

# Nepal: Emergency withdrawn but democracy remains a far cry



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THE state of emergency has been withdrawn in Nepal and this appeared as a happy augury for a country which so painstakingly introduced democracy in 1990, but the last nail was driven on the fragile system with the sacking of the elected prime minister in February this year by the King when the state of emergency was declared and many other restrictions imposed. The stringent moves drew sharp criticisms and also condemnation internally and internationally as these were seen as "killing of democracy" by the monarch, whose role was supposed to be largely ceremonial.

Facing orchestrated clamour for restoration of democracy, King Gyanendra started slowly showing readiness to relax his absolute control and has recently withdrawn the emergency. But he is demonstrating little sign to revert to democratic system even though pressure continues to mount on him for early elections and other steps including release of political leaders and workers who are still detained. The statement from the finance minister that the King wants democracy back, but it is likely to be restored in three years clearly belies the impression that the monarch would follow up the withdrawal of emergency by further positive measures. Consequently, prospects of early restoration of representative authority in this south Asian nation seems bleak and certainly this sends a discouraging signal.

Earlier, the King released former prime ministers Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba and general secretary of Nepal Communist Party Madhav Kumar Nepal from detention. Obviously,

intense pressure from home and abroad resulted in the release of these people, among many others. Needless to say that King Gyanendra's action in dismissing the elected prime minister sought to put the clock behind as he took over all executive powers on flimsy grounds. In a bid to ward off mounting criticisms, he is, to an extent, slackening his grip and indicating that the tough measures are a short-lived arrangement. But this is not happening despite the fact that emergency is no longer there.

of Sher Bahadur Deuba government, strictly speaking, has not come as a total surprise. In a way, something like this was apprehended sooner or later since political developments held no promise for a better future taking into consideration the evolving condition centering the elections and the ever increasing unrest caused by a determined insurgency by the Maoists.

A popular monarch King Birendra had to loosen his grip on powers facing a pro-democracy movement when he conceded demands like

Maoists want dismantling of the monarchy and setting up a Republic, and a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. The King is not ready to accept these demands, not surprisingly. Recent reports say the army has gone all out against the ultras.

Evidently, a country like Nepal can ill afford to absorb two serious crises - stemming from political instability and the long-drawn Maoist insurgency, which is growing in intensity even though none of the sides is in a decisive stage. But the solution definitely not lies in measures like "killing" democracy in the country. King's February measures are proving counter-productive.

Nepal developments came in for severe criticisms in the South Asian region and also the world at large. Donor nations including the United States, the UK and India - all important democracies - threatened to cut off military aid to the country. Setback to democracy has not been taken kindly. After a meeting between Indian prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Nepalese King Gyanendra

in "Bandung" on the sidelines of the Afro-Asian conference, India showed readiness to resume military aid to Nepal, but the decision came in for criticisms from some partners of the Congress-led UPA alliance government. Later Indian government said the issue of resumption of the assistance is contingent upon the process of restoration of democracy in the country. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, during his recent visit to New Delhi, stressed that the King must act quick to revive the representative government. But the latest position of the government hardly gives any indication of an early election. Nepal needs a return to democracy. That can more effectively serve the nation to eliminate political instability on one hand, and the "Maoist" insurgency on the other even though the latter is a difficult task. This will also improve the image of the otherwise peaceful and lovely country abroad.

Undoubtedly, the biggest headache for the King is certainly the activities of the Maoists, who often engage themselves in fierce battles with the army and police leading to big toll of lives on both sides. By this time they control a large area in the countryside. Efforts for a government-Maoists negotiation did not bear much fruit and consequently a stand-off situation exists as far as the fighting is concerned. The

## MATTERS AROUND US

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Sensing that the King would seek to cling to power, seven political parties have launched a common platform for democracy and made a demand on monarch's power. The political climate is further heating up rather than getting a cooling effect after withdrawal of state of emergency.

