement

The overarching aim of the indigenous nationalities movement is to increase the social, economic, and political power of these people, and to end the dominance of the high-caste Hindus in the state. The movement

asserts that indigenous nationalities form a community that faces this problem as well as the loss of their traditional religions, languages, and cultures. Since 1990 the movement has increased awareness of ethnic issues among citizens, mainstream political parties, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and pressured the state into addressing ethnic inequality in some concrete ways

the indigenous nationalities movement...[seeks] to increase the social, economic, and political power of these people

(Gurung 2057 v.s. (2000)). Movement organizations have played a key role in channeling ethnic grievances in a nonviolent way and in democratizing the political system.

Over the course of history, the expression of ethnic activism expanded and contracted as the legal forms of political expression changed. The post-1990 era marked the first time that ethnic activism emerged as a political force that could put pressure on the state. Facilitated by the increasingly democratic political system, ethnic organizing became more coherent and open than in the past. However, even during earlier periods, when the state restricted the forms of political participation, ethnic groups engaged in some forms of political action against Hindu dominance.

The History of Ethnic Activism in Nepal

Various forms of social and political organizing by ethnic groups provide evidence of a long history of conflict between them and the Nepali state. Beginning in the 1900s, for example, Limbus struggled against the state to retain their rights to their ancestral lands (*kipat*) in eastern Nepal (Caplan

1970; Regmi 1976); in the early 1950s, there were acts of violence against Bahuns in eastern Nepal (Caplan 1970: 184); and in 1959, Tamangs in Nuwakot and Dhading districts rebelled against Bahun moneylenders and landowners, accusing them of taking their lands through unfair practices. Although the Tamangs looted property and beat many Bahuns (Devkota 2036 v.s. (1979): 326–42; Tamang 1987: 56–57), ethnic conflict rarely resulted in violence.

Prior to 1990, ethnic political demands were articulated primarily through social organizations that focused on cultural preservation and revitalization. During the Rana era, these organizations emphasized cultural reforms because the state did not tolerate explicitly political organizations. Yet these efforts had political undertones, and they presented a subtle critique of the state dominated by high-caste Hindus. Newars in Kathmandu formed some of the earliest of these organizations. Beginning in the 1920s and increasingly through the 1930s and '40s, Newar intellectuals sought to promote their language through publications and by establishing Newari literary associations (Gellner 1986: 119–37). During this same time, Newars also began practicing Theravada Buddhism, an expression of “semi-articulated resistance” to the Hindu state (Leve 1999). Rana rulers exiled Theravada monks from Nepal in the 1930s and '40s, demonstrating that the Nepali state felt threatened by this religious movement (Ibid.).

Many organizations that have played a key role in the post-1990 ethnic movement were formed between 1951 and 1960, when the Ranas lost power and Nepal had its first experience with multiparty democracy.⁴ These organizations promoted social cohesion within single ethnic groups and the preservation of a group's cultural practices. For example, the Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh (Thakali Social Reform Organization), founded in 1954 (2011 v.s.) by Thakalis who had migrated to the town of Pokhara, organized community events such as festivals and life-cycle rituals, operated rotating credit associations, and attempted to reform funeral and marriage practices so that they were less expensive (Manzardo and Sharma 1975). These organizations sought to reform their own communities rather than the state.

During the Panchayat regime, ethnic activism was curtailed as overt forms of political expression, other than within state-sponsored organizations, were forbidden. However, when a window of relative political freedom opened in 1979, ethnic activity increased and became more political. Leading up to a referendum to determine whether the people of Nepal wanted to continue the Panchayat system or institute a multiparty system, the state allowed political parties and organizations to be openly active.

Although the freedom was short-lived, since the results of the referendum called for continuing the Panchayat system, many organizations were formed during this time, several of which continued to operate throughout the 1980s.⁵ These groups demanded that the state recognize and support cultural diversity and ethnic languages.⁶

This brief history illustrates that ethnic activism in post-1990 Nepal emerged from several decades of low-key organizing. The focus of these earlier organizations on promoting and preserving culture, language, and religion, and on building coalitions across ethnic groups, continued in the post-1990 movement. However, the pre-1990 organizations were involved in direct political action only periodically, when the state became temporarily more democratic during the 1950s and then in 1979, and such political activities became more pronounced after 1990.

Issues of the Indigenous Nationalities Movement after 1990

The diverse organizations in the indigenous nationalities movement share a key set of issues in two interrelated categories: political demands and cultural politics. The political demands include the call to change the state so that it is more inclusive and representative of the population and more responsive to all citizens' needs. This requires ending the high-caste Hindu dominance of the state, which is often referred to as *bahunbad* (Brahmanism) because the Bahun (or hill Brahman) caste is the most over-represented in the government. The movement demands a new constitution and the restructuring of the state through the establishment of a federal system to enable ethnic autonomy, reservations for indigenous peoples in the government and other state-sponsored institutions, and the elimination or the reduction of the power of the Hindu monarchy. These changes would promote the capacity of indigenous nationalities to determine their own path of development and their own identities. Redefining the national identity of the state so that it reflects the cultural diversity of the population is another core political demand of the movement. Indigenous nationalities groups propose that Nepal should be a secular rather than a Hindu state, and that national symbols such as the national dress, holidays, anthem, and calendar should not be drawn exclusively from the high-caste Hindu culture.

Cultural politics involves transforming the cultural practices and identities of groups of people. It targets society, yet it feeds back into demands on the state to recognize and support cultural diversity. Cultural politics includes a range of activities through which indigenous nationalities define and promote the cultural practices of their own communities. Guiding these cultural activities is the belief that the indigenous nationalities should

reject the culture of high-caste Hindus, which was imposed on them, and revive their own distinct histories, languages, religions, and other cultural practices, including clothing, dances, and festivals. Inspired by the indigenous nationalities movement, many of its members have made dramatic changes to their cultural practices. They have increasingly identified themselves as followers of non-Hindu religions, adopting Buddhism or other religions. These cultural activities are intrinsically political because they challenge the state's previous strategy of assimilation and the status of high-caste Hindu culture as national culture.

Efforts to preserve ethnic languages and to promote literacy or education in these languages have also been a mainstay of movement activity. Ethnic activists have revived their languages through language classes, publications, cassettes of songs, and films. The 1990 Constitution guaranteed communities the right to primary education in their mother tongue, yet no funds or programs were provided to support this goal. Ethnic organizations demanded that the government create such programs, but they also began developing learning materials and holding their own classes.

Efforts to redefine the Nepali nation have been central to the movement, as is evident in one of its most publicized initiatives, the boycott of Dasain, the country's major national Hindu festival. People began discussing this controversial initiative in numerous publications and conferences after 1990, and by the early 1990s many had begun to boycott Dasain, at least in Kathmandu and eastern Nepal. In the call to boycott Dasain, the movement encouraged ethnic groups to abandon a holiday that most people celebrated and that has long been a key component of a Hindu national identity (Hangen 2005a).

Ethnic organizations also began reviving their own calendrical systems as a way of asserting their unique identities and histories and contesting the dominance of the “Hindu” Vikram Sambat calendar, which the state has used since the political consolidation of Nepal. Celebrations of the New Year have become major festivals for each ethnic group, bringing these ethnic calendars into practice. The Gurung New Year, Lhochhar, was an obscure holiday that few Gurungs celebrated in the early 1990s; since the mid-1990s, however, it has become a major festival bringing thousands of Gurungs together in Kathmandu.

Although the earlier phases of the movement emphasized cultural politics, the movement has increasingly focused on explicitly political demands. This shift has occurred largely as a result of the changing political context: with the rise of the Maoist movement, previously radical political ideas and strategies have become more mainstream. While lan-

guage (*bhasa*), religion (*dharma*), and culture (*sanskriti*) were key to the movement in 1990, the current emphasis is on the right to self-determination

(*atmanirnaya*) and ethnic autonomy (*jatiya swayatta sasan*).

The centrality of the discourse of self-determination, the right of a group to determine its own future, stems from its currency in the international indigenous rights movement and in Communist

Ethnic autonomy...is a corollary to the right to self-determination

ideology. Ethnic autonomy, or ethnic control over political and other aspects of life, is a corollary to the right to self-determination. Federalism is seen as the best way to achieve ethnic autonomy.

Before further investigating the forms and goals of these organizations after 1990, it is crucial to consider how this movement has defined the group of people it seeks to mobilize. The next section examines the significance of the term “indigenous nationalities” and how the collective identity of this group has emerged.

The Construction of a Collective Identity

One major achievement of this movement has been the construction of a collective identity for diverse ethnic groups as “indigenous nationalities” (*adibasi janajati*). This was a crucial step toward mobilizing people to achieve political changes: since no single ethnic group is a majority in Nepal, groups must work in broad coalitions in order to be recognized by the state. This identity established this diverse group of peoples as an important collective political actor that could intervene in the political system.

The category *adibasi janajati* is now recognized by both a wide sector of society and the government as constituting a meaningful and legitimate pan-ethnic identity. The construction of this identity has been a contested process, however; not everyone agrees that this should be the identity label for this group, and debates about which peoples fall under this category continue. This section examines how this identity has been defined and the political consequences of constructing the identity in this way.

The idea that the fifty-nine or so ethnic groups that compose the category of indigenous nationalities constitute a discrete section of Nepali society is historically contingent. The common ground among these culturally diverse groups is primarily their oppositional relationship to the domination of the state by high-caste groups. The state established the historical precedent for this shared identity with the 1854 legal code, the Muluki Ain, which corralled many of these groups together under the label *matwali* (alcohol drinkers). While ethnic activists contest the derogatory

connotations of this term, the community that they seek to mobilize is nearly coterminous with the group that was defined as *matwali*.

The term *janajati* emerged as an ethnic label in the late 1980s, when the indigenous nationalities movement was beginning to mobilize.⁷ Although the word *janajati* was not new to the Nepali vocabulary, it previously held different meanings, referring to either a tribe or the general public (Pragya-Pratishtan 2040 v.s. (1983): 469). Its current use as a collective identity became familiar to people at the end of the Panchayat era, as it appeared in some of the earliest publications to address ethnic political issues.⁸

In the 1990s, *janajati* became the dominant name for the marginalized ethnic groups that were previously known as *matwali*, largely through the efforts of a federation of ethnic organizations, initially called the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities), established in 1990. This organization, which is discussed in detail below, became the central voice of the indigenous nationalities movement. Activists in this organization selected the label *janajati* to denote a community that is outside the fold of the Hindu caste system (Tamang 2005: 6). The term reflects the movement’s rejection of the state’s definition of Nepal as a Hindu state and nation, and counters the state’s claim that the majority of Nepalis are Hindus. *Janajatis* are also held to share a common history of subjugation by the state. Thus it is in opposition to the Hindu castes and the Hindu-dominated state that the common identity of these groups has been created.

Another important component of the definition of *janajati* is that they have “their own distinct tradition and original linguistic and cultural traditions” (Nepal Janajati Mahasangh 2047 v.s. (1990)). However, because the various *janajati* groups share no particular language, religion, or culture, they are united only in opposition to the cultural traditions of the dominant group. This aspect of this definition has the potential to fragment rather than unite these groups. It is included because the state has recognized language and religion as categories of difference in the census, and groups that wish to make claims on the basis of difference cannot ignore state-recognized categories.

Janajatis are also defined as Nepal’s indigenous peoples (*adibasi*).⁹ By invoking indigeneity, activists assert that their people are the original inhabitants of Nepal,

and, in particular, of specific regions of Nepal. This aspect of the defini-

***activists assert that their people
are the original inhabitants***

tion has become increasingly prominent, and the word for indigenous, *adibasi*, is now used in conjunction with the term *janajati*. In 2004 *adibasi* was appended to the name of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, which became the Nepal Adibasi Janajati Mahasangh, or Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).

Earlier, the label *adibasi* (literally, “first residents”) was given primarily to small, seminomadic foraging groups such as the Chepang and the Raute. In the 1990s, when the concept of indigeneity became a prominent way of mobilizing support for ethnic political issues in the international arena, the term *adibasi* gained a much wider usage. Initiatives by the United Nations and other international organizations made the discourse of indigeneity a viable way for small groups of marginalized peoples to claim rights within states (Warren 1998: 6–9). When the United Nations (UN) declared an International Year for the World’s Indigenous Peoples in 1993, ethnic groups in Nepal began to emphasize their identity as indigenous peoples. Members of Nepal’s National Committee for the International Year for the World’s Indigenous Peoples attended international conferences such as the United Nations’ World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, and held cultural programs to showcase the languages and other cultural practices of Nepal’s indigenous peoples. Other organizations disseminated UN statements about indigenous peoples.¹⁰

These activities have intensified. There are now major annual celebrations in Nepal on International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, August 9. One prominent ethnic activist, Parsuram Tamang, is on the Council of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and representatives of other ethnic organizations, including NEFIN, send delegates to the annual forum at the UN in New York. This enables them to contact donors, learn from other indigenous peoples around the world, and gain global attention for their cause.

