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General Election in Nepal

How GenZ changes the country's political landscape

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Nepal's early general election on March 5, 2026, marked one of the most significant shifts in the country's political landscape since the adoption of the 2015 Constitution.¹ The election followed a period of intense political instability triggered by the youth-led GenZ protests of September 2025, which ultimately led to the resignation of the government of former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.²

Although Nepal has held several elections since the transition to a federal democratic system, the 2026 vote stands out due to the unprecedented electoral success of the reform-oriented Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). Early results suggest that the party is on course for a landslide victory that could fundamentally reshape the country's party system and weaken the long-standing dominance of traditional political forces such as the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist). The emergence of RSP leader Balendra Shah as a potential prime minister also symbolizes a generational and political shift in Nepali politics.

Background

The 2026 general election represents the third parliamentary election since the adoption of Nepal's new constitution in 2015, which established a federal system and decentralized governance structure.³ The election was officially announced on 12 September 2025 by the President of Nepal following the recommendation of the government after widespread youth-led protests demanded political reform and accountability.⁴

These protests, often referred to as the "*GenZ movement*," reflected growing frustration among younger voters with dominant political elites, corruption scandals and government

¹ Government of Nepal. 2015. Constitution of Nepal 2015. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal. Available at: https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal-2072_Eng_www.moljpa.gov_.npDate-72_11_16.pdf (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

² BBC News. 2025. "What We Know About Nepal Anti-Corruption Protests as PM Resigns." BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crkj0lzlr3ro> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

³ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). 2026. "Elections in Nepal: 2026 General Elections." Election Snapshot. Available at: <https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/election-snapshots/elections-nepal-2026-general-elections> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

⁴ Al Jazeera. 2025. "Nepal Sets March 5 Vote, Restrictions Eased as Interim Government Takes Charge." Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/13/nepal-sets-march-5-vote-restrictions-eased-as-interim-govt-takes-charge> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

inefficiency perceived by the younger members of society. The protests significantly undermined the legitimacy of the ruling coalition and ultimately forced the resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, opening the way for early elections. The political environment leading up to the vote was therefore characterized by deep public dissatisfaction with the traditional political establishment. Established parties such as the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) had dominated Nepal's political system for decades, but many voters increasingly widely viewed them as disconnected from the concerns of younger generations. Amid these developments, the relatively new Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) emerged as a reform-oriented alternative advocating transparency, good governance and generational change.

Electoral Process and Participation

Voting took place nationwide on 5 March 2026 in a single phase. Polling stations opened at 7:00 a.m. and closed at 5:00 p.m., allowing voters ten hours to cast their ballots. The Election Commission of Nepal established 10,963 polling stations and 23,112 polling centers across the country to facilitate the electoral process.⁵ International and domestic observers monitored the election to ensure transparency and credibility. Approximately 4,500 observers from three international organizations and 37 national organizations were deployed. Although this number was lower than the more than 20,000 observers present during the 2022 election, monitoring coverage was still considered adequate.

The election drew participation from more than 3,400 candidates representing 68 political parties, reflecting the highly pluralistic nature of Nepal's political system. Voter participation remained strong. More than 18.9 million citizens were registered to vote, including nearly one million first-time voters.⁶ Youth participation played a particularly important role: approximately 52 percent of the electorate was between 18 and 40 years old. Overall turnout exceeded 60 percent, roughly comparable to the 61.63 percent turnout recorded in the 2022 parliamentary election. Although slightly lower than the historic participation levels of earlier elections, the turnout indicates sustained engagement in Nepal's democratic process.⁷

Nepal uses a mixed electoral system designed to combine direct representation with proportional inclusion. Voters cast two ballots:

- One ballot to elect **165 members of parliament through the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system** from individual constituencies.
- A second ballot to elect **110 members through proportional representation** from national party lists.

