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## **TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY IN NEPAL : THE PROCESS AND PROSPECTS**

The beginning of the decade of 1990s witnessed major changes with far-reaching consequences in the political scenario in some countries of South Asia. Nepal is one of them. The partyless panchayat rule in the Himalayan Kingdom ended in April 1990 with the announcement by King Birendra that he was legalising political parties thus initiating the democratic process in the country. Discontent against the suppression of democracy combined with economic hardships aggravated by the Indian trade blockade had been simmering for long. Therefore, the popular uprising was long overdue. The victory of the anti-autocracy movement has brought to an end thirty years of partyless rule. An interim government headed by Krishna Prasad Bhattarai of the Nepali Congress was formed. Its main task was the drawing up of a new constitution, which was promulgated last November and holding of Nepal's first multi-party elections in thirty years. The elections were held on 12 May 1991 in which the Nepali Congress won. It has formed the government with G.P. Koirala as the Prime Minister.

Although the mass movement has successfully ended the authoritarian rule and initiated the democratic process, its success depends upon a number of factors. There are already sharp differences between the ruling and opposition parties in the parliament regarding various issues, which include among others

relation with India which plays a significant role in both its economy and politics. On the other hand the King still exerts considerable influence in the country. Therefore, the collapse of the panchayat rule must not mislead one to underestimate opposition from vested interests particularly the pro-panchayat groupings. The purpose of this paper will be to trace the process of evolution of oppositional politics in Nepal. The other main objective here is to study the factors behind the historic change from autocracy to multi-party democracy in the Kingdom. The challenges and problems faced by the newly elected government are then examined for the sake of outlining the prospects for a stable democratic system in the country.

#### I. STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY : RISE OF OPPOSITIONAL POLITICS IN NEPAL

Struggle for democracy in Nepal began with the formation of political parties in the 1930s, previously unheard of in Nepalese politics. The people, mostly uneducated, were dissatisfied from the political process which was dominated mainly by Brahmin and Khatriya families. In 1846 the Ranas established their rule with the massacre of many leading officials and members of prominent and influential families and by deposing King Rajendra. The victorious faction was led by Jang Bahadur Kunwar who ruled as an absolute dictator thereafter. Full powers in both domestic and external affairs were granted to the prime minister in the Royal Sanad (order) of 1856 which also legitimized the Ranas' right of succession to the prime minister's office on a hereditary basis.

Although the King had been deposed the royal family still had considerable influence over the people. Therefore, the Ranas in order to curb their popularity kept them virtually under permanent palace arrest, allowed them to meet the elite or the general populace under strict vigilance and ended the King's powers to veto any act of government by transferring the royal

seal used for this purpose to the prime minister. Later the prime minister developed his own seal.<sup>1</sup> The military was kept under effective control by giving higher military ranks to the Ranas. Despite these attempts to remove any possible threat to the Rana regime, ironically threat to the system at first came from within the family, the reason being the sub-groupings in the Rana family labeled as 'A', 'B' and 'C' according to the caste of the mother. The most important posts including that of the prime minister was attributed to the 'A' group and very rarely to group 'B'. In the long run this division became fatal for the Ranas as the 'C' class Rana's and some 'B' class Ranas being deprived of these posts, actively contributed to the formation of political parties.

### Formation of political Parties

Opposition in the form of political parties in Nepal began in the mid-thirties. Two factors contributed to this development. First, the Indian Nationalist movement which encouraged the Nepali youths in India to form their own political party. The second, factor was the support and cooperation of the 'C', class Ranas.

The first political organization was the Praja Parishad formed in 1936. This organisation largely contributed towards raising of political awareness among the masses and increased the prospects for organised mass upsurge during the following years. Although this organisation was initially successful in its objective it soon lost its importance as it lacked proper knowledge and skill necessary in running of a clandestine organization. However, its contribution in raising the political consciousness, confidence and courage among the general masses cannot be ignored.

