

## POLITICS-NEPAL: Maoists Armed With Popular Vote

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KATHMANDU, Apr 14 (IPS) - Proving the political pundits wrong, the people of Nepal have voted overwhelmingly for former rebels, the Communist Party of Nepal- Maoist (CPN-M), in the just concluded constituent assembly elections in this Himalayan nation.

Of the 196 seats already allocated, the CPN-M has won 108, according to the latest results released by the Election Commission on Monday, thus establishing a comfortable lead that gives it a fair chance to gain a simple majority.

Postponed twice the historic election finally took place on Apr. 10 with 240 of the 601 seats up for grabs under the first-past-the-post (people electing candidates directly) and 335 under proportional representation electoral systems. Another 26 seats are to be made through appointments by the interim government to be formed after the polls.

The new assembly is expected to draw up a new constitution for a republic that will replace rule by a 240-year-old monarchy. The CPN-M signed a peace accord in November 2006 to end a decade-long insurgency and join a seven-party coalition government to prepare for the first general election in the country since 1991.

If the CPN-M does gain a simple majority in the assembly, it can be expected to make towards abolishing the unpopular monarchy as its first order of business.

Although the CPN-M has always claimed an undercurrent support among the Nepali public, the results caught them by surprise as much as its rivals.

Except in the central tarai (plains) where regional Madhesi (plainsmen) parties have done well, and eastern hills, the former underground party has swept the elections across the country in which 60 percent of the 17.6 million eligible voters cast their votes. Of these, 4.1 million are newly-registered voters.

The elections were given a clean chit by international observer missions, including the United Nations, the European Union and the Carter Centre. All these bodies praised Nepal's Election Commission -- assisted by the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) -- for smoothly executing the elections across the country.

Not only have the Maoists won the elections handsomely, all their top leaders have either won or are enjoying unsurpassable lead. On the other hand, bigwigs of the Nepali Congress (NC) and the CPN (UML) have lost to relatively unknown opponents.

"We expected this kind of support for us," Baburam Bhattarai, the second top leader of the CPN-M, told IPS on Sunday. "It is only the mainstream media and so-called experts that refused to see the writing on the wall."

But others disagree, pointing out the violence and disruptions by the Maoist cadre across the country in the run-up to the elections that were widely reported by national and international media.

"No one expected this kind of results, not even the Maoists," said Nilambar Acharya, a well-respected political analyst.

No one, however, disputes that the people were very disenchanted with the two largest parties -- the NC and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) -- that have ruled the country for 15 years since 1990 when the first popular movement toppled the monarchy-supported party-less 'Panchayati' system of government.

"More than a positive vote for the Maoists, this is a negative reaction against both the NC's and the CPN (UML)'s lacklustre performance," Acharya said.

According to Acharya people were appreciative of the Maoists joining the peace process after running a bloody insurgency for ten years and did not want to see the Maoists moving away.

Prakash Sharan Mahat, senior leader and spokesman of the NC -- the country's largest and oldest party -- acknowledged that people vented their anger and frustration against the two major parties.

"But that is not the only reason for our unexpected loss and the unprecedented win for the Maoists," Mahat told IPS. "Fear factor played a very big role in the election with the Maoist candidates and cadre threatening to go back to the jungle and wage another 'people's war' if not voted for."

Various media reports and national election observer missions like the Nepal Election Monitoring Alliance (NEMA) and the Nepal Election Observation Committee (NEOC), who deployed thousands of observers throughout the country, said the Maoists resorted to threats, intimidation, and violence to terrorise voters and political rivals.

Bhattarai's rival candidates from the NC and the CPN (UML) in the Gorkha constituency asked for postponement of the election, accusing the Maoists of not letting their cadres distribute election-related material and campaign freely. Even on election day, the two parties accused the Maoists of not allowing their candidates' polling agents to be present at the voting booths. Bhattarai has refuted these allegations.

"In rural areas, the Maoists told the people that if they lost, they

would resume the people's war (Maoist insurgency)," said Kamal Thapa, chairman Rastriya Prajatantra Party (Nepal), that openly campaigned for votes on the two main planks -- retaining constitutional monarchy and keeping Nepal a Hindu rastra (nation).

So far, the RPP (Nepal) has failed to lead in any seat and Thapa lost his poll deposit in one of the two constituencies he was contesting, for failing to even garner 10 percent of the votes.

Bhattarai denied that the Maoists intimidated voters. "This allegation is being repeated by parties that have been rejected by the people and are finding it difficult accepting the will of the people," he said.

With the Maoists now set to at least lead a coalition government, the question uppermost is what the victory of the Maoists means for other parties and the country.

Acharya said that the NC will have to go for drastic changes, with new and young leaders allowed to give direction. "Rethinking, rebuilding and remoulding should be the NC's mantra and to a lesser extent that of the UML as well," he suggested.

With consensus a key factor in writing the new constitution, failing which a two-thirds majority is required on contentious issues, the Maoists will still have to take along its coalition partners.

"It is a mandate for restructuring the state and society and the people have given us the mantle to execute it," Bhattarai said. "The people have expressed their desire for overwhelming change."