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## PARTYLESS 'PANCHAYAT DEMOCRACY' IN NEPAL : A PROGNOSIS

It has often been stated by both the civil and military dictatorial rulers of the Third World countries, particularly by the propounders of the guided democracies that liberal democracy is not appropriate to the "genius and temperament" of the people of these countries. For achieving the objective of development, according to this view, some sort of "disciplined" political system is to be preferred. Leaders of some of these countries where such guided systems are in operation have also tried to fulfil this objective by contriving what Braibanti calls "sedated participation"<sup>1</sup> through indirect elections and controlled organizations. But the experiences of such systems have demonstrated that the idea of managing political life without designing well-based political organizations as vehicles of systems would become more challenging.<sup>2</sup> It happens mainly because in countries where liberal democratic institutions are once introduced or practised and the people therein have had a taste of such values, the "ration" type of democracy or sedated participation cannot satisfy them. Different political groups which are largely antagonistic of the new system soon thus turn into counter-elites and pose even violent threat to the system. These new

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1. See Ralph Braibanti, "Pakistan's Experiment in Political Development" *Asia* (New York) Supplement No. 1, Fall 1974, quoted in Lok Raj Baral, *Oppositional Politics in Nepal*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 9.

2. Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

systems often face mass upheavals subsequently being replaced by one or other type of 'democratic' rule or at the least some of the antagonised forces are absorbed in a broadbased structure which appears to be or which is claimed to be more democratic than before. The partyless Panchayat democracy in Nepal is a case in point.

The partyless Panchayat system in Nepal, an 'innovative' step of late King Mahendra came into existence following the dismissal of the Parliamentary system of Government by himself in December 1960. This non-partisan system of rule placed the King in a supreme position of the state. In fact, unlike similar arrangements in other countries, the Panchayat system in Nepal has had the unique advantages of direct involvement of, and respect to the authority of the monarchy. The "institutionalized faith" of the people which accepted the King as a "benevolent reincarnation" became very much associated with the King's assertive personality.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the referendum in 1980 gave the mandate for the continuation of the Panchayat system with "suitable reforms".

These advantages apart, at the functional level, the system does not seem to be free from the problems of political integration many of which are in-built in the Nepalese society. From the very beginning, the ideology propounded by the system and the justifications given were basically "make-shift" or an "experimental" nature. As a result, many Panchayat leaders showed their penchant for liberal values on the grounds that the new political system offered by the King was only a stage in the process of transition to fullfledged democracy. Presently the dispute between supporters of a multi-party system and the partyless Panchayat system has become acute. The 'fragile foundations' of the Panchayat democracy are being exposed as a result of the general elections held on May 12, 1986 to elect 112 members of the country's legislature. It is reported that more than half of the newly elected

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3. Narayan Khadka, "Crisis in Nepal's Partyless Panchayat System : The Case For More Democracy," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 3, Fall 1986, p. 43

members who unseated old members, are comparatively young and want radical changes to the system.<sup>4</sup> Events in 1979 and 1985 have also shown that the political situation in Nepal may become explosive at any time and that neither political stability nor economic progress can be attained in the uncertain atmosphere. Moreover, in Nepal, government has failed to involve a large section of the population in its development efforts. The feeling is also gaining ground that only in a democratic atmosphere can an appropriate pace of development be set, and development cannot be attained by neglecting the interest of the alienated groups.<sup>5</sup> A study of the Panchayat system is attempted below keeping in view this general outline of the Nepalese political scene. What were the factors that led to the adoption of the Partyless Panchayat democracy in Nepal? What is the nature of this system? How democratic is this system and what are its strengths and weaknesses? Is there any possibility of immediate change in Nepal's political system? If so what would be its nature? These are some of the questions that will be dealt with in the present paper.

### History, Tradition and Political Culture of Nepal

As a unified political and social system, the contemporary nation-state of Nepal is of relatively recent origin dating back only to the latter decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Prithvi Narayan Shah integrated the Kathmandu Valley in 1769 and thereafter undertook to unify the country and created the modern state of Nepal. In fact, the emergence of Prithvi Narayan as a strong Monarch out of the chaos and uncertainty following the breakdown of the tribal era was a major factor in the growth of Nepali nationalism and Kingship.

