



RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. For more information on this, please do not hesitate to email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor of RSIS Commentaries.

Nepal and the Communists: The long march to democracy?

Sujoyini Mandal

17 December 2007

Nepal's Constituent Assembly elections were postponed for the second time on 22 November 2007. This follows the withdrawal of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) from the government and has exposed the cracks in the arduous road to democracy in Nepal. The absence of governance carries implications for regional security, as shown in the concerns expressed by the United States and India.

FOR THE past few decades, Nepal has witnessed the tussle for political power between an autocratic monarchy, the Nepali Congress and its coalition parties, and a violent insurgent Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M). For almost ten years, the Nepali Maoists have been trying to establish a communist republic. In a decade long civil war between the Maoists and other government forces, close to 13,000 people have been killed. The situation has brought further poverty and hardship to a country that is one of the poorest in Asia.

In April 2006, a peace process was finally begun, culminating in the 8 November 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the CPN-M. The management of rebel arms was solved when the Maoists agreed to lock up the weapons under United Nations supervision, and place their 35,000 fighters in temporary camps. However, the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections have been postponed twice already, demonstrating the lack of real political will by the SPA-CPN-M alliance.

The manoeuvres of the Maoists

The rise to prominence of the CPN-M started with the 'people's war' in 1996. At that time, the agenda was to control the countryside through guerilla warfare and ultimately surround and capture the capital Katmandu. However, 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 attempted to establish a dialogue with the mainstream political parties. This received a boost with the royal coup in February 2005 as King Gyanendra dismissed the democratic government. Together, the Maoists and the SPA revolted against the king and in a series of street protests, succeeded in seizing power from the autocratic monarch. Thus ten years after they started their struggle, the Maoists have accepted multi-party democracy. However, on 18 September 2007, they withdrew from the government plunging the country yet again into political chaos in the absence

of a united political front.

Why the pullout?

The decision of the CPN-M to quit the government chiefly stems from their relative lack of success in joining mainstream politics in Nepal. While, on one hand, it was a pragmatic decision, at the same time the Maoists have been criticised for ignoring the demands of the marginalised communities like the ethnic groups, Dalits and the landless people -- the very groups that they are supposed to represent. The result has been the decrease of its support base. At the same time, much criticism has been directed to the Young Communist League, considered to be the youth militant wing of the CPN-M which has been engaged in violent activities in the Terai region.

Although distant from politics in Katmandu, Nepal's capital, activities of the Madhesis in the Terai region in southern Nepal are, nevertheless, increasingly getting worrisome for the government. In the past few weeks, a considerable 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 region. The most prominent groups representing the Madhesis are the Madhesi Janaadhikar Forum (MJF) and the Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (JTMM) whose demands include political representation and the mitigation of economic and linguistic discrimination.

What does it mean for regional security?

Located between the two rising, and potentially competitive powers, India and China, Nepal occupies a strategic 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 ten million Nepalis live and work in India, while about eighty thousand Nepali soldiers are employed in the Indian armed forces. Any major unrest in Nepal would thus have a natural spillover effect into India.

More importantly, the political developments in Nepal have a direct bearing to two of India's most severe domestic security problems. The first are 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) or CPI-M remains allies of the Nepal Maoists, their relationship has both waxed and waned in recent times. The practical support given to Nepali Maoists by their Indian counterparts has been limited and the departure of the CPN-M from their original strategy of armed struggle has been criticised at times by the Indian Maoist leader Ganapathy. Nevertheless, in light of the active Maoist violence in India at present, any 'back to the armed struggle' scenario by the CPN-M would cause security concerns within India.

The second is the link between the Nepali Maoists and the insurgent groups operating in northeast India. On 24 March 2004, a senior Nepalese Maoist leader, Vaidya, was arrested in West Bengal. Subsequent interrogation of Vaidya revealed the connection between the Nepali Maoists and groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the KLO (Kamtapur Liberation Organisation). Taking advantage of the porous border between India and Nepal that provides a safe communication route, these groups were involved in sharing training, finances and arms supply.

The Road Ahead?

At present each political entity in Nepal -- the SPA, the CPN-M and the Terai groups -- are watchful of each other's moves and trying to play out the stalemate to the best of their advantage. The two main

issues of concern are the abolition of the monarchy and implementation of the 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 and come to a compromise, the Maoists are in talks with the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) in order to pressurise the SPA led by G.P. Koirala.

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

**Sujoyini Mandal is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*