

A Tectonic Shift: Nepalese, Often Jaded About Politics, Now Say Enough Is Enough

By [SOMINI SENGUPTA](#)

NEW DELHI, April 16 — With all the howls of "Burn the crown" during the 12 days of pro-democracy protests in [Nepal](#), the most obvious question raised is also the most ominous: Where will this all lead?

Will the country's politicians, themselves surprised by the intensity of the demonstrations roiling Nepal, be able to keep control of popular outrage or to corral the ambitions of the Maoist rebel leaders who have given their blessings to the pro-democracy movement?

Will the palace unleash the Royal Nepalese Army against the protesters — and will soldiers, so far relatively restrained, obey?

Most significant for the long run, will Nepal's deepening political crisis spell the end of the monarchy in the world's only Hindu kingdom, or will King [Gyanendra](#) ultimately manage to save his plumed crown?

This is "the beginning of the end," C. K. Lal, a columnist for The Nepali Times, said in an interview. He predicted further "suppression by the regime," followed by bigger and more intense street protests.

Whatever the future holds, the protests that began April 6, marking the anniversary of the democracy movement that ushered in parliamentary rule in 1990, testify to a tectonic shift already under way in Nepal's politics.

First, if many Nepalese were once willing to give their king a chance to bring peace and stability to a country racked by a violent Maoist rebellion, they seem to have lost their patience.

Second, fuelled by the ballooning number of young people in the country, what was once an untouchable reverence for the monarchy seems to have vanished like clouds crossing the mountains.

Third, and most important, if protest calls once brought out political party workers in certain politically active towns, this round of demonstrations has pricked a sense of outrage among commoners, including those who once said they were hardly interested in or downright disgusted by politicians.

Ordinary Nepalese — lawyers one day, a group of the disabled another day — have flooded the streets and courted police beatings for nearly two weeks. Government workers have staged work stoppages known in South Asian bureaucratese as "pen down" actions. Donations have been collected to treat the hundreds of protesters injured by the police.

"People are realizing that the king will not deliver until we take to the streets," said Pramod Poudel, 30, a handicrafts exporter who once believed that Gyanendra's royal takeover in February 2005 could bring peace and stability to the country. Until last week, Mr. Poudel had never considered it necessary to join a political protest. "Now, it's high time for people like myself," he said.

At Model Hospital, Srichandra Pokhrel, 31, a trekking guide with a rubber-coated pellet lodged in his right cheek, said he knew that the street protests served only to keep away the tourists that are vital to his livelihood. Yet Mr. Pokhrel, who is not a member of a political party, was injured in one demonstration last week and was ready to join the next one as soon as the pellet was extracted from his cheek.

"If I make demonstrations and there is peace, then we can get business," was his reasoning. "First peace. Then is business."

In short, no longer are the street protests filled with the ranks of the political rent-a-crowd. "This is a huge pressure for political parties," Narayan Wagle, the editor of *The Kantipur*, a Nepalese-language daily, said in an interview. "They can't betray the public."

The Nepalese public already has been amply betrayed by its leaders. In 2002, about a year after Gyanendra ascended to the throne following a mysterious palace massacre of his brother and most of the rest of his family, the country's elected Parliament was suspended.

In October of that year, Gyanendra fired the elected prime minister, postponed scheduled elections and appointed a series of prime ministers. In February 2005, the king seized total control of the government in what he called a necessary step to defeat the Maoists.

On Friday, in his annual New Year's Day message, after protests in which at least 3,000 people had been arrested, hundreds injured and four killed, the king extended his offer to hold talks with the political parties and, eventually, elections. He said nothing about the protests or the protesters' demands to restore parliamentary rule. The [United Nations](#) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has criticized the Nepalese police, saying they have used excessive force.

An editorial in the state-run newspaper, *Rising Nepal*, on Friday offered the palace perspective on the week's events. Under the headline "Normality Returns," it accused the political parties of linking arms with "Maoist terrorists" and plotting to "create chaos and incite violence." It commended the government for taking "strict measures to check such untoward events."

The king's New Year's message did little to douse public opposition. On Sunday, protest organizers estimated that 30,000 people had rallied in three separate neighborhoods in the capital. Travel agents held their own rally in Thamel, the famed tourist epicenter of Katmandu.

In a statement released Sunday evening, the coalition of Nepal's seven largest political parties called on teachers, bankers, transportation workers and others to join the continuing protests. It reiterated its call for citizens to stop paying taxes and asked Nepalese abroad for the seemingly impossible: to stop sending their remittances to this destitute country.

Katmandu, the capital, squeezed by a strike that has blocked the movement of goods into the city for 12 straight days, began to feel acute food and fuel shortages. There were long lines outside gas stations; the price of staple foods, from tomatoes to garlic to lentils, has climbed appreciably.

A US official, reacting to the king's Friday address, urged the palace to release political prisoners and restrain its police force. "The king should act immediately to restore

democracy," the official said. "If the king does not act immediately, the situation in Nepal will only worsen." The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the subject.

Perhaps the most ominous question of all is whether the Maoists, who have waged a cruel decade-long insurgency, will stick to their promise to abide by the rules of parliamentary democracy. In a New Year's Day message of their own, they described the king's message as a "travesty to the country and the people."

Tilak P. Pokharel contributed reporting from Katmandu, Nepal, for this article.