

ETHNIC IDENTITY MOVEMENT AFTER THE NAMING OF KOSHI PROVINCE AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

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1. Background

Since the implementation of the federal system in Nepal, the provincial assemblies formed in 2017 had decided on name of all the provinces besides Province 1. Following the second provincial election held on November 20, 2022, the issue of naming Province 1 was tabled in the first session of the Provincial Assembly. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) [CPN (UML)] and Nepali Congress agreed to name Province 1 as ‘Koshi’ Province. In the previous provincial assembly too, these two parties wanted to name the province as Koshi. However, other parties, including CPN (Maoist Centre) insisted that the name should reflect the community identities of the province. At that time, the resolution failed to pass due to the lack of the required two-thirds majority. This time, when CPN (UML) and Nepali Congress stood together, it reached two third majority. CPN (Maoist Centre) and Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) also lent their support to naming the province as Koshi.¹ Subsequently, in accordance with Article 295(2) of Constitution of Nepal, the 13th meeting of the first session of the Provincial Assembly, held on March 1, 2023, officially registered a proposal to name as Koshi province.

In the provincial secretariat, two proposals were tabled regarding name of the province. Ram Bahadur Magar, a Member of the Provincial Assembly representing CPN (UML), submitted the proposal to name as Koshi province. This proposal was seconded by Bhumi Prasad Rajbanshi of Nepali Congress and Niran Rai of CPN (UML). The proposal articulated the following rationale for naming the province as Koshi:

“The provincial assembly bears the responsibility of determining the province’s name, considering the region’s rich historical tapestry, encompassing Hinduism, Buddhist philosophy, the Kirat civilization, Mithila heritage, Limbuwan culture, Birat kingdom’s history, Koch traditions, and cultural influences. Furthermore, it must acknowledge the significance of the Koshi river and its tributaries in shaping the historical, religious, indigenous languages, civilizations, and cultures of the area. Given that the Koshi river flows from the Himalayas to the hills and tarai region, and recognizing the vital role it plays in present and future development and prosperity, it is appropriate to name the province as Koshi.”²

Similarly, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) [CPN (Unified Socialist)] and the Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP) had registered another proposal to name the province as ‘Kirat-Limbuwan-Sagarmatha’, aiming to reflect the province’s multi-ethnic identity. Rajendra Kumar Rai of CPN (Unified Socialist) introduced the proposal, which garnered support from Kamal Prasad Jagebu of the same party and Nirmala Limbu from JSP. However, the assembly rejected this proposal due to the lack of majority support.

A total of 82 provincial assembly members, including CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre), and RPP, as well as members from the opposition party Nepali Congress, voted in favor of ‘Koshi’. Consequently, the name garnered approval on the same day, securing a resounding two-thirds majority. On that day, “large number of security forces were deployed around the province capital and assembly secretariat, live broadcasting of the assembly session was stopped and limited number of provincial assembly members

¹ Adhikari, Hari. 2079 B.S. When Nepali Congress and CPN(UML) Came Together Province 1 Named Koshi. March 1, 2023. Available at www.onlinekhabar.com/2023/03/1270879; accessed August 30, 2023.

² Baahrakhari. 2079 B.S. Naming Province 1: CPN (UML) and Nepali Congress Collaboration: Koshi Proposal. March 1, 2023. Available at <https://baahrakhari.com/detail/380138>; accessed August 28, 2023.

were aware of the issue. Within two hours of the discussion the province was named Koshi.”³ In this way, the naming of the province could not follow the basic democratic values and procedures as it was named in a hurry.

Pro-identity supporters are protesting that the name Koshi should be revoked and the new name should reflect the ethnic, community, linguistic, cultural, territorial and historical continuity of the province. In this context, this political situation update (PSU) delves into the ongoing identity-based mobilization and its potential implications. For this update interviews were conducted with various individuals, including representatives from political parties, supporters of the movement, provincial assembly members, professors, journalists, and local residents in Panchthar, Ilam, Jhapa, and Morang districts of the Koshi Province, and in Kathmandu. This update covers the political developments from March 1, 2023 to September 16, 2023.

2. Movement Preparations and Activities

Various political parties, Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, and various social and religious organizations have been protesting since the Constituent Assembly of 2008 demanding the restructuring of the state along with identity. Contrary to their demand, when the name Koshi was passed by the Provincial Assembly in Province 1, the agitation has intensified again.

