

A Young Prime Minister and Nepal's Moment of Reckoning

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

The ascent of Balendra Shah—widely known as Balen—signals a profound shift in Nepal's political landscape, one that blends symbolism, generational change, and a restless public mood demanding transformation. His swearing-in as the country's 47th Prime Minister on the day of Ramnavami has not merely marked the beginning of a new administration; it has triggered a deeper national conversation about identity, governance, and the delicate balance between tradition and constitutional values.

At 35, Balen is the youngest Prime Minister Nepal has seen in the modern era since 1950. His rise is remarkable not only because of his age but also because of his unconventional journey. A rapper, engineer, and activist before entering politics, he represents a departure from the entrenched political elite that has long dominated the country. His victory, secured with a commanding parliamentary majority, reflects a growing impatience among citizens—particularly the youth—with a system perceived as stagnant, corrupt, and disconnected from everyday realities.

Yet, even before his government begins its substantive work, the symbolism surrounding his oath-taking has stirred unease. Ramnavami, a major Hindu festival, carries deep cultural and religious significance. By choosing this day for his swearing-in, Balen invoked imagery associated with an idealised form of governance rooted in justice, morality, and welfare. For many Nepalis, this gesture resonated as a reaffirmation of cultural heritage. For others, however, it raised concerns about the constitutional commitment to secularism, a principle enshrined after the abolition of the monarchy.

This tension is not incidental. Nepal's identity has long been shaped by its history as a Hindu kingdom, unified in the 18th century under Prithvi Narayan Shah. His legacy continues to cast a long shadow over the nation's political imagination. Cultural symbols tied to that era still appear in public and institutional spaces, reflecting a continuity that many citizens find reassuring. Yet, in a republic that has formally embraced secularism, such symbols can also blur the line between cultural expression and state endorsement.

Balen's decision, therefore, must be understood within this broader context. It is as much a



reflection of Nepal's layered identity as it is a political statement. However, symbolism alone cannot sustain governance. The real test of his leadership lies in addressing the structural challenges that have long hindered the country's progress.

Central to Balen's appeal is his populist style, which has effectively mobilised public sentiment. On the eve of assuming office, he released a song titled "Jay Mahakali," which quickly attracted millions of views. The song, invoking a powerful cultural symbol, blends national pride with defiance against critics. It portrays Balen as a determined leader, unyielding in the face of opposition and committed to change.

This fusion of art and politics has been instrumental in building his image, particularly among younger audiences. It allows him to communicate directly with the public, bypassing traditional political channels. However, it also underscores a broader challenge. Populism thrives on emotional connection and immediate impact, whereas governance requires deliberation, compromise, and often difficult decisions that may not yield instant approval.

Reconciling these two dimensions will be crucial. The expectations surrounding Balen's leadership are extraordinarily high. His support-

ers view him as a transformative figure capable of rebuilding a nation burdened by decades of political instability, economic challenges, and administrative inefficiency. Yet, the very scale of these expectations risks becoming a constraint. The demand for rapid results, often framed through short-term performance benchmarks, may not align with the realities of long-term reform.

One of the most pressing issues Balen faces is the need to reform Nepal's bureaucracy. Widely criticised for inefficiency and lack of accountability, the administrative system has often been seen as an obstacle rather than an enabler of development. For any meaningful change to occur, this system must be restructured to prioritise transparency, efficiency, and service delivery.

However, bureaucratic reform is inherently complex. It requires not only policy changes but also a shift in institutional culture. Resistance from within is almost inevitable, particularly when reforms threaten established interests. Balen's outsider status may provide him with the credibility to challenge the system, but it also means he must build alliances and navigate entrenched networks of power.

Equally significant is the challenge of balancing short-term populist measures with long-term national priorities. In an environment

where public approval is closely tied to visible action, there is a temptation to prioritise initiatives that deliver immediate results. Yet, sustainable development often involves decisions that are less visible and more gradual in their impact.

For instance, addressing unemployment, improving infrastructure, and strengthening public institutions are long-term endeavours. They require consistent policy direction, investment, and patience. Balen must resist the urge to reduce governance to a series of headline-grabbing actions. Instead, he must focus on building a foundation for enduring progress, even if it means facing criticism in the short term.

