

Nepal makes way for the comrades

By Dhruva Adhikary

KATHMANDU - Fridays are fateful, if not eventful, days in Nepal. Five years ago, on June 1, 2001, a mysterious shootout took place in the palace claiming the lives of 10 royal victims, including King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and Crown Prince Dipendra. The person who was the country's prime minister at that time (coincidentally, he holds the same position now), Girija Prasad Koirala, later said that he gets jittery on the eve of every Friday.

As if to prove him prophetic, the current king, Gyanendra, has taken a series of adventurous steps on Fridays. In 2002, it was on Friday, October 4, when he announced the dismissal of an elected government, sparking a major constitutional crisis leading to political instability and upheaval in Nepal. And almost all subsequent measures he took to consolidate the powers unconstitutionally seized failed, compelling him to bow to people power this April.

His first public proclamation to this effect also came on a Friday - April 21. Four days later, Gyanendra made another proclamation leaving himself at the mercy of a parliament he himself had revived after a gap of four years. Very swiftly it stripped him of all powers, perks and privileges and converted him into a person whose property and income are taxable. Observers had to wait until last Friday to find out whether or not Gyanendra even retained the status of Nepal's head of state when he was allowed to receive credentials from newly arrived ambassadors from Thailand and South Korea.

But last Friday's extraordinary spectacle was witnessed elsewhere in Kathmandu - at Baluwatar, the official residence of the prime minister, 2 kilometers from the royal palace. And the host of the show, considered providential by mainstream leaders, was none other than the octogenarian Koirala. Despite frail health, he received the top Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, and held "summit-level" talks with him for more than an hour.

The news that the man who has commanded the bloody insurgency in the country for 10 years had entered Baluwatar spread like a wildfire. Some of the local radio stations interrupted regular programs to churn out whatever they could gather from reporters who had braved summer heat standing outside the main entrance to the prime minister's residence. They were part of a 300-strong crowd of fellow reporters and photographers, both Nepalis and foreigners, who remained more interested in "Comrade Prachanda" than in the possible outcome of parleys being held inside the residence compound.

The reason was obvious - he was somebody who had led a "People's War" that claimed more than 13,000 lives and made tens of thousands invalids, several hundred thousand displaced and a large number of children orphaned. Destruction of public and private property worth billions of rupees is something that needs to be calculated separately.

A formal meeting between Koirala and Prachanda was not unexpected, but few had any idea that such an event could be organized suddenly, and without public knowledge. As it became clear within hours, Krishna Prasad Sitaula, the interior minister, had picked up Prachanda in the early morning hours from the outskirts of Pokhara, a tourist town in the

west, and brought him to the capital using a chartered helicopter. Sitaula then escorted him from the airport to the place where Koirala greeted him, his wife and his comrade-in-arms, Baburam Bhattarai. It indeed was a sensational development. (Sitaula once again extended the same courtesy to Prachanda the following morning by accompanying him to an undisclosed location in the far-western hill district of Doti.)

At the end of day, the elusive Maoist leader finally appeared before the media. His appearance displayed an aura of confidence and his expressions conveyed a message that this could be a person who believes in action.

"He appeared like a leader with vision, and a person who is highly unlikely to deceive the peace-seeking people of Nepal," Sundarmani Dixit, a medical doctor and civil-society activist, told a radio interviewer after a short, separate meeting with Prachanda. What came out at the press conference, attended by all important personalities except Prime Minister Koirala (for health reasons), has now become a matter of intense political debate. While there is unanimity of view that a joint statement would send a strong message to the public that the country is heading toward a democratic process that is irreversible, murmurs of discontent and disgruntlement over the eight-point agreement signed by the leaders of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the top rebel leader is getting louder day by day.

A perception is developing in the Nepalese political landscape that SPA leaders yielded too much to the Maoists without obtaining even an assurance that they would renounce violence or hand in weapons before they could be invited to join a new interim government. The Friday agreement stipulates that the present interim government would be replaced by another interim setup; the parliament that was restored at the end of April would be dissolved, and the present constitution (promulgated in 1990 and substantially altered through parliamentary declaration of May 18, 2006, on provisions relating to the monarchy) be scrapped to make room for an interim constitution to be announced in a month.

