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MARCHING TOWARD DEMOCRACY
Nepali voters go to the polls

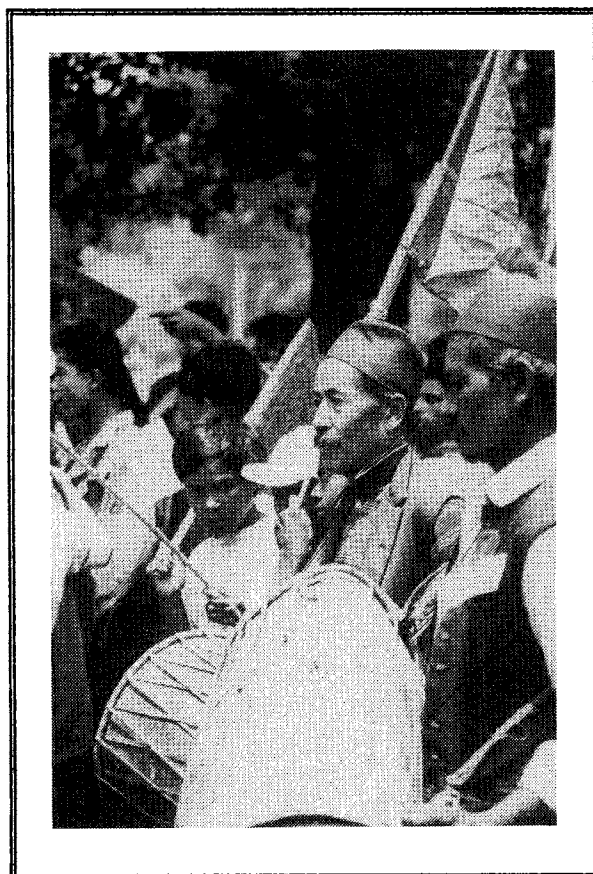
by Carol Rose

"Save democracy, change society," read a slogan scrawled on walls and buildings around Kathmandu.

The plea came as this Himalayan Hindu kingdom of 18 million people moved from an absolute monarchy toward constitutional democracy. On May 12, nearly 8 million voters went to the polls in Nepal's first multi-party elections in 32 years.

The biggest winner in the vote was the Nepali Congress Party, a centrist political party that garnered 110 of the 205 seats to capture a majority in the Lower House of Parliament. But in a surprising show of strength, the Nepal Communist Party won 65 seats, including four of the five constituencies in Kathmandu. And in an extremely close race, a Communist candidate defeated the acting Prime Minister and Congress Party president, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai.

I lived in Nepal for four months leading up to the elections. Although writing primarily about refugee issues, I found myself caught up in the excitement that gripped the nation as it took its first steps toward democracy.



Victory of a peoples' democratic revolution is celebrated by a drum corps on the streets of Kathmandu, the day after the May 12 elections.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on the cultures of South and Central Asia, with particular focus on refugees.

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From the princes to the people: A former Rana family palace is now the office of the Nepal election commission.

THE ROAD TO FREE ELECTIONS

Last year thousands of people marched through the streets of Nepal's major cities demanding multi-party elections and a new constitution to limit the power of their monarch, King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev. The popular street revolt lasted only four months. But the underground struggle for democracy had been going on for more than three decades.

Nepal has a long tradition of absolute rulers. The kings of the Shah dynasty ruled from 1769 to 1846. They were followed by a series of hereditary Prime Ministers of the Rana family, who controlled the kings and the country for nearly one hundred years. Rana rule came to an end in 1951, when Nepal's King Tribhuvan, backed by India, abolished Rana rule and announced that an interim government would rule Nepal until a representative assembly could be elected by the people.

This first experiment in democracy was threatened when King Tribhuvan died and his son, King Mahendra, reformed the constitution in 1958 to give the king supreme executive and emergency powers. Nevertheless, the Nepalis held their first multi-party elections in the spring of 1959, resulting in a victory for the nascent Nepali Congress Party, led by B.P. Koirala. Democracy collapsed twenty months later when King Mahendra exercised his emergency power to dissolve the parliament and threw Koirala and other Nepali Congress leaders in jail.

