



## **Perception of the International Community on the Political Change of 1960 and Referendum of 1980**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** King Mahendra's dissolution of Nepal's parliamentary system on December 15, 1960, elicited divergent international reactions.

**Responses to the 1960 Dissolution:** India strongly opposed the move, with Prime Minister Nehru expressing concern and socialist leaders staging protests. China remained silent, appearing satisfied with the King's action. Britain's Labour Party condemned the proclamation and urged restoration of democracy, though the government maintained stability and allowed Queen Elizabeth's visit. The United States, wary of communist influence, refrained from criticism, treating the change as Nepal's internal matter while maintaining diplomatic ties. Overall, responses reflected geopolitical interests, with democratic nations cautious yet prioritizing stability and strategic relations over open opposition.

**Responses to the 1980 Referendum:** The 1980 referendum in Nepal, initiated by King Birendra, offered citizens a choice between a multi-party system and a reformed Panchayat system, with the latter securing majority support. The international community, particularly the United States, viewed the referendum positively as a democratic exercise that broadened participation and reinforced national unity. U.S. officials emphasized Nepal's right to self-determination and praised the peaceful conduct of the vote. Other nations, such as Austria, also commended the referendum as a stabilizing measure.

**Conclusion:** Global reactions affirmed Nepal's independence and political legitimacy.

**Keywords:** referendum, king Mahendra, panchayat, democracy, demonstration.



## **Introduction**

On December 15, 1960, King Mahendra, through a royal proclamation, dissolved the Nepali Congress government that had been formed only eighteen months earlier through general elections, and imposed a partyless panchayat system (Bhattarai, 2025). With this declaration, the fundamental rights of the people were curtailed, and both houses of parliament were dissolved. Leaders of political parties were arrested. The King expressed various reasons for dissolving the elected government and banning political parties. Following the royal move of December 15, reactions began to emerge both within the country and abroad. Inside Nepal, some described the King's step as a defense of nationalism, democracy, and sovereignty, while others praised it as respecting the people's voice (Manandhar & Sharma, 2053 B.S.). Similarly, the move was also characterized as timely and historic, and was praised accordingly, as evident from the study of contemporary newspapers (Devkota, 2036 B.S.). Those who opposed the royal move were mainly political parties. The Nepali Congress Party labeled it as a sign of distrust toward democracy and the beginning of political instability, while the Communist Party opposed the step and demanded that parliament be reconvened quickly. The Nepal Praja Parishad (Acharya) supported the King's move (Pokharel, 2064 B.S.). In reality, the royal step was largely welcomed and supported within the country, with relatively few voices of opposition.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem statements adopted in this article are as follows:

- (a) What was the perception of the international community on the political change of 1960 ?
- (b) What was the perception of the international community on the referendum of 1980 ?

## **Objectives**

- (a) To highlight the perception of the international community on the political change of 1960.
- (b) To explore the perception of the international community on the referendum of 1980.

## **Methodology**

The research employs qualitative historical methodology using descriptive and Analytical approaches drawing from primary and secondary sources including government documents, Academic books, articles and contemporary newspaper. Gregorian (A.D.) and Bikram Sambat (B.S.) date systems are used in the main text of the books, journals, news papers etc. However, A.D. has not mentioned in English dates and B.S. has been referred in Nepali dates. The main achievement of this article lies in clarifying the perception of the International Community on the political change of 1960 and referendum of 1980, as well as explaining the impact of that perception. To prepare this article, newspapers published in Nepal at the time and books written by various authors have been used. In order to clarify how reliable the news published in government papers was, reports from privately published newspapers were also studied and compared. However, sources from China and the then Soviet Union could not be used in preparing this article, which remains a limitation of the work.



