

## Harmonizing Voices: Democratic Public Sphere in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to investigate the significance of the democratic public realm on people's civic development. Citizenship and democracy are intertwined and interdependent. Democracy is a system designed to prioritize the will of the people, or citizens. Citizenship is also described as an act of citizenship (civic engagement) that fosters critical thinking, democratic activities, and participation since citizenship itself is always connected with successful democratic citizens. This research approach uses case studies to investigate democratic public principles in a comprehensive manner. The study concludes that a vital forum for addressing social concerns and encouraging community involvement is the democratic public sphere. It also helps people absorb important principles of civil society, such as collaboration, diversity, tolerance, and politeness. Through encouraging tolerance and fraternal ideas in the neighborhood, nation, and state, this democratic and participatory arena cultivates a peaceful atmosphere.*

**Keywords:** *Citizenship, Civic development, Participation, Case studies, Fraternal ideas, Community involvement*

### Background

The state ideology of democratic, secular, federal, and social justice, as well as the people's perspective in carrying out social and state activities first, cannot be separated from the peculiarities of Nepali democracy (Rose et al., 218AD). This is because the people are a political community, or, in Ben Anderson's words, an imagined community—a shadow community that will undoubtedly remain divided if any of them fail to serve as a unifying force in the country's affairs. The defenders of Nepal's federal democracy came to understand that as the country's populace is diverse, so too are its ambitions. As a result, everyone must work together to administer the state by optimizing participation, which includes creating aspirational routes that are open to all. However, because the state is prone to conflict, riots, and communal conflicts, and because maintaining order and security for society is its constant concern, it must be controlled collaboratively by optimizing participation. According to Rosada, democracy and participation are the only ways to foster and preserve amicable relationships, coherence, and mutual trust throughout all various populations (Rosada, 2018).

Given that democracy is predicated on an educated populace, the state of Nepali society has the potential to generate conflict with all its diversity. Due to the large number of people lacking access to adequate education, it is possible to receive democratic education without it, which could lead to archaic viewpoints. It is also simple to spread propaganda, which means that disagreements over democratic principles can polarize society and cause division, hatred, and a continued rejection of the importance of harmony. In a nation that upholds a contemporary democratic system, where there is a great deal of potential for division that breeds hatred, a civilized democratic public space is a hope. As such, state administrators must play the important duty of fostering unity and raising public awareness. The focus of study that looks at its significance in the process of people developing democratic character is the presence of space for the establishment of a democratic and participatory forum via recess as a democratic public space.

Public space is a platform for citizen involvement and public virtue that arises from respect for their rights as citizens, (Hardiman, 2010) Put another way, it's a democratic space where the community can bridge the interests of the public. Part of this process involves forming public opinion through discussion and deliberation free from the influence of individual, group, or governmental interests. This consensus is then communicated to the government, which serves as the government's organizer. Therefore, rather than being used for private objectives, public space is intended to address issues that affect the whole public. a dedication to preserving the democratic public space's uniqueness so that it may be utilized to channel hopes toward resolving social challenges in society rather than being used only as a political tool or to organize the public for a particular political cause.

A democratic public sphere's existence is an abstraction resulting from political awareness. Politics has one door, but culture has many. Politics is therefore more rigid than culture. Culture movements are seen to have a wider reach than political movements since it is commonly considered that the phrase "cultural approach" is better equipped to overcome the limits present in the political approach. The evolution of human culture and civilization is eventually influenced by political stances that have the power to shape culture and impact human decision-making (Alfian & Azman, 2016). Delanty asserts that constitutionalism, plurality, and citizenship are the components of democracy. Naturally, in a modern nation like Nepal, the constitution plays a crucial role in ensuring the survival of the state. It outlines the goals and ideologies of the government, the roles of state institutions as a means of directing state officials, and the rights and obligations of its people. In a democracy, pluralism is also the most crucial element. According to Eck's perspective, pluralism is an accomplishment rather than a gift, therefore it calls for citizens' commitment. Competence alone will not be enough to provide consistency in achieving peace. Lastly, the definition of citizenship involves behaviors of citizenship (civic engagement) that include participating in political, social, and cultural activities, expressing critical thinking that is constructive and committed to upholding one's rights and duties, and taking part in government policies.

According to Delanty's perspective above, citizenship and democracy are inextricably linked and cannot be separated. A democracy is a structure that prioritizes the will of the people. First, although civic engagement is necessary for democracy to survive, one could even argue that a nation's advancement stems from its inhabitants' active participation in constructing their country.