Another defining feature of Balen's leadership is his emphasis on youth participation. His cabinet reportedly includes several young leaders, reflecting a conscious effort to bring fresh perspectives into governance. This approach aligns with his broader narrative of representing an aspirational generation eager to shape the country's future.

However, youth-driven politics comes with its own set of challenges. While energy and innovation are valuable, they must be complemented by experience and strategic thinking. Managing a team of ambitious and dynamic individuals requires careful coordination. Without clear direction, enthusiasm can quickly give way to fragmentation and internal conflict.

This concern is particularly relevant in the context of potential power struggles within his political circle. Figures such as Rabi Lamichhane, who has already held significant positions including Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, represent influential actors within the same political space. While their collaboration may appear seamless at present, underlying ambitions could create friction over time.

The distinction between individual popularity and party strength further complicates this dynamic. Balen's electoral success is widely attributed to his personal appeal rather than the institutional strength of his party. This creates a delicate balance, where leadership authority must be carefully managed to prevent internal divisions from undermining governance.

Beyond internal politics, Balen must also navigate an evolving landscape of public accountability. Despite his strong parliamentary majority, the formal opposition remains fragmented and relatively weak. This shifts the centre of scrutiny away from the legislature and towards the public sphere.

In today's interconnected world, accountability is no longer confined to parliamentary debates. Social media, independent journalism, and civic activism have created a platform where citizens can voice their opinions instantly and collectively. The same youth who propelled Balen to power are likely to scrutinise his every move, demanding transparency and responsiveness.

This environment presents both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it encourages openness and engagement. On the other, it can create pressure for constant validation, where leadership decisions are influenced by immediate public reaction rather than long-term considerations. Balen must learn to engage with this dynamic without becoming captive to it.

A further challenge lies in the exercise of power itself. Nepal's political history offers numerous examples of leaders who, once empowered, struggled to maintain restraint. The concentration of authority, even when justified by popular mandate, can lead to governance that prioritises control over collaboration.

For Balen, the task is to redefine what strong leadership means. It is not about centralising power but about strengthening institutions and fostering a culture of accountability. Knowing when to assert authority and when to delegate will be critical in ensuring that his government remains both effective and democratic.

Ultimately, Balen Shah's leadership embodies a moment of possibility for Nepal. He represents a break from the past, yet he operates within a system shaped by historical legacies and contemporary challenges. His success will depend on his ability to navigate these complexities with clarity and discipline.

The promise of his leadership lies in the potential for renewal—a chance to move beyond cycles of instability and towards a more stable and inclusive future. However, this promise is contingent upon the choices he makes in the months and years ahead.

Transforming a nation is not the work of a single leader, nor can it be achieved through symbolism alone. It requires sustained effort, institutional reform, and a willingness to confront difficult realities. Balen's journey from a popular figure to a responsible statesman will be closely watched, not only within Nepal but beyond its borders.

In the final analysis, the true measure of his tenure will not be found in moments of spectacle or popularity, but in the quieter, enduring impact of his policies. It will be reflected in stronger institutions, improved public services, and a political culture that values accountability and integrity.

Nepal stands at a critical juncture, with a leader who embodies both its aspirations and its contradictions. Whether this moment becomes a turning point or a missed opportunity will depend on the delicate interplay between ambition and restraint, vision and execution.

For now, the country watches with cautious optimism, aware that the path to meaningful change is rarely straightforward, but hopeful that this new chapter may finally bring the progress it has long awaited.

Iran's Asymmetric Edge in a Maritime War

The Strait That Defies Power: How Iran turned Geography into Strategy

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

In modern warfare, overwhelming military superiority is often assumed to guarantee strategic control. Yet the unfolding maritime confrontation between the United States and Iran tells a far more complex story—one in which geography, doctrine, and asymmetric tactics have combined to blunt even the most formidable naval force in the world. Despite deploying an extraordinary concentration of naval power, Washington has found itself unable to fully secure one of the most vital arteries of global trade: the Strait of Hormuz.

