

Democracy movement puts Nepal's monarchy on the spot

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The simmering political crisis in Nepal erupted on the streets of the major cities Feb. 17, when a combined opposition consisting of the banned Nepali Congress party and a United Left Front launched a movement to bring democracy back to this strategically situated Hindu kingdom. The confrontation between the pro-democracy crowd and the monarchy-supported "partyless" government has already caused at least 30 deaths, left hundreds injured, and led to the arrest of more than 1,200 political activists. The bloodiness of the confrontation indicates that neither side is yet ready to throw in the towel.

Although the combined opposition has not yet made an official demand for removal of the monarchy, the demands they *have* made, if met, will significantly curb the power of King Birendra. As the Nepali Congress party has articulated it, the movement demands restoration of a multi-party system, the right to free association and the freedom to form trade unions. Nepali Congress spokesman Rishikesh Shaha told the *Times of India* that King Birendra alone could defuse the crisis by granting the demands, adding that there was no possibility of a compromise with the king. "No, there are no options," Shaha said. "Even if Nepal is an independent country, today the Nepali people are not free. They can't breathe freely."

The confrontation is of vital interest to both China and India, Nepal's immediate neighbors. India, which has given shelter to Nepali Congress leaders for years, will be interested in seeing the democracy movement succeed. It is a foregone conclusion that sooner or later Nepali officials will accuse India of providing moral, if not covertly material, support to the movement—accusations that Beijing could be expected to echo. China has cultivated King Birendra and his father to significant practical strategic advantage over the past 30 years.

Seeds of confrontation

The seeds of confrontation were planted in the 1960s, when King Mahendra, Birendra's father, engineered a military coup to dismiss a democratically elected government and put the ruling Nepali Congress party leaders behind bars. A year earlier, the country's first and only democratic elections had brought the Nepali Congress to power. Following the coup, King Mahendra imposed a partyless *panchayat*

(council) system in which 112 members are elected by adult franchise and 28 are nominated by the king. Only individuals who denounce a multi-party system are allowed to contest, and, for the most part, only those candidates who enjoy the full approval of the palace are elected. Once elected, members of parliament passively endorse decisions of the cabinet, which receives its instructions directly from the palace.

The Nepali Congress, the largest political party in Nepal, was banned more than 30 years ago and its leaders have been systematically persecuted. Many sought asylum in India, and, over the years, have developed strong links with Indian politicians across the party spectrum. In 1986, following a series of meetings with Nepali Congress leaders, King Birendra gave indications that he would allow the banned party to rejoin the mainstream and participate in the May 1986 elections to the Rashtriya Panchayat—but the hints were never followed through.

Last year, following the impasse between India and Nepal on trade and transit issues associated with lapsed bilateral treaties governing relations between the two nations, the democracy movement began to gather momentum. In September, student bodies sounded a call to unite and fight for the establishment of democracy in Nepal. The pro-Moscow group, which had until then been one of the staunchest backers of the partyless system, was among the movement's leaders.

Socialist International in the fray

When the banned Nepali Congress decided to hold a public conference in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, in January, focusing on a political resolution calling for the launching of a mass movement to restore democracy, it was clear that the storm would soon break. Fearing violent repercussions otherwise, the palace allowed the meeting to take place. The conference declared Feb. 18 to be "Democracy Day" in Nepal. The proceedings got a boost with the participation of a number of senior Indian politicians from the ruling Janata Dal as well as the opposition Congress (I). Although the Indian High Commission stayed away, diplomats from the United States, West Germany, and Israel were present.

Though the Nepali Congress leaders have friends among Indian politicians, they in fact look more to the affiliates of

the Socialist International than to India's Congress (I) party. India's National Front government has at least one leading light, Minister of Railways George Fernandes, who is a prominent member of the Socialist International, and an outspoken proponent of independence for Tibet. But reports indicate that bigger fish than Fernandes are already in the fray. The *Times of India* reported on Feb. 14 that Willy Brandt himself is likely to come out in support of the Nepalese struggle, and that the Socialist Democratic Party of West Germany may send observers. It has also been reported that a West German television team will be "on location" to record the course of the democracy movement.

