

EDITORIAL

Red Salute to the Brave and Fighting People of Nepal

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The people of Nepal are once again making history. The surging waves of people's movement in this Himalayan 'kingdom' have already forced the thoroughly isolated and infamous king on the backfoot. The autocratic king who had first usurped the royal throne through a gory palace massacre and then gone on to steal absolute power by hijacking the fledgling system of multi-party democracy has now been compelled to promise to 'return' sovereignty to the people. Many leaders of the movement including CPN(UML) General Secretary Madhav Nepal who had been illegally detained have had to be released in the face of mounting popular opposition. It is now crystal clear that with all his American backing and military might, Gyanendra can no longer rule in his old autocratic way.

This new turning point, which hopefully marks the beginning of a decisive advance for the people of Nepal, demonstrates the great power of a united and determined popular movement. Backing the present upsurge of the people is a very broad alliance of political forces that includes virtually all shades of political streams barring perhaps only the die-hard royalists. This grand political alliance, however loose, has facilitated an unprecedented social polarisation and even soldiers and officers of the Royal Nepalese Army have to face growing opposition from their own family members. This massive unity of the people is led predominantly by the Nepali Left, comprising both the CPN(UML) and the Maoists and it is powered by a growing republican resolve of the Nepali people that appears to be in no mood to stop with another halfway compromise.

This is where the present juncture marks a distinct step forward from that in 1990. The 1990 movement was inspired more by a desire to end the partyless panchayat system and establish an elected multi-party democracy. This time round, the movement is pitted directly against the king and the key demand goes beyond a restoration of the old arrangement to the establishment of a constituent assembly and thus possibly to the point of heralding a republican future for the country. The people's anger against Gyanendra the autocratic king has clearly begun to grow into a desire and demand for an end to the very system of monarchy. If foreign powers now try to intervene with the agenda of saving the discredited and beleaguered king, the mounting mass anger in Nepal may well explode against these foreign powers as well.

The king's current offer to cede power to an interim government headed by a prime minister nominated by the seven-party alliance to be followed by elections at an unspecified date under the 1990 constitution evades this key question of formation of a new constituent assembly. The people of Nepal do not want another elections just to have another government that the king may again happily dismiss whenever he chooses. They want a new constitution to be drafted by an elected constituent assembly. Instead of the king deciding the future of Nepal, they want the new constitution to decide the fate of the king. The leaders of the movement have therefore rightly snubbed the king's current offer and Comrade Madhav Nepal has rightly pointed out that nothing short of an elected constituent assembly could end the present imbroglio.

What is the Indian response to the present juncture in Nepal? The Indian state continues to repeat

its old twin-pillar policy for Nepal - "constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy". The US has clearly expressed its displeasure over the growing coordination between the seven-party alliance and the Maoists. The king's current offer to the seven-party alliance to nominate an interim prime minister and elections under the 1990 constitution is clearly in accordance with the US gameplan of 'restoration of democracy' in Nepal. Did the Indian Prime Minister's 'message' to the king of Nepal differ in any respect from this American agenda? Given India's strategic partnership with the US and the growing Congress-BJP consensus on the question of foreign policy, the answer is only likely to be in the negative.

If the Indian state seeks to save the beleaguered monarchy and prevent Nepal from making its possible transition towards a leftwing republican future, the democratic people of India must oppose such an Indian intervention and stand unambiguously by the fighting people of Nepal and their republican resolve. Quite significantly, the UPA government has chosen a former Indian prince like Karan Singh as its special envoy for Nepal. There are speculations that some Left leaders may also be pressed into this act of mediation. No matter who is chosen as the messenger or mediator, the message from India must be one of emphatic and total solidarity with the people of Nepal. Victory to the brave and fighting people of Nepal!

