

Nepalese king seizes power with the backing of the military

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In a desperate move that will only intensify the country's political crisis, the Nepalese monarch, King Gyanendra, last week sacked Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, assumed full executive powers and imposed a state of emergency that gives sweeping powers to the military.

Gyanendra's decision announced on February 1 was immediately followed by a crackdown on political parties, student organisations and other opposition groups. He cut off the country from the rest of the world by shutting down the Internet and telephone lines. International calls are still banned, while local calls are limited to five hours during the day and two at night. International flights into and out of Nepal were banned for three days.

At least 50 political leaders, as well as an estimated 1,500 political and human right activists and student leaders, have been jailed or placed under house. Among them are the sacked prime minister, Nepal Communist Party United-Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) leader Madhav Kumar Nepal and Nepali Congress Party (NCP) leader Girja Prasad Koirala. Some 45 non-government organisations have been ordered to close.

Under the emergency regulations, the country's limited constitutional freedoms have been annulled. These include freedom of the press, free speech, free assembly, the right to privacy and the ban of preventative detention. In a show of force, heavily-armed troops have been deployed at strategic points and installations throughout the capital Katmandu.

The printed and electronic media have been subject to drastic censorship, including a six-month ban on all criticism of the king's actions, the state of emergency or the armed forces. Army officers have been stationed at TV and radio stations to vet programs before airing. Newspaper articles have to be approved by the military before publication. An editor told the *Asia Times* website that journalists "have received clear warning not to do anything against the interest of the current regime."

The president and general secretary of the Nepali Journalist Association—Taranath Dahal and Bishnu Nishthuri—have been arrested for issuing a statement denouncing the king's decision and demanding the restoration of democratic rule. Last Wednesday, the army used helicopters and troops to crush a protest by students at the Narayan college campus in Pokhara,

about 200km from Katmandu. Some 15 students were injured.

In seizing power, King Gyanendra accused Prime Minister Deuba of "failing to hold parliamentary elections and to end the Maoist insurgency." But the king has no intention of holding elections. He promised to restore "peace and effective democracy" and, in the same breath, insisted that he would keep power in his own hands for the next three years. On Thursday he installed a cabinet of 10 of his close supporters.

While the new cabinet has called for peace talks with Maoist leaders, the "offer" is more an ultimatum than a genuine attempt to reach a negotiated solution to the long-running civil war. The newly installed education minister Radha Krishna Mainali told the media last week: "If they do [come to talks], we can move forward in a certain way. And if they don't, we have to make another choice."

The army, which is the main prop for the monarchy, has already made clear that it intends to go on the offensive—all in the name of forcing the Maoist rebels to the negotiating table. In comments to senior officers last Friday, army chief Pyar Jung Thapa declared: "The army must take tougher action against the Maoists if they ignore His Majesty's call to lay down their arms, join the mainstream and continue their violence."

In taking power Gyanendra praised the army for combatting "terrorism" and accused political parties of unjustly criticising the military. The Royal Nepalese Army has now increased in size to 138,000 troops and has over the last three years received training and arms from India and the US. The army officer caste has increasingly intervened in political life. Last December the RNA openly opposed calls by Deuba to reciprocate a unilateral ceasefire declared by the Maoist guerrillas.

For their part, the Maoists have indicated their willingness to reach an accommodation with the monarchy. All of the major political parties, including the CPN-UML, have been urging both sides to compromise to end the seven-year armed rebellion that has claimed at least 11,000 lives. Prime Minister Deuba had been attempting to establish the basis for negotiations. The king and the army, however, are only prepared to end the war on their terms.

In a bid to garner support, the king has promised to end the

infighting and corruption of the political parties. At the same time, small demonstrations of support for the king have been staged in Katmandu for the media.

Gyanendra, however, is deeply unpopular. He was anointed as king after a rampage by Crown Prince Dipendra in 2001 resulted in the death of King Birendra—Gyanendra's brother—and a substantial portion of the Nepalese royal family. The murky affair has never been properly investigated and many Nepalese continue to believe that Gyanendra had a hand in the killings.

While accusing political leaders of corruption, Gyanendra has his own substantial business interests. He is known to have stakes in the country's largest cigarette factory, a five-star hotel and a tea garden in eastern Nepal. After being installed as monarch, Gyanendra tightened his grip on power. In 2002, he sacked Deuba and disbanded parliament and installed a succession of hand-picked loyalists. He only reinstated Deuba last June in the face of mounting pro-democracy protests. There have been no national elections in Nepal since 1999.

Maoist leader Prachanda denounced the king last Wednesday as "a national betrayer" and declared that his Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (CPN-M) would be "discussing with pro-people forces...[and] the resistance will be heightened." A three-day general strike called by the Maoists failed to materialise amid heavy censorship and a large military presence in Kathmandu. The CPN-M has gained significant influence, particularly in rural areas, by exploiting widespread discontent over poverty and unemployment. The Maoists claim to control 68 of the country's 75 districts.

Gyanendra's seizure of power has provoked sharp opposition from the US, the European powers and India. While India and the US have been bolstering the Nepalese army, both countries have been pushing the king to isolate the Maoists by reaching an accommodation with opposition parties. Last year the World Bank and donor countries issued a statement calling for the restoration of democracy. On the same day Deuba was appointed prime minister, the World Bank approved \$US40 million worth of aid to Nepal.

Last week US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher strongly criticised Deuba's dismissal, declaring: "I would say we are deeply troubled.... [T]he actions, we feel undermine the Nepali struggle with the Maoists." During a meeting with the Nepalese ambassador, British foreign office spokesman Douglas Alexander voiced similar sentiments. He warned that "this action will increase the risk of instability in Nepal" and could even threaten the monarchy.

A statement by the Indian external affairs ministry declared that king's actions were a "serious setback" for freedom and called for parliamentary elections. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh cancelled his scheduled visit to Bangladesh to attend a meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) after Gyanendra announced he would be attending.

None of these statements have anything to do with defending the democratic rights of the Nepalese people. The small impoverished Himalayan country has become the focus for sharpening rivalry. India has traditionally regarded the kingdom as its strategic preserve and has reacted sharply against any turn by Nepal towards India's traditional regional rivals—China and Pakistan. Washington, which has been developing a close alliance with India, is seeking closer ties with Nepal as part of its broader strategic efforts to encircle China.

The Indian government is concerned that, in seizing power, King Gyanendra may look to support from China and Pakistan. Indeed there are some signs that the two countries are seeking to capitalise on the situation, or may possibly even have known of the king's moves in advance. Just prior to the ousting of Deuba, Gyanendra closed the Kathmandu office of the exiled Tibetan Dalai Lama—one of Beijing's longstanding demands. In what appears to be a quid pro quo, China's foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan told the press that Gyanendra's move was an "internal affair of the Nepal."

Pakistan went even further. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz promised Nepal "all possible help in fighting the terrorists" and "to extend army and civilian training in Pakistan." Confronted with the possibility of being outmanoeuvred in Nepal, India has moderated its position towards Gyanendra. Indian officials have indicated that contacts be established with the new government.

Gyanendra is playing a high-risk game—manoeuvring between more powerful countries on the international stage, while relying on the military at home to crush any opposition. His methods will inevitably produce hostility and resistance—in all probability, sooner rather than later. On Monday, 24 human rights groups and professional organisations defied the king's edicts and held a meeting in Kathmandu to organise a protest for Thursday. In seeking to buttress his own position, Gyanendra has lit the fuse on a political powder keg.



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