Already some human rights groups have been activated. The Human Rights Organization of Nepal, HURON, has warned U.S. Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch to desist from actions that might be interpreted as anti-democracy. HURON has also taken note of a remark by Richard N. Haass, special assistant to George Bush and senior director for East and South Asian Affairs, to the Asia Society in January. Haass said, "The first and most important challenge facing us [in South Asia] is the need to make democracy permanent."

In spite of the dubious links that the Nepal democracy movement has established, India would like to see it flourish and succeed simply because it may curb the growing anti-India policy of the palace and its cozying up to China, in particular.

The China factor

The Nepali monarchy's efforts to distance itself from India and get closer to China began in the early 1960s, when the tension between India and China began to surface. In the face of a violent resistance struggle from the ousted Nepali Congress and India's protestations against the royal coup, King Mahendra began to stroke Nepali chauvinism. The Sino-Indian border clash, which humiliated the Indian Army, gave Mahendra the opportunity to enlist the Chinese in his anti-India campaign. Construction of the Kathmandu-Kodari road, which connects the capitals of Nepal and Tibet, and strident anti-India statements by visiting Chinese Vice Premier Chen Yi in 1962, increased India's suspicion about the palace game. At the end of King Mahendra's reign, China got involved in cotton textile projects and geological surveys along the Indo-Nepal border, in what India took to be a play to undermine the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

King Birendra, who took over after his father's death in 1972, did little to improve things either with India or domestically within Nepal. In 1973 Birendra told *Newsweek* magazine that Nepal "is not a part of the subcontinent; it is really that part of Asia which touches both China and India." By 1988, when King Birendra imported a significant consignment of anti-aircraft guns and other arms from China, India's trust had been sorely frayed. Delhi considered the act a deliberate attempt to violate the spirit of both the 1950 treaty and

the 1965 agreement on import of arms. Earlier, in 1985, King Birendra had tried to involve China in the western sector (the Kohlpur-Banabasa section) of the east-west highway, since China submitted the lowest bid for the Saudi Development Fund- and World Bank-funded project. India preempted the King's move by providing a \$50 million grant to Nepal.

One of King Birendra's central strategic-political gambits, to which India has also not taken kindly, is the campaign to establish Nepal as a "zone of peace" launched in 1975. The zone of peace proposal, which internationalized Nepal's security, in effect abrogates the treaty of 1950. It is no surprise that China was one of the first countries to endorse the proposal. Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng, who visited Nepal last November, stated that China wanted to see Nepal as a zone of peace. China would always support Nepal—"no matter what happens in the international situation"—Li Peng vowed, adding his appreciation for Nepal's "understanding approach toward China after the counterrevolution in Beijing," a reference to the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989. Now that Nepal is in difficulty (over trade and transit issues with India), Li said, China would try its very best to provide moral and other support to Nepal.

In contrast to the palace's continuing effort to nettle India, leaders of the Nepali Congress believe that India is Nepal's natural ally.

Monarchy on shaky ground

So far, the pro-democracy movement has not called for the ouster of the royalty, and there are reasons for it. The Nepali monarchy is considered the incarnation of the Hindu god Lord Vishnu by the population at large. Still, neither King Birendra nor Queen Aishwarya is considered above criticism. There are constant rumors about Birendra's perpetual drunkenness and Aishwarya's involvement in drug trafficking. In short, though the royalty still dazzles rural Nepal, some of its glitter has certainly tarnished.

More significant have been the recent statements of some of the pro-democracy leaders. Recounting his meeting with King Birendra, Nepali Congress spokesman Rishikesh Shaha said: "I told him three things that day. I said, 'Your Majesty, you are sitting on a volcano.' And I told him that his palace had become a center of corruption. And lastly, that he should put the political process back on track without getting involved in it himself. My advice was not heeded. Now we will know whether or not monarchy itself has outlasted its utility."

It is clear that the monarchy is on the spot. Whatever the outcome of the immediate battles ahead, it will continue to lose strength and credibility. A bloody crackdown will put the royal house on death row. On the other hand, allowing a multi-party democracy to emerge may save the monarchy from sudden death, but only at the cost of gradual extinction, its vise-like grip on every aspect of life in Nepal decisively loosened.