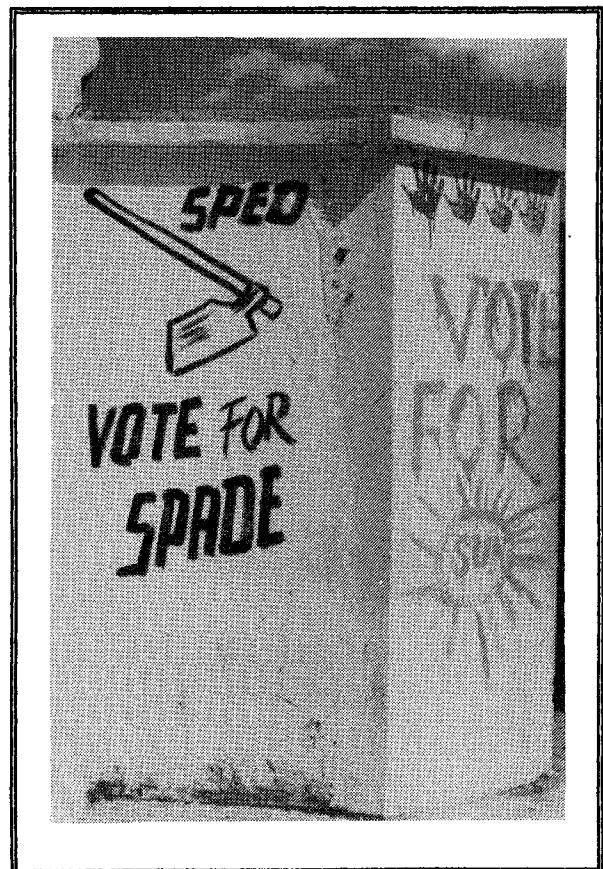
The King then abolished the parliamentary system, declaring it alien to Nepal's "tradition and genius." In its place, he created a partyless panchyat -- or village council -- system, in which the king appointed village leaders to represent palace interests. Annual tours of inspection by a royal commission ensured that panchyat leaders remained loyal to the king.

King Mahendra's son, Birendra, was enthroned in 1972 and continued to rule through the panchyat system until last year. King Birendra has long encouraged the popular belief that the king is a reincarnation of the Hindu God, Vishnu, who preserves all life and the world itself. Needless to say, Vishnu -- and thus the king -- is above the law.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Nepali Congress leaders who were not imprisoned continued to push for free elections, often from self-imposed exile in India. Communist parties also gained influence in Nepal during this time. Some factions were independent and some embraced Maoist ideology, but most had links to Moscow. The Communists embarked on a campaign to politicize school teachers in rural areas and university students in the major cities.

The Communists and the Nepali Congress Party joined forces in the spring of 1990, organizing mass street demonstrations demanding an end to the panchyat partyless system. Laborers, students, teachers, doctors, engineers, and other professionals joined the rallies, staged strikes, burned effigies of palace officials, and submitted petitions of protest to the government. One of the more imaginative stunts involved tying a cardboard crown to the head of a bitch puppy wearing a name tag of the queen. Several male dogs with "Birendra" name tags were then sent chasing her through the streets.

Serious violence erupted in major cities in early April 1990, when police and soldiers used clubs, tear gas, shot-

