

**THE MAOIST INSURGENCY OF NEPAL:  
ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION**

S.D. MUNI

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# **The Maoist Insurgency of Nepal: Origin and Evolution**

S.D. Muni<sup>1</sup>

‘More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia’ is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of ‘Maoist movements’ in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme, and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the seventh paper in this series.

## **Abstract**

*Nepalese revolutions, both at the apex and the grassroots, have been characterised by violence. The paper examines the rise of Maoism in Nepal, which was influenced by India’s Naxal movement of the 1960s. In Nepal’s eastern Terai region of Jhapa, sections of communists experimented with the Maoist concept of ‘people’s war’ by unsuccessfully taking up arms in May 1971. The end of the cultural revolution and the demise of Mao Tse-tung resulted in a split between the Maoists, echoes of which can still be heard. Although the decade long ‘people’s war’ fought by the Maoists brought about the downfall of the monarchy in 2006, a clear vision for making their revolution a success still eludes them. The paper examines factors that have fuelled the Maoist insurgency, including poverty, illiteracy, scarce economic opportunities and increasing economic disparities.*

## **Introduction**

Violence has played a significant role in Nepal’s political history. Both the bloody struggle for power at the apex level and violent resistance against the state at the grassroots level have given decisive turns to Nepali politics. Two of the landmark events smeared in blood at the apex level were: (i) in 1846, the Kot massacre led to the establishment of the Rana dynasty that ruled Nepal as hereditary prime ministers for more than a 100 years, reducing monarchy into a decorated paralysed institution, and (ii) in June 2001, the Narayanhiti (Royal Palace) massacre changed the character of monarchy and led to its eventual elimination in 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor S.D. Muni is Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at National University of Singapore. He can be reached at [isassdm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassdm@nus.edu.sg). The views reflected in the paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

At the grassroots level, there is a long history of peasant revolts in Nepal. They date back to the early 1770s when the Gorkha conquests were still in the process of consolidation. The Rais, the Murmis and the Limbus of the eastern Nepal fought against the Gorkhali forces and later even joined the Chinese in this fight.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, the Murmis, Rais, Gurungs, Magars and Kiratis rose in revolt against the Nepali state for over 150 years between 1793 and 1950.<sup>3</sup> In 1951, King Tribhuvan of Nepal himself led a movement against the autocratic Ranacracy, wherein he was supported by the armed revolt of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal. This movement laid down the foundations of a democratic polity under constitutional monarchy in Nepal, but the armed revolts against the state did not come to an end. Soon after the end of the Ranacracy, during 1951-53, the ousted extremist Ranas who had formed *Gorkha Dal* revolted against the new government, followed by the group of Nepali Congress militants and peasants who took up arms under the leadership of Dr K.I. Singh and Bhim Dutta Pant.<sup>4</sup>

The experiment to build a constitutional monarchy came to an end in December 1960 when the then King Mahendra in a coup dismissed an elected Nepali Congress government and the parliament to establish his direct control over the polity. The Nepali Congress took up arms against the King's rule during the early 1960s. This resistance was suppressed, but armed protests by the Nepali Congress continued to erupt as part of their long struggle for democracy until the end of the King-dominated *Panchayat* system in 1991. In this struggle, the Nepali Congress had procured arms through their clandestine sources in India where they also sought refuge and shelter to escape the King's repression, using the open border operating between India and Nepal under the Treaty of 1950.

The foundations of the communist movement in Nepal were established in 1947 with the formation of the Communist Party of Nepal. It had joined hands with the Nepali Congress in fighting the Ranacracy, but could not build its strength until the beginning of the 1970s. The ideological division in the international communist movement during the 1960s (the Sino-Soviet split) and the polarisation of Monarchy versus Nepali Congress conflict within Nepal kept the communists divided and fragmented. There were nearly 20 big and small communist groups in Nepal by the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> No major armed struggle was launched by these communist factions except

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<sup>2</sup> M.C. Regmi, *Imperial Gorkha* (New Delhi: Adroit Publications, 1999), p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Harka Gurung, 'Rastriyata re rajniti' (nationality and politics), in May des Chene and Pratyoush Onta (eds), *Nepal ko Sandarbha ma Samaj Shastriya Chintan (Social Science thoughts in the context of Nepal)* (Lalitpur, Nepal: Himal Books, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For some details see Deepak Thapa, 'Tackling Insurgency: The Nepal Case', in S.D. Muni (ed.), *Responding to Terrorism in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Narayan Khadka, 'Factionalism in the Communist Movement in Nepal', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.68, no.1 (Spring 1995), pp.55-76.

for the Maoists. In a lighter vein, many of these communist groups were termed in Nepal as the King's communists.

