

In Kathmandu Protests, Youth Take Center Stage

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KATHMANDU, Nepal, April 24 -- Fired with anger against the king, Sudhir Maharjan marched near the front of the protesters at midday Sunday, waving the red flag of Nepal's largest student group. He was determined, he said, to break through the cordon of helmeted riot police that blocked the way.

The Kathmandu native wears a gold ear stud, strums Nirvana tunes on his guitar and draws political inspiration from the lyrics of reggae legend Bob Marley. Maharjan, a 28-year-old graduate student, began Sunday by racing through the alleys of his neighborhood shouting a line from a Marley song: "Get up, stand up: Stand up for your rights!"

He is typical of the young, internationally oriented organizers who have emerged as an important force in nearly three weeks of tumultuous democracy protests here.

The Internet and independent news media were late arriving in this deeply traditional kingdom in the Himalayas. But their influence -- helped along by personal emissaries of outside thinking, Western tourists -- has been clear in the recent political tumult and such people as Maharjan.

Often the young people have been at odds with their allies on the streets, the country's traditional political parties, which they view as timid. Sunday's advance ended when party officials who orchestrated the protest at the edge of the capital had a hurried conversation with police and agreed to turn back, avoiding violence.

"We wanted to break the cordon," Maharjan complained a few minutes later in the sanctuary of an ancient temple complex. "We are ready to take the risk."

Slender and earnest in an Adidas sweat shirt and below-the-knee shorts, his calf bearing the recent imprint of a policeman's rubber bullet, Maharjan declares he is willing to risk his life in pursuit of democracy.

While political parties have tried to maintain a degree of order during the massive protests, young people have often clashed with police, underscoring the political influence of Nepal's swollen population of young. Like Maharjan, many have no party affiliation. Some are associated with Maoist rebels who have waged a decade-long insurgency to topple the Hindu monarchy, which has ruled Nepal since 1769.

In a TV address late Monday night, Gyanendra promised to reconvene the lower house of parliament on Friday, a key demand of the political parties, which appeared to welcome the move. It was unclear, however, whether youthful demonstrators, many of whom want the king out altogether, would abandon their newfound street power.

Analysts and diplomats say that if the protests continue, it could bring on an escalation in violence and perhaps provide an opening for Maoist rebels, who roam freely in the Nepalese countryside.

The outsized influence of the young in the recent protests reflects demographic reality. Nepal is one of the youngest countries in the world, with about 59 percent of its 28 million people younger than 25, according to government census data.

This generation grew up under a constitutional monarchy that was established in 1990, with an elected parliament and prime minister. It was this system that Gyanendra put on hold on Feb. 1, 2005, when he assumed powers of direct rule in a move that he said was necessary to defeat the Maoists.

The democratic era is remembered here as far from perfect, but it was a time of modest economic growth, modernization and growing exposure to the outside world. Nepal had only about 35,000 Internet users in 2000. By 2005, the figure reached about 175,000.

The changes were especially marked in the capital, flanked by snowy peaks, where families living in traditional balconied homes have in recent years coexisted with cybercafes, pizzerias and hippie backpackers in search of spiritual or drug-induced bliss.

It was against that backdrop of opening that Maharjan, the student leader, came of age. The son of a retired driver for Nepal's central bank, he lives with his parents, wife and 3-year-old daughter in a tiny three-story house in the historic Patan district. Down the street is a brick-paved square filled with centuries-old temples adorned with prayer bells and carvings of Hindu gods.

Educated at an English-language private school, Maharjan went on to study business at Tribhuvan University. He dated a Japanese woman who came to Kathmandu as a tourist. He developed a taste for marijuana, a habit that he dropped several years ago, he said. He is now pursuing a master's degree in social work.

In his spare time, he listens to Western and traditional Nepali music, watches pirated videos of Hollywood hits and keeps abreast of the news through television and private FM radio stations, major information sources in Nepal.

To pay for his studies, Maharjan proofreads documents at Nepal's central bank -- or he did until the general strike that has paralyzed the country since early April.

He has long been involved in student politics, he said, and was formerly a member of the Nepali Students' Union, which is affiliated with the Nepali Congress, the country's largest political party.

Unlike many young protesters, who have insisted that the king must go, Maharjan said he could accept Gyanendra in a ceremonial role. He also said he has sometimes tried to restrain Maoist infiltrators -- easily recognized because their pockets are bulging with stones.

Maharjan endorses the party leaders' demand for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution, and he has heeded their recent call to the streets, sometimes carrying the student union flag.

But he has little patience for politicians because, he said, "they betrayed the people after 1990," and he is deeply frustrated by the parties' reluctance to push their confrontation with the king further. "There is a lot of fire in the youth who are participating in the demonstrations, but the political parties are pouring cold water on it," he said.

That frustration came to the fore on Sunday.

"They don't even know what democracy means," he said of the party leaders who aborted the march. "I know it. I am ready to take bullets."

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