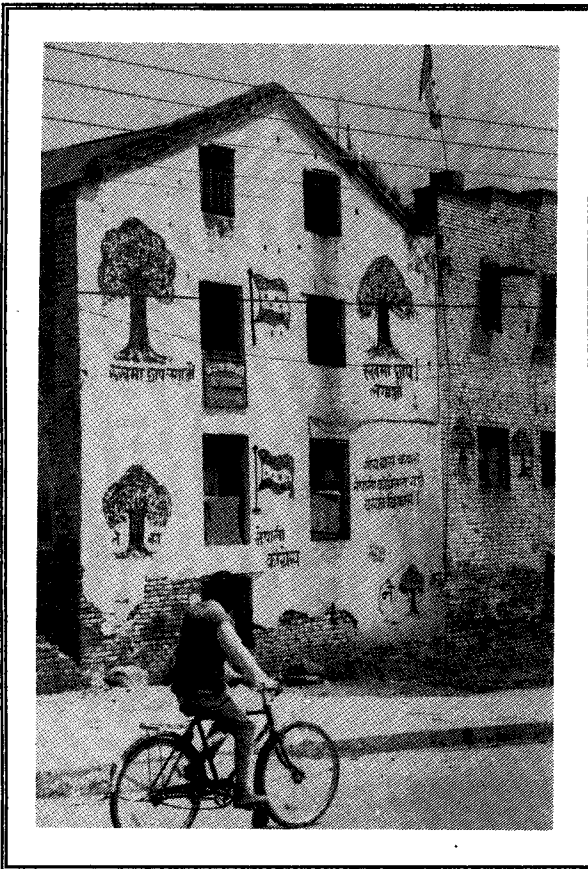


Graffiti urges voters to choose among the 26 political parties taking part in the election.

guns, and armored vehicles against the crowd. Demonstrators, in turn, attacked statues of the King and government buildings, smashed street lights and tore down power lines. Curfews were declared in major cities, and the airport was closed. When it was over, the official death toll stood at 56, but unofficial estimates put the number killed at well over 500.

In late April, King Birendra bowed to the combined pressures of popular protests and the threat of intervention by India. He agreed to a new constitution and multi-party elections. An interim government was formed, comprised of a coalition cabinet with representatives from the Nepali Congress Party, six Communist factions and the royal palace. Bhattarai was named the acting prime minister of the interim government. After 30 years of struggle, the people of Nepal at last had won the right to vote.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL



Paintings of trees, the symbol of the Nepali Congress Party, decorated many houses around Kathmandu.

In the weeks leading up to the election, virtually every wall, building and bus throughout Nepal was covered with colorful graffiti. Slogans in both Nepali and English urged voters to "VOTE COW" "VOTE SUN" or "VOTE TREE" -- symbols of the 26 political parties registered for the elections. Drawings of fish, trees, suns, cows and other signs of nature implored the country's largely illiterate population to elect representatives of their choosing. One villager told me he planned to vote for the "sun" party (Communists) because, "We can live without trees (Congress), but not without sunshine."

Shopkeepers and landlords initially attempted to paint over the signs, but soon learned that each fresh coat of paint provided a clean writing space for budding graffiti artists. Newspaper editorial pages decried the

"environmental degradation" of the graffiti, but I found the voters' enthusiasm refreshing compared with the apathy evident in many U.S. elections.

In addition to wall art, Nepal was besieged by political party vehicles roaming the streets day and night, blaring party slogans and playing Nepali folk music. This was retail politics at its finest: stump speeches in small towns, bicycle rallies through the cities, and buses loaded with pretty girls driving through the countryside in an effort to win the hearts and votes of the people.

"There was little in the way of media campaigning, since literacy rates in urban areas are no more than 29 percent, and as little as 19 percent in the rural areas," said Ramesh Upadbyay, campaign coordinator for the Congress Party.

Yet, the campaign also contained elements of high-technology. Prime Minister Bhattarai toured the country in an Army helicopter for four days just before the election -- a tactic reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson's early "whirly-bird" congressional campaigns in Texas. I watched as Bhattarai's helicopter hovered over a rally in the tiny town of Dhulikhel, east of Kathmandu. Thousands of villagers dashed from their shops and fields to watch the mechanical bird, reaching up as if to grasp its power.

In contrast to LBJ's Texas campaign, the helicopter stunt didn't translate into victory for Bhattarai. Said one villager: "We don't like him here -- he should go out to the villages and see how the poor people live."

