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Abstract

With Nepal's recent transition to state secularism, the politicization of Muslim religious identity has emerged with increasing vitality. One particular pan-Nepali Muslim organization, the Rastriya Muslim Mane Nepal (National Muslim Forum Nepal), offers a window into the complex relationship between national and religious identity that animates this politicization. Through analysis of the National Muslim Forum's earliest discourses, produced between 2005 and 2006, both immediately before and after the people's revolution that resulted in the declaration of Nepal as a secular state, this essay highlights the ways that experiences of conflict coupled with a national political transition shape and contribute to this politicization. It also offers a picture of some of the ways in which conceptions of the nation and religious community come together to help define the forum's call for a new Muslim religio-political identity across a diverse Nepali national population. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Islam, Muslim, Nepal, identity, community

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5 The National Muslim Forum Nepal: experiences of conflict, formations of identity

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With Nepal's recent transition to state secularism, the politicization of Muslim religious identity has emerged with increasing vitality. One particular pan-Nepali Muslim organization, the *Rastriya Muslim Manc Nepal* (National Muslim Forum Nepal), offers a window into the complex relationship between national and religious identity that animates this politicization. Through analysis of the National Muslim Forum's earliest discourses, produced between 2005 and 2006, both immediately before and after the people's revolution that resulted in the declaration of Nepal as a secular state, this essay highlights the ways that experiences of conflict coupled with a national political transition shape and contribute to this politicization. It also offers a picture of some of the ways in which conceptions of the nation and religious community come together to help define the forum's call for a new Muslim religio-political identity across a diverse Nepali national population.¹

Muslims in Nepal

Muslims are the second largest religious minority in Nepal, and constitute 4.2 percent of Nepal's population according to the 2001 census data.² The majority of Muslims in Nepal are Sunni and identify as Hanafi, the legal school predominant in South Asia.³ Within these two broad religiously-determined categories of identification, however, Muslims in Nepal tend to cast their own identities in more narrow and specific categories of affiliation such as doctrinal orientation, ethnicity, occupation, region, and educational level, each of which involves its own internal divisions and hierarchies. In the Kathmandu valley, which is home to only a small percentage of Nepal's Muslims but represents a social and religious microcosm of the Muslim population, Muslims are divided most broadly between Kashmiris, whose presence in Nepal dates back as early as the sixteenth century, and those known alternately as "Hindustani," (as earlier literature calls them) or "Nepali" Muslims (i.e. from the Tarai). In addition, there are several smaller populations of Tibetan Muslims, "Kathmandu" (alternately called Newari, or Iraqi) Muslims, and Churaute Muslims in the valley. In the Tarai, where the majority of the country's Muslims reside, some are descendents of local

converts as far back as the Delhi Sultanate.⁴ Many Muslims of the northern hill regions are of the bangle-making Churaute ethnic group, whose ancestors migrated from India centuries ago. Divisions within these affiliations abound to such an extent that many Muslims themselves describe their national population as fragmented, dispersed, and sometimes unwieldy in its diversity.

The most pronounced divisions within Nepal's Muslim population are those based on doctrinal orientation and geographic location. Doctrinally, Muslims oriented towards particular schools of thought, particularly Barelvi,⁵ Deobandi,⁶ Ahl-e Hadis,⁷ and Jamaat-i Islami,⁸ tend to see themselves as distinct from one another. Geographically, Muslims of the hills and the Kathmandu valley see themselves as culturally distinct from Muslims of the Tarai. This regional divide between the pahari Muslims and the madhesi Muslims, which is felt in the Kathmandu valley, is perhaps the most intractable of divisions among Muslims in Nepal, as it is part of a larger issue of social, political, and cultural tension in Nepal between Paharis and Madhesis. In the Kathmandu valley, there is a perception of Madhesis as more Indian in essence than Nepali. By extension, Madhesi linguistic, cultural, and social ties with north Indians make for a perception among pahari and Kathmandu valley Muslims that madhesi Muslims are "less Nepali" than pahari Muslims because they are even further from the Hindu pahari-oriented national identity.⁹ Within the Kathmandu valley there are also further, significant divisions between the Kashmiri Muslims and "Hindustani", or "Nepali," Muslims who have more recently emigrated there. According to many Muslims, few in recent memory have reached across these boundaries to cultivate cooperation and communication on a national scale.

The National Muslim Forum Nepal

The National Muslim Forum Nepal was created in 2005 as a pan-Nepali Muslim organization. Founded not as a religious or social service organization, but rather as a centralized platform for a unified Muslim voice, the forum aimed to unify and communicate Muslim needs to the government at the national level. It offered a vision of Nepali Muslim unity in which the Nepali Muslim population at large was conceived as a "nation," or community, whose survival would be dependent upon the Nepali state of which it is a part. Now in its sixth year of existence, the National Muslim Forum continues to offer this vision of a new, forward-looking, pan-Nepali Muslim identity articulated most clearly in its founding discourses.

Upon its conception, the National Muslim Forum called for Muslims throughout the country to unite across the divides of regionalism, doctrinal affiliation, and ethnicity by recognizing fundamental commonalities among one another. Its founding documents describe it as being founded with the primary objectives of "protect[ing] and cultivat[ing] the religious, economic, social, and cultural benefits of the Muslim community in Nepal ... with an aim to consolidate the age-long tradition of religious tolerance and the feeling

of brotherhood among the people of Nepal” (National Muslim Forum Nepal 2005b: 1). It called for “essential coordination, cooperation, and collaboration ... with Muslim organizations” (National Muslim Forum Nepal 2005b: 3) and membership would be open to Muslims of all sects or schools of thought (U., *maktabi fikr*).

