

As Nepal Strives to Become More Inclusive, Are Muslims Being Left Behind?

Peter Gill | Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2018

The villages of Narainapur Rural Municipality, in Nepal's lowland Terai plains, are poor, even by the standards of one of the poorest countries in South Asia. The area does not yet have electricity, and electrical poles installed by the government stand unused. On a typical day, the main road is quiet, with just a handful of vehicles passing by each hour, creating torrents of brown dust that can be seen from miles away.

But just over a year ago, on a Monday afternoon in December 2016, the road was the site of a loud and boisterous parade. The Muslim community of Narainapur, which makes up just under half (http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/VDC-Municipality%20in%20detail/57%20Banke_VDCLevelReport.pdf) of its population, was celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday—known as Mawlid in Arabic, or Muhammad Diwas in Nepali. Several thousand men, women and children rode on motorcycles and tractor-drawn trailers, waving flags bearing the shahadah, the Muslim declaration of faith, and chanting lines of Islamic poetry and singing religious songs. In addition to honoring Muhammad, the parade is a rare chance for Muslims, who account for just under 5 percent of Nepal's population, to celebrate their identity.

Those who turned out that day had no way of knowing the celebration would take a tragic turn. Earlier in the day, a small fight had broken out at a roadside shop between some local Hindu and Muslim youth, and several Hindus were injured. Though the dispute was personal in nature, it quickly took on a communal dimension. By the time the parade-goers reached Matehiya, a small, predominantly Hindu village within Narainapur, a large group of Hindus had assembled to block them. After coming to a halt, several senior Muslim leaders approached the Hindu group to try to negotiate, but before a dialogue could begin, they were attacked by members of the crowd wielding farm implements and homemade weapons. One Muslim died on the spot, and more than a dozen were injured; five victims who were seriously injured were evacuated by air to Kathmandu. One of them, a cleric named Wajahul Kamar Khan, died of his injuries a few days later.



A Nepali Muslim boy prays on the second day of Ramadan at a mosque in Kathmandu, Nepal, Aug. 2, 2011 (AP photo by Nirajan Shrestha).

Word of the violence in Matehiya spread among Nepal's Muslim population. Khan had been a respected leader who ran a madrassa in the nearby city of Nepalgunj. Thousands of people gathered in Narainapur for funeral services for the dead.

Eager to head off further communal tension, the government paid for the medical bills of all the injured and provided 1 million rupees, or just under \$10,000, to the families of those killed. But the violence was unsettling to many Muslims in no small part because religious conflict is uncommon in Nepal; the country is often thought of as a bastion for religious tolerance in South Asia. The incident in Matehiya was the worst violence committed against Muslims in years.



Footage from the most recent parade in Narainapur Rural Municipality marking the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Peter Gill).

According to census data (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/wphc/Nepal/Nepal-Census-2011-Vol1.pdf>), Nepal's population is 81.3 percent Hindu, 9 percent Buddhist, 4.4 percent Muslim and 1.4 percent Christian. In parts of the country, religious syncretism has existed for centuries, with most Hindus worshipping Buddha as one among a pantheon of other gods, and some Buddhist groups also celebrating Hindu holidays. Over the past half century, Nepal has also served as host to religious refugees, including

Buddhists from Tibet, Ahmadis from Pakistan and even a small population of Rohingyas from Myanmar.

Although for most of its history the Nepali state has been controlled by high-caste Hindus, in 2008 lawmakers voted to abolish (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/28/AR2008052801440.html>) the 239-year-old constitutional monarchy, turning the Hindu kingdom into a secular republic. That decision was upheld in the country's contentious new constitution, promulgated in 2015—a development that sparked protests in the Terai by those, including some Muslims, who believed the charter did not go far enough to address historical injustices.

Despite progress in promoting religious pluralism, Nepal's Muslims remain a poor, marginalized group, often neglected in politics and nearly invisible in conceptions of national identity. As the country increasingly comes to grips with its diversity, Muslims are still struggling to assert themselves in Nepali society. As Haroon Halwai, a Muslim journalist in Nepalgunj, puts it, “Muslims are behind economically, and they've been put behind in politics as well.”

