

L.S. Baral. 2012. *Autocratic Monarchy: Politics in Panchayat Nepal*. Pratyoush Onta and Lokranjan Parajuli, eds. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

As a result of the anti-Rana movement, Nepal entered into a democratic era in 1951 but Nepal's first experiment with democracy did not proceed smoothly. Instead of consolidating democratic norms, Nepal saw a frequent change of governments and wrangling among various political parties. This gave ground to strengthen the monarchy that had been virtually imprisoned till recently at the hands of the Ranas (1846–1951). During the brief spell of democracy (1951–1960), disgruntled forces, especially the dethroned Ranas, their supporters, and the ambitious crown prince Mahendra, who succeeded King Tribhuvan after his death in 1955, all remained determined to let democracy fail. Encouraged by squabbling parties, King Mahendra was not inclined to give up his power as a traditional monarch and instead appeared to intensify his authority over politics in Nepal. He was alarmed with the rise of the Nepali Congress (NC) party as the single largest party with a two third majority in the parliament after the first general elections (1959). In addition, against his wish B.P. Koirala, whom Mahendra saw as his rival, became the Prime Minister. Unhappiness about the growing popularity of B.P. Koirala and the fear of being sidelined by the latter, resulted in disaster for Nepal when Mahendra overthrew the elected government and introduced a partyless Panchayat, a system claiming to be 'suitable to climate and soil' (*hāwā-pāni ra māto suhāūdo*). In the present book, L.S. Baral (1925–1997) examines these features of Nepali politics with some insightful understanding.

The importance of this book lies in the well-informed data that the author provides us with a scholarly discourse on how the 'autocratic monarchy' succeeded in weakening the political parties and their leadership. This paved the way to launch a coup in 1960 and overthrow the democratically elected

NC government led by B.P. Koirala. Baral further articulates how the partyless Panchayat system that Mahendra introduced steadily took root despite many odds and weaknesses it contained.

The two editors, Pratyoush Onta and Lokranjan Parajuli, have put precious time and effort in collecting, editing and publishing these essays, hitherto spread in various journals and edited volumes, in this one volume. As the editors state (p. 1) they started working to bring out this volume in 2002, but the publication was delayed for various reasons and appeared 15 years after the passing of L.S. Baral. In their 'Acknowledgements' (vii–viii), the editors have provided a complete list of publications where these essays previously appeared. In addition, in a 53-page long introduction, the editors have summarized and analyzed systematically the subject discussed in every single essay collected in this book. This analytical review greatly helps readers navigate the subjects discussed in each essay and to understand their importance. The introduction also sheds light on the personal and professional life of the author and also explains his academic activities and working surroundings.

The book is divided into two parts; Part I containing 10 chapters and Part II containing three chapters. The essays listed in the first part focus mainly on internal politics of Nepal while Part II provides us with a discussion on 'Nepal and non-alignment' (Chapter 11), Nepal's foreign policy (Chapter 12), and its relation with India (Chapter 13). These final three chapters in Part II show how Nepal accomplished her dignity as a separate nation through the role it played in the international arena and its relation with its two giant neighbors India and China. The author has especially examined Nepal's relation with India, with whom she had difficult relations at times because of the latter's support, covertly and overtly, to B.P. Koirala's struggle to revive multiparty democracy in Nepal.

The chapters included in Part I brilliantly discuss various aspects of the political state of Nepal for the period between 1951 and 1978. During this period, Nepal saw three monarchs: Tribhuvan, Mahendra and Birendra, essentially autocrats, whom we see much concerned to consolidate their feudal power rather than to let democracy flourish in the country. The first chapter of the book 'The 1959 Constitution of Nepal' gives a glimpse of the history of making constitutions in Nepal. Presenting a brief discussion on the 1948 Constitution during the government of the Rana Prime Minister Padma Shamsher, it also touches upon the features of the 1951 Interim

Constitution of Nepal that King Tribhuvan proclaimed soon after the Rana regime had been overthrown, which also contemplated an election to a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. Taking advantage of the unstable political situation, instead of conducting an election to a Constituent Assembly, King Mahendra himself announced a new constitution in 1959 as “a royal reward” through a “Drafting Committee” (p. 61). The constitution put the king above the constitution, giving him the right to suspend or select all articles of the constitution. The chapter also discusses how Mahendra manipulated the situation and silenced the parties insisting on an elected Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. This first chapter Baral co-authored with A. Appadorai while the rest is authored by Baral alone.

