



Democratic Transition in Nepal: A Case Within the Third Wave of Democratisation

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Abstract

Nepal's shift from an autocratic Rana oligarchy to a federal democratic republic is among the most turbulent and complex democratic transitions in South Asia. Nepal's post-Rana history, since 1951, has been a cycle of democratic experiments, royal authoritarianism, popular revolts, and ultimately, republican transformation. The latest and most remarkable political transition occurred in September 2025, when the government of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was toppled by an uprising led by Generation Z, driven by the government's censorship of social media and extreme frustration with corruption and nepotism. This led to the landmark election of Balendra Shah and the Rastriya Swatantra Party in March 2026. The article traces the entire trajectory of Nepal's democratic transition from the 1950s to 2026, and examines the structural, institutional, and societal forces that have shaped the country's evolving political landscape.

Keywords: *Panchayat System in Nepal, Rana Dynasty, Madhesi, Generation Z Uprising, Balendra Shah*



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1. Introduction

Democratic transitions are seldom linear. They are subject to historical legacies, elite bargaining, mass mobilization, external pressures, and institutional design choices [1]. Nepal has been a role model in this regard. From 1846 to 1951, the king was a figurehead as the Rana family ruled Nepal autocratically and transferred all state power to themselves [2]. The fall of the Rana regime and the opening of

Nepal's first democratic experiment came with the return of King Tribhuvan from exile in India in 1950–51. What followed was not a smooth consolidation of democracy but a long and contested process of parliamentary rule, royal coups, the Panchayat system, mass revolts, civil war, and finally a negotiated transition to a federal republic.

To understand the democratic trajectory of Nepal, we need to consider multiple variables:

the role of political parties, the relation of the monarchy to democratic governance, the Maoist insurgency, ethnicity and regional politics, the role of India and China as external powers, and most recently the rise of digitally-organized youth movements that have disrupted traditional political alignments [3]. The article provides a comprehensive discussion of each stage of Nepal's democratic transition based on academic literature, primary sources, comparative political analysis, and recent reports.

2. The Fall of the Rana Regime and the First Democratic Experiment (1950-1960)

Jung Bahadur Rana established the Rana oligarchy in 1846, and it ruled Nepal as a hereditary prime ministership, deliberately isolating the country from modernizing influences. By the late 1940s, the Rana system was under pressure from newly independent India, internal discontent among educated elites, and the activities of the Nepali Congress party (NC), which was founded in 1947 with Indian support [4].

The 1950-51 revolution marked a turning point. King Tribhuvan, held under virtual house arrest by the Ranas, escaped to the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu in November 1950 and was flown to New Delhi. Under Indian diplomatic pressure, the Ranas were forced to enter into a power-sharing arrangement. The Delhi Compromise of February 1951 ended the Rana rule and established a coalition government, formally bringing Nepal into the democratic era [5]. Political instability during 1951-60. The Nepali Congress could not consolidate power, and the palace continued to exercise considerable influence. Political parties multiplied – by the mid-1950s, there were more than two dozen registered parties in Nepal – but few had any organizational depth beyond Kathmandu [6]. Nepal's first general elections in 1959 saw a landslide victory for the Nepali Congress under B.P. Koirala, the country's first democratically elected prime minister.

Linz and Stepan (1996) characterized this period as a “transition without consolidation”. Democratic institutions were formally created—an election of a parliament, an adoption of a constitution in 1959, a formation of a cabinet—but structural conditions for

democratic sustainability were weak. Literacy was less than ten percent. Infrastructure was minimal, and political culture was still dominated by patronage networks based on elite families [7].

3. The Royal Autocracy and the Panchayat System (1960-1990)

On 15 December 1960, King Mahendra dissolved the elected government of B.P. Koirala, suspended the constitution, imprisoned political leaders, and banned all political parties. This royal coup heralded the commencement of thirty years of authoritarian rule under the ‘party-less’ Panchayat system [8]. The Panchayat system evolved as an indigenous alternative to the Western type of multi-party democracy. King Mahendra claimed that political parties were divisive and alien to the culture of Nepal and the tools of Indian interference. Instead, the Panchayat system created a hierarchy of councils (panchayats) from the village to the national level, all formally subordinate to the king. In practice, this system centralized power in the palace and relied on a loyal bureaucracy and military to suppress dissent [9].

