

May First : High Noon in Nepal

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"You must come to Kathmandu with shroud cloth wrapped around your heads and flour in your bags. It will be our last battle. If we succeed, we survive, else it will be the end of our party."

General Secretary Badal of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)

APRIL 21 — There are moments when Kathmandu does not feel like a city on the edge of revolution.

People go about all the normal business of life. Vendors sell vegetables, nail-clippers and bootleg Bollywood from the dirt, cramping the already crowded streets.

Uniformed kids tumble out of schools with neat ties in the hot weather. Municipal police loiter at the intersections while traffic ignores them, their armed counter-parts patrol in platoons through the city with wood-stocked rifles and dust-masks as they have for years. New slogans are painted over the old, almost all in Maoist red. Daily blackouts and dry-season water shortages are the normal daily of Nepal's primitive infrastructure, not the sign of crisis. Revolutions don't happen outside of life, like an asteroid from space – but from right up the middle, out of the people themselves.

Passing through Kathmandu's Trichandra college campus after meeting with students in a nearby media program, I walked into the aftermath of bloody attack. Thugs allied with the Congress party student group had cut up leaders of a rival student group with khukuri knives leaving one in critical condition. Hundreds of technical students were clustered in the street when I arrived by chance. The conflict most often described through the positioning of political leaders is breaking out everywhere.

Indefinite bandhs are paralyzing large parts of the country after the arrest of Young Communist League (YCL) cadre in the isolated far west and Maoist student leaders in Pokhara, the central gateway to the Annapurna mountain range. The southern Terai is in chaos, with several power centers competing and basic security has broken down with banditry, extortion and kidnapping are now endemic. Government ministers cannot appear anywhere without Maoist pickets waving black flags and throwing rocks.

With no central authority, all sides are claiming the ground they stand on and preparing their base. It's messy, confused and coming to a sharp point as the May 28 deadline for a new constitution draws near with no consensus in sight. The weak government holding court in the Constituent Assembly can't command a majority, not even of their own parties. Seventy assembly representatives of the status quo UML party signed a letter calling on their own leader to step down from the prime minister's chair to make way for a Maoist national-unity government. He refuses, repeating demands that the Maoists dissolve their popular organizations and return lands seized by the people who farm them.

The Maoists have more pressing concerns than the legalism of the parliamentary parties. If they can't restructure the state, by constitutional means or otherwise, the enthusiasm that brought their revolutionary movement this far may turn to disillusionment. With no progress in the assembly, and the leaders of the status quo parties now say there will be no resolution on time. The Maoists have rejected any extension as a stalling tactic and are turning to the people. With now-or-never urgency, they are mobilizing all their forces for a decisive showdown in Kathmandu.

Nepal braces for May First

Posters for May First appeared overnight announcing the Maoist call for workers and villagers to converge on Kathmandu for a "final conflict." The Maoists are calling for a sustained mobilization, with the hope that an overwhelming showing can push the government out with a minimum of bloodshed and stay the hand of the Nepal Army.

May First is International Workers Day, the traditional day of action for communists around the world, but the mobilization has already begun.

Thousands of recruits are being trained by YCL cadre in districts throughout the country, drilling with bamboo sticks in place of rifles. With threats from Nepal Army commanders to put these protests down with force, the Maoists are preparing to defend their mass organizations, the marches, the party and the people from attempts at counter-revolution. Their meetings include political orientations and anti-disinformation training to combat the confusing fog of manufactured rumors and lies that are already in the air.

National assemblies of radical students, artists, intellectuals, ethnic federations, women, unions and trade organizations convened widely during the month of April. All sectors are receiving the same message : The Maoists will not return to the jungle, or replay a guerilla struggle. They will not retreat. The conflict will be decided frontally in the cities.

Dual Power - Class Struggle at the Tipping Point

Nepal has two mutually-exclusive power structures : one is the revolutionary movement led by the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which has a powerful mass base among the people, a disciplined political militia in the YCL and its People's Liberation Army. The other is the apparatus of Nepal's state — held-over from the monarchy, unreconstructed, backed by the rifles of the Nepal Army and the heavy weight of feudal tradition.