Chapter two, ‘Nepal’s Apprenticeship in Democracy 1951–1960’ examines the political situation of Nepal preceding the 1960 coup. This chapter discusses the intra-party and inter-party tussles among the political parties that helped to strengthen the power of King Mahendra. Baral explains how some of the prominent Nepali Congress leaders helped Mahendra to stage the 1960 coup, dissolve the elected parliament and outlaw all the political parties.

From Chapter three to Chapter 10, Baral presents more comprehensive discussions on the Panchayat polity in Nepal. He synthesizes his discussion from the moment Mahendra staged the 1960 coup. Chapter three dives further step-by-step into the components of the new system. For instance, in ‘King Mahendra’s Coup of December 1960,’ the author analyses the reasons behind the failure of the short experiment with democracy in Nepal. In Chapter four, ‘Shifting Elite Loyalties: The Non-Congress Leaders Implications in Nepal,’ he discusses how the people who envied the Nepali Congress cheered the coup against the NC government and gradually extended their support to the new system. Here we see how political parties other than the NC initially reacted to Mahendra’s coup, and how they gradually toned down their voice as they lacked the strength to oppose the new system. We also observe the form of ‘elites’ in the Panchayat system. In Chapter five, ‘The New Order in Nepal under King Mahendra, 1960–1962: An Assessment,’ Baral examines the way in which the Panchayat structured itself in these two initial years with various activities including the announcement of a new constitution. These in fact gave a solid foundation to the Panchayat system. In Chapter six, Baral discusses ‘The Panchayat Elections in Nepal, 1962–1963: The Emergence of a New Political Generation.’ In Chapter seven, “‘Class

Organizations” in Nepal: Social Control and Interest Articulation,’ he analyses the different organizations such as Peasants’ Organization, Labour Organization, Youth Organization, Veterans’ Organization, Women’s Organization, Students’ Organization, Children’s Organization, etc. that were created to solidify the Panchayat system. In Chapter eight, ‘Opposition Groups in Nepal, 1960–1970,’ Baral examines the voices of opposition within and outside the Panchayat system, which he finds extremely weak and unable to deter the path taken by the autocratic monarch.

Chapter nine, ‘The Nepali Ministerial Elite since 1960: Change and Continuity of the Political Elite’ provides a discussion of the personalities of political actors who were active in Panchayat politics and succeeded in capturing important ministerial posts. In particular, we see certain names repeatedly mentioned such as Surya Bahadur Thapa, Dr. Tulsi Giri, Vishwovandhu Thapa and Rishikesh Shaha who fully supported King Mahendra in establishing the Panchayat system, and whom King Mahendra and his successor Birendra trusted and awarded important ministerial posts or premiership time and again. Interestingly enough, once they were pushed out of their posts, they expressed their discontent over the lack of democracy in the Panchayat system and even opposed the role of the king. At times, they even pleaded for the reintroduction of the multi-party system but were silent once rewarded with posts they desired. “The demand for reforms of some aspects of the partyless Panchayat system has been a constant feature of Nepali political life ever since its introduction under the new constitution awarded by King Mahendra on 16 December 1962” (p. 349). In Chapter 10, ‘The Changing Constitutional and Political System of Nepal,’ Baral has examined this phenomenon in detail.

The partyless Panchayat system that determined the politics of Nepal for three decades is still a much-debated subject in Nepal. Enough has been written on the subject during and after the demise of the Panchayat rule. However, besides a few investigative works (e.g., Baral 1977, Shaha 1990) we lack critical scholarly studies that could provide us with some in-depth knowledge of that time. In this regard, this work by L.S. Baral provides us with some wider perspectives on this period. This book will specially help readers to understand characteristics of the political history of Nepal of post-Rana (1951–1960) and the years of the partyless Panchayat system under the autocratic monarchy (1960–1978). This book, however, carries no observation for the years between 1979 and 1990, when Nepal witnessed

two major political events, i.e., the 1980 referendum, to let Nepali people choose between the reformed Panchayat system or the multiparty system, and the 1990 People's Movement, which forced King Birendra to reintroduce multiparty democracy in Nepal. We can hope that this work will invite further writing on this topic.

## References

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