

Nepal king keeps date with spring

After a winter of discontent, Nepal's 'suspended' King Gyanendra kept his date with religion, making his first public appearance since a new constitution divested him of his remaining executive position as head of state.

The king Tuesday appeared at the capital's public square, where an ancient palace stands as a tribute to the omnipotence Nepal's kings once enjoyed, for a traditional ceremony.

Basanta Panchami, the first day of spring as well as the festival of the Hindu goddess of learning Saraswati, is traditionally observed at the Hanumandhoka Durbar Square with the chanting of verses from Hindu scriptures and religious rites.

Amidst reports of royalists instigating unrest in the southern plains, the king appeared without the fanfare royal motorcades he used to enjoy in the past. He was garlanded and presented a salute by the Nepal Army and followed it up by listening to priests chanting lines from the Vedas.

This is the first public appearance by the humbled king, who had to yield his position as head of state to Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala when a new constitution was promulgated Dec 16.

Since then, the new statute has put the 238-year-old institution of monarchy on hold till a key election is held by June.

The election will decide if Nepal is to remain a kingdom or it will abolish the crown and become a republic.

Earlier this month, the king's ceremonial task of administering oath of office to the chief justice was also taken over by the prime minister.

Forced to give up his place in the government as well as the army, which was renamed to distance it from the royal family, the king has only the traditional religious festivals left to him to attend to.

After a public uprising against his direct rule and the fall of his government in April, Nepal's new multi-party government has declared the country a secular state from the earlier Hindu kingdom.

With neither the ruling seven-party alliance nor the Maoists showing any interest in religious ceremonies, this is the only bastion still left to the royal family.

Since he stepped down from power in April, the king's first public appearance was at the temple of a Hindu goddess of power where he offered sacrifices.

King Gyanendra's 15-month absolute rule was marked by sacrifices at various temples and consulting numerous astrologers.

Pro-Hindu groups have still been rallying behind the king, demanding that Nepal be declared a Hindu kingdom again.

A Nepali weekly reported that next month, when Hindus celebrate the Shiva Ratri festival, royalists

will organise a march of Indian Naga sadhus (ascetics) who wear only a loin cloth throughout the year.

The holy men will parade on the roads of the capital, demanding the restoration of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, the Jana Aastha weekly said.

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