

# The King Takes A Disastrous Step Off the Road to Peace

By Murari Raj Sharma | April 14, 2005

I conscientiously believe that democracy makes everyone in Nepal a winner. It ensures sovereignty and freedom for the people, permanence for the monarchy, and independence, prestige, and cooperation for Nepal in the comity of nations. The royal takeover of February 1, 2005 goes against this vital interest of the country.

The King cited the failure of political parties to resolve the Maoist conflict, provide political stability, and control rampant corruption when he assumed power, imposing a state of emergency, suspending civil liberties and press freedom, detaining key political leaders, and weakening the judiciary. His strongest rallying point is this: He is saving multiparty democracy from the Maoist terrorists.

Indeed, I understand the monarch's concern about the conflict and its consequences, but I fail to fathom his logic. You do not get rid of a patient to save him from the disease he is carrying; you kill the bacteria causing the disease.

### Reaction

The King's move has evoked a wide spectrum of reactions at home and abroad. At one end, the Hindu fundamentalists, fringe rightists, and feudal class close to the royal court are happy. At the other, some people blame Gyanendra, as both Prince and King, as having engineered a series of mishaps since 1990—including the Maoist problem—to destabilize the country and pave the way for reasserting active monarchy.

Others have shades of opinion in the middle. As expected, the mainstream political parties and the majority of civil society have vehemently opposed the step. Contrary to the expectations, the party the King has long patronized did not support it, rather called for dialogue with the political parties.

International condemnation of the draconian step was swift and strong. India, USA, and the U.K. have

suspended military assistance; some Western democracies have put their development assistance on hold. Even the United Nations' reaction was robust. North Korea, Cuba, and Pakistan supported the royal foray and China shrugged it off as an internal affair.

### Perspective

One must put things in perspective. Of course, there is wide frustration that political leaders put their interest above that of the people, and that they did not act responsibly and serve the country well. It was a manifestation of the people's desire to elect better leaders; it was not a mandate for the King to take over. Although the people's expectations were not met, not everything was gloomy on the political leaders' watch. Talks were held with the rebels; the economy was liberalized; the private sector thrived; the growth rate picked up; and more than 1.5 million people found foreign employment. Local governments gained real authority and resources; civil society became vibrant; and the tough anti-graft law began to bring the corrupt to book.

The monarchy has not been beyond reproach either. In 1960, the father of King Gyanendra toppled an elected government citing unrest and imposed a corrupt and repressive Panchayat system that lasted 30 years. King Gyanendra, known for his disdain of democratic values and institutions, has dealt a fatal blow to the people's power to decide. He has added to instability by changing four governments in three years, since his ascension in 2001. Palace confidants were having secret rendezvous with the Maoists when the government was chasing them



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as terrorists, and the new captains of the government are old hands with shady pasts.

In fairness, I must say the House of Gurkha has remained a symbol of national unity. It deserves as much credit for the positive gains of past 14 years as the political parties do. Not much would have happened without the consent or countenance of the Palace, as the King wields tools to check all branches of government and retains direct control over the military, under the 1990 Constitution. Precisely for this reason, the Palace is equally, if not more, responsible for the nation's woes. Actually, the Palace could have helped settle the Maoist crisis by yielding some political ground and allowing military deployment earlier, but did not. It is widely believed that the King advised the beleaguered Prime Minister Deuba in 2002 to dissolve the parliament and subsequently postpone the elections.

The main culprits for Nepal's crisis, however, are the Maoists who have dragged us to the unenviable present predicament by unleashing violence, accentuating the social and regional divides, and making the country increasingly ungovernable. The insurgents have frittered away their initial popularity because of their horrendous brutality, unscrupulous extortion, and abominable use of child soldiers.

### Complication

A complex situation has been further complicated by the royal adventure. The rebels have been emboldened by the growing alienation between the Palace and political parties and stepped up violence and disruption. They have refused to talk to the King's regime. In the heightened conflict, both sides have violated human rights more than previously. Military victory will be hard to achieve in guerilla warfare in the mountainous and forested terrains of Nepal, more so if the King has to quell political dissent also.

If such a stalemate persists, the country might polarize between the pro- and anti-monarchist camps and produce an ugly and unacceptable outcome. The war of attrition might break the King's way if external assistance continued and Nepal could end up with an authoritarian system. Conversely, if the Maoists win, the country will be a totalitarian state. In either case,

the people will lose their lives and liberties and will have to fight for democracy down the road. It will also raise the prospects of external intervention.