The Praja Parishad movement had three distinctive features. First, it was the first organized movement by the commoner

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1. Leo E. Rose and John T. Scholz, *Nepal : Profile of a Himalayan Kingdom*, Selectbook Service Syndicate 1980, p. 28.

against the Ranas with its great symbolic value for the coming generations. Second, it indicated the beginning of a new oppositionist tradition in the country, and it was not as much a product of family feuds or conspiracies of contending factions intent on seizing power as the outcome of common people's choice. Finally, it showed that in the autocratic regime, where peaceful means of political opposition was outlawed, a violent method was the only alternative to overthrow it.<sup>2</sup> Another organization called Citizens' Rights Association was formed in the late thirties which demanded the restoration of royal power and called on the people to oust the Ranas. During this time educated and politically conscious youth also welcomed the growth of Nepali nationalism. However these organisations suffered a serious setback with the arrest of their leaders. In 1946 B. P. Koirala formed a new political party called the Nepali National Congress (NNC) not only with the pledge to help the Indian people achieve complete national independence but also with the hope that political change in Nepal would take place with the independence of India. The newly formed party's principal objective was to replace the Rana regime by a constitutional monarchy through non-violent means. Therefore, keeping in line with their promise the NNC formed a labour strike in the same year in support of the striking mill workers at Biratnagar. Only assurance of constitutional reforms by Padma Shamsher helped in calling off the strike. In January 1948 Padma Shamsher announced the first constitution of Nepal which provided restricted fundamental rights. His policy of accommodation was greatly resented by the other Ranas thus forcing him to resign in February, 1948. This move to suppress the liberalisation of administration further intensified anti-Rana feelings. Realizing the intentions of the Ranas two prominent members of the 'C' class Rana's, Subarna Shamsher and Mahabir Shamsher along with others formed the

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2. Lok Raj Baral, *Oppositional Politics in Nepal*, Abhinav Publications, (New Delhi, 1977), p. 23.

Nepali Democratic Congress at Calcutta in August 1948. This party later on merged with the Nepali National Congress and in 1950 the Nepali Congress (NC) was born with the objective of bringing an end to the autocratic regime of the Rana's. Apart from the NC the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) was also formed in exile in 1949, its objective being the achievement of people's sovereignty and setting up a responsible government. During the anti-Rana movement the Nepali Congress played the leading role. While the NCP, instead of joining with the NC adopted negative attitude towards the movement as it felt that the NC was too pro-Indian.

One interesting aspect of the anti-Rana movement was the support of the King to the NC which began an armed struggle against the Rana regime. The Ranas in order to curb the NC countered the insurrection by force of arms, which far from being successful led to the overthrow of the Rana regime and the restoration of King Tribhuvan as the King of Nepal. The aftermath of the anti-Rana movement saw the emergence of several new political parties, the foremost being the Gorkha Parishad formed in 1952 by extremely rightist Ranas. Their policy was "aggressive nationalism" in the form of anti-Indianism and anti-Congressism.<sup>3</sup> Other parties included the socio-religionist groups such as the Karmavir Mahamandal and the Janahit Sangha. Another party, the United Democratic Party (UDP) was founded in September 1956. All these parties were more interested in trying to gain the King's favour and were personality oriented. Some parties were also formed for the purpose of dividing votes in the 1959 general elections.

### Post-Rana Development

The anti-Rana movement came to an end in February 1951 as a result of a compromise commonly known as the Delhi

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3. *Ibid*, p. 34.

Settlement, between the King, the Rana prime minister and the political parties through the efforts of the Indian government. The arrangements stipulated under the 'Delhi Settlement' were given a formal institutional shape with the enactment of an "Interim Government of Nepal Act 2007 on 30 March 1951." The Act vested in the King executive, legislative and judicial powers and clearly laid down his supremacy over the prime minister.<sup>4</sup> A struggle arose between the Ranas and the NC who were determined to replace the Ranas. Despite attempts at trying to keep them united B. P. Koirala and his colleagues resigned from the coalition government followed by the resignation of the Rana prime minister Mohan Shamsher. Therefore, a new government was formed in November 1951 formally excluding Ranas from the political system for the first time in many years. Their elimination from the power structure gave rise to a pattern of politics that remained consistent for a few years. Two major developments took place between the years 1952-59 in Nepalese politics. The first was the assertion by the King of his supreme position in the power structure, through the amendment of the Interim Constitution and the enactment of additional legislative provision. This amendment was done in order to remove any obstacles that may arise in the future in the execution of the King's authority. The second was the King's move to establish a close personal rapport with the armed forces and the police. This was done by modernizing them and improving their service condition. In addition to these changes a Royal Decree issued in April 1958 added 'His Majesty' and 'Royal' as the prefix before the names of all the official departments and institutions.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these changes, the Palace Secretariat became the nerve

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4. R. S. Chauhan, "Constitutional Development in Nepal", in P.C. Mathur (ed.), *Government and Politics in South Asia : The Domestic Scene*, Vol. 1 Printwell Publishers, Jaipur 1985, p. 156.

