



Nepal - Where Do We Go From Here?

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The Backdrop

The Royal Kingdom of Nepal is in crisis. An already precarious situation was made worse by the sudden imposition of emergency by the King on 1 February 2005. Dismissing a democratic government, the Palace confined all political leaders, imposed censorship, shut off the country for a day and imposed a state of emergency. The world responded in dismay, condemned the Royal "coup" and suspended military aid to fight the Maoist insurgents. Some of these measures were scaled down afterwards. Two months and more later, is there a rethink in the Palace? Not likely, even though the Indian Ambassador has finally met His Majesty. Instead the King is visiting China in end April 2005 in a desperate bid to try and drum up support there. The time has come to ask in New Delhi, where do we go from here?

The situation in the Kathmandu Valley, when I visited it last a week before the coup, was tense. Rumours were afloat earlier in December 2004 of a Royal takeover. But, it was hoped that the Indian Ambassador's genuine efforts with different groups about that time would induce reflection and a stepping back from the brink. The troika (India, the US and the UK) were acting in unison and there were no doubts about their views or the steps they may jointly take. Yet, its implication seemed to have escaped the King as also the fact that the 21st Century was different from 1960. Perhaps things had already proceeded too far.

Where do Indian interests lie and what should be the policy that it should follow? Let us make no mistake Nepal is important to India - emotionally, environmentally, strategically and economically. From the perspective of internal security in its neighbouring provinces, developments in the

Kingdom can and do affect India intimately as it has for centuries. About ten million Nepalis live and work in India. Tens of thousands are employed in the Indian military and other security forces. As a larger power and one that is critical to Nepal's survival, New Delhi has a special responsibility to the country and its people. The international community is looking to it for a lead. The global environment allows little room today for either China or Pakistan to play spoil sport and they know it. For India too, it is not a simple question of flexing its muscle, for that era has surely passed. Also, Nepal is a proud neighbour, never colonised in the past. In the new nationalism prevailing in the Kathmandu Valley anti-India sentiment is always high and just below the surface. All parties in Nepal can and will exploit this for their own interests. All these place both a high responsibility as well as impose caution on New Delhi.

Indian response has to be mature and well considered, befitting a nation that aspires to a place at the global top table and a permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Therefore, its policy should be framed not merely in its enlightened national interests, but within the parameters of good neighbourliness and adhering to universal values and human rights.

The Recent Situation in Nepal

The situation in Nepal did not develop suddenly. It was at least fifteen years in the making, though some might date it from an even earlier era. Inadequate development, over population, absence of governance, had all contributed to enormous socio-economic inequities and utter deprivation among a large population, particularly outside the Kathmandu Valley. With the arrival of democracy in 1990, there was hope and high

expectation. When it failed to deliver, the disappointment was deep.

Nepal had always had strong leftist influences. These were imbibed no doubt from neighbouring parts of India. In February 1996 the more left wing group, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) broke away and took to armed struggle, basing their ideology on Mao Zedong and the Shining Path of Peru.

The Maoists announced a 40-point Charter of Demands, patently anti-Indian and steeped in Marxist ideology. Conditions in the country side were ripe for such a movement and it spread rapidly. It targeted government treasury and banks for funds. With sufficient money and arms largely captured from the state police, the insurgency was well on its way. Initially the Government took little notice. The civil police, woefully under strength, untrained and ill-equipped were left to counter it. They suffered hugely and made no headway. The Army remained on the sidelines, exploiting constitutional ambiguity and encouraged by the Palace, while also not sure of civilian government support.

Finally, in November 2002 the Maoists struck the Army at Dang inflicting heavy casualties. This was a mistake. The Army was now forced to strike back

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and it did so with a vengeance. In the ensuing battles over the next two years and more, casualties mounted sharply and there were widespread human rights violations by all sides. Meanwhile, democratic politics made little difference to the lives of the people. Rampant corruption and political infighting seemed to discredit the democratic process itself and this sentiment seems to prevail even now. It can well be argued that the correction for inadequate democracy is not removal; but perhaps even more democracy,

with better checks and accountability through constitutional mechanisms and due process of law. It is equally true that such developments take years of patient negotiations between different stake holders, a luxury that Nepal did not enjoy.

Of the three elements currently vying for power in the country - the Maoists, the political parties and the monarchy - it is the Maoists who are emerging the strongest. Political parties and politicians are hounded by the King and the Army. Under pressure many may be forced to align with the Maoists against the monarchy. The monarchy, already discredited by the regicide of 2001, may have further weakened itself, particularly if things do not go in its favour early and if it cannot obtain international support. Already a desperately poor country whose development is nearly entirely dependent on aid, Nepal has all the possibility to become a failed state. Meanwhile the Maoists have the upper hand and in this vacuum are likely to regain some popular sympathy that it had recently lost through its coercion and violence.

According to recent documents and captured speeches of Baburam Bhattarai, it appears that the Maoists were prepared to launch a strategic offensive from February 2005. Whether this was true or not, this has been thwarted for now. The Maoists are surely carefully reformulating their options. Given the current situation they will probably explore possibilities of widening their political support base before launching the final strategic offensive. What is certain is that there is not much time left.