### **Perception of the International Community on the Political Change of 1960**

King Mahendra's step also drew mixed reactions from neighboring countries and abroad. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru expressed deep sorrow and concern over the King's action and the political change in Nepal, remarking that it was a serious setback to Nepal's democratic development (Devkota, 2036 B.S.). Likewise, the Indian Socialist Party observed "Nepal Day" to protest the royal proclamation (Jha, 1975; Manandhar & Sharma, 2053 B.S.), while Indian socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan stated that the King's move would ultimately harm the monarchy itself (Jha, 1975). Overall, India opposed the royal step, whereas another neighbor, China, made no comment. Perhaps due to the Nepali Congress's inclination toward India, China was satisfied with the King's action (Rose, 1971).

The British government did not formally oppose the royal move, but the main opposition party, the Labour Party, protested the proclamation. It urged its government to pressure the King of Nepal to restore democracy and release imprisoned elected leaders (Devkota, 2036 B.S.). The party also issued a formal statement declaring that "the King's dissolution of parliament and government has created a serious crisis for democratic institutions in Asia" (Devkota, 2040 B.S.). Furthermore, the Labour Party opposed Queen Elizabeth's planned visit to Nepal at that time, arguing that it was inappropriate for the Queen to visit while democracy had been rejected in Nepal, and that the British government should first help restore a favorable environment (Devkota, 2036 B.S.). However, the British government maintained that despite restrictions on political activity, Nepal's security situation remained stable, and therefore did not postpone the Queen's visit (Devkota, 2040 B.S.). As scheduled, Queen Elizabeth visited to Nepal.

Like the British government, the American government also did not openly comment on the royal step. However, the U.S. closely observed King Mahendra's dissolution of the parliamentary system with suspicion, wondering whether communist forces were behind it. Once it became clear that no communist power was involved, the U.S. did not oppose the King's move (Tiwari, May 1979, p. 32; Dharmadashani, 1984). This shows that America wanted to ensure that communism did not gain any foothold in Nepal. Even though the United States is a democratic nation, it did not protest the end of democracy in Nepal. Perhaps, had communist involvement been detected, America would have opposed the move. Externally, neither communist Russia nor communist China had any role in the King's action. Therefore, the U.S. saw no reason to be concerned. America considered King Mahendra's step to be Nepal's internal matter (Muni, 1973), and thus expressed no reaction. However, a statement made in July 1962 by Nepal's ambassador to the U.S., M.P. Koirala, indicates that the new political system introduced in Nepal did create some confusion for America (Muni, 1973; Nepal Press Digest, July 23-29, 1962, p. 149). Initially, the U.S. believed that either communist Russia or communist China might have influenced Nepal's political change. But once it was clear that no communist power was involved, America felt reassured (Muni, 1973).

In the U.S. presidential election, John F. Kennedy was elected president after Dwight D. Eisenhower. The newly elected President Kennedy also did not oppose King Mahendra's action. Two months after the dissolution of parliament, in February 1961, King Mahendra sent



a congratulatory message to Kennedy on his election. In reply, President Kennedy expressed that the friendly relations between Nepal and the United States would always remain intact (Muni, 1973). This indicated that despite political changes in Nepal, relations between the two countries would not be affected.

Just five days after King Mahendra ended the parliamentary system and assumed power on December 15, 1960, U.S. Ambassador Henry E. Stebbins met the King on December 20. In that meeting, King Mahendra told the ambassador that he had dissolved the elected government and imprisoned its leaders because the government had failed to control corruption and was showing a tilt toward communism (Khadka, 1997). In reality, this accusation seems intended to prevent the U.S. from opposing his move and instead gain its support. Ambassador Stebbins himself acknowledged that there was some corruption at higher levels and minor communist activity, but not to the extent claimed by the King. He understood the King's action as an effort to protect the monarchy and establish its true character (Khadka, 1997). This interpretation was partly valid, since after the elections the Nepali Congress government was increasingly active in governance and politics, which could overshadow the monarchy. During the meeting, King Mahendra clarified that the decision was made solely by him, and that no foreign country, especially China was involved. This may have been said to assure the U.S. of the absence of external communist influence. However, Ambassador Stebbins believed that members of the royal family, the Rana family, and privileged groups from before 1951 had played a role in advising the King (Khadka, 1997). Stebbins reported all these details to his government through telegrams.

