Nepalese general strike to protest monarchic rule, 2006

April 5, 2006 to April 24, 2006
Country: Nepal

Goals:
The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) called for the creation of multiparty, democratic rule with curtailed powers for the king; the reinstatement of the Nepalese Parliament, and the creation of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 090. Revenue refusal
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
General strike
Economic shutdown

Methods in 5th segment:

- Assemblies of protest or support
- General strike
- Economic shutdown

Methods in 6th segment:

- Declarations of indictment and intention
- Marches
- General strike
- Economic shutdown
- Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- General Nepalese worker population
- Political opponents of King Gyanendra
- Trade union organizations.

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) called the strike

Partners:
Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI); Nepal Trade Union Congress-Independent (NTUC-I); General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT); Democratic Confederation of Nepalese Trade Unions (DECONT); Confederation of Nepalese Professionals (CoNEP); Civil Servants Organization of Nepal; Private and Boarding Schools Association of Nepal (PABSON)

External allies:
International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); The governments of the United States and India; UN workers present in the country to observe events; World Confederation of Labor (WCL); Communist Party of Nepal (CPN)

Involvement of social elites:
The governments of the United States and India were vocal supporters of democratic reform, calling on King Gyanendra to initiate talks with the opposition.

Doctors and medical practitioners threatened to strike if repressive violence by the government continued against protestors.
Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- GEFONT/FNCCI/NTUC-I/DECONT/CoNEP
- Journalists
- United Nations observers
- United States government

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Doctors/medical practitioners
- Family members of security personnel
- Indian government
- Teachers
- Workers Assisting Popular Movement Fund—GEFONT

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 3 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The Nepalese government and security forces, headed by King Gyanendra

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
Not Known

Repressive Violence:
There are many reported cases of the government security forces using violence against protesters, including tear gas, baton charges, and plastic or rubber bullets. A reported thirteen Nepalese were killed, and an estimated 1,500 more wounded; some 1,000 students, politicians and protestors were arrested.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The strike managed to directly accomplish one of the major goals of the SPA; curtailing the powers of the king, ending emergency rule and reinstating the Nepalese Parliament. On April 24, 2006, King Gyanendra recalled the old Nepal House of Representatives that he had dissolved in 2005, effectively ending the general strike. However, due to various setbacks,
elections to a Constituent Assembly (another of the campaign’s important goals), did not take place until late the following year. And King Gyanendra wasn’t wholly dethroned and Nepal declared a republic by a newly elected government until 2008. Additionally, unrest within the Maoist-led government and political instability has continued to the present.

The SPA and CPN (as well as their various partners) survived through the strike and to see the eventual achievement of their goals.

The SPA and CPN (Maoist) managed to sustain the general strike for the entire period. Other methods added on to the campaign as it progressed, like a tax boycott announced by the SPA on April 9th. The protest marches that occurred during the campaign grew in size as more members of the general population took action in support of the SPA/CPN’s demands.

The 2006 general strike in Nepal was part of a larger democracy movement in the country. Nepal has had a historically monarchical government dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1940’s, political opposition rose, critical of the enduring, often unstable, autocratic rule and calling for democratic reforms. In 1951, Nepal instated the Nepali Congress Party, dissolving some of the monarchic hegemony. But relations between the government and the king did not run smoothly—in 1959, then-King Mahendra abolished the nascent democratic system, creating unrest among those opposed to the king. A brewing People’s Movement finally forced King Birendra (1972—2001 reign), to accept constitutional reforms and bring back the multiparty parliament in May 1991.

In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) began what would become a long and violent rebellion against the government in an attempt to establish a people’s socialist republic. More than a decade of conflict cost the lives of more than 13,000 Nepalese. The conflict also severely damaged Nepal’s infrastructure and economy, leaving much of the population in poverty. Then, in 2001, a massacre in the royal palace left most of the royal family dead, including King Birendra, his wife, Queen Aishwarya, and their son, the Crown Prince Dipendra. Dipendra was accused of patricide, and died from a gunshot wound two days after the event. King Birendra’s brother, Gyanendra, succeeded to the throne on February 1, 2005. King Gyanendra promptly abolished the entire Nepalese Parliament indefinitely, instated military rule, and assumed full executive powers, promising to quash the Communist rebellion.

It was within this context that the Nepalese democracy movement originated. The political opposition to King Gyanendra, and to the autocratic system of governance more largely, formed the Seven Party Alliance (SPA). The Alliance consisted of a coalition of opposition leaders, including 90% of the dissolved Parliament. Their primary goals were to reinstate multiparty, democratic rule by reestablishing the old Nepalese Parliament, hold elections, and establish a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. The SPA gained the support of the rebel Maoist Communist faction in an agreement that guaranteed the CPN election to a future Constituent Assembly.

