

Transformation of the Maoists

From revolutionaries to reformists?

Jhalak Subedi

In 2006, soon after he had surfaced in public following 25 years 'underground', I asked Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda if the Maoists' stated commitment to join peaceful politics was strategic or sincere. In other words, was the revolution still on or had it been abandoned? Prachanda answered: '[I]t will appear that sometimes we are going to the Left and sometimes to the Right ... We are walking on both legs. Sometimes the left foot leads, sometimes the right foot. It is only by walking on both our feet that we accomplished the ten years of struggle.'

The conversation was part of an interview I conducted for the Delhi-based magazine *Combat Law*. Although not in the published text, Prachanda also said that, after the 2005 *12-Point Understanding* agreed with the major Nepali political parties, the Maoists were 'moving to the Right. If there is a need we will once again move to the Left. This is the revolutionary strategy.' This suggested that the Maoists were planning to safeguard the power they had garnered through the armed movement and use this to push for social transformation as far as possible, including completing the revolution if the opportunity arose.

In the ten years since the 2006 *Comprehensive Peace Accord* that finally ended the war, the Maoists have entered parliament and then government; Constituent Assembly elections have been held; Nepal has been declared a republic; the Maoists' People's Liberation Army has been integrated into the Nepali Army and eventually disbanded; and a new constitution has been promulgated. Through these developments the Maoists have nearly erased their revolutionary image and integrated themselves into Nepal's political elite. This article charts the transformation of

the Maoists, comparing their original agenda and the post-war path they have subsequently taken.

Evolution of the revolution

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) is an ideological heir of the Communist Party of Nepal, established in 1949. In the Nepali context, Maoism was to a large extent defined by principles of insurgent military strategy and continuous revolution. Prior to the establishment of the CPN-M, such principles had been adopted by the then-Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), and were first manifested in the Jhapa Movement of the early 1970s.

The forerunners of the CPN-M, the CPN (Masal) and the CPN (Mashal), held similar convictions and also believed that Chairman Mao Zedong's death had led to a counter-revolution in China. They felt that the capture of the state was possible only by starting the revolution at the village level and organising the peasants. When the Nepali Maoists, at the time a comparatively small radical group, began the 'People's War' in 1996, their fundamental understanding of the route to state power was similarly founded.



Baburam Bhattarai and Prachanda talk to the press at the prime minister's residence on the day of their arrival in Kathmandu, 16 June 2006.
© Kiran Panday

The Maoists also came up with a momentous reassessment of Nepal's socio-political situation. Previously, Nepal's communists had considered issues of marginalisation, such as those associated with Janajatis (indigenous groups), Dalits ('low caste'), Madhesis (from the southern Tarai plains), and women, to be part and parcel of class discrimination as a whole, and that once class oppression had ended, the problems faced by such excluded groups would also be resolved. Yet, time and again, caste, ethnic and regional issues continued to surface separate from class within the communist movement. Beginning with the founding in 1949 of the CPN, almost all communist groupings gave considerable weight to such matters. Despite its current shift towards conservatism, at its Fourth Convention in August 1989 the Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist-Leninist (CPN-ML) – which later became the CPN-Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) called for a number of measures, including: ensuring religious freedom by ending the hegemony of one religion; ending the hegemony of caste, language and dress; and ensuring the right to education in the mother tongue.

Prior to the Maoists, however, none of the communist factions had envisaged federalism as a means to grant recognition to ethnic identity. Redefining identity in the Nepali context to be an element of class struggle was key to the expansion of the Maoist cause. The participation of Dalits, Janajatis and women in the People's War was unprecedented in the history of Nepal's political movements. This became the centrepiece of the Maoist political and ideological intervention to solve Nepal's ethnic and regional problems. In the course of the war, the Maoists started looking at ethnic repression in Nepal as a historical problem created by oppressive state power, moving closer to the neo-Marxian understanding that other factors besides class can serve as the basis of subjugation.

Other issues raised by the Maoists to establish themselves as a 'revolutionary' force were not very

different from the other communist groups in Nepal, namely seizure of land from landlords and redistribution among the landless; adoption of worker-friendly policies, which would include wage increases for labourers in both the organised and unorganised sectors; opposition to the comprador class; the end of feudalism; special provisions for Dalits; the end of patriarchal exploitation of women; republicanism; and resistance to 'Indian imperialist influence'.