The constitutional development of Nepal after Prithvi Narayan Shah may be divided into four relatively distinct periods. The first

4. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 29, 1986, p. 27

5. See Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.*, p. 453-54

6. Leo E. Rose and John T. Schotz, *Nepal: Profile of A Himalayan Kingdom*, Selectbook Syndicate, 1980, p. 1

period may be identified as from 1769 to 1946, when the King both ruled and reigned. Though the post of Prime Minister was not unknown during this period, the King of Nepal undertook to rule directly and with authority. The second period starts in 1846, when the power was transferred from the Shah family to the Rana family. The Ranas ruled Nepal autocratically on a hereditary prime ministership basis "by eclipsing royal authority" for a period of 105 years upto 1951. The end of the second world war, and more particularly the achievement of Independence of India, marks the beginning of the third period when political consciousness awakened in Nepal, resulting in a move against the oligarchic family rule of the Rana in 1951. The traumatic event of 1951 was unique in the sense that the King joined forces with the people at the risk of his crown. This popular movement abolished the Rana regime by obtaining the monarch's "commitment to constitutional rule". The period between 1951 and 1957 may be regarded as formative because of the experiment with constitutional democracy although it was also accompanied by political instability which culminated eventually in a royal announcement that a general election would be held to introduce a parliamentary form of government. The Nepali Congress party which had a democratic socialist philosophy got massive mandate in the election of 1959 and formed the government. The brief democratic exercise, which was unique in entire Nepalese history, did not last long. Only after 18 months in December 1960, King Mahendra dissolved the popularly elected Nepali Congress government and banned all the political parties. After a brief period of direct rule, the King introduced his partyless 'Panchayat Democracy' in 1962. The fourth stage marks the beginning of this Panchayat system.

It is important to mention that after the emergence of Nepal as a nation-state in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the primary objective of the Nepalese ruling elite was to maintain the traditional power structure, which meant continuation of the political

power of the various elite families composing the court. Political power was largely concentrated in two groups, Brahmins and Kshatriyas.<sup>7</sup> Among Kshatriyas the most important subdivision was that of the Thakurs, who constituted the royal as well as the ruling Rana families for over a century. The offices of the Royal Preceptor and Royal Priest have always been held by Brahmins, who have also produced a number of prominent political leaders. The traditional power structure remained intact till the Revolution of 1951 and the common people were not allowed to participate in and influence the decision-making process of the ruling elite. In fact, "Nepal was in the strict sense a 'traditional oligarchy' in South Asia".<sup>8</sup>

The Nepalese history and political culture is characterized also by two other distinct features. One is the traditional legitimacy provided by the institution of Monarchy. Monarchy, sustained by Hindu value system, occupies central place in Nepal. Though King had played occasionally controversial roles in Nepalese history, the abolition of monarchy was never thought about. Even the Rana rulers who relegated the monarchy to a powerless institution, never felt the need to abolish monarchy.

The other distinct characteristic of Nepalese political culture is that the people of Nepal have fairly low level of political consciousness. "They neither had a clear sense of identity with the symbols of nationalism nor strong attitudes regarding the proper limits of political activity".<sup>9</sup> The people have largely been ambivalent toward the government at the operational level. In the fifties (after the revolution of 1951) the people did not expect a great deal

7. See M.D. Dharamdasani, "Political Change : An Overview", in V.D. Dharmdasani, (ed.) *Political Participation and Change in South Asia*, Shalimar Publishing House, India, 1984, p. 2

8. *ibid.*,

9. P. Sharan, *Government and Politics of Nepal*, Metropolitan, Delhi, 1984, p. 8.

from the government, consequently they did not experience much frustration when the government failed to deliver the goods. On the other hand, at the time of "royal take-over" in 1960, the general people did not question the King's act of dissolving the parliamentary system of government nor did they show their impatience to know His future plan. Mostly unconcerned about party principles they took for granted whatever the king said against the dissolved government.

