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WHEN BALENDRA SHAH entered Nepal’s prime ministerial office in March, he appeared to have achieved something extraordinary. A former rapper, structural engineer and independent mayor had broken through a political system dominated for decades by familiar personalities. His rise was more than an electoral victory. To millions of Nepalis, it represented the possibility that the country might finally escape its cycle of

instability, corruption and disappointed expectations.

On March 5, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which had embraced Shah as its prime-ministerial candidate, won 182 of the 275 seats in Nepal's House of Representatives. When Shah was sworn in on March 27, he commanded a parliamentary majority almost unprecedented in the country's recent democratic history, as Reuters reported.

For a nation accustomed to fragile coalitions, rotating prime ministers and political bargaining, the result was remarkable. Yet a strong mandate is not the same as strong government.

Seven months later, Shah finds himself facing a problem familiar to political outsiders who become insiders: the qualities that made him popular are not necessarily the qualities that make governing successful. His direct communication, impatience with bureaucracy and willingness to confront established interests helped transform him into a political phenomenon. Those same instincts now face a more demanding test.

The central question is no longer whether Balen Shah can win an election. He has answered that decisively. It is whether he can build a state capable of delivering the transformation he promised.

From rebellion to responsibility

Shah’s rise cannot be separated from Nepal’s exhaustion with its political establishment. For years, governments changed while many of the country’s underlying problems remained stubbornly familiar. Young Nepalis continued leaving in search of employment. Businesses complained about bureaucratic inefficiency. Public services struggled to meet expectations. Political parties appeared more adept at negotiating power than delivering reform.

The upheaval of September 2025 exposed the depth of that frustration. Youth-led protests, initially driven by anger over restrictions on social media and broader grievances about corruption and privilege, escalated into a national political crisis. The violent response and subsequent unrest left dozens dead. The protests ultimately brought down the government of KP Sharma Oli and opened the way for an extraordinary political realignment.

Shah benefited from that realignment, but his appeal had been building for years. His victory as Kathmandu’s independent mayor in 2022 demonstrated that a candidate outside Nepal’s traditional party machinery could mobilise a substantial electorate. His public persona was deliberately unconventional. He communicated directly, challenged officials and projected an image of someone uninterested in the compromises of traditional politics.

Supporters regarded this as evidence of independence and determination. Critics saw a leader more comfortable issuing decisions than negotiating their implementation. Both interpretations became relevant when he moved from Kathmandu Metropolitan City to Singha Durbar.

Municipal leadership had allowed Shah to concentrate political attention on visible urban problems. National government is different. It requires responsibility for economic policy, diplomacy, public administration, federal institutions, legislation and the expectations of nearly 30 million people. An independent political identity may help a leader win an election. It cannot, by itself, make an administration function.

The gap between announcements and achievement

One of the government’s earliest decisions was to adopt an ambitious 100-point governance reform agenda. It promised changes across public administration, corruption control, digital services, economic management and institutional accountability. Some commitments carried aggressive deadlines. The objective was unmistakable: demonstrate that the new government would work at a pace its predecessors had rarely achieved.

The first hundred days provided an important test. The administration claimed substantial progress, reporting that 70

commitments had been fully implemented and presenting an overall achievement assessment of 87.2%, according to its public report card.

An independent review published by The Kathmandu Post, however, classified only 38 of the 100 commitments as implemented by July 4.

These figures are not directly comparable measures of identical outcomes. They reflect different assessment methods. Nevertheless, the discrepancy raises a legitimate question about what governments mean when they announce that a reform has been delivered.

Establishing a committee is not the same as recovering misappropriated money. Launching an online service is not necessarily the same as making it reliable nationwide. Drafting legislation is different from passing it, funding it and implementing it.

The Shah administration deserves credit where it has made measurable progress. Its early programme included digital-governance measures, anti-corruption initiatives and initial repayments to some depositors affected by Nepal’s troubled cooperatives. Such interventions address real public grievances.

But an ambitious reform agenda also creates a political liability: every promise becomes a measurable obligation. The government has repeatedly emphasised speed. Its critics increasingly ask about results. For Shah, the distinction matters. He won because voters were dissatisfied with a system that made promises without fulfilling them. If his administration becomes associated with the same gap between intention and outcome, the central argument of his political movement will weaken.

The uncomfortable business of democracy

Perhaps the most consequential criticism concerns not what Shah wants to achieve, but how he chooses to govern. He possesses an overwhelming majority in the lower house. Yet questions about parliamentary engagement have persisted throughout his premiership.