Supported by the opinions of Branson & Quigley, who argue that civic competence is primarily civic knowledge—that is, the comprehension of all legally enforceable norms in relation to one's rights and duties as a citizen—among other things (Branson and Quigley, 1998). The second set of civic skills is focused more on citizen acts, or what is known as participation actions inside the framework of the country, state, and society as a feature of democratic citizens. The citizens' character comes in third. Naturally, in this situation, a nation that has ingrained an ideology as a reflection of its national identity must instill a character in line with the unique character and style of the Nepali people, namely, a dedication to upholding harmony and the capacity to adjust its national life to accommodate all differences, as well as characters that aid in the preservation and advancement of the country. constitutional democracy's growth. Since everything goes to the public side, the civic abilities may also be considered a component of citizens' democratic character maturation. Building upon Jurgen Habermas's perspective (Flew and Swift, 2015) the public sphere emerges as a powerful tool for enhancing citizen democracy, providing a space where public opinions can form and ensuring rights for all citizens. In revisiting the introduction, the study aims to delve into these intricacies, examining the role of a democratic public space in shaping and sustaining Nepali democracy with academic rigor and clarity.

## **Literature Review**

The body of research on democratic public spaces and civic engagement emphasizes how important they are for fostering social cohesion, tolerance, and engaged citizens. Academics like Azyumardi Azra and Ismatul Izzah stress that the creation of a good quality of living based on social principles is a component of civil society, which goes beyond pro-democracy activities. It is emphasized how crucial it is to develop social and cultural capital in order to bring people together, raise social consciousness, and support the development of democratic maturity. As demonstrated by Kim et al., research on civic engagement in democratic nations reveals five critical attributes that positively link with civic involvement: trust, competence, connection, character, and caring (Kim et al., 2016). This body of literature emphasizes how crucial democratic people are to the advancement of civilization and stresses the importance of continuously adhering to cultural standards.

Habermas definition places particular emphasis on the circumstances of citizenship, the integration of citizenship with the public sphere, and the pursuit of wide and equal involvement in the framework of democratic public spaces. Scholars such as Bjur and Estman have recognized the characteristics of self-reliant individuals as the cornerstone for the establishment of civil society organizations, which supports this viewpoint (Adler and

Goggin, 2005; Doolittle and Faul, 2013; Jones, 2006; Perez et al., 2010; Rosada, 2018; Umar, 2017). The foundation of civil society is further explored by Wajdi Ibrahim's investigation of the heavenly city or city of civilization, which emphasizes ideals like as tolerance, democratic citizenship, politeness, and respect for variety (Wajdi Ibrahim, 2012). This is consistent with the notion that democratic public places, via encouraging reciprocity, remembrance, and humanization, contribute to the characteristics of civil society.

It is important to highlight that, despite the literature review's thorough examination of theoretical viewpoints on democratic public spaces and civic participation, there isn't much empirical research that focuses on Nepal's Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA) procedures. Although PHPA is widely recognized as a valuable tool for democracy in many settings, there is a notable absence in the research about its application and results in the Nepalese context. The deficiency of empirical study on PHPA in Nepal underscores the necessity of conducting focused studies to examine its operation, significance, and subtleties in the context of the nation's distinct socio-political environment. Understanding PHPA dynamics in the context of Nepal's metropolitan cities, especially within Province 3, is essential for informed policymaking and community development, since PHPA plays a significant role in citizen participation and governance processes. Therefore, the proposed study intends to fill this vacuum by offering empirical insights into PHPA activities done in metropolitan centers of Province 3, Nepal. With a particular emphasis on the Nepalese context, the research aims to add to the body of knowledge on democratic public spaces and civic participation by concentrating on the lived experiences and views of participants.

## **Methods**

This study's research technique combines a case study research design with a qualitative approach. The research sample consists of those who were in province 3 Assembly of the 2022 election and who are expected to run until 2027, election (Devkota, 2024; Khatiwada, 2023). Committee chairs, two ministers with experience in democracy education, and a sociocultural specialist who served as an informant to offer further context and validation to the data collected are among the chosen participants. The main methods of gathering data were observation, interviews, and documentation in order to extract thorough insights. The gathered data was then methodically examined using the Milles and Huberman model (2012). Three main stages comprise this analytical framework: data reduction, data visualization, and data validation. In addition, data triangulation was used as a methodological technique to improve the findings' dependability and trustworthiness. To verify the accuracy and completeness of the data, cross-referencing information from several sources—including different data collection techniques—was necessary. By employing this rigorous research technique, it is possible to guarantee a comprehensive investigation of the viewpoints and experiences of Province 3 Assembly members, providing insight into the nature of their responsibilities and contributions to the democratic processes.

