In a celebrated interview twelve years ago King Birendra of Nepal declared that his country was not 'not a part of the sub-continent', but was rather 'that part of Asia which touches both India and China'.¹ For readily understandable political reasons, this statement obscures the fundamental reality that Nepal's cultural and economic links are overwhelmingly with her southern rather than her northern neighbour. It is true that the western section of her border with Tibet runs slightly to the north of the main line of the Himalayas, and that among the many ethnic groups which make the country such a happy hunting-ground for anthropologists, there are a number with more or less close Tibetan affinities. Nonetheless, much the greater part of Nepal's territory and even a greater proportion of her fifteen million population, are south of the major peaks. The national language, Nepali, mother-tongue of just over half of the inhabitants and widely understood among the remainder, is closely related to Hindi and written in the same Devanagri script. The dominant groups, both numerically and even more so in terms of economic and political power, are caste Hindus², and King Birendra is still regarded as an *avatar* of Vishnu by most of his subjects. Citizens of both countries move freely across the open border with India, and the much easier communications with the south mean that virtually all trade, even with third countries, is conducted via Indian territory. In effect, King Birendra is the ruler of the last of the Indian princely states, and, in the shadow of the Indian Union, faces the problem of maintaining the power of the monarchy despite the continued demand of many in the country for full democratisation.

King Birendra is the tenth-generation descendant of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of the little hill principality of Gorkha whose conquest of the Kathmandu valley in 1768 marked the birth of modern Nepal. Under Prithvi Narayan and his successors the Gorkhas rapidly overran Hindu chieftdoms and independent tribesmen alike and by the early 19th. century controlled the hill country from Sikkim in the east to the river Satlej in the west. However, further expansion was first checked by the Sikhs, and then in 1814 they clashed with another rising power — the British East India Company. They
were defeated, but not before inflicting serious reverse on the British, who thereafter retained a healthy respect for their military abilities. It was in the closing stages of this war that deserters from the Nepalese forces were recruited into the British Indian army, forming the nucleus from which the Brigade of Gurkhas (the English mis-spelling of Gorkha) was to grow. The peace settlement of 1816 deprived Nepal of about a third of her territory, the principal loss being of the hill country between the Satlej and the Mahakali. Her borders have remained substantially unaltered since that time.

Internally, the succession to the throne of infant kings encouraged the emergence of ‘mayors of the palace’, amidst struggles for power between different members of the royal family and the various bharadars, as the leading military and civil officials were styled. Order was imposed in 1846 when Jang Bahadur Rana became premier and proceeded to institutionalise his own family’s predominance, which was to last until 1951. In an arrangement similar to that between Emperor and Shogun in Japan, the descendants of Prithvi Narayan retained titular supremacy as Maharajadhiraj (‘Great King of the Kings’), whilst the Rana ruler, who combined the posts of Prime Minister and Maharaja (merely ‘Great King’), held actual power.

The Ranas reached a satisfactory modus vivendi with British India, being left free from interference in their internal affairs but providing valuable military support for the raj. This involved both the committing of Nepal’s own forces in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny and in the two World Wars, and also, from 1885 onwards, facilitating recruitment into the Gurkha regiments of the Indian army. It was probably the wish to ensure that such recruits would remain willing to put down disturbances by the Indian nationalists that led the British explicitly to recognize Nepal’s fully independent status in the treaty of 1923: the Nepalese themselves had never acknowledged any British authority over them, but the British had for some years before then been maintaining that Nepal possessed ‘full internal autonomy’ but not the right to determine completely her own foreign policy.

Despite her rulers attempt to insulate Nepal from social and political developments to the south, by the time of Indian independence in 1947 there were a small number of ‘dissidents’ amongst the minuscule educated minority in Kathmandu, whilst Nepalis in India, often participants in the Indian nationalist movement, had been organising propaganda against the Rana rule for a number of years. Against this background, the Ranas tried to establish a similar relationship with the new Indian government as they had enjoyed with the British, providing military assistance, which was especially valuable during the disturbances which followed partition, whilst hoping to be allowed a free hand at home. Nehru and his colleagues, however, still pressed for liberalisation in Nepal, believing that unmitigated Rana autocracy would provoke revolt and threaten stability on the northern frontier at a time when the Chinese communists were consolidating their regime and proclaiming their intention to ‘liberate’ Tibet.

