

Widespread protests erupt against Nepal's King Gyanendra

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Popular protests and a general strike continued in Nepal for a sixth day yesterday as thousands of demonstrators continued to defy a curfew and a ban on political rallies and to demand an end to the autocratic rule of King Gyanendra.

In the capital of Kathmandu, protesters, chanting “democracy, democracy, down with the autocracy”, set up barricades with bricks and burning tyres. Police attacked the crowds with batons and tear gas then fired on protesters, first with rubber bullets then live rounds. A Nepal Red Cross volunteer told the *New York Times* that at least 90 people were injured in the Gongobu section of the city.

Police also fired on a rally of about 10,000 in the western city of Pokhara, injuring two people. Three people have been killed so far in six days of protests, including one who was shot dead by soldiers in Pokhara on Saturday. More than 2,300 people, including senior political leaders, have been arrested across the country since the protests began last week.

A Home Ministry statement announced that police and soldiers would begin a search of houses across Kathmandu, claiming that Maoist guerrillas were infiltrating the pro-democracy protests. “The security forces are searching for these terrorists for which there will be a massive search of private homes,” it declared.

A general strike is also in force and drawing in wider layers, including doctors, engineers, lawyers, journalists and teachers. Yesterday employees from the country's state-owned banks and utilities walked off the job. “We will not cooperate with the government,” a spokesman told the *New York Times*.

The seven main political parties including the Nepal Congress Party (NCP) and the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist Leninist (CP-UML) called for four days of protests from last Thursday. Their campaign was

backed by the Maoist Nepal Communist Party, which has been waging a protracted guerrilla insurgency against the monarchy but called a ceasefire on April 3.

As the opposition movement continued to grow, the political leaders were compelled to announce on Sunday that the protests would continue until the king restored parliamentary rule. In February last year, Gyanendra dismissed the government and took direct control of the country, appointing his own monarchist cabinet. He imposed draconian emergency laws, cracked down on the political parties and launched a military offensive against the Maoist rebels.

The narrow base of support for the Gyanendra regime was exposed in local government elections in early March. The king had called the polls as a means of legitimising his dictatorial rule, but the result was a debacle when opposition parties called for a boycott. Half of the positions had no candidate, many others had just one and voter turnout was just 20 percent.

Commenting on the current protests, Dhruva Adhikary from the Nepal Press Institute told Associated Press: “You are seeing people in rural areas—doctors, teachers—joining in on their own. It's not going to stop here and we can't rule out more clashes. The authorities' measures appear harsher by the day.”

Lok Raj Baral, head of the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies, was quoted in the *Christian Science Monitor* as saying: “The scale of this uprising is unprecedented. During the people's movement in 1990 that brought democracy to the country, the uprising was significantly smaller in size and scale. This time, every locality in Kathmandu Valley, and every district in the country are in spontaneous revolt.”

The ongoing protests are producing a deep political crisis for the king and his cabinet. While insisting that the security forces will continue to crack down on

opposition rallies, Interior Minister Kamal Thapa yesterday issued an appeal to the opposition parties. “[T]he government is ready to hold talks with the seven political parties, provided they give up their links with the Maoists,” he said.

The regime came under sharp political pressure on Monday from Washington to make such a move. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack issued a sharp rebuke, declaring that “King Gyanendra’s decision 14 months ago to impose direct palace rule in Nepal has failed in every regard. The demonstrations, deaths, arrests and Maoist attacks in the past few days have shown there is more insecurity, not less.”

The US call for the Nepalese opposition to break from the Maoists puts Washington at odds with New Delhi. The seven parties signed a formal 12-point agreement with the Maoist NCP-M after high-level talks in India last November. While the Indian government denied any involvement, it is inconceivable that top Maoist leaders were able to travel to the country without tacit approval from New Delhi. Under the terms of the agreement, the Maoists accepted for the first time “a competitive multiparty system of governance” and their eventual disarmament under UN or other international supervision.

In a statement on April 7, the Indian government called for the “immediate release of arrested” in Nepal and a “return to the path of dialogue and reconciliation.” New Delhi is concerned at the potential for the protests in Nepal to trigger political unrest in India and also fears that rivals China and Pakistan will establish stronger influence in Kathmandu.

While the US, the European Union and India cut off supplies of arms to Nepal after Gyanendra seized direct power, China has continued to provide military aid to the Royal Nepalese Army. Beijing has, however, distanced itself somewhat from the king. During a visit to Nepal last month, Chinese State Councillor Tang Jiakuan pointedly met with opposition party leaders and spoke of the need for reconciliation.

While the major powers, along with the Nepalese opposition parties, are concerned that the protests do not spiral out of control, the movement is developing a life of its own. Anger over repressive police methods and the lack of democratic rights is combining with deep-seated resentment over the failure of successive governments to improve living standards. Nepal is one

of the poorest countries in the world with an annual per capita income is just \$US240 and terrible levels of malnutrition and disease.

As Lok Raj Baral from the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies commented: “Even the parties had not expected this degree of spontaneous participation ...The massive participation from the people is more due to disillusionment with the royal regime than due to love for the parties. People have no expectations [of] the royal regime anymore.”



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