

April 23, 2006

Protests Mount as Nepal Parties Reject King's Bid

By [SOMINI SENGUPTA](#)

KATMANDU, [Nepal](#), April 22 — Neither a curfew and tear gas nor King [Gyanendra's](#) offer to give up control of the state stemmed the fury of his subjects on Saturday, as protesters, for the first time in 17 days of demonstrations, broke through police lines to pierce the ancient heart of the city, reaching within a few blocks of Narayanhiti Palace.

Police officers pushed the pro-democracy protesters back through the warren of narrow, sunless alleys, firing tear gas, whipping with cane batons and infuriating them even more. "Dogs!" they screamed, eyes red from the tear gas, as paramedics rushed in to pick up the injured.

A boy who looked no older than 15 lay bleeding from the head. A young woman stumbled blankly into an ambulance, blood streaming down the side of her face. One alley was strewn with hundreds of sandals left by demonstrators trying to flee the police charge.

For the second day in a row, more than 100,000 protesters flooded the streets as police officers, backed by the Royal Nepalese Army, for the most part stood by and let them pass through what was, even a day before, the heavily fortified Ring Road encircling the city center. Only around the palace did the police say that they were under strict orders to keep protesters at bay.

By midafternoon, the coalition of Nepal's seven largest political parties, which began the demonstrations more than two weeks ago, formally rejected the king's offer, made in a televised address on Friday night, to return control of the government to a prime

minister of the parties' choosing. In a statement, the seven-party alliance vowed to carry on with the agitation.

"It has undermined the sentiments of the people," the statement said of the king's proposal.

The king addressed neither of the coalitions' two principal demands: the restoration of the elected Parliament, suspended nearly four years ago, and a referendum to rewrite the Constitution and allow Nepalese citizens to decide on the future of the monarchy once and for all. Nor did the king say a word about the protesters still in detention, including doctors, lawyers and writers, nor the stream of laws that his royal government has imposed since his takeover 14 months ago.

In rejecting the king's offer, the seven-party alliance flouted the advice of two of its most important backers, India and the United States. Party leaders may not have had much choice, for they found themselves literally corralled by the protests in the streets on Saturday morning. As senior politicians huddled inside the home of Girija Prasad Koirala, a former prime minister and head of the Nepali Congress Party, protesters jammed the lanes leading to the house with a message meant to both boost and bully.

"Don't get weak in the knees!" they yelled. "Don't ditch the people!"

"We don't give a damn about anything else," another group of protesters shouted nearby. "We don't want the monarchy."

Indeed, the protests that have ground life in the capital to a halt, strewing streets with bricks, broken bottles and burned tires, seemed increasingly to be more a referendum on the reign of King Gyanendra than a cry for democratic reforms.

On Saturday morning, a teacher named Bidur Gurung, 39, had fashioned an upside-down mock crown, made of tinfoil and broom straws, and fixed it atop a bamboo pole.

"Crown down," he declared giddily, surrounded by hundreds of demonstrators. "We don't need the crown."

The latest turn in Nepal's swift descent came as India, the United States and the [European Union](#) urged party leaders to take up the king's offer.

"We think it is the basis on which we can build and move forward," the British ambassador, Keith George Bloomfield, said after meeting with opposition leaders around midday, The Associated Press reported.

Pauli Mustonen, charge d'affaires of the Finnish Embassy, added, also according to The A.P., "We have explained to them that this would lead to a process that could help end the violence and lead to the beginning of democracy."

On Friday, the Bush administration pressed the parties to "respond quickly by choosing a prime minister and a cabinet."

The [United Nations](#) secretary general, [Kofi Annan](#), cautiously welcomed the development. "It is up to the parties to work out the modalities for the transfer of power in a timely, orderly and responsible manner," he said in a statement.

The protesters who filled the streets on Saturday, however, predicted that their leaders would fall if they caved in to international pressure. "They have to listen to the people's message," said Rajendra Shalabh, 46, a television producer.

Central to ending the Maoist rebellion, added Ishwar Chhetri, 37, a tour operator, was to keep the commitment to the constitutional referendum. The Constitution enshrines the monarchy and allows the king to control the military. "They should be addressing the Maoist problem," he said of the political leaders.

The influence of a decade-long Maoist rebellion, which has cost 13,000 lives, can be plainly felt on the political crisis. The rebels' main rallying cry has been an abolition of monarchy in Nepal. Their main political demand, in exchange for giving up the gun and joining the political mainstream, is the vote on the constitution.

In a statement on Saturday, the rebel chairman, Prachanda, described the king's offer as "an insult." In an accord signed last fall, the parties agreed to the Maoist demand for a constitutional referendum; in exchange, the Maoists agreed to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy.

For party leaders to now succumb to pressure from abroad, especially from India, which the Nepalese widely view as a domineering neighbor, would be to suffer not only a crisis of credibility, warned C. K. Lal, a columnist at The Nepali Times, but also a confirmation of longstanding Maoist rhetoric — "that these bourgeois parties are not for the people."

The central city on Saturday was a shadow of its usual self, with shops and businesses shuttered and security forces, including armed personnel carriers, posted along the empty main roads.

From Gangobu, on the northern edge of the city, the crowd came marching. The police apparently could do little to stop them from breaking through the Ring Road curfew zone. The crowd then pushed through the normally lively backpacker haunts of Thamel. In a long, loud parade, it snaked through Bhedasing, picking up locals who poured out of the alleys.

By the time it reached the main square at Ason, the police had backed up to the main road.

The sky darkened. The police line stiffened. At the blow of a whistle, the police charged, pummeling the crowd with their canes and sending up plumes of tear gas.

The crowd turned on its heels and fled. It was unclear how many were injured by the police charge and how many in the stampede that followed.

A police deputy inspector, Ganesh K.C., said his forces were under orders to protect the palace. "This is a vulnerable area," he said.

Tilak P. Pokharel contributed reporting for this article.