

Triumph of the Popular Will

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When former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif met in London and announced their plan to return to Pakistan and fight jointly to restore democracy, one wonders whether they paid attention to one of the most remarkable movements unleashed anywhere to regain and extend the rule of the people — namely, Nepal's anti-Palace pro-democracy mass agitation. Its success in bringing the arrogant King to his knees in just 19 days is a measure of what grassroots popular mobilisation can accomplish in the face of overwhelming state power and armed repression.

It's hard not to experience a strong, spontaneous sense of solidarity with the pro-democracy struggle, to feel proud of the Nepali people, and to want to share in their jubilation. Their victory over a powerfully armed and remarkably brutal regime represents a triumph of the people's will and kindles or reinforces the hope that the people will eventually, but inevitably, prevail over tyrants and elitist rulers, however powerful, and however much protected these bigwigs might be by curfews, shoot-at-sight orders, and other draconian measures, besides laws gagging free expression.

The triumph of the democracy agitation in Nepal also vindicates and reconfirms a great lesson which history has taught us right since the English Revolution of 1640 — that the era of the despot is over, that kings and emperors, however mighty, have no future as rulers, that public opinion will prevail over the force of arms.

It also disproves a stereotype about the peoples of South Asia, which holds that thanks to their fatalistic attitudes, and the existence of deep social hierarchies, as well as powerful and arrogant states, they tend to put up with the most extreme forces of oppression and exploitation. They won't rebel or revolt.

Nepal's 'democratic revolution' has been in the making for a long time. Ever since King Gyanendra

usurped direct executive power 15 months ago in a putsch, itself following his coup of October 2002, it has been obvious to everyone familiar with Nepal that the Palace was courting serious trouble. Blatant mis-governance, cavalier interference with countless ministries, cronyism of the most despicable variety, muzzling of the media, and brutal repression soon became the order of the day.

The King's direct rule, disastrous in every way, further strengthened the Nepali people's already adverse opinion of the monarchy. In recent months, their day-to-day life became more and more suffocating. The Palace's attempt to justify autocratic government by citing the Maoist 'threat' failed to cut any ice with the people. Rather, larger numbers began to sympathise and identify themselves with the Maoists.

Eventually, all the seven parties that make up the bulk of the Nepali political space were forced to form an alliance to defend themselves against the Palace's depredations. Last November, they joined hands with the Maoists on the basis of a thoughtful, well-negotiated 12-point agreement under which the Maoists agreed to shun violence in return for a joint commitment by the broad coalition to demand the establishment of a Constituent Assembly.

The Assembly would decide whether Nepal would have a nominal or ceremonial monarchy, or become an outright Republic. The consensus excluded a continuation, in one form or other, of the ultra-authoritarian system that Gyanendra has run under the guise or pretence of a 'Constitutional monarchy', coupled with 'multi-party democracy', the so-called 'twin pillars'. Put simply, he wilfully destroyed both the pillars.

The process of reaching the 12-point agreement, which New Delhi facilitated largely under the pressure of the supporting parties of the United Progressive Alliance, was a tortuous one. India vacillated and prevaricated. The United States was hostile to the agreement, and until last week, made public its preference for the Palace over the Maoists whom it distrusts and has put on the terrorist watch-list.

The agreement, mercifully, survived the

vacillations and ups and downs, punctuated by the resumption of (limited) arms supplies to the Royal Nepal Army by the US and India. Not to be left out, the British too supplied arms to the RNA, no doubt impelled by their long-enduring addiction to recruiting Gorkha soldiers as mercenaries.

Last month, the agreement was fleshed out in the form of an agitation plan that would be implemented beginning April 6. The King got increasingly delusional as the agitation gathered force in the face of savage repression. India, to its abiding disgrace, sent a former maharajah, Karan Singh, who is married into Nepalese royalty, as an emissary to Gyanendra. The message was clear: India still sets store by King Gyanendra as a guarantor of Nepal's stability. On April 21, Gyanendra played his last card, by pretending to restore democracy, but under his own hegemony or paramountcy.

However, such was the force of popular rejection of this egregious ploy that he was compelled just three days later to retreat and announce that 'state and power sovereignty are inherent in the people of Nepal' and that he takes cognisance of 'the wishes' of the 'Jan Andolan' (people's movement). India had clearly misjudged the mood of the Nepali people and was forced to revise its April 21 stand — although Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated it the next day, only to be contradicted by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran.

The Nepali people have won a historic battle. But two issues remain: the procedure to be adopted for proclaiming elections to the Constituent Assembly, and differences between the Seven-Party Alliance and the Maoists over the King's latest announcement. The SPA has welcomed it and proceeded to form a government. The Maoists reject it.

These problems are not insuperable. There has been some informal consultation between the SPA and the Maoists. The Maoists will keep up the pressure for a Constituent Assembly even after the Nepali parliament is restored and an SPA government is installed. According to informed sources, a confrontation between the SPA and the Maoists is unlikely. The demand for a Constituent

Assembly represents a popular urge in the streets of Nepal. It would be extraordinarily foolish for the SPA to try to bypass it.

The Indian government has promised cooperation with, and an economic package to help, the new government. Although it is still silent on the issue of whether and how soon a Constitutional Assembly is to be convened, it is unlikely to resist that demand.

There are major lessons in the Nepal developments for all of South Asia. The region's peoples are getting politicised. Once they take to the streets to assert their democratic aspirations and rights, they get more and more energised and empowered, and the momentum of their power becomes unstoppable.

Political arrangements like the 12-point agreement, which accommodates the urges of the underclass represented by the Maoists, are the best — if not the only — way to bring militant currents into the mainstream and tap their creative energies. Armed repression cannot work beyond a point. Nor will Machiavellian manipulation and backroom deals.

Bhutto and Sharif will do well to pay heed to these lessons — as will all others in the region who share a pro-democracy sentiment. The best guarantee of a genuine and enduring democratic transformation of South Asian politics lies in mass mobilisation that empowers the people — not in shady, slimy political deals.

P.S.

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