The crisis, which escalated sharply in early 2026, has exposed a paradox at the heart of contemporary naval conflict. The United States, with its unmatched fleet of aircraft carriers, submarines, and advanced surveillance systems, has succeeded in dismantling much of Iran's conventional naval capability. Yet, even as Iranian warships lie destroyed or disabled, the flow of global commerce through the narrow strait remains precarious—subject to disruption, intimidation, and selective control by Tehran.

This is not a failure of firepower. Rather, it is a reminder that control of the seas—especially in confined and politically sensitive waterways—depends as much on strategy and geography as on sheer military strength.

A Show of Force—and Its Limits
The chain of events leading to this impasse began on 22 January 2026, when Donald Trump announced the deployment of a massive American naval armada towards Iranian waters. The move followed weeks of rising tensions and was widely interpreted as a prelude to direct military confrontation.

Two carrier strike groups formed the backbone of this deployment. The USS Abraham Lincoln, leading Carrier Strike Group-3, was redirected from the Indo-Pacific towards the Gulf of Oman. At the same time, the USS Gerald R. Ford, the largest warship ever built, led Carrier Strike Group-12 from the Atlantic theatre towards the eastern Mediterranean, positioning itself to support Israel and reinforce regional deterrence.

The objectives were clear. First, to conduct offensive operations aimed at crippling Iran's naval and military infrastructure. Second, to strengthen defensive networks across allied ter-

ritories in West Asia, ensuring protection against potential retaliation.

When hostilities began, the United States moved swiftly and decisively. Within days, Iranian naval bases and frontline vessels were struck with devastating precision. Key assets—including large support ships and drone carriers—were destroyed. In one notable engagement, the USS Charlotte, a nuclear-powered attack submarine, sank an Iranian frigate in international waters—an event that underscored the intensity of the conflict.

By Washington's own account, dozens of Iranian vessels were eliminated in the opening phase of the war. Independent assessments broadly confirm the scale of this destruction. On paper, Iran's conventional navy had been effectively neutralised.

And yet, the Strait of Hormuz remained contested.

Geography as a Strategic Equaliser
To understand this contradiction, one must first recognise the strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz. At its narrowest, the waterway is only about 33 kilometres wide, with designated shipping lanes barely 3 kilometres across in each direction. Through this confined corridor flows nearly one-fifth of the world's oil supply—approximately 20 million barrels per day—making it one of the most critical chokepoints in the global economy.

Such geography inherently favours disruption over control. It creates conditions in which even a comparatively weaker power can impose significant costs on a stronger adversary.

Iran has long understood this reality. For decades, its naval doctrine has centred not on matching superior fleets ship for ship, but on exploiting the vulnerabilities of constrained maritime spaces. The current conflict has demonstrated the effectiveness of that approach with striking clarity.

The Logic of Asymmetric Naval Warfare
At the core of Iran's strategy lies the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), a force specifically designed for unconventional maritime operations. Established in the 1980s, the IRGCN operates alongside—but distinct from—Iran's conventional navy, focusing on speed, dispersion, and surprise rather than traditional fleet engagements.

Its arsenal reflects this philosophy. Thousands of small, fast-attack craft—often described as a "mosquito fleet"—form the backbone of the

force. These vessels, though relatively small, are heavily armed with short-range missiles, rockets, and machine guns. Their strength lies not in individual capability but in collective impact.

Capable of high speeds and rapid manoeuvres, these boats are designed to swarm larger vessels, overwhelming their defensive systems through sheer numbers and unpredictability. This is warfare by saturation. Advanced warships, equipped with sophisticated radar and missile defence systems, are optimised to counter a limited number of high-value threats. When faced with dozens—or even hundreds—of small, fast-moving targets, these systems can be stretched to their limits.

The result is a tactical imbalance. Defending forces are often compelled to expend high-cost interceptors against low-cost attackers, creating an economic asymmetry that favours the weaker side. Even a single successful strike can have disproportionate strategic consequences.

A Multi-Layered Threat Architecture
Iran's maritime strategy does not rely solely on fast-attack craft. It is built around a layered network of threats operating from sea, shore, and subsurface domains.

Along its extensive coastline, Iran has deployed a network of shore-based missile batteries capable of launching both cruise and ballistic anti-ship missiles. These systems can target vessels at significant distances, forcing adversaries to operate further offshore and limiting their operational flexibility.

