

Royal Regression and the Question of a Democratic Republic in Nepal

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People's hopes have already been massively compromised by the violence brought on by the Maobaadi insurgency, but now they have the added misfortune to be led in an opposite and equally unrealistic direction by a king who misreads the demands of the

21st century. However, Nepalis still have it in their power to decide for themselves, and to reverse the regime change introduced by Gyanendra. If the monarchy will not loosen its grip on the state, the state will have to be pried away from it. **EPW**

Royal Regression and the Question of a Democratic Republic in Nepal

It is a matter of serious concern that even two months after the palace coup in Nepal, the democratic forces have not been able to come up with an effective and coordinated plan of resistance against the autocratic monarchy. In this context, the question of an anti-monarchy common minimum programme acceptable to all, including the parliamentary and revolutionary forces and international community, is important. It is the considered view of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) that the programme of election to a representative constituent assembly and institutionalisation of the democratic republic is best suited for the purpose. No one should be in doubt that without the complete abolition of the archaic institution of feudal monarchy and its puppet, the Royal Nepal Army, no form of democracy can be secure in Nepal.

BABURAM BHATTARAI

In his famous work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx had said: "Hegel observes somewhere that all great incidents and individuals of world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." This was drawing a parallel between the coup of 1851 by Napoleon's nephew Louis Bonaparte, who had crowned himself as Napoleon III, and the original Napoleonic coup of 1799. Of course, this was written in a satirical sense.

A similar law of Hegelian dialectics seems to be in operation in the history of Nepal too. While the father, King Mahendra, had staged a military coup on December 16, 1960 against the first parliamentary democracy established after 1950 to centralise all power in himself, now the son, King Gyanendra, has staged another military coup on February 1, 2005 against the second parliamentary democracy restored after 1990 and centralised

all state power in himself. However, for the politically enlightened ones, it is not difficult to see beneath the surface that this episode of February 1 is merely a continuation or culmination of the episode of June 1, 2001, when the relatively more weak or liberal King Birendra, along with his entire family, was butchered and a new dynasty ushered in by Gyanendra. This way, the 'First February' of the Nepalese history seems to be a carbon copy of the 'Eighteenth Brumaire' of the French history; but it is yet to be seen whether it will be more 'tragic' or more 'farcical'.

Essence of Royal Regression

In his every public utterance after the coup, including the 'royal proclamation' of February 1, Gyanendra has laboured hard to sell the theory that his present move is designed to restore 'peace' and consolidate 'multi-party democracy' by exorcising the ghost of 'terrorism' (i.e., the ongoing revolutionary people's war led by

the CPN (Maoist), and this is meant only for a definite time frame of the next three years. While talking to a group of selected media persons on February 24, he took pains to project himself as the real messiah of 'democracy', the exorcist of 'terrorism' and has demanded of the parliamentary political parties and the entire members of the international community to cooperate with him in this grand venture against 'terrorism'. Thus, he has sought to project himself as the true follower of the US President George W Bush in the international crusade against 'terrorism' and begged everybody to grant legitimacy to his autocratic military regime at least on that count. Of course, he seems to have learnt a few lessons from General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

However, such political gimmicks are not cutting much ice among the masses, as Gyanendra has a tainted image as the hardliner autocrat even within the palace since his father's and brother's days and is particularly hated among the public for the palace massacre of June 1, 2001. After his induction of the old palace stooges of known anti-democratic persuasions like Tulsi Giri and Kirti Nidhi Bista, as his principal political associates and his abduction of all fundamental and democratic rights of the people with the contrywide declaration of emergency, the essential nature of Gyanendra's despotic military rule has been thoroughly unmasked. Despite his incessant parroting about his commitment to 'multi-party democracy' and 'constitutional monarchy', all his actions so far including the crackdown on political parties and their leaders, free media and human rights activists and a blatant trampling upon the limited democratic provisions of the old constitution, leave one in no doubt that the supine parliamentary democratic system has been snuffed out and the autocratic monarchy restored in Nepal.