As its leaders describe it, the forum’s broad sweeping call for unity and cooperation emerged in direct response to the incident in August of 2004 that came to be called *Kalo Buddhvar*, or “Black Wednesday.” On that day, protests and riots that included well-orchestrated, incendiary, and highly symbolic anti-Muslim violence broke out throughout the Kathmandu valley in response to an Islamic terrorist group’s murdering of twelve Nepali men working in Iraq.¹⁰ At multiple sites in the Kathmandu valley, organized bands of rioters, who were later identified with the Nepal branch of the Hindu nationalist organization Shiv Sena, launched a coordinated attack on all people and things seen as connected to Islam (Sijapati 2011). This included Muslim religious leaders, business owners, and householders, and Muslim-owned businesses, manpower recruitment agencies, gulf airlines, and the Egyptian embassy. Rioters paraded the streets chanting anti-Muslim slogans, broke in to mosques and burned and urinated upon Qurans and threw them out into the street, vandalized mosque interiors, and attacked madrasas (Islamic religious schools).

The anti-Muslim violence of *Kalo Buddhvar* was the first on record to occur in the Kathmandu valley, and it differed on several levels from past incidents of religious violence in other regions of Nepal. Violent confrontations between Hindus and Muslims had occurred in the Tarai districts of Mahottari, Rautahat, Bara, Dang, and Banke (Dastider 2000) – all areas with significant Muslim populations and close to the Indian border – in the second half of the twentieth century. In Nepalgunj, five violent conflicts took place between Hindus and Muslims between 1992 and 1997 (Lawoti 2007). The violence of *Kalo Buddhvar*, however, was uni-directional – Muslims did not retaliate – and it was in an geographic area more removed from the contentious issues in northern regions of India that have influenced Hindu-Muslim relations in Tarai districts in the past, such as the Babri Masjid dispute. *Kalo Buddhvar* was sparked by an event that took place far outside Nepal’s borders but struck a deep emotional chord with many Nepalis perhaps because of the large number of Nepalis working in the Arab Gulf. And while public protests are common in Nepal, these are usually political expressions of dissent and do not target one segment of the population. On *Kalo Buddhvar*, rioters targeted Ghanta Ghar (N., “clock house”), the valley’s main Islamic area and a centrally located base for Nepal’s two largest and most influential Muslim organizations, which lies just down the road from the Royal palace. The two mosques there, which are the valley’s largest, were broken into and vandalized, and mosques all across the valley, from Imadol to Patan to Kalimati, were attacked as well. When I visited the Ahl-e Hadis mosque in Kalimati in early 2006, the extensive damage from *Kalo Buddhvar*

was still evident. Fire damage was visible on the mosque walls and a stack of charred Qurans remained covered in the corner of one of the rooms. The son of the mosque's former Imam (prayer leader) explained that the blackened Qurans remained there only because no one knew the proper Islamic way to dispose of damaged Qurans. Prior to the attacks, the mosque's small boarding school had drawn Muslim students from villages outside of the valley, but following *Kalo Buddhvar*, few parents felt safe keeping their children there and the school was forced to close.

At the time of *Kalo Buddhvar*, many Muslims saw it as the community's breaking point in the long suffered institutional injustices and discrimination faced over the years of recent memory (Sijapati 2011). In addition to having no place in Nepal's national narrative and identity, little political voice, and few resources for educational development, in the months prior to *Kalo Buddhvar* Muslims had experienced an alarming elevation in discriminatory incidents aimed at members of their community. The clearest example of this was the arrest and detainment of seven madrasa teachers from various parts of the country. They were held for several months under the pretense that the schools in which they were teaching served as training centers for Islamic extremists with links to terrorist outfits such as al-Qaeda (Adhikari 2004; Rajdhani Rashtryia Dainik 2004).

Only in 1963 were Muslims recognized by the state as a separate religious group and given status as citizens equal before the law. The first national Muslim organization on record, the All Nepal Anjuman Islah, was formed in 1953 to work towards the "social and economic development of Muslims in Nepal" (Ansari 1981: 31). Another early organization, still active today, was the Millat-e Islamiya,¹¹ established in 1971 "to facilitate the Islamic surrounding and [promote] Islamic awareness throughout the whole country" (ibid.: 38). In the mid 1990s, a nation-wide organization called the All Nepal Ettihad Sangh held national meetings and brought Muslim representatives from all districts to pass resolutions pertaining to Muslims (Dastider 2000). By the late 1990s, however, it was no longer holding national meetings. On *Kalo Buddhvar*, it appeared to many that no one, not even the government, would protect Muslims from such large-scale organized expressions of violence against them. There was even widespread suspicion that King Gyanendra had sanctioned the anti-Muslim attacks of *Kalo Buddhvar*. In the views of its senior leaders, the National Muslim Forum's goal to draw together a unified Muslim voice into a political platform for representing the interests of the nation's diverse Muslim population was conceived in direct response to these experiences of discrimination and violence.

In a beginning that symbolized the heterogeneity of voices to be included in the National Muslim Forum's one unified voice, its leaders came from various schools of South Asian Islamic thought, geographic regions, and ethnic groups of Nepal. The greatest representation was from Muslims oriented towards reformist schools of thought, particularly Ahl-e Hadis, Deoband, and Jamaat-e Islami, and many of the leaders and members of the forum

were also (and continue to be) active figures in the Islami Sangh Nepal, the country's largest and most influential Islamic religious organization (Sijapati 2011). Its leaders came from regions stretching from the Tarai districts of Kapilvastu, Sunsari, and Morang to the capital of Kathmandu and the hill district of Gorkha. There are also members of the Kashmiri Muslim community in the forum, though Muslims who claim the Tarai as their *vatan* (U., homeland, native country) were in the majority in the forum upon its conception. A number of Muslims who frequent the offices of the Millat-e Islami in Ghanta Ghar, and are both members of the National Muslim Forum and part of the core of the Islami Sangh leadership, are from the eastern Tarai district of Sunsari.