In addition to bringing international recognition to Nepal’s indigenous nationalities, the concept of indigeneity is a powerful tool for unifying a heterogeneous population by emphasizing their common historical relationship to the land of Nepal. The category of indigenous peoples excludes Hindu caste groups, which, indigenous nationalities argue, arrived from India. Caste Hindus are viewed as outsiders and as nonnatives, a rhetorical move that also enables ethnic activists to portray the dominant group as colonizers. Indigenous nationalities are positioned as the bearers of the “original” cultural forms of Nepal, and thus more authentically Nepali than caste Hindus.¹¹ This discourse of indigeneity may impede efforts to create coalitions of indigenous nationalities and other marginalized groups based on common political goals. Dalits and

most Madhesi (with the exception of those Tarai dwellers who are also indigenous nationalities) are categorized as nonnatives; they are positioned as outsiders who are less authentic and thus less deserving members of the nation.

The movement’s representation of these ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities has been contentious. First, high-caste Hindus and some other people argue that everyone in Nepal is indigenous because the country was settled in waves of migration (Bhattachan 1995: 128). Second, there is some debate about whether all groups that fall under the category of *janajati* are also indigenous; some ethnic groups in the mountain region arrived relatively recently (Tamang 2005: 7). There may be future efforts to distinguish between indigenous *janajati* and nonindigenous *janajati* (Ibid.: 9). Thus, depending on how it is interpreted, the concept of indigeneity may splinter the *janajati* community.

In 2002 the government of Nepal established an official definition of *adibasi janajati* through the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN). NFDIN listed fifty-nine groups on its official schedule of indigenous nationalities and defined them as “a tribe or community as mentioned in the schedule having its own mother language and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history” (National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities 2003: 7). Conflict over the boundaries of ethnic categories and over the precise number of ethnic groups within the country has since emerged. Sixteen of the groups listed on the NFDIN schedule were not reported on the 2001 census, and some argue that many of the groups on the NFDIN schedule are in fact subgroups rather than separate ethnic groups (Gurung 2003: 29). NFDIN’s definition omitted part of the definition that indigenous nationalities had recommended, which stated that *janajatis* were not part of the Hindu caste system (Onta 2005: 7), perhaps because it was too oppositional for the government. Furthermore, according to the NFDIN’s definition, an ethnic group’s inclusion in the *adibasi janajati* category is dependent on it being listed on the official government list.

In an effort to recognize some of the differences between these ethnic groups, NEFIN classified the fifty-nine groups on the official schedule into five categories, based on socioeconomic status: endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advantaged (Tamang 2005: 8–9). Some see this as a necessary step toward creating programs and policies that address the particular needs of each community, while others see it as dividing the indigenous nationalities movement.

Arguments about whether or not a people constitutes a separate ethnic group will be difficult to resolve, as they depend more upon politics than upon objective cultural differences. Ethnic groups, as many social scientists have argued, do not emerge due to the existence of cultural differences; rather, cultural differences become salient and serve as markers of ethnic groups in particular political and economic circumstances (Eriksen 1993). Both the government and ethnic activists seek to represent ethnic groups as bounded entities with an objective existence, but the internal diversity and historical fluidity of these groups complicates this image. Although some of the ethnic labels have long histories, these ethnic groups are not static, and the meanings of ethnic identity have changed over time.

The fluidity of ethnicity and diversity within ethnic groups make it challenging to create official lists, which attempt to fix these dynamic identities, that satisfy everyone. Government policies require such definitions, and yet they may flounder because of them. While such schedules may assist in addressing some ethnic grievances, they may ironically produce other grievances, since they exclude some people while privileging others.

While *adibasi janajati* is the dominant way of framing a collective identity, there have also been efforts to represent this identity in racial terms. Although this has been a relatively minor discourse in the indigenous nationalities movement, it has the potential to become more central. It deserves attention because of its potentially polarizing effects. The main proponent of this racial ideology has been an ethnic political party, the Mongol National Organization (MNO). The MNO explicitly rejects the term *janajati*, vociferously arguing that it means “nomads” or “gypsies,” contrary to the widely accepted definition of the term.¹² Instead, the MNO calls this same group of people “Mongols,” a term that emphasizes a racial identity.

The MNO argues that Nepal’s population consists of two distinct racial groups: Mongols, who make up 80 percent of the population, and

Aryans, or caste Hindus, who make up 20 percent. The MNO asserts that Mongols and Aryans can be distinguished from one another on the basis of physical traits: Mongols have flat noses and stocky bodies, and the men have sparse facial hair, while Aryans have pointy noses and taller, thinner bodies, and the men have abundant facial hair.

Many people, particularly in many rural areas, were not familiar with these terms until the MNO began to organize after 1990. Although these racial terms were previously used in social

***The MNO argues that
Nepal’s population consists
of two distinct racial groups***

science texts, they had not been adopted as forms of self-identification (Hangen 2005b).¹³

As a form of identity, race is similar to indigeneity in that both are globally recognized categories and both serve to unite culturally heterogeneous populations by invoking an ascribed form of identity. Both identities also oppose caste Hindus to other ethnic groups. However, race emphasizes biological distinctiveness.

The MNO promotes a racial definition of identity to argue that a culturally heterogeneous group is biologically united. Race also provides the MNO with an authoritative social scientific discourse that they use to discredit the classification of their community by the state, which does not use race as an official category in the census or legal codes. By adopting the term “Mongol,” the MNO rejects the state’s categorization of their community. Finally, the MNO uses race, which is a global framework for understanding human diversity, to bring international attention to their political cause. With the term “Mongol,” the MNO redefines fragmented and obscure ethnic groups as a united and globally recognizable race. The MNO has argued that Mongols elsewhere in the world would be sympathetic to their plight.¹⁴ However, the MNO’s appeal to its fellow Mongols may go unheeded, as outside Nepal the term “Mongol” generally refers to citizens of Mongolia rather than to a race.

Regardless of whether the MNO is successful in the future, its discursive work to create race as a form of self-identification in Nepal may have a lasting impact. The potential strengthening of racial identities is significant because it may increase animosity between marginalized and dominant groups. Ethnic conflicts that are framed as racial conflicts may be more likely to become more violent than those that are not based on race, as one analysis of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda suggests (Mamdani 2001).

Race can also be used to bridge identities, however, and the National Coalition against Racial Discrimination (NCARD) has taken steps in this direction. Nepali activists who were involved in the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, formed this organization as an alliance of federations of different marginalized communities, including indigenous nationalities, Dalits, Madhesis, and others. The organization uses a very broad definition of racial discrimination, considering it to refer to any form of discrimination or oppression, regardless of whether it relies on physical differences.¹⁵

Organizations within the Indigenous Nationalities Movement

Organizations in the indigenous nationalities movement share common goals, yet they approach political action differently. The main types of

organizations include: social organizations representing single ethnic groups; federations of these organizations, both within and across ethnic groups; professional organizations (for journalists, for example); and political parties. Recently, mainstream political parties have also organized wings representing the indigenous nationalities. This section examines three types of organizations: social organizations, now referred to as Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPOs); the main federation of these organizations, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities; and ethnic political parties.

The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities

The dominant organization in this social movement is the Nepal Janajati Adabasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN), composed of fifty-four member organizations that represent particular ethnic groups.¹⁶ When established in 1990, this organization was called the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities, or NEFEN) and encompassed eight organizations. Originally, it aimed merely to coordinate the work of its member organizations, but it has since developed into a body that articulates the goals of the movement and represents them to the government, society, and international agencies.

Sources of funding for NEFIN activities have expanded dramatically since the late 1990s. Originally the organization's modest expenditures were funded through donations of time and money from individuals. After 1997, however, government funding became available, and after 2000 NEFIN also began to accept foreign funding, as will be discussed further below (Tamang 2005: 14–15). The increasing visibility and legitimacy of this organization and its new sources of funding are reflected in the change in its official quarters: although it originally occupied a couple of rooms in a building by the dusty central bus station, it is now located in an elegant new multistory house on the south side of the capital city.

***Sources of funding for
NEFIN activities have
expanded dramatically***

Much of NEFIN's early work was devoted to establishing *janajati* as a legitimate political identity and their concerns as legitimate, democratic concerns (Tamang 2005). Initially, much of NEFIN's work involved raising public awareness about language rights, religious freedom, and cultural revitalization by publishing pamphlets and holding annual meetings and conferences in Kathmandu on topics such as "Education in the Mother Tongue."

Until recently, NEFIN had articulated its political demands primarily by operating as a lobbying or pressure group, working to influence members of the various governments to accommodate the interests of *janajatis*. During the drafting of the 1990 Constitution, for example, NEFIN made recommendations to the Constitution Commission, and later the organization spearheaded opposition to government initiatives to make Sanskrit language classes a compulsory part of the school curriculum. Since 1992 NEFIN has issued a declaration of its demands for policy reform at its annual general assembly. The demands, which have remained fairly consistent, include that the government declare Nepal a secular state, reform the constitution, ensure linguistic equality for all people, ratify international conventions related to indigenous peoples and minorities, introduce a federal system of governance, and develop an affirmative action program (Ibid.: 20–21).

Over time, NEFIN has been increasingly involved in more overtly political activities and has employed the strategies of political protest that are so ubiquitous in urban Nepal. This shift is due to both the interests of the general secretary of NEFIN from 2000 to 2006, Om Gurung, who has long been active in leftist politics, as well as to the changing political climate. In 2004 NEFIN staged a street demonstration involving about 10,000 people to protest the royal takeover of October 2002 (Ibid.: 14). During the April 2006 People’s Movement for the restoration of democracy, NEFIN participated in many rallies and marches in defiance of the curfew. For example, NEFIN, in coordination with the Seven Party Alliance, contributed to a plan to hold demonstrations around the entire length of the Ring Road surrounding the capital by staging a “democratic” cultural program and song fest (*dohori*) (Sasaktikaran Sandesh 2006: 12). On the occasion of the first meeting of the reinstated parliament, NEFIN protested outside Singha Durbar to demand an unconditional constituent assembly and a secular state (Ibid.). By engaging in these protests, the organization demonstrated that it is willing to act as a political force to create changes in the state.

NEFIN is making efforts to become more representative of the full range of indigenous nationalities. While each ethnic group can have only one representative organization in NEFIN, there are now multiple organizations for most ethnic groups, and there is no clear process by which a particular organization is chosen to serve in NEFIN. If the organization is not representative of the diversity within an ethnic group, members of that group could feel excluded from having any voice within NEFIN. Conflict over this issue has emerged within the Gurung community, as some Gurungs would like to replace the organization that currently represents

the Gurung community, the Tamu Bouddha Sewa Samiti, with a federation of Gurung organizations that represents a wider range of the community. Others argue that Tamu Choj Dhi, the largest Gurung organization, should be the NEFIN representative.¹⁷

NEFIN has operated mainly in Kathmandu, although most indigenous nationalities live in rural areas. The leaders of this organization are overwhelmingly urban intellectuals, well-educated, middle-aged men, many of whom have been involved in leftist politics and teach at the college level or hold positions in law firms or development agencies. However, NEFIN has gradually increased its activities outside the capital. By 2006 it had established district coordination councils in forty-two of Nepal's seventy-five districts.¹⁸

The number of indigenous nationalities that are represented in NEFIN has expanded. Regardless of its population size, each group is represented by only one organization in NEFIN. Smaller groups are thus overrepresented in NEFIN, although in the past, many NEFIN leaders have been from the larger indigenous nationalities, leading the smaller, more marginal indigenous nationalities to feel underrepresented (Onta 2005: 36). In 2007, NEFIN's executive committee has substantial representation from smaller groups. However, few women are involved in the organization, or in its member organizations. Extending the movement to include women is crucial to make this organization more representative and thus more widely credible.

Indigenous Peoples Organizations

Organizations that represent single ethnic groups founded this movement, beginning in the 1950s. Currently, several hundred such organizations exist, according to one estimate (Ibid.: 29). Most of the indigenous nationalities have organizations that represent them, although of the fifty-nine groups listed on the official schedule of indigenous nationalities, eleven of the most marginal groups lack one (Tamang 2005: 16).

These IPOs focus on revitalizing the religions, languages, and cultures of ethnic groups. In order to achieve these goals, they hold seminars, publish magazines and books, and hold language classes. Cultural programs (*sanskritik karyakram*), performances in which people perform dances, sing songs, and wear clothing that is meant to represent the identity of an ethnic group, have also been a mainstay of the IPOs. While these organizations prioritize cultural revitalization and the preservation of their ethnic group over political change, their cultural projects have clear political dimensions, challenging the state's past project of assimilating ethnic groups into the dominant national culture.

