

Nepal: The constituent assembly election and the revolutionary left

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As the elections to the constituent assembly draw near (April 10), the question in Nepal seems not to be whether there will be a democratic republic, but rather what kind of democratic republic it will be. Bourgeois democrats'' would want to preserve the country's capitalistic character, while the revolutionary left'' will make every effort to give it a transitional character to bring socialism on to the nation's agenda. The reformist left'' will vacillate between the two courses but predominantly forge alliances with the bourgeois democrats''.

As the revolutionary left braces to complete the next stage of a rather long bourgeois-democratic revolution in Nepal -- the election of a constituent assembly -- these words of Lenin in 1905 may serve as a beacon pointing the way toward socialism: The proletariat must carry the democratic revolution to completion, allying itself to the mass of the peasantry in order to crush the autocratic resistance by force and paralyse the bourgeois instability. The proletariat must accomplish the socialist revolution, allying itself with the mass of semi-proletarian elements of the population so as to crush the bourgeoisie's resistance by force and paralyse the instability of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie.'' Lenin was emphatic that these tasks of the proletariat be carried out even when the bourgeoisie recoiled from its responsibility during the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Those who keep a close watch over the history of class struggle in Nepal will know that the democratic revolution has been delayed at certain junctures, but never halted. Indeed, it has carried on even though the Nepali bourgeoisie recoiled to such an extent that its representative party viewed itself and the monarchy as Siamese twins with a single body and intertwined heads. The bourgeoisie came to favour constitutional monarchy, undermining the call for a democratic republic from the left. In 1958 they abandoned the struggle for a constituent assembly in favour of the constitution given by the then monarch, won an election under that constitution, but were soon stripped of state power by enforcement of a clause of that same constitution. The stance of the Nepali bourgeoisie can be viewed as a local manifestation of a worldwide phenomenon in predominantly feudal states surviving under the grip of imperialism and colonialism or neocolonialism. These outside forces were aligning with local feudal forces for easy access to, and exploitation of, the national resources, and to ensure their influence in a geostrategically sensitive territory. The character and attitude of the bourgeoisie was also changing under such influences; over time they turned themselves into comprador and bureaucratic capitalists who gained more by compromising with feudal and imperialist elements than by standing against them. As a class, the bourgeoisie found a comfortable perch under the protective wing of a bourgeois monarchist party. Thus Nepal came to witness the sorry development of the Nepali Congress which, while

proclaiming democratic socialist'' principles, in practice preferred to forge alliances with monarchist

forces rather than with the left, even though the monarchy kept on pushing them out of political power and whenever possible out of the state political apparatus all together.

Left extends the boundaries

As the bourgeoisie recoiled from its historic tasks to curl up subserviently at the feet of the monarch, responsibility to complete the democratic revolution and hold a constituent assembly election fell to the fledgling revolutionary left, representing the proletarian class. They were clear that only by completing the course of bourgeois-democratic revolution, of new democracy, could they embark on the path of socialist revolution. Realising that they could not step outside or past the bourgeois-democratic boundaries of the Nepali revolution as it was currently constituted, the revolutionary left made every effort to extend those boundaries, pushing the bourgeoisie further along the path toward its completion, whenever and wherever the latter tended to stop due to its own limitations. Alliances made with the peasantry, expressed in rural class struggle, have been the main means to expand those boundaries and to pressure the bourgeoisie.

In this context, the People's Movement of 1990, or the Janandolan-1 as it is now popularly called, stands as an important turning point in Nepali history. The absolute rule of monarchy was no longer acceptable and the political system through which it was practised -- the partyless panchayat system'' -- could no longer serve as its vehicle. The bourgeoisie, threatened by a maturing left force, had to become more vocal for its own agenda of abolition of the panchayat system, establishment of multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy. Left influence and power had increased to the extent that for the first time they were participating in a joint movement on an equal basis with the Nepali Congress, some in alliance and some outside the alliance. Students, teachers and a section of civil society were also taking a strongly pro-democratic stand against the monarchy. The convergence of all these forces, backed by popular participation, successfully ousted the partyless panchayat, established a multiparty parliamentary system, and replaced absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy. Outwardly it appeared that sovereignty had been wrested from the crown and vested in the people where it belonged, though some on the revolutionary left immediately realised that a Janandolan-2 would be necessary to achieve true people's sovereignty. From a long-term perspective, the greatest importance of Janandolan-1 and the period that followed may lie in the fact that several long-held political hypotheses were put to the test. The first to be refuted was the hypothesis of the viability of constitutional monarchy itself. For decades this theoretical concept had been presented by the bourgeoisie as a political panacea for many of the socio-economic ills of Nepal's semi-feudal society. When put to the test however, actual constitutional monarchy proved neither to be prepared to respect constitutional restrictions, nor to be ready to make a break from the feudal base that had sustained it over centuries. Backed by a loyal army and bureaucracy, it continued to defy the letter and spirit of the new constitution and to create difficulties for the bourgeoisie to rule effectively. Conversely, the government could not substantively protect the people from the oppression of feudal and comprador forces, nor did it have the political will or class interests necessary to protect the country from the liberalisation/structural adjustment regime of the international financial institutions that was so severely imposed