Islam's Roots in Nepal

Muslim communities, nearly all of which are Sunni, have lived in Nepal for centuries. As noted by the sociologist David Seddon in his new book “The Muslim Communities of Nepal (<https://www.abebooks.com/first-edition/Muslim-Communities-Nepal-David-Seddon-Adroit/22585721046/bd>),” Muslims hailing from Kashmir and others claiming lineages to Central Asia and the Middle East began to settle in Kathmandu and other areas in Nepal's Himalayan foothills in the 15th century. Many early Muslims were merchants invited by Hindu rulers of small hill-based kingdoms, who welcomed Muslims' ability to tap into regional trade networks. The Shahs, the Hindu dynasty that eventually unified Nepal through military campaigns in the 18th century, also invited Muslim specialists to help manufacture firearms in Gorkha, their headquarters.

But the vast majority of Nepal's Muslims, over 95 percent, settled in the Terai region, far from the power centers in Kathmandu and the hills. Migrating from territory that became the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, they began to arrive as early as the 17th century, with subsequent waves in the 19th and 20th centuries, as the Nepali state sought to expand agricultural production in the Terai. A malaria eradication program in the 1960s made the region more habitable, fueling an influx of Nepalis from the hills and of people from south of the border, including more Muslims. Unlike the hill and Kathmandu communities, Terai Muslims were predominantly farmers, although some also specialized in oil pressing, weaving, tailoring, butchering and sweets production.

The Nepali state has historically viewed Muslims as outsiders. In the country's first national code, the Muluki Ain of 1854, which ranked citizens based on a Hindu caste hierarchy, Muslims were positioned near the bottom, just above Dalits, or so-called untouchables.

In the 1950s, the country underwent a democratic transition that began creating more space for all religions. Although the country officially remained a Hindu monarchy, public worship became easier, and mosques could be opened without government permission. Several Muslims won seats in parliament in Nepal's first elections, held in 1959.

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From 1960 to 1990, Nepal's monarchy assumed greater control, and democratic parties were banned. During this period, Muslims were sometimes given token positions in royal Cabinets, but most positions, both at the local level and at the central level, were controlled by high-caste Hindus. A pro-democracy movement in 1990 opened up democratic space once again, but political parties usually failed to include Muslims and members of low-caste and indigenous groups in leadership positions.

In 1996, Maoist rebels launched their "People's War," the civil conflict that would grip the countryside for the next decade. In their initial 40-point list of demands, the Maoists called for a variety of economic, political and social reforms, including a new constitution drafted by elected representatives, the removal of royal privileges, land reforms, secularism and greater inclusion of Nepal's ethnic minorities and low-caste groups in official bodies.

As the war progressed and grew bloodier, the rebels found that their demands related to greater ethnic autonomy and inclusion were especially popular. Although support for the Maoists among Muslims was, and remains, limited, the rebels' agenda of identity-based inclusion has grown to dominate much of Nepali political discourse since 2006, when the insurgency ended with a peace agreement. In 2008, in line with the Maoists' demands, Nepal elected its first ever Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, which was finally promulgated in September 2015.

For most Muslims in Nepal, the end of the Hindu monarchy and the 2008 declaration of a secular republic represented an important first step for their community's inclusion and representation in the state. "It was like the road opened, and people could walk for themselves," says Shafeeqar Rahman, a Muslim cleric based in Kathmandu who runs a charity organization. "Before it was closed, and even if you wanted to walk, you couldn't."

The Struggle for Inclusion

Several other policies that were favorable to Muslims followed. In 2012, the government established a

Muslim Commission to research and advise the government on policies intended to benefit the country's Muslim population, although its role to date has been limited. The 2015 constitution also explicitly recognizes Muslims as one of Nepal's disadvantaged communities.

There is good reason for this. Though Muslim traders in Kathmandu and some other regional cities have joined Nepal's growing middle class, in general Muslims today rank among Nepal's most underprivileged groups. According to government data (http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/nepal_nhdr_2014-final.pdf), the mean Human Development Index score for Muslims—which takes into account health, education and standard of living—is 0.422 on a scale ranging from 0.0 to 1.0, lower than nearly all Hindu and Buddhist groups. Likewise, the Muslim adult literacy rate is 45 percent, well below the national average of 66 percent.



Nepali Muslims take photos after they offer prayers on Eid al-Fitr at a mosque in Kathmandu, July 18, 2015 (AP photo by Niranjana Shrestha).

