

# Decline and fall of the monarchy

Gagan Thapa

The crowning of Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha as King of Kathmandu on 25 September 1768 is generally considered the birth of the modern Nepali state. After his death, his eldest son succeeded him but died within three years, leaving Prithvi Narayan's 30-month-old grandson on the throne. This began a practice of 'baby kings', with the country actually administered by one group of courtiers or another until the end of the feudal order in 1950–51.

The early struggles for democracy in Nepal around the middle of the 20th century were, therefore, not directed against the king, who had no more than a ceremonial role, but against the 'shogunate' of the Rana dynasty of leaders that held real power. The earliest documents of the Nepali Congress, the political party that spearheaded the armed movement against the Rana regime, identified two alternatives for the post-Rana political order: first, a constitutional monarchy coexisting with an elected government; and the second, prepared in case the Crown should resist the first, a fully republican model. It is no surprise, therefore, that the monarchy was quick to ally itself with the democratic movement that ended the Rana regime in 1951.

All the major political movements from the 1940s to 1990 aimed to establish a democratic political order that would include the king in a constitutional role. Even the communists accepted this when they participated in the political processes that led to the advent of democracy in 1951 and again in 1990. Some fringe leftist groups had called for Nepal to become a republic as early as the 1970s, but republican sentiments remained marginal until much later.

## Royal massacre

The royal massacre in June 2001 was the single most important turning point in the history of the monarchy. The kings of Nepal have always claimed a divine right to rule as avatars of the Hindu deity, Vishnu. Since ancient times they have carried titles that placed them among the gods and established them as the protectors of *dharma* (the righteous order). Many religious ceremonies involved the presence of the king alongside the deities in either physical or symbolic form.

The royal household was also shrouded in mystery. A blissful image was projected to the public while strict secrecy was maintained over the private lives of the royals.

Thus, many people struggled to accept the revelation that Crown Prince Dipendra, who had until then been viewed as a youth icon, was actually a drug-addicted psychopath responsible for killing his father, King Birendra, and the rest of his immediate family. The manner in which the incident catapulted King Gyanendra to the throne seemed more like an elaborate conspiracy than the work of a rogue royal gunman. The episode radically changed the way the royal family was viewed, but also irrevocably undermined the legitimacy of King Gyanendra's rule.

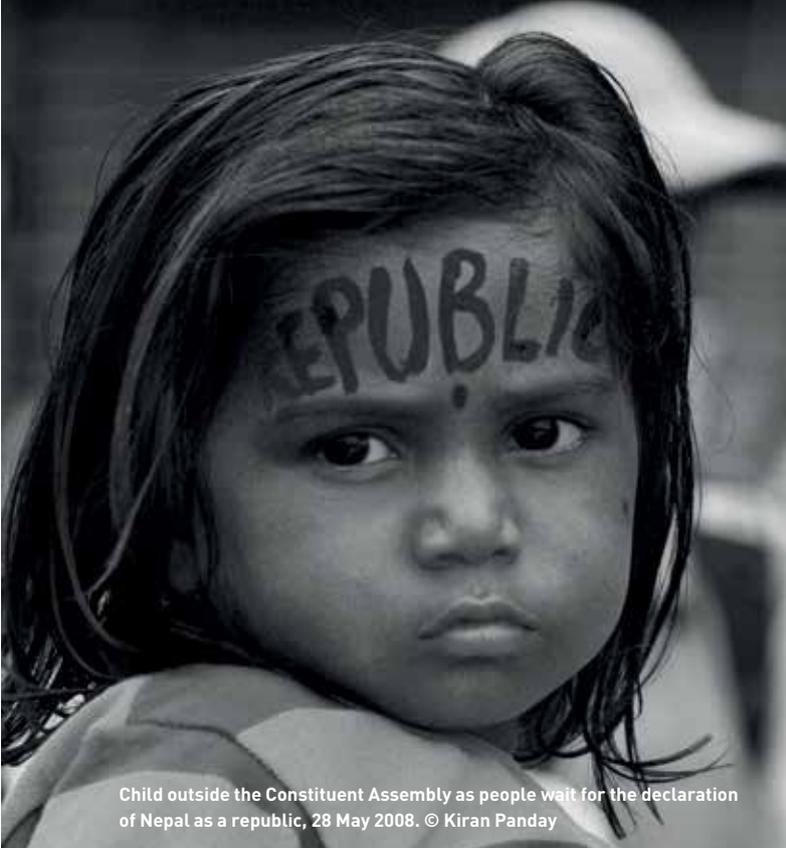
## Maoist insurgency

A number of communist groups have existed at the far left of Nepal's political spectrum since before 1990. Some of these even contested the 1991 general election, and one, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre), a newly formed grouping of these hardliners, emerged as the third largest party in the first post-1990 parliament [see *article on political parties*, p.68]. However, one faction ultimately concluded that parliamentary competition would not help them realise their ideological ambitions, broke away and called themselves Maoists, and launched an armed rebellion in 1996.