## **Rise of the Maoists**

Maoism in Nepal was inspired by India's Naxalite movement (northeast Naxalbari district area) that emerged during the late 1960s in the context of Cultural Revolution in China. Some of the radical groups among the communists decided to experiment with the Maoist concept of 'people's war' by taking up arms in Nepal's eastern Terai region of Jhapa in May 1971. This is popularly known as the Jhapali revolt in Nepal's political history. The revolt was soon suppressed by ruthless police action. The failure of the revolt, which was followed by the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Mao Tse-Tung's death in 1976 led to serious ideological churning among the radical communists of Nepal, particularly among leaders like Pushpa Lal Shrestha (who had established the Communist Party of Nepal in 1947) and relatively younger leaders like Mohan Bikram Singh and Nirmal Lama. While Pushpa Lal remained committed to the traditional communist line willing to fight against the monarchy through communist unity and in collaboration with other parliamentary parties like Nepali Congress, Singh and Lama remained committed to armed struggle. But they split up in 1983-84 when Lama accepted the line of China's post-Mao leadership (i.e. Deng Xiaoping) while Singh continued to stick to the Maoists' methods. The young radical members of the Mohan Bikram Singh group included Baburam Bhattarai, Mohan Vaidya and Pushpa Kamal Dahal. These are the leaders of the present Communist party of Nepal (Maoists), as it was named in 1994 after their break from Singh through a series of splits and mergers.<sup>6</sup>

The ideological issues of mass struggle in Nepal were at the root of numerous splits and mergers among the Maoists. They were oscillating between the methods of radical mass movement and Mao's 'people's war'. During both the students' struggle of 1979-80, which led to referendum on the *Panchayat* system and the first *Jan Andolan* (people's movement) of 1989-90, the Maoists of Nepal joined the Nepali Congress and the parliamentary communist groups to advance the 'mass struggle'. They, however, did not fully endorse the outcome of the first *Jan Andolan* which demolished the *Panchayat* system and the absolute monarchy and restored constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democracy. Their constant ideological emphasis was on securing an elected Constituent Assembly to craft a people's democratic order for Nepal. Accordingly, they decided to pursue a dual strategy of playing the parliamentary game, while also preparing for the

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<sup>6</sup> See S.L. Mikesell, *Class, State and Struggle in Nepal* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1999); Arjun Karki and David Seddon, 'The People's War in Historical Context', in Arjun Karki and David Seddon (eds.), *The Peoples War in Nepal: Left Perspectives* (Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2003).

‘people’s war’.<sup>7</sup> The Maoists fought a fierce people’s war for a decade from 1996-2006 that eventually led to the elimination of monarchy, but there has never been a final and lasting ideological resolution among them on the most appropriate strategy for the success of their revolution.

The Maoist insurgency of Nepal has been a product of its socio-economic and political context. Economically, Nepal is one of the poorest countries in South Asia. At the end of Ranacracy, 85 per cent of employment and income were dependent on agriculture and less than 25 per cent of the population was literate. The monarchy was using the state for *rentier* purposes without initiating any development. For thirty years from the King’s takeover in 1960 to the success of the first *Jan Andolan* in 1990, Nepal’s GDP (gross domestic product) grew at an average of 1.5 per cent per annum.<sup>8</sup> Two of its major resources, the hydropower potential and tourism, remained unharnessed for political considerations. Land ownership remained archaic to reinforce feudal dominance. People migrated to India and other countries for livelihood providing a political cushion to monarchy.<sup>9</sup> Hope was generated in 1990 with the success of the first *Jan Andolan*. But, the dominance of politics without concern for development and the disappointing role of the democratic leadership as well as monarchy soon frustrated these hopes. Socially, a deep divide exists between the dominant castes (Brahmins, Chetries and Newars) and the marginalised nationalities.<sup>10</sup> Another cleavage between the dominant *Paharis* (hill people) and the *Madeshi/Terians* (lower flat-land people) has operated for decades. Madeshi people claimed that though they constitute nearly 50 per cent of Nepal’s population, their share in administration, army, business and governance is negligible.<sup>11</sup>

The socio-economic and political context of Nepal created conditions for the Maoists insurgency to emerge, but the causal relationship between the two becomes clear only when we look at the anatomy of this insurgency closely. The Maoists’ ‘people’s war’ was launched in February 1996 in Nepal’s mid-west region constituted by Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot, Salyan and Gorkha districts of the Rapti Zone. The Maoists also included Sindhuli district in the mid-east region in this

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Hutt (ed.), *Himalayan People’s War: Nepal Maoist Rebellion* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004). (Specially see the Chapters by Michael Hutt, *Monarchy, Democracy and Maoism in Nepal*, Deepak Thapa, *Radicalism and Emergence of the Maoists* and Sudheer Sharma, *The Maoist movement: An Evolutionary perspective*. Also see Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Kumar Pahari (eds), *The Maoist Insurgency In Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty-first Century* (UK: Routledge Oxon, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Sujeev Shakya, *Unleashing Nepal: Past, Present and Future of the Economy* (India: Penguin Books, 2009), p.50.

<sup>9</sup> Dr Baburam Bhattarai, who is now the second ranking Maoist leader, has been making this argument since the late 1970s. For his analysis of Nepal’s developmental dilemma, see Baburam Bhattarai, *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Harka Gurung, *op.cit*. Also see Pitamber Sharma, *Unravelling The Mosaic: Spatial aspects of ethnicity in Nepal* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Himal Books, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Fredrick H. Gaige, *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); International Crisis Group ‘Nepal’s Troubled Terai Region’, *Asia Report #1* (July 2007); Jason Malik, ‘Nepal’s Terai: Constructing An Ethnic Conflict’, *South Asia Briefing paper #1* (Peace Research Institute of Oslo, 2009).

launch. The mid-west region is a typical representative of Nepal's socio-economic context where the Maoists established the base of the 'people's war' in Rolpa and Rukum districts. These two districts have been a traditional stronghold of the communist since 1950 in Nepal. These districts have remained one of the most under-developed parts of Nepal. The first road was laid in this region in 2003. Only 10 per cent of the land in these districts is arable. *Hashish*, which grew in abundance in this area formed an important source of livelihood, besides migration and recruitment in Indian and British armies. But, in 1976, the government banned 'production, distribution and sale' of *hashish* leading to considerable economic hardships for the inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>