These organizations originally called themselves social organizations (*samajik sansthan*) to emphasize the nonpolitical focus of their work, but are now called Indigenous Peoples Organizations, the standard international designation for such groups. This name change reflects the growing international influence in this movement.

Most of the organizations are registered in the capital city. Some have reported difficulty in being allowed to register in the districts by local government officials (Ibid.: 17). Many of the larger organizations have village-level committees throughout the area where the population of their ethnic group is the largest. The capacity of these organizations varies widely. While many of them lack paid staff, office space, and telephones, seven organizations from the larger ethnic groups—the Limbus, Tamangs, Rais, Gurungs, Newars, Thakalis, and Magars—have greater resources (Ibid.: 17). Another shortcoming of these organizations is their lack of internal democracy, as they generally have not used voting to make decisions and select officers (Onta 2005: 32).

Among these organizations, the Limbu group, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC), has become one of the most active and well-run organizations. Founded in 1989 with 68 members, the organization swelled to 12,000 members by 1995, and its activities also expanded. By 1998 KYC had chapters in 11 districts and 200 villages. By 2005, 15 people were employed by the organization (Tamang 2005: 18).

KYC was established as a “nonpolitical, non-profit making social organization” (Kirat Yakthung Chumlung 2049 v.s. (1992): 1). According to the organization’s charter, among its main objectives are promoting and preserving the Limbu language, script, and culture and uplifting the Limbu community. In line with these goals, the organization conducts research on these topics and works to “enhance awareness among the Limbu community” (Ibid.: 3). From its inception, KYC has fulfilled these objectives by organizing cultural programs with demonstrations of “traditional” Limbu dances and songs and publishing a monthly Nepali- and Limbu-language newspaper and a yearly calendar. KYC also supports the efforts of other indigenous nationalities by sending representatives to attend their cultural and discussion programs.¹⁹

In 1993 the KYC began a nonformal education program focused on revitalizing the Limbu language and educating Limbus. The organization developed textbooks and trained teachers to teach the Limbu language and the Sirijanga script, in which it is written, to Limbus who did not speak or read it. KYC now conducts these classes in villages throughout far eastern Nepal (Kirat Yakthung Chumlung 2056 v.s. (1999)). This

project enacted the right of every community to preserve and promote its language, script, and culture and the right to establish and operate schools to educate its children in their “mother tongue,” as guaranteed in Article 18 of the 1990 Constitution (HMG 1990: 13–14).

In addition to these cultural activities, the organization has also been involved in directly political activities. Along with NEFIN and other organizations, KYC has lobbied the state to change its treatment of Limbu and other indigenous nationalities. When the new Constitution was being drafted in 1990, KYC was also involved in efforts to have Nepal declared a secular state. Later the organization worked with others to oppose government initiatives to make Sanskrit language classes compulsory.

Perhaps KYC has been able to accomplish so much because of the relative cultural unity of the Limbus. Limbus have a clearly defined territory, a shared language and script, and a strong sense of history, stemming from their long resistance to the Nepali state.²⁰ The primary challenge for most of these IPOs is to create a sense of unity within the group despite their internal cultural diversity. Publications and seminars sponsored by these organizations frequently address issues such as what religion Magars should follow if not Hinduism, and which of the many Rai languages should serve as the Rai lingua franca. This sense of unity will be necessary in order to develop state policies and institutions that support the cultures of indigenous nationalities, such as educational materials in ethnic languages, proportional representation of these groups, and state recognition of ethnic holidays.

Efforts to create shared identities while recognizing the differences that exist within ethnic groups have resulted in federations of these IPOs for at least two groups, Newars and Gurungs, also known as Tamus. The Gurung (Tamu) National Council (Rastriya Gurung (Tamu) Parishad) was founded in 2000 to coordinate the dozens of Gurung organizations that had opened throughout the country and abroad. Its goals are to create uniformity within Tamu culture, facilitate mutually supporting relationships between Tamu organizations, and enable these organizations to voice common issues together. One of its major activities is coordinating the celebration of the Gurung New Year (Lhochhar) in Kathmandu and Pokhara. In 2003, the group held its first national meeting, which fifty-three different Gurung organizations attended (Rastriya Gurung (Tamu) Parishad 2060 v.s. (2003)).

While the Gurung (Tamu) National Council seeks to serve as the main body representing all Gurungs, some are not willing to cede it this status. Another Gurung organization, Tamu Choj Dhi, claims that it already functions as the primary Gurung organization, as it has chapters

throughout Nepal, and it has refused to join the council.²¹ Such internal disputes will complicate the process of determining national-level political demands.

Since 2000 an increasing number of Nepali indigenous nationalities organizations have opened outside Nepal. In the United States, organizations for all of the largest ethnic groups exist, including the Tamu (Gurung) Society, the Newah Organization of America, and the Tamang Society of America. These organizations seek to promote and preserve these identities in the diaspora and provide ways for people to be involved in the indigenous nationalities movement in Nepal from a distance. They contribute funds to organizations in Nepal, issue declarations establishing their position on political issues affecting indigenous nationalities, and meet with representatives of organizations when in Nepal.²² Gurung organizations in the United States and Japan, for example, contributed thousands of dollars to the fundraising efforts for the first convention of the Tamu National Council (Ibid.). This council emerged partly in response to demands from Gurungs abroad, who wanted to be able to contribute to a central Gurung organization.²³ These diasporic organizations are likely to play an increasingly important role in funding and shaping the indigenous nationalities movement.

While the indigenous nationalities movement brings some voices to center stage, it eclipses others. As in most political sectors in Nepal, gender inequity has been persistent within the movement (cf. Onta 2005: 31), even though it has tended to view gender discrimination as a nonissue within its own community. Ethnic activists have espoused the idea that gender inequality is primarily a problem within the politically-dominant Hindu society, existing within the indigenous nationalities only because of the Hinduization of these communities. They believe that resolving ethnic inequality will end any gender imbalances within ethnic communities.

The existence of gender inequity is reflected in the limited participation of women in all aspects of the indigenous nationalities movement. The IPOs have no more women among their members than mainstream political and social organizations. NEFIN, however, has tried to increase the representation of women on its central committee. Because none of the other IPOs have established programs that specifically target gender inequity, indigenous nationalities women began establishing their own organizations in the 1990s. Most of the large indigenous

***Most...indigenous
nationalities groups...have
women's organizations***

nationalities groups now have women's organizations, and there are also several federations of these organizations. The National Indigenous Women's Federation-Nepal, for example, established in 2000, includes thirteen member organizations, each representing a different ethnic group.²⁴

These organizations provide space for women, excluded from the main organizations, to be active in the indigenous nationalities movement. They address the problem of patriarchy within the indigenous nationalities movement, and the fact that it fails to represent women's issue as part of its main platform (Tamang 2063 v.s. (2006)). They also broaden the base of the women's movement in Nepal, which has been dominated by high-caste Hindu women activists, and bring indigenous concerns into the dominant women's movement (Magar 2060 v.s.-a (2003); Bhattachan 2060 v.s. (2003)). These organizations have become more involved in overtly political activities. A new federation of indigenous women's organizations, the Adibasi Janajati Mahila Loktantrik Manch (Indigenous Nationalities Women Democratic Forum), was established in July 2006 with the express purpose of ensuring that indigenous women are represented in the process of drafting a new constitution (Tamang 2063 v.s. (2006)). Women will continue pressing to be better represented in the central issues and organizations of the indigenous nationalities movement.

Ethnic Parties

Ethnic parties represent an important yet often overlooked component of the indigenous nationalities movement. These parties view political power as the key to improving the status of the indigenous nationalities and assert that it is futile to try to gain power through mainstream political parties dominated by high-caste Hindus. These organizations offer one way for indigenous nationalities to obtain higher rates of participation in the formal political process and thus influence government policy and institutions. They aim to make the government more representative of the population and to increase the accountability and responsiveness of politicians, as the predominantly high-caste Hindu politicians have not been responsive to the demands and interests of people from other communities.

Indigenous nationalities have not able to participate fully and make political demands in the mainstream political parties. The leadership of these parties, as seen in the composition of the central committees, is dominated by those of high caste (Onta 2005: 44). Excluded from mainstream parties, indigenous nationalities have turned to small parties to run for election. In the 1999 parliamentary elections, 80 percent of the indigenous nationalities candidates either ran as independents or were affiliated with small parties (World Bank and DFID 2005: 31–32).

Mainstream parties have a mixed record on ethnic issues. Immediately after 1990, these parties failed to address ethnic grievances (Bhattachan 1995: 129–30), but gradually they began to deal with these issues through their party manifestos, other policy documents, and specific party wings. The Communist Party of Nepal (UML) opened the Jatiya Mamila Bibhag (Ethnic Issues Department) in 1998, while the Nepali Congress Party established an organization called the Nepal Indigenous Nationalities Association in 2001. Overall, however, these mainstream parties have done little to end ethnic inequality (Onta 2005: 45–46).

Ethnic parties, of which there are relatively few compared to IPOs and other types of parties, have not been the central players in the indigenous nationalities movement. A total of only six, including the Rastriya Janamukti Party (RJP) and the Mongol National Organization, have opened. As of 2005, there were also fifteen regional liberation fronts such as the Limbuwan Mukti Morcha and the Khambuwan Mukti Morcha (Ibid.: 30). These liberation fronts, which have boycotted elections, argue that each ethnic group should control a region of the country. Initially they existed largely by virtue of their vocal leaders and the occasional pamphlets they produced. Some of these organizations, however, became aligned with the Maoist party and have become involved in revolutionary activities, as discussed further below.

These parties have faced legal constraints that the IPOs have not encountered. Article 112(3) of the 1990 Constitution barred the Election Commission from recognizing or registering any political party explicitly formed “on the basis of religion, community, caste, tribe, or region” (HMG 1990). Although candidates from unregistered parties could run as independents, they were not assigned a single and permanent election symbol, as were candidates from other small parties. Because voters placed marks on these symbols on ballots in order to cast their votes, these symbols were a crucial means of creating a party identity and gaining votes. Supporters of ethnic parties viewed the Election Commission’s refusal to register ethnic parties as proof of the state’s Hindu bias. Ethnic parties were also hampered by their lack of access to mainstream media coverage. They were not mentioned on the government-controlled radio, and rarely received coverage in major newspapers.

Ethnic political parties are a more radical form of ethnic activism than IPOs because they aim to gain direct political power for indigenous nationalities. The state’s restrictions on ethnic political parties suggest that lawmakers perceive these parties to pose a threat to the democratic system. While ethnic political parties are often assumed to jeopardize multiparty

democracies, these parties have, in fact, contributed to democratization. They provide a way for a wide variety of people to mobilize and make claims against the state and helped to broaden the base of people who were involved in running for election and in political activities. These parties, furthermore, respected the rules and boundaries of electoral politics.

In order to assess the potential of ethnic parties to secure greater political representation for indigenous nationalities, it is important to examine why these parties performed so poorly in national elections, and ask what would make these parties more electorally viable. The RJP and the MNO have been the only parties to participate in elections, yet neither has fared well.

The RJP is one of the only ethnic political parties to secure registration from the Election Commission. In order to do so, it broadened its explicitly ethnic agenda and claimed to represent all peoples who are oppressed. The party also eliminated the “communal” term *janajati* from its name, which was initially Rastriya Janajati Mukti Morcha. Despite this name change and the alteration of its official platform, the RJP continued to focus primarily on indigenous nationalities issues, calling for a federal government, elections based on proportional representation, reservations for marginalized groups in the government, and a secular state (Rastriya Janamukti Party 1994: 2–3). Most of the party’s supporters and candidates were from the indigenous nationalities: of the eighty-two candidates that it put up for election in 1994, eighty were indigenous nationalities, one was Dalit, and one was Madhesi (ibid.: 4). The party split in 1998 (Shreshta 2004: 24), and later it faced another crisis when its founder and leader, Gore Bahadur Khopangi, accepted King Gyanendra’s nomination to become a minister in 2002. This act discredited Khopangi’s claim that he was working for political change and for ethnic rights, and he was branded a royalist.²⁵

The RJP never won a seat in parliament. Furthermore, in none of the national elections did it secure the required 3 percent of votes cast necessary to achieve status as a national party. Its vote share did increase, however, between 1991 and 1999, as it ran an increasing number of candidates in each election (Lawoti 2005: 69). The RJP did not participate extensively in local elections in 1992 and 1997.²⁶

The MNO, a much smaller party than the RJP, participated in elections in east Nepal despite lacking registration from the Election Commission.²⁷ It threatened to take over the state by armed revolution if it could not gain power through elections. Since the party’s founding, MNO leaders have aimed to restructure Nepal as a federation of states where ethnic languages are used and to abolish the monarchy, a buttress of Hindu

dominance. In the mid-1990s, the MNO began arguing that a real democracy would mean *loktantra* (power to the people), since *prajatantra* (the post-1990 political system) was a limited form of democracy, which gave power to people only as subjects (*praja*) of the king (Hangen 2001). The party was one of the earliest advocates of positions that by 2006 had become part of mainstream political discourse.²⁸

In each of the three parliamentary elections held in 1991, 1994, and 1999, MNO candidates ran for election in the Ilam and Jhapa districts, yet the party did not win any seats. The party was most successful in Ilam, where at least one candidate came in third place in every election, just behind two of the large national parties, the Nepali Communist Party (UML) and the Nepali Congress Party, and beating out another large party, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party. Between 1991 and 1999, however, the MNO received a decreasing number of votes, as table 3 shows.

