

Nepal: now that's what I call democratisation

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Why are those who bang on about bringing 'people power' to foreign lands so ambivalent about the people demanding power on the streets of Nepal?

For the past two weeks youthful protesters fought running battles with the Royal Nepalese Army and police, demanding an end to the autocratic rule of King Gyanendra. An 18-day general strike virtually paralysed the small Himalayan nation and brought Gyanendra's kingdom to its knees. The protesters defied stringent daytime curfews and did their best to dodge the army and police's 'shoot-on-sight' policy (which claimed 14 lives) in their desire to see the King ousted and democracy installed. So why did many in the West either remain silent about these mass protests, or go all ambivalent about them? Why did Western officials and thinkers who talk endlessly about 'regime change', 'democratisation' and 'change advocacy' in foreign affairs view the Nepalese protests with disapproval, even disdain?

The protests reveal two things: first, that people still desire self-determination, to be treated as autonomous adults rather than as big kids who need a caring King, or anybody else for that matter, to look after them; and second, that this is not the kind of 'people power' many in the West have in mind when they talk about enabling democracy in far-off lands. Western leaders and commentators like the idea of people power until it involves real people demanding real power - then they come over all panicky and squeamish. They like to 'encourage good governance' and install 'people participation programmes' in various African, Eastern European and Asian states, but they balk at the sight of thousands of people demanding their democratic rights.

The protests have not only exposed the isolation of a clapped-out and archaic Hindu monarch - they have also exposed the West's empty rhetoric on democracy and its fear and loathing of the masses.

At root these were protests for self-determination. Nepal is a strange and unstable kingdom; it is the only Hindu state in the world, ruled over by monarchs who fancy themselves as reincarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Until 1990 it was an absolute monarchy under the executive control of the King; then King Birendra initiated political reforms which created a parliamentary monarchy, with the King as head of state and a prime minister as head of

government. Things have remained deeply unstable. As one report says: 'No Nepalese government has survived for more than two years, either through internal collapse or parliamentary dissolution by the monarch.' (1) In 2001, King Birendra, his wife and several other members of the royal family were shot dead by Birendra's son. For the past 10 years there have been clashes between royalist and government forces and Maoist guerrillas demanding an end to the monarchy. It was under the pretext of crushing the guerrillas that King Gyanendra unilaterally declared a state of emergency in February 2005, shutting down parliament, placing elected ministers under house arrest, and assuming all executive powers.

The protesters have sought to overturn this backward state of affairs. One protester declared: 'The King is like the foreign people...he thinks we are ignorant temple-dwellers, that all we need is food and God and to be ruled.' Here, we can glimpse the protesters' demands: they reject both the idea that people should be happy with their lot, and also old backward notions about God-appointed monarchs knowing what's best. 'We know that Gyanendra is not a god, that he is just a man and that we can end him', said another protester (2). Many of the protesters are young and Westernised - people in their late teens and early 20s, many of them professionals, who talk about watching MTV and wishing to earn a decent disposable income. These will be the children of the Nineties, that brief period when there was something approximating democracy in Nepal, who will not stand for a return to the arbitrary rule of Kings. There is an admirable fury to their protests.

Western officials and policymakers view it differently. For all their talk about supporting democracy around the world they have spent the past two weeks trying to put a lid on the Nepalese protests, encouraging the King and the various political parties (most of which, to some extent, support the anti-monarchy protests) to come to a compromise that will 'end the crisis'. The Bush administration and the Blair government pose as the deliverers of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet they said little about the pro-democracy protests in Nepal. In fact, they viewed them as deeply problematic. US diplomats put pressure on the parties to accept the King's offer at the end of last week to name a new prime minister, even though this would have left the King with the power to dissolve parliament.

The British ambassador to Nepal, Keith George Bloomfield, also encouraged the parties to accept this compromise; protesters branded him as 'naive' and told him to 'mind his own business' (3). (Bloomfield was also put in the awkward position of having to cancel a planned celebration for his own Queen's eightieth birthday at his Nepalese Embassy because, as one report from India put it, 'Right now, a lavish bash, with Nepali ministers and bureaucrats as guests, would not gel with the Nepali people who are demanding the abolition of the monarchy.') The UK Department for International Development

has a programme in Nepal that encourages 'change advocates' and 'pro-poor stakeholders' to take more control. Yet since the protests broke out, DfID officials have hidden from view; this, clearly, is not the kind of 'change advocacy' they have in mind.

