

The spectre of a new Maoist conflict in Nepal

Wednesday 1 May 2019, by [ADHIKARI Gyanu](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2019).

Following a decade-long insurgency and a tumultuous peace process, a new conflict might be in the making in Nepal.

About a decade ago it seemed as if Nepal was marching into a new era. After a devastating decade-long war between Maoists and the government, an all-party People's Movement took to the streets of Kathmandu in April 2006 and forced King Gyanendra to reinstate the parliament. In the following months, a seven-party coalition took control of the government, stripped the king of most of his powers and accepted an interim constitution.

In May 2008, the monarchy was officially abolished, and Nepal became a federal democratic republic, thanks to movements for equality from its marginalised groups such as the Madhesi. For the first time in Nepal's recent history, all segments of the population, including the Maoists, were participating in the democratic process. Every Nepalese citizen felt as if they had a voice in the parliament, if not the streets. There was hope in the air.

What followed was years of protracted negotiation over a new constitution. In April 2015, Nepal was [hit](#) by a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that killed over 9,000 people and injured tens of thousands of others. Using the unprecedented devastation experienced by the population as an excuse, the dominant parties in parliament subdued all opposition voices and "fast-tracked" a new constitution and two years later held a controversial election.

Having ignored opposition protests and popular grievances for years, Nepal's new leadership is now facing a major threat. A new Maoist force, fed by popular disillusionment and anger, is growing in strength. As a result, Nepal once again appears to be heading towards a national conflict.

Simmering discontent

"Dream big", the new Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli, long-time leader of the Marxist Communist Party of Nepal, told the nation when he took office in February 2018. "Nepal's rise is inevitable," he said.

And since taking office, he has made some controversial, and perhaps illogical, steps to show the Nepalese people and the world that he is determined to transform Kathmandu into a global trade capital. In a land-locked country, nestled between the Indian plains and the Tibetan plateau, he inaugurated a shipping office with much fanfare, claiming that it will help "study ways to develop inland waterways". He also signed an agreement with China to build a railway link connecting Tibet with Kathmandu through the arduous Himalayan terrain.

Such fantasy projects should have raised eyebrows in one of the poorest countries in the world where the government struggles to provide most basic necessities like public schools, hospitals and housing. However, the government managed to present these mega projects as symbols of national pride. Massive corruption scandals involving ministers and senior politicians from the party were met with indifference while questioning the necessity of such expensive and unrealistic endeavours

became tantamount to being unpatriotic.

As the government continued with its plans to connect Nepal to the world and make Kathmandu a global hub, however, discontent among some Maoists was simmering below the glossy surface.

Back in 2012, as their former comrades were ascending to positions of power and wealth, a group had splintered away from the Maoist Party, which is now part of the ruling coalition. They had rejected the peace process and started planning a new “unified revolution”.

The splinter Maoist group, which calls itself the Communist Party of Nepal and is led by Netra Bikram Chand “Biplab”, has been engaging in both peaceful and violent activities with the goal of “completing the revolution” that it says was abandoned when the Maoists joined democratic politics at the end of the war.

During the 2017 election held under the new constitution, Biplab’s party detonated over a hundred improvised explosives, targeting rallies of prominent politicians across the country. The splinter Maoist group did not end its violent activities following the victory of a Communist coalition - which included its former allies - in the election.

In April 2018, members of the group also [planted](#) a bomb at the office of Arun III Hydro Project, which is being developed by an Indian company, in an attempt to make its views on foreign direct investment clear.

On February 22 this year, it [targeted](#) Ncell, a telecommunications giant that has been flouting a court order to pay the national treasury more than half a billion dollars in unpaid taxes. The group openly accepted responsibility for the attack but apologised for the killing of a bystander.

In early March, it also [bombed](#) the empty house of Rohan Gurung, the chairman of a union of labour exporting firms, after calling him a “human smuggler”.

A new Maoist conflict on the horizon

On March 12, the Nepalese government officially declared the Biplab’s party a criminal group and banned all its activities. The ban was the clearest signal to date that Nepali polity is once again headed towards a confrontation that could potentially spiral out of control. Ominously, the prime minister has tried to give himself the sole authority to deploy the army, overriding the constitution.

While the ban came on the back of an established pattern of violence, it still carries the risk of escalating the situation into a full-blown insurgency. In the past, similar hard-line attitudes by the political elite and brutality by the security forces helped fuel an armed rebellion.

After the end of the Maoist war, successive governments failed to deliver transitional justice to the victims of the conflict and many war crimes went unpunished. Moreover, the security forces that participated in countless human rights abuses failed to reform.

As a result, following the ban imposed on Biplab’s party, many fear a new wave of abuse will be unleashed on the group’s supporters, including those who have not engaged in violent activity, further fuelling the Maoist discontent.

A number of Biplab supporters have already been arrested across the country since the ban was put in place and the security forces have been accused of [torturing](#) the detainees.

As the confrontation between the banned Maoist party and the government escalates, it is possible

that history will repeat itself and we will witness another wave of human rights abuses.

The way to peace

Despite the government's efforts to cast Biplab's party as a radical, criminal organisation, the group enjoys the support of many within Nepal's disadvantaged and marginalised communities frustrated by casteism, corruption, underdevelopment and injustice, which the current government has made no serious attempts to address.

It has a nation-wide organisation and can lay credible claims to have regrouped a chunk of the Maoist "People's Army" that once waged a deadly war against the state. In fact, many local Maoist leaders have at least some sympathy for Biplab's party. They started to understand and support Biplab as their disillusionment grew with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, the former Maoist supremo who, in a show of great opportunism, merged his party (Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)) with an opposing Marxist/Leninist group and became the co-chair of the Communist coalition currently ruling the country.

It is true that Biplab's party doesn't have the clear ideological demands of the Maoists' avatars operating in the 1990s under a feudal Hindu monarchy. But what they lack in ideology, they can make up with resentment against a deeply corrupt system oblivious to the interests of the common people.

Banning a political party is unconstitutional and, as Nepalese history has shown, it tends to bolster the popularity of the banned organisation. In fact, all the prime ministers in Nepal's republican era, including the current one, come from parties once banned. More importantly, a ban can escalate tensions even further.

The last thing Nepal needs after a decade-long insurgency, a tumultuous peace process and a disastrous earthquake is a second Maoist war. The sensible option for the government would be to make an honest effort to invite such opposition groups for talks, maintain law and order, and undertake massive reforms to address the inequalities that contribute to hordes of disillusioned youth joining violent groups.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Gyanu Adhikari](#)

Gyanu Adhikari is the editor of Kathmandu-based independent outlet The Record.

This document has been composed with the free HTML editor which can be accessed [here](#). Use it every time for document editing.

Gyanu Adhikari

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Al Jazeera

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/spectre-maoist-conflict-nepal-190404111507371.html>