At the time of the forum's first annual meeting in December of 2005, the political future of the country was highly uncertain. King Gyanendra was grasping to maintain his position of absolute power while the Maoists and Nepal's seven political parties were putting increasing pressure on him to abdicate the throne and restore the country to its status as a parliamentary democracy. Muslims, like many others in Nepal, were energized by the growing movement for the re-institution of democracy and the imminent transformation into a secular state. Muslims were motivated by the sense of exigency in productively responding to the religious violence committed against them, and by the broad national energy that was accumulating as the possibility of the end of King Gyanendra's rule looked increasingly likely.

Among Muslims associated with the organizations based out of Ghanta Ghar, there was anticipation for what political future would lie ahead. This was combined with excitement and concern for the importance of this unprecedented opportunity to participate in the political process and gain greater recognition and rights as the country's second largest religious minority. Muslims anticipated the opening of a new space within the popular political discourse, in which they not only *could* contribute their voice, but were required to do so in order to ensure what they saw as their rightful place in the future multireligious, multiethnic, secular state.

At its first annual meeting, the forum's leaders formally presented its aims and objectives to a Muslim audience in eloquent speeches delivered by the forum's President and General Secretary (which were later published by the organization and are cited in the following pages). These goals were couched within the forum's reflections on the condition of Muslims in Nepal at the time. Their speeches addressed the nature of Nepali Muslims' problems and the necessity of Muslims to come together and create a laudable and persuasive voice of protest to the government. Concerns with Nepal's political instability, the vulnerability of its Muslim community, and the Muslim place within the country's future shaped the speeches of this countrywide Muslim gathering. A few months later, these aims were reformulated as demands to the new government, published in both Urdu and Nepali and distributed from Ghanta Ghar. The front of the forum's glossy pamphlet publication illustrates the multiple orientations of Nepali Muslims, all of which informed

the concerns of the forum's speeches: a sketch of the Himayalan mountains stretched above the forum's logo of a crescent moon (the *hilar*, a multifaceted symbol of Islam) cradling the word *Allah* (God, written in Arabic) and an outline of the geographic boundaries of Nepal – all encircled by the forum's name written both in English and Nepali above the forum's title in large Urdu script.

Visions of a unified identity

One of the National Muslim Forum's central goals was to make clear to Nepal's Muslims that, despite their diversity, they were already unified by virtue of their dual commitments to their religion and the Nepali state. The forum called for Nepal's ethnically, linguistically, geographically, and religiously heterogeneous Muslim population to recognize a latent commonality and a communal responsibility, each informed by religion and political necessity. To this end, it called for Nepali Muslims to understand themselves as a community, or "nation," (U., *millat*, *qaum*) of Muslims within the nation (U., *muluk*)¹² of Nepal. According to the forum's first President, the cultivation of a unified Muslim community identity would amount to no less than a "resurrection" of the "Muslim *qaum* (nation, community)" (National Muslim Forum Nepal 2005b: 17). This, he explained, would be part of the larger project of transforming the state of Nepal itself, which was in early 2004 in the throes of "destruction" (ibid.: 23). The survival and prosperity of both "nations" – Nepal and its Muslims – he argued, would be contingent upon the growth and strengthening of the other.

How the forum conceives of these two "nations" is revealed by the choice of terms it employs to discuss them. To refer to the state of Nepal, the Forum uses the Arabic-derived Nepali term *muluk*. There is nothing distinctly Islamic about the forum's use of the term *muluk*; Nepali contains a number of words derived from Arabic and Persian, and the use of *muluk* in Nepali dates back to the early nineteenth century. The earliest legal code of the land was the *Muluki Ain*. Whether in the form of a Hindu kingdom or a secular republic, the term *muluk* denotes the country as a whole, perhaps best understood as the state, specifically with citizens with equal rights and obligations.

For the "nation," or community, of Nepali Muslims, however, the forum uses two Urdu (Arabic-derived) terms: *millat* and *qaum*. These terms can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the context, to denote sub-groups delineated by ethnicity, race, or tribe. The Urdu term *millat* is derived from the Arabic term *malla*, meaning "to turn, to convert," and has the dual meanings of "religion, faith, creed" and "a nation, people" (Platts 1960: 1064). The forum uses the term *millat* in the sense of those of one faith, i.e. Islam, therefore "*ek millat*," in the sense of "all those of the Islamic faith" in Nepal. The term *qaum* is also used frequently in the forum's speeches and other discourses, and its use bears particular significance. *Qaum*, which is used in the Quran in connection with Muhammad's predecessors, i.e. the Prophets of

the Abrahamic lineage, signifies “a people, a nation” (ibid.: 796), and is used to denote the “modern conception of ‘people’,” (Kassis 1983: 948–54; Wensinck 2007), the smaller groups of people within the greater global community of Muslims, the *umma*, who identify with one another both as Muslims and, in narrower terms, as communities bound by ties of race, ethnicity, geography, and culture. It can be used in the sense of a religious community, a nation, or even caste, and it has been defined in varying ways among South Asian Muslims in the past. The forum uses the terms *millat* and *qaum* to describe the Muslim population as it imagines it: as an ideal community unified by the ties of religion, yet heterogeneous; a community, or “nation,” of Muslims, within the larger group of citizens comprising the nation-state of Nepal.

Participating in the shaping of the new democratic and secular state required Muslims, as both marginalized citizens and members of a religion with a complicated relationship to ideologies such as nationalism, to grapple with the very concept of the nation-state. As bearers of a unique – and in ways significantly contrasting – religion and religious identity, Muslims would not see themselves as fitting into the nation-state of Nepal as defined by the Hindu-majority. Their experiences as marginalized members of the historically Hindu state and society render them outside the dominant national narrative. Further, for Muslims in South Asia, the concept of nationhood, and Muslim identity within the nation, is fraught with overtones of complicated historical struggles. The ideal relationship between religion and politics in Islam has been the source of great debate and conflict among Muslims (Hardy 1972).

