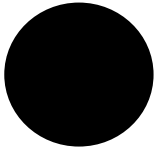


REFLECTIONS

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Nepal: The Politics of Failure

Barbara Crossette

In the winter of 1980–81, on my first visit to Kathmandu, a Nepali acquaintance deeply involved in the always treacherous politics of the Himalayan kingdom took me to meet a frail, sickly man holding court in a chilly anteroom of a once-and-future party headquarters. Courtiers flanked the old wooden chair on which he sat, while reverent admirers jostled for the chance just to be in his presence. They called him BP, and on him the hopes for Nepali democracy seemed to rest heavily.

A year and a half later, B. P. Koirala, who had been suffering from cancer, was dead. Now, a quarter of a century later, the democratic revolution of 1989–90 that he did much to inspire but did not live to see may also be dying under assault from both the extreme political left and right. It is a crisis of enormous importance for South Asia, and it is playing out largely out of sight from the rest of the world.

A well-born, well-educated son of a high-caste Nepali family forced by its progressive social and political views to flee to India, BP had given his life to the democratic cause. A writer held in high regard, he was also a founder of the Nepali National Congress, the oldest and most important of Nepal's political parties. He had spent years in jail and years in exile as a political organizer and protestor against not only an antiquated monarchy but also the singularly Nepali system of hereditary prime ministers drawn from a quasi-monarchical dynasty known as the Ranas. Together (though not always in harmony) the Shah kings and the

Rana ministers effectively cut everyone else out of leading roles in government.

BP, who had served briefly in 1959–60 as the first elected prime minister in the country's history before being ousted by King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah, lived to see the end of the Ranas—at least as hereditary prime ministers; they are still very much around otherwise. But he was gone in 1989–90 when Nepalis poured into the streets by the thousands and forced another king, Mahendra's son Birendra Bir Bikram Shah, to accept a constitutional monarchy. An age of real democracy had finally begun in Nepal. Or had it?

The legacy of B. P. Koirala and his Nepali Congress Party should be a rich and shining one. Tragically, it is not. In the decade and a half since that exhilarating democracy movement realigned the political forces in Nepal, Congress politicians and their opposition counterparts have let the country down, comprehensively. Show-stopping parliamentary spats, legislative deadlocks, myopic infighting, name calling, and pervasive corruption seemed all that Congress leaders could produce when the country finally got its best chance to institutionalize democracy. The mainstream, unarmed Marxist-Leninist political opposition did not do much better in or out of power.

Today's Nepal has regressed, politically, by nearly half a century. On one side stands an unloved, autocratic, accidental king, Gyanendra, with his inept and lawless army, and on the other side an extreme armed Maoist movement of almost unimaginable

brutality and terror. Electoral politics, a free media, and the civil and human rights so proudly fought for are being largely swept away, and politicians are powerless to temper the monarchy or contain the march of Maoism, a movement not historically related to traditional Nepali Marxism, which has essentially internationalist roots. BP's heirs have not honored his memory nor served his cherished principles well.

The continuing descent of Nepal and the dimming of Nepali democrats' dreams hold warnings globally—including in Afghanistan and Iraq—for those who still nourish the shaky conviction that democracy can be established simply through an outburst of people power (or an invading army), a constitution, and an election or two, without the vital dedication of a political class willing to put aside differences and look beyond their giddy, greedy moments of triumph to broaden support, build institutions, and draw into politics new faces and ideas from those instinctive democrats in the streets. In Nepal, where thousands of students were turning out by the late 1980s to demonstrate their eagerness for change, an aging political establishment refused to relinquish power and offered no compelling vision for the future when Nepalis most needed one to believe in.

For the Himalayan region—isolated, prone to natural disasters, and wracked by political turmoil to one degree or another for nearly two decades from the Hindu Kush to Kashmir, the borders of Bhutan, and the restive Indian Northeast—the implosion of Nepal and the collapse of its democratically motivated experiment with constitutional monarchy would be ominous indeed. Both China, now busily remaking the culture of Tibet, and India, with its perennial paranoia about the reliability of the buffer provided by what was once a string of mountain kingdoms, have interests in landlocked, vulnerable Nepal. For underpopulated Bhutan, the last Himalayan Buddhist kingdom and a land already under de-

mographic pressure from a Nepali diaspora, the fall of Nepal into Maoist hands portends a catastrophe.

