

The Discontents After the Revolution

ADITYA ADHIKARI

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Aditya Adhikari (aditya.adhikari@gmail.com) is a journalist based in Kathmandu.

The split among the Maoists in Nepal is a result of ideological and organisational reasons. The splinter party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) still grapples with its ideological line – what form of "peoples' revolt" would it have to launch – and faces a difficult future. But substantial numbers of people in Nepal, often disgruntled with the dysfunctional nature of the mainstream polity, have historically responded to the call of radical communists, who are therefore here to stay.

There was little surprise in Kathmandu when a number of radical leaders from Nepal's Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) split from the party in June 2012. They had, after all, been publicly skeptical of the party's course since it abandoned People's War and entered mainstream politics in 2006. For at least a year before the split, radical leaders such as Mohan Baidya "Kiran" and Ram Bahadur Thapa "Badal" had been trying to wrest control of the party from the "establishment faction" controlled by Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" and, to a lesser extent, Baburam Bhattarai. The Maoist radicals had managed to form parallel committees in many districts in almost all of the party's affiliate organisations (student unions, trade unions and ethnic front).

The size of the new Maoist party, which is led by Mohan Baidya, is not insignificant. It drew around thirty percent of the parent party's central committee members and around a third of the Maoist members of the now dissolved Constituent Assembly. In addition, it also includes a large number of wartime cadres who feel abandoned by the parent party and has managed to attract popular support in Rolpa and other districts that were rebel strongholds during the conflict.

The grievances towards the original Maoist party and its leadership are diverse. To a great extent, they are ideological. The 12-point agreement between the Maoists and the parliamentary parties committed the rebels to join democratic politics, which they did after the popular movement of 2006 that toppled the monarchy. When the agreement was signed, senior leaders like Mohan Baidya "Kiran" and C.P. Gajurel were in prison in India. After they were released and returned to Nepal, they made it known that they were skeptical about the decision to enter mainstream politics. Within the party, Baidya represented the section that was dubbed "hardliners" by the popular press. He had argued that the rebels should not be too eager to implement the commitments made in the peace agreements; rather, they should maintain a tactical approach to the entire peace process. In his view, the game of multi-party politics would gradually corrupt the Maoists and rob them of their

revolutionary edge. Long-term alliance between the Maoists and the older parliamentary parties was impossible given their irreconcilable ideologies. The other parties would in no circumstances agree to promulgate a constitution that was acceptable to the Maoists. Now that the monarchy had been overthrown, the party had to focus their struggle against the parliamentary parties.

These views were in contrast to the line represented by Baburam Bhattarai, who had for years advocated an alliance with the parliamentary parties against the monarchy. He believed that once the Maoists gained control over the state, they had to allow greater political freedom than had existed in the communist regimes of the twentieth century. Now, Bhattarai argued that the peace process should not be viewed merely from a tactical angle. Rather than breaking the peace agreement at the first opportunity, the Maoists should recognise the remarkable political changes brought about by the People's War and the 2006 People's Movement. The monarchy had been abolished and the country declared a secular state, shaking the very foundations of Hindu chauvinism, upper-caste hegemony and feudalism. The Constituent Assembly was engaged in negotiations over how best to emancipate Nepal's oppressed castes and ethnic groups. It was necessary to draft a constitution that would safeguard and institutionalise these gains for the long term. The remnants of feudalism would gradually be eroded through land reform and other measures. Nepal would see steady economic growth and eventually become liberated from the chains of dependency. But the nation would only move in this direction if the Maoists continued to work within the democratic framework and abide by the peace agreements.

Baidya and Bhattarai both appealed to Prachanda to uphold their respective positions as the party's official line. The chairman agreed with Bhattarai that the Maoists could not immediately launch an insurrection and capture state power. The state institutions in Kathmandu remained too powerful for them to take over by force, the party lacked the mass support required for an urban insurrection, and major foreign powers would not accept a one-party Maoist state. Yet, Prachanda could not afford to alienate Baidya and his supporters. After all, they had been loyal to him since the days before Bhattarai had even joined the party. Moreover, during his stint as finance minister, Bhattarai had gained a reputation as a competent and reliable politician and become popular even among the bourgeois classes that were otherwise ill-disposed towards the Maoists. Bhattarai was also trying hard to establish his own faction of loyalists within the party. The chairman felt it was necessary to retain Baidya's support to ensure that Bhattarai did not gain too much power.

