

Maoists, Parties Take Tentative Steps Closer

Analysis by Akhilesh Upadhyay

KATHMANDU, Jun 20 - Nepal's political stalemate, which started in 2002 with the dismissal of parliament, hit a new low last week when seven major political parties declared they would boycott municipal elections the government plans to hold by April next year.

The parties say they will have nothing to do with the administration headed by King Gyanendra, who seized absolute power Feb. 1. The monarch has accused successive governments led by the parties of gross corruption and of bumbling the fight against the nine-year-old Maoist insurgency.

The poll boycott puts the palace on the spot, for many of them say the king sees the municipal poll as a forerunner to parliamentary elections, which were last held in 1999.

The parties instead called on the Maoists to renounce violence and join their movement to restore party rule in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom, where more than 11,500 people have died since the communist guerrillas launched their "people's war" to dislodge the monarchy and create a more equitable society in 1996.

Analysts say the longer King Gyanendra continues to hold on to absolute power, the more he will push the beleaguered political parties closer to the Maoists. For their part, say the analysts, the rebels will be only too keen to join forces with the parties, currently in deep disarray but still regarded by most of the international community as the most legitimate political force in the country.

Once dismissed as unimaginable, there are now strong indications that the parties and the Maoists are talking. At some point, the parties could very well take up the republican line themselves if the king continues to ignore them, but, just as importantly, if they can convince the rebels to drop their guns.

The possibility of the parties and the Maoists coming together has become stronger since the king's power grab on Feb. 1, says columnist Narayan Khadka. "The distance between the king and the parties has not only increased, but the two forces have now begun to see each other as enemies."

Late last month, people here reacted in disbelief when news reports claimed that a powerful rebel leader, Baburam Bhattarai, had actually travelled to New Delhi to hold talks with exiled Nepali political leaders. The news came at a time when the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist was said to be facing a vertical split and Bhattarai, second-in-command in the underground movement, had been unceremoniously dumped from the party politburo.

After days of confusion, which saw New Delhi denying outright claims that it had organised the Maoist parleys, the CPN-Maoist itself admitted that Bhattarai had been dispatched to the Indian capital. Former Prime Minister and Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala has also been to New Delhi since as have other ranking Nepali leaders.

"There is in fact competition between the king, parties and even New Delhi to take the lead in approaching the Maoists to deliver peace," says Hari Sharma, a Cornell University scholar

and a Koirala aide. "These are all, however, covert activities, and will take sometime before they deliver tangible results."

That could well be true, not least because the Maoists have in recent weeks drawn widespread condemnation in Nepal and elsewhere for their bloody attacks on civilians. The parties well understand that they face a strong public backlash should they be seen to be cosy up to the rebels, without extracting some kind of public pledge from them shunning violence Against civilians.

Early this month, at least 40 innocent civilians were killed when the Maoists attacked a crowded passenger bus that was also carrying soldiers in a village in central Nepal. Though the Maoist supreme leader Pushpakamal Dahal, aka Prachanda, apologized for the incident the next day, the media and civil society have demanded that the rebels follow up their mea Culpa with action.

After the Maoist apology, there have been two other major attacks on civilians, though the rebels have denied responsibility for the deaths of seven civilians, one of them an infant, in the western town of Dhangadhi. In Kavre, at least eight people, including six security men and two civilians, were killed when the rebels blew up a passenger bus.

"The Maoists are less and less likely to get the benefit of the doubt from the media, civil society leaders and human rights workers," Guna Raj Luitel, news editor of 'Kantipur' daily, told IPS. "We shall call a spade a spade. We are in no mood to buy the bluster, may it come from the security forces or the Maoists."

Luitel believes the Maoists are under the strongest pressure since the start of their uprising to find a face-saving exit to sustain their own political relevance, and that they see alignment with the parties as the best possible option.

On Sunday, Prachanda responded positively to the seven parties' call not to disrupt their movement against the king's government. And he labelled the parties' newly revised position to support the call for elections to a constituent assembly a "progressive step."

Sharma admits that the recent rebel atrocities are a serious setback to the Maoist-party rapprochement, but not insurmountable. "Chitwan is indeed a heinous crime. But that doesn't shut the door for reconciliation. Mind you, dialogues take place even in times of a full-blown war."