Royal Slaughter and Maoist Rebellion

B. P. Koirala—the B. P. stands for Bishweshwar Prasad—was one of three Koirala brothers involved in the formation of the Nepali National Congress, a political movement with its intellectual and spiritual roots in the Indian Congress Party of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Matrika Prasad Koirala (a half-brother) had led a royally appointed government under King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah in the early 1950s, one of many short-lived administrations during that period. Girija Prasad Koirala, known as GP, the youngest of the three brothers, has been in and out of the prime ministership since 1991, when the first election took place under the new 1990 constitution that reestablished multiparty democracy after a period of party-less elections, and relegated the monarchy to the largely ceremonial functions of chief of state—or at least until the current king, Gyanendra, found loopholes.

G. P. Koirala was prime minister of Nepal on the horrific night of June 1, 2001, when in an orgy of butchery most of the royal family, including King Birendra and his queen, Aishwarya, were gunned down as they gathered for dinner at Narayanhiti Palace in Kathmandu. The official story, which not a lot of Nepalis believe, was that the crown prince, Dipendra, had slaughtered his parents and other family members in an alcoholic and/or drug-induced rage at being denied his choice of a bride, and then shot himself. He lingered on in a coma for a day before dying, though not before being proclaimed the new monarch while in a comatose state. The official evidence blaming him was flimsy from the start, and contributed substantially to the widespread skepticism about Dipendra's guilt that has persisted to this day. Not uncommonly for Hindu South Asia, there were no proper

autopsies, only a few medical tests and scant other forensic work done before the royal bodies were cremated at the most sacred of Nepali Hindu sites, the temples of Pashupatinath.

In the wake of the slaughter of the king and the death of Crown Prince Dipendra, it was the most unpopular member of the royal family in line to the throne, Prince Gyanendra, the dead King Birendra's brother, who was crowned the twelfth monarch of the Shah dynasty. Suspicious Nepalis were asking: Why had Gyanendra missed the family dinner? Was this a royal coup? Worse, King Gyanendra's even less popular, notoriously violent, and headstrong son, Paras—who had, among other things, run down and killed a popular singer with his car and then demanded at gunpoint that the police not pursue the case—moved into position as crown prince. GP and his government could do little but drift around the margins of these spectacular events. Though prime minister, he did not get news of the violence in the palace for hours, and then was at first told only that King Birendra had suffered a heart attack.

All of this could not have happened at a worse time, given the steady progress of the Maoists, whose rebellion had burst into the open only five years earlier and was spreading rapidly. In October, the International Crisis Group (ICG), an independent global research organization, laid out the situation starkly: "The Maoist insurgency has transformed Nepal." According to the organization's report, "The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has spread armed conflict across the country and reshaped its political environment irrevocably."¹

Nepali Maoists are a largely home-grown, or South Asian, phenomenon thought to be linked to radical leftists in India, but not to post-Mao China or any international terrorist movement—though there is always the fear that they could provide havens to likeminded groups from outside as they expand their control of the Nepali

countryside. However, the top Maoist leaders, drawn from well-educated, high-caste Hindu backgrounds, were greatly influenced by the Senero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru.

The Maoists—formally called the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)—have in a decade spread their political influence and the reach of their People's Liberation Army across the country by stealth, political indoctrination, and surprise attacks from a starting point west of Kathmandu. The International Crisis Group, which has made one of the most thorough studies of both Nepali Maoist ideology and fighting strength, acknowledges that there are huge gaps in what the outside world knows about this guerrilla army and its secretive leadership.²

The ICG's analysts believe that the number of armed Maoist troops may be around 10,000, though there are differences of opinion among experts whether that is an overestimation or an undercount. Small militia units have also formed in the countryside, as the Maoists have set up "governments" in areas they control. In this episodic war, thousands of Nepalis have died—there are no firm figures—and many thousands more have fled the countryside for the country's few urban areas, where the Maoists can strike only sporadically.

An assortment of local Maoist leaders have emerged in fragmented operations on the ground, though the roster of commanders is a moving target. There have been many quarrels among the Maoists as well as losses through arrests and killings by security forces in both Nepal and India. The two enduring names that stand out as the prime founders, thinkers, and directors of the insurgency are Pushpa Kamal Dahal, known by his nom de guerre Prachanda, and Baburam Bhattarai, a Marxist scholar. Both men are Brahamins, with Prachanda, who is reported to be in his forties and a former teacher of horticulture, the more important of the two and probably now the

unchallenged chief of the movement. As often in shadowy guerrilla wars, the elusive leader Prachanda has taken on mythical dimensions, but it is still a fact that under his leadership the Maoists, little known beyond South Asia, have moved with astonishing speed into position to challenge the political establishment of Nepal.

