

Rising popular anger over Nepali government's response to COVID-19

By Rohantha De Silva
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The Nepalese government of Prime Minister Sharam Oli has mobilised the police to shut down protests and arrest demonstrators denouncing the administration's failure to control the coronavirus pandemic.

According to the most recent official figures, Nepal, with a population of 28 million, has 22,2972 confirmed cases and 75 deaths. Thousands of people are currently confined in cramped makeshift quarantine facilities that lack basic sanitation facilities and have now become virus hotpots.

On July 31, youth affiliated with the "COVID-19 Nepal: Enough is Enough" Facebook group, demonstrated outside the prime minister's residence in the capital Kathmandu.

Members of the social media group denounced government indifference to the plight of the masses and raised concerns about the rising number of suicides across the country. More than 1,200 people killed themselves during the government's 74-day coronavirus lockdown over job cuts and the resulting loss of income.

Protesters demanded that the government health authorities increase the use of the more effective Polymerase Chain Reaction Test, instead of the Rapid Diagnostic Test.

A major reason for Nepal's relatively small number of reported infections is the limited testing being carried out. Although the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) government previously claimed it would conduct 10,000 tests per day from July, testing remains at just 4,000 per day, one of the lowest rates in the world.

Demonstrators also demanded proper contact tracing of infected individuals and safer quarantine facilities for women and the oppressed Dalits, who have been harassed and attacked. They also called for financial

transparency over the 10 billion rupees the government claims to have allocated for pandemic control.

According to the media reports, police attacked the demonstration, detaining about 50 youth, including random individuals who happened to be in the area. As Aalok Subedi told the *Kathmandu Post*: "I was at Big Mart [a local department store] when the police accosted me and put me in their van."

While those detained were released later that evening, the police attack points to fears by the Stalinist NCP administration that the youth protests will become a rallying point for mass anti-government demonstrations.

"Covid-19 Nepal: Enough Is Enough!" has over 209,000 Facebook members. The mainly middle-class youth involved in the group are not affiliated with any political party, another indication of the widespread disaffection among Nepali youth with the establishment parties.

The organisation, however, is attempting to divert these youth into futile attempts to pressure the government. Dharendra Shrestha, 29, told the media, "We are not demanding that the government step down" but telling it "that what they are doing is not enough."

Attempting to politically hijack this movement, the Nepali Congress party has voiced its "support" for the organisation. Like the Stalinist NCP, Congress governments are equally responsible for the dangerous, rundown state of the Nepali health system.

The July 31 demonstration is one of several protests in recent months. On June 9, around 150 people staged a sit-down protest outside Oli's residence. It was attacked by the police using water cannons and batons. Later in June, hundreds of youth took to the streets in major cities around the country.

Responding to widespread anger over the July 31 arrests, Deputy Superintendent of Police Roshan Khadka told the media that his officers would end the random detention of protesters.

These assurances are worthless.

In June, five protestors were arrested for staging a hunger strike at Patan Durbar Square in and on July 30 another group was arrested on their way to file a “Right to Information” petition with the courts. Police officers did not have warrants for those arrests and the youth were harshly treated while in custody.

The anti-government opposition is not confined to its inadequate response to COVID-19 but also to the government’s indifference to the pandemic’s devastating economic impact on millions of the country’s poverty-stricken citizens. Nepal’s economy relies almost entirely on tourism and remittances from overseas migrant workers. Revenue from these sources has all but collapsed.

Migrant workers from Nepal, including those unable to return from India and the Gulf State countries, face a dire situation. Despite repeated calls by the Nepali Supreme Court, the Stalinist NCP government has refused to provide any significant assistance to these trapped workers.

Nor has the government provided any serious financial relief to those involved in the tourist industry. The desperate situation facing urban workers, day labourers and the rural poor, as well as small entrepreneurs, including small shopkeepers and the farmers, is appalling.

Confronted with the growing mass discontent, the NCP government has resorted to whipping up chauvinism and religious sectarianism to divert attention from the escalating social crisis. On July 13, Oli claimed that Lord Ram, the mythical Hindu god, was not born in Ayodhya, as claimed by India’s ruling Bharatiya Janatha Party and other Hindu extremists, but in a Nepali village. This was Indian “cultural encroachment,” Oli declared.

The inadequate and indifferent response of the Stalinist NCP administration to the coronavirus pandemic is not an accident. Like its counterparts throughout South Asia and internationally, the Nepali ruling elite is not interested in the fate of working people and rural toilers confronting the coronavirus disaster but is determined to defend the profit system

and further enrich the capitalist class.

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