These arrangements, argue some dissenting leaders, make all the changes announced after the April 24 proclamation meaningless. Their contention is that while the Maoists' support during the pro-democracy movement this year was crucial, they should not have been allowed to dictate the terms. Does one Maoist party carry weight equal to the weight of seven other parties combined?

In reciprocation, the Maoists have consented to dismantle what they have been calling "people's governments" at all levels - central, district and village. The other Maoist concession is for placing their weapons and fighters under United Nations supervision. But these are not substantial gestures. Local Maoist governments are very much similar to local units of other political parties. And the issue of UN supervision of weapons and fighters is irrelevant, if not outright objectionable.

"How convincing is the contention of assigning the legal status the state army enjoys to a band of fighters who were terrorists until cases against them were withdrawn recently?" asked Govinda Raj Joshi, a central committee member of the Nepali Congress, the political party headed by Prime Minister Koirala, when approached for his reaction. Joshi was once minister of home affairs.

Joshi is one of those politicians who tend to think that the entry of Prachanda and his comrades into state power through the upcoming interim government amounts in essence to a Maoist takeover of Nepal. Western diplomats also see these prospects as worrying. Neighbors and Nepal's influential friends abroad do not see any sense in dissolving the existing parliament without a ready-made substitute for it. That Maoists openly espouse a republican agenda has also become a matter of concern to those who are in favor of retaining monarchy in a "ceremonial form". Then there is the Nepali intelligentsia, which refuses to accept a Maoist dictatorship in the place of an autocratic monarchy.

To the Maoist leadership, this is an alarmist view. And Prachanda used his maiden press conference to assure the public that he and members of the party he heads, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), have come out in the open for good. They do not intend to return to the jungle. They have begun opening offices in different districts and areas across the country, with women's and students' wings providing an additional support base to the party, which plans to run a campaign aggressively ahead of the polls for a Constituent Assembly (CA). That the CA is needed to draw a new constitution for Nepal has already been agreed upon. Once the new constitution, to be written and issued by the people's representatives, is ready the country is to hold new parliamentary elections.

In an interview with Asia Times Online, Dev Gurung, a senior central committee member of the CPN (Maoist), contended that the Maoists' decision to join competitive politics in a peaceful manner is genuine and irrevocable. When asked about the basis to believe that the current round of negotiations with the government would not fail like two previous rounds (in 2001 and 2003), Gurung, who is one

of three members of the Maoist team holding talks with the government team led by Sitaula, offered this explanation: "There were royal governments in the past, and their representatives always rejected our proposition for a Constituent Assembly. The atmosphere has undergone a sea change now, with the SPA agreeing to elections for a Constituent Assembly. In fact, there is no competition between us and SPA now, as both sides are working to make the current transition phase as smooth as possible. Competition and rivalry may come once the country gets a new constitution and a new parliament.

"We are committed to retain and respect full democratic rights," Gurung said.

According to Gurung, his party would tolerate public criticism, including those made against the party supremo, Prachanda. In reply to a question about an incident in which the head of an association of Maoist victims was shot dead in cold blood when he led a demonstration that burned an effigy of Prachanda, Gurung expressed regrets over such incidents and also for the death of innocent civilians, and said incidents that happened during the insurgency would not be repeated.

What do the Maoists want in the new political configuration? According to Gurung, his party's objective is to make Nepal a democratic country with a civilized society. It should have room for all of Nepal's ethnic and regional groups, developing a federal structure if necessary.

All the things that make Nepal a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country should be done away with. The institution of monarchy and the unequal treaty of 1950 between India and Nepal are examples of such a legacy. In addition to this, the 1,800km border between Nepal and India should not be left "open" (unregulated) forever.

Maoists are critical of those democracies, particularly the United States and India, that did not extend their support to Nepal's pro-democratic movement. Gurung expressed surprise about the pro-king policy followed by them in the initial phase. And he singled out US Ambassador James Moriarty for his meddlesome role. India's policy remained ambivalent up to a point, as some of the politicians in New Delhi found the status quo expedient compared with a setup formed and owned by the people of Nepal. China, he said, at least remained neutral.

