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The February 1 Royal Move:

Was the February 1 Royal Move necessary? Were there alternatives? Are the political parties or the Maoist rebels also responsible for February 1? What is the “nikas” (way-out)? Can national security claims justify the curtailing of civil liberties and political freedoms?

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Ram Sharan Mahat, Ph.D.: *The royal move has given de jure character to the earlier de facto rule of the King. The immediate revival of the House of Representatives is part of the Nikas to the current situation. Unfortunately, many of the common men who spoke out against the Maoists are now keeping silent.* Mr. Pradip Nepal: *The political parties do not need to take responsibility for February 1.* Minendra Rijal, Ph.D.: *The Nikas lies in a three-step strategy: an inter-party, common minimum program, negotiations with the King to end direct rule, and the formation of a new government to draw the roadmap for a peaceful resolution of the Maoist problem.* Mr. Pari Thapa: *The political parties should accept responsibility for ignoring the importance of multiple cultural identities within the country. National Peoples' Front takes a pro-republican stance, but emphasizes the need for a general consensus among the major political forces.*

Ram Sharan Mahat, Ph.D.

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The February 1 royal move was simply not necessary. It has further complicated the already grave situation in Nepal. We knew that the proxy Royal rule since October 4, 2002, through handpicked Prime Ministers, could not continue. But instead of resorting to democratic options, the King chose an authoritarian option. The latest action has given *de jure* character to the earlier *de facto* rule.

Undoubtedly, political parties have made mistakes in the past. However, that does not justify the direct rule. Democracy is a self-correcting system. It takes time to gain maturity and perfection. At the same time, the twelve years of democracy has brought about visible and beneficial changes in political and socio-economic aspects of people's lives.

Unfortunately, the Maoist movement and the royal repression have reinforced each other's extreme positions. On the one hand, the Maoist politics of violence have provided the King with an easy justification for his authoritarian response. On the other hand, the King's authoritarianism has provided the Maoists with a justification for their criticisms and extreme position. The Maoist violence is the King's "national security" excuse, while the February 1 move reinforces the Maoist message that democracy in Nepal is just an illusion. Therefore, the insurgency and repression have reinforced each other's extremism.

The *nikas* lies in a democratic solution. This solution must include the revival of the constitutional process and the end of the insurgency. The country must be prepared for a radical political solution that includes elections for a constitutional assembly as demanded by the Maoists, if that will make them renounce violence.

But the modality and method for such a solution must be democratic and constitutional. We have demanded the revival of the House of Representatives until a new election can be held. The conventional wisdom is that until there is a new mandate, the previous mandate remains valid. The revival will reactivate the constitutional process, which the King derailed. It will keep the democratic institutions functioning. Political parties will fight in the parliament rather than on the streets. That will fill the present political vacuum and enable them to confront the Maoists politically.

Additionally, the curtailing of civil liberties and political freedoms is not justified. Restrictions on political freedoms do not enhance security. In fact, the curtailing of press freedoms has likely worsened the security situation. Just because Kathmandu remains relatively free of conflict does not mean that the situation has improved elsewhere. What about the prison raids, ambushes, highway blockades and other incidents? There are reports that, because of perceived threats and insecurity, even the frequency of police patrols has decreased. Also, the absence of press coverage has generated an information vacuum. In the absence of other media coverage and information, more people in rural areas are now listening to Maoist-run FM radio broadcasts. As a result, the restrictions on press freedoms have generated uncertainty, speculation, and distortions. Therefore, the lack of reliable information about what is happening in the country is contributing to the national sense of insecurity.

In this way, the King's authoritarian methods have played into the hands of the Maoists. First, as mentioned above, the King's repression and the insurgency reinforce each other. Second, the restrictions on press freedoms generate more uncertainty and insecurity and enhance the effectiveness of Maoist radio in the countryside. Additionally, one reason why there may be less violence against civilians is because the Maoists have deliberately stopped harming the political party cadres in an attempt to entice them to their side. They have openly appealed to other political parties to work with them against the monarchy to establish "true democracy". Common men who once spoke out against the Maoists are now keeping silent. Political party cadres who are already under the mercy of the Maoist guns in the countryside are now turning to their own party leaders and asking why we cannot join hands with the Maoists to restore democracy? Thus, the Royal move on February 1 has worsened the security situation in Nepal. A democratic solution is imperative.

