

INDIA MUST NUANCE ITS POLICY IN NEPAL

by Prashant Jha [Mail Today 30 Dec 09]

At a mass rally to announce their fourth phase of protests against the President and the present government a week ago, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda' was unusually blunt about the roots of the present impasse in Nepal.

On May 4 when resigning as Prime Minister after the President overturned his decision to sack the then army chief General Rookmangud Katwal, in what the Maoists term as an 'unconstitutional' move, Prachanda had hinted at the role of 'foreign lords'. Last week, he declared it was pointless to talk to other parties like the Nepali Congress or Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) as they were all 'puppets' and 'remote-controlled' by India, and that he would rather talk to the 'master' directly. Prachanda also cited Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor's reported opposition to integration of former Maoist combatants in the Nepal Army as proof of the India's 'naked interference'. Prachanda's speech, which has led to widespread controversy, comes at a time when the political, peace, and constitutional process in Nepal is stuck. The country continues to have two armies, with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in UN-monitored cantonments — no progress has been made on their integration into security forces or rehabilitation.

The constitution time-table has been amended for the eighth time and the chances of a new statute by May 28, 2010 are unlikely, which can give rise to a vacuum. With Maoists protests escalating and security forces asserting authority, confrontation is in the air. At its core, the issue is about balance of power and agenda. The Maoists are stronger than even the two main parties, NC & UML.

The former rebels have used their three years in over-ground politics to expand through front organisations across urban sectors — students, university teachers, government servants, and manufacturing and service sector employees. Their core mass base, which includes a substantial segment of hill and Tarai Dalits, marginalised ethnic communities, landless and workers, and the lower middle class, remains intact.

Maoists

In the last seven months since quitting the government, the Maoists have held at least half-a-dozen mass rallies in the capital alone, besides organising training for cadre across the country. They have used democratic legitimacy and the threat of coercion to penetrate financially lucrative sectors at the local level, for instance constructions and licenses — making it perhaps the richest party in Nepal taking care of thousands of full-time workers. On top of this, the Maoists also have a 19,000 strong PLA, and the Young Communist League, a paramilitary structure.

With this kind of base and muscle, the former rebels do not intend to become just another liberal democratic, or even an Indian CPI (M) type mainstream Left party. The Maoists are committed to a programme of radical state restructuring, which would include federalism where ethnicity has a prominent basis; 'first rights' to local communities regarding natural resources; land reform; a revised taxation policy to be enforced strictly; an 'equal' relationship with India; an executive Presidency at the centre; 'democratisation' of the Nepal Army through integration of former PLA combatants and firmer civilian control; and eventually restricted multiparty political competition where 'anti-imperialist and anti-feudal' parties would not be allowed to operate. The party machinery would play an important role in assisting the state in expanding its penetration.

While some leaders believe this can be achieved through peaceful mass politics and electoral politics, other dogmatists seem to emphasise that an urban insurrection is the only way.

For now, Maoists have adopted the route of mass politics, but with degrees of coercion when necessary. Maoist energy and radicalism is one side of the picture, the inertia and inability of the other parties to break from their conservative impulses is the other.

The Nepali Congress and UML party structures do not reflect either the generational transformation or the assertion of the marginalised communities that has taken place over the past decade in Nepali society. The entire top brass of these parties has been a part of the discredited Kathmandu politics of the 1990s.

Both parties have done little to deliver tangible benefits to their own constituencies while in power, or utilise the democratic space and exploit ground level contradictions to battle with the Maoists. Instead, NC's second ranking leaders are embroiled in a battle to decide who would succeed Girija Prasad Koirala.

The UML is locked into a personal positional feud between party Chairman Jhala Nath Khanal, Prime Minister Madhav Nepal, and strongman K P Oli and an ideological battle about whether the party should continue with its present right-ward drift or align with the Maoists.

The 'mainstream' outfits are perceived as elite hill Hindu caste- led parties. And their reluctance to embrace federalism or even active affirmative action policies wins them brownie points with established Kathmandu interests but loses them further support in the countryside.

This utter weakness of Nepal's 'democratic' political class and their incapacity to reform forces them to depend and call out to India externally and the Nepal Army internally for political support to check the Maoists.

New Delhi

New Delhi has its own reasons to suspect the Maoists. The Maoist attempt to internally refashion the Nepali state; its ground strength which made it less pliable than other Nepali regimes to Delhi; the warmth with China while Prachanda was PM; and the move to 'control' the Nepal Army by sacking its chief against Indian advice embittered India- Maoist ties.

India played an active role in cobbling together a discredited coalition of 22 parties after Prachanda resigned, and Delhi's support has sustained the Madhav Nepal government. While engaging with the Maoists sporadically, India's position has got tougher.

It feels that till Maoists engage in a course correction — settle PLA question without hampering the Nepal Army's structure, disband YCL, renounce violence, act like a responsible opposition, return seized property, give certain minimum guarantees on the bilateral relationship — the former rebels cannot be trusted and have to be kept out.

Prachanda's call for dialogue to Delhi cannot be reciprocated officially by India for obvious reasons. But instead of seeing this as yet another proof of Maoist 'anti- Indianism', Delhi should use the opportunity to review its policy, which is uncannily like George Bush's tendency to see things in black or white. The sum total of India's approach, with M K Narayanan calling the shots, seems to be, "Maoists are bad guys. They are not for us and so they are against us."

Responsibility

By attempting to keep the country's most powerful political party out of the power equation, India is neither helping the cause of democracy in Nepal, nor the democratic transformation of the Maoists itself. It is only strengthening far Left and the far Right elements of Nepali polity. The dogmatic line within the Maoists has got stronger and is telling its cadre they have little choice but to go for a violent insurrection. The right wing elements of the military and established parties who never wanted the peace accord hope to win Indian support for a security crackdown. A prolonged stalemate will mean no constitution; a possible right wing takeover, fueling an ultra Left urban unrest and violent revolt; ethnic warlords gaining ground; and a weak state security apparatus fire-fighting to preserve the state.

The onus lies on the Maoists to shed their unilateralism, dogma and reassure other parties of their commitment to non-violent pluralistic democracy.

Other parties need to feel more secure, which can happen if they work harder on political mobilisation. But India has a role. Instead of acting in a completely partisan manner, and cornering the Maoists, it has to nurture the Nepali consensus back on track by using its leverage on all sides constructively and encouraging the moderates.

If Delhi fails to do so, it will have to bear its share of the responsibility for aborting the process it had initiated by getting the parties and Maoists together, and pushing Nepal back to a conflict.

The writer is a Nepalese journalist based in Kathmandu