

# Nepal's King Birendra relents on constitution, but tension still high

by Susan Maitra

On April 8, facing mounting popular pressure against the existing *rashtriya panchayat* (partyless democracy) system of government, Nepal's King Birendra agreed to delete the word "partyless" from the Nepalese Constitution and lift the 30-year-old ban on political parties in his mountain kingdom. Following the King's proclamation, the Nepali Congress-United Left Front (ULF) alliance called off its 50-day agitation for restoration of a multi-party democracy in the country. The King also reportedly promised to set up a committee to amend the present Constitution.

But the ink was barely dry on the royal proclamation when the glow of the popular victory began to fade. As of April 12, it was impossible to foretell what the coming days' negotiations between the King and his government and the opposition would produce. The precedents are not reassuring, and there is no doubt that the King still holds many cards.

King Birendra's decision to bow to popular demands followed a week or more of heightened confrontation. On April 6 the King's Israeli-trained security guards were given shoot-to-kill orders as a crowd of 500,000 people attempted to storm the palace. On April 7 army helicopters were swung into action in Patan in Lalitpur district and in the hilltop town of Kirtipur and Panga village to fire on people demanding a multi-party system. The strafing incident and shooting culminated a week-long intensification of the agitation, during which a number of *rashtriya panchayat* leaders quit the administration in protest over the government's excesses against the demonstrators. According to some estimates, 400-500 were killed.

In fact, the resignation of Nepalese Foreign Minister Shailendra Kumar Upadhaya on March 29, barely 24 hours before his scheduled meeting with an Indian delegation to conclude the trade and transit treaty which has been hanging fire for about a year, was the giveaway that the ruling *panchayat* setup would not be able to stem the rising tide. The Nepalese government also was confronted with a new set of allegations, not the least of which is the alleged clandestine arrival of some 50 truckloads of Chinese arms.

King Birendra then moved to sack Prime Minister Marich Man Singh Shrestha and his cabinet colleagues and name a former prime minister known to have connections to the Nepali Congress, Mr. Lokendra Bahadur Chand, to head a

new government. A last-ditch attempt by Prime Minister Chand to persuade Nepali Congress leader Ganesh Man Singh to call a halt to the agitation on the strength of Shrestha's ouster fell flat on April 6, and the die was cast.

## The power of the King

Despite King Birendra's agreement under pressure to install a multi-party system of government, a number of imponderables remain, the most basic of which is the issue of the monarchy itself. In December 1960, after a brief 19-month experiment with parliamentary democracy, Birendra's father, King Mahendra, used the absolute authority that comes with absolute monarchy to dismiss the elected Nepali Congress government, ban all political parties, and put the ruling party leaders in jail. Mahendra then established the royal dictatorship that came to be known as "partyless democracy." Birendra has never given any indication of wishing to dilute the absolute power he was bequeathed.

Although acting Nepali Congress president Krishna Prasad Bhattarai did state that his party wanted the Nepalese King to be a constitutional monarch, who would remain the focal point for different ethnic groups in the context of a parliamentary democracy, the commitment to constitutional monarchy may simply be rhetoric. Subsequent fawning by the same Mr. Bhattarai, that "the King is a very gentle person whose liberal disposition and his love for the people are truly deep," and "that is why he accepted our request for a multi-party system," indicates that the King is very much in the driver's seat.

One reason the King has remained the absolute arbiter of events in Nepal is that the Nepali Congress leaders are a group of urban elites with few rural contacts, and little or no base in rural Nepal where more than 80% of Nepalis live. In rural Nepal, where illiteracy and poverty reign supreme, the King is considered to be a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, a Hindu god. The opposition leaders are not in much of a position to challenge this. Virtually by definition as urban elites in a feudal society, they in one way or another owe their status to royal blessing.

## Déjà vu?

Once before, in 1974-80, there were efforts to break the royal stranglehold. On May 24, 1979, facing an onslaught

from urban-based student groups, King Birendra made a proclamation asking the population to choose between a "reformed" *rashtriya panchayat* system and a multi-party system. The proclamation was generally heralded as a turning point by the Nepali Congress leadership—"a forceful stroke by King Birendra," said one. The King "threw the dice against himself," exclaimed another.

What happened next is history. When the referendum was held in May 1980, the Nepalis voted to continue with the King's *panchayat* system. Political parties remained banned. Allegations of vote rigging were downplayed by the opposition, whose veteran leader, B.P. Koirala, adopted a new strategy of "national reconciliation." (The same Mr. Koirala had been jailed by King Mahendra as the first elected prime minister of Nepal.) Indeed, King Birendra's "forceful stroke" allowed him to continue with absolute monarchical rule for another decade.

With the April 8 proclamation, King Birendra has left ample room for himself to maneuver. The growing gap between popular aspirations and the government's intentions, as reported from Nepal, is testimony to that. On April 11, Nepal Foreign Minister Pashupati Singh Rana reminded one and all that all executive, judicial, and legislative powers still "emanate" from the King. Rana added that the present

government should not be disbanded, but simply expanded to include the Nepali Congress leaders and others. Already, at rallies in the capital Kathmandu, the charge had been sounded that the monarchy's concessions are merely cosmetic, and allegations are circulating that pro-democracy leaders have sold out to the palace.

It is likely that the Nepali Congress leaders will decline to press the absolute monarchy issue. They will also be unable to hang the blame for the death of hundreds of protesters on the King's neck. Birendra was careful to condemn the violation of law and order without making any provocative statements directed toward the protesters as such in recent weeks. Now it is clear that he has succeeded in directing the entire blame for excesses toward his former Prime Minister Shrestha—the protesters have been demanding his head—even though it is most implausible that the former prime minister was taking decisions on how to handle the escalating confrontation by himself.

Further, King Birendra is well-positioned now to provoke a split or splits within the opposition alliance between the Nepali Congress, allegedly pro-India and backed by some Indian politicians, and the ULF, allegedly pro-Beijing and previously participants and active proponents of *rashtriya panchayat*.



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