

Political crisis in Nepal continues after prime minister resigns

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The political crisis in Nepal, precipitated by weeks of anti-government protests, continued unabated this week despite the resignation of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa last Friday. King Gyanendra has found no replacement for Thapa and is under continuing pressure from the country's five major parties to restore parliamentary democracy and a government containing representatives of all parties.

The capital of Katmandu and other urban centres were paralysed this week by a two-day strike called by the opposition parties. Schools and universities were closed, as were banks, private businesses, shops and some government offices. The roads were deserted of all but emergency vehicles. On Wednesday, the second day of the strike, the king foreshadowed talks with opposition leaders, but there is still no resolution to the political impasse.

The king installed Thapa, a loyal monarchist, last June after a previous protest movement forced his predecessor Lokendra Bahadur Chand to resign. King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government, shut down parliament and appointed Chand in October 2002, citing a list of grievances against the ousted government, including its failure to deal with the country's protracted Maoist-led rural rebellion.

Last month, five parties—the Nepali Congress Party (NCP), the Nepali Congress Democratic Party (NCDP), the United Maoist Liberation party (UMLP), the Communist Party of Nepal (NCP) and the Mazdoor Kishan Party (MKP)—initiated the present protest campaign. On April 2, more than 200 people were injured when a rally in front of the Royal Palace was baton charged and fired on by the police.

The king banned all demonstrations and rallies, making it illegal to gather in public places in groups of more than five. But the protests continued virtually

daily and spread to other parts of the country despite police repression and mass arrests. Workers, students, women and professionals joined the demonstrations, which swelled to around 100,000.

In the course of the protests, police detained more than 5,000 people, including senior opposition figures such as NCP leader G.P. Koirala and UMLP head Madeve Kumar Nepal. More than 300 people were injured in violent clashes between police and demonstrators.

The protest demands also began to widen, with students in particular taking up the call for the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. A referendum held at the Tribhuvan University in Katmandu last weekend, in defiance of a police ban, registered a 92 percent vote in favour of abolishing the monarchy. Referenda on other campuses produced similar results.

King Gyanendra is increasingly unpopular. He became the country's monarch in 2001 in bizarre circumstances, after the son of the former king allegedly ran amok and shot his father, mother and other family members before killing himself. The events have never been fully explained. Gyanendra's own son, Crown Prince Paras, is even more despised. Among other things, he has allegedly been involved in four hit-and-run accidents, for which he has never been charged.

As well as the widening protest movement, the Thapa government has confronted a rising level of clashes between the country's security forces and insurgent Maoist guerrillas. An estimated 2,300 Nepalis, including many civilians, have died since the last attempt at peace talks broke down nine months ago. In recent months, the guerrillas have staged a series of major attacks on government establishments, including

on the residence of the home minister.

The deteriorating political situation has provoked growing concerns in Washington and New Delhi—the two powers on which Nepal is heavily dependent for arms and training to fight the Maoists. On April 22, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher urged the restoration of parliament, declaring: “The king and its [Nepal’s] politicians need to set aside their differences and work together.”

Pointing to New Delhi’s fears, a senior Indian official pointedly told the media: “Our bottom line is that instability in Nepal will harm our national interests and there is the danger of a spillover of the Maoist revolution.” After meeting with the king and opposition leaders, Indian ambassador Shyam Sarah called on “the confronting parties to patch up their differences in the larger interest of Nepal and her population”.

A key turning point came last week. Under mounting pressure, the government lifted the ban on rallies and released detained opposition leaders in the lead-up to a meeting of the Nepal Development Forum (NDF) on May 5-6. The NDF meeting of 20 donor countries and organisations such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank is held every two years.

Previously the NDF has made no criticisms of the Nepalese government. But last week for the first time it issued a public statement calling for urgent steps to “have the democratic process restored”, improve human rights and peacefully end the war with the Maoist rebels. The meeting ended without agreement on Nepal’s request for \$US560 million a year in financial support.

The government is heavily dependent on foreign assistance. According to the “Asia Pacific 2004 report”, economic growth in Nepal last year was just 2.4 percent. While the growth rates for 2004 and 2005 are predicted to be 3.5 percent and 4.5 percent respectively, those estimates are premised on progress in peace talks with the Maoists. Some 42 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line.

The day after the NDF meeting, Thapa resigned as prime minister. A statement from the palace indicated that the king was now looking for someone with “a clean image to become the prime minister and form a government that can restore peace and conduct elections this year.” Gyanendra, however, has been seeking separate meetings with each of the political

leaders in a bid to split the opposition parties. To date they have refused to meet the king separately.

The five parties held 194 of the 205 seats in the dissolved parliament. They are insisting that any fresh elections, which the king has promised by April 2005, be held under the auspices of a government of all the major parties. As in the past, however, the official opposition parties have indicated their willingness to compromise with the monarchy.

The Maoists have also signalled their readiness to hold talks with the king, as long as he invites leaders of the five opposition parties to the palace at the same time. Central Committee member Bahadur Chettery declared recently: “The King wants a dialogue with us to resolve the current crises... If the King creates a conducive environment for talks we will not only hold dialogue but we will also sit for a roundtable discussion with the parties.”

Whether any agreement is possible remains to be seen. But whatever regime is finally installed will be compelled to do the bidding of the World Bank and major powers for market reforms, making deeper inroads into the social position of the majority of the population, and setting the stage for further political unrest.



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