then destroy all major political parties.

King Gyanendra thought that he had finished the job of burying all political parties when he took over all state power in a brilliantly executed self-coup on February 1, 2005. However, he had failed to take into account the vibrancy of Nepali civil society that had taken root in the imperfect but uninterrupted democratic exercise of a dozen years. All opposition to King Gyanendra's autocratic rule was spearheaded by civil society organizations.

Protests by engineers, doctors, journalists, lawyers, professors, human rights activists, cooperative groups and various other volunteer organizations succeeded in drawing the attention of the world. More importantly, Nepal's donors and friends withheld their support for the royal government. The king was forced to relent and restore parliament on April 21, after nearly a month of mass uprising that saw an unprecedented show of people power in Nepal. Hardly a family was left in the country that didn't have at least one member protesting against the autocratic rule of the king.

Future uncertain

The sequence of events since April 21 has been dramatic, to say the least. The Maoists declared ceasefire on April 27 and the political parties responded positively to their offer. On April 28, the reinstated parliament opened. Two days later, a visibly ailing Koirala once again became the prime minister as the lower house passed a resolution to conduct constituent assembly elections, which made the parliament itself superfluous.

On May 4, Maoists welcomed the government's decision to declare ceasefire, and agreed to sit for negotiations. On May 18, the parliament curtailed the power of the king and brought the army under the command of the prime minister. A series of talks then culminated in the agreement over the interim constitution signed on December 16.

Maoists had called for country-wide protests to oppose the government's administrative decisions in the last week of December, but they withdrew all protest programs as abruptly as they had been announced. There is a feeling in Kathmandu that the scorching pace of change in Nepal is being facilitated by India, the country which was home to top Maoist commanders during the decade of armed insurgency. That impression gives rise to a lingering suspicion: withdrawal of Indian backing of the peace process on any pretext can derail it at any time.

The interim government of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) led by octogenarian premier Koirala has notched up notable successes. It has resolved the long-standing issue of citizenship of madheshis -- indigenous people of plains bordering India -- and has drawn up a comprehensive peace plan. But the SPA coalition isn't amenable to the demands for a federal structure.

The Maoists, too, seem to have acquiesced to the tendencies of the ruling coalition. The international community -- vocal during the autocratic rule of the king -- seems to have lost all interest in the political agenda of the country after the restoration of the parliament. Instead, they seem to be worried about the possibility of a Maoist takeover, facilitated by the inefficiency of mainstream political parties.

Uncertainties over the future of the constituent assembly elections may give rise to frustration in the Maoist camp. A substantial section of rebel commanders in the countryside feels that they have been let down by their central leaders. Ethnic autonomy promised by Maoist leaders helped them garner support against the unitary state. It appears now that they, too, aren't very committed to the idea of a federal structure for the country.

This may cause a fresh wave of insurgencies by breakaway factions of Maoists, a process that has already begun in the eastern parts of the country where a section of ethnic madheshis -- a Maoist splinter group -- have commenced a campaign against migrants from the hills. If it escalates, the resulting conflagration will be much worse than whatever this country has seen in the last ten years of ruthless insurgency that claimed over 14,000 lives.

A desirable future for Nepal will entail development of a national consensus over the agenda of peace, based upon restructuring of the state. The leadership will have to accept the inevitability of federalism, democracy, rule of law, and a commitment to social justice. These commitments will then have to be enshrined in a constitution written by the representatives of the people selected through free and fair elections.

These are challenging tasks even under the best of circumstances. It requires sagacity from leaders, commitment from political parties and the government machinery, and patience from the general population. A society yet to recover from the trauma of centuries of oppression, and over a decade of violent insurgency, doesn't have any of these in abundance. Add to that the silent fury of an outsmarted king, sullenness of an injured army, and the impatience of insurgents; and the picture looks far from reassuring.

Hope will have to be placed upon the TINA factor: There Is No Alternative to democracy, pluralism, and coexistence. Without democracy, the international community will not support any regime in Nepal. Pluralism is the sine qua non of functioning democracy in all multi-ethnic societies.

Maoists, too, will have to opt for coexistence as violent revolution is unlikely to be accepted by any of Nepal's neighbours. But these compulsions imply negative peace, possible only because all other alternatives have been ruled out.

For peace to be sustainable, positive grounds of solidarity need to be laid. Ironically, it is the unorganized masses of Nepal that have shown more political maturity than all the other important players on the scene. They have been denied justice too often in the past. With the April uprising, Nepalis have shown that they are ready to take destiny in their own hands should the leaders fail to live up to their expectations.

The oldest state of South Asia may yet prove to be the most vibrant one of the region. The course the country takes in the coming one or two years will determine its fate for the coming decades, just as promises not kept and opportunities denied in the 1950s have bedeviled its polity for over half-a-century.

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