Political parties went underground or into exile. The Nepali Congress and the communist groups continued to function underground, and occasional uprisings – most significantly the student uprising of 1979 – forced limited political liberalization. After the protests of 1979, King Birendra conducted a referendum in 1980 in which voters could opt for a reformed Panchayat system or a multiparty democracy. The Panchayat system won by a narrow margin, but in conditions of limited political competition.

In a comparative perspective, the Panchayat era is an example of the concept of “authoritarian resilience” [10]. The monarchy preserved stability through coercion, co-optation, and nationalist legitimacy. It managed democratic pressure through managed liberalization. But it was also a period that deepened socioeconomic inequalities, marginalized ethnic minorities and lower castes, and bred the grievances that would later fuel both the Jana Andolan (People's Movement) and the Maoist insurgency.

4. Restoration of Democracy and Jana Andolan I (1990)

The year 1990 was a watershed in Nepal's democratic history. Between February and April 1990, a wave of popular protests, known as Jana Andolan I (People's Movement I), swept the country. The movement included street demonstrations, strikes, and civil disobedience. The movement was organized jointly by the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front, a coalition of seven communist parties [11]. Immediate triggers included economic hardship after India's 1989 trade embargo and global democratic momentum after the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. But the deeper causes lay in decades of political repression, elite corruption, and the regional and caste inequalities built into the Panchayat system [12].

King Birendra first reacted with violent repression, killing more than fifty protesters, but he eventually gave way to the movement's demands. The king lifted the ban on political parties on 8 April 1990, and a new democratic constitution was promulgated in November 1990, which established a constitutional monarchy, a bicameral parliament, and multiparty democracy [13].

The 1990 transition was a 'transplacement' (Huntington 1991), a negotiated democratic transition where power was shared between the incumbent regime and opposition in the design of new institutions. The constitution was progressive in many ways – guaranteeing fundamental rights, freedom of the press, and judicial independence – but retained considerable royal powers and did not address the profound structural inequalities experienced by women, Dalits, Janajatis (indigenous nationalities), and Madhesis (plains people) [14].

5. Democratic Consolidation and Its Failures (1990-1996)

The 1990s opened with optimism, but devolved into political dysfunction. Between 1990 and 1999, Nepal had twelve changes of government. The Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or CPN-UML, dominated electoral politics but ruled poorly, marked by corruption, intra-party rivalries, and the prioritization of elite interests over structural reform [15].

Democratic institutions existed, but large sections of the population did not regard them as legitimate. The state's penetration into rural areas was limited, and the provision of public goods – education, health, infrastructure – was highly unequal along geographic, ethnic, and caste lines [16]. This democratic deficit created the ideological and organisational space for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) to start a 'People's War' in February 1996.

6. The Maoist Insurgency: Its Political Consequences (1996-2006)

The Maoist insurgency, led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda') and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), was not just an armed rebellion but a fundamental challenge to the political order of Nepal. The Maoists developed a program that integrated Marxist-Leninist ideology with particular demands for ethnic autonomy, land reform, and the abolition of the monarchy [17]. The insurgency mushroomed, feeding on the weaknesses of a parliamentary democracy that had failed to deliver inclusive development. By the early 2000s, the Maoists controlled large parts of the countryside, set up parallel 'people's governments' and had delivered serious military setbacks to the Royal Nepali Army (Hutt, 2004). The decade-long conflict claimed more than 13,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands [18].

A security crisis, compounded by a political crisis. In June 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra shot and killed nine members of the royal family, including King Birendra, in what is known as the Royal Massacre. Birendra's brother, Gyanendra, then assumed power and was far more authoritarian. In February 2005, he carried out an outright royal coup, dissolving the parliament and declaring a state of emergency, ruling by decree. In October 2002, he dismissed the elected government [19].

Ironically, Gyanendra's coup accelerated Nepal's democratic transformation. It united the parliamentary parties against the monarchy, pushed them towards talks with the Maoists, and attracted broad international condemnation. In November 2005, the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) of parliamentary parties and the CPN (Maoist) signed the Twelve Point Understanding in New Delhi, agreeing to work together for the

restoration of democracy and convening of a Constituent Assembly [20].

7. Jana Andolan II and the Republican Turn (2006)

The April 2006 Jana Andolan II (People's Movement II) exploded with unprecedented ferocity. For nineteen days millions of Nepalis poured into the streets in protests, general strikes and civil disobedience. The movement brought together the organizational capacity of the political parties with the mobilizing power of the Maoists and spontaneous popular participation from all social classes and regions [21].