Nepal, the landlocked nation, admirably introduced parliamentary democracy in 1990 replacing executive monarchy. The developments in the country -- sacking of the elected prime minister and vesting of all power in the monarchy -- cannot be commended to any extent since these measures are certainly taking the nation further away from representative character of governance. The current millennium had certainly begun on an ominous note for Nepal, which was otherwise a largely calm and peaceful country drawing too many tourists from all over and was making significant strides to change its impoverished image. Monarchy remained the constitutional head with an elected parliament and leader of the majority party or alliance as the prime minister to run the nation. But over the last four years, the happy conditions began to change and the political situation got murkier. The dismissing

democratic government in 1990. Political parties -- the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) and other smaller groups -- have not shown maturity in a new parliamentary democracy as intra-party rivalries as well as squabbles within the main Nepali Congress kept all at bay about the fate of democracy even though people favour representative system of government. The murky political situation can be well judged by the fact that Nepal witnessed as many as thirteen premiers in fourteen years of introduction of democracy. Nonetheless, nascent democracy was gaining experience and killing of it is no answer to the ills. On the contrary this will compound the situation.

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## EAST-WEST CENTRE

# Building an Asia-Pacific community

KHALEDA RASHID

MAY 14 is the EWC (East West Centre) Day. Being an alumna of the EWC, I assign great importance to the role alumni of different educational institutions/organisations can play in building international understanding. Looking at the world and the events taking place around us, it is evident that now more than ever that we need to understand each other's cultures, way of life and religion. There are about 37 East West Centre Alumni (EWC) Chapters in Asia. The EWC Alumni, Bangladesh Chapter remained quite inactive and dormant for many years. Dan Berman, former EWCA President and presently Special Representative for South Asia, EWC President's Office, New Delhi, and Karen Knudsen, Director, External Affairs, EWC visited Bangladesh in September 2004 to rejuvenate the Bangladesh Chapter. An ad-hoc committee was formed. So far the ad-hoc committee has been able to successfully track down 273 alumni and update information on some of them. Much more remains to be done. Dan Berman's recent visit to Bangladesh on 23rd April, 2005 has paved the way for further consolidation of the Chapter.

During Dan's visit the Bangladesh Chapter hosted a EWC Alumni Evening on 26 April, 2005 and had fruitful open discussion and question-answer sessions. The EWCA Bangladesh Chapter intends to create a database of the alumni. The Bangladesh Chapter needs and expects the support from the alumni so that it can develop into a Chapter that excels all others. The EWCA South Asia Chapters have scheduled a Regional Conference at the Habitat Centre New Delhi in November 16-18, 2005. The theme of the Conference is 'Building a South Asia Community in a Global Context'. Bangladesh Chapter has taken on the responsibility of organising panels on Gender Issues and Demographic Transition in South Asia.

In 1977 I got an East West Centre grant as a degree participant to do my post-graduate degree at the University of Hawaii (UH). The East-West Centre was established through an act of the United States Congress in 1960 to "promote better relations and understanding between the United States and the nations of Asia



and the Pacific through cooperative study, training and research". To support this mission, the Centre's programmes focus around specific institutional goals -- to assist in creating an Asia Pacific community in which the United States is a natural, valued, and leading partner. Research, dialogue, educational activities and public outreach incorporate both the Centre's mission and the programmatic focus of building an Asia Pacific Community.

The aim of the Centre is to strengthen relations in the region through 'Cultural and Technical Interchange' and it is a national and regional resource for information and analyses on Asia and the Pacific. It is a meeting ground of people with a wide range of perspectives and views. The EWC is a public, non-profit national and regional research and education institution. It is run by an international Board of Governors funded by the US government in addition to support from private agencies, individuals and corporations, and a number of governments in Asia and the Pacific. The Centre is an internationally recog-

nised education and research organisation promoting a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia Pacific community. Since its establishment more than 50,000 people have participated in Centre programmes.

The Center's 21 acres site is in Honolulu, adjacent to the UH campus. The Burns Hall with conference facilities is the centre for administration and research; Hale Manoa, Hale Kihini and Lincoln's Hall are residential halls for participants; and Jefferson Hall with meeting rooms, a large conference room accommodates the cafeteria, students lounge and many seminars and conferences. Jefferson Hall was the centre for social interaction among the participants. It was the venue for the yearly event, the International Fair, where participants and the Hawaiian community learnt about other cultures and people. Unfortunately this is no more. The Jefferson Hall is now a private facility that the Centre may use on payment.