Britain and America's intentions in relation to Nepal become clear when you consider that both have offered military assistance to the regime in recent years. According to Amnesty International, in the year prior to the King's coup Nepal received 20,000 M16 rifles from America and small arms from the UK. It is reported that two Islander fighter aircraft supplied from Britain to Nepal in 2004 have been used in attacks on Maoist guerrillas and also civilians in Maoist-controlled territory (4). Britain and America want stability over democracy in Nepal. Before the King overthrew parliament that meant supplying military assistance to crush the armed opposition; following the King's coup, which was condemned by Washington and London, it has meant US and UK officials leaning on the King and the parties to strike a deal. These interventions, where Western officials have sought to dampen the protests by pushing the politicians into a relationship with the King, give the lie to the Bush and Blair governments' claims to be international warriors for democracy. Their idea of 'democratisation' is in fact little more than posturing, designed to boost their own moral authority rather than install anything like democracy around the world.

Even commentators who are critical of Bush and Blair and sympathetic to the protesters have described the protests as a 'crisis' which only democracy, assisted by a better kind of international intervention, can resolve. This gets things the wrong way around. Instead of seeing the protests as an attempt by the Nepalese to build a democracy, some commentators see them as a violent and destabilising outburst which 'installing democracy' might put an end to. So Isabel Hilton in the Guardian criticises the interventions of America, Europe, India and China for being 'inglorious', and suggests that these external powers should encourage democracy instead, since 'only democracy can end the crisis in Nepal' (5). Here, democracy is discussed as a kind of appeasement for the masses - not as something they earn and shape themselves, but as something graciously provided to them in order to keep in check their potentially unpredictable behaviour. More radical commentators look to the language of the past to describe and justify events in Nepal. Tariq Ali, unable, it seems, to see what is new and different today, says the protests are 'refreshingly old-fashioned' (6).

And consider the contrast between Western media coverage of these protests and its coverage of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2005 or the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003. Those events were immediately described as 'revolutions' and celebrated in newspaper columns and breathless TV reports. In truth, they were largely stage-managed affairs, often orchestrated by Western intervention. They may have involved large numbers of people taking to the streets and

attending pro-democracy pop concerts, but they would best be described as the consequence of Western pressure to replace one dubiously-elected political party with another. They were media events, too, staged as much for the international press corps as to put pressure on the incumbent regimes. The Nepalese protests, by contrast, were massive, often vigorous, and they took place regardless of whether or not photographers were there to capture them. Yet they have been largely ignored by newspaper columnists, or referred to as a 'crisis'.

It seems that many in the West are far more comfortable with carefully planned 'revolutions' that last a few days and which win the support of the US State Department and the UK Foreign Office, than they are with the fury of masses who have had as much as they can take. It seems to me that some in the West are even more comfortable with suicide bombings than they are with mass protests like those in Nepal. Acts of individual and nihilistic terrorism, such as those by Palestinians against Israel or by a handful of disgruntled men from Leeds, seem to have been discussed more sympathetically than the Nepalese protests have been (and to have received as much, if not more, media coverage). There is a kind of vicarious pity and self-indulgent empathy for suicide bombers who apparently have no choice but to kill themselves and a few civilians; they are seen as victims of powerful forces understandably lashing out. Yet a more meaningful lashing out by a mass group of people that might have real consequences - that is viewed as something scary and suspect.

The protests exposed to ridicule King Gyanendra. He has now announced that he will restore parliament - certainly a step in the right direction towards democracy, though whether this concession will satisfy people's desire for more control and choice in their lives remains to be seen. The protests also exposed the West's flimsy attachment to democracy and its fear of mass and unpredictable actions. What really unnerved Western officials and commentators was that they felt they could not meaningfully influence events in Nepal; instead of sitting in some plush committee room devising and enforcing a 'governance plan', they were reduced to watching the protests and wondering how they would end. UN secretary general Kofi Annan called for the 'transfer of power in a timely, orderly and responsible manner' - that's how they like things to be done, in an orderly fashion and to a clear deadline, probably to be followed up by annual reports on targets reached and developments made....

Our leaders cannot handle the messy business of real people in Nepal loudly demanding some real power over their lives. Yet this is what struggles for democracy look like. It may not be pretty, but it can be pretty inspiring.

Notes

(1) Nepal, Wikipedia

(2) Nepal's young show rage in the streets, *Cleveland Dealer*, 23 April 2006

(3) British Queen's birthday bash in Nepal put off, *Daily India*, 24 April 2006

(4) In cahoots with the King, *Guardian*, 11 April 2006

(5) Standing behind the despot on the wrong side of history, *Guardian*, 24 April 2006

(6) This is no rah-rah revolt, *Guardian*, 25 April 2006

P.S.

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