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Across Nepal, Thousands Demonstrate Against Demand for Provinces Based on Ethnicity

Posted: 05/26/2012 11:24 am



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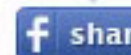
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Pokhara, Nepal - Thousands of Nepali took to the streets this week in support of a United Nepal. Their cry, "Himal, Pahad, Terai," (Mountain, Hills, Plains), was in response to violent demonstrations that have plagued the country over the past week, as some of Nepal's more than 100 minorities demanded a new form of government that would divide Nepal into States based on ethnicity. If their demands are successful, this tiny Asian country could be thrust into an era of tribal feuding that has not been seen since Prithivi Narayan Shah unified warring tribes into

one central Himalayan kingdom in 1769.

Basu Tripathi, owner of Adam Tours in Pokhara and an organizer of the event, along with the local Chamber of Commerce, explained: "We all want prosperity for Nepalese Society. This is a great gathering of industrialists and tourism entrepreneurs and social people. Let's not split mountains from the hills. Let's not split hills from the Terai. Nepal is a unique combination; let's keep this country prosperous, let's keep this country integrated."

Members of the Pokhara Tourism Council stepped off the rally onto Hallan Chowk, one of two main intersections in the Lakeside tourist area and proceeded to Zero Kilometer, where it merged with marchers representing area trade associations. The combined forces, numbering in the thousands, continued to the main market area in Mahendrapul, where leaders spoke in support of peace and cultural diversity.

The present strife is a direct result of the Maoist-led "Nepalese Peoples War" fought between 1996 and 2005. Maoists espouse the philosophy of the late Chinese Premiere Mao Zedong, architect of the brutal Cultural Revolution, who used violence and terror to overthrow the upper class, appropriate their estates, and redistribute land to the common people. In Nepal, the Royal Monarchy led by King Gyanendra had become corrupt and unresponsive to its subjects by the mid-1990's. Maoists seized upon the unrest, promising free land, food, and the designation of States based on cultural identity to disenfranchised ethnic groups who had largely been ignored by the government. In 2006, Maoists agreed to a cease-fire and became a legitimate part of the government when Gyanendra was forced to step down in May 2008.

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Since then, the country has been struggling to forge consensus between opposing political parties in order to draft a new constitution. The May 27th deadline for adopting the constitution has been extended each year for the past three years, but last September the Nepal Supreme Court decreed further extensions illegal. As the deadline once again approaches, tensions have flared. Members of lower castes say high-caste leaders have yet to acknowledge their grievances. Concerned they will not be equitably represented in the final constitution, they decreed a series of bandhs (general strikes) over the past two weeks that shut down all public transportation, closed stores, government offices, and factories, essentially crippling the country.

In Pokhara, demonstrations turned violent during a bandh last week when members of the Gurung caste tried to tear down a "United Nepal" billboard erected by Brahmins and Chhetris. Fourteen people, including an eight-month old baby who was hit in the skull with a rock, were taken to the hospital with injuries on Monday. The following day, all the windows of a local hotel were shattered by rock-throwers. In Kathmandu, more than 70 protestors were arrested and police were forced to fire tear gas canisters when rioters burned motorcycles and severely beat members of the media. Most severely affected are the southern Terai and far west areas of Nepal, where the population is primarily underprivileged ethnic minorities. Bandhs in these areas have been ongoing for more than two weeks, stranding travelers who quickly ran out of money for food and lodging, forcing them to sleep on the ground next to their abandoned buses.

Those in favor of a United Nepal that would not divide the country based on ethnicity and identity had been largely silent until Thursday, when the two associations took to the streets. Since then, there have been no further reports of violence in Pokhara, however the bandhs have left their mark. Despite the fact that tourists have not been targeted, Pokhara looks like a ghost town. Visitors who had to leave for Kathmandu were escorted to the airport by police buses but planes returning from the capital arrived empty, creating added hardship for local merchants who rely on tourist dollars.

Remarkably, there appears to be unexpected progress in the negotiations. Three major political parties and members of SLMM, the most prominent group representing ethnic concerns, met this week. The Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML) have presented a joint proposal that the interim constitution be promulgated by the end of business on May 27, with the two remaining disputed issues being forwarded to the interim Parliament for resolution. The issues of contention are the formation of Provinces (States) -- how many, what their names will be and what their boundaries will be -- and whether or not they will be based on single or multiple ethnic identities.



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If this last minute proposal is successful, most Nepali I speak with believe Maoists influence will begin to wane. Maoists won the largest share of seats in the interim Parliament through intimidation, they charge. Once the new constitution is in place, a new Parliamentary election will be held and most no longer feel pressure to vote for the Maoists, since they have laid down arms and are a legitimate part of the government. It is generally believed they will incur massive losses in the next election.

On the day that Nepal's monarchy was abolished, the headline in the *Himalayan Times* read "A hope is born." It's been four long years in the making, but it now appears that the exuberant hopes for peace and prosperity that prevailed following the overthrow of the monarchy might finally be realized.

Rally In Pokhara, Nepal

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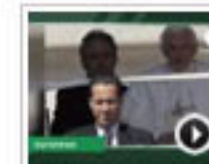
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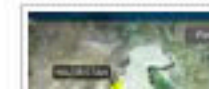
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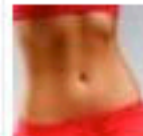
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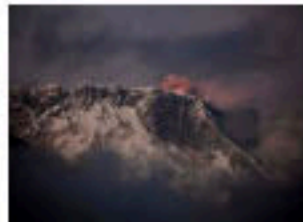
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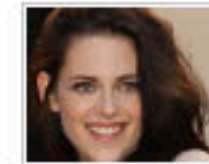
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