

The Young Communist League of Nepal: The revolutionary front in question

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Within a few months, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), CPN(M), has completely changed its status. Managed by a charismatic and energetic leader, Prachanda, assisted by a talented team, the rebel revolutionary party, in 2006, was waging war against the royal system, which at that time was barely an archaic residual of absolute power, at the edge of collapse and military defeat despite the help of the United States. The population of the country, then at the brink of ruin, was, in addition, morally exhausted by almost ten years of a tense conflict. In April 2006, however, suddenly, astounding events started unfolding, one after the other. In April 2006, indeed, while the troops of the CPN(M) respected a timely truce, the main political parties, including the Nepal Congress NC, of center right, and the United Communist Party CPN(UML), of centre left, launched a peaceful movement. King Gyanendra, facing huge demonstrations, had to give up absolute power. Shortly afterwards, a peace treaty was signed with the CPN(M), the weapons were stored under the control of the United Nations, and the CPN(M) joined the government. A few months later, when the elections for the Constituent Assembly took place in April 2008, the CPN(M) gathered the majority of votes. After the monarchy was abolished by the Assembly, Prachanda, under his real name Pushpa Kamal Dahal, became Prime Minister in August 2008 and formed a government together with CPN(UML) and another party from the Terai, the plain bordering India in the South of Nepal.

Quite an achievement indeed! Prime Minister Dahal, his brilliant partner Baburam Bhattarai now Finance Minister and other representatives of his government are now welcome with all due honours in international forums, even in the United States. The CPN(M), a few months ago just a vague terrorist organisation threatening a rightful and respectable royal power, according to the one-sided reports despatched by the local press and also the international representations, now has become very acceptable company.

Fortunately, for all the grumpy minds reluctant to acknowledge the fantastic epic of Prachanda and his supporters, there remains, to express bitterness and criticisms, the Young Communist League or YCL [1]. The CPN(M) of Prachanda, indeed, since the beginning of rebellion in 1996, relied on a turbulent youth wing, but it is mainly after 2007 that YCL became a hot topic, both in the newspapers and in the daily life of Nepal. While most revolutionary endeavours, in Europe, Russia or China, have developed such youth groups, in Nepal, it quickly became clear that YCL was due to play a specific role.

The importance taken by YCL, first, reflects the adaptation of the rebels to the changes required by the military truce and the involvement of their leadership in government offices. For the leaders of CPN(M), YCL is the pillar which guarantees, for its root militants, the fundamental commitments of the party to the core moulding of a new Nepalese society, and, simultaneously, it is an extremist wing from which one can claim to be independent. YCL, thus, after 2007 and especially during the elections in 2008, is a total trustworthy body, on which one can rely for the advancement of the communist program, and a more or less free organisation whose ways can be regretted, when necessary, in order not to have to take any responsibility. While the CPN(M) starts to be accepted as a governing party, willy-nilly, YCL is there to focus the rancour of the other political parties which have some difficulty in swallowing their defeat in the elections of April 2008.

It is not very difficult to disfigure YCL as an extremist paramilitary organisation hosting, in addition to the party youth, former cadres of the rebel army now on hold, and to blame YCL for all evils. The political parties do not hesitate; they accuse YCL to have terrorised the population in the villages and to have manipulated the results of the elections, which by the way is quite convenient to avoid addressing the real causes of the poor performances of the CPN(UML) and NC parties in 2008. The media, largely controlled by these two parties, since 2007, almost daily, dwell on the exactions committed by YCL. Arbitrary arrests, political leaders beaten up in public, forced labour, violations of fundamental rights, and other horrors, accusations most certainly not always without grounds.

