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Comments on Adhikari and Mathe by Whelpton

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There are certainly aspects regarding the global media coverage of the tragedy of 1st June that deserve criticism. In particular, several newspapers published highly detailed accounts of the incident without warning readers that much of the detail was in dispute. The international media also, arguably, did not make it clear just how widespread and lasting suspicion of the official version was among highly educated and well-informed Nepalese - although they did convey the skepticism among the population in general. I was myself, surprised by the strength and persistence of disbelief when I was in Kathmandu for ten days in July. I was told (unattributably) that even very senior figures in the Congress Party have grave doubts about what really happened. They toe the official line in public for political reasons, in an ironic parallel with the Maoist leadership who are also not sure of the truth but, again for political reasons, express certainty that there was a conspiracy. I should not really blame CNN *et al* for my surprise since I had had the advantage of telephone and e-mail contact with friends in Nepal and of some access to the Nepali-language press here in Hong Kong. I had perhaps been most influenced by the fact that the *Himal*-Mercantile stable of publications was convinced quite early that Dipendra was the culprit. I assumed that most other Nepalese whose judgement I respect would share their conclusion. I am wiser now and so is at least some of the international media, judging by Isabel Hilton's statement in her *New Yorker* (30 July 2001) article that Rabi Shamsheer (who was standing next to Birendra when he was shot the first time) was one of the few people she met who had no doubt of Dipendra's guilt.

Having said all that, I still feel that the majority view amongst foreign commentators, and the minority one amongst Nepalese, is correct. Despite the many shortcomings in the official investigation and the handling of information by the palace in the days following the killings, all the other explanations offered seem even more difficult to believe than the official one. Many of the arguments against the official version are also even stronger arguments against any conspiracy theory. If someone wanted to eliminate the royal family, why do it in such a bizarre way? Why have the assassin weave in and out of the billiard room three times instead of mowing down all the intended targets right at the beginning? Even if we suppose conspirators were able to find someone who physically resembled Dipendra (more plausible than supposing all of the royal survivors lied to the enquiry), how could they have been confident the likeness was sufficient to fool family members at close range? Above all, why stage an elaborate charade in the palace, which would require many people's involvement

and thus make it virtually certain the truth would leak out sooner or later? Why not design a more straightforward, terrorist-style attack that could easily have been blamed on the Maoists?

Then, would any of the suggested candidates have had a rational motive for such a conspiracy? Gyanendra (whose wife was injured in the shooting), would have certainly realised that if he came to the throne as the result of such a massacre, he and his family would be suspected and that, even if he managed to allay those suspicions, the incident would strengthen republicanism. He already enjoyed wealth and social position, so why risk everything to inherit a devalued throne, particularly now that the King of Nepal no longer rules but just exercises a *de facto* veto power over some of the elected government's actions? Some people doubt whether Paras is capable enough to have organised a conspiracy on his own, but assuming that he is, the same arguments apply.

A CIA and/or RAW conspiracy? The Maoists have officially adopted this line. Foreign hands are supposed to have wanted Birendra out of the way, either because he was too friendly towards China or because he was preventing full army intervention against the Maoists' 'People's War.' On the non-Maoist Left, veteran Communist leader C.P. Mainali laid particular stress on the China factor when I met him in July. However, the Nepalese monarch no longer makes foreign policy, so changing the king would not make Nepal more pro-Indian or pro-American. Assassination to facilitate army deployment is slightly less implausible, but still very unlikely. Birendra's reluctance to commit the army to a full counter-insurgency rule was partly the result of a personal aversion to full-scale confrontation with any sizeable section of the population, but it also stemmed from other considerations. First, it might be dangerous for the monarchy to be seen as an ally of an unpopular Congress government, especially when public opinion polls suggest most people, while opposed to the Maoists' tactics, do not support strong military action against them: the public are probably naïve to expect 'talks' alone to solve the problem, but the king cannot disregard their feelings. Secondly, there are those in 'the palace' who see the insurgents as pawns to be played in a power struggle with elected politicians. Again, would-be conspirators had no reason to believe eliminating Birendra would transform the situation and, indeed, Gyanendra has so far continued his brother's line on the Maoist issue.

In contrast, seeing the massacre as an act of irrationality on Dipendra's part seems more plausible both to foreign analysts and also to those Nepalese who have closest links with the Shah-Rana aristocracy, and therefore better knowledge of who the royal family truly is behind their

