



Witnessing Chaos in the Himalayas: The Maoists, the Monarchy and the People of Nepal

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Long simmering conflict in the Himalayan mountain kingdom of Nepal spilled onto the streets these last weeks, producing seismic shifts in the current stand off between King Gyanendra, a home-grown Maoist insurgency and the beleaguered citizens of Nepal. While the outcome remains unclear, the present tensions cannot long be sustained.

HURON, the Human Rights Organization of Nepal, invited Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, an Amherst-based non-profit organization, to lead a conflict transformation seminar for human rights activists. Scheduled for early April, our seminar in Kathmandu took place as an alliance of the seven political parties and the Maoists called for a general strike, effectively shutting down the country in protest against the increasingly autocratic royal rule. Our workshop thus became a living laboratory for activists who shuttled between the classroom and the streets, reporting news of human rights violations and detentions, dodging their own arrests, developing strategies to maintain a peaceful protest and applying theory to immediate needs. We adjusted our workshop design to meet emerging realities and to respond to the eagerness of participants for guidance and insight in this period of transition.



On our last day in Kathmandu, the king attempted to prevent the demonstrations by declaring a curfew over the entire country, ordering his military and police to forcibly remove anyone found outside their home. Only ambulances and tourist vehicles were allowed in the streets, which was most fortunate for us as the curfew began on our scheduled departure day. As we were escorted to the airport, we thus had the opportunity to witness a city under curfew, a scene usually visible only on television. Kathmandu, with a population of 700,000, was eerily silent. Only stray cats and dogs wandered the city. Soldiers and police, complete with guns and riot gear, patrolled the shuttered buildings and empty streets. Our vehicle flew through the deserted capital, stopped only occasionally by soldiers making sure we were foreigners and not Nepali protesters in disguise. We enjoyed a privilege not accessible to Nepalis; we could depart for the safety of another country. They could not leave, and indeed would have to endure many more days of curfew after our departure, with escalating tension and brutality against the thousands who risked curfew violations to join protests and marches. The population across the country would remain shuttered behind sealed doors for days, offered only brief breaks to stock up on essential food, water and kerosene supplies. Those who are the working poor would have no daily income and thus no means of purchasing these essentials.

The real grievances provoking the national strikes are with the king, who assumed the throne in 2001 through a brutal royal slaying worthy of Shakespeare, in which ten members of the royal family, including his brother King Birendra, were murdered in the palace. The following year, King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government and has since appointed his prime ministers. He seized total control of the reins of government again in 2005, claiming executive powers, ruling with an iron fist and becoming

increasingly out of touch with the public. Precipitous responses have included withdrawal of foreign aid from most international donors and a steep decline in tourist revenues vital to the economy. The hotels are so empty that some 5 star establishments are advertising one- dollar nightly rates in hopes of selling food and other services. Nepal's world-famous trekking routes are deserted. The large impoverished population cannot long endure the privations of unemployment and lack of assistance.

The Maoists campaign for the hearts and minds of the poor and marginalized, promising equality, prosperity and dignity for the outcastes and low born, whose lives in feudal Nepal have not been improved by royal rule or brief periods of semi-democracy. Nepali Maoists thrive in the impoverished remote mountain villages and lowland plains, far from the capital. Declaring their opposition to the government in 1996, the Maoists extort support from citizens through hold-ups and abductions, recruit children and youth into their cadres, and terrorize the population. The Maoist campaign against the constitutional monarchy, a revolution based on violence, has cost some 10-13,000 lives, mostly attributed to government forces attempting to crush the Maoists. The average citizen of Nepal is caught: repressed by the king, terrified of the Maoists and unrepresented by the rather elite political parties. Events in early April, most especially the heavy-handed response of the king to pro-democracy protests and largely nonviolent demonstrations, has incurred the wrath of the population. Mass arrests, several deaths and thousands of injuries have created a scenario where King Gyanendra has lost his people, most likely permanently.



Domestic and international pressure will force change, hopefully without further bloodshed. The political parties will, in the most hopeful outcome, democratize and become more sensitive to the needs of ethnic groups, the poor and the voices of women, and the Maoists will renounce violence for a stake in the government. Their leader Prachanda has declared that the Maoists will abide by a constitutional monarchy and accept multi-party democracy. The people of Nepal are on the march and will not be stopped for long.

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding plans to return to Nepal for a series of workshops in 2006-07. We have received many requests for knowledge and guidance in this fragile period of transition, and we look forward to partnerships with several Nepali human rights and development organizations. Nepali grassroots leaders are especially interested in lessons learned from other parts of the world where nonviolent movements have brought down dictators and changed the course of history. Nepal is ripe for such transformation and hopeful for its future. We are hopeful with them, and ready to extend a hand as needed to share in this transition.

For more information about Karuna's work or to support this ongoing program, please contact:

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