The reported rupture in the Maoist outfit has come at an interesting time. It could be a red herring. But if the rift is true and the factional strength comparable, the Maoist organization will implode and its members will disintegrate into gun-toting gangs of thugs only to spread the culture of violence further. If the rebels hold together, it will strengthen the hand of the hardliners.

### Viable Option

In any case, the best viable option is a political settlement that can bring a lasting solution to the 9-year-old Maoist crisis. Despite their refusal at this stage, I am sure the rebels would come to the table under the following four circumstances:

- 1) If talks are held under the aegis of a mutually acceptable third party, as they have said.
- 2) If a powerful third party, enjoying their confidence, assures them of a fair result.
- 3) If the government accepts their demand for a constituent assembly.
- 4) If the government squeezes them to the table by ratcheting up military and political pressure.

As far as I know, the first two options are not acceptable to the government because of their unpredictable outcomes. The third route could prove suicidal to the Shah dynasty unless political parties come to its rescue. And the fourth road entails seamless cooperation between the King, who has the security forces, and the political parties, who have their dedicated institutions and committed cadres.

Unfortunately, the new government, rather than building bridges with the political parties, is burning them. No one has the right to put their personal interest above the people's progress and liberties. The Nepalis, who have rightly criticized political leaders for feathering their nest, will not spare others for the same crime. We must bear in mind, one wrong cannot right another wrong.

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I agree with those who think that the Maoist issue is best tackled internally. But we should remain open to outside help if we cannot do it. Besides, we will certainly need external assistance, including from the United Nations, to leverage the negotiations and implement the agreements with the rebels, as well as to disarm and demobilize the combatants and carry out post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian assistance.

Evidence abounds that democracies are better equipped to address the entrenched anomalies of a diverse society. Eastern Europe has shown that repression only postpones solutions and contributes to the inevitable social explosion. Only an inclusive, democratic process would be able to produce prudent public policies and ensure their effective implementation to ameliorate the social grievances in Nepal before they get out of hand.

In essence, Nepal is in an existential crisis. The Maoists have set the country in flames. It is time for the King and the political parties to put out the fire and prevent further damage to the nation's fabric; it is not an occasion to pick a fight. The political parties have shown their readiness for dialogue; now the King must suggest a sincere and forward-looking initiative to save Nepal.

## Appeal

Hence, I call on the King to take the first step by reinstating democratic rights and civil liberties, releasing the detained leaders and human rights activists, and initiating a genuine dialogue with the political parties. By doing that, the monarch will not only respect his deceased brother's solemn contract with the people, but also prolong the dynasty's life. I am afraid if the King loses the people's love and confidence, the monarchy in Nepal, as elsewhere, may survive only in history books.

To the political parties I have this to urge. Redeem yourself by publicly admitting your past mistakes and vowing not to make them again, by cleansing your structures of corruption, and by letting a new crop of clean and capable leaders step forward. That will win back the trust of the Nepali people.

My profound appreciation goes to Nepal's friends and allies—the United States, the U.K., India, and other freedom-loving countries, as well as the United Nations, civil society, and the Nepali diaspora—for their principled support to the people of Nepal at this critical juncture. I request they continue putting pressure on all sides for peace, and on the King to reverse his ill-conceived step and seek rapprochement with the parties.

Above all, I appeal to you, friends of Nepal, to deluge your Government as well as your Senators and Congressmen with phonecalls and letters asking them to support the restitution of democracy and civil liberties in Nepal. I am confident that you have the moral authority and political influence to make a difference. The Nepalis will be grateful to you.

To those who blindly support the King's ill-advised move, I wish to say this. I respect their freedom of choice and hope they will reciprocate. They might be hurting, not helping, the monarchy by supporting his quest for power. All dictators start with enticing promises only to break them. As for King Gyanendra, I know he is an ambitious man in a hurry to make history.

Finally, let us celebrate democracy and freedom not only for ourselves, but also for our fellow human beings. I prefer a flawed democracy to a flawless dictatorship for a simple reason: people have a vote to change one, but not the other. To recall what a 7-time Mt. Everest summiteer said in New York the other day: he had the pleasure of seeing the world from up there and took the risk of going back. The Nepalis have climbed the height of freedom once and will cherish going back up again.

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