

Nepal's battle is no part of the Bush war

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The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal is witnessing a heightened popular surge for democracy. King Gyanendra cowers as relentless waves of people battle uniformed protectors of royalty in the bloodstained streets of picturesque Kathmandu, the country's capital. A conspiracy is on, however, to convert the battle into a part of a so-called "war for democracy" that the world has come to dread.

The people of the tiny nation, particularly the youth free from the feudal tradition of loyalty to the King, continue their heroic struggle despite the mortar bombs dropped from military helicopters on agitating crowds including women and children. Hardly concealed, meanwhile, are attempts to hijack the struggle into the holy war on "terror," unleashed by the George Bush administration of the USA.

The Bush regime has long been engaged in a war on "terror" in Nepal - but on the King's side. It is now pretending to an initiative on the people's side through a new-found regional proxy - but may end up bailing Gyanendra out of his grave predicament.

The dangers of such disorientation facing the struggle find illustration in the impact of the Nepal events in India.

It was about two months before 9/11 that Gyanendra made his gory ascent to the throne. His anointment as king after a massacre of King Birendra and the rest of the entire royal family by Crown Prince Dipendra is an oft-recounted piece of recent history. Not so well recorded is the post-9/11 story of an increasingly intimate Washington-Kathmandu alliance.

It was "terrorism" of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or CPNM, popularly called Maoists, that supplied the rationale of the alliance. It was the same "threat" that also

provided the King a rationale for his subsequent assaults on a parliamentary democracy that co-existed with a constitutional monarchy and that the people had won after years of struggle.

India's stand has similarly been one of support for democracy as also for constitutional monarchy in Nepal (the two being described as "the twin pillars" of a desirable order in Nepal) along with anti-Maoist solidarity with Kathmandu. The similarity has acquired a new significance ever since the birth and growth of a USA-India "strategic partnership."

Promoters of this "partnership" are busy pleading for intervention in Nepal by India as an ally of Bush in "the war on terror."

In January 2002, Colin Powell, at the time US Secretary of State, paid an unprecedented visit to Kathmandu to announce open and total support for the monarchy in crushing the Maoists. "You have a Maoist insurgency that's trying to overthrow the government and this really is the kind of thing that we are fighting against throughout the world," Powell declared. The then-US ambassador to Nepal James Francis Moriarty made no secret of America's "strategic interest" in the region.

The partnership had grown to menacing proportions by February 2005, when Gyanendra sacked the elected government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and declared an emergency. Wrote US journalist Conn Hallinan: "The Bush Administration has concluded that the civil war threatens to make Nepal a "failed state" and a haven for international terrorists, leading it to place the CPNM on the State Department's 'Watch List,' along with organizations like al Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf, and Lebanon's Hezbollah." Then US Ambassador to Nepal Michael E. Malinowski waxed enthusiastic in his endorsement of the King's line.

As I wrote in these columns then, the result was "the heavy influx into South Asia's poorest nation of US weaponry and military equipment, along with British helicopters and American advisers, to aggravate a civil war that has taken a toll of thousands of Nepali lives."

India, for its part, had been extending anti-terror military assistance of 4.5 billion Indian rupees to Nepal per year. New Delhi did discontinue this assistance in February 2005, but it took only a few face-saving measures by the King for it to resume its military supplies.

In the current context, staunch Indian lobbyists for the "strategic partnership" are asking New Delhi to play the role of the super power's regional proxy in this matter. One of them, C. Raja Mohan, for example, writes: "In the last few years much of the world, including the United States and the European Union have waited for India to take the lead on Nepal and agreed to coordinate their policies with those of New Delhi. If India holds back, other powers would soon begin to act on their own." The other powers presumably include China, which has played an unabashedly pro-monarchy role thus far and has just started recognizing parliamentary parties in Nepal.

Warns Raja Mohan : "If India does not act immediately, the ground situation - worsening by the day - would compel India to consider more drastic remedies in the future. That could include military intervention to prevent state failure in Nepal."

Ironically, the main opposition to such a course come from the far right which, during the term of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had set the "strategic partnership" in motion. The ground for their opposition would be the special place for Nepal in their as the "world's only Hindu kingdom." Apologists for the king in these quarters have even advocated absolute monarchy.

This opposition can conceivably be overcome if the US-India partnership over Nepal is projected as a possible precedent for a similarly combined role with regard to Pakistan and Kashmir in particular. The Vajpayee government, it may be recalled, spoke in significant approval of the right of nations to pre-emptive anti-terror strikes and pressed for extension of such a right to India.

Needless to add, such an extension of the "war on terror" to Nepal can do no good at all to

the cause of peace in South Asia.

P.S.

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