

# Nepal's Democratic Movement: Moves One Step Further

- Shobhakar Budhathoki\*

Nepal's peaceful demonstrations have been opening the path for sustainable peace and ending the autocratic monarchy in the country. The historic 19-day-long peoples' movement that began on April 6, 2006 has forced King Gyanendra to withdraw from his position as absolute monarch. The forceful reinstatement of the June 2002 dissolved parliament and handover of executive powers, ended, to some extent, the King's illegitimate and authoritarian regime. However, the struggle goes on to achieve absolute democracy and eliminate the remaining autocratic elements in the government and throughout the country, while King Gyanendra continues to defend his February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 autocratic move and position the Shah Dynasty as the patron of the country, atrocities continue to be carried out by the security forces, and human rights abuses and the use of excessive force against peaceful demonstrators goes on. The royal address that reinstated parliament completely disregards the people's aspirations and the minimum demand of the Seven Political Party Alliance (SPA) that include the declaration of an unconditional constituent assembly election to lay the foundation for an absolute democracy and sustainable peace.

Although the royal address theoretically accepts the SPA's roadmap, the potential for disrupting the process of state restructuring and moving forward with the roadmap remains considerable. Despite the vagueness and obvious insincerity of the monarch's statement, the SPA welcomed the reinstatement of parliament and recommended Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala for the post of Prime Minister, which was announced as such by the King on April 27, 2006. The SPA further decided to declare the constituent assembly election; hold dialogue with the Maoists; constitute an inquiry commission to investigate the atrocities carried out during peaceful demonstrations; annul all "regressive" decisions taken and ordinances made by the King's regime after October 2002; and compensate the martyrs' kin and those seriously injured persons during the democratic movement.

The Maoists rejected the King's reinstatement of parliament stating that the royal address did not address the minimum demand of the people's movement and that they will continue the peace and democratic movement until the declaration of an unconditional constituent assembly election. They also expressed their disappointment in the SPA immediately accepting the King's "deal" and potentially undermining the SPA - Maoist 12-point understanding that was formed in a November 2005 dialogue session. However, the Maoists have decided to withdraw their indefinite blockade of Kathmandu and District Headquarters until the first parliamentary session to be held on April 28, 2006 and have declared a three-month ceasefire, demonstrating their commitment to the 12-point understanding and in a step that seems to be giving the SPA this time to at least make significant progress in fulfilling the demands of the people.

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The most recent and largest demonstrations that led to the current political situation were comprised of professionals, laborers, peasants, women, various religious and ethnic groups, etc...; generally ordinary Nepalese came out in droves to protest the King and ensure that they have a democratic and free future. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary people have joined in peaceful demonstrations against the King's authoritarian regime and now to lobby the SPA to ensure their role in determining the future political system of the country. The consensus of ending the King's authoritarian regime through peaceful movement was decided after continuous dialogue between the SPA and the CPN-Maoists as put forth in the 12-point understanding. The understanding provides opportunities to bring the Maoists into mainstream politics and lays out their commitment to a multiparty system, human rights, rule of law, press freedom, etc.

In response to the large peaceful demonstrations, the King's security forces have used excessive force against the demonstrators. The army as well as the armed police and Nepal police were mobilized against the demonstrators. Protesters and bystanders alike were badly beaten, resulting in serious head wounds, broken bones, neck and back injuries and loss of sight. Tear gas was used in excess resulting in respiratory problems and a few cases of individuals who remain unconscious today due to the tear gas. The firing of tear gas was also carried out at small groups at close range. While rubber bullets were used the security forces also used live ammunition, resulting in a minimum of 15 deaths. The exact number of deaths cannot be confirmed because the security forces were seen taking away bodies from the scene of demonstrations and also have taken away the corpses of martyrs from hospitals resulting in at least one cremation without consent from the family. They had also taken injured persons who have not yet been located. The security forces also prevented ambulances, medical teams, and hospitals from carrying out medical services to injured persons on numerous occasions. The actual number of injured persons also remains unclear, but the political parties and human rights organizations have statement that more than 5,000 people were injured in 19 days of demonstrations.

The regime, including the security forces who are directly under the command of the King, must be held accountable for their actions. They have worked and continue to work with full impunity. The Royal Nepal Army, the Armed Police Force, and the Nepal Police have been given excessive powers by the King to carry out repressive measures against peaceful demonstrators, impose unnecessary prohibitory orders and curfews, and restrict the movement of ambulances, medical teams, human rights defenders and media during curfew hours, illegally detain leaders and cadres of political parties, the human rights community, journalists, etc. The regime has also used the National Intelligence Bureau, plain-clothed security forces and vigilantes to disrupt peaceful demonstrations. Some of these have been placed in crowds with weapons (grenades, pistols, etc...) to accuse the Maoists of infiltration and as an excuse to use force. Some have physically attacked leaders of the SPA and leaders of the student associations, and some have been planted among the demonstrators and have instigated violence against the security forces, human rights defenders, and medical teams.

While the King retains a significant amount of power, the reinstatement of parliament must now be considered the beginning of establishing an absolute democracy and sustainable

peace in the country. The restored parliament should operate as the means of achieving the goals of the 12- point understanding, which includes the aspirations of the Nepalese people. However, parliament may not be enough and the peaceful democratic movement should and will continue to lobby leaders, and also to continue voicing Nepalese sovereignty and what that will mean for the future of the monarchy and structure of the state.

Therefore, national actors (political parties, civil society, professionals, trade unions, women and minority groups, human rights community, students, media, etc) and the international community (UN, EU, residential diplomatic offices, donors, friendly countries, etc.) must continue to support the SPA's attempt to establish absolute democracy and sustainable peace through holding the unconditional constituent assembly election and initiating political dialogue with the Maoists. In the mean time, the international community should not blindly give funding and aid to a government that is still ultimately controlled by the monarch; a monarch that has taken power and wealth from the people and suppressed the rights of that people, nor to his security forces who have committed grievous human rights violations, particularly since February 1, 2005. The international community must play a proactive role in ensuring that the commitment made by the monarch, to give sovereignty to the people of Nepal, is upheld and fulfilled.