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Nepal: Changing Strategies of the “People’s War”

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- The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist) has been changing its ideology and strategies with the changing dimension of national and international politics. Initiated as a class war to establish a People’s Republic in Nepal, now it has reached an understanding with the agitating seven-party alliance for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution and has expressed its commitment to join competitive democratic politics in the short run.
- After the Royal takeover, Nepalese politics witnessed a rapid polarization of forces. On the one hand there is the state versus the agitating seven-party alliance including the Maoist rebels. On the other hand, donors appear to be polarizing themselves. India, the UK and the EU are supporting the seven-party alliance, while China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and Pakistan are supporting the King’s efforts to hold elections and restore stability in the country.
- The Maoist announcement of a unilateral ceasefire, and its extension, received mixed reactions. The Western donors, the United Nations, India and Nepalese political parties have welcomed it. The government has not reciprocated and has called for the surrender of arms by the rebels and announced an amnesty if they renounce violence.
- India is consulting the USA and the UK in trying to mediate between the political parties and the Maoists in the framework of a constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy.

Background

The CPN (Maoist) leaders - Puspa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) and Dr. Baburam Bhattarai - formally started their People’s War in Nepal on February 13, 1996 with the aim of establishing a “new people’s democracy.” Based on the ideological teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao, it draws inspiration from the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and Peru’s left wing guerilla movement, the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). For them, the ‘People’s War’ constitutes a “historical revolt against feudalism, imperialism and reformists.” The immediate reason given for declaring the People’s War was the failure of the Nepalese government to respond to their 40-point memorandum presented on February 4, 1996 pertaining to nationalism, democracy, livelihood and abrogation of unequal treaties with foreign countries.

When the People’s War started in Rukum and Rolpa, a small group of people led by CPN (Maoist) fought with locally available weapons - knives, sticks, sickles, homemade explosives and old-fashioned guns. After six months, it formed its first squad of fighters and began on their path of guerrilla warfare. The initial raids were carried out against local feudals, police, rival political workers, government spies, moneylenders, rapists, wife-beaters, smugglers and corrupt officials. Chronic governmental instability and failure of the political class to understand the structural causes of the insurgency made the conflict management strategies of various governments ineffective. The subsequent shoddy police operations swelled the number of victims and they began to join the ranks of the CPN (Maoist). It helped to transform the localized, low-intensity conflict into a high-intensity one with geopolitical consequences.

On April 7, 1999 the CPN (Maoist) adopted a strategy to eliminate selected enemies, leading them to target high-level political and administrative officers, district headquarters, police posts, strategic installations and Village Development Committee (VDC) buildings. It imposed regular blockades against several district headquarters, twice even in the capital city, Kathmandu. In the same year, the United Revolutionary People's Committees had begun to function in the western districts of the country, treating them as the base area and had established political authority in various zones. In the "Guerrilla Zone" it fought with the police. In their "Propaganda Zone" it mobilized urban people and spread the campaign of political education to weaken the authority of the state. And in the "Main Zone" it established base areas. It was easy for the Maoists to expand in rural areas because the multi-party governments had withdrawn the police, administrative offices and service delivery agencies to the district headquarters. In many VDCs the village secretary was the only representative of the state in society, and the post remained vacant. Rebels had thus filled the authority and security vacuum.

Up to 2001, the CPN (Maoist) party had acquired modern weapons such as mortars, rocket launchers, machine guns, self-loading rifles and small weapons, some of them from the security forces after their raids. Leftist media report that the military wing of the party has three divisions, nine brigades and 29 battalions, apart from their militias. They expect to raise the number of people's militia to 100,000 members. In February 2001, the national convention of CPN (Maoist) invented the "Prachandapath" and formulated a number of tactics for urban insurrection by carrying out activities through its 21 fraternal organizations - trade unions and organizations of students, women, indigenous peoples, peasants, teachers, intellectuals, ethnic, regional and cultural units, etc - to weaken the central power of the state, instigate revolt within the security forces and seek the support of mainstream political parties.

On November 24, 2001 it announced the formation of the United Revolutionary People's Council (URPC) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) stating their commitment to freedom and against state bureaucratization, for

participation, proportional representation of all groups in the House of Representatives and for the establishment of local self-governance by granting self-determination to oppressed groups and implementing land reforms.

It began to settle local disputes, administer production and supply of basic goods and services and the development of roads and communications in the mid-western hills. Until recently, its new plan aimed to provide defensive and offensive training to the masses to fight "tunnel warfare" against national and foreign intervention. The irreconcilable divisions in the ruling classes jockeying for power, existing inequalities, poverty, neglect of the mid-hills, corruption and a culture of impunity fuelled the Maoist insurgency, thus helping it spread throughout the country. At its third plenum in Rolpa in October 2005, CPN (Maoist) admitted the inadequacy of the orthodox ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao and argued the party's need to enter into the spirit of the 21st Century to face the contemporary challenges of globalization.

