Bizarre royal murders plunge Nepal into political turmoil

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A bizarre turn of events over the last week, which began last Friday with the murder of the king and queen along with a substantial portion of the royal family, has thrown the impoverished Himalayan kingdom of Nepal into political turmoil. The most likely murder suspect Crown Prince Dipendra was anointed king on Saturday even though he was on life support in a military hospital in the capital Kathmandu. He died early on Monday resulting in the accession of a third king—younger brother of the first—in just four days.

Yesterday the government imposed a second curfew in as many days as protesters took to the streets demanding a full explanation of the incident. No one believes the implausible official account of a gun going off accidentally and rumours have been widely circulated of a court intrigue involving the new King Gyanendra and his unpopular son Paras. At least two people were killed and 19 were injured during the police crackdown on Monday.

The whole affair has provoked distinct unease not only in Nepal but also in ruling circles internationally as governments calculate the potential for it to destabilise an already politically fragile country, strategically located between India and China.

No adequate explanation has yet emerged of what took place last Friday night in the royal palace in central Kathmandu. The first stories were released not in the Nepalese but the international media the following day. Drawn from local sources, their account still appears to be the most likely and has subsequently been corroborated by other informants.

According to these reports, the royal family gathered for an evening meal in the banquet hall of the palace. Crown Prince Dipendra, 29, was apparently bitter that his parents—his mother in particular—refused to allow him to marry Devyani Rana, a member of the aristocratic Rana family and daughter of a former minister. The reasons for the queen's opposition vary but focus mainly on her hostility to the future bride's Indian connections. Her mother was Indian and she has close family ties to several leading Indian politicians.

Somewhat drunk the crown prince left the room, armed himself with one or two automatic rifles, returned to the hall, locked the door and opened fire on the family. By some accounts, he made sure that his parents were dead by putting a pistol shot through their heads. Throughout the bursts of gunfire, the royal servants and guards observed court etiquette and did not interfere in "family matters". The rampage only came to a halt when Diprendra was finally confronted, shot himself and was carted off unconscious to a military hospital.

The dead included King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, 55, and Queen Aiswarya, 51, along with their other two children—Prince Nirajan, 22 and Princess Shruti, 24. Two of the king's sisters Princess Shanti Singh and Princess Sharada Shah were also killed along with the latter's husband Kumar Khadga Bikram Shah, and a cousin of the late king, Princess Jayanti Shah. At least three others were wounded. One of them, Birendra's brother Dhirendra Shah, died of his injuries on Monday.

Even though the shots were heard outside the palace and the story was in the international media, no official statement was made until around 1pm on Saturday—more than 15 hours after the event. Keshar Jung Rayamajhi, chairman of the State Council, an advisory body to the monarchy, announced on state TV and radio that the king was dead and had been replaced by the crown prince, "in accordance with the law, custom and usage relating to the succession to the throne."

The chairman went on to declare: "Since the new king is physically unable to exercise his duty and is undergoing treatment at the intensive case unit of the military hospital in Katmandu, his uncle, Prince Gyanendra, has been proclaimed the regent." It was left to Gyanendra to offer the first official, yet altogether unbelievable, explanation on Sunday morning that the deaths were not a case of murder but the result of "an automatic weapon suddenly exploding" in an otherwise happy family gathering.

This account provoked considerable hostility, both because of its ludicrous character and because neither Gyanendra nor his son Prince Paras are popular. The regent is known as an autocrat who opposed King Birendra's decision in 1990 to allow a limited form of constitutional monarchy and hold the first national elections in over three decades. Paras, 27, has a reputation as a dissolute playboy who has been involved in at least two vehicular homicides. In the most recent, last August, he ran over and killed a popular Nepalese singer. Despite a petition with half a million signatures demanding he be prosecuted, no action was taken.

In the absence of any plausible official explanation, rumours about palace intrigues were rife in Kathmandu. The deaths were blamed on everyone from Gyanendra to Prime Minister Girija Prasada Koirala, leader of the Nepal Congress Party, who is also not a well-liked figure. It was also speculated that the young crown prince was a secret member of the Maoist-inspired guerrillas who have been fighting the police and army since 1996.

