

“Those who have watched the deteriorating political conditions in Nepal for several years are skeptical of the royal regime’s capacity to bring the insurgency under control. . . . Nepal, they say, is now destined for a surge in violence and the 237-year-old Nepali monarchy appears doomed.”

Red Star over the Himalayas

CHITRA TIWARI

Sandwiched between China and India under the shadow of the majestic Himalayas, Nepal is caught in a protracted and bloody civil war. A little more than a decade after the world celebrated the fall of the Soviet Union and declared communism “dead,” Maoist ideology that is shunned in neighboring China has found fertile ground in Nepal. Maoist guerrillas have scored victory after victory in battles with the royal armed forces and have developed the capacity to encircle the capital city of Katmandu. They have emerged as a potent political force because of the government’s inept response to the reformist democrats who hoped to transform Nepal’s absolutist monarchy. The fighting, which has left more than 13,000 people dead, shows no signs of peaceful resolution and the country appears to be headed toward full-scale revolution.

CONSTITUTIONAL CRISES

Since Nepal’s emergence as a state in 1768, the monarchy has gone through several political crises. It was at the conclusion of one of these crises in 1951 that King Tribhuvan agreed to form a constitution and allow the election of a constituent assembly. But the first movement toward popular participation in the state fell victim to political maneuvering in the royal family. Elections to a constituent assembly never took place, and the parties that had emerged in hopes of playing a role in a constitutional government were banned by King Mahendra in December 1960.

Bolstered by events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the banned parties started a movement for multiparty democracy in February 1990. The Nepali Congress (NC) party joined with seven leftist parties called the United Left Front (ULF) to lead the pro-democracy campaign. Another politi-

cal force, the United National People’s Movement (UNPM), a coalition of radical leftist parties, advocated total revolution.

Six weeks later, on April 9, 1990, King Birendra was forced to agree to lift the ban on political parties following a massive demonstration three days earlier in Katmandu. The nervous king and the conservatives around him had only two choices: unleash the army in a total crackdown on the “people’s movement” or agree to begin discussions for a multiparty system. With international sentiments in favor of democracy, the hard-liners correctly assumed they had no chance of outside support if they deployed the military.

King Birendra and the leaders of the NC-ULF agreed not only to lift the ban on parties but also to create an interim government to manage the country until a new constitution could be drafted and a parliament elected. (The UNPM, even though its influence was clearly visible in the April 6 uprising, was ignored and sidelined in the palace understanding.) Both the monarchists and the parties fought hard to create political space for themselves in the new dispensation. Deeply aware of the monarchy’s banning of political parties in 1960, the party representatives wanted to limit the king’s power while the monarchists worked to preserve the prerogatives of the crown.

Unsurprisingly, the constitution—drafted by individuals nominated by the king, the Nepali Congress party, and the ULF—emerged as a compromise document serving the interests of the monarchy and the NC and ULF. Sovereignty, which traditionally had been vested in the monarchy, was transferred to the people, but the power to command the armed forces was left to the king. Political parties were allowed to function and a parliament was established. The constitution declared Nepal to be a Hindu state with a Hindu king. A “winner take all” electoral system, which marginalized minority parties and

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interests, was introduced. And the monarchy was declared sacrosanct, hence free from any constitutional amendment.

The new constitution was not approved by a constituent assembly or a parliament. Moreover, the UNPM and others espousing republican values were left outside the new political dispensation. Contradictions inherent in the constitution would soon become apparent in day-to-day politics, and ultimately would lead to a bloody insurgency.

The elections for the new parliament held in 1991 produced a majority government for the Nepali Congress. The Unified Marxist and Leninist party (UML), an offshoot of the ULF, emerged as the main opposition party. The UNPM, which changed its name to the United People's Front (UPF), decided to take part in the elections. The front said it would use the parliament as a forum to "expose" the fallacy of "bourgeoisie democracy" from within. It gathered enough votes to win nine seats in the parliament.

BULLETS INSTEAD OF BALLOTS

Nepal soon began to suffer from chronic political instability. Internal squabbles fragmented the Nepali Congress's political power. Between 1990 and 1995, four prime ministers governed but none of them addressed the popular expectations of the 1990 people's movement. Corrupt members of the previous regime whom the people wanted to see in jail were rewarded with political appointments. Smuggling, embezzlement of public funds, bribery, and kickbacks in the allocation of development projects infested the system.

In Rolpa, a midwestern mountain district, a small peasant movement that began in 1995 soon developed into a full-fledged armed rebellion. The peasants demanded a fairer share of their crops from landlords and relief from unscrupulous creditors. The government, instead of politically addressing these problems, resorted to massive armed police operations, beating, torturing, and killing several hundred poor peasants and forcing others to flee into jungles for safety.

