

“We Are Abandoned”

Former Prime Minister B.P. Koirala Speaks With Theodore Jacqueney
Just Before Returning to Nepal and Jail

Jacqueney: Mr. Prime Minister, you are known to be a champion of freedom and the democratic process and have repeatedly called for democracy in Nepal. What is your concept of democracy for your country?

Koirala: To be very clear, my concept of democracy is democracy as it used to be understood in the nineteenth century—liberal democracy. This means that there are three basic elements of democracy.

One is that the people have democratic rights—freedom of expression, freedom of organization, freedom of the press, and freedom of conscience so that people can practice whatever religion they want. Briefly, civil liberties. The *second* feature of democracy is that sovereignty of the state belongs to the people of the nation as a whole; the administration of the state should be in the hands of the representatives of the people. This means that government must be formed on the basis of the widest franchise, and the government should be responsible to the parliament that is elected by the people. And the *third* feature of democracy is that the judiciary must be independent.

Now, in our context in Nepal, democracy takes another dimension: Democracy alone, without economic development, becomes meaningless. On the question of economic development, democracy is also necessary. In conditions of acute poverty, when there is not enough capital for development purposes, democracy alone is that institution that can get people involved in the process of development. Our slogan is: “We need democracy for development purposes also.”

This is very important, because there is a misconception among some Socialists that since people live in conditions of poverty, real need is food and shelter and the eradication of diseases and that liberal democracy is of secondary importance—that priority should be given to economic development. This is a misconception, according to our analysis: We cannot eradicate poverty unless we motivate the people. Our capital is the people. We don’t have machinery, and we don’t have financial capital; we have labor. So we have got to motivate our people for developmental purposes. And that motivation can be provided only by institutions

that are democratic and responsible to the people and reflective of the aspirations of the people. This is the best way to provide the leadership that can involve the people in the developmental process.

Mr. Prime Minister, to what do you attribute your passion for democracy?

My father was a rebel. He died in prison. My father became a rich man through his own efforts. And then he thought it was time for him to think of the people. He started opening schools and hospitals, an undertaking that was not liked by the feudal rulers of Nepal. And he wrote to the *Rana* (King) ruler saying that there is a vast gap between the small minority of rich people and the rest of the population. To dramatize this he sent a parcel of torn clothes from the back of a poor peasant to the ruler, with a covering letter saying that he should compare his own royal robes with the torn, tattered clothes of his poor subject and understand the gulf that separates the ruler from his own people.

The ruler became enraged, and a warrant of arrest was issued against my father when he was about thirty or thirty-four years old. I was three or four years old at the time, and we had to flee the country and be refugees in India. That is how I started imbibing the movement for democracy. My father had to struggle hard to maintain our family in India, to keep us alive; but he still joined the national liberation movement of India. I received my political training at home. Then, after the *Rana* ruler died, his successor permitted us to return to Nepal. Then I knew what it was to be a Nepalese subject. We had no dignity. No honor. It was my sense of honor that led me to political life. That is why I always emphasize that our political struggle has a spiritual dimension also.

So first of all I was brought up in a democratic political posture in the family. And secondly I saw the injustice of the tyrannical, authoritarian system, which not only reduced people to poverty and deprived us of fundamental political rights, but deprived us of the right to live as human beings. I have been in prison, in India and Nepal, altogether about fourteen years. In India, of course, it was for democratic rights and for India’s

B.P. Koirala

The former Social Democratic prime minister of Nepal, B.P. Koirala, was arrested again on November 8, 1977, and charged with offenses that could lead to a death sentence. I talked with him in New York shortly before he returned to Nepal.

One of the Third World's leading champions of electoral, pluralistic democracy, Koirala, sixty-four, was prime minister from May, 1959, to December, 1960. He was ousted at that time by the late King Mahendra, who, according to press accounts, was dissatisfied with Koirala's efforts to move Nepal toward constitutional monarchy and arrested the prime minister and his entire cabinet. Banning all political parties, the king jailed Koirala for eight years, much of which was spent in solitary confinement, but released him in 1969 for cancer treatment in India.