Pradip Nepal

The royal move of February 1 was unnecessary. There was no need to take such an extreme anti-democratic measure. Hence, the political parties do not need to take responsibility for the Royal move on February 1. The King was emboldened, in part, by the Maoists' refusal to speak with the government, but in any case the Royal move was unnecessary and has made matters worse. Civil liberties and political freedoms should never be removed, and the solution to the current crisis lies in the renewal of the democratic process.

The *nikas* lies in the return to a democratic system and peace talks with the Maoist rebels. A coalition government must be formed that includes all parties represented in the dissolved parliament. Only such a government can have a meaningful dialogue with the rebels and lead the Maoists down a peaceful path.

Under no conditions should citizens' freedoms and rights be curtailed. For the same reason, the Royal move of February 1 was wrong. The long-term remedy is to engage the nation in the process of full democracy.

Pashupati Shamsheer Rana

The Royal move was due in part to failures of cabinet leadership and the failure to reach consensus in parliament. The democratic alternative was to change the Prime Minister, or to try another multi-party coalition. We failed to come to a consensus between the parties in parliament to resolve the crisis. The party cabinet could not rise to the occasion. However, the Maoist insurgency is also responsible because the insurgency provided the security justification for a military build-up that facilitated the Royal move.

The constitution visualizes an emergency under multi-party norms, not an abandonment of those norms. February 1 has changed all the political calculus in Nepal. If a compromise does not occur, the consequences will be tragic.

Minendra Rijal, Ph.D.

No, February 1 was not necessary. The Royal proclamation of February 1 has shattered the basic elements of the 1991 Constitution and reinforced the political parties' lingering doubts regarding the King's willingness to respect the outcome of the glorious 1990 people's revolution.

February 1 has decreased the chances for lasting peace in Nepal. By not respecting the boundaries of the constitutional monarchy, the Royal move has undermined democracy and the rule of law in Nepal, and has therefore eliminated any incentives the Maoists had to reach a negotiated, non-violent solution. Furthermore, the Maoist strategy of violence has weakened the roots of democracy and has contributed to the political justifications for the King's direct rule of the country.

I propose a three-step strategy as a way out of the current situation. First, the political parties should reach a consensus regarding a minimum political program that includes the restoration of peace and democracy. Second, based on this consensus, the political parties should enter into negotiations with the King for the formation of an interim, constitutional government. Finally, the interim government can propose a roadmap for the peaceful resolution of the Maoist conflict.

Pari Thapa

The Royal February 1 move was totally unnecessary. There were other democratic options, including a meaningful consultation with the mainstream political parties represented in the dissolved House of Representatives in order to reach a consensus over a reasonable solution.

The mainstream political parties share some of the responsibility for February 1. Specifically, the two largest parties, Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN (UML), are particularly responsible for contributing to unhealthy competition and political animosity prior to February 1. In their rivalry to win the King's support and to stick to power politics, they neglected the institutional and structural foundations of democracy. They abided by the procedural requirements of a multi-party system, e.g., periodic elections, majority government and minority opposition, pluralism and an open society, but they ignored multi-cultural identities and social inequalities. Their formal, procedural democracy was not truly inclusive or participatory. The same goes for the design of the electoral system. Moreover, they overlooked the necessity of restructuring the bureaucracy of the State.

With regard to the Maoists, they were in favor of the dissolution of the parliament, nullification of the 1991 Constitution, and eventually the collapse of the multi-party democratic system. Therefore, the Maoists also contributed to the Royal move by insisting on violence and the failure of the democratic system.

Regarding the *nikas*, we are in favor of a republican state, beginning with the election of a constituent assembly. However, the individual standpoint of a party is less important than the constellation of political power in the country. There should be a consensus amongst the mainstream political parties over a minimum political program. Such a minimum program should include the end of autocracy, the establishment of full-fledged democracy, and the vesting of sovereign power in the hands of people. In short, the common, minimum program should be based on peace and democracy.

Democracy, rights, and freedom travel together. Restrictions on rights are restrictions on freedom and cannot be justified. If democracy is a skeleton, then liberty and freedom are its flesh and blood. The national interest is more than just security, and even security is the business of more than a handful of people or ruling elites. A peaceful and just future for Nepal is the concern of all the people.