Today the people by and large seem to be aware of the existence of the Panchayat system, "although they may not fully understand its dimensions". As a result they do not have any pronounced enthusiasm for its potential nor do they demonstrate spontaneity in the agitational programmes launched against the system. In general, the political culture of Nepal may be characterized as one of "positive neutrality,"<sup>10</sup> or "subject political culture"<sup>11</sup>.

#### **Panchayat Democracy : Reasons for its Adoption**

Befor the dissolution of parliamentary system in 1960, while visiting the United States, King Mahendra expressed that "the parliamentary system of government was really a strenuous process in a society which was deeply embedded in traditional value system. The other serious roadblock in the progress of democracy in the countries like Nepal is that the age-old social and religious practices do not at all conform to the norms and standards of a modern democracy".<sup>12</sup> And after his dissofving the parliamentary System, the King mentioned, "Since Panchayats are the basis of democracy and a democratic system imposed from above has proved unsuitable, as is apparent from the

10. Lovis D. Hayes, "Political Development in Nepal", *Indian Journal of Political Science*, April-June, 1976, p. 21.

11. Parmanand, "The Nepalese Political System", in Urmila Phadnis, S. D. Muni & Kalim Bahadur (eds.) *Domestic Conflicts in South Asia*, Vol. 1, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1986, p. 181.

12. King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Deb, *Proclamations, Speeches and Messages*, (HMG, 1967), quoted in Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

present experience of the country, we have now to build democracy gradually layer by layer from the bottom upwards."<sup>13</sup>

Although there is no denying that the above mentioned factors might have contributed to some extent to the dissolution of parliamentary system and introduction of Panchayat system in Nepal, the main reason behind all these steps taken by the King was something different.

In fact, the factors that prompted Mahendra's 'royal coup' in 1960 were : (a) the growing popularity of the Prime Minister B.P. Koirala and his stubborn political dealings with members of the royal family and (b) the radical socialist line adopted by the Nepali Congress 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 monarchical institution, the King should direct the policies of the nation as an absolute ruler".<sup>14</sup>

After taking over powers, King Mahendra thus moved towards searching an alternative political order which would establish "supremacy of the Monarchy" and at the same time, fulfil "minimum democratic aspirations" of the people of Nepal. With this objective he introduced the partyless Panchayat system in 1962. Mahendra's main objective behind adoption of this system became clear when after his taking over Mahendra appointed a 'Constitution Committee' to study the political systems of some of the developing countries like Pakistan's 'Basic Democracy', Indonesia's 'Guided Democracy' and the 'Class Organization System' in Egypt. It would be interesting to note here that in these countries the so-called alternative democratic political order was evolved by the military dictators in order to legitimize their own authorities, such as, Ayub Khan did in Pakistan, Sukarno in Indonesia and Nasser in Egypt. After studying these

13. King Mahendra, *Proclamations, Speeches and Messages*, p. 9.

14. Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

politico-administrative institutions the Constitution Committee suggested the establishment of the 'Partyless Panchayat System' which incidentally resembled Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy, Sukarno's Guided Democracy and the class organization system in Egypt. An analyst has mentioned that "above everything else, King Mahendra seemed to be much fascinated by Pakistan's Basic Democracy".<sup>15</sup> It became clear from the Joint Communique of King Mahendra and Ayub Khan at the conclusion of the former's visit to Pakistan issued on 6 September 1961 which stated : "His Majesty showed keen interest in the philosophy and working of the concept of 'Basic Democracy' as is being evolved in Pakistan. .... They were firm in their conviction that each country should evolve its own system best suited to the conditions prevailing in the country and to the genius and traditions of the people."<sup>16</sup>

From the above discussion it is thus obvious that although King Mahendra described the Panchayat Democracy as a truly 'Nepali' political system based on the culture and tradition of Nepal "it was neither a full-fledged indigenous system nor was it conceived in terms of a systematic evolution in the course of its implementation".<sup>17</sup> Partyless Panchayat Democracy was introduced aiming at establishing a 'disciplined' system with a democratic facade just in the line of 'third world model of democracy.'

### Structure and Ideology

The Panchayat system, as outlined in the 1962 constitution, was based on a pyramid, having a four-tier structure with the basic units in the village and the town Panchayats. At the apex was the National Panchayat. In between the apex and the base were the district and Zonal Panchayats (the latter was abolished by the ammended constitution in 1967).

15. Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

16. Quoted in Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 61-62.

17. *ibid.*



The representative to the village or town panchayats which formed lowest tier of the panchayat system, were elected directly by the village or town assemblies constituted by the adult population of the villages or towns within its boundaries. The indirect method of election was in practice in tiers above the village or town panchayats wherein the representatives of the lower tier elect representatives to the higher tiers of the panchayats.

All persons residing within the area of a *Gaun sabha* (village assembly), and of the age of 21 years became the members of the *Gaun Sabha*. Each *Gaun Sabha* elected its own 11-member executive body, called village panchayat, for a period of six years. The Pradhan Pancha (Chairman) and the Upa-Pradhan Pancha (Vice-Chairman) of the village Panchayat were located by the village assembly for a period of two years.

The district Panchayat was an 11-member executive body of the Jilla Sabha (district assembly) comprised of representatives from each village Panchayat and town Panchayat within a district in the prescribed manner. These members of the district Panchayat retired after every year and the vacancy so caused was filled up by election. Thus the district Panchayat became an "ever rolling body". The tenure of the President and the vice President of the district Panchayat, which was originally for two years, was extended later for four years.

The Rastriya Panchayat consisted of 125 members (later the number has been increased to 140) who included : (a) Members elected by the zonal assemblies, (b) Members elected by the class organizations and professional organizations ; (c) Members elected from among the graduates and (d) Members nominated by His Majesty. The 1962 Panchayat constitution also provided for a Council of Ministers headed by a Prime Minister appointed by the King. The Council of Ministers was an administrative body responsible for the implementation of the policies and programmes of His Majesty. The King was at the top of the system holding all the powers of a sovereign ruler. Every organiza-

tion within the system was under his guidance and control. He was the repository of all legislative, executive and judicial powers.

The constitutional amendment of 1975 made extensive changes in the panchayat system particularly in the structure and composition of national panchayat. It abolished the representation separately provided to class organizations and the graduates' constituency in the legislature and restricted it to the panchayats. A provision was also made for ordinarily open and yearly sittings of the national panchayat, and the deliberations of the panchayat were made public. However, the King continued to constitute the Council of Ministers, and royal prerogatives and power in overall political matters were further increased and strengthened.

On 24 May 1979, the King announced that a referendum would be held to let the people choose between the existing partyless panchayat system with suitable reforms and a multiparty system of government. The King's proclamation was followed by two significant measures. First, the 'Back to the Village' Campaign Committee operating at various level was dissolved. Secondly, some sort of freedom of speech was granted to the people to allow them to propagate for any system.

The structure and ideology of the panchayat democracy again went under changes with the third amendment in the constitution. The King on 15 December 1980 proclaimed the third amendment in the constitution. While the amendment re-emphasized the position of the King as an absolute ruler in the literal sense of the term, some features of the parliamentary system have also been incorporated. These were : election of legislature (Rastriya Panchayat) on the basis of direct universal suffrage, the appointment of Prime Minister on the basis of legislature's recommendation, and the cabinet to be responsible to the legislature.

It is important to mention that notwithstanding all the provisions mentioned above, the Panchayat democraey in Nepal still lags far behind the democratic system. However, we will examine this in the next section.

### How Democratic is the 'Panchayat Democracy' ?

Apparently the present panchayat system in Nepal is based on democratic principles. Direct elections to the national legislature (Rastriya Panchayat) has been introduced. The amended constitution also provides for election as well as the removal of the Prime Minister by the National Panchayat. For the first time in more than two decades Nepal's incumbent Prime Minister was voted out of office by means of a no-confidence motion in the Rastriya Panchayat on July 11, 1983. Present King Mr. Birendra Bikram Shah quickly dissolved the two year-old government of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa after a stunning 108 votes to 17 (with 11 abstentions) verdict against it in the House. Moreover the distinction between a cabinet and ministry, which holds good in the United Kingdom and India, may also be applied to the Council of Ministers in Nepal. The Cabinet is the smaller body within the ministry, which also includes the ministers of state as well as deputy ministers. Each minister holds one or more portfolios, as such he is the political head of one or more ministries and departments. The Cabinet as a body meets to make important decisions, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister or the King himself. These all seem to be the manifestation of democratization of the Nepalese Panchayat system.

