

Triangular Balance of Forces

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A retrogressive royal coup d'etat has been executed in the country and an autocratic monarchy has been restored by nullifying the limited democratic rights won after the 1990 people's movement. Whether the parliamentary political parties would be allowed to function or not and the 1990 Constitution would be formally scrapped or not, is just a matter of convenience and expediency to the autocratic monarchy.

BABURAM BHATTARAI

A process of revolution and counter-revolution is unfolding with dramatic momentum in Nepal. Whereas a revolutionary People's War (PW) led by CPN (Maoist) for a democratic republic has been going on since the last seven years, the archaic feudal monarchy has staged a coup d'etat against the parliamentary democracy on October 4, 2002 and centralised state authority in itself. This epic fight between monarchy and democracy (of both 'old' and 'new' variety), reminiscent of the history of all civilised countries in 18th and 19th centuries, has naturally drawn the attention of the outside world to the geo-strategically placed country of Nepal. It is, therefore, imperative that the internal and external dynamics of this political upheaval be scrutinised and the immediate prospects be assessed.

Nature of Coup

Though the October 4 proclamation of dismissal of the elected prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and assumption of executive power of the state by the self-proclaimed King Gyanendra has been generally dubbed as a coup d'etat, there is discernible divergence of opinion amongst the political forces and observers about the real nature of the coup. Whereas a reactionary class interest has motivated some to view it as an unpleasant but necessary step by the monarchy to restore 'order' from years of revolutionary upheavals, others have failed to see through the essential retrogressive nature of the royal move against the limited democratic

gains of the 1990 people's movement because of some formal legalistic illusions. A formal "commitment and allegiance of Constitutional Monarchy and the multiparty democratic polity" in the royal proclamation seems to have lulled these observers into believing that the royal takeover is just a transitory move and there is no permanent threat to the multiparty parliamentary democracy in the country.

Let us look at the royal proclamation itself, which says:

As it is our responsibility to preserve nationalism, national unity and Sovereignty, as well as, to maintain peace and order in the country and also to ensure that the state of the nation does not deteriorate for any reason, a situation has arisen wherein, by virtue of the State Authority as exercised by us and in the spirit of the constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, as well as, taking into consideration Article 27(3) of the Constitution, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba should be relieved of his office, owing to his incompetency to conduct the general elections on the stipulated date in accordance with the Constitution, and the Council of Ministers dissolved. Similarly, the general elections slated for November 13 also needs to be postponed. We, therefore, issue the following orders in accordance with Article 127 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990...

As it will take some time to make new arrangements, we will exercise the executive powers of the Kingdom of Nepal until such arrangements are in place and we ourselves undertake responsibility of governance in the country...

We will never allow the commitment and allegiance of Constitutional Monarchy and

the multiparty democratic polity to be compromised. The government to be constituted will make adequate arrangements for peace and security as soon as possible and conduct the general elections (emphasis added).

Firstly, it should be noted that from Louis Bonaparte of 19th century France to modern day military dictators in Pakistan and elsewhere to our own King Mahendra (father of the coup d'etat swears by some obscure and double-edged provision in the prevailing constitution and dangles the carrot of restoring democracy "as soon as possible". But, as they say 'the taste of the pudding is in the eating', one has to judge the monarchical or military dictators not by their pious words but their actual deeds.

Secondly, Gyanendra, through his October 4 proclamation, has usurped "executive powers of the kingdom of Nepal until such arrangements are in place" and sought to "undertake the responsibility of governance in the country". This is pure and simple coup d'etat against the letter and spirit of the constitution of 1990. As it is a matter of common sense that the so-called constitutional monarchy nowhere exercises 'executive powers' and assumes 'responsibility of governance' and the 1990 constitution through its Article 35(2) clearly exhorts the monarchy to undertake "all functions according to the advice and consent of the Council of Ministers". Hence it is axiomatic that the king can operationalise the much flaunted Article 127 (which states, "If any difficulty arises in connection with the implementation of this Constitution His Majesty may issue necessary orders to remove such difficulty and such orders shall be laid before parliament") not through his own independent volition but according to the advice and consent of the council of the ministers. However, in the present case the council of ministers advises the king to postpone the planned November 13 elections to a future date, according to an all party consensus, and the king in return castigates the PM as 'incompetent' and summarily dismisses the council of ministers. If this is not forcible restoration of an absolute monarchy, what is it?