The objective conditions of economic hardships were fuelled by additional factors to generate a strong sense of deprivation and neglect among the people of this area. Two of the royal princesses, the sisters of King Birendra and Gyanendra, were married to the feudal lords of Rukum and Rolpa. The regional royal families prospered on Kathmandu's patronage and lived in comfortable urban environs without ever paying any attention to the development of this region. A US\$50 million Rapti Integrated Development Project run by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which otherwise benefitted many in the neighbouring districts, had no impact on Rolpa and Rukum. The development project could not reach these districts due to total absence of transport and communication access.<sup>13</sup> The result of this was a creeping sense of inequality and discrimination among the people of Rolpa and Rukum. It is this sense of inequality, which had more to do with the rise of insurgency than simply the poor level of development.<sup>14</sup> If seen only in terms of the level of development, the far flung districts of Karnali Zone could be a better theatre for the initial burst of the insurgency. In fact the people in Rolpa and Rukum had their days of comfortable, if not prosperous living, when they had freedom to grow and sell *hashish*. The drift in their economic prospects after the ban on this vocation, added to by years of indifference on the part of the Nepali state, stirred among them a resolve to revolt.

The economic deprivation and inequality of the people of mid-west was reinforced by their social marginalisation. Most of the inhabitants of the districts were Magars, who constituted seven per cent of Nepal's population, the largest single minority. Being in a remote and inaccessible part of the Kingdom, they were not integrated into the mainstream national life and

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Gersony, 'Western Nepal Conflict Assessment: History & Dynamics of the Maoist Revolt', *Mercy Corps: Be the Change*, (September 2003), [www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/file1137793491.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/file1137793491.pdf) 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Fran Moore, 'A Spatial Analysis of the Causal Factors of Nepal's Maoist Insurgency', *ES 103-Spatial Analysis of Social and Environmental Systems* (May 2006), [www.docstoc.com/docs/2413244/A-Spatial-Analysis-of-the-Causal-Factots-of-Nepal%E2%82%AC%99%E2%82%BF%BDS-Maoist](http://www.docstoc.com/docs/2413244/A-Spatial-Analysis-of-the-Causal-Factots-of-Nepal%E2%82%AC%99%E2%82%BF%BDS-Maoist). Also see M. Mansood Murshid and Scott Gates, 'Spatial-Horizontal Inequality and the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal', *Review of Development Economics*, Vol.9, no.1 (February 2005), pp.121-134.

the state never really governed them. The Magars living here speak Kham, which is distinct from the Magar mainstream language. Even during the creation of modern Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Magars did not get fully subjugated, nursing in their subconscious mind, an aspiration for autonomy, if not sovereign independence.<sup>15</sup> Rolpa and Rukum also had exposure to Christianity. They believe in their own form of 'animism' and did not quite feel identified with the Hindu character of Nepal's Monarchical State.<sup>16</sup>

These economic and social factors, added to political isolation and marginalisation, had facilitated strong communist activities in this part of Nepal. The Maoists had carefully studied the political economy as well as topography of mid-western Nepal, while deciding to launch their 'people's war' and make it a base of their 'revolutionary' operations. The party documents adopted at the Third Plenum of the Central Committee in March 1995, describing the 'strategy and tactics of armed struggle in Nepal', clearly took note of the 'conscious peasant class struggle developed in the western hill districts, particularly Rolpa and Rukum. It represents the high level of anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle. That struggle has given birth to some new tendencies in the Nepali communist movement, which have inspired us to be more serious about the business of armed struggle'.<sup>17</sup> Later in an interview to Li Onesto of 'Revolutionary Worker' in 1999, the Maoist chief Prachanda said:

*The west is historically, geographically and culturally the core of the revolution. It is the main starting point for the revolution – the people here are more oppressed by the ruling classes and the government in Kathmandu is very far from here...*

*...masses of the Western region were not so much under the control of the ruling government, and they did not care what the government did or did not do...in Western Nepal, there are the Mongoloid ethnic groups... These nationalities are so sincere and such brave fighters – historically they have had this kind of culture. Upper caste chauvinism and feudal ties do not prevail among these nationalities.*<sup>18</sup>

## **Beyond Rolpa and Rukum**

The significance of Rukum and Rolpa in the launching of the Maoists 'people's war' should be seen in the larger context of economic underdevelopment, socio-cultural marginalisation and

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<sup>15</sup> Mercy Corps report, *op.cit.*, pp.26-30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Some scholars have also identified alienation of the tribal groups from Hindu State as a factor in the rise of Maoists in Nepal. Philippe Ramirez, 'Pour une anthropologie religieuse du maoïsme népalais' (In French) *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, Vol.42, no.99 (July-September 1997), pp.47-68.

<sup>17</sup> As cited in Karki and Seddon, no.5, p.18.

