

'We will not keep the country in crisis'

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Barsha Man Pun ('Ananta') of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) is a member of the Constituent Assembly as well as a member of the party's Central Secretariat. He was deputy commander of the People's Liberation Army during the decade-long war, and is still responsible for overseeing Maoist combatants in the seven major cantonments spread throughout the country. He recently spoke with Himal Southasian about the current political crisis in Nepal, the constitution-drafting process and the recently released controversial video of now acting Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'). The following is a translation from the original Nepali.

Many of the other parties are accusing the Maoists of having fired the army chief, Rukmangud Katawal, for political reasons rather than in an attempt to bolster civilian control over the military. How would you respond to this?

It is clear from the prime minister's resignation that we were not motivated by politics. After the cabinet decision was not implemented, after the president took the unconstitutional step [of telling General Katawal to remain in his position], the prime minister felt a moral obligation to resign. At that time, there were already two army chiefs, two power centres. The prime minister could have taken a stand and ordered his chief to work. If that had happened, there could have been bloodshed, revolt or even civil war. Such a stance would have proved the other parties right in saying that the Maoists were taking a political decision. Why did we not do that, and instead resigned from the government? The resignation makes it clear that the party was not motivated by politics. The firing of the army chief was absolutely to establish civilian supremacy. Because that was not allowed to happen, the party was ready to quit the government.

The Maoists have said that they will not allow a new government to form unless the President Ram Baran Yadav's decision is reversed, which the other parties do not seem likely to allow to happen. What is the Maoist strategy for ending this political crisis?

Let us first be clear on the fact that the president took an unconstitutional step. This has been accepted by intellectuals as well as by legal scholars. There is now a case before the court. Nowhere does the interim constitution give the president any rights; rather, it only gives him some duties. Therefore, the reversal of the cabinet's decision by the ceremonial president is unconstitutional. We will protest that in both the Parliament and the streets.

It is not that we will stop the whole government-formation process. If the other parties can show a majority, then let them form a government. But even if it is a majority government, it will not be a secure one. At this time, when the constitution is being impeded, when it is not clear who has executive power and how much, when civilian supremacy has yet to be established, the government will be fearful of the army and the president, and will be uncertain of its rights. We, on the other hand, had established 'people's democracy' and civilian supremacy. We formed a government in which the cabinet was powerful, and the prime minister had decisive executive power. The interim constitution itself has provisions for a ceremonial president who accepts the leadership of the prime minister and ratifies his decisions. A government that is not formed within these guidelines will have no moral authority. We are not saying that we will stop the other parties or not allow the formation

of a new government, or that we will keep the country in crisis.

You say the party will allow a majority government to form. But the Maoist Constituent Assembly members are now boycotting the parliamentary process, right?

Just 15 days earlier, the Nepali Congress was stopping all parliamentary business, just because Prachanda had asked the army chief for clarification on his actions [regarding recruitment by the army this past winter]. Right now, the constitution itself is being challenged. Now, after the government's decision was not implemented, after the ruling prime minister's step had been overturned, it is natural that we would protest. But even so, we are willing to hold discussions with other parties about how to move forward. But none of the other parties are willing to have discussions with us at the moment, saying that the Maoists are preventing work from happening. It seems they are going to go down the unconstitutional path, and that is a serious issue.

What role did foreign actors – such as India or the US – play in the crisis and the resignation of the prime minister?

We have already seen the role played by the foreign actors. Let us not name names, but the Nepali people, intellectuals and political leaders understand the interests of the various actors and the roles they have played. Actions have been taken by impeding on diplomatic limits and the rights of a sovereign state. We are fully opposed to that. Then again, this happens because Nepal's political parties work with the mentality that they will come to power by making foreigners happy. They lack a sense of commitment to the Nepali people.

If you are strong within your own house, nobody will be able to do anything to your house. What can we expect if our house is weak, if our leaders are weak and if their loyalties do not lie with the people? It is clear that they look only to be in power or extend their time in power. We are even more opposed to that. After all, all countries have their own interests. We are not overly worried about why others act or do not act for us. Rather, our concern lies in figuring out why we are weak. Why does the space exist for foreigners to play in our country? Who is responsible for allowing that to happen? Our neighbouring friends should understand that we are in transition, and should support us rather than interfering.

