

Sagar S.J.B. Rana. 2023. *Kingdom Lost: Nepal's Tryst With Democracy, 1951–2008*. New Delhi: Rupa.

The abolition of the 240-year old Nepali monarchy in 2008 was a historically significant event. The book under review seeks to analyze Nepali political history from the end of the Rana era in 1951 to the collapse of the monarchical institution in 2008.

Sagar Shamsher Rana, a great grandson of Rana Premier Chandra Shamsher (r. 1901–1929), was educated at Oxford University. In his first book, *Singha Durbar: Rise and Fall of the Rana Regime of Nepal* (2018), he offered an interesting history of the century-long Rana rule. In *Kingdom Lost*, he picks up the story where his previous book had ended. In the process his new book presents an in-depth political history of Nepal during the latter half of the 20th century. The book is based on the author's personal observations and involvement in major events during that period, supplemented by a meticulous study of different aspects of recent Nepali history and politics. It also draws on interviews the author conducted with a number of people from different sectors, including politicians, social workers, bureaucrats, and even Nepal Army and Police personnel.

Kingdom Lost is divided in ten chapters along with an introduction. The first two chapters deal with the interim period from 1951 to 1959. The third chapter focuses on the 18-month parliamentary rule (1959–1960). The next three chapters (4–6) discuss the political scenario in Nepal during the 30-year Panchayat system (1960–1990). The following three chapters (7–9) examine the two decades after the collapse of the Panchayat system. The concluding chapter explains how the institution of monarchy was abolished in 2008; hence we get the title of the book as “Kingdom Lost.”

The Gorkha Dal episode of April 1951 (which involved Bharat Shamsher Rana, the older brother of the author) gets a special focus in the discussion of politics during the interim period. The author makes a case that the episode strengthened the royal authority. He considers the political development after King Mahendra ascended the throne in 1955 as the victory of the new monarch over the democratic forces. The author explains how Mahendra brought divisions in the Nepal Communist Party through Keshar Jung Rayamajhi and developed relations with China as a counter move to India through Tanka Prasad Acharya. The book is, however, silent on how Mahendra canceled the election to the Constituent Assembly as promised by

his father King Tribhuvan. In this Mahendra was supported by Tanka Prasad Acharya and K.I. Singh. For their cooperation, the duo were appointed as prime ministers. The author, citing John Whelpton, sees the 1959 Constitution as a work of Ivor Jennings. Historic evidence suggests otherwise. Jennings had submitted four different drafts, but Mahendra chose the one that gave him sufficient authority under the umbrella of a parliamentary democracy.

The chapter on the 18-month parliamentary rule is 15 pages long. It mostly focuses on Nepal's relations with India and China and Mahendra's December 1960 coup against a democratically elected government led by Prime Minister B.P. Koirala. The author mentions the controversial Gandak Agreement that the erstwhile elected government had signed with the southern neighbor. This chapter also highlights B.P. Koirala's deft dealings with China in resolving the issues related to Sagarmatha and the Mustang incident. On his coup, the author suggests that Mahendra informed the Nepal Army of his plan only on the day of action but states that he had consulted with three politicians months earlier. It is unlikely that Mahendra trusted the politicians more than the Nepal Army.

The discussion on the 30-year Panchayat rule occupies more than 90 pages in the book. The author divides the Panchayat rule in three phases. In the initial phase, the country had to face an armed revolution launched by the Nepali Congress (NC) with the active support of India. Mahendra openly sided with China to suppress this armed threat to his rule. China not only stood by Mahendra, it also made an undeclared war against India. The second phase was marked by the mounted challenges to implement Panchayat philosophy and its constitution. Despite reforms in different sectors, ranging from agriculture and land reforms to education and culture, the author admits, Mahendra remained unsatisfied and was willing to bring substantial changes, retaining the word "panchayat." Quoting Mahendra's personal physician, Rana concludes that in the weeks before his death in late January 1972 (incorrectly stated as 1971 in the book), Mahendra "was a disturbed man who took 'undue risks with his health'" (p. 107). In the third phase, though King Birendra took a historic decision to hold a national referendum in 1980 and got the victory for a "reformed" Panchayat against the popular demand for a multi-party system, the actual support for Panchayat worsened in the subsequent years. In 1990, NC with the help of the United Left Front led the People's Movement I against the one-party monarchical rule. Discussing the success of the 1990 mass movement led by the democratic forces, the

author notes: “Leaders of all mainstream political parties in India assured the NC of their support, and China was unlikely to rescue the king as it had in 1962” (p. 137). Eventually, the Panchayat system collapsed.

