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## Goodbye to all that

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At 6.15pm the fountains were switched on. The water danced. The white-clad military band stood to attention. And waited. And waited. After 239 years of rule by the Shah royal dynasty, perhaps it was inevitable that the last few hours of waiting for the monarchy to be abolished and a republic set up should also be long and drawn-out. When the announcement came, it was greeted with cheers. Three bombs had gone off earlier in the day. Yet all things considered, the decision, momentous as it was, sparked neither bitter complaint nor intense celebration.

Perhaps the long period of violence and uncertainty beforehand had something to do with it. Nepal has seen a decade-long civil war; two postponed elections; a massacre of the royal family; the grabbing of absolute power by the king and the handing back of it again; and most recently, victory in elections by Maoist former guerrillas. Nepalis could be forgiven for being uncertain of what lies in store.

The country's constituent assembly voted to abolish King Gyanendra's house by 560 votes to 4. The king's unpopularity, among assembly members and the ordinary Nepalis who elected them in April, was well earned. In 1990, his brother, King Birendra, bowed to popular demands and became a constitutional monarch, attaining respect and affection as a result.

When the Maoists began their insurrection in the western hills in 1996, getting rid of the crown was not on their agenda. Yet Gyanendra alienated supporters by grabbing dictatorial powers in 2005, only to be forced to hand them back again after a clumsy attempted crackdown turned peaceful protests into nationwide strikes. Most Nepalis believe—without any evidence—that Gyanendra and his unpopular playboy son, Paras, were involved in the royal massacre of 2001 when Crown Prince Dipendra killed his immediate family, several other relatives and himself.

The royal family was once revered as the reincarnation of Hindu gods. But the massacre undermined faith in the monarchy in general, and turned Nepalis against this king in particular. Before he ascended the throne, Gyanendra had been a successful businessman. He will be allowed to stay in Nepal and return to commerce. His palace will become a museum.

But for the man who engineered the king's departure, tougher choices lie ahead. This is the leader of Nepal's Maoists, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, which means "awesome". Prachanda has long said he would become the first president of a Nepalese republic. He stands on the brink of achieving that ambition. His problems start then.

The Maoists are the biggest party, but do not have a majority. Nepal is led by a fractious coalition, which the Maoists want to widen by including regional parties from the south and south-east. That may make managing the coalition trickier.

The abolition of the monarchy is a first step in a much wider reform. Laws and even customs deemed to go against the country's status as a republic are to be repealed. Many politicians who supported Prachanda's demand to abolish the monarchy will not necessarily back proposals for what should replace it. For example, the parties of the south and south-east want extensive regional autonomy. Prachanda seems unlikely to give it to them.

He will also have to get to grips with the aftermath of the civil war. The former royal army is 90,000-strong. Nepal also has 23,000 Maoist ex-combatants kicking their heels in temporary camps. The Maoists want to merge the two forces. The army's high command is reluctant.

Then there are economic and social promises to fulfil. The Maoists want to push through land reform, emancipate the lower castes and seek foreign investment. With growth slowing, that would be hard enough by itself. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown—and the breast that sports a presidential sash.

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