On the East-West Road (occasionally closed to vehicular traffic) of the UH and the Centre, Jefferson Hall and Kennedy Theatre stand facing each other. When I saw the Jefferson Hall

for the first time, I was amazed at its architectural beauty, elegance and serene landscaped setting. The large cantilevered first floor gives the building its grandeur and the wide terrace on the back overlooks a picturesque Japanese garden gradually merging into the Manoa Stream and the mountain beyond. The garden is visible from the residential halls, Hale Kihini and Hale Manoa. I still remember with nostalgia the "home away from home", many friends and the activities we shared, the plumeria (frangipani) groves on the campus and mild fragrance of its flowers, the adventure of collecting mangoes, the picnics and outings and the hiking trip to Kauai so strenuous yet enjoyable.

At the University of Hawaii, in both the Department of Architecture and the Department of Planning I came in touch with a few very competent personalities not only as teachers, but as human beings as well. I bear a deep sense of admiration for them. I recall with gratitude their contribution in developing my career and an understanding of other people. The University of Hawaii provided me the knowledge and the confidence to meet future obstacles with professionalism and competence.

What better location can there be than the Hawaiian Islands for the EWC, the 'Centre for Cultural and Technical Interchange between East and West'? Indeed an appropriate place, midway in the Pacific Ocean for the East to have a dialogue with the West! Let us contribute to the establishment of a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia Pacific Community; let us come together on the occasion of EWC Day.

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# Lessons from the rubble

MUJTABA AHSAN

WHEN a nine-storied garment building and hundreds of human lives along with it, goes down, it brings up the terrible truth that the value of human lives in our society is almost zero. It once again brings back the stark reminder that we harbour a deep-rooted incapacity to have an accountable and safe building practice in the country. It is easy to go on a finger pointing exercise after every such incident with the whole gamut of the owner-architect-engineer-building permit authority nexus coming under fire at various points in the hands of the public media. The fact of the matter is we cannot bring back the lives lost in all these tragic failures, nor can we make amends for the losses to the families concerned. But what we can do, at the least, is to make sure that similar incidents do not happen in the future. Let's go over this step by step.

A large number of the garment factories in the city operate in flagrant violation of building rules and safety. They are almost like ticking time-bombs waiting for things to go wrong. First of all, many of these factories are established within existing residential or other previously constructed buildings. These hardly meet the health and safety requirements of the new use. What is more alarming is the fact that, in the absence of dedicated structural designers in the country, general practicing civil engineers take on the task of adapting the old structures to the new live and dead loads.

In most cases, proper as-built drawings are hardly ever present, and the rule of thumb solution based on a working stress design rather than on ultimate load, banks for its success on an overly done safety margin. This increases the cost of construction and owners try to recover some of that by building beyond the recommendations of the civil engineers. In most cases this works because the safety margin holds and they get away with it, the result is however, much more disastrous because even if the building does not collapse, largely unsafe and precarious structures become an ever growing threat in the long term to the city dwellers.

Most structural designers perhaps predict that under a reasonably strong earthquake almost 70 percent of the city's buildings would go down. Therefore, when we are dealing with human lives, such a public attitude and practice is hardly desirable. One thing that stands in the way is the political machinations by powerful technocratic circles in preventing the adoption of stringent registration standards or quality control of professional services. Neither is there an appropriate legal apparatus, nor is there adequate quality of professional services to bring to book violations of structural design. Quite amazingly in this day and age, when there are no such assurances available, the public clings on to an invisible "BUET" standard, which practically means nothing.

Besides structural issues, the second major threat to these garment factories is fire hazard. Even though this has fed popular media outcry for some time in the wake of several fire disasters in the city, nothing useful has come out of it. Unfortunate but true,

most architects in our country seem to be of the opinion that in the time of fire the only strategy is to run for your life, and therefore, all a building needs is a fire stair and exit door. Even though the simple rationality of the idea seems obvious, it is not totally correct. Fire-fighting in a building usually comes in three steps: precautions and safety measures to prevent the cause and spread of fire, management of the fire in containing it and evacuating the

buildings hardly ever consider these issues at the architectural design phase, largely because of a perception that having an exit door and a stair is all that is needed. What a terrible mistake this can sometimes be.