(Written on 23rd April night)

IN FOCUS

Nepal: Birth Pangs of A New Republic

Nepal is in the midst of a veritable civil war. Renowned military scientist Clausewitz said that war is a continuation of politics. But Nepal is witnessing a peculiar situation in which politics and war have merged into one. People are taking on the military on streets. Curfew, shoot at sight order promulgated by the monarch have all proved futile. Political parties have rejected the King's offer of talks, saying that he is facing complete isolation at home and in the international community. In response they have launched 'Non Cooperation Movement' on 16 April 2006 and called upon the people not to pay taxes and even stop paying bills for water, electricity and telephone services. Agitators have not only brought down all the hoardings and statues of Gyanendra in Kathmandu and elsewhere, they have changed the names of places and streets connected to monarchy. On 20 April, they encircled the palace and changed the name of square in front of Narayanhiti Palace from Gyanendra Chowk and renamed it as "Loktantra Chowk".

In this phase of upsurge, people have started proclaiming one district after the other as "republic". Chitwan district was declared as "the first republic of Nepal". Next it was the turn of Kirtipur. On 15 April, people declared Lalitpur as a 'liberated zone'. People thronging in tens of thousands, braving a shower of bullets by the Royal Nepal Army and armed police through rain and hail, have shown it amply that at whatever cost of life they will reject the king with the contempt it deserves, and proclaim the whole of Nepal as a republic.

On 21 April or the 16th day of the Nepal-wide general strike, around one and a half lakh people were on the street in Kathmandu encircling the palace despite 9 am to 8 pm curfew and the order to shoot agitators at sight. They were waiting for an announcement by the king, which was expected following the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's special emissary Karna Singh's visit. In the evening the king did come with an announcement, but only to once again make the promise to

“restore democracy in Nepal”, without spelling out any concrete steps. In his speech the king asked the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) to nominate a prime minister, but reports are there that he has already invited KP Bhattarai to assume the office of prime minister. Whatever Karan Singh many have advised his relative, the fact is that the king has refused to take steps backwards. On the one hand he is talking of restoring democracy, on the other, the police on the same day arrested two top CPN(UML) leaders Jhalanath Khanal and Bamdev Gautam, who were holding talks with Maoists. Following the king’s announcement, CPN(UML) General Secretary Madhav Nepal has asserted firmly that the movement for democracy will settle for nothing short of the election of a constituent assembly, and it will continue till the achievement of that end. Veteran Nepali Congress leader GP Koirala has also termed the announcement as too little, too late, and vowed to continue the agitation. And the next day, on 22 April, the SPA has given a 24-hour ultimatum to the king, and have declared their intention to set up a parallel Government.

The present spate of democratic upheaval has started on 6 April 2006 with the four-day all-Nepal General Strike called by the SPA. Initially the SPA had announced to hold it for four days and call a mass rally in Kathmandu on 9 April at the culmination of the strike. But the king adopted a very obstinate attitude and imposed a curfew on the rally, as a result of which the rally had to be called off. Instead the SPA announced to continue the general strike for an indefinite period till the king bows down.

It was in support of this general strike that CPN(Maoist) had announced a unilateral ceasefire on 3 April. However an arrogant king completely ignored this opportunity to engage with them, instead he imposed an indefinite prohibition on holding rallies in Kathmandu. It seems that by now he was determined to slight the SPA as well. This along, the king made the ‘terrorist and disruptive activities ordinance’ even more stringent by introducing a clause to award a 3-year sentence or 50,000 NCR as fine or both to any person on the charge of having contacts with Maoists, knowing fully well that CPN(UML) and other SPA parties’ leaders have been in contact with Maoists. And it had also been clarified in the order that the provision would be applicable to both political leaders and journalists alike. This was nothing but a vain attempt to browbeat the SPA to renege their agreement with CPN(Maoist). Clearly Gyanendra was following the Bush dictum that Washington would regard all those who join hands with Maoists as terrorists.

Were these acts even distantly aimed at finding out a solution to the political question of the Maoists? No, these acts were clearly a sign of unleashing a war on the parliamentary as well as the Maoist opposition, at one go. And the result was predictable - his tactics met with colossal failure. Seeing that the king has preferred to board a sinking ship, a section of the army and the police, personnel of Supreme Court and Home Department have proclaimed their support for the democratic movement. It seems that the Indian Government envoy Karan Singh has also failed in finding a solution for the king, and the infamous plain-speaker, US envoy James Moriarty, has cautioned the king that time is running out and he may have to make a Saigon exit.