As the monsoon session ended on October 2, opposition lawmakers criticised his limited appearances and insufficient participation in parliamentary scrutiny. The Kathmandu Post reported that he appeared in the lower house on only six dates during the session. The House held 68 meetings and, according to the Speaker’s account reported by Radio Nepal, passed 12 bills including legislation replacing ordinances.

Legislative productivity cannot be measured by bill counts alone. Some important reforms take longer to design than routine

legislation. But the contrast between parliamentary strength and the pace of major institutional change is difficult to ignore.

The promised Federal Civil Service Bill illustrates the challenge. The government originally committed to preparing the measure within 45 days. Yet reporting in late September showed that consultation was still underway, months after that deadline.

There is also a structural constraint that a landslide in the lower house cannot eliminate. The RSP does not command an equivalent majority in the National Assembly, Nepal’s upper chamber. The passage of major legislation therefore requires engagement with political forces the government defeated electorally.

Shah’s direct style has advantages. Social media allows him to communicate policy priorities without depending entirely on traditional political intermediaries. It can make government more accessible and reduce opportunities for established interests to control public messaging. But communication is not consultation.

Parliamentary debate, legislative review and independent institutional oversight are not merely inconveniences designed to slow down a popular government. They exist partly to prevent mistakes, test assumptions and ensure that public power remains accountable.

There is a deeper political irony here. Shah was elected to challenge institutions that many citizens believed had been

captured by party interests. If he responds by circumventing those institutions rather than strengthening them, he risks replacing one problem with another.

The strongest case for his approach is that conventional processes have too often protected inefficiency and obstruction. That criticism has considerable force. Yet democratic reform cannot depend indefinitely on the exceptional authority of one individual. A durable political transformation requires institutions capable of functioning after the leader who initiated it has left office.

An economy that will not respond to slogans

The economic challenge may prove even less forgiving than the political one. Shah’s government inherited an economy constrained by weak private investment, inadequate domestic employment, persistent administrative barriers and heavy reliance on workers abroad. Its election platform promised substantially faster growth, higher incomes and economic modernisation. Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle brought economic-policy expertise to the cabinet, creating expectations that political momentum might be matched by credible reform.

But the economic environment has deteriorated. In its October 2026 Nepal Development Update, the World Bank estimated growth of 3.9% in the fiscal year ending in July 2026 and projected

a slowdown to 3.7% in fiscal year 2027.

The devastating floods of August 26 added another burden. Damage to hydropower, electricity transmission, transport and other infrastructure has threatened production, trade and tourism. Reconstruction will require substantial spending at a time when the government faces fiscal constraints.

Not all these problems are Shah’s creation. Natural disasters cannot fairly be blamed on a prime minister. Nor can decades of structural economic weaknesses be resolved within a few months. What can be judged is the quality of the response.

The World Bank reported that Nepal’s capital expenditure execution had fallen to 46.8% in fiscal year 2026. That figure reflects constraints extending beyond the new administration’s tenure, but it illustrates the weakness of the machinery through which development ambitions must be realised.

A government may allocate money to infrastructure. If procurement is delayed, administrative coordination fails or implementation capacity is inadequate, the promised investment remains largely theoretical.

The financial system presents further difficulties. Non-performing loans reached 5.7% by mid-July 2026, according to the World Bank. Weak bank asset quality can reduce lending appetite at precisely the moment when businesses require investment capital.

Shah’s greatest economic difficulty may therefore be neither a shortage of proposals nor a shortage of political authority. It is the distance between policy decisions and economic activity. Businesses invest when rules are predictable, contracts are credible, infrastructure works and officials implement decisions consistently. These conditions are less dramatic than political announcements, but they matter more to long-term prosperity.

The government needs to make Nepal a more attractive place to create employment, not simply a country with more energetic leadership.

The diaspora dilemma

For Nepalis living in Dubai, Doha, Sydney, London or New York, the government’s economic record is especially important. Nepal’s diaspora is not merely an audience for national politics. It is an essential part of the country’s economic structure.

According to the World Bank’s October assessment, remittance inflows were equivalent to 35.8% of GDP in fiscal year 2026. Those transfers sustain household consumption, education, housing and Nepal’s external finances. They also reveal an uncomfortable reality: a country that depends so heavily on the earnings of its citizens abroad is benefiting financially from a labour market that often cannot provide sufficient opportunities at home.

Shah’s political appeal extends to a generation that has watched relatives leave Nepal, or has already left itself. His rise created hope that migration might increasingly become a choice rather than an economic necessity. Such a transformation is possible only through sustained improvements in productivity, investment and domestic employment.