The progressive changes in Nepal's state structure since 2006 that resulted directly from the People's War included the following: Nepal's establishment as a republic; inclusive democracy with proportional representation; reserved quotas for women's representation; federalism; constitutional provision for identity-based autonomous or protected areas for minorities; education, health and housing as fundamental rights; and the increase in the participation of Dalits in politics. The major failure of the Maoists, though, was their inability to carry through their stated programme of establishing a 'people's democratic republic' and ethnically based states, and also of implementing revolutionary land reforms and class-based economic policies. This can partly be explained by ideological slippage and divisions within the Maoist movement, but it has primarily occurred through concessions made by the Maoists to Nepal's traditional establishment through political bargaining, the primary driving force that has defined the evolution of progressive change in post-war Nepal [see *article on constituent assembly processes and constitution making*, p.59].

Politics of inclusive change

The *12-Point Understanding*, signed in New Delhi in November 2005, marked the beginning of a new political journey for Nepal and for the Maoists. The concord between the Maoists and the parliamentary powers reflected the high point of the Maoists' insurgent power, as well as a clear trade-off: the promotion of the Maoists' socio-economic agenda in return for their acceptance of political liberalism – albeit in the new form of an inclusive democracy and a federal state that would grant recognition to the country's special social characteristics. The agreement to institutionalise political changes signaled the willingness of the parliamentary parties to consider the restructuring of the state, including replacing the 1990 Constitution with one drafted by an elected constituent assembly.

The success of the April 2006 People's Movement led to the Maoists' entry into peaceful politics. A ceasefire was immediately put into effect, followed by the signing of the *Comprehensive Peace Accord* (CPA) a few months later. In January 2007, the 1990 Constitution was annulled and

an Interim Constitution was promulgated. An interim government was formed under the leadership of Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala. Koirala, however, had not inherently embraced the Maoist agenda of socio-economic transformation and his only point of concurrence with the Maoists was on the political front – to weaken the monarchy and, if it came to it, even to support republicanism. Not surprisingly, the government made no attempt to introduce any kind of social and economic change, all of which were presumed to be tasks for the period following the adoption of a new constitution. Since the Maoist leadership and some of their cadres were now part of this government, the process of the Maoists' assimilation into the elite had also begun.

The CPN-M emerged as the largest party in the first Constituent Assembly (CA) election, winning 50 per cent of the directly elected seats and more than 30 per cent under proportional representation. The first CA was the most inclusive in Nepal's history. Women, Janajatis, Madhesis, Dalits and other minorities had strong representation. The Maoists had derived their political power from a progressive agenda, but despite being the largest party in the CA, albeit without a majority, they were not able to form a government immediately. So began the process of bargaining with conservative forces, through which the Maoists' agenda in the new constitution became increasingly circumscribed.

Inclusion was an important aspect of the Maoists' political development. Inclusion here meant the creation of conditions for opportunities for marginalised social groups, including Janajatis, Madhesis, Dalits, women and communities from remote regions such as Karnali in the mid-west. Initially, the Maoists had envisioned ethnic provinces as well as autonomous and protected areas with special rights for groups that had lived there historically. They had mentioned a Madhes autonomous region and also special rights for Dalits. There had also been talk of a system of proportionality in representative institutions and of the adoption of a proportional inclusive appointment process in the state's administrative and judicial structures.

After the signing of the CPA, the Maoists used the direct or indirect threat of their armed combatants only twice to advance their political ends: first to support their demand to amend the Interim Constitution to include the provision that the first meeting of the CA would declare Nepal a republic; and second when they tried to influence voters and opposition parties during the election to the first CA by 'reminding' them that they were an armed group. But, the question of whether the constitution could be drafted without first disarming the Maoists emerged as a key focal point for political brokering.

Powerful conservative elites in Kathmandu and beyond supported the continued hegemony of 'high-caste' hill Bahuns. These included: elements within traditional political parties like the Nepali Congress (NC), the UML and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party; established landowners as well as the newly wealthy; high-ranking officials in the judiciary, the army and the bureaucracy; and business leaders, industrialists and intellectuals.

“ The concord between the Maoists and the parliamentary powers reflected the high point of the Maoists' insurgent power, as well as a clear trade-off”

Different groups seeking to secure their respective vantage points ultimately began to target the CA itself, as they came to realise it would not draft a constitution sufficiently in their interests. A section of Kathmandu's middle class openly opposed the Maoists and were able to establish a discourse to re-brand identity-based federalism as a ploy to break up the country. Such resistance coalesced during the first CA through various organised movements and demonstrations. In 2012, even though the Maoists had by then been completely disarmed, the Supreme Court ruled against extending the term of the first CA and it was dissolved without having agreed on a new constitution.

