

# An Account of the General Strike in Nepal

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While the world media was focused on a boring battle between the Tories and their New Labour cousins in Britain, a historic struggle was underway in Nepal. Nine months after the victory of the Maoists in the 2008 constituent assembly (CA) elections, bourgeois forces, with support from the Indian government, succeeded in forcing them out of power. They were replaced by a 22-party coalition, dominated by the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) (UML), that has unsuccessfully tried to govern the country since May 2009. A constitutional crisis looms, since the interim constitution will expire on May 28; the new constitution is far from written and the CA cannot be extended without a deal between the Maoists and the ruling coalition or the declaration of an emergency. It was in this context that the Maoists called for an indefinite countrywide general strike demanding the resignation of the incumbent Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal and the formation of a national unity government. [1]

It is difficult to describe the scale and character of the general strike. In terms of sheer numbers, the strike was impressive; various estimates suggest that, on May Day and the first few days of the strike (which lasted from May 2-7), the Maoists succeeded in mobilizing several hundred thousand activists in Kathmandu alone. However, it is two distinctive features, which on the surface appear dichotomous, that combined to make this mass mobilization unique.

The first is that the Maoist activists were not only superbly organized with clear chains of command and impressive discipline — they were also bound together by a unity of purpose driven by high levels of political awareness. While this might suggest a forbidding paramilitary gathering, the reality of the Maoist gathering in Kathmandu was just the opposite. Much of the day and significant parts of political rallies were spent in cultural activities; street intersections became sites for hours of singing and dancing. The women and men who were part of this were very curious about outsiders but also remarkably open, honest and friendly.

These two features were reflected in the character of the strike. Since a hundred thousand disciplined activists make for a veritable army, the strike was extraordinarily successful. For six days, material forces bowed to political will as the wheels of the economy across Nepal ground to a halt. In Kathmandu, almost all shops (except for chemists) were closed although the markets were allowed to open each day between 6-8 p.m. What is striking is that it was achieved with almost no violence. [2] While businesses were shut, the atmosphere on the streets was remarkably relaxed. People walked about freely and in the early days of the strike a superficial observer would have concluded that the country was on vacation!

The response of the government was very curious; it did nothing at all. The state simply melted away in the face of the Maoist mobilization. Although small groups of the “Armed Police Force” stood guard at a few crucial spots, most policemen vanished from the streets. Even the tiny flow of traffic (comprising ambulances, diplomatic vehicles and human rights observers) was regulated by the Maoist cadre. Credible information suggests that the Prime Minister was unable to travel the few kilometers from his official residence to his office and ended up operating from home!

On May Day, the UN representative in Nepal explained that “rights to peaceful assembly . . . were exemplified,” but this misses the point. The state cannot cede control so completely to another

political force without tremendous loss of legitimacy. What is more, strength on the streets is absolutely critical for politicians. Politicians build capital by helping their constituents in times of need. Who would vote for a party whose grip on the levers of the system was so weak that it was unable to resist the Maoists effectively even in a single neighborhood? How would such a party ever push the interests of its constituents?

The fact that the ruling coalition had no problem acknowledging its helplessness is very revealing. The obvious conclusion is that the NC-UML combine is not even interested in maintaining a popular base. The government survived not because of its popular appeal but because of support from the domestic elite, the Indian government and the security establishment.

Paradoxically, the strike was a victim of its own success. The complete economic shutdown had a deleterious impact on daily wage earners and small shopkeepers. Second, once the Maoists had succeeded in demonstrating the impotence of the state, popular resentment started to be directed not at the government but at the Maoist establishment. Eventually, faced with an intransigent government that evaporated from the streets but refused to relinquish power, the Maoists were forced to end their strike.

While the withdrawal of the strike might appear to be a setback, its effectiveness completely delegitimized the NC-UML coalition. While the strike did result in resentment against the Maoists, almost none of this translated into increased support for the government. If anything, their formidable show of strength might well lead many of those who opposed the strike to vote for the Maoists in the next election.

However, the strike had another important consequence that has not attracted much attention: the formation of a fresh counter-revolutionary force. On the morning of May 7, big business, small traders and sections of the ruling coalition organized a “peace rally” to oppose the strike. Text messages were crucial in getting people to the event. A typical SMS that did the rounds was the following: “FNCCI [Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry], Nepal Chamber of Commerce, PAPAD [Professional Alliance for Peace and Democracy] & other non political organizations are going to organize a peace rally to oppose the Bandh [strike]. . . . Please join the rally with your family to show the strength & solidarity” (emphasis added). This rally ended up being much bigger than either the organizers or the Maoists expected; between thirty to fifty thousand people showed up.

The rally later overflowed into a march that ran into a small settlement of Maoists and proceeded to deliberately provoke a clash. The possibility that such clashes might recur and spiral out of control worried the Maoists and probably played a part in their decision to end the bandh.

The unifying cry at the “peace rally” was that “politics is bad.” Two popular comedians Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansha Acharya regaled the crowd by making fun of the entire political establishment, i.e. both the Maoists and the ruling coalition. While the claim that all politicians and, by extension, politics itself are bad is superficially attractive, it is, in fact, representative of a deeply conservative viewpoint. The notion that political movements should step back and allow the economy to run unhindered is a recipe for maintaining the status quo. Whether or not these implications were clear to the majority of attendees and cultural activists at the rally, they were undoubtedly clear to its organizers.

While the Maoists leadership has attacked “government infiltrators” in the march for provoking a confrontation, it has been soft on the central de-politicizing message of the rally itself. This is problematic because there is a very real danger that, in a few years, this “peace rally” coalition will turn into the dominant counter-revolutionary force in Nepal. The Nepali elite probably recognizes

that it cannot, any longer, defend the status quo through the current huddle of demoralized bourgeois political parties; its only option is to attack the process of change. However, this metamorphosis will take time and, even if the NC-UML coalition collapses (as might happen soon), several more immediate battles loom in the coming weeks.

To summarize, the general strike marked a watershed in the Nepali revolution because it demonstrated the extent of the mass base that the Maoists have developed. In this new phase of mass politics, international solidarity will be important. While the Nepali revolution has not received the same degree of support from the international left (especially the “new left”) that Latin American revolutions have received, it represents a possibility that is different but just as exciting. We should not lose sight of a central fact: after more than a generation, the movement in Nepal presents the first real opportunity for radical change in Asia. So, we should do all we can to defend its gains and advance its objectives.

**by Suvrat Raju**

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## **P.S.**

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The key disagreements between the Maoists and the bourgeois parties that have held up the peace process are on the integration of Maoist fighters into the regular security forces and the form that the Nepali republic should take; this includes questions of federalism and whether the government should be presidential or parliamentary.

[2] Of course, at points, the strike was imposed using an implicit threat of violence but this is very similar to the way the state imposes its laws.