On March 1, 2023, supporters of ethnic identity and religious organizations launched protests against the decision on the same day when Koshi name was tabled in the assembly and passed. These demonstrations commenced in the province capital in Biratnagar and Urlabari of Morang and extended to Damak and Birtamod of Jhapa, and other locations within the province. Subsequently, a series of general strike and torch rally unfolded across all 14 districts of the province. Demonstrations were also held in Kathmandu in show of solidarity with the movement on multiple occasions. On March 19, 2023, during a public demonstration in Biratnagar, Padam Limbu ‘Lajehang’ sustained injuries and died on March 24, 2023. In a separate incident on April 7, 2023, during a torch rally in Damak, other protesters were injured when police fired bullets. These wounded demonstrators are currently receiving medical treatment in various hospitals. The protesters adopted various strategies, including boycotting the 82 provincial assembly members who had voted in support of Koshi.

³ Adhikari, Raju. 2023. MPs of Congress and Maoists Say- It Was a Mistake to Name Koshi in a Haste. *Setopati*. May 28. Available at: www.setopati.com/politics/303022; accessed August 28, 2023.

Protesters also took action to erase the word ‘Koshi’ from the government office signboards. All these mobilizations are coordinated by the Province No. 1 Renaming Joint Struggle Committee (Coordination Committee) [hereafter referred as Joint Struggle Committee]. This committee had submitted an ‘Ultimatum’ demanding the dismissal of the name Koshi to the then Chief Minister Hikmat Bahadur Karki and Speaker Baburam Gautam.

While political parties have been conducting their organizational activities without any restrictions, the leaders who supported the Koshi have faced obstruction and retaliation from the protesters. The protesters have specifically targeted those cadres and leaders who express favorable opinions about the Koshi. The statement issued by the Joint Struggle Committee on August 18, 2023 states “event organizers should reconsider inviting CPN (UML) leader K.P. Sharma Oli, Yogesh Bhattarai, and Kshitiz Thebe who spoke negatively against the protests.” The protesters have been disrupting activities that announce support to Koshi province name and political programs that use banners with Koshi province written on it. Chairperson of CPN (UML)’s Panchthar district committee said that protesters had not obstructed general organizational activity. The district committee has been conducting extended meetings in 8 rural municipalities without any problems.

Presently, rather than organizing large scale demonstrations, the Joint Struggle Committee has focused toward expanding the movement at the village and settlement level. As a result, the movement has spread across the villages and many youth have been connected with the movement. The Joint Struggle Committee adopted this strategy due to the constitutional concerns regarding the legitimacy of the Koshi government, and the instability of the provincial government and difficulties created by monsoon. A member of the Joint Struggle Committee explained, “Now that it is rainy season, the movement seems to be a bit relaxed as it’s time to concentrate on agricultural activities. On the other hand, the state government itself is temporary. Continuous mobilization is costly too. At the same time, we are preparing for movement and shifting our focus to the village level. In a way we are reserving our power. From mid-September we will have a stronger movement again.” A journalist from Biratnagar, who has been closely observing the situation, pointed out that while the movement may seem inactive presently, the preparations made by protesters are sensed like a ‘silence before the storms’.

Additionally, the movement leverages festivals celebrated by various ethnic groups, as well as events and anniversaries of social organizations, to advance their cause. For instance, on September 2, 2023, DRCN researchers observed the

Kirat Rai Student Association's foundation day. During the occasion a program was held at Damak's Janajati Bhawan, where leaders from identity-based movements expressed their perspectives. Students from grade 11 and 12, hailing from different parts of Jhapa, participated in the event. They voiced their protest by singing songs supporting the renaming of the province with an identity-based name and performed traditional Sakela cultural dance. Similarly, the protesters have used the anniversary celebration of Kirat Yakthung Chumlung in order to further their movement.

2.1 FORMATION OF YOUTH FOR IDENTITY SQUAD

The Joint Struggle Committee is currently coordinating the formation of youth for identity squads in all 14 districts of the province. Some informants said that the squads have already been constituted in Taplejung, Okhaldhunga and Jhapa and preparing to expand to other districts. A leader from Jhapa, who has been actively involved in forming the Youth for Identity squads within the district, emphasized the importance and need of such squads, stating, "The state has been repressive towards identity-based movements. To resist and counter it, we have formed a youth squad. Also, it helps to make the movement organized and disciplined. Furthermore, these youths will play a crucial role in safeguarding the movement's leaders, as well as providing support to differently-abled and elderly citizens participating in the movement." It was said that they were given self-defense training with batons, and a code of conduct has been established to maintain order within these squads.

