

NEPAL: Communism's Last Bastion in High Altitudes

By Akhilesh Upadhyay

KATHMANDU, Mar 31 (IPS) - In the past nine years, Nepal's Maoist movement has grown so fast that it has now become a proud citation for revolutionaries round the world. To them, the Maoists from an impoverished Himalayan kingdom give intellectual sustenance at a time when the days of communists toppling the state have long gone.

Though communist parties exist in most countries, few patterned on the one that successfully led the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 hold state power. That's a huge comedown for the communists who until 1980s ruled one-fourth of humanity, including China and the now- defunct Soviet Union.

In South-east Asia, not since Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge peasant army toppled the U.S.-backed Lon Nol republic in 1975 and over one million people died in utopian restructuring thereafter has a peasant movement come close to overwhelming the state. For that reason, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist holds a special place for diehard communist revolutionaries.

The Maoists control a vast swathe of the countryside, especially in western Nepal where their "people's war" started in 1996 to overthrow the monarchy and establish a kingless communist republic. Their strategy: "surround the cities with liberated villages," which is modeled on the classic Maoist insurgency theory.

Now, nearly a decade on, Nepal's Maoists stand at a crossroads.

In the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, the test of a guerilla group comes when it sets to overthrow a political regime - not just in some remote corner of a country but over an entire national territory.

On Feb. 1 their overarching goal to overthrow the regime took a decisive turn when King Gyanendra dismissed the government headed Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, declared that successive party-run governments had failed to stave off the menace of a Maoist insurgency, and took absolute power.

"What he essentially did was remove the buffer between monarchy and the Maoists, a space occupied by the parties," says Arjun Bhandari, a journalist who has closely kept tab of Nepal's communist movement.

If recent claims made by government officials are anything to go by, the Maoists who rule much of the countryside are on the brink of a vertical split themselves. The story has is that two supreme Maoist leaders, party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a.k.a. Prachanda, and party ideologue Baburam Bhattarai have developed irreconcilable differences.

Bhattarai, who holds a doctorate in engineering and remains the intellectual force behind one of the most potent Maoist movements in the world, is said to be unhappy with Prachanda's alleged megalomania. Followers of the party boss Prachanda believe he has given an entirely new meaning to the Maoist revolution and hence his brand of Maoism, Prachanda Path, puts him alongside such giants of the international communist movement as Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Unconfirmed reports say Bhattarai has been sacked from the CPN-Maoist's all-powerful politburo and placed in the party's military custody in western Nepal.

Though the Royal Nepal Army hasn't given exact details about Bhattarai's whereabouts, it says it has gathered intelligence that proves that the Maoists have placed Bhattarai in military custody and the party is facing a serious split.

In a high-profile press conference held last week in its headquarters in Kathmandu, the army claimed that it had gained strategic success against the Maoists in recent weeks, essentially meaning since the king took over on Feb. 1.

Citing its intelligence, the army said that the a large number of Bhattarai supporters have started fleeing to India and they are disillusioned by party chairman Prachanda's insistence to continue with the violent people's war". More than 11,000 Nepalis have died since the start of the insurgency in 1996.

According to an announcement made in its underground meeting in New Delhi on Mar. 20, says the Nepal Army, CPN-Maoist has relieved Bhattarai of all his executive duties while his wife Hisila Yami, an influential member in the party herself, has been expelled from the party altogether. Bhattarai's politburo membership has been transferred to Dev Gurung, an intellectual lightweight.

"Though Bhattarai has been regarded highly outside the party," writes the 'Samaya' weekly, "inside the party he is once again seen as a weakling."

Analysts take Bhattarai's alleged sacking to highlight major shifts in the guerilla movement.

First, the new government headed by King Gyanendra is most anxious to put the Maoists on the defensive and tell the world that he can do what the political parties have failed to do in the last nine years.

Second, the CPN-Maoist has of late indulged in extreme atrocities against the civilians and as a result seems to have lost much of the moral high ground it enjoyed in the mid-90s. The Maoists have indiscriminately torched transport vehicles that have defied their shutdowns, forcibly recruited thousands of children in their ranks as soldiers, and levied parallel tax from teachers to businesses, say analysts.

Observers who have recently traveled to the Maoist heartland in the western districts told IPS that Maoist workers were aware of the "differences in the party and actions have been taken against the dissidents at various levels". By all accounts, it will however be some time before the exact nature of the alleged split will come to the fore.

For now Chariman Prachanda will do all he can to control the fallout at home.

"Nepal's Maoists know they have come far," says journalist Bhandari, just back from a week-long tour in western Nepal. "Prachanda will do all he can at damage control, in the event that Bhattarai has actually been expelled from the party."