

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Season of Change in Nepal

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Dear Peter,

When I heard the BBC* news that 32 people had been killed and more than 4000 jailed in riots in Nepal during the month of April, I was quite astonished. Students and their followers had been staging protest marches for several weeks, but the police I had encountered on campus appeared more to be loitering than patrolling. Although I recognized the laundered nature of the government-controlled news broadcasts, it seemed inconceivable to me that so much could have happened without comment or rumor in the narrow, busy streets of this small-town capital, Kathmandu. The BBC report seemed a bit exaggerated or, at best, premature at the beginning of May. Given the distressingly slow rate of development in Nepal, one of the world's poorest countries, the political protests that have rocked this generally peaceful Himalayan kingdom could not have been totally unexpected. Nevertheless, both citizens and government alike have appeared surprised at the speed with which the student-led protest escalated and engulfed the country.

The recent disturbances erupted on April 6, when police prevented student demonstrators from presenting a memorandum protesting the execution of former Pakistani Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto to Pakistani embassy officials in Kathmandu. The brutal mismanagement of the demonstrators by the police seemed to coalesce the otherwise factious student population. In response to the police action, the students called a protest strike and submitted a list of demands to the government. Superficially the solicited reforms appeared to pertain solely to academic matters, however, several items in essence demanded freedom of expression and self-determination. As vague rumors of student agitators with Soviet money were circulated, government supported groups pointed to the student strike as a "sign of a well-planned conspiracy to serve the interests of certain foreign stooges."

Within a week the strike had spread to some 80 campuses throughout the country; secondary and primary schools also closed. Angered by consumer goods shortages, rising prices, and increased taxes, merchants, laborers and peasants joined the students in their protest marches. The demonstrators, labeled terrorists and miscreants by the government press, marched on customs and tax assessors offices, banks and police posts. Confrontations between edgy

* British Broadcasting Corporation. Broadcasts are received via short-wave radio from the United Kingdom.

police and eager protesters often erupted into violence with the result that many were injured and several killed. Various sources estimated that from 150 to 300 or more persons were jailed. In addition to demonstrators, leaders of several banned political parties and intellectuals were arrested and held in preventive detention. Nepali students and sympathizers reportedly staged demonstrations before the Royal Nepali Embassies in New Delhi and Moscow.

In the first week of May, under the pressure of widening protest and increasing violence, Nepal's 33-year-old King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah removed the Minister of Education, Pashupati S.J.B. Rana, and established a special Royal Commission to investigate charges of police brutality and other student grievances. In addition, he ordered the release of many political prisoners and the resumption of classes, and he granted the students permission to form an independent student union. These concessions failed, however, to satisfy the students and their followers who demanded the dismissal of Prime Minister Kirti Nidhi Bista and his cabinet. Demonstrations continued throughout the country. Peasants and agricultural laborers, frustrated in their attempts to secure jobs and food in the current drought and denied loans by the rich farmers, organized themselves and forcibly appropriated rice and maize from the latter's storage bins, reportedly pausing to issue receipts. In the Terai, more than 3000 students, government employees, shopkeepers and peasants demonstrating at the local land revenue office were charged by police leaving 8 dead and 160 injured. In this instance protesters reportedly included angry peasants who, having been resettled by the government in an area with inadequate water supplies and building timber, had been severely punished when they attempted to cut timber in a nearby forest reserve. Shopkeepers in Kathmandu blamed food shortages on Indian truck drivers striking in sympathy with Nepali protesters. On May 23 demonstrators set fire to government-owned newspaper offices, government airline automobiles and a petrol pump in central Kathmandu. The army was called to quell the the violence.

The next morning over Radio Nepal King Birendra announced that a national referendum would be held to decide whether to retain the present Panchayat* system with suitable reforms or to institute a multi-party system of government. The following week Prime Minister Bista resigned and the Council of Ministers was dissolved. On the recommendation of the national legislature, His Majesty appointed Surya Bahadur Thapa to the post of Prime Minister. The King also established a National Election Committee to supervise the referendum, and as a prerequisite to a "fair and impartial" referendum, he lifted the ban on public meetings, demonstrations and freedom of expression, urging all to express themselves "freely and fearlessly ...without restraint." Nevertheless, authorities made it clear that it is considered "undemocratic to abuse or show disrespect to anybody in the course of the campaign" and that "freedom of expression

* A "partyless" hierarchial form of representative government assemblies; the system takes its name from a traditional Nepali local government council.

should not be used to undermine the Crown." Existing constitutional and legal provisions prohibiting the formation and operation of political parties were left unchanged.