It is impossible to judge at this stage whether there is any element of truth in these stories. No new evidence has come to light, in particular in the form of public statements from those in the banquet hall at the time. The rumours are based on surmises—Gyanendra's "guilt," for instance, is adduced to the fact that he was conveniently absent from the fateful dinner. The only account that has officially been ruled out is the involvement of the Maoist guerrillas.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Koirala announced that an official investigation would be ordered into the events. It was considered an audacious suggestion because of the constitutional issues that such a probe would raise. While the country is routinely described as a constitutional monarchy, much like Britain, the monarchy still retains considerable powers, including the benefit of a constitutional provision which places the king above the law. None of his actions can be the subject of any court and parliament is forbidden from discussing the affairs of the royal family.

The comatose Dipendra—the new king—hooked up to life-support in the military hospital thus presented a constitutional problem. Even if an open-and-shut case were established, Dipendra could not have been prosecuted

for murder. That particular legal conundrum was conveniently resolved early Monday when he died and was replaced by his uncle Gyanendra. According to press reports, the thousands, who dutifully lined the streets to watch the new king paraded in a horse-drawn carriage accompanied by military band and ceremonial cavalry, were less than enthusiastic.

Later on Monday, protesters took to the streets shouting “Dipendra is innocent,” “Punish the real murderers” and “We don't want Gyanendra”. Police and soldiers used batons, tear gas and fired warning shots to break up the demonstrations and impose an overnight, shoot-on-sight curfew which was renewed from noon yesterday.

In a speech on Monday night, Gyanendra, undoubtedly under considerable pressure, appealed for national unity and announced an official investigation into the deaths by the Supreme Court chief justice, the parliamentary speaker and the leader of the opposition Madhav Kumar Nepal. Any prospect that the inquiry would quell the discontent faded quickly, however, after the opposition leader, a member of the Unified Marxist Leninist Party (UML), refused to participate.

It is not the purpose of this article to try to explain the psychological motives of those involved in these peculiar events. Suffice it to say that while the country as a whole is wracked by economic backwardness and poverty the members of the royal family live a life of luxury shut off from the bitter social realities facing the vast majority of Nepalese. Such an environment undoubtedly creates its own peculiar tensions.

If one did not know otherwise, the individuals involved—the king who bred corgis, painted watercolours, and parachuted; his pampered Eton-educated son chasing after an attractive wife; a by-all-accounts scheming queen intent on standing on Hindu tradition and imposing an arranged marriage on the crown prince, etc—would appear like the characters in a racy potboiler set a century or more ago. Were it not for the political needs of capitalism in this area of the globe, this outlandish caste would have long ago lost any legitimacy and ceased to exist. Yet not only does the royal line persist in Nepal, it still wields considerable power.

International reaction has been nervous, reflecting fears about the potentially destabilising impact of the royal murders. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, for instance, issued an extraordinary statement over the weekend declaring that his government “respected” the official account of the deaths and expressing concerns “about the implications of all of this for the stability of Nepal.” Unlike Australia, the US administration did not subscribe to the theory of the “suddenly exploding gun,” but it did state its concern for the stability of the country.

An article on the BBC web site struck a more positive note, seeking to reassure its audience that new king Gyanendra “is regarded as a safe pair of hands” despite the fact he faced “a major difficulty... getting the public to accept him.” According to the BBC, Gyanendra's main qualifications for the job are his involvement in conservation work and the promotion of Nepalese tourism, in which, as the owner of a number of hotels in Katmandu, he has a particular pecuniary interest. His other businesses include a tea estate in the east of Nepal and a cigarette factory.

While the international media have noted a few potential flaws in Gyanendra's character, its coverage of the dead king has been uniformly sycophantic. Numerous reports have described Birendra—to quote one—”as a beloved monarch regarded by many as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu”. An editorial in the Indian newspaper, the *Hindu*, was even more extravagant, declaring: “Indeed the assassinated monarch enjoyed an enormous degree of acceptability among the ordinary Nepalese citizens. A unique high point of his long reign was the people-friendly role that he played to facilitate Nepal's transformation into a constitutional monarchy with a democratic core in 1990.”

