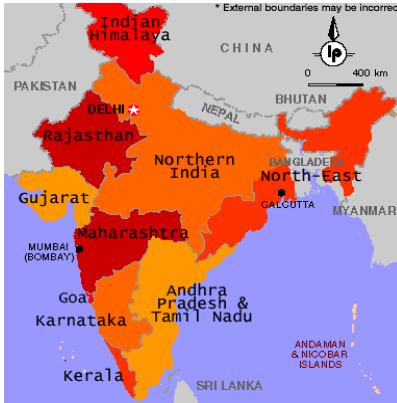


TWO HIMALYAN KINGDOMS GIVE UP THEIR KINGS

By Nick Gier



Bhutan and Nepal, two small nations nestled at the foot of the Himalayas, have just held significant elections. The Nepalis voted in a Communist-led government and ended a 239-year-old royal dynasty without regret. The Bhutanese, on the other hand, very reluctantly voted to end the rule of their popular absolute monarch.

When I first visited Nepal during the Dasein festival of 1992, I witnessed the Nepalis' love for their Hindu King Birendra, as thousands of them lined up to receive a personal blessing from him. On June 1, 2001, under very suspicious circumstances, King Birendra and seven members of the royal family were assassinated. Gyanendra, the surviving younger brother, ascended to the throne and proceeded to bring further disgrace to the royal family.

In 1996 Maoists broke from the Communist Party of Nepal, and launched the Nepalese People's War; and by 2006, after about 13,000 had been killed, they were control of most of Nepal's rural districts. In 2004 the Maoists surrounded the Kathmandu and closed down the city for a week. The Maoists ruled their areas with an iron fist, but the Nepalese army's response was equally brutal.



Using the threat of a Maoist take-over as an excuse, King Gyanendra (left) instituted a state of emergency in 2005, shutting down the press, stopping the internet, and dissolving the Parliament. In April of 2006, massive Gandhi-style nonviolent demonstrations forced Gyanendra to reintroduce democracy, and the Maoists agreed to lay down their arms and to participate in new elections.

In the meantime Gyanendra, who by tradition is the incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu, became more and more unpopular. One day while on a religious pilgrimage, his

motorcade was pelted with stones, and he was forced to beat a quick retreat to his palace. In February of 2007 Maoists decapitated a statue of the founding king of the royal dynasty, and then they dragged the head through the streets of Kathmandu. Gyanendra's



image once graced the face of the 500 rupee bank note, but he has now been replaced with a picture of Mt. Everest.

Kathmandu's Living Goddess, a ten-year-old Buddhist girl who by tradition embodies the sovereignty of Nepal, refused to give Gyanendra his annual blessing. The goddess' only other refusal was once in 1950s, when she turned to the king's son and applied the *tikka*, a ceremonial mark on the forehead, to him rather than to his father. Nepalis claim that their goddess, incarnate in successive virgin girls, obviously knew that the king would die shortly thereafter.



On April 10 the Maoists, contrary to every prediction, won 37 percent of vote in the Constituent Assembly election. (Their leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal is pictured on left.) The Congress Party, affiliated with famous Nehru-Gandhi-led party in India, was a distant second at 18 percent. The Communist Party of Nepal was close third with 17 percent. The Maoists, whose military units were up to one third female, nominated 22 out of the 26 women elected, and Nepal's first openly gay man was elected on a small Communist party ticket. There were 55 political parties contending in the election, and the eight Communist parties garnered a total of 338 seats.

In South Asia it is very common for Communists to stand and win parliamentary elections. The Indian Congress Party now rules India with the helped of the Indian Communist Party. Currently there are Communist-led governments in the Indian states of Kerala, Tripura, and West Bengal. The economic results in these provinces have been consistently poor, but Kerala boasts the highest literacy and lowest infant mortality rates in India. West Bengal's government, however, is riddled with corruption.

Nepal's Maoists are said to be studying the programs of their Indian comrades in order to keep their promises to their peasant supporters, some of whom make only one dollar a day. While planning land reform and public assistance, the Maoist leaders promise that they will not abolish capitalism.

Even before the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly on May 28, King Gyanendra was preparing to leave the royal palace to take up residence in a private villa. The May 28th vote against the monarchy was 560 opposed and only 4 in favor. Gyanendra took the decision in stride, praising "the enthusiastic participation of the Nepalese people."