It is significant then that the forum uses the word *qaum* to describe Muslims in Nepal, as a whole, irrespective of their more specific ethnic, geographic, and cultural ties. This marks a move towards unifying the various *qaums* – sub-groups of Nepali Muslims delineated by ties of ethnicity, race, geography, etc. – that are constituted through these very ties and that exist inherently within the Nepali Muslim population, into a larger *qaum* based on religious identity. In one sense, the forum understands this ideal Nepali Muslim “nation,” or community, this *qaum*, to be based first on the ties of Nepali citizenship, and then narrowed through the bond of religion, rather than through the ties of ethnicity, language, or geography.

Whether understood metaphorically, as a united people, or literally, as a distinct political minority functioning as a micronation within a larger nation-state, the articulation of Muslims in Nepal as a “nation” would require discursive efforts at conceptualizing a new community. What is to draw Nepali Muslims out of – or just beyond – their local ethnic, geographic and doctrinal-based identities based on ethnicity, language, geography, or doctrine and into the larger identification as members of a pan-Nepali Muslim community, or “nation”? The forum claims that this larger identification has many sources. Two of these are significant for our understanding of the relationship between religion and nation for Muslims: experiences of

hardship and violence, and a sense of belonging to and responsibility for the state of Nepal.

These two foundations for national Muslim identity were elaborated upon in the speeches given at the forum's first annual meeting. The President explained to his fellow Nepali Muslims that the country was "going through a delicate time in its history," (National Muslim Forum Nepal 2005b: 24) and that all Muslims were feeling it. Nepal, he held, was once a model for peace, but now only a place void of "peace and security," where the "sanctity of life and the security of property" had "become rare concept[s]" (ibid.: 23). He lamented:

Our country, which was an example for peace and a place of safety, of complete beauty, a central attraction for tourists, with the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas and Mount Everest, used to be world famous. Now, it is like a deserted, ripe autumn valley where the holiness of the honor and security of life and property has become a joke. Man is man's enemy and people of the nation have begun to drink each other's blood. The poison of cruelty has already penetrated the hearts of the sons of the nation in such a way that the security and the honor of ordinary citizens and countrymen have no reality beyond our dreams. The entire country is kept like an abundance of gunpowder and from one quick spark can change into a spreading fire.

(Ibid.: 24)

As the forum saw it, the social cohesion and integrity of Nepal was in an unprecedented state of volatility, evidenced by *Kalo Buddhvar*. Nepal faced the alarming rise of the Maoist insurgency, the instability and new aggressiveness of King Gyanendra's government, recent anti-Muslim violence by Hindu extremists (thought to be tacitly condoned by the King) and the other pandemic problems of poverty and under-development, all exacerbated by a web of government corruption. *Kalo Buddhvar*, the President suggested, was a painful example – and consequence – of this volatility, for by a small spark (i.e. the murder of Nepali workers in Iraq) the country, because of its instability and corruption, gave way to violence that targeted some of its least prepared and most vulnerable citizens: its Muslims.

In painting the political situation of Nepal in such stark terms, the President made it clear that the political stability of the country was of vital concern to its minority of Muslims whose primary loyalty may be to *either* religion or state, but whose conditions were, regardless, determined by condition of the country. The President underscored the shared sense of sorrow among Muslims and their fellow Nepalis for the country's political, economic, and social problems, and proclaimed that from this sorrow should follow a shared desire among Muslims for Nepal to prosper. He explained, "we [Muslims] respect [this country's] growth and development," for "we are this country's responsible people and wise citizens" (ibid.: 22–23).

However, he reminded his listeners that Muslim reverence for the homeland of Nepal is not like that of Nepali Hindus for whom the land bears a special religious significance as a locus of religio-mythical narrative and sacredness.¹³ Muslim loyalty to the state and land of Nepal does *not* supercede loyalty to religion and religious identity. He explains that “we are not worshippers of our birthplace (U., *vatan*), but when our hearts are filled with feelings for our country then naturally with its development our hearts are happy and with its destruction we feel pains of grief” (ibid.: 23).

It is important to note here that the forum articulates a pan-Nepali Muslim religious identity that it sees as distinctly *not* ethnic. This is in part because as forum leaders see it, Islamic sacred sources call for social egalitarianism through submission to a path of action-based devotion to a monotheistic God, in which there is no room for the idolization of ethnic or racial identities. While this scriptural ideal may fail to translate into consistent social reality, Muslims of the forum espouse a socially egalitarian brotherhood of Islam as the core of Muslim society. However there are other reasons that the forum works to ensure that the pan-Nepali identity they are calling for is not taken to be ethnic. Unlike for many of Nepal’s ethnic groups, for Muslims, their claims to political rights and socio-cultural recognition (as represented by the National Muslim Forum) are not, and cannot, be grounded in the status of being indigenous to the territory of Nepal. Further, their heterogeneity and the ethically driven principles of Muslim social equality mentioned above prevent them from claiming an ethnic unity based on any racial, linguistic, or cultural traits that would be essentially “Nepali Muslim.” They therefore navigate a complex identity – as so many minority religious groups do – rooted in their belonging to Nepal and their membership in a global religious community whose roots are outside of Nepal. For Nepal’s Muslims, despite the existence of local sites of sacred geography such as saints’ shrines (which are located across the country, and the veneration of which is coming under increasing criticism by Islamic reformers and revivalists, many of whom are part of the National Muslim Forum), the larger sacred geography of Islam is necessarily extra-territorial. This translocal orientation is most simply demonstrated in their facing the direction of the Kaba in Mecca during their five daily prayers. Other, more tangible markers of their translocal orientation include Muslims’ sacred text, as it is in a non-Indo-Aryan language (the Quran can be translated from Arabic into another languages, and has been recently translated into Nepali with the support of the forum and other organizations, but in translation it is no longer considered the actual sacred text, but rather a rendering of meaning of the text), and the use of Urdu, the national language of Pakistan and linguistic cultural carrier of Islam in South Asia, as a pan-Nepali Muslim language.

