

Three cheers for Nepal's new democracy!

Sunday 26 November 2006, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 25 November 2006).

Amidst Chinese president Hu Jintao's visits to India and Pakistan, themselves important, we risk trivialising the far greater, indeed momentous, change now under way in another South Asian country: Nepal. This past Tuesday, a guerrilla movement there did something unprecedented: it signed a comprehensive peace agreement with the government, and pledged to disarm itself and join the democratic mainstream.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) is now all set to participate in an interim all-party government, which will pave the way for the election of a constituent assembly (CA). This is likely to inaugurate Nepal's transition to a new political order based on radical democracy, which replaces monarchical rule, strips the king of privilege and property, and attempts to bring about a social transformation.

This calls for celebration. It's not often that a self-avowed revolutionary movement comes to power within a democratic framework. While smaller in scale, the transition Nepal seems poised to make is no less radical than South Africa's shift from apartheid to majority rule.

However, Nepal's transition won't be free of hitches. It could pose problems at each stage: parliament's reconstitution to include 73 Maoist representatives; formation of an interim government in which the Maoists have five ministers (of a total of 23), the same as the Nepali congress and communist party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist); procedure for the disarmament of the People's Liberation Army under United Nations' supervision; and the 425-member CA's election — including 205 members from existing constituencies, 204 through proportional representation, and the remaining by government nomination.

Even trickier is the issue of a referendum, demanded by the CPN (UML), on abolishing the

monarchy. This is widely seen as contriving at the king's backdoor entry into power. All other parties want the issue settled by a new constitution. Differences also persist on whether Nepal should be a full-fledged republic or a ceremonial monarchy.

Nevertheless, Nepal seems set for great political change — more fundamental and potentially more durable than in 1990, when the parliamentary government was installed thanks to a mass agitation. That shift was messy, and hemmed in by a monarch who controlled the army and could dismiss an elected government. Even this partial democratisation was cynically reversed with Gyanendra's imposition of absolutist rule in February 2005.

The historic changes under way in Nepal are attributable to a popular anti-monarchy movement, which brought the despotic king to his knees last April. This was preceded by a 12-point agreement between the seven-party alliance (SPA) and the Maoists, which pledged to end the 'autocratic monarchy' and establish democracy through a constituent assembly.

The mass movement was without precedent in South Asia for its scale, sustained energy and powerful thrust against arbitrary rule. Although catalysed by the Maoists-SPA, it had an autonomous political character. Ordinary Nepalis took charge of it. The agitation didn't degenerate into chaos; the people showed exemplary maturity. They emerged as arbiters of their fate. In the contest between their will and the monarchy, they won.

The 12-point agreement wouldn't have happened without the Maoists' insistence on a CA. The Maoists too had to moderate their stand under the 8-point agreement with the SPA last June. They pledged a "firm commitment to the acceptance of the multi-party system, fundamental rights..., human rights, the rule of law and democratic... values... "

It's tempting to see this as opportunism. But Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai had formulated a new thesis even earlier: in the 21st century, a left-wing strategy cannot be based on armed struggle alone. Nor can it use revolutionary violence, which Nepal's two big neighbours, India and China, oppose. Nepali socialism must have a

multi-party system.

More recently, CPN(M) chairman Prachanda too said that "the inherent monopolistic and bureaucratic tendencies of communist parties in power can be checked" only through a multi-party system. He explicitly repudiated Stalinism.

Today, Prachanda seems to be modelling himself after Nelson Mandela. In Delhi last week, he didn't hesitate to meet World Bank officials — who called on him in recognition of the inevitability of a Maoist role in future governments —, but without losing his radical bearings.

He promised to 'improve on' the Indian model of democracy by giving it substantive content through programmes to abolish poverty and 'all forms of exploitation'. The Maoists' domestic record in fighting rural oppression, casteism and gender discrimination is encouraging.

One can only hope that Prachanda's grand vision is translated into action in abjuring violence, getting the Maoist militia (organised outside the PLA) to surrender arms, and in verifiably stopping tax collection and recruitment of schoolchildren into the PLA.

This view differs sharply from the cynical attitude of many hawkish 'strategic analysts' who believe the CPN(M) is intent on grabbing power by violent means to establish a dictatorship; it must be disarmed first. Such analysts don't understand the forces that shape history. The Maoists must be held down to their commitment to disarm under international supervision. But they aren't bound by any agreement to do so before joining the interim government.

Maoism arose in Nepal because of entrenched inequalities, coupled with the palace's despotism and blatant misgovernance for two centuries. Seventy per cent of Nepalis are desperately poor. The top five per cent own 37 per cent of the land, while close to half own just 15 per cent.

The Kathmandu Valley's elite dominates Nepal's society. But in recent years, power has devolved to the periphery and the janajatis (subaltern ethnic groups) and the landless have become

assertive.

The Maoists represent them. They advocate land reform and rural empowerment. It's impossible to justify their indiscriminate violence. But they indisputably speak for Nepal's dispossessed. If they join the democratic mainstream, they can make a sterling contribution to Nepal.

The present moment offers a historic chance to integrate the Maoists into the mainstream. It'd be disastrous to squander it under the influence of ideological prejudice or by citing 'threats' from them to regional, especially Indian, 'security'.

The CPN(M) is far too shrewd not to realise that destabilising the regional security balance or threatening India means taking terrible risks. Prachanda has distanced the Maoists from India's Naxalites. He recently pooh-poohed the 'Pashupati-to-Tirupati Red Corridor' idea. The claim of an operational Naxal-Maoist link been repeatedly disproved.

The past Nepal policies of China, India and Pakistan were all based on uncritical support for the monarchy on the premise that it's the best guarantee of 'stability' — which it patently isn't.

India facilitated the 12-point agreement, but soon started vacillating. At the peak of the pro-democracy movement, India, following the 'stability' premise, sent former maharaja Karan Singh to Kathmandu to indicate its support for Gyanendra. This was one of India's greatest foreign policy blunders ever. India revised its stand, but lost popular Nepali goodwill at a critical juncture.

All of Nepal's neighbours must resist the temptation to suggest any role for the monarch in a future political arrangement. They must respect the wishes of the Nepali people and distance themselves from the United States, which has been trying to buttress the palace and tilt the political balance against the Maoists through its arrogant viceregal ambassador James Moriarty.

Nepal's stability will come not from monarchical symbols, but from participatory democracy, which

is responsive to the people.

P.S.

* From The News International, November 25. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | November 26, 2006 | Dispatch No. 2325 - Year 8.

* Praful Bidwai, a former newspaper editor, is a researcher and peace and human-rights activist based in Delhi.