

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan B. Maitra

Nepal elections resolve nothing

The votes are not yet all in in this first election in 30 years, but some trends are becoming clear already.

The much-awaited first parliamentary election in Nepal since 1959 has failed to deliver a decisive mandate. The results, still creeping in, show that the violence that preceded the polls on May 12 was, an indication of the confusion dominating Nepalese society, a confusion enhanced by the new-found "democracy." Though the Nepali Congress (NC) did manage to get a thin majority, most of its top leaders were soundly defeated. Meanwhile, the defeated caretaker Prime Minister K.P. Bhattarai, of the NC, has resigned, and the monarchy seems to be perfectly positioned to decide who will run the government on the Palace's behalf in the coming days.

Though results are still coming in, it is nonetheless evident that the Nepali Congress, which had been in the forefront of the demand of democracy, is headed for victory. But the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) is close on its heels. In the event a clear majority doesn't emerge smaller parties, mostly reactionaries set up by the Palace, are expected to be the brokers by enhancing confusion or pressing home the advantage that the monarchy has gained through the electorate's failure to give a majority mandate.

The electoral outcome was not surprising. Perhaps the only surprise was the strength that the Communist Party showed. Top Nepali Congress leaders, such as K.P. Chatterai, Prakash Man Singh, Marshal Julum Shakya, and the wife of NC leader Ganesh Man Singh, all lost to the UML. Indeed, the only NC leader to come out unscathed was the virulently

anti-Communist and pro-India General Secretary, G.P. Koirala. By contrast, the UML leaders have done extremely well, especially in the capital city of Kathmandu.

The May 12 elections were held under the shadow of last year's furious pro-democracy movement which brought down the partyless system and set the stage for transforming Nepal into a "constitutional monarchy." After months of bickering with the Palace, the harbingers of democracy did produce a new Constitution. King Birendra proclaimed the new Constitution "in the belief that the Constitution will help to forge the people in a bond of unity and advance the cause of multi-party democracy in constitutional monarchy."

Despite bluster from the NC, it was patently clear that it was and is the Palace that holds the strings. As one Indian analyst has pointed out, the Palace's reassertion is evident in three areas—control over the bureaucracy, intervention in writing the Constitution to ensure the King's role, and the creation of influential political instruments to its advantage. The royal hegemony is epitomized by the fact that the much-maligned Queen's men continued to carry on after last spring's "uprising" against their corruption.

The UML, which comprises both the pro-Beijing and pro-Moscow variety of Communists, has long been the Palace's cat's paw. The UML has been used, discarded, and re-used by the Palace whenever the voices for democracy reached a certain described level. The Communists in Nepal, besides being religiously anti-India,

function as a perfect foil to the NC's muddle-headed democratic proclamations.

The India-factor played a key role in the election. Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's visit three months before the election was cited by the UML as Indian interference in Nepal's affairs. Yet when West Bengal chief minister and CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu went to Kathmandu to facilitate the unity of the Marxist-Leninist groups, to the communists everything seemed in order. Only a month before the elections, Nirmal Lama, a communist leader, told a newsmen: "Our nation is in danger because of the pro-Indian stand taken by the Nepali Congress."

The communist onslaught, backed by the Palace, also softened the Bhattarai-Ganesh Man Singh faction of the NC. With no clear majority, it is likely that the aged duo will support any Palace move to bring the two parties (NC and UML) together to share power when all the poll results are in. It is almost certain that G.P. Koirala, general secretary of the party, will strongly oppose such a move and instead will try to strike a bargain with other right-leaning parties who have some seats to offer.

When all is said and done, it is clear that the democrats, autocrats, and communists all have invisible strings attached to the Palace. It is this moral bankruptcy of Nepali politicians that is giving rise to a dangerous form of Nepali chauvinism. A banned book, *The Hidden Facts about Nepal*, by a minor politician is becoming a rallying point for some who identify themselves as the original "sons of the soil." The book charges that the Nepal monarchy, the Shah kingdom, was transplanted from India. Prithviraj Shah, the first Shah king, was a Rajput from India, it is claimed, and all the elites in present-day Nepal are linked to this transplanted monarchy.