

POLITICS IN HIGH PLACES

*The people of Nepal go to the polls, and hope
democratic government will improve their lives.*

BY FRANÇOIS LAFRENIÈRE

IN INDIA, THEY HAD GANDHI, and now, at last, it's our turn with Ganesh Man Singh," cried out a very excited, elderly Nepali when on 9 April 1990, a large, rejoicing crowd flowed onto *Durbar Marg* (The King's Alley) in the country's capital. This celebration in the sunny streets of Kathmandu followed days of twenty-four-hour curfews, and marked the end of several weeks of tension and violence between Nepal's popular movement in favour of a multiparty system, and the government. Following the fatal shooting of dozens of protestors by the armed forces, the monarch of the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal, King Birendra, proclaimed only hours later and in the same location, the legalization of the country's political parties, abolished more than twenty-five years earlier.

Ganesh Man Singh, the respected and venerable leader of the Nepali Congress Party (NCP), has been perceived by many as the political soul of the multiparty movement. While clearly affiliated with the NCP, Ganesh Man Singh has always endeavoured to stay clear of partisan electoral dealings, struggling only against the "opponents of democracy."

The open, multiparty election of 1959, the only one in Nepal's history, brought the NCP to power and B. P. Koirale, its leader at the time, headed His Majesty's government for eighteen months. In 1960, King Mahendra, father of the present king, repudiated the multiparty system, threw out the government, and replaced it with a non-party regime, the *Panchayat*. A Sanskrit word that literally means "council of five members," village *Panchayats* were created as local instruments of government through which the palace could secure its control of the country. In 1980, a referendum with results that favoured maintaining this setup, led to accusations of vote-rigging from various quarters. And it was this same corrupt regime which collapsed under popular pressure in the spring of 1990.

INSPIRED IN PART BY THE SUCCESS OF SIMILAR MOVEMENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE, the clandestine political parties of Nepal launched their combined action in February 1990. Clashes, first with the police, and then with the armed forces, became more widespread. The movement now has forty-three official martyrs, and the government is completing its investigations into other disappearances and deaths which occurred during that period.

A few days after the legalization of political parties, a caretaker government was formed, whose main task was to submit a proposal for a new constitution and to organize elections. As was the case with Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, most of the ministers, including the prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, had spent years in prison.

The constitutional changes finally accepted by the king are regarded by the various political parties as a big step towards democracy. The new constitution explicitly stipulates, among other things, that Nepal's constitutional monarchy is a multiparty system. Although some leftist parties would have preferred a completely secular state, the nation, with a population of close to twenty million, remains a "Hindu Kingdom" (King Birendra is regarded as the reincarnation of Vishnu, a Hindu deity). All religious faiths are tolerated, but active promotion of religious conversion is an offence.

The king retains his power to dissolve parliament in an emergency, and although formally the army answers to a National Defence Council, as a practical matter, it owes its allegiance to the palace. Most Nepalis seem satisfied with the new constitution, although for some it does not go far enough towards a complete guarantee of freedom of expression. "A good constitution, but there is room for improvement," is the way the English-language Kathmandu magazine *Himal* put it.

Despite being implicated in the violent events of early 1990, the monarchy has regained some support, although its grip on legitimacy remains tenuous. The hostile, anti-monarchy slogans heard during the weeks preceding Birendra's legalization of political parties, have disappeared. While anti-monarchism still runs strong in various leftist factions, the major parties are aware of the King's popularity, particularly among rural people.

The symbol of unity in this Himalayan country of diverse

ethnic and linguistic groups, Nepal's monarchy sees itself as the guardian of Hinduism, and the protector of the country's sovereignty. The palace has accused various political parties of being too open to the political machinations of Nepal's two giant neighbours – the NCP towards India, and the various communist parties towards China. Since Nepal is dependent on vital trading links with India, it is under constant political and economic pressure from its southern neighbour, which opposes any rapprochement with China.

THE WHOLE COUNTRY WAS CAUGHT UP IN THE LONG-AWAITED 12 MAY election. It is Nepal's urban dwellers from the Kathmandu Valley – less than ten percent of the population – who constitute the majority of the pluralist movement's militants. Few of the remote villages are accessible by road, so parties sent "recruiters" on foot. The canvassing efforts created deep divisions within very small communities, and it was not unusual to find peasants holding several different party membership cards.

The solidarity of the many and various parties during their underground struggle disintegrated rapidly during the months following their legalization, with each trying to put distance between itself and potential rivals. The United Left Front, having first cooled its relationship with the NCP, broke into some ten different communist factions, dominated by the *Male* party. The NCP headed the caretaker, multiparty government, and has within its ranks numerous former elected representatives including some who were opposed to the *Panchayat* regime. The government that fell in 1990 also created a new bloc, the National Democratic Party, which in turn split into two factions. The most important of the regional parties is probably the *Terai* which contests the legitimacy of any central government in Kathmandu.

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES IN THE ELECTION RESULTS THEMSELVES WERE NCP's surprisingly poor showing in Kathmandu – the current caretaker prime minister and NCP leader Krishna Prasad Bhattarai lost his own seat – and the more or less complete rout of the factions representing the old *Panchayat* regime. The NCP did win a slim majority in parliament and will likely form the government. The communist *Male* party captured the next largest number of seats.

As for the patriarch Ganesh Man Singh, he opted not to run for parliament, but his wife and son both did in Kathmandu under the NCP banner, and both lost to communists. This now, somewhat tarnished family, has become the target of satirical cartoons portraying them as "father of democracy, mother of democracy, son of democracy."

The non-elected, caretaker government had been rendered practically ineffective because of its temporary nature. With the election over, the promise of real change, which lies invariably with the new government, has created expectations for economic development, nutrition, health and education that will be difficult to meet. Most Nepalis, without really knowing what the changes should be, are convinced that they will lead to better times. □