Better digital services for migrants, stronger consular support and more efficient public administration are worthwhile reforms. But they do not substitute for a broader employment strategy.

The true test is whether Nepal can support competitive industries, expand its technology and services sectors, improve technical education and make productive investment commercially viable. The diaspora may continue supporting Shah politically even while living abroad. But political loyalty is not an adequate measure of development success.

A more demanding indicator would be whether increasing numbers of qualified Nepalis find credible professional opportunities without having to emigrate.

The problem with personal popularity

Shah’s political identity has always been unusually personal. His distinctive appearance, music career, blunt public messaging and outsider reputation helped create a connection with voters that conventional political leaders struggled to match.

That personal brand remains an important asset. It gives the government public attention, the capacity to frame debates and some room to pursue difficult reforms. Yet popularity can become a weakness when institutions are expected to follow a leader rather than operate through clear systems.

A modern government needs capable ministers, independent regulators, professional civil servants and functioning parliamentary committees. It cannot depend on the prime minister personally directing every consequential decision.

Internal criticism need not signal political disintegration. In a healthy party, it can be evidence of democratic accountability. But a large parliamentary majority is not identical to unconditional political agreement. Shah also faces the challenge of converting an electoral coalition into a durable governing organisation.

Voters who united around opposition to the old political order may disagree on taxation, federalism, public-sector reform, civil liberties or the appropriate role of the state. These differences become harder to contain when a movement stops campaigning against a government and becomes responsible for one.

A disaster and a test of state capacity

The August floods exposed another dimension of the challenge. Natural disasters are particularly demanding for governments because they compress months of administrative decision-making

into hours. Rescue services, communications, road networks, medical facilities and local authorities must function together under extreme pressure.

The devastation in Rasuwa and surrounding affected areas brought serious humanitarian and infrastructure consequences. The World Bank commended the emergency response and announced emergency financing support, but the longer-term test lies in reconstruction and prevention.

Can the administration restore damaged infrastructure efficiently? Can it establish transparent reconstruction contracts? Can it ensure vulnerable communities are not forgotten after national attention fades? Can Nepal begin building infrastructure that is more resilient to increasingly severe environmental risks? These are questions that cannot be answered through rhetoric.

The floods also complicate the government’s economic ambitions. Money required for recovery competes with existing development priorities, while damaged transport and energy facilities weaken the productive economy. A government with Shah’s mandate has an opportunity to confront these problems with unusual political authority. Whether it can translate that authority into stronger institutions is another matter.

Balen’s greatest opponent may be time

The argument that Shah’s premiership is already a failure would be premature. Seven months is too short a period in which to reverse decades of administrative weakness, industrial underdevelopment and political instability. His government has initiated reforms, demonstrated administrative ambition and retained a parliamentary majority that offers substantial room for action.

It is also fair to argue that some of the resistance he encounters comes from interests that benefited from the previous system. A government attempting genuine institutional change should not be judged unsuccessful simply because it produces controversy. But defenders of the administration cannot use inherited problems to excuse every delay, nor treat criticism as evidence of hostility to reform.

The distinction between genuine transformation and political theatre becomes clearer with time. A successful Shah government would make public services more dependable, improve the investment environment, institutionalise anti-corruption safeguards, strengthen legislative accountability and create conditions for better employment. The most convincing achievements would be those that survive beyond his personal popularity.

This is where his overwhelming electoral mandate becomes both an advantage and a burden. Unlike many predecessors, Shah cannot easily attribute every failure to coalition partners or a hostile lower house. His party possesses the numbers to pursue much of its programme, even though constitutional structures, an opposition-controlled upper chamber and administrative realities still impose limitations.

His government will ultimately be judged less by the number of enemies it confronts than by the public institutions it improves. That requires a change in political temperament. The leader who gained support by rejecting traditional politics must now demonstrate patience with legislative procedure, respect for independent scrutiny and discipline in economic management. These habits are less exciting than confrontation. They are also essential to competent government.

Balen Shah has achieved something that once seemed improbable: he persuaded Nepal to give a new political generation an extraordinary opportunity to govern. He has not yet proved that his administration can convert that opportunity into lasting change.

His greatest challenge is no longer defeating the old establishment. It is avoiding the institutional weaknesses that made the old establishment so disappointing. The tragedy would not be that Shah failed to change Nepal overnight. Nobody could

reasonably expect that. It would be that a rare moment of public confidence produced another government remembered more for its promises than its achievements.

Nepal has already demonstrated that it is ready for different leaders. **Now it needs different results.**

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