In 1950 two separate Nepali anti-Rana organisations in India amalgamated to form the Nepali Congress, and in secret contact with Bireendra’s grandfather, King Tribhuvan, made plans for a rising in Nepal. After news of these preparations reached the Rana regime, Tribhuvan and most of his family, including five-year-old Bireendra took refuge on 6 November 1950 in the Indian Embassy.
in Kathmandu. Four days later Maharaja Mohan Shamsher, under Indian pressure, agreed to the royal family being flown to Delhi. Armed Nepali Congress volunteers now crossed the border and, while fighting continued, the Indian government sponsored a compromise settlement under which Tribhuvan returned to Kathmandu in February 1951. It was intended that he should rule with a cabinet consisting equally of Rana and Nepali Congress representatives, pending the election of a constituent assembly. On 18 February, a date now celebrated as 'Democracy Day', the Interim Government of Nepal Act formally returned executive power to the monarchy, where it has since remained. But thirty-five years later Nepal has yet to achieve a real national consensus on an acceptable framework for her political life.

It was hardly surprising that the monarchy, rather than the Nepali Congress or any other of the groupings of dissident intellectuals, took over the Rana's mantle as effective power in the land. Throughout the Rana period the religious awe which surrounded the throne had been maintained, and, as far as the vast bulk of his subjects were concerned, an incarnation of Vishnu had a decided advantage over a party politician. The king also became the natural focus of loyalty for most members of the old elite: the Ranas and the Shah dynasty had intermarried since the 1850's, so that in the broadest sense the same family remained in power, only with a different branch in the ascendancy. The 'popular' forces were in any case deeply divided. On top of the tension between Nepali Congress-men who had been based in India and other anti-Rana groups who had been in Kathmandu throughout, personal differences between political leaders led to constant splits and realignments. Against this background King Tribhuvan tended to play a more active role himself, and was probably encouraged in this by his Indian advisors. The different forces at work were well illustrated by the events surrounding the end of the Rana-Congress coalition cabinet in 1951. This was precipitated by the death from police firing of a student taking part in a leftist demonstration against the government. After the resignation of the prime minister, former Maharaja Mohan Shamsher, the king turned to the Nepali Congress for his successor, but passed over the party-leader B. P. Koirala, in favour of his half-brother M. P. Koirala. This was partly because B. P., as Home Minister in the coalition cabinet, at the time of the police firing, was felt to be too controversial a figure, but both the king and the Indian ambassador were also widely believed to be personally predisposed against him. The choice was opposed by the bulk of party members, but Tribhuvan allegedly told the party that unless they accepted M. P. Koirala he would appoint no cabinet at all and instead rule directly with the help of General Kaisar Shamsher, a younger brother of the ex-Maharaja and Tribhuvan's own brother-in-law.

This development led ultimately to the expulsion from the Congress of M. P. Koirala and his supporters, but nonetheless cabinets of differing composition under his leadership alternated with a period of direct rule by Tribhuvan and a council of 'Royal advisors'. The holding of a constituent assembly seemed as far away as ever when Tribhuvan died in 1955.

His successor, Birendra's father, Mahendra, reigned until 1972, and though opinions differ sharply as to whether his actions served the true national interest, friend and foe alike would agree that he was a consummate political tactician.
He was adept at sizing up the forces ranged against him and then playing them off against one another. In the field of foreign policy he broke with his father’s acceptance of Indian tutelage and cultivated a counter-balancing relationship with China, as well as establishing relations with many other countries and generally putting Nepal on the map of international diplomacy. This maximised the sources of foreign aid, as well as preserving his own freedom of manoeuvre.

Mahendra sought to employ the same strategy in domestic affairs, both as an adjunct to this foreign policy and to serve his domestic end. The appointment as prime minister of the pro-Chinese Tanka Prasad Acharya, a veteran political campaigner who had spent the last ten years of the Rana regime in prison, aided the development of closer relations with the People’s Republic, but once this object had been achieved the King replaced him with the pro-Indian K. I. Singh. Acharya, despite his self-proclaimed Marxist credentials, had also been willing to help Mahendra prepare the ground to dispense with the long awaited constituent assembly and promulgate a constitution himself. The Nepali Congress and other groups protested but almost decided to participate in the general election held under the new constitution in 1959. The result was an overwhelming victory for the Nepali Congress, which gained 74 out of 109 seats. K. I. Singh’s United Democratic Party and Acharya’s wing of the Praja Parishad secured only five and two respectively, and the Nepal Communist Party four. The Gorkha Parishad, a right-wing grouping founded by hard-liners of the Rana family, emerged as the main opposition grouping with nineteen seats. Mahendra had almost certainly both hoped for and expected a much closer result, in which competing political factions would still all have been obliged to look to the throne for patronage. He nevertheless invited B. P. Koirala to form a government and allowed it to function for eighteen months. On 16 December 1960, however, he made use of the emergency provisions in his own constitution to dismiss the entire ministry and to imprison both them and the leaders of the other parliamentary parties. The King justified his action by accusing Nepali Congress of general maladministration, failure to maintain law and order, and endangering national sovereignty. There had, in fact, been disturbances in the Gorkha area between Congress and Gorkha Parishad supporters, in the course of which police had opened fire and several persons had been killed, and there had been protests against the government in the Kathmandu valley, but there had certainly been nothing approaching a general break-down of law and order. The Congress itself counter-charged that the king acted at the behest of ‘reactionary elements’ alarmed at the government’s land reform proposals and other radical measures. Such elements were indeed among those who had been pressing for royal intervention, but their concerns were not essential reason for Mahendra’s move: he was himself later to introduce legislation similar in many respects to that proposed by Congress and if its actual implementation did not produce any very radical change, experience elsewhere in South Asia suggests that the result would not have been so very different if the Nepali Congress had implemented the programme. The king was primarily concerned that the main focus of power might slip irretrievably from the royal palace to the prime minister’s office, his fears being the more readily understandable, is, as has been suggested, there were signs that, despite previous clashes, the Gorkha Parishad was actually moving towards some sort of accommodation.
with the Congress. 5