Thus, the interim Prime Minister, Girija Koirala, the old NC leader, a few months ago, could talk about the Young Criminal League, a good joke spread by all newspapers. The very same newspapers, however, remained silent on the sceptical reactions of the common folk. That day, indeed, in response to the supposedly spiritual idea of Koirala, I heard that NC was the acronym of Nepal Crooks. This offers quite a symbolic example of the tremendous rift between the streets and the political parties through their press. Indeed, people did not, so stupidly, follow the gross manipulation about YCL. At local level, the YCL militants, in general, are well known, appreciated and encouraged in their actions.

During the summer of 2007, for example, YCL undertook numerous arrests of notorious gangsters, including the main leaders of the mafia related to the royal family and the political parties. While we could hear the horrified reactions of Koirala and the other leaders of NC, repeated by the poor international press under shock, the population was clapping. In Boudhanath, in the suburbs of Kathmandu, a mafia boss who, since more than ten years, in total impunity, was terrorising the local population with his gang of gorillas, was arrested in full daylight by a group of young guys, skinny and poor, but determined and sufficiently armed, and handed over to the police after a good beating. In the whole valley, people rejoiced while hearing the news; I literally saw people jumping up and down. In the name of Human Rights and beautiful democratic principles, the gangster was freed a few weeks later and Koirala could congratulate himself for having put Justice back in order. However, even the international organisations handling this liberation were uncomfortable. The disgusting culprit arrested by YCL was guilty to the bone and, even if the method could be argued, the population understood on which side was justice and right. The young peasants, supposedly agitated and uneducated, at the origin of this crisis were celebrated as heroes. It is then quite understandable that, in so many districts of the country, the CPN(M) candidates were elected with a comfortable majority.

At local level, in 2008, in any case, the achievements of YCL are far from calling indignation; rather, they deserve some admiration. In the suburbs of Kathmandu, YCL has organised night patrols, which lead to a dramatic reduction in criminal activities, which had been increasing since 2005. Now, again, it is possible to go out in the streets in the evening. I also witnessed YCL members giving back his scooter to a poor man. The scooter had been stolen a few hours before and the man was totally desperate because it was his only property. The young guys from YCL had gone looking for it and, thanks to their efficient network, they could locate it rapidly. YCL also works to find solutions for widows without earnings, abandoned children, they take care of health and accommodation problems, denounce abuses, and hunt injustice. Far from being self-appointed judges, they try to find compromises, negotiate solutions, and try to keep most people happy at local level. Even after the victorious elections and the appointment of their leaders to government positions, they can still be seen working without sparing their efforts, wearing the same dusty tennis shoes and the same torn old jackets. In short, reality is quite different from the scary articles inundating the newspapers.

Some other similarly respectable and more spectacular actions of YCL are not better treated in the media, or even totally ignored. For example, during the winter of 2007, YCL decided to clean up the

streets of Thamel, the tourist area of Kathmandu, where garbage had not been collected for weeks. Several YCL teams showed up one morning with small trucks and brooms. One could see these well organised young boys and girls, not smiling very much but quite efficient in their work, pick up the stinking mountains of garbage, sweep, wash and vanish without saying any word and without asking for anything. The shopkeepers, standing at their doors, looked over the scene with dark disapproving looks, telling to the tourists with a tone of despise "they are the Maoists of the Young Criminal League", and the tourists were shivering on the very word mentioning the terrible revolutionary legions. They did appreciate, however, the cleanup which made the area liveable again. It has to be pointed out that the Thamel shopkeepers, all more or less in the grips of the Manangi mafia and their related gangs, are untouchable because they are, supposedly, the pillar of the economic resources of the country. This remains to be demonstrated. The profits of the Thamel economy seem to be invested abroad. That the economy of the country benefits from this business park is a mere hypothesis and it is another more radical cleanup which could be attempted by YCL without any damage. Drugs, illegal business, prostitution, adoption trafficking... these are the real interests that YCL is putting at risk and this may explain the consistently negative press campaign.

