

1990 Constitutional Monarch, 2005 King-Less Republic?

BANGKOK, Feb 2 (IPS) - In May 1990, the winds of change that began with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the freeing of South Africa's Nelson Mandela, had reached the Himalayan Hindu kingdom of Nepal. The role of the god-king - the incarnation of Lord Vishnu was challenged.

King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah's role, as a divine being whose presence should be worshipped and preemptory command obeyed without question, was about to end. In the face of huge pro-democracy demonstrations, King Birendra abandoned his absolute powers without any real struggle and agreed to be a constitutional monarch. Though he could have called in the Royal Nepal Army whose loyalty to the monarchy was unquestioned, the king chose not to. And it rankled the minds of many at the time on why Birendra did not do so.

At the end of 2001, writing about the June palace massacre that year - where Birendra and his entire family were gunned down by Crown Prince Dipendra in what was the bloodiest and most complete slaughter of any royal household in history - British journalist Jonathan Gregson refers to that 1990 event in his best-seller "Blood Against the Snows". "By stepping back from the brink, King Birendra not only prevented his countrymen from spilling each other's blood; he also side-stepped the very threat that the institution of the monarchy would be jettisoned," he writes.

But recent calamitous events could put the throne itself in danger, perhaps spelling the end of the Shah dynasty that began in the 1700s when King Prithvi Narayan Shah united all the Gorkha tribes under the terror of his sword and founded the Kingdom of Nepal.

On Feb. 1, Birendra's younger brother Gyanendra, who inherited the plumed crown of Nepal, sacked Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's government for the second time in just over two years and took full control of state power. The king accused Deuba's government of failing to conduct parliamentary elections and being unable to restore peace in the country.

"King Gyanendra's announcement of a takeover for 'up to three years' provides a long window in which Nepal's highly successful experiment with democracy of the last dozen years may be eroded," said prominent Nepali journalist and publisher Kanak Mani Dixit.

"His (Gyanendra's) unprecedented action on Feb.. 1 has exposed the historically significant institution of Nepal's monarchy to the vicissitudes of day-to-day politics and power play. Does the Nepali monarchy deserve this at this late a date in history?" asked Dixit.

Nepal's parties have reacted predictably, denouncing the royal move as a "coup" and calling for the re-establishment of multiparty democracy. Deuba's Nepali Congress (Democratic) quickly convened a meeting of the leadership at the prime minister's official residence. In a statement issued Feb. 1, the party criticised the king's seizure of power as "a direct assault on the constitution" which was promulgated after the 1990 pro-democracy movement.

"This is a totally undemocratic move. It is a coup. This will push the country to further ruin," newly dismissed state minister for foreign affairs and Deuba's top advisor Prakash Sharan Mahat told reporters in the Nepali capital Kathmandu.

The other parties have been thrown in disarray as their top leaders were quickly put under house arrest. Alongside Deuba, the leader of the Nepali Congress party Girija Prasad Koirala and general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) Madhav Kumar Nepal have been detained at home. Security forces also swept up student leaders and activists aligned to the various parties.

The heart of the matter, however, is the current Maoist insurgency, which has seen more than 10,500 Nepalis die since the fighting began in 1996. Maoist leader 'Comrade Prachanda' wants to overthrow Nepal's constitutional monarchy and replace it with a communist-styled republic. The Maoists have also refused to come into the mainstream of Nepali politics and end the violence.

In his address on state-run television before declaring a state of emergency, King Gyanendra said: "Innocent children were found massacred and the government could not achieve any important and effective results. The crown traditionally is held responsible for the protection of national sovereignty, democracy and people's right to live peacefully."

The king called the Maoists "terrorists" and vowed to strengthen the security forces to quell the rebellion. He added that though the government had utmost respect for human rights, "the terrorists and state cannot be weighed on the same balance." That language has sent a chill down the spines of international human rights groups.

"The international community must make it immediately clear to the king that by assuming power he is directly responsible for protecting the people of Nepal and safeguarding their fundamental human rights," said Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists in a joint statement.

"Basic human rights must be fully protected even in times of emergency. These include the right to life and the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, as well as fundamental principles of fair trial and freedom from arbitrary detention," the groups added.

What's worrying is the direct control King Gyanendra has over the Royal Nepal Army and his determination to unleash them against the Maoists, unlike his brother who wanted the troops to remain in the barracks and used the police instead against the insurgents.

"The most commonly reported pattern of extrajudicial executions by security forces is that, during a search operation in a village, a number of local people are taken into custody, interrogated and beaten, then taken to a secluded place and shot. The majority of extrajudicial executions have been reported from districts outside Kathmandu," said the London-based Amnesty International in a January report.

In order to save the throne, King Gyanendra must be able to show - after disdainfully dismissing the government - that the palace is able to negotiate with the Maoists to restore peace in the country. But that could prove difficult, if the political parties decide to strike some working relationship with the Maoists to get rid of the king himself - taking into account the lessons of 1990 where the centrist Nepali Congress joined hands with six splinter moderate and radical Nepal Communist Party groups to end absolute monarchy at the time. "Unless there is a rapid move towards resolution of the insurgency, it is also likely that the Maoists will try to make common cause with the political parties," said Dixit.

"Although it is not likely that the above-ground parties will go with the insurgents as long as they hold on to the gun, it is certain that the royal action will add strength to the insurgents' demand for a king-less republican constitution and government, a call that has been taken up with alacrity lately by many politicians," he added.

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