No one knows for sure the ideology or future policy of the CPN. It can range the spectrum from 'bhadrak' communists a la West Bengal to Pol Pot in Cambodia. There have been indications for several years now of their increasing links and cooperation with Marxist organizations of South Asia.

Maoist Links with India

Ten left wing armed extremist groups formed on 1 July 2001 a Coordinating Committee of Maoist Parties and Organizations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). There were four groups from Bangladesh, one each from Nepal (the CPN) and Sri Lanka and four from India. They share a common ideology, believe in armed struggle for liberation, meet annually to coordinate strategy,

support each other with logistic arrangements, undertake joint training and have formed a common front for joint action. Their object of a Compact Revolutionary Zone (CRZ) of contiguous liberated areas has not yet materialized. The proposed CRZ is characterized by high poverty, large tribal population exploited for millennia and a corrupt state administration. Simply it is ripe for revolution. The area is a crescent from Nepal, through Bihar, West Bengal and adjacent Bangladesh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, where left extremist violence has grown enormously in recent years. In its second annual conference in August 2002, the CCOMPOSA launched what it called a Protracted People's War.

The lead for much of this has come from the CPN, supported and funded at least partially by the Inter Services Intelligence of Pakistan from the Terai region of Nepal.

The spread of Naxalism in India in recent years has been phenomenal. From about 75 districts affected by the year 2000, it has spread to 125 districts by 2004. It is assessed that there is a battle hardened cadre of 10,000, with a support group of 15,000 directly backing them. The Indian Naxals are armed with about 225 AK-47 rifles. They commit approximately 1500 acts of violence a year and collect annually about Rs 150-200 crores through extortion, taxes and dacoity. With this money they directly pay a monthly salary to their cadres and maintain a permanent strength of committed revolutionaries.

A victory or even a continuation of the struggle by the Maoists in Nepal can only be disastrous both for Kathmandu and New Delhi and set it back for decades. Fortunately this possibility need not be countenanced for now, but only if we play our cards right.

Countering Maoist Violence in Nepal

There are significant advantages that security forces will have in Nepal over the Maoists. First, there is so far only limited outside support. The ISI is under pressure and more can be applied on it. China has desisted from providing support and is likely to stay aloof. What sanctuary they do receive come presently from India, which must be eliminated. Second, the Maoists have lost much popular support within Nepal by their extortion

and coercion. Their cadres too exploit the people. Third, though the cadre strength is large and reasonably well motivated, a majority are ill-trained and only a few are armed with basic weapons. Fourth, their support base within Nepal is still narrow and is restricted to the lower castes. Finally, the RNA does control the Kathmandu Valley and major population centres.

Considering these realities, the Maoists can be countered effectively by the RNA itself. The solution to any insurgency is not through force of arms alone and the RNA fortunately accepts it. Yet, at this stage of Maoist violence, its suppression by the state through minimum state coercion is unavoidable. But, this will require massive rearming and reequipping of the RNA, careful training in winning hearts and minds and proper leadership. The strength of the RNA too will have to be greatly augmented. Most important the RNA will have to be retrained in ensuring that they do not commit human rights violation. This will take a fairly long time, given the neglect and maladministration of decades. Also, this can be only done under a political leadership in the country that truly represents popular will. It is this that makes reintroduction of democracy an essential prerequisite for countering Maoists in Nepal and not an arbitrary imposition of a form of governance by force from outside.

How should this be brought about?

Policy Towards Nepal

India has to take an initiative in helping to restore the situation in Nepal. Some measures that it should promote are:-

- Early initiation of a dialogue with all concerned in Nepal through a small

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consortium of representatives from concerned countries. To succeed all approaches should be multilateral.

- Allowing a greater role for the United Nations and its agencies. Aspiring as it does for a greater role in the world body, India should actively support and play a lead role in this initiative. It must of course have a suitable role in it.
- Even as international institutions such as the UNHRC, UNDP and others are actively involved, all actions have to be initiated and acted upon under the sovereign authority of Nepal.
- Therefore, restoration of popular government must be the highest priority. This can be through restoration of the earlier Parliament for a limited period, forming a government of national consensus of people of high credibility or any such measures that are patently credible and can carry forward the next stage of democratization.
- For a country long under monarchy and with fledgling democratic traditions, a constitutional monarchy is desirable for the stability it provides. In Nepal its traditional role is still acceptable even though the institution itself suffered a deadly blow in 2001 and any unpopular measures by it may truly kill it permanently. Clearly then the King's role too should be constitutionally delineated and limited and only a little more than ceremonial.
- Talks with Maoists should be initiated at the earliest by the polity, preferably under international mediation or facilitation. Pressure on Maoists to negotiate should be exerted from the international community and through concerted action from India.
- Arrangements to assist the RNA should be initiated, but only after it is constitutionally under the political leadership and directly accountable to it. Training in human rights issues should be a high priority.
- All human rights violations must be thoroughly investigated through national judicial process and acted upon speedily.

These are a few of several measures that may be required and in which India has to play a pro-active role.



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