Hence the question arises: How could the limited bourgeois democratic system established after 1990 be abolished and the autocratic monarchy restored so smoothly? Should not the wheel of history move forward rather than backward? For the correct answers to these questions, one has to grasp the laws of social development in an objective manner and to evaluate the weaknesses and limitations of the chronically inform parliamentary system after 1990.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that struggle between social classes provides the basic motive forces of societal development. The present Nepalese society is in a

semi-feudal and semi-colonial stage and is a multi-class society. The principal struggle is among the feudal, the bourgeois and the proletarian classes. All the three principle contending classes have their allies, too. The traditionally dominant feudal class has the comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisie with it; the small and weak bourgeois class has a section of the rural and urban petty-bourgeois class with it; and the proletariat has the vast number of poor peasants and semi-proletariat with it. This basically triangular class contention is increasingly turning into a bipolar contention after the initiation and development of revolutionary people's war since 1996. In other words, according to the law of class struggle and social development, the parasitic reactionary classes are polarised on one side under the leadership of the most capable and strong class among themselves, and on the other side are rallied the working and the progressive classes under the leadership of the most advanced class, the proletariat. As the monarchy representing the feudal and comprador and bureaucratic bourgeois classes is historically the strongest representative of the reactionary classes in Nepal, the parasitic classes most adversely affected by the people's war, have been increasingly rallying under the leadership of the monarchy. This is the rationale and essence of the current royal regression or the restoration of autocratic monarchy in the social class terms. The regressive march of the reactionary classes in opposition to the progressive march of the working classes is perfectly in keeping with the dialectical law of social development.

Secondly, viewing from a further political angle, it should be acknowledged that the inherent defects and weaknesses of the bourgeois parliamentary democracy established in Nepal after 1990 and the general infirmity and incapacity of the middle strata and forces also provided an objective basis for the feudal autocratic regression. Historically, the major parliamentary political forces, viz, the Nepali Congress and latter the revisionist UML, enjoy no independent class base of their own, tend to represent a hodge-podge of class forces ranging from the feudals and comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisie to the petty-bourgeoisie and constantly take vacillating and conciliatory political positions. Contrary to this, the monarchy traditionally draws its strength from the prevailing feudal property and cultural relations, and principally, from its monopoly hold over the

Royal Nepal Army (RNA). To be more specific, the political change and the Constitution of 1990 did not properly settle the question of 'state sovereignty' traditionally claimed by the monarchy and left the final 'state authority' and strategic control over the RNA in the hands of the monarchy. This 'historical blunder' (to paraphrase Jyoti Basu from India!) paved the way for the monarchy to gradually gobble up Parliament and the Constitution and consummate the current royal regression. Moreover, the parliamentary forces during their 12-year long rule did nothing to bring about a progressive transformation in the traditionally feudal and increasingly comprador and bureaucratic capitalist socio-economic and cultural base of the society. In the later period, particularly along with the rapid development of the people's war, their class and political base got further eroded. As a result, the upper strata of the society which had backed the parliamentary forces after the political change of 1990 gradually returned back to the fold of the monarchy, and the lower strata and a section of the middle strata naturally got polarised around the people's war. This dilemma of the reformist parliamentary forces has been summed up in party chairman Prachanda's recent people's war anniversary statement thus: "Ultimately, the so-called royal proclamation of February 1 has not only exposed the irrelevance of reformism in the Nepalese politics, but also shattered the collective lethargy of the parliamentary political forces."

Thirdly, from a military point of view, this action of total centralisation of the old state authority in the absolute monarchy can be seen as an attempt of the moribund reactionary classes to wage a final battle with the revolutionary forces in the ever mounting class war in the country. In view of the recent declaration of the CPN (Maoist) to lead the nine-year old people's war into the final and decisive stage of strategic offensive, it is not unnatural, for the frightened reactionary classes to attempt to wage a final battle of life and death under the direct leadership of the monarchy, which has assumed supreme commandship of the RNA since its inception. In the recent past the pathetic showing of the RNA in almost every real battle with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been blamed by certain quarters on the contradictions of de jure political leadership of the parliamentary forces and de facto leadership of the monarchy over the RNA. Also, it is not hard to understand

the super military ambitions of Gyanendra to project himself as the great saviour of his tottering feudal and comprador-bureaucratic bourgeois class. Nevertheless, as any common student of military science would know, the victory or defeat of a particular army ultimately depends more on its social class base and the political goal rather than on the leadership prowess of its commander, and in that sense the ultimate defeat of the RNA should be a foregone conclusion and Gyanendra's dream would be mere chimera.