While in office B.P. Koirala had managed to maintain good relations with both India and China, despite the growing tension in the region caused by the revolt in Tibet and the Dalai Lama’s flight, and by the Indo-Chinese border dispute. Nevertheless his identification in earlier years as strongly pro-Indian strengthened the disquiet with which New Delhi viewed the royal coup. Perhaps unwisely, Prime Minister Nehru voiced his disapproval in the Lok Sabha, and the activities of Nepali Congress exiles in India over the next two years brought Indo-Nepalese relations to an all-time low. Mahendra accused India of permitting the dissidents to launch cross-border raids, and the scale of these actually increased after the king’s 1961 visit to Peking and agreement with China for the construction of a road through the Himalayas from Tibet to Kathmandu. Tension along the Indian border ended in major disruption of the normal trade and transit arrangements and Mahendra would almost certainly have been forced to accept a compromise with his Congress opponents, as Delhi was urging, had not the October 1962 Chinese invasion of Ladakh and NEFA compelled the Indian government rapidly to mend its fences with the king. The Indians prevailed upon Suvama Shamsher, leader of the Congress exiles, to suspend the guerilla campaign, and India thereafter reconciled itself to the end of parliamentary democracy in Nepal. However, the evolution of political institutions was still to be greatly influenced by events in India.

Internally the complete loyalty of the security forces had made Mahendra’s initial task extremely easy. Leaders of marginal political parties, such as Tanka Prasad Acharya and K.I. Singh, initially welcomed the removal of their political opponents from power, and though they later took up a more critical stance their initial support had been valuable to the king. The most prominent figures in the new council of ministers which Mahendra subsequently formed were, however, two Congress renegades Tulsi Giri and Vishwabandu Thapa, and Rishikesh Shaha, once a member of a splinter group from the Congress and subsequently a member of the diplomatic service. These three were instrumental in the framing of a new constitution, promulgated in December 1962 on the second anniversary of the royal take-over. A four-tier system of panchayats (councils) was established, with village or town, district, zonal (until 1967 only), and national levels. Only the bottom tier was to be directly elected, members of the remainder being selected by those in the tier immediately below from among their own ranks. At the apex of the pyramid, membership of the Rashtriya Panchayat (National Assembly) was supplemented by royal nominees and by representatives of various ‘Class Organisations’. Most of the latter were also indirectly elected, but college graduates, a ‘constituency’ numbering some 2,000 in 1963 and about 10,000 in 1971, could vote directly for their four representatives. 6 The prime minister and other ministers had to be members of the Rashtriya Panchayat but were appointed by and responsible to the king, who also had extensive powers to bypass the assembly’s legislative powers.

The village panchayats forming the basis of the system were allegedly indigenous institutions, although ‘traditional’ Nepalese panchayats were in fact caste rather than local government bodies. Nevertheless, these local councils were similar to the ones established under the panchayat raj introduced by many.
states of the Indian Union, and although, as in India, there were problems with their functioning, particularly in relation to the interface with representatives of the central government at local level, they were not in themselves particularly controversial. The real argument was over indirect elections to the national legislature, and the exclusion of political parties from the system. Indirect election, together with the initial holding of Rashtriya Panchayat sessions in camera, made it virtually impossible for representatives to be held accountable to their constituents or for issue-related campaigning to take place. Thus although nirdatiyata (partylessness) was not written into the constitution until the 1967 first amendment, it was clearly the intention to prevent any party system from developing, and the whole structure owed more to foreign models such as Ayub Khan’s ‘basic democracy’ in Pakistan, or similar systems in Indonesia and Egypt, than to any native precedent. The apologists for Panchayat Democracy argued that it provided an ‘organic’ or ‘consensus’ rather than an adversarial approach to politics but critics at home and abroad saw it merely elaborate ‘window dressing’ to disguise continuing rule by the king and the bureaucracy.

