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Women's Protests and Demonstrations for Democracy in Post-Coup Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines the political crisis triggered by King Mahendra's coup in 1960, which dissolved the democratically elected government of Prime Minister B.P. Koirala in Nepal. Driven by his desire to establish an autocratic rule, King Mahendra collaborated with opportunistic political figures like Dr Tulsi Giri and Vishwabandhu Thapa to arrest key political leaders and dismantle democratic institutions. With military backing, he launched a nationwide crackdown on political opponents, instituting the Panchayat system to replace the parliamentary democracy. While the king's regime suppressed opposition, many political leaders fled to India, where they organized resistance under Suvarna Shamsher at the Patna Conference. Despite early difficulties in mobilizing a rebellion, courageous leaders like Shailaja Acharya, Rashmi Shah, and Nona Koirala stood up against Mahendra's policies, organizing the Black Flag Demonstration Movement on February 7, 1961. This movement, spearheaded by women, represents a critical yet under-researched episode in Nepal's struggle for democracy. Through qualitative research, using both primary data from interviews and secondary sources, this article seeks to highlight the significance of this protest and its role in the broader resistance against King Mahendra's autocratic rule.

Keywords

King Mahendra's Coup, Black Flag Demonstration, Panchayat system, Nepali Congress Resistance, Autocratic Rule in Nepal.

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1. Introduction

King Mahendra, from the moment he ascended the throne, harbored a desire to rule with absolute power rather than as a constitutional monarch. He questioned the value of removing Rana's rule and establishing democracy if he remained bound by the constitution (Joshi, 2006). To fulfil his ambitions, he cultivated loyal supporters without aligning with political parties, forming strategic alliances instead. He identified opportunistic politicians like Dr. Tulsi Giri and Vishwabandhu Thapa, who helped conspire against the democratically elected government (Thapa, 2001). With their loyalty, King Mahendra consulted key figures, including his Chief Secretary Hanshman Singh and Military Secretary Sher Bahadur Malla, to arrest ministers, dissolve the government, and launch a nationwide crackdown (Gautam, 2011). As a result of King Mahendra's unconstitutional actions, everyone involved in the political landscape of the country, no matter how small their role, suffered. Many political leaders and activists were imprisoned, the capital was placed under military control, curfews were imposed, and guards were stationed at foreign embassies to prevent political leaders from seeking refuge.

The king, using military power to achieve his ambitions, overthrew the democratic government and established an autocratic regime. After invoking Article 55 of the Constitution, he favored those who supported him and turned the state press into an ally to justify his actions. As there was no immediate rebellion, he launched a propaganda campaign to influence international opinion (Manandhar & Sharma, 1996). Following the king's directives, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that, despite the government's dissolution, the parliamentary system was not abolished, and a general election would be held soon.

The royal palace announced that the king had no intention of ending the democratic system but caused confusion by stating that a new governance system would soon be introduced. After securing the

support of Dr. Tulsi Giri and Vishwabandhu Thapa, the king formed a cabinet under his leadership, signaling a shift away from the parliamentary system (Adhikari, 1998). With most Nepali Congress leaders imprisoned, the political opposition remained silent, leaving the country in a tense calm. Unable to counter the king's anti-democratic actions from within, several Nepali Congress activists fled to India, where they established contact with Suvarna Shamsher in Calcutta (Paramanand, 1982). Though Shamsher did not immediately respond publicly, he recognized that the king would not back down without resistance and focused on keeping the activists organized and pursuing diplomatic efforts.

Recognizing the threat of an organized rebellion, the King, with the Council of Ministers, shifted his focus to eliminating political parties and asserting his supremacy. Understanding the king's intentions, the Council unanimously agreed to ban political parties and establish a new system called the Panchayat, which would be non-partisan and directly led by the king (B. Thapa, Personal communication, March 14, 2013). After the decision, King Mahendra had Bishwabandhu Thapa announce the policy publicly, clarifying that political parties, active for the past decade, would no longer be allowed to hold meetings, rallies, or protests. The Panchayat system was presented as the foundation of democracy (Thapa, 2022).