The royal proclamation came, I think, as quite a surprise to most people. Staunch royalists expressed that His Majesty should have granted a new political system to the people without deferring to a referendum. In most circles the King's action was praised. Although reports as to the true extent of King Birendra's participation in governmental decision making are vague and contradictory, it is said that having been educated in England, Japan and the United States, the King is keenly aware of the shrinking scope for monarchs in today's world. Certainly the events in nearby Iran over the winter did not pass without notice and comment in Nepal.

For the most part the student demands have been satisfied or scheduled for review by the ad hoc Royal Commission constituted in early May. Except for a small group of students protesting their fellows yet detained on criminal charges, most have returned to classes. Emboldened by the student successes, striking workers in both public and private sectors have demanded wage increases of from 50 to 100 percent plus many fringe benefits. Political leaders warned strikers that reactionary elements might use such disruptions as cause to postpone the referendum. The relaxation of government repression of dissent has encouraged peasants to come forward with their grievances as well. Representatives from various regions of the country presented to the Prime Minister lists of locally perceived development needs. The leader of the banned All Nepal Peasants Association called for an end to forced "volunteer" labor contributions, provision for fuelwood supplies, refund with interest of compulsory savings, abolition of the Panchayat Development and Land Tax, reduction of bank interest rates to farmers (reportedly 14 percent to farmers even at subsistence level), and the arrangement for tenancy rights to be saleable and inheritable. Business leaders also are complaining of arbitrary tax assessments and prohibitively high import duties on crucial industrial inputs.

Of course the most vociferous group to take advantage of the government's new liberalism has been the politicians. With the previous attitude being essentially that any expression of discontent was an attempt to overthrow the regime, the political opposition has been severely muffled for the past 19 years. Only recently B.P. Koirala, leader of the largest opposition group, the Nepali Congress Party, has been permitted to return from exile in India. Spokesmen from the still outlawed political parties have emerged to acclaim the wisdom of the King and exhort the people to vote for a multiparty system and the restoration of democracy. Political posters and graffiti, the vast majority in favor of a multi-party system, have become popular entertainment for the evening strollers. The widespread corruption and arbitrary administration of government under the Panchayat system provide ample fodder for political speech writers. It is interesting to note that the destruction of the forests has been highlighted as one example of the present government's gross mismanagement of the nation's resources. Several of the opposition leaders have called for dissolution of the present government and establishment of an interim government in order to prevent undue influ-

ence on the electorate by the incumbents. Many local, regional and national government representatives have resigned their positions to speak out in favor of a multi-party alternative. Leaders of the several revived political parties appear cautious in their criticism of the present administration, and perhaps wisely so. On June 9, the editor of the Nepal Post was arrested for printing some unmentionable, and the June 11 international edition of Newsweek, which carried an article on recent political events in Nepal, was banned. On the brighter side, one notes that the government-controlled newspapers now print a more politically diversified group of articles, and, moreover, they no longer use solely derogatory terms in referring to government opposition leaders. Government-owned Radio Nepal is much more conservative in its reporting, however, and has been widely criticized for its obvious bias. With roughly 85 percent of Nepal's population illiterate, the radio is a very important propaganda tool. Multi-party proponents are demanding the opportunity to air their views over the government-controlled radio network.

Government supporters point out that the nation's territorial sovereignty and integrity have been preserved under the present partyless Panchayat system. Appealing to xenophobic sentiments reminiscent of the pre-1951 Rana regime, they accuse multi-party supporters of being backed by foreign money. They argue that under a multi-party system the government would be unable to maintain the present foreign policy of nonalignment, and coincidentally the enormous influx of foreign aid money. Furthermore, they posit that the conflict inherent in the multi-party system would divide the nation and divert energy and resources from the important task of national development. Pro-Panchayat workers have split roughly into three factions: those who believe that being graced by the King, the present system need not entertain any alterations or alternatives; those who believe that a multi-party structure could be accommodated by the present system; and those who favor a broad spectrum of reforms. A National Panchas* Convention was held in Kathmandu at the end of June. Convention participants proposed many political and economic reforms, which appear very similar to demands being made by various political and socio-economic groups. Should these proposed reforms become law within the next few months, they very likely will suffer the same torpid fate as previous legislative attempts to remedy other social ills in Nepal. Even though laws might be responsive to the needs and desires of the people, as long as governmental officials are not responsible to the people, the administration of law and justice will remain arbitrary and selective, heavily influenced by money and power.

When the referendum was announced the press hinted that the King would like the voting to be held as soon as possible, perhaps in early fall. Voting lists have yet to be prepared, however, and some 22,000 people wait for government bureaucratic machinery to process their applications for citizenship. Although the National Election Committee has fixed the voting age at 21, many groups are calling for it to be lowered to 18 or 16, the legal age for various other purposes.

