

# **Standing behind the despot on the wrong side of history**

Tuesday 25 April 2006, by [HILTON Isabel](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2006).

**Only democracy can end the crisis in Nepal, but the US, EU and India back the king and his attempts to crush the Maoist uprising.**

In the rapidly moving crisis in Nepal, a few lines are clear. King Gyanendra, with the desperation of the failing despot, tosses a small concession from his leaking boat. On the streets, the democracy movement reacts with contempt and a renewed determination to be rid of him. In the hills, the Maoists watch, alert for signs of betrayal by the seven political parties with whom they signed an agreement last November to push for a constituent assembly and a democratic constitution. Nepal - the world's only Hindu kingdom, with a population of 28 million people - is on the edge of a collapse, with far-reaching implications for the entire region. And in the shadows, the external powers, India, the US, China and Europe, are pulling strings, trying to exert leverage on this complex situation. So far, their intervention has been inglorious.

In India there is a growing outcry at the part played by the prime minister and his special envoy, Karan Singh. Dr Singh was not an accidental choice. The son of the last maharajah of Kashmir, he had to flee his own royal palace as a boy. His wife is a member of the Rana family, until 1960 Nepal's corrupt and despotic hereditary prime ministers. And her niece, Devyani Rana, is the woman for whom Nepal's crown prince massacred most of his family in 2002. Dr Singh was sent to talk sense to a king intent on hiding from the anger of his people behind the guns of the Royal Nepal Army. Gyanendra's Friday night statement, in which he offered to hand over some power to a prime minister and council of ministers, was the result. He did not apologise for his power grab last February, or the brutality of his armed forces. Nor did he offer

to restore parliament or give up his control of the army, and he made no mention of a constituent assembly. Gyanendra offered, in short, a return to the situation of late last year, when, having dismissed parliament, he ruled through an executive whom he could dismiss at will.

India brokered the November agreement between the Maoists and the democratic opposition, so it came as a surprise when Dr Singh and the Indian prime minister immediately welcomed the king's move. In Kathmandu, the ambassadors of the US, Sweden, France, Britain and Germany went to the home of Girija Prasad Koirala, president of the Nepali Congress party, to try to persuade the leaders of the seven-party alliance to accept. As the ambassadors cajoled the politicians inside, thousands of protesters outside chanted their opposition.

The democratic leaders did not accept, recognising that the deal would leave them powerless but facing renewed hostilities from the Maoists in a war that, as all serious observers agree, cannot be won on the battlefield. Accepting it would have ended all hope of a political settlement of the decade-long war, which has claimed more than 13,000 lives. It was a blueprint for greater bloodshed.

In the Duwakot armed police barracks, where they languish in detention for defying the king's ban on peaceful demonstrations, a group of 20 eminent civil society leaders issued a powerful rebuttal of the ambassadors' position. In a letter smuggled out of their prison, the group, who include one of Nepal's most distinguished editors and two of the framers of Nepal's 1990 constitution, wrote:

*"[We] believe that your governments' welcoming response to Friday's address by King Gyanendra was based on a misperception of Nepali political reality and a misreading of the address itself ... Your reaction has needlessly delayed a peaceful transition in the country at a critical hour, when millions of Nepalis are on the streets agitating for an immediate return to democracy. This show of people's solidarity ... deserves more respect than has been accorded by the international community."*

The king's offer, they argued, would return Nepal to a state in which the king could dismiss the prime minister the next time the mood seized him. That, they said, would not be long coming: "*We appeal to your excellencies to also recall the many times that the royal palace has played the game of deception with you, and to introspect whether King Gyanendra, retaining all the powers as head of state not responsible to a legislature, will allow any forthcoming government to act independently. Your attitude seems to be 'the king has given this much, take it and make the best of it.'*"

Why did India and the ambassadors get it so wrong? The king, as one of India's leading journalists wrote, is a despot on the wrong side of history. But there is one external power that does believe in a military solution to Nepal's Maoist uprising. After Gyanendra seized power, a procession of US "security experts" visited Nepal to urge the king and the army to step up the war. Many Indian commentators see in the Indian prime minister's apparent change of tack the results of the new strategic partnership between the US and India, in which the US will give India nuclear cooperation and India will become a US ally in Asia and the "war on terror".

The newspaper Asian Age yesterday reported that "informed sources" said the Indian government "was acting along with the US that has also been very keen to isolate the Maoists and retain the king as a constitutional monarch". In Nepal, activists told the newspaper that New Delhi "must learn to listen to the people of Nepal instead of working out secret deals with the king and the Americans". It is a message that the EU would do well to heed. There is one way out of Nepal's crisis: the king must go and a full democracy that includes the Maoists must be established.

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