After receiving the Council of Ministers' recommendation, King Mahendra announced the policy program and formally established the autocratic Panchayat system, overturning the gains of the 1951 revolution (Adhikari, 2001). Realizing that democracy would not return under the king's rule, Nepali Congress leaders and members who had fled to India regrouped and began organizing a resistance movement. On January 25, 1961, under Suvarna Shamsher's leadership, the Patna Conference was held, where he was appointed Executive Chairman. The conference decided to launch a resistance movement, entrusting all responsibilities to Suvarna Shamsher.

Despite preparing for resistance, the Nepali Congress could not immediately mobilize a rebellion, as many of the king's opponents in the country hoped he would eventually hand over the administration to them (Y.P. Upadhyaya, Personal communication, January 13, 2020). Even the youth, though angered by the king's actions, did not protest. With political forces unsure of their next steps, the Nepali Congress prepared for major actions. While large-scale protests were delayed, women leaders like Shailaja Acharya, Rashmi Shah, and Nona Koirala

bravely opposed King Mahendra's policies, successfully organizing a black flag demonstration. This event highlighted the courage and sacrifice of Nepali women. As there has been little study of these events, this study focuses on the key events leading to the Black Flag Demonstration Movement on February 18, 1961.

2. Method and Materials

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the protests against King Mahendra's coup and his subsequent dictatorial rule in Nepal, which resulted in the overthrow of Prime Minister B.P. Koirala's elected government in 1960. Data collection spanned two months, followed by 20 days of writing. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with participants and witnesses, including surviving protestors, political activists, and their relatives. These interviews captured personal narratives, focusing on their motivations, experiences, and involvement in the resistance. Semi-structured interviews addressed key themes such as challenges faced and the political climate of the time. To corroborate these accounts, archival documents, protest pamphlets, and personal letters from the period were reviewed, and visits to significant historical sites, including protest locations and prisons, were conducted.

Secondary data were obtained from published sources such as books, journal articles, biographies, and news reports that documented Nepal's political environment during King Mahendra's rule. Descriptive analysis provided a clear narrative of the coup and its aftermath, while deeper analysis explored patterns linking the king's dictatorial policies to political dissent and the broader social impact on Nepal's democratic movements. Ethical research practices were adhered to, including obtaining informed consent from interviewees and anonymizing data where necessary. By combining firsthand accounts with historical sources, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the resistance against King Mahendra's regime and its significance in shaping Nepal's democratic history.

3. Result and Discussion

Despite heavy police presence, Shailaja Acharya, with help from Saroj Pradhan and Uma Sharma, secretly created her first pamphlet on December 28, 1960, at Tarini Prasad Koirala's house, Biratnagar. They then distributed the handwritten leaflets in busy areas like New

Road, sparking protests in the capital. The Nepali Congress opposed King Mahendra's anti-democratic actions, and subsequent pamphlets announced the formation of the Democratic Student Women's Committee. Despite increased government surveillance, the students managed to evade capture. Encouraged by their success, Rashmi Shah led the group in planning their next steps while temporarily pausing the pamphlet distribution.

3.1 Demonstration through Pamphlets

At just 16 years old, Shailaja Acharya witnessed King Mahendra's dissolution of Parliament on December 15, 1960, and was deeply outraged by the suppression of those who opposed the King's actions. Born in Biratnagar as the eldest daughter of Pinaki Prasad Acharya, Shailaja showed a sharp intellect and strong logical abilities from a young age (Gautam, 2014). Although not biologically related, she was very close to the Koirala family, especially B.P. Koirala, who treated her like a niece. She was also raised under the guidance of Sushila Koirala (U. L. Sharma, personal communication, March 4, 2013).