The reasons for this rather obsequious praise became clearer when the editorial touched on India's strategic interests in its northern neighbour. “While Kathmandu often appears keen to do a balancing act in its foreign policy in respect of New Delhi and Beijing, Nepal's internal agendas are not also devoid altogether of security concerns to its big neighbours.” India has in the past voiced concerns about Chinese influence in Nepal accusing Beijing of supporting the Maoist guerrillas. For its part, China has expressed fears that the 30,000 Tibetan exiles living in Nepal may politically threaten its hold over Tibet.

Nepal's balancing act between China and India has always been precarious. If the *Hindu* had been at all honest in its account, it would have pointed out that Birendra's decision in 1990 to decree a new constitution was not the action of a benevolent monarch but was forced on him by widespread protests against his rule, in which more than 500 people were killed. Those demonstrations were the result of an acute social and political crisis precipitated, at least in part, by the Indian government's decision in late 1989 to impose a trade blockade on the land-locked country in reprisal for Nepal's perceived pro-China steps and other sleights. The step rapidly led to a shortage of fuel, salt, cooking oil and other basic commodities, a slump in Nepal's tourist industry and an intensification of social tensions.

The 1990 constitution itself was hardly a model of democracy. As well as placing the monarchy above the law and parliament, the king's income and property remained tax-exempt and inviolable. The constitution enshrined the right of the king to exercise a number of powers including the exclusive authority to enact, amend and repeal laws related to the succession to the throne. He also retained the ultimate sanction: to exercise broad emergency powers in the event of war, external aggression, armed revolt or extreme economic emergency. In such a situation, the monarch has the right to suspend basic democratic rights without judicial review. The sole safeguard is that the declaration of emergency must be agreed to either by the lower house of parliament, or if it is not in session, the upper house.

Contrary to the picture painted in the media of a much-beloved monarch presiding with a democratic parliament over a contented people, the lack of democratic rights and the gulf between rich and poor have been a constant source of discontent. Over the last five years, a Maoist guerrilla insurgency has gained ground in the western areas of the country. The estimated death toll has been put at more than 1,600 as the fighting has spread from isolated areas to more than 30 districts. In an attack in April, the guerrillas overran a district police post, killing 47 people including 29 police.

The ability of the guerrillas to recruit to their ranks is not difficult to explain. Nepal is the poorest country on the impoverished Indian subcontinent with an annual per capita gross domestic product of just $210. Over 80 percent of its 22 million people support themselves through subsistence agriculture. The principal sources of foreign exchange are tourism and the export of carpets and garments. Half of the country's development budget comes from foreign aid and there is little industry.

A string of governments over the last decade, including those led by a coalition of so-called communist parties, has failed to make any significant inroads into the country's high levels of unemployment and poverty. In fact, since 1991, the country has made attempts to open up the economy to foreign capital, selling off many former state enterprises and exacerbating the already deep social problems. In remote areas, there are not even roads let alone rudimentary education and health facilities. Illiteracy is still widespread—estimated at 72 percent for those over 15. Life expectancy is just 58.47 years for males and 58.36 for females.

In these conditions, governments have resorted to the most brutal forms of police repression not only against the Maoist insurgents but any form of opposition or protest. The US State Department provided the following cautious summary of the state of human rights in its country report on Nepal published last year:

“The government generally respected citizen's human rights in many areas; however, problems remain. The police at times used unwarranted lethal force. One person died in custody due to torture. The police

continue to abuse detainees, using torture as punishment or to extract confessions. The police also conducted raids on newspapers suspects of having links to the Maoists. The government rarely investigates allegations of police brutality or punishes police officers who commit abuses.

"Prison conditions remain poor. The authorities use arbitrary arrest and detention. Lengthy pretrial detention, judicial susceptibility to political pressure and corruption, and long delays before trial remain problems. The government continues to impose some restrictions on freedom of expression. The government imposes restrictions on freedom of religion. Women, the disabled, and lower castes suffer from widespread discrimination. Violence against women, trafficking in women and children for prostitution, forced labour and child labour also remain serious problems. There were reported instances of forced child labour.

"In 1996 parliament unanimously enacted a bill providing for a permanent human rights commission with the authority to investigate human rights abuses. However, the commission still has not been established."

