Ethnic Composition of Security Forces and National Security in Nepal: Analysis from Global and South Asian Perspectives

- **Col Uttam Sapkota** *(sapkota.uttam@gmail.com)*

Abstract

The composition of security forces in multi-ethnic states has significant implications for national security, institutional cohesion and societal stability. This article examines the relationship between the ethnic composition of security forces and national security through a qualitative and comparative analysis of global and South Asian case studies with particular reference to Nepal. The study adopts a comparative and analytical approach, focusing on ethnicity as an institutional factor shaping professionalism, cohesion and effectiveness of security organizations. The article begins by establishing a conceptual framework that defines key terms and outlines the relevance of ethnic composition to national security. It then explores the theoretical linkages between ethnic representation, institutional harmony and security outcomes. Selected global experiences from the ethnic composition in the Balkans, Africa and Asia are analyzed to highlight both successful integration models and cases where ethnic divisions within security forces have contributed to internal friction and security challenges followed by South Asian experiences.

Against this broader comparative background, the article assesses Nepal's experience. The article argues that Nepal's security forces, particularly the Nepali Army, have historically functioned as a cohesive and inclusive institution, reflecting the country's social diversity. Since its inception, the Nepali Army has served as a melting pot of various ethnic, caste and regional groups, maintaining harmony and institutional integrity even during periods of political and security transition. A distinctive feature contributing to this is the barracks-based system, which promotes close interaction, shared identity and discipline, thereby reinforcing cohesion and professionalism. The article concludes by highlighting that Nepal's experience offers valuable insights into

managing diversity within security forces and demonstrates how institutional cohesion and inclusiveness can strengthen national security. While challenges remain, Nepal's case provides a meaningful reference for broader comparative discussions on security forces and national stability.

Keywords

Ethnic composition, national security, institutional cohesion, security institutions

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Security forces serve as the states' final guarantors and the only means that can protect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of a nation. Across political systems, the public relies on security forces as the ultimate safeguard of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and stability. Although debated, the composition of security forces has emerged as an important factor in the discourse on national security, particularly in states characterized by ethnic, cultural and social diversity. The issues of Balkans where the ethnicity of the security forces seems to have played a prominent role to have brought the nations to the present state is always discussed in the global arena. Likewise, in absence of a well-managed structure within the security forces, national security can go imbalanced, is what the global experience demonstrates clearly (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2015).

The issues of built up of ethnic make of security forces in South Asia cannot become complete without digging deep into its formation structures. Case of Nepal, one of the oldest and unique armies and an independent nation since its inception has a distinctive experience in the arena (Baral, 2007). The organization has served as the last resort and the only hope of the public in the national context when varying situations have tested the nation. Lately, in recent decades, global and regional experiences have demonstrated that the manner in which security institutions reflect, manage or exclude social diversity can influence their legitimacy, cohesion, professionalism and effectiveness (Ozerdem & Podder, 2011). In several contexts, imbalances or divisions along ethnic lines within security forces have contributed to institutional fragmentation, weakened public trust and in extreme cases, internal instability. Against this backdrop, examining the ethnic composition of security forces is essential to understanding broader national security dynamics.

Ethnic composition, for the purpose of this study hence refers to the representation and integration of various ethnic, caste and social groups within the formal security institutions of the state. National security extends beyond territorial defense to include

internal stability and institutional resilience. Internal stability, institutional resilience and the maintenance of social order are other facets that it encompasses which remain interconnected, as the security institutions function at the crossroads of state authority and society.

Scholarly literature suggests that security forces that are perceived as inclusive and representative tend to enjoy higher legitimacy and trust, which are critical for operational effectiveness and long-term stability (Janowitz 1960). On the other hand, forces perceived as ethnically exclusive or politically aligned may face challenges in cohesion and public acceptance, thereby affecting national security outcomes. This is how the relevance of ethnic composition lies not in identity politics, but in its implications for institutional harmony, discipline and professionalism.

Within this context, perspectives from civil-military relations (CMR) and security sector reform (SSR) provide useful analytical reference points. CMR literature emphasizes the relationship between security institutions, political authority and society, highlighting professionalism and neutrality as key attributes of effective forces (Huntington, 1957). SSR frameworks, meanwhile, underscore the importance of accountable, inclusive, and effective security institutions for sustainable security and governance (OECD, 2007; United Nations, 2008).

The primary objective of this article is to examine how ethnic composition of security forces influences national security by drawing lessons from selected global and South Asian experiences, with specific reference to Nepal.