After B.P. Koirala became Prime Minister, Shailaja lived at the Prime Minister's residence in Tripureshwar and was present during King Mahendra's unconstitutional actions. On the day the king dissolved Parliament, Shailaja had invited her friends for lunch. Though not politically aware at the time, she went to Thapathali, where she saw B.P. Koirala being taken away in a military jeep (Acharya, 2001).

After returning to the Prime Minister's residence, she stayed there for a while as security personnel refused to let her friends in. When King Mahendra's takeover was announced on the radio, Shailaja left with her mother, Indira Koirala, and Rosha Koirala, heading to Tarini Prasad Koirala's house. Upon arrival, the sight of soldiers and search operations in the capital fueled her anger. Reflecting on the king's assault on democracy and the elected government, Shailaja became determined to find ways to stop his oppressive actions (Duwal & Naharki, 2008). Many of her acquaintances and relatives in Kathmandu, fearing the political situation, stopped recognizing her or were too afraid to speak, with some even hesitant to open their doors when she visited.

Rashmi Shah, born into the Rana family and married to Jagat Prakash Jang Shah, was deeply aware of Nepal's political landscape. Active in Nepali Congress politics, she developed close ties with key

leaders like B.P. Koirala and Suvarna Shamsheer. On December 15, 1960, Rashmi warned B.P. Koirala and others that King Mahendra would not easily give up power (N. P. J. Shah, personal communication, January 1, 2019). Through Rashmi, Shailaja Acharya learned about King Mahendra's unconstitutional actions and ambitions. Outraged by the king's undermining of democracy and imprisonment of his relatives, Shailaja resolved to protest, even if alone. While staying at B.P. Koirala's brother Tarini Prasad Koirala's house in Naxal, which was under police surveillance, Shailaja, without informing her family, began organizing a resistance with friends Uma Sharma and Saroj Pradhan under Rashmi's guidance (U. L. Sharma, personal communication, March 4, 2013).

Despite the police siege, Shailaja and her team produced and distributed handwritten pamphlets on December 28, 1960. They secretly carried the leaflets and distributed them in busy areas like New Road and front of Ranjana Cinema Hall. Shailaja and other students continued to protest against the king's regime (S. Adhikari, personal communication, March 4, 2013).

In a city where a heavy security presence created an eerie calm, the efforts of female students sparked significant unrest. The Nepali Congress strongly opposed King Mahendra's actions to dismantle democracy (Gautam, 1997). The first pamphlet distributed by the Nepali Congress condemned the King's decision. Two days later, on December 30th, another pamphlet in red ink highlighted the threat to fundamental rights and announced the formation of the Democratic Student Women's Committee (N. P. J. Shah, personal communication, January 1, 2019). Recognizing the impact of these daily-distributed pamphlets in busy areas, the government swiftly increased surveillance to catch the pamphleteers, but their efforts were unsuccessful. New pamphlets soon appeared, depicting King Mahendra as a villain and urging people to protest against his anti-democratic actions (B. Thapa, Personal communication, March 14, 2013).

Despite intensified searches and raids on the homes of prominent Nepali Congress members, the government failed to capture any of the daring female students behind the pamphlets. Unable to prove any charges, they remained clueless. Encouraged by their success, Rashmi Shah advised the group, including Shailaja Acharya, to plan their next major action while temporarily halting the pamphlet-eering. The students, pleased with their ability to operate undetected,

took a few days to prepare for their next move and assess public opinion.

3-2 Protests through Black Flag Displays Against the King

Shailaja Acharya was dissatisfied even after Rashmi Shah suggested pausing further actions to protect the Antila girls due to escalating tensions in the capital and arrests of Congress families following three stages of pamphleteering (Pokharel, n.d.). On January 5, 1961, King Mahendra, seeking to consolidate his power, banned political parties and introduced the Panchayat system, indicating his determination to suppress political leaders (Gautam, 2021). Concerned that the king might further tighten his control, Shailaja, Uma Sharma, and other students, following Rashmi Shah's advice, decided to move their activities outside Kathmandu.