Koirala returned to Nepal in December, 1976, after an exile spent in India advocating the restoration of democratic government based on universal adult franchise and full political and human rights. He was promptly rearrested. Nepal's new king, Birendra, twenty-nine, the son of Mahendra, re-

leased him in June so that Koirala might travel to the U.S. for operations for a throat malignancy. Having promised the king he would return, Koirala kept his word. He was reportedly arrested before his feet again touched Nepalese soil. The Royal Air Nepal jet on which he traveled was ordered to a remote area of the Katmandu airport and Koirala was arrested.

An official Nepalese view on Koirala charges that the former prime minister's 1960 ouster and detention came about as a result of alleged pro-India leanings that endangered Nepal's security with respect to China and would have made impossible the peaceful resolution of a border dispute, which has since been settled. According to this official account, Koirala's vigorous advocacy of democracy did not cause his arrest, since the late King Mahendra had approved of the very democratic process by which Koirala was elected. After Koirala's ouster, however, neither King Mahendra nor Birendra again permitted comparable democratic elections. The kings have since ruled through a handpicked cabinet and a 146-seat parliament selected with royal approval.

Koirala is also accused of organizing military raids into Nepal from India, according to the same official account. However, Amnesty International, which limits itself to concern for non-violent "prisoners of conscience," has repeatedly taken up Koirala's cause during his various incarcerations. Nepalese government sources also charge that Koirala violated a signed pledge that he would not engage in political activities while abroad. Officially, Koirala's trial was interrupted so that he could come to the U.S. for medical attention in June, and his arrest upon his return in November marks the continuation of his trial.

The Nepalese government account suggests that the human rights situation in Nepal has improved significantly, with political prisoners down from eighty to twelve. The just-published *Amnesty International Report* for 1977 records a continuing series of releases and new arrests, yielding a less-than-clear picture of human rights progress.

Koirala participated in India's independence movement and is an intimate of top Indian political figures such as J.P. Narayan and Chandra Shekhar,

independence. But in Nepal the question before us was whether we wanted our dignity, our honor, or not. If we wanted to live with dignity, we had to be in prison. It was a simple choice.

Many Westerners believe that in the Third World those leaders that seem to be democrats seem most often to come from countries that existed under British colonial rule. Nepal, on the other hand, has never had any colonial masters. Were there British influences on your ideas concerning democracy, either directly or indirectly, through Indians?

You have to understand that Gandhi's movement was possible only under British rule. No other dictatorial authority could have permitted Gandhi to exist. Although India was not a fully democratic country, the British did give a modicum of freedom to the Indian people. There was freedom of the press, there was freedom of expression, freedom of organization. And the British courts maintained a semblance of independence. There was rule of law. These were ideas of democracy that I also learned in reading books on British history, which was taught in India, and through watching the British imperial system work in India.

It was not a very good model for democracy, this British system in India. But still we could compare what

obtained in our country with what obtained in India. So we found that it was easier to live in India than in our country. Whenever we came out of Nepal to India we found ourselves in a freer climate. We could speak our mind. We could even say that British rule was bad. We could get Indian newspapers criticizing the British in no uncertain terms. So that was the training I received when I was a student, both in school and in causes when I worked in the national revolution movement in India: I got my political training and my democratic philosophy from my participation in the Indian national struggle, and from my membership in the Socialist party of India.

You said you believe that democracy is indispensable for development. Would you elaborate on this?

It is like this: What are the resources for our development purposes? We would accept outside aid, but that can only have a marginal impact on our development. Our development starts when we mobilize the people. We have manpower, and land. We have to mobilize this manpower. You know, every year Nepalese migrate to India to the tune of a few hundred thousand, seeking jobs. We export human beings rather than goods. So this human material is not being used in our development. In our country we want to have small industries that will be labor intensive, where we do not need too much capital,

president of India's ruling Janata party, whom he consulted in India before returning to his country and who have called for his release. Indian newspapers have reported on his detention and on the efforts of Indian democrats to help free him. Indians for Democracy, an organization of Indians abroad who actively opposed the Indira Gandhi dictatorship, has also taken up Koirala's cause.

