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Nepal's vote of reckoning

The upcoming elections could decide if reform finally outpaces entrenched corruption and instability

Nepal will head to the polls on 5 March in what could prove a landmark national election. The vote comes just months after youth-led protests in September demanded sweeping political change, exposing deep frustration with the country's political establishment.

Nestled between India and China, the small Himalayan state has struggled with chronic political instability since the restoration of democracy in 1990. In the following decades, Nepal moved from a centralised monarchical system to a federal democratic republic — a turbulent transition that included a decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006.

This will be the third election under the framework of the 2015 Constitution, which enshrines Nepal as a federal, secular and inclusive republic. Yet despite this progressive framework, successive governments have failed to achieve political stability, curb corruption, uphold good governance or create quality jobs. This has resulted in widespread public frustration with state institutions and political parties.

Against this backdrop, the coming vote is more than a routine democratic exercise. It is an attempt to restore confidence in a constitutional order shaken by protest and political crisis — and a test of whether a new government can push through meaningful reforms despite entrenched structural and economic constraints.

The Gen Z movement and its aftermath

Last year's deadly protests brought down the coalition government formed by the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML). They also triggered a serious institutional crisis, paralysing the executive, the judiciary and other constitutional bodies. Among the protesters' core demands were the lifting of social media bans, curbing corruption and ensuring good

governance.

As Gen Z groups rejected Parliament and refused to accept another party-led government, President Ram Chandra Poudel took the extraordinary step of appointing Sushila Karki – a former chief justice of the Supreme Court and non-member of parliament – as interim prime minister. Karki had also secured the largest share of votes in a digital election conducted through Discord, a social media platform widely used by the movement. The constitutionality of her appointment is now under review by the Supreme Court.

Various Gen Z groups continued to press for immediate measures in the areas of corruption control, governance reform and constitutional change. The Karki-led government argued that only a newly elected legislature would have the mandate to amend the constitution and revise key laws. Nonetheless, it introduced a number of austerity measures and signed an agreement with Gen Z representatives outlining proposed reforms.

Its major provisions include constitutional amendments, revisions to laws aimed at strengthening transparency and accountability, the formation of a high-level constitutional amendment committee, safeguards for digital freedom, and the establishment of a high-level committee to investigate the politicisation of state institutions and political corruption. The agreement, however, will not be binding on the next government.

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The CPN-UML, led by KP Sharma Oli – who was forced from office by the protests – has rejected the agreement between the interim government and the movement. The upheaval has also shaken other major political parties internally. Within the Nepali Congress, a faction led by youth leader Gagan Kumar Thapa unseated two-time party president Sher Bahadur Deuba. A legal battle over the party leadership is now pending before the Supreme Court. The reconstituted NC has aligned itself more closely with Gen Z demands, while other parties have largely retained their existing leadership structures.

In the coming elections, almost all political parties have pledged to address the issues raised by Gen Z, though their level of commitment varies. All major parties have acknowledged the need to amend the constitution to address corruption and governance challenges. The NC,

the largest party in the dissolved House of Representatives (HoR) under its new leadership, has pledged to form an inter-party coordination framework among major parliamentary forces and to seek dialogue and build consensus with parties outside Parliament, civil society and other stakeholders.

The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) – a relatively new party positioning itself as an alternative to traditional political parties – has pledged to form a commission to initiate the constitutional amendment process. Key debates now centre on reforming the electoral system, reconsidering the form of government – whether to retain a parliamentary prime ministerial system or move toward a directly elected executive – and ensuring the autonomy of key institutions such as anti-corruption bodies. Other proposals include internal party reforms, term limits for prime ministers and ministers, and greater transparency and accountability in government.

On corruption, most parties have pledged to form a commission to investigate the assets of political leaders who have held public office since the political changes of 1990. Traditional parties have acknowledged past mistakes during the campaign and promised corrective measures. Meanwhile, newer parties are attracting voters with strong platforms centred on anti-corruption, governance reform and economic growth.

Prospects of change

Whatever its composition, the next government will face intense public pressure to deliver results. Yet Nepal's mixed electoral system – combining First-Past-the-Post and proportional representation – makes a single-party majority unlikely. Coalition politics will remain the norm. However, a close reading of campaign dynamics, media coverage and ground-level voter sentiment suggests that RSP is poised to emerge as the largest party. Led by former television anchor Rabi Lamichhane and backed by the reformist image associated with Kathmandu's former mayor Balendra Sah, RSP has impressed voters with its good governance agenda.

For decades, the NC and the CPN-UML have alternated in power, particularly since the political changes of 1990, yet their governance record has left many citizens disillusioned. Across society, there is a palpable appetite for change. For any meaningful reform process to begin, political stability in Parliament and government is essential. Untimely dissolution of Parliament and frequent government changes have hindered reform efforts in the past. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority — impossible without broad cross-party consensus.

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Agreement may be easier on technical reforms than on core political questions. Constitutional change is often described as opening a 'Pandora's box', inviting competing demands. For instance, royalist groups advocate restoring the Hindu state and monarchy, while other identity-based groups press their own agendas.

Governance reform will also require amendments to numerous laws — an equally complex and time-consuming process. Yet without stronger institutions and credible anti-corruption measures, private investment will remain weak. Sustainable growth, job creation and productivity gains depend on improved governance.

There is also a need to attract greater foreign direct investment to bridge funding gaps in infrastructure and development. However, foreign companies frequently cite bureaucratic red tape and policy uncertainty as obstacles to investing in Nepal. The economic policies of the next government will therefore be closely watched at home and abroad.

The incoming administration will thus confront a formidable agenda of political, economic and institutional reform. Whether it can meet public expectations will depend above all on its ability to secure stability and forge consensus in Nepal's fragmented political landscape.



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