Under this irresistible pressure King Gyanendra capitulated on April 24, 2006, bringing back parliament. The restored parliament moved quickly: it curtailed the powers of the king, declared Nepal a secular state, and opened the door to a Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the Maoists, signed in November 2006, which ended the decade-long armed conflict [22].

Nepal's transition at this juncture is an instance of what scholars refer to as a 'pacted transition'—a negotiated agreement among key political actors who consent to the rules of the democratic game even as fundamental issues about the future system remain unanswered (Karl, 1990). The peace accord committed the parties to an election for a Constituent Assembly, the integration of Maoist combatants into the national army, and the restructuring of the state along more inclusive lines [23].

8. Federal Republic and Constitution Making (2008-2015) Constituent Assembly

The election to the Constituent Assembly (CA) in April 2008 was a milestone. The CPN (Maoist) emerged as the largest party, winning 220 seats out of 601, reflecting the transformation of a rebel movement into a mainstream political force [24]. In May 2008, the CA abolished monarchy, declared Nepal a federal democratic republic and ended 240 years of Shah dynasty rule.

But the constitution-making process turned out to be deeply divisive. The CA was not able to come up with a constitution within its two-year term and was given two extensions. The first CA was dissolved in 2012 without

completing its work necessitating fresh elections in 2013 for a second CA in which Nepali Congress and CPN-UML were dominant [25].

The second CA promulgated Nepal's constitution on 20 September 2015, making Nepal one of the world's newest federal republics. The constitution established a three-tiered federal system – federal, provincial and local – and included provisions for proportional representation in state institutions to ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups [26]. The constitution was immediately controversial, however, with Madhesi and Janajati groups protesting that the new provincial boundaries were drawn to minimize their political representation and India informally supported a month's long blockade that worsened economic hardship in Nepal [27].

9. Post-Constitution Consolidation and Challenges (2015-2024)

Important institutional milestones were reached in the years following the 2015 constitution. The 2017 federal elections were a resounding victory for a left alliance of CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist Centre) which later merged to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in 2018, signalling a new phase of political stability (Cecen, A., Xiao, L., & Adhikari, S. (2014)). But the NCP fell apart in 2021 when Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli tried to dissolve parliament, after the Supreme Court twice reinstated it, sparking a constitutional crisis.

"These events highlight the ongoing fragility of Nepal's democratic institutions. An expression of democratic resilience has been the judiciary's active role in restraining executive overreach. But political parties lack organization, and they are undemocratic internally and faction-ridden [28]. Corruption is still rampant; public services are provided unevenly and the devolution promised by federalism has been realized only in part.

Ethnic and regional inclusion is still a work in progress. The 2015 constitution and subsequent legislation established mechanisms for the representation of women, Dalits, Janajatis and Madhesis, but social discrimination and economic marginalization persist (Lawoti, 2019). "Political tensions continue to exist in the Terai/Madhes as the plains have not been fully

integrated into the national political community [29].

10. External Dimensions of Democratic Transition in Nepal

No account of Nepal's democratic transition is complete without mention of external actors, particularly India and China. In the past, Nepali politics has been greatly affected by India, providing safe haven and support to political parties during times of royal authoritarianism and playing a decisive role in the transition of 1951 and the 2005–06 negotiations [30]. Nepal's foreign policy. India's tacit support for the Madhesi blockade in 2015 showed that New Delhi still has economic and political leverage to influence Nepal's constitutional choices.

China has become an increasingly important player, especially after the 2008 Tibetan protests, which increased Beijing's sensitivity to political developments in Nepal. China has cultivated relations with successive Nepalese governments and political parties, invested heavily in infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, and consistently opposed any political arrangements perceived as threatening to its interests in Tibet [31]. Nepal's democratic transition is thus taking place in a geopolitical context marked by the competing interests of its two giant neighbours.

11. 2025 Generation Z Rebellion: Digital Revolution in Nepal

The Generation Z uprising of September 2025 was the most dramatic and consequential political event in Nepal since the 2006 People's Movement. The 2025 protests were not organized by any political party, guerrilla movement or established civil society organization, unlike earlier democratic upheavals. They were leaderless, digitally coordinated and led by a generation with no memory of the Panchayat system or the Maoist war. The drivers of their grievance were the day-to-day reality of present-day Nepal: endemic corruption, elite nepotism, chronic youth unemployment, and a political class that refused to listen and had recycled the same faces across eight governments since 2015 [32].

