

Moriarty Versus Nepal's Maoists

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"Maoists would get very few votes if elections are held in the present context." This is not a line from any media prognosis of the outcome of a poll in Nepal, limping back to peace. Nor is it a quote from any politician in the Himalayan state, whose people have high stakes in the success of the promised first post-monarchy election to decide Nepal's future.

Surprising as it may seem, that public pronouncement on the poll prospects of a particular political party of the country came from the official representative a foreign power. US Ambassador to Nepal James Francis Moriarty made the statement a couple of weeks ago, but it is all the more relevant to recall it now as his host-country prepares to make history.

Moriarty himself, of course, made history of a dubious kind with the statement that no one would normally expect of a diplomat. Have we heard any foreign representative in Washington publicly predicting the fortunes of the rival parties in the US Congressional polls? The statement, made in a meeting with journalists and intellectuals in New Delhi, would have once been considered an indecorous show of interest or involvement in the internal affairs of the concerned country for even a super-power's envoy to evince.

Many in Nepal saw the statement as a stern warning against moves aimed at getting the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or the CPNM, into the country's interim government now under the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA), headed by the Nepali Congress of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. It was SPA-CPNM unity that made possible the popular overthrow of King Gyanendra and his hated monarchy last April. The reinforcement of the unity through power-sharing was expected to lead to stable democracy and national reconciliation in a land where civil war had raged for a decade, taking a dreadful toll in human lives and suffering.

It was not only surprising but also significant that only the Maoist leadership has taken exception to the statement, with the Koirala government preferring to keep its own counsel in the matter. Similarly significant was the fact that only the CPNM - and the Indian Left - objected to Moriarty's declaration at a public forum in Kathmandu in July that induction of the Maoists into an interim government - without the rebels first giving up their arms and also, less precisely, "renouncing the politics of violence and terror" - would have serious consequences, including a cutoff in US assistance to Nepal.

The official US backing for the breakthrough now made in Nepal must be seen against this background of attempted blackmail. Moriarty has left little doubt about the frightening fragility of his far-from-unconditional support for the process initiated by an SPA-Maoist agreement on November 8. The agreement has sorted out the problem of managing and monitoring the arms of the Maoists and the erstwhile Royal Nepal Army under United Nations supervision. It has worked out a calendar for creation of a new republic of Nepal, envisaging the broader interim government by December 1 and the adoption of a new constitution by mid-2007.

Even while the agreement was on the anvil, Moriarty gave more than a hint of his response to it by saying that the US attitude to the Maoists in peacefully shared power will be similar to its approach to the Hamas in post-election Palestine. The announcement of the agreement did not receive his unreserved greeting. While welcoming the pact, the US embassy stated: "The agreement must diminish the fear of violence, intimidation, and extortion that the people of Nepal have endured over the past 11 years. In this regard, effective monitoring that includes penalties for violators will prove essential."

None too veiled is the threat against the Maoists, from whom alone Moriarty expects such violations, despite the deadlier record of the Royal Nepal Army against human rights. An embassy spokesperson reiterated the point of the statement, aimed at keeping the power dry against Maoists in power and during the proposed polls, by telling the Kathmandu Post on Monday that the Maoists would stay on the US list of terrorist organizations "even if they join the government."

Nepal's Maoists entered this long list nearly five years ago. Former US secretary of state Colin Powell visited Nepal in January 2002, and told his hosts: "You have a Maoist insurgency that's trying to overthrow the government, and this really is the kind of thing that we are fighting against throughout the world." US arms sales to famished Nepal and consultations between US military officers and their Nepali counterparts followed.

Moriarty elaborated on the theme in August 2005. Adopting a tone of endearing interference, he told an elite audience in Kathmandu: "Today, in the spirit of the long friendship Nepal and the United States have enjoyed, I want to talk about two concepts that I think are absolutely vital for Nepal at this point in its history: democracy and reconciliation. Before I do so, however, I would like to explain why my country, the United States, has the temerity to speak out on issues such as this." "The explanation for the "temerity" was terse and to the point: "In his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush declared that the United States 'will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right.'" "The "moral" role of the Bush administration in the making and unmaking of regimes is what Moriarty is upholding in his crusade against the

Maoists in the mountain state. Neither Bush nor Moriarty is likely to reconsider the role merely because of US Congressional poll results.

The explanation is not going to put at ease the people of Nepal, as they await the further unfolding of the peace-and-democracy process.

P.S.

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