What events led to the present political juncture in Nepal? When the Maoists started their armed struggle in April 1996, the nascent parliamentary democracy in Nepal had started revealing its fissures. Gradually its instability had come to the surface. Coupled with parliamentary opportunism (and corruption) characteristic of a halfway-house democracy, the parliamentary institution itself in a few years earned enough disgrace in the eyes of the people.

Both the monarchy and the Maoists benefited from this crisis. However, it was not before the turn of the century that the key question of an alternative system came to the fore. While ‘celebrating’ the tenth anniversary of the great democratic upsurge of 1990 and promulgation of the new constitution, Nepali newspapers prominently discussed the question of whether a review of the decade old constitution was necessary. A good section of intelligentsia expressed the need either to draft a new constitution or drastically reform the old one. The greatest flaw in the 1990 constitution

was that it was not a product of any representative constituent assembly, it was just drafted by monarchy and political parties together. As a result, the supremacy was vested clearly to the people's representatives and the main arm of state power, the army remained in the hands of the king. Moreover, he had the last say in foreign affairs. It was at that time that Maoists picked up the issue of the constituent assembly, which was originally the common demand of the democratic movement of 1990. For that matter, Nepali Congress had already raised this demand decades back. However, the compromise at the peak of the people's upsurge relegated this issue to the background.

In the sway of victory, Nepali political parties had no apprehension at the time that this loophole would be utilized by a shrewd monarch in the event of crisis of instability in the parliamentary system or that it might lead to a reactionary coup by the king. However, Gyanendra precisely did that first as a dress rehearsal towards the end of 2002, sacking the Deuba government on the charge of its 'incompetence' in dealing with the Maoists and holding elections, and then finally in February last year. Thus he laid down the background of a revolution for establishing a democratic republic. As he had usurped the kingship following a conspiratorial palatial massacre, he himself suffered a crisis of credibility from the very beginning, and this fact quickly pushed him towards the autocratic option. The king himself could never achieve the twin tasks of dealing with the Maoists and holding elections. It soon became clear that it was only a ploy to cling to power and this led the entire political spectrum to unite and wage a movement to restore democracy.

Still, for a couple of years the parliamentary parties and Maoists could not arrive at a single issue, because the king was playing his cards deftly. The king mobilized the erstwhile monarchists and by alternatively assigning importance to Maoists and parliamentary parties, he could successfully conspire to drive a wedge between the two camps. This also became possible because, having a stake in the 1990 constitution, political parties including CPN(UML) had nurtured an anachronistic notion that both monarchy and parliament were the 'two pillars' of governance in Nepal, a position held by Indian establishment as well. And CPN(Maoists) were of the view that a compromise could be reached on no less than the demand for an elected constituent assembly. Thus the political polarization remained triangular which created great confusion and passivity among the masses as to what course could be adopted to get rid of the oppressive monarchy.

Following the February coup by the king, seven parties including CPN(UML), NC(D), Jan Morcha Nepal, NMKP, NSP (Anandi Devi) and Joint Left Front of Nepal came together to form the SPA. As early as in June 2005 negotiations with Maoists had started. With the initiative of CPN(UML), who had by this time come to the realization that a new constituent assembly had to be called to wriggle out of the present state of affairs, and for that, an interim government had to be formed, an understanding was reached at between Maoists and SPA came into force, thus paving the ground for the broadest possible front against the monarch. On the basis of this understanding the SPA launched a new spate of mass movement against the monarchy and 'on their request' Maoists unilaterally declared ceasefire in September 2005 for three months. Even then the Maoists had hoped that the king may respond positively. However, the king simply ignored the ceasefire and utilized the respite to suppress the agitation launched by the SPA. He was in no mood to retreat even a single step. Ultimately on 22 November the SPA and Maoists reached at 12-point agreement according to which a constituent assembly was to be convened, an interim government was to be formed for conducting elections to the constituent assembly, and the autocratic monarchy (not monarchy as such) was to be removed.