Before returning to his country Koirala visited a number of American and European political figures and journalists, including former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, now chairman of the Socialist International, an organization of social democratic parties to which Koirala's outlawed organization belongs; as well as Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and the chief of the Socialist party of Spain, Felipe Gonzalez. The Labor party of Great Britain has issued a public resolution backing Koirala's "struggle for freedom and democracy" in Nepal and calling for his release, and the *Times* of London has editorialized on Koirala's behalf.

When Koirala was let out of prison to travel to the U.S. for medical attention in June, observers in Nepal and India

believed his release was the probable consequence of President Jimmy Carter's championing of human rights and the triumph of the democratic forces in the recent Indian elections. Koirala himself agreed with this assessment when I spoke with him in September, 1977. Koirala's family and supporters in the U.S. say that they have been in contact with State Department and other American figures requesting public and private expressions on behalf of the release of Koirala and many of his democratic supporters in Nepal.

Under normal conditions Koirala's throat condition would have required a follow-up operation in the spring. However, eyewitness reports from people claiming to have seen Koirala in prison charge that the former prime minister is now in a state of "medical urgency" in his detention, "coughing blood" and exhibiting other emergency symptoms similar to those that required his hospitalization last year. "Please help," requests a close Koirala associate, who related the latest, grave accounts of the former prime minister's state of health. "Outside publicity goes a long way in Nepal to move the king."

—Theodore Jacqueney



where we can employ many people, rather than employ a small number of people and big machines. We have to improve the productivity of land, without introducing machines, but improving the plow, improving the breed of the cattle that pulls the plow, and so on.

So—democracy for development. We say that we want democracy not only for political rights and democratic rights but also for the purposes of mobilizing people, getting people involved in the process of development, getting people involved in the process of the formulation and implementation of policy.

What is being done today is that experts trained at Harvard and at London universities economics departments prepare a very good plan at the top. Then the plan is sent to the districts. The district authorities issue some kind of fiat for implementation. And the people are asked to work on that plan. No local leadership is created. It is through a bureaucratic machinery, with a psychological antagonism between the bureaucracy and the people. And the people start thinking that the job of development is the responsibility of the government, with participation by the people unwelcome. That is why, despite all the aid that has been received, there has been no development.

This is our conviction: Wherever there has been authoritarian rule, development has been slowed. Even

if you compare China with India, I don't think that India lags very far behind China on the levels of development that India has achieved. In some sectors, of course, China has developed faster, because their development is army-oriented, their industry is army-oriented, they wanted to make their army a powerful instrument of greatness, so I think in the engineering sector oriented to the task of military might they may be more efficient in China. But there are other aspects of development where I think the development is faster in India, even though we read news reports about increasing poverty in India; and even though India has not always had the leadership she should have got, leadership that can motivate the people.

The mistake of India has been that of a poor country wanting to adopt the model of Russia and America. It should have adopted the model given by Mahatma Gandhi: small scale, agro-industry, industry catering to the needs of village folks. This is what we want to do in our country. Industry that takes care of the tools of production, like improving primitive designs of the plow, improving the breed of the cattle, the need of the people to clothe themselves, improving their energy resources, like the conservation of cow dung for energy purposes.

America has been a very bad model for Third World development. There is an attraction to American styles

of life, so everyone thinks that the model to adopt is America. And whatever they may say, many Third World leaders have this model in mind. The first to conceive of a different model was Gandhi in India, and Jaya Prakash (J.P.) Narayan today; and now there are thinkers coming up, in England people like the author of the beautiful book *Small Is Beautiful*, E.F. Schumacher. He coined the phrase "intermediate technology" for the Third World, technology that does not need great infusions of capital. That is the model we will adopt, not the American model, which we can't afford in our country.

Many people now believe that for the Third World electoral, constitutional democracy is irrelevant to development, a useless luxury. How do you respond to those arguments?