Rashmi Shah, whose husband Jagat Prakash Jung Shah was imprisoned in Nuwakot Palace and dismissed from his position as Deputy Director of Radio Nepal due to his Congress affiliations, sought to spark rebellion. She reached out to her son, Navin Prakash Jung Shah, for advice as directed by her husband (Baral, 2022). With support from friends in Bharatpur, Chitwan, and hopes of assistance from Calcutta, Shailaja and the students eagerly prepared. However, their plans to leave Kathmandu were thwarted when the administration denied them passports, citing the government's policy of restricting movement in and out of the capital.

The 16-year-old students, new to college, were dissatisfied with the lack of action from political parties and leaders. Eager for more significant efforts, Shailaja Acharya and Rashmi Shah, with guidance from Nona Koirala, decided to organize a student-led rally in Kathmandu (Gautam, 2010). Nona, who had previously sent her sons as liberation commanders during the 1951 revolution, encouraged them to persevere despite potential challenges (Acharya, 2023). They agreed to hold a women's protest in the capital and began secret preparations, planning to involve women from surrounding areas.

Jagat Prakash Jung Shah, who had a strong political presence in the Dhading-Nuwakot region, was defeated by Bharat Shamsheer in the 2015 general election for the Dhading North constituency. In response, Rashmi Shah decided to protest King Mahendra's actions by mobilizing women from that area to Kathmandu (Prasai, 2000). She sent her son, Navin Prakash Jung Shah, to Nuwakot with letters

concealed in the soles of his shoes. Navin successfully delivered the letters and returned with confirmation of the plan.

While Rashmi, Shailaja, and Nona were organizing the protest, Nona received a newspaper, *Dharmayug*, containing a hidden message from Calcutta, India, based on Suvarna Shamsheer's plan. After passing on the message and receiving further instructions, Nona left her sick son and travelled to Calcutta to relay the information to B.P. Koirala (Gautam, 2020). By the time she returned with Suvarna Shamsheer's strategy, Rashmi Shah had organized a women's march in Kathmandu on February 23, 1961, including women from Nuwakot and Dhading.

As Rashmi Shah and the women prepared for the march, the Nepalese government announced the celebration of Democracy Day on February 18, 1961. This event, attended by King Mahendra who had imposed autocratic rule by dismantling democracy and imprisoning leaders without trial would also include foreign diplomats. The revolutionaries, following Suvarna Shamsheer's advice, saw this as an opportunity to stage a public protest that would be visible to international observers (U. L. Sharma, personal communication, March 4, 2013). They planned to involve students from Kathmandu Valley campuses in a demonstration by displaying black flags in front of the king at Tundikhel, the state-organized venue.

With support from student leaders, members of the Tarun Dal, and party families who had evaded arrest, they secretly organized the protest. Black flags were distributed with instructions to wave them during the event (N. P. J. Shah, personal communication, January 1, 2019). When King Mahendra arrived, all invitees were present, and the Democracy Day program began as planned. Government employees, teachers, students, and others participated in a disciplined procession, dressed in prescribed attire and carrying banners. The king observed the procession, but the boys assigned to display the black flags, noticing the heavy security and high vigilance, began to retreat. The Thon police, suspicious of their actions, started to monitor them closely (Giri, 2017). Alarmed, the boys left the program without displaying the flags.

At that moment, Shailaja Acharya, positioned in the last row, made a decisive move and signaled to her friends. Shailaja, who had been responsible for the final preparations for the February 23, 1961, event, had attended the program wearing a black chunni over her

kurta-salwar, ready to inform Rashmi Shah and others about the unfolding situation (U. L. Sharma, personal communication, March 4, 2013). Uma Sharma, a leading student, had also arrived at the venue with her younger sister, Bhuvan, both dressed in black.

