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NEPAL AND THE COMMUNISTS

Eddies in the red tide

By Sujoyini Mandal

FOR the past few decades, Nepal has been witnessing the tussle for political power between its monarchy, the Nepali Congress and its coalition parties, and a violent insurgent Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M).

For almost 10 years, the Nepali Maoists have been trying to set up a communist republic. In their decade-long civil war with government forces, close to 13,000 people have been killed. The situation has brought more poverty and hardship to a country already one of the poorest in Asia.

In April last year, a peace process was finally begun, resulting in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the CPN-M. The Maoists agreed to lock up their weapons under United Nations supervision and place their 35,000 fighters in temporary camps.

However, Constituent Assembly (CA) elections have been postponed twice already, demonstrating a lack of real political will by the SPA-CPN-M alliance.

The rise to prominence of the CPN-M started with the 'people's war' in 1996. The agenda then was to control the countryside through guerilla warfare and ultimately surround and capture the capital, Kathmandu.

But three strategic weaknesses led to a revision of their means. These were the realisation that no outright military victory against an internationally backed Royal Nepalese Army was possible; the general shortcomings of communist models; and a hostile international environment.

Thus, in 2004, the Maoists tried to establish a dialogue with mainstream political parties. This received a boost with the royal coup in February 2005, when King Gyanendra dismissed the democratic government. Together, the Maoists and the SPA rebelled against the King and, in a series of street protests, succeeded in seizing power.

Now, 10 years after they started their struggle, the Maoists have accepted multiparty democracy. However, on Sept 18 this year, they withdrew from the government, plunging the country yet again into political chaos in the absence of a united political front.

The CPN-M's decision to quit the government stems chiefly from its relative lack of success in joining mainstream politics. While it was a pragmatic move, the Maoists were also criticised for ignoring the demands of marginalised communities such as ethnic groups, the Dalits and landless people - the very groups they are supposed to represent.

The result has been a decrease in its support base. At the same time, much criticism has been directed at the Young Communist League, considered the youth militant wing of the CPN-M, which has been engaged in violent activities in the Terai region in the south of the country.

Although distant from politics in Kathmandu, events in the Terai region are nevertheless increasingly worrisome for the government. In the past few weeks, a large number of civil servants have quit their jobs in

the face of increasing extortion and kidnapping threats. In the past six months, 82 people have been killed and 75 abducted by different groups operating in the central and eastern Terai.

Located between rising powers India and China, Nepal occupies a key position in South Asia. Nepal is important to India - strategically, economically and historically. During the British colonial period - and even now - Nepal was one of the neighbouring countries that formed the 'inner ring of India's defence' against hostile external powers.

Also, from the point of view of internal security, about 10 million Nepalis live and work in India, while about 80,000 Nepali soldiers are employed in the Indian armed forces. Any major unrest in Nepal would thus have a natural spillover effect on India.

More importantly, political developments in Nepal have a direct bearing on two of India's most severe domestic security problems. The first involves the Indian Maoists - particularly in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh - who aim to establish a 'red corridor' from Nepal in the north to Trivandram in the south.

Although the Communist Party of India (Maoist) remains an ally of the Nepal Maoists, their relationship has not been smooth. The practical support given to Nepali Maoists by their Indian counterparts has been limited, and the departure of the CPN-M from its original strategy of armed struggle has been criticised at times.

Still, in the light of active Maoist violence in India, any 'back to the armed struggle' scenario by the CPN-M would cause security concerns within India.

Then there is the link between the Nepali Maoists and insurgent groups operating in north-east India. On March 24, 2004, senior Nepalese Maoist leader Vaidya was arrested in West Bengal. Subsequent interrogation of Vaidya revealed the connection between the Nepali Maoists and groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation. Taking advantage of the porous border between India and Nepal, these groups are involved in sharing training, finances and arms.

At present, the political entities in Nepal - the SPA, the CPN-M and the Terai groups - are watching each other's moves and trying to play out the stalemate to their own advantage. The main issues are the abolition of the monarchy and the implementation of a proportional system of representation.

It seems as if all the groups are hedging and playing out alliances. For instance, while the SPA and the CPN-M continue to try to reach a compromise, the Maoists are in talks with the Communist Party of Nepal in order to pressure the SPA.

But as long as the Constituent Assembly polls are postponed, violence and unrest will continue to thrive in the absence of a strong central authority. Although it is unlikely the Maoists will take up arms again, the security situation will continue to worsen until political compromises that best suit all parties can come into play.

The writer is a research analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.

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