

Nepal Calms as Coalition Picks a Premier

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KATMANDU, Nepal, April 25 — Nepal's politicians woke up this morning poised to resume control of the government and inherit the unenviable challenge of crafting peace.

What had been a unified front of politicians, rebels and pro-democracy protestors against King [Gyanendra's](#) 14-month-long royal takeover of power seemed to wash away, the day after he announced the restoration of Parliament. Underneath, lay the hard ground of knotty political bargaining.

The coalition of Nepal's seven largest parties agreed on a prime minister, the veteran Nepali Congress Party leader and former prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala. They called off a general strike that, along with the curfew imposed by His Majesty's government, had debilitated the capital for nearly three weeks. They promised to form an interim government and to start peace talks to end the decade-long Maoist insurgency. Parliament, suspended by the then-prime minister in May 2002, is to be revived Friday.

But the coalition also faced a stinging statement from the Maoist rebels, who had lately linked arms with them. In an apparent bid to ensure that they are not forgotten in an easy political settlement, the rebels denounced the parties' acceptance of the king's offer as "a historic blunder" and vowed to carry on with a blockade of the main roads leading to Katmandu, effectively preventing the flow of goods, including food and fuel, from reaching the capital.

"It's a little bit departing from the understanding we have reached," said a cautious Jhala Nath Khanal, one of the party leaders who negotiated an accord with the Maoists last fall. "If there's some grievances we have to listen."

The nub of the disagreement is around whether — and how quickly — the new government will hold a vote to redraw the country's constitution and decide on the fate of the monarchy and the king's precise role. Party leaders, in interviews today, insisted that the king, late Monday, had conceded to their entire roadmap for peace, which includes the referendum on the constitution.

The skeptics — and they include the parties' younger, more radical foot soldiers responsible for sustaining three weeks of defiant street demonstrations — pointed out that the king's speech did not explicitly mention the vote on the constitution.

Nor did the anger towards the monarchy dissipate on Katmandu's streets. "Hang Thief Gyaney," a clutch of demonstrators chanted today, just as they have for the last 20 days. Several held up photos of security forces accused in the fatal shooting of demonstrators.

In the city center, less than a mile from Narayanhiti Palace, protesters dislodged metal billboards carrying the words of the king. "Monarchy is always guided by the optimum interest and continuous progress of Nepal and the Nepali people, not by cheap popularity," read one. His words lay crushed on the street, and young men took turns stomping on them with great delight.

The king is regarded by his followers as an earthly descendant of a Hindu god. Whether he had managed to save his crown by the concessions made Monday night remains to be seen. Certainly he gave up much more than he wanted to, and undoubtedly placed the institution of the monarchy in peril.

Katmandu remained in the grip of rambunctious demonstrations all day, though the mood was palpably less menacing today than previously. There were celebrations on the street, but also tough warnings to the party leaders not to renege on their promise of a vote on the constitution.

"Now the ball is in the court of the seven-party alliance," cried Gagan Thapa, the leader of the youth faction of Nepali Congress, not far from the home of the chosen, Mr. Koirala, who was nowhere to be seen. "They should fulfill the commitment they have made to the people."

Mr. Thapa promised to continue the demonstrations until the party leaders announced a date for the constitutional vote. "Our movement is still on," the crowd yelled around him.

"The leaders shouldn't get weak in the knees," Dhundi Raj Dahal declared, during an impromptu rally in the eastern outskirts of the city. "If they get weak, yesterday's antiking anger will be redirected against them."

The paralyzed capital, in the vise of two weeks of curfew and nearly three weeks of a general strike, came to life in the flash of one night. Beauty salons and bakeries reopened. Vegetable markets remained open all day. Taxis plied the roads. Soldiers vanished from view, even from around the palace where they had formed a strict cordon the day before.

"I think the solution is not too far," said a hopeful Resham Shrestha, who managed to open his coffee shop for the first time in nearly three weeks. The political crisis cost Mr. Shrestha nearly \$300, a crippling amount in this, one of the world's poorest countries. That a hard road lay ahead did not go unnoticed by party leaders. They said they realize all too well that their only hope for bringing peace to this country and holding on to power is to wean the Maoists off the gun and into the corridors of power.

The Maoists and the Seven-Party Alliance last fall signed an accord that obliges the politicians to accept the Maoists' demand for a vote on the constitution, while at the same time obliging the Maoists to agree to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy. It is a significant retreat from the Maoists' original goal of establishing a one-party Communist state. The mystery now is whether they mean what they say.

"We will try our best, using our wisdom, to convince them to come towards the political mainstream," added Mr. Khanal, a central committee member of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist).

Going forward, the Maoists may not have it easy either. Their war has cost an estimated 13,000 lives over the last 10 years and not succeeded in bringing them to power. There seems no military solution in sight. Their only chance of coming to power and pushing through broad social reforms, starting with the demand for a kingless democratic republic, depends largely on their alliance with the politicians.

Among the questions looming is not simply whether the politicians will keep their promise of a constitutional referendum, but whether they will go so far as to ask people to vote on the future of the monarchy itself — or settle for what one Western diplomat called "an implicit agreement" to hold on to the institution in a ceremonial role.

Second, will the parties be able to persuade the Maoists to at least put down their guns, while elections are under way? Third, will the new government be able to persuade the military to declare a cease-fire, with an invitation to the Maoists to reciprocate?

"The parties have taken power," said one European diplomat. "Now they must demonstrate they have it. They must push all the way to the boundary of what's possible."

Nepal's most important ally, India, today also pointed to the tough tests that lay ahead.

"We are conscious of the challenges that lie ahead for Nepal as it embarks on the journey towards restoring political stability, achieving economic recovery and finding a peaceful solution to the armed conflict," its foreign ministry said in a statement. "These challenges will require the positive contribution of all concerned, drawing upon the support of the people of Nepal."

Tilak P. Pokharel contributed reporting for this article.

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