Conceptual Linkages between Ethnic Composition and National Security

Security forces are central symbols of state authority and their composition often shapes public perception of neutrality and fairness. More the inclusiveness of the security forces is perceived more the fairness and trust they receive from the populace (Duffield, 2001). Hence, the relationship between ethnic composition of security forces and national security can be understood through theoretical perspectives that emphasize legitimacy, cohesion, professionalism and institutional effectiveness.

Within the broader frame of national security, ethnicity in itself might not be considered as a determinant of security outcomes but the manner in which this diversity and inclusiveness is managed can significantly influence the performance of security institutions. In this context, ethnic representation and institutional legitimacy becomes one of the major factors to be considered. Therefore, when security institutions broadly are considered as the mini depiction of the nations in themselves and are looked upon as

the representation of all castes, creed and ethnic individuals, it in true sense has to reflect the social diversity viewed as being legitimate and representative. This in turn is likely to strengthen trust between the state and society. Conversely, perceptions of exclusion or dominance by particular groups can undermine confidence in security institutions, affecting compliance, cooperation, and overall stability. Comparative literature and national policy documents indicate that ethnic composition of security forces has been a factor in shaping security outcomes in certain contexts, as reflected in the Rwandan experience of the early 1990s and in Nepal's post-conflict efforts to enhance inclusion within its security institutions (Prunier 1997; Government of Nepal, Ministry of Defence, various policy documents). Legitimacy, in this sense, functions as an enabling condition for effective national security rather than an abstract normative concept.

A second linkage concerns institutional cohesion and professionalism. Cohesion within security forces is essential for discipline, command effectiveness and operational readiness. Theoretical literature suggests that cohesion is strengthened not merely by homogeneity, but by a shared professional identity that transcends individual social backgrounds. However, if diversity is poorly managed or politicized, it may create internal fault lines that weaken cohesion and effectiveness. Historical recruitment and unit-formation practices in several militaries illustrate that cohesion has often been cultivated through shared identity and tradition rather than through institutional homogeneity alone. For instance, in the Indian Army, regimental systems such as the Jat, Rajput, and Sikh (Punjab) regiments emerged from regionally and socially based recruitment patterns. Likewise, in the Nepali Army, traditional units such as Kali Bahadur and Purano Gorakh and in the later stage formation of Naya Sabuj unit have been associated with particular ethnic or regional identities. Those have all fostered strong esprit de corps while remaining firmly embedded within a centralized and professional command structure. These cases demonstrate that ethnic or regional diversity, when managed within a robust institutional culture, can coexist with and reinforce professionalism and cohesion. Conversely, where such identities are politicized or inadequately integrated into a unified command framework, they may generate internal fault lines that undermine cohesion and professionalism, as illustrated by the experience of Sri Lanka, where ethnic imbalances and perceptions of exclusion within state security institutions contributed to weakened legitimacy and prolonged internal conflict (Tambiah, 1986; DeVotta, 2004).

Classical civil-military relations concepts provide useful reference points for understanding these dynamics. Huntington's concept of objective civilian control emphasizes professional autonomy and political neutrality of the military as foundations

of effectiveness (Huntington, 1957). Janowitz, meanwhile, highlights the evolving relationship between the military and society, stressing the importance of social integration and legitimacy (Janowitz, 1960). While these theories do not focus explicitly on ethnicity, they underscore professionalism, cohesion and societal linkage as core attributes relevant to diverse security forces.

Similarly, security sector reform literature offers a broad institutional lens. Frameworks advanced by the United Nations and the OECD-DAC emphasize that effective security institutions should be accountable, inclusive, and capable of providing security to all segments of society (OECD, 2007; United Nations, 2008). Within this context, ethnic composition is treated as an institutional factor influencing effectiveness and trust, rather than as a political objective in itself.

Global Perspectives on Ethnic Composition of Security Forces

Experiences from different regions demonstrate that the ethnic composition of security forces has been a recurring and globally prevalent issue with direct implications for national security, institutional cohesion and post-conflict stability. Across diverse political and cultural contexts, the management of ethnic diversity within security institutions has influenced legitimacy, professionalism and operational effectiveness. These global patterns underline the need for deliberate and tactful management of diversity, particularly in states undergoing political transition or post-conflict reconstruction.

A prominent global example is the Balkans, particularly in the context of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In several successor states, security forces became closely associated with dominant ethnic groups, reflecting broader political fragmentation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, the ethnic division of armed forces along Bosniak, Croat, and Serb lines undermined centralized command and weakened state authority during and after the conflict. While integration was eventually achieved, the process highlighted the risks posed by ethnically divided security institutions and the long-term challenges of rebuilding cohesion and professionalism (Bieber 2003; Caplan, 2005).