In Nepal, with a per capita income of about \$240 a year, the Maoists have found especially fertile ground for recruitment in the abjectly poor, isolated villages of the mountainous kingdom where they promise a long people's war (albeit punctuated now and then by ceasefires) with the eventual aim of remaking society and the state. Rural people, who have not benefited widely from Nepal's once-booming tourist industry, hear the promises but know nothing of the record of devastating Maoist experiments in political reductionism elsewhere in Asia. As early as 1991, when I went to visit a town not far from Kathmandu where people were living a medieval existence and leftists were already making inroads, a *New York Times* editor put an apt headline on the article I subsequently wrote: "A Town So Old, Communism Is Hope of Future."³

So Much Has Gone Wrong

The Narayanhiti Palace, where the Shah dynasty was decimated by gunfire, is a collection of buildings on rambling lawns with its centerpiece that dark, brooding, slightly sinister 1960s tower looking down on busy Durbar Marg, in Kathmandu's upper-end tourist area. The wide avenue is lined with expensive hotels, smart boutiques, and Westernized places to eat. Not far away is cacophonous Thamel, with its narrow streets, bulging shops peddling all kinds of knock-offs and outmoded hippy gear, and innumerable small restaurants. Manjushree Thapa was in Thamel the night of the royal massacre enjoying dinner with friends. Thapa, still in her thirties, is one of Nepal's most talented writers. The daughter of a diplomat, she was educated both in Nepal

and in the West and can be at once a passionately Nepali insider and something of a cosmopolitan outsider. Either way, she reflects in her writing the sadness and bitter desperation of those trying to confront what is happening to Nepal.

"It isn't easy for a Nepali to trace what has gone wrong, because so much has," Thapa has written in a very personal new book that takes off from the royal murders and the bewildering days that followed the tragedy, and then sweeps over the country's past and muddled present, ending in a trek through Maoist territory for a taste of what may lie ahead. She is in search of answers, as much for herself as for her readers. The book, *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*, was published in New Delhi in 2005 by Penguin Viking but has yet to reach the American market. That's a pity. It gives new dimension to the image of at least urban Kathmandu, its small intellectual circle in which Thapa moves, measured perhaps in the hundreds, and its largely unknown (to outsiders) middle class of prosperous business people and landed families, probably numbering only in the tens of thousands in a fast-growing city of about a million people, most of them poor. Divided by caste, diverted by consumerism, and unable to hold and expand the political center, the Nepali bourgeoisie has not had the impact on politics that its counterparts have in, for example, Sri Lanka or Thailand or Indonesia.

For many outsiders Nepal was always a magic kingdom, one of those countries able to charm, effortlessly, nearly all who come in contact with it: backpackers, wealthy travelers, trekkers, serious mountaineers, and seekers of truth and tranquility. It is the world's only Hindu kingdom, but it has always had a strong Tibetan Buddhist presence and thus a pleasingly eclectic culture. Many Nepalis of ethnic groups living in the hills and mountains beyond Kathmandu are traditionally Buddhist and more Tibetan than South Asian. In the Kathmandu Valley,

monasteries of various orders and teachings welcome adepts from around the world, serving as universally attractive centers of Buddhist learning. Lumbini, in the south, is the site of Gautama Buddha's birth.

When there is trouble in paradise, however, it can take time for old images to die. Tourists may know there are warnings about travel in Nepal, but these give little hint of the depth of the country's political collapse and the despair, confusion and powerlessness of its people. Thapa writes: "The last anyone knew, this was a pre-political idyll, a Himalayan Shangri-La good for trekking and mountaineering and budget mysticism."

That is the story the press and television reporters brought with them when they arrived to cover the royal murders. "The political quandaries facing the country before the massacre—and the multiple crises looming now—proved of little interest to the international media, who had descended upon Kathmandu to scoop the story of the duty-bound crown prince and his forbidden love," Thapa writes. "As they saw it, the massacre had taken place against a romantic medieval background. But for Nepali people, it had taken place in a field charged with politics." Thapa, with an artist's eye—she has degrees from the Rhode Island School of Design and the University of Washington's master of fine arts program, which she attended on a Fulbright fellowship—skillfully portrays a city hungry for facts and feeding instead on rumor, its people seeking information in the homes of friends or among crowds on the streets. "When trying to take a position—a reasonable position, one we can defend in our most dispassionate moments," she says, "most Nepalis will conclude that we just don't know what happened on the night of 1 June 2001. We lost the truth; we lost our history. We are left to recount anecdotes and stories, to content ourselves with myth."