5. S. D. Muni, "Political Change in Nepal, 1950-71" in P.C. Mathur (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 174.

centre of the kingdom's administrative network at the cost of the PM's Secretariat at Singh Darbar.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Royal Coup and the Panchayat System**

After succeeding his father in 1953 King Mahendra in order to gain popular support began to establish direct contact with the people. This policy was pursued with the intention of projecting himself as the leader of the people deeply committed to the ideals of democracy and their welfare. Realizing his motives of undermining the popularity of the political parties the Nepali Congress, the Communists and the Gorkha Parishad began to strengthen their district level organizations throughout the country building an electoral base to solidify their claim of popular support. At the same time they began to instigate public agitation for elections which Mahendra's father had promised. Despite these attempts Mahendra countered the problem by catering to smaller political parties and associations who were eager to delay national elections. However, when unified agitation by the major parties could not be ignored any longer Mahendra called for elections to a national parliament. In the elections the Nepali Congress got the majority votes with the Gorkha Parishad in the second place. After some hesitation the King accepted the parliament's choice of B. P. Koirala as Nepal's first elected Prime Minister. This government was however short lived as the King who was far from being content as a constitutional monarch dismissed the cabinet in 1960 with the support of the army. Factors responsible for this dismissal included : (a) the growing popularity of the Prime Minister B.P. Koirala and his stubborn dealings with members of the royal family, and (b) the radical socialist line adopted by the NC which was detrimental to the interest of the feudal landlords and aristocratic families. Moreover, the implicit ideology, or political belief that the King had was that in a country with a popular image of the

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6. *Ibid.*

monarchic institution the King should direct the policies of the nation as an absolute ruler.<sup>7</sup> Consequently Mahendra introduced the "panchayat system" which according to him was more suitable for Nepal's political system. This system was a four-tiered hierarchical arrangement of indirectly elected assemblies and councils with the national panchayat at the top followed by zonal, district and village or town panchayet in the descending order. The panchayat ideology stressed the active leadership of the crown, partylessness, national unity, development, decentralization and class coordination. The system was said to be an indigenous democracy and suited to the genius of the Nepalese people.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in order to maintain it speech, assembly and media had been tightly controlled and political activity outside its framework was banned. The executive branch of the government, i.e., the ministers, were not dependent upon the panchayat but to the King. Moreover, the panchayat was in no position to vote no-confidence, thus forcing the government to resign; at best it could express dissatisfaction with the government.<sup>9</sup>

### Uprising Against the Panchayat System

The Nepali Congress took the dismissal of their government as a great challenge. The arrest of its top ranking leaders and Subarna Shamsher's flight to India the day before the dismissal paralysed the party for a while. After a short period some politically committed workers of the NC formed the Nepal Action Committee under the chairmanship of K.P. Koirala and called for

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7. Mahbubur Rahman, "Partyless Panchayat Democracy' in Nepal : A Prognosis", *BIISS Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1988, p. 99.
  8. Thomas B. Smith, "Nepal's Political System in Transition (1979-81)" in M.D. Dharamdasani, (ed.), *Political Participation and Change in South Asia*, Shalimar Publishing House, India, 1984, p. 23.
  9. M. D. Dharamdasani, "Political Change : An Overview", in M.D. Dharamdasani, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