Support for the idea of inclusion in the second CA election was much reduced, reflected in the fact that the Maoists came in as the third largest political force, behind the NC and the UML. Prachanda sought different ways to implement the Maoists' agenda, notably through building alliances. In response to increasing opposition to identity-based federalism by the ruling NC and UML, the Maoists organised street movements together with Madhesi and Janajati groups. However, internal splits and a perception that it had not been sufficiently proactive when it had been in power meant the CPN-M had lost an important source of support, and these movements were not able to gain significant traction. Prachanda increasingly resorted to bargaining away important provisos related to inclusion, in various attempts to maintain power and relevance.

Revolutionaries to reformists?

The promulgation of Nepal's new constitution in September 2015 provides for a natural juncture to ask how far the new statute represents success in institutionalising what the 'People's War' had been all about: class liberation,

recognition of identity, the end of discrimination against Dalits, and women's liberation.

The negotiated compromise that enabled the Maoists to enter mainstream politics led to changes in power relationships and to conflicts between the traditional political elite and new political forces, nationally and locally. All political parties have provided for quotas for Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, women and people from underdeveloped regions, and the 2015 Constitution has guaranteed the participation of all at every level. The new constitution has, to a large extent, institutionalised this new power equation.

“ The fire of the Maoists’ armed struggle has been extinguished and the party has turned into one that believes in peaceful competition. ”

But the recent constitutional process has been criticised for a lack of public consultation, while the substance of the new statute contains compromises in relation to women's citizenship and political representation for marginalised communities, and has sparked protests in the Tarai and elsewhere. The Maoists acknowledge these contradictions and are also aware that the constitution has not fulfilled all of their agenda. In fact, they registered a total of 57 points of dissent on the present constitution. But the party has also noted, as in the Central Committee resolution of November 2015, that the adoption of the constitution ‘marks the end of one main tactical chapter raised by the great People's War and the historic people's movement’.

The revolutionary political party that had embarked upon the path of armed rebellion with an agenda of societal upheaval had, by the end of the constitution-drafting process, become a reformist power, through the peace process and the post-war transition. With the promulgation of the constitution, both the country's and Maoists' agendas have changed. There is disagreement though among the Maoists over the extent of both their achievements

and their failures, and over the reasons behind these different outcomes.

Baburam Bhattarai, a senior leader and ideologue of the ‘People's War’, has since abandoned the Maoists and founded a new political party. Talking to this author in February 2016, he asserted that he, ‘quit the Maoist party not because it was in the wrong until the promulgation of the constitution or even afterwards. I did not leave because of its agenda. I left because I believed that it would not be able shoulder its new responsibilities until it can break out of Prachanda's *bureaucratic Stalinism* and the web of corruption that has spread to the bottom of the party’.

Bhattarai's statement suggests that the Maoist party per se has not tilted too far to the right as much as its organisation and leadership have lost their way. The fire of Maoists' armed struggle has been extinguished and the party has turned into one that believes in peaceful competition. But it is well to remain aware that its political space is still on the left of the political spectrum.

When I reminded Prachanda in February 2016 of his ‘left-foot, right foot’ analogy of 10 years earlier, he responded matter-of-factly:

We moved a considerable distance along the reformist path. But all of the constitutional provisions on Janajatis, women, Madhesis and Dalits were possible only through such a step. It is now time to take the left foot forward ... Until now, our emphasis has been on republicanism, federalism and inclusive electoral system. From here we will focus more on class issues and the party will move along the revolutionary path of class struggle.

[Translated from the original Nepali by Manesh Shrestha]

Jhalak Subedi is a writer, former student leader and political activist with Marxist leanings. He was editor of the leading Nepali-language magazine on leftist thought, *Mulyankan*, and is currently affiliated with the daily *Naya Patrika*, writing on contemporary politics, political economy, and international affairs. He is the author of *Nepali Bidhyarthi Andolan: Adha Shatabdi* (Nepali Students' Movement: Half a Century – 1991); *British Samrajyaka Nepali Mohara* (Nepali Pawns of the British Empire – 2012); *Bhumi, Kisan ra Rajya* (Land, Peasants and the State – 2016); and the novel, *Adha Joon* (Half Moon – 2013).