

patrician class, and the operas they staged often strained the bounds of decency as well as political rhetoric. Yet so long as they “refrained from criticizing the Venetian government they were reasonably safe from governmental prosecution, even if many of them ran afoul of the Holy Office.”

What was happening on stage was not the only scandalous aspect of Venetian opera. A prominent and novel feature of the new opera theaters, such as the Teatro S. Cassiano, built in 1637, was theater boxes, which Venetians quickly learned to use, writes one historian, “as if they were modern motel

The mystery of why opera emerged in 17th-century Venice might make a best-selling Dan Brown novel.

rooms.” With opera season coinciding with carnival and many in the audience masked, the scene was set for audiences to take “full advantage of the collective anonymity.”

But as time passed, says Muir, commercial opera gradually became “just a subset of a whole new literary economy during the 17th century,” which

helped connect the city “to the broader intellectual and political developments of Europe.” Venice’s loss of the spice trade to other European shipping rivals actually boosted investment in commercial entertainment, and Venetian opera began importing talent from other cities, becoming, Muir writes, “less of a self-contained genre and more of a stop on the burgeoning opera circuit.” Opera offered audiences a welcome escape from their daily lives, which were wracked by economic concerns and worries about war and disease. Once it caught on in the other great cities of Europe, opera was there to stay.

## OTHER NATIONS

# Nepal’s Backward Trek

**THE SOURCE:** “Nepal: The Politics of Failure” by Barbara Crossette, in *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2005–06.

NESTLED IN THE HIMALAYAS BETWEEN China and India, the Hindu kingdom of Nepal has a reputation among foreigners as a prime destination for exotic adventure. Less widely known to the outside world are the tempests of its political life.

An outpouring of popular support for democracy in the late 1980s forced the king to accept a constitutional monarchy in 1990, but since then democracy has foundered. Now, tensions among the autocratic King Gyanendra, fractious political parties, and brutal Maoist guerillas threaten the country’s stability, warns Barbara Crossette, former *New York Times*

chief correspondent in South Asia. The buffer mountain kingdom could easily become a source of trouble for the entire region.

Crossette says that travel warnings “give little hint of the depth of the country’s political collapse and the despair, confusion, and powerlessness of its people.” In 2001 King Birendra and nine members of the royal family were shot dead at a royal dinner, allegedly by the crown prince, who is said to have then committed suicide. Birendra’s brother Gyanendra assumed the throne, and since then has placed restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of speech, dismissed several prime ministers, and, in February 2005, arrested political leaders and dissolved the government.

Gyanendra’s actions have strength-

ened connections between the now-impotent political parties and the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists, formerly the Communist Party of Nepal, have grown in strength since the mid-1990s and are now estimated to have 10,000 members. They face an “inept and lawless” army. The armed Maoists draw recruits from isolated, impoverished mountain villages by “playing on the hopelessness and weariness of the poorest people,” says Crossette, and they “have amply demonstrated their contempt for democracy.”

In the international community there is growing alarm about the rise of Maoism, but “there is no focal point around which to build a solution” to Nepal’s governance crisis. Even before Gyanendra’s royal coup, leaders of the dominant Congress Party “let the country down, comprehensively,” indulging in corruption and infighting and producing legislative gridlock.

As Nepalis abandon hope in the promise of democracy and embrace extremism, the Nepalese experience is

a warning “for those who still nourish the shaky conviction that democracy can be established simply through an outburst of people power . . . , a constitution, and an election or two, without the vital dedication of a political class willing to put aside differences.”

## OTHER NATIONS

## Goodbye and Good Riddance

**THE SOURCE:** “Mexico’s Wasted Chance” by Fredo Arias-King, in *The National Interest*, Winter 2005–6.

REFORM WAS IN THE AIR WHEN Vicente Fox was elected president of Mexico six years ago, ending more than 70 years of one-party rule. Yet as the July 2 election of a new president nears, reforms have been few, “corruption has actually increased, and the quality of government has deteriorated,” writes Fredo Arias-King, the founding editor of *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, who worked as a speechwriter for Fox’s campaign.

Fox’s two immediate predecessors, Carlos Salinas (1988–94) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), from the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), had instituted some economic reforms, but essentially they “only replaced the existing crony socialism with crony capitalism.” To do better, the popular Fox and his center-right National Action Party (PAN) needed to tackle “bureaucratic red tape, monopolies, obstacles to foreign investment, the byzantine tax code, criminal networks in government, a bloated public sector, [and] the lack of property rights.”

Instead of breaking completely with the old regime, however, Fox chose to work with elements of the PRI, while slighting his own supporters and his party’s coalition partner, the Green Party. Members of the old guard were installed as the national security adviser and the ambassador to Washington, while others ran the Finance Secretariat and Fox’s own presidential office. Fox “resurrected some of the most notorious figures of the pre-Zedillo PRI,” including two men who had served with the secret police during Mexico’s “dirty war”

cooperation, he was disappointed, notes Arias-King. “The PRI has blocked Fox’s most important proposals in Congress, including labor, energy, and tax reform, and has used its networks inside the federal government to continue funneling resources to its campaigns.” The PRI regained its congressional plurality in 2003, and the Green Party left Fox’s coalition for an alliance with the PRI.

It’s not Fox’s fault that Mexico’s economic growth has been feeble in recent years (America’s lagging economy is mostly to blame for that), says



Many hoped that Vicente Fox would bring much-needed reform to Mexico when he was elected president in 2000, but his administration has been disappointing, with corruption worse than before he took office.

against the country’s leftist guerrillas in the early 1970s. He also rejected an offer from some 50 newly elected PRI congressmen to break with their party and vote with PAN and the Greens, in return for minor favors. The legislators, said Fox, should “stay in the PRI, since we need a strong and united PRI to negotiate better with it.”

If Fox hoped that his unilateral concessions to the PRI would win its

Arias-King, but “the worsening quality of government largely is.” Surveys by Transparency International and other organizations show increased corruption and inefficiency. Mexicans’ faith in political institutions has eroded. “If this trend continues,” Arias-King warns, “the party system itself could be discredited, opening the door to a Hugo Chávez-like figure” in Mexico and an increase in guerrilla activity and terrorism.