Role of the International Forces

In the present-day world of imperialist globalisation any internal political event has more international ramifications than ever before. Hence the February 1 royal regression has generated worldwide reactions, and all major world and regional powers and organisations, including the UN, the US, the UK, the EU, India, China and others have issued public statements on the question. Surprisingly none of the major international players have supported Gyanendra's regressive steps so far. Not only that the major powers like the US, the UK, the EU and India, which have been the principal props for the reactionary regimes in Nepal in the past, have publicly opposed the current developments, and others like China, Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc, have commented upon the events as 'internal affairs of Nepal'. The most significant international development has been the suspension of military aid by India and the UK (the US also appears to be toeing the same line) and suspension of 'development aid' by a number of EU countries. International human rights organisations such as the Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, etc, have publicly denounced the royal regime for its rampant violations of human and democratic rights of the people. Thus the autocratic royal regime has been totally isolated from the international community so far, which is a good omen for the democratic movement.

However, the despotic regime is desperately seeking to exploit two issues to gain international support for itself. The first is the 'anti-terrorism' card, and the second, the 'geopolitical' card. The hackneyed 'anti-terrorism card, much exploited after September 11, 2001 by all and sundry petty dictators and reactionary regimes of the world, has already lost much of its original steam and is yet to be seen how it will fare

in Gyanendra's case. But one can be fairly certain that the enlightened world public opinion will not be easily hoodwinked by the 'anti-terrorism' claims of a person of Gyanendra's ilk, whose hands are blood-stained in the infamous palace massacre and who has now launched a countryside reign of military terror against the people by suspending all political and fundamental rights. Nevertheless, as all the values and norms in a class-divided society are governed by class interests, it will not be surprising if some of the reactionary rulers of the world would ultimately back the regressive royal regime, overtly or covertly.

As far as the 'geopolitical' card of the country's strategic positioning between the two superstates of China and India is concerned, Gyanendra's attempts to repeat the skilful diplomatic manoeuvring of playing one neighbour against the other as practised by his father, Mahendra, in the specific cold war context of the last century cannot be expected to bear much fruit in the changed situation of international balance of forces in general and India-China relations in particular. The recent coming together of the US and India and

their coordinated policy against royal regression may tempt Gyanendra to play the China card. He has given enough hints of this by appointing the old royalist Kirti Nidhi Bista with a known pro-China tilt as one of his principle associates in the government. Similarly, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with traditional contradictions with India, may provide some breathing space for the royal regime; some indications of which have already come from the Pakistani ambassador in Kathmandu. However, given the extremely shaky position and uncertain future of Gyanendra himself, it is hard to believe that any of the neighbours will go beyond diplomatic niceties to extend him any substantial material help. Similarly, on the part of the proletarian revolutionaries they should be prudent enough to practice strategic firmness and tactical flexibility in the matters of diplomatic relations particularly with the immediate neighbours.

Another noteworthy factor in recent days is the indication of some positive change in the attitude of major international and regional powers towards the revolutionary forces in Nepal. Due to their own distorted

class outlook and interests, these major powers in the past used to regard the monarchy and the parliamentary forces as the so-called 'two pillars of stability', and they were seen working hard to bring about a grand alliance between the two against the revolutionary democratic forces. Now they seem to be increasingly veering round a 'three pillar' theory, including the revolutionary forces; which is, of course, a step forward. But the historical necessity and the new objective reality of the country is that the new 'two pillars' of parliamentary and revolutionary democratic forces join hands to uproot the outdated and rotten third 'pillar' of monarchy. The CPN(Maoist) has already made a policy decision to this effect, which is reflected in the recent anniversary statement issued by the party chairman Prachanda.

Question of a Democratic Republic

After the royal regression of February 1, there have been some important developments in the internal political situation. Whereas earlier national politics was divided into three streams of the monarchy,

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parliamentary democracy and revolutionary people's democracy, now it is gradually getting polarised into two broad streams of the monarchy and democracy. The leaders, cadres and supporters of parliamentary democracy have now seen through the anti-democracy manoeuvring and divide-and-rule policy of the monarchy and their collective ire against the monarchy has sharpened more than ever before. Though there are sponsored public rallies and statements in favour of the autocratic monarchy on a daily basis, none of the known political parties or their leaders have openly endorsed the royal move so far. While the royal regime has laboured hard to propagate that the harsh autocratic measures are directed only against the 'terrorists' (i.e., Maoist revolutionaries), the people have increasingly realised that they are against all the democratic forces. Similarly, almost all the members of 'civil society', media persons, human rights organisations, professional organisations, etc, have openly come out against the royal coup. This is obviously a good sign for the future of democracy in the country.

