

## Crowds Matter in Street Protests

Marty Logan

KATHMANDU, Sep 14 (IPS) - "There's going to be a clash now," says a smartly dressed young man, turning away from the small crowd squeezed into a narrow lane and quickly walking away.

On one side: hundreds of protesters in street clothes chant slogans; some pump fists in the air. Just metres away, about 50 policemen, clad in helmets and body padding over their blue camouflage uniforms, stand in short rows. A few have rifles slung over their shoulders, but most carry 'lathis', metre-long cane rods they use to beat back demonstrators.

The shouting crowd presses forward, trying to break free from the police and spill onto the main road. Suddenly, an order is heard and half a dozen officers burst forward, seize two women protesters and begin pulling them to a police van parked behind their lines.

More police rush to grapple with the women. Photographers in fluorescent "Press" vests scramble around the moving knot of people to get pictures.

"At first we were more than 100, but most of them didn't want to be arrested, so we moved forward," says Bidhya Bhandari, remembering the protest in the capital Kathmandu last Friday.

"We knew the road was a prohibited area and the police wouldn't let us go, but we still tried to push past them."

Similar scenes have recurred daily in the Nepali capital for the past week as the political parties and their student wings field their most sustained protests yet, in response to King Gyanendra's takeover on Feb. 1.

On Tuesday, 529 people were arrested as demonstrators tried to enter various banned areas in the city centre. Dozens of students were hurt as they clashed with riot police, 10 seriously, reported local media. About 150 were jailed after Friday's protests.

For her efforts, Bhandari, chairperson of the All Nepal Women Association (ANWA)-- an affiliate of the United Marxist-Leninist wing of the Communist Party of Nepal -- spent a few hours behind bars and on Monday, was already preparing for another protest called by a seven-party alliance of political parties.

"I think the king will be compelled to address our movement," she says through a translator. "Nowadays he is alone. All sectors -- business, social organisations, the Bar Association, journalists, doctors and civil servants are against the move," Bhandari adds, sitting in the ANWA office with a handful of other members of the group's central committee.

But if that is true, where are the thousands of supporters we might expect to see?

"This is politics in a vacuum," says a retired civil servant who has a vast network of contacts within and outside government. "No one around here (his neighbourhood in central Kathmandu) is attending (the demonstrations)."

During Friday's protests, which continued for hours, a steady stream of people hurriedly squeezed past the opposing ranks to return to their homes in the heart of the old city.

Many people here say unless those ordinary citizens put aside their quotidian cares and take up the chant against the king, he could continue to wield power for the three years he pledged when he shoved aside a government he called corrupt and incompetent.

"What happens or does not happen in Kathmandu will be the main driver in seeing if we can break this deadlock peacefully," says a western diplomat based in Kathmandu.

"All the people want peace but will they express that?" he asks.

Nepalis won their multiparty democracy just 15 years ago, when months of protests in the Kathmandu Valley grew to massive demonstrations of people from every walk of life, pressuring then King Birendra to hand over power.

But the parties' rule was marked by infighting and corruption so that even today many former protesters are loath to join them on the streets.

"People are silent but they are with us," argues Bhandari, adding that with the monsoon just ending and the festival season starting, people's interests are elsewhere. After two months, 100,000 Nepalis will take to the streets, she predicts.

"Nowadays our demonstrations are symbolic -- we are giving the king time to think about it."

Many analysts here believe King Gyanendra did reconsider his strategy when he decided to skip a visit to the UN General Assembly this week. But that change of mind occurred after a shrewd move by the Maoist rebels and not because of street actions.

On Sep. 3 the Maoists, who have been fighting the state for almost a decade, declared a unilateral ceasefire, one the government refuses to reciprocate. That move, argue observers, pre-empted the king's UN appearance, where he would have argued for more international support to vanquish the group the government has labelled "terrorists".

About 12,000 people have been killed by both sides in a war that most military experts say the Royal Nepali Army cannot win, largely because the Maoists are more at home in the Himalayan nation's harsh terrain. They now control most of the countryside, beyond heavily guarded district headquarters.

The international community, led by Nepal's southern neighbour India and the United States, continue to press the king to restore multiparty democracy and hold talks with the parties and Maoists. Earlier this month, Washington reaffirmed it will not resume supplies of lethal weapons to the government.

The United Nations has established a branch office of the human rights commission in Kathmandu to pressure the warring sides to respect rights and a U.N. expert on torture, currently visiting the country, is the latest in a long list of emissaries from the world body.

But such moves do not appear to have swayed King Gyanendra. Touring the countryside in recent weeks -- where modest estimates say 100,000 people have been displaced because of

fighting -- the monarch continued to insist that his handpicked government is improving life for ordinary people.

But the monarch has worked himself into a corner, says poet Bairagi Kaila of the, newly formed, 'Democratic Creators Common Platform'.

Also arrested at Friday's protest, Kaila told IPS, "there is no option for the king. He doesn't have the support of the conscious people of this country. The international community is also not supporting him".

Noting that Nepal's labour unions are the latest institution to back the political parties' alliance, he says politicians are regaining their previous support because people realise they are the mainstay of democracy.

"Slowly people are turning towards the movement called by the political parties. They are also more conscious than in pre-1990 days because they have enjoyed democracy."

"This is the 21st century and the king has to bow to the demands of the people or gamble his crown," Kaila added.