

Discussions with the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist): Lessons for the Philippine left

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March 20, 2012 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — While Nepal is very different from the Philippines in many key aspects of the country's economy, society and politics, nevertheless the experience of the Maoist movement in that country holds valuable lessons for the Philippine left – both the Maoists and the non-Maoist revolutionary movements.

In Nepal we see the successful implementation of a people's war strategy, followed by and combined with the development of an insurrectionary urban mass movement, which resulted in the overthrow of a feudal monarchy, the declaration of a federal democratic republic, the establishment of a constituent assembly and a successful intervention in elections in 2008 by the United Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN-M).

Today the UCPN-M has entered a new phase of the struggle, significantly different from the previous phase of the "people's war". Both phases of the struggle, the "people's war" phase to overthrow the monarchy and the current period of a revolutionary government, hold important lessons for us in the Philippines.

This new generation of Maoists of the UCPN, who had waged a people's war for almost a decade before the 2006 people's uprising against the monarchy, won the largest popular vote in the 2008 elections, gaining 229 of the 575 elected seats (around 40%) in the newly established constituent assembly. After much maneuvering against them by the bourgeois opposition forces, the Maoists were able to form and lead a national coalition government, which as its first task, declared Nepal a republic. The Maoist leader "Prachanda" (aka Pushpa Kamal Dahal), also the chairperson of the UCPN, became the republic's first prime minister.

Just over one-year after winning government, the Maoists were forced to resign as a result of a de-facto coup, backed by the elite and instigated by India and the United States. The UCPN then took to the streets, with mass support among the urban and rural poor and with the largest number of seats

in parliament, demanding that the government resign. In May 2010 it led an insurrectionary movement, mobilising more than half a million people in the streets of Kathmandu, calling for the resignation of the elite-backed government. In August 2011, with the support of smaller parties in the constituent assembly, UCPN leader Baburam Bhattarai was elected as prime minister.

While there are important debates taking place on how to move forward in the historic conjuncture that the revolution and the party in Nepal face today, we in the Philippines cannot avoid the fact that the comrades in Nepal managed to accomplish what we could not, i.e. a successful implementation of a people's war over some 10 years, to overthrow a feudal monarchy and win government, in a socioeconomic context that they correctly analysed to be "semi-feudal and semi-colonial". It is almost as if the comrades in Nepal had studied the Philippine experience very closely, learned the lessons of what not to do and as a result have made substantial progress to date.

In conducting the people's war, the UCPN correctly assessed Nepal to be both a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. Unlike in the Philippines, where there is a considerable level of industrialisation and urbanisation and where the working class, both urban and rural, constitute the majority of the population, in Nepal more than 90% of the population continue to be "pauperised, landless and poor and lower class peasants scattered over the vast rural areas". I saw little or no large-scale factories or industrial complexes in the capital city, Kathmandu.

The UCPN also assessed that the major forces who would lead the "New Democratic Revolution" would be the working class, including farm workers. While the main emphasis was armed struggle in the countryside, or people's war, to oust the monarchy, the policies of the party included:

- Give priority to the rural work, but do not leave out the urban work;
- Give priority to illegal struggle, but do not leave out the legal struggle, too;
- Give priority to specific strategic areas, but do not leave out work related to the mass movement, too;
- Give priority to class struggle in rural areas, but do not leave out countryside struggle, too;
- Give priority to guerrilla actions, but do not leave out political exposure and propaganda, too;
- Give priority to propaganda work within the country but do not leave out worldwide propaganda, too;
- Give priority to build army organisation, but do not leave out to build front organisations, too;
- Give priority to relying on one's own organisation and force, but do not miss to forge unity-in-action, to take support and help from international arena. [\[1\]](#)

Gender equity, the right to self-determination and opposition to ethnic and caste discrimination are also key features of the UCPN's day-to-day struggle. The UCPN built up a formidable reputation for leading in these aspects of the practical struggle, linking it with the historic tasks of the national democratic revolution. They also recruited large numbers of poor rural women and excluded minorities to the party and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Debates

After the overthrow of the monarchy and the declaration of a ceasefire, there have been debates in

the party on what strategies or tactics to pursue. The leaders I spoke with are careful to emphasise that the debates are tactical in nature and are not about strategy. They say that the strategy is to establish a new democratic society heading towards socialism and there is no debate about this.

During the leadership plenum which was held soon after the ceasefire – the “Balaju” plenum – the debate was on whether to participate in the constituent assembly elections and the peace process or continue with the people’s war. While the nuances of the debates are hard to follow from afar, according to the comrades I discussed with, there is a “three-line” debate within the party, which emerged at the party’s Palungtar plenum of November 2010.

