Ethnic nationalism is on the rise in Nepal. With only 23.2 million inhabitants and measuring only 147,181 square kilometres, Nepal is the home of various ‘nationalities’ (janajati). None of these nationalities, including the predominant Khas population — consisting of Brahmin-Kshetri castes, speaking Nepali (Khas) and practising Hinduism — can be considered a single majority group. The Khas, however, remain determined to propagate their language, culture, and religion through their control of state institutions. While ethnic mobilization in Nepal has largely, to date, avoided bloodshed, the frustration of minority nationalities, ethnicities, castes, and tribes (janajati) is an important factor behind the growing popularity of the Maoists’ ‘people’s war’.

In the wake of political reforms insti-
tuted in 1990, non-Khas nationali-
ties began asserting their own national
identities within the boundaries of the
current state. A new constitution was
introduced that year, confirming Nepal
as a multinational (bahujan) and even
multilingual (bahaskhola) country. The
constitution, however, retained the
Nepali (Khas) language as the official
‘national language’ and Hinduism as the
sole ‘state religion’. Although the
constitution provides liberty for ethnic
non-Khas and non-Hindu religious
communities to express themselves —
against the domination of the ‘one
nation, one language, and one religion’
policy of the government — minority
languages and religions remain with-
out legal protection. The major demands of the non-Khas nationalities in Nepal are: the right to autonomy; political representation in the central government; equal rights for their women; protection of their own
languages, in education, and in local and central adminis-
tration; and an end to the domination of Hindu religion and culture. The ‘All Nepal National Democratic Con-
stitutional Organisation’ (Akhil Nepal Janajati Samgha), a Maistriyati organization to the Communist Party of Nepal, has presented the most radical demands, including the right of secession for all nationalities in Nepal. The influence of the Maistriyati Party, engaged in a violent ‘people’s war’ for more than six years, is increasing throughout the country and threaten-
ing its stability.

A truly ruling class manipulating state institutions, Brahmashvik dwitiya are the target of other nationalities’ criti-
cism. The latter find it insulting to be
categorized alongside low-caste Hin-
dus. Mainstream scholarship often
views these groups as ‘tribes’. Most groups in
Nepal including the Newars, Tamangs,
Magars, Gurung, Shera, Limbu, Rai,
and Tharu, do not accept the labels ‘eth-
ic groups’ or ‘minorities’. They prefer to be
called ‘nations’ and believe they fulfill all the criteria of nationhood: lan-
guage, religion, culture, territory and a
history of independent statehood, which
would be achieved again if rights to
secession were granted. All these
groups now accept the Nepali word
janajati, translated as ‘nationality’ in
English. In 1990, when eighteen of these groups got united to form a Maistriyati
formation called Nepali Janajati Mahasangha, they translated it as the ‘Nepal Federation of Nationalities’.

The search for ‘national identities’ in
Nepal may be a recent phenomenon, but
has deep roots in the past. Until
1769, present-day Nepal was composed
of small independent states and prin-
ciples of different ‘nationalities’. The Gorkhā king Prithivi Narayan Shah, forfather of the present ruling dynasty in Nepal, embarked on an expansionist campaign, bringing several small states and principalities under the control of Gorkha. His successors continued the
expansory policy, which came to an end only after they defeat in a war with the British East India Company (1784–
1816). It was only in the 1930s that the
Nepalese parliament began to adopt the name ‘Nepal’ as an attempt to make it a modern nation state (Burghart 1996: 215). In general, people of
different origins within the country’s bor-
ders continued to live together in peace
over the centuries. However, this ended when groups began to feel discrimi-
nated against by the state.

Soon after the Gorkha conquest of
1769, the Gorkha king Prithivi Narayan Shah proclaimed his country to be the
‘True Land of Hindus’ (Asalii Hindu-
sthan). In 1875, Jung Bahadur, the first Rana prime minister, introduced writ-
ten laws based on Hinduism, dividing the
country hierarchically and subordi-
nating all other nationalities to the Brahmin and Kshetra (Khas) ruling
class. In 1960, King Mahendra, the
father of the present king, introduced the party-less political system called
‘Panchayati’, which proclaimed Nepal as the only ‘Hindu Kingdom’ and ‘Nepali or Khas the only official language’, thus
growing its multi-religious, multina-
tional, multicultural, and multilingual
character.

The ruling Hindu population of Nepal has been historically in conflict with the non-Hindus (janajati), who have been
oppressed castes. Yet Nepal’s ethnic
nationalities are aware of the reality
among the different groups in a multi-
national like Nepal is a difficult
challenge for many of the Balkan states,
ethnic conflict. If ethnic uprisings are
not handled with great care, Nepal may face trouble in the near future, as it has been experienced by the Balkan states, by Southeast Asian countries, or by
neighbouring India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. As indicated above, ethnic insurgency in Nepal has been prevent-
ded thus far because of the people’s war launched by the Maoists. The involve-
ment of ethnic nationalities in this bloody war, however, has become painfully apparent.

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