

## Royalists take to the streets in Kathmandu

Nepal's beleaguered King Gyanendra's supporters began regrouping in the capital Friday, taking on the Maoists in an unprecedented show of defiance.

Headed by former minister Rabindra Nath Sharma, around 200 royalists staged a march here raising slogans in support of the monarchy and condemning the Maoists and the seven-party alliance, hours before the government began talks with the guerrillas to decide the fate of the king in the upcoming constitution.

A splinter group of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, one of the oldest parties in the kingdom now sitting in opposition, called the march.

As the royalists marched towards Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's residence to hand him a memorandum, they were overtaken by scores of red flag waving students belonging to the Maoists' student union.

'They were waving rods and other weapons and attacked us,' said Krishna Sigdel, Sharma's aide. 'Nearly 10 of our members were injured.'

Security forces pushed back royalists as well as Maoists and tension grew in the area.

The group, now calling itself the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Nepal), was formed by former home minister and King Gyanendra's henchman Kamal Thapa, who split the original party to take part in the controversial local election called by the monarch during his direct rule.

However, after a strong anti-king wave swept the royal regime from power and Thapa was publicly condemned as the man who ordered the use of excessive force against unarmed demonstrators, the faction dropped him from its leadership. Sharma, a former education minister nominated by the king, was made new leader of the group.

Earlier this month, the faction began regrouping and started a 'save the crown' campaign.

After holding meetings in Biratnagar, Nepalgunj and Mahendranagar cities, the group faced stiff opposition in Pokhara city last week where students attacked the gathering.

Said Sigdel: 'In a democracy, everyone has the right to have his opinion... While we do not advocate an active monarch, we feel the need for a constitutional king to keep national integrity intact. If we come under attack for expressing our view, the government must realise that it sends out a bad message about democracy.'

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