

Nepal: Maoists back at the helm

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The Maoists are leading government again, but will have to choose between the interests of the ruling establishment, of which they are now a part, and the millions whom they have inspired.

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Nepal's Constituent Assembly elected Baburam Bhattarai, vice-chairman of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), as prime minister yesterday. He is the country's fourth prime minister since it was declared a republic in 2008.

In a straight majority, Bhattarai secured 340 votes out of 575 MPs who voted, while his only rival, Nepali Congress vice-president and parliamentary party leader, Ram Chandra Poudel, won 235 votes. Crucially, Bhattarai's victory was assured when the UDMF (United Democratic Madhesi Front), a coalition of five parties with ethnic roots in the southern plains bordering India, announced its support for the Maoists.

The parties that make up the UDMF have been involved in their own movement against the discrimination of Madhesi people within Nepal. Their politics are mixed but in general are more akin to the mainstream neoliberal parties than to the Maoists' vision of socialism. By leading government in an alliance with the mainstream UDMF, the Maoists can hardly escape accepting mainstream economic priorities.

Coalition and consensus

The UDMF and the Maoists agreed a four-point deal, which includes integrating 7,000 former Maoist combatants into various security agencies, including the army, but details would be dealt with through the formation of a high-level political mechanism involving all parties, according to Bhattarai.

The integration and rehabilitation of the Maoists' army has been the main source of the impasse between the parties since the Maoists came into the mainstream in 2006. The appointment of Bhattarai is seen as easing these tensions because Bhattarai has been arguing for a tactical shift within the party – from protracted people's war to peaceful politics – since 2005, when the Maoists signed a 12-point agreement with the parties. The 12-point agreement, in part facilitated by India, became part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the war.

Other details of the deal with the UDMF include making the army more inclusive, and dropping the court cases against activists for alleged crimes committed during the Maoist movement, Madhes movement and other movements for indigenous rights. Human rights groups have objected to the amnesty, arguing that it goes against the peace process and international humanitarian law.

The UDMF has secured 11 portfolios in the Cabinet out of 26, including the key positions of deputy prime minister and home minister. Bhattarai admitted that being prime minister of a majority coalition was not his choice, and preferred to be leading a government based on consensus. He said he would make efforts to ensure the other main parties, Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) or UML, are involved in the government.

Nepali Congress and UML have dominated Nepali politics since the 1990 democratic revolution and are respectively the second and third largest parties in the Constituent Assembly. But currently they plan to play a 'strong and watchful' role in opposition, have refused to join government on any condition, and object to the deal between the Maoists and the UDMF.

In the run-up to the election the Maoists also agreed to return property seized by the party during the war – a longstanding demand of the other parties – and assured India of their commitment to the peace process and drafting a new constitution. Man Mohan Singh, India's prime minister, congratulated Bhattarai on his appointment.

Previously Bhattarai was finance minister in the first Maoist government led by chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal following Constituent Assembly elections in 2008, in which the Maoists emerged as the largest party, with 236 seats out of the 601-member parliament. Dahal resigned as prime minister after 9 months citing the lack of civilian supremacy over the army.

Bhattarai has said his first priority was the peace process, and second to draft the new constitution, the deadline for which is 31st August. The Maoists have proposed extending the deadline for another six months. He also said he would focus on addressing poverty, unemployment and corruption, but urged people to understand that this could not be accomplished immediately.

High hopes

In the past Bhattarai was praised by the private sector for his expertise as finance minister and in particular for increasing revenue collection. Despite initial apprehensions about the Maoists' politics, business leaders have not lost hope that Bhattarai will be an ally in curbing 'militant trade unionism' and resolving outstanding pay disputes between workers and employers.

But the Maoists were brought to power in 2008, in part on the basis of their trade union activity – securing increased wages and stable contracts – and because the millions who voted for them believed they could bring about fundamental social and economic change. The Maoists promised a 'New Nepal' and expectations amongst the vast majority are still high.

In recent interviews Bhattarai has insisted the Maoists have not abandoned the revolution, and that their participation in government is tactical – a transitional phase before the realisation of socialism in the future. Unfortunately, the Maoists will not be able to deliver on their promises as long as they remain in a consensus-based government or coalition with the mainstream, when the mainstream has never been capable of delivering for the poorest, and has its interests in the status quo.

The Maoists' strategy of consensus is a product of their view that Nepal is not ripe for socialism, due to its underdevelopment. The problem here is that this has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Precisely by becoming entangled in the politics of the mainstream (and the finer points of constitution-building and negotiating moderate reforms), the Maoists have effectively demobilised the movement over the last few years. Calling off the general strike last year amidst pressure from businesses and NGOs, and appealing to workers not to strike over wages, are notable examples.

There are deep contradictions between the expectations of the vast majority and the moderation and conservatism of the ruling establishment. The Maoists will find it very hard not to be pulled by the establishment they are participating in, and therefore to concretely challenge dominant neoliberal dogmas from this relatively weak parliamentary position.

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P.S.

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