Since 1990 the monarchy has no doubt sought to shift the blame onto the government for the political and social problems of Nepal. The present situation is, however, the direct consequence of the long and rather sordid history of royal rule in the preceding period.

The monarchy based on the Shah family, and Nepal itself, are a comparatively recent phenomena. Until the mid-18th century, the House of Gorkha, which traces its origins to a Hindu Rajput dynasty driven out of India by Muslim invaders, ruled over a tiny hill state—roughly the size of one of Nepal's present 75 districts. Using more advanced guns and techniques learnt in his contact with the British East India Company, Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah reorganised his army and by 1769 had succeeded in overrunning the bulk of present-day Nepal.

From the outset, however, the grip of the Gorkhas over Nepal remained tenuous. Externally the monarchy was forced to make concessions after being defeated by the major powers—firstly China in the late 18th century, and then by the army of the British East India Company in the early 19th century. Internally, it was subject to constant factional scheming and power struggles within the royal family which reached their climax one night in 1846. In what became known as the Kot massacre, a royal gathering called to discuss the murder of a noble descended into a bloody brawl in which dozens of the cream of the Nepalese aristocracy were either killed or seriously injured.

The main beneficiary of the massacre was the prime minister, Jang Bahadur, who the following day launched a purge that killed many of his aristocratic rivals and drove 6,000 people into exile in India. Jang Bahadur, who later took the title of Rana, established a hereditary prime ministership that kept the monarchy in conditions of virtual house arrest and dominated Nepal for more than a century.

The ability of the Rana aristocracy to maintain itself in the country's unstable political climate was the result of its close ties with Britain, the colonial power in India. In 1857, Jang Bahadur provided much needed military assistance to beleaguered British East India Company troops to suppress the widespread Indian mutiny. After the rebellion, Britain rewarded Jang Bahadur with a grant of lands, and maintained the Nepalese dynasty as a loyal military ally and a source of recruits into the British army.

The Ranas only began to lose their grip over Nepal under the pressure of the nationalist movement throughout the Indian subcontinent. A series of bourgeois political parties was formed in the 1930s by Nepali exiles in India which sought an end to the rule of the Ranas and advocated a limited program of democratic reforms. Eventually consolidated as the Nepali National Congress, these exiles established links with disaffected layers of the lower Rana aristocracy, the army and in late 1950 with King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah who had escaped from the palace.

When the Ranas were finally ousted in early 1951 with the support of the Indian government, the result of the opportunist alliances forged by the Nepali Congress party was the reinstallation of the king as the head of state wielding considerable political powers. Both he and his son Mahendra, who became king in 1955, stalled on the granting of a constitution and the holding of elections, and obstructed even the limited measures proposed by the Nepali Congress leaders.

When the constitution was finally announced in 1959, it was a farce, with the upper house dominated by royal appointees. The king retained the power to act without consulting the prime minister, controlled the army and foreign policy, could dismiss the cabinet and proclaim a state of emergency. The charade of democracy lasted a little more than a year. In December 1960, the king without warning and with the backing of the army declared a state of emergency, dismissed the government and arrested its leaders on the charge that they had failed to maintain law and order.

For three decades King Mahendra, and after 1972 his son, the recently deceased Birendra, maintained one of the world's few remaining absolute monarchies. A four-tier *panchayat* system, based on partyless elections for local assemblies that in turn nominated the members of the district, zone and national assemblies, was the only concession to democratic sensibilities. Despite the fact that the national panchayat had no power to criticise the king let alone make an independent decision, the Nepali Congress and various communist parties adapted themselves to this political system.

That such a historical anachronism could remain in place for decades was not simply the product of the opportunism of the various Nepali political parties. The US and all the major powers maintained close relations with the Nepali monarchy as a bulwark against the Soviet Union and China in a key strategic area of the globe. Indian governments, particularly in the wake of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, strengthened their ties with the king. New Delhi suspended its support for Nepali opposition groups based in India and concluded a series of trade and military agreements granting concessions to Nepal in return for an alliance.

The events of the last week have once again highlighted the bizarre character of the Nepali monarchy. It is one of the more extreme cases of the historical relics which were resurrected from oblivion in the course of the 20th century and utilised as crucial points of political support for capitalist rule in Asia and elsewhere.