This progressive decline may indicate that voters were increasingly discouraged by the fact that votes for candidates who did not win were wasted votes. As people became more familiar with how the electoral system worked in Nepal, they saw that MNO candidates did not have a realistic chance of winning parliamentary seats, especially when compared with national-level parties that had formed governments, held seats, or

Year	Ilam district			Jhapa district	
1991	Constituency	Results		Results	
		Votes	%	Votes	%
	1	2,519	5.14		
	2	6,019	12.77		
1994	1	1,611	4.77		
	2	2,396	7.49	383	0.91
	3	3,403	10.19	525	1.37
1999	1	496	1.20		
	2	693	1.71	361	0.66
	3	2,321	5.72	1,098	2.08

Sources: Election Commission and author communication with MNO leaders.

had at least obtained registration, like the RJP. This does not necessarily mean that people became less supportive of the MNO's ethnic political platform. Rather, they may have become more skeptical about the possibility of achieving these goals through elections.

In 1992 and 1997 the MNO achieved more electoral success in village-level elections in Ilam district than it did in the national elections. In 1992 MNO candidates were elected in twenty-four out of forty-seven village governments, called Village Development Committees (VDCs), and won the majority of the posts, including the chair and vice-chair seats, in two of these VDCs (Nirbachan Aayog 2049 v.s. (1992)).²⁹ In 1997, however, MNO candidates were elected in only nineteen VDCs, though they retained the majority in the two villages where they had previously established it (Nirbachan Aayog 2054 v.s. (1997)). Overall, votes for MNO candidates in local elections decreased between the 1992 and 1997 local elections: they won 13.47 percent of seats in 1992, but only 5.5 percent in 1997 (Hangen 2007).

This decline reflects a nationwide trend in the 1997 local elections: across Nepal, the ruling Nepali Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist) won more than 50 percent of the seats in VDCs (Hachhethu 2005: 166). In Ilam as well, the MNO lost seats to the Nepali Communist Party. The

***VDCs have had little
power or autonomy***

decline in the MNO's vote share may also be explained by people's increasing understanding of the limited role of village governments in the post-1990 political system. Despite the government's support for the concept of decentralization, VDCs have had little power or autonomy. The capacity of VDC elected officials to bring resources to the village depended on their networks with elected officials

and bureaucrats at the district center, who were all members of the mainstream political parties. MNO candidates who were elected to the VDC were thus thwarted in their attempt to secure resources from the center because they did not win seats at the district or national level.

Many analysts interpret the failure of ethnic parties to gain seats in parliament as evidence that ethnic political parties are not viable in Nepal because voters do not support their platforms (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999; Baral 2005: 46; De Sales 2002: 337–38). However, as Lawoti (2005) argues, the explosion of ethnic organizations after 1990 shows that ethnic issues were of concern to people, and that there are many other reasons why ethnic parties did not fare well at the polls, such as the historical, internal, and systemic challenges they faced when competing for votes (Lawoti 2005: 69–73).

Systemic challenges to the parties include the inability to register and achieve recognition from the Election Commission. This clearly limited the ability of ethnic parties to mobilize votes, as they were denied a consistent and common election symbol, access to media, and government campaign funds. Nepal's electoral system also worked to the disadvantage of small parties like the ethnic parties. Nepal employed a first-past-the-post electoral system, in which seats were allotted to the individuals who won the most votes, rather than a proportional electoral system, which would allot seats to parties according to the proportion of votes that they receive (Ibid.: 264–65).

The ethnic parties were also established much later than the major parties, which worked underground from 1962 to 1990 despite being banned. Because they had been established more recently, they lacked the funds and the experience of older parties. Furthermore, they had to compete with the established networks of other political parties, which had already gained loyal supporters. Finally, ethnic elites were reluctant to leave parties with district- and national-level networks to join these small new parties.

If some of these factors were to change, ethnic parties could become viable in Nepal. The most important change would be the removal of the structural constraints established by the 1990 Constitution. This would mean establishing a proportional electoral system and removing the constitutional constraints on the registration of ethnic parties. Comparative data from Latin America suggests that institutional changes that serve to increase the representation of minor parties in the political system are necessary though not sufficient for ethnic parties to become electorally viable (Van Cott 2003). But if structural constraints were removed in Nepal, the ethnic parties might then have the opportunity to gain further resources and political expertise.

One identity-based party that achieved success in national elections is the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), which seeks to end political discrimination against Madhesis, those who live in the Tarai region, in Nepal's southern plains. The NSP won six seats in parliament in 1991, three seats in 1994, and five seats in 1999 (Lawoti 2005: 69). The NSP also formed part of several coalition governments between 1994 and 1999. Its inclusion in parliament furthered the aims of the movement as it “helped the NSP to highlight Madhesi problems and demands,” even if it was not able to enact changes to address these problems (Ibid.).

It is unclear why the NSP was more successful in elections than parties representing indigenous nationalities. It was able to register with the Election Commission, perhaps because its name, which means the Nepal

Goodwill Party, contains no ethnic or regional references. Yet, as the case of the RJP indicates, registration alone does not guarantee electoral success. Differences between the Madhesi social movement, which mobilizes people in the Tarai region, and the indigenous nationalities movement may also be part of the answer. Madhesi politicians may have greater financial and social resources than their indigenous nationalities counterparts, and people in the more urban Tarai may have a higher degree of political consciousness than people in other regions. Although further investigation is needed to explain the relative success of the NSP, this case demonstrates that it is possible for an identity-based party to gain widespread support in Nepal.

Despite their lack of electoral success, ethnic parties have made important contributions to the indigenous nationalities movement. Participating in electoral politics was a form of protest as well as a way for these parties to gain seats. Despite having been denied official party status, the MNO directly challenged the state simply by putting up candidates for election. It called attention to the fact that not all political parties were considered legitimate, and demanded that the limitations to the multiparty system be removed.

Ethnic political parties have also played an important role in the indigenous nationalities movement in rural Nepal, raising awareness about ethnic grievances and mobilizing people committed to ethnic issues. When compared with NEFIN and its member organizations, these political parties have created a broader-based form of political action. Ethnic parties mobilize voters to elect representatives who would then make changes. Thus the primary target of their political activities is the broad base of voters, including those in rural Nepal. In the 1990s, NEFIN primarily aimed to influence the state through leaders who were not formally chosen by a broader base of the population. This lobbying strategy did not require the mobilization of rural society, and earlier in the movement, NEFIN and its organizations remained based in the capital. Thus, in the 1990s, ethnic political parties mobilized and involved a broader segment of society than did NEFIN.

Like NEFIN and its member organizations, the MNO achieved many cultural changes. It encouraged people to reject high-caste Hindu culture and to revive their own languages, religions, and other cultural practices. They held celebrations of Tihar, presenting it as a Mongol holiday, campaigned for the boycott of the Hindu festival Dasain (Hangen 2005a), and encouraged many people to abandon Hinduism in favor of Buddhism and other religions. The MNO also changed the consciousness of its rural supporters, making people aware of the issue of ethnic inequality and engag-

ing people in discussions about the relationship between ethnic groups, national identity, and the state. The party enabled people to view themselves as political actors with the power to change both their own cultural practices and those of the state.

Despite these democratizing contributions, the MNO replicates some of the problems of mainstream parties. Women are underrepresented among candidates and activists, and larger, more powerful ethnic groups are more visible than more marginal ethnic groups in the party. Furthermore, the party is overly centralized, with much power resting with the founder and president.

Yet these problems do not justify continuing the ban on registering ethnic parties. Ethnic parties should be fully legalized in Nepal, ensuring that they continue to participate through legal political channels. The continuation of this prohibition is likely to foster revolutionary actions by these parties.

Ethnic parties should be fully legalized in Nepal

The Maoists and the Indigenous Nationalities Movement

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which rose from a small party to become a significant power broker over the past decade, and the indigenous nationalities movement have a complex, mutually influential relationship. Many indigenous nationalities and other marginalized peoples, including women and Dalits, participated in the decade-long People’s War. Indigenous nationalities have supported the Maoist insurgency for a variety of reasons. The Maoists raised ethnic issues with more force than any of the mainstream political parties. Shortly before launching the People’s War in 1996, the Maoists incorporated into their platform many of the issues that the indigenous nationalities movement had voiced: they vowed to end high-caste Hindu political dominance, demanded a secular state and language rights, and declared that ethnic groups should have the right to self-determination. Later, the Maoists announced plans to form nine autonomous regions in Nepal that would give ethnic groups the right to self-determination and secession (Sharma 2002: 18–19).

The Maoists also established several ethnic liberation fronts, such as the Magarant National Liberation Front and the Tamang National Liberation Front (Lawoti 2005: 65). Some of these organizations, such as the Limbuwan Mukti Morcha, were formed independently of the Maoists and later joined them. The Limbuwan Mukti Morcha was founded in 1991 by Bir Nembang to demand autonomy for Limbuwan, a region in far eastern Nepal. In 2001, it joined the Khambuwan National Front at

the Maoists' behest to form the Kirat National Front. These alliances have appeared unstable: the Khambuwan National Front left this alliance in 2002 to form the Kirat Workers' Party but rejoined the Maoists in 2003 (Shreshta 2004: 19). Other ethnic parties such as the MNO have not joined forces with the Maoists, despite pressure from the Maoists to do so.³⁰

The Maoist's direct approach to addressing ethnic inequality may have appealed to indigenous peoples (Lawoti 2005: 65–67). Whereas the mainstream indigenous nationalities movement initially prioritized cultural reform and settled for gradual political change, the Maoists sought immediate political and economic change through the use of violence. Some activists involved in the mainstream ethnic movement later joined the Maoists, preferring their strategy. Suresh Ale Magar, the first general secretary of NEFIN, for example, joined the Maoist ethnic wing, the Akhil Nepal Janajati Sangh, in November 1994 (Sharma 2002: 14). The paucity of accessible channels through which ethnic groups could communicate their political demands may have contributed to their support for the Maoists' armed rebellion (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004; Lawoti 2005).

Many ethnic activists have been apprehensive about the Maoist agenda. They are concerned that the Maoists might merely be using the ethnic agenda to achieve power and will not prioritize these issues once in power (Lawoti 2003: 87–94). Their skepticism is underscored by the fact that while indigenous nationalities have served as rank-and-file members of the Maoist party, the highest leaders are mainly high-caste Hindus.

In response to the considerable involvement of indigenous nationalities in the insurgency and the Maoist adoption of this platform, the indigenous nationalities movement has become more politicized. For example, the Maoist movement has had a clear impact on the ethnic political activities of the Magars. At the beginning of the 1990s, Magar demands were religious and linguistic, and their demand for an autonomous Magar territory "appeared as a pleasing but totally unrealistic idea" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004: 134). The People's War politicized and divided Magar activists. One segment formed the Magarant Liberation Front, which became openly affiliated with the Maoists and demands an autonomous territory (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004).

***the rise of the Maoist
movement has been beneficial***

In sum, the rise of the Maoist movement has been beneficial for the indigenous nationalities movement in some ways. The Maoists have pressured the political center to take ethnic

issues seriously, yet whether the Maoists will continue to prioritize

ethnic issues when in power remains a question of central concern. As will be discussed further below, this question is particularly pressing in light of the Interim Constitution, which the indigenous nationalities have critiqued for failing to address their demands, and in light of the Maoist responses to Madhesi protests in the Tarai.

State and International Responses to the Movement

State Responses

Largely through the efforts of NEFIN, the indigenous nationalities movement pushed the state to recognize ethnic grievances as legitimate political issues and to adopt a new institution that formally addresses ethnic issues. The state's positive, if partial, responses to the movement's demands illustrate the democratizing force of the movement. Here, the state responses to the movement from 1990 to 2006, prior to the second People's Movement, will be discussed.