Very strongly. This usually is the propaganda coming from those in power who want to perpetuate themselves in power; and there are, unfortunately, unthinking intellectuals in prestigious campuses who subscribe to this kind of stupid argument about development. I can't understand how a dictator, who is not responsible to anybody, not even to his people, can develop faster than leaders drawn from the people themselves and responsible to them by periodic free elections. As long as Indira Gandhi was a dictator, or developing into an authoritarian ruler, there were publicists, professors, and writers who thought that she was doing the right thing, that what she was doing was needed.

According to our conception, democracy and economic development are *not* contradictory concepts, they are complementary concepts. As a matter of fact, economic development starts from politics. If you have appropriate political instruments that are responsible to the aspirations of the people, only then can you start thinking about development and serving the people. Otherwise it is all humbug.

And then, secondly, who is to decide who will be that authority who will have dictatorial power to develop? Not professors from Harvard University. They are not going to select them. It will be some man riding on a white charger, who will say that "I am destined to develop the country, and the powers must belong to me." It is a very simple question: Even if we agree, for the sake of argument—and I want to emphasize that I *don't* agree—that a poor country needs an authoritarian rule, who will be that authority? Who is going to protect the people from the authoritarian power? Whoever has the longest sword? We will have to measure the length of the sword to decide who will have the maximum power in the state. I react very strongly to this kind of propaganda. And unfortunately there are intellectuals who make these kinds of arguments for the Third World.

Ultimately we must ask the basic question: What is the objective of development? Is the objective to improve the statistical numbers on a piece of paper? Or is the objective to make a man happy? If making people happy is the objective, how can you make them happy by depriving them of their elementary human rights? Russia has not made faster economic development under authoritarian rule than if democracy had been introduced after

the overthrow of the czarist regime. Even during the czar's time the development was about as fast as it was during Stalin's time in Russia. West Germany has developed faster than East Germany. And I think that India has been developing faster than Pakistan, even though Pakistan has been receiving massive economic aid from outside. Per capita aid is very much greater in Pakistan than in India. Moreover, you cannot present this problem to poor people—this is insulting the dignity of people of the poor nations, to present the issue as a choice between poverty and democracy.

Have you ever had any conversations on these subjects with any leaders of Third World dictatorships in the course of your political life?

I have, but not with many. Many of the Third World leaders with whom I did talk about these subjects were themselves democrats, like in Burma before the military takeover, so these questions did not come up in the context that they would now. But one example that would interest you was when I was in Iran in 1960. I spoke with the Shah of Iran, and I told him—I was prime minister then—that monarchy should not be dictatorial, it should be constitutional, and the people should be permitted to select the government of their choice.

And what was the Shah's response?

He gave the usual explanation of dictators: He said that his people were poor and uneducated and therefore not fit to enjoy democratic political rights. The Iranian people do not know what is good for them, he said. He said things must progress, but they must progress very slowly. He also said, "You should not ride on a fast horse."

I don't understand exactly.

He was being prophetic. I rode a fast horse for democracy, and two or three months after meeting with the Shah I was toppled. As I recall, I met the Shah in 1960, perhaps in October or so. I did not have much occasion to meet with many Third World leaders after this [Koirala was in political prisons in Nepal for eight years—*T.J.*]. But I did meet with Indian leaders and with Pakistani opposition leaders.

I understand that the new young king of Nepal released you from prison and permitted you to come to America for medical attention. Once your operations here are completed I know you intend to return. What do you expect, and what are your plans?

I had a ninety-minute interview with the king before I left Nepal. That is the only time I met him. He was a young boy, a student in England, when I was prime minister. I got the impression that he is a well-meaning young man, and if there were no pressures from his coterie, he would go along with development along democratic lines. This impression is based only on one interview; I may be wrong, but I carry a very good impression of the king, and I expect that he will

gradually liberalize the administration. I do not expect that at one go he will introduce democracy, but he has realized that if Nepal has to exist as a nation or develop as a nation, it must also develop democratic institutions, and the very fact that he met me and permitted me to come here is a good indication. It is a political gesture—don't you think so?