Land seizures co-exist with plantations. Old judges still sit in their patronage chairs dispensing verdicts to the highest bidder while revolutionary courts turn off and on in the villages. The deposed king Gyanendra lost his crown, but retains vast tracts of land, a near monopoly on tobacco and a "personal" business empire. Large-scale infrastructure like hydropower remains largely under foreign ownership, but only operate when, and how, the Maoist-allied unions let them. In short, the semi-feudal, semi-colonial system of Nepal is in place but the organized workers and Maoist-led villagers hold a veto.

In Nepal, people were taught that the poor would always be poor. They long believed it. There would always be kings, lords, myriad deities and foreign patrons to look over them. Caste dictated behavior and expectations for most, justifying dull cruelty and vast human waste. The tolerance and fatalism so beloved by British travel writers were also consigning the people of Nepal to isolation, ignorance and the lowest life expectancies in Asia. But the world doesn't actually stand still, or turn in circles,

as some would have it. Things do change.

When urban civil uprisings wrested a parliamentary system from King Birendra in 1990 nothing changed for the people after, save whose hands got greased for government services. When rising expectations crashed into the closed doors of realpolitik of elite “democracy” – the Maoists blew it open, building an army up from the basic people themselves. From bases of support in Rolpa and Rukum, the People’s War spread to 80% of the country in ten lightening years. Over 10,000 lost their lives in the greatest uprising in Nepal’s history.

Yubaraj Lama, a prominent actor/director thrust into radical politics by the movement against the king, put it simple : « It was the failure of the political parties to bring democracy, any real social change for the masses of people that fueled the People’s War. This is what the Maoists changed. People were very fatalistic, looking up to politicians like princes. That is over. »

People who had never thought social change is possible now believe they can end their poverty. Kings are not gods and their crown can fall. Women and girls are more than a way to have male children. The heavy hand of foreign domination and its imposed backwardness can be challenged. The Maoists changed the concept of politics from appeal-if-you-dare to revolution from the ground up.

Everyone isn’t happy with the way the wind is blowing. It is easy to find haughty conservatives that think any hope from the poor comes at their expense and who want to see the Maoists crushed.

Talking with the owner of an English-language bookstore, an outspoken supporter of UML’s embattled prime minister, he insisted that people only attended the Maoist rallies because they were forced to. This plainly isn’t true, but I asked why they won the elections. He told me “these people are stupid” and “believe the Maoist lies that they can live in the big house.” When I noted that all the unions in the neighborhood were Maoist and they hardly seemed forced into it, he laughed. “Of course they are, they want to take all the money from people who own them.”

With all the paranoia of America’s white-fright militias, Nepal’s reactionaries conflate rudimentary democracy, let alone the communist program of the Maoists, with the very end of the world.

Nepal’s embattled elites also can’t simply be brushed aside or nuanced into reform. They to have an army, the former Royal Nepal Army (NA), renamed but unreconstructed. The officer corps is steeped in caste ideology and disdain for the common people, supplied with modern weapons and not-so-secret Indian and American advisers.

The PLA is training and waiting within UN-supervised cantonments – military bases scattered across the countryside. The YCL, led by former PLA commanders is training new militias throughout the country. And for its part, the Nepal Army is confined to its barracks, concentrated in and around Kathmandu.

The politics of this moment are intricate. Many forces parry and maneuver for advantage. But the basic situation is this : Dual power has produced a highly unstable stalemate between a revolutionary people and a weakened regime – a paper tiger with real claws — and the moment of decision is fast approaching.

Democracy is just a word

Over the last twenty years, passion has only grown to see the people decide Nepal’s future, to have

some form of genuine popular democracy. It erupted first in the 1990 Jana Andolan civil uprising. It fueled the People's War that started in 1996 and animated the powerful mass movement that toppled the king in 2008.

One of the fruits of that sustained struggle was the current Constituent Assembly - where elected representatives of the grassroots were supposed to craft a new framework for a new society, with both open election to seats and sectoral representation to ensure that women, minorities and workers had direct representation. The very idea of such a constituent assembly comes from communist demands - it was their answer to bourgeois democracy.

Maoists made 40 demands of the King in the mid-1990s before launching their guerrilla war. Despite consistent flexibility on almost everything, a constituent assembly was the only demand that was never negotiable. It's profound, the idea of an empowered assembly drawn from every corner - including elected representatives of the poor, women and minorities - for the purpose of remaking the very basis of government and society. This was to be the workshop of a New Nepal.

In a short-lived alliance with the parliamentary parties brokered in 2006, a popular uprising in Kathmandu forced the king out and secularism was established. Elections were held in 2008, and the Maoists emerged the largest party, with more delegates than the old standbys UML and Congress combined. The rest of the seats went to a score of minor parties.

