

Nepal Rejects Hindu State Proposal, Religious Liberty Concerns Remain

Nepal's constitution, to be released on Sept. 20, will include language defining it as a secular state.

In the months leading up to a formal vote on the proposed constitution, there has been a strong push to return the nation to a Hindu state, as it had been prior to 2007, leading non-Hindus to fear religious persecution.

According to a UCA News [report](#), "On Sept. 14, lawmakers voted down a proposed amendment that would have declared Nepal to be a Hindu state. It was rejected overwhelmingly by more than two-thirds of lawmakers in the 601-member Constituent Assembly."

"One of our key demands was to declare Nepal a secular state in the new constitution and allow its citizens to freely choose any religious belief and practice without any objection," said Samim Ansari, coordinator of the National Muslim Struggle Alliance. "Secularism is a timely and relevant demand. It is the right of every citizen to enjoy guaranteed freedom of religion."

Silas Bogati, Roman Catholic vicar general of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nepal, said, "Secularism is not only an issue of religion, but stands for freedom and equality within all the religions."

Hindu activists [protested the vote](#), clashing with police outside the building in which the Constituent Assembly is meeting.

"They wanted to march towards the assembly, demanding that Nepal be acknowledged as Hindu state in the new constitution," The Times of India noted,

and they attacked several vehicles, including a U.N. transport.

The Kathmandu Post (TKP) [reported](#) explosions outside two churches in Nepal's Jhapa district following the vote rejecting the proposal to make Nepal a Hindu state. The buildings were damaged, but no one was injured.

A third bomb placed near another congregation failed to detonate. Three police officers were injured when attempting to defuse the bomb at the local police station.

"Pamphlets of Hindu Morcha Nepal were found in all three explosion sites. Chief District Officer Tej Prasad Poudel said they were investigating the case to find the perpetrators behind the violence," TKP reported.

Despite the rejection of language declaring Nepal a Hindu state, concerns remain due to religious liberty restrictions within the soon-to-be-released constitution.

The Baptist-led 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative [issued a letter](#) in late August voicing opposition to a provision criminalizing proselytizing.

Section 31 (3) of the constitution reads: "No one shall behave, act or undertake activities that breach public order or break public peace/peace in the community; and no one shall attempt to change or convert someone from one religion to another, or disturb/jeopardize the religion of others, and such acts/activities shall be punishable by law."

Reports indicate that this section has been retained.

The U.S. State Department issued a [statement](#) on Sept. 14 expressing "hope that the document that emerges embraces the creativity, inclusiveness and flexibility that will build a peaceful and prosperous Nepal" and urging that it "honor fundamental rights such as gender equality and basic freedoms."

Elijah Brown, chief of staff for the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, told EthicsDaily.com that Peter Bodde, U.S. ambassador to Nepal, "received [the

Wilberforce] letter, personally met with Wilberforce and pledged that this issue would continue to be raised as a matter of United States concern.”

Brown said Wilberforce is “grateful that over two-thirds of the lawmakers in the Constituent Assembly of Nepal resisted significant efforts to constitutionally enshrine Hinduism as a defining national identity.”

Though disappointed with the retention of Section 31 (3)’s problematic phrasing, he noted that the organization is “hopeful that the courts in Nepal will read Section 31 (3) in a limited fashion and choose instead to focus on Section 31 (1) and Section 31 (2) which promote the right to religious freedom for all citizens.”

A letter from 25 U.S. Congress members, dated Sept. 11, was sent to Secretary of State John Kerry, Brown told EthicsDaily.com, providing a copy of the document that expressed concern over Section 31 (3)’s “anti-conversion clause.”

The congressional letter urged Kerry “to work through diplomatic channels and to coordinate with regional allies and the United Nations to call upon the government of Nepal to ensure that its new constitution protects the rights of religious minorities.”