The Chinese media refrain from using the word "Maoist"; they usually allude to "anti-government guerrillas".

If elected to power, according to Gurung, his party would adopt an economic policy that could transform the present subsistence-level agricultural economy into an industrial one. Nepal must not be allowed to remain a captive market for Indian products. Gurung said there was absolutely no truth to the rumor that his party's policy is to end private ownership of land and other properties. What the party seeks, he clarified, is to remove grounds for the exploitation of poor and marginalized communities by affluent and influential groups.

Outwardly, despite differences in their approach to some of the issues at hand, Maoists and SPA partners are committed to work for democracy and the democratic process. But elements of mutual suspicion lurk just beneath the surface. At the press conference on Friday, the Maoist supremo said he was not out of woods yet, as far as conspiracies are concerned. He criticized the Nepalese army, which remained loyal to the king with a "royal" tag attached to its name until recently; he also cited a road accident resulting in the death of a charismatic communist leader, Madan Bhandari, 13 years ago.

Bhandari, a firebrand nationalist, was general secretary of a mainline but moderate communist party, and he and his traveling colleague died when their jeep skidded down a mountainous highway and plunged into the Narayani River in the central hills. At first, it was accepted as a road accident, but the incident later attracted a conspiratorial dimension. The jeep driver, who survived the accident, was shot dead in broad daylight in a Kathmandu suburb by unidentified gunmen. The case remains unsolved.

Political parties associated with the SPA too have their doubts about Maoists and their maneuvers. From the SPA's standpoint, the Maoists still are not a trustworthy, responsible political party. Their whole exercise could be a window-dressing, in essence a move to buy time to regroup so that they could launch another phase of guerrilla warfare to accomplish their goal of one-party rule in Nepal.

Their cadres, particularly in the countryside, have not stopped killings, abductions and extortions. Nobody knows for sure whether they have indeed closed their training camps and shelters in far-flung, isolated districts. They have not made any pledge to respond to public complaints about hundreds of people who have disappeared in Maoist camps. What about the state of relationship Prachanda conceded Maoists had with the palace? The press conference was told that all channels of contacts and communications were severed after Gyanendra imposed direct rule on Nepal on February 1, 2005. But can his words be taken at their face value? Doubts persist, at least among political analysts.

Kathmandu is in a state of flux, and New Delhi and Washington are watchful. A Maoist takeover of Nepal, a buffer zone between two Asian giants, could be destabilizing for the whole of South Asia. In spite of their growing contacts and the resultant thaw with China and Pakistan, Indians are quite unlikely to see Nepali Maoists in power as anyone other than China's friendly forces at their doorstep. Conversely, China would be highly sensitive to prospects of an Indian military presence in Nepal, which shares borders with Tibet. Chinese reactions to activities associated with "Free Tibet" campaigns, inspired and often funded by Western powers, have always been strong. A Chinese response to extreme situations remains unpredictable.

What is the way out, then? A viable course is to let Nepal grow as a democratic country with a vibrant civil society. No country with a competitive political process and with a government adopting policies and programs that are transparent can be a security threat to its neighbors or world peace.

If left-wing parties in India can take part in competitive politics, take power in some states and be an influential factor in the national parliament in New Delhi, why can't their Nepalese counterparts be encouraged to synchronize their activities to emerging trends and aspirations?

Nepal's chances of coming out of present phase uncertainty largely depend on the help it receives from its immediate neighbors and friends. And this help has to be in the form of helping Nepalis to help themselves.

"Keeping in view ... experiences with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, it is better that we keep away from the internal affairs of that country," said S Sudhakar Reddy, a member of the Indian parliament, after a visit to Nepal last month.

Hindu nationalists in secular India, too, need to realize that while Nepalis might remain keen to retain the character of a religion followed by the majority, they definitely are not in favor of giving Nepal the look of a theocratic state. The king of Nepal, even if he survives the ongoing whirlwind, cannot be a pope for Hindus.

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