African experiences further reinforce these lessons, particularly in post-conflict contexts where security forces have reflected societal fragmentations. In Rwanda prior to 1994, the concentration of power within ethnically tilted state institutions, including the armed forces, made them vulnerable to politicization during the genocide. Subsequent reforms focused heavily on integration, professionalization and the removal of ethnic identifiers within the security sector, demonstrating an attempt to restore legitimacy and

national unity through institutional transformation (Prunier, 1997; Des Forges, 1999). Similarly, in countries such as Nigeria and Sudan, perceptions of ethnic differences within security forces have periodically contributed to mistrust, internal instability and challenges in managing internal security, underscoring the broader African relevance of the issue (Uvin, 1998).

At the same time, global experience also offers examples of best practices. Post-conflict integration efforts in the Balkans and Rwanda reveal that inclusive recruitment, unified command structures, standardized training and strong professional norms can diminish ethnic tensions over time. These cases suggest that diversity within security forces do not fundamentally undermine effectiveness; rather, the absence of a shared institutional identity and professional ethos poses the greater risk. Internationally supported reforms have proven that sustained political commitment and institutional discipline are critical to transforming divided forces into cohesive national institutions. Hence, from a comparative perspective, the key lesson for developing states is that ethnic diversity within security forces is a structural reality rather than an exception which if recognized and managed well, can coexist with operational effectiveness and national loyalty.

South Asian Perspectives on Ethnic Representation in Security Forces

The South Asian subcontinent presents a complex historical and contemporary landscape for examining the ethnic composition of security forces, shaped by colonial legacies, state formation, and regional conflicts. The departure of the British in 1947 led to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, accompanied by large-scale population movements and communal tensions. Security forces inherited structures from colonial institutions, influenced the cohesion and professionalism, creating both challenges and opportunities for inclusivity (Cohen, 2001; Prasad, 2010).

In Afghanistan, ethnic and tribal dynamics have historically shaped the conduct and effectiveness of security forces and irregular combatants. Afghan fighters from diverse ethnic backgrounds successfully resisted Soviet occupation in the 1980s and later challenged international coalition forces. These experiences underscore that cohesive and effective military resistance can emerge from deeply heterogeneous groups, provided there is shared purpose, strong leadership and culturally grounded organizational norms (Barfield, 2010; Giustozzi, 2009). At the same time, the Afghan case illustrates the long-term consequences when security institutions are politicized or fragmented along ethnic lines, as instability persists decades after external intervention.

Within South Asia, Nepal's experience offers an informative example of how ethnic diversity can be harmonized within a professional security force. Since its inception, the Nepali Army has functioned as a cohesive institution encompassing personnel from diverse ethnic, caste and regional backgrounds. Its barracks-based system fosters daily interaction, shared identity and discipline, promoting a sense of cohesion that surpasses social divisions. The Nepal Police and Armed Police Force similarly reflect ethnic diversity and the representation of Madhesi communities within the police has partially addressed concerns regarding inclusivity, even as their presence in the army remains limited and is at times contested. These arrangements highlight the importance of maintaining apolitical security forces with institutional cohesion as a primary goal. Any deviation due to politicization or attempts to restructure the composition could carry significant consequences for national security (Lawoti, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2011).

Neighboring states illustrate contrasting experiences. In India, regiment-based recruitment based upon specific ethnic groups such as Jats, Rajputs, and Sikhs have generally functioned effective within professional command structures. In contrary, ongoing debates about regional representation highlights potential friction points. Sri Lanka and Pakistan similarly demonstrate that ethnic imbalances or politicization within security forces can exacerbate internal tensions, emphasizing the need for careful management of diversity (DeVotta, 2004; Uyangoda, 2007).

In summary, in South Asian context, though in present scenario Nepal's composition of security forces exemplify best practice in balancing inclusion with cohesion, impact depends on institutional culture, professional norms, recruitment policies and the apolitical stance of the security forces require careful consideration while coming to regional experiences which cautions that deviations from neutrality or politicization can have serious consequences.

Ethnic Composition of Nepal's Security Forces and National Security Implications

Nepal's security institutions-comprising the Nepali Army, Nepal Police, and Armed Police Force, Nepal offer a distinctive example of maintaining cohesion and professionalism within a multi-ethnic society. Unlike many regional and global experiences, the Nepal's security forces have historically functioned as a miniature of the nation's diverse social, ethnic and regional composition. This diversity has been integrated within institutional frameworks that emphasize professionalism, discipline, and loyalty to the state, rather than to individual social groups, providing valuable insights for understanding the relationship between ethnic representation and national security.

