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## Where next for Nepal's monarchy?

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Campaigning has ended for Nepal's first country-wide election in nearly a decade, which takes place on Thursday.

Maoist former rebels and other parties have canvassed hard for the polls, in which an assembly will be elected to write a new constitution.

But little is being heard from one group - people who want to keep Nepal's monarchy.

With the institution now due to be abolished, few venture to voice support for the generally unpopular King Gyanendra. But he has his supporters.

One of them is a 51-year-old karate black belt, Jagat Gauchan.

I saw him instructing a horde of cream-clad men, women and children in a back room at the national stadium - with kicks, punches, knee and elbow strikes.

He says karate instils discipline and honesty - the same values he links to strong political leadership.

For that kind of strength, he says, Nepal must turn to its monarchy - which has ruled this diverse country for over two centuries.

Strong institution

"We believe that the country needs the king," he said.

"Without the monarchy in Nepal, this country will not remain. It will break into many pieces or it will be a part of India."

Mr Gauchan said this is because there was no other responsible statesman in the country.

"Our country is very poor and uneducated. Once we don't have a strong institution to lead the people, this country will disappear."

Away from the stadium, Mr Gauchan was to be found on the campaign trail, greeting voters in a picturesque village constituency outside the capital.

Loyal to King Gyanendra, he served as a minister in the ill-fated royal government of 2005. He is now an assembly candidate for a small royalist party.

Two elderly men tell the BBC they have some attachment to the crown - but it is limited.

Tradition

"We should keep the king, because if there's no father, what's the use of the son?" said one.

But he believes King Gyanendra "isn't wise" - he preferred his late brother, Birendra, slain in a palace massacre in 2001.

His friend says the new assembly should decide whether to keep the monarchy or not. He values the tradition - but, he adds, an elected president would be just as good.

A recent opinion poll suggested nearly half of Nepalis favoured keeping the monarchy, but Gyanendra was personally unpopular.

The institution's popularity used to be much greater, and the main reason for the decline is the royal massacre.

The official inquiry, and eyewitnesses, said the then Crown Prince killed his father, eight others and himself.

But most Nepalis think it was all plotted by the successor king, Gyanendra, and his unpopular son, Crown Prince Paras.

Unpopularity

"When King Birendra was killed and his brother Gyanendra became king, he started out with the liability of being a PR disaster to begin with," says Kunda Dixit, editor of the Nepali Times.

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His unpopularity grew when he took direct power in the name of fighting the Maoist rebels.

"I think people realised that this king is ambitious and he's actually making the country even more crisis-ridden than it would otherwise be," added Mr Dixit.

After presiding over a worsening security situation and a civil rights clampdown, Gyanendra was forced by street protests to abandon his direct rule two years ago.

United against him, other parties formed a new government.

The government has tried to wipe out signs of the king. His face has been removed from new coins and currency notes.

And the king is now due to be taxed, and his palaces likely to be nationalised.

Nostalgia

So, will the monarchy be mourned? Nepalese journalist Prashant Jha thinks only to a certain extent.

"I think there might be an element of nostalgia in some quarters.

"The monarchy has been an integral part of what this country has been, since it was formed 240 years back.

"And maybe some in the older generation, who did worship the king as a reincarnation of God, might look back with some affection.

"But I think that nostalgia won't go too far. Because this monarch in the last five years has done something that no monarch had been able to do, which is to destroy... the political legitimacy of the institution ."

In some quarters, the king still commands strong support - or at least fascination.

Morale

He has been stripped of even his ceremonial roles, though in recent months his unofficial appearances at religious festivals have brought out crowds - sometimes cheering.

But the ruling coalition has decreed that after the polls the monarchy will go.

Royalist election rallies have been broken up by the Maoist party. And their morale in general isn't high, says Kunda Dixit.

"I think the mood among the monarchists is quite subdued. They get the sense from the public that the Nepali people, even though they may want the monarchy to continue in some form, feel like it's no longer a symbol of national unity, but of national division."

For now, signs of Nepal's royal past - for instance, some statues of its past kings - are still visible.

The monarchy is still valued by some - but it is also associated with autocracy.

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## The Maoists triumph

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The former rebels surprise everyone with a stunning electoral success. That may prove to have been the easy part

THE red flags and Maoist slogans on pavements and office blocks in Kathmandu, Nepal's pleasant, down-at-heel capital, were daubed in protest. But this week, as results came in from an election held on April 10th, they assumed a radical new meaning: ownership. Defying every prediction but its own, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), until two years ago a feared rebel army, won handsomely.

A complicated electoral system, in which around 40% of seats are directly elected and 60% through proportional representation, has held up final results. But the Maoists, proscribed by America as terrorists, were on course for a clear

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majority in the first tranche, with 119 seats out of 224. And they had 33% of the vote in the second. They will certainly be the biggest party, but without a majority, in a 601-seat assembly, which will have a 30-month term limit and will be charged with drafting a new constitution.