Military Strategy

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has adopted Mao Tse-Tung's military strategy - "tactically pitting ten against one" because of the overwhelming presence of security forces and "strategically one against ten", assuming where security forces are isolated from the main center it could easily overrun them. It applied the strategy of protracted guerrilla warfare, enticing the security forces deep into its areas and ambushing them. It aimed to encircle the cities after taking over the villages. Local people have provided them with intelligence and reconnaissance support. On August 31, 2004, it announced the opening of its "strategic offensive." In the beginning, it maintained a "strategic defensive" because of its comparatively weaker position. After the formation of the PLA, it claimed that it had achieved the phase of "strategic equilibrium," a phase where neither side is in a position to eliminate the other and the society and international community recognize the power of both sides. The third plenum of CPN (Maoist) has formulated a strategy of what it calls, "hitting at the head of the enemy by riding on its back."

The Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) began to disarm the Maoists after they were attacked in Dang in 2001. It initiated counter-insurgency operations and an extended Integrated Security and Development Package (ISDP). To beef up security, the government created a Unified Command of the RNA, Armed Police Force and Police, increased the strength of the RNA to 100,000 and diversified the source of arms supply. So far, it has received weapons from India, the USA, the UK and Belgium, but these countries stopped the supply of lethal weapons after the royal takeover. Recently, China has agreed to provide \$ 989,000 military aid to Nepal to promote stability, development and peace and combat internal and external terrorism. A number of factors, such as surrender of rebels to the security forces, factionalism within the rebels and the lack of regional and international legitimacy are influencing the strategy of the rebels.

Political Strategy

The CPN-Maoist's political strategy involves the creation of a rift between the political parties and the king, attract youth, women, ethnic and indigenous groups and Dalits and indoctrinate them, neutralize the international community and create a "united front" of various left, progressive, patriotic and democratic forces to smash the existing political system. By 2000, it had already made twenty-one fraternal organizations operational to draw recruits for the party. Nepal's ruling classes caught over the differences on how to deal with insurgency were engulfed in inter- and intra-party feuds and generational conflicts apart from the persisting crisis of governance. This crisis was deepened further when King Birendra, the queen and other members of royal family were massacred on June 1, 2001 and CPN (Maoist) intensified its attacks against state installations.

Prime Minister G.P. Koirala submitted his resignation when the RNA refused his request to quell the Maoists and demanded an "all-party consensus" for the use of RNA. King Gyanendra chose a new Prime Minister, Sher B. Deuba, who called for negotiations with the Maoists. In July, CPN (Maoist) agreed for a ceasefire and held several rounds of talks in which it demanded a round table dialogue including all the political forces and an interim government for the election of a constituent

assembly to draft a new constitution. On November 23, 2001 Maoist Supremo Prachanda issued a statement saying that since the government had rejected the main demands of his party, the ceasefire had ended. The rebels attacked the RNA barracks in Dang, the first attack on the RNA, and several other places forcing the government to deploy the army against the rebels. On November 26 the government declared a nationwide state of emergency. Due to growing opposition to the emergency, the government in May 2002 dissolved the parliament and subsequently also local bodies. The dissolution of elected bodies weakened the legitimacy and political base of the government and provided the CPN (Maoist) considerable space to expand.

As the rift in the ruling classes arose over the extension of the emergency, on October 4, 2002, King Gyanendra dismissed the Deuba government, assumed executive power and nominated three politicians one after the other over a period of about two years with the mandate to initiate dialogue with the CPN (Maoist) and hold elections. Several rounds of dialogue were held. But the Maoists terminated the ceasefire on August 27, when 17 unarmed Maoists and two civilians were killed by security forces in the midst of the negotiations. The CPN (Maoist) also rejected any proposal to talk to the Deuba-led coalition government, saying that it would like to directly talk with the king through the mediation of the UN. In early 2004, it formed nine Autonomous People's [provincial] Governments and extended its organizational base in those areas. The CPN (Maoist) had changed its political strategy from "new democratic revolution" to "bourgeois democratic revolution" for the medium-term.

Daily agitation of the political parties against the Deuba government in Kathmandu, coupled with the growing insurgency in rural areas, motivated the King to stage a takeover on February 1, 2005 to quell the insurgency which has already claimed 15,500 lives and caused massive damage of development infrastructure. The King's prime concerns are the extension of state authority in society and bringing the rural areas back into government control. But his takeover provided the ground for the seven-party alliance (NC, NC (Democratic), NSP-Anand Devi, Nepal Workers and

Peasants Party, United People's Front and United Left Front) and CPN (Maoist) to move closer and agitate against his regime. The NC and CPN-UML have already deleted the mention of constitutional monarchy from their party statutes and programs and supported the Maoists' demand for the election of a constituent assembly. The Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Nepal Sadbhavan Party (NSP) and Rastriya Janashakti Party (RJP) still believe in constitutional monarchy and rule out any possibility of cooperative action with the Maoists. The CPN (Maoist) is now trying to convince the seven-party alliance that the king would not remain constitutional within the framework of the present constitution and that it is time that the political parties and the Maoists come together to have a new constitution drafted.