fresh elections.<sup>10</sup> In January 1961 Shubarna Shamsher, at a conference of the Nepali Congress at Patna declared that Nepal and its people would not rest until democracy was restored irrespective of the hardship and sacrifice that may follow. They also adopted several resolutions calling for the release of leaders and workers including former Prime Minister B.P. Koirala, reconvening of the parliament and withdrawal of the King's anti democratic proclamations. Subarna Shamsher who was elected the Acting President of the NC also decided to wage a peaceful civil disobedience movement if the King refused to meet the party's demands. Realizing that the King was far from accepting this the Nepali Congress, which by now had acquired different party workers as members including Bharat Shamsher a former leader of the Gorkha Parishad launched an armed struggle against the Royal regime. Several clashes took place between the rebels and the royal army and party broadcasts under the name of "Democratic Radio" added a new dimension to the anti-monarchy activities. In their armed struggle they were very successful as the Nepal army was not particularly familiar with, or successful in, countering their hit and run tactics from bases in India. Despite their successes the rebels had to stop their armed movement in November 1962 giving the reason of increasing Sino-Indian hostility. As India was playing a major role in this movement its help to the rebels was labeled as being an act of aggression against Nepal's sovereignty. Therefore, the acting president S. Shamsher called to halt the armed movement. After the suspension of armed conflict the period from 1963 to 1968 was marked by passive resistance in the form of publication of journals from India criticizing the panchayat system and the deterioration of the condition of the Nepali people in different fields. However improvement in the NC's relation with the King took place after the release of G. P. Koirala as a result of which S. Shamsher extended his party's cooperation to the working of the panchayat

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10. Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

system. This led to the release of B.P. Koirala and Ganesh Man Singh. Soon after B.P. Koirala's release relations began to sour again between the monarchy and his party. However, by the time Mahendra died in 1972 he had succeeded in getting the support of new as well as established political parties by distributing among them state resources. Communist party members and other political leaders who had joined the panchayat system and had also been appointed as ministers or were given other top positions benefitted.<sup>11</sup> When Birendra ascended the throne in 1972 the monarchy's dominant position was well-established. But the King's effort to prevent the emergence of the Nepali Congress as the dominant party system that may challenge the monarchy in the near future remained unsuccessful and the partyless panchayat system was reconfirmed in the constitutional amendments of 1975.<sup>12</sup> Like his father Birendra felt that the panchayat system conformed to the Nepalese way of life. His attitude set at rest all speculations of an imminent change. The frustration soon found expression in the form of students movement and armed uprising in the northern district of Okhaldunga. Soon after the Okhaldunga armed uprising the King declared that the exiled leaders would be allowed to return if they accepted the panchayat system. In 1976 both B.P. Koirala and G. M. Singh returned to Nepal and were arrested immediately. As agitation against the suppression of civil and human rights took the form of a national uprising King Birendra hoped that the threats to his regime could be contained and the masses pacified by the holding of a referendum by which the people would decide whether they wanted the panchayat system or not. Therefore, in May 1979 the King announced the holding of a national referendum and ordered the release of B.P. Koirala and other political leaders. The referendum was held in 1980 in which 54 percent of the 67 percent voters voted in favour of the panchayat system.<sup>13</sup> The

11. Leo E. Rose and John T. Scholz, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

13. *The Economist*, May 5, 1990.

political parties took the results as a setback and called on the people to carry on their struggle for democracy. The Nepali Congress continued their struggle by pursuing a policy of non-cooperation. The first general elections of the National Panchayat was held in 1981 and the second in 1986. The Nepali Congress boycotted both the elections. They declared that they would participate in the elections only if an interim government was constituted and if they were given the freedom to campaign as was done at the time of the referendum. The leftists participated in the 1986 elections and won 16 seats. Political situation in Nepal remained more or less calm in the years following the 1986 elections. In 1990, however the situation took a different turn when after nearly thirty years of panchayat rule the King stepped down making way for a multi-party system in response to the violent mass upsurge led mainly by the Nepali Congress along with the communists and other political parties.

## II. FACTORS BEHIND THE CHANGE

The dramatic events that led to the change in the political scenario in Nepal in 1990 was the result of operation of different factors both internal and external. Throughout the years the people of Nepal being mostly uneducated and disassociated from politics tolerated whatever the panchayat system gave them. However with the passage of time, development of the media and increase in interaction between Nepal and other states, particularly those having a democratic system became an eye opener for the Nepalese people. As a result the victory of the people striving for democracy around the world became known and in turn influenced to a large extent the outcome of events in Kathmandu. Many factors have been responsible for the victory of democracy. We will now take up a brief discussion of these.

