

King loses place in Nepal's historic knights' game

In yet another sign that Nepal's royal family is losing its place in the nation's socio-cultural life, King Gyanendra, for the first time in the history of Nepal, will not be attending the Ghode Jatra festival in the capital, one of the most colourful and attractive ceremonies watched by hundreds.

Held in the heart of the capital every summer, the festival draws spectators from far and wide to watch soldiers of the Nepal Army perform astonishing feats on horseback.

The event is traced to an old legend that associates it with the destruction of a demon who preyed on children.

In the past, when the king of Nepal used to head the army, he was the chief guest at all army celebrations, including Ghode Jatra.

However, after the present king Gyanendra's attempt to seize power and rule the government directly resulted in a public revolt, the new government formed last year removed the king as head of the army.

The change began to be evident from this year with Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, who is the new army chief and head of state, attending all the programmes earlier earmarked for the king.

Last month, the traditional army parade on Shiv Ratri, a widely celebrated Hindu festival, took place without the attendance of the royal family. With the octogenarian premier being ill, the army chief, Gen Rukmangad Katuwal, had to step in as the chief guest.

The Ghode Jatra festival on Sunday, however, is expected to have Koirala as chief guest since the 84-year-old leader has recovered from jaundice.

The disappearance of the crown from Nepal's colourful ceremonies comes at a time the government also decided to axe the servitors employed in the palace by 50 percent. From nearly 800 employees, the Narayanhity royal palace will now have less than 400 staffers with many due to retire as well.

For the first time in the history of the Shah dynasty of kings, the palace recently had to defend itself against the Maoist guerrillas, who are making public allegations about royalists plotting to assassinate politicians and diplomats.

A recent statement issued by the king's secretariat called the allegations malicious and baseless.

Before King Gyanendra ascended the throne in 2001 after the killing of his brother king Birendra, such open allegations against the royals would have been inconceivable.

However, besides losing the allegiance of his subjects, the king could now also lose his crown with the new government having pledged to hold a historic election by June that will put the institution of monarchy to vote.

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