In practice, the operation of the system at local level has resulted in leadership positions going to large landowners and other members of the traditional elite. This feature can, of course, occur with political parties operating freely, as is amply demonstrated over much of India, but the tendency is probably stronger under the panchayat system. In addition, the restriction on the formation of mass organisations based on common economic interests or shared ideology has often reinforced high-caste dominance, and also the ‘personalistic’ pattern of politics based on the patron-client tie at all levels.

The system did not, however, succeed in eliminating ‘factionalism’ altogether, despite the setting-up of the ‘National Guidance Ministry’ to oversee its workings and regular admonitions from King Mahendra himself. There was a problem from those who retained membership of the banned political parties, though not an unmanageable one. B.P. Koirala and some of his closest associates were retained in prison until October 1968, sixteen months after Suvarna Shamsher, head of the Congress in exile, had formally announced that the party was not prepared to accept the panchayat system. The Nepal Communist Party split into various factions, one group virtually co-operating with the royal regime while others were restrained in their opposition by the anxiety of both Moscow and Peking to remain on good terms with Mahendra. It was clear, however, that panchayat ideology was not winning the loyalty of the intelligentsia: student union elections in the colleges were regularly fought between Nepali Congress (‘Democrats’) and pro-Peking Communist (‘Communists’ or ‘Progressives’) factions, with pro-government students coming a very poor third, whilst anti-system candidates topped the 1967 and 1971 elections for the Rashtriya Panchayat graduate constituency. Opposition was also encountered even from those at the heart of the system: of the 125 members returned to the first Rashtriya Panchayat in 1963, sixty per cent were former party workers, of which a third had been with the Nepali Congress, and old habits died hard. Even the three ideologues of the system — Tulsi Giri, Vishwabandu Thapa, and, most spectacularly, Rishikesh Shaha — emerged as critics later on. The regime’s response to criticism
tended to fluctuate, imprisonment under the *Security Act* being used against those who stepped too far out of line, but the students were allowed a relatively free hand. The more liberal tendency was reinforced by the attitude of the Supreme Court, which often interpreted such rights as were afforded under the 1962 constitution as generously as possible, whether as a result of autonomous decisions or because the palace, for tactical reasons, hinted that leniency was required. 10

When King Mahendra died in February 1972 and Birendra ascended the throne at the age of twenty-six, there was a general expectation of change. It was hoped by many that the Eton and Harvard educated monarch would himself favour a more liberal line than his father. India’s recent success in establishing an independent Bangladesh, and China’s failure to provide anything but verbal support for Pakistan, had raised her prestige and lessened the scope for Nepal to play off China and Pakistan against her, as Mahendra had been able to do with great success in the early sixties. Finally the disturbances in the *Rashtriya Panchayat* the previous year over the election for the graduate constituency of a blatantly anti-panchayat candidate had highlighted discontent with the existing system. Against this background, Surya Bahadur Thapa, a trusted collaborator with King Mahendra in the early days of the panchayat regime and premier from 1966 to 1969, emerged in May at the head of a group demanding liberalisation on similar lines as Rishikesh Shaba and others had done in 1968–1969. He threatened to back up his demands with a civil disobedience campaign, and denounced in particular the ‘dual government’ under which the palace secretariat bypassed the prime minister’s office to issue orders direct to government departments. Thapa’s support in the *Rashtriya Panchayat* was extensive and the motion of no-confidence put down against prime minister Kirtinidhi Bista, would have been a close-run contest had it not been prevented on procedural grounds. Thapa and three colleagues were arrested in August for campaigning outside the legislature and were kept in prison for a year. In the meantime colleges throughout the country had been paralysed by a wave of student strikes.