Thirdly, Gyanendra has announced a 'council of ministers' headed by his ever loyal, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, on October 11, against the joint petition of all the six parliamentarist parties having representation in the dissolved parliament.

Though the nominated PM belongs to the pro-palace Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and the crumb of deputy PM (DPM) has been offered to the acting head of the pro-India Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), they have been personally handpicked by Gyanendra against the stated policies of their respective parties, thus ensuring that the puppet cabinet would dance to the tune of the palace. And it is interesting to note that the king who had branded Deuba as 'incompetent' for not holding the mid-term elections on November 13 has conveniently avoided to fix the new date of elections so far, providing enough hints of his disinclinations to share power with the showcase parliament in the near future.

Hence there should be no illusion that a retrogressive royal coup d'état has been executed in the country and an autocratic monarchy has been restored by nullifying the limited democratic rights won after the 1990 people's movement. Whether the parliamentary political parties would be allowed to function or not and the 1990 constitution would be formally scrapped or not, is just a matter of convenience and expediency to the autocratic monarchy. In any case, a 'multiparty Panchayat system' would be hardly different in essence from the previous incarnation of 'partyless panchayat system' of the 1960-1990 autocratic monarchical period.

What are the objective and subjective factors that contributed to the ultimate restoration of despotic monarchy after 12 years of flirtation with the multiparty parliamentary democracy? Are not the parliamentary political parties accountable for this fiasco due to their apparent non-performance, corruption, etc? Did not the Maoist led People's War prepare a ground for this rearguard action by the feudal-bureaucratic monarchy? There are speculations galore in the media and armchair discussions of the urban intelligentsia. However, the issue would deserve a deeper probing than mere motivated or ill-informed insinuations.

First of all, it should be recognised that historical events of this import do not occur due to mere will or omission and commission of individuals or groups, but as an historical necessity propelled by incessant contradictions between antagonistic social forces. In that sense this royal coup d'état is a further link in the long chain of revolution and counter-revolution generated by the epic fight between feudal monarchy and bourgeois democracy for the last half century in Nepal.

It may be worthwhile to recount that in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary sweep across third world countries after the second world war a nascent bourgeois parliamentary democracy was introduced in Nepal in 1950, which was snuffed by a royal coup d'état in 1960 and continued to be suppressed till 1990. A broad-based people's movement abetted by the then global clamour for multiparty democracy in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet and eastern European state systems, resulted in restoration of the multiparty parliamentary system in 1990 but without significantly weakening the feudal-bureaucratic-military basis of the age-old monarchy. The history of last 12 years is the history of continued contention between the semi-feudal and semi-colonial social formation principally patronised by the monarchy and a progressive bourgeois democratic transformation, which had a qualitative leap with the initiation of revolutionary PW in 1996. The recent royal putsch is just one more link in the ongoing process of life and death struggle between the retrogressive and progressive forces, and this will continue till the feudal-bureaucratic forces are completely swept away by the ultimate victory of democratic revolution. And this royal coup d'état has unmistakably validated the principled stand of the revolutionary Left that the 1990 political change had not consummated the bourgeois democratic revolution in the country and the feudal-bureaucratic monarchy with its continued control over the traditional Royal Army still constituted the main danger even to the incipient parliamentary democracy. In that sense the recent developments are not at all 'unnatural' and 'unexpected' as some people have claimed to be.

