

Nepal keeps its date with destiny

Defying the spectre of violence that killed nine people, frequent blasts and a shutdown called in the Terai plains, Nepal Thursday kept its date with destiny, holding a unique election after nearly six decades of struggle and bloodshed for it.

Octogenarian Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala led the 17.6 million voters, being one of the first to cast his vote for the historic constituent assembly election from his home town in Biratnagar in southern Nepal as polling opened at 7 a.m.

As soon as the over 20,000 polling booths opened in 240 constituencies in 75 districts, voters began queuing up to cast their ballot in an exercise that could spell doom for the nation's centuries-old royal family and transform the Himalayan kingdom into a federal republic.

There was unprecedented security for the first national election after nearly a decade with over 60,000 security personnel and over 55,000 temporary staff deployed along with round the clock aerial patrolling to ensure a free and fair election.

Once known as the home of Mt Everest, the highest peak in the world, and then the land of a violent communist insurgency that killed over 13,000, Nepal became the cynosure of all eyes as the first country to hold an election to determine the fate of its King Gyanendra and the lineage of the Shah dynasty of monarchs who had ruled the country from the 18th century.

It is also being watched closely due to the emergence of the Maoist guerrillas as a parliamentary party from an underground organisation once banned as terrorists.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), that ended its decade-old 'People's War' in 2006 and signed a ceasefire, returning to parliament and eventually joining Koirala's coalition government, Thursday faces the battle of the ballot, participating in an election after nearly 17 years.

The charismatic leader of the party, an agrarian graduate called Pushpa Kamal Dahal who left his profession as a school teacher to take up arms and declare war on the powerful royal dynasty, faces an acid test, contesting from the capital as well as Rolpa, the remote mountainous district that gave birth to the Maoist movement.

'The dream of all martyrs has finally come true,' exulted Dahal, now famed as Prachanda, meaning 'Awesome', as he cast his vote early Thursday morning from the picturesque district of Chitwan along the Indo-Nepal border famed for its wildlife park.

Along with 12 members of his family, including his wife Sita and son Prakash, both of whom are full-time party workers, Prachanda cast his vote after 28 years, marking the end of an era when he carried a price on his head, and the beginning of a new one in which the Maoists are hoping to lead the new government.

Within the first hour, most top leaders had cast their votes.

They included former deputy prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, whose Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist lost a candidate Tuesday after unidentified gunmen shot him dead in

remote Surkhet district, causing the poll to be deferred in that constituency to April 19.

The others were former premiers Surya Bahadur Thapa and Sher Bahadur Deuba and pace and construction minister Ram Chandra Poudel.

Chief Election Commissioner Bhoj Raj Pokhrel said the first results are expected by Friday.

'The position of the parties is likely to be made clear within 10 days,' Pokhrel said.

Nepal has adopted a mixed system to elect the 601-member constituent assembly.

While 240 seats would be elected on the basis of a direct fight, 335 would be chosen on the basis of proportional representation with the remaining 26 to be nominated by the PM.

Within 21 days of the announcement of results, the constituent assembly would have to hold its first meeting and declare if Nepal is to remain a kingdom or become a republic.

In December the Maoists forced parliament to proclaim Nepal a federal republic with the proviso that it would be implemented after it was endorsed by the election.

An element of uncertainty hangs over the twice-postponed polls with questions as to what would happen should the voters desire to retain the king.

The Maoists have warned they would begin a new revolt if that happens and there is fear that the former rebels may turn violent during the election.

The king, a key actor in Nepal's politics, however has no vote along with his family.

In a surprising turn of events, King Gyanendra issued a message from his palace on the eve of the election, asking his 'beloved countrymen' to vote without fear. Royal watchers say it indicates either confidence in the king that his crown will be saved by the royalist parties in the fray or that he is reconciled to a new life as a commoner stripped of all former glory.

Ironically, the king's grandfather Tribhuvan had promised to hold the constituent assembly election in 1950 after he returned to power from exile in India. But he never kept his promise and Maoists renewed the call for election in 1996 when they began their savage 'People's War'.

Though the political parties resisted the demand, they eventually conceded in 2006 after King Gyanendra seized power with the help of the army and waged a war on both the opposition and the Maoists.

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