In response to the demands of the movement, the government's five-year plans since 1992 have increasingly addressed indigenous nationalities issues. The eighth five-year plan (1992–97) stated that programs targeting *janajatis* would be carried out (Onta 2005: 19). In the ninth plan (1997–2002), a section of one chapter, entitled “Adivasis and Janajatis in Development Programs,” discussed carrying out social, economic, and cultural development programs for this group. The plan called for a council that would coordinate government programs for indigenous nationalities and for district-level committees that would carry out these programs (Ibid.: 19–20). The tenth five-year plan (2002–07) devoted an entire chapter to ethnic issues and called for many of the same initiatives that were outlined in the ninth plan, such as promoting ethnic languages and ending poverty. However, the plan failed to quantify objectives to be achieved (Ibid.: 21–22). Indigenous nationalities activists hailed the inclusion of these issues in these various plans as achievements, but the government failed to fulfill these plans.

The government's concrete actions addressing ethnic grievances include the formation of five task forces or commissions between 1993 and 1996. However, the reports of these bodies were largely ignored, and the government even acted against some of the recommendations. Such commissions could be seen as a government “strategy to ward off popular demands” (Tamang 2005: 10). For example, in 1994 the Commission on Broadcasting of National Languages in Radio recommended the broadcasting of news in languages other than Nepali (Sonntag 1995). Ethnic activists welcomed this program as a concrete sign of the government's recognition and support of linguistic and ethnic diversity. Their enthusi-

asm was dampened, however, when the government also began to broadcast the news in Sanskrit, the ancient language used in Hindu rituals and known only by Hindu priests. Similarly, the National Languages Policy and Recommendation Commission, established in 1994, recommended that the state should adopt a three-language policy, but the government banned the use of Maithili and Newari in municipal governments (Tamang 2005: 9).

The state's most significant response to the movement was the establishment of the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) in 2002. This foundation was recommended by a task force that the government had established in 1996; the National Committee for the Development of Nationalities (NCDN) preceded it in 1997. This earlier committee laid the groundwork for NFDIN by establishing policies for how programs aimed at supporting *janajatis* should be created, conducting research, producing publications, organizing seminars and discussion series, funding indigenous nationalities organizations, and sponsoring scholarships (Onta 2005: 25–26).

NFDIN has a large governing council composed of representatives from NEFIN's member organizations and the government. Its objectives include preserving and promoting the culture and knowledge of indigenous nationalities and providing "assistance in building an equitable society by making social, economic, religious and cultural development and upliftment of indigenous nationalities" (National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities 2003). It has performed a wide range of activities to achieve these goals, including supporting research about indigenous nationalities, participating in cultural preservation activities, and performing development activities such as generating income (Onta 2005: 27).

NFDIN was granted an inadequate budget of just over 20 million rupees from the government. (Ibid.: 28). However, NFDIN applied for and received funding from the British government's Department for International Development (DFID) in September 2005. The NFDIN will receive funds for a period of three years to be applied to the Institutional Strengthening Project (ISP), the key objective of which is to enhance the efficiency and strengthen the capacity of NFDIN (National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities n.d.). Bal Krishna Mabuhang, a former general secretary of NEFIN, is the project coordinator of the ISP.

Political instability has prevented NFDIN from making satisfactory progress on this project. After April 2006, NEFIN demanded the resignation of the executive committee of NFDIN on the grounds that these indi-

viduals were appointed under the king’s government, which was no longer legitimate.³¹ Without the NFDIN executive committee members, who were all involved in the ISP, Mabusang could not make headway on the project. He met with the restored parliament to urge them to appoint a new executive committee, since the DFID may retract its funding of the ISP.³² These problems demonstrate how NFDIN as a government institution is vulnerable to upheavals in the government and can only be effective if the government itself is stable and accountable to the people.

The most significant contribution of NFDIN, and the task force and committee that preceded it, is that it has “helped legalize ethnopolitics in Nepal” (Onta 2005: 24). The state now considers ethnic grievances to be legitimate issues, at least when they are expressed in forums over which it maintains some control rather than as divisive threats. NFDIN has also established an official definition of the indigenous nationalities category, as discussed earlier. The state has now agreed to view ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities, rather than as caste groups or groups to be assimilated. These changes in the state view of ethnic issues represent major accomplishments by the indigenous nationalities movement, and have set the stage for the further implementation of the indigenous nationalities demands.

The state has...agreed to view ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities

The Impact of International Development Funding

Until recently, international donors ignored ethnic organizations in Nepal, even while pouring funds into other NGOs. This may be because international development organizations throughout the world have not considered ethnic inequality to be of primary importance in planning projects (Esman and Herring 2001). High-caste Hindus who represent the state also discouraged donors from focusing on ethnic inequality (Bhattachan 2001).

Starting in the late 1990s, however, international donors began expressing interest in partnering with ethnic organizations because of a new development paradigm of “social inclusion” and the legalization of ethnic politics within Nepal. Several ethnic organizations began receiving money from organizations such as Plan International, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Canadian government (Ibid.: 75). Only two IPOs, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung and Nepal Chepang Association, have entered into long-term projects with foreign funding. Not many organizations have the knowledge about how to acquire devel-

opment funding or the resources necessary to network with agencies (Tamang 2005: 18). However, as more organizations gain this knowledge, international development funding will expand. In 2004, NEFIN received a large multiyear grant from DFID, as will be discussed further.

The introduction of international funding to these organizations has been hotly debated within the indigenous nationalities movement (Bhattachan 2001). Many activists are concerned that the goals of these

organizations will be diluted. Their fears are supported by scholars who show that elsewhere in the world, international funding and the development approach to social change have acted as an “anti-politics machine,” leading people to view social problems as resolvable via technical interventions rather than

***international donors ignored
ethnic organizations***

through political solutions (Ferguson 1990). NGOs are often “diverted away from social mobilization and toward the provision of services and development initiatives” (Fisher 1997: 454). Thus, IPOs could become more beholden to donors than to the communities they seek to represent. Furthermore, the capacity of indigenous nationalities leaders to demand political and structural changes from the state could decrease as the result of their involvement in projects that are tailored for the funding prerogatives of international development agencies. To some extent, this will depend on the donors’ expectations for project outcomes. While further research on the impact of international funding on these organizations is needed, there are indications that after receiving such funds, some of these organizations began to focus on development projects that aimed to provide concrete goods and services to ethnic groups even while they continued their programs on cultural revitalization, consciousness raising, and political protest.

This is an important issue for Nepal’s political future because if IPOs cannot be responsive to ethnic political demands, indigenous nationalities may seek to challenge the state in more revolutionary ways, creating further conflicts. Furthermore, these organizations represent one of the few channels of political action in Nepal that have not been subsumed within party politics or driven by donor concerns. The loss of autonomy of these movements as a result of donor agendas could limit critiques of the development paradigm and the expression of alternative forms of democracy.

Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC), one of the first ethnic organizations to receive international funding, has increasingly followed the operating style of mainstream NGOs. The organization’s development activities

included a drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation center in 1996, partially funded by the United Nations Drug Control Program,³³ and micro-credit projects and environmental and health education in 1997, funded by the Danish Association for International Co-operation (MS-Nepal). However, these projects have not eclipsed the KYC cultural revitalization programs.³⁴ The KYC also received funding from MS-Nepal for programs on advocacy and rights, as well as funds from the World Bank Grants Faculty for Indigenous People in 2004 to document Limbu healing practices and knowledge on biodiversity.

In 2004, the British government through the DFID generously funded NEFIN to carry out the three-year Janajati Empowerment Project (JEP). With a budget of UK £1.52 million, this is by far the largest-scale project with international funding to be carried out by a Nepali ethnic organization (Onta 2005: 35). The project’s aims, as stated in an informational pamphlet published by NEFIN, are to “increase participation of *janajatis* in socioeconomic and political processes at all levels” and “to build up the capacity of Nepal’s *janajati* groups so as to lead to a stronger social movement.” As planned, the project could sustain NEFIN’s political focus: the JEP explicitly aims to strengthen the capacity of IPOs to help ethnic groups develop and articulate their demands to the state. The proposed activities are similar to NEFIN’s past activities, including strengthening institutions, raising awareness, increasing empowerment, influencing national policy formation, and conducting advocacy and research.

In practice, the JEP may channel more of NEFIN’s efforts toward the delivery of standard development goods. A list of JEP activities for highly marginalized indigenous nationalities in 123 villages includes some programs with a political and cultural focus, such as those on education in the mother tongue, legal education, and cultural programs, yet it names many more typical development programs, such as adult education, scholarships, community health and drinking water, agricultural programs, and training in a variety of trade skills (Lama 2006). It will be important to evaluate the outcomes of this project and its impact on NEFIN to determine whether and how this organization is changing in response to this recent influx of funding.

Ethnic Demands for a “New Nepal”

Since April 2006, the indigenous nationalities movement has come closer to seeing its goals realized as mainstream political discourse increasingly addresses issues that the movement has raised. During the nineteen-day popular movement that month, which forced the king to relinquish his

control of the government and reinstate the parliament that he dissolved in 2002, people across the country demanded changes that once only radical ethnic and leftist political groups had voiced: the end of the monarchy, a secular state, and a new constitution. Since then, the government has made many key decisions that converge with long-term demands of the indigenous nationalities. Upon being reinstated, the parliament repealed the political power of the monarchy, declared Nepal a secular state, and pledged to hold elections to a constituent assembly. The comprehensive peace accord and Interim Constitution have further implemented these changes. However, these documents have failed to meet the demands of the indigenous nationalities and other marginalized groups. Indigenous nationalities activists charge the interim government with paying inadequate attention to their demands, which they had clearly expressed.

The Comprehensive Peace Accord, which the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance signed on November 8, 2006, officially ended the decade-long war. In addition to reaching a settlement about managing the arms and armies of the government and the Maoists, the Maoists and the SPA made many agreements relating to ethnic issues. They agreed to hold elections to a constituent assembly that will draft a new permanent constitution, and that these elections would employ a mixed electoral system, with 205 members elected through the first-past-the-post system and 204 members elected by proportional representation, on the basis of votes won by political parties. Sixteen members would be appointed. The accord did not guarantee proportional representation for marginalized groups but suggested that political parties should implement it when choosing their candidates. It curtailed the power of the king, nationalized royal property, and stated that the constituent assembly would decide the fate of the monarchy. It proposed that the interim government consist of 209 members of the Seven Party Alliance, 73 Maoists, and 48 members from “sister organizations and professional bodies, oppressed ethnic communities and regions, and political personalities.” Regarding the structure of the state, the agreement recommended that the centralized and unitary structure of the state be deconstructed and that an inclusive and democratic state be established, but it also stated that the final decision would be made by the constituent assembly.³⁵

NEFIN and other organizations critiqued the peace accord for not addressing the interests and demands of the indigenous nationalities.³⁶ In a public letter issued on November 18, 2006, NEFIN general secretary Om Gurung forwarded fifteen demands and warned that NEFIN would begin a series of protests if the Maoists and Seven Party Alliance failed to comply. NEFIN demanded clarification on how the state would be restruc-

tured, proportional representation for indigenous nationalities in the constituent assembly and in all levels of the interim government, and a referendum on the monarchy to be held along with the constituent assembly elections, among other issues. Furthermore, the letter stated that the document’s failure to include the term *adibasi janajati* suggests that the political parties do not respect and recognize this identity.³⁷

The Interim Constitution was finalized on December 16, 2006, and adopted on January 15, 2007. This constitution upholds many of the decisions of the peace accord. While it represents a significant advance over the 1990 Constitution with respect to ethnic issues, it failed to meet the demands of the indigenous nationalities.

In its demands to the Interim Constitution Drafting Committee in July 2006, NEFIN requested that the Interim Constitution express Nepal’s status as a secular state, provisions guaranteeing the right to use ethnic languages in education and government offices, the restructuring of the state into ethnic and regional autonomous regions, the right to ethnic self-determination, and proportional representation for indigenous nationalities in all sectors of the state.³⁸ The Interim Constitution does not include any of these demands, aside from the statement that Nepal is a secular state, leaving these issues to be resolved by the constituent assembly. Proportional representation, reservations, and federalism are the issues on which there is the biggest discrepancy between ethnic demands and the Interim Constitution. Indigenous nationalities want these changes made through amendments to the Interim Constitution, before the constituent assembly elections, so that they have a better chance of being well represented in that assembly.

From NEFIN’s perspective, political leaders must explicitly include ethnic issues in state documents rather than merely calling for broad changes and assuming that ethnic aspirations are subsumed within these statements. Indigenous nationalities want their demands to be at the center of efforts to revise the political system. While they welcome the symbolic changes that the lawmakers have adopted, such as the declaration that Nepal is a secular state, these changes are not sufficient. Furthermore, they want to be included in the decision-making process and want their community acknowledged by having it named in official documents.

