

Nepal: Anti-monarchy struggle at a crossroads

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Seeking to break the increasingly explosive momentum of nearly three weeks of continuous mass protests and strikes despite shot-to-kill military curfews, on April 24 Nepal's King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah announced on national television that he would reconvene the parliament elected in 1999.

However, the king's real power, especially his control over the Royal Nepalese Army, will remain intact. Gyanendra has thus skirted around rather than met the central demand of the recent wave of mass protests - that he restore parliamentary rule.

The recent round of mass mobilisations, which started in January, are the biggest since the protest wave in 1990 that led to the end of the monarchy's absolute rule in 1991, and are the result of cooperation between the two main streams in Nepal's pro-democracy movement.

One of those streams is the alliance of the seven parliamentary opposition parties - the Nepali Congress party, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), Nepali Congress (Democratic), Janamorchha Nepal, Nepal Workers and Peasants Party, Nepal Sadbhawana Party and the United Left Front.

Nepali Congress and the CPN(UML), which hold 113 and 68 seats respectively in the parliament's 205-member lower house, are the decisive components of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA).

The other stream is led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which has been waging an anti-monarchist rural-based guerrilla war since 1996 and is estimated to control about 80% of the landlocked Himalayan country.

Under the pretext of crushing the Maoist-led rural insurgency, the king unilaterally declared a "state of emergency" in February 2005, closing down the parliament and assuming all executive powers.

In November last year, the CPN (M) struck an historic 12-point agreement with the alliance of seven urban-based parliamentary parties, providing a much-needed boost to the pro-democracy anti-monarchy forces.

In that agreement, the CPN(M) was able to move the seven parties much closer to supporting its long-standing demand for a freely elected constituent assembly and a new constitution that would abolish the monarchy. These commitments were affirmed in a March 19 memorandum of understanding between the two sides.

To facilitate mobilisation for the April 6-9 general strike, which was subsequently indefinitely extended, the CPN(M) declared an indefinite unilateral ceasefire on April 3.

The November and March agreements have thus made possible a nation-wide broad-based agitation, mobilising daily tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of protesters simultaneously in various parts of Nepal since early April.

Differences between the SPA and the CPN(M) emerged in their responses to the king's April 24

announcement, with the SPA nominating Nepali Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala to the king to be the country's new prime minister.

The CPN(M) issued a statement on April 25 declaring that, in accepting the king's offer, the SPA had "broken the 12-point understanding and have breached the aspirations of the Nepalese people". In its statement, the party had vowed to continue with its economic blockade of Kathmandu and all district headquarters.

In defending his party's acceptance of the king's offer, Madhav Kumar-Nepal, leader of the CPN(UML), told the April 25 Indian Tribune that the formation of a new government is meant to be "the first step" towards the formation of a constituent assembly, which would be tasked with drafting a new constitution for Nepal.

The South Korean-based OhmyNews International website reported on April 28 that the CPN(M) had declared "a three-month unilateral ceasefire to express the party's commitment to peace and to encourage the parliamentary forces to announce elections for a constituent assembly. The declaration came just hours after the CPN(M) called off a crippling economic blockade of the capital, Kathmandu...

"A few hours prior to the Maoist announcement of the blockade, Nepali Congress (NC) president Girija Prasad Koirala urged the Maoists to call off the general strike in the wake of the recent political developments of the country.

"The oppositional Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) has already announced that the main agenda of the reinstated parliament would be to hold elections for the constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

"The Maoist party had said that it would continue the blockade if the first meeting of the parliament did not take the unconditional decision to hold elections to the constituent assembly, among other positive decisions."

The CPN(M) holds the view that it was a "historic blunder" for the Nepalese left not to have continued the mass mobilisations of 1990 in order to abolish the monarchy's control over the army and police. In a January 2002 analysis, CPN(M) leader Dr Baburam Bhattarai said the 1990 political reform "ushered a multi-party parliamentary system, but the effective political power remained in the hands of the traditional feudal monarchy - the royal army was allowed to owe its continued allegiance to the monarchy - through an ambiguously worded constitution drafted by a committee nominated by the king and promulgated by him using his 'traditional authority', rather than by an elected constituent assembly".

Despite the apparent democratic "experiments" since the 1950s, the Nepalese state remains dominated by a landlord-based monarchy that still actively promotes the highly oppressive Hindu caste system.

Nepal, inhabited by 27 million people, is one of the poorest and least developed nations in the world; up to half of its population lives below the poverty line. Eighty per cent of its work force is involved in agriculture. It has been estimated that 7000 of Nepal's women are sold to Indian brothels every year.

US imperialism's support for the Nepali monarchy is unmistakable and Washington has been hostile to the anti-landlord, anti-monarchy and anti-caste struggle waged by CPN(M). For example, just as the CPN(M) and the royal palace were conducting formal talks in May 2003 seeking to end the warfare, Washington formally declared the CPN(M) to be "terrorists". Shortly after this, Washington

signed a counter-insurgency agreement with the Nepalese king and, under this pretext, started providing the Royal Nepalese Army with weapons and military “advisers”.

India has long had a dominant economic and military relationship with Nepal. Despite a half-hearted arms embargo the king’s February 2005 dismissal of the elected government, New Delhi has admitted it has continued providing Kathmandu with military training.

P.S.

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