As understood by many of Nepal’s reform and revival oriented Muslims, who are in large number in the forum, the practices and epistemologies of Islamic religious tradition remain located outside the cultural-religious complex of historical Nepal. Aware of the way this extra-territorial orientation

may be perceived by Nepal's non-Muslims, the Forum works to make explicit Muslims' Nepali identity (both to Muslims and non-Muslims) in practical terms through the participation in the social and political discourses pertaining to the formation of the new secular state (Sijapati 2011). Symbolically, it communicates their connection with the geography of Nepal, for example, in their logo (described earlier), which features a sketch of the Himalayas, the territorial boundaries of Nepal, and a crescent moon.

In its first meeting, the forum's President explained that Nepali Muslim concerns with what they see as the country's rapidly declining political and social conditions can compel movement towards an active, unified Muslim voice in the country through participation in its development as a secular state. He explained that the Muslim population would need to come together to recognize the dire situation that enabled *Kalo Buddhvar* to occur, and take on their responsibilities as both Nepali citizens and Muslims in addressing it. He explained to them that through a unified platform they must rise above their petty concerns with "personal benefits and our group and sect bigotries" and come together to "raise a voice only for the [Muslim] nation's (U., *millat*) greater welfare" (ibid.: 24).

Muslims could save themselves in and through the rescue of the Nepali nation-state, and *this* would be a foundation for unity. This is significant, for historically, Muslims were designated by those in power as foreigners, by virtue of being *outside* the Hindu hierarchy that defined the social, legal, and religious structure of the state. Through the caste based hierarchy of the *Muluki Ain*, put into effect in 1854 and influential until very recently, Nepali Muslims were grouped together through a broad-sweeping political and social identity as groups of "impure but touchable" castes, despite the fact that they bore few commonalities beyond a broad religious affiliation. By 2006, with the juridical dissolution of a Hindu caste-based social and legal hierarchy, which remains in existence informally, the National Muslim Forum posited a new basis for a broad pan-Nepali Muslim identity defined not through exclusion, but through inclusion in the national project for stability and prosperity, despite the many internal divisions that still abound among the Muslim population.

In the forum's view, the situation of the Muslim crisis and the country's political crisis – dual crises of different natures but intertwined – should compel in Muslims a sense of responsibility to the development of the nation for the prosperity of the multination state as well. The condition and future of each was intertwined, and the raising of the Muslim "nation" would contribute – rather than present challenge – to the development of the Nepali nation-state. In this way, the National Muslim Forum presented a vision for Nepali Muslim identity in this early period of political transition. Through this vision, informed by the experiences of political instability and religious violence within the country, it argued that the Muslim population possesses a foundation for commonality that could be harnessed for a new, unified identity – one inherently Nepali, entirely Muslim, and aimed at their very preservation and future as Muslims in a non-Islamic state.

A path to the “resurrection of the nation”

The National Muslim Forum laid out specific methods through which the population's unified identity could be further cultivated. I will address only a selection of them here, with a focus less on the explicitly religious points in preference for the more politically-oriented ones (though the two are often difficult to disentangle). At a basic level, the forum asserted that while differences within the population were healthy, the intra-communal biases and tensions that plague it would have to be ameliorated. In order to affect social change, the forum argued, Nepali Muslims, the Islamic nation or community (the term used is *Islami millat*), would need to outwardly reflect cohesion and strength to the society at large, while remaining internally heterogeneous. The forum condoned the doctrinal diversity (or rather, divisions, as many would prefer to call it) within Nepal's “Muslim nation” by emphasizing their common commitment to fundamental religious principles above and beyond sectarian, doctrinal differences. “It is not a fault for there to be differences in any group,” the President explained, and as a solution “Islam has laid out the best community (*ummat*) for us” (ibid.: 10). Differences within the community would have to be embraced, he held: “by way of our own affiliations [i.e. Deobandi, Bareilvi, etc.] and relations we must follow our own religious schools of thought/sectarian affiliation [U., *masalik*]” (ibid.: 20). Contingent upon this, however, would be the responsibility of members of the Muslim population to take on one another other's problems and challenges, as the forum's goal of presenting “Muslims' demands and necessities before the current government” would not be possible “through individual efforts” (ibid.: 26). It would require that “wherever a matter arises that is a problem of the entire society, we [must] be united in every way and give life and limb for the solution. In this the secret of our perpetuity is hidden, and in this the safety of our identity is also secure” (ibid.: 19).

In the forum's view, this unification could bring in a new era, and since all else has failed thus far in the history of Muslim development¹⁴ in Nepal, nothing but good could come from this new approach:

Come—now at this stage we should do a new experiment, we should show our unity and power, and in the strength of our unprecedented unity in this country we should write a new history ... and there is no reason why, upon dropping our small discords and prejudices between *masalik* for the more extensive benefits of the [Muslim] nation, we should not be able to be one.

(Ibid.: 19)

The forum cites one recent harnessing of this dormant unity of the Muslim community: the successful fundraising efforts among the country's Muslims for the victims of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. The collection of over 600,000 rupees for the support of fellow Muslims outside of Nepal was

"proof that on the one hand the collective heart of the [Nepali Muslim] nation (U., *qaum*) has not died yet and the desires of our Islamic brotherhood have not grown cold. On the other hand, it is proof that the individuals of the [Nepali Muslim] nation are fully ready to welcome our appeal [for a unified Muslim platform]" (ibid.: 27).

