

Maoist Victory in Nepal - A Himalayan Surprise

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Nepalese left stuns the world yet again. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M), US designated terrorist outfit, won a landslide victory in April 9 general elections. In a complex electoral process for 601 seats, Maoists have bagged 112 out of 240 first-past-the-post seats at the time of filing this report. With 30 percent of votes, they are likely to get big chunk of 335 seats to be decided on proportional representation basis. Another 26 seats are reserved for minorities.

Last time, it was the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) that surprised the world when it emerged as the largest party in 1994 elections at a time when high on the heel of Soviet demise, Francis Fukuyama was triumphantly announcing the 'end of history'. It was kind of Chile in Asia. For the first time in Asia, communists were voted to power at national level. The UML victory, headline material for a while, was soon forgotten since global focus was shifting to Middle East.

While the Maoists landslide might have surprised even themselves---media predicting a distant third place for them---a left victory in Nepal, however, should not surprise anyone acquainted with this Himalayan state.

The communists here had always been at the forefront of democratic struggle. Formed in 1949, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) went through all the twists and turns of international communist movement. It split. It re-united. Only to split again. It was a unification of CPN (ML) and CPN (Marxist) led to CPN (UML-Unified Marxist Leninist) in 1991 while there was a split in Samyukta Jana Morcha Nepal (SJMN) in late 1993 fathered CPN (Maoists). At the time of split, SJMN was third largest party in the parliament with nine MPs.

After its birth, CPN (Maoist) headed for jungles while UML reached the echelons of power in 1994.

Poverty and feudalism

The success of communist ideas in Nepal underlines the crisis facing this impoverished land of 25 million, almost 70 percent earning two US dollars a day. With an annual national income of just US\$241 per head, Nepal is the world's 12th poorest country.

Despite some democratic reforms paving the way for multiparty elections in 1990, Nepal until now was a classic example of a feudal state ruled by a powerful monarch supported by the upper-caste Hindu elite. The masses have been looking to the communists to rid them of exploitation by the monarchy, its lackeys and state apparatus, because the communists of various hues were always in the forefront of the struggle for democracy and change.

Hence UML was voted by the electorate to power in 1994. But the communist government not only failed to deliver the land reforms it had promised, it also disillusioned its cadres. An isolated UML government was easily removed by the monarch in August 1995.

Meanwhile, the CPN-M provided the action the Nepali masses were perhaps seeking. As the UML was losing its electoral base in the towns, the Maoists were gaining ground on the countryside. An uprising launched in 1996, had soon assumed the control of almost 70 percent of the countryside.

One reason for the rapid Maoist control of Nepal's territory could be that the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) was poorly armed at the time the guerrilla struggle was launched. However, it was Maoists radical ideas on land reform and negation of the caste system that won them support. They began running the districts under their control through people's committees and implemented land reforms, besides setting up "people's courts".

Human Rights Watch, however, was critical of these courts: "As part of its 'people's war', [the CPN-M has] deliberately targeted and killed civilians suspected as informers. Most of the victims are members of opposition political parties, persons suspected of having informed against them, and persons who oppose them in any other way."

The Nepalese government became ruthless too and in an ensuing conflict, 13000 lives were lost. Meantime, several attempts at peace talks between the government and the Maoists proved unsuccessful. The first peace talks, which began on August 30, 2001, broke down on November 23 that year. On January 29, 2003, the government and the Maoists announced a second ceasefire, but the talks soon reached an impasse over a justified Maoist demand for a constituent assembly, and the ceasefire ended on August 27.

Mass democratic uprising

In Feb, 2005, Kathmandu witnessed another government dismissal - it was 14th government change in as many years. However, the situation took a dramatic turn in April 2006 when a mass democracy movement caught hold of Nepal. Unlike US-sponsored Purple/ Cedar/ Velvet revolutions, the Nepalese revolution was---to quote Tariq Ali--- no 'Ra Ra Revolution'.

A two-hundred year-old monarchy was forced by a general strike and mass uprising to give up its hold over Nepal. Fresh elections for the future republic were agreed under a coalition government.

Meantime, the Maoists' growth in tiny Nepal was making giants of the world nervous. Nepal, serving as a buffer zone between India and China, has been strategically very important. Landlocked Nepal, has been in the sphere of Indian influence and is also desperately in need of Indian support and cooperation.

Traditionally, India and Britain supported the Nepalese monarchy, but, of late, the US has increasingly been extending its support too. The Bush administration put the CPN-M on its list of terrorist organisations on October 31, 2003, and also signed a five-year agreement "for co-operation in fighting terrorism and preventing possible terror attacks" with Nepal in 2002.

Washington may have concerns about the impact of instability in Nepal on the Indian subcontinent as a whole. But the major reason for the growing US military ties with Nepal was the country's strategic position.

Washington has a series of military arrangements with countries bordering China, stretching from

its new bases in the Central Asian republics through South-East Asia to its formal allies in north-east Asia: Japan and South Korea. Therefore, the United States became a major provider of military assistance to Nepal, allocating over \$29 million in grants to Nepal to pay for US weapons, services and training from October 2001 to October 2004.

US military assistance to Nepal increased dramatically after 2001 and the justification offered was interesting: "FMF in Nepal will help its government cope with a brutal insurgency, restore enough stability to permit elections, and prevent the countryside from becoming a haven for al Qaeda and other terrorist groups." World's only Hindu state becoming a haven for Muslim al-Qaeda!

Regardless of what Uncle Sam propagates, now Nepal will be a serious headache if it becomes a Venezuela in Asia. Though Maoists uphold Stalin's bankrupt two-stage theory yet the dynamics of international situation may force them to go even beyond Venezuela. Time to heed Saint Just's stern warning : 'Those who make half revolution dig their own graves'.

P.S.

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