Also in 1995, the UPF reorganized itself as the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and secretly began to make plans for an armed revolution modeled on Mao Zedong's theory of "people's war." The Maoist party stood behind the suppressed people of Rolpa and submitted a 40-point set of demands with a 30-day ultimatum threatening armed rebellion if the government failed to discuss the party's demands. The government viewed the movement as a problem of "law and order" perpetrated by a few "extremist crooks" and hence ignored the

demands while continuing police operations. The Maoist party in turn fired its first salvo of the "people's war" on February 13, 1996, attacking local police posts in 5 of Nepal's 75 districts.

Nine years later, in 2005, the Maoist movement has proliferated throughout Nepal. The country's mountains have become killing terraces for the army, the police, and what is known as the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA). The insurgency- and counterinsurgency-related violence has killed at least 13,000 people, wounded many more, displaced thousands of Nepalis from their towns, and left hundreds languishing in jails.

The insurgency and the militarization that is taking root in Nepal are the result of the legitimacy crisis created by the unholy alliance between the Nepali Congress and other parties and the king. They sought guarantees for each other's survival by writing a rigid constitution that cannot be amended and that placed minorities and women at the mercy of the majority. The constitution also left the Dalits or so-called untouchables politically and socially excluded, granting them neither proportionate representation nor guaranteed civil rights. It was a grand lesson in applied political thuggery 101. And now the Maoists have succeeded in rallying support from communities that feel excluded and cheated by the Katmandu-based rulers.

There is a deeper problem. Declaring Nepal a Hindu state with a Hindu king while trying to make him a "constitutional monarch" based on the European Christian experience was in itself an example of intellectual-philosophical bankruptcy on the part of the constitution makers. The powers given to a Hindu king by religious texts are permanent; it is but natural for the monarch to use his traditional divine authority when he feels powerless under a written constitution. That is exactly what King Gyanendra did on February 1, 2005, when he seized control of the government less than four years after succeeding his late brother as monarch. The Hindu king in Nepal either will stay absolute or there will be a republic. There is no middle way.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE ENEMY

King Gyanendra's power grab also had its roots in the government's two unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the Maoists since 2001. The Maoists had three demands: abolition of the monarchy, election of a constituent assembly, and formation of an interim government that included members of the Maoist party to supervise the elections. But the war in Afghanistan after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington produced a new envi-

ronment in Nepal. The country's hard-liners believed that the United States would come to Nepal's aid in suppressing the Maoists. These hopes led to continuing rejection of Maoist demands, including the demand for a constituent assembly.

The government's refusal to hold an election for a constituent assembly—in which the Maoists hoped to secure a majority to write a republican constitution—was the point of no return. In late November 2001, the Maoists broke a cease-fire that had been agreed to and launched massive human-wave offensives against military and police installations in many parts of the country.

The government declared the Maoist party a terrorist organization, imposed a state of emergency, and ordered the army to crush the rebels. Initial military actions did push the Maoists into the mountainous interior, raising hopes in the capital that the guerrillas would be finished within months. The “people's war” continued, however, as guerrillas regrouped into small units and fought a war of attrition.

These crises led to King Gyanendra's growing political activism. Never especially popular with the public, Gyanendra had risen to the throne in 2001 after a royal palace massacre that saw his brother, King Birendra, and the king's entire family killed—allegedly by drunken Crown Prince Dipendra, who later shot himself to death. Gyanendra made it clear that he wanted to be seen as a “constructive” monarch.

In October 2002, King Gyanendra fired Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for “incompetence” after elections were not held within six months of the dissolution of parliament and for failing to control the Maoist insurgency. On February 1, 2005, he took over all government powers, arresting the prime minister and his cabinet colleagues, suspending civil liberties, and imposing martial law. The royal coup triggered universal condemnation outside Nepal and the suspension of Western and Indian military assistance to the royal regime.

MIGHTY MAOISTS

The insurgency, for its part, has raised issues of legitimacy, economic development, and income and resource distribution in Nepal. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who also uses the alias Prachanda, is leading the Maoists. Another leader and ideologue is Baburam Bhattarai, who holds a doctorate in architectural engineering from India's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The size of the Maoist guerrilla forces has expanded significantly in the past four years. It is said the Maoists started their people's war with only two shotguns, one of which did not fire. Today, insurgent forces are believed to include approximately 32,000 heavily armed soldiers (although some put the number as low as 15,000). In addition, 100,000 or so rag-tag militia with locally made guns, sticks, knives, and slingshots roam the countryside.