And then we must make very clear—because here to discuss politics is to discuss terms of getting to power. I am discussing whether we have an understanding with the king that when I return home I would be put into power, getting back into the chair of the prime minister: It is not that way.

We want basic human rights to be established for the people. We are not at all interested in getting into power without getting specific sanctions from the people. So we are not in the race for getting into the seat of power. We are for democracy. And if through the democratic process we get into power, then we will be. But getting back into power is not our prime objective. We won't want to get to power willy-nilly, at all costs, by fair means or foul.

We feel strongly that unless we develop economically, unless the people are motivated, unless there are democratic institutions our state cannot exist as an independent state, sandwiched between two great powers of Asia, both developing at a very fast rate. We cannot just stagnate, vegetate, tucked away on the slopes of the Himalayas. We cannot just remain as a seventh-century kingdom. We have got to develop. We must think in modern terms, and we must think in democratic terms. I think this message must have been realized by the king, and by everybody in Nepal who has the interest of the country at heart.

I understand that, as you have been recuperating from the throat operations you have been through, you have been invited to visit with some American senators, congressmen, State Department officials, and others. What do you say to such Americans, and what do they say to you?

I told them that you do the opposite of helping democrats in the Third World. I give the example of the Shah of Iran. You Americans put him on the throne. You know the story: He had fled his country. The CIA put him back on his throne. And ever since he has been suppressing the democrats in his country. Now the alternative to the Shah is not democrats but Communists, because the Shah of Iran has seen to it that all Iranian democrats have been killed. But as long as the Russian regime exists on his border he can never wipe out all the Communists. So in Iran you have been helping to finish off all the democrats and create a real danger of a Communist revolutionary government controlling a great deal of petroleum against you.

You should thank us—we, Third World democrats. For myself, I do not want any other help from Americans, except the expenditure of breath. I want words from the leaders of America that you want to see democracy in my country. Show your commitment to

your own ideology of democracy! We do not need your military or financial assistance.

We hope that when President Carter takes a stand on human rights, he does not mean it in a cold war context but means precisely what he says. If there is a little support for our cause, it could help. Congressmen, senators, other officials—if they will just say that they want democracy in Nepal. Let them write to the king, privately maybe, or publicly, and my battle is won. I have also told them this whenever I have met with them. They will be amused by my seemingly hostile attitude toward both the United States and the Soviet Union, because both seem to be interested in introducing Communist authoritarian rule to the world. Russia does this positively, and America negatively, by supporting unpopular dictators to whom the only alternative are the Communists.

In Vietnam you did not help the democrats, with whom you could have stabilized the situation. Instead you stabilized the dictators. There was a very strong democratic movement in Vietnam. You Americans thought there were only the Communists in Vietnam, that the other democrats did not exist. South Americans have told me that we should create a Communist movement in Nepal so that America would be interested in helping us. What has your government been doing all these years helping all these dictators? Having put the Shah of Iran back on his throne, you are now placating him because he might go to Russia. Let him go. But you have created a situation where democrats are of no consequence in Iran.

The story repeats itself. Before Indira Gandhi was defeated people here in America thought that she was the only hope. Some Americans supported her for imposing authoritarian rule. It pains me to say that learned men in prestigious American universities write about "soft states" and "hard states" and "authoritarian states," and play with ideas without understanding the ideological basis of dictatorship all over the Third World. People like me are fighting those dictatorships everywhere, with their backs to the wall, but never receive international understanding from the democracies. When democrats are shot down like dogs in the Third World, no voices of protest are raised.

I think that America, because it is the leader of the democratic world, is derelict in its duty all over the world. You have failed the Third World. You have failed the people who could have come to power to help the democratic world. Now one after the other potential democracies go under the heels of dictators, and learned men in the democracies write books saying that this is the process of development. We democrats feel this way because we have staked our lives on these principles, and we are abandoned.

What can Americans do now to help in Nepal?

Let Americans write to the king; private individuals, senators, congressmen, artists, writers, people in public life: Write to the king, publicly and privately. Be polite to the king: Call him "Majesty." Tell him that democracy must be restored.