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The February 1 Royal Move: Comment

C. D. Joshi*

The present crisis is the culmination of past mistakes.

Everywhere there are discussions about the King’s take over on February 1. Be it among the upper strata or the common people, or among those who struggled for restoration of democracy against the Panchayat regime, everyone is talking about the King’s return to a direct rule that resembles the deposed Panchayat system. The Political Parties are not yet outlawed but have been deprived of their regular political functioning, citizens’ fundamental democratic rights are suspended in the name of emergency, and daily arrests of the party cadres continue. The general population is puzzled and is not in a position to decide who is responsible for this crisis? Why is democracy being penalized again? Why is democracy being victimized in Nepal?

The blame, first of all, rests with the King, who dismissed the parliament, deposed the popularly elected Government, paralyzed the popular constitution, and dismissed the tripartite agreement of 1990 in which he had accepted to become a constitutional monarch. Now he has betrayed that 1990 promise.

Everyone knew that the King accepted the 1990 tripartite agreement not out of personal conviction or self-realization, but rather under the pressure of the historic mass support for democracy. The King was never happy with this constitutional arrangement. Clearly, from the very first day of the new constitution, he strived to recover power. He strove to be a King above the Parliament, not a King subordinate to the Parliament. It is only a myth that the late King Birendra was dedicated to democracy. He was also cautiously moving towards the same goal as King Gyanendra, but probably at a slower pace, in accordance with his nature. So, throughout the past 12 years, the regressive forces have been waiting for February 1.

But what about those “great leaders of big parties” who fought for the restoration of democracy for 30 years and ruled Nepal after democracy was restored? Why did they allow all these subversions? Were they unaware of a counter-revolutionary process?

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Counter-revolution is simple political arithmetic. It starts from the moment the revolution begins. Revolutions are easy to make but much more difficult to save. The deposed forces start to work against the revolution as soon as the revolution starts to work, and they engage in a covert struggle for power. Hence, revolutionary forces need to be vigilant and prepared in order to safeguard the accomplishments of the revolution. Otherwise, the counter-revolution will prevail.

This is precisely what happened in Nepal on February 1. The events of February 1 were not sudden or unexpected. February 1 was a culmination of a long and effective series of revivalist activities to which the political leadership capitulated at every stage. Instead of safeguarding democracy by resisting the regressive activities of the palace, the political leadership submitted to the King in order to satisfy their own narrow interests.

I do not intend this discussion to be a criticism of any one person or party, but an honest retrospective of past mistakes is necessary in order to ensure a better course for the future.

The first and foremost task of any revolutionary after taking over power is to dismantle the state machinery built by the old regime. Ironically, the royal palace is doing this now in the aftermath of February 1. (The old bureaucracy, as it is, cannot be transferred into the service of a new revolutionary state power.) This was where our “great leaders of big parties” failed. Even before the completion of the third phase of the popular movement, i.e., the transfer of state power to the People, the alliance between the Leftist and Democratic parties (that had been formed in the 1990 movement after a long process) was dismantled prematurely and the united Leftist front was dismissed unnecessarily without acknowledging their contributions. The result was the overthrow of the party-less Panchayat system and the writing of a new constitution. However, the military, which was the core source of power in the previous regime, remained with the Palace. The premature separation of the parties not only weakened the pro-democracy political forces (both the Leftist parties and the democratic party), but also placed them in a confrontation with each other, generating a space for anti-democratic activities.

Second, the Parties did not feel the need to win the peoples’ trust to defeat the opposition. Instead, the parties preferred to fight for the favors of the deposed power groups, who in turn wisely exploited the situation in their favor.

Third, after coming to power, the parties set aside the ideologies, philosophies and goals of the parties, forgot what the common people had expected from democracy, and indulged in undemocratic practices, including corruption, internal fighting, etc. Also, the mounting Maoist insurgency continued to shock the nation. The daily occurrence of shootings, bombings, looting, and the abduction of children and innocents wreaked havoc upon the population. In the midst of this violence, the government was ineffective in provided for the safety of civilians. As a result, the people grew frustrated. Although K.P. Bhattarai, G.P. Koirala and even Surya Bahadur Thapa tried to mobilize the army against the Maoists, they were unsuccessful.
Now, all parties have realized the mistakes of the past and have made public admissions to that effect. However, the mere acknowledgment of mistakes is not enough. People are expecting concrete programs and actions from the parties. Unfortunately, the political parties have not yet organized a common program to address the crisis. To win the trust of the people, a common program is imperative. Narrow interests, political rivalries, and arrogance are the main hurdles in this regard. The political parties need to unite in this struggle. Finally, the disgraced leadership must clear the way for a new leadership that can revitalize the parties from within. This new leadership should then emphasize inclusive politics and try to bridge relations across all democratic and leftist parties.

Besides the political mistakes, there were serious problems with the socioeconomic programs of the parties. Democracy is supposed to help solve socioeconomic inequality. Along with the serious problem of socioeconomic inequality, other problems include the historical pattern of unequal regional development, backward and oppressed communities, and the expectation of regional autonomy. One thing is very clear. From now on, mere political slogans will not be sufficient to get the people’s support. The socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and regional problems that the country is facing must be addressed.