Loopholes for Subversion

Now, let us see the developments through a purely constitutional or legalistic prism. As the revolutionary Left had warned right then, the 1990 Constitution and the process of constituting it had left enough loopholes for future subversion by the all-powerful monarchy. The 1990 Constitution was not made by any elected body, but drafted by a king-nominated committee and promulgated by the king using his so-called "inherent constitutional and state authority and privilege". This clearly meant that the ultimate source of constitutional authority were not the sovereign people but the monarchy, and the king could

subvert the constitution using the same 'inherent authority' at the time of his choosing. The fact that the king has now quoted the same passage from the preamble of the constitution – i.e., "by the virtue of the State Authority as exercised by us" – to execute the coup d'état clearly underscores the Himalayan blunder committed by the parliamentary political parties in not insisting on a constituent assembly in 1990. The parliamentary political parties were lulled by the passage, "The sovereignty of Nepal will be vested in the Nepalese people", in Article 3 of the constitution, but they did not take notice of the Damocles sword of the so-called inherent state authority of the king as proclaimed in the preamble of the same constitution. It is clear that such constitutional ambiguity about 'Sovereignty' and 'State Authority' too has now enabled the monarchy to stage a counter-revolutionary coup in a very 'constitutional' manner.

However, if one closely follows the sequence of events particularly after the infamous palace massacre of June 1, 2001, it is not difficult to foresee the current developments as a logical conclusion or climax of the counter-revolutionary process triggered much earlier. In a recent article 'Comparisons Between Recent US-Backed Coups', Wayne Madsen, a former US Navy officer, writes,

According to unblemished sources in Kathmandu the King (i.e., Birendra) and his family were quickly dispatched by a Nepali army commando unit trained at the time by US special operations forces sent by US Pacific Commander in Chief Adm Dennis Blair (he is the same guy who propped up General Wiranto with special training while the good general was committing genocide in East Timor). What was to become the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Influence (PSYOP's division) prepared a story, with the assistance of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) intelligence agency, that the king and his family were murdered as a result of the Crown Prince going nuts with automatic weapons after being forlorn over his mother's refusal to allow him to marry a commoner. (www.spiesafe.com).

After eliminating Birendra for his apparently weak posture against the revolutionary and democratic forces, Gyanendra systematically undertook the mission to concentrate powers in his own hands, primarily through the Royal Army and palace bureaucracy. From the declaration of nationwide state of emergency and

imposition of royal military dictatorship last November, through the engineered split in the largest parliamentary political party, the Nepali Congress, and untimely dissolution of parliament, to the virtual reduction of the Supreme Court and the Election Commission into palace stooges, the demolition of all formal democratic institutions was complete within a span of one year. Hence this direct royal takeover was just a matter of time.

The principal weakness and mistake in this whole process of major parliamentary parties was not to grasp the age-old feudal monarchy as the foremost bulwark of reaction and instead to fancy it as an ally of 'democracy'. Consequently, during the past 12 years in power these parties could not introduce a single programme to cut the roots of feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism and prepare a material base for sustainable bourgeois democratic institutions. None of these parties who shared state power during the period, including the parliamentary left UML, attempted to carry out radical land reforms. Rather all of them seemed to vie which each other to appease the monarchy and share the crumbs of power. As a result the shrewd monarchy continued to play one against the other and went on consolidating its own position. The utterly ridiculous position of Deuba faction of the Nepali Congress, which was conveniently utilised by the monarchy to dismiss the parliament and spilt the largest party, only to be kicked out in the end with an ignominious label of 'incompetent' on it, adequately speaks of the abject surrender of the parliamentary parties to the crafty monarchy.

Coming to the role of Maoist PW in precipitating this counter-revolutionary backlash, this last desperate action by the autocratic monarchy has been consciously

resorted to when all other means failed to check the People's War sweeping across the country which is basically intended to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution in the country. It was quite natural that in a closer relation developed between the parliamentary forces and the Maoist revolutionaries against the feudal monarchy. This obviously alarmed the monarchy and goaded it to undertake this desperate step.

Response of Different Political Forces

There is a triangular balance of power among three political forces, viz. feudal monarchists, bourgeois parliamentarists and revolutionary democrats, currently in Nepal. Accordingly, three different responses are seen towards this royal coup, and these will largely determine the political course of events in the immediate future.