## Results and Discussion

Numerous tools are available for use in public spaces, and the opening of the democratic faucet permits gathering, assembling, and articulation of viewpoints. According to the constitution, a program known as public auditing (PHPA) can be used to include the representatives of the people's desires into the container area that makes up public space. but, PHPA, does not necessarily travel to the higher levels of government in Nepal. However, PHPA has evolved into a space for dialogue and a means of resolving conflicts. Because participants may become knowledgeable about state rules, it has also contributed to the development of citizen competences and citizen intelligence. Citizens' expertise is another factor because it enables the development of their character and fosters public trust in a community that upholds the values of equality and kinship. Citizens already know that there are solutions to all social problems, and that these solutions are the responsibility of state administrators and turn into rights for citizens. According to Niall Ferguson, "the success of a civilization is measured not only by its aesthetic achievements, but also by the duration and quality of life of its citizens." (Alfian and Azman, 2016) Put differently, by utilizing recess as a tool for problem-solving, a civilized democratic system may develop.

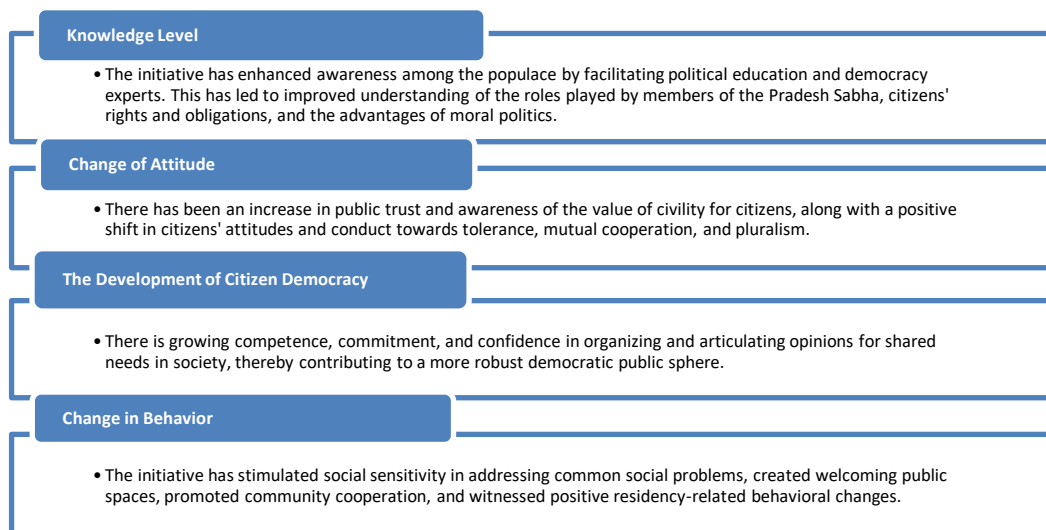
This participatory method called public hearing and public auditing (PHPA) attempts to improve the accountability and openness of Nepal's local governments (Dhakal, 2013). Through the PHPA, individuals may express their thoughts, grievances, and requests as well as evaluate how well elected officials are performing in relation to local development initiatives (Dhakal, 2013; Khatiwada, 2023). The PHPA is expected to take place on a minimum of one occasion every year, and the participants reach a consensus on a set of proposals that are examined in the subsequent PHPA (Dhakal, 2013). It's a collaborative effort with the goal of improving Nepal's local governments' accountability and openness.

Various organizations and agencies, including the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Local Governance and Community Development Programme (LGCDP), and the Department of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR), have developed some technical guidelines on PHPA. These technical guidelines include the goals, guiding principles, protocols, roles and duties, metrics, and instruments needed to carry out PHPA in a way that is inclusive and efficient. Additionally, they offer the templates, checklists, and formats needed to prepare and submit the PHPA findings (Chaturvedy, 2007; Dhakal, 2013).