The rebels claim the insurgency has reached the stage of strategic offensive, which is the final phase in the three-phased people's war as outlined by Mao. It is a phase in which the guerrillas, after exhausting the resources of the incumbent government, begin to fight pitched battles in conventional formations with a strategy to capture the central authority.

Over the past nine years the Maoists have reportedly built an impressive and efficient network of decentralized guerrilla organizations, each capable of mobilizing hundreds of youth at the local level. Membership of these organizations is made up of poor peasants, the so-called untouchable caste

groups (Dalits), members of minority ethnic groups, and women.

Likewise, the regular armed guerrilla forces come from the masses of the dissatisfied, the illiterate, and the semi-educated; unemployed youth; and women. (Almost half of the guerrillas are believed to be women.) The rebels have successfully capitalized on centuries of isolation, neglect, and underdevelopment of the interior and remote regions of rugged Nepal. They raise the financial resources needed to conduct the war through extortion, bank robberies, donations from supporters and sympathizers, and imposition of taxes on the peasantry in their strongholds.

The Maoists appear to be effective in the recruitment, training, and deployment of cadres for military actions as well as ideological propaganda. In fact, the rebels have wiped out the central government's presence in most rural areas. That the guerrillas have not only survived but thrived in the past nine years clearly suggests that they command support of a significant portion of the population.

INTERNATIONAL WORRIES

India is the regional power most concerned about Nepal's civil war. New Delhi is worried about the expansion of Maoist revolution in Nepal into India since India confronts its own Maoists, popu-

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larly known as Naxalites. The nexus between the two groups is well known. India thus declared Nepal's Maoists to be "terrorists" long before Katmandu did, and decided to provide Nepal with nearly \$70 million worth of military assistance to fight the Maoists. New Delhi has also taken measures to check the infiltration of rebels into Indian territories across the India-Nepal border. Since Gyanendra's seizure of power in February, New Delhi has continued to stress the need for reconciliation between the king and the political parties, but has also opened communications with Nepali Maoist leaders.

Although the Nepalese hard-liners' hopes for US intervention were never realized, American policy makers are alarmed by the possible emergence of a Maoist Nepal as a potential haven for international terrorism. Before this year's royal coup, the Bush administration helped the Gyanendra government through military as well as economic assistance, providing \$22 million in military supplies, including 20,000 M-16 rifles. The British government provided a few helicopters, and Belgium sold Nepal 5,500 machine guns. Since 2002 Nepal has received military assistance, both lethal and non-lethal, from India, the United States, and Great Britain worth more than \$100 million.

The Chinese, for their part, have distanced themselves from the Maoist movement. The use of the word "Maoist" to describe the Nepali rebels has become a matter of embarrassment for Beijing, which prefers to call them "anti-government guerrillas."

Since the February royal coup the Western powers and India have withheld military supplies to protest the king's actions. The outside powers have told Katmandu that royal activism helps the Maoists. They have emphasized the need for the king and the parliamentary parties to reconcile in order to deal with the Maoist threat.

Yet the idea that a king-party alliance can defeat the Maoists is difficult to square with political reality in Nepal. The Maoists, after all, had disabled the government even when the king and the political parties were working together before the parliament was dissolved in October 2002. And since the February coup, the king has lost the support of parties that favored a constitutional monarchy. In these circumstances, hope in Washington, London, and New Delhi for reconciliation is misplaced.

THE MILITARY-SOLUTION ILLUSION

Moreover, there does not appear to be a military solution to the crisis. The army's ability to defeat the guerrillas was suspect from the beginning of the conflict, since its resources as well as its responsibilities were overstretched. Nearly 40 percent of the 163,000-strong police and armed forces are defending urban-based strategic positions such as the royal palace, military bases, telecommunications centers, and electricity generation stations, leaving only 60 percent available for deployment against guerrillas throughout the country.

This is too small a force. Counterinsurgency experts believe it takes a 10 to 1 preponderance of soldiers to bring a guerrilla conflict under control. The current ratio of 5 to 1 in favor of the army—all of the roughly 163,000 government troops (including the police) to as many as 32,000 guerrillas—may be sufficient for conventional war, but it is insufficient to destroy the insurgency.

The topography and size of Nepal also preclude the possibility of eliminating the guerrillas. Most rebel bases are scattered throughout a large mountainous jungle area of about 35,000 square miles, with heavy woods,

bad roads, and a sparse population. This region is ideal for guerrilla forces and presents serious difficulties for motorized and infantry units of a conventional army. (And unlike the more urbanized Peru, where Shining Path Maoists failed to gain much traction, all but 15 percent of Nepal's population live in the countryside—the insurgents' stronghold.)

