

June 20 to decide King Gyanendra's fate

Though traditionally marked by foolery and merry-making, All Fools' Day struck a chilly note for Nepal's royal family Sunday with the ruling parties finally announcing June 20 as the date when voters would choose between the crown and a republic.

The top leaders of the eight-party ruling alliance held their final negotiations Sunday morning, before the new government was sworn in, agreeing on the new date for the historic election.

Just a week's delay from the original mid-June poll time frame pledged by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala earlier, the new date sets the election in the first week of monsoon.

With violence and unrest stalking the Terai region in southern Nepal, the parties, who suspect monarchists' hand in the anarchy, Sunday added a safeguard to prevent the polls from being sabotaged.

'If the royalists try to create obstructions, the eight parties have decided that parliament can proclaim an end to monarchy and declare Nepal a republic if two-thirds of the MPs vote for the motion,' Maoist chief Prachanda told the media in parliament.

King Gyanendra's attempt to seize power with the help of the army and impose a 15-month authoritarian reign alienated Nepalis from the institution of crown that was once revered as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu.

The same mainstream parties who had in the 90s resisted the Maoists' demand to hold such an election agreed to do so after the king grabbed absolute control with a coup in 2005.

However, though the election date has been set finally, the way is still strewn with obstacles.

Ethnic protesters, some of whom are armed, have begun staging protests in the Terai.

On Monday, a Terai bandh comprising 22 districts has been called by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, a plains group demanding an autonomous state for plains people.

Though Prachanda said his party's priority is to hold free and fair elections in a transparent manner free from fear, it remains to be seen if his cadres will really allow that.

The rebels have continued with violence, extortion and intimidation and there is fear that they have not locked up all their arms and soldiers in the barracks monitored by the UN.

It also remains to be seen if King Gyanendra will meekly sit back and allow an election that may mean an end to the 238-year-old institution of monarchy.

It would be uncharacteristic of the king, who had been making a series of covert manoeuvres since 2001 to take control of the government.

Sudeshna Sarkar (© IANS / India eNews)