<sup>18</sup> The full text of the interview can be found in [www.mcs.net/~rwor/a/v21/1040-049/1043/interv.htm](http://www.mcs.net/~rwor/a/v21/1040-049/1043/interv.htm).

political exclusion of a large number of social groups in the whole of Nepal. Besides Magars, who inhabited Rolpa and Rukum, there were a number of other ethnic minorities like Tamangs, Gurungs, Rais, Limbus, Kirats, Tharus and marginalised caste groups like Dalits (untouchables), scattered all over Nepal, in the hills as well as in Terai. The yearnings of these people for a respectable place in the country's social, economic and political system were gaining momentum gradually with the rise of awareness, identity consciousness and aspirations for better life. These excluded groups, including the Madheshis, constituted more than 70 per cent of Nepal's population. These excluded people have been asking for their rights and accommodation over the years as reflected in the political turbulence and agitation for democracy since the 1930s. It was the failure of monarchy and of the democratic leadership, which created conditions for the rise of the Maoists as leaders of a new struggle for change. Writing in 2003 on the 'political economy of the People's War', the Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai said:

*The process of the People's War is a link in a chain of just such a continuous revolution in Nepal to solve its current economic and social problems. The principal objective and rationale of the people's war in Nepal is, thus to develop the social productive forces and create a higher form of society through a continuous revolution of the base and the super structure by putting 'politics in command'.<sup>19</sup>*

Accordingly, the Maoists' agenda for Nepal's socio-economic transformation was not devoid of the goal of assuming power and changing its political structure.

The question may be raised here of the timing of the 'people's war' in 1996, though the Maoist groups have been involved in political processes since the 1970s. The factors that triggered the insurgency may be taken note of. It has been mentioned earlier that the Maoists did not accept the outcome of the 1989-90 *Jan Andolan-I* ('people's movement'). But, they decided to contest the 1991 parliamentary elections and managed to secure a noticeable presence in the democratically elected parliament with nine seats and the status as the third largest party, though way behind the two mainstream parties, i.e. the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (ML) (later renamed as United Marxist Leninist - UML). They mobilised civil servants and other professional groups to agitate for their demands against the government, but these agitations were put down strongly and both the dominant parties got almost united in treating the Maoists shabbily in and outside the parliament.<sup>20</sup> Then came the fall of the government in 1994 and announcement of new elections. The Maoist groups got split on the question of elections, with one group led by Prachanda and Baburam, denied recognition by the Election Commission. This group contested its de-recognition and eventually won their case in Nepal courts, but by

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<sup>19</sup> See his Chapter in Karki and Seddon, *op.cit.*, p.164.

<sup>20</sup> Deepak Thapa, 'The Maobadi of Nepal', in K.M. Dixit and S. Ramachandran (eds), *State of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2002).



then elections were over. This group having been treated ruthlessly by the state was in any case not for participating in the election, but the Election Commission's unsustainable denial of recognition added to their alienation from parliamentary politics.

It is true that the Maoists had entered parliament as a part of their 'two line struggle' of working for revolution and yet participating in the parliamentary processes at the same time. Their participation in parliament, being a cover for their 'revolutionary' zeal and strategy, was no indication of their lack of commitment to the 'people's war'. But, if the Maoists could be encouraged and accommodated in their parliamentary politics by the other mainstream parties and treated as legitimate partners in political dynamics in the interest of constructive democratic evolution and consolidation in Nepal, their recourse to the 'people's war' in 1996 could have at least been delayed, and in the long run, perhaps gradually weakened. There was a constant debate within the Maoist groups on strategy and tactics as well as also on the timing of the 'people's war'. This debate could have been deepened and those pleading for a people's struggle within the framework of peaceful parliamentary politics strengthened if the Maoists' agitational politics and mobilisation could be spared strong-arm methods. It may not be far off the mark to say that ruthless police operations during 1994-95, particularly the operation code named as 'Romeo' in 1995, not only reinforced the Maoists' resolve to launch the 'people's war', but also enabled them to swell their ranks by recruiting young cadres and gaining sympathies of large sections of people all over Nepal. The Human Rights Year Book of Nepal for 1995 listed the gory details of the police oppression.<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the 'Operation Romeo' in Rolpa, the Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai said in a press interview in December 1995:

*Around 1,500 policemen...have been deployed to let loose a reign of terror against the poor peasants...there has been indiscriminate ransacking and looting of properties of common people by the ruling party hoodlums under the protection of the police force. More than 10,000 rural youth, out of a population of 200,000 for the whole district, have been forced to flee their homes and take shelter in remote jungles.*<sup>22</sup>

This repression led the Maoists to submit a charter of 40 demands to the government in February 1996 giving 10 days to respond. But even before the expiry of the deadline, the 'people's war' was launched. Yet, another ruthless police operation on an extended scale covering 18 Maoist infested districts in 1998, code named 'Kilo Sierra-2', further facilitated the Maoists in getting new recruits and enhanced public support and sympathy. It helped them to spread their 'people's war' into an increasing number of Nepal's districts, reaching 45 out of a total of 75 districts by 2001.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Thapa, *Ibid.*

