

Nepal royalists seek return of king

AFP- Nearly two decades since Nepal became a secular republic, a surge of pro-monarchy protests have swept the Himalayan nation, fuelled by economic despair and disillusionment with current leaders.

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets last month in a royalist rally that turned violent, with two people killed and more than 100 arrested.

It was one of the latest in a wave of protests demanding the restoration of the monarchy, which has grown in tandem with popular dissatisfaction over political instability, corruption and lacklustre economic development.

The Hindu-majority nation became a secular republic in 2008 after parliament abolished the monarchy in a peace deal to end a decade-long civil war in which more than 16,000 people died.

Rajendra Lingden, chairperson of the royalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Nepal's fifth-largest party, said the king is linked with national identity and pride.

"We do not seek monarchy as a ruling institution, but rather as a guardian that safeguards national interests and prevents foreign interference," Lingden told AFP.

In 2017, RPP won a single seat in parliament. Then in the last election in 2022, their royalist and pro-Hindu agenda gained them 14 seats.

"The country faces instability, prices are high, people are jobless, and there is a lack of education and healthcare facilities", said Rajindra Kunwar, 43, a teacher who joined a royalist demonstration last month.

“That’s why we need the king back.”

– ‘Outdated concept’ –

Former king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah, 77, was crowned in 2001 after his elder brother king Birendra Bir Bikram Shah and his family were killed in a palace massacre that wiped out most of the royal family.

His coronation took place as the Maoist insurgency raged in far-flung corners of Nepal.

Shah suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament in 2005, triggering a democratic uprising in which the Maoists sided with Nepal’s political establishment to orchestrate huge street protests.

That eventually precipitated the end of the conflict, with parliament voting in 2008 to abolish Nepal’s 240-year-old Hindu monarchy.

“I have assisted in and respected the verdict of the people,” Shah said in a short address before leaving his palace, adding that he “will not leave this country” and go into exile.

As he departed, many gathered to cheer the monarchy’s end, while a few royalists wept.

Mainstream politicians have dismissed a return to the past.

“Monarchy is a failed and outdated concept,” said Rajaram Bartaula, chief whip of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), which governs in a coalition with the Nepali Congress Party.

“Conscious Nepalis of the 21st century will not accept the return of the monarchy,” he added.

The World Bank notes that impoverished Nepal faces multiple challenges.

But it also said this month that real GDP grew by 4.9 percent in the first half of the 2025 financial year – up from 4.3 percent in the same period a year earlier – primarily due to a “pickup in agricultural and industrial sectors”.

– ‘Save the nation’ –

The deposed king had largely refrained from commenting on Nepal’s fractious politics – but in the last few months, he made several public appearances, mainly visiting religious sites with supporters.

“It is now time,” the former king said in a statement on the eve of national democracy day in February before embarking on a tour of several districts.

“If we wish to save our nation and maintain national unity, I call on all countrymen to support us for Nepal’s prosperity and progress.”

His arrival in Kathmandu airport last month drew thousands of supporters, who waved the national flag and chanted: “Come king, save the nation”.

Political analyst Hari Sharma said the royalists were seizing an opportunity as dissatisfaction grows among many ordinary Nepalis.

“The royalists have found the chance to articulate their demands and frustrations, especially in a global climate where right-wing conservative ideas are gaining traction,” Hari Sharma said.

AFP