

# Nepal Observer

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## **Nepal's voters are proving themselves to be responsible citizens: there is hope for political stability, but what about social inclusion?<sup>1</sup>**

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The voters have spoken. The election result could hardly have been clearer. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) is the overwhelming winner of the House of Representatives election. The party secured a clear two-thirds majority under the first-past-the-post system and, even when proportional representation seats are included, fell just short of such a majority by the narrowest of margins. This also significantly overshadows the victory of the CPN (Maoist) in the elections to the first Constituent Assembly in 2008, when it won exactly half of the first-past-the-post seats. Whereas the Maoist party had received just under 30 per cent of the proportional representation votes in 2008, the RSP now secured around 48 per cent. This suggests that voters finally desire political stability and that they consider this most likely to be achieved through a single-party government led by the RSP. The justified dissatisfaction with the manipulations and misguided policies of the old parties that have dominated Nepal for years is likely to have played a significant role. The latter was the cause of the Gen-Z revolt in September, which has gained democratic legitimacy through the current election.

As a result, the old parties and their so-called leading politicians, who have dominated Nepalese politics over the last twenty years, have been virtually wiped out. They have been almost obliterated. Only the Nepali Congress (NC) has managed to secure a double-digit share of the vote in the direct elections, which may be linked to the belated, though still incomplete, internal party reforms. Most of the old politicians, insofar as they stood for election at all, were effectively dismantled.

### **Consequences of the youth revolt**

Looking back at why this snap election took place in the first place, we come to the events of 8 and 9 September 2025, when the country's younger generation – half the population is aged 25 or under – had had enough after the Oli government, on top of its already misguided policies, sought to impose even tighter controls on social media. The Oli government attempted to suppress peaceful demonstrations on the first day against this, as well as against rampant corruption and nepotism – which were being covered up by party leaders – and many other issues, with brutal force, resulting in 19 deaths on that first day alone. The then Prime Minister, who bore political responsibility for this, still maintains to this day that he had nothing to do with it. The youth movement's response the following day was the senseless destruction of public and

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<sup>1</sup> A similar version of this article has been published in [Khabarhub](https://www.khabarhub.com), 16 Mrch 2026

private property, which inflicted unimaginable damage on the already impoverished country. A total of 77 people lost their lives in this uprising and there were numerous injuries.

In the face of the violent excesses of the rioting crowds, the Oli government resigned en masse. Many leading politicians fled or sought refuge with the army, which ultimately restored peace and order. The transitional government led by Prime Minister Sushila Karki, established in cooperation with the army, President Ram Chandra Paudel and representatives of Gen-Z, found itself faced with a seemingly insurmountable task. Many of Gen-Z's demands could not be implemented at all given that parliament had been dissolved. Consequently, the government prioritised the parliamentary elections that have now taken place. Sushila Karki may well have made mistakes, but credit must be given to her and to the Election Commission for the fact that the elections were very well prepared and conducted. The result shows all too clearly that the people no longer wanted the system, the politics and the politicians that have dominated the last ten years. The voters have spoken and they want fundamental change.

### **Reactions from the old parties**

Why were the established parties dealt such a heavy blow in these elections? First and foremost, of course, there is the normal process of attrition inherent in a democracy. Following the adoption of the current constitution, these parties had ten years in which to actually implement it and drive forward the country's democratisation and development. Unfortunately, from the outset, the aspirations of leading politicians were primarily driven by personal ambitions for power. To achieve this, they increasingly tolerated, encouraged and covered up corruption and nepotism. For the candidates in the direct election system, they again selected predominantly men from the Khas Arya circle in the current election. They simply ignored the constitutional provision for adequate social inclusion, just as they ignored the involvement of the party grassroots in these nominations. The PR system gave them a further option to nominate MPs from the ranks of their respective constituencies. The very idea of social inclusion is rendered absurd by the current electoral system, which is inadequate in many respects. It should also be noted that the law on political parties grants party leaders completely undemocratic powers, which make fruitful dialogue and critical debate within the parties – which are, after all, so vital to a democracy – impossible. Finally, reference must also be made to the practice of forming electoral alliances, which have repeatedly worked in the past and served solely to maintain the dominance of the old established parties. After the elections, such alliances generally ceased to have any significance and were thus nothing more than a betrayal of the voters. In the current election, at least among the old dominant parties, no such alliances were formed. This, too, limited their chances in the direct election system.