Nepali Army

The Nepali Army (NA), as the country's primary military institution, has been notable for its historical inclusiveness. From its early formation, personnel from different ethnic groups; have served together, creating a melting pot that reflects the nation's demographic mosaic. The barracks system, in contrast to conventional cantonments, facilitates daily interaction among soldiers of diverse backgrounds, fostering cohesion and shared identity. These features have helped the NA maintain operational readiness, discipline and effectiveness even during periods of political transition and internal turmoil. Research and historical accounts suggest that such institutional integration has contributed to public trust in the army as an impartial and apolitical entity (Uprety, 1992; Nepal Army Headquarters, 2015).

Nepal Police and Armed Police Force, Nepal

The Nepal Police (NP) and Armed Police Force, Nepal (APF) similarly demonstrate institutional measures to reflect societal diversity. The post-2006 reform emphasized recruitment from previously underrepresented groups, including Madhesi and Janajati communities, to enhance inclusivity and address longstanding opinions of marginalization. While the representation of Madhesi personnel remains limited in the NA, their presence in the NP and APF partially mitigates grievances and strengthens the legitimacy of the state's security apparatus. These efforts underscore that inclusion need not compromise cohesion when accompanied by professional norms, structured training and clear institutional roles (International Crisis Group, 2011; Lawoti, 2010).

Post-2006 Inclusion and Reform Measures

Following the Comprehensive Peace Accord of 2006, Nepal undertook systematic measures to integrate formerly excluded social groups into security institutions. Besides this, Nepal also witnessed the integration of former Maoist cadres in Nepali Army. Furthermore, quotas and targeted recruitment strategies were implemented to ensure broader representation, particularly in the army and police. In doing so, the professional ethos of the forces was preserved through standardized training, unified chain of command and mechanisms for merit-based promotion. These reforms were aimed at preventing politicization of the forces, maintaining operational effectiveness and reinforcing the neutrality of security institutions.

Impacts on Institutional Cohesion and National Security

The careful management of ethnic diversity has had several tangible impacts on institutional cohesion and national security. The public opinion surveys conducted at various times by the Asia Foundation (2012, 2017) consecutively rank the Nepali Army as one of the most trusted state institutions, reflecting how public have their confidence and see Nepali Army as being neutral and professional. Likewise, UNDP and DCAF assessments with regards to Nepal's security sector reform process also highlight how inclusive recruitment policies have contributed to internal discipline, operational effectiveness and reduced risks of factionalism (UNDP, 2014; DCAF, 2016).

In line with, understanding the impacts in institutional cohesion and National Security, few issues that clarify the instances can also be highlighted. First, it has sustained a high degree of internal discipline and operational readiness. Second, it has reinforced public confidence in the security sector as an impartial actor, capable of maintaining law and order across diverse communities. Third, the integrated structure of the forces has mitigated risks associated with factionalism or politicization, ensuring that ethnic identity does not override loyalty to institutional norms or the state. During periods of political transition and civil unrest, including the 2006 peace process and the recent Gen Z protests, the Nepali Army's solid and non-partisan posture further demonstrated institutional cohesion and adherence to constitutional norms (International Crisis Group, 2020; Government of Nepal, 2022).

Comparative evidence from South Asia also reinforces this pattern. Studies on Sri Lanka and Pakistan indicate that ethnic and institutional imbalances within security forces contributed to politicization and internal instability, whereas more inclusive structures in India and Nepal have supported professional norms and the gained the trust of the public (SIPRI, 2018; Wilkinson, 2015).

Achievements, Challenges and Strategic Concerns

Since its inception, Nepal has remained as an independent nation overcoming various challenges that were posed at different timings of history. Earning the faith of the population as the most reliable and trustworthy organization, Nepal's security forces exemplify best practices in harmonizing unity in diversity. Achievements include sustained institutional cohesion, successful management of internal security and high levels of public trust, where Nepali Army stands on top with the latest survey done by Kathmandu University (KU) in collaboration with Interdisciplinary Analysts and supported by The Asia Foundation in 2022 (Data released in January 2023).

