

# Monarchy vs Democracy: A Case Study of Nepal

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**Abstract**—This paper examines the political evolution of Nepal from absolute monarchy to federal democratic republic. By comparing institutional structures, patterns of political participation, governance outcomes, and socio-economic indicators, it assesses the merits and drawbacks of monarchical and democratic systems within the Nepali context. Employing a qualitative case study methodology including archival analysis, secondary literature review, and contemporary media accounts this study elucidates the drivers behind Nepal's democratic transition and evaluates its current challenges.

**Index Terms**—Monarchy, Democracy, Political Transition, Nepal Jana Andolan, Federal Republic, Civil Liberties, Governance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Debates over the relative advantages of monarchy and democracy hinge on differing conceptions of legitimacy, accountability, and national unity. Nepal's unique trajectory—from the Shah dynasty's absolute rule through the Panchayat era to a multiparty federal republic offers a compelling case for exploring how political systems shape state-society relations. This research aims to trace Nepal's institutional transformations, analyse the impact on political participation and governance, and situate current tensions within broader comparative debates on regime type.

## II. PRESENT CONTEXT

Nepal's republican experiment continues amid frequent government changes, coalition infighting, and public unrest. Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, Kathmandu has seen thirteen different federal administrations, underscoring deep political fragmentation between the Communist parties and the Nepali Congress.

In 2025, nationwide protests erupted when the government imposed a ban on 26 social media

platforms to enforce new registration laws. What began as a Gen Z movement against digital censorship quickly broadened into mass demonstrations demanding accountability over corruption, nepotism, and economic inequality. Clashes with security forces left nearly 19 civilians dead and over 200 injured, highlighting generational and systemic divides in Nepal's evolving democracy.

As Nepal prepares its fiscal policy for 2025–26 and eyes graduation from least-developed country status in 2026, the ruling coalition pledges reforms aimed at economic recovery, social inclusion, and strengthening federal institutions. Yet lingering doubts about political will and capacity raise questions about the republic's resilience against regressive forces yearning for centralized authority or a symbolic monarchy restoration.

## III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Unification under the Shah Dynasty

In 1768, Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha unified multiple principalities to establish the Kingdom of Nepal and inaugurate the Shah dynasty. This absolute monarchy commanded centralized authority over military, economic, and judicial spheres, enabling territorial expansion but limiting public accountability.

### Rana Oligarchy

Between 1846 and 1951, power shifted to hereditary prime ministers of the Rana clan who sidelined the Shah monarchs to ceremonial roles. The Rana oligarchy-maintained isolationist policies, curtailed civil liberties, and prioritized elites, provoking discontent and laying groundwork for future democratic movements.

### Panchayat System

King Mahendra's 1960 coup dissolved political parties and instituted the Panchayat system—a party less, centralized model claiming to represent grassroots councils. Though framed as indigenous democracy,

the regime stifled dissent, suppressed regional voices, and entrenched patronage networks until mass protests in 1990 demanded constitutional reforms.

#### IV. TRANSITION TO CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY AND REPUBLIC

##### Jana Andolan I (1990)

Popular uprisings in 1990 forced King Birendra to accept a multiparty constitution, restoring political parties and parliament. The new framework limited royal prerogatives but preserved the monarchy as head of state, inaugurating a fragile constitutional monarchy.

##### Maoist Insurgency and Democratic Backsliding

During the 1990s, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) waged guerrilla warfare against state and feudal structures, contesting both royal authority and democratic elites. King Gyanendra's dismissal of parliament in 2002 ended the constitutional experiment, stoking further conflict.

##### Jana Andolan II and Abolition of Monarchy (2006–2008)

A second mass movement in 2006, led by political parties and Maoists alike, compelled the monarchy to cede power. A Constituent Assembly abolished the 240-year-old institution in 2008, declaring Nepal a federal democratic republic and signaling a definitive break with monarchical rule.

#### V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis draws on comparative regime theory, contrasting:

- Monarchy: centralized legitimacy derived from hereditary authority and tradition.
- Democracy: popular sovereignty, competitive elections, and institutional checks on power.

Key variables include political stability, citizen participation, civil liberties, and governance effectiveness.

#### VI. ANALYSIS: MONARCHY VS DEMOCRACY IN NEPAL

##### Institutional Structures

Under monarchy, executive and legislative powers were fused in the sovereign, limiting institutional oversight. The republican constitution introduced

separation of powers, federalism, and proportional representation, expanding political inclusion but complicating coalition governance.

##### Political Participation and Civil Liberties

Democratic regimes ushered in multiparty competition and press freedoms absent under royal rule. Yet persistent elite capture and procedural irregularities have eroded public trust, as evidenced by youth-led protests challenging both incumbents and entrenched party hierarchies.

##### Governance and Accountability

Monarchical and Panchayat administrations relied on patronage networks to maintain order, often at the expense of service delivery. Democratic governments have pursued anti-corruption measures and social welfare programs but frequently succumb to coalition bargaining and legislative gridlock, hampering policy implementation.

##### Socio-Economic Outcomes

Economic modernization accelerated only after democratic reforms facilitated foreign aid and tourism growth. Nonetheless, unemployment, remittance dependence, and regional disparities persist, fueling public disillusionment with formal political channels.

##### Contemporary Tensions

The 2025 social media ban and resultant protests underscore enduring fault lines: generational divides over digital rights, scepticism toward centralized authority, and demands for transparent governance. These events reveal that Nepal's democratic institutions still face tests as profound as those that ended the monarchy.

#### VII. DISCUSSION

Nepal's experience illustrates that while monarchy can deliver short-term stability through centralized decision-making, it sacri fices political pluralism and civil liberties. Democracy, conversely, promotes inclusivity and accountability but risks fragmentation and policy inconsistency without strong institutional safeguards. Nepal's ongoing challenge is to balance federal decentralization with mechanisms that foster durable coalitions and citizen engagement

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The Nepali case demonstrates that regime change, in isolation, cannot guarantee effective governance or societal cohesion. Sustainable democracy requires continuous institutional refinement, responsive leadership, and vibrant civil society to address structural inequities and foster political legitimacy. Lessons from Nepal's transition are instructive for other nations navigating the complex interplay between tradition and democratic aspirations.

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