Another display of high technology was arranged by Nepal's Chief Election Commissioner, Surya Prasad Shrestha, who attempted to connect the country with computers, telefax machines and high-speed printers in preparation for the vote. By election day, the



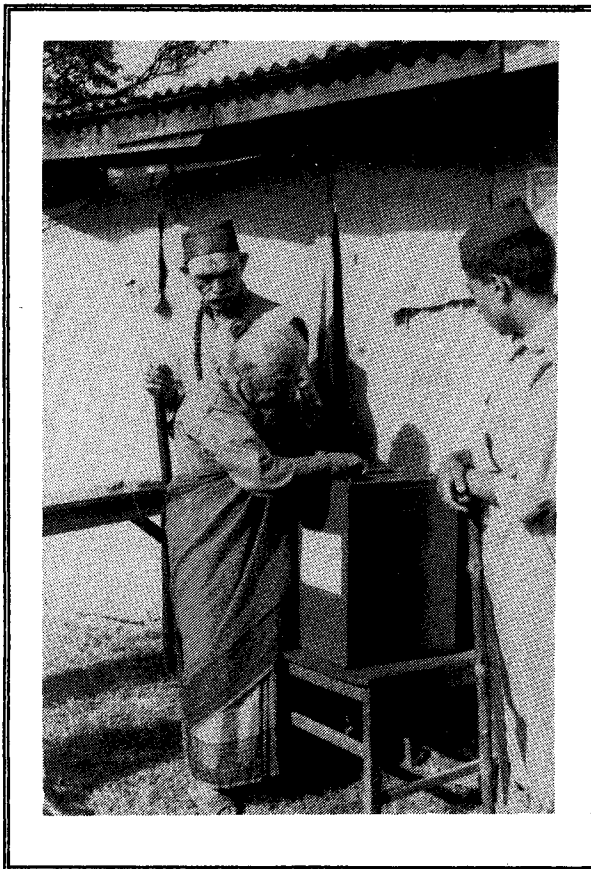
Political party symbols were painted everywhere. The sun represented the Communist party.

commission office was equipped with nearly \$1 million worth of electronic equipment, all donated by the Danish government. Prior to the elections, the only machine in the office had been a 35-year old RCA wireless one-way transmitter.

Despite the modernization effort, ballots were still counted by hand on election day and plans to use telefax machines to relay the results were hindered because only 50 of Nepal's 75 districts had telephone connections.

TO THE POLLS

Voters in the Kathmandu valley began forming lines hours before the polls opened at 8 AM on election day. Elderly couples, some leaning on canes for support, waited two, three or even four hours to vote for the first time in their lives. Young housewives carried babies on their backs as they entered the temporary tents that had been erected as voting booths.



"It's the first time I've voted in my life," exclaimed a 77-year old woman after she cast her ballot.

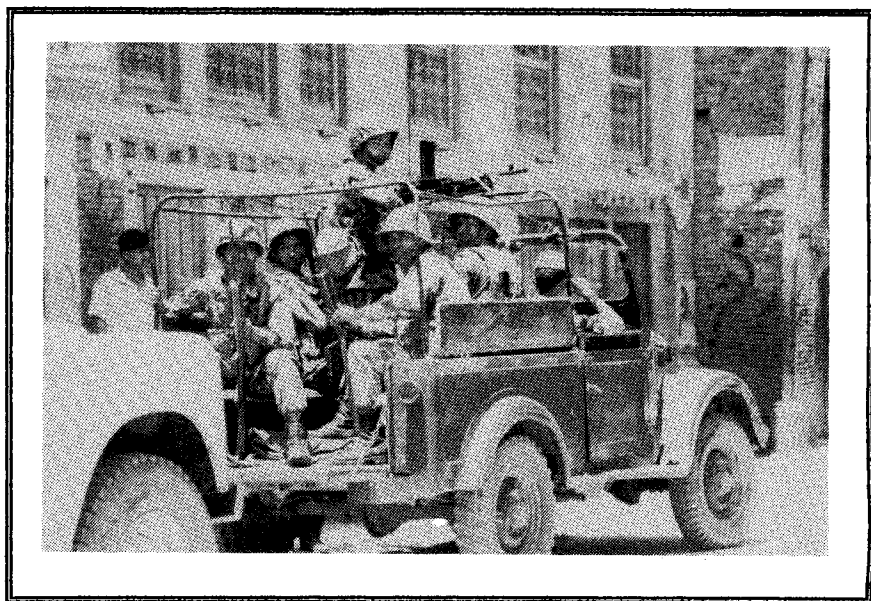
"I am voting for the party that I like," said a 77-year-old woman, who refused to disclose her name or party preference. Beaming with pride, she added: "This is the first time I have voted in my life."