First of all, the feudal monarchist forces, sidelined but not crushed by the 1990 people's movement, have jubilantly welcomed this royal move and even audaciously taken to street celebrations shedding 12-year long political hibernation. The ultra-rightist elements who had thrived in the autocratic panchayati era and mostly belong to the Shah-Rana aristocratic families and big landlord and bureaucratic capitalist classes, have overnight floated various ultra-nationalist ('mandale' in Nepali parlance) and obscurantist outfits like Pashupati Sena, Shiv Sena, etc. (ala Bal Thackerays of India) and demonstrated their muscle power in favour of the king. Similarly, marwari traders whose economic interests have been closely tied with Shah-Rana families for long, are seen to be most vociferous supporters of this royal

coup. However, when this orchestrated move by the discredited revivalist elements seemed to boomerang on the monarchy, it was mysteriously curbed within a few days.

Secondly, the parliamentarist forces, as usual, demonstrated their vacillating, irresolute and meek character during this period. It took them several days to grasp the enormity of the royal move and to make any meaningful response against it. However, with the passage of time there are signs of positive development in their attitude and they are increasingly inclined to resist the royal coup. Their collective decision not to join the royal puppet ministry, after Gyanendra refused to heed their advice regarding the formation of an interim all-party government, is a significant pointer towards this. Nevertheless, there are important overt and covert differences in the postures of different parties. Whereas the most discredited Deuba faction of the Nepali Congress, has termed the royal takeover as 'unconstitutional' and 'undemocratic' and vowed to fight against it, the larger Koirala faction more aware of the repeated betrayal of the monarchy since the days of the late B P Koirala has shown enough indications to resist this retrogressive move. As usual the role of the UML in this case, too, has been timid, vacillating and conciliatory. It is interesting to note that the higher one moves in the leadership hierarchy of this group the more opportunistic one finds them, which was amply reflected in the response towards this royal takeover. Whereas, the general secretary, Madhav Nepal, was initially hesitant even to condemn the counter-revolutionary coup the lower level cadres were already in the streets in protest. It is also reliably learnt that but for the firm opposition from other



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parliamentarist parties Madhav Nepal would have occupied the chair of puppet PM in place of Lokendra Bahadur Chand. However, the increasing pressure from other parties and its own cadres compelled the UML leadership to come out against the royal coup. The other smaller parties, the rightists RPP and NSP seem to be vertically divided on the issue and the minor Left groups have so far shown positive signs to resist the royal takeover.

Thirdly, the revolutionary democratic forces, principally represented by the CPN (Maoist) and the United Revolutionary Peoples Council (URPC) (an embryonic Central People's Government Organising Committee in the form of a revolutionary united front), have unequivocally condemned the royal takeover as a counter-revolutionary coup and called for joint resistance against it by all the parliamentary and non-parliamentary democratic forces. The CPN (Maoist) and URPC have already announced Madhes and Tharuwan (i.e., Terai) bandh (shut-down) on October 27 and a three day Nepal bandh on November 11, 12 and 13 to protest against the counter-revolutionary coup d'état. It may be relevant here to note that the CPN (Maoist) and URPC have advanced the immediate slogans of a roundtable conference of all patriotic and democratic forces, an interim government and election to a constituent assembly to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution, which is getting increasingly positive response from other democratic forces, the intelligentsia and the general masses. Now a general consensus is building around the proposition that unless a democratic constitution is drafted and promulgated by an elected constituent assembly and the feudal Royal Army is disarmed and replaced by a modern National Army such periodic royal coups cannot be prevented and democracy fully consummated and firmly implanted in the country.

Role of International Forces

Because of the particular geo-strategic position of the country sandwiched between two super states, India and China, and a semi-colonial relation with India since the days of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, internal political dynamics of Nepal have been invariably conditioned by the external interferences, and overt or covert hands of imperialist and expansionist forces are widely suspected to be involved in the recent royal coup d'état as well. What

ought to be firmly grasped in this context is that, despite their lip-services towards 'democracy', an autocratic monarchy or a military dictatorship is seen to be more convenient and acceptable for the guardians of international monopoly capital in the backward, underdeveloped and dependent third world countries like ours, which is amply verified by the intimate patronage of imperialist powers enjoyed by the medieval Sultans of the west Asia and a host of military dictators in other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the light of the increased interventionist activities of the sole superpower US in central and south Asia in recent times and tightening collusion between the ruling classes of US and India with a strategic perspective of containing China, these forces seem to have chosen the autocratic monarchy as a better bet over the democratic forces to consolidate their vested interests in the region. Hence there are enough grounds to suspect prior knowledge and approval, if not direct involvement, of the US and Indian rulers in this royal coup.

