

War by other means

By Ajai Sahni

The shift in Maoist strategy that had been emerging since June has now crystallized in what is evidently a tactical and for Kathmandu deeply unsettling unilateral declaration of ceasefire.

On September 3, Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, aka Prachanda, issued a media statement declaring a three-month truce under which the Maoists will not undertake any "offensive activities", but will "remain in a position of active defense and resist if there is an offensive from the side of "the enemy" (the government).

The Maoist chief also warned that if the government intensified its military offensive or expanded army bases by interpreting the Maoist move as "weakness", the ceasefire could be ended at any point.

Shortly thereafter, the Maoist spokesperson, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, made it clear that there was no prospect of peace talks between his party and the royal government clearly eliminating any possibility of actual resolution of the protracted insurgency by obviating negotiations with the most significant political and military entity in the country. Instead, he said, the Maoists would hold talks with the seven-party opposition alliance, members of civil society and the international community.

With this move, after months of an apparent impasse, a "false air of suspended animation", the Maoists have launched the next phase of their strategic advance, seeking a more complete polarization of political forces in Nepal, with King Gyanendra increasingly pitted against all others. Already, September 4 has seen large political demonstrations in Kathmandu, with police resorting to baton charges and tear-gassing to disperse crowds, culminating in the arrest of former prime minister and current president of the Nepali Congress (NC), Girija Prasad Koirala.

The present unilateral truce can be expected to herald a process of feverish overground mobilization and political activity, even as the Maoists continue with a process of quiet military recovery and consolidation. In this, the Maoists would exploit the persistent and widespread misconception that the insurgency "had to be eventually resolved through negotiations". In truth, a "resolution" is even now unfolding, as the king's position weakens and as the desperate political parties tentatively seek an alliance with the Maoists to engage in "democratic protests" against the king's seizure of power on February 1.

The Maoists had already secured a significant political consolidation with the opposition alliance, progressively diluting its stance on the monarchy as an "essential pillar" of Nepali politics. The monarchy is now infinitely more than it was before February 1 regarded as an anachronism, and the only relevant consideration remaining appears to be to define the terms of its dissolution.

The demand for a "republic" has moved from the radical Maoist camp squarely into the democratic mainstream. Indeed, protesting against King Gyanendra's participation in the UN General Assembly at New York on September 16, and demanding that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan disallow the "unconstitutional king" from speaking on behalf of Nepal, Koirala echoed the Marxists: "The days of the king are gone. Now his days at the throne are numbered, you can start counting his days."

A false dichotomy has often been created by analysts, between "military" and "political" solutions. But war, as Carl von Clausewitz remarked, is just "the continuation of politics by other means". What is being engineered in Nepal is, at once, both military and political, and there is not the remotest possibility of excluding one or the other from the evolving dynamic.

The current ceasefire is a link in a chain of initiatives that seeks the de facto transformation of the prevailing equation of power and of the status of the rebel group in Nepal, and this is consistent with the circumstances that have emerged out of each phase of "peaceful negotiations" in the past. The success of this strategy of a tactical truce on earlier occasions is demonstrable, though it remains widely and wilfully ignored within a political constituency that remains apparently unaware of the dangers of a "false peace". It is of crucial importance to note that this truce is a Maoist decision. Both war and peace are now conditions imposed by them, demonstrating fairly clearly where the initiative and control is located in the present conflict. This confirms further the emerging patterns that were differently manifested in Prachanda's call to the political parties to join in the "historic movement" to bring "an end to the despotic monarchy". As for the feeble and fractious political parties, all they have sought in return for their emerging alliance with the Maoists is an assurance that their cadres will not be attacked and, as former prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa of the Rashtriya Janashakti Party expressed it, that the Maoists do not to use this ceasefire period to consolidate their strength or extort money, as they did during two periods of "peace" in the past (2001 and 2003).

There is another significant aspect to the current change of strategic direction it appears to have at least an implicit Indian catalyst, and is believed to have emerged from the "consultations" between leaders of India's left parties, partners in the ruling coalition at Delhi, and the top Maoist leadership, which was brought to the Indian capital under obvious intelligence cover in May. The king's obduracy has been substantially to blame for the evolving shift in the Indian position (this is still to consolidate itself into declared national policy, and there are polarized factions within the Indian policy community that are advocating diametrically conflicting approaches), and there would also have been some pressure from the left.

The argument increasingly heard in Indian intelligence and policy circles is that you simply have to deal with the Maoists their power is a fact and there are no credible political forces in Nepal that could provide any effective policy option. Within the prevailing circumstances, the Maoists cannot be neutralized, nor is there a stable alternative, with sufficient popular legitimacy in Kathmandu, that could be supported within the context of a protracted war. There is, moreover, a belief that a prolonged process of negotiations and possible participation of the Maoists in the political order or political processes in Kathmandu will moderate the orientation of at least some of their leaders and transform their goals.

If anything, King Gyanendra has lent himself further to the process of Maoist consolidation in Nepal, forcing the hapless political parties into Prachanda's arms. Even as he sought to destroy their freedoms and political base, Gyanendra presented the parties with a stark choice between his autocratic and unconstitutional rule and "the terrorists", declaring that "the parties are talking about negotiation and alliance [with the Maoists]. They must be clear about their position on terrorism." Having painted himself into a corner as far as all his potential "natural allies", both within the country and in the international community, are concerned, the king now stands utterly isolated unless he chooses an uncharacteristic and dramatic retreat from positions he has intransigently held since his takeover on February 1.

For those who see in the Maoist ceasefire an offer in good faith of peaceful or political resolution, it is of vital importance to note that the announcement came within two days of a joint statement by the Nepalese and Indian Maoists (under the signature of Prachanda and Ganapathy, the general secretary of the central committee of the Communist Party of India Maoist) reiterating their "pledge to fight unitedly till the entire conspiracies hatched by the imperialists and reactionaries are crushed and the people's cause of socialism and communism are established in Nepal, India and all over the world".

The vaunting rhetoric of the joint declaration must not detract from the fact that these groups have separately sustained these objectives in a protracted war that has continuously afflicted parts of India for at least 25 years and with interruptions and under different organizational structures has been ongoing for the better part of half a century in certain areas and that has been inflicted continuously for nine years on Nepal.

The Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is still staggering under the consequences of an ill-considered period of a false peace and a deceitful process of "negotiations", which the Maoists exploited to further consolidate their position both within Andhra and in neighboring states, before they unleashed a campaign of escalating violence.

The Maoists are currently at the point of their widest influence in this region and are continuously experiencing rising successes and extensions of their areas of operation. It is altogether delusional to expect that, at this historical moment, they would accept any dilution of their objectives, or can, in any measure, be distracted from their strategy of protracted war by the weak blandishments and importunities of politically marginalized parties in Nepal, or by the patternless plotting of vacillating states and their agencies that cannot even begin to consistently define the outcome they seek to secure in the tormented Himalayan kingdom.

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