The objectives of creating democratic public spaces, according to all of the informants, are to meet community needs, uphold the importance of traditional knowledge, address social issues, and improve the emotional bonds between members of the Pradesh Sabha and Provincial Assembly and other communities in order to maintain peace. safeguarded from any disagreements in political decisions and also a calm road for all conflicts and debates. Researchers have extracted information that can be categorized into the following: if the PHPH is systematically implemented and introduced into a democratic public space, it can educate the community politically in order to realize a civilized democracy free from hatred.

In other words, it can serve as a mediator in social problem solving, build trust in public administrators, and act as a catalyst for the acceleration of positive development, which is mutual agreement. The democratic public space initiative has shown significant impacts on various aspects of democratic development in Province 3. From enhancing knowledge levels to fostering changes in behavior and attitudes, the initiative has played a key role in promoting civic engagement and democratic principles.

**Figure 1. Markers of Effectiveness**



Source: Author's creation (Observation and interview research)

### **Freedom of expressing on social Issues**

According to Mukham, socio-cultural competency refers to the presence of a buffer in a heterogeneous society that includes elements like faith, ethnicity, and culture, as well as its function in promoting democratic civility (Mukham and Agus, 2022). This skill emphasizes the significance of building social and cultural capital to bring people together through a sophisticated understanding of sociocultural values and is regarded as essential for national understanding. In this perspective, citizenship is understood to be a driving force behind the development of social consciousness and democratic maturity via the enhancement of social competence.

According to Thomas Ehrlich (Doolittle and Faul, 2013), citizen involvement is essential to democracy since it is the mechanism by which people feel obligated and given the chance to improve their community. This commitment is complex, covering ideals, expertise, and capacities. Civic engagement is identified in some scholarly works as contributing to a positive societal outlook, fostering convictions about constructive societal behavior, and playing a crucial role in building social capital among young individuals, thereby mitigating labor shortages and augmenting the demographic bonus (Bhangaokar and Mehta, 2012). As such, democracy's use of public space as a tool raises public awareness of current problems and concerns in society.

Building on these previously discussed viewpoints, the author argues that civic engagement and social development are mutually reinforcing, with the former helping people develop into more mature actors and the latter improving their ability to communicate with others in the community. Consequently, this place public space in a position to promote democratic maturity and increase the demographic dividend. Ramaley emphasizes the wide concept of civic engagement, which includes a range of interests and points of view. Civic engagement is defined as social transformation, collective action, political involvement, and community service. In the context of community service, civic engagement places a strong emphasis on each person's accountability for adopting civic responsibilities and actively taking part in both individual and group volunteer activities. In the area of collective action, people work together to carry out their responsibilities, which influences the larger civil society. To be politically involved means for citizens to take collective action to address concerns through political channels and processes, this calls for leadership and active engagement in public life. Another aspect of civic engagement is social transformation, which is actively influencing future social change by becoming involved in people's lives.

To put it simply, civic engagement emphasizes how crucial human involvement is to promoting positive societal change. According to this concept, the democratic public sphere fosters social competency and promotes ongoing research into societal problems' solutions. Involving residents in this domain turns it into a civic duty, requiring deliberate and proactive engagement in tackling issues facing the community. By increasing knowledge of social concerns and encouraging a sense of communal sensitivity towards their resolution, this participation functions as an instructional tool.

Social concern activism is one way that citizen engagement in a democratic society takes on an activist quality (Perez et al., 2010). But Boulianne in (Boulianne, 2016) makes the case for a more expansive interpretation of involvement that goes beyond simply taking part in campaigns, acknowledging non-institutionalized acts like signing petitions or joining boycotts as significant kinds of engagement, especially when it comes to tackling social justice issues. Furthermore, volunteering, which is understood as a voluntary exchange of energy and charitable contributions—is considered essential to increasing civic engagement (Jones, 2006). Therefore, the democratic public sphere is essential for advancing liberating ideas about social issues and fostering a sense of community in addressing them.

### **Development of Civil Society Characters**

Azyumardi Azra claims in (Masengi et al., 2023) that the term "civil society" encompasses more than only pro-democracy movements; it also refers to the development of a high standard of living. Consequently, civil society results in sophisticated or contemporary living circumstances that are rooted in social ideals and lead to wisdom in behavior. This implies tolerance, which is the capacity of individuals to tolerate a wide range of political beliefs and social behaviors, according to Nurcholish Nadjid's character.

