

Democracy and the Ruse of Empire

By Saubhagya Shah

It is ironic that the more Nepal sinks into the abyss of violence and anarchy, the more it emerges as an attractive destination for all manners of gun runners, conflict managers, crisis entrepreneurs and democracy missionaries out to make a quick buck or a fast name.

As the internal crisis deepens in proportion to the external intervention, it becomes apparent that the "international concern" (an euphemism for Euro-American power and its regional subsidiary) is more about appropriating the occasion to reaffirm the geopolitical stakes and ideological superiority of the saviors than finding a just and early relief to the common Nepalis brought to their knees by violence and conflict. Much of this "Listen up folks ... this is how you are to be saved" charade is prompted by a peculiar mixture of careerism, pietistic adventurism and arrogance of power rather than a commitment to the sanctity of Nepali life or from even a minimum understanding of the local condition.

Take the example of US Senator Patrick Leahy.

In the august halls of the US Senate, he recently accused King Gyanendra of harboring "imperial ambitions". Coming from a hyperpower whose military garrisons the globe, the senatorial charge was as breathtaking as it was ludicrous. The gaffes of a long-distance boutique radicalism aside, the world is in for more nasty surprises if this be the standard of evidence, reason and rancor operative in the world's premiere executive committee.

It is in this context that one attempts to make sense of the coordinated offensive launched against the Nepali state by the Washington-London-Delhi axis. The latest charges have an eerie family resemblance to the dressing downs General Douglas MacArthur used to administer on Emperor Hirohito after Japan's surrender or the chastisements British resident officers inflicted on recalcitrant native rulers during the good old Raj days in the sub-continent.

The basic tenets of diplomatic decorum and discretion have been cast to the wind as the /sahibs/ and their /babooos/ (government officials) are out in the street trying to outdo the shrillest local radicals. Echoing the Republican rant, Democrat Leahy issued a fiery warning in the US Senate that the days of monarchy were numbered. Although the good senator did not specify whether his marching orders were just for the Hindu King or for all the oil-rich monarchies in the Middle East as well, interesting times are certainly assured when Christian Empire comes to smack down this heathen kingdom.

The sense of *deja vu* is only belied by the fact that this is not a condition of unconditional surrender as in Japan, nor is Nepal a dominion of Her Britannic Majesty. Yet, the will to exercise sovereign diktat in every sphere and level of governance is unmistakable. From broad policy guidelines to the minutiae of day-to-day governance, the urge to micro-manage Nepal from abroad is on the rise. The envoys from the European Union, the United Nations, the US and the United Kingdom, and Delhi are already acting as the colonial viceroys of yore. Assuming that they all sincerely want to transplant democracy, the question then is: can the flower of democracy take root in a soil devoid of sovereignty?

Herein lies the paradox of the West's democracy promotion campaign in Nepal as elsewhere. While democracy requires the goodwill of all to take root and evolve the necessary values and institutions, the zeal to telescope the process and ram down the formula is often

counterproductive, simply because it undermines the sense of dignity, agency and ownership that is vital in sustaining and consolidating any popular political system.

Democracy without the independence to choose is a contradiction in terms that only generates alienation. The democracy project at present appears to suffer from its overemphasis in replicating the formal structures of Western democracy without attention to its substantive purpose. Democracy, in its best sense, is about maximizing human freedom, well-being and security within a viable state. If this is the ultimate goal, the appropriate institutional means and processes will necessarily have to be shaped by the evolving nature of the local socio-economic relations, geopolitical opportunities and cultural orientations. That is, if democracy can be conceived of as anything other than a Coca-Cola franchise - already bottled and ready to go.

The conceptual inability to reconcile the universal relevance of democratic purpose with sustainable local means to achieve the idealized objectives has perhaps done more disservice to the democratic cause than is often realized. The fallacy of making the democratic function a derivative of its Western form is all too clear to see in dozens of countries with failed political systems.

As America stepped onto the world stage as the emerging power after World War I, President Woodrow Wilson declared triumphantly that it was America's mission to make the world safe for democracy. Far more modestly, anthropologist Ruth Benedict cautioned that it might be just as important to make the world safe for differences. A century later, her call for toleration and respect for difference has acquired new urgency as the world finds itself beset with all kinds of self-righteous bigotry and extremism.

Since the champions of democracy do not usually export the brand of democracy they themselves practice at home, the sceptics here should be excused for being a bit apprehensive about the version being contemplated for Nepal.

As it is, neither the intentions nor the actual results of externally engineered democratic changes against Patrice Lumumba in Congo, Chhogyal in Sikkim, Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Salvador Allende in Chile make for a democratic hallelujah.

Despite its messianic claim to the contrary, democracy has historically been a tightly rationed commodity usually apportioned to afflict the independent-minded states, spare the clientalist regimes and prop up fifth columns around the globe. Like most things in life, winning alien sponsorship for democracy is neither free nor cheap.

The first time such a thing happened here, Nepal paid with Kosi and Gandak. Second time around, the prices had gone up and Tanakpur, Mahakali, Laxmanpur, Susta (water treaties with India) and the Bhutanese refugees were sacrificed to repay the democratic debt. Where will the next pound of flesh come from? One is left wondering as the merchants of mercy descend on Kathmandu for the next big deal.

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