In 1962, American education expert Hughes Wood, who had come to Nepal to work on educational development, was informed by King Mahendra that he had taken the political step to prevent a crisis and because no economic development had occurred in the past 18 months (Scarry, Moran & Kalavan, 1992). By highlighting the lack of progress, the King sought to expose the weakness of the elected Nepali Congress government and to assure that the new Panchayat system would play a vital role in national development.

China supported King Mahendra's move, which could increase China's influence in Nepal. The United States became concerned about this and adopted two main policies to counter it. They were;

**Support for the Panchayat system-**The U.S. provided economic, technical, and administrative assistance to help ensure the success of Panchayat-led projects and development programs.

**Anti-communist messaging-**The U.S. sought to discourage Nepalis from leaning toward China by promoting anti-communist views. For example, in May 1963, during a program at the Nepal-America Cultural Center in Kathmandu, U.S. Consular Ernest H. Fisk advised Nepali students not to follow communist countries, arguing that the international communist bloc negatively affected world peace (Nepal Press Digest, May 18-24, 1963, p. 101). His remarks were particularly directed at China, since Nepal-China relations had improved after the King's move.



Similarly, in 1964, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara stated that there was a 'Chinese threat' in Nepal (Nepal Press Digest, February 1-5, 1964, p. 31). However, the Nepalese government neither responded nor confirmed such a threat. The U.S. did not clearly explain what the supposed Chinese threat entailed. It appears that by raising this issue, the U.S. aimed to foster anti-China sentiment in Nepal, weaken Nepal-China relations, and draw Nepal closer to the Western military bloc.

Although the U.S. government was a supporter of democratic systems, it did not openly oppose or issue a clear reaction to King Mahendra's action. However, according to some sources, American diplomats expressed dissatisfaction with the royal step (Mihaly, 1965), though it is not known through whom or in what manner this dissatisfaction was conveyed. The U.S. also held the view that "the King's move was an obstacle to the development of democracy in Nepal" (Mihaly, 1965). Overall, the U.S. government neither opposed nor openly supported King Mahendra's action. Yet, within a year of the royal step, at the request of the Panchayat government, the U.S. began providing extensive assistance to strengthen both the Panchayat system and the Nepalese Army. This demonstrated that the U.S. had, in practice, supported and recognized the partyless system (Nath, 1975). In 1960, Prime Minister Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala had visited China and held discussions with Chinese leaders about Nepal-China relations (Sharma, 1988). He also advocated at the United Nations General Assembly for China to be admitted as a member (Sharma, 1988). These actions likely led the U.S. to perceive the Nepali Congress government as leaning toward China. For this reason, when King Mahendra dissolved the elected Nepali Congress government, the U.S. did not protest. Those who described King Mahendra's move as a "military coup" acknowledge that the U.S. effectively supported the King's action at the time (Roka, *Kantipur*, March 9, 2004, p. 6). Analysts argue that...

In 1960, the Cold War was underway. Nearly the entire world was divided into either the American or the Soviet bloc. The United States and the Soviet Union were competing intensely to bring countries into their respective spheres of influence. In the face of this rivalry, concepts such as democracy, human rights, freedom, and the rule of law held little value. Regardless of the type of government or ruler, once a country aligned with either the U.S. or the Soviet Union, it automatically received protection (Nepal, October 16, 2005, p. 6).

Therefore, when King Mahendra banned political parties and ended democracy, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union took it very seriously. Although Nepal pursued a foreign policy of neutrality during the Cold War, if the U.S. had opposed the King's move, Nepal might have leaned toward the Soviet Union; and if the Soviet Union had opposed it, Nepal might have leaned toward the U.S. For this reason, the U.S. refrained from criticizing the King's action, ensuring that Nepal would not tilt toward the Soviets, and later began providing various forms of assistance to the Panchayat government.

