

Maoists required

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The peace process still on life-support

THE incompetence of Nepal's self-regarding politicians helped fuel a nasty decade-long war, mercifully ended in 2006. Now, charged with working alongside the Maoists who fought the war to safeguard a delicate peace process, and write a new constitution to lead Nepalis to the light, they are blundering again.

The resignation on May 4th of the Maoists' leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, as prime minister has left the government in limbo. Mr Dahal was protesting at being foiled in his effort to sack the country's army chief, General Rookmangud Katawal. The sacking was vetoed by the president, Ram Baran Yadav, with encouragement from almost every other political party. United in their suspicion that the Maoists' recent commitment to democracy is a sham, the former guerrillas' two biggest opponents, a mainstream leftist party known as the UML (for "Unified Marxist-Leninist"), and the Nepali Congress party (NC) are now trying to form an alternative government.

That requires support from a majority of the 601-member Constituent Assembly. And with only 212 seats between them, the UML and NC are struggling. Even with support from a dozen small parties, they need backing from Nepal's fourth-biggest outfit, an alliance of parties dedicated to the Madhesi ethnic group, known as the United Madhesi Democratic Front. The Madhesis seem willing; but they want a promise that the new government would grant them an autonomous Madhesi province in the southern Terai region.

The difficulty of making a non-Maoist government is a clue to how misguided it would be. Mostly drawn from Kathmandu, a pampered capital, the Maoists' opponents have consistently underestimated them and the rural grievances that fuelled their struggle. The UML and NC both expected to win the country's first post-war election last year. But the Maoists triumphed, winning 38% of the seats. Wiser than their politicians, Nepalis wanted the former guerrillas to prove their democratic credentials. Even if the Maoists now do so in opposition, as Mr Dahal says they would, they will be able to block a weak and fractious government on most issues. Moreover, despite Mr Dahal's pledge, the Maoists have stopped the assembly functioning since his resignation. Unless Mr Yadav withdraws his support for General Katawal, they say they will not return to the government—but that any alternative administration would be illegal.

With a history of unstable coalitions, many Nepali politicians appear to think this mess normal. But with a peace to be won and constitution to be written, for which political consensus is required, these are not normal times. According to a 2006 peace agreement between the Maoists and their political opponents, some of the Maoists' 23,000-odd former fighters, currently in UN-supervised camps, should be integrated into the army. But General Katawal, egged on by the NC, UML and India, has resisted this. Indeed, many Nepali politicians say the agreement should be renegotiated, arguing that the Maoists have not kept their side of the bargain, for example by failing to control their thuggish youth wing. That is true. But tearing up the peace agreement will hardly encourage the Maoist leaders, with their standing army outside Kathmandu, to honour it.

P.S.

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