

MAOIST WAR VIOLENCE BETWEEN HOPE AND SORROW¹

-Sanjeev Pokharel

This February 13th Nepalese Maoist rebels will celebrate 7th anniversary of their 'armed struggle against the constitutional monarchy'. A period of six years has passed leaving behind cornfields turned into battlefields, forests into rebels' shelters and hideouts and infrastructure into piles of debris. Thousands have died in the 'war'; thousands and thousands have become homeless; and a great many young men and women have been physically impaired by the wounds of the brutal war. For those who don't go to the war (especially women, children and elderly people living in the 'Maoist affected' areas), the idea of living, not of dying, haunts both by day and night.

The Maoists have called their movement as the people's war; journalists label it as insurgency in their writings; for the government it is terrorism; some ordinary people consider it as a civil war; and for some others it is an act loaded with violence and atrocities. This might reflect the problem of both naming and identifying the movement making it difficult for finding a simplified explanation and understanding. Whatever it is, the war with all its violence and cruelty will, perhaps, be mentioned in the history books as the bloodiest episode of inhuman carnage ever occurred in the entire history of the nation.

Today, with the mixed feeling of shame and sorrow, I will try to analyze the politics and the poetics of this horrendous war, which is haunting the people of Nepal through the images of death, destruction and violence.

A GLIMPSE AT THE PRESENT SITUATION:

- From its beginning till this date, more than six thousand people have been killed in the war (visit: <http://www.american-reporter.com/1958/111.html>). The death toll comprises of government soldiers and/or security forces; Maoist rebels; and innocent civilians. An estimated number of twenty thousand people have been wounded.
- There have been massive violations of human rights from both Maoists and the government soldiers. Nepalese human rights organizations such as Amnesty International Nepal, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), INSEC, etc. actively express their concerns about the violations of human rights. People have been abducted, tortured and even murdered indiscriminately. Those who are killed by the government forces are later described as terrorists and those who are killed by the Maoist guerrillas are described either as *shoshak* or *jasus* (exploiters/oppressors or as informants). It is not unknown that, not only the Maoist dissidents and deserters, but also innocent people get brutally mutilated

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and killed by the rebels in front of the crowds. There are reports about the involvement of children (esp. by the Maoists) in the war (visit: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2077795.stm).

- The Maoist rebels have bombed and destroyed infrastructures like telecommunication towers, highways, airports, bridges, hydropower projects (Jhimruk, Adhikhola, Modikhola, etc), power transmission centers, water supplies, government offices, schools, health centers, and institutions such as agricultural training center as in Kavre -to weaken the reactionaries (for more details see Spotlight Vol. 21 : No. 38, Apr05 - Apr12, 2002). As the result, more than 22 districts of the Western Nepal are devoid of many of these essential services.
- The country's economy has been ravaged by the ongoing war. Development organizations have stopped many of their programs implemented in the rural areas. The number of tourists coming to Nepal has been reduced to the minimum. Village agriculture has been adversely affected since young men and women have either joined the war or left the villages with fear of being killed. The government has diverted more than 60 percent of the development budget to security expenses to stop the war.
- The war has spread to all 75 districts threatening the safety and security of the people. The police and administration are basically confined to the district headquarters
- Many Western countries and the neighboring India and China have supported the government's decision to declare this movement as an act of terrorism, and waging war against it. Indian and the US governments have even provided the weapons and helicopters (as by India) to the Nepalese governments in addition to substantial amounts of money.

THE EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

One of the earliest significant events occurred on 4th February 1996. One of the factions of Nepalese communists who call themselves Marxist-Leninist-Maoist, was due to submit its 40 demands to the then Prime Minister of the coalition government Sher Bahadur Deuba. After some hassles with the policemen at the entrance of the Prime Minister's office at Singha Durbar, the group led by an architect-turned-Maoist-leader Baburam Bhattarai, made its way to his office. The group submitted the charter of demands related to “nationalism, democracy and livelihood” and warned him that if the government didn't take necessary steps towards fulfilling all those demands by 17th February (1996), they would go to an armed struggle to overthrow the constitutional monarchy, and establish a communist republic.

As we see the demands, they vary from very concrete (e.g. declaring Nepal a secular nation) to very abstract (e.g. inflation should be controlled); from very big (e.g. drafting of a new constitution through a constituent assembly) to very small (e.g. a ban on cars with Indian Number to move inside Nepal).

It is obvious that many of these demands could be fulfilled through dialogues and, perhaps, didn't necessitate any protracted 'armed struggle'. Some other political parties vis-a-vis ethnic organizations had similar demands pressurizing the government to take practical steps towards fulfilling them. But what about the big ones including those which were also rhetorical, abstract and subjective? Is it fair to argue that the Maoists were not clear about their own demands? Or the Maoists included those intentionally in their charter? A brief history of the genesis of the war may answer these questions.