Rising Alarm

If there are still those outside Nepal dealing in images of yaks, yetis and Mount Everest,

concern bordering on alarm is rising in foreign embassies in Kathmandu, in international organizations, including the United Nations, and in independent human rights groups and policy think tanks such as the International Crisis Group. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, a Canadian, has recently opened an office in Kathmandu to begin to address what she calls a "grave human rights crisis" involving abuses by both the Maoists and the Nepali security forces. The United Nations has assigned no less an expert than Ian Martin, the distinguished former secretary general of Amnesty International, to run the operation. In recent months, he has begun working to hold both rebels and the military accountable for crimes against their fellow Nepalis. The Maoists have engaged in kidnapping, torture, murder, bombings and the recruitment of children. The state security forces have been accused of disappearances and summary executions, as well as intimidation and arbitrary arrests of people in politics and the media.

When the U.N. human rights operation in Nepal is fully staffed, there will be 50 international rights experts, but they will be spread across an often inaccessible terrain in a country of more than 27 million people. Still, the willingness of King Gyanendra to allow the operation to exist at all reveals at least a first small opening and a recognition by the ruler that he needs help and cannot defy and dismiss foreign opinion. Since he assumed power after the murder of his brother, King Birendra, in 2001, he has shut down parliament, in 2002, and then, on February 1, 2005, declared a state of emergency and dismissed and jailed the last prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, leader of an anti-Koirala faction of the Nepali Congress. The state of emergency was later lifted, and a timetable for at least local elections announced, but civil rights remain severely curtailed.

The International Crisis Group, in a report in February 2005, said the king's action this time really did amount to a royal coup, even if his accession to the throne in 2001 did not, as many Nepalis assumed. "Gyanendra, who has dismissed three governments since 2002, claimed he was acting to 'defend multiparty democracy,'" the ICG said. "But his moves had every familiar and indefensible coup ingredient: party leaders were put under house arrest, key constitutional rights were suspended, soldiers enforced complete censorship, and communications were cut."⁴ Political parties from right to left were too weak and fractious to resist. The United Marxist Leninist Party, moreover, was thought to be considering going underground, raising fears among Nepalis that it could find some common ground with the armed Maoists during a period of political vacuum.

The United States is taking this possibility very seriously. In November, the U.S. embassy in Kathmandu issued a statement noting "with alarm" the media reports of possible alliances between existing political parties and the Maoists.⁵ The embassy statement went on to say that until the Maoists put down their weapons, negotiate seriously, and join the political mainstream, they "cannot be treated as a political party." Since the Russian Revolution, history has shown the strategic advantage revolutionaries gain by creating broad fronts that assuage the fears of citizens otherwise wary of essentially antidemocratic, violent movements. When the battle for power is over, purges of moderates follow.

Some of these qualms about Maoist intentions were heightened at the end of 2005, when the guerrillas, observing a ceasefire, and the now impotent political parties agreed to an alliance that appeared to create a broad opposition against the king. Details of the agreement are scant at this writing, but publicly the rebels and some politicians portrayed the accord as a step toward the restoration of Parliament and the

reworking of the Nepali constitution. It will take some time to assess what the accord means and how it will work, given the weakness of democratic political leadership and the apparent isolation of the monarchy, which many Nepalis still revere as an institution.

Regrettably, King Gyanendra's suppression of free speech hardly offers a clear alternative to Maoist absolutism. The king's assault on the Nepali media, which had been truly independent only since the 1990 democracy revolution, was described graphically by Kunda Dixit, founding editor of the *Nepali Times*, an English-language weekly newspaper in Kathmandu, in an interview with Julia Heming of the *Columbia Journalism Review's* online *CJR Daily*. The king turned on the press and broadcasting immediately after the royal coup of February 2005. "For the first two weeks, there were actual soldiers in the newsroom with guns, especially in radio stations, TV stations, Internet service providers and daily newspapers," Dixit said, adding that his weekly paper fared only slightly better: the soldiers weren't carrying weapons. Troops nonetheless had the power to censor anything, from news articles to cartoons and letters to the editor. Dixit said that he responded by leaving white spaces where words or images had been excised. White holes were then banned, so they were filled with "absurd editorials, or metaphorical stuff, or very indirect satire," he said. In the months that have passed since the king restricted civil liberties and freedom of speech, Dixit said, radio stations have become "extremely creative," setting up street corner studios where people can drop in and listen to the news, including reports about the king's activities. Websites operate from outside the country, though they are officially banned, including perhaps the most comprehensive available online news source about Nepal now, the International Nepal Solidarity Network.⁶

What is obviously absent from all but clandestine reporting or websites published

outside Nepal is coverage of human rights violations and other topics that touch on any aspect of national security. Violating regulations can bring severe punishment, Dixit said. "As you know from conflict situations all over the world," he told *CJR Daily*, "press freedom is the light that you can shine whenever there is a violation. If you don't have that light, rather sinister things go on in the darkness."⁷ In the absence of news, he and other Nepalis under pressure say, rumor again fills the void. Since Dixit's interview, King Gyanendra's government has passed a tough new media ordinance, which was being challenged boldly in the Nepali Supreme Court at this writing.