Politically aware voters therefore had ample reason to stop voting for these failed parties and politicians. However, this situation was exacerbated further by the behaviour of the old parties and their leading politicians following the youth uprising. None of them were willing to acknowledge their mistakes, and some still refuse to do so to this day. After a short while, they believed they could simply carry on as before. Above all, the CPN (UML) and the NC attempted to prevent the elections by seeking a court order to reinstate the dissolved parliament. Both parties rejected internal party reforms. The UML party leader, KP Oli, once again used the considerable power vested in him to manipulate the dominance of his supporters at the party conference in

such a way that critics and those who raised concerns stood no chance and were subsequently mercilessly punished by Oli. In the end, Oli stood for election with his loyal followers, who have now been punished accordingly by the voters. Many people rightly felt that Oli should have stepped down from politics at the latest following the events of last September – indeed, much earlier. But his lust for power was probably already far too great for that, as his megalomaniacal prediction that his party would win 70 per cent of the seats suggested. In other words: KP Oli was practically begging for the crushing direct defeat against Balendra Shah that he has now suffered, as well as for his party's humiliating defeat. Presumably, even a radical overhaul of the party's personnel, structure and ideology following the events of September would not have been able to avert the defeat, but it might have been somewhat less severe.

Things took a slightly different turn within the NC. There, the long-standing party leader Sher Bahadur Deuba – who, along with his wife, had been physically attacked during the youth uprising – attempted, much like Oli, to maintain the status quo. At one point, he had even considered collaborating with Oli. However, an internal party revolt, instigated by the two general secretaries Gagan Kumar Thapa and Bishwa Prakash Sharma, toppled the faction led by Deuba – which had been so dominant for many years – at a party convention. Unlike in the UML, a younger generation was thus able to take the helm of the party. Presumably, however, this came far too late to restore the 'old lady' of Nepalese politics to her former glory. It may well be thanks to the reform drive launched at short notice, however, that the NC has now managed to win twice as many direct mandates as the UML. But the numerous flaws and weaknesses of the Deuba system probably had a greater impact. Nor is any real change yet apparent in the very last-minute selection of candidates. Whilst numerous former leading party politicians were no longer considered, there was no sign of significantly greater participation from the younger generation, nor from women, Dalits, Janajati, Muslims, etc. The current defeats of the party's two new leading politicians are also likely to weigh heavily. There is already discussion about whether there should be another change at the top of the party, but I consider this premature. Thapa and Sharma had no time at all before the elections to comprehensively reform the party. It is not these two who are responsible for the electoral disaster, but the Deuba regime, which dominated and controlled the party's politics until the beginning of this year. Thapa and Sharma should now be given time to genuinely reform the party in line with the times, in terms of personnel, organisation and ideology. A pioneering step could, for example, be the introduction of social inclusion within the party, something which has so far been lacking in all parties, including, to a large extent, the now victorious RSP.

The former Maoist party, now known as the Nepali Communist Party (NCP), took a different approach in the run-up to the elections. This is an alliance between Pushpa Kamal Dahal's former CPN (Maoist Centre) and numerous smaller communist or Maoist splinter parties. Dahal himself no longer calls himself "chairman" but "coordinator", yet this has done nothing to alter his dominant claim to sole authority. Dahal was presumably aware that the star of his Maoist movement would continue to wane. The left-wing parties that he managed to persuade to merge with his own party may appear numerous, but they were all largely insignificant. The UML, which refused to merge, would probably have made the election result look slightly better for the NCP, but even this would not have prevented the defeat of the left, as the election results in both electoral systems demonstrate. Unlike Deuba and Oli, Dahal has not attempted to use legal means

to force the reinstatement of the dissolved parliament. Perhaps this has played a small part in his winning a direct seat once again in the former Maoist heartland, where people are still waiting for the promised improvements to their living conditions. Since its major electoral success in 2008, when it achieved what was then a truly dreamlike result, the Maoist Party – or the current NCP – has been in a state of continuous decline. With a total of just 17 seats, the party is increasingly being relegated to the ranks of the minor parties. Its once revolutionary ambition has failed, but he will not admit it. Indeed, in view of the heavy losses suffered by all left-wing parties, one must ask whether communism is losing ground in Nepal.

### **RSP's victory**

The RSP contested the 2022 elections as a newly formed party, winning seven direct seats and, with 10.7 per cent of the proportional representation votes, almost as many votes as the Maoist Centre. Although its party leader, Rabi Lamichhane, repeatedly made negative headlines – sometimes for lacking Nepalese citizenship, sometimes for his alleged involvement in the cooperative scandal – the party is now the clear winner of this general election and will govern alone. How can this development be explained?