***Indigenous nationalities...
want to be included in the
decision-making process***

Protesting the Interim Government's Actions

Since issuing the Interim Constitution, the government has faced the most sustained protests by marginalized ethnic groups in the country's history. Expressing their dissatisfaction with the Interim Constitution, NEFIN launched a series of general strikes and other protests in the capital and in district centers, which have been ongoing since January 2007. On February 26 and March 2, 2007, NEFIN held talks with the interim government and expressed their four minimum demands: ethnic-based proportional representation in the constituent assembly elections, an immediate decision on how a federal system would be set up, linguistic freedom, and a new national emblem.³⁹ These talks were inconclusive, and NEFIN pressed forward with a new series of protests. While NEFIN's protests have thus far been peaceful, the organization is turning to more coercive forms of political action. It threatened to call for an indefinite blockade of the Kathmandu Valley in April 2007 if its demands are not met; enforcing such a blockade could require the use of violence.

The Madhesi movement's response to the Interim Constitution has been equally critical. Following the announcement of the Interim Constitution, the Republic Tarai Liberation Front (Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha, or JTMM), which has two factions, and the Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF) spearheaded protests in the Tarai that spiraled into a regionwide surge of violence. Several key incidents triggered this violence. When MPRF activists protested the Interim Constitution by burning copies of the document on January 16, 2007, the police arrested their leaders. MPRF activists responded by organizing violent demonstrations in the Tarai; the situation escalated further after Maoists killed an MPRF activist in Lahan.⁴⁰

Clashes between MPRF and JTMM activists and the Maoists, especially through their affiliated organization, the Madhesi Liberation Front (Madhesi Mukti Morcha, or MMM), have continued. The most violent clash occurred on March 21, 2007, at Gaur, where both the MPRF and MMM had planned mass meetings on the same day at the same venue. Twenty-eight people were killed and forty were injured, most belonging to the Maoists. Maoists condemned the violence as an effort to delegitimize their party and derail the peace process, and Maoist leader Prachanda argued that the MPRF should be banned.⁴¹ This is cause for concern because the MPRF is more moderate than the two JTMM factions, which have engaged in violence targeted against people from hill-based ethnic groups, and which demand a separate, independent Tarai. The growing gulf between the Maoists and the Madhesi movement will make it increasingly challenging for the ruling coalition to negotiate with the movement

and to incorporate their underlying demands into the political process. The Maoists’ reactions also suggest that they are not willing to support free political expression and are only interested in working with ethnic political groups that they control.

Conflict between marginalized groups and the state will not be easily resolved and may intensify. The interim government’s reluctance to incorporate the full slate of ethnic demands, and the failure of talks between NEFIN and the interim government, indicate that differences remain between ethnic demands and the interests of the political center. Whether the Maoists will prioritize ethnic demands in the constituent assembly remains uncertain. In December 2006, the Maoist leader Prachanda assured marginalized groups that were critical of the peace accord, “Ethnic issues are the real issues to be addressed at the moment. We will propose addressing these issues in the Interim Constitution because these were the issues we raised while launching people’s war.”⁴² Yet the ruling coalition decided that these issues should be determined by the constituent assembly rather than in the Interim Constitution. Maoist conflicts with the Madhesis also raise questions about the Maoists’ commitment to the ethnic agenda.

Other challenges to resolving ethnic conflict may be posed by dominant social groups that do not agree with the political agenda of the indigenous nationalities and may resist efforts to incorporate this agenda into the structure and policies of the state. This was evident in the backlash to the parliament’s declaration of Nepal as a secular state in May 2006: Hindu religious organizations, led by the World Hindu Federation, held several days of protests and strikes in opposition to the move.⁴³ Many high-caste Hindus from the hills are unlikely to support the plan of ethnic federalism, particularly as most draft proposals have not allotted them a state.⁴⁴

If ethnic demands are not met through legal channels, further violence is possible. The success of the Maoists in coming to share power in the government after staging a violent revolution has set a dangerous precedent: radical, underrepresented political groups will feel they can gain attention and achieve their political goals through violence. Inspired by the Maoists, small political organizations have increasingly engaged in or threatened to adopt violence. The indigenous nationalities movement may join the Madhesi organizations in using vio-

***If ethnic demands are not met...
further violence is possible***

lence to achieve their goals. Khambuwani National Front used violence to make their demands for autonomous regions, and the MNO formed the Mongol Liberation Army, giving their earlier threats to abandon ballots for bullets more teeth.⁴⁵

Understanding and Addressing Ethnic Demands

In talks with the interim government, NEFIN has made four minimum demands: ethnic-based proportional representation in the constituent assembly elections, an immediate decision on how a federal system would be set up, linguistic freedom, and a new national emblem. Of these, the last two are symbolic, and the state could easily incorporate them. Linguistic freedom, for example, could be guaranteed in the constitution. Although Nepali is the only official language named in the Interim Constitution, indigenous nationalities want all languages to have an equal status. They also seek the guaranteed right to use ethnic languages in local and higher-level government bodies. The demand to replace the old national emblem, which refers to the Hindu monarchy, will most likely be met, as the old national song praising the monarchy has already been replaced with a new national song, written by a member of the indigenous nationalities community. Addressing the demands of proportional representation and federalism, however, will be far more challenging for the state.

Proportionality appears to be one of the surest methods of securing representation for indigenous nationalities in the political process. In order that the ethnic composition of government bodies reflects the composition of the population as a whole, they seek reservations of seats for indigenous nationalities. The Interim Constitution suggests that political parties should select candidates based on the principle of proportional representation. Given the history of hill high-caste Hindu domination in the major political parties, it seems unlikely that this nonbinding suggestion will have the intended effect.

Indigenous nationalities are not well represented in the interim government, and they perceive that this is why all their demands have not been incorporated in the Interim Constitution. Indigenous nationalities and other marginalized peoples must be represented in the decision-making processes, yet there is no guarantee that individuals from these particular groups will support ethnic demands as articulated by the movements. A further challenge to establishing proportionality will be deciding how the numerous, internally diverse groups within collective categories such as indigenous nationalities will be represented fairly. Gender equity should also be addressed in these reservations.

Lawoti (2005) recommends that in addition to using reservation policies and other mechanisms to ensure the proportional distribution of

resources, Nepal should use a proportional electoral system rather than its current first-past-the-post system. In a proportional system, political parties would receive seats in accordance with the percentage of total votes that they won. This would not guarantee that indigenous nationalities would be better represented in parliament, but it would probably increase their presence in that body. One ethnic party, the RJP, would have won three seats in the 1999 parliamentary elections had this method been used (Lawoti 2005: 265).

Federalism is one of the core demands of the indigenous nationalities movement, as well as of the Madhesi movement. The movement regards federalism as the best way to grant ethnic autonomy to these groups, enabling them to exercise self-determination, gain adequate representation in political systems, and support their own cultural traditions. Federalism is widely supported among the indigenous nationalities: a recent survey reveals that 95.8 percent of indigenous nationalities students support it.⁴⁶

Indigenous nationalities and Madhesi activists and scholars advocate ethnic federalism, which would ideally create territories where each ethnic group is a majority. Proposals forwarded by the indigenous nationalities scholars and activists, the Madhesis, and the Maoists vary, however, as to the number of states, the names of these states, and how the boundaries should be created. There are many conflicts between these proposals: several groups may seek autonomy over the same territory, for example.⁴⁷

The issue of federalism is likely to be the major point of contention between the indigenous nationalities movement and dominant political players. Most political parties outside the movement agree that Nepal is overly centralized and that efforts to decentralize the country have failed. While they accept federalism as one way of achieving this goal, they more often advocate administrative rather than ethnic federalism. It is unlikely that indigenous nationalities would accept this form of federalism, however, as it “will not address the ethnic aspirations” (Ibid.: 235).

It will be a challenge to implement ethnic federalism because there are no majority ethnic groups in Nepal. In existing proposals, there are few cases in which the ethnic group with a territory named for it is actually a majority in that territory. This could be the source of many problems. For example, people may feel pressure to relocate to states that represent their particular ethnic group, and there may be efforts to create more homogeneous states. And while minorities may be granted rights within these states, they may remain excluded, as they will be seen as lesser members of these states, and may eventually demand their own states.

Federalism is one of the core demands

However, ethnic federalism is a central demand of the movement, and it will be difficult for the government to convince indigenous nationalities to settle for administrative federalism. The ruling coalition will have to ensure marginalized groups that they will be included in the political system. Adopting proportional representation and affirmative action policies at all levels of the state may be one way of doing so.

Demands for ethnic and regional autonomy have become increasingly strident in the indigenous nationalities movement. The Khambuwan National Front, fighting for an autonomous Khambuwan region, began an armed struggle in 1997 (Shreshta 2004: 25). On December 12, 2006, the Limbuwan Autonomous Concern Forum (Limbuwan Swayatta Sarokar Manch, or LSSM) and two other organizations called a shutdown (*bandh*) in nine districts in eastern Nepal to protest the fact that the Maoists ignored their demands for a Limbuwan autonomous region before the constituent assembly elections.⁴⁸ Similar demands are also at the heart of the Madhesi movement and the extensive violent protests that erupted in 2007. This violence was foreshadowed in the summer and fall of 2006, when the Janatantrik Tarai Muktimorcha (JTMM), an organization that demands regional autonomy for the Tarai and broke away from the Maoists, exploded bombs in several places,⁴⁹ staged shutdowns, and took credit for killing a member of parliament.⁵⁰

To create political stability and a more democratic polity, the state should adopt policies that create an inclusive political system. State representations of the Nepali nation should reflect the diversity of the population. The state must ensure that indigenous nationalities are adequately represented in any decision-making bodies, through appointments, reservations, or a proportional electoral system.

The state should be responsive to all identity movements. Gaining state recognition of their movement through the establishment of NFDIN

encouraged indigenous nationalities to continue to work for change within the political system. The state also established an institution to address Dalit issues, yet it did not create such an institution for Madhesis. Perhaps it is this lack of state recognition that contributed to the escalation of Madhesi protests against the Interim Constitution in 2007.

Legalizing ethnic political parties could also help to prevent further conflict. Opposition to these parties will fuel resentment that may cause groups to

espouse violence. Ethnic parties are likely to criticize the Interim Constitution because it does not lift the ban on the registration of such

The state should be responsive to all identity movements

parties that was established by the 1990 Constitution.⁵¹ A purely proportional election system, rather than the mixed electoral system planned for constituent assembly elections, would also ensure that small parties are given a voice within the legal political system. This could also diversify the parliament, given the large number of indigenous nationalities candidates who run in small parties. By gaining seats, small parties could also be dissuaded from taking up arms.

Leaders in the indigenous nationalities movement should increase the representation of women and marginal indigenous nationalities groups within their main organizations to advance their agenda of creating a more inclusive state. In addition, indigenous nationalities should work in coalition with Dalits, Madhesis, and other marginalized groups in order to ensure that policies and institutions adopted by the state are as inclusive as possible. The indigenous nationalities and Dalit and Madhesi movements all view the domination of the state by high-caste

Collaboration...will be key in bringing long-term stability

Hindus as a problem. However, activists in these movements have rarely emphasized connections between or sought common solutions to their problems, and coordinated political action has been limited. Collaboration has not been adequately pursued, but it will be key in bringing long-term stability to the country.

Indigenous nationalities often represent themselves in opposition to Hindu caste groups. The definition of indigenous nationalities excludes all caste Hindus and many Madhesis who are viewed as nonnatives. The MNO defines Mongols in opposition to Aryans, excluding all other groups from its organization on the basis of biology. Yet the social complexity of Nepal complicates these neat oppositions: Newars, for example, are indigenous nationalities, and yet they have a caste hierarchy and have shared in state power, and some Madhesis are also indigenous nationalities and Dalits. Forging a broader collective identity that includes all marginalized peoples would improve the ability of these groups to determine common political goals and strategies.

One organization that has forged an alliance across the various identity movements is the National Coalition against Racial Discrimination (NCARD). Formed in 2001, it brings together federations of different marginal groups, including indigenous nationalities, Dalits, Madhesis, Muslims, and other religious and linguistic minorities, as well as class-based groups such as Kamaiyas (freed bonded laborers) and former

Gurkha soldiers. The organization broadly defines racial discrimination as including any form of discrimination or intolerance. Among other programs, NCARD carried out a Dalit empowerment program and organized the Citizens' Constitution Drafting Consultation Committee to ensure that a new constitution is free of discriminatory laws.⁵² This organization provides a model for bringing together marginalized groups to ensure that new state policies and structures are as inclusive as possible. Such strategies will be crucial for achieving the indigenous nationalities movement's demands.

Conclusion: The Significance of the Indigenous Nationalities Movement for Democratization

The indigenous nationalities movement has made substantial contributions to the democratization process since 1990. Although ethnic activism has been viewed as destabilizing and divisive, the indigenous nationalities movement has abided by the norms of democratic political action: they have worked within the framework of the democratic state, making demands peacefully rather than through armed revolution as the Maoists did. Through IPOs and ethnic parties, which provided new avenues for political participation, the movement has mobilized segments of the society that are underrepresented in the political sphere. Unlike most of the NGOs that proliferated after 1990, ethnic organizations did not cater to the prerogatives of international donors. Rather, the ethnic political agenda was defined from within Nepal.

