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From The Sunday Times

July 23, 2006

Nepal humbles its god-king

Dean Nelson

THE GOD-KING Gyanendra of Nepal, who is revered by many as an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, was stripped of his sole remaining official responsibility last week when he was dismissed as patron of the country's holiest temple. In a savage reversal of fortune, the government will bring forward a bill this week to restrict the king's power of succession ahead of an assembly that may topple the monarchy once and for all.

In the space of three months, Gyanendra, 59, has fallen from absolute monarch with the power to appoint ministers, judges and generals, to tax-paying mortal with three purely ceremonial duties.

He merely accepts the credentials of new ambassadors, visits a girl-goddess at the temple where he was formerly patron and receives a priest who flashes a bejewelled undergarment in a holy ceremony.

The government's decision to remove Gyanendra and his wife Queen Komal as patrons of the Lord Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu followed allegations that the palace was siphoning off donations.

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Gyanendra's decline began earlier this year when he ignored Indian pleas to restore democracy after seizing absolute power in 2005 in the hope of defeating Maoist rebels controlling the countryside. His downfall gathered pace in April when demonstrations forced him to reinstate parliament.

Since then parliament has purged the words "His Majesty's" from the government's title, absorbed the royal household staff into the civil service and brought palace finances under government control.

Baburam Bhattarai, the Maoist leader, has stepped up pressure on the government to proclaim a democratic republic.

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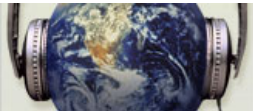
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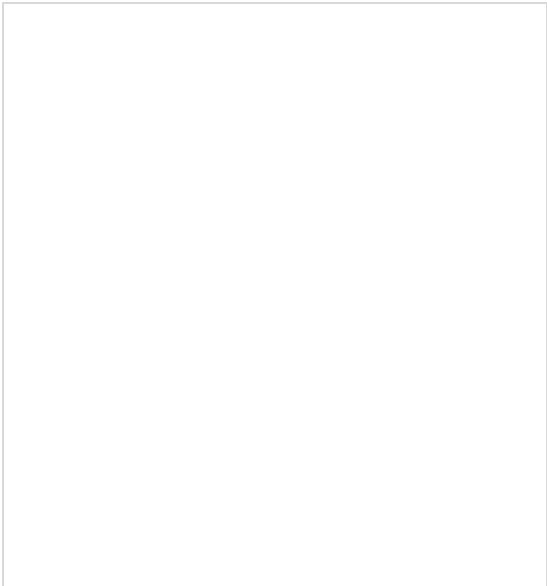
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