### **People's Power**

The successful completion of the pro-democracy movement in Nepal owes much to the participation of the people. Apart

from the students it was participated by a large section of the intelligentsia which included various professionals like doctors, lawyers and academics. It was joined by the national airlines pilots as well. Another interesting feature of this movement was that unlike previous occasions, this time the movement had the support of the rural population. Previously, protests and demonstrations were confined to Kathmandu and other surrounding towns. The strikes and demonstrations were the bloodiest of the type held so far in the history of Nepal.

The 1990 pro-democracy movement in Nepal began on 18 February, a national holiday honoring the late King Tribhuvan. Over 15,000 people joined the demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> Gradually more protests took place and in response to the NC's call for a general strike the civic life was paralyzed. Even legal proceedings came to a halt in all courts. More than 2000 lawyers refused to work.<sup>15</sup> In some districts torch processions were held. Electricity workers joined the movement causing occasional disruption of power supply. Prayer meetings were held to mourn the death of demonstrators.<sup>16</sup>

The final blow to the panchayat system was dealt on 6 April 1990. Despite the King's dismissal of the unpopular government of prime minister Marich Man Singh Shrestha and declaration that he would enter into consultations with people holding different political views, the general masses refused to believe any such promises. As a result violence erupted. The demonstrators began attacking properties and homes thought to belong to the ruling authorities and marched towards the royal palace. The police, in order to disperse the demonstrators opened fire, which left dozens of demonstrators dead or injured. Realizing that the situation was

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14. *Asiaweek*, March 2, 1990.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Asiaweek*, April 20, 1990.

getting out of control, the King finally accepted the demands of the people. Therefore, people's power, backed by unity among all sections of the people helped immensely to bring democracy to Nepal, a country which had become tired of many years of autocracy.

### **The Indian Blockade**

Another immediate factor behind the change was the widespread discontent among the general masses caused by the Indian economic blockade against Nepal centering around the controversy over the extension of the Trade and Transit agreement between the two. It was imposed by the government of late Rajiv Gandhi from March 1989. This drastic measure was imposed against Nepal in the backdrop of what New Delhi viewed to be Kathmandu's attempt to assert its sovereignty by pursuing policies regarded as being detrimental to India's security concern. Similar policies were adopted by the Ranas and carried out more rigorously by King Mahendra and his son Birendra. These policies had included : (a) the revival of Nepal's strategic doctrine of balanced neutrality between two giant neighbours first put forward in 1769 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah and (b) the proposal for "Nepal as a Zone of Peace" put forward in 1975 by King Birendra in his coronation speech. The immediate reasons for the conflict however included (a) the introduction of work permits for Indian workers employed in Nepal, (b) Nepali citizenship rights were made more rigorous, (c) foreign companies were supposedly instructed not to employ Indians and (d) policies were adopted for protecting Nepalese citizens from unrestricted competitions with the Indians. These policies in turn contributed to the failure of the two countries to conclude new trade and transit treaties or renew the existing one that lapsed in March 1989. The other factor behind the worsening relation between Nepal and India was the policy of playing the "China Card" by Nepal. Nepal was clearly aiming at lessening its dependence on

India. As a measure Nepal reportedly purchased a fairly sizable number of anti-aircraft guns and other arms in 1988, accepted Chinese assistance for building highways between Nepal and Tibet and for projects close to the Indian border. These moves according to India contravened the provisions of the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two countries. India acted promptly and strongly. It closed all but two of the fifteen transit routes through which imported goods by Nepal from third countries could reach it. Supply of most essential commodities such as fuel, baby food, medicine, etc., were stopped. As a result these commodities had to be rationed, price of food went up and Nepal's small foreign currency reserve rapidly exhausted as payment had to be made for goods imported via other routes. This came down hard on the Nepalese economy having a profound affect on the general mass causing great economic discontent. Thus, the Indian embargo added to the Nepalese popular discontent which was already heightened.