Despite the popularization of the inclusion agenda initiated by the Maoists, progress in bolstering the political representation of Muslims has been slow. This is partly because, until very recently, Muslims have not constituted a distinct category in Nepal's so-called reservations system, which established quotas for seats in parliament and the civil service beginning in 2008. Instead, Muslims were lumped together with another marginalized group: the Madhesis.

The term Madhesi refers to a broad swath of the population that hails from the Terai and shares cultural and linguistic ties with communities across the border in northern India. It encompasses high as well as low castes and various ethnicities speaking languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi. Madhesis are often darker skinned than Pahadis, or Nepalis from the Himalayan foothills and mountains, a trait that is looked down upon in Nepali society. Moreover, Madhesis' historical and ongoing ties with India have often led Pahadis to question their loyalties and citizenship.

In 2007 and 2008, Madhesis held major protests across the Terai that gave rise to the reservations system. In the lead-up to and following the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, political parties representing Madhesis again staged protests, backed by an unofficial Indian blockade (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/12/crisis-nepal-india-border-blockade-continues-151223082533785.html>), calling on the government to create one province for the entire Terai region under the federal system created by the new constitution. The blockade fizzled after four and a half months without achieving the Madhesis' demands. Today, most of the Terai remains divided up into provinces that also contain hill and mountain regions, except for one province in the eastern Terai, which is a continuing grievance among Madhesi activists.

Acceptance of the overarching Madhesi identity among Muslims has been mixed. On the one hand, many Muslims identify as Madhesi, feeling that the discrimination they face is as much due to their regional identity as it is to their religion. Muslims took part in the Madhesi protests, and a handful were killed during violent police crackdowns (<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/pdf/ahrc-olt-004-2017-01.pdf>) against the movement.

Yet some Muslims who once supported Madhesi political parties have become disillusioned with them, feeling that, like other political parties, they have failed to sufficiently include Muslims in leadership positions.

Other Muslims reject the Madhesi label altogether. They point to the fact that Muslims live not just in the Terai, but also in Kathmandu and the hills. They argue that separate quotas are necessary for Muslims as a distinct religious group. This perspective was recently validated by a 2017 election law that required parties to meet quotas for Muslims as a distinct category from Madhesis when naming representatives for seats won in the lower house of parliament and provincial assemblies. However, whether the government will move to include a separate Muslim quota for new civil service vacancies remains unclear.

'Only There to Clap Their Hands'

Some Muslims believe that, in the long run, even quotas will not be enough to empower them in politics. Megan Adamson Sijapati, a scholar of religion at Gettysburg College who focuses on Nepal, has suggested

(<https://www.amazon.com/Islamic-Revival-Nepal-Routledge-Contemporary/dp/0415618746>) that Muslim politicians historically have felt beholden to the powers that appointed them rather than ordinary Muslim voters. Under the new postwar democratic system, voters elect 60 percent of the members of parliament directly, and the rest through a proportional representation system, whereby seats are allocated by parties. Most parties field a disproportionately high number of high-caste people, mostly men, for the directly elected seats, and then make up their quotas for other groups, including women, Dalits, indigenous groups, Madhesis and now Muslims, through the proportional system.

In general, the seats in parliament allotted through proportional representation are seen as carrying less weight than the directly elected ones. Representatives elected through the proportional system, including many Muslims, feel more pressure to toe the official party line, and parties often employ whips for important votes anyway. “Whomever Muslims get to be a member of parliament, they are only there to clap their hands. They don’t get to add their own ideas,” says Halwai, the Nepalgunj journalist, who is also a member of the United Marxist Leninist Party, which swept recent legislative polls

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23819/what-a-leftist-alliance-victory-in-landmark-elections-means-for-nepal>) in a Left Alliance with the Maoists.

Still, things could be worse. For one thing, there are no powerful political groups that openly target Muslims in Nepal. The mainstream Hindu nationalist political party, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, has focused on trying to restore Hinduism as the official state religion, bringing back the monarchy and stopping the spread of Christian proselytization. While these issues are indirectly threatening to Muslims, the party generally does not oppose Muslims in its rhetoric. Moreover, the party faltered in the recent national elections, winning only one directly elected seat (<http://election.nagariknews.com/?lang=ENG>).



Nepali Muslims participate in a rally, Kathmandu, Jan. 14, 2014

(AP photo by Niranjana Shrestha).