Whilst Birendra made it clear by both word and deed that he was not in favour of any substantial modification to his father’s system, opposition of a more drastic kind emerged in the shape of a mini-terrorist campaign conducted by extremist supporters of the Nepali Congress during 1972–1974. Incidents included the hijacking of a plane to India, an assassination attempt on the king himself and (though this may possibly have been accidental) the destruction by fire of the Singha Darbar, the central secretariat building in Kathmandu.11 The security situation never became critical, and India was reasonably cooperative in checking cross-border activity. Nevertheless in December 1974 Birendra announced the appointment of a Constitutional Reforms Commission. When, however, the third amendment to the constitution was finally promulgated the following December, it involved not a liberalisation but a tightening of the system. Representation of the ‘Class Organisations’ in the *Rashtriya Panchayat* was abolished, thus doing away with the continuing embarrassment.
which the graduate constituency had provided for the regime. The National Committee of the Back to the Village Campaign, nominally concerned with checking the drift of talent from the villages to Kathmandu and other towns, was revamped and given politbureau-like powers to vet candidates for panchayat elections at all levels. According to one interpretation, Birendra needed reliable men in elected office to help check a growing tendency for bureaucrats to allow special interests to block important development projects. The change could, on the other hand, be seen as a move to crack down on dissent generally, and would probably not have been made if Indira Gandhi’s proclamation of an ‘internal emergency’ in India that summer had not made the sub-continental climate safer for authoritarianism.

If the Indian emergency initially enabled Birendra to take a harder line against Nepalese dissidents, it was also responsible for starting a chain of events which was to lead to changes in the opposite direction. On 31 December 1976 B.P. Koirala, who had been in self-imposed exile since 1969, returned to Nepal from India, where many of his friends had been placed in detention. The claim has been made that he was led to return home by secret assurances from the palace, Birendra allegedly wanting a rapprochement with him because of alarm at Indira Gandhi’s adverse reaction to Nepalese criticism of Sikkim into the Indian Union. However, regardless of any communication which may previously have passed between the two men, Birendra seems at first to have decided he could safely take action against Koirala, who, whilst in India, had not accepted the new soft-line adopted by the Suvarna Shamsher faction of the party, and had made statements supporting violent action against the regime.

The situation took a new turn in March 1977, with the surprise victory at the polls in India of the Janata party, who could be expected to take a strong line on human rights issues generally, and whose mentor, J.P. Narayan, had been a close friend and associate of Koirala since the 1942 Quit India movement. Over the next fifteen months legal proceedings against Koirala were slowly carried forward, but he was twice permitted to travel at royal expense to the U.S.A. for cancer treatment. By the end of 1978 he had been cleared by the Supreme Court of many of the charges against him and others were allowed to lapse. Leniency towards him had been prompted both by Indian attitudes and by the relatively conciliatory line he was now taking in his own public pronouncements.

One of the most difficult tasks for observers of Nepalese politics is to assess how far actions by ‘the palace’ are originated by the king himself or by particular members of the ‘inner circle’, which probably includes members of the royal family, senior aides and officials in the palace secretariat, and (to a disputed extent), ministers and other prominent officials. It is, however, reasonably certain that the handling of the Koirala issue had aroused considerable differences of opinion within this group and that hard-liners now successfully argued that a balancing display of firmness was needed. The consequence was the execution in February 1979 of the two Congress activists sentenced to death eighteen months previously for terrorist offences committed in 1974. Feeling against the regime amongst Congress supporters was exacerbated, and this was the major factor in the minds of many student
demonstrators when they took part on 6 April in what was nominally a protest march to the Pakistan Embassy against the hanging of ex-president Bhutto. Clashes with the police on that occasion led to further demonstrations and strikes, disturbances spread to other parts of the country, and several people were killed in police firing at Hetauda. In early May a royal commission was appointed which rapidly agreed to accept student demands on university conditions, but on 23 May a massive demonstration in Kathmandu turned upon student leaders who had accepted the government offer. Government newspaper offices were set on fire and troops had to be called out in support of the police. The following day Birendra broadcast his decision to hold a referendum in which the electorate would be offered the choice between continuation of the panchayat system on a reformed basis, or reversion to multiparty politics. The ban on political parties remained in force, but in practice they were now allowed a large measure of freedom to operate, which has, by and large, continued up to the present day.

Birendra's decision was apparently taken with little or no consultation with his advisors, and it was rumoured that the Queen Mother and the king's brothers were opposed to the step, believing that the situation could have been brought under control without so drastic a gesture. However, although the level of violence was arguably still low compared to what frequently accompanies election campaigns across the Indian border in Bihar, Birendra was aware that longterm consequences had to be taken into account, perhaps not least the renewed possibility of Indian connivance with his opponents if periodical disturbances continued. The collapse of the Shah of Iran's regime a few months earlier was also a warning of the need to make concessions before being absolutely forced into it. Finally, even relatively small-scale violence in Nepal had a dramatic effect on the king's thinking as on public opinion generally, precisely because life in the country was ordinary much more peaceful than in many other parts of South Asia.