This unprecedented assembly has been gridlocked since it convened. On one side, the old political parties want an Indian-style parliamentary system that is quite compatible with rural feudalism and caste oppression. And opposing those parties, stand the Maoists who speak of a radical new peoples democracy where those excluded from politics will now set the terms.

The Maoists have used their days in this assembly to flesh out their plans for a New Nepal. They drafted and popularized constitutional provisions for a future people's republic - including land reform, complete state restructuring, equality for women, autonomy for oppressed minorities and an end to Nepal's stifling subordination to India. Ambitious plans to redirect government investment in basic infrastructure like roads, sanitation and vastly expanded public education were all scuttled when the Nepal Army refused to recognize civilian control after the Maoist victory. Then-Prime Minister Prachanda resigned, leading the Maoists out of government and leaving the Constituent Assembly in gridlock. They are the largest party, the legal and extra-legal opposition.

The same callous ruling classes, who ignored the bitter poverty of people for decades, now claim to be Nepal's only "democratic" alternative to the Maoists.

Yet everyone knows : It was those Maoists who went deep among the people, who fought with guns, braved torture and sacrificed many lives for constitutional elections — winning a popular mandate in that voting. Who, then, are the true democrats here ? Who really speaks for the people and their aspirations for power ?

Time itself is accelerating

All the political forces in the country have now spent the last years in slow-mo maneuvering. They have revealed their programs and exposed their natures - before a closely watching population.

The Maoists are refusing to wait any longer. Leaders of Congress and UML parties admit a constitution can't be delivered by May 28. The Maoists reject any postponement of that May 28 deadline. No more stalling, they say.

Hundreds of thousands have been mobilized in peaceful mass marches over the last months. Such marches have been a vehicle for intensive mass organizing. They have been used as a gauge of growing partisan strength. The logistics of moving people through the streets to each of the main government offices is practice for seizure. In short, they can be understood as dress rehearsals for a revolution.

On April 6, 2010, Maoists held powerful rallies in all of Nepal's 75 districts demanding that the unelected prime minister resign to make way for a new Maoist-led government. Further rallies are scheduled leading up to May First.

The Maoists program is unlikely to be met by parliamentary procedure and they know it. Maoists have discussed a double-barreled approach : build on the base areas and social transformation of the People's War to launch popular insurrection in the city. Nepali revolutionaries have been incredibly patient, refusing to over-extend their hand. They are seeking to apply one of Mao Zedong's most famous principles, the mass line :

"It often happens that objectively the masses need a certain change, but subjectively they are not yet conscious of the need, not yet willing or determined to make the change. In such cases, we should not make the change until, through our work, most of the masses have become conscious of the need and are willing and determined to carry it out. Otherwise we shall isolate ourselves from the masses. Unless they are conscious and willing, any kind of work that requires their participation will turn out to be a mere formality and will fail."

This is what Prabhakar, Deputy Commander of the PLA, meant when he said : "We will not take any action against this government. *People at large* will decide the fate of this government"

The Maoists have been working hard to make the next push - for the final seizure of power - an act of the people, not a self-isolating putsch by the communists alone.

On April 15, YCL commander Sonam was arrested in Kathmandu on weapons charges. Thousands of people mobilized *within the hour* for a torchlight march to the jail. Sonam was released.

Backed by the Defense ministry, commanders of the 96,000-man Nepal Army began new recruitment this week in direct violation of prior agreements.

UCPNM leader Ashok calls this "conspiracy to invite civil war."

For all its complexity, dual power in Nepal rests on two armies. The middle ground is disintegrating under the pressure. Splits are appearing within all kinds of political forces - including the moderate leftist UML and reportedly among the army rank-and-file. The UCPN(M) openly says it is seeking to make its case "directly to the soldiers."

« If the army acts against democracy, the people won't stand for it, » said Bishnu Pukar. A human rights activist and former leader of the revolutionary teacher's union, Pukar was arrested twice in the fight for a new Nepal by the military. « Too many lives have been lost. There will be general rebellion. »

In short : The Maoists are forcing a question of ultimate power that the people of Nepal will have to decide. Look to May First and the days that follow.

P.-S.

* From JED BRANDT blog :

<http://jedbrandt.net/2010/04/21/may-first-high-noon-in-nepal/>