The “three-lines” are led by the party vice-chair Mohan Baidhya (alias Kiran), Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai and party chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal (alias Prachanda). The decision of the majority to participate in the peace process and the constituent assembly elections marked a significant shift from the previous emphasis placed on the people’s war and marked a new phase of the struggle. Recent UCPN documents describe the strategy pursued as a “fusion of people’s war and the historic mass movement”.

Similar debates have taken place in the Philippine movement from the late 1970s onwards. The overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship and the overthrow of the king in Nepal are approximately comparable periods in the history of the struggles in both countries. In the Philippines the refusal of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) leadership to “fuse” the people’s war with the urban mass movement, the clearest example of which was the policy of boycotting the elections in 1986 and continuing to emphasise the primacy of the armed struggle (to the point of believing that the anti-Marcos elite would take up the armed struggle in the countryside), the inability to lead a broad anti-dictatorship front especially after the assassination of former Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino (Cory Aquino’s husband) and the refusal to bring in the New People’s Army (NPA) forces to the urban centres to support the uprising was a major error that lost the revolutionary movement the leadership of the “Edsa revolution” in 1986. The anti-Marcos elite stepped in, Cory Aquino won the election and set up a “revolutionary” government, and the rest is history.

A key lesson for us from the struggle in Nepal is that there is no strategy for all seasons. The people’s war overthrew the feudal monarchy, but now the emphasis is on the mass movement. It is also interesting to note that during my discussions with the UCPN comrades the people’s war was never described as being “protracted”, as is the case with CPP, with its “protracted people’s war strategy” that could go on even for “one hundred years”. As politburo member Comrade Partha Karki explained to me (in meetings in 2010), “The revolution can and needs to be developed to suit current situations. To paraphrase Lenin ‘to follow the old path is to sacrifice living Marxism to the dead letter’. In Nepal we have a republican state, an outcome of ten years of people’s war which united with the people’s movement.”

The ‘revolutionary line’?

The divisions in the UCPN, however, are significant, with those wanting to continue with the “people’s war” line as the “revolutionary line”, describing the majority line of the party as “reformist”.

One of the leaders of the “people’s war” line, Indra Mohan Sigdel (aka “Basanta”), a politburo member, describes the divisions in the party:

“The differences in our party now are serious. One of these differences is the sub-stage theory. Baburam Bhattarai has put forward the argument that there is a sub-stage between the monarchical

system and the new democratic system; a sub-stage of democratic republic. Our chairman, Prachanda, has now indirectly supported this argument. This is the root of the political difference we currently have. The Marxist position is that either there is a joint dictatorship of feudal, comprador, bureaucratic and bourgeois forces or a people's dictatorship. In between these two there is no other form of dictatorship. A sub-stage means the dictatorship of compromise, which is ultimately a bourgeois dictatorship. Whether to stop at a bourgeois dictatorship or to go ahead with establishing a people's dictatorship is the crux of the difference we have in our party now." [2]

Comrade Khimlal Devkota, UCPN member of the constituent assembly and the secretary of the parliamentary wing of the party, describes the problems of the transition to socialism in the following way:

"... in the current socioeconomic structure and the development of class struggle, armed struggle is not the appropriate means of capturing the central state power... Nepal is still semi-feudal ... we cannot jump from feudalism to socialism ... without passing through a capitalist stage. During capitalist development we want to focus on distribution, then socialism...The new constitution should be a basic document - a menu of people's socio-economic rights... [including] land reform to change the mode of production, economic development to improve livelihoods through equal distribution."

Will the bourgeois parties in the constituent assembly agree to such a constitution? And even if they do, how will the UCPN government implement it, given the inevitable resistance to fundamental reforms, such as land reform or "land to the tiller" - a key program of the national democratic revolution - that will be mounted by the "comprador, bourgeois and feudal classes". These are the key questions that face the UCPN-M and which underlie the debates in the party.

According to Comrade Devkota, "if peace and constitution cannot be completed, then insurrection is the second option". The party documents rightly emphasise the importance of developing the mass movement in this new period, to organise and mobilise the masses to implement the revolutionary democratic program. In this situation, and learning from the experience of the 2009 coup attempt by Nepal's military high command against the UCPN government then, and also drawing from our own experience, we know that the role of the armed forces is also a key issue. Therefore a related issue is the integration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into the former Nepal army.