### Donor's Pressure

The pressures exerted on the Nepalese Government by the donor countries of the West including Japan to give in to popular demand functioned as a factor behind the victory of the pro-democracy movement. Japan, U.S., India, West Germany and Switzerland expressed concern over the violent repression by the police and called for a political settlement through dialogue between the pro-democracy forces and the ruling authority. Some of them also threatened to review their aid programme. The consequences of such a policy would have been disastrous for the Nepalese economy. It is dependent on \$1 billion U.S. aid annually<sup>17</sup> apart from further amounts injected into its economy by other donor countries. According to U.S. State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler, "Nepalese and people

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17. *India Today*, June 30, 1991.

everywhere should be free to organize themselves into political parties if they choose or express their opinion freely without fear of arrest or reprisal.<sup>18</sup> The message for the Nepali government was clear, and, therefore, it could hardly ignore it.

### **Demonstration Effect**

The demonstration effect of democratic changes in East Europe and the students uprising in China for the restoration of democracy helped in spearheading the movement for democracy in Nepal. The movements influenced the young party cadres to put pressure on the leaders, particularly those of the Nepali Congress to take direct action. It also had an intense impact on the intelligentsia to take action which in turn helped to motivate the general masses. The Nepalese people realized that if mass participation of the people helped to eradicate 40 years of communist rule in East Europe their participation in demonstrations against the autocratic regime could also bring change in Nepal.

### **National Unity**

Unity among the political parties namely, the NC and different left wing parties, a rather unusual phenomenon in Nepalese politics, provided courage and hope to the people. This helped in making the movement more widespread and powerful than in the past. During the anti-Rana movement the Communist Party did not cooperate with the Nepali Congress. The movement's success was the outcome of the support extended by the King and India to the Nepali Congress. In later years factionalism among the parties provided opportunity for interference by the King. The result was dismissal of the NC government in 1960 and the introduction of the panchayat system. This system was totally undemocratic as it

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18. *Asiaweek*, April 20, 1990.

abolished the multi-party system, and vested absolute authority in the King. It led to years of exile and imprisonment of prominent political leaders. This move had weakened the democratic forces considerably. Therefore, the political parties' decision to unite was very significant. According to Radhakrishna Mainali, a key radical oppositionist, the left supported the mass movement because they realised that by fighting separately the strength of the political parties had become divided, while the system gained. He further stated that they would remain united until multi-party system was established.<sup>19</sup>

### **Widespread Socio-economic Discontent**

The undemocratic panchayat system benefitted only a privileged few. It led to widespread corruption among the leaders and served the interest of the monarchy and its supporters. According to the system the minister to be elected required 60 percent votes of the members of the Rashtriya Panchayat. However, as about 20 percent of the members were nominees of the King it was extremely difficult for a candidate to be elected without the support of these members.<sup>20</sup> The system did not permit any form of opposition. It prohibited the formation of associations, organisations and unions. Multi-party system was opposed and abolished. Therefore, opposition in the form of political parties was absent. The King was the absolute ruler. The cabinet was only responsible to the King. He could dismiss any minister if he so wished. The national assembly merely approved the King's decisions.

There was no scope of any criticism of government policies since no opposition party was represented in the Rashtriya Panchayat. The system also curbed the freedom of press and

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19. *Asiaweek*, March 2, 1990.

20. *Holiday*, April 13, 1990.

speech. Human rights were being constantly violated. Although the system was supposed to be "democratic" and help in the overall development of the Kingdom, Nepal, once a rice exporting nation, began to suffer a deficit, despite decades of planning for development. The panchayat system indeed created the power base of the government in the form of vested interests of both political and economic nature. While five star hotels cropped up in an around Kathmandu, no industrial base was established. Unemployment increased which forced the people to migrate to the Terai region adding to the population pressure in a limited area thereby increasing social, cultural and ethnic problems. The economy was practically controlled by a few traders and part of the economy became too reliant on illicit trade and smuggling. All these led to mounting popular discontent and frustration forcing the people to take to the streets for pro-democracy movement.

### **Popular Awareness**

Increase in the political consciousness of the people because of new ideas and values injected into the society by the Nepalese living abroad, particularly India and the West added a qualitative dimension to Nepalese politics. The anti-Rana movement was carried out by students living in India. They had participated in and observed the Quit India Movement and the Indian struggle for independence as a whole. Therefore, they had the experience necessary for carrying out a movement against the Ranas. Over the years the number of Nepalese living in the West and other countries increased. As a result they came into contact with different political beliefs and practices, they also observed mass participation in movements particularly by the students and the general mass. These experiences broadened their perimeter of vision and beliefs. Therefore, the revolution in Iran in 1979 was said to have spearheaded movements and agitations by students leading to the 1980 referendum while the events of 1990 was the

fallout of changes throughout the world. Moreover, in Nepal a broadly western system of education developed over the years, this gradually increased the high expectations of a growing educated class. They took into account the different ideas and beliefs brought to them by these people living abroad. It clashed with the traditional beliefs, values and norms in the Nepalese society leading above all to the erosion of unqualified allegiance to the crown. Growing number of Nepalese citizens became aware that democratic form of government was the better option which could ensure their own participation in the politics and government of the country.

