

Nepalese king bows to mass protests and offers to recall parliament

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Confronted with the prospect of a further major protest today that is expected to attract hundreds of thousands, Nepal King Gyanendra made a short televised statement yesterday conceding one of the main demands of the seven-party opposition alliance—the immediate recall of parliament, which was dissolved in May 2002. Parliament is due to be convened on Friday.

Gyanendra made no direct reference to the other major opposition demand—for the convening of a constituent assembly to rewrite the country's constitution. He did, however, declare that his proclamation was being made “according to the road map of the agitating political parties”. In his first direct reference to the “people's movement,” the king hypocritically expressed his condolences for those killed by the security forces he unleashed on the demonstrators.

In February last year, Gyanendra arbitrarily seized executive power and ruled directly through his own cabinet of royalist appointees. His crackdown on political opposition, the press and all protests provoked widespread popular hostility. The king's isolation was graphically exposed in February when he staged local government elections as “part of a road map for democracy” but was decisively rebuffed. The turnout was just 20 percent after the opposition called for a boycott.

While the seven opposition parties—including the Nepal Congress Party (NCP) and the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML)—have yet to formally respond, there is little doubt that they will welcome yesterday's announcement with open arms. As the protests have swelled in numbers and defiantly challenged the state apparatus, these parties have been desperate to find a means for reining in the movement and preventing broader social and political demands being raised.

Senior NCP leader Arjun Narsingh immediately declared: “It is a victory of the people's movement.”

CPN-UML leader Rajan Bhattarai said that the parliament's first task would be the calling of elections for a constituent assembly. Asked about the future of the monarchy, Bhattarai only said: “Whatever [the] decision of the constituent assembly, it will have to be abided by the monarch.”

The Maoist Nepal Communist Party (NCP-M), which has been waging a guerrilla war for nearly a decade and has significant control of rural areas of the country, is yet to respond. Last November, with the tacit support of India, the Maoists forged an alliance with the seven opposition parties, to eventually disarm and join the political mainstream. With the prospect of their limited demands for a constituent assembly and an end to the monarchy being met, the NCP-M leaders may decide to end the conflict.

The scope of the protests has clearly shaken not only the monarchy, but the opposition parties. Over the weekend, the alliance was compelled to reject last Friday's proposal by Gyanendra to appoint an opposition leader as prime minister, but not recall parliament. The offer, which left power in the hands of the king, was derisively rejected by crowds of protesters who have been calling for an end to the monarchy.

The opposition parties had no option but to decline the proposal on Saturday as “meaningless and inappropriate”. As Homnath Dahal, leader of the Nepal Congress-Democratic (NC-D), explained: “Prolonging the street protests would prove disastrous for the country. But stopping the movement now might turn the street protests against the seven-party alliance.”

The decision left the major powers scrambling. India, the US and the European Union had been pressing Gyanendra to make some concessions to the seven-party alliance in order to find a means of shutting down the protests. Ambassadors from the US, EU and India met with opposition leaders to urge them to use the “window”

to negotiate a settlement. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also issued a statement calling on the opposition to work out the transition.

The opposition parties, however, feared that, having set the protests and general strike in motion on April 6, the movement would slip out of their grip. Major demonstrations took place in Kathmandu and other cities and towns over the weekend despite a curfew and the mobilisation of heavily armed police and soldiers.

In the capital alone on Saturday, 100,000 people joined the protests, broke through the cordon surrounding the city and clashed with police and soldiers armed with tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Staff at the Kathmandu Model Hospital told the *New York Times* that they had been flooded with nearly 150 casualties, 43 with bullet wounds. “It was like a war. Every minute, ambulances coming in with victims,” Dr Pandey said.

Bharat Sharma, a volunteer with a makeshift ambulance service, told the British-based *Independent*: “The bastards shot at children. If the king thinks he can control us with bullets he’d better forget it. This is the 21st century and a king is a rarity, something that belongs in a zoo.”

As the opposition leaders huddled inside the home of former prime minister and Nepal Congress head Girija Prasad Koirala, protesters jammed the streets in the area. “Don’t get weak in the knees! Don’t ditch the people!” one group yelled. “We don’t give a damn about anything else. We don’t want the monarchy,” another group shouted. Others were chanting the more common slogans: “Gyanendra’s a thief”, “Hang Gyanendra” and “Gyanendra leave the country”.

Tens of thousands continued to protest on Sunday and Monday along ring road at the outskirts of the city, setting up barricades of burning logs and tyres. Many of them are young, frustrated not only with the lack of basic democratic rights but the lack of jobs and educational opportunities. During the past 19 days, soldiers and police have killed at least 14 people and injured hundreds. Some 5,000 party activists, journalists and other protesters have been detained.

However, while deeply hostile to the monarchy and suspicious of the opposition parties, the protesters have no clear political alternative. An article in *Time* magazine noted: “The trouble is that no one knows who might replace him [the king]. Through the anti-King movement has wide support, many protesters are teenagers or twentysomething Nepalese men in Nirvana and Metallica T shifts who have no leader and few goals beyond throwing rocks. Cars, shops and the Hyatt Regency Hotel

have all been attacked in the past weeks.”

Behind the scenes, the major powers have been seeking to work out a deal to head off the threat to bourgeois rule. Deeply concerned that political instability will spill over the border, India has played a prominent role. Last week Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held a special cabinet meeting and dispatched envoy Karan Singh to Kathmandu with “a strong message” to the king to offer a compromise.

Singh welcomed the king’s announcement last Friday, saying it was a “step in the right direction”. Speaking to reporters during a flight to Germany, he said: “We can’t afford to have Nepal as a failed state.” But when the king’s offer was rejected, New Delhi abruptly changed tack, declaring it was up to the Nepali people “how to realise their democratic aspirations”.

Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran deliberately undercut the king, indicating for the first time that New Delhi would not necessarily back a constitutional democracy in Nepal. “If today or tomorrow the people of Nepal want a different kind of political arrangement, that’s for the people of Nepal to decide—not for India,” he said. As Kunda Dixit, editor of the *Nepali Times*, commented: “[V]ery intense behind-the-scenes talks are going on. Indian brokering has gone into high gear and a plan is going back and forth.”

There is no doubt that India, the US and the European powers all had a hand in pushing the king to make a further announcement last night. Opposition leaders have declared that today’s mass demonstration, expected to draw up to two million people, to be “a victory rally”—a clear signal that they are moving to end the protests. Whether that takes place is another matter. Many of those who have risked their lives confronting the security forces are deeply distrustful not only of the king but the entire political establishment, which has failed to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of the Nepalese masses.



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