Shops in all major cities were closed for election day, and the streets of Kathmandu were virtually empty of cars, in stark contrast to the frenzied days of campaigning that led up to the vote.

More than 75,000 policemen, including 42,000 temporary police, were called out to guard polling stations. More than 100,000 soldiers patrolled the streets in armored vehicles, despite a promise from the government to deploy troops only in the event of violence.

There were reports of minor skirmishes at dozens of the 14,000 polling stations, and a few polling booths were

closed on election day because ballot boxes were stolen, thrown in the river, or otherwise tampered with, forcing re-polling later in the week. Nonetheless, the official figure of six campaign-related deaths and 25 injuries on election day was extraordinarily low, particularly considering the violence that accompanies most elections in South Asia -- most recently India.



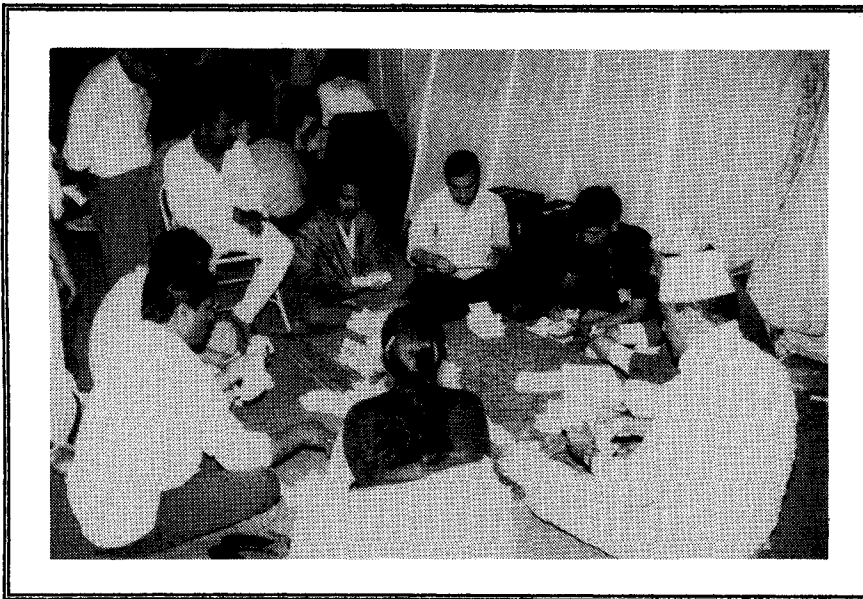
More than 175,000 soldiers and police officers were called out on election day.

"They have carried out this election with good humor, which is absolutely vital if the elections are to be a success and no bad feelings left behind," said Neil Thorne, a British Member of Parliament who spent the day as part of the International Observer Delegation. The delegation, comprised of 64 people from 22 countries, pronounced the elections "fair, free and open enabling the full expression of the will of the people."

In Kirtipur, a city of 16,000 on the outskirts of Kathmandu, voters stood in queues at a Hindu shrine to cast their votes. For most, it was the first time to vote.

"I am very happy to vote, even if I had to wait in the queue for five hours," said Surendra, 22, a business student at the local college who, like many Nepalis, has only one name. Surendra said he voted for the Nepali Congress Party. But he stood with arms linked around his friend Ram, age 20, who says he voted for the Communists.