A small group within the Unity Center led by Comrade Prachanda alias Pushpa Kamal Dahal had already adopted the 'plan for the historical initiation of the people's war' well before it broke away from it in 1995. The same year, CPN (Maoist) was granted membership in RIM, a worldwide network for coordinating Maoist movements, on condition that they contribute towards the further development of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement through an armed struggle for the establishment of a communist republic. It makes us difficult to say whether the whole charter was the showing tooth or they were ambivalent about their own demands.

It was apparent that the Prime Minister didn't pay much attention to either demands or the leaders. He only promised to *study* the demands and discuss about them *after* his state visit to India, which was scheduled for a few days later.

But the 'armed struggle' kicked off with a formal declaration from the Maoist leaders, on 13th February (1996), four days before the deadline and well before the Prime Minister returned from his state visit! The party leaders and activists immediately went underground. That night, the Maoist rebels attacked government offices in six villages of Rolpa and Rukum districts as the formal inauguration of the armed struggle.

When it began, it looked like for many 'an outdated pastime of a handful of Maoist fanatics'. Neither the general public nor the political pundits could believe that this *tiny* group of Maoists could promote any significant political movement. At that time the idea of them being able to challenge or overthrow the existing system seemed a far cry. Similarly, the leaders of some of the major political parties had never assumed that the war would cross the backwaters of a few remote villages and enter the city centers causing unprecedented havoc in the national politics. But it was a gross misconception.

As early as 1994, there were severe confrontations between UPF (United People's Front) activists and the ruling Nepali Congress party-workers in some villages of Rolpa, a stronghold of orthodox communists. After some severe clashes between the two parties and some incidents of murders of Nepali Congress party members, the government decided to use force to quiet the incurable communists. The Nepali Congress premier Mr. Girija Prasad Koirala deployed a force of more than 2000 policemen to the area. The force, loyal to the party led by the Prime Minister, carried out a brutal clean-up operation (the infamous kilo sera two) in Rolpa and Rukum districts. The government soldiers brutally flogged many innocent villagers, imprisoned more than two hundred men and women under different charges; and abused the properties of the then United People's Front party members. The brutal police operation in the impoverished districts of the

western region strongly ignited a vigorous anti-government sentiment and hatred. Overlooked by Nepalese premier and the leaders as minor clashes, this might have prepared a ground for the Maoist leaders to adopt a war strategy for the establishment of the communist state.

POVERTY AND POLITICS

Development indices have to show that Nepal ranks 129th in the list of 162 countries. It secures 76th position among 88 poor nations in the world. More than 88 per cent of the total population lives in villages which lack good roads, communication facilities, health centers, and schools and colleges. About 10 million people live in absolute poverty. Forty-seven percent of the population cannot afford minimum of dietary energy consumption. More than half of the adult population over the age of 15 is illiterate, and only 24 per cent of women over the age of 15 have ever been to any school. One out of four children dies under the age of five due to poor healthcare facilities.

During *janaandolan* (the popular movement of 1990 against the Panchayati regime), people of Nepal were assured of amelioration of their life conditions once the restoration of democracy was over. Nepali Congress leaders portrayed the Panchayti system as inimical to development assuring, at the same time, economic prosperity under the multi-party democracy.

On the other hand, the most popular communist party of the time namely, CPN (ML) was prophesying the communist *mantras* of equality, emancipation and prosperity. This had a powerful impact on the youth quarters. These communist leaders also assured the people that they wouldn't stop their struggle for the establishment of a communist republic even after the multi-party democracy was restored in the country. Looking back in history, we find that it was these unflinching communist youths who sacrificed their limbs and lives to destroy the Panchayati regime, and needless to say, many of them genuinely believed in establishing a communist republican state.

Contrary to these expectations, the political situation of Nepal after the fall of Panchayati regime didn't head towards any of these expected ends. Neither the Communist Party (UML) nor the Nepali Congress could ever devise any effective measures to reduce the throes of the impoverished people.

The political situation of the country has been the one blighted by the lack of foresight among the leading lot along with their individual strives for personal wealth and power. This is illustrated by the three general elections and eight changes in the government the poor country could hardly afford in a period of as short as 12 years. After 1990, there has been a blatant misuse of the wealth of the nation by the political leaders. Corruption is rampant and almost institutionalized. Since political positions have usually been used to secure personal gains, the rift between rich and poor is ever widening. The poor and unprivileged never got any real chance and opportunity to ameliorate their life conditions. Obviously, they got even more despaired and frustrated by the new situation. So, it is not unnatural for a significant segment of population to perceive their continuing deprivation as the high price they have been paying for achieving the multi-party democracy. It is a

common contention among ordinary people that the multi-party system has worked perfectly for the leaders but imperfectly for those who are already poor and underprivileged.