The heightened bonhomie between the ruling Hindutva forces in India and the so-called 'incarnation of Visnu' within the Nepalese royal palace particularly during and after Gyanendra's state visit to India last June, is there for all to see. The ban imposed on the All-India Nepalese Unity Society under the draconian POTA on July 2, arrest and deportation of four journalists including P Chhetri on July 11 and capture and disappearance of the popular mass leader Bam Dev Chhetri from New Delhi on September 5, were clearly designed to appease the monarchy. Though the South Block has so far sought to underplay the royal coup and much fuss is made about the absence of senior officers in the Indian Embassy at the time, the visit of high profile former ambassadors K V Rajan and M K Rasgotra to Kathmandu on the eve could not have been without any implications. More significant pointers are, however, provided by the editorial comments of the pro-establishment dailies published from New Delhi. Penned perhaps earlier than the mid-night royal coup and published in the early morning edition on October 5, the *Hindustan Times* editorial entitled 'Rumbles in Nepal' says: "King Gyanendra is well within his powers under Article 127 of the constitution to establish an interim government under his personal charge." Why such hurry to provide advance legitimacy to the totally undemocratic actions of the monarchy?

And *The Times of India* editorial of October 8 under the heading "King's Compulsions" says: "New Delhi needs to understand the compulsions that led King Gyanendra, a monarch known for his modern outlook and pragmatism, to act in the manner he did and to help him and the interim government in every way it can to restore normality in the kingdom." Note the eulogy heaped on the most discredited and unpopular 'king' in the Nepalese history! This has all the more fuelled the suspicion in the minds of the Nepalese people that the Indian rulers are deliberately propping up an unpopular and weakened king so as to further aggravate the ongoing civil war and to militarily intervene with the king's formal 'invitation' in a grand strategy of Bhutanisation and Sikkimisation of Nepal. (See Sunanda K Dutta-Ray's book *Smash and Grab* on the Sikkim episode in this context. As regards to other foreign powers, the northern neighbour China has as usual termed the developments as the 'internal affairs' of Nepal and refused to politically commit itself on the issue. However, there are enough indications that they are keenly watching the heightened interference of other external powers, particularly the US, with deepening alarms. (See for example, 'What is the United States Doing in Nepal', *The World Times (Huanqiu Shibao)*, May 13, 2002.

The western powers, on the other hand, have been intensely lobbying to rationalise the royal coup and pressurising the parliamentarist parties to capitulate before the autocratic monarchy so as to defeat the 'Maoist terrorists'. The US ambassador, Michael Malinowsky, is seen most active in this mission, visiting all and sundry in Kathmandu. The British parliamentary under secretary of state in the foreign and commonwealth office, Mike O'Brien, who was in Kathmandu on October 10-12 to chair a meeting of the so-called International Contact Group, is reported to have said, "(Maoist) Terrorism can never be allowed to win. International community is determined to support democracy opposing terrorism." (*Kathmandu Post*, October 13, 2002). So whoever opposes 'Maoist terrorists' is a 'democrat' – with this funny logic Gyanendra would naturally be the greatest 'democrat'. But, Mr O'Brien, did all the colonised countries in the past 'win' their freedom from British colonialism because you very gracefully "allowed" it? Of course, not. The European Union, however, has struck a milder

posture and called for the settlement of the issue through negotiations.

Future Prospects

As the Nepalese politics has strange tradition of going on 'holidays' during the major festival of 'Dashain' (or 'Durga Puja/Dussehera'), new courses of events are still to unfold after the initial royal move. However, they are expected to unroll any time after the festival season. Meanwhile there are speculations galore on the future course of events, according to one's class interest or outlook. Where will the wheel of history stabilise in the immediate future? What will be the internal and external power equations? As the objective situation stands today, we can only offer some clues.