The repression unleashed by the government against the Maoists could have been bloodier if the army had been deployed against them. However, King Birendra did not let this happen. There were a number of considerations in the King's firm resistance to the use of army against the Maoists. Deploying army against the Maoists under the leadership of a political party-led government would have meant a dilution of the King's own power base, as the party could get access to and influence over the Royal Army's command structure. He was also averse to escalating the civil war which would have resulted from the army's deployment. As the use of the army would have been on a long term basis, this would also have meant strengthening of the army and incurring more expenses. The escalation of conflict with ruthlessness of the army would also have resulted in unpopularity of the King among the affected people. King Birendra, known for his comparatively liberal views, emphasised a political approach. He established clandestine contacts with the Maoists through his younger brother Dhirendra and even arranged to have talks with them. The Maoist leader Prachanda disclosed it years later in 2010, when he said: 'Birendra's youngest brother Dhirendra was in touch with us and we were to start direct talks with him within a month with the request to abdicate his throne and become the country's first president. He was killed in this backdrop'.<sup>23</sup> Analysts in Nepal also attribute King Birendra's reluctance to the deployment of army against the Maoists as a reflection of his frustration with the way the political parties were managing the insurgency. The possibility of him making deft use of the Maoist insurgency to weaken and discredit the political parties also cannot be ruled out. The Maoists deeply lamented the assassination of King Birendra and his family and took out public demonstrations to sympathise with him and other victims of the palace massacre. The Maoist leader, Baburam Bhattarai, in a published open letter after the sixth day of the Royal massacre said:

*Whatever your political ideology might be, one thing every honest Nepali nationalist has to agree with is this: King Birendra's liberal political ideology and his patriotism were seen as his weaknesses and had become a crime in the eyes of the expansionist and imperialist powers... his unwillingness to mobilise the army – which has a tradition of loyalty towards the King – to curb the People's revolution taking place under the leadership of the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) became his biggest crime... Some Marxist pundits, based on this, called us a pro-monarchist party, and we can now say that we – NCP (Maoist) and King Birendra – had similar views on many national issues and this had created in fact an informal alliance between us.<sup>24</sup>*

This 'informal alliance' between the King and the Maoists changed into an unmitigated antipathy under the new King Gyanendra. Permission to deploy the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) against the Maoists was granted by the new King in September 2001. Taking advantage of the changed

<sup>23</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, (10 January 2010).

<sup>24</sup> *Kantipur*, (6 June 2001).

international context after 9/11, where international community supported strong anti-terrorism methods, King Gyanendra resolved to militarily eliminate the Maoists and assume greater powers in the name of fighting terrorism. In this process, he also wanted to sideline the political parties, as since 2002 he increasingly took control of the administration directly into his hands leading eventually to his coup in February 2005.

It was this use of army against the Maoists that made the RNA and the Maoists enemies. There were no indications of hostility between them until the end of King Birendra's regime in 2001. Initially, the RNA fared badly against the Maoists. It had never been exposed to a resolute and well organised ideological rebellion. In the 23 operations listed between November 2001 and December 2002, the Maoists claimed success against the RNA in all except three or four.<sup>25</sup> In these operations, they had destroyed the army camps and even captured many of their weapons. The army therefore had to be expanded and heavily equipped. Its strength reached almost 100,000 by April 2006, when the *Jan Andolan-II* eventually brought the Maoist insurgency to an end. But the enhanced strength also did not result in the RNA's victory over the Maoists. At best, it created a stalemate, where army could defend its cantonments only, without stirring out to challenge the Maoists in rural or urban areas. On their part, the Maoists perfected the tactics of paralysing the movement of goods and people on the main road network of Nepal and creation of chaos in the country. The hostility between the two precipitated the issue of 'civilian supremacy' and equal treatment of the Maoists People's Liberation Army and the RNA. This issue has vitiated the whole peace process in Nepal and, if not resolved soon, threatens to restart the insurgency as we shall see later.

An important factor in building up the Maoist insurgency and carrying forward their 'people's war' was the nature of leadership. We have noted that the beginning of the Maoist movement in Nepal took place in the early 1970s in the context of the Chinese Cultural revolution and the rise of Naxal revolt in India. The internal ideological and leadership conflicts kept the Nepal Maoists preoccupied for the first decade. Prachanda admits that by 1985, he and his associates had the clarity that their struggle should be waged on the basis of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideas.<sup>26</sup> The present leaders of the Maoist movement stand out distinctly from their predecessors in two areas, namely intellectual sharpness and ideological resilience. The present Maoist leaders, at least the top duo of Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai, are better educated. While Prachanda completed his graduation in agricultural science, Baburam after obtaining an engineering degree, did his PhD at India's Jawaharlal Nehru University. The intellectual agility and higher educational levels of this leadership have enabled them to engage with a diversity of contacts and ideas, both within and outside Nepal. This in turn has helped them to broaden their approach and imbibe the

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<sup>25</sup> *The Worker*, a Maoist organ has listed these operations. See S.D. Muni, *Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: The Challenge and the Response, Annexure III* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2003), pp. 88-89.

<sup>26</sup> Prachanda's interview with Li Onesto, *op.cit.*

lessons learnt from this exposure in carrying their movement forward. It has also enabled them to cast the requirements of their movement to adjust with the prevailing regional and international context within which Nepal is placed, as also the internal socio-economic dynamics that impinges on their political objectives.