The RSP set out three and a half years ago with the aim of being different from the established parties. With its symbol, the bell, it sought to rouse people from their slumber. The fact that this did not prove more successful in terms of direct mandates in 2022 was likely also due to the manipulation by the established parties through their sham electoral alliances, whose pledges were then disregarded after the elections. In what way is this party different? It was undoubtedly younger than the old parties as early as 2022. It also had a significantly higher proportion of women among its direct candidates, although this too remained below ten per cent and fell far short of the requirements of the constitution. In terms of its public image, however, the party always gave a dynamic, almost youthful impression. With its many significantly younger candidates, it was the party that best represented the concerns voiced by young people in the current elections. This may also have been the reason why the RSP was better able to respond to the demands of Gen Z, giving the impression that it identified with their ideals. A further boost came when Balendra Shah, the 35-year-old mayor of Kathmandu, joined the party and quickly rose to become its figurehead. This was facilitated by the fact that the party leader, Rabi Lamichhane, was unable to stand for a top office due to various ongoing legal proceedings against him. Thus, Balendra Shah, a former popular rapper, became his party's declared candidate for the office of Prime Minister. With his immense popularity, he gave the RSP a further boost and was able to take on the already severely weakened KP Oli in his traditionally safe constituency of Jhapa 5, humiliating him in the process.

### **The RSP's tasks**

In which areas does the victorious RSP have some catching up to do? The party will be four years old next summer. Unfortunately, there are some areas in which it has so far refused to make a clear statement or has expressed a confusing view. This applies, for example, to the issue of federalism. In the past, the RSP has repeatedly advocated abolishing the provinces and reducing the political system to a two-tier structure: national and local levels. It was also noteworthy that the party did not take part in the 2022 provincial assembly elections. Yet the current federal system has not failed, as its opponents are so fond of claiming, but has simply not been properly

implemented; it has been misunderstood and abused for the power politics of the national party elites. Given the traditional neglect of many regions of the country and their unequal ethnic composition, a functioning federal system could contribute to greater social inclusion, unlike the centrally controlled state of the last 10 years.

Like the established parties, the RSP also lacks adequate social inclusion. The RSP may have brought about a significant rejuvenation of Nepal's political landscape, but it too is heavily dominated by male members of the Khas Arya castes. This holds true even for the slightly higher proportion of women. Only 16 of the party's 164 direct candidates were women, 13 of whom were elected. The latter may also be seen as evidence of an increasingly stronger role for women, provided they are allowed to play it. Other social groups are also severely under-represented in the RSP, particularly the Dalits, of whom there was only one candidate. This may go some way towards explaining why the party has repeatedly advocated a return to a Hindu state in the past, or at least that is how it sounded. Here, the party will have to prove that it is there for the country's entire multi-ethnic and multicultural society. And a Hindu state is not compatible with this. Religion and state must remain separate, which also means that the secularism enshrined in the constitution must be far more than the interpretation given there, namely that every citizen is free to practise their traditional religion and culture. The latter, however, does not deserve to be called 'secularism'. In particular, the young party must demonstrate that it will not allow itself to be drawn into the schemes of other parties, such as the offer from the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), whose failed politician Kamal Thapa has now proposed to help the RSP secure a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives if it were to reintroduce the Hindu state in return.

Apart from the 1990s, when the NC – severely weakened by factionalism – twice held a theoretical absolute majority in a parliament composed entirely of directly elected members, the RSP will in future be able to govern alone. This at least fulfils one prerequisite for greater political stability. But more is needed to achieve this. Above all, it will depend on whether and how the future government addresses the country's many challenges; that it does not once again amount to nothing but empty talk and slogans; that the economy is revitalised; that jobs are created within the country so that young people are not forced into labour migration; that the rule of law prevails and human rights are upheld; that the peace process is finally brought to a conclusion; and that women, Dalits, Janajati, Muslims and Madheshi are given the same opportunities for participation and the same rights as the male Khas Arya, that nature and the environment are protected and preserved and air pollution is curbed, that citizenship law and electoral law are reformed in a way that is fair and equitable for all, and that Nepal, in this difficult global situation, maintains a path of independence and security in friendly relations with neighbouring states and the wider world. One could mention many other things. These are all tasks that the future government must conscientiously address.

So let us hope for better policies. Things can really only get better. The RSP has the necessary majority to shape these policies in the interests of the country and its people. It has already nominated Balendra Shah as its candidate for the office of Prime Minister during the election campaign. Shah had already demonstrated, as Mayor of Kathmandu, that he is capable of holding a position of responsibility. He is still very young and sometimes comes across as a bit impetuous.