For the first five years of the insurgency, the Maoist rebels remained a small band of under-equipped guerillas raiding weakly defended police posts in remote villages. Their presence was limited mainly to six districts in the mid-western hills. Political events following the royal massacre saw them quickly expand their influence across the country, and the rapid growth of the insurgency coincided with the fracturing of the legitimacy of the monarchy.

## Social changes

Economic growth accompanied economic liberalisation in Nepal through the 1990s. This was concentrated mainly in the service sector, however, in which less than 10 per cent of the workforce was employed, primarily in a few



Child outside the Constituent Assembly as people wait for the declaration of Nepal as a republic, 28 May 2008. © Kiran Panday

cities. This trend led to a widening of the gap between both the rich and the poor, and cities and villages, which was reflected in a rise in the country's Gini Index (a measure of inequality) from 0.3 to 0.35 between 1985 and 1995.

The 1990s also saw mass migrations of people from the villages to the cities and from the hills and mountains to the plains. This was the result of the opening up of the post-1990 political space, an expanding transport infrastructure, and the growing insurgency, among other factors. It resulted in a much more diverse population in the large cities and contributed to the breakdown of some established – and conservative – social structures: women gradually stepped out of their traditional roles, while Kathmandu saw the rise of several movements working for a greater understanding of progressive issues such as women's rights, Dalit ('low caste') oppression and Janajati (indigenous) identity. School attendance also expanded, with almost as many girls as boys attending, while the proliferation of mass media meant that this young and educated population was more politically conscious than earlier generations.

All of these factors would prove decisive in the evolution of politics in Nepal in the 2000s, in particular in relation to the role of the king.

### **Two coups and the 12-Point Understanding**

With his party riven by factional fighting, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba dissolved Parliament in May 2002 with two years still to go. A few months later he recommended postponing the constitutionally mandated parliamentary elections because of the increasingly

violent Maoist insurgency. The failure to hold elections gave King Gyanendra a convenient excuse to dismiss Deuba, effectively ending parliamentary democracy. The king then appointed and removed the next three prime ministers at will before taking direct control of the government in February 2005, as Chair of the Council of Ministers. He promised a return to democracy within three years, by which time peace and security would be restored.

The 2005 coup precipitated two significant developments: first, the creation of a broad partnership among the mainstream political parties, known as the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA); second, it brought the Maoists and the mainstream parties closer together, since the republican agenda espoused by the insurgents was now no longer taboo – even though the *12-Point Understanding* reached between the SPA and the Maoists in November 2005 called for no more than an end to 'authoritarian monarchy'.

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By this point, the increasingly autocratic royal regime had become isolated internationally, while the relationship



Deposed king, Gyanendra Shah, speaking at a press conference just before quitting the Narayanhiti Royal Palace, 14 days after the nation was declared a republic, June 2008. © Kiran Panday

between the major political forces and the Maoists carried a promise of peace that the regime had failed to deliver. It was against this backdrop that the People's Movement of April 2006 took place.

## **Republic**

The king's restoration of the dissolved parliament on 24 April 2006 effectively represented his total surrender. Notwithstanding the Maoist insurgency, for which establishing a republican order was not an essential goal, it is remarkable that the 2006 People's Movement triggered the end of the monarchy, with minimal bloodshed. Since then, Gyanendra has also never overtly tried to alter the course of political events – even when the Constituent Assembly formally abolished the monarchy in May 2008.

For the moment, there seems little possibility that the monarchy could make a return. There is some dissatisfaction

with secularism among sections of the population and what they perceive to be the proliferation of Christian missionaries, and an element of the Hindu right is also attempting to link the Hindu fundamentalist agenda with the reinstatement of the monarchy, a strategy that suits pro-monarchy forces very well. On the whole, however, the monarchy is very unlikely to make a comeback owing to its badly damaged public image – and in particular to the dubious circumstances in which the last king came to the throne.

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**Gagan Thapa is a member of the Central Working Committee of the Nepali Congress party. He came into national prominence as the General Secretary of the Nepal Students' Union, affiliated to the Nepali Congress, and was one of the earliest proponents of overthrowing the monarchy during the civic agitation following the king's takeover in 2002. A member of both the 2008 and 2013 Constituent Assemblies, he is currently the Minister for Health of Nepal.**