

Nepal's Future: Uncertain and Fragile

After 10 years of chaotic democracy and Maoist rebellion, the restoration of Nepal's parliament on April 28, 2006, and the promise of a constituent assembly put power into the hands of the country's people—for the moment. But Nepal's future is far from secure. The role of the monarchy, if any, has yet to be decided; the balance of power between the confrontational political parties and the Maoists is just beginning to be worked out; the Maoists' commitment to the political process is not locked in; and Nepal's political meltdown still poses a danger to India and the region. Moving from today's fragile beginning to a stable and secure political arrangement for Nepal and for the region will require uncharacteristic self-restraint on the part of Nepal's political actors and steady nerves on the part of its foreign friends.

A turbulent time: Nepal's transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1990 was marked by brittle and confrontational politics and frequent changes of government. The murder of the king and most of his family in June 2001 brought to the throne the current king, Gyanendra, who sought to end the Maoist insurgency by taking charge, expanding the powers of the monarchy, and relying on the military. Parliament has been suspended since 2002. The dismissal of the government in February 2005 brought protests from Nepal's political parties and also from most of Nepal's foreign friends, notably India, the United States, and the UK. Far from being cowed by the king's reliance on the army, the Maoists have extended their activities to virtually the entire country. Nepal's politicians, on the receiving end of the king's repressive policies, began looking for a way to make a tactical alliance with the Maoists.

A wave of protests began on April 6, 2006, when a coalition of seven political parties and the Maoist rebels jointly called for a four-day general strike. Caught off-guard, King Gyanendra's government responded by arresting opposition leaders and shutting down cell-phone services. As public anger increased, so did the brutality of the security forces: shoot-to-kill curfew orders were issued in Kathmandu and three protestors were killed on April 20, 2006. Things got steadily worse; civil service and banking employees joined the strike and shut down the capital. The king's initial offer of talks with the political parties was welcomed by India and the United States but enraged the demonstrators. By the time the

king decided to bring the parliament back on April 24, 2006, 16 demonstrators were dead and public anger at the monarchy had reached an all-time high. The king's gesture clearly represented a handing over of power to parliament.

Arduous negotiations ahead: As this paper goes to press, the parliament has been sitting for approximately one month. The new government, headed by 84-year-old veteran politician Girija Prasad Koirala, has taken great pains to make it clear that it, and not the king, is in charge. Although Koirala was sworn in by Gyanendra, the rest of the cabinet was sworn in without the participation of the king. The new government has recalled all the ambassadors appointed since the abolition of parliament in February 2005. It has also asserted its authority over the army, and General Pyar Jung Thapa, the army chief, has accepted it. Given the army's traditional relationship with the monarchy, this is important, but it may not be the last word on the subject.



The new government's constitutional authority is unclear. The old constitution has not been formally abolished; the assembly that will create a new one has not yet been elected. If the present political and military ceasefire breaks down, this anomalous situation could undermine the government's legitimacy.

Talks have begun between the new government and the Maoists in Kathmandu. Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula is leading the government team, while the Maoist team is being led by senior party leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara. The first thing on the agenda will be to consolidate the 12-point

agreement reached between the seven-party alliance and the Maoists, including preparing for elections for the constituent assembly, releasing Maoist prisoners, and addressing human rights abuses of the last decade. These talks are intended to set the stage for the final round of talks between Maoist leader Prachanda and Prime Minister Koirala.

If past developments are any indication, these negotiations will be extremely difficult. The two major issues will be the question of an interim government and the disarmament of the rebel army. The Maoists want the constituent assembly to be elected as soon as possible and to name an interim government in which they will play a central role. In addition, the government wants the rebels to surrender their weapons while elections are held for the constituent assembly. The Maoists have said that they will not disarm. Maoist leader Prachanda has proposed that rebel forces will agree to be sequestered as long as the army agrees to do the same. There is a general feeling among the Maoists that they are not getting due credit for the role they played in organizing the mass protests that led to the king's stepping down. How serious these issues could become was made clear on June 1, when some 200,000 people joined Maoist-led demonstrations in Kathmandu.

Toward a constituent assembly: The politicians, the Maoists, and the king all agree, in principle, that the next step should be the election of a constituent assembly, which in turn will write a new constitution. The ground rules for electing the constituent assembly will need to be established before elections are held. The election itself will have to be conducted openly and the outcome accepted by all parties and by the public. This will probably require the presence of outside monitors. Then, the assembly will need to go to work. Observers believe that this process will take at least two years, and perhaps more.