The government's announcement of the holding of municipal elections by February 8, 2006 and national elections by mid-April 2007 has put the Maoists in a dilemma about whether to continue the present ceasefire and enter into cooperative action with the seven-party alliance (which is opposing the elections) or provide effective resistance to the election by breaking the ceasefire. By announcing elections, the King has virtually foreclosed the option for the revival of the parliament demanded by the seven-party alliance.

At present, the seven-party alliance and the rebels have signed a 12-point accord to go for an election to a constituent assembly, expecting reliable involvement of the international community in the talk process and hoping to arrive at a common road map as the agitation advances. The seven-party alliance's road map includes the revival of the dissolved House of Representatives, an all-party government and talks with the Maoists and an election to a constituent assembly. The CPN (Maoist) has preferred a national political conference of the democratic forces, followed by an interim government that will conduct the election to a constituent assembly. The agreement also says that the army and rebels will be under the supervision of the UN or a similar international organization during the elections. Both sides have agreed to effectively boycott the municipal elections.

External Policy Strategy

Initially, the CPN (Maoist) condemned "US imperialism, Indian hegemony and native comprador bourgeois as barriers to people's war" and as "enemy of Nepali people." It has maintained strong relations with the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Center (MCC) in India and has established a Compact Revolutionary Zone (CRZ) extending from Nepal to several Indian states. The Coordination Committee of Maoists Parties and Organizations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA) coordinates the activities of their parties in the region. The CPN (Maoist) considers NGOs and INGOs as vehicles of colonialism and imperialism and mandated them to register with their local party offices if they want to work under the areas of their influence. Under the aegis of the American global war against terrorism and to prevent Nepal from becoming a failed state, the USA, the UK and India coordinated their policies and provided extensive military and development assistance to the Nepalese government.

The US, in cooperation with India and the UK, tried to ensure that Maoists do not get outside support and take over the capital city, Kathmandu. The USA and the UK supported the Indian role for reconciliation between political parties and the King, while the official media is alleging that India is trying to reconcile the seven-party alliance with the CPN (Maoist) for an agitation in Nepal. They have blamed India for stopping military support at a time when the counter-insurgency is going on, while at the same time keeping a blind eye to the arms being smuggled into Nepal by the Maoists through its territory, apart from allowing safe havens for the Maoists on the Indian soil. As a result, Nepal looked to China, Pakistan and Russia for military support. The CPN (Maoist) also changed its policies towards these countries. Now, it thinks in geopolitical terms, rather than class, and believes that without the cooperation of the US, China, India and the EU, real peace in Nepal cannot be achieved. It is pressing for a UN mediation to see disarmament and ensure that the security forces do not undermine the deal. The government, NC, NC (Democratic), RPP, Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), India, China and the USA oppose third party mediation including the UN and argue that the Nepalese themselves can solve this problem. However, with-

out a UN role there will be no constituent assembly election and the seven-party alliance has clearly stated that they will not participate in any election under the current regime. This could lead to another kind of deadlock.

Politics of Ceasefire

On September 3, 2005 CPN (Maoist) announced a three-month unilateral ceasefire and suggested the formation of an interim regime and election to the constituent assembly to solve the crisis facing the country. An Indian newspaper, *The Pioneer*, said that the Indian Ministry of External Affairs had pushed the Nepalese Maoists for announcing the truce. It said that Maoist leader Prachanda was in India recently for talks with officials of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Secretariat. The report added, "Ignoring the Union Ministry of Home Affairs' stand that India should take a tough stance against the Maoists in Nepal, the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of External Affairs have been eagerly pushing a deal with Prachanda, possibly at the instigation of Communist Party of India (M)," a partner in the coalition government in India. Maoist spokesperson K.B. Mahara made it clear that there was "no prospect of peace talks with the government." Within two days of the announcement of ceasefire Prachanda and Ganapaty (CPI-M of India) to fight unitedly.

By declaring the ceasefire, the Maoists are trying to take a political initiative to compensate for their military losses, woo the seven-party alliance agitating against the regime, and gain popular national and international sympathy. It warned of a resumption of hostilities if the government keeps resorting to military means. The party statement said that it was currently involved in a "positive interaction" with civil society and political parties, for a "democratic republican order" as a temporary solution. It urged the parties not to doubt the Maoists' political commitment and to create an atmosphere of mutual trust to push "progressive political reforms." The statement added, "it will encourage political powers, including the UN, to initiate new moves for ensuring progressive political reforms in Nepal." The CPN (Maoist) interprets the parties-Maoist consensus on "complete democracy" as a middle ground between the Maoist's concept of "people's democracy" and the

seven-party alliance's concept of "parliamentary democracy." It is supposed to be a transitional phase toward a "democratic republic."