Still on the Path to Revolution

Prachanda's chief strategy was to try and convince Baidya and his supporters that the party was still on the revolutionary path. He argued that a long period of preparatory work was necessary before the Maoists could seize state power. The great Lenin himself was able to lead a successful insurrection only after 25 years of peaceful struggle. Addressing PLA commanders in 2008, Prachanda said, "Yesterday, war meant holding a machine gun and

killing or being killed by our enemies. Today war means sitting with our enemies at the same table and chatting over cups of tea. Although the war looks different now, its essence is the same." On occasion, the chairman even argued that a violent insurrection might not be necessary after all; the Maoists could gain total control over the state if they won a substantial majority in subsequent elections.

In reality Prachanda recognised the necessity of completing the peace process and drafting a Constitution. As he became increasingly embroiled in negotiations with the other parliamentary parties, it became difficult to maintain the fiction that he was committed to the path of revolution. The party's cadres now had little work to do. They did not have to scour far-flung villages and convince people to join their cause as they had done during the war. Their leadership was no longer concerned with expanding the party's organisation or staging strikes or demonstrations. The cadres watched their leaders in Kathmandu from a distance. It seemed to many of them that the party was irrevocably sinking into parliamentarism. Nepali politics had become a matter for influential coterie of leaders negotiating behind closed doors. They felt that their leaders were offering too many concessions to the parliamentary parties during the peace process.

For instance, in November 2011, Prachanda and Bhattarai reached an agreement with the other parliamentary parties that finally decided on the future of the Maoist combatants who had been confined to cantonments since the end of the war. According to the agreement, out of the 19,602 combatants still in cantonments, a maximum of 6,500 were to be recruited into a newly formed directorate of the Nepal Army. Compromising on their initial position that their combatants should be recruited into the national army en bloc, the Maoists agreed that potential recruits would have to fulfill the "standard norms" of the army with regards to education, age and marital status. It was clear that most combatants would not meet these criteria, in particular the education requirements. As a result, only 1,451 former combatants were recruited in the end. Those who were ineligible or didn't wish to join were offered alternatives such as further education and vocational training. But almost all of them regarded this offer as an insult, and opted for the cash packages ranging from Rs 500,000 to Rs 800,000 before leaving cantonments to re-enter civilian life.

This agreement caused much discontent within party ranks. According to the stringent terms on offer, most combatants would not be eligible to join the Nepal army. Only a few Maoists were to be given officer-level positions. Many of them thought that the compensation packages they were meant to receive were insufficient. They also accused their commanders and political leaders of embezzling funds that the state had allocated for their upkeep. On the night of April 10, 2012, fights broke out between aggrieved combatants and commanders who remained loyal to Prachanda. At the Maoist chairman's behest, the government sent in the Nepal army to the cantonments to prevent further violence. For many former rebels, this was the ultimate betrayal: their own chairman had ordered the army that had until recently been their enemy to intervene in the Maoists' internal disputes.

A New Maoist party

By this time, the culture of collectivism and self-sacrifice that the Maoists had fostered during the war had largely crumbled away. Many Maoist cadres felt that their leadership had used them to come to power and was now abandoning them. Combatants regularly complained that they had sacrificed their youth for the Maoist cause but had received nothing in return. They had believed their leaders when they urged them to leave schools that provided useless “bourgeois education”. Now, left without a cause to fight for, and forced to return to normal life, their lack of education placed them at a big disadvantage. A former Maoist combatant told the journalist Kiran Pun, “Earlier, the PLA was united by emotion, ideology and organisation. But none of that exists any longer. Thankfully, they have not raised arms [against their leaders] so far.” A large number of disgruntled ex-combatants (though not a majority) have joined the new Maoist party.