The second notable character of the present Maoist leadership is their ideological resilience and strategic pragmatism. Most of their predecessors had remained stuck to the dogmas of Marxist and Leninist thought without relating these thoughts to Nepal's internal and external realities. They also believed in preparing fool-proof plans before launching substantial and decisive actions, in turn keeping them static in their proposed struggle. The present leadership analysed the failure of the communist movements and learning from them has tried to evolve a synthesis of the ideal and the real; the praxis of thought and action, in the classical Marxist sense. Explaining his approach to 'people's war', Prachanda said:

*...we must also learn war by waging war. The intellectuals' instinctive tendency is that we have to learn all these things, we should read everything,... and then we can make war. These kinds of tendencies were there right from the beginning. But we said, no, this is not Maoism. This is not Marxism. This is not dialectical materialism...The issue is of learning war through war itself.*<sup>27</sup>

A couple of years later, in 2001, he added:

*In our opinion, the real key to rapid development of the People's War is the fusion between the science of proletarian revolution, on the one hand, and the needs and fighting spirit of the Nepalese people, on the other.*<sup>28</sup>

The ideological resilience and pragmatism is also in the definition of their ideological exposition in the form of *Prachanda Path* (Prachanda Line) that goes beyond Marxist-Leninist-Maoist straitjacket. Prachanda described *Prachanda Path* as 'enrichment of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism' and 'a new example of creative Marxism, opposed to both, the right revisionists and sectarian dogmatists'.<sup>29</sup> Though this amounted to ego projection and bragging on the part of the leader, it nonetheless synergised their Marxist ideology with Nepali nationalism and added a typical popular flavour and appeal to the movement. The ideological resilience and pragmatism also enabled them to play the Marxists' concept like 'united front' and 'two line struggle' for forging alliances and tactical equations with all sorts of contradictory forces, ranging from monarchy to the multi-party proponents. Consistency has not really been the ideological virtue

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<sup>27</sup> Prachanda's interview to Li Onesto, *op.cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Interview to RIM magazine, 'A World to Win' (May 28, 2001). Text in Karki and Seddon, *op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.276.

for the present Maoist leadership. The strength of this approach has been evident in their success in bringing together diverse marginalised social groups under their struggle and secure support from their known adversaries, howsoever tactical and short-lived this support might have been proved. It moved their movement and political goals ahead. A significant contribution of their pragmatic approach can be seen in the involvement of women in their struggle in a big way. Almost 30 per cent of their cadres have been women and this strengthened the movement in several respects.<sup>30</sup> It has brought gender equality to the forefront of New Nepal's political agenda.

The new Maoist leadership has, however, not been free from internal tensions and rivalries. These tensions have manifested on issues of ideology and tactics, on united front allies and adversaries.<sup>31</sup> A serious ideological and personality cleavage exists between the Maoist supremo Prachanda and his better educated and ideologically grounded deputy, Baburam Bhattarai. This cleavage has erupted periodically, at times threatening to split the movement vertically. Some of Prachanda's close associates have also resisted the rise of Baburam Bhattarai within the organisation to preserve their own respective places around the party chief. The party has managed to keep the organisational unity largely because Baburam Bhattarai does not seem to have a stronger push for power or personality projection.

### **The External Dimension**

Nepal's Maoist insurgency was considerably helped by the external factor. As noted above, the new Maoist leadership was induced to establish wider contacts and learning from their external exposure. Their first contacts were with the Indian Naxalites in 1970s as noted earlier. But the new Maoist leadership has expanded these contacts and there have been reports that Prachanda played a significant role in facilitating the merger of India's Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and the People's War Group. The Nepal Maoists also established close contacts with the Nepali diaspora (eight to 10 million strong), in pursuance of their political agenda. These contacts with the Naxalites and the Nepali diaspora substantially helped the Maoists in ensuring shelter and 'safe havens', procuring arms, training and mobilising financial support in India. Way back in 1985, they were among the founding fathers of the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), which aimed at networking with the radical left movements all over the world. This brought the Nepal Maoists into the contact of Peruvian communist and led them to study and

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<sup>30</sup> Com. Parvati, *Women's Participation in the People's War*, in Karki and Seddon, *op.cit.* Also see, Hisila Yami, 'Women's Role in the Nepalese Movement: Making a People's Constitution', *Monthly Review* (8 March 2010), <http://mzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/yami080310.html>. For the tensions arising from the large women cadres in the movement, see Rita Manchanda, 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalizing Gender Narratives', *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol.16, no. 2-3 (Sage Publications, 2004), pp.237-258.

<sup>31</sup> For details see, ICG Reports, 'Nepal Maoists: Their Aims, Structure and Strategy', *Asia Report No. 104* (27 October 2005); and 'Nepal's Maoists: Purists Or Pragmatists?', *Asia Report No. 132* (18 May 2007).

imbibe ideas from Shining Path. In some ways, inspiration for evolving its own ideological trade mark and naming it as *Prachanda Path* came from the Nepali Maoists' interaction with the Peruvian Communist Party. The Nepal Maoists also took initiative in bringing the South Asian Maoist groups onto one platform by establishing the Coordination Committee of the Maoists Parties of South Asia (CCOMPSA) in July 2001. There have been annual meetings of CCOMPSA since then to take a collective position on some of the regional and global issues. Explaining the advantages of all these external contacts and their role in advancing the Maoist movement in Nepal, Prachanda said:

*... there was consistent international involvement. First and foremost, there was the RIM (Revolutionary International Movement) Committee...From the RIM Committee, we gained the experience of the PCP (Communist Party of Peru) and of the two line struggle there, and also we shared experience in Turkey, in Iran, in the Philippines. We learned from the experience in Bangladesh and from some of the experience in Sri Lanka. There was a South Asian Conference in which we participated. At the same time we were also having direct and continuous debate with the Indian communists, mainly the People's War (PW) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) groups. All of this helped in one way or another; it helped us to understand the whole process of People's War.*<sup>32</sup>

