

## America, Nepal and the Royal Coup

Declassified papers show American response to King Mahendra's putsch 60 years ago this week

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*On 15 December 1960 (१९६० १२) exactly 60 years ago, **King Mahendra** ordered the jailing of **Prime Minister BP Koirala** and other political figures, many of whom the Nepali people had put in power 18 months earlier in Nepal's first-ever election.*

Ending a decade of democratic experimentation, Mahendra decided to rule the country directly. After his death in 1972 his son Birendra took power. Many of today's top political leaders cut their political teeth in years of underground opposition to the monarchy.

The U S government at the time noted that Mahendra's coup was accomplished 'with great secrecy and superb organisation'. After 1960, the US slowly shifted its approach in Nepal, embracing the monarchy and moving away from democratic reform.

Ten years earlier, the globalisation of the Cold War had forced the US to pay more attention to South Asia. After China turned Communist in 1949 and war broke out on the Korean peninsula in 1950, Asian nations, particularly those near China, became hot spots for Cold War competition between the Soviet Union and China on one hand, and the US led capitalist democracies on the other.

During the 1950s, believing economic progress and expanded political freedoms would inoculate Nepal against communist influence, the U S offered aid programs and supported democratic reforms. As part of this vision, Washington promoted health and agriculture programs but also, in part to counter populist Communist Chinese programs, pushed for economic leveling programs such as land reform.

In the late 1950s, the US grew increasingly concerned as China and the Soviet Union expanded activities in Nepal. A November 1960 National Security document warned that Nepal had become 'a particularly vulnerable target'.

But the US believed that Nepal's 1959 election had strengthened the country. Nepal, the National Security document noted, 'currently enjoys greater internal stability than heretofore, following the introduction of popularly-based parliamentary government'.

The US also thought highly of B P Koirala. A 1960 memo explained, 'Koirala is intelligent, forceful, respected by his party, and popular with his people.' He was 'basically pro-Western and anti-Communist' and didn't underestimate the communist threat, showing 'grave concern' about it.

The US had a less positive view of Mahendra. He was seen as anti-communist and as a 'stabilising and unifying force' but seemed less forceful, and less consequential. An internal memo discounted him as 'a conscientious man of simple tastes and austere habits ... rather naive politically and not particularly forceful as a ruler ... awkward socially, and indecisive'. It noted he had advanced some reforms but that 'he is firmly convinced that a strong monarchy is necessary to insure stability'.

The last lines of an April 1960 US memo raised the possibility of a royal takeover in Nepal, saying the king was not 'irrevocably committed' to representative government. But it discounted the possibility: 'Such a drastic step is not anticipated.'

A week after the coup, on 20 December, 1960, CIA Director Allen Dulles told the National Security Council that the King's 'strange coup' owed to two reasons: Koirala was 'too progressive' and had too 'close relations' with India. He warned of a more 'archaic form of government'.

US Ambassador Henry Stebbins met with Mahendra on 21 December, 1960 and cabled Washington to say that the King professed a strong belief in democracy, which he claimed he himself had brought to Nepal. He said he dismissed the Koirala government and imprisoned its leaders because they were guilty of corruption and of aiding and abetting Communism. In a letter to US President Dwight Eisenhower a couple days later, he also blamed poor administration.

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*Featured image: Charge d' Affaires L. Douglas welcomes BP Koirala to the US Embassy inauguration in 1959. (Source: Nepali Times)*

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