

## STRIFE AT GOVERNMENT LEVEL IMPERILS HEALTH OF CIVILIANS

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Recently, while en route to Kathmandu, Nepal, for a medical mission, my nephew lingered a few extra days in Bangkok because of civil unrest in Nepal. Legislators in the Nepalese Constituent Assembly had been throwing microphones and breaking desks. During the ensuing scuffle, several security officers were injured. The opposition leadership then organized a general strike, during which vehicles were set on fire and businesses were closed. The army was seen throughout the city, and police with riot gear were at the ready. No one seemed to benefit.



As we took pause in Bangkok, Thai lawmakers who had been appointed by the military junta, in power since May, impeached and indicted Yingluck Shinawatra, the Thai prime minister. Daniel Russell, the top U.S. envoy to Asia, expressed his concern that the junta had deposed the democratically elected leader of Thailand for political reasons.

But unlike Nepal, this time the streets of Bangkok remained calm. The modicum of stability in Thailand is owed in part to the beloved Thai king who, despite fragile health, remains a profoundly positive presence.

In contrast, Nepal overthrew its monarchy in 2008. However, the body blow to the hearts and minds of the Nepalese people came several years earlier, in the middle of its decade-long civil war. In 2001 the king and eight other members of the Nepalese royal family were assassinated by the heir to the throne, who then committed suicide. Suspicions had been placed on the king's brother who took the throne.

This crisis in confidence tipped the scales of the civil war. By 2006 the Maoists, fighting a proxy war for China against India for influence in Nepal, prevailed. Today the Maoists lead the opposition against the Nepali Congress coalition, which leans toward India and Hindu nationalism. Discord among the two major factions has been obstructive to the mission at hand: to finalize a new Nepalese constitution, now many years in the making.

News of a seismic shift in U.S.-Indian relations, during President Barack Obama's recent visit to India, has had ripple effects in the Himalayan nation. Having resolved differences that held up landmark agreements made in 2008 between the U.S. and India, Obama sat next to India's new nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, during India's 66th Republic Day, a celebration of India's constitution. This sent a strong message that was not lost on the Nepalis — the Jan. 22 deadline for Nepal to adopt its own constitution has come and gone.

In conjunction with India's Republic Day, the nation gave 20 ambulances, four buses and many boxes of educational materials to 19 districts in Nepal. In addition, money and blankets were given to former soldiers and their families belonging to the Nepalese Gurkha regiment of the Indian army — a reflection that Modi is making good on his campaign promise to get tough with China on a broad range of geopolitical issues.

Ira Zunin M.D., M.P.H., M.B.A., is medical director of Manakai O Malama Integrative Healthcare Group and Rehabilitation Center & CEO of Global Advisory Services Inc.

Please submit your questions to [info@manakaomalama.com](mailto:info@manakaomalama.com)

These efforts are not unopposed. Also during Republic Day, high-level government officials announced plans to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Nepalese-Chinese diplomatic relationship. Key figures from both countries will meet to discuss how China can support economic and infrastructure development in Nepal.

Notwithstanding the highly visible expressions of support by the world's two most populous nations on its borders, Nepal, already an impoverished, failed state, is becoming increasingly polarized.

While the politicians make hay, the people suffer. Ongoing tensions make it impossible to develop, fund and execute cogent health policy. Nepal, one of the least developed countries in Asia, ranks 138th in the world in overall human development. Its people contend with high rates of malnourishment and childhood mortality, particularly in remote rural villages.

During my last trip to Nepal, I worked a village just south of the Tibetan border, a six-day walk from the nearest road. The only health care available was two young aid workers who had but several weeks training. There were few supplies.

Holding a dying baby through the night in this remote Himalayan village, I kept thinking that he needed more than political grandstanding. The next morning he was flown to a hospital in Kathmandu, but it was too late.