The party opposition is critical of the decision of the UCPN to integrate the PLA into the Nepal army. They argue that "integration has brought virtually no benefits to our movement. PLA soldiers are being recruited not as a single unit but on an individual basis. It amounts to capitulation to the ruling establishment, mere recruitment for the Nepal army."

However, according to Comrade Devkota, the integration of the PLA into the Nepal army is key to the peace process. "For peace we need to integrate and rehabilitate the PLA ... We have to restructure and democratise the army... to form a true people's national army", as opposed to the previous character of the army which was loyal to the monarchy and not the "nation".

Assessing the new period

So is the UCPN-M pursuing a "reformist" line today? Comrade Devkota's admits that there are risks involved in taking the parliamentary path, but argues that "Marxism is not a lifeless dogma. It's not a holy book. We [negotiated] a compromise to consolidate our achievements of the revolution... The Russian revolutionaries and the Chinese revolutionaries also took risks to complete their revolutions. They also made a series of compromises and adopted 'reformist' tactics. If you need to move forward you need to take both left and right steps. Today we have taken a right step to achieve more. To

analyse a movement you need to take into account the whole, not parts of it. If we are now 'reformist' then you can say, in the same way, our past was ultra-left ... to see both is the Marxist way."

Key to the debate on what line to pursue is the assessment of the character of the new period and therefore the peace process. The 2009 party document of the UCPN, entitled "The present situation and the historic task of the proletariat", makes the following assessment of the peace process as one that has been won through revolutionary struggle and not imposed by the reactionaries on the revolutionary movement:

"Reactionaries, in and outside of the country, have clearly understood that the ideological, political... relation of the peace-process and constituent assembly is inseparably related with Maoist people's war and the revolutionary movement. In the special context of Nepal, for the reason that peace-process and constituent assembly are the fruit of people's war and revolutionary movement, victory of reactionaries in this arena is impossible."

The peace process as a result of a revolutionary overthrow of the monarchy, and with the UCPN-M in government, is very different to the "peace process" between the MNLF or the CPLA and the Philippine capitalist government, which resulted in the "integration" of their armed members in to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and in the case of the CPLA, the collapse and disappearance of that organisation. It's also very different to the "peace process" being conducted between the CPP-New People's Army-National Democratic Front and the Aquino administration today, which is not an outcome of a successful people's war, but is more in the framework of a legitimate tactical manoeuvre by the CPP leadership to bide time and maintain its forces.

While Nepal's federal democratic republic is a result of the revolutionary struggle, what are the prospects of achieving a genuine people's republic? According to the "historic tasks" document, "There is no basic change in the class character of the state. Even today, there is a sole control of comprador, bureaucrat and feudal classes in the state. Seizing the achievements of great people's war and historic mass movement or by means of counterrevolution this class wants to retract into status quo... these challenges clarify the reality that Nepalese democratic revolution has not yet been accomplished, rather its final completion along with decisive struggle still remains waiting."

According to Comrade Devkota, a key question is "formal democracy and real democracy... we are trying to make it a real democracy ... social justice and equity ... distribution to be pro-people through socio-economic rights ... the liberals have no courage to put this forward ... this is a good opportunity to put forward the demands of the people ... for socio-economic rights ... for real democracy."

When we in the Philippines campaigned for a transitional revolutionary government (TRG) to replace the former Arroyo government, we also understood that the Philippine state under the TRG would continue to remain a capitalist state. We struggled for the TRG on the basis that a TRG would provide the most suitable conditions under which we could deepen the revolutionary struggle, by providing the maximum political space - through bringing about fundamental political reforms, a new constitution and the restructuring of the Armed Forces of the Philippines - in which to further the struggles of the masa [masses] for their most immediate and basic social and economic demands.

Party unity

The differences in the UCPN-M are sometimes openly expressed in struggle. In January 2012 the

student movement organised a strike campaign against the government's oil price hikes, in which the All Nepal National Independent Students Union (Revolutionary) of the UCPN also participated. In August 2011, the Young Communist League, which includes youth members of the PLA, demonstrated against plans to disperse them. The UCPN is also under pressure to address the impact of the ravages of the people's war on its own base (the estimates of those who died during the armed struggle range as high as 15,000): thousands of destitute families of PLA fighters, unemployed youth members, who have returned from the countryside, lacking formal qualifications and struggling to find employment and livelihoods. Party documents openly discuss these problems, including the need to address emerging corruption amongst party leaders, in a situation where a majority of party cadre are desperately poor.