Unmanned systems have further enhanced this capability. Aerial drones, unmanned surface vessels, and underwater platforms provide reconnaissance, deliver explosive payloads, and complicate enemy targeting processes. These systems are relatively inexpensive, easily replaceable, and difficult to detect in large numbers.

Naval mines add another layer of risk. Even the possibility of mines can disrupt shipping, as vessels are forced to reroute or wait for clearance operations. In narrow waterways like the Strait of Hormuz, such disruptions can quickly escalate into major logistical challenges.

Together, these elements form a comprehensive anti-access and area-denial strategy. Rather than seeking outright naval dominance, Iran aims to make the cost of operating in the region prohibitively high for its adversaries.

Disrupting the Arteries of Global Trade
The most visible impact of this strategy has

been on commercial shipping. Since the outbreak of hostilities, several merchant vessels have been attacked or damaged in and around the Strait of Hormuz. Reports suggest the use of explosive-laden boats, sea mines, and missile strikes.

More significantly, Iran has moved to selectively regulate passage through the strait. In a striking display of geopolitical signalling, it has indicated that vessels associated with China would be allowed safe transit, reflecting Beijing's relatively supportive stance during the conflict.

This selective control highlights the intersection of military strategy and global trade politics. Iran is not merely challenging the United States militarily—it is leveraging its geographic position to influence international commerce.

For major energy-importing nations, particularly in Asia, the implications are profound. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz ripple across global markets, affecting oil prices, supply chains, and broader economic stability.

Echoes of the Red Sea

Iran's approach bears notable similarities to the tactics employed by Houthi forces in the Red Sea in recent years. Despite sustained airstrikes by a US-led coalition, the Houthis managed to maintain a persistent threat to maritime traffic through mobility, concealment, and decentralised operations.

Underground networks, mobile launch systems, and a steady supply of low-cost weapons enabled them to absorb significant damage while continuing their campaign.

Iran, with greater resources and a more sophisticated military infrastructure, appears to be adapting and scaling these methods. The result is a form of warfare that is resilient, flexible, and difficult to suppress through conventional military means.

Law, War, and Humanitarian Obligations
Even amid escalating hostilities, naval warfare remains governed—at least in principle—by established international legal frameworks. These include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Geneva Conventions.

Under these rules, enemy warships may be targeted in international waters without prior warning. At the same time, belligerents are bound by humanitarian obligations. They are required, where feasible, to rescue and care for wounded and shipwrecked personnel, regardless of nationality.

These provisions underscore an enduring principle: that even in war, certain norms must be upheld. Reports of search and rescue operations following naval engagements suggest that, despite the intensity of the conflict, these obligations have not been entirely disregarded.

A Strategic Stalemate at Sea

As the conflict enters its fourth week, the maritime domain has emerged as a decisive front. The United States has demonstrated its ability to destroy and degrade Iran's conventional naval forces. Yet it has not been able to guarantee the safe passage of commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

This reality became evident when Donald Trump called upon European and allied nations to deploy naval forces to help secure the waterway. The response was cautious. Several key allies, including the United Kingdom and Germany, declined to participate—reflecting both the risks involved and the recognition that such a mission is far from straightforward.

Securing a narrow, heavily contested chokepoint against a determined and adaptive adversary is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. It requires not only military capability, but sustained coordination, political will, and a readiness to accept the risks of escalation.

The Enduring Power of Geography
In the final analysis, the Strait of Hormuz has reaffirmed a timeless truth: geography remains one of the most decisive forces in international politics. Iran, despite its relative military limitations, has transformed its location into a strategic asset of immense value.

By combining geographic advantage with asymmetric tactics, it has been able to challenge a far superior adversary and exert influence over global trade flows.

For the United States and its allies, the lesson is both sobering and instructive. Naval supremacy, while formidable, is not absolute. In constrained environments—where geography, commerce, and conflict intersect—power must be exercised with nuance, patience, and strategic foresight.

The waters of the Strait of Hormuz may be narrow, but the implications of this conflict are vast. And as the crisis continues to unfold, it is becoming increasingly clear that control of these waters will not be decided by strength alone, but by the ability to adapt to the complex realities of modern maritime warfare.