

Democracy Under Assault in Nepal

By Kanak Mani Dixit | February 2, 2005

Nepal's 14-year-old experiment in constitutional monarchy suffered a major assault on February 1, 2005 when King Gyanendra sacked the prime minister, formed a new cabinet composed largely of royalists, and established direct monarchical rule. This was followed by a declaration of a state of emergency as leading political leaders were placed under house arrest, media censorship was imposed, fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of assembly were suspended, and telephones (landlines and cellular) as well as the Internet were shut down.

The King justified his actions under a constitutional provision that enjoins the monarchy to uphold and protect the Constitution. While he repeated many times in the royal address his commitment to constitutional monarchy and multiparty rule, the king's drastic action went patently against those principles. First, he was taking over as executive monarch on the basis of a personal decision. Second, the royal address was full of denigrating references to political parties, who are the intermediaries for pluralism and democratic practice anywhere in the world.

King Gyanendra's antipathy toward the political parties is well known and has been often-expressed, but by sidelining them completely and planning to rule as well as reign, the king has removed a buffer between himself and the rough and tumble of politics. To that extent, he has taken a great risk and put the institution of monarchy in the line of fire. Clearly, the king believes that the risk is worth taking.

This raises the issue of whether Narayanhiti Royal Palace has a trump card vis-à-vis the raging Maoist insurgency, which has claimed roughly 10,000 lives since 1996. If the King does have an agenda that can resolve the conflict, with the insurgents either being routed or laying down arms, then the royal palace may be able to overcome the turbulence it has introduced into Nepali politics. Peace and an end to the insurgency would put the monarchy back on the pedestal as a respected institution, but everything depends on how soon that would happen. At one time, the Maoists did announce that they would negotiate only with Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's "master," so are we to hope that now with

the king directly in charge, the Maoists will extend a hand? We can hope.

Further, the Royal Nepal Army's fight against the highly motivated and increasingly brutal insurgents thus far has been lackluster. Will the royal palace's direct control of national affairs mean that the military will now put up a spirited fight, and also that its human rights record will improve from current levels? We will have to see.

What is clear is that this has been a radical step exposing the monarchy to criticism, when other approaches could have been tried. Such approaches could have included using the inherent powers of kingship to cajole the political parties to work together and establish a political front against the insurgents. But the king's deeply held feelings toward the political parties seems to have blocked off this avenue toward resolution. The calls made since King Gyanendra took over informally in October 2002 for an all-party government or revival of the Third Parliament, all of which would have provided political challenge to the Maoists on their home ground, are now meaningless.

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 past dozen years may be eroded. Unless there is a rapid move toward resolution of the insurgency, it is also likely that the Maoists will try to make common cause with the political parties. Although it is not likely that the legal parties will ally with the insurgents as long as they engage in armed struggle, it

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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.

It remains unclear how the royal palace plans to respond to the criticism that has already erupted domestically as well as in the international community. India, the United States, the United Nations, and others have already denounced the King's actions. In castigating the political parties, King Gyanendra preferred to hark back to the Parliament dissolved three years ago, while keeping silent over the interim period and his rule through palace-appointed prime ministers. This is the period when the peace and security of the country's populace plummeted more than in any previous period.

In his speech, King Gyanendra highlighted the great contribution of the Shah dynasty to the creation of the nation and ventured that he was speaking for the *janabhawana*, i.e. the Nepali people's feelings. While it is true that the desire for peace overwhelms all other political desires among the Nepalese people, the question arises whether the royal takeover was the proper way to address these *chahana* (desires). Rather than denounce the political parties' inability

to work together and opt for the takeover, it would have been a much more popular and realistic move for the king to have used his prerogative as head-of-state to bring the bickering parties together at this critical juncture, thereby defending rather than weakening democracy.

In the end, unless King Gyanendra is able to pull out the trump card of peace vis-à-vis the Maoists in the near term, one can conclude that his unprecedented action of the first of February has exposed the historically significant institution of Nepal's monarchy to the vicissitudes of day-to-day politics and power plays. Did the Nepali monarchy deserve this at this late a date in history?

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