### III. PRESENT CHALLENGES AND THE OUTLOOK

After 32 years of dictatorship Nepal finally held its multiparty elections on 12 May 1991. The Nepali Congress came out to be the victor. It bagged 110 of the 205 seats in the House of Representatives. Girija Prasad Koirala has been sworn in as the country's Prime Minister. The NC's main rival, the United Marxist-Leninist Party (UCML), emerged as a formidable opposition with one-third of the total seats in parliament. Of the other 42 parties which contested the elections, only six could survive, with the United People's Front (UPF), an extremist leftist group gaining nine of the 26 remaining seats.<sup>21</sup> Much of the election result was influenced by the political parties' manifesto. Many of the illiterate voters fell for the communists' election pledge of a car, a house and a plot of land, while some educated people, particularly students voted for the communist party because of their anti-Indian stand.

The new Prime Minister G.P. Koirala in his first major policy address to the nation departed from the traditional Nepali

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21. Anirudha Gupta, "Nepal Election Results and Their Implications", *Economic and Political Weekly*, No. 22 and 23, June 1-8, 1991, p. 1375.

Congress stand that "India is a brother; China a friend," by his even handed reference to both China and India. This departure indicates his realization that a conspicuous pro-Indian policy would get the new government nowhere. Therefore, Koirala had to take account of the anti-Indian popular sentiments that were reflected in the election results. His predecessor Bhattarai's failure to get elected was that he was seen to be too soft towards India. More importantly, with the left parties having considerable influence in the parliament he cannot possibly afford to venture anything other than a balanced relation vis-a-vis India and China.

The newly elected Nepali Congress government has to maintain friendly relations with India because 30% of Nepal's trade is with India and virtually all its trade goes in transit through India. This must be done in order to prevent the repetition of trade embargo against Nepal in 1989 that crippled its economy and helped to bring down the panchayat system. While India baiting is going to be an important factor in Nepali politics in this new phase it cannot be denied that the Nepali Communists too have their contacts in India. One of the CPI(M) leaders H.K. Surjeet attended the politburo meeting of the Nepal Communist Party (Marxist) in December 1990, while Jyoti Basu, the West Bengal Chief Minister has kept close contact with the leaders of the Sahana Adhikari faction.<sup>22</sup> This means that the new political formations in Nepal do not want to loose their contact with India. Whatever role and policies the opposition adopts the NC government must be careful with its policies, while trying to tackle its national problems independently, it must also take care not to anger India, so that its popularity does not get stained at home.

Although the NC won the polls it failed to obtain absolute majority not only for its pro-India policy but also for various other reasons. During the interim government headed by NC

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22. *Ibid*, p. 1376.

leader K. P. Bhattarai the law and order situation worsened. The price of essentials rose upto 50 percent. The army and the police refused to cooperate with the interim government. The police revolted and the army declared that sovereignty must rest with the King; Nepal must remain a Hindu Kingdom; and both the army and the police must remain under the King's control. It was their non-cooperation that delayed the promulgation of the new constitution. Under the new constitution the army is to be under civilian control. It is guided by a security council headed by the Prime Minister along with the Commander-in-Chief of the army, a few defence personnel, a nominee of the King, the Defence Minister and the Home Minister. Their task is to guide the operations of the army. It was this provision of the constitution that was not acceptable to the army. The fear of army's non-cooperation however subsided when the King requested the people to stand by the government and work towards strengthening the multi-party system.

Although the new constitution in Nepal grants limited powers to the King which includes the right to information, he will also be apprised of all the developments in the country and will also have certain emergency powers, which he can exercise only on the advice of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The King is still regarded as a binding force on the various ethnic groups and many Nepalese still believe that he is the reincarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. However the elected government may face some problems, if not opposition from an entrenched bureaucracy and their powerful patrons close to the palace. Similar problems had been faced by Bhattarai's interim government.