Very Little from Democracy

Against this background, a steady procession of officials from around the world have been arriving in Nepal for the proverbial "assessment of the situation." India has strengthened border security, fearing a spillover of Maoism into poor areas of northern India where radical leftist groups already operate, according to the International Crisis Group.⁸ Nepalis say that the traffic is two-way, with arms and money crossing into Nepal from India, where the Maoist leader Prachanda has been living. The border is long, however, so foot traffic moves freely, and any attempt by India to close the widely scattered road crossings has the effect of a punishing economic blockade. India has done that to exert pressure on Nepal for other reasons, but the tactic tends to backfire in several ways: igniting the embers of anti-Indian nationalism, creating an opening for greater influence by China, and leading to accusations that Indians are breaking international law protecting landlocked nations by cutting off Nepal's southern trade routes and access to ports.

The United States, which froze military assistance after Gyanendra seized political power but continues to aid Nepal in other ways, also has to tread carefully. Across

South Asia Marxist politicians and leftist social activists are quick to rail against Western influence and the evils of capitalism, as India's reformist economists, business leaders, and politicians rediscover too often. There is an undercurrent of distrust of Washington running through Nepali websites and blogs, and in the writings of intellectuals. James F. Moriarty, the United States ambassador to Nepal, alluded to this when he delivered a strong lecture to the Nepal Council of World Affairs last August. "I would like to explain why my country, the United States, has the temerity to speak out on issues such as this," he said, before launching into a searing (for a diplomat) indictment of Maoism, the royal government and the political parties. "The parties should make clear that they are ready to discuss all ideas in order to find a common path to a functioning democracy," he said. "That's what political parties do. They compromise, they discuss, they form coalitions, they work together to create policies and governments that fulfill the will of the people."⁹

Outsiders seem to be at a loss in finding concrete prescriptions for Nepal. There is no focal point around which to build a solution: politicians are discredited, the king is widely disliked and distrusted, and the Maoists do not (yet?) have the trust of enough people for serious negotiations on the country's future to begin. Moreover, the Maoists and the army are fighting "two different wars," says the International Crisis Group. "The Maoists are following a guerrilla warfare plan in which territorial control is of minimal significance, while the state has devoted most of its resources to static defense of towns and key infrastructure."¹⁰ History played out in other places seems doomed to repeat itself here: towns become rebel territory after dark, while the military, active by day, engages in body counting as a measure of success. Yet Maoists seem able to attack almost at will, and military casualties are thought to be much higher than admitted.

Inside Nepal, people still cling to the elusive hope of a political solution of some kind. But the phenomenal rise of the Maoist insurgency has driven home to Nepalis, especially the urban middle class, a sad lesson. "Though we in Kathmandu did not take this 'war' seriously, we understood instinctively why it had begun," Manjushree Thapa writes. "The People's Movement of 1990 had spread enlightenment aspirations throughout Nepal. But because the political parties were so occupied with their own power struggles, the majority of people had received very little from democracy."

In overpopulated, impoverished South Asia, that is a chilling judgment. A billion people in the region—the majority of them in India—live on the edge of subsistence in increasingly threatened natural environments and facing one of the world's fastest spreading HIV/AIDS infection rates. For many, especially in India, democracy has been the means of managing multiple challenges. Moreover, the present government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has also been more evenhanded and openhearted in dealing with the region's smaller nations. But the neighborhood seems to be getting more dangerous.

Nepali Maoists, playing on the hopelessness and weariness of the poorest people, have amply demonstrated their contempt for democracy, despite their recent attempt to align with mainstream political parties to oppose the unpopular king. In nearby Pakistan, under military rule, it is the Islamists who offer another, also undemocratic, way out of despair—as the Taliban once did in newly but shakily democratic Afghanistan. Sri Lanka has its reductionist totalitarians in

the Tamil Tigers and to some extent in the radical Sinhalese nationalists, among them radicalized Buddhist monks. Both sides appear willing to risk renewed violence across an ethnic and linguistic divide.

At the United Nations and in numerous foreign ministries, political analysts now fret over the return of leftist-populist regimes in Latin America and the political and social implosion of once vibrant African nations such as Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe. Political chaos in South Asia, with about a sixth of the world's people and two nuclear-armed nations, would be much worse. ●

Notes

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