To the forum, a mapping of the country's Muslim population would also be crucial to the internal cohesion of the Muslim nation. Among its goals would be (and remains) the preparation of "data on all the madrasas and mosques in Nepal," (ibid.: 5) for they would need to determine the topography of its constituents in order to effectively cultivate a unified national awareness. The lack of reliable information on the numbers, locations, and types of madrasas and mosques in the country renders the community reliant upon occasional regional studies sponsored by the government and government census data, which many Muslims do not trust.¹⁵ This new information would alert the forum to districts that may not have sufficient madrasas or mosques to serve their localities, and would also make the committee aware of institutions and populations in the northern and western hill regions, for example, that may be as of yet unknown to the forum because of its base in the Kathmandu valley and orientation towards the Tarai.

As part of this mapping, the forum called for the government to "make a report on Nepali Muslims' true population" (ibid.: 5). This stems from the long held suspicion among Muslims that government census data on the Muslim population is inaccurate (a feeling shared by Dalits, indigenous nationalities, and Madhesis). Some believe the population is most likely between 8 to 10 percent of the entire national population, as opposed to 4.2 percent, the amount determined in the most recent government census of 2001. In my various interviews and discussions with Muslim leaders, they expressed concerns about flaws in the methodology used in the census enumeration, flaws that they believe account for the low numbers assigned to the Muslim population in the 2001 census. The first of these is that the census delineates categories for identification that are sometimes overlapping. Muslim groups of certain ethnicities get counted in their particular ethnic group category to the exclusion of the Muslim category because it, too, is a designated ethnic group in the census taxonomy. An example of this is the group of Muslims enumerated in the census and referred to as Churaute, Muslims in the hills who are of the traditional bangle-selling profession and who are enumerated under their own category in the census.¹⁶ Their numbers therefore go towards the Churaute category at the expense of the Muslim category in the count of the adherents of various religions.

In asking the state to see them as Muslims first and foremost, the forum seeks to empower these groups (as it sees it) by linking them with the larger group of Muslims that may receive rights and privileges based on its size. In the forum's view, religion should be all Muslims' primary source of identification, and so all Muslims in these subcategories should be, as it sees it, enumerated as such in the census. The forum's second concern regarding the

census is with government corruption and the potential bias at work in the collection of census data. Some suspect that census-takers, when arriving in a remote or unfamiliar village, may ask any available resident about the religious composition of the village rather than directly collecting the information themselves, and as a result may receive an inaccurate or biased report.

The National Muslim Forum aims to cultivate Muslim cohesion and identity among the population also by standardizing institutions of religious learning. A primary goal is the re-haul and systematization of madrasa education across the country. In Nepal, a broad based Muslim identity cannot come from a religio-legal structuring of social and religious life through implementation of *sharia*, nor has it yet to come through formal institutions of discursive learning. The forum called for “all those responsible leaders of madrasas” to come “together for a meeting to think long and hard about madrasa problems [in this country]” (ibid.: 5). It would standardize madrasa curriculum in Nepal by bringing together the country’s *ulama* (formally trained religious scholars) to decide upon the most effective curriculum for training Muslims to pursue either religious scholarship or secular professions. One Muslim affiliated with the National Muslim Forum explained to me that the aim is to create a Muslim Education Board in Nepal that would decide upon a countrywide code of curriculum, similar to Muslim education boards in India. By streamlining and standardizing the curriculum of madrasas across the country, the government would be more likely to recognize the legitimacy of madrasa education and certify madrasa diplomas. Some argue that if madrasas become certified, then there will be higher numbers of attendance, something that the Forum, as well as other organizations such as the Islami Sangh Nepal, sees as essential in the strengthening of Muslim identity.¹⁷

Another way of helping to bring about this unity, the forum states, would be to make consistent the methods of moon sighting (U., *hila*). The sighting of the crescent moon determines the beginning of Islamic holidays and is therefore both a symbolic and actual tool for ritual standardization among a dispersed population. In Nepal, as in other places, there are competing methods between Muslims of Bareilvi orientation and those of other north Indian schools of thought such as the Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadis for determining the sighting of the crescent moon. To many Muslims, this difference in observance methods points to a troublesome sectarian division within the population, observable along the tangible lines of religious practice. It splinters the community practically and symbolically. To help mitigate these divisions at the important times of religious practice, the forum called for the creation of a “Hilal Committee” (or “Moon Committee,” U., “*chand committee*”), which would synchronize the time that these religious observances begin throughout the country. When the two major Islamic holidays, Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Azha, were declared national holidays in 2008, a Hilal committee was formed in order create consensus in the moon sighting process necessary for declaring their commencement. As of 2009–10, the Vice President of the

National Muslim Forum also served as the Hilal committee President and Kathmandu representative.

With secularism, a new religious voice?

In the spirit of the historical movement of the people's protest for political change in 2006, the National Muslim Forum sought to represent the Muslim community alongside various other ethnic and religious minorities in "presenting [their] demands ... for the guarantee of the rights of every class and religion" (National Muslim Forum Nepal 2006: 1). As the forum explained in its publication of demands presented in 2006, and as many of its members reiterated in conversations with me:

Muslims cannot be separate from the political changes that we are witnessing in the country. In the planning and management of the country's matters, every religion and every class needs a reasonable share. In terms of the results of the present political changes, those establishing the new Constituent Assembly, and the new Constitution, Muslims' representation and the guarantee of their rights needs to be organized.

(Ibid.)

In highlighting Muslims' attachment and claim to Nepal, and by extension their legitimate claim to equal political representation and legal rights, the forum evoked the longevity of Muslim commitment to Nepal. It reminded Muslims and non-Muslims that Nepali Muslims' ties to the country are long and deep, for "Muslims have inhabited Nepal for centuries" (ibid.). It harkened back to the Muslim military support of Prithvi Narayan Shah in unifying Nepal in the late eighteenth century, during which time, "in the making of this country's history, Muslims performed an important role" (ibid.).