The day after the referendum announcement, prime minister Bista resigned and, as recommended by the Rashtriya panchyat, Birendra appointed Surya Bahadur Thapa as his successor. The choice of the man who had been imprisoned in 1972 for demanding liberalisation of the system, and who had a considerable following still among panchas, was a shrewd tactical move. It was subsequently made clear by the king while the referendum campaign was still in progress that victory for the nirdaliya (partyless) camp would be followed by the introduction of direct elections to the Rashtriya panchyat and the making of governments responsible to it.

When the referendum was actually held in May 1980, a 67 per cent poll produced a verdict in favour of the panchayat system by 2.4 to 2 million votes. There were inevitably accusations of ballot-rigging, and it is quite possible that officials in some remote northern districts stuffed ballot-boxes with extra pro-panchayat votes, since the figures for the percentage of the electorate voting and the percentage of spoiled ballots were respectively much higher and much lower than might have been expected. I do not, however, believe that this had a more than marginal effect on the overall figures. Despite the claims made over a number of years by B.P. Koirala and others that ninety per cent of the population favoured a return to Indian or
British style parliamentary politics, the referendum results are probably an accurate enough indication of public opinion, and any cries of ‘foul’ should rather be directed at the way in which that public opinion was formed. The multi-party advocates had been by and large free to campaign, but the official media, in particular Radio Nepal, put only the panchayat case. Although king Birendra never explicitly directed his subjects which way to vote, his pronouncements left little room for doubting that he remained personally opposed to the party system. In the hills panchayat political workers did not hesitate to tell voters that the real question was *Do you support B.P. Koirala or the king?* The multi-party side were also harpered by disunity in their own ranks, and sometimes by lack of sensitivity towards the feelings of the electorate; some party workers, for instance, spoke out against the recruitment of Gorkhas into the British army, even though they were campaigning in areas of the hills where such service is highly prized.

In December 1980 the Third Amendment to the constitution was promulgated, introducing direct elections and the responsibility of the government to the *Rashtriya panchayat*, as had been prefigured by the king the previous year. The assembly’s choice of a particular individual for prime minister would, however, only be binding on the king if supported by sixty per cent of the members, a difficult hurdle for an ‘opposition’ candidate to overcome, especially as 40 of the 128 seats in the *Rashtriya panchayat* were to go to royal nominees. Criticism was also directed against the ‘Panchayat Policy and Investigation Committee’ and the ‘Coordination Council’, which were also to be nominated by the king and which would have extensive supervisory powers. It was stipulated in addition that any candidate for assembly or local elections must join one of the official ‘Class Organisations’ and take an oath of loyalty to the panchayat system. Objecting in particular to these last two points, the main body of the Nepali Congress finally decided to boycott the 1981 elections held under the amended constitution. B.P. Koirala personally, though sharply critical of the Third Amendment, would probably have preferred participation, but the sentiments of Ganesh Man Singh and other hardliners carried the day.

A prominent feature of the elections, held in May, was the existence of two partially overlapping sets of ‘official’ candidates, one backed by ‘the palace’ (here meaning rather the king’s entourage than Birendra himself) and one by prime minister Thapa. In theory, of course, everyone was standing purely as an individual and so no lists of such candidates could be published, but their identities were generally public knowledge, and when the results were declared it transpired that many had been defeated by their casualties being ex-prime minister M.P. Koirala (B.P.’s half-brother and long-standing rival). It was claimed that as many as 70 per cent of the candidates backed by Thapa failed to gain election. Another interesting trend was discerned in the Tarai, the strip of fertile plain along the southern border, where much of the population is of very recent Indian origin and feel a certain degree of alienation from the politically and culturally dominant hillmen. Most Tarai constituencies were won by indigenous Tharu tribesmen or by Yadavs (a *sudra* caste which is politically influential in adjoining areas of India), whereas previously members of the Tarai’s own higher castes
or immigrants from the hills had represented the area, the old pattern had been a result of the pre-1980 system of indirect elections, which grouped districts together in such a way that the Tarai's representatives could only be elected with substantial support from hill areas. Finally, the new Rashtriya Panchayat also contained a number of members with known party affiliations, in particular Bakhan Singh Gurung and two colleagues from the most moderate wing of the Nepali Congress, and several Marxists of various stripes.

