

Political Pact With Maoists Could Checkmate King

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KATHMANDU, Nov 29 (IPS)- An alliance between Nepal's mainstream political parties and Maoist rebels brings hope of resolution to a crisis, brought on by King Gyanendra's Feb. 1 assumption of direct rule, citing the failure of democratically-elected governments to deal with a bloody, decade-old communist uprising.

The agreement between a seven-party coalition and the outlawed Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), to push for an interim constituent assembly--termed a "meeting point" for the former adversaries--carries the danger of a violent backlash by the palace that has the backing of the kingdom's armed forces.

Under the agreement, announced last week, the two sides agreed to end the armed conflict between the Maoists and the army by doing away with "autocratic" monarchy and establishing absolute democracy.

The rebels have committed to move ahead in a peaceful, new political current through this process. The agreement also speaks of the Maoists' commitment to institutionalising values of competitive, multi-party democracy, civil and fundamental rights, human rights and the rule of law.

"The party-rebel understanding is a historic and long-needed one, for the establishment of peace," Narayan Wagle, editor of Nepal's largest-selling daily 'Kantipur' and noted political analyst, told IPS.

"Ironically, it was King Gyanendra's coup (of Feb. 1) which made this possible," Wagle observed.

Devendra Raj Panday, a former minister who has served as chief of Transparency International's Nepal chapter, and is one of the stalwarts of the citizens' movement for restoration of democracy, said the agreement has instilled new hope for peace in the country.

Addressing a mass meet in Kathmandu, on Friday, Panday said a new constitution, formed through the planned constituent assembly, would address infirmities in the 1990 constitution which was drawn up when Nepal moved from absolute monarchy to a democratic polity.

Many crucial issues have, however, been glossed over by the new alliance, such as the future role of the monarchy, decommissioning of weapons by the rebels and the extension of the Maoist-declared unilateral ceasefire that expires on Dec. 2.

In an interview to pro-Maoist news portal, 'KrishnaSenOnline' on Nov. 24, the CPN-Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda (Mighty One), said breaking the ceasefire would not affect the "preliminary working unity" with the seven-party coalition.

Despite such thorny issues, editorials in the independent press hailed the understanding as a "breakthrough" and a "historic pact" for establishing peace.

India and the United States, countries which wield enormous clout in Nepal, have cautiously welcomed the pact which was made public on Nov. 22.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who is "studying" the agreement, has urged the Maoists to extend the ceasefire and the government to reciprocate it. He also reiterated his offer of help in resolving the crisis.

After initially protesting against the foreign-sponsored (India) "unholy" and "unnatural" deal on foreign soil (India), the government spokesperson and Minister for Information and Communications, Tanka Dhakal, issued a short press release on Nov. 24, saying that the government was "conscious towards any activity meant for establishing peace".

Dhakal's statement spoke of the government's belief that representative system could be practiced under the present constitution alone and reiterated the government's "strong determination" to conduct the elections (municipal and parliamentary).

Both these possibilities have been given a toss by the understanding reached between the mainstream parties and the outlawed rebels.

While the parties allege that the king has blatantly violated the constitution-- a product of the popular 'Jana Andolan' (People's Movement of 1990)-- and maintain that no elections can be free and fair under the king's rule, the Maoists have always wanted to scrap it.

Even as the parties and the Maoists were drawing up their pact in New Delhi, earlier this month, the government stepped up efforts to foil political rallies and demonstrations by the opposition throughout the kingdom-- from immobilising the party cadre-carrying vehicles to baton-charging the demonstrators.

Major political parties blame an "over ambitious" king for pushing the country back several decades and being an obstacle to peace, democracy and development and have vowed to cut down his powers.

Already, about 13,000 people have lost their lives since 1996 when the Maoists started their armed insurgency to overthrow monarchy in this landlocked kingdom sandwiched between two Asian giants-- China and India.

Much will now depend on how the king responds. With his near total isolation, the freezing of weapons supply by India, the U.S. and Britain and the people's desire for peace, the monarch will find it difficult to pursue his own 'war on terror' and perpetuate his direct rule.

"Obviously, the ball is in the king's court," said Wagle, who believes the king has no choice but to respond positively. "Confrontation or acceptance is up to the king but this is a golden opportunity for him to retract since the Maoists appear to accept some role for monarchy. If the king fails to respond positively, he will not only risk his own rule but the institution of monarchy itself," Wagle warned.

If the king retracts his "unconstitutional moves of Oct. 4, 2002 (dismissing an elected prime minister) and Feb. 1, 2005 (assuming absolute powers after dismissing an all-party government), he could still remain a constitutional monarch," said communist leader Madhav Kumar Nepal.

There is also disagreement on the procedure to set up a constituent assembly. While the parties want to reinstate the dissolved parliament first, form an all-party government, hold talks with the Maoists and then go for the constitution-making body, the Maoists have still not

accepted the demand for the restoration of the dissolved parliament.

The rebels prefer holding a national political convention, followed by an interim government which would conduct elections to the proposed constituent assembly. But the two sides have decided to hold further discussions to sort this out.

Although the Maoists have not made any commitment to surrendering their weapons, the parties and the Maoists have agreed to keep the rebel armed forces and the Royal Nepalese Army under the supervision of the U.N. or any other dependable international body during the elections for the constituent assembly.

In addition to these differences, the parties also wanted the Maoists to renounce violence completely but the 12-point agreement is silent on this.

All eyes are now on Gyanendra, who is returning to Nepal on Dec. 2 after a three-week foreign tour that covered a regional summit in Dhaka, the World Summit on Information Society in Tunis and a much-criticised African safari at tax-payers' expense.