

NEPAL: THE KING'S GAMBIT

By Kunda Dixit

KATMANDU, Mar (IPS) - Two months after Nepal's King Gyanendra seized power on February 1, many of the Himalayan kingdom's political leaders are still in detention, the state of emergency remains in force, and there is harsh censorship.

The royal regime is isolated internationally. The United States, Britain, and India have suspended military aid to help fight the nine-year-old Maoist insurgency in a struggle that has claimed 12,000 lives. Nordic donors have announced cuts in further development aid until democracy is restored. The World Bank has suspended budgetary support. Nepal's army has also come under heavy criticism at the ongoing session of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights in Geneva over the conduct of its counterinsurgency.

The royal government has reacted with defiance saying that Nepal doesn't need help and can go it alone. Ministers have expressed outrage that the international community is not helping in its fight against "terrorism". Tulsi Giri, the 78-year-old vice-chairman of the ministerial council, said sarcastically: "America has one standard for itself in its fight against terror and another for the rest; India coddles Bhutan's autocrat king but lectures us on democracy."

King Gyanendra is gambling that given the choice between himself and the Maoists, the international community will ultimately have no choice but to support him. The question is: who will blink first?

Katmandu-based diplomats say this is a false choice and the king's suspension of civil liberties and detention of political leaders have emboldened the Maoists. In an outspoken interview last week British ambassador Keith Bloomfield said: "The king's move was a backward step in terms of democracy and restoring peace; it has made the process of negotiations [with the Maoists] much more difficult."

King Gyanendra justified his takeover saying the political parties had misgoverned the country since the restoration of democracy in 1990 and blamed them for the rise of the Maoists. He said he needed three years to restore peace, put democracy back on track, and hold fresh elections. He asserted that he needed to suspend civil liberties to focus on the fight against the insurgents.

But two months on, if there have been any major victories against the Maoists, the army is not boasting about them. In fact the security forces have been busy putting down pro-democracy demonstrations by political parties, keeping politicians in detention, enforcing censorship, and intimidating the media.

Many Nepalis are willing to give the king the benefit of the doubt, but only if he quickly restores peace. A recent public opinion poll showed very few people support either republicanism or absolute monarchy, and most want the king to remain a constitutional monarch. In a meeting with the American ambassador last month, the king is said to have asked for 100 days to lift the emergency. His time is nearly up.

Nepal's media, once vibrant and independent, is now muzzled by strict censorship. Although the soldiers have now been pulled out of newsrooms, security forces still detain prominent Katmandu journalists, summon them for interrogation, and harass editors in the districts. The message to the media is clear: support the government, or else. Hardest hit have been Nepal's vibrant community radio stations which are now only allowed to broadcast music.

The public's loss of trust in the media is counterproductive for the government because no one believes it even if it is telling the truth.

The king has opened himself up on three fronts with his takeover: the Maoists, the political parties, and the international community. India, which is worried about a spillover of Maoism into its own territory, says that without the restoration of democracy and constitutional monarchy the Maoists will grow stronger. Britain and America agree. Nepal's northern neighbour, China, which has itself abandoned Maoism, says the struggle is a domestic matter and that outsiders shouldn't meddle. It is doubtful that China will jeopardise its growing economic ties and geopolitical rapprochement with India and play tug-o-war over Nepal.

Meanwhile Nepalis are waiting impatiently for some hint that King Gyanendra has a plan to end the conflict. But the longer they are made to wait, the more they will be convinced that February first was just a power grab.