

New Nepalese government seeks to defuse mass protest movement

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8 May 2006

For the first time in nearly four years, the Nepalese parliament reconvened on April 28 following weeks of mass protests against King Gyanendra's autocratic rule. While the international media and major powers have hailed proceedings as a positive step towards "peace and democracy", the return to formal parliamentary rule in no way addresses the aspirations of ordinary working people for basic democratic rights, let alone their pressing social needs.

The installation of 84-year-old Nepal Congress (NC) leader, Girija Prasad Koirala, as prime minister marks a return to the notoriously corrupt and unstable parliamentary regimes of the 1990s that proved completely incapable of resolving the economic and social crisis confronting the country. Koirala, a veteran politician and central figure in the Nepalese political establishment, was formally sworn in by the king on April 30.

Koirala is well aware that he is skating on thin ice. Hundreds of thousands of people, from many different layers of the population, risked their lives and took part in mass rallies that confronted the army and police to demand an end to the monarchy. At least 21 people were killed in clashes with the security forces and many more were injured.

Among young people in particular, there is not only hostility towards the king, but deep distrust in Koirala and the opposition parties. During the horse-trading over the ministerial posts last week, hundreds of students tried to storm parliament to voice their demands. "If you leaders don't overcome your greed for power and work according to wishes of the people, we will gherao [blockade] your houses," they shouted.

Koirala announced an interim seven-member cabinet on May 2. His party has four of the seven ministers with one each to the Communist Party of Nepal-United

Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), the Nepal Congress Democratic Party and the United Left Front. Koirala has the key defence portfolio and another NC member Krishna Sitaula holds the home ministry in charge of police. CPN-UML leader K.P. Sharma Oli was appointed deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

Between 1991 and October 2002, when King Gyanendra shut down parliament, the NC and CPN-UML led a series of shaky coalition governments, which accepted the limited constitutional reforms established following mass protests in 1990 against the absolute monarchy. Koirala became the first elected prime minister in 1991 and played a key role in defusing the widespread opposition movement in 1990 in which 500 people died in clashes with the military and police.

Now Koirala has been installed to do the same again. The parliament has already voted to hold elections for a constituent assembly to consider changes to the country's constitution in a bid to stem popular anger against King Gyanendra's anti-democratic methods. The cabinet has also annulled all appointments made by the king since 2002 and recalled 12 ambassadors including to the US, India, Britain, Japan and France.

Above all, however, the Koirala government is resting on the Maoist Nepal Communist Party (NCP-M), which has been waging a guerrilla insurgency since 1996 and controls a significant number of the country's backward rural districts. The seven opposition parties struck a formal agreement with the NCP-M in New Delhi last November for a joint campaign against King Gyanendra. As part of the deal, the Maoists agreed to eventually disarm and join the political mainstream.

Over the past week, the new government has intensified its efforts to draw in the Maoists. On the same day he was appointed, Koirala appealed to the

rebels “to renounce violence and come to the process of dialogue.” And the NCP-M is responding. After initially denouncing the decision of the seven parties to accept the king’s offer as “a historic blunder”, the Maoist leadership quickly adopted a more conciliatory tone, announcing a ceasefire and indicating their willingness to enter talks.

For his part, Koirala is keen to use the Maoists to help contain the mass protest movement. The government declared an indefinite ceasefire on May 3, ended the designation of the NCP-M as “terrorist” and initiated steps towards the possible release of hundreds of detained Maoist rebels. Cabinet Minister Man Shrestha told Agence France Presse: “We have already called the Maoists to talks and once the dialogue process starts rebel leaders detained in various prisons will also be released.”

The willingness of the Maoist leaders to embrace the Koirala government is a tacit admission of political bankruptcy. The CPN-M is following a similar path as has previously been trodden by their political rivals among the other Nepalese Stalinist parties such as the CPN-UML. In the current political crisis, the NCP-M has become a vital prop for maintaining bourgeois rule.

Top Maoist leader Prachanda has declared that talk of disarming was “a suicidal dream” when the army still has its weapons. At the same time, however, he has urged the government to organise talks quickly and to release political prisoners to “create a good atmosphere of confidence.” Maoist leader Vinod Upadhyay is quoted in a Nepalese magazine as saying: “The Maoists will definitely take part in the interim government.”

The CPN-M’s eagerness to join the political establishment reflects their concern that the events of the last month have left them on the political sidelines. While their rebel army has a significant presence in economically backward rural areas, the party has little influence in the major cities and towns where the latest mass protests were concentrated. The CPN-M is now preparing to join the long line of guerrilla outfits around the world that have already exchanged their automatic rifles for posts in government and business.

Behind the scenes, the US, the EU, India and China played a key role in forcing King Gyanendra to relinquish control and reconvene parliament. New Delhi, in particular, which helped to forge the agreement last November between the Maoists and the

opposition parties, was at the centre of diplomatic efforts to put pressure on the king. The common fear of all the major powers was that the unrest in Nepal could spill over the border into neighbouring countries.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 27 described the close international collaboration. “In recent weeks, ambassadors of the US, India and China—as well as Britain—have worked closely to pressure King Gyanendra to restore democratic rule and end a confrontation that threatened to feed a growing, decade-long rebellion by Maoist militants. Ambassadors held one-on-one conversations to hash out a collective approach to the problem. A final intensive diplomatic push followed, when several ambassadors met the king in succession. According to a diplomat with knowledge of the meetings, they delivered a unified message: Step aside.”

In the wake of Gyanendra’s decision, the major powers have been working to prop up the Koirala government. US Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher visited Nepal last week and met with party leaders and also with the army chief, but pointedly not with the king.

The US and its allies are backing the new government, not to establish “democracy” in Nepal, but for exactly the opposite reason: to head off the intervention of masses of ordinary people and their demands for decent living standards and basic democratic rights that cannot be met within the framework of capitalism.



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