There are five (five) advantages of taking part in democracy. Each of the five traits – Trust, Competence, Connection, Character, and Caring – is positively correlated with civic involvement, according to research on democratic countries (Kim et al., 2016). The five characters demonstrate how democratic citizens are essential to the advancement of civilization and the expansion of civil society because they are highly consistent with cultural norms, which guide the actions of citizens who are aware of their rights and obligations. The expert opinion supports this, stating that in order to develop a sense of nationality and love for the country, good citizens (to be good citizens) must possess civic intelligence, which includes intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual intelligence; they also need to have civic responsibility and a sense of pride in and responsibility for their community; and they need to be able to participate in civic life (Adler and Goggin, 2005).

According to the above description, citizen involvement in democratic public spaces is primarily focused on developing citizens' character, which supports the idea of a nation as involvement in upholding harmony despite differences and cultivating a national spirit that reflects civil society and has the gotong royong character. Humanize each other. As a result, by definition, a civil society is a nation that can understand its own existence in light of the variety within its society and a civilized society that has all of the local wisdom linked to it. Habermas's definition of the public space, as explained by Adut in 2012, emphasizes conditions of citizenship or decency, unification of the public sphere with citizenship, and ideals for broad and egalitarian participation. The qualities of independent individuals, as advocated by Bjur and Estman, serve as the cornerstone for developing civil society institutions. Engaging in the democratic public sphere, according to this perspective, is a powerful means to foster a civil society committed to decency, complete civility, mutual understanding, and respect (Khatiwada, 2023).

The idea of the heavenly city, the city of civilization, or the city community is described as the foundation of civil society in a journal (Wajdi Ibrahim, 2012). Nevertheless, the definition of civil society is also based on the idea of al Mujtama 'al-Madani, which was first presented by Prof. Naquib al-Attas (Wajdi Ibrahim, 2012). He clarified that the concept of civil society is a kind of community order that upholds the values of tolerance, democratic or participatory citizenship, civility with full wisdom, and respect for diversity. In this way, the value of wisdom is cultivated through democratic public spaces, where mutual respect, reminding one another, and humanizing one another are democratic practices that contribute to the traits of civil society.

A second informant emphasizes the importance of sensible principles as the foundation for any public space, particularly within the democratic system. This is crucial given the increased openness and potential of the democratic system to teach the value of capitalism, focusing not only on materialistic gain. Religious values, referencing figures like Sayyidina Umar and the Prophet Muhammad SAW, are seen as instrumental in teaching the fundamentals of politics. Additionally, the development of values such as trust is facilitated by emphasizing the value of Siri, or shame, particularly in public meetings where political



agreements hinge on the intentions of the participants. This underscores the importance of upholding one's word for elected officials to fulfill their roles.

### **Peace and Tolerance**

Within the context of democratic government, the Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA) is a vital tool for promoting harmony and inclusivity across communities. This democratic public forum fosters civic involvement and open communication, which in turn fosters citizen understanding and cooperation. People participate in positive dialogue through PHPA, which is essential in fostering communal harmony and tolerance. Participants in the PHPA process give information, hold debates, and solicit comments from the public, giving them a platform to express their worries, thoughts, and recommendations on a range of topics. Individuals are empowered by this participatory approach, which also fosters a sense of group responsibility for the community's well-being (Dhakal, 2013; Ministry of Water Supply, 2023; Rpublica, 2018)

The significance of sharing problems and perspectives is emphasized by the participants, who also highlight how this process fosters an open investigation of solutions that lead to a more tranquil neighborhood. One of the Participants emphasized the importance of accountability and transparency, emphasizing how PHPA puts these principles front and center and promotes the kind of atmosphere that is essential for world peace; one of openness and understanding. It is also acknowledged for its contribution to the construction of bridges across various groups. Sharing thoughts and viewpoints is essential to fostering tolerance and appreciating the benefits that variety offers to society. Participants discuss how the process gives residents more power than simply having their opinions acknowledged and allows them to actively participate in determining the direction their community will go. This empowerment fosters a sense of duty to make constructive contributions, making the atmosphere more accepting and tranquil for everybody. PHPA is also acknowledged as an educational venue that works to refute stereotypes and promote understanding of a range of topics. Tolerance naturally increases as people gain more knowledge, fostering a culture where people value diversity rather than fear it.

