

## **ROYAL ROLLBACK IN NEPAL**

**By Kunda Dixit (\*)**

KATHMANDU, Apr (IPS) After three weeks of a growing people power movement, Nepal's King Gyanendra finally yielded on Monday and restored parliament, which he dissolved four years ago.

The king vacillated until it was almost too late. On Saturday a crowd of a hundred thousand protesters got to within a stone's throw of the royal palace in Kathmandu. The police fired rubber bullets and used bamboo sticks to beat demonstrators, injuring hundreds.

But faced with increased international isolation, the threat of having aid cut off, and pressure from neighbouring India, the king finally relented. "Sovereignty," said the sombre-faced monarch in his midnight address, "rests with the people." That met the key demand of an alliance of seven opposition parties who will now sit in the reconvened parliament on Friday.

But it doesn't go all the way to addressing the demand of the Maoists, who have been fighting a guerrilla war for the past ten years to overthrow the monarchy. The Maoists wanted an election to a constituent assembly to craft a new constitution and got a promise from the parties that they will take the process through parliament.

King Gyanendra had sacked an elected prime minister in October 2002 and since last year had taken over all executive powers. The king justified his move saying he needed to defeat the Maoists, but he has instead dismantled democracy. His takeover isolated the king internationally and turned Nepal into a pariah state. Donors stopped aid, and Britain, India, and the US suspended military aid to the army.

Opposition to the king was spearheaded by the political parties, civil society, and the media, which defied strict lese majeste laws to criticise the king's absolute rule. Increasingly desperate, the political parties entered into a loose alliance with the Maoists and last month launched a joint protest programme to pressure the king. The country was crippled by blockades and strikes. Police crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters killed ten people and injured hundreds, and fed the rising anti-monarchist feeling in the streets.

The parties were walking a fine line: they needed to keep up the pressure on the king but couldn't let the protests get out of control and create anarchy. It worked beyond their wildest dreams, as tens of thousands of doctors, civil servants, journalists, lawyers, and labour unions spontaneously took to the streets to protest. Even the staff in the Ministry of Interior went on strike.

On Friday, parliament will immediately deliberate on the Maoist demand for a constituent assembly election, which would pave the way for the Maoists to renounce violence and join the political mainstream. This compromise deal was brokered by the Indians and gave the king, the parties, and the Maoists a face-saving way out of the impasse.

In the end, three weeks of nationwide non-violent people power achieved what the Maoists couldn't get with years of armed struggle. Restoration of democracy will now end Nepal's international isolation, free up foreign aid, and with peace the task of rebuilding and rehabilitation can begin. Perhaps then Nepal can turn its attention to improving health, education, and nutrition for its 26 million people.

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