For Mohan Baidya and other senior Maoists still committed to revolution, the disbandment of the PLA was only one in a series of betrayals by Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai. They also accused the duo of surrendering to Indian expansionism. In their view, the trade agreement that Bhattarai signed with the Indian government soon after he became prime minister in August 2011 was yet another “unequal treaty” that compromised Nepal’s interests. They were ambivalent about the party’s support to ethnic movements. In recent years, the establishment faction of the Maoist party had allied with political groups representing historically marginalised groups such as Madhesis and Janajatis. Together, they had been advocating a federal system for Nepal that reflected ethnic claims. In their pursuit of federalism, Baidya and the other Maoist radicals argued, the party had succumbed to “imperial and expansionist” pressures and come to privilege identity claims over class struggle. Then, the Constituent Assembly that was elected in 2008 was dissolved in May 2012, after the parties could not reach an agreement regarding its contents. For Baidya and his supporters, this was proof that the Maoists could not coexist within a democratic system with parties such as the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML. Further, the dominant section of the party had grown too attached to the spoils of government and had exploited their newfound power to benefit themselves and their cronies. In short, Prachanda and Bhattarai were “ideological opportunists, rightist-revisionist liquidationists and national and class traitors.”

Since the party split, the leaders of the new Maoist party, which is officially called the Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist, have tried to consolidate their party’s strength. Their political line, as formulated at their recently concluded convention, is to build on the “foundations laid by the decade long people’s war” and launch a “people’s revolt” to capture state power. Some of the more radical leaders such as Netra Bikram Chand “Biplab” had argued that the party should go back to waging People’s War from rural areas. Kiran and others, however, argued against this. They recognised that, embittered as they are, the former Maoist combatants are too exhausted to plunge back into more violence. Moreover, their leaders are now well-known public figures; they cannot simply go underground and

operate incognito as they had done in the mid-1990s.

But launching even a “people’s revolt” – meaning an urban insurrection – is a task that is difficult, some might say even impossible. The state security forces are far more powerful than the Maoist radicals. They also lack public support. Very few people are willing to come out on the streets to even protest on their behalf.

Thus the splinter Maoist party has no choice but to continue operating in the existing system. Within this political framework, however, they are isolated and marginal players. They are not invited to any of the negotiations between the major political parties. They have refused to even compete for positions in government. They did try to form a tactical alliance with the Nepali Congress and UML to bring down the Baburam Bhattarai government. But these parliamentary parties were aware of Baidya’s eventual intention and did not trust him. The radical Maoists even appealed to former royalists on the basis of their common “nationalist” sentiments. But right-wing monarchists have more or less lost their political relevance, and in any case, the social gulf between them and the Maoists is too wide to create any meaningful alliance. Baidya also tried to cultivate Madhesi and Janajati groups. But the leaders of these groups reject the notion that class should take precedence over identity claims, and they prefer working with Prachanda and Bhattarai.

Although the new Maoist party has tried to organise former Maoist combatants into a militant wing, they lack the resources needed for its upkeep; the party had refused to participate in government and strike lucrative deals with powerful business interests. Anecdotal evidence indicates that one of the chief tasks of the new party these days is to collect funds from business houses in Kathmandu. It is possible that there will be an increase in localised instances of violence: cadres from the Baidya group may seek to intimidate, extort money and seize the property of those they regard as their class enemies.

The establishment party is incomparably more powerful than the dissidents. Prachanda has criticised them as “ideological dogmatists with a mechanical [and] narrow interpretation of objective reality; leftist liquidationists... with petty bourgeois impatience.” However, the party chairman is also worried that the split has weakened the party’s electoral prospects. Those close to him suggest that he is trying to woo back Mohan Baidya and others to the party fold. This may not be impossible. Unable to go back to war and unable to increase their power in any other way, some members of the new party may decide that it is in their best interest to return to their original party. Baidya himself, although very firm in his ideology, has historically shared deep personal bonds with Prachanda and this might make him sympathetic to the chairman’s overtures.

Entrenched Radicalism

While the prospects of the radical Maoist party do not currently look bright, it is important to recognise that they represent tendencies with deep roots in Nepali society. Nepal’s communist movement has gone through uncountable splits over the past sixty years. Every

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time one communist group has made compromises with the governing structure, another radical one has arisen, claiming to be the rightful representatives of the downtrodden and denouncing others as traitors and renegades. Frustrated with the perpetually dysfunctional politics and limited avenues for advancement in their lives, substantial numbers of people have historically responded to the call of radical communists. The use of violence too has a strong appeal within Nepali society. Whatever the fate of the new Maoist party, which claims to be the heirs of the revolutionary tradition, it is clear that the discontents it represents are here to stay.