Political parties, the mafia, the entire old order which is so keen to exploit the population of Nepal, have been quick to understand the situation. It is indeed YCL which is now handling the revolutionary action while the leaders are busy negotiating a peaceful transition. These very leaders, for the moment quiet in public, can only encourage the accomplishments of YCL, which are totally in agreement with the initial program of their rebellion. That a revolutionary agenda is being carried out using extremist wings is not new. The YCL of Nepal is often compared in the press with the Red Guards of Mao, which does not seem very relevant. Did the Red Guards maintain community-level social programs in the long term? The role that Mao gave to his Red Guards, during the Cultural Revolution, seems miles away from the daily work of YCL.

The use of violence is far from being a dogma in the Nepalese revolution, and the CPN(M), through his army or YCL, has used violence only in specific circumstances and, in many cases, in self defence. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to claim that the actions of YCL have only been virtuous and that abuses have not been committed. However, the events have to be evaluated with caution. The French Revolution also had its revolutionary militias. It is thanks to the "sans-culottes" that the Republic could be declared in 1792 and the Jacobin leaders used them permanently to promote the republican ideals. Memory kept only the dark side of the "sans-culottes", because of the rather rough rewriting of History after the Terror.

Whether or not they can be compared with historical precedents, YCL is playing an important and perfectly organised role for CPN(M). The chief of YCL, Ganesh Man Pun, is a former commissar of the revolutionary army and is closely associated with Prachanda. YCL is probably not acting very spontaneously but, rather, according to a well planned policy. More problematic than YCL itself, during the past three months, has been the multiplication of scuffles with other youth organisations: Tarun Dal for NC and Youth Force (or YF) for CPN(UML). These two parties, indeed, seeing the tremendous success obtained by CPN(M) thanks to YCL, have revived their youth groups, but they seem to have incorporated only the most vulgar aspects; they are just trying, it seems, to organise street gangs. One may wonder to which extremities the demoted parties, rather bad losers, are going to be drifting.

Today, YCL members themselves are wondering about their future. On the one hand, NC and CPN(UML) keep shrieking that YCL should be dismantled. On the other hand, one may wonder whether CPN(M) will not be tempted to silence over-lively forces that have become too cumbersome. While a liquidation of YCL appears unlikely, the organisation certainly will need restructuring to be able to support the government efficiently, a government which must be successful at all costs, as the leadership of CPN(M) must be fully aware. The Prime Minister and his team have to implement the

terms of the peace treaty, set up a new constitution and rebuild the country. YCL must contribute to these tasks and not hamper them with untimely initiatives. In a few months, we will know a little more on the role that will be assigned to YCL, divided into two or more organisations. What is sure, however, is that YCL, in one way or the other, will remain one spear-head of the revolutionary front in Nepal.

In any case, it would be rather narrow-minded to be satisfied with merely comparing the actions of YCL to examples from the past, examples that may not be necessarily fascinating. We tend to forget too often, in western circles, that Nepal and other parts of the Indian continent have been nurturing the oldest human civilisations. At the time when Merovingians, Saxons and other tribes did not have many activities other than mutual slaughtering, Nepal was already carrying the heritage of more than thousand years of art, literature or philosophy. Nepalese people are perfectly able, without any reference or guidance from western subprophets, of inventing a new revolution, with efficiency as well as subtlety.

Instead of fear or reprobation, it might be more relevant to express some encouragements for these devoted participants to the impressive Nepalese revolution, a revolution that can already display exemplary achievements. Many items, on the list of tasks that Prachanda and his party wrote down at the beginning of their action, have been implemented: the royal system is abolished, a new leftist government has been formed, the old leaders of the corrupt parties have been swept away after being crushed during the elections. The rebuilding of the country and the end of misery will be more difficult, but, without any doubt, these are grounds where YCL members have been actively involved, with determination and dedication. Rather than phrasing judgments or criticisms, we would be well inspired to observe and learn, and, maybe, in France for example, try to achieve the same, if we can.

Footnotes

[1] Harald Olav Skar, The Red Guard of Nepal, *Himal* magazine, October 2008.