Indigenous nationalities activists have worked to create a more democratic system by challenging restrictions that remained in the post-1990 system and that contradicted the supposedly democratic character of the new state. For example, they critiqued Nepal's continued status as a Hindu

state, arguing that only a secular state would guarantee the rights of non-Hindus, and called attention to restrictions on ethnic parties. The movement implemented new rights that were guaranteed in the 1990 Constitution and yet not supported through state programs, such as the right to primary education in the mother tongue. Furthermore, they

pressured the government to create institutions to address ethnic issues. As a result the government created NFDIN, a foundation devoted to ending ethnic inequality.

***Indigenous nationalities
activists have worked to create
a more democratic system***

Since at least the early 1990s, ethnic parties and IPOs have been a leading force in changing political discourse, raising the issues that the Maoists and SPA have now adopted. A secular state was one of the main demands of ethnic activists for the 1990 Constitution. They have argued for a republican Nepal, and introduced the term *loktantra*, currently embraced to represent the ideal form of democracy in the Nepali context.

Yet journalists and politicians give credit to the Maoists for these innovations and for the sweeping changes that the state is embarking upon. Certainly, through staging a revolution that the state could not end, the Maoists have pressured the political center to adopt new positions. The Maoists also effectively mobilized rural Nepalis and popularized radical political issues, including the demand for ethnic equality, among this population.

It is important to recognize that the Maoists alone are not responsible for political and social changes in the country. Maoists adopted ethnic concerns only in 1996, well after the indigenous nationalities movement was in full swing. Indigenous nationalities activists must receive recognition for their ideas and for the work that they have done to disseminate these ideas through democratic and peaceful methods. If their contributions to the ongoing political changes are overlooked, there is a risk that indigenous nationalities will be perceived as inconsequential and not a significant political constituency.

It is imperative that political leaders and influential international actors address ethnic concerns in this process of creating a “new Nepal.” Otherwise, ethnic groups may lose faith in efforts to create change by working through democratic channels and may pursue revolutionary tactics, leading to further instability for the country. More fundamentally, the polity will remain dominated by a small segment of society, preventing Nepal from achieving a more just and democratic political system.

***ethnic groups...[could] pursue
revolutionary tactics***

Endnotes

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1. One theory holds that the Shahs' ancestors fled to Nepal in the twelfth century to escape Mughal invasions. However, some sources assert that it is more likely that the Shahs were part of the Khas people, who were living in western Nepal as early as the second millennium B.C. (Bista 1967). Even though the Shahs have held the throne since the second half of the eighteenth century, the king's power was severely curtailed during the Rana rule.
2. However, the relationship between Newars and the state was largely ambivalent, as Newar kingdoms were also conquered by the Shahs. Furthermore, although many Newars have been part of the ruling elite, others have not. Newars are included within the category of the indigenous nationalities.
3. Wealthy Brahmans from newly annexed territories thus received land grants in exchange for giving loans to the Gorkha government, as well as for acting as envoys for the Gorkhas by negotiating with political elites of newly conquered territories (Pradhan 1991: 103). Recipients of these *birta* land grants were exempt from paying regular taxes to the state and had the right to rent out their land and tax those who cultivated it (Regmi 1971: 43).
4. Some of the organizations formed during the 1950s include: Tamang Bhasa Sanskriti Bikas Samiti, Tamu Dhi Pariwar (a Gurung organization), Langhali Pariwar Sangh (a Magar organization), Tharu Kalyan Samaj, and Rai Limbu Samaj Sudhar (Tamang 1987: 60).

5. Some new organizations were formed in the 1980s, such as the Thakali Sewa Samiti in 1983, but these were not directly involved in politics (Fisher 2001).
6. For example, the Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala, a Newar organization that promoted the Newari language, demanded that Radio Nepal permit programming in Newari and other languages besides Nepali, that primary schooling be available in the mother tongue of all communities, and that all people have the right to speak and conduct business in court in their own language (Gellner 1986: 134). In 1979, Tamangs held their first national conference (New Light 1979a), and a Tharu organization (Tharu Kalyan Karini Pariwar) held a large public meeting in Kathmandu (Ibid. 1979b). In 1979, Gopal Gurung and others held a conference in Pulchowk, Kathmandu, to discuss the problems facing Mongols (Kurve 1979).
7. Other labels for this pan-ethnic community have circulated in the past. During the Panchayat era, the state referred to these ethnic groups as “backward castes” (*pichadieko jati*) (Onta 2005: 3). Another Panchayat-era term for these groups was Seta Magurali, an acronym created by combining the first syllable of the names of six major ethnic groups in Nepal: Sherpas, Tamangs, Magars, Gurungs, Rais, and Limbus. Although some people claim that there was a clandestine organization called Seta Magurali, there is no concrete evidence to support this. The term Seta Magurali, however, was occasionally used during the early 1990s, until it was replaced by *janajati*.
8. Sitaram Tamang’s landmark book *Nepalma Jana-jati Samasya* (Nationalities Problems in Nepal) is the clearest example of this (Tamang 1987).
9. The MNO, along with several member organizations of the Janajati Mahasangh, insists on using the term *mulbasi*, which can be translated as “original residents,” to express this idea of indigenosity. They argue that only the term *mulbasi* accurately expresses the idea of indigenosity, and that the term *adibasi* contains negative connotations of primitiveness. Janajati Mahasangh leaders such as Parsuram Tamang argued that the term *mulbasi* obscured the idea that the *janajatis* belonged to this land, as it suggests that there are other groups of people who could also be original residents of Nepal (Mukta Tamang, personal communication).
10. The Janajati Mahasangh published Nepali translations of the Charter of the Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests. Nepal Tamang Ghedung, a Tamang organization belonging to the Janajati Mahasangh, published Nepali and Tamang translations of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
11. For a further discussion of how Nepal’s ethnic groups can fit into the framework of indigenous peoples, see Gurung 1994a: 109–34.
12. The MNO’s objections to the term *janajati* may symbolically express its rejection of the widely pursued strategy of cultural promotion and lobbying in favor of its own strategy of seeking political power directly.
13. The terms “Mongol” and “Aryan” are derived from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial categorizations of South Asians. They circulated in Nepal through social science writings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and continue to appear in social science textbooks. Nepali social scientists continue using these racial terms to describe their country’s population (Hangen 2005b).
14. Author interview with Gopal Gurung, Kathmandu, Nepal, July 1997.
15. Author communication with Sumitra Manandhar-Gurung, chair of NCARD, August 24, 2006.

16. NEFIN was preceded by earlier efforts to build coalitions across ethnic groups, such as the Pichadieko Bargiya Sangh (Backward Class Organization) in 1956 (Gurung 2039 v.s. (1982): 3) and the Nepal Sarvajatiya Adhikar Manch (Forum for the Rights of All Ethnic Peoples in Nepal) in 1986 (Fisher 1993: 12). Although these particular organizations did not last, they provided a model of cooperation between ethnic organizations that probably inspired the founders of NEFIN.
17. Author interview with Om Gurung, New York, United States, May 22, 2005.
18. NEFIN website, www.nefin.org.np.
19. Kirat Yakthung Chumlung website, <http://chumlung.org.np/wiki/index.php/programs>.
20. The state was unable to vanquish the Limbus in the late eighteenth century and recognized Limbu political autonomy until 1967 (Sagant 1996: 320–27).
21. Author interview with Ganesh Man Gurung, Kathmandu, Nepal, July 2005.
22. Based on the author’s ethnographic research with these organizations in New York City.
23. Author interview with Ganesh Man Gurung, Kathmandu, Nepal, July 2005.
24. National Indigenous Women Federation-Nepal, www.niwf.org.np/index.html.
25. Khopangi’s loss of legitimacy was sealed when he took Dasain *tika* (a mark on the forehead made of a rice, yogurt, and red powder mixture, given along with blessings by higher status people to those of lower status) from the king along with all of the other ministers, after he had urged indigenous nationalities to boycott the holiday (Khapangi 2060 v.s. (2003); Thapa 2059 v.s. (2002); Magar 2060 v.s.-b (2003)).
26. Author’s analysis of Election Commission local election data, 1992 and 1997.
27. This discussion of the MNO is informed by the author’s ethnographic research with this party from 1994 to 1997, with updates in 2000, 2003, 2005, and 2006.
28. The MNO’s founder, Gopal Gurung, was one of the first writers to discuss ethnic discrimination. He began writing about it in 1972 in the Nepali newspaper *New Light*, and later published an influential book on the topic, *Hidden Facts in Nepali Politics* (Gurung 1985). In 1988 he was sentenced to three years in jail for his writings under the State Offense Act, which made it illegal for anyone to damage the image of or attack the royal family, or to disturb the peace of the country in any way. He founded the MNO in 1989 while in jail.
29. Since MNO candidates are listed as independent in the official election data, election results for MNO candidates were ascertained by combining information about candidates’ names from MNO leaders with official data from the Election Commission. The number of seats on each VDC was eleven in 1992, increasing to forty-seven in 1997.
30. Author interview with Gopal Gurung and district-level MNO leaders, Kathmandu, January 2003.
31. According to an anonymous reviewer of this paper, personality clashes between NEFIN and NFDIN leaders also contributed to this conflict. NFDIN had not funded NEFIN’s programs the previous year, angering NEFIN leaders.
32. Author interview with Bal Krishna Mabuhang, Lalitpur, Nepal, July 28, 2006.
33. Author interview with Yograj Limbu, Lalitpur, Nepal, July 21, 2000.

34. Author interview with Yograaj Limbu, Lalitpur, Nepal, July 21, 2000.
35. "Full text of the decisions of the SPA-Maoist summit meeting," www.nepalnews.com/archive/2006/nov/nov08/Full_text_summit_meeting.php.
36. "Historic Agreement Fails to Woo Janajatis," *Himalayan Times*, November 9, 2006.
37. The letter, dated November 16, 2006, is posted at <http://nefin.org.np>.
38. "NEFIN wants due berth in statute draft," *Himalayan Times*, July 13, 2006.
39. "NEFIN sits for talks with govt, turns down requests to call off banda," February 26, 2007, www.kantipuronline.com/kolnews.php?&nid=101964.
40. Sanjay Dhakal, "Piece by Peace," *Spotlight*, January 26, 2007, www.nepalnews.com.np/contents/2007/englishweekly/spotlight/jan/jan26/coverstory.php.
41. Sanjay Dhakal, "Ominous Trend," *Spotlight*, March 30, 2007, www.nepalnews.com.np/contents/2007/englishweekly/spotlight/mar/mar30/national.php.
42. "Autonomy, Federalism Main Issues Now: Prachanda," *Himalayan Times*, December 3, 2006.
43. "Hindu activists close down Birgunj," *Nepal News*, May 24, 2006, www.nepalnews.com/archive/2006/may/may24/new12.php.
44. An anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested that many hill high-caste Hindus outside Kathmandu are not against ethnic federalism, recognizing that without it, conflict may ensue and force them out of the region.
45. Author interviews with Gopal Gurung, Kathmandu, July 2006.
46. "Janajati Students for federal republic: Survey," *Himalayan Times*, September 23, 2006.
47. "Ethnic-based federal autonomy may open up another can of worms," 2006, www.nepalihimal.com/ntimestemp/race_for_identity.htm.
48. "Strike cripples life in 9 eastern districts," *Kantipur Online*, December 12, 2006, www.kantipuronline.com/kolnews.php?&nid=94273.
49. "Tarai Janatantrik Muktimorcha explodes six bombs in Siraha," *Gorkhapatra*, December 1, 2006, www.gorkhapatra.org.np/content.php?nid=7343.
50. "Government forms probe committee to investigate MP assassination case, TJMM takes responsibility of murder," *Kantipur Online*, September 24, 2006, www.kantipuronline.com/kolnews.php?&nid=87129.
51. Article 142(4) of the Interim Constitution states that parties that restrict membership on the basis of religion, caste, ethnicity, language, or gender will not receive registration from the Election Commission. It also states that parties with names, goals, symbols, or flags that disrupt the religious or communal harmony of the state or divide the country will not be registered. This could be interpreted very broadly and used to deny registration to many parties.
52. Author communication with Sumitra Manandhar Gurung, August 24, 2006.

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Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia

Project Information

Project Rationale, Purpose, and Outline

Project Director: Muthiah Alagappa
 Principal Researchers: Morten Pedersen (Burma/Myanmar)
 Saroja Dorairajoo (southern Thailand)
 Mahendra Lawoti (Nepal)
 Samir Kumar Das (northeast India)
 Neil DeVotta (Sri Lanka)

Rationale

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries. Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were sup-

pressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course. Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries, including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

Purpose

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such

conflicts have affected the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

Design

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.

