

Cover Feature

Two chairmen and a people

The journey through the labyrinth of Nepali politics is complicated by a three-way tussle that makes difficult the search for a way out. The first challenge is to force the royal regime in Kathmandu to capitulate; the second is to put a government of political parties in place; the third is to engage the Maoists in dialogue; and the fourth is to start the march to rehabilitation, reconstruction and economic revitalisation, writing a new constitution along the way. The irony of it is that restoring peace and reinstating pluralism in Nepal requires nothing less than having faith in the leaders of a vicious rebellion and defeating the agenda of an autocratic ruler.

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

It has not rained in Nepal for five months and the ground this spring is parched, the haze thicker for the dryness all around. Electricity production is so low that even the privileged of Kathmandu Valley are seeing 17 hours of load-shedding per week, and this has also affected drinking water distribution. The tourists have disappeared with the Maoist blockades and government curfews, and the five casinos of Kathmandu meant to trap them are filled instead with Nepalis betting their fortunes. Petroleum prices are suddenly up, and double-digit inflation is on its way. The political confusion on several fronts, however, is as yet preventing the accumulated frustrations from boiling over in a rash of spontaneous violence.

Everywhere in Nepal today there is listlessness, a waiting for something to happen. Potholes are not repaired, nor are buildings painted; and in the districts, the people have nearly forgotten the ubiquitous term of four decades' standing, 'development project'. There is a hope that the vortex of violence that has Nepal in its grip will be broken by the end of spring, before the monsoon sets in. Spring is historically the season of political change in Kathmandu, and something must give, or so people hope. That 'give' must come from the direction of the Narayanhiti royal palace, stuck in its militarist, undemocratic ways. As for the Maoist rebels in the jungle, they have already indicated in a variety of ways their desire – indeed their desperation – for a way to open, aboveground politics.

The polity is today at a stalemate awaiting release, either planned or forced, so that the 26 million people of this sizeable country can once again breathe the air of peace and freedom. That peace was wrested by the violence of the Maoist insurgency of ten years' standing, and the state security's response that has placed the country towards the top of the charts in numbers of tortured and 'disappeared'. The freedom was first stolen in the villages by the gun-toting rebels, who even today like to claim they have public support; and in the last three years by a newly crowned king-turned-despot, who shows contempt for the people at every turn and speaks in Orwellian doublespeak of democracy and constitutionalism while proceeding to demolish both.

Both of the chairmen – the Maoists' Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the royalty of Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev – hold the belief that the Nepali public is a peasantry more than willing to submit to their individual feudal dictates. They do not seem to recognise, or care to concede, that the citizens have developed a taste for democracy, and for what a modern-day pluralistic state can deliver in social and economic progress. They know that that future lies neither with king nor rebel – not in right-wing dictatorship, nor with ultra-left totalitarianism.

Over the autumn and winter, the insurgents have given ample indication of their desire to submit to the people's will. The Maoists must perforce be tested in their announced willingness to join multiparty politics, but today it is the royal chairman



SAGAR SHRESTHA

Funeral pyres at Pashupati Ghat. Why the need for peace and democracy?

who is the stumbling block to peace and democracy: by not responding to the Maoist ceasefire of four months' standing last autumn, by continuing to snub the very parliament-abiding political parties who could save his throne and his dynasty, and – the unkindest cut of all – by militarising the Nepali state.

The entire national superstructure is crumbling around Chairman Gyanendra, and yet there is no indication that he understands the gravity of the situation. The destruction of the state structure and economy over a single year leads to the inescapable conclusion that Chairman Gyanendra has neither the aptitude nor acumen to be a head of government, which he has been since he appointed himself chairman of the Council of Ministers following the royal coup d'état of 1 February 2005. It could even be that, having got himself into a jam, the chairman's arrogance does allow him to extricate himself. He has not reached for the lines that have been thrown to him in the past year.

The frustration with the head of government is exemplified by the anger of a soldier shouting into a phone at a public call booth in Nawalparasi District last month, after a devastating attack on an army convoy. Here is how he was overheard: "Sir, how many more of my boys have to die because of the arrogance (hath) of one man?!" There is disillusionment in the police force with a king who insists on moving about in army combat attire, and increasing disquiet among the army officer corps who are unable to pass the message up the ranks. The police these days surrender at the first instance of attack, and the soldiers are fatigued without having really taken on the rebels – socially isolated and without inspiring leadership. They might well have put up a good fight for the sake of the citizenry, but not for the 'supreme commander-in-chief'.

A time for sanctions

If the knot lies in the obduracy of Chairman Gyanendra, then the question would be how to force his hand. International condemnation has not worked for someone who seems willing to operate under the isolationist junta model perfected by the generals of Rangoon. Neither is the chairman bothered that his failures are paraded before the people, with fiascos in governance, diplomacy, development, economic management, administration and warfare. The public, finally, got a flavour of what some diplomats had known earlier about the royal ability to misrepresent, with the televised address on the anniversary of the takeover. Looking straight to the camera, on the morning of 1 February 2006, Chairman Gyanendra claimed that the Maobaadi were reduced to indulging in "isolated incidents of petty crime", even while, at the moment of the taping, the guerrillas were destroying the Rana-era administrative centre of Palpa. He proposed that the national image and pride had been restored, when in fact the chairman cannot extract a single invitation for a state visit overseas, and foreign dignitaries shun the country like the bird flu. Chairman Gyanendra also, with a straight face, claimed that democracy had been strengthened during his year of royal rule.



Prachanda in The Hindu interview of 8 February 2006

Nor was that it. Having squandered numerous opportunities to build bridges to the political parties, in a Democracy Day message on 19 February, Chairman Gyanendra called on those "interested" parties to approach the royal person for discussions. He did this while scores of political leaders – including the topmost, such as Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and Ram Chandra Poudel of the Nepali Congress – were in detention at his command. This was yet another exhibition of the chairman's contempt for the Nepali public, by now too numerous to list. It is part-and-parcel of a mindset that thinks the international community will believe his democratic credentials if he repeats the term 'democracy' several times in a speech.

Given the recalcitrance of Chairman Gyanendra and his royalist cohort, and the unwillingness of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) leadership to caution the chairman from this destructive path, the time has come for targeted international sanctions to check the anti-democratic, militarist royal agenda for the sake of the people of Nepal. As called for by several international human rights organisations, and increasingly by bold activists speaking out within Nepal, the sanctions would apply to the individuals of the royal regime – freezing the international bank accounts of members of the royal family including a nefarious son-in-law, and denial of visas for international travel by both that family and by the topmost handful of military generals and all the members of the royal Council of Ministers. The international community must also demand information from the RNA on officers implicated in violations of international humanitarian law, so that they can be prevented from going on the highly-regarded United Nations peacekeeping assignments. If the army does not supply those names to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as it is currently refusing to do, then the individual battalions implicated must be refused peacekeeping stints.

It is important to go for targeted, individualised sanctions because the Narayanhiti regime does not respond – as even minimally democratic governments would – to the kind of sanctions that directly and indirectly hurt the people at large, such as reduced or cancelled foreign assistance to development projects and the government budget. A personal targeting and shaming, on the other hand, might yield results. It would spread immediate panic among the royalists ranks and serve as a potent 'feudalist' pressure on the chairman to back down.