A small ray of hope i.e., a pledge to better life vis-a-vis emancipation from these austerities and plunders, could be cashed by those who wanted peace as well as by those who wanted war. And for the Maoists who first burst into the scene in 1996, it was not difficult to find a ready supply of supporters and fighters. The Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) workers, who really felt let down, were seduced by the revolutionary slogans and actions of the CPN (M). It is believed that a number of these party workers joined the Maoist movement after 1996. It was an opportunity for them to realizing their radical dreams and satisfying personal revolutionary satisfaction.

However, these incidents and accidents are probably not enough to probe into the algebra of the 'protracted war'. So, let's have a look at some other intriguing factors that have, in my opinion, given the war its protracted nature.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE WAR

The varied geographical settings and the wide ethnic, linguistic and religious differences have been the major characteristic of the small 'Hindu Kingdom'. Besides numerous caste groups of the Khas speaking Hindus, there are more than 60 ethnic groups in Nepal. People speak 124 tongues and follow more than eight different religions. Three different geographical zones namely, Himal (high mountain), Pahad (middle mountain) and Tarai (plains) are endowed with disparate climatic conditions and natural resources, and people living in these different zones have been pursuing many different livelihood patterns.

And veiled behind the popular rhetoric of 'peaceful, harmonious and integrated nation', our societies contain stark divisions and/or stratification on the basis of caste, ethnicity, gender, class and so on. The 1990 constitution guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all. However, in practice, people categorically relegated to subordinate social positions are in many cases denied equal access to social, economic, political and legal resources. So, it is not unnatural that the issues of domination and/or exploitation achieved more prominence in popular discourse in the democratic environment after 1990. Low-castes, women, ethnic minorities and poor were gradually beginning to feel that they were oppressed by the opposites, and also that they needed to struggle for their political and economic independence.

Making the 'oppressed' conscious about their 'real' situations, the Maoists not only assured them of full emancipation, justice and equality, but also of their participation in politics and bureaucracy after the establishment of the communist republic. Today, 30 percent of the Maoist guerrillas comprise of women. There have been estimates that more than 45 per cent of the active guerrilla fighters belong to the lowest stratum of the caste hierarchy i.e. 'dalits'. More than thirty per cent of the active guerrilla fighters belong to ethnic minorities such as Magar, Rai, Limbu, etc. Therefore, it is perhaps justified to say that assurance to these groups about the participation in the new political environment (i.e. the communist state) has been consequential for the expansion of this movement.

Maoists might have been successful in adopting this formula to intensify some of the most prominent anti-government sentiments in order to win support from the people and to enhance their movement.

CONDITIONS SUPPORTING THE PROMOTION OF THE WAR

In terms of strength and skill the Maoist war in Nepal is considered today as one of the biggest guerrilla wars in the world. It is estimated that more than six thousand well-trained Maoist guerrilla fighters are active all over the country . Maoist guerrillas are equipped with state-of-the art weapons. Their guerrilla warfare techniques are extremely sophisticated. And, they claim a highly efficient intelligence network and communication links.

But the question here is -who provide these rigorous training to the Maoist guerrillas? We don't have any first-hand information about who trains the Maoist rebellions. Therefore, some believe that the Maoists were trained in some places of India. The People's War Group (PWG) of Northwest India has been accused by some for providing the training and other resources to the Maoists. The condition that Nepal has an open border with India may support this argument to some extent. But there has been no satisfactory evidence to prove that the Indians did this for the Nepalese Red Army. So, why not we look for other explanations?

While others believe that the retired Gurkha soldiers are behind the scene. Many of the Maoist affected areas are inhabited by a large number of well-trained, retired Indian and British Army Gurkha soldiers. There is an equally large number of retired Nepalese Army soldiers in the areas many of whom have received rigorous warfare training to work as the peace keeping force of the UN in different war prone regions of the world. So, it is not unlikely that these people either by force or by deliberate desires are providing training and combat human resource necessary for the guerrilla warfare.

One cannot disregard the fact that the Maoists have amassed a huge amount of wealth. Contrary to the rhetorical image of the poor Maoists fighting against the rich landlords, Maoist organization in Nepal, today, is highly prosperous.

One of the government reports says that (see Kathmandu Post, May 12, 2002) the Maoists have, so far, looted over Rs 330 million from three largest banks of the country including Nepal Bank Limited (NBL), Rastriya Banijya Bank (RBB) and Agriculture Development Bank (ADB) in their six year old war. So far, Maoists have looted 132 branches and sub-branches of government-owned Agricultural Development Bank, 17 branches of Rastriya Banijya Bank and 13 branches of Nepal Bank Limited. On October 23, the Maoist rebels looted 3.8 million from a private bank (Everest Bank Ltd.) in the Bara district.