And although sporadic incidents of anti-Muslim violence do occur—most notably riots in Kathmandu in 2004 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/02/world/asia/nepalese-attack-a-mosque-and-muslims-in-katmandu.html>)—religious violence is much less common than in India, where interfaith relations have been fraught since the bloody partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The government in Delhi is currently controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which some see as fostering a culture of impunity (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/india-hate-crimes-against-muslims-and-rising-islamophobia-must-be-condemned>) for crimes against religious minorities.

“In Nepal, there is better security,” says Rahman, the Kathmandu cleric. “There is peace.” He adds that, after the deadly incident in Matehiya, “the government got the situation under control very quickly. That system for control doesn’t exist in India.”

A Need for Development

In early December, one year after their parade was targeted by an angry mob, Narainapur’s Muslims once again celebrated Mawlid. The parade started in the morning, just several hundred yards from the Indian

border. Like the previous year, the atmosphere was festive, but with an air of defiance. The crowd again numbered in the thousands, and locals estimated it was bigger than previous years. As they walked, the men chanted the Urdu verses, “It is a gift to the world/ Muhammad was born.”

At the front of the parade rode a motorcade of several jeeps transporting Narainapur’s newly elected mayor, religious leaders and the local police inspector. In a nod to parade-goers’ security worries, the government had deployed hundreds of extra police, and officers lined the road at major intersections.

To date, the violence of December 2016 has received scant attention in the national media. Shortly after the episode, a few back-page articles appeared in the national dailies Kantipur

(<https://www.kantipurdaily.com/national/2016/12/14/20161214081319.html>), The Kathmandu Post

(<http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-12-13/religious-leaders-appeal-for-social-harmony.html>) and Annapurna Post

(<http://www.annapurnapost.com/news/60621>), but they either omitted the religious aspect of the violence or downplayed the fact that people were killed.

Some see this reluctance to speak frankly about the unrest as dangerous. “Whenever the mainstream media hides these matters, the challenges get worse,” says Mohna Ansari, one of Nepal’s first female Muslim lawyers and a member of the National Human Rights Commission in Kathmandu.

Nevertheless, there has been progress. Most residents in Narainapur seem to agree that relations have improved since their nadir one year ago. “Where people used to be afraid to talk to one another, now people are sitting together,” says Alam Khan, a Terai-based human rights activist.

In June of last year, Nepal held its first local elections in two decades, and the Narainapur municipality elected a Muslim cleric, Istyak Ahmed Sah, as its mayor. Many people attribute his win to religious divides; the Hindu vote was split among three other candidates, whereas he was the only Muslim candidate. But residents also acknowledge that the new leader has made important gestures to foster peace, including attending Hindu celebrations and reaching out to Hindu religious leaders.

The government arrested a total of 27 suspects in relation to the violence in Matehiya. Nepal’s justice system is notoriously slow, and all of the suspects are currently out on bail while their trials are underway in the district court.

But tensions remain. In public conversation, the turmoil is generally avoided, at least at tea shops along the dusty main road in Matehiya. Part of the reason may be that people still can’t agree on a single narrative about what exactly happened, and who is to blame.

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In private, residents open up a little, but not much. Ganga Ram Tiwari, the Hindu manager of a farmer's cooperative in Matehiya, says he blames Muslims for starting the initial fight, although he thinks the two elderly Muslims who were killed were innocent of any wrongdoing. Anish Ahmad Ansari, a Muslim shopkeeper, says the violence was started by Hindus who'd been drinking alcohol.

If disagreements around the nature of last year's incident persist, there is at least one thing that most people agree on: the need for socio-economic progress in an area long neglected by the state. Shambhu Shahi, program coordinator for a local NGO that promotes community cohesion, says a sense of economic hopelessness can contribute to communal violence. "If people work, then they are busy," he says. "But if they don't have anything, they fight. If there is development, livelihoods, work, quality education and health service, then people will change."

Sah, the new mayor, says he hopes to enlist Narainapur's Hindu and Muslim youth to work together on new infrastructure and agricultural projects, since the area could become fertile with proper irrigation.

But economic progress will be gradual. For now, Sah has been visiting Hindu leaders, and he recently attended their celebration of Dashera, the victory of the Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura, when Hindus parade effigies of their deities to the nearby Rapti River.

"I don't have hatred for anyone in my mind...I see every community with the same eye. All my constituents are my community," says Sah, who witnessed the 2016 violence and helped evacuate the injured. "I just have one thought: to let change come to this society."

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