Despite its semblance with democratic practice, the Panchayat system in Nepal (even after the amendment) has maintained intact the position of the King as an absolute ruler. As prior to the rule of the hereditary Prime Ministers of the Rana family and in post-1960 Nepal, the King's traditional authority to rule by peremptory command or *hukum* and to exercise royal prerogative of conducting *pajani* or dismissing any public officials at the sweet will of the ruler at any time has been retained in the amended text of the constitution. The amendments have also belied the accepted democratic norm and belief by reserving for the King the right to dismiss arbitrarily the elected Prime Minister in Article 26 (4d) of the amended constitution.

The King plays a significant and effective part also in the organization of Rastriya Panchayat (national legislature). As already indicated one-fifth of the total membership of the Rastriya Panchayat ( 28 out of 140 ) comprises the nominees of the King. Paradoxical, or even funny though it may seem, every constitutional amendment so far has strengthened the position of the King. Chart I shows how every constitutional amendment has increased his power of nomination to the national legislature.

**Chart 1. The Structure of the Rastriya Panchayat**

Period	Total Members	King's Nominees	Percentage of the nominees of the total membership of the House	Percentage of the nominees of the elected membership of the House
1962-75	125	16	12.80	14.69
1975-80	135	23	17.83	20.53
1981	140	28	20	25

*Source* : Parmanand, "The Nepalese Political System", in Urmilla Phadnis, S. D. Muni & Kalim Bahadur (eds) *Domestic Conflicts in South Asia* (South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1986), p. 176.

It is also important to mention that although it was hoped that once Rastriya Panchayat was made a directly elected body it would favourably effect the modus operandi of the body, but it did not. Many of those having enjoyed the membership of the earlier Rastriya Panchayat and the present one feel that there is little change in the mode of its functioning despite its largely elective character.<sup>18</sup>

The King enjoys tremendous power in the selection of the Prime Minister, even though the power has been vested theoretically and technically in the Rastriya Panchayat. The successful candidate must secure 60 per cent of votes and if none of the candidates for the

18. Parmanand, "The Nepalese Political System", in Urmila Phadnis, S.D. Muni & Kalim Bahadur (eds.), *op cit.*, p. 176.

Prime Ministership obtains the required majority, there will be a run off election between the two who obtain the highest numbers of votes. Should this also fail to resolve the issue, the legislature is required to forward any three names from among its members to the King who will be free to appoint one of them even if it means excluding those who fought for the office in the election on the floor of the House. "All this is merely intended to make the legislature subordinate to the King or the palace by preventing the former from choosing its leader freely".<sup>19</sup>

According to the constitution of Nepal, Ministers owe a double allegiance. They are, in the first place, responsible to the King who appoints them and may at any time dispense with their services. They are, in the second place, responsible to the Rastriya Panchayat, because they can not be or continue to be members of the Council of Ministers unless they have their seats in the House and unless the House is kept in sufficient good humour to prevent any adoption of vote of no-confidence against them. But it is sufficiently clear that whatever the nature of their responsibility, the Council of Ministers is not a corporate body working under the principle of joint responsibility. But joint responsibility is the central feature of party government under the parliamentary system of democracy and has no useful role to play under the partyless Panchayat system of democracy.

It is also worth noting that while political parties are considered to be the 'life blood' of any democratic structure, the very partyless character of the Panchayat system itself testifies its undemocratic character. As discussed in a previous section, such a 'guided' or 'disciplined' political system in the third world countries always aims at limiting the popular participation of the masses and tends to make them 'depoliticized'.

Moreover, the present state of the freedom of speech and press in Nepal is also not conducive to a democratic atmosphere. More

19. Rishikesh Shaha, "The Third Amendment to the Constitution", in M.D. Dharmdasani. (ed) *op. cit.*, p. 66.

and more restrictions are being imposed on the press. Consequently, even though merely 300 newspapers and periodicals are being published from Kathmandu alone, no discriminating newspaper reader would find any free analysis of the political situation in the Kingdom, for those who really count in Nepalese politics are mostly above newspaper discussion and analyses.<sup>20</sup> The same is the situation regarding fundamental human rights.