Publications

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be pub-

lished in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

Public Forums

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeast India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

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Project Participants

Project Director

Muthiah Alagappa

Director, East-West Center Washington (from February 2001 to January 2007)

Distinguished Senior Fellow, East-West Center (from February 1, 2007)

Burma/Myanmar Study Group

Morten Pedersen

United Nations University
Principal Researcher

Mary P. Callahan

University of Washington

Christina Fink

Chiang Mai University

Saboi Jum

Shalom Foundation, Yangon

Kyi May Kaung

Freelance Writer/Analyst,
Washington, D.C.

Tom Kramer

Freelance Consultant, Amsterdam

Curtis Lambrecht

Yale University

David Scott Mathieson

Australian National University

Win Min

Chiang Mai University

Zaw Oo

American University

Martin Smith

Independent Analyst, London

David I. Steinberg

Georgetown University

David Tegenfeldt

Hope International Development
Agency, Yangon

Mya Than

Chulalongkorn University

Tin Maung Maung Than

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,
Singapore

Ardeth Thawngmung

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Meredith Weiss

East-West Center Washington

Khin Zaw Win

Independent Researcher, Yangon

Harn Yawnghwe

Euro-Burma Office, Brussels

Southern Thailand Study Group

Saroja Dorairajoo

National University of Singapore
Principal Researcher

Thanet Aphornsuvan

Thammasat University

Marc Askew

Victoria University, Melbourne

Suchit Bunbongkarn

Chulalongkorn University

Kavi Chongkittavorn

Nation Multimedia Group, Bangkok

Neil John Funston

Australian National University

Surat Horachaikul

Chulalongkorn University

Srisompob Jitpiromsri

Prince of Songkla University,
Pattani Campus

Joseph Chinyong Liow

Nanyang Technological University,
Singapore

Chandra-nuj Mahakanjana

National Institute of Development
Administration, Bangkok

Duncan McCargo

University of Leeds

Celakhan (Don) Pathan

The Nation Newspaper, Bangkok

Surin Pitsuwan

MP, Thai House of Representatives

Thitinan Pongsudhirak

Chulalongkorn University

Chaiwat Satha-Anand

Thammasat University

Vaipot Srinual

Supreme Command Headquarters,
Thailand

Wattana Sugunnasil

Prince of Songkla University,
Pattani Campus

Panitan Wattanayagorn

Chulalongkorn University

Imtiyaz Yusuf

Assumption University, Bangkok

Nepal Study Group

Mahendra Lawoti

Western Michigan University
Principal Researcher

Itty Abraham

East-West Center Washington

Meena Acharya

Tanka Prasad Acharya Memorial
Foundation, Kathmandu

Lok Raj Baral

Nepal Center for Contemporary
Studies, Kathmandu

Surendra Raj Bhandari

Law Associates Nepal, Kathmandu

Chandra Dev Bhatta

London School of Economics

Krishna Bhattachan

Tribhuvan University

Sumitra Manandhar-Gurung

Lumanthi and National Coalition
Against Racial Discrimination,
Kathmandu

Harka Gurung (deceased)

Transparency International, Nepal

Dipak Gyawali

Royal Nepal Academy of Science and
Technology, Kathmandu

Krishna Hacchethu

Tribhuvan University

Susan Hangen

Ramapo College, New Jersey

Lauren Leve

University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill

Prakash Chandra Lohani

Former Finance Minister, Nepal

Pancha Narayan Maharjan

Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur

Sukh Deo Muni

Observer Research Foundation,
New Delhi

Anup Pahari

Foreign Service Institute, Arlington

Rajendra Pradhan

Social Science Baha, Kathmandu

Shree Govind Shah

Environmental Resources Planning
and Monitoring/Academy of Social
Justice & Human Rights, Kathmandu

Saubhagya Shah

Tribhuvan University

Hari Sharma

Social Science Baha, Kathmandu

Sudhindra Sharma

Interdisciplinary Analyst (IDA),
Kathmandu

Dhruba Kumar Shrestha

Tribhuvan University

Seira Tamang

Centre for Social Research and
Development, Kathmandu

Bishnu Raj Upreti

National Centre of Competence in
Research, Kathmandu

Northeast India Study Group**Samir Kumar Das**

University of Calcutta
Principal Researcher

Sanjay Barbora

North Eastern Social Research
Centre, Assam

Sanjib Baruah

Center for Policy Research,
New Delhi
Bard College, New York

Pinaki Bhattacharya

The Mathrubhumi, Kerala

Subir Bhaumik

British Broadcasting Corporation,
Kolkata

Uddipana Goswami

Center for Studies in Social Science,
Kolkata

Dolly Kikon

Stanford University

Dipankar Banerjee

Institute of Peace and Conflict
Studies, New Delhi

Kalyan Barooah

Assam Tribune

M.P. Bezbaruah

UN – WTO (World Tourism
Organization), New Delhi

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Hartwick College
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Ravinatha P. Aryasinha

American University

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Colombo

Rohan Edrisinha

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Colombo

Nimalka Fernando

International Movement Against All
Forms of Discrimination & Racism,
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Dayan Jayatilleka

University of Colombo

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Center for Human Rights and
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S.I. Keethaponcalan

University of Colombo

N. Manoharan

Institute of Peace and Conflict
Studies, New Delhi

Dennis McGilvray

University of Colorado at Boulder

Jehan Perera

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka,
Colombo

Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam

MP, Sri Lanka

Mirak Raheem

Centre for Policy Alternatives,
Colombo

Darini Rajasingham

Centre for Poverty Analysis, Colombo

John Richardson, Jr.

American University

Norbert Ropers

Berghof Foundation for Conflict
Studies, Colombo

Kanchana N. Ruwanpura

Hobart and William Smith Colleges,
New York

P. Sahadevan

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

Centre for Policy Alternatives,
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Muttukrishna Sarvananthan

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Peter Schalk

Uppsala University, Sweden

Asanga Tilakaratne

University of Kelaniya

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University of Colombo

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Centre for Policy Alternatives,
Colombo

Jayampathy Wickramaratne

Ministry of Constitutional Affairs,
Sri Lanka

Javid Yusuf

Attorney-at-Law, Colombo

Background of the Conflicts in Nepal

Founded in 1769 with the Gorkhalis' conquest of the third and final principality of Kathmandu Valley, the Nepali state is one of the oldest in the region and in the world. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his descendants subsequently won over vast tracts of land and conquered peoples from the Tista River region in the east and the Satlaj River area in the west. The 1814–16 War with the British East India Company and the subsequent Sugauli treaty in 1816 defined the borders of present-day Nepal. Jang Bahadur, who later adopted the title of Rana, killed important palace courtiers during the Kot Massacre in 1846 and established the Rana regime. Until 1951, the hereditary Rana prime ministers effectively controlled political power, even though the king remained on the throne. The Rana rulers kept Nepal isolated, discouraged development and mobilization, and brutally repressed dissent while maintaining good diplomatic ties with the British in India. In 1854, Jang Bahadur introduced a civil code (Muluki Ain) that codified and standardized the existing diverse customs, laws, and practices in the context of Hindu precepts and laws and enforced them upon all communities including non-Hindu communities. This code and its implementation reinforced the process of assimilation of diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in Nepal that had begun under King Jayasthiti Malla of Kathmandu.

After the end of the Rana regime, Nepal witnessed several different governments led by various political leaders. Nepal conducted its first parliamentary elections in 1959. The Nepali Congress obtained a majority, and its leader, B. P. Koirala, formed the government. King Mahendra, however, removed Koirala in 1960, and in 1962 he promulgated the Panchayat Constitution, which centralized political power in the royal palace and promoted monocultural nationalism: one language (Nepali), one religion (Hindu), one dress (Daura Suruwal), and one culture (Hill Hindu). The Panchayat era, however, also brought an end to untouchability in 1963, and land reform was introduced in 1964. Adult franchise was introduced after a referendum in 1980, but political parties were still banned. The Panchayat system ended in 1990 after a popular movement forced King Birendra to relinquish power.

Democracy was restored in 1990, but the country failed to achieve stability, despite three parliamentary and two local elections. Twelve governments were formed between 1990 and 2002. Corruption became

widespread and unemployment grew. A culture of impunity flourished as powerful political leaders got away with the abuse of their power. The decade saw an explosion of identity movements as marginalized groups—including various ethnic, caste, regional, and gender groups—each of which faced political, economic, cultural, and social discrimination—began to demand autonomy, reservations, and proportional representation. Despite the growth of the media, the private sector, and successful community initiatives, such as management of forests, Nepalis became increasingly disenchanted, as the poorer segments of society did not benefit from development and growth.

The Maoists, capitalizing on this growing disenchantment, launched a violent insurgency against the parliamentary democracy in 1996. Police brutality against the Maoists and those suspected of being Maoists also fuelled the insurgency. The Maoists received considerable support in rural areas, especially from women and excluded caste and ethnic groups, and expanded rapidly. The Maoists also suppressed opposition in rural areas with violent means and benefited from infighting in the formal political establishment. The army was deployed in a counterinsurgency role only after the death in 2002 of King Birendra who had refused to deploy the army against the Maoists.

The government and the Maoists engaged in peace talks but failed to reach a settlement during the first two attempts (June–November 2001 and January–August 2003). The Maoists attacked an army barracks after the first peace talk, which resulted in the army joining in the fray, and the death toll increased considerably. The deterioration of law and order was so extensive that the governments were not able to conduct the overdue local and parliamentary elections.

King Gyanendra, who became king after Birendra's entire family was killed in the palace massacre in 2001, dissolved the elected government in October 2002, charging that it had failed to hold elections. However, Gyanendra himself failed at both holding elections and establishing peace. The royal governments tried to suppress the insurgency, but despite some initial success in hampering the rebels, they could not quell the movement.

King Gyanendra took complete control of the country in February 2005, an action that brought the Seven Party Alliance, which was fighting to reinstate the parliament that was dissolved in June 2002 and take back executive power from the King, and the Maoists together. They agreed to launch a joint movement against the king and were successful in forcing

him to relinquish power in April 2006 after a 19-day popular protest that mobilized people from all over Nepal. The Maoists and the government signed a comprehensive peace treaty in 2006. Since then, an interim parliament and an interim government with the Maoists' participation have been formed. The plan of the eight ruling parties is to hold an election for the constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

Despite the peace agreement, Nepal faces numerous challenges. The process of forming the constituent assembly has become contentious. Madhesi movements, indigenous nationalities, women, and Dalits have demanded proportional representation in the constituent assembly. The demand for a federal structure and for proportional representation by the Madhesi Janaadhikar Forum turned violent in March 2007 resulting in several dozen deaths. Although the Maoists have joined the interim government and peace is holding, the postponement of the Constituent Assembly elections scheduled for June 2007 has created an uncertain political environment. A major challenge for Nepal as it moves forward is to accommodate the various excluded groups, which collectively form two-thirds of the population. Another is to establish the rule of law. The Maoists continue to coerce the people and extort funds and have refused to return properties confiscated during the insurgency. They are also intolerant toward opposition groups, against which they have employed violence. Finally, Nepal faces the challenge of holding leaders—such as the prime minister, who has been made more powerful by the Interim Constitution—accountable. A dramatic improvement in governance, an increase in accountability of leaders, and rule of law are essential for the creation of a viable and responsive state in Nepal.

Map of Nepal



- Capital Cities
- Cities and Towns
- ▲ Mountains
- ⋈ Provincial Boundaries
- ▬ Country Boundaries

Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.

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Onkar S. Marwah
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Tel: 202-293-3995
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About this Issue

This study explores the ethnic dimension of the challenges that Nepal currently faces. Although Nepal has made substantial progress toward regaining political stability since April 2006, ethnic conflict has become a major problem. The indigenous nationalities movement, whose origins and demands are examined here, identifies fifty-nine diverse groups as indigenous nationalities, and has mobilized them to revitalize their own cultures and end the domination of the state by high-caste Hindus. The movement seeks ethnic federalism, the proportional representation of indigenous nationalities in state institutions, and linguistic freedom. It has contributed to democratization by creating awareness of ethnic issues and pressuring the state into addressing ethnic inequality. Analysts often credit the Nepali Communist Party (Maoist) for transforming the political discourse and system through their decade-long People's War. The contributions of the indigenous nationalities movement must be recognized, however, so that indigenous nationalities will be acknowledged as rightful political leaders. To create long-term stability and strengthen democracy, the state should adopt policies that create an inclusive political system. All marginalized groups must be adequately represented in decision-making bodies. A proportional election system would ensure that small parties have a voice within the political system and are dissuaded from taking up arms. Legalizing ethnic parties could help achieve this goal, as state opposition to them will fuel resentment, leading to violence. Representations of the national identity should recognize Nepal's diversity. Without these changes, much of the population will remain excluded from political processes, and further conflict may result.

About the Author

Susan Hagen is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and International Studies at Ramapo College of New Jersey. She can be contacted at shangen@ramapo.edu.

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