How do you see the role of the United Nations Mission to Nepal (UNMIN) in the country's future? UNMIN has a rather limited role in Nepal's peace process. Monitoring during the Constituent Assembly elections was one responsibility. Making sure both sides were sticking to agreements on the arms and armies is another task. They have no role beyond this. UNMIN's term lasts until July, and what is to happen after that rests with the new government that is to be formed. To bring the peace process to a logical end, we have a national special committee and a technical committee. UNMIN's job is to see whether work has gone forward within the modality created by these bodies – nothing more.

How do you think this crisis will affect the army-integration and peace processes?

It will have some effect, but we will not allow it to have a decisive impact. We had said a consensus government and consensus politics must be in place for two years until a constitution is drafted, while the peace process is ongoing. After the Constituent Assembly was formed, that was lost. It went towards using any means to form or fell governments. That is wrong. Writing the constitution must be our main target. Bringing the peace process to a logical end must be another target. To achieve that, parties can choose whether they wish to stay within or outside the government. From our side, the constitution must be written. It must represent all the peoples of the country – Madhesis, Dalits, Janajatis, women and various other minorities – and form a union that includes everybody. That is our emphasis.

Another significant factor to consider is that we have come from war and have signed an agreement

on integrating the two armies. So we will build the national army and new security wings. In fact, we will reconstruct the entire state. That is how we have moved forward. It is our main agenda. Even if we are in opposition, we will remain committed to these goals and keep working towards them. But if people keep eroding the interim constitution, do not work towards writing a constitution or are not true to the peace process, things will change. But this will not take place because of us.

In your view, will the constitution get written within the given timeframe?

In terms of time, we have quite a bit left. If you look at the process before this, we took suggestions from the people, processed their ideas and tabulated them. All of this is good. But to write the constitution, we have to create a suitable international environment, where we can get everybody's support. We must also take the peace process and integration forward in an appropriate manner. Related to this is the issue of whether the parties that go on to have power will be honest. A number of parties are geared towards not writing the constitution. When the constitution does get written, a number of comforts will be cut to which certain people are accustomed. The constitution will have no meaning for those in power – for the ruling class, society or group. In fact, it will make them weaker. We know that the constitution is more important for women than for men; and for Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis and Tharus, rather than for Pahadis [hillfolk]; and for the rural poor rather than for those in the urban centres. There are many people who desire a constitution, but a few powerful people who do not want it. We want an environment that will allow for the constitution to be written – this is the expectation and the need of the people.

With regard to the recently released video of the prime minister speaking at the Shaktikhor Cantonment, do you think it will reduce the people's trust in him and the party?

We are a party that has come in from revolt. When it seemed that the Constituent Assembly was not going to be formed, we had no other options. We had an army, we had the people with us, and we had causes for which to fight. When it seemed these causes were not going to be addressed and there was going to be no election, we could not just sit around. We had to plan for further action at that time. Now the situation has changed. Elections have happened, we have led the government for nine months, a new government is going to be formed, and quite a bit of work has been done on drafting the constitution. In this situation, the video has no meaning. We must understand it in this context.

On the other hand, the video surfaced at a time when it had great potential to damage the peace process, reduce the trust of the parties, weaken the Maoists, and take the country in unconstitutional directions. It came, but it should not have come at this time. The way in which it was made public was part of a plan to remove the Maoists from the peace process, to disallow the completion of the constitution, and to give continuity to the trend of taking unconstitutional steps.

Based on the prime minister's claim [in the Shaktikhor video] that the PLA had only 7000 to 8000 fighters, a number of parties have called for a re-verification process of the Maoist combatants. Would you agree to this if there were to be consensus among the other parties that this should happen?

The numbers have already been cleared. We have PLA documents, and everybody knows what the numbers were. There was a central force, a regional force and the militia. Initially, our stance on verification was that the militia should also be included somehow. If we are going to have a re-verification process, we will say that we want the 100,000 militia members also included in it. This would be good for us. There were also thousands of fighters that the UN removed, saying they were not of age or were recruited later. And we compromised on the number. Now, we would also want them to be included in the re-verification. This too would be good for us.

We could also ask why we should continue to keep our arms in the [UN-monitored] containers. We could keep them ourselves. If we are going to go about reversing existing agreements, why should

we keep the PLA in the cantonments at all? Let's have a new agreement then, and our soldiers will stay outside the cantonments. But in my opinion, such things will not happen. The process will move forward. Lots of issues have arisen lately, and if we latch onto them we will only move backwards. The call for re-verification has been part of a political agenda, and it is understandable that opposition parties would do so. As I said earlier, everybody knows that the PLA strength stood at about 100,000, including the militia. So if we are going to revisit all the agreements, we will have to bring in all of these issues.

P.S.

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