

Nepal elections: Millions vote in second and final round

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Kathmandu: Millions of people were voting in southern Nepal on Thursday in the final phase of mostly peaceful elections for members of the national and provincial assemblies.

Nepalese people cast their vote during the legislative elections in Bhaktapur, Nepal.

It is the first election for members in the seven provincial assemblies established under the constitution that was adopted in 2015 after initially being rejected by ethnic groups in southern Nepal. The assembly members will name the seven states formed under the constitution and will draft provincial laws.

Thursday's voting involves about 12 million people in the southern half of the Himalayan nation, nearly 80 percent of the population. The northern, mountainous region voted on Nov. 26. Counting of all the votes is expected to start Friday and take several days as some of the ballot boxes must be transported from remote villages to counting centers.

People holding their voting cards in their hands lined up before polling stations opened at 7 a.m. in the capital, Kathmandu.

"I am here to vote today because it is the first election for provinces with the hope these provincial governments would be able to deliver development to a focused and concentrated areas," said Kedar Sharan Raya, 74-year-old retired advocate.

"I am voting after many years because there is new hope in the country with the establishment of provinces," said Iswor Prasad Shrestha, 70, businessman.

Police said voting was peaceful. Police, army soldiers and temporary police officers are guarding polling stations. Vehicles were banned from the streets and voters walked to the polling stations in their neighborhoods.

Nepal's slow path to democracy began in 2006, when protesters forced the king to give up his rule. Two years later, Nepal officially abolished the centuries-old monarchy and decided a federal system would best serve all corners of the one of the poorest nation's in the world.

But bickering among political parties delayed until 2015 the implementation of the new constitution, which declared Nepal a republic.

Security was stepped up for the elections, with thousands of police and army soldiers deployed. According to the Home Ministry, more than 400 people were detained in days leading up to the vote.

Soon after the constitution was implemented in 2015, protests by ethnic groups in southern Nepal turned violent and left some 50 people dead.

The ethnic Madhesi group protested for months, saying they did not get enough territory in the province assigned to them. They said they deserved more land because they represented a bigger population. Their protest blocked the border with India for months, cutting off fuel and other supplies in Nepal.

- AP