Monarchists, however, appear to be under the illusion that they can establish peace in Nepal and consolidate the waning monarchy through a head-on fight with the Maoists. For this, the military would need not only more soldiers but also more arms and ammunition. Because of the postcoup embargo on shipments by the United States, Britain, and India, the royal government has invited bids to buy arms from the open market, triggering concern in India.

The royal regime's intent to militarize the country in recent years reflects the lack of a middle way. The army's size has increased from 40,000 in 1990 to 100,000 in 2005. In addition to the armed forces, the royal regime is backed by a 16,000-strong armed police force and 47,000 civilian police. Since the early days of the Maoist insurgency, the military, commanded by royal relatives and their cronies, has emerged as a decisive political actor. Indeed, secu-

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rity expenses in the government's \$1.8 billion budget have more than doubled, from 8 percent in 1997 to 17 percent in 2004. Yet, while military-related expenditures are climbing, government revenues have fallen amid a decline in business activity.

Nepal's economy has suffered considerably because of the civil war. Annual GDP growth has fallen sharply from 6 percent in 2000 to 2 percent in 2004. Tourism, Nepal's main foreign-currency earner, is roughly half its former level as travelers shun Nepal because of security considerations. The country is running on the strength of about a billion dollars in remittance money sent home annually by an estimated 1.2 million Nepali workers abroad.

OBSOLETE MONARCHY?

Despite the wishes of India and Western countries, Nepal's political parties and the monarchy have been at loggerheads over King Gyanendra's dissolution of parliament in October 2002. With the king's takeover of total power in February 2005, the parliamentary parties have formed a seven-party alliance and have tilted toward the Maoists.

A "road map" issued by the seven-party alliance calls for restoration of parliament, creation of a parliamentary committee to negotiate with the Maoists on the technicalities of a constituent assembly, and formation of an interim government including the Maoists to conduct elections for the constituent assembly. Support from the seven-party alliance for the Maoist goal of a constituent assembly is not unconditional, however: the alliance wants the rebels to lay down their arms and join the political process.

Some say this idea is fanciful, indeed suicidal, not only for the rebels but for the leaders of the other parties. They argue that, if the rebels put down their weapons, it would conclude the war in favor of the absolute monarchy.

Some observers argue that bringing an end to the conflict in Nepal is possible only if republican democrats are given political space in the system through a constitution drafted by a constitutional assembly. In other words, the parliament must be empowered to vote to abolish the monarchy, if necessary. The present constitution, however, cannot be amended to accommodate republicans, whether they are Maoists or non-Maoists.

THE KING AND MAO

Fierce competition for power between traditionalists and modernists has characterized the politics of Nepal over the past 55 years. The modernists have tried to reach an agreement with the traditionalists through constitutional compromises.

They have failed or have been cheated—consistently forcing them into mass movements, demonstrations, and now, armed hostilities.

While the scope and influence of the political movements prior to the unleashing of insurgency were limited to the urban middle class, the Maoist revolt in the past nine years has taken politics into the rural grassroots. The poor—including the untouchables, ethnic minorities, and women—are rallying behind the Maoist movement. Nepal, a country in which people regarded the king as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu until a few years ago, is now questioning the institution of the monarchy.

A sharp polarization is taking place between the republican democrats—both Maoist and non-Maoist—and the monarchists. Those demanding a constitutional assembly are converging with the Maoists' platform of a democratic republic while opponents of a constitutional assembly are rallying around the king.

The Maoists have pledged to honor multiparty democracy and participate in competitive elections. In a recent interview I conducted with Bhattarai, the Maoists' second-in-command, he said they would accept a democratic order in which they could be voted out of power. He acknowledged that this view represents a "significant departure from the past models of people's or socialist democracies" and understands there is skepticism. "Given the bitter experiences of the practice of people's or socialist democracy in the erstwhile socialist countries," he said, "we can appreciate this 'once bitten, twice shy' syndrome." But he insisted that "multiparty competition within [a] legitimate constitutional framework would ensure maximum participation of the masses in state affairs and check monopolistic and bureaucratic tendencies." The Nepali Maoism, in this sense, appears limited to a revolutionary strategy, not a vision of communist nation-building.

In any case, those who have watched the deteriorating political conditions in Nepal for several years are skeptical of the royal regime's capacity to bring the insurgency under control. Many analysts agree that King Gyanendra's takeover is a gamble in desperation; Nepal, they say, is now destined for a surge in violence and the 237-year-old Nepali monarchy appears doomed.

Indeed, unless the royal regime agrees to accept an internationally supervised election for a constituent assembly, a full-scale revolution looms. The umbrella of a US "war on terror," which has already become leaky following the Anglo-American and Indian condemnation of the royal coup, is not likely to shelter the monarchy from the popular storm. ■