

Royalists begin 'save King' campaign in Nepal

Die-hard followers of King Gyanendra in Nepal have kicked off a campaign to save the crown, saying the Himalayan kingdom could not do without monarchy.

Led by the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Thapa) loyal to the palace, former ministers and government officials are trying to persuade people that the future governments should have a role for the monarch, if not as a constitutional king, then at least as a ceremonial ruler.

Among the royal followers pleading for the return of King Gyanendra are former education minister Rabindranath Sharma, Padma Sundar Lawoti, another former minister named in a corruption deal during his tenure whose son was beaten up by Crown Prince Paras and his cronies, and Jagat Gauchan, who was appointed minister by the king after his coup in February 2005 and then dropped unceremoniously during a cabinet reshuffle.

Taking on the Maoist guerrillas, who are driving for a republic with the king reduced to a commoner and stripped of all his property, the pro-king campaign kicked off Saturday in Nepalgunj town in midwestern Nepal, a stronghold of the communist rebels.

The royalists are blaming 'foreign forces' - which primarily means India - for 'conspiring' to destabilise Nepal's 238-year-old monarchy. Though King Gyanendra's absolute reign triggered a mass revolt that forced him to step down and fuelled a demand for holding an election to put monarchy to vote, the royalists say the crown is more essential for the country now than it was in the past.

From Nepalgunj, they say they will campaign from 'Mechi to Mahakali' - meaning across the length and breadth of the country - to sway public opinion in favour of the king, who has been keeping a low profile since his ouster in April.

Though the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, one of the oldest parties in the kingdom, had always been a staunch supporter of the king, it was forced to criticise King Gyanendra's coup after the strong wave of condemnation at home and abroad. It also did not take part in the controversial local elections called by the king early this year.

Angered by the disobedience, King Gyanendra lured several leaders away from the party, offering to make them ministers. Led by Kamal Thapa, who was made home minister, the dissidents split the party and formed the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Thapa) faction.

The splinter group took part in the controversial election and captured most of the contested seats. However, it was a hollow victory for Thapa, who became branded as a ruthless turncoat and was found guilty of ordering excessive force on anti-king demonstrators.

While Thapa is lying low, the faction is now trying to become active under other leaders.

The pro-king campaign comes after two more royalists united last week.

Former prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, who had been appointed premier by the king in 2003, joined forces with Keshar Bahadur Bista, a former minister in the royal cabinet.

With the merger of the two splinter parties, which enjoy little public support, the palace could be trying to strengthen the save the king campaign.

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