In the forum's view, the designation of Nepal as a secular state ensures that for "people of all religions [to be] treated equally" and allows no religion to receive special status. This crucial first step towards secularization would lead to an improvement in the condition of Muslims in Nepal by ensuring "the freedom to each citizen to follow and live according to the teachings of his or her religion" (ibid.). While Muslims were legally free to practice their religion prior to this, as non-Hindus they were neither encouraged nor empowered to seek religiously based legal and political rights. They were required to adhere to inheritance, marriage, divorce laws, etc. that were influenced by Hindu norms and values (Lawoti 2005). In order to ensure these rights, the forum holds that the Muslim community must be guaranteed political representation, "according to their population," for "the heart of democracy is that the populations of every religion, language, and region are represented in the government's affairs and legal framework" (National Muslim Forum 2006: 3).¹⁸

The forum cited the United Nation's International Human Rights Commission's policies, instituted in 1947, of "prohibiting the classification and/or

discrimination (U., *tafriq*) on the bases of religion, language, caste, brotherhoods, or political affiliation" (ibid.). Invoking this external arbiter of rights, the forum called attention to the declaration wherein "the power of religious minorities is also a priority ... the common political rights in the documents guarantee the flourishing of every religion, language, and society" (ibid.: 2). Even in Nepal, which has suffered from protracted political instability, "the safety of the rights of religious minorities must be safeguarded in this way" (ibid.: 3). The Nepali state, "having already signed these international rules and regulations," must "follow this commitment" (ibid.). Calling upon this external body of legal and humanitarian authority, the forum highlighted the failure of the Nepali state to live up to the standards of international law and justice in the past and underscored the forum's expectation that the state would adhere to these international standards in the future state.

By extension, the forum called for the creation of a committee that would "manage the eradication of hatred against religious, linguistic, and regional minorities" (ibid.). This demand clearly addressed King Gyanendra's government's suspected complicity in the violence against the Muslim community on *Kalo Buddhar*. Muslim leaders believe the Pashupati Sena and Shiv Sena Nepal were emboldened and given a green light by the monarch to destroy Muslim sacred sites and property. Following the King's abdication of absolute sovereignty and the declaration of Nepal as a secular state, Hindutva groups from India and their Nepali counterparts became increasingly proprietary about Nepal as a Hindu country and increasingly vocal about the supposed threat to Hinduism posed by other religions in a secular state. Such groups quickly emerged fomenting aggression towards those supporting non-Hindu religious and social rights in the former Hindu state (Sangraula 2006). Ensuring that these groups are monitored and restricted in the new government was – and continues to be – a matter of great importance to the National Muslim Forum.

The forum from the outset has viewed the Muslim situation as distinct from that of other minorities in the country and entirely different from that of the indigenous nationalities (*adivasi janjatis*). It nevertheless invoked them in its earliest discourses as setting a precedent for minority groups obtaining constitutional rights that would accommodate their religious practices. As the forum sees it, "in the recent past all fifty-nine minorities (U., *qaba'il*, 'tribes' or 'families') – *janjati* – in Nepal were accepted in the 1990 constitution of the government and they legally obtained various facilities. But the status of Muslims along these lines has never been clear" (National Muslim Forum 2006: 3).¹⁹

The forum made several demands to the government that it thought would help to make clear to the government what Muslims require legally to cultivate a pan-Nepali Muslim identity and be supported within the new secular state. Among these demands were governmental protection for the "Muslim language of Urdu" (ibid.: 4) the declaration of Eid ul-Fitr, Eid ul-Azha and Milad ul-Nabi as national holidays, the certification of madrasa diplomas,

and the eventual establishment of a madrasa board for monitoring issues pertaining to Muslim education. It called for the creation of a Muslim Development Committee "in order to determine the true number of Muslims in Nepal, to save their language, society, customs, traditions (U., *Islami tehzib o siqafat*), and identity (U., *tashakhos*), and to research and study their problems" (ibid.: 4). Other demands on their list were more specific, such as a call for easier acquisition of Nepali citizenship papers, which is a significant issue for Muslims of the Tarai who often do not have documentation of their place of birth and are suspected to be (and perhaps sometimes are) Indian.²⁰ The forum even called for a Muslim personal law board, which would work to establish a provision in Nepali law for the application of Islamic law in personal law matters, though it recognizes that the possibility of such a legal privilege in Nepal (which itself would be highly contested within the Muslim population) would be unlikely.²¹

Conclusion

In cultivating a discourse that cast the diverse population of Muslims as a "nation," the National Muslim Forum from its beginning posited an inherent unity among Nepal's Muslims that aimed to transcend the population's many points of difference. While often "movements of identity politics take efforts to stabilize a particular identity at the expense of another one" (Sokefeld 2003: 327), the National Muslim Forum's positing of a Muslim religious identity that is national in scope can be seen as an example of a movement of identity politics that has sought from its beginning to stabilize two distinct identities – national and religious – in and through one another, *not* at the expense of one another. At its beginning, the National Muslim Forum conceptualized a new Nepali Muslim identity at the country level that would be informed by both Muslim experiences in Nepal and the larger political environment of the country. In advocating for the Muslim population's rights and representation, the forum began firmly, in direct response to religious violence against Muslims, on the path of politicization of a pan-Nepali Muslim identity at a time of great political transition in the country. This time of both countrywide political change and Muslim self-reflection following a traumatic experience of violence compelled serious engagement with the question of how to survive and prosper as a religious minority in a newly secular state defined by a larger arena of contemporary identity politics. Moving forward towards the progress of both "nations," the National Muslim Forum Nepal concerns itself with both the larger political needs of a nascent secular Nepal as well as with the bonds of religious tradition.

