

# Role of the citizen in Nepal's transition

## Interview with Devendra Raj Panday

Devendra Raj Panday played a key role in both the 1990 and 2006 People's Movements. He was one of the principal drivers of the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP), a civil society initiative that was instrumental in laying the ground for the 2006 movement. Earlier, following the success of the 1990 movement, he was the Minister of Finance in the interim government that oversaw the drafting of the 1990 Constitution. He started his career as a civil servant and resigned from government service as Secretary at the Ministry of Finance in 1980.

### On the monarchy

Since 1951, Nepali kings have always been waiting in the wings for politicians to make a mistake so that they can take over again. [King] Birendra was also one of them. I gave him the benefit of doubt since, while he professed to pursue development, he himself was a prisoner in the palace. But monarchs are monarchs after all. He was a ruler under the Panchayat system with its 'feudal tentacles'. And even in the multiparty system after 1990, the constitution had been drafted in such a way that he felt he could intervene once in a while.

But, the Shah dynasty ended the day the royal massacre happened in June 2001. There was no way it could last because symbolically the Vishnu [one of the Hindu trinity whose reincarnation Hindu kings are supposed to be] was dead. The narrative is that his son did it. We don't know what took place, but whatever happened doesn't happen in Vishnu's household. The traditional legitimacy the monarch had in Nepali society was lost that day.

### On the impetus for a civil society movement

In 2005 and 2006, in addition to the authoritarian regime that [King] Gyanendra had imposed on us, there was violence all over Nepal due to the Maoist 'People's War'. It was causing unnecessary deaths, disappearances of

people and humanitarian crimes. The Maoists were making all kinds of demands for a new constitution. Some of these were what we as civil society actors were also demanding, and we began to think of ways to bring them to the table to talk peace, to talk about regime change of a sort that would also be acceptable to the established parties.

When Gyanendra seized power in February 2005 it added energy to our enthusiasm. Those were the days when the basic demand of the Nepali Congress and the UML [Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist] was just the reinstatement of the parliament that was dissolved in 2002. That was not acceptable to the Maoists who wanted more, and we thought they were right, at least in that context.

### On civil society in the 2006 People's Movement

We faced challenges in making a clear demarcation between the parties and ourselves. The movement called for by the political parties did not pick up speed on its own. People were fed up with them, just as seems to be the case now. The civil society activists who used to come to our meetings were professionals wanting to talk shop, but we had to have mass meetings to mobilise people's support. We went to the people, from house to house. In many places, I remember people saying they would support us if it was *our* programme. And we had to explain who we were – civil



Devendra Raj Panday. © Kiran Panday

society actors who mediate concerns between the people and the parties; but we are not political parties, we do not run the government. Because we explained this and perhaps because of our actions, we got the support that we did.

The Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace created the grounds for political parties to take the lead in the struggle against the king. After our movement caught on, the mass meetings of the political parties also started becoming more vigorous with greater participation of the people. The parties got re-established once again, as we wanted them to. All along, our point was it is the political parties who run the government. We are civil society – to ensure human rights, peace and justice, and if the political parties err again, we have to rise again and correct them. That had been our line all along and that was how we acted.

### On the demand for a republic

At the CMDP meetings, the Nepali word for democracy, *loktantra* [rule by the demos], was deliberately chosen. Democracy was then known as *prajatantra* [rule by the subjects]. We questioned this: we are not subjects now, we are citizens! We had started thinking about Nepal as a republic from that time [2005], but if we had spelt it out from the very first day, half the people would not have come out in support. Many people had not made up their minds or at least had not thought through ending the monarchy. It was only that Gyanendra kept on facilitating it through his ignorance and arrogance. We used *loktantra* so that people who were for a republic would join the movement – but so too could those who were not. The transition from *loktantra* to *ganatantra* [republic] was easy.

### On the 'New Nepal'

In some ways, we were ahead of the political parties. We were not going to be happy with what Marxists call a change in the 'superstructure'. We had gone through that in 1990. There were other changes that we were looking for. Some of these coincided with the Maoist agenda – and that's what made us Maoists in the eyes of some of our detractors. As the movement grew and as our work with the Maoists and the Seven-Party Alliance proceeded, we stood for more than just a republican state, which we had not been for in the beginning in any case.

Restructuring the state was very much part of our agenda. We hadn't called it federalism yet, but rather the end of the unitary system. The problem was that power was centralised in the palace and in Kathmandu. We used to talk about inclusive state and sometimes inclusive democracy. We wanted to see the end of one particular *pahadi* [hill] caste group that had been running the show for centuries – the end of exploitation, as the Maoists would call it – and to see equality and justice. That is the 'New Nepal' we imagined.

But, later on, New Nepal just became an empty slogan. The restoration of the parliament in April 2006 was the watershed. From that point on, the parties rose and the New Nepal agenda went down. The Seven-Party Alliance got the reinstatement of parliament it wanted. For many of its leaders, this was mission accomplished. The war had ended. Gyanendra had sidelined himself. We were in a jam.

In our next meeting, we asked what would happen to the Constituent Assembly. What if it is not formed? What happens to the restructuring of the state? What if it is the 1990 Constitution all over again? The Maoists would not be able to do anything. Having come this far, they could not have gone back. That was the main issue, personally for me and for many of our friends in the group. We issued a statement the next day that our movement was to go on until the Constituent Assembly took place and a new constitution was framed. Only then would we wither away. From that point on, we were labelled Maoist sympathisers. Slowly, the political actors began moving away from us, especially when prominent citizens rose against us and began writing articles calling us Maoists and so on.

### On what happened to the New Nepal

The established parties had to fight the Maoists in elections and so understandably they had to do all they could to undermine them. For us, the agenda for change was more important, which itself was a fusion of liberal democracy and socialist democracy, along with the Maoist agenda of economic and socio-cultural change. That was what was

driving us in CMDP, but the established parties were not interested in any of that – though they would not admit it openly. Girija [Prasad Koirala, Nepali Congress president] to some extent was an exception. He had realised how far he had come. I think he had accepted the idea of change after many meetings with [Maoist leader] Prachanda and so many meetings with us. He was the principal driver of the *12-Point Agreement* [of 2005], and so he had a responsibility towards it as well.

The Maoists did not help either. They had arrived from the jungle to the parliament without knowing the rules of the game whatsoever. And then they brought their YCL [Young Communist League] into the streets, which brought such a divide among the people. The Maoists were still armed at the time [early 2007]. Every time I met Prachanda, I would tell him that they would have to learn how things worked and then earn the trust of the people through their social,

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economic and cultural agenda. That meant having to re-work their ideology. But, they were carrying their old book while trying to play a new game with new rules.

#### **On the New Nepal agenda**

Many of the progressive words and phrases in the *12-Point Agreement* were there at the insistence of the Maoists. The Maoists' main point was that there was no inclusion in the 1990 Constitution. The people could demand their rights, but the supply side was completely dry (those are my words). In this situation the 1990 Constitution could not succeed. The Interim Constitution was also influenced by the Maoists. It is full of leftist language in the eyes of some. There was acceptance from all sides but only for the sake of agreement without internalising what that language really meant. That was the problem with many other agreements.

#### **On being an ordinary citizen**

Politicians have to run the party and have to provide the spoils of office to their supporters. I am not a politician. I am truly independent. I love being a citizen. That is the most powerful position in the world.