In Jhapa, a leader who is coordinating the formation of youth squad a total of 1,500 youths (100 youths from each local unit), including men and women have been associated with the squad, with many more eager to join. Similarly, almost 1,000 youths have joined the squad in Panchthar district. A leader from an identity-based political party in Panchthar stated "Initially, it was difficult to find youths for the squad. But now the situation has changed. After the activities of the Joint Struggle Committee and its constituent wings campaigned in every villages and disseminated the message to the youth through social media, the number of youths who want to join the squad increased significantly."

It is important to note how the Joint Struggle Committee leadership mobilizes, manages, and controls the squad. According to a political analyst from Morang raised concerns by citing the example in the past, the activities of 'Limbuwan Volunteers', who went beyond the control of the leadership and they were more involved in extortion and physical violence. If leadership does not pay attention

in time, the Youth for Identity squad may land up in similar situation posing a security challenge and violence in the province.

3. Leadership of the Movement

In the past, identity-based political parties have played a prominent role in identity-based movements and mobilizations. However, their influence got significantly reduced due to the internal differences and contradictions within these parties including Sanghiya Loktantrik Rastriya Manch, Sanghiya Limbuwan Party, and Rastriya Janamukti Party among others. In this movement, these identity-based political parties have been relegated to the background. The leadership of this movement has been taken over by the Joint Struggle Committee. This committee has received support of more than forty ethnic, religious, social, and political parties and their cultural organizations. Among them five organizations – Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Kirat Rai Yayokhya, Nepal Sherpa Sangh, have come together to form the Province 1 Joint Struggle Committee. This committee is actively involved in grassroots mobilization and organizing protests. However, the role of political party leadership in bringing the movement to a logical conclusion cannot be undermined.

4. Internal Differences and Contradictions

While various social and religious factions involved in the movement have a consensus against the name Koshi and that the new name should reflect the ethnic identity of the province, there is no consensus about what the alternate name should be. The major point of agreement is that the name should reflect the multi-ethnic identity of the province with possible options being 'Kirat-Limbuwan-Koshi' or 'Limbuwan-Kirat-Koshi'. Besides these, other strong options put forward have been Kirat or Limbuwan. However, based on conversations with the individuals from the Rajbanshi community in Jhapa, the emphasis was put on naming the province Kochila. The community feels that their demand will not be fulfilled by the Joint Struggle Committee and as such they will form a Kochila Struggle Committee (consisting of many other smaller communities) to further their demand. While the protesters belonging to the Dhimal community from Morang feel that they can accept a 'Dhimal autonomous area' inside Limbuwan province, however, protesters from the Rajbanshi

community feel that they cannot accept such a special or autonomous region. Similarly movement leaders argued that such special autonomous area could be offered to the Sherpalung (Sherpas), however the protesters themselves are not confident that the Sherpa community would accept the offer. Few ethnic communities from Jhapa shared that indigenous groups should organize a roundtable discussion to finalize the identity-based name of the province. These conflicting interests of different communities could make the naming decision tricky.

5. Impact to Political Parties

There appears a high level of dissatisfaction among the pro-identity supporters and cadres of the political parties - CPN (UML), Nepali Congress, and CPN (Maoist Centre)- who voted in favor of Koshi. While the cadres from the parties have been openly supporting the movement, the senior level leaders have not been directly involved. A District Chairperson of Nepali Congress said, “There would not have been any negative effect if the province had been named based on identity, however the central level leadership made it an issue of prestige. The Provincial Assembly members of Nepali Congress voted for Koshi as the province’s name because of the party whip issued by the center. There should have been prior consultation with the district level leadership regarding the naming issue, however no such discussions were held. Due to this we issued press release stating our favorable stance towards identity-based name.” As the movement gained momentum, 14 district Chairpersons of Nepali Congress from the province had released a joint statement requesting for a reconsideration of the naming of the province. The press release states, “A serious objection has been expressed in the form of protest movement by the citizens of Province 1 regarding the decision to name Province 1 as Koshi. ...since the decision of the Provincial Assembly, a large faction of the people have mobilized to protest against the decision. Nepali Congress’ leadership should pay heed to the protests.”