The immediate reason was the government's decision on September 4, 2025 to

shut down twenty-six major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Reddit, ostensibly because they had failed to register under new Digital Services Tax regulations. Critics, however, saw the ban as a direct response to a viral "Nepo Kid" or "Nepo Baby" phenomenon on TikTok and Reddit, where young Nepalis were documenting and satirizing the ostentatiously rich lifestyles of politicians' children against a backdrop of widespread poverty and youth unemployment. According to World Bank data quoted in CSPPS reporting, in 2024, the youth unemployment rate among Nepalis aged 15-24 was 20.85 percent, a figure that has resulted in many educated young people traveling abroad [33].

The social media shutdown converted frustration into anger. With the mainstream platforms disrupted, activists flocked to Discord, which became a digital home base for protest organization and strategy planning. The protests were initiated by a youth NGO called Hami Nepal, which started with peaceful rallies, but quickly transformed into a nationwide, decentralized movement that lacks any formal leadership structure.

On September 8, 2025, the day that would prove decisive, thousands of young demonstrators, many in school and university uniforms, converged on the area around the federal parliament building in Kathmandu. Public protest had long been institutionalized in Nepali civil society, as a Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health analysis found this widely perceived non-violent gathering. The state's response was catastrophic. Police opened fire on protesters and killed at least nineteen students in that one day. Forensic reports from the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital suggest that almost all the gunshot victims had been shot above the waist — a pattern which does not conform to the standard crowd control protocols. A 12-year-old student died, the Ministry of Health and Population of Nepal confirmed. Later, police logs showed that 13,182 rounds of ammunition were fired in two days, including 2,642 live bullets [34].

The protests were radicalized by state violence. On September 9, angry crowds set fire to the parliament building, the Supreme Court, the party offices of all three major parties, and

the homes of political figures. By the end of September, at least 76 people had been killed and more than 2,113 injured. On September 9, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who had begun his fourth term as prime minister only the previous year, resigned along with several cabinet ministers [35].

What followed was a most extraordinary and unprecedented transition. The protesters were part of talks at the Nepal Army Headquarters on the formation of an interim government. They were coordinating through Discord. The bottom-up selection process led to the appointment of Sushila Karki, former Chief Justice of Nepal, as interim prime minister on September 12, 2025. She became the country's first female head of government. President Ramchandra Paudel then dissolved parliament and announced early elections for March 5, 2026 [36].

The 2025 uprising must be understood as part of a wider regional and global wave of Gen Z-led democratic movements. Nepal is the third South Asian government to be toppled by protests led by young people in the 2020s, after Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya movement and Bangladesh's 2024 uprising that overthrew Sheikh Hasina. The internet's equalizing power meant that Nepali youth looked for inspiration in regional upheavals. Movements in several countries even adopted Nepal's One-Piece skull-and-straw-hat flag as a common protest symbol [37].

The uprising also laid bare a deep-seated legitimacy crisis of the post-2015 political order in Nepal. Eight successive governments have rotated among the same three parties and the same aging leaders since the constitution was adopted. Since democracy was restored in 1990, Nepal has had twenty-seven prime ministers, none of them women, each lasting just under a year on average. The Gen Z movement was a generational rejection of the recycled elite, demanding real accountability, an end to dynastic privilege, and a reformulation of the republic's promise [38].

12. The 2026 Election and the Creation of a New Political Order

The verdict of the general election held on March 5, 2026, was not fully anticipated by most analysts and was in the balance. The

centrist anti-establishment Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), founded only in 2022 by former television personality Rabi Lamichhane, won 182 of 275 seats in the lower house of parliament - the first single-party majority in Nepal since 1999. The dominant party in Nepali politics since 1959, the Nepali Congress, was reduced to just 38 seats, former Prime Minister Oli's CPN-UML won only 25 seats and the Maoist-led Nepali Communist Party won only 17 [39].

The RSP's landslide was largely decided by its prime ministerial candidate, 35-year-old structural engineer, rapper and former independent mayor of Kathmandu, Balendra Shah, popularly known as 'Balen'. Shah's own biography was a political statement in itself. His pre-political rap music had dealt with corruption, inequality and government dysfunction, and he had gained prominence during the Gen Z protests of 2025. During his time as Kathmandu's first independent mayor from 2022 to 2026, he introduced reforms like digital building permits and the live broadcasting of council meetings—small but symbolically important gestures toward transparency [40].

Shah's appeal cut across the usual political categories. His campaign drew massive support from young Nepalis, women, Madhesi and diaspora communities, forging a wide national coalition that transcended the regional and ethnic divides that have shaped Nepali politics since 2006. Shah faced off against former prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli in the high-profile Jhapa-5 constituency, beating him by 68,348 votes to Oli's 18,734 votes — the highest individual vote tally in the history of Nepal's parliamentary elections [41].