When Shailaja saw that the boys assigned to display the black flags had fled, she realized the plan would fail unless they acted quickly. She signaled her close friends and, in a bold move, raised her black chunni while shouting protest slogans. Following her lead, Uma Sharma, Saroja Pradhan, Vijaya Baral, Gauri Rana, Kamala Chitrakar, and others also raised their black chunnis and shouted slogans, startling the audience.

The female students near the stage, in front of King Mahendra, began chanting slogans such as “Nepali Congress Zindabad”, “Death to Dictators”, “Protect Democracy”, and “Release Our Leaders”. As they displayed their black flags, police quickly surrounded them and attempted to control the situation (Subedi, 2017). The police used batons to beat the protesters, leading some students from Trichandra and Padmakanya Colleges to resist. In the ensuing chaos, they managed to seize the batons from the police and used umbrellas for protection. When the students surrounded and chased away Kundan Sharma, the army also intervened with force.

From the stage, Ministers Tulsi Giri and Vishwabandhu Thapa ordered the protesters to be beaten, while Ministers Hrishikesh Shah and Anirudraprasad Singh urged restraint (Basnet, 2017). The female students were subjected to violence, with boots pressed against their chests, and later locked in a cold, dark room (Subedi, 2017). It was reported that Sani Bainsi Bhuvan, who had come with her sister Uma Sharma, tried to grab her sister’s hand to join her in the police car but was unsuccessful as the car drove away.

Although it is reported that the police detained him at Hanuman Dhoka without providing food or water, he was never taken to court (Gautam, 2019). He was permitted only limited visits from relatives and friends, while the police prepared the charge sheet. He endured harsh conditions for about one and a half months until a written plea was heard following an order from Commissioner Vishnumani Acharya. He was imprisoned only after attempts at torture (Basnet, 2017). Confined in a foul-smelling room with loose cattle, prostitutes, and other miscreants, the police aimed to demoralize him. Despite this, the revolutionary female students maintained their courage and

resolve. They survived on food brought by friends and family, demonstrating their resilience.

While the media and publications within Nepal reported only on the government's activities, foreign journalists and diplomats present at the event took photographs and reported the protest against King Mahendra. Consequently, some countries, including India, reported that a group of female students had displayed black flags and chanted slogans against the king (D.R. Subedi, personal communication, June 9, 2011). The bravery of these students inspired other youths and political activists, reinforcing the fight for democracy. Despite widespread feelings of helplessness due to King Mahendra's suppression of democracy and the imprisonment of political leaders, the students' courage reignited hope. Revolutionary figures from the Nepali Congress, such as Rashmi Shah and Nona Koirala, began final preparations to ensure the success of the program on February 23, 1961.

4. Conclusion

The news that sixteen- and seventeen-year-old daughters of Nepal, like Shailaja Acharya, who had just started college, had revolted and shown a black flag to King Mahendra created a stir across the villages and settlements of Nepal. This event inspired the youth of the country, from students to political activists, to align with the Nepali Congress, which was preparing for an armed struggle after the Patna conference, and to resist the king's anti-democratic measures. In retaliation, the administration expressed its anger by torturing and prosecuting several women and democratic activists from Kathmandu who had supported the female students' protests. Despite repeated attempts by Commissioner Vishnumani Acharya and the police chief to pressure them into writing letters of apology claiming they had made mistakes, were misled by others, and would focus only on education in the future-the women stood firm and refused to bow down.

Frustrated by their unwavering resolve, the authorities resorted to a temporary judicial process, sentencing them to one year of imprisonment and fining them Rs. 500. In the Janana Jail, which lacked even basic facilities, they were subjected to harsh treatment, placed with mentally ill individuals, and denied proper food, including meals brought by their friends and relatives. Despite the administration's cruel tactics, Shailaja Acharya, Umalakshmi

Sharma, and the other female students fearlessly opposed the oppressive regime, embodying the role of soldiers for democracy. Their courage and resistance became the foundation of the history of women's awakening in Nepal and made a significant contribution to shaping the path of the democratic movement.

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