The Maoists ended a decade-long armed struggle in 2006, after Nepal's King Gyanendra, who the previous year had seized absolute power, was compelled by street protests to hand it back. Entering a coalition government with six political parties, the scrubbed-up insurgents committed themselves to the democratic process. To many, this looked like either a tactical ploy or noble folly. Led by a charismatic guerrilla, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, or Prachanda ("awesome", pictured above), the Maoists held sway in much of Nepal. But they were thought to be loathed for their part in a nasty war that left more than 10,000 dead. Most pundits expected them to be trounced at the polls.

They reckoned without three factors. First was the Maoists' manipulation of the result. Thugs from several parties terrorised voters. European Union observers of the election concluded it was held in a "general atmosphere of fear and intimidation". But the Maoists' thugs were chiefly to blame. The party's candidates also hinted that if it lost, they might resume the war. And no doubt, in the country's many remote and lawless places, some voters wanted the Maoists in faraway Kathmandu—not their forests, stealing their food and pressganging their children.

Yet even near Kathmandu, where some 2,000 foreign election observers were clustered and there were few reports of malpractice, the Maoists won seven of 15 directly elected seats. In the eastern Terai area, next to India, the Maoists had been supplanted by local nationalist groups, both armed and democratic. Yet they have so far won ten out of 27 seats there.

A second explanation for the results is more convincing: that Nepalis were sick of the alternatives. These were chiefly the Nepali Congress (NC) party, which dominates the ruling coalition, and its traditional rival, a mainstream leftist party known as the UML (for "Unified Marxist-Leninist"). Both were tarnished by spells of corrupt and ineffective rule during the 1990s. As for King Gyanendra, he can also take his cue from the electorate. At the Maoists' insistence, the 240-year-old monarchy was provisionally abolished in December—a sentence that the next assembly is due to confirm. This seemed undemocratic at the time; it doesn't now. Nepal's three small royalist parties won no directly elected seat: ie, one fewer than the tiny Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party, which supports North Korea's Kim Jong Il.

With only 31 directly elected seats, the UML vowed to quit the government. Its leader, Madhav Kumar Nepal, has resigned. The NC, with 34 directly elected seats, is shocked, feuding and outraged by an attack this week by Maoist thugs on a senior member, Ram Sharan Mahat, the finance minister. Many in the NC also want to quit the government, leaving the Maoists with a lonely and difficult command. Apparently as stunned as anyone by the scale of their success, the Maoists prefer to keep the coalition. But they will have the top jobs, including those of the prime, home and foreign ministers.

Under an interim constitution, the seven-party coalition is in fact supposed to stick together until the new constitution is written. Before the election, the NC prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, an octogenarian four-time premier, expressed his wish that it last for another decade. Any party that abandons the government may therefore risk being seen as a spoiler of the peace process. For their part, the Maoists want to make the coalition bigger, not smaller, by taking in at least one of several Terai nationalist parties, which won 34 directly elected seats in the south-east.

Managing a fractious coalition is just the start of the Maoists' troubles. The drafting of the new constitution will be a dreadful business. The Terai parties, for example, want extreme provincial autonomy, even the right to self-determination. The Maoists are partly to blame for this, having ostensibly fought for a vaguely defined decentralisation of power. But they are above all nationalists, not leftists, and will certainly disappoint the south-easterners.

And then there is a peace process to salvage. The new government will inherit a huge backlog of peacemaking provisions neglected by its predecessor—including the matter of what to do with the Maoists' 23,000-strong army, which stands armed and organised, under UN surveillance, and the 90,000-strong royalist army. The Maoists say the two forces must be combined. The army, partly at the urging of India, which has unruly Maoist insurgents of its own to worry about, says it will accept no indoctrinated guerrilla into its ranks. As the biggest party of government, the Maoists may now be in a position to insist. However, their deputy leader, Baburam Bhattarai, implies that they will test their new strength carefully. "Before, we were in a stage of making demands; now we are in a stage of implementation," he said, seated beneath a poster exhorting workers everywhere to unite behind "Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, Prachandaism!!"

This last "ism", which describes the Maoists' struggle as a "bourgeois peasant revolution", is tricky to pin down. Their economic policies, which include seeking foreign investment for Nepal's hydropower industry, seem quite liberal. Many of their social policies, which the Maoists describe as a war against "feudalism", are also laudable. Besides scrapping a discredited monarchy, they would fight caste-based discrimination, the deprivation of tribal groups and the exploitation of landless labourers. For poor Nepalis, all this makes a popular message. That is the third—weirdly overlooked—reason for the peasant revolutionaries' great victory. Of course, making big promises is easier than keeping them, and the Maoists will disappoint. The question is: how badly?