Infact, the Panchayat system in Nepal, has introduced some of the features of parliamentary government merely for the sake of "window dressing".<sup>21</sup> In spite of the democratic set-up in the form of Panchayats at various levels, the government of Nepal is in no way democratic; it is still monarchical with a "minimum" semblance of democracy.

#### **Political Opposition During 'Partyless Democracy'.**

Ever since the parliamentary government ended in Nepal and the new system has been introduced, there has been strong opposition from the banned political parties. To contain the opposition forces Government has always followed repressive measures. Yet the political opposition could not be totally eliminated.

Opposition in Nepal under the partyless system has found expression in non or quasi-political institutions, in clandestine political organizations, in different areas of the systemic structural components and even in isolated individuals and intellectuals.<sup>22</sup> However, all the political oppositions that have been manifested in various ways during the last few years may be broadly classified as follows: (1) Extra-constitutional : to replace the current royal regime altogether by overt or covert means aimed at the revival of parliamentary

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20. See Parmanand, "The Nepalese Political System", in Urmilla Phadnis, S.D. Muni & Kalim Bahadur (eds.) *op. cit.*, p. 182.

21. See Rishikesh Shaha, "The Third Amendment to the Constitution, in M.D. Dharmdasani (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 65

22. Lok Raj Baral, *op. cit.*, p. 231

democracy, (2) Extraparliamentary : to offer specific suggestions or policy alternatives from different platforms outside the legislature, primarily for peaceful changes in the prevailing order, however, without challenging the royal regime or the system. (3) Parliamentary : to voice demands through peaceful means, seek amendments of the various clauses of the constitution in force for a variety of purposes or to articulate the various interests on key policy issues from the floor of the legislature, without overtly seeking to overthrow the system.

Among the extra-constitutional or extra-systemic forces the names of the Nepal Congress and the Communist party (Pro-Chinese faction) can be mentioned who played the vital role. Both the parties have also created strong basis among the students and youth who have always been a source of trouble for the government. Since the late seventies the anti-establishment student movements have been intensified in Nepal.

The students demonstration in 1979 took the form of countrywide political agitation and eventually shook the Panchayat system and challenged the "alternativelessness" of the system. It ended with King Birendra's proclamation that a national referendum would be held on the basis of universal adult suffrage and a secret ballot. The referendum offered two choices—retention of the existing Panchayat system with suitable reforms, or the setting up of a multi-party system of Government. The referendum was held on May 2, 1980 and the results were proclaimed twelve days afterwards. It was announced that the people had given their vote for the retention of the panchayat system with suitable reforms. The vote in favour of retention was 45.7 percent, with 45.3 percent cast for the multi-party supporters.

Although the referendum gave a mandate for the continuation of the panchayat system with "suitable reforms", it failed to resolve the main issue—the dispute between multi-party supporters and the panchayat system (and, by implication, the King). The struggle of the multi-party supporters for more democratic reforms in the Panchayat system still continues.

Infact, the opposition forces have become more outspoken after the referendum despite the repressive measures followed by the government since then. The banned Nepali Congress launched a massive peaceful non violent *satyagraha* (civil disobedience movement), "not only to bring about a political change but to remove fear from the mind of the people, make politics a matter of direct concern for the people, check the decline of national character, bring about normal upliftment of the Nepali people and achieve the development of a democratic political system and a democratic culture".<sup>23</sup> This movement was launched in May 1985, and has taken the form of national political agitation. The *satyagraha* was supported by five leftist groups, which believed that "the crisis facing the nation will end, if the partyless system is abolished".<sup>24</sup> The leftist groups also started their own agitation, which resulted in the arrest of a number of their political workers. Similarly, the three factions of the pro-Communist students group—the Nepal Revolutionary Students Federation, the Nepal National Students Federation and the Nepal Democratic Students Union—announced that they had presented a twenty one-point demand to the authorities. Other student forces have also been organized.