The debates have, as yet, not led to an open organisational split in the UCPN (much to the dismay of some Maoist groups around the world) although some opposition groupings have left the party in the last few years. Comrades are careful to emphasise the need for unity within the party, despite the differences, and the fact that the party has managed to accommodate these sharp differences is encouraging. The party also emphasises the need for a collective leadership:

"Marxist leaders failed to develop their own successors and the whole movement was negatively affected by the end of the leader. Recognising the historical fact, the tactic of collective leadership was opted [for]. Leadership is not a nominee... grooming up from the revolution was the major tactical development regarding the leadership." [3]

How long the UCPN can continue to remain united in this period is, of course, another matter. The CPP, on the other hand, was never healthy enough to realise party unity in the midst of major debates on strategy and tactics, and the revolutionary movement continues to grapple with these issues, of how to conduct a healthy political debate today.

All the comrades I met and discussed with understand very clearly that the new Nepal is yet to be born. They are acutely aware of the daunting tasks ahead of them. They understand that this is a critical conjuncture in which the strategies and tactics pursued by the UCPN will decide the future of the country and its people. The cadres are very conscious of the need for ideological clarity and the importance of ideological struggles. A constant refrain in party documents is the need to guard against "right revisionism" and "capitulation to reformism" as the main "ideological foe" of the revolutionary movement today, while also noting the problems of dogmatism and sectarianism.

As Comrade Partha Karki explained to me, "One thing is for sure, sectarian thinking, especially in the Maoist movement, paid a big price. We must narrow down the number of small groups and find unity on basic principles. Before, members of some smaller parties physically killed each other, but now, with the unification of these groups [referring to the unification of the Maoists with several smaller groups], we have made an environment in which these groups can sit together and discuss."

International situation and solidarity

The UCPN has won significant gains for the masses, even revolutionary gains, in the context of Nepal. In the final analysis this is what the struggle is about. Comrade Devkota listed them for me: the interim constitution; establishment of the republic; the election of a constituent assembly; laws for gender equity and social inclusion based on proportional representation for women and marginalised castes, ethnic and religious groupings; the establishment of a federated state structure to represent this; and the building of a true national army.

The comrades are also aware of their roles and responsibilities in the international revolutionary

movement. They say their policy is to have relations with all revolutionary parties (again much to the annoyance of some parties attempting to form a Maoist international). The 2009 party document makes a positive assessment of the international situation and prospects for the revolutionary movement, but does point to the weakness of the left internationally to maximise the opportunities: "However, compared to the objective situation, the subjective condition of the world communist movement is very weak."

The document notes the exception of Latin America: "the wave of victory of anti-imperialist leftists in Latin American countries in the elections attracts a special significance. The left opinion there will have a special role in developing an anti-imperialist front in the world level." Party leaders I spoke to are very keen on understanding the developments in Latin America, where mass upsurges made a breach in the system of elite rule, leading to left electoral victories and the establishment of revolutionary governments. They understand that these revolutionary governments, such as that of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, are now attempting to deepen the revolution towards "socialism of the 21st century". They see some similarities with the situation they face today, as a revolutionary party in government. Perhaps there is an argument to be made that the revolutionary forces in Nepal are in a stronger position than in Venezuela or even Bolivia.

The left in the Philippines today is under tremendous pressure to work from "within the system", "advancing" the struggle through positions in a pro-elite and capitalist government and by "having the ear of the president". Sections of the left have succumbed to this pressure, with little or no result. The developments in Nepal show us what the revolutionary movement is ultimately all about: not to win a few seats in congress or the senate, not for some miserable positions in government to delude ourselves (and others) into thinking that we are at the centre of power inside Malacanang, with any real influence, or that a president of the elite such as Noynoy Aquino can be convinced to implement the TRG just because some of us have "his ear". The implementation of the TRG requires a revolutionary government led by the left. There are no short cuts to this. The revolutionary movement is about the revolution, with the masa wielding power to advance their positions and interests, acting on behalf of the entire nation.

We should follow the debates of the comrades in Nepal and understand and learn from their tactics and strategy. And most importantly, we must be prepared to act in solidarity with them in their struggle.

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P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/2789>

Footnotes

[1] "The Maoist Movement in Nepal: Development of Tactics and Strategies Legal and Political Aspects" by Khimlal Devkota, UCPN-M Constituent Assembly member and Secretary of the UCPN-M parliamentary group.

[2] "Interview: Debating the Way Forward" at

<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/15494-interview-debating-the-way-forward-in-nepal>.

[3] “The Maoist Movement in Nepal: Development of Tactics and Strategies Legal and Political Aspects” by Khimlal Devkota, UCPN-M constituent assembly member and secretary of the UCPN-M parliamentary group.