The SPA called for a nationwide general strike from April 5—9, 2006 to protest King Gyanendra’s emergency rule. In accordance with the planned strike, the Maoist rebels announced a ceasefire in the Kathmandu valley. Additional support came from the various trade union organizations in Nepal, including the two largest trade union confederations, the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT), and the Nepal Trade Union Congress-Independent (NTUC-I). Various professional groups were vocal supporters of the strike and the democracy movement. All around Nepal, but especially in the capital city of Kathmandu, economic life was brought to a standstill. Numerous press reports released during that time mention the halt to all types of enterprises and workplace activity; transport, professional/intellectual, informal, civic service, hotels and tourism, agricultural, and construction industries were among the economic sectors that participated. Labor support networks and world and international trade unions supported the strike efforts. The United States and Indian governments gave some of the most pressing demands for King Gyanendra to enter negotiations with the opposition. When government forces arrested close to 400 opposition activists on the first day of the strike, the United States expressed strong disapproval of King Gyanendra’s government.

On April 8, the SPA increased the level of opposition activity by calling for a tax boycott, and an indefinite continuation of the
strike until the king announced the end of emergency rule and a move towards democracy. The government responded by announcing a daytime curfew in Kathmandu. Thousands of Nepalese flooded the streets in defiance of the decree, and hundreds of people were arrested. Security personnel used violent repressive tactics against the protesters, including rubber and plastic bullets, baton beatings, and tear gas. United Nations workers who were present in the country to observe events were denied curfew passes, and their movement throughout the country was curtailed despite an agreement with the Nepalese government to allow them freedom of movement.

Despite this repression, protests, rallies and marches continued throughout the strike period. Protest marchers waved the Nepalese flag, chanted pro-democracy slogans, and burned tires in the streets of Kathmandu. Specific instances of protests include a group of 50 teachers who rallied in a Kathmandu marketplace, and several Home Ministry workers who participated in a demonstration outside the Home Ministry building. The Civil Servants Organization of Nepal was a vocal critic of the arrests and threatened more protesting until its members were released. Even doctors joined the protest by threatening to go on strike if the government continued to use violence against peaceful protesters. The United States and Indian governments continued to be vocal supporters of multi-level negotiations.

Regardless of international and domestic condemnation, the police forces continued to retaliate with violence. All told, thirteen people died and at least 1,000 were wounded over the course of the campaign, as the result of government-inflicted repressive violence. In addition, security forces arrested close to 1,500 people. King Gyanendra’s regime placed severe restrictions on political and media activities, and cut off the mobile phone service in the country.

On April 19, the SPA again announced a continuation of the strike and called on King Gyanendra to meet their demands and enter into negotiations. The government responded with another daytime curfew on April 20 in an effort to stop mass protests and rallies. But on April 21, hundreds of thousands of protesters participated in a huge march on the capital. The same day, King Gyanendra announced he would return political control to the people, and called on the SPA to nominate a new Prime Minister to his cabinet.

The SPA and CPN rejected the move, stating that it did not fit with their intended goals. They reiterated their main objectives—reinstatement of Parliament, a multi-party government, and elections to a Constituent Assembly—and vowed to continue the striking and protesting. In response, King Gyanendra reestablished the previously abolished Nepalese Parliament on April 24, 2006. This was accepted by the SPA, and Girija Prasad Koirala was declared the head of the new government. The Maoist rebels opposed the action, stating that simply reinstituting Parliament would not solve the major underlying problems. Koirala negotiated a three-month truce with them on April 27, and on May 18 the Parliament unanimously voted to strip the King of most of his powers, essentially leaving him a figurehead with no political authority. May 18 has come to be known as Democracy Day in Nepal.

However, the country’s political instability continued. From the end of the strike, it would be another two years before the King was officially dethroned and Nepal declared a republic, and another year before preparations for election to the Constituent Assembly were underway. Despite negotiation efforts, relations between the SPA and the CPN met with periodic setbacks and contention. Still, the April 2006 general strike in Nepal was a crucial stepping-stone in the country’s transition to democratic rule, and demonstrates the potent force of concerted, people power efforts to aid in generating change.

Research Notes

Sources:

General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) press and news archives (online):

-----“Nepalese authorities arrest 400 opposition protesters during strike” April 7, 2006.
-----“Nepal's Opposition Alliance Says Strike Will Continue” (Update 1) April 19, 2006
-----“Nepalese defy curfew” (Update 2) April 21, 2006
-----“Nepal's King Gyanendra said he will return power to his ‘countrymen’” (Update 3) April 21, 2006

Additional Notes:
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