He should try to avoid mistakes such as his approach to solving problems like slum settlements or street vendors. The Greater Nepal map behind his desk would certainly be inappropriate for the Prime Minister's office. Otherwise, he also demonstrated during the election campaign that he understood the voters' interests and was able to communicate his solutions.

### **Other parties**

Not only were the three major established parties severely decimated, but the smaller parties also suffered bitter setbacks. Most of them have virtually disappeared from the scene. Ultimately, this may also be linked to the fact that they, too, were part of the old system.

First and foremost is the RPP, which, unlike almost any other party, continues to advocate for the restoration of the monarchy on the basis of a Hindu state, even 18 years after its abolition. It is the only one of the old minor parties that managed to secure a direct mandate and four proportional representation seats. With its significant involvement in the debate over the revival of the Hindu state and the monarchy, the RPP has repeatedly caused unrest and, alongside the misguided policies of the old parties, placed an additional burden on people's daily lives. In this election, the population has delivered an overwhelming commitment to democracy and the republic. Looking at the results of the party that most strongly advocates a return to the monarchy and the Hindustaat, the outcome is more than sobering. The party chairman has failed just as much as the senior vice-chairman, Rabindra Mishra, who has now resigned from the party on the spot. The latter had emerged in 2017 as an "alternative force" within the promising Bibeksheel Sajha Party, before realising that he would rather advocate a return to the root of many problems: namely, a Hindu state and the monarchy. Compared to 2022, the current result is yet another setback, and the RPP should finally recognise that the vast majority of people in Nepal do not share its views.

The situation is even worse for the Tarai parties, both those that have been in existence for some time and those founded only a few years ago. For a long time, the leaders of these parties justified their existence by claiming to represent specifically the interests and concerns of the people of the Tarai, on the grounds that these were not, or were insufficiently, taken into account by the national parties. Whilst this justification was valid, the leaders of the Tarai parties soon began to prioritise similar personal ambitions for power to those seen among the top politicians of the major national parties. Consequently, the advocacy of interests they had initially claimed soon took a back seat. The elected representatives of these parties formed coalitions with one or the other national party in order to secure their respective governing majority in parliament. In return, they were awarded one or other ministerial post. The concerns of the Tarai population, however, were mostly neglected.

Whilst the then still small number of Tarai parties had managed to win over 80 of the 601 seats in the elections for the first Constituent Assembly in 2008, this figure had already more than halved by the second election in 2013, partly due to the increasing fragmentation of these parties. In the 2017 elections, they again secured 33 seats, divided between two parties; by 2022, this had fallen to just 16. Today, the Tarai parties have sunk into insignificance. They have neither won a direct mandate nor received anywhere near enough votes to enter parliament via the proportional representation lists.

This downward trend has also affected CK Raut's Janamat Party (JP), which contested parliamentary elections for the first time in 2022 and was represented by six MPs in the previous parliament. Raut, who had originally advocated for an independent Tarai state, tended to fade into the background in parliament with his small group and occasionally adopted a coalition policy similar to that pursued by other Tarai politicians. Recently, the JP has also faced internal party problems.

Another successful new party in 2022 was the Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP), which won three direct seats at the time. Various scandals and internal power struggles, culminating in a party split, severely damaged the NUP. This party, too, had repeatedly been called upon by the major established parties to help secure a majority.

Also worthy of mention are parties that were only recently founded in the wake of the youth uprising of September 2025. The Ujyalo Nepal Party (UNP) is particularly noteworthy. Its promising leader, Kumar Singh Ghising, had briefly agreed to join the now highly successful RSP shortly before the elections. However, he subsequently distanced himself from it again, apparently due to differences over leadership claims. Ghising, who once turned the energy sector around, brought the electricity authority out of the red and put an end to the constant power cuts, would certainly have been a valuable partner in the future government.

Another new party is the Shram Sanskriti Party (SSP), founded by Harka Sampang, the former mayor of Dharan. Unlike the UNP, the SSP managed to win three direct seats, all of which went to members of the Rai community. The SSP demonstrated a certain degree of strength, particularly in Koshi Province. In the end, it also managed to clear the 3 per cent threshold under the proportional representation system and, with seven MPs, will be the fifth-strongest party in the new House of Representatives. It presents itself as a further alternative to the three major established parties for the future.

## **Conclusion**

The elections demonstrate the citizens' good understanding of democracy. The majority of people were dissatisfied with what the old national parties had been doing since the current constitution came into force – that is, for the past 10 years. They saw the constant lies, the endless power struggles, the manipulation, rampant corruption, nepotism and, most recently, the inability of the so-called party leaders to admit their mistakes and shortcomings. The youth revolts and the large number of young voters are also likely to have contributed to the old, entrenched factions being voted out of office in a peaceful yet drastic manner.