However, persistent challenges, including the underrepresentation of certain communities and allegations of influences in recruitment and deployment, do create space for the concerns to be raised regarding long-term institutional cohesion and public confidence. If left unaddressed, such perceptions may undermine morale, weaken internal discipline and erode institutional credibility. Similarly, increasing social mobilization and identity-based political narratives in Nepal demand security institutions to remain more vigilant and cautious with regards to the issues of inclusiveness.

From a strategic perspective, maintaining an apolitical posture and strengthening transparency, management of human resources where there will be no grievances are essential for preventing external interferences. Only consistent, transparent and proactive management through professional education supported by institutional oversight can mitigate those risks. Therefore, meeting those requirements and addressing the shortcomings, Nepali Army have achieved a notable success in sustaining public trust and operational stability.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between the ethnic composition of security forces and national security through global, regional and Nepal- specific perspectives. Comparative experiences from Sri Lanka, India and African nations demonstrate that while ethnic exclusion and politicization have contributed to institutional fragmentation and conflict, inclusive recruitment and professional integration have strengthened legitimacy and public trust thereby leading to organizational efficiency (UNDP, 2014; DCAF, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2011). In the same context, Nepal's experience presents a different case, where a historically inclusive and professionally oriented security sector, particularly the Nepali Army has functioned as a unifying national institution, reflecting societal diversity while sustaining cohesion and professionalism. The integration of diverse ethnic and regional groups within a strong institutional culture, reinforced by apolitical norms and clear command structures, has mitigated internal divisions and strengthened public trust. Overall, Nepal's case underscores that ethnic diversity, when managed well, can enhance rather than undermining national security.

References

Asia Foundation. (2012, 2017). *Public Perception Survey in Nepal.*

Baral, L. R. (2007). *Nepal: Security Sector Reform, Democratization and Transitional Justice*. Geneva: Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

Barfield, T. (2010). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press.

Bieber, Florian. 2003. "The Challenge of Institutionalizing Ethnicity in the Western Balkans: Managing Change in Deeply Divided Societies**." *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 3(1):89–107. doi:10.1163/221161104X00066.

Bojicic-Dzelilovic, V. (2015). Ethnic security paradox in Bosnia-Herzegovina: How intra-group trust undermines inter-group security. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development, 4*(1), Article 38.

Caplan, R. (2005). *International governance of war-torn territories*. Oxford University Press.

Cohen, S. P. (2001). *India: Emerging power*. Brookings Institution Press.

DCAF. (2016). *Security Sector Reform in Nepal.*

Des Forges, A. (1999). *Leave none to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda*. Human Rights Watch.

DeVotta, N. (2004). *Blowback: Linguistic nationalism, institutional decay, and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Giustozzi, A. (2009). *Koran, Kalashnikov, and laptop: The Neo-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan*. Columbia University Press.

Government of Nepal, Ministry of Defence. (Various years). *Policy documents and directives on recruitment, inclusion, and institutional reform in the security sector*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Defence.

Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The Soldier and the State*. Harvard University Press.

International Crisis Group. (2011). *Nepal: Identity politics and federalism*. ICG Asia Report 206.

International Crisis Group. (2020). Nepal's Political Transition.

Janowitz, Morris. 1960. "The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47(2):365. doi:10.2307/1891771.

Lawoti, M. (2010). *Ethnic politics and the building of an inclusive state*. Routledge.

Nepal Army Headquarters. (2015). *Annual report and institutional overview*. Kathmandu: NA.

OECD. (2007). *Handbook on Security System Reform.*

Özerdem, A., & Podder, S. (2011). Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. London: Routledge.

Prasad, B. (2010). *Military and society in South Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Prunier, Gérard. 1997. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. Repr. New York: Columbia Univ. Pr.

Sapkota, Uttam. 2025. "Ethnic Diversity and National Security: Lessons from Global Experiences and The Case of Nepal." *The Shivapuri Journal* 26(1):13–28. doi:10.3126/shivapuri.v26i1.75830.

SIPRI. (2018). *Security Sector Governance in South Asia.*

Tambiah, S. J. (1986). *Sri Lanka: Ethnic fratricide and the dismantling of democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

UNDP Nepal. (2014). *Security Sector Reform and Governance in Nepal.*

United Nations. (2008). *Securing Peace and Development: The Role of the United Nations in Supporting Security Sector Reform*.

Uprety, P. S. (1992). *The military history of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Uvin, P. (1998). *Aiding violence: The development enterprise in Rwanda*. Kumarian Press.

Uyangoda, J. (2007). *Sri Lanka: The crisis of governance and the ethnic conflict*. Social Scientists' Association.

Wilkinson, S. (2015). *Army and Nation in South Asia.*