Eight months before dissolving parliament on December 15, 1960, King Mahendra visited the United States and met President Eisenhower. At that meeting, he mentioned that parliamentary elections had been held in Nepal and that an elected government had been



formed, expressing his full faith in the democratic system. Yet, only eight months later, he ended parliamentary democracy. If he truly had full faith in democracy, as he claimed, he would not have dissolved parliament in such a short time. This suggests that King Mahendra's statement of support for democracy was made merely to please President Eisenhower and the U.S. government, and to secure American support and assistance. This can be described as 'visit diplomacy' conducted during his visit.

In reality, when King Mahendra banned political parties and ended democracy, the United States neither supported nor openly opposed his move. It only expressed the view that the King's action was an 'anti-democratic campaign' (B.B. Thapa, personal communication, September 15, 2008). What is important to note here is that, unlike in the 1951 revolution, the U.S. did not look at King Mahendra's step through India's perspective. During the anti-Rana movement, the U.S. had considered Indian policy correct and gave Nepal's anti-Rana revolution silent and moral support. But this time, when King Mahendra abolished the parliamentary system and banned parties, India opposed the move, while the U.S. did not openly protest.

Although India initially opposed the royal step, it later appeared to side with the monarchy, as it continued providing economic assistance to Nepal. For example, in April 1961, India gave 13.2 million rupees for rural development, irrigation, hydropower, and other projects. It also agreed to resolve Nepal's transit problems. Possibly, by continuing aid and relations, India wanted to prevent Nepal from moving closer to China and falling under Chinese influence (Prasad, 1989). If this interpretation is correct, then the same reasoning may explain why the U.S. also refrained from opposing King Mahendra's move. America, too, wanted to ensure that Nepal did not tilt toward China. If everyone had opposed the King's action, he might have been compelled to strengthen ties with China, something the U.S. did not want.

### **Perception of the International Community on the referendum of 1980**

On December 15, 1960, King Mahendra dissolved the elected Nepali Congress government and banned political parties. Shortly afterward, he introduced the partyless Panchayat system. However, dissatisfaction with this system grew among the Nepali people, who began efforts to restore democracy. Various events inside and outside the country further intensified opposition to the Panchayat system. As a result, King Birendra held a referendum in 1980 to decide what kind of political system Nepal should follow. In this referendum, citizens were given the choice between a multi-party system and a reformed Panchayat system. The reformed Panchayat option won the majority of votes.

Neighboring countries and other nations expressed their own views and perspectives on Nepal's referendum. For example, M.A.R. Kopecko, President of Austria's Association for Foreign Policy and International Relations, stated that King Birendra had shown farsighted wisdom by announcing the referendum, and that it would greatly strengthen political stability in the country. He further remarked that the monarchy would always remain a symbol of Nepal's unity and development (*Gorkhapatra*, Vol. 79, Issue 261, January 29, 1980, p. 1).

In the referendum, citizens were given the choice between a multi-party system and a reformed Panchayat system. Since the United States was a supporter of democracy, it viewed



the referendum positively, as it gave people the opportunity to choose democracy (B.B. Thapa, personal communication, September 15, 2008). The U.S. government praised the referendum as 'a historic step taken to create national unity and harmony' (*Nepal Times*, Vol. 25, Issue 251, July 11, 1980, p. 1). King Birendra himself expressed happiness at America's appreciation of the referendum.

Philip R. Trimble, the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Nepal, also emphasized that the referendum had broadened public participation, fostered reconciliation and national unity, and would decisively contribute to achieving development goals (*Nepal Times*, Vol. 25, Issue 251, July 11, 1980, p. 2). On July 10, 1980, when Ambassador Trimble presented his credentials, the Nepali side informed him that the people had peacefully and freely exercised their political rights by voting in favor of the Panchayat system. This may have been intended to assure the U.S. that there was no electoral malpractice.