Besides this, they have been successful in amassing huge amounts of wealth by other various measures. They have collected donations from different private and public organizations; seized the properties of the villagers who do not finance the war; and there

are estimates that the Maoists are receiving financial supports from international Maoist organizations and its well wishers.

Many ordinary people in Nepal contend that Maoist guerrilla fighters as well as party workers receive salaries for their services. Many peoples, as the contention further goes, have preferred to join the 'red army' to working in India as menial wage laborer or even as Gurkha soldiers in the Indian arm force. There were some sporadic reports, though not approved, that the Maoist organization pays its guerrilla fighters and members in cash, which is often more than the Indian government pays to the Gurkha soldiers in India.

We cannot also undermine the disposition of Nepalese mind to romanticism and/or emotionalism. This also might have fuelled the expansion of the Maoist war. Nepalese people are, in my opinion, one of the most romantic and emotional peoples. One of the good illustrations of the romantic culture is the violence which Nepalese youths performed in December 2000 in some major cities of Nepal. Initially they were meant to be demonstrations against an Indian actor (namely, Hritik Roshan) who supposedly expressed his hatred towards Nepal and her people through an Indian TV channel. But they promptly turned into fierce anti-India mayhems and the security situation of the whole country became tensed and chaotic. Three students were killed and a number of the protestors were injured during the demonstrations.

Giving it an anthropological touch, I find it very tempting to show some affinities between mysticism and the popularity of the Maoist movement to some degree. In addition to being emotional and romantic, we Nepalese people are devout lovers of mysticism. One of the characteristics of our culture is that it orients us to having great disposition to occult powers and practices. From shamanism to Hinduism -all our cultural traditions have conditioned our minds to be easily seduced by the unseen, the ambiguous and the abstruse. The Maoists qualify in some of these standards. They speak difficult language; dwell in jungles; perform violence; work at nights; and talk about dramatic upheavals and changes. People are drawn towards and fascinated by these mystical and supernatural forces and images, and worship these images and powers. It is tempting to ask from an anthropological point of view, to what extent do these factors provide the Maoist movement a favorable cultural condition.

THE CURRENT PEACE TALKS AND FUTURE SCENARIO

The first significant peace talks between the Maoists and the government were held in last year. There were three rounds of talks between representatives of the government and the Maoists which lasted for about three months (from August to October, 2001). In the beginning the Maoists demanded rewriting the constitution, abolishing Nepal's constitutional monarchy and establishing an interim government. Since the government representatives denied those proposals, the Maoists demanded the formation of a constituent assembly and an interim government. But the talks ended inconclusively followed by the Maoists' intensive attack in an army barrack and a police station, and declaration of the state of emergency from the part of the government.

Just recently, the Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal has called for an all-party-meeting including the King. The Maoist leaders are also arguing that the norms of the new constitution (i.e., the 1990 constitution) should be respected and peaceful solutions to the present political crisis should be sought with consensus from among the major political parties. But will any peace talks bring about peaceful solutions to the present crisis? The answer is not easy.

This is what one of the apical Maoist leaders Baburam Bhattarai has to say in a recent interview with Nepali Times:

Our openly stated goal is the total state power for the oppressed masses. Nothing more, or less. Will the ruling classes hand over state power through a "negotiated settlement"? You should ask them. There is absolutely no possibility of the CPN (Maoist) turning into a parliamentary party. That would be a great betrayal to the revolutionary aspirations of the masses.

(visit: http://www.insof.org/politics/130701_interview_baburam.html)

So, it is very difficult to contend that the Maoist war will come to an end through peaceful dialogues or negotiations. This is because the Maoists will not probably be satisfied with the present constitutional monarchy, and the King and other political parties won't probably surrender to the Maoists' demand to establish a communist republic.

To sum up, any analysis of the origin and development of the Maoist war in Nepal requires a broader understanding of the incidents and accidents of the Nepalese history. Rather than explaining it as a unified Maoist movement of the poor/underprivileged, it is perhaps wise to explore economic, political and socio-cultural dynamics of the war. This might give us some knowledge about the movement and the conditions behind people's participation in it.

In my opinion, the war should be understood as the people's expression of their frustrations and dissatisfactions about the recent political and economic situations of the country. Not the Maoist ideals but the people's hatred to the political leaders and their activities have boosted the war. So, the war appears to me just as a symptom, not the cause or the force of Nepalese history. Any effort to treat the symptom, therefore, cannot produce long term peace. The cause must be treated, and that is poverty and deprivation. The war teaches us a lesson that unless people's real problems are duly addressed, and if possible, solved, we will continue to see different wars or movements like this. We cannot ignore the fact that the end of this war may not be the end of all wars if people's sentiments are ignored.

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