

# ISAS Insights

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## G.P. Koirala: Nepal's Democracy Icon<sup>1</sup>

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The paper recalls the life and achievements of G.P. Koirala, the first Prime Minister of Nepal's elected Parliament in 1991, and subsequent Prime Minister on five more occasions. Highlighting the vacuum created by G.P. Koirala's death and his absence from Nepali politics, the paper explores the possible ramifications and the political outlook for Nepal.

Any narrative of Nepal's struggle for democracy will revolve around the three Koirala brothers namely, Matrika Prasad (M.P.) Koirala, Bishweshwar Prasad (B.P.) Koirala and Girija Prasad (G.P.) Koirala. Matrika Babu, as the eldest of the three brothers was popularly known, tried to institutionalise Nepal's post-Rana democratic aspirations without much success. B.P., the younger one fought hard against an assertive and autocratic monarchy all his life, but failed. The youngest of the three, G.P. Koirala, or G.P. as he was known to his friends and admirers, made the most impressive contribution in democracy's march towards success in Nepal. He was the front runner of Nepal's two major people's movements (*Jan Andolan I & II*) in 1988-89 and 2005-06 respectively. The first movement abolished the authoritarian Panchayat System established in 1962 by King Mahendra in the aftermath of his coup against the elected Parliament in December 1960. The second abolished the perverted autocratic monarchy headed by King Gyanendra who had crowned himself after the ghastly Royal massacre of June 2001, in which his brother, King Birendra, and his entire family were wiped out.

The author's acquaintance with all three Koirala brothers was through G.P. Koirala. Way back in 1968, there were efforts to release his elder brother and Nepal's first democratically elected Prime Minister, B.P. Koirala, who was rotting in King Mahendra's prison since December 1960. The Indian Ambassador in Kathmandu in 1968 was a veteran Congress leader, Raj Bahadur. The author was then in Kathmandu for fieldwork pertaining to his research. He knew Ambassador Raj Bahadur personally, as both were from the western Indian state of Rajasthan. G.P. Koirala persuaded the author to request the ambassador to get his brother's release expedited.

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on the long personal association that the author had with G.P. Koirala for more than four decades.

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The atmosphere in Kathmandu at the time was loaded with the prospect of growing Chinese influence. An ugly incident in the national exhibition (*Ramelo Mela*), when some Nepali youth ransacked a Chinese stall in protest against King Mahendra's photo being downgraded against Chairman Mao's portrait, had created a public mood in favour of democratic leaders. Those were the days of the "Great Cultural Revolution" in China. As indications for his brother's release got firmed up, G.P. Koirala became very excited. He wanted to go to his hometown in Biratnagar to meet the family and prepare politically for the release. The author was affectionately persuaded by him to accompany and spend a few days in 'Koirala Niwas' in Biratnagar. Those few days in 'Koirala Niwas', gave the author a rare opportunity to know the Koirala family members from close quarters. The whole family was a part of the political struggle. They lived a simple and rather hard life. G.P. Koirala's wife Sushma died at a very young age in an accident. His daughter, Sujata, an infant then, was brought up by G.P. Koirala's sister-in-law, Nona Koirala, married to his elder brother Keshav Koirala, who also died later fighting against the King's coup. G.P. Koirala's deep involvement in the struggle left him with very little time for his young daughter.

The author's contacts with the Koirala family subsequently grew in strength. G.P. Koirala and Keshav Koirala visited him in the hostel of the Indian School of International Studies (ISIS) in Sapru House, New Delhi, where he was writing his doctoral dissertation as a guest from the University of Rajasthan. The author was asked to take the responsibility for Sujata as her local guardian for a short while as she was being admitted in a school in New Delhi. During these visits, the author saw G.P. Koirala's craving for the good things in life, as an urge to compensate for his harder days in the field of fight for democracy. From 1974 onwards, the author joined the faculty of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where he occasionally hosted G.P. Koirala and other leaders of the Nepali democratic struggle like B.P. Koirala and Pushpa Lal Shrestha (a communist leader). Later, Rishikesh Shah, Baburam Bhattarai and Hisila Yami (both were then students in JNU and are now Maoist leaders) became frequent visitors to the author's residence. The author's contacts with the Koirala family continued during his stay in Varanasi (1985-86), where he was teaching in the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) as a professor of political science. B.P. Koirala died in 1982 from cancer soon after losing the referendum of 1980. Both the Koirala family and the democratic struggle were in disarray then.

After the victory of the first *Jan Andolan* (1989-90), G.P. Koirala emerged on Nepal's national scene in a big way. He was the first Prime Minister of the elected Parliament in 1991 and then became Prime Minister on five more occasions. His last Prime Ministership was from April 2006 to August 2008, after the victory of the *Jan Andolan II* (2005-2006). During this period, he had the unique distinction of being both the head of the government and the state, as the monarchy had been abolished in 2007.

There was hardly any occasion since 1990, either during the author's visits to Nepal, or G.P. Koirala's visits to New Delhi, when the two did not get to meet. The author was contacted thrice by G.P. Koirala from King Gyanendra's prison in February 2005, when he was in the Naval College of Warfare at Mumbai. Koirala wanted as much help as possible mobilised from India, not only to get him and his associates out of prison, but also to fight King Gyanendra's repression. During his many visits to Delhi in 2005 and 2006, he had long discussions with the author on delicate issues of Nepal's peoples' movement. After April 2006, when he headed the interim government of a Republican Nepal, there were occasions when the author was taken directly from the Kathmandu airport to meet him in the Baluwatar

Prime Minister's Residence. There were also occasions when he vented his ire on India's role in Nepal and the Maoists' manoeuvres to dictate the peace process. The author saw him last in a hospital in Singapore in November 2009, when even from a sick bed, he tried to prevail over the Maoists to accept his proposal of establishing the High Level Political Mechanism (HLPM) under his leadership to guide Nepal's peace process.