Less than a month after the referendum, Trimble stated that Nepal would play an important role in establishing normal relations among powerful nations in the region, and that the U.S. would always support Nepal's independence (*Nepal Times*, Vol. 25, Issue 214, May 22, 1980, pp. 1-2). This confirmed that the U.S. accepted the referendum results and adopted a policy of continuing its support and cooperation with the newly established government, just as before. Former U.S. Ambassador to Nepal, Douglas Heck, also praised Nepal's referendum. He observed that the large voter turnout made the election enthusiastic, with citizens casting their votes peacefully and in an orderly manner. In his words:

The Election Commission and the staff assisting it carried out a fair and honest referendum, which was an extraordinary achievement. Considering the country's geographical difficulties, the large number of illiterate voters, and limited resources, their work becomes even more significant. During the referendum, facilities had to be created for nearly half of the population about seven million people to vote. (Devkota, 2039 B.S.).

At that time, the United States had adopted a policy that nations in Southeast Asia should be able to make their own decisions freely, without external interference. This was evident from remarks made by U.S. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (*The Everest*, June 29, 1980, p. 1). Therefore, by supporting Nepal's referendum, where citizens were given the choice between a reformed Panchayat system or a multi-party system, the U.S. was putting its Southeast Asia policy into practice. The American government's support confirmed its principle that all Asian nations should be free to make their own decisions. This was further validated when Dr. Bhesh Bahadur Thapa, upon presenting his credentials as Nepal's ambassador to the U.S., expressed gratitude on behalf of the Nepali people (*The Everest*, September 21, 1980, p. 5). It is also relevant to note that before the referendum, in January 1977, the American organization *Freedom House* had published a report titled *Map of Freedom*, in which Nepal was described as not being a free nation (Baral, 1983). However, since the U.S. took a positive view of the referendum, such American institutions also began to change their perspective on Nepal. In



summary, although the referendum result went against the multi-party system, the U.S. government still accepted it positively and expressed support.

### **Conclusion**

Nepal's political transformations in 1960 and 1980 reveal the country's persistent struggle to balance domestic aspirations with the pressures of Cold War geopolitics. In 1960, King Mahendra's dissolution of the elected government and introduction of the Panchayat system exposed Nepal's fragile sovereignty. International reactions were shaped more by strategic interests than democratic ideals: India condemned the move but moderated its stance to maintain influence and counter China; China welcomed the change as an opportunity to expand its presence in South Asia; Britain balanced criticism with caution, prioritizing stability; and the United States adopted restraint, favoring geopolitical order over principle. This episode demonstrated how Nepal's internal decisions were continually reshaped by the rivalries of neighbors and global powers.

Two decades later, King Birendra's 1980 referendum reaffirmed the Panchayat system yet carried a different international resonance. Unlike the abrupt break of 1960, the referendum was widely seen as a constructive step. Austria praised the king's wisdom, while the United States emphasized sovereignty and applauded the peaceful conduct of the vote. American diplomats highlighted its logistical success and symbolic importance, aligning with Washington's policy of non-interference and its aim to prevent Nepal from leaning toward China or the Soviet Union. Even critical voices such as Freedom House softened their stance, acknowledging limited progress. The referendum showed that modest reforms could reshape Nepal's global image and reduce external criticism.

Taken together, these two episodes illustrate a consistent pattern: Nepal's political trajectory was shaped not only by domestic pressures but also by the cautious, strategic perceptions of the international community. Foreign powers responded with a blend of criticism, pragmatism, and guarded support, revealing that geopolitical interests often outweighed ideological commitments. For Nepal, the challenge of asserting sovereignty meant navigating the competing priorities of powerful neighbors and global actors. Ultimately, the political shifts of 1960 and 1980 demonstrate that Nepal's democratic journey was inseparable from Cold War geopolitics, reminding us that its internal struggles were always part of a larger international contest.

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