* Member of a Panchayat assembly.

Government opposition leaders are demanding that all political prisoners be released and that exiled political workers be allowed to return to Nepal and vote in the national referendum. A myriad of excuses for postponement of the referendum have surfaced, for example, the impossibility of travelling to polling places during the summer monsoon or the winter snows and the unwillingness of farmers to leave during planting, harvesting or major festivals. Consequently, the proposed date of the referendum has been pushed to April or May 1980, at the earliest. This delay should give the multi-party supporters sufficient time to canvass the country and express their views. To be sure, they will not be met with open arms in all parts of the nation. Many rural people are fiercely loyal to the King whom they believe to be the protective Hindu god, Vishnu, incarnate. When it was ousted from power 19 years ago, the Nepali Congress Party was not universally popular in Nepal. Since the inauguration of the Panchayat system, reference to the Congress Party has become a familiar curse in the hill regions.

The extension of the pre-referendum period could favor the Panchayat defenders. Incumbents should have ample opportunity to make amends and to cultivate a fear of the unknown in the prospective electorate. Already the King has directed the new Council of Ministers to review the tax system and to take appropriate measures to make it "scientific, simple and equitable." In presenting the budget for fiscal year 1979/80, Prime Minister Thapa announced a reduction in income and property taxes as well as import duties on many consumer goods. Almost all of the items affected, however, are enjoyed exclusively by the middle and upper classes. The needs of the rural poor, some 95 percent of the population, are more in the category of food grains, fuelwood, building materials, irrigation and drinking water systems, bridges, trails and health posts; these are a little harder to come by on short notice. Indeed, it was reported that 22 percent of the original development budget for the 1978/79 fiscal year remained unspent at the end of that period. Reasons for the disparity were given as the shortage of construction materials and bureaucratic delays. Fear of losing one's job may spur some government administrators to action in the coming year; surely some will work more diligently at securing fortunes for their retirement. Recently the government has been rocked by scandals implicating government officials at the highest levels in the overinvoicing of goods in order to gain export promotion award money. Historically authority has been centralized in the upper echelons of the government bureaucracy, where at present political turmoil and apprehension are the greatest. I expect, therefore, that governmental decision making and development programs will proceed at an even slower pace than usual. The much needed program in community forestry, which is based on the principle of local panchayat-delineated forest lands, may be substantially delayed by the recent rash of resignations and indecisiveness among the panchas.

For the average individual on the street, or mud path as is more likely the case in Nepal, life has changed very little in the past three months. The vagaries of the weather are of far more importance to this largely agrarian society than those of the politicians in Kathmandu. There is a story told that many years ago the father of the present king went into the hills to ask his people what they thought of the newly instituted Panchayat system of

government. The peasants answered that, indeed, their lives were much better under the new system. They went on to explain that after the institution of the new system, the individuals who had been exploiting them had been appointed to administrative positions in far-off Kathmandu and, thus, were no longer around to abuse them. Apparently the appetite of the government has grown substantially since then, for despite the still very primitive condition of the trails in most of the country, the tax man has found his way back to the villages.

The student revolt was fortuitous in its timing; it came at the end of the agricultural year when rural foodstocks are low and people are apt to be hungry. As the pre-monsoon maize crop withered in the unusually dry spring weather, shopkeepers hoarded various consumer goods in hope that the government would lift the price ceilings. Rising prices and food shortages were blamed on the increasing cost of petroleum products and political and labor problems in neighboring India, through which almost all goods for Nepal must pass. Taxes had been increased in the face of recent scandals involving the misappropriation of development funds, adulteration of government-controlled products, and financial misconduct at all bureaucratic levels. The common citizen, both disappointed and frustrated, readily sympathized with the protesting students who provided the boldness and leadership necessary to challenge the administration. The weather, though bad for agriculture, was ideal for marching.

Unfortunately what may result from the postponement of the referendum may be the waning of the political fervor generated by the student strike. A desensitization tends to occur after one is aurally assaulted month after month by bombastic political rhetoric. In the sideshow that is politics it too often seems that over the years the characters remain the same and only the costumes change as is politically expedient. In Nepal, politics appears to be largely the pastime of the urban elite. For the vast majority of the population the most immediate and engrossing concern is finding sufficient food and fuel for the family. All the fine phrases emanating from Kathmandu seem to have done little to ease this chore for the average man and woman in Nepal. If this year's monsoon is as dry as predicted, food shortages will be even more severe next year. The diminished and degraded forests will be unable to provide the reserves of food which in the past have sustained the rural population in times of poor harvest. In such case, the recent riots in the Terai may augur a political future for Nepal which makes this spring appear mild by comparison.

Sincerely,



Deanna G. Donovan
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