At 35, Shah was sworn in as prime minister on March 27, 2026, making him Nepal's youngest-ever head of government and its first Madhesi prime minister — a symbolically important milestone for a community from Nepal's southern plains that had long felt marginalized in national politics. Over a third of the 120-plus political parties registered for the 2026 election were born after the Gen Z uprising — the highest number of parties to contest a Nepali election since democracy was restored in 2006 [42].

The new government has a herculean task. The violence of September 2025, which left 76 dead, remains unaccounted for; a commission set up to investigate protest deaths had not yet released its report at the time of writing [43]. Nepal: Transitional justice and protest accountability still outstanding. Economically, Nepal faces high youth unemployment, and disruption of remittance flows from Gulf countries because of regional conflicts and energy shortages. Geopolitically, the RSP government will have to manoeuvre relations with India and China: Indian PM Modi said the election was a proud moment in Nepal's democratic journey, while China congratulated the RSP government and pledged to support Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity [44].

The RSP government's accountability will depend a lot on civil society, including the Gen Z movement groups that helped put it into power, as seen, given its near-supermajority victory with little parliamentary opposition. The obvious danger is that an excessive mandate, however democratically earned, could generate the unresponsiveness that inspired the protests against its predecessors. The question of the hour in Nepal is whether Balendra Shah's government can turn the energy of Nepal's newest democratic revolution into lasting institutional reform [45].

13. Theoretical Considerations

Nepal's democratic transition defies simple categorization in conventional theoretical frameworks. This is not a simple 'third wave' transition driven by economic modernisation (Huntington, 1991) [46], for Nepal remains one of Asia's poorest countries. And it is not a matter of elite-led liberalization or externally driven democratization in the conventional sense. Nepal's trajectory is one of mass mobilization, elite bargaining, armed conflict, and institution-building. It is a messy, non-linear process in which a democratic breakthrough is followed by authoritarian backsliding before a more durable democratic settlement takes hold.

The concept of 'conflict-to-democracy transition' is particularly apt for the 2006 phase. The changes that year in Nepal were directly related to the Maoist insurgency and the political crisis that emerged after the royal coup. The

peace process and the democratic transition were not separate, and the difficulties of post-conflict state-building – including reintegrating combatants, transitional justice, and institutional reform – became enmeshed with the difficulties of democratic consolidation [47].

But the 2025 revolt adds a new theoretical dimension: a so-called "digital democratic rupture". The movement was not organized by political parties, unions, or ideological vanguards, but by a digitally literate generation that used platforms like Discord to coordinate action horizontally, without a hierarchical structure. This phenomenon connects Nepal's experience to a global wave of Gen Z protests in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and beyond, indicating the rise of a new form of democratic contention in which social media platforms both enable mass mobilization and become objects of political contestation when governments try to shut them down [48].

14. Conclusion

Nepal's democratic transition since the 1950s has been marked by setbacks and renewed struggles. Nepal's political history has been a series of fundamental transformations, from the scant parliamentary experiment of 1959-60 to the Panchayat autocracy, the 1990 restoration, the Maoist insurgency, the People's Movement of 2006, the federal republican constitution of 2015, and, most recently, the 2025 Gen Z uprising and the 2026 electoral revolution. Each of these has been a product of both popular pressure and elite negotiation.

The most striking feature of Nepal's experience is the remarkable political agency exercised by ordinary Nepalis across generations — in the streets of Kathmandu, in village assemblies, on the battlefield, and in digital spaces — to demand inclusion, accountability, and dignity from their political system. In this sense, the 2025 protests were a continuation of a long tradition of popular democratic assertion: from the anti-Rana movement of 1950, through the Jana Andolans of 1990 and 2006, to the leaderless digital revolt of Generation Z. Each movement has expanded the circle of political participation and raised the bar for what democratic governance must deliver.

Nepal enters 2026 with a new government, a generational mandate for change, and unresolved questions about justice, inclusion, and institutional integrity. Whether the Shah administration can achieve what its predecessors could not, and whether Nepal's democracy can at last take root on solid foundations, will depend not only on political leadership, but on the lasting ability of Nepali citizens to hold power accountable. Many questions remain unanswered, such as how Nepal is conducting its foreign policy with India, China, and the rest of the world. However, we hope that this transition from monarchy to democracy in Nepal will bring about change and prosperity for the Nepali people.

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