The top positions of the Nepali bureaucracy gives much importance to community and caste origins. It is, therefore, very unlikely that caste structure of the administration would be made flexible under the new system. Moreover, the communists criticize the Nepali Congress as veering towards the palace in order to

check the communists whenever the opportunity strikes. According to them several former panchas, ministers and royalists have joined the Nepali Congress. On the other hand, the prime minister G. P. Koirala, does not share the mild mannered pragmatism of Bhattarai. He is known to be bitterly anti-communist and his strong views on policy matters may yet add a new dimension to the Kingdom's fractious politics.<sup>23</sup>

The attitude of the United People's Front which is represented by a combination of leftist factions - Masal, Unity Centre and Communist League is also important. They had stayed out of the democracy movement and criticised both the Congress and the United Left Front interim government for being soft on the issues of monarchy and Indo-Nepalese relations. They see a strong connection between "feudal forces in Nepal and Indian imperialism," which they say must be broken to bring about genuine revolutionary changes in a poor, agrarian-based economy like Nepal.<sup>24</sup>

The new government has inherited the problems and failures of past three decades in the economy sector. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world with a nominal per capita yearly GNP of only \$ 170. The expectations of the people have been enormously heightened in the wake of the success of pro-democracy movement. Whatever shape the political scenario takes the success of the new government will be judged by its success in meeting those expectations. For obvious reasons this may not be too easy a task. The common people may for the moment have some sympathy towards the new government. But in order to sustain this the government has to undertake such practical measures as would generate tangible economic benefits for the success of democracy. It has already suffered a setback by the

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23. *Ibid*, p. 1375.

24. *Ibid*, p. 1376.

British decision to reduce the five Gurkha battalions in the British army. These Gurkhas make a significant contribution to the Nepalese economy. Nearly US \$ 50 million in foreign exchange is sent back every year to Nepal.<sup>25</sup> The British decision has led to the criticism of the Koirala administration. While demanding to know whether the Prime Minister was consulted before the decision was made and whether it was in conformity with the 1947 tripartite agreement between Nepal, U.K. and India, the left parties have called for the abrogation of this agreement stating that it is against Nepal's non-aligned foreign policy. Moreover, when these Gurkhas are back in Nepal, providing them with jobs will be another problem for G.P. Koirala. The Communist Party of Nepal's general secretary, Madan Bhandari has already threatened that his party would bring down the NC government if they failed to live up to the expectations of the people by means of agitation.<sup>26</sup>

The success of the present government depends on the amount of cooperation it will get from the opposition. On many substantial issues, such as constitutional monarchy, secularism and foreign policy the NC and the UCML hold more or less similar views. Their top leaders have also decided to refrain from any direct confrontation for the time being. Infact they must try to overcome their difficulties by being accommodative in order that democracy may succeed.

Although the nation's new constitution makes King Birendra a constitutional instead of an absolute monarch he still has considerable influence over the masses. A law has also been passed recently in Nepal that makes criticising the King and his family illegal. In the constitution the King has also been considered as the symbol of Nepalese nationality and the unity of

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25. *Dialogue*, August 9, 1991.

26. *Asiaweek*, March 29, 1990.

the people. The King may himself be satisfied with his present ceremonial position. But that does not wipe out problems likely to be created by disenchanted sections of the administrative machinery which had benefitted largely from the palace patronage.

The army and the police as already mentioned are still very loyal to the King. They are likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. Much would, therefore, depend on whether or not the new government will be able to run the country by avoiding any confrontation with them. The critical factor here would be the prospect of political stability in the country and overall law and order situation. The government must, therefore, seek the cooperation of the opposition on major issues of national concern to ensure such stability and order.

With the holding of Nepal's first multi-party elections and instalation of the new government Nepal has for the first time in over thirty years embarked itself on a course of transition to democracy. The election by itself has not established democracy, nor is its outcome likely to change the economic condition of the country overnight. A significant milestone has been crossed and there is a long way to go. In this journey the Nepalese people, particularly the political leaders need to be prepared to cooperate with each other in establishing and strengthening the institutional basis for democracy in the country.