The biggest issue before the constituent assembly will be the future of the monarchy. The choice is between a ceremonial monarchy, which several members of the seven-party alliance prefer, or none at all. Deep anger at the king's stewardship of the country for the past two years has undoubtedly strengthened the hand of the antimonarchists. The crown prince is, if anything, even more unpopular than the king. Either eliminating the monarchy or reducing it to ceremonial status will be a major event for a country where, in the past, the king has been revered, and where few other unifying political institutions exist.

The view from Delhi...: India is Nepal's closest and by far most influential neighbor, with strong economic and military

ties. India is not only Nepal's largest trading partner; it also provides Nepal with substantial aid. In the past, New Delhi has fiercely defended its position as the most important outside country in Nepal. During the current crisis, the Singh government has sharply criticized the king's movement away from democracy, calling instead for a political alliance across the spectrum of Nepalese politics. At the same time, India has sought to help the government resist the Maoists. The Indian military has a close relationship with the Nepalese army, including a long history of aid and important Indian army recruitment in Nepal. India's Border Security Forces have assisted the army in tracking down rebels and have trained Nepalese soldiers in guerilla warfare.



King Gyanendra: Only a figurehead now.
(Photo credit: AP.)

In April 2006, India sent Karan Singh, a veteran politician and son of the former maharaja of Kashmir, to meet with King Gyanendra and persuade him to accept a realistic compromise with the political parties.

While this was intended to help stabilize the situation, the popular reaction in Nepal, focusing on Karan Singh's princely status and family relationship with the king, saw in this move an effort to shore up the monarchy and a contrast with the Indian government's stated pro-democracy policy. With the reconvening of parliament and the king's acceptance of a secondary role, both publicly welcomed by India, the appearance of contradiction in Indian policy receded.

From a strategic perspective, India will be uncomfortable with the presence of Maoist rebels in any government in Kathmandu. India faces a widening Maoist insurgency in many of its own states, and the Maoists in Nepal share strong ideological and financial ties with their counterparts in India, known as *Naxalites*. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently called the Maoist threat in India the "single biggest security challenge" since independence. The success of the Maoist rebellion in Nepal has undoubtedly boosted the Naxalite movement in India, which has grown considerably in size in recent years. It is now estimated that Maoists rebels are active in nearly 14 states in central and eastern India. Security experts worry that unless checked, the Naxalite movement could prove to be a major source of regional instability.

...and from Washington: U.S. policy has focused on restoring democracy and on ending the Maoist threat. Military assistance has been restricted since February 2005. U.S. economic assistance has been redirected toward supporting institutions that promote democracy and good governance. U.S. funds will be used to support the Election Commission,

the Peace Secretariat of the Nepalese government, and the National Human Rights Commission, in addition to assisting with the work of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The United States has also distanced itself from the king. On a recent visit to Nepal, Richard Boucher, assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, did not visit the king, concentrating instead on the political parties. The Maoists are on the United States' terrorist list, which effectively precludes any significant U.S. contact with them. The United States has acted in close coordination with India. Despite U.S. statements that it does not defer to India, this is an issue that concerns Nepal's politicians.

Uncertain future: Electing a constituent assembly is a step in the right direction for Nepal, but the country still has a long way to go. The alliance of seven political parties, which now forms the government, has to reach an agreement with the rebels on a new constitution and on a division of power—thorny issues in the best of circumstances. The rebels have declared a ceasefire for three months, but that may change quickly if talks fail. The good news for the political parties is that the public seems to have forgiven them for their past sins. The Nepalese people appear willing to give their politicians another chance at steering the small Himalayan nation away from the violence and chaos of the past decade. The army and the king currently accept their much-reduced role, although both may be looking for signs of weakness among the other political players, hoping to improve their bargaining positions as the time for constitution writing approaches.

The greatest danger is that violence, insurgency, and governmental meltdown will resume. The institutions of the state are at best weak and fragile in Nepal. If the present slow positive movement breaks down, Nepal has all the ingredients to become a refuge for troublemakers or terrorists of various types, with little ability to bring its own countryside or borders under control. Much is riding on the self-restraint, wisdom and political skills of Nepal's inexperienced and, until now, bitterly opposed political leaders. Nepal's peaceful transition to a functioning democracy is going to be difficult for a country that is scarred with the violence of the past.

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