In summary, the PHPA process proves to be a powerful tool for promoting peace inside the democratic arsenal. It promotes open communication, transparency, and community involvement to help create a more tolerant and peaceful society in which people take an active role in creating a peaceful cohabitation. Tillman discusses the characteristics of tolerance that will contribute to a peaceful society in (Supriyanto & Wahyudi, 2017). These characteristics include viewing peace as a goal, being open to differences, showing respect for people and one another, showing courage and sensitivity, fostering love and affection, and having the fortitude to face challenging circumstances and endure unfavorable circumstances. Consequently, dialogue that is developed in a democratic and participatory environment promotes the virtue of fraternity and the quality of tolerance, which creates a climate of peace in the community, the country, and the state.

Through communication that is also built between the community and people's representatives, it becomes a bridge for the birth of educational policies that are more futuristic and anticipatory and able to consider aspects of the heterogeneity of Indonesian society so that the recess program or democratic public space becomes the right place or means to foster and instill values of peace and values. the noble values of living together in all differences in society (Umar, 2017). According to John J. Patrick in (Jones, 2006), the act of citizenship in the common interest is a sign of good citizenship in a democratic country, which includes upholding and defending everyone's right to privacy, engaging in politics responsibly, constantly serving as a model of democratic citizenship values in the community, and advancing the common good. As a result, it is crucial to organize community gatherings in public spaces because they foster a spirit of harmony and peace by fostering a commitment to upholding moral standards in society and defending the rights of one's fellow citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Without opportunities for public engagement, the democratic process cannot continue to develop its character. The development of civic engagement was an attempt to promote a democratic and participatory nature. The democratic public sphere provides a platform for the exchange of ideas about current social issues and inspires people to address social issues or take up volunteer work. PHPA can be seen as an essential program to bring people together, and that social and cultural capital needed to be developed. In light of this, citizenship stimulates social sensitivity and grows democratic maturity as social competence increases.

It is clear from analyzing the Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA) as a democratic public space that this tool is more than just a formality; rather, it is a dynamic force that is forming a society that is more tolerant and peaceful. Because PHPA is participatory, it gives citizens a voice, promotes accountability and transparency, and encourages positive communication. Communities are actively creating bridges between disparate groups and resolving disputes through PHPA, creating an atmosphere where diversity is valued. The responders speech snippets highlight how PHPA has a profoundly positive effect on people's lives and communities. Participants emphasize how PHPA empowers them, gives them a voice, and fosters a commitment to making constructive contributions by instilling a sense of empowerment and responsibility. The procedure serves as a hub for educational activities, clearing up misunderstandings and increasing awareness, all of which support the development of tolerance in society.

A democratic public space is one that is actively assimilating civil society ideals including respect for variety, tolerance, collaboration amongst people, and politeness. Since the foundation of civil society is a system of community order that places a high value on tolerance, democratic or participatory citizens, civilized with full wisdom and respect for diversity, mutual respect, reminding one another, and humanizing one another are examples of democratic civility that contribute to the qualities of civil society that can provide people's lives with purpose, both as individuals and as a community.

It becomes a public space, a forum for political communication between the community and people's representatives, and a conduit for the emergence of educational policies that are more forward-thinking, anticipatory, and capable of taking into account the diversity of Indonesian society through the communication that is also developed between the community and people's representatives. As a result, the democratic public sphere can promote the qualities of tolerance and fraternity, which promote a peaceful society, country, and state. It is advised that more efforts be made to increase and improve the accessibility of such democratic public places, building on PHPA's capabilities. Outreach initiatives might be used to promote greater community involvement and make sure that a variety of viewpoints are heard. Furthermore, the integration of educational efforts into PHPA processes has the potential to enhance their effect by advancing a more profound comprehension of social challenges and cultivating an ongoing learning culture. Community leaders and legislators are also urged to actively use PHPA as a tool for conflict resolution in their jurisdictions, given its significance in resolving disputes. Through the proactive application of PHPA as a conflict prevention and resolution tool, communities may cooperatively overcome obstacles and maintain the values of tolerance and peace.

To ensure PHPA's continuing relevance and efficacy, initiatives to institutionalize it inside the democratic framework should also be investigated. Policymakers have the option to think about ways to strengthen PHPA's standing as a cornerstone of democratic practice by integrating it into decision-making procedures at different levels of government. In conclusion, PHPA's capacity to change lives by promoting tolerance and peace emphasizes why it is so important as a pillar of democratic government. Through the adoption and utilization of PHPA, communities may strengthen their adherence to democratic principles and foster settings where the varied array of opinions fosters a peaceful and accepting cohabitation.

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