"This town will divide half for Congress, half for the Communists," said Ram. "But it won't cause any problems. The election decides only the parliament, and not our relations with friends. The government may not last, but friendships will."



Despite nearly \$1 million in high-tech computers, the vote counting was done by hand.

THE UPSETS

The big losers in the election were the two parties representing the former panchyat system. Between them, they won only four seats.

But the biggest upset came when voters elected militant Communist leader Madan Bhandari, by a slim 750 vote

margin, over acting Prime Minister Bhattarai in Kathmandu constituency number one. The defeat probably spelled the end of Bhattarai's political career, a major blow to a man who had spent 14 years in prison fighting for democracy, and at least as many years building coalitions between Congress, the far-Left and the royalists.

To my surprise, most people with whom I spoke -- Communists and Congress Party supporters alike -- expressed grief and shock at Bhattarai's defeat. Many felt he was the only man who could build bridges between the extremist political elements within the country.

Jan Sharma, editor of the weekly Independent newspaper, attributed Bhattarai's defeat to his decision, as prime minister, to lower the voting age from 21 years to 18 years. "He thought the young people would be grateful to him for that," said Sharma. "But at least two and a half of the 3 million voters that were added to the voting lists ended up voting for the Communists."

In another surprise, voters rejected the candidacies of Mangala Devi Singh and Prakesh Man Singh, the wife and son of Nepali Congress Party leader, Ganesh Man Singh -- known also as the "Nepali Congress Supremo." Their defeat set Nepal apart from the South Asian tradition of family dynasties -- such as the Gandhis in India or Bhuttos in Pakistan. Said one Kathmandu tailor: "We voted against the Singhs because we don't want a family dynasty in Nepal."

The defeat of the Singh family and Bhattarai effectively wiped out the voices of moderation within the Congress Party leadership. Nepal's new prime minister is Girija Prasad Koirala, the General Secretary of the Nepali Congress Party and brother of the man elected prime minister in 1959, the late B.P. Koirala. The younger Koirala is known as a man of ruthless political tactics and virulent anti-Communist rhetoric. His repeated vows never to compromise with the Communists is a radical departure from the conciliatory approach of Bhattarai.

"Nepal is in for a lot of street politics and instability," predicted Rishikesh Shaha, a Nepali political historian and founder of the Human Rights Organization of Nepal. "The communist victory in Kathmandu will turn the Kathmandu valley into another Calcutta, with people resorting to street politics in opposition to the government.

"The collective wisdom of the people indicated a vote for a coalition between the Congress and the Communists," said Shaha. "Unfortunately, the leaders of the two parties will not respect that."

Leading the Communist opposition is Man Mohan Adhikari, a moderate elder-statesman. But the real power within the Communist party lies with Bhandari, who demonstrated his ability to mobilize the Nepali masses by defeating Bhattarai and then calling tens of thousands of young Communist supporters out into to the streets for mass rallies to celebrate his victory.

"We are responsible for the independence of the country, democracy and the aspirations and problems of the people," said Bhandari. "If the government goes against these fundamentals we will oppose it in the Parliament and in the streets."



The agony of defeat: Prime Minister Bhattarai flashes a victory sign after voting, only later to learn that he was defeated by the Communist party candidate.

CHANGING SOCIETY TO SAVE DEMOCRACY

Nepal's new government faces the daunting task of making democracy work. At the top of its agenda is economic development. Nepal remains one of the poorest nations in Asia, with a per capita annual average income of \$170. The United Nations ranks Nepal 17th from the bottom worldwide in terms of overall "human development" -- a measure that includes life expectancy, literacy, income, and "deprivation."

"The average illiterate peasant sees democracy as a burden: it has given him nothing in social terms but has exposed him to great social anarchy," said Bhekh Thapa, the former Nepalese ambassador to the United States. "In my district there is a general sense of dismay over the economic conditions, which seem unchanged despite the political changes of the last year. The people are starting to realize that they are doomed to a life of poverty."

