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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Low Voices at High Altitude

By MANJUSHREE THAPA

New Delhi — UPON assuming absolute power over Nepal on Feb. 1, King Gyanendra banned all expressions against the spirit of his coup, including those voiced in interviews, writings, publications and even private discussion. It is hard for me, as a writer, to accept this. And ensuing events in my country have shown that I'm hardly alone.

Nepal won its democracy in 1990, after centuries of despotic monarchy. Perhaps the most dramatic effect of this liberty over the past 15 years is that Nepalis got in the habit of talking. We talk in our houses and in the tea shops, we talk in offices and on the streets, we talk through the news media and at public forums, we assemble in demonstrations to voice our opinions. No topic is off limits. We criticize, we praise, we summarize and analyze anything, everything. It became, it seemed to us, impossible to silence us.

Yet King Gyanendra has been trying to do just this. After his coup, he immediately suspended the right to assemble peacefully, cracked down on the free press, overturned the right against preventive detention and banned rights to property and privacy. He took from the people the right to most constitutional remedies, leaving us completely at the mercy of his government's whims. We are no longer citizens, but subjects.

The military has stationed itself in state-owned and private news media organizations, vetting every report published or broadcast. Soldiers captured the nation's telecommunications system, first shutting down all phone lines for days, then turning them off and on at will. Many politicians, social advocates, human-rights defenders, journalists and writers fled their houses, fearing arrest. (I was lucky enough to get out of the country on Feb. 6 under the protection of a foreign diplomat who walked me through the airport and onto my plane.)

People were right to be scared: the round-ups of those who posed a threat to the king's new regime began even as the coup was announced, and have continued. The news of the government's actions was spread by word of mouth, as all news reports, even those on satellite TV, had been blocked.

In the first few days of the coup, everyone hunkered down, afraid. But soon people began to meet and talk, to talk against the coup. Protests popped up all over the country. The nation's businesspeople joined the chorus: bankers complained of the lack of phone lines; officials at airlines, hotels and other businesses dependent on tourism warned of economic collapse. Soon there was talk that the king was planning to seize the bank accounts of democratic politicians on trumped-up charges of corruption.

As they talked, people grew emboldened. They found out who had satellite phones, who had Internet connections that somehow still worked. Journalists smuggled their reports across the Indian border or from the compounds of diplomatic missions. Contraband writings - The New York Times, The Guardian of London and the Indian newspapers' coverage of the coup - passed from hand to hand.

Eventually, censorship itself became an object of ridicule. The country's biggest English-language daily, The Kathmandu Post, ran nonsense editorials like "Socks in Society" - a thoughtful treatise on how socks without holes are a prestige symbol in a poor country like Nepal. The weekly Nepali Times ran an editorial criticizing a recent spate of deforestation - trees being the symbol of the Nepali Congress Party, whose leaders had been arrested. One daily, Deshantar, simply left a blank space where its editorials usually appear.

As the public mood has shifted from fearful to defiant, the coup seems more of a farce than a tragedy. The king's main justification for taking power was that the country's Maoist insurgents, who have fought the state since 1996, had grown powerful enough to paralyze all governance. The king promised to deploy the military more effectively now. Yet people quickly realized that if the military was going to spend so much effort arresting dissidents, censoring the news, nationalizing property, scattering demonstrations, disbanding organizations and generally evading the rule of law, who would ward off the Maoists?

Now several demonstrations have taken place in Katmandu, the capital, and other forms of defiance are planned. The Nepali people have grown fond of freedom. We won't give it up without a fight.

But we are concerned about the international response to the coup. More than 60 percent of Nepal's national budget comes from foreign grants and loans. If liberal democratic nations - the United States, Britain and the other European countries - would halt their aid (even just the money going to the military), it might make it impossible for the king to sustain absolute power. It is a supreme act of bad faith on the part of the king to ask taxpayers around the world to foot the bill for his autocratic reign.

Of course, even if we are able to reverse the coup and restore democracy it won't solve all of Nepal's problems. Not only is the country one of the poorest in the world, but the Maoist insurgency has claimed more than 11,000 lives and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes. A Maoist takeover is simply not an appealing option to most Nepalis.

Most analysts in Nepal agree, however, that there is no military solution to the Maoists either. Not only is the army ineffective, but many claim that it has used the insurgency as an excuse for extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions and rape. In the end, the democratic political parties and the Maoists must negotiate a settlement, perhaps with international mediation.

With his ill-advised coup, King Gyanendra has only distracted the Nepali people and the world from what truly matters: making democracy work, making it possible for Nepalis to enjoy our rights - like talking about anything and everything - without any fear of the gun.

Manjushree Thapa is the author of "Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy" and "Tutor of History," a novel.