

Nepal's New King Faces Country in Tumult

Worst Uprising in Recent Years Breaks Out

By **JESSE PESTA**

Staff Reporter of the Wall Street Journal

June 5, 2001

KATMANDU, Nepal—For a god-king, Nepal's newest sovereign is off to a rough start.

This Himalayan nation on Monday chose its second king in three days, but also faced its worst popular uprising in years. Rioters clashed with police across the capital, Katmandu, throwing stones, burning tires, and expressing grave doubts about the new king's recent statement that Friday's massacre of the royal family was an accidental discharge of an automatic weapon at a family dinner.

On Monday, King Gyanendra stepped away from that assertion, promising a full investigation. It's a turnaround that could tarnish his reputation with his subjects, particularly since the Nepalese traditionally credit the king with infallibility, and some worship him as a Hindu god.

Highlighting the complex mix of beliefs and emotions at work in the Nepalese capital, one policeman on the streets early Monday said he anticipated that violence would break out later in the day because so many people don't believe that King Birendra who was shot on Friday, is actually dead. "People are dissatisfied" with the official statements, he said, "because they believe the king is immortal."

Throughout the day, police fought back against protesters with tear gas and cane sticks, before imposing a curfew midafternoon. Nepal's military also had a presence on the streets, highlighting a quirk of the military chain-of-command that could become

important if the crisis worsens. Nepal's constitution appears to be intentionally vague on whether the army answers to the king, or to the elected government, some scholars say.

The military issue also has come up in the context of how best to respond to a Maoist insurrection in Nepal's countryside that has killed more than 1,000 people in recent years. The Maoists are a byproduct of one of Nepal's most intractable economic problems, a disparity between urban and rural incomes in this poor agricultural nation of 24 million people. In a statement issued Monday, the Maoist leader, Prachanda, spoke out for the first time on the massacre, calling it a "grave political conspiracy."

A decade ago, Nepal faced weeks of street violence, which ultimately led to the then-king—the man killed in Friday's massacre—discarding absolute monarchy in favor of the current parliamentary system. Today Nepal has a constitutional monarchy in which the king's primary tools for influence are the people's respect for the institution, and his personal skill at statesmanship.

In this regard, the newly crowned King Gyanendra faces an uphill battle. He's believed to have been cool to the move to full democracy a decade ago, an achievement that is cited as one of the crowning glories of his deeply revered predecessor. He received a subdued welcome from people along the route of his post-coronation parade Monday, reflecting skepticism at his claim that Friday's murders were an accident.

In addition his son, Paras, is widely distrusted because of allegations that he was involved in a fatal car accident, as well as other difficulties with the police. In several demonstrations Monday morning, protesters raised chants against Paras, who may be the next heir to the throne. A school principal walking near Nepal's army hospital, when asked his opinion of the new king, focused on his son, repeating a popular

rumor that he may have killed several people.

A spokesman for the palace didn't return phone calls seeking comment.

On Friday, eight members of Nepal's royal family, including the king and queen, were slain. Early reports blamed the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Dipendra, who over the weekend was in a coma after reportedly shooting himself in the head. Despite the wound, he was crowned king according to Nepal's succession rules, and reigned until Monday, when he died. That paved the way for the ascension later in the day of his uncle, King Gyanendra. Dipendra was to be cremated Monday night in Nepal.

"The facts on the Friday night incident will be made public," King Gyanendra said Monday. He also offered a partial explanation of his earlier statement that the shooting was an accident, saying that "the facts could not be made public in (Sunday's) statement due to legal and constitutional hurdles."

That was interpreted as a reference to the fact that Dipendra was still alive at the time, so couldn't be criticized under Nepal's tradition of reverence for the monarch.