One key to combating poverty will be maintaining good relations with India. In 1989, Delhi imposed an economic embargo in response to Nepal's purchase of weapons from China, creating widespread shortages of petrol, kerosene and other vital

About those refugees...

Refugee policy is determined by politics, so it isn't surprising that the results of the Nepali elections could have a negative impact on the future of the Tibetan, Chinese and Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal.

"With a strong Communist opposition, there is bound to be a change in attitude toward the refugees here," said Eugenio Ambrosi, a former protection officer with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Nepal. "The Communists may argue that anyone fleeing from China is not a refugee, but an escapee from the peoples' revolutionary justice."

The election results may also hamper international efforts to convince Nepal to sign the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, which is opposed by India and the Communist parties.

"We had a chance when the interim government was in power, because a lot of its leaders came from the human rights movement," said Ambrosi. "But the Congress Party has been so scared by its near-defeat in these elections that it probably won't fight the Communists on an issue like refugees."

commodities. A new trade and transit treaty between Nepal and India is expected to be negotiated in the next six months.

"The Indians will really like to see Koirala crack down on the Communists," said one Nepali Congress official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

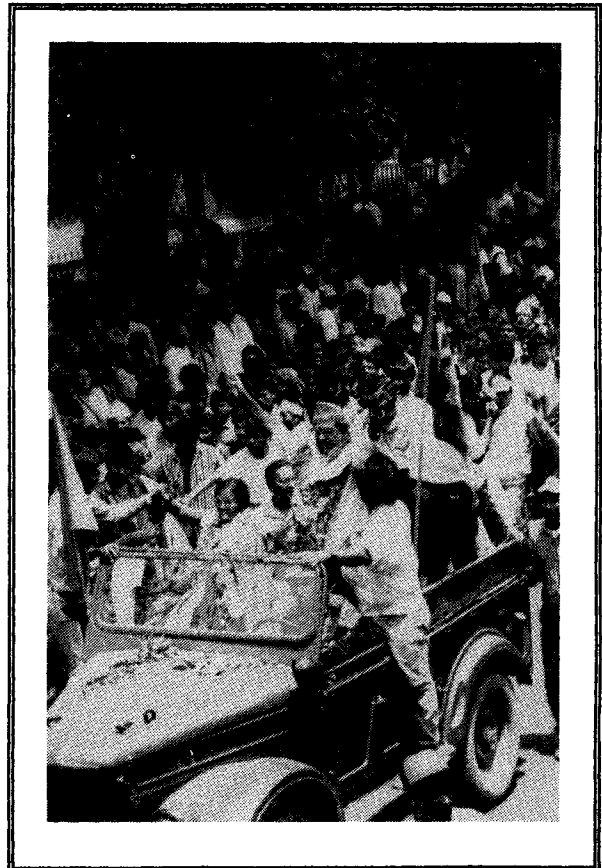
Finally, of course, there remains the question of the King. The new Constitution, promulgated last November, transformed the King from an absolute ruler into a Constitutional monarch. But human rights advocates insist the Constitution has failed to guarantee the external safeguards of democracy.

"Our biggest problem is the perpetuation of our traditional political culture," said Shaha. "People in Nepal are still being arrested without a warrant, and some are subjected to torture. The only difference is now I talk about it."

Although the lower House of Parliament was democratically elected, King Birendra retains the right to nominate ten of the 60 members of an upper house called the National Council. He also remains supreme commander of the armed forces, although the military officially will come under a National Defence Council.

Most importantly, the King -- like his father before him -- retains in the Constitution the right to declare a state of emergency in the event of a "grave emergency having arisen due to war or external aggression or armed revolt or extreme economic depression."

"The King still has some utility, because the army will not listen to anyone else," said Shaha. "Of course, he can do anything he likes. This is not a Constitution by the people, for the people. The King gave us this Constitution. He can just as easily take it away."



The thrill of victory: Communist party General Secretary Madan Bhandari mobbed by tens of thousands of supporters during his victory drive through Kathmandu.