Besides giving consideration to proper structural design and architectural fire management needs, the third major concern I would like to bring forth is for garment workers' safety in terms of indoor air quality. A

delivering optimum working conditions for the workers, it is necessary that garment factories are designed by competent professionals and commissioned by responsible owners. I am sure that the owner of Spectrum garments has had many wakeful nights and found himself at the receiving end of public and media outrage for his gross negligence, but I find it hard to blame only this single pitiful soul. It is our social attitude to

In conclusion, I don't waste my ink with the expectation that our public institutions would wake up at this time, but I expect our second generation of educated Bangladeshis and newly rich entrepreneurs to bring a change to their attitude and think twice about what is at stake and what is a prudent choice to make the next time they walk into their humming factories teeming with workers. A brand shirt that sells for seventy dollars hardly makes the garment worker any more than thirty cents. The least these workers deserve is a promise to preserve their lives at work even if we cannot ensure a fair share of profit for their toil. This is something which is within our capacity to deliver. I particularly look towards the BGMEA because I know that it is run by some very educated and progressive people, who can not only review the conditions of the garment industry workers and their workspace in the future if they seriously intend to do so, but can also set up some kind of standards to follow, so as to ensure that our prime source of foreign exchange revenue remain healthy and in good hands.

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building occupants properly to safety, and finally to douse the fire and prevent damage to property. So it is quite obvious that the designer's task does not start and end at having fire exit doors and a stairway installed.

Modern fire-fighting techniques within a building are more or less an established science and we have a lot to learn. Even at the design phase it takes into consideration the building and interior materials based on fire rating. Fire rating, in a broadly simplified term, establishes the combustible character of any building material in terms of how long it can withstand and prevent the spread of fire before its collapse. Fortunately, the fire rating of concrete and brick that are typically used in our country as construction materials can withstand fire for quite long. But then, many interior materials do not, and some elements such as clothing can quickly spread fire in an interior. This is of critical importance as a rapidly spreading fire and fumes can suffocate and often block the passage to evacuation and the fire exit door or the stair can become absolutely useless.

Secondly, fire management takes into account the typical travel distance from the place of work to the nearest exit door in case of an emergency. Having a long and tortuous journey during a panic from fire almost inevitably means a disaster. Exit routes are therefore designed and placed within close reach. These are in most cases standardised, so that workers can quickly reach them in an emergency. Fire management also demands that people are previously oriented and trained how to evacuate a building in a systematic manner or else the inevitable result occurs that people panic and cause more harm by randomly running around in a stampede than by suffocating or actually catching fire. It is not hard to recognize the importance of this fact if we critically examine some of the past instances of fire and the principal causes of death. Fire drills at regular intervals and fire safety tools such as extinguishers within easy reach, coupled with fire alarms, are therefore essential to fire management in a building. Having said that, the necessity of designing electrical wiring in the interior is also another aspect that needs to be addressed. Any designer conscious of fire hazards not only needs to keep a close eye on electrical wiring within the building, but also needs to have fire alarms and indicators placed at every vital junction. I am afraid a majority of the garment factory

large number of factories provide working conditions in which suspended fibres and synthetic materials float in the air. Many of these airborne particles and fibres have severe health implications. Addressing indoor air quality has become an essential issue, with interior designers and architects closely involved with delivery of safe interiors today. Unfortunately, this trend has not entered into a mainstream practice in our country. Not only in terms of safety, but also in

disregard for public safety and the nature of the public apparatus to allow this status quo to exist that is to blame. I cannot even start to think of the proportions of the loss that has occurred at this disaster. Some things cannot simply be measured by a dollar figure, but I am sure the cost of having a competent design for a safe building would have had been much less. The greatest thing we can achieve from a disaster is an understanding and preparedness to prevent the next one.

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6X3