Groomed in a family of democrats and mentored by his elder brother, G.P. Koirala was a true fighter. His political career started with the successful organisation of the Biratnagar jute mill strike in 1948 against the autocratic Rana system. This strike established his credentials as a great organiser, which got further reinforced on later occasions, whether through carrying out a plane hijacking (in 1974), mobilising arms for the Nepali Congress's struggle after King Mahendra's 1960 coup, or leading the two *Jan Andolans*. His domineering style of functioning got him into conflict with other Nepali Congress and national leaders like Ganeshman Singh, Krishan Prasad Bhattarai, Shailaja Acharya, Mahendra Narayan Nidhi and Sher Bahadur Deuba. No one, however, could challenge him in his grasp and hold of the grassroots. He delivered on all occasions and kept up to his commitments.

Though authoritative and feudal in personal style (generous and benign to his admirers and supporters and uncompromising to those who defied him), Koirala's courage and commitment to the cause of democracy was unflinching. He refused to compromise with King Birendra, when his party was split to weaken him, and he refused to succumb to King Gyanendra, when he dissolved the Parliament in 2002. G.P. Koirala had launched the *Jan Andolan II* then itself, though it gathered momentum only after King Gyanendra's takeover of direct power in February 2005. He never endorsed or became a part of the royal political manoeuvres to weaken parliamentary institutions or democratic political parties. He was not a Gandhian. He had no hesitation in using violence and unlawful methods in the fight for democracy. He even allowed the Maoists to retain arms in the aftermath of the victory of *Jan Andolan II* because the possibility that the Royal Nepal Army could make moves to frustrate the victory could not be ruled out. However, he never endorsed the use of violence and armed coercion against a democratic system. That is why he was for using all available force, including the army, against the Maoists during 1996-2001. After 2006 also, he consistently stood against the Maoists' militant Youth Communist League and their proposal for a wholesale integration of their armed cadres into the regular Nepal army.

Besides his firm grip over Nepal's grassroots politics, he also had a remarkable ability to be ideologically resilient in advancing the cause he had committed himself to. There has been no political leader in Nepal during the past sixty years who was equally comfortable in dealing with the royalists and the revolutionaries at the same time. His credibility with the international community during the most testing times in Nepal's political history was also unmatched. His practical approach to politics could pull diverse forces together under his leadership on a single platform. This was so ably demonstrated during the two *Jan Andolans*. It was his resilience that let him have his way on the outcome of both these peoples' movements. He made the Maoists agree on the reconvening of the Parliament as against an all party conference for election of the Constituent Assembly in April 2006. The HLPM was a unique device not only to keep himself at the centre of political dynamics, but also a forum to keep the Maoists engaged even when they were kept out of power. Though he refused to let his party join the coalition led by the Maoists in May 2006, he never approved of the Maoists leaving the government, the way they did in May 2009, on the question of sacking the army chief.

Though surrounded by various controversies around his persona, politics, and policies, G.P. Koirala was the tallest political leader of his times. Even when he was being shifted from one hospital to another, wearing an oxygen mask, people in Nepal keenly awaited his next political move to unfold. From President and Prime Minister, to various party leaders and diplomatic representatives of the international community in Nepal, everyone looked for his guidance and help. He was nominated by the Nepal government for the Nobel peace prize in acknowledgement of his role in ending the Maoists' insurgency. His overt affection for his daughter and the consequent eagerness to ensure her political future, for which he was criticised most in his last days, reflected his emotional vulnerability. He was probably yearning to compensate for his fatherly lapses in Sujata's upbringing during her childhood. A master political strategist, G.P. Koirala was also bereft of a grand vision and sense of history, unlike his brother. If that was not so, he would have consolidated democracy during the decade of the 1990s, by avoiding, or at least delaying, the rise of the Maoist insurgency. That would have ensured that the post-2006 peace process did not falter on the power ambitions of its incumbents.

He passed away at a time when he was needed most. His party is in a state of internal chaos and the peace process is passing through its most critical stage of survival. If the Nepali Congress leaders do not manage the succession issue with consensus and unity, they will push the party into internal conflict and political erosion. The answer to the peace process lies in recreating the consensus that ensured the success of *Jan Andolan II*. Only Koirala had the ability and skill to forge the national consensus, which is so badly needed for completing the process of constitution making for new Nepal.

His absence surely leaves the room open for the Maoists to display their resilience and creative leadership potential (if they have any) in taking the peace process forward. For this, the Maoists have to take the first step in bridging the trust deficit with other political parties and forces, by reiterating their commitment through actions, and not only words, to a peaceful and democratic conduct in politics. They must gather the internal organisational courage to disband their militarist outfits. There are powerful vested interests, both within and outside Nepal, which may not like the emergence of a Maoist-led coalition government. But such a government seems to be the only viable and orderly way to advance the peace process.

The breakdown of the national political consensus, G.P. Koirala's absence, and the prospect of the Maoists dominating the political scene has also encouraged the royalists to assert themselves. There are even demands for the revival of the monarchy and doing away with the concept of a secular and inclusive (federal) state. But these regressive forces must remember that the ground reality of Nepal has changed so much that it has no room for the revival of the archaic forces and institutions. It was his failure in grasping the essence of this ground reality that led King Gyanendra to his fall and the abolition of monarchy.

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