The functioning of the new style Rashtriya Panchayat since the elections has shown first that the factionalism which emerged at times even under the old electoral system is now a permanent feature and, second, that palace influence on the assembly is being exerted not through crude and open employment of powers formally reserved to the crown in the amended constitution, but rather in the manner in which George III of Great Britain contrived to control parliament during the earlier part of his reign. Despite the defeat of many of Thapa's men in the election, all but thirteen members voted for his reappointment as premier, in accordance, it was widely believed, with royal instructions. A small group of dissidents, including both hard-line critics of Thapa's relatively liberal line towards the non-panchayat forces and also some more moderate individuals, soon began to oppose the government constantly. The campaign reached a climax in summer 1983 with a rally in Kathmandu against alleged corruption and mismanagement, but it still seemed to have won the support of only a minority of Rashtriya Panchayat members for a motion of no-confidence which was now tabled. Local election results had suggested that Thapa's position amongst panchas (members of panchayats at any level) remained strong generally, yet that position now suddenly crumbled: eight members of the cabinet resigned claiming it was 'morally' impossible to remain in the government, and when the vote was taken in the assembly on July 11, Thapa went down decisively by 108 to 17. Lokendra Bahadur Chand, who was believed to have been dissuaded by the palace from putting himself forward as a rival to Thapa in 1981, now secured the necessary number of votes and was asked by the king to form a government.

This sudden change was clearly again on palace orders, rumour even having it that many members had been personally summoned before Princes Dhirendra or Gyanendra (the king's brothers) to be instructed where their duty lay. When Thapa had initially been appointed premier during the 1979 crisis, it appears that the 'dual government' he had announced in 1972 had been temporarily ended, or at least greatly abated, and for some time he had been able to insist on the administration being unambiguously run from the prime minister's office. The king's entourage had, however, soon been able to re-assert themselves, and although Birendra himself had for long retained confidence in Thapa, he too had finally decided that the premier must go. Birendra is believed to have asked Thapa to resign before the vote of the no-confidence motion, but the latter insisted that under the amended constitution he was responsible to the Rashtriya Panchayat and should only be dismissed by that body.

Immediately the new government had been installed, a group of members including some of Thapa's hard-core supporters emerged as an 'opposition'. Thapa publicly blamed his downfall on 'unconstitutional pressures' and on the 'new bharadars' (bharadar was the term used for leading courtiers in Rana and
earlier times), and has continued to campaign in the country against his succe-
essor. Thus, even leaving out of account the Nepali Congress and other self-
avowed political parties, the panchayat camp itself seems to be spawning a
new party system of its own.

The death of B. P. Koirala in the summer of 1982 deprived the advocates
of full multi-party democracy of their single most prestigious figure, but the
tens of thousands who followed his funeral procession demonstrated not only
his personal standing but the strength of the cause he represented. The leaders
of the Congress are currently in some disarray over tactics, with B. P.’s younger
brother, Girija Prasad clearly less enthusiastic about their proposed satyagraha
to force further reforms than are Ganesh Man Singh and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai.
Nonetheless, the party retains a substantial following, of which a recent indication
was the victory of the Congress front-organisation over its Communist rivals in
student union elections at several campuses in the Kathmandu valley last Febru-
ary. Whether the bulk of the party maintains its boycott of the panchayat
institutions, or eventually swings in favour of the ‘entryism’ favoured by the
Bakhan Sing Gurung faction, few of any political persuasion can believe that
the third amendment represents anything but a provisional arrangement. So
long as the continued vitality of parliamentary democracy in India maintains
that system as a realisable possibility in Nepalese minds, Birendra will in all
probability continue the monarchy’s slow retreat back towards the system
which his father abolished so dramatically in 1960.

Beyond the question of political institutions lie the fundamental problems
facing any administration in Nepal. In the foreign policy field the management
of the relationship with India is the crucial factor. India’s preponderant power
in the sub-continent and the support the Soviet Union can be relied upon to
give her mean that should she ever decide to intervene decisively in Nepal no
other power would provide an effective counter, whereas if China were to
attack Nepal, India would certainly come to her assistance, no matter what
the formal state of treaty relations was at the time. Although Nepal’s trade
diversification efforts have had some success, India also still absorbs 85 per
cent of Nepal’s recorded exports and provides 47 per cent of her imports, as
well as being her principal aid donor. Relations are nonetheless often far
from smooth, and in addition to long-standing wrangles on the trade and
transit issue and the question of Indian immigration into the Tarai, another
bone of contention has been India’s failure to endorse the proposal that Nepal
should be recognized internationally as a ‘Zone of Peace’. This demand has
been the central feature of Nepal’s foreign policy (at least as publicly presented)
since Birendra made it originally in 1975. Birendra’s wish to have his country’s
neutrality formally acknowledged in this way is arguable inconsistent with the
 provision in letters exchanged at the time in the 1950 Peace and Friendship
Treaty between the two countries was signed: these committed both governments
to ‘consult... and devise effective counter-measures’ in case of attack by a third
power upon either. Since, however, Nepal has stated that she will continue
to honour all prior-existing treaties, and since the 1950 Treaty did not in any case prevent Nepal from remaining neutral in the 1962 Indo-China War and the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, the whole argument appears somewhat theoretical: one western diplomat in Kathmandu remarked to me that the only thing he found more difficult to understand than why Nepal was so keen to have the proposal accepted was why the Indians were so reluctant to oblige. Nonetheless the king appears to feel that the proposal can help ‘internationalise’ South Asian regional issues and also make it marginally more difficult for India to pressurise Nepal, and this feeling is seemingly shared by India.

