

Nepal's prime minister resigns amid spiraling protests

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Nepal has been plunged into political crisis by three days of mass protests involving tens of thousands of mainly young people that erupted on Monday. While the immediate trigger was a government ban last Thursday on 26 social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, X and YouTube, the protests reflect widespread frustration and anger over a lack of opportunities, corruption and the social gulf between rich and poor.

Young people viewed the social media ban as censorship. Before it was imposed, posts on X and TikTok using the hashtag #nepokids exposed the lavish lifestyles of the families of politicians. Unverified but widely shared photos of a minister's son posing with luxury brand boxes and a video showing a former judge's son dining in upscale restaurants and standing beside a Mercedes went viral recently.

Protest slogans included "[Prime Minister] Oli is a thief, quit the country," "Shut down corruption, not social media," "Justice and accountability for the lives lost," "We are standing here for our future" and "Provide economic opportunity."

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world with one in four living below the poverty line. Official unemployment last year was 10.7 percent and for youth (ages 15-24) was 22.7 percent. Many young people are forced to leave the country to look for work.

The protests quickly spiraled out of control despite a brutal police crackdown using tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons and live ammunition. In a desperate effort to placate the protesters, Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak resigned on Monday, and the government announced the lifting of the social media ban.

Protesters, however, ignored these attempts at appeasement as well as a curfew that was imposed not only in the capital Kathmandu but in other cities

throughout the country. Angered by police violence, young people clashed with police and targeted symbols of the political establishment, including the parliament building, the Supreme Court and other government buildings.

The homes of prominent politicians including two former prime ministers—Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress Party and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)—were broken into and vandalised. Nepali Congress is part of the ruling coalition. Kathmandu's airport was also temporarily closed by fires.

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, from the Communist Party of Nepal—United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), resigned on Tuesday after widespread criticism in the media and by opposition parties of the government's handling of the protests. Some reports indicate that Chief General Ashok Raj Sigdel also called on Oli to resign. Oli remains as caretaker prime minister.

Amid the deployment of the army and continuing protests, the military held talks on Wednesday with representatives of the protesters, who proposed the formation of a technocratic interim government with former Chief Justice Sushila Karki suggested as a possible interim prime minister. No agreement was reached, however.

Also on Wednesday, prisoners staged jail breaks from several prisons, with widely varying estimates of escapees from around 3,000 to 13,500. Troops remained on the streets to enforce a curfew, with the military warning of harsh measures against looters and rioters. About 25 people have been arrested for looting and violence. The death toll over the past three days stands at 25, with the health ministry reporting on Wednesday that more than 1,000 have been injured.

The protest movement is the most significant since mass demonstrations forced the abdication of King Gyanendra Shah in 2008 and resulted in the formal abolition of the country's 240-year-old absolute monarchy. Since then, Nepal has been plagued by political instability with 14 governments in the past 17 years—none of which has completed a full term of five years. Last year, 73-year-old Oli was sworn in for a fourth time as prime minister.

None of the major parties is able to address the country's economic and social crisis. The various Stalinist parties—including Oli's CPN-UML and the CPN (Maoist Centre) of Pushpa Kamal Dahal—have been just as ruthless as the conservative Nepali Congress in imposing the burden of the crisis on working people that has hit young people in particular.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal headed the CPN (Maoist) before it split. It had waged a protracted guerilla war against the army and the monarchy. After the fall of the monarchy, it gave up its weapons and joined the Kathmandu political establishment, serving a vital role in containing opposition and anger to the existing parties.

Dahal, who has subsequently served as prime minister three times, has proven to be a staunch defender of Nepali capitalism and big business interests, and an advocate of pro-market reforms. The transformation of the Nepalese Maoists into trusted props of bourgeois rule is another graphic expression of the reactionary character of the Stalinist two-stage theory, which justifies the embrace of capitalism and so-called progressive layers of the bourgeoisie.

Underlying the political turmoil is the country's worsening economic crisis. A comment in the *Annapurna Express* in April, which expressed the frustration and concerns in business circles, declared:

“The economy is in shambles, the citizens are crying out, and the ones in power are stuffing their ears with wads of cash. The recession currently faced by the nation is the result of decades of corruption, inefficiency, and misplaced priorities.”

It noted the lack of foreign aid, compounded by the ending of USAID and warned of “some tough times in the future.” After pointing out that optimistic growth figures were questionable, it painted a picture of a backward capitalist economy dependent on tourism, agriculture and remittances from overseas workers.

Some 67 percent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, which contributes less than a quarter of GDP.

It is little wonder that there are few opportunities for young people and mounting frustration that finds no outlet in any of the traditional parties. The only party that has expressed any support or sympathy for the protesters is the populist Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which was only established in June 2022 and has won 20 parliamentary seats, by appealing to youth on an anti-corruption platform.

It is capitalism, however, not corruption, that is the source of the political and economic crisis in Nepal and that is fuelling mass discontent and anger throughout the region and internationally, including in recent weeks in Indonesia where mass protests of young people erupted.

The only progressive solution lies in the political struggle for socialism based on a unified movement of the international working class. We urge workers and youth to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International which alone fights for this perspective.



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