The author next describes in detail the 16-year period of multi-party democracy and lists several factors which led to its failures. These include fatal rifts within the NC, the Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML)’s move to set up a parallel structure of governance, the Maoist uprising, the palace massacre and finally King Gyanendra’s ambition to play an assertive role in Nepali politics. Together these factors sounded the death knell for monarchy in Nepal, despite the 11th hour intervention of the Indian government to save the institution. Rumors had it that the agitating political parties too had assured Gyanendra that the institution of monarchy would be preserved, and the ex-king himself has subsequently hinted at such an assurance several times. The author is silent on this issue. The first session of the Constituent Assembly in May 2008 officially declared Nepal a republic.

Despite its many strengths the book displays biases of the author throughout. Rana gives too much importance to his brother Bharat Shamsher and the latter’s role in Nepali history. Similarly, the book depicts NC as the one and only party to have struggled for democratic ideals. Throughout the book the author refers to the NC leader, the late Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, as Kishunji, a respected title used in the party circle. The book also relies too heavily on the publications on the history of Nepali Congress. This bias is likewise visible in the photo section which features all the top leaders of NC ranging from B.P. Koirala, Subarna Shamsher Rana, Ganesh Man Singh and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai to Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba. But with the single exception of a group photo of Madan Bhandari, Man Mohan Adhikari and others, the leaders of the CPN-UML do not get similar photographic visibility in the book.

There is no bibliography section in the book. Even in the endnotes, in many cases, books and articles are mentioned without the relevant page numbers, making it difficult to verify the author’s claims. The work would have been methodologically sound with the inclusion of a bibliography mentioning the published sources that were utilized along with a list of persons interviewed.

The author’s facility with the English language displays his Oxford training. At the same time, his attractive method of using Nepali words and

phrases give a native flavor. A Nepali reader may enjoy words like *raksī* (alcohol), *avatār* (incarnation), *bhaktipūrṇa* (most submissive), *pahādī* (a man from the hills), *ançalādhis* (Zonal Commissioner) and *Kāle Bāje* (the nick name for Mahendra's most trusted official Bishnu Mani). However, it may be difficult for a foreign reader to properly understand the meaning and significance of these words and phrases. No doubt, the author has translated most of these words within the text and given a glossary at the end of the book but quite a few words remain untranslated. The literary and dramatic language used in the book is quite refreshing. This may also explain the presentation style of the book being narrative-driven rather than being analytical in execution. The key events such as Mahendra's coup of 1960, the 1990 People's Movement, the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), the 2001 palace massacre and the 19-day People's Movement II in 2006 have been discussed in great detail but not critically examined.

Many books have been written on Nepali politics after the middle of the 20th century. Perhaps, this is the first one in English language that covers the political history of nearly six decades since the end of the Rana regime in 1951. Coming from an author who is a member of a family that has been involved in the politics of Nepal over several generations, the readers may notice some new facts in this book. For example, a meeting between Baber Shamsher Rana, the author's grandfather, and B.P. Koirala (then serving as the Home Minister) in Bombay in May 1951 may be cited here. Koirala had arrested the author's older brother Bharat Shamsher of Gorkha Dal in Kathmandu a month earlier but according to the author, both parties showed their politeness during the meeting, suppressing their bitterness. The author adds that this "scene has remained deeply etched in my memory" (p. 20) and later drew him into the fold of Nepali Congress. As such, the book provides a plethora of materials through personal observations and interviews with political leaders. Future scholars may have to investigate the themes and claims presented here in a critical and objective manner. *Kingdom Lost* can be of interest to anyone interested in recent Nepali political history.

Tri Ratna Manandhar
Tribhuvan University