

Christians hail Nepal's shift to secular republic: Newly elected assembly abolishes monarchy

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Christians in Nepal have joined in celebrations to mark the transition of the Himalayan Hindu kingdom of Nepal into a secular republic after a decision by the nation's newly elected constituent assembly to abolish the monarchy.

"This is a victory for people and bodes well for freedom of religion," said Simon Pandey, the general secretary of the National Churches Fellowship of Nepal.

Thousands of people gathered in Kathmandu outside the convention hall on May 28 when the constituent assembly was meeting for the first time since the April elections. They sprinkled vermilion, a red-tinged powder, on each other to celebrate the rebirth of Nepal as a secular republic.

Pandey said churches had been "eagerly looking forward to this day" since a pro-democracy movement began two years ago.

A decade-long insurrection seeking abolition of the monarchy in the Himalayan kingdom had claimed over 13,000 lives before massive pro-democracy protests led by Maoists, and supported by opposition parties, forced King Gyanendra to abdicate power in April 2006.

The interim government, led by an opposition alliance that took control, declared a truce with the Maoists, who then joined the interim administration. This paved the way for the elections, in which the Maoists emerged as the biggest party.

"This is a historic occasion. The people are very excited," said Pius Perumana, vicar general of the Roman Catholic Church in Nepal.

Christianity has grown rapidly in Nepal over the past two decades. Christians are now estimated to number 1 million of the country's 29 million people. More than

three-quarters of the population is Hindu.

“We hope this will provide us full religious freedom,” said the priest, noting that Christianity is not currently recognized as a religion in Nepal. As a result, he said, churches could not be registered or own land. This forced many congregations to build “multipurpose halls” which were used for private worship.

However, Perumana said he is optimistic that “religious freedom is now a certainty in Nepal as we move in the path of secular democracy.”

A senior Maoist leader said in mid-May that secular Nepal would remove all curbs on religious freedom. Barsha Man Pun told a meeting organized by the National Christian Council of Nepal that the state “should treat all religious communities equally.” *-Ecumenical News International*