Notes

- 1 The analysis in this paper is based on the Urdu publications of the National Muslim Forum and personal interviews with its members and leaders conducted in

- 2005–6, 2008, and 2009 in the Kathmandu valley and Nepalgunj. All translations from the Urdu are the author's.
- 2 A number of Muslims claim that this number is inaccurately low due to methodological inconsistencies in the census, and that their population is closer to 10 percent.
 - 3 Hanafi is the term for one of the four schools of legal thought in Sunni Islam, named after Abu Hanifa of eighth century Iraq, to whom the school's origins are attributed. It is the most widespread school of Islamic legal thought in the world and is followed in South Asia. There is no provision in Nepali law for the application of Islamic law in criminal, civil or personal law matters and so the identification reflects a general orientation towards the school of law traditionally followed in India.
 - 4 Hence they are largely of the *ajlaf* castes, those believed to be descendents of South Asian converts to Islam. This is in contrast to hill Muslims who often claim Turkish ancestry and are referred to as *ashraf*. Whelpton writes, "There is a widespread oral tradition among both Hindus and Muslims living there [in the Tarai] today that their ancestors moved into the area only about 200 years ago, which was around the time of the Gorkhali conquest of the Kathmandu valley." See John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15. I spoke with one Muslim man in Kathmandu who believed his ancestral lineage in the Tarai to be of the Muslim regiment of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq of Delhi when he seized the Tarai city of Simraungarha in the fourteenth century.
 - 5 Bareilvis, also known as Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamah (People of the Prophet's Sunna and the Community), are a group of religious scholars and their followers, founded in India in the 1880s. Bareilvis emphasize the primacy of Islamic law and the continual intercession of the Prophet Muhammad with God on the behalf of Muslims. They believe that saints are essential to Muslims' relationship with the Prophet Muhammad and God.
 - 6 Deobandis are a group of religious scholars, and their followers, associated with the influential Islamic madrasa located in Deoband, northwest of Delhi, founded in 1867. They emphasize the traditional sciences of the Quran and Hadith. The definitive work on the history of Deoband is Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*.
 - 7 Ahl-e Hadith ("People of the Prophetic Tradition"), or Ahl-i Hadith, are Muslims who are part of a movement that originated in nineteenth century India that rejected the authority of the schools of Islamic law and instead gave primacy to the traditions of the Prophet and the Quran in matters of faith and practice.
 - 8 Jama'at-i Islami is an Islamist political party in Pakistan, founded in Lahore in 1941 by Maulana Syed Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, with independent branches in India and Bangladesh. It was See Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and more recently Irfan Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of the Jama'at-i Islami*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
 - 9 Following the National Muslim Forum's first meeting and the simultaneous acceleration of identity politics that emerged with the writing of the Interim Constitution, Madhesi organizations called for greater representation in the central government, and even for a separate state. They became a major political challenge within Nepali politics. There is a Muslim faction of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, but the National Muslim Forum claims no ties with it.
 - 10 This terrorist group in Iraq was *Ansar al-Sunna* (Army of the Protectors of the Sunna), which had alleged ties to al-Qaeda.
 - 11 In its early years it forged connections with overseas Islamic organizations for the translation of "Islamic books and brochures" and established the current Islamic library in Ghanta Ghar. Today the Islamic library holds over 10,000 titles in Urdu,

- English, Hindu, Nepali, and Arabic. It is also registered with the government as an NGO and runs a health clinic for the poor, as part of its *da'wah*. The organization also has a website: www.islaminnepal.com/EN/index.html
- 12 Usage in the Nepali language of the Arabic term *muluk* for the sense of "nation" dates back to the early nineteenth century, when it was used, for example, in the title of the national legal code, the *Muluki Ain*. The inclusion of Arabic and Persian terms in Nepali court language was common from the time of the Malla Kings in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, who modeled numerable aspects of their imperial culture after the powerful Mughal court to the south. See Mary Shepherd Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 68–69.
 - 13 See Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*.
 - 14 The concept of development pervades political and social discourse in Nepal, and by extension the concept pervades Muslim reflections on the state of their own population.
 - 15 H. Md. Zahid Parwez, J. B. Rana, Pasang Sherpa and Prakash Swayam, 'Access of Muslim Children to Education (Phase II)', in *Formative Research Project* (Kathmandu: Tribhuvan University Research Center for Educational Innovation and Development, 2004).
 - 16 I thank Hamid Ansari for sharing his insights into these issues.
 - 17 It is well known that madrasas often serve to educate Muslim students whose families cannot afford any other type of schooling for their children. Families who can afford to may send their children to mixed curriculum schools instead of madrasas.
 - 18 It also highlights its status as the second largest religious minority in Nepal according to the most recent census. Some Muslims I spoke to cited the Madhesi government quota system, whereby the Tarai population receives a certain quota of political representation to better balance the political representation with the population distribution of the country. See, for example, Prakash Dubey, 'Muslim Minority Wants Quotas in Parliament and Civil Service', *Asia News*, April 15, 2007.
 - 19 The Constitution was promulgated in 1990, but indigenous groups attained such recognition only in the second half of the nineties.
 - 20 Many Muslims in the Tarai, like other Madhesi, do not have proof of their Nepali citizenship, for it is not needed in crossing the border to India. When as adults they apply to the Nepali government for citizenship documents they have a difficult time obtaining them, as the government turns down their applications in fear that they may be Indians feigning Nepali birth in order to obtain a Nepali passport. A recent article that discusses this issue is Vijay Kanta Karna, 'Most of the Madhesi People Are Losing Their Identity since They Are Treated as "Less Nepali" or "Non-Nepali" by Pahadi People', *Telegraph Nepal*, 2007.
 - 21 Muslims I interviewed and spoke with had varying opinions about the need for, as well as the feasibility of, the implementation of Islamic law in Nepal. The pursuit of Muslim Personal Law in Nepal seems to be gaining increasing momentum among members of the Forum now.

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