This mixed system was introduced by the 2015 Constitution to ensure both local representation and broader political inclusivity. However, critics have often argued that it

⁵ The Kathmandu Post. 2026. "Enthusiastic Voting Underway Nationwide: Election Commission." Available at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/03/05/enthusiastic-voting-underway-nationwide-election-commission> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

⁶ The Kathmandu Post. 2025. "EC Publishes Final Voters' Roll with 18.9 Million Eligible Voters." Available at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/12/27/ec-publishes-final-voters-roll-with-18-9-million-eligible-voters> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

⁷ The Kathmandu Post. 2026. "Voter Turnout Around 60 Percent in Nepal's Parliamentary Elections." Available at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/03/05/voter-turnout-around-60-percent-in-nepal-s-parliamentary-elections> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

makes it difficult for a single party to secure a decisive parliamentary majority, often resulting in coalition governments. The 2026 election results appear to challenge this assumption.

Election Outcome

Early results suggest a dramatic transformation in Nepal's political landscape. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) has achieved a dominant lead in the directly elected constituencies, securing **125 of the 165 FPTP seats**⁸ and leading in several additional races. If confirmed, this performance could enable the party to obtain a simple majority—or even approach a two-thirds majority—in the 275-member House of Representatives.

Traditional parties performed significantly worse. The Nepali Congress secured only 18 seats in the direct contests, while the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) won 8 seats.⁹ Other parties such as the Nepal Communist Party, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party and the newly established Shrama Shakti Party gained only a handful of seats. The election therefore represents not merely a routine change in government but a structural shift in Nepal's party system.

The election also produced a series of remarkable personal defeats for senior political figures. Most notably, RSP leader Balendra Shah defeated former prime minister KP Sharma Oli in his constituency with a margin nearly four times larger than his opponent's vote total.¹⁰ Shah's political rise has been particularly striking. Previously known as the mayor of Kathmandu, he has rapidly transformed into a national political figure and now stands as a potential prime minister.

Shah's popularity stems both from his reputation as an outsider to traditional party politics and his strong appeal among younger voters, who are seeking reform-oriented policies and a break from established structures. In addition, Shah is associated with a subtle pro-monarchy narrative, which resonates with certain segments of Nepal's population, particularly conservative and older voters. This element of his political profile connects a reformist, youth-focused agenda with nostalgic aspects of Nepal's former monarchy, allowing him to mobilize an unusual coalition of supporters—including both progressive urban voters and traditionalist, monarchist-leaning constituencies. The combination of his outsider status, direct connection to Kathmandu's urban electorate, and the light monarchist undertones has enabled Shah to appeal across a broad spectrum of voters. His success reflects not only growing public frustration with established political parties but also a desire for a new political identity that merges reform with national traditions.

Many other prominent figures from traditional parties also lost their seats. Senior leaders from the Nepali Congress, including party president Gagan Thapa and other high-ranking officials, were defeated. The leadership of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) suffered similar setbacks, with multiple vice-chairmen and senior officials losing their

⁸ Election Commission of Nepal. 2026. "Election Result Portal." Available at: <https://result.election.gov.np/> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

⁹ Election Commission of Nepal. 2026. "Election Result Portal." Available at: <https://result.election.gov.np/> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

¹⁰ The Kathmandu Post. 2026. "Balendra Shah Defeats UML Chair Oli in Jhapa-5." Available at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/03/07/balendra-shah-defeats-uml-chair-oli-in-jhapa-5> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

constituencies. Prominent figures from Madhesh-based parties—including Upendra Yadav—were also defeated, highlighting the nationwide nature of the political shift.

Several factors contributed to these outcomes. Public dissatisfaction with established political elites had grown steadily in recent years. The perceived suppression of youth protests, internal factionalism within traditional parties and the growing appeal of reform-oriented political movements all played a role. The decision of Balendra Shah to join and lead the RSP further strengthened the party's credibility as a force for political change.

Political Significance and Regional Implications

The 2026 election is widely interpreted as a contest between dominant political elites and emerging reformist forces. If current trends are confirmed, the RSP could achieve one of the strongest electoral mandates in Nepal's democratic history. In the 275-member House of Representatives, 138 seats are required for a simple majority, while 184 seats are required for a two-thirds majority. Achieving either threshold would have profound implications for governance. For decades, Nepal has struggled with political instability.

Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, the country has experienced more than fourteen changes in government leadership.¹¹

Frequent coalition breakdowns have often blocked policy implementation and long-term planning. A single-party majority government could therefore significantly improve political stability and policy continuity. It would also enable the government to pass legislation more efficiently. If the RSP were to secure a two-thirds majority, its constitutional authority would expand considerably. Such a majority would allow parliament to remove key officials, impeach senior judicial figures and amend the constitution.

At the regional level, the election results could also influence political dynamics in South Asia. Nepal occupies a strategically important position between two major regional powers, India and China. As a result, changes in Nepal's domestic politics often have implications for regional diplomacy and economic connectivity. A stable government led by the RSP could strengthen Nepal's ability to pursue a balanced foreign policy between its powerful neighbors. Previous governments sometimes struggled to maintain this balance amid domestic instability and coalition politics. A strong electoral mandate could allow the new leadership to negotiate infrastructure projects, trade agreements and investment partnerships more confidently.

The election also signals a broader regional trend: the growing political influence of younger voters and reform-oriented movements. The success of the youth-driven political shift represented by Balendra Shah may inspire similar political dynamics in other South Asian countries, where large youth populations increasingly demand accountability and economic opportunity. At the same time, the new government will face significant expectations

¹¹ NDTV World. 2025. "14 Governments Since 2008: A Timeline of Political Instability in Nepal." Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/nepal-gen-z-protests-14-governments-since-2008-a-timeline-of-political-instability-in-nepal-9249693> (Accessed: 9 March 2026).

domestically. If it fails to deliver tangible improvements in governance and economic development, the political momentum generated by the recent protests could quickly decline.

International Implications

For Germany, Nepal has long been an important partner in development cooperation, particularly in areas such as federal governance, renewable energy, climate adaptation and vocational training. German development institutions—including the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the KfW Development Bank—have been active in Nepal for decades. If the new government succeeds in forming a stable majority government, this could create more favorable conditions for long-term development cooperation projects.

Nepal has often struggled with frequent changes in government, which complicated policy continuity and slowed implementation of development programs. A stable government could therefore facilitate more predictable cooperation with Germany in key sectors such as hydropower development, sustainable infrastructure and climate resilience. At the same time, Germany will closely observe whether the new political leadership can translate its reformist rhetoric into concrete institutional reforms, particularly in areas such as anti-corruption measures, administrative transparency and rule of law. Successful reforms could strengthen Nepal's attractiveness for European investment and deepen economic engagement.

For the European Union, Nepal's election result may present both opportunities and uncertainties. The EU has been an important partner for Nepal in development assistance, trade preferences and democratic institution-building. Under the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP), Nepal enjoys preferential access to European markets, which supports sectors such as textiles and handicrafts. A government led by the RSP could potentially align well with the EU's emphasis on governance reform, transparency and democratic accountability. If the new leadership prioritizes institutional strengthening and anti-corruption policies, it may open opportunities for deeper cooperation in governance reforms and public administration modernization.

However, the EU will also be attentive to Nepal's foreign policy orientation. European policymakers will be interested in whether the new leadership maintains Nepal's traditional non-aligned approach or shifts its strategic partnerships. Additionally, a more stable government in Kathmandu could allow the EU to expand cooperation on climate policy. Nepal is highly vulnerable to climate change, particularly through glacial melting and extreme weather events in the Himalayas, making it a key partner in international climate adaptation initiatives.

Outlook

The 2026 general election represents a major turning point in Nepal's political development. The dramatic success of the RSP and the defeat of numerous senior politicians from traditional parties indicate a generational shift in voter preferences, particularly among younger generations.

The results also demonstrate that the political momentum generated by the GenZ protest movement has successfully translated into electoral change. This suggests that youth engagement will play an increasingly important role in shaping Nepal's political future.

However, the coming years will test whether the RSP can transform electoral success into effective governance. Expectations among voters—especially young citizens who supported political reform—are extremely high. Delivering on promises of transparency, accountability and economic reform will therefore be essential for maintaining public trust.

If the party succeeds in forming a stable government and implementing meaningful reforms, the 2026 election could mark the beginning of a new phase of political stability and institutional consolidation in Nepal. If not, the country may once again face the cycles of political fragmentation that have characterized much of its recent history.

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