A provincial assembly member of the CPN (Maoist Centre) stated that, despite the CPN (Maoist Centre) raising the identity issue, it was a wrong decision to vote against the identity when the province was eventually named. Although her party CPN (Maoist Centre) carried the identity agenda, there was never any serious discussion within the party regarding an identity-based name. According to her, if her party had taken a firm stand in support of identity, it would have pressured provincial assembly members of the Nepali Congress who favored identity-based names to

oppose Koshi. She claimed that a different scenario would have emerged against Koshi.

The CPN (UML) leaders and Provincial Assembly members were in agreement regarding the name Koshi, as they felt that Koshi as a name was above any ethnic group. It reflected the ancient civilization and the development of a common civilization between different ethnic groups. A leader of CPN (UML) expressed, “Unlike other parties we do not feel that naming Koshi was a mistake. However, we are willing to have discussions with the representatives from the rename movement”. He admitted that there have been questions regarding the naming decision in the party’s internal meetings.

Despite standing for identity-issues, the Koshi province cadres of JSP have expressed their dissatisfaction because of the response of the central leadership. They feel that the party has not been able to capture the support of the protesters from the identity-based movement. “At the federal level, JSP is part of the government. Here, on the ground cadres are openly involved with the identity-movement. Most cadres have stopped coming to the meetings called by the party and the cadres who come to the meeting have accused JSP’s leadership of weakening the identity-based movement by continuing to be part of the government”, a district Chairperson of JSP shared. As the impact of the movement, the Samajwadi Front only mentioned the provincial committee in the banner of the program organized in Biratnagar. After the leaders of JSP, CPN (Unified Socialist) and CPN (Maoist Centre) had difference of opinion whether or not to write Koshi on the banner, only the provincial committee was mentioned. Koshi Province is not written even in the campaign materials.⁴

6. Potential Implications

The pro-identity supporters do not seem very confident that the name ‘Koshi’ will be immediately rolled back and, the province renamed. To resolve this issue, the protesters emphasize the need to constitute all-party negotiation committee comprising representatives from all parties in the provincial assembly. Protesters are also aware that after the naming of Koshi Province, there is a growing dissatisfaction against the political parties including CPN (UML), Nepali Congress, CPN (Maoist Centre), and JSP. As a result, there is a growing voice for the idea of forming a regional identity-based party. The success of newly formed Nagarik Unmukti Party in November, 2022 election in Sudurpashchim

⁴ Baahrakhari. 2080 B.S. Koshi Naming Controversy: There is No Name in the Banner of the Meeting Attended by the Prime Minister. September 11. Available at <https://baahrakhari.com/detail/399336>; accessed September 12, 2023.

province has provided encouragement to the protesters. The leaders of the movement seem to be visualizing two strategies to pressure renaming of the province. First, they aim to form a regional party, and if that effort fails, they will shift their focus on forming a united front of identity-based supporters for the upcoming provincial elections. According to them, this front would strive to become a politically powerful force in the Provincial Assembly, capable of pressurizing renaming the province. The second approach involves continuing the current protest movement and strengthening it to exert enough political pressure to reverse the decision to name the province Koshi.

The impact of the movement has also spread across other provinces. For example, the Tamsaling Joint Struggle Committee of Nepal has been formed with the aim of pressing for the declaration of an autonomous Tamsaling province.

According to a citizen right activist supporting the movement, if the leadership of the movement does not clearly define the identity and cannot explain to citizens, it can turn violent, instead of the claim of equal rights envisioned by federalism and inclusion. Violent psychology can take place in the movement. Based on that, the state can repress. This may jeopardize the current achievements.



Founded in 2014, the Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN) is a national non-governmental organization dedicated to the study and research of social and political issues. Since its establishment, DRCN has consistently undertaken in-depth and evidence-based research into various aspects of Nepal's transitional political landscape, including the implementation of federalism, local-level restructuring, and election observation. The outcomes of these studies are shared with stakeholders, fostering discussions and debates. DRCN's overarching objective revolves around advancing efficient governance within Nepal's federal framework through these rigorous research endeavors and thoughtful discourse.



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