In the specific historical context of spiralling contention between the moribund feudal monarchy and upsurging people's democracy in the form of a nationwide civil war, it is but natural to centralise one's forces for the decisive battle, and this royal coup d'état is just a manifestation of that. Hence in the coming days revolution and counter-revolution can be logically foreseen to clash with greater intensity and ferocity. Those conversant with the father king's (i.e., Mahendra's) coup of 1960 and subsequent 30 years' protracted struggle between the autocratic and democratic forces may be inclined to believe that the history would repeat itself. But things have undergone a fundamental change between 1960 and 2002, as not only much water but also a lot of blood has flown down the Kosi, the Gandaki and the Karnali rivers. The most apparent and significant change is that the most backward countryside which acted as the bulwark of feudalism and reaction for ages have now been turned into liberated areas of revolutionary democrats. Still more important from the practical point of view is that for the first time in the history of the country there now exists a well-motivated People's Liberation Army (PLA) to effectively take on and defeat the demoralised Royal Army. Also, millions of masses of oppressed classes, castes, gender, regions and nationalities now identify monarchy as the principal guardian of the oppressive and exploitative order and the main target of their immediate wrath. In such a vastly changed scenario a successful anti-monarchy uprising could materialise much sooner than ordinarily expected.

However, two major factors are likely to influence the pace of the revolutionary

democratic process. Firstly, it would be the role of the parliamentary democratic forces in the anti-monarchy movement. Even though the guardians of international monopoly capital are working overtime at the moment to bring about one more rapprochement between the autocratic monarchy and the parliamentarist forces citing the rising spectre of 'Maoist terrorists', the parliamentary democrats would have to decide for themselves whether they want to be deceived by a Musarrafi-style 'election' under the aegis of Gyanendra (if at all he holds it in the near future) and get politically liquidated for ever, or they would like to do away with the despotic monarchy once and for all and consummate democracy in the country. There is no other alternative left. All 'constitutional' paths for restoration of the spineless parliamentary democracy of the past are now totally blocked. Since, once you acknowledge the 'right' of the monarchy to snatch away or return the 'executive powers' of the state at its whims, then the Damocles sword of a royal coup will forever dangle over the head of parliament and democracy. It is in this context that we have been hammering on a round-table conference of all democratic forces, an interim government, election to a constituent assembly and formation of a National Army in place of the Royal Army. Only this way can the 'Sovereignty' and 'State Authority' be effectively handed over to the people from the monarchy. And this is nothing but a pure and simple bourgeois democratic programme. Also, the CPN(Maoist) has publicly committed itself to a multiparty system in the future. That is why their constant appeal to all the parliamentary parties has been—'you accept republicanism, we will accept multipartyism'. Hence there are strong chances that on the basis of this common minimum programme there would be a second edition of 1990 people's movement, but with higher intensity and efficacy, in the near future.

Secondly, the role of the international forces, particularly the US and India, would have a significant bearing on this whole process. (See, *Nepalese People's Appeal to the International Community*, URPC, August 2002). What these powers fail to realise is that so-called constitutional monarchies in some advanced capitalist countries were brought back by the victorious bourgeoisies to function under their (i.e., bourgeoisie's) exclusive hegemony, and in the pre-capitalist countries like ours there would be either autocratic monarchy

or no monarchy at all. This is the objective law of history, which cannot be altered by the anybody's pious wishes. As regards the vain hopes of restoring order in the strategically placed Himalayan state under the hegemony of a discredited monarchy, that is another great illusion of these powers which will burst asunder sooner than they realise. It is thus expected that the genuine democratic forces in the international community, particularly the closest neighbour India, will prevail upon the faulty policies of their respective governments and let the Nepalese people decide their own future themselves.

Wheel of history may be temporarily stalled, but it cannot be permanently turned back. To paraphrase Karl Marx, the father king's (i.e., Mahendra's) 'tragedy' of 1960 may be repeated as the son king's (i.e., Gyanendra's) 'farce' of 2002, but nothing more than that. Our own new edition of 'eighteenth Brumaire' may not last that long. [17]

[The author, Baburam Bhattarai, is Standing Committee Member of CPN (Maoist) and Convenor of United Revolutionary People's Council, Nepal.]

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