life under the king's direct rule. Elections for a constituent assembly were promised by the king, but were never held. King Mahendra intensified court intrigues to bring back all state powers from the Singh Durbar Secretariat to the Narayanhiti Royal Palace. Intensification of cold war rivalry created a suitable geo-strategic environment for King Mahendra to stage a military coup in 1960, and the experiment of parliamentary democracy in the country came to an abrupt end within 18 months of hesitant practice.

King Birendra followed in the footsteps of his father and fended off all attempts for restoration of democracy in the country with clever maneuvers like Go to the Village National Campaign (a kind of royal politburo that selected people's representatives at all levels of Panchayat), vague referendum (the details of "improved" Panchayat, a choice in the plebiscite, were deliberately left unclear), and deceitful constitutional amendments that always ended up reinforcing the royal control. He agreed to exercise his powers by staying within the limits of the constitution only when the People's Movement of 1990 forced him to reach an agreement with the political parties spearheading the movement for the restoration of democracy in the country.

Court intrigues, however, didn't cease even after the promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, in 1990, which asserted that sovereignty resided in the people of the country. On the surface, King Birendra appeared as a model constitutional monarch, but behind the scenes he never refrained from exercising his power and influence. It so happened that one after another the Premiers -- Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, Girija Prasad Koirala, Man Mohan Adhikary, and Sher Bahadur Deuba -- were only too willing to accept the king's wishes as his command.

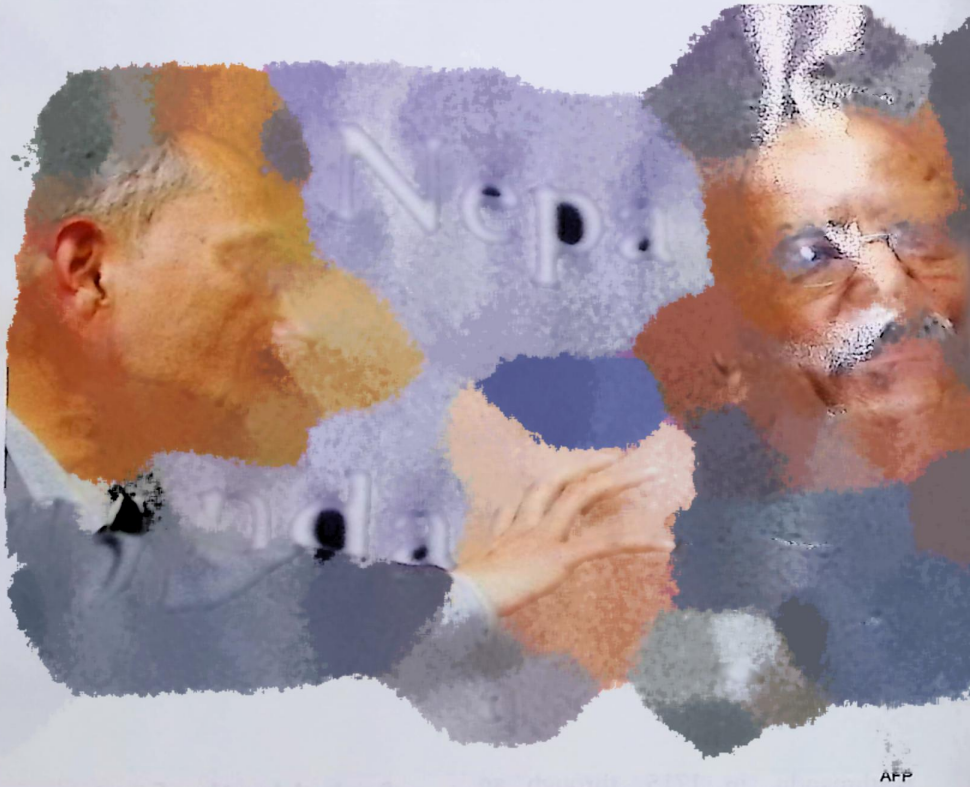
Once out of office, Bhattarai admitted that King Birendra had told him that the command of the army rested solely with the monarch, and that the prime minister had no authority to mobilize it without his express permission. This diarchy spelled trouble, but nobody took serious note of it back then. Bhattarai failed to put the crucial issue of control of the army for discussion in the parliament, or to make it public immediately. He could have resigned after taking a principled stand; instead, he went out of Baluwatar in ignominy when faced with the prospect of a motion of "no confidence" in his own parliamentary party.

The Narayanhiti massacre of June 1, 2001 exposed the limits of the prime minister's authority when the Royal Nepali Army didn't take the ruling head of government into confidence, even hours after the killing of the reigning head of state. Premier Koirala weathered the storm of criticism but refused to publicly accept that he was as unaware about what went on inside the royal palace on that fateful Friday evening as anyone else.

Koirala did resign, but only when his image had been tarnished with the brush of what was clearly a cleverly orchestrated scandal over an aircraft lease deal. Koirala had to leave in a huff in July 2001 when the Royal Nepal Army refused to carry out the order of his government to rescue policemen held hostage by Maoists. However, he still refused to divulge the details of his humiliation. Such was the hold of the palace upon the high and mighty of the land. When Sher Bahadur Deuba became the premier after the ouster of Koirala it was widely believed that he had the blessings of the palace and the army.

The second term of Deuba as prime minister of the country turned out to be its most disastrous. He declared a state of emergency in the country, mobilized the army to fight Maoists, formed a breakaway faction of his mother party, and dissolved the parliament to support his political adventures. He failed on all counts: the insurgency escalated, the army got ambitious and the palace began to pull his strings.

Even though Deuba was ready to sign on the dotted lines in everything other than his own resignation, he was dismissed by the king as a prime minister "incompetent" for holding the election on the previously announced date. The palace had finally succeeded in outwitting all politicos after relentless effort for 12 years. During this period, courtiers used every trick in the book -- and some brilliant ones of their own, like making Deuba commit hara-kiri by dissolving the parliament when there was no way of holding an election -- to deride, defame, discredit, divide and



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