The Nepal Maoists went beyond the communist and Maoist groups in seeking support and establishing linkages in the interest of their struggle. After a careful analysis of the changing international and regional strategic context that had become strongly oriented towards anti-terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, the Maoists sought to differentiate themselves from the 'terrorist groups'. For this, they wrote letters to various heads of states in the United States (US), Europe and also to the United Nations Secretary General. They also tried to reach highest levels in the government of India to explain their political goals and ensure the Indian government that they would desist from doing anything against India's vital interests.<sup>33</sup> This international mobilisation of support was essentially prompted by the fears that King Gyanendra was seeking military support from the US and the United Kingdom (UK) to defeat their 'people's war', invoking the post-9/11 context of counter-terrorism. Support and understanding was secured in India, not only from the government but also political parties, intellectuals and civil society members. This proved critical in fighting against King Gyanendra's autocratic moves and in leading to the success of the *Jan Andolan-II*, launched by the Maoists in alliance with the mainstream political parties of Nepal. The success of the *Jan Andolan-II* in April 2006, marked the culmination, or at least a radical transformation of the 'people's war'.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Li Onesto, *op.cit.*

<sup>33</sup> See S.D. Muni, 'Bringing Maoists Down from the Hill: India's Role', in David Malone and others, *Conflict Resolution in Nepal* (Forthcoming edited volume).

## Unfolding of the Insurgency

Nepal's Maoist insurgency has unfolded gradually in various stages. These stages were influenced by the broader dynamics of Nepali politics and the changing regional and international strategic parameters. The first stage, from the beginning of 1970 to 1985, was of the Jhapali revolt as mentioned earlier, when the Maoists leaders mobilised peasants of Jhapa in eastern Nepal to take arms. This revolt was an unprepared beginning by romantic Maoists and was quickly suppressed by the Nepali state. This led to an intense debate among the Maoists on the experience of the Jhapali revolt and strategy to move the struggle forward. By 1985, at least a section of the Maoists had come to the conclusion that Maoism has to be treated as an integrated part of Marxist-Leninist thought and the parameters of the movement have to be cast in the wider context of international experiences. This led to the second stage of further ideological churning and the leadership struggle, which ended in 1995 when the present Maoist leadership emerged as a focused group determined to launch the 'people's war'.

The 'people's war' has passed through two major stages. One was from 1996 to 2001, when the Maoists fought with state police forces with rudimentary weapons, expanded their cadres and strengthened their organisation, established base areas and developed institutions of governance, including kangaroo courts. According to the Maoists, this stage of the 'people's war' was carried out according to six strategic plans namely: decentralised actions within centralised plan and command; balance between political and military offensives against the enemy; political justification of military action; utilisation of the contradictions amongst the enemies to isolate the main enemy; organisation and mobilisation of the masses in the quickest and best possible way.<sup>34</sup> During this stage, the 'main enemy' was the party governments of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal – UML. The King was treated as an ally. Besides attacking police posts, the Maoists also ruthlessly killed many of the political activists of the ruling parties, occupied their properties and distributed their lands to their own cadres.

The second stage of the 'people's war', from 2001 to 2006, began with two major developments: one inside Nepal and another outside. In June 2001, Nepal witnessed its ghastly royal massacre that changed the character of monarchy. The new King Gyanendra followed his father's strategy of acquiring more powers at the cost of representative institutions and popular parties. He dismissed parliament in 2002 and assumed all executive powers in a coup on 1 February 2005. He also decided to deal with the Maoists strongly, unlike his brother, the slain King Birendra and deployed the army against them. Externally, 9/11 took place unleashing the reactive 'global war on terror' under the US leadership. With this, military assistance started pouring into the RNA, especially from India, the US and the UK. The Maoists' enhanced confidence through their

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<sup>34</sup> Prachanda's interview with RIM magazine (May 2001), *op.cit.*

success during the first phase and the deployment of a well assisted RNA made the ‘people’s war’ dirtier and bloodier. There were brutal killings from both the sides, though independent estimates by a Kathmandu-based NGO – Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) – attributed two-thirds of all the killings to the RNA and one-third to the Maoists between 13 February 1996 and 24 April 2006.<sup>35</sup> The Maoists expanded their operations covering more than 80 per cent of all the Nepali districts. The army’s responses also gradually improved with greater training and better equipment through external assistance. The brutality of the conflict deepened and reinforced the antagonism between the Maoists and the RNA that subsequently created serious difficulties in the progress of Nepal’s Peace Process.

During this second stage of the ‘people’s war’, a realisation started dawning on the Maoists that while they have reached a strategic balance with the RNA by 2002-2003, it may not be possible for them to achieve total victory in their struggle. Even if they succeeded in capturing the state through their ‘people’s war’, the international community and India would not let them retain the control of the state for long. They had already activated their political front by exploiting the emerging conflict between King Gyanendra and the political parties, seeking ‘united front’ with the latter, and also by approaching India and the international community to explain that they were not waging a terrorist war, but a genuine political struggle of socio-economic emancipation for the Nepali people. Between 2001 and 2003, the Maoists had rounds of ceasefires and talks with the King’s government and they increasingly interacted with the political parties in search of a ‘united front’ against the autocratic monarchy. King Gyanendra’s coup of 2005 greatly facilitated this search as that move had not only antagonised all the political parties, but also alienated the international community. The result was the 12 Point Understanding signed in November 2005 between the Maoists and the mainstream parliamentary parties of Nepal, who had earlier formed a Seven Party Alliance (SPA). This understanding precipitated a 19 day-long *Jan Andolan II*, from 6 to 24 April 2006, leading to the collapse of King Gyanendra’s autocracy and the eventual elimination of monarchy, less than two years later.

