

Christians Fear Religious Persecution Could Return to Nepal

✖ Four years after Nepal became officially secular, fear is growing that the country could revert to the Hindu state it was till 2006, when proclaiming Christ was a punishable offense and many churches functioned clandestinely to avoid being shut down.

Concerns were heightened after Nepal's deposed King Gyanendra Shah, once regarded as a Hindu god, broke the silence he has observed since Nepal abolished monarchy in 2008. During his visit to a Hindu festival this month, the former king said that monarchy was not dead and could make a comeback if people so desired.

Jason Maehl / IstockPhoto: Durbar Square in Kathmandu, Nepal, housed the royal residence until the 19th century.

Soon after that, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, a former prime minister and respected leader of the largest ruling party, said that instead of getting a new constitution, Nepal should revive an earlier one. The 1990 constitution declared Nepal a Hindu kingdom with a constitutional monarch.

There is now growing doubt that the ruling parties will not be able to fashion the new constitution they promised by May.

"We feel betrayed," said Dr. K.B. Rokaya, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Nepal. "The Constituent Assembly we elected to give us a new constitution that would strengthen democracy and secularism has frittered away the time and opportunity given to it."

The clamor for a Hindu state has been growing as the May 28

deadline for the new constitution draws near. When a Hindu preacher, Kalidas Dahal, held a nine-day prayer ritual in Kathmandu this month seeking reinstatement of Hinduism as the state religion, thousands of people flocked to him. The throng included three former prime ministers and top leaders of the ruling parties.

"The large turnout signals that Hinduism is enshrined in the hearts of the people and can't be abolished by the government," said Hridayesh Tripathi, a former minister and Constituent Assembly member whose Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party is the fifth-largest in the ruling alliance. "It was a mistake to abolish Hinduism in a hurry."

Another blow for a Hindu state was struck by the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N), the only party that fought the 2008 election in support of monarchy and a Hindu state. It is now calling for a referendum. As a pressure tactic, it paralyzed the capital and its two neighboring cities in February by calling a general strike.

"The election gave the Constituent Assembly the mandate of writing a new constitution, not deciding issues of national importance," said Kamal Thapa, the RPP-N chief who also was home minister during the brief government headed by Gyanendra. "Most people in Nepal want a Hindu state and a constitutional king. If their demand is not heeded, they will feel excluded and refuse to follow the new constitution. We are asking the government to hold a referendum on the two issues before May 28."

With only two months left, it is clear the demand can't be met if the constitution is to come into effect within the stipulated time. Now the specter of anarchy and violence hangs over Nepal.

Nepal's Maoists, who fought a 10-year war to make Nepal a secular republic and who remain the former king's most bitter

enemy, say attempts have begun to whip up riots in the name of a Hindu state. The former guerrillas also allege that the campaign for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion is backed by ministers, politicians from the ruling parties and militant religious groups from India.

Effectively Hindu

None of the church members have been able to return to their homes. They feel completely unsafe and at risk. Even if a new, secular constitution is approved by the deadline, there is still no guarantee that the rights of religious minorities would be protected.

Nilambar Acharya, who heads the committee that is drafting the new constitution, said it would be merely a broad guideline for the government; compatible laws would have to be drafted to protect rights.

“The previous constitution abolished ‘untouchability’ [a practice among Hindus of treating those at the bottom of the social ladder as outcasts],” Acharya told Compass. “But untouchability still exists in Nepal. To achieve all that the constitution promises, the mindset of society has to be changed first. For that, you need political will.”

Though Nepal became secular in 2006, Hinduism still gets preferential treatment. The state allocates funds for institutions like the *Kumari*, the tradition of choosing prepubescent girls as protective deities of the state and worshipping them as “living goddesses.” The state also gave money to organizers of a controversial, five-yearly religious festival, the Gadhimai Fair, where tens of thousands of birds are slaughtered as offerings to Hindu gods despite international condemnation.

There is no support, predictably, for Christian festivals. When the Constituent Assembly was formed – partly through election and partly by nomination – no Christian name was

proposed even though the prime minister was authorized to nominate members from unrepresented communities.

Christian leaders want such religious bias abolished. Rokaya of the National Council of Churches of Nepal said Christians have recommended full freedom of religion in the new constitution: allowing one to follow the religion of one's choice, to change one's religion if desired or have the right not to be associated with any religion.

The churches have also asked the state not to interfere in religious matters.

"We are asking the government not to fund any religious activity, not to be part of any religious appointments and not to allow public land for any religious event," Rokaya said.

The recommendations, however, may not be heeded. During their brief stint in power, the Maoists tried to stop state assistance for the *Kumari*. It led to violence and a general strike in the capital, forcing the party to withdraw the decision.

In its 2009 report on religious freedom in Nepal, the U.S. Department of State notes that while the interim constitution officially declared the country secular, "the president, in his capacity as head of state, attended major Hindu religious ceremonies over which the king previously presided."

It also notes that there were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

"Those who converted to a different religious group occasionally faced violence and were ostracized socially," it states. "Those who chose to convert to other religious groups, in particular Hindu citizens who converted to Islam or Christianity, were sometimes ostracized. They occasionally faced isolated incidents of hostility or discrimination from

Hindu extremist groups. Some reportedly were forced to leave their villages.”

Dr. Ramesh Khatri, executive director of Association for Theological Education in Nepal, has experienced such persecution first-hand. When he became a Christian in 1972, his father disowned him. Then in 1984 he was arrested for holding a Bible camp. Though the case against him was dropped in 1990 after a pro-democracy movement, Khatri said hatred of Christians still persists.

“Christians can never sleep peacefully at night,” he said wryly. “The new constitution will make Nepal another India, where Christians are persecuted in Orissa, Gujarat and Karnataka.” The Oxford University-educated Khatri, who writes a column in a Nepali daily, said violent responses to his articles show how Nepal still regards its Christians.

“I am attacked as a ‘Rice Christian,’” he said. “It is a derogatory term implying I converted for material benefits. The antagonistic feeling society has towards Christians will not subside with the new constitution, and we can’t expect an easy life. The Bible says that, and the Bible is true.”

Christians continue to face persecution and harassment. In March, missions resource organization Timeless Impact International (TII) noted that a church in northern Nepal, near the foothills of Mt. Everest, was attacked by a local mob.

The newly established church in Dolakha district was attacked during a fellowship meeting in January. An ethnic mob headed by religious leaders destroyed the church meeting place, assaulted participants and warned them not to speak about Christianity in the village, TII said.

The situation, even now, remained unchanged.

“None of the church members have been able to return to their

homes,” TII stated. “They feel completely unsafe and at risk.”