

## **NEPAL: King's Retreat May Not Save Crown**

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KATHMANDU , Apr 26 (IPS) - Even after Nepal's King Gyanendra reinstated parliament Monday night, paving the way for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, anger on the streets remains high, making it unlikely that a new constitution would accommodate the monarchy.

With 14 people killed and over 5,000 injured, after security personnel used force on peaceful demonstrators in 19 days of protests that started Apr.6, many people are unwilling to let the monarchy retain even a ceremonial role.

"If the constituent assembly, that is to be elected, decides to give a ceremonial role to the monarchy, we will organise demonstrations and bring the whole country to a standstill one more time," said Narayan Sharma, a student taking part in a victory rally in Kathmandu's Maharajgunj area.

The popularity of the 238-year-old Shah dynasty reached rock bottom in the last three weeks, as security forces brutally suppressed pro-democracy demonstrations that paralysed the country. Some are demanding that the king to leave the Himalayan nation.

The protests started after Nepal's seven-party alliance (SPA) called a nationwide strike demanding constituent assembly elections through reinstatement of parliament.

With the Maoists agreeing, late November 2005, to enter multiparty politics through constituent assembly elections and the drafting of a new constitution, the increasingly irate and impatient protesters saw the King as the sole obstacle to peace and democracy in the country.

This ensured the transformation of the uprising from a pro-democracy movement to an anti-monarchist one.

At midnight Tuesday, the embattled King announced, in a televised address to the nation, that he was honouring the sentiment of the people's movement and reinstating parliament. He called on the SPA to solve the violent Maoist insurgency, facing the nation, by following their own road map.

But although the king's retreat has brought to an end the pro-democracy protests, analysts say that by taking one wrong step after another, Gyanendra may already have ensured the end of monarchy in Nepal.

"It's like a Greek tragedy," said Prof. Abhi Subedi, former chief of the English department at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. "The king has himself worked this (the end of monarchy) out."

Such statements are common on the streets of Nepal given the extreme unpopularity of the king.

Gyanendra's 14 months of direct rule, which began through a 'royal coup' on Feb. 1, 2005, saw civil liberties vanishing in the country. While the king defended the coup as necessary to tackle the Maoist insurgency that has claimed over 13,000 lives, there were no efforts by his ministerial council towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

This made many citizens conclude that the king was using the insurgency as a pretext to cling on to absolute power. A slew of restrictions imposed during his direct rule antagonised different groups from civil society, trade unions, doctors and government servants to the press.

While the parties have welcomed the king's move, the Maoists, who supported the uprising and even participated in it, rejected Tuesday's announcement and said that the parties were making a historic mistake and breaking their pact with the Maoists.

The Maoists have said that the nationwide movement will continue till constituent assembly elections are announced. But on Wednesday they suspended, until Friday, a crippling blockade of the capital and other major towns.

"We have withdrawn our call for a blockade in response to an appeal from Nepali Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala, until the first meeting of the parliament," Prachanda, the shadowy leader of the Maoist uprising said in a statement, indicating cooperation with the SPA.

In November, the SPA made a pact with the Maoists under which elections for a constituent assembly and the drafting of a new constitution were preconditions for the Maoists to join competitive, democratic politics.

The 1990 constitution made the king the supreme commander-in-chief of the Royal Nepalese Army, which effectively ensured the army's continued loyalty to the monarch.

King Mahendra gave Nepal its first taste of democracy by holding general elections in 1959. A year later, he dismissed the government and parliament, banned political parties, and ushered in a partyless 'panchayat' system that continued till 1990 when a democratic movement forced his son and successor king Birendra to accept constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy.

Last February, Birendra's younger brother, Gyanendra, replayed history.

"The kings of Nepal have always betrayed the people," says Ravi Maharjan, a student from Bhakatpur district.

Maharjan, who has been at the demonstrations in Kathmandu Valley since Apr. 6, said that the monarchy has to be abolished if Nepalese people want to ensure that democracy is not taken away by another "ambitious king". "The best insurance for democracy is to overthrow the monarchy," he argued.

Analysts say that the Maoists are only an announcement away from entering competitive politics, and that their rejection of the king's address is only because it does not explicitly say anything about constituent assembly elections.

However, the SPA will convene parliament Friday and have stated publicly that the election of a constituent assembly was their main agenda.

"We will announce constituent assembly elections," said Madhav Kumar Nepal, who heads the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist, addressing a rally of over 100,000 people at Kalanki on the outskirts of Kathmandu on Tuesday.

The assembly will decide the future of monarchy, and gauging by the overwhelming public sentiment, it might have no room for even ceremonial monarchy.

(\*The Asia Media Forum, coordinated by IPS Asia-Pacific in partnership with ActionAid International, is a space for journalists to share insights on issues related to the media and their profession, as well as stories, information and opinions on democracy, development and human rights in Asia.)