However, it is a matter of serious concern that even after more than a month since the coup the democratic forces have not been able to come up with an effective and coordinated plan, programme or mechanism of resistance against the autocratic monarchy. The CPN (Maoist) attempted to provide initial tempo to the resistance movement by organising a three-day 'Nepal bandh' and a 15-day transportation blockade in February, and is planning further mass-mobilisation and military-action programmes in the coming months. The parliamentary forces did organise some propaganda activities from India and symbolic public rallies within the country, and are planning peaceful mass-arrest programmes for the future. But the desired sharp attacks against the monarchy in a unified manner, firstly, amongst the parliamentary forces and, secondly, between the parliamentary and revolutionary democratic forces, has not materialised so far. Whereas the Nepali Congress has come out more sharply against the monarchy, the so-called 'leftist' UML has made a relatively muted response against the royal coup. This has naturally raised some apprehensions among the masses whether a new 'Rayamajhi' trend (i.e., the capitulation of the then general secretary of the CPN, Keshar Jang Rayamajhi, to the monarchy in the 1960s) is in the offing. However, after so much

bloodbath the situation has undergone a sea change since then. Hence, even if a few Rayamajhis from the left camp and a few Tulsi Giris from the Nepali Congress camp arise, the overwhelming majority of the leaders and cadres of the political parties and the general masses of the people are likely to fight till the end against the autocratic monarchy. Moreover, with the presence of the revolutionary PLA to take on the monarchist RNA, and the more favourable international situation than ever to fight against the absolute monarchy, a new objective ground has been prepared for the democratic political forces to mount a unified assault against the monarchy so as to sweep it away for ever.

Common Minimum Programme

In this context the question of an anti-monarchy common minimum programme and slogans acceptable to all the democratic forces, including the parliamentary and revolutionary democratic forces and the international community, has become pertinent. It has been the considered view of the CPN(Maoist) that the programme of election to a representative constituent assembly and institutionalisation of the democratic republic is best suited for the purpose. The old slogan of restoration of the parliament or reactivation and amendment of the 1990 Constitution, advanced by the parliamentary forces and the international community has become totally outdated and inadequate in the new context. A brief recapitulation of the incessant struggle between the monarchy and democracy since the 1950s in the country should leave no one in doubt that without the complete abolition of the archaic institution of feudal monarchy and its puppet RNA, no form of democracy can be secure and institutional in Nepal. It has been proven time and again that the so-called 'constitutional monarchy' seen in operation in some of the highly developed capitalist countries cannot be replicated in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. Hence any attempt on the part of the parliamentary political parties and international forces to preserve the thoroughly rotten and discredited institution of the monarchy, in this or that pretext, does not correspond with the historical necessity and ground reality of balance of forces in the country. The agenda of 'democratic republic' has entered the Nepalese politics.

As far as the sincere commitment of the revolutionary democratic forces, who

aspire to reach socialism and communism via a new democratic republic, towards a bourgeois democratic republic is concerned the CPN(Maoist) has time and again clarified its principled position towards the historical necessity of passing through a sub-stage of democratic republic in the specificities of Nepal. In 'An Executive Summary of the Proposal Put Forward by CPN(Maoist) for the Negotiations' presented during the negotiations in April 2003 (*Some Important Documents of Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)*, 2004) the minimum content and the process of realisation of this democratic republic through a constituent assembly has been expressed in concrete terms. The fact that the democratic republic is envisaged to be institutionalised through a freely elected constituent assembly, should cast away any illusions about the democratic credentials of the revolutionary forces. Further, concrete issues like the creation of a new national army after the dissolution of the royal mercenary RNA can be discussed during the process of negotiations.

The need of the hour is unity of all democratic forces of the country on the common minimum programme of a democratic republic. If anything is lacking so far it is the real democratic vision and will power on the part of the leadership of major political parties. Also, it is time to win confidence of the masses of the people through a correct projection of the democratic credentials of political parties, and for this the correct practice of inner-party democracy would be a significant component.

In the end, it may be useful to recollect Engels to understand why a proletarian party needs to uphold the programme of a bourgeois republic in a country like present-day Nepal. Lambasting the Bakuninist anarchists who had opposed the immediate programme of a republic in 19th century Spain, Engels had said:

When the Republic was proclaimed in February 1873, the Spanish members of the Alliance [i.e., Bakuninist 'International'] found themselves in a quandary. Spain is such a backward country industrially that there can be no question there of *immediate* complete emancipation of the working class. Spain will first have to pass through various preliminary stages of development and remove quite a number of obstacles from its path. The Republic offered a chance of going through these stages in the shortest possible time and quickly surmounting the obstacles. But this chance be taken only if the Spanish working class played an active political role (from "The Bakuninists at Work"). [17]