Under the 12 Point Understanding and post-*Jan Andolan II* Peace Process, the Maoists have abandoned their ‘people’s war’ and committed themselves to peaceful and democratic participation in restructuring a new Nepal. The Peace Process gave the Maoists a share in power, first as a junior coalition partner under the interim government headed by G.P. Koirala of Nepali Congress and then as leader of the coalition after the Constituent Assembly elections held in April 2008, in which the Maoists surprising all their opponents, emerged as the largest block. This Maoist victory seems to have become a source of the undoing of Nepal’s fragile Peace Process.

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<sup>35</sup> Conflict Study Centre, ‘Situation Update VIII: Ratification of International Criminal Court to Just Peace’, (15 September 2006), [www.nepalresearch.org/coup\\_2005/paper/csc\\_060915.pdf](http://www.nepalresearch.org/coup_2005/paper/csc_060915.pdf).



The vulnerabilities of the Peace Process arise from serious deviations on the part of both the Maoists and the mainstream political parties in their commitments made under the 12 Point Understanding, as well as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement concluded on 21 November 2006.<sup>36</sup> The Maoists have not returned to the legitimate owners the land and properties that were occupied by them during the insurgency nor have they completely given up their strong-arm methods of coercive political mobilisation. This has given rise to doubts about the sincerity of their commitment to democratic functioning, and also because they continue to harp on their radical rhetoric of the ‘people’s war’ period. Possibly, the Maoists accepted the outcome of the *Jan Andolan II*, in form of the reinstatement of the dissolved parliament and installation of an interim government under G.P. Koirala, only as a compromise and yet another stage in their revolutionary struggle. The mainstream political parties on their part have not accepted the Maoists as equal partners in the democratic political process. This was evident during the interim government when no critically important portfolio was given to the Maoist ministers. It became even more evident when a representative government was not installed for three months under the Maoist leadership after the April 2008 elections by the interim Prime Minister Koirala, under one flimsy pretext or the other. Even then, the Nepali Congress decided to stay out of the government and play the role of opposition, contrary to the agreement on consensual politics until the writing of the constitution by the elected Constituent Assembly. The mainstream parties have also been reluctant to integrate the Maoists armed cadres into Nepal’s security forces. It was this issue that precipitated the conflict between the Maoists and the Nepal Army, resulting in the ouster of the Maoist government in May 2009.<sup>37</sup> The mainstream parties united to form the alternative government, keeping the Maoists, the largest single group, in opposition. India and other interested international forces are keeping this fragile government functioning without any real governance or the prospects of the Peace Process reaching its culmination through the writing of the new Constitution, the deadline for which was 27 May 2010.<sup>38</sup>

The hard reality of Nepali politics at this juncture is that Nepal’s Peace Process and constitution writing cannot proceed unless there is a constructive political consensus at least among the Maoists, the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and the Terai-based parties. This consensus has actually broken down on the question of power sharing since the installation of the Maoists government in May 2008, when the Nepali Congress as an opposition party created difficulties in carrying the Peace Process forward. The consensus was further strained on the issue of ‘civilian supremacy’ over the army raised by the Maoists to secure the sacking of the

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<sup>36</sup> For details see, ‘Nepal’s Peace Agreement: Making It Work’, *Asia Report No. 126* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 2006).

<sup>37</sup> On the Army- Maoists conflict see S.D. Muni, ‘The civil-military crisis in Nepal’, *The Hindu* (6 May 2009).

<sup>38</sup> See the address by B. Lynn Pascoe, the UN Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, *Nepal’s Peace process* (Kathmandu: Nepal Institute of Policy Studies, 11 March 2010). Also, W.A. Sunil, ‘Political Standoff in Nepal over constitution’, *World Socialist Website* (17 March 2010), [www.wsws.org/tools/index.php?page=print&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org/tools/index.php?page=print&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wsws.org).

then army chief General Rukmangad Katawal. The political parties connived with the President to defeat the cabinet decision (with dissent from other coalition partners) of the Maoist-led Ministry. The Maoists resigned on this issue and have been demanding redress on the ‘civilian supremacy’ issue and restoration of a national government under their leadership.

On both these issues, the Maoist position, at least theoretically, is justified because the army cannot defy the civilian authority in a democracy and the largest group in Constituent Assembly has the legitimate privilege to head the government. However, the deep trust deficit which exists among the main stakeholders in political power is not allowing any way out of the political impasse. It may not be out of place to mention here that while the Maoists have also sufficiently contributed to the prevailing trust deficit, the mainstream parties and the international community can in no way escape blame. They are equally responsible for ensuring culmination of the Nepali Peace Process and securing the mainstreaming of the Maoists. The Maoists, at least ostensibly, abandoned their ‘people’s war’ in favour of fair accommodation in democratic politics. Keeping them out is forcing them to consider reviving the ‘people’s war’. Nepal is certainly not prepared for the ‘people’s war II’, and the Maoists cannot be wished away from the unfolding Nepali politics. Whether an amicable resolution to save Nepal from another round of chaos and anarchy, remains to be seen.

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