Accordingly, at its third plenum in Rolpa in October the CPN (Maoist) decided to join mainstream politics, allowed the entry of cadres of other parties in the areas of their influence and seek the UN's role in supervision of the laying down of arms during the proposed constituent assembly elections. In order to translate the unilateral ceasefire into a lasting peace it is, however, important to have the cooperation of the government, other political parties, civil society and the international community.

Response to Ceasefire

All the major political parties, civil society and the international community have termed the ceasefire as a positive move, urged the CPN (Maoist) to return to peaceful politics and give up arms. They also urged the government to reciprocate the truce offer. Recently, a team from the business community met the king and briefed him about the National Business Initiative (NBI), which is trying to mobilize various sections of society for peace. The RNA has, however, termed the ceasefire a drama and continued operations against the rebels. RNA Spokesperson Deepak Gurung said, "Maoists' continuous terrorist acts were the reason behind the army's decision to continue its operations. Ceasefire is a part of their strategy to prepare for another attack."

On September 5 the government's spokesman, Minister for Information and Communications Tanka Dhakal asserted, "In view of the past experiences when repeated announcement of the cessation of terrorist activities failed to pave the way for permanent peace, there is no reason to be assured yet. However, ... the government has offered an opportunity to one and all to enter into the mainstream politics and participate in the campaign of peace and development. As usual the government is fully committed to enforce the existing rules and regulations." Former negotiator, Kamal Thapa argued, "The Maoists' announcement of ceasefire could be a strategy to align with the seven-party alliance for an urban uprising."

Post-Ceasefire Strategy

Four days after announcing the ceasefire, CPN (Maoist) declared a three-month long program to press for an interim government, constituent assembly elections and a democratic republic. Prachanda said, "The party would utilize the truce with mass mobilization and struggle" to campaign for a democratic republic. The rebels would take initiatives to form a common front with mainstream democratic parties at the district and regional levels to fight autocracy. The campaign, which began on September 10, has become a part of their "efforts towards providing a progressive political solution to the ongoing conflict and to respect people's aspirations for peace and prosperity." It announced that rallies would be held at the district and regional levels from November 7 to December 3 and mobilize all the party wings for the campaign while the "people's liberation army" will be kept on high alert in an "active defense" position during the truce, to foil possible attacks by security forces.

On September 10, accusing the government of trying to sabotage the unilateral ceasefire and to force the Maoists to withdraw it, Prachanda called on political parties and civil society to monitor the truce. Accordingly, an organization called Civil Society Committee on Ceasefire Monitoring (CSCCM) has begun to monitor the ceasefire.

Future Scenario

The CPN (Maoist) has been criticized by all the left parties as "adventurist," while non-left parties fear its militancy and oppose the use of violence. Donors are also divided on how to resolve the problem of insurgency. A group of donors, such as the EU, the UK and the USA has asked the King to restore the democratic order and ally with mainstream parties to cope with the Maoists. With the consent of the US, the Indian government has played a role to reconcile mainstream parties and the Maoists in order to bring the Maoists to de-

mocratic politics. But, the Indian support to democratic movement has evoked a fear in the mind of the government. Neither the King-party alliance (which existed before the takeover and could not solve the problem) nor the party-Maoist alliance can guarantee durable solution as this strategy would only isolate one force, provoke powerful resistance and does not address the root causes of conflict.

The government can still exercise several options: adopt a hard position if the party-Maoist alliance adopts a belligerent posture, accept the ceasefire and bring the party-Maoist alliance to the negotiation table, prepare a broad-based road map for peace by involving all the functionally relevant groups of society or go alone with the elections. For the King-party alliance, the king wants a clear position from the parties on the issues of terrorism, corruption, good governance and fiscal discipline, on which the parties have been dilly-dallying. The government has already declared the dates for municipal elections and announced amnesty to those Maoists surrendering to the security forces. The seven-party alliance is looking for support from the Maoists to increase their bargaining position with the king, while the Maoists are interested to change the system and accommodate their party cadres in their fold. In a situation of uneasy deadlock, the King is extending the authority of the state in society and issuing regulations on the media, NGOs and human rights organizations prescribing codes of conduct for them until the national security situation substantially improves. If the party-Maoist alliance sees that it will have a viable future by peaceful political means, if certain governance reforms are initiated in social, economic and political realms and face-saving devices are offered, it might opt for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Otherwise, the mutually hurting stalemate will continue to plague the political life of Nepal.

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