Following this development, Maoists unilaterally extended ceasefire for another month. But The US ambassador Moriarty and the king saw red in this development. Moriarty had then openly advised the king to negotiate with SPA and concentrate fire against Maoists, who are named in the 'terrorist list' of the US. However, this was opposed by an overwhelming majority of Nepali intellectuals who

recommended to the king to hold an all-party dialogue including the Maoists to resolve the crisis. To the accusation of compromising with Maoists, GP Koirala replied: the king as well as the international community never tire parroting that not a military but a political solution must be found out to deal with Maoists, but when we draw them to a dialogue we are being branded as siding with terrorists!

Instead of listening to domestic intellectuals or international opinion, the king launched a fresh offensive against political activists on 20 January 2006 and arrested top leaders. Curfew was imposed in Kathmandu and for the first time since 1990, the army was deployed to deal with the agitators. Along with the stick, however, the king dangled carrots of municipality elections before the political parties in early February, hoping that they would part ways with Maoists on this question. But keeping solidarity with the Maoists, the SPA boycotted the elections and not even a single nomination was filed for 22 municipalities. In many other places the candidates were elected unopposed. With all the bogus and forcible voting by army and police, the poll percentage could not cross 20%. Even the seasoned monarchist leader Surya Bahadur Thapa's RPP had to boycott the elections saying that "proper political atmosphere was not conducive to elections". The king played another gambit by holding free student union elections to woo youth and student. To his surprise this time participation was overwhelming but not even a single candidate of any pro-monarchy student organization could win a seat. This amply demonstrated that the king enjoys support from no quarters in the Nepali society.

Following the 12-point agreement, the situation in Nepal has changed speedily. This is because now the battle lines are clear and people have no confusion as to the course of struggle. With mobilization of people across all walks of life, organs of state power have started showing cracks. Despite having a pro-king chief justice, the Supreme Court ruled on 13 February that the formation of Royal Corruption Control Commission (RCCC) was illegal as, more importantly, the sovereignty is vested not in the king but the people of Nepal. In view of this judgment, some 2000 lawyers from 81 bar councils of the country held a Convention on March 1 and demanded from the king to respect the SC verdict and abdicate the throne.

In the present spate of mass upsurge, which continues even as these lines are being written, even the traders and entrepreneurs have joined in movement. They have realized that it was a mistake to take this movement just as a political parties' battle, it was theirs too. In Thamel, the most busy bazaar of Kathmandu where tourists throng in hotels, Democratic Tourism Society Nepal held a peaceful dharna where some entrepreneurs were arrested by police. Journalists are bringing out rallies and courting arrest. In Nepalganj, kinsmen of army and armed police employees took out a rally and warned the men in uniform to deter from firing on democratic agitation. In Kanchanpur, the wife of a DSP was arrested leading a teachers' procession. Nepal Medical Association has mobilized doctors and other professionals like engineers, lawyers, accountants, professors etc have launched peaceful demonstrations in support of democracy movement. Apart from students, peasants and workers, the massive participation of women is significant. Government employees have stopped work and are sitting on a dharna.

In the present phase of this political civil war some 14 agitators have laid down their lives since 6 April, according to the reports, and hundreds suffered grievous injuries. Army and armed police have resorted to indiscriminate firing and mass scale arrests; the people thus arrested could not be kept in already overcapacity crowded jails, they were lodged in stadium. However, despite all heinous repression, the number of agitators is swelling day by day, and their grit and resolve is getting firmer. And most importantly, the organs of state power are showing cracks. This indicates that the day is not far off when either the king will have to flee the country like Marcos from Philippines or Americans from Vietnam. Or else, the people will themselves do justice with him once

he falls in their hands.

P.S.

* Liberation, Central Organ of CPI(ML), May, 2006.