

Nepal rallies against the King

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In a breakthrough agreement, all seven significant political parties of Nepal and its Communist Party (Maoist) have announced a non-violent agitation to put an end to the "absolute monarchy." Although the agreement was announced in two separate statements, it's the result of hard negotiations between Nepal's two major political blocs, culminating in success on March 19.

The big showdown with King Gyanendra will begin with a peaceful general strike on April 6, with a mass rally on April 9. This period marks the 16th anniversary of the "end of absolute rule" in Nepal announced by former King Birendra.

Public anger against King Gyanendra's February 2005 usurpation of executive power and his autocratic rule has erupted in energetic demonstrations around the slogan "Gyane chor, Nepal Chhor" (Thief Gyanendra, quit Nepal). The near-total boycott of last month's municipal elections made Nepal's parties confident that they can replace absolutism with a Constitutional monarchy, if not Republic.

The March 19 understanding between the parties and the Maoists built upon a landmark 12-point agreement last November under which the Maoists would disarm under "credible" international supervision. The deal was reached in India and facilitated by the Congress, Communists and other parties. It was also endorsed by the Indian government.

The agreement could be reached primarily because the Maoists radically rethought their strategy. They concluded their main enemy is the King and the best way of removing him lies in peaceful methods, not armed insurrection.

The March 19 understanding was reached after many days of talks. The US's shadow hung heavy over the deliberations. On February 15, Washington's ambassador to Nepal James Moriarty launched a scathing attack on the November agreement. US official Donald Camp recently told a Congressional Committee: "We are concerned that Maoists, who have refused to renounce violence, have gained a greater degree of legitimacy from their engagement with the political parties."

Although India endorses the 12-point agreement, it made no attempt to dissuade Washington from adopting a hard line towards its implementation.

Thanks to US pressure, former Prime Ministers Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba, who lead the two factions of the Nepali Congress, were reluctant to issue a joint statement announcing a united agitation with the Maoists. They eventually came around to the "compromise formula" of separate statements largely because of pressure from their party cadres. The formula is a tribute to popular support for the 12-point agreement.

The Nepali people are fed up with the monarchy. Under Gyanendra's rule, the economic situation has worsened, development activity has come to standstill, and corruption has flourished. Democratic freedoms stand suspended. As much as one-third of that poor country's budget goes to the military. Textbooks have been taxed to buy guns.

The coming agitation could be the final struggle against the absolute monarchy. The King won't find it easy to repress it. The history of Nepal's democracy movement of 1989-90 shows that once the

people are fired by the ideas of freedom, self-empowerment and democracy, force becomes counter-productive.

King Gyanendra risks an ignominious collapse of the monarchy if he ignores this lesson. His best (indeed, only) bet lies in a Constitutional or largely ceremonial monarchy.

However, the path to democratisation won't be smooth. The seven parties don't fully trust the Maoists although CPN(M) leaders Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai have repeatedly declared they will have their armed squads disarmed.

In recent interviews to the BBC and The Hindu, Prachanda said that although the Maoists prefer a Republic, they would abide by the verdict of a Constitutional Assembly in case that favours a nominal monarchy.

The coalition partners differ on tactics. The Maoists advocate immediate elections to a Constitutional Assembly. But the seven-party alliance would like restoration of the National Assembly first. There's a real danger that the Assembly's restoration will lead to jockeying for power and produce rifts.

The King might also launch armed attacks on the Maoists, hoping that retaliation would wreck the two-bloc coalition. The parties and the Maoists will have to perform a tight-rope walk.

The Indian government too has to walk the tight-rope as it corrects its Nepal policy. It used to be hostile to the Maoists and supported and armed the monarchy against them. For 18 months after Gyanendra's coup, it continued to pay lip service to the "two pillars" thesis: "Constitutional monarchy" and "multi-party democracy"-even though the first pillar was hollowed out by the monarch himself.

It's only recently that New Delhi stopped parroting the thesis. But it must go further and make a decisive break with its past approach. This consisted in clinging to the King as the best guarantor of Nepal's unity and stability-which he's patently not-, banking on discredited politicians, while spurning the Maoists.

India's opposition to the Maoists was unduly influenced by its security forces and unreasonable fears about a Maoist-Naxalite link. There's at best a weak link between the two. Prachanda advises India's Naxalites to participate in elections!

India should acknowledge that the Maoists represent a force for positive change and reform from below, although their reliance on violence is totally unacceptable. The present moment offers the best chance to bring the Maoists fully into democratic politics. India must seize it.

India must also persuade the US to take the Maoists out of the "terrorist" watchlist. It can convincingly cite the 12-point agreement to this end. India must counter Washington's attempt to stitch together a bogus, unviable settlement in Nepal through the King's appointment of a nominally "democratic" government. That can only prolong the cycle of state violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Nepal and India have a unique relationship and an open 1,400 kilometre-long border. India has a legitimate stake in democracy and stability in Nepal. The Nepali people welcomed India when it threw its weight behind their pro-democracy demand.

India can't play this role if the King prolongs his stay in power. The true solution lies in the 12-point agreement. India must carry it to its logical conclusion. Nepal's people deserve nothing less.

P.S.

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