Post-war Nepal – view from the PLA

Interview with Suk Bahadur Roka

After Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda became prime minister in 2008, he relinquished his position as Commander of the Maoist People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Taking over from him was Nanda Bahadur Pun, arguably the most well-known of the four Deputy Commanders of the PLA. In 2015, after the promulgation of the new constitution, Pun was elected the second Vice-President of the country. Joining him as his Principal Private Secretary was Suk Bahadur Roka ‘Sarad’. Roka was in charge of the 5th Division Cantonment in Rolpa, and later the 2nd Division Cantonment in Sindhuli after the PLA had been distributed among seven cantonments and 21 satellite camps in 2006. He hails from Jelbang in Rolpa, the village which experienced the highest number of killings in Nepal during the Maoist insurgency. Actively involved in Maoist politics since 1990, Roka went underground in 1995 following police operations in Rolpa.

On PLA cantoning
When it was agreed that there would be an election to the Constituent Assembly, the Nepali Congress and the [Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist] UML were worried about our arms. In the Kamidanda meeting [27–31 August 2006] we agreed that we would stay in temporary camps, but on condition that the Nepali Army returned to barracks during the election.

On the situation of two armies
Each time the people had been deprived of their rights it was done with the help of the army. That’s why the army had to be reformed. Now, the king and the army are no longer part of the same institution: the army has become more professional and has been brought under the parliament. There cannot be two armies. But the old army needed a new structure into which the new army [the PLA] could be integrated.

Today, the army has become the backbone of the state again. Let’s hope that what used to happen in the past – the monarchy and the army working together to take away the rights of the people – will not happen in the future. But the democratisation of the army has to continue. It takes time to change the culture of any institution.

On PLA recruitment after 2006 ceasefire
I cannot speak for other places, but in Rolpa at that time the people who joined up were not ‘brand new’ recruits – they had served in the village militia or in other formations but were not attached to the main forces. There had been fighting everywhere and so everyone who joined had had such experience. Being chased by the police and the army was normal in those days.

The idea was to keep the force intact. There was no talk of integration at the time. The Constituent Assembly was not certain either. There could be a breakdown of talks and when that happened we would have to fight again.

On deserters from the cantonments
Around 200 left from the 5th Division and 300 from the 2nd Division. Initially, it was people not used to army life who quit, but later people who had fought left, too. In the end, the majority of deserters were fighters who did not see any future for themselves. The war had ended. Some actually said straight to my face: call us if the fighting begins again but we’re now going home.

The monthly allowance was 3,000 rupees [around USD 30] with only food provided, not even clothes. Outside the cantonment even as a labourer they would be able to earn 7–8,000 rupees [USD 60–80]. When 500,000 rupees [USD 5,000] was later offered for retirement, people regretted having left earlier. But, except for those who were abroad, had been prosecuted for criminal offences, or did not get
the information, anyone who came back to the camp was readmitted. After all, we knew they had fought. When they had left, we did not have money. And, if the state is going to provide the money, why not?

On PLA involvement in negotiations
We were hardly ever consulted. For instance, after the integration, some of those who had opted to join the Nepali Army decided to leave, either because they were not able to complete the training or because they did not want to stay. Without asking either us or the army, the top leaders of the parties decided that PLA members who had joined the army would receive only half the amount offered to those who had taken voluntary retirement. Apparently, some people even questioned why they should be given anything at all. What crime had they committed to be penalised in such a way?

“...In the end, the majority of deserters were fighters who did not see any future for themselves. The war had ended. Some actually said straight to my face: call us if the fighting begins again but we’re now going home.”

On integration
When [Maoist leader] Prachanda came with the integration package, we told him to do whatever he wanted. He was our commander and is now our leader, so we had to follow him. We did not say anything in public. Just like the army has to follow the command of the state, the PLA also had to go with what the party orders. We were never allowed a voice; there were no consultations with us. We did not go to the media either, because we did not want to disrupt the peace process. I left my camp and did not go back even for the integration process. My heart was broken by how things were decided.

On the 2013 election
In the last election, I told Prachanda that the party was going to lose for four reasons. First, the requirement for voter IDs, which our core supporters in the villages did not have. Second, the split [in the party in 2012] had had such a deep impact that no one had a positive opinion of the Maoists. If the other faction were to call for a boycott, we would lose votes. If they were to take part in the elections, our vote would be divided. Third, where would the funds for the election campaign come from? Those who fought in the conflict had nothing with which to fund the campaign. And the party had no money. So, it was going to be only the rich from our party who would fight the election. That would dilute our party’s identity and a party without an identity of its own would not win. Fourth, our cadres were disheartened.

Prachanda would not believe me and instead asked me where I wanted to stand for the election from. I told him, ‘I have gone around with a gun. Why should people love me, and why should they vote for me?’ I haven’t lived in Rolpa since 1998. And there are people like Mahara, Ananta, Onsari, Pasang, Jhakkhu, [senior Maoist leaders from Rolpa] and others from parties that have joined us. I would never stand a chance. Also, an election campaign would cost four or five million rupees. I told him, ‘Comrade, if I had four or five million rupees, I would build a house and not get involved in all these hassles.’ I told him, ‘Comrade, don’t worry about me. Worry about whether we’ll win or lose the election.’

On the current state of the party
The biggest problem now is that the PLA fighters are mostly from peasant backgrounds: during the conflict, being able to fight was sufficient qualification; in today’s politics, only those with an education are considered qualified. This is the main schism within the party. I myself would not be in my position if I did not have a bachelor’s degree. Other division commanders do not. Of all those integrated in the army, not a single officer comes from Rolpa for the simple reason that they don’t have an SLC [school leaving certificate] or degree.

The collapse in commitment within the party stems from the fact that the cadre who were in the frontline ready to give up their lives are now on the sidelines, and they are disheartened. They are the roots of the party. Without watering the roots, no matter how big the plant is, it will not grow.