Whatever political changes occur in Nepal over the next few years, the country is likely to continue formally to reject the notion of a special relationship with India, but to co-operate quite closely in practice. Nepal’s principal concrete contribution to Indian security, viz. the recruitment of her nationals into the Indian army, will also continue, even if the 1947 agreement formally regulating it were to be abrogated: unlike Britain, India does not operate a recruiting depot on Nepalese territory, and Nepalese citizens choosing to join the Indian army are in much the same case as the nationals of the neutral Irish Republic who enlist in the United Kingdom’s forces.

More fundamental for the future are Nepal’s daunting economic problems. Eighty-five per cent of the nation’s households remain dependent on agriculture, the majority being subsistence farmers in the hills, where deforestation and consequent erosion threaten the ecological base. Efforts to improve agricultural techniques and to halt the destruction of forest cover have only been effective in restricted areas, while the modest overall economic growth achieved has been outstripped by the increase in population, GNP per capita actually decreasing by an average of 0.1 per cent per annum in the period 1960-1982. Even the relatively prosperous Tarai is likely soon to become a grain deficit area, as the hills have long been already, and one pessimistic survey of future prospects concluded that no solution is likely to be found ‘in time to save millions of people from impoverishment, malnutrition, fruitless migration, and early death’.

A change in the balance of power between the monarchy and the nation’s elected representatives would carry no guarantee that this crisis could be more effectively resolved, but a resolution of the constitutional issue might at least allow more energy to be concentrated on this basic problem.

NOTES

2. Approximately 65 per cent of the population are ‘twice-born’ Hindus (mostly Chettris and Brahmans), whilst the principal hill tribes (including those from amongst whom the ‘Gurkhas’ in the Indian and British armies are recruited) are around 20. The remainder are largely ‘impure’ caste Hindus and ‘untouchables’. M. Gaborieau, ‘Muslims in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal’. Contributions to Indian Sociology VI (1972) 95.
3 L. E. Rose, Nepal: Strategy for survival (Delhi, 1973) 166.
5 Ibidem, 387.
6 Lok Raj Baral, Oppositional politics in Nepal (New Delhi, 1977) 136-139.
7 Pashupati Shemsher J. B. Rana and Mohammed S. Moshin, A study report on the pattern of emerging leadership in Panchayats (Kathmandu, 1967).
8 See, for example, P. Caplan, Priest and cobblers (London, 1972) and B.-E. Borgstroem, The patron and the panca (New Delhi, 1980).
9 Baral, Oppositional politics, 62.
10 Three examples of such decisions by the court are the acquittal of candidates in the 1967 graduates’ election who had been arrested by the government for anti-system activities, the 1965 quashing of K. I. Singh’s conviction for planning to launch a satyagraha, and its 1970 decision upholding the right of students to form independent unions.
11 Shailendra Kumar Chaturvedi, Bharat-Nepal Sambandh (Delhi, 1983) 56 suggests that the 1974 suppression of the Kamas who had been operating from Mustang into Tibet was prompted by fear that they would join in the Congress campaign. It was widely believed at the time, however, that the Nepalese government took this action in response to Chinese pressure.
13 C. F. Parmanand, The Nepali Congress since its inception (Delhi, 1982) 382.
14 Ibidem, 383.
15 See the analysis in R. Shaha, Essays in the practice of government in Nepal (New Delhi, 1982) 120-128.
16 Ibidem, 181.
18 Tarai-hill tensions are analysed in detail in F. H. Gaige, Regionalism and national unity in Nepal (Berkeley, 1975).
22 Rising Nepal, 31 December 1984. The percentages would be much higher if illegal trade is taken into account.
24 See Rose, Nepal, 257-258. Many of the ‘Gurkhas’ in the Indian forces are Indian citizens of Nepalese descent, but the number of Nepalese citizens involved was estimated at 14,800 by the Nepal government in 1969, Jha, Uneasy partners, 181.
26 World Development Report 1984, Table I.