

Farcical municipal elections intensify political instability in Nepal

W.A. Sunil, Deepal Jayasekera
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The record low turnout in Nepal's municipal elections last week has exposed just how isolated King Gyanendra and his autocratic regime are. The election, touted by Gyanendra as part of a "road map to democracy," has only intensified opposition to the king's rule and deepened the country's political crisis. Gyanendra dismissed the national parliament and seized full executive power in February last year.

The official voter turnout was just 20 percent, compared to 62 percent for the last municipal election in 1997 and 66 percent for parliamentary elections in 1999. Many of those who did vote were officials, military and police personnel who faced dismissal if they failed to do so. "I was forced to vote. I had no choice," one government worker told the media.

There was also a lack of candidates. The seven major parties, which controlled 90 percent of seats in the parliament before it was dissolved, denounced the poll as a sham and called for a boycott. Of the 4,146 positions up for election, over half had no candidate and many others had only one candidate. Only 15 percent of the posts were contested.

The International Crisis Group (ICC), a Brussels-based thinktank, reported that only 3,255 candidates filed nominations on January 26. "Given the chance two days later, more than 600 candidates withdrew. Many of them were reportedly unwilling candidates in the first place; some complained that their names had been put forward under duress or without their knowledge," the ICC stated.

The February 8 election took place under a heavy police and military presence, designed to crack down on opposition protests and prevent attacks by Maoist guerrillas. The government ordered the security forces to shoot anyone who tried to interfere with the election. The authorities also banned local and foreign

journalists from observing the polling. "We have orders from our high command not to let you in," said a soldier to a group of journalists at a polling station in central Katmandu.

Nepali police clashed with opposition demonstrators in several parts of the country. In the western town of Dang, the army opened fire on protesters, killing Umesh Thapa, a Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) activist. The following day, more than 1,000 people shouting "Hang Gyanendra!" and "Give us the body of the martyr" gathered in Kathmandu to demand the release of the body.

Not surprisingly, pro-monarchist parties swept the polls. Home Minister Kamal Thapa issued a statement absurdly declaring that turnout for the election had been "overwhelming" and the conduct of the poll "extremely peaceful". "This shows that people want peace and democracy in the country and want to give the same message to the world," it stated.

The minister's comments bear no relationship to reality. As Kunda Dixit, editor of the *Nepali Times* commented to Reuters: "These municipal elections were a referendum on the king's takeover one year ago. The message to the king is that 80 percent of people don't support him. I think his days could be numbered."

Lok Raj Baral, a lecturer at Tribhuvan University, told Reuters: "It [the election] has further deepened the crisis for the king. He has reached the point of no return. It helped further polarise forces into monarchical and anti-monarchical. The king is alone. He is isolated internally and internationally."

In Washington, there are serious concerns that the Nepalese regime could collapse. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack bluntly declared that the

poll “represented a hollow attempt to legitimise power”. He noted that voter turnout barely reached 25 percent in Kathmandu and was half that outside the capital, indicating “a clear lack of support”. He called on the king to release political prisoners and begin dialogue with the opposition parties.

Similar fears were expressed internationally. India’s ministry of external affairs issued a statement calling for a “genuine process of national reconciliation” to tackle what it described as Nepal’s grave challenges. “Any credible electoral exercise should have the active involvement and participation of all the mainstream parties,” it stated. The European Union condemned the vote as “a setback for democracy”. British Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon described the situation in Nepal as “very, very serious”.

In Kathmandu, the beleaguered king shows no signs of backing down. Responding to international criticism, a foreign ministry statement declared: “Nepal finds the statements... totally objectionable, thus unacceptable and asks them [the countries] to refrain from making such insolent comments on matters that fall essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of a sovereign country.”

In a further US statement this week, American ambassador James Moriarty warned of a Maoist takeover unless the king and political parties ended their standoff. “If the king and his government opt for greater repression their attempts will ultimately fail and Nepal will suffer greater misery and bloodshed,” he said. Moriarty also criticised the loose alliance reached between opposition parties and the Maoists rebels in November, describing it as “wrongheaded”.

The ambassador’s comments put the US at odds with India, which played a role in encouraging the Maoist Nepal Communist Party (NCP-M) and Nepalese parliamentary opposition to meet and hammer out a deal to campaign jointly against the monarchy. The NCP-M agreed for the first time to eventually join the political mainstream and disarm under some form of UN or international supervision. While denying any official involvement in the negotiations, India obviously gave tacit approval for the key meeting to take place in New Delhi.

India has traditionally regarded Nepal as falling within its sphere of influence and is concerned at China’s growing involvement in Nepalese affairs.

After the US and India cut off arms supplies following the king’s takeover last year, Nepal turned to Beijing for assistance. But in a statement last month, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan declared that China was also “fairly concerned” about the political situation in Nepal and appealed to all parties to “narrow their differences through dialogue”.

The lack of international support is compounding the crisis for the king who received another blow on Monday when the country’s supreme court ruled that the Royal Commission for Corruption Control was unconstitutional. Former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and other political prisoners, who had been jailed by the commission, were freed on Tuesday. The government declared that it would not challenge the court’s decision.

While relatively minor in its immediate impact, the court ruling does directly challenge Gyanendra’s authority. It indicates that sections of the state apparatus, on which the king has rested, are shifting their allegiances. The real fear in ruling circles in Kathmandu and internationally is that Gyanendra’s refusal to compromise with the opposition parties will allow the political situation in Nepal to spiral out of control.



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