

# Prachanda, rebel leader, became Prime Minister of Nepal

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On August 16, 2008, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, was elected Prime Minister of Nepal by a thumping majority vote of the Constituent Assembly. On May 28, this Assembly, freshly elected in April, had solemnly abolished monarchy and created the Federal Republic of Nepal, making the former king Gyanendra, heir of the Shah dynasty, a simple citizen. In a few months, the representatives of the people have written memorable pages in the history of this small Himalayan country, and put an end to an eight-year conflict. What an accomplishment for Prachanda, who, in 1996, had launched the so-called Maoist rebellion against the royal authority and corruption, an adventure worthy of the greatest annals of Communism!

Born in 1954, the future rebel leader grew up in the countryside, became an agriculture graduate and was a school science teacher when he went underground and started his rebellion against the royal system and the political parties caught in petty quarrels, which only increased the poverty of the country. Together with Baburam Bhattarai, a member of the intellectual elite, he created a dissident branch of the Communist Party, CPN(M), Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In February 1996, CPN(M) launched a People's war against the royal power. This declaration of war, at that time, was not taken very seriously in national and international intellectual circles. However, Prachanda and his team could rely on an impressive organisation and a solid base in the poorest mountainous regions of West, first, and then of Central and Eastern Nepal. Year after year, the royal army, despite the open support of the American State, could not contain the military success of the rebel troops which continuously grew in number. As a matter of fact, the army, with the exception of some fanatic battalions and certain police units, did not seem very eager to fight.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001, in circumstances that still remain mysterious, King Birendra and all his family members were butchered in the very heart of the royal palace in Kathmandu, renewing the bloodiest traditions of the past; the royal power, already weakened and now tainted with misery and murder, ended up on the shoulders of his brother Gyanendra. The new king, very unpopular, as is being said, because of his son Paras, violent and rake crown prince, was not able to face the insurrection. The United States, renewing the mistakes committed elsewhere at other times, was supporting king Gyanendra who installed an authoritative regime, repudiating both government and Assembly. During that time, the Maoist flags and the posters adorned with Prachanda's face were flourishing in the countryside. In 2002, the royal troops were barely holding a few big centres whereas the press, with no shame, was perpetuating the image of a still strong royal power, blackening the picture of the rebels referring to the darkest hours of the Shining Path in Peru or the Red Khmers in Cambodia.

In the field, nevertheless, from 2003 onwards, the popularity of the rebels kept growing. In the regions under their jurisdiction, while in Kathmandu one talks only of exactions and assassinations, one could see roads and shelters for the homeless being built, and one was politely negotiating with the local Maoist leaders. No long talks, but acts. Meetings always on time, always brief and efficient. In Kathmandu, in the very core of the government administration, officials were secretly working for Prachanda's Party, sometimes out of sincere dedication, and often, most probably, by sheer disgust of the shaky royal regime, slowly sinking in failure and corruption. The efficiency of the civil and

military secret organisation of Prachanda was becoming clear to everyone. Prachanda was keen to display additional talents, more rarely found among rebel leaders, except maybe Ho Chi Minh.

Indeed, in 2006, an agreement was settled with the political parties, in particular the Congress Party (centre right), managed by the old democrat Girija Prasad Koirala, and the unified Communist Party CPN(UML), who launched in April 2006 a non-violent campaign against the royal power. The rebels armies stayed in the background, sticking to the agreement and, in front of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators that included not only youngsters of all political breeds, but also house women and elders, the king had to renounce absolute power. The victory of the people allowed the formation of an interim government to which the rebels were associated after the signature of a Comprehensive Peace Accord in November 2006.

The elections for the Constituent Assembly were delayed by the numerous tergiversations of the political parties, who were trying to garner the political benefit of the April Movement of 2006. However, when the elections finally took place in 2008, the majority of votes fell on the candidates presented by Prachanda and his Party. Prachanda, however, had to continue to demonstrate his negotiator's abilities, as the CPN(M) could not win absolute majority. He had to give up the post of President of Republic, and associate himself with the CPN(UML) and another party from Terai, the plain along the Indian border.

Today, definitely, Prachanda ranks among the great characters of the Communist epic. Within a few years, the events unfolded more and more rapidly. Few observers had given him a chance, none surely had perceived over the last decade the in-depth changes in the Nepalese society. This probably means that the same observers, today, are poorly qualified to give their opinion, and it is not without a certain amusement that we read their articles, full of reservations, easy criticism, warnings and erroneous statements. Dressed in a superior tone, it is indeed the time to give lectures...

Fortunately, Prachanda never waited for the approval neither of the press nor of the international think tanks. Numerous challenges are in front of him. The economic situation of the country is disastrous and the terms of the Peace Accord have to be implemented, in the context of a difficult international situation, between two huge neighbours, India and China, who constantly play their own game only. For all these challenges, Prachanda can count on a wide and enthusiastic popular support, on the base militants of the Party, and on a managing team trained by years of common work, and, first of all, Baburam Bhattarai, today the Minister of Finances.

As for us, humble visitors in this extraordinary land, Himalayan valleys squeezed between the plains of India and the highlands of Tibet, maybe we should pay homage to all victims from all sides, and just join the tremendous hope of the population of Nepal. In the painful history of Communism, so much discredited during the last twenty years as a dusty antiquity, here is a country with men and women determined to build a novel ideal of society, and who in addition accept to negotiate and share success. Rather than trying to analyze, which others will do later on, maybe we should just express our admiration. Here are villagers from the lost mountains of the Himalayas, villagers on which, not so long ago, nobody was betting a cent in front of the royal power supported by the powerful America, villagers who had no hospitals, no schools, nothing even to eat, those villagers have given us a magnificent lesson. A lesson of courage, courage to fight with weapons in hands, and the courage, even greater, to drop the weapons when the victory was in sight. What a lesson indeed! Yes, it might be possible after all, a society reviving the ideals of the Commune? This is one message sent today to the whole world from the mountains of the Himalayas.