

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Tremors in the Hindu kingdom

A banned political party held an open conference demanding a multi-party political system in Nepal.

The conference organized by the proscribed Nepali Congress at Kathmandu in December against the best wishes of the Nepalese government, outlines the shape of things to come. The "partyless democracy" ploy instituted by the monarchy to prevent the growth of a political process has come under sharp attack lately, and the decision taken by the Nepali Congress, the leading political party, at the conference, to launch a nationwide movement from Feb. 18 is bound to disturb the monarchy's tranquility.

The conference was attended by high-level political leaders belonging to India's ruling Janata Dal as well as the Opposition Congress (I). It discussed political reform. Withstanding covert armtwisting from His Majesty's government, the conference rejected the present set-up of the *Rashtriya Panchayat* (parliament) in which 140 members are elected indirectly or are nominees of the king.

It is this control which allowed the monarchy to sidle closer to China and make moves which irritate India, its other neighbor. China finds it convenient to use the monarchy to maintain its presence along India's northern borders, and to promote a system somewhat analogous to its own. The dissension against the "partyless system," if it gains momentum, will be reflected in Sino-Nepalese relations, although as of now this has remained unspoken.

The Nepal monarchy, headed by King Birendra, is a decadent institution. There are reports of the King's perpetual drunkenness and persistent rumors of royalty's covert involve-

ment in drug trafficking. Critics also point out that King Birendra, who is seldom in a state to stay in touch with what is going on in the country, is under the thumb of three Harvard graduates, outside the royal family, who are virulently anti-India and who dream of turning Nepal into a "Singapore" or the "Hong Kong" of South Asia.

Yet the monarchy as an institution is revered by the Nepalis living in rural areas. Perhaps for this reason the Nepali Congress—a mishmash of nationalists, communists, and socialists—has not yet attacked the monarchy directly.

King Birendra and his handpicked politicians are expected to blame India for the current tremors. It is also not unlikely that some high-level government official will visit Beijing to shore up further support. So far, the Indian government has acted with circumspection by advising its ambassador at Kathmandu not to attend the Nepali Congress's conference. The Nepalese Foreign Ministry had asked diplomatic missions in Kathmandu to stay away from this "unlawful assembly." While India complied with the edict, the British and the U.S. ambassadors attended the conference.

After the expiration of the trade and transit treaty on March 23, 1989, Nepal submitted a draft treaty which, among other things, called for ending the age-old special relationship with India and opting for a "most-favored nation" status instead. Nepal also wants all trade to be transacted in hard currency, except for the "payments in connection with border trade." The trade is now conducted in Indian cur-

rency, and Nepal would clearly like to enhance the smuggling potential of the border business. The Nepalese government has also asked for continuance of 17 transit points to enable the kingdom to receive consignments from abroad. Under international law, landlocked Nepal is entitled to one point of transit.

Besides objecting to the draft for dropping the special relationship status and encouraging border smuggling, India notes that the draft does not mention the earlier provisions banning export of opium and other dangerous drugs, a matter of concern to Indian Customs.

The straining of relations between the two countries has a deeper history. Nepal's large-scale arms purchases from China, King Birendra's campaign with active support of the Chinese to make Nepal a "zone of peace," allowing the Chinese to build roads close to the Indo-Nepal borders, the construction of a road linking Tibet to Kathmandu with Chinese help, and enforcement of laws requiring work-permits on Indian workers (Nepali workers do not require work permits in India), have raised India's suspicion about Nepal's motives.

So far, the United States has refused to take Nepal's side in the dispute with India. Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Asia and Pacific Affairs recently, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John H. Kelly said the United States is of the opinion that India did not violate any international law by closing the transit routes to Nepal in March 1989.

The Nepalese government has taken measures to silence dissension within its borders. Chief district officers have been provided with unlimited authority whereby they can detain individuals for 18 months under the pretext of being a threat to national security.