From an international perspective, the U.S. is once again confronted with a democratic election in which people on our terrorist list have won. The U.S. continued its support even when the Maoists were part of a provisional government in 2006-2007, the U.S. has announced that it will work with the Maoist leaders.

Fearing instability on their border with Tibet and possible Indian intervention, China is not happy with the Maoist victory either, which is ironic because they share the same political hero. The Indians is also disappointed, because for decades they have been fighting Maoist guerrillas in some of their own provinces.

While 60 percent of Nepalis turned out for their spring election, 80 percent of the Bhutanese voted in their election of March 24th. Leaders of the two parties on the ballot openly admit that they would have preferred to remain under the rule of King Jigme Wangchuck, pictured below with his four wives (all sisters).



The leader of the People's Democratic Party admitted that the sole reason for his party's founding was that the king told them to do so. When King Wangchuck abdicated in favor his 28-year-old son in 2006, the Bhutanese realized that their monarch was serious about the move to democracy.



Harvard educated and on the "Dragon Throne" for 34 years, King Wangchuck made world headlines when he said that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. He explained this policy as "acquisition of contentment rather than the acquisition of capital."

While on a tour of Buddhist temples and festivals in 1999, I witnessed the results of King Wangchuck's beneficent dictatorship. Royal decrees banning logging exports to India and preserving 60 percent of the nation's forests have kept the Bhutanese landscape healthy and beautiful. Motorcycle taxis, which foul the air in all other South Asian cities, are not allowed in Bhutan. Taking seriously the Buddhist belief that the Himalayas are mountain goddesses, Wangchuck banned mountaineering while allowing trekking in the foothills. The king has made the preservation of traditional religion, dress, and architecture a top priority.

Many Bhutanese believe that their king would take better care of them than politicians who would form alliances with the wealthy and the powerful. With free education and health care, it is ironic that Bhutan is almost the paradise that South Asian Communists have always promised.

One night our tour leader scheduled a dinner with Bhutanese businessmen and women who had ambitious plans to develop their country. I was impressed with their energy and their English language skills, and I also noted the large percentage of women among them. But I can understand why people in the countryside might not trust them with their country's future.

The Bhutanese are mindful of the mistakes which they believe the Nepali government has made, actions that have led to horrible pollution in the Kathmandu valley and widespread environmental damage. Nepalis, however, are not happy with what they think are unfair comparisons between the two countries. With only a slightly faster

population growth, Nepalis live 199 per square kilometer while the Bhutanese figure is 43.

The Nepalis also remind the Bhutanese that there are 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese still living UN camps in Eastern Nepal. The otherwise mild mannered and tolerant Bhutanese drove them out in the early 1990s. Nine of the candidates elected to Parliament are Nepali-speaking and the majority party has promised to address problems of the Nepalese minority.

According to the CIA's *World Factbook* the Bhutanese have a lower infant mortality rate (52 vs. 62 per 1000) and a higher longevity rate (66 vs. 61 years), but the Nepali literacy rate is slightly higher at 49 vs. 47 percent. At \$1,400 Bhutan is a bit ahead of Nepal's \$1,100 in terms of GNP per capita. The Bhutanese are not embarrassed by a high divorce rate, because they believe that it demonstrates the power that Bhutanese women have traditionally had to determine their own destinies.

Even with this impressive economic growth of an average 7 percent per year, there is a growing shortage of jobs for college students. One third of most recent 1,200 graduates could not find positions, and for the first time gangs of unemployed youth are letting out their frustration by drinking and fighting in the streets of Thimphu, the capital city of 100,000 people.

The number of tourists used to be limited to 6,000, but now there are 20,000 per year. This will make way for good paying jobs for Bhutanese who are fluent in English, but it may change the once harmonious culture in substantial ways. At the end of each day, our young assistant guide, frustrated that he was not leading a trekking group, changed out of his traditional "gho" into jeans and a T-shirt, and ordered one drink after another at our hotel bar.

Some unemployed young people watch TV 12 hours a day (a favorite show is *Desperate Housewives*), and they cruise the clubs of Thimphu where Cameron Diaz was once sighted dancing the night away. One reporter also noticed that even though the king

has banned tobacco sales in the country, black market cigarettes were being lit up everywhere.



In 2007 there were mock elections to prepare the Bhutanese for democracy. Four dummy parties were created and the Yellow Dragon Party, devoted to preserving Bhutan's rich cultural heritage, received the most votes. These voters may have good reason to be concerned about their country's future.