The level of dissatisfaction with the Panchayat system could also be gauged by the series of mysterious bomb blasts that rocked the country towards the end June 1985. Just twenty four hours before the blasts, in his address to the thirty-sixth session of the National Panchayat on June 19, 1985 King Birendra had threatened that "the Nepali people are determined to discourage any attempt to undermine peace and order in the country. It becomes the bounden duty of all panchas to counter those who seek to create an atmosphere of instability in the country by spreading unnecessary confusion about the system chosen by the people themselves in free exercise of their will".<sup>25</sup> Bombs were

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23. Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.*, p. 443

24. *Samiksha*, May 17, 1985, quoted in Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.*, p. 444

25. *The Rising Nepal*, June 20, 1985, quoted in Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.* p. 445.



exploded in politically and strategically important locations in Kathmandu, including the Southern and Western gates of the royal palace and the main gates of the National Panchayat Secretariat. Explosions also occurred in other parts of Nepal.

The challenges to the Panchayat system (and also to the King) are coming not only from the extra-systemic forces but also from the systemic opposition. The challenge posed by the latter became self-evident during the thirty-seventh session of the national Panchayat. It has been mentioned that "during the debate on the royal address at the national panchayat at least ten members made speeches demanding the abolition of the Panchayat system and the restoration of the multi-party system".<sup>26</sup>

By all indications, the Nepalese partyless Panchayat system is in crisis. It is facing enormous pressure from the opposition parties. The major concerns for the government today, therefore, are : how all the major parties could be persuaded to join the Panchayat system and give up their respective ideologies?<sup>27</sup> How to cope with the terrorist threats and organized violences? And above all how to accommodate the desire of over 45% of the electorate for a multi-party system of government? The longer these questions remain unanswered, the deeper will be the impending political crisis in Nepal.

### Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that the partyless panchayat system in Nepal has reached the crossroads. In all

26. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 29, 1986, p. 27.

27. The Nepali Congress, the main opposition to the panchayat system although boycotted the 1986 Rastriya Panchayat election, took part in the district and village-level elections held in the first half of 1987. However, Koirala, son of the late B.P. Koirala said in a statement that the recent decision of Nepali Congress for taking part in the local council elections would not deter the party from demanding constitutional reforms, nor would it mean "compromising with the present political system." See, *IDSAs News Review on South Asia/Indian Ocean*, Vol. 20, No. 3, March 1987, p. 312.

probability, it cannot survive in its present form. A return to pluralist democracy appears to be the growing trend in today's Nepal. As time passes, the politicized section of the Nepalese society is likely to realize more and more sense of "relative deprivation" of democratic values cherished by its counterparts elsewhere. It may be noted here that during the last referendum although multi-party supporters marginally failed, generally the educated and urban voters were in favour of multiparty system of government. Out of 21 town panchayats multiparty system secured majority votes in 20 town panchayats.<sup>28</sup>

Observers of Nepalese political scene have opined that "peace is not likely to be established in Nepal so long as the present system of government is not made truly democratic, as demanded by the banned political parties and popular leaders of the people."<sup>29</sup> Analysts have also mentioned that "Monarchy can survive even in this tradition-bound land only when the King agrees to becoming a constitutional head. The present form of rule by the King with a show of democracy will not pacify the politically conscious people and lead to any appreciable improvement in the condition of the people."<sup>30</sup>

In the context of the rising political agitation both from within and outside the system including the possible threats mentioned above, such views seem to be justified. However, as the people of Nepal by and large have faith in the traditional institution of monarchy, one can expect that "the King still has a way to bring about a democratic atmosphere and so play a positive and significant role in the political development of the country—he should be ready to share some of his powers with the people."<sup>31</sup> But in the event of his failure to evolve such a political structure or arrangement, it may lead to further disharmony and instability in Nepal.

28. See B.C. Upreti "The Politics of Referendum", in M.D. Dharmadsani (ed) *op. cit.*, p. 50.

29. See M.D. Dharmadsani, "Political Change : An Overview" in M.D. Dharmadsani (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 20, Sharan, *Government and Politics of Nepal*, *op. cit.*, p. 120 and Paramanand, "The Nepalese Political System" in Urmilla Phadnis, S.D. Muni & Kalim Bahadur (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 174-183.

30. *ibid.*

31. Narayan Khadka, *op. cit.*, p. 454.