The RSP's clear victory must certainly also be seen as a kind of protest vote. The party's candidates were significantly younger than those of the established, stagnant major parties. Furthermore, the RSP was the only party to credibly claim to address the demands of Gen Z. A fly in the ointment in this picture are the unresolved legal issues surrounding their party leader, Rabi Lamichhane, even if they clearly did not carry much weight in the elections. These should be resolved immediately and not swept under the carpet. Otherwise, it looks just like the old parties. In future, the RSP will have to prove that it really is different, and that will not always be easy. For instance, some of Gen Z's demands require a constitutional amendment, which in turn

requires the support of two-thirds of MPs in both chambers of parliament. However, the RSP is not represented in the second chamber of parliament, the National Assembly.

Other parts of the constitution also need to be amended as a matter of urgency. For instance, the law on citizenship must be improved so that Nepali women and their descendants have exactly the same rights as Nepali men and their descendants. The current citizenship law is clearly shaped by the patriarchal and macho mindset of the ruling male elite.

The electoral law also needs to be revised in a number of respects. At present, only a small proportion of potential voters have actually been able to vote. And this is not solely because turnout this time was just under 60 per cent, which is low by Nepalese standards. The main problem is that many people cannot vote because there is no postal voting or other voting options. Consequently, anyone who is unable to travel to their village on election day or who lives abroad is excluded. However, anyone who is working during the elections – as an election official, security staff, hospital staff, etc. – is also excluded. Some of these people have now been given the opportunity to participate, at least in the proportional representation system, though this has not always worked out. In any case, these people are denied or restricted in their fundamental right to vote. The Supreme Court has repeatedly criticised this, but the former top politicians have never taken any interest in it. In this context, mention must also be made of the millions of stateless people, particularly in the Tarai, who are excluded because they are denied full citizenship through their mothers.

The voting age should also be changed. In Western democracies, there is a growing trend towards lowering the voting age to 16. Given that half the population is aged 25 or younger, such a reduction in the voting age should also be urgently considered in Nepal. Even more serious is the age restriction of 25 for the right to stand for election. In Western democracies, this stands at 18. Given the young average age of the population, half of them are excluded from active political participation. Until these elections, Nepal was a state controlled by old men who refused to let go until they were voted out by the mature citizens. Now, only 13 of the directly elected MPs are over 60. Fifty-five are under 40, and a further 57 are under 50. This must be regarded as a great success, and it is thanks to the RSP.

Unfortunately, however, there are still far too many shortcomings regarding other aspects of social inclusion. The PR system was introduced to ensure that all social groups are adequately represented in political life, but it does not function properly in this regard. The main reason is that the political parties are entirely under the control of male Khas Aryas and, when nominating direct candidates, they predominantly put forward men from their own social group. Women in general and members of other groups are simply overlooked far too often. Unfortunately, this also applies to the now victorious RSP. The deliberate disregard of the Dalits must surely be regarded as a criminal offence. Since the parties are unlikely to change their ways, it seems that inclusionary provisions must first be introduced for the FPTP system as well – provisions that already existed under Article 63(4) of the 2007 Interim Constitution, but which the parties unfortunately failed to adhere to at the time. Only then does it make sense for a corresponding proportion of Khas Arya candidates to be nominated via the PR system as well. Given current practice, the over-representation of Khas Arya is only being further reinforced. In this context, one might also reconsider whether the PR system should not be accorded greater importance

once again, as was the case during the period of the Constituent Assemblies. At present, the PR system tends to serve merely as a stopgap. For example, it ensures that 33 per cent of MPs are women, as the candidates nominated under the first-past-the-post system are overwhelmingly men. Under the current system, there is simply no genuine representation of the concerns of all social groups.

The fact that the RSP, which is set to form the next government, did not take part in the 2022 provincial elections and currently holds no seats in the National Assembly could prove to be a disadvantage. The Assembly remains dominated by the established national parties, the NC, UML and NCP. Despite its narrow two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives, the future ruling party could therefore face difficulties in passing laws that require the approval of both chambers of parliament. In particular, various necessary constitutional amendments are virtually impossible. Cooperation with the established parties is therefore essential here. This may be viewed as either positive or negative. However, it could also continue to jeopardise political stability, unless the established parties are finally prepared to adopt policies that are geared towards the concerns of the country and its people.