throughout the south during the 1990s. Failing to better the condition of the masses, the bourgeois-monarchist political position weakened considerably. In this context, two strong tendencies emerged which played a dominant role in preparing the groundwork for the 2006 movement, or Janandolan-2 -- another landmark of great historical importance. {{The left}} The first of these tendencies was the radicalisation of the revolutionary left. Immediately after Janandolan-1 the revolutionary left stream organised itself into the Nepal Communist Party (CPN) (Unity Centre) with the objective of accomplishing the new democratic revolution. At the same time, the reformist left current concentrated itself in the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist or UML), organised around the slogan of people's multiparty democracy''. This latter current which drew its inspiration from Eurocommunism, kept vacillating between social democracy, and a revised form of new democracy. The reformist left was keen to beat the bourgeois-monarchist forces at their own game. In order to occupy the political space created by the shrinking of bourgeois influence, it made peace with the palace and regressive Indian forces, and immersed itself in capturing state power through elections. The CPN (UML) hypothesis that people's power can be won and executed through elections without uprooting the feudal structures and socio-economic relations was also refuted by the events of the post-1990 period. The negligible achievements even during occasional periods of partial state power made this clear. Even clearer was the extent to which their reformist philosophy led to their co-optation within the system.

The revolutionary left was faced with the challenge of reconciling with multiparty democracy which they jointly fought for in 1990, and continuing the revolution through to the end. They also adopted two tactics: participating in parliament to expose its reactionary class nature, and underground preparation for mass agitation, general strikes and peasant revolts. However, as the crisis in the bourgeois camp deepened, the revolutionary left divided over the nature of people's war and appropriate timing for its launching, the question of united front, the importance of mass movement, integration of urban and rural class struggle, and integration of people's war with popular uprising. That stream which opted to begin people's war renamed itself as Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), while the other stream continued as CPN (Unity Centre) with its legal front known as United People's Front (later People's Front'' or Janamorchha). {{Splits and unity}} Much has been written about the genesis of the Nepali Maoist movement, the war they waged, their achievements and losses. Much less attention has been paid to the changes they were making in their positions and outlooks during this period. What began almost as a repetition of the Peruvian Maoist's People's War developed its own character as the Nepali Maoists achieved victories in battle, learned to minimise losses and preserve themselves with great flexibility and tenacity, and to change course as and when needed. These changes were influenced by the intense debate that continued between the two streams of the revolutionary left within the general context of grasping the reality and course of events around them. For an observer who revisits the debates over political positions from the period of the split and commencement of people's war, it will be clear that many of the CPN (Maoist) positions were refuted by the practice of revolution and it gradually adopted the positions taken by the CPN (Unity Centre). On the other hand, while the CPN (Unity Centre) proved itself to have achieved theoretical clarity about the course of revolution, it could neither launch another people's war nor join the CPN (Maoist)'s ongoing war, given the continuing difference in analysis concerning the role of building a mass base for the success of a people's war. In this situation, its revolutionary task evolved to protect the Maoist movement while fiercely criticising the militarist thinking and

petty bourgeois adventurism within its ranks. A famous dictum of Mao is the three magic wands that made the Chinese revolution successful -- the Communist Party, the Red Army and the united front. In Nepal the CPN (Maoist) could claim the first two and the CPN (Unity Centre) the first and third. Together they have complemented one another in furthering and shaping the course of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Nepal. After the people's movement of April 2006, these two streams have achieved consensus on major issues. The senior-most leaders of both streams have stated more than once that the objective and subjective conditions leading to their split no longer exist; hence unity is inevitable. At this late date the technicalities of election commission regulations prevent them from achieving formal party unity before the election of the constituent assembly. However, the revolutionary left still has a chance to make electoral alliances and join forces to influence the outcome of the constituent assembly. Their commitment to their own hypothesis that unity of the revolutionary forces is imperative to complete the bourgeois revolution may now be tested. {{Rejection of absolute monarchy}}

The second tendency that emerged to take advantage of the political chaos and dissatisfaction of the people was the extreme right's attempt to re-establish absolute monarchy. The gruesome palace massacre of 2001 was followed by the long royal takeover that began in 2002 and culminated on February 1, 2005. This period saw a succession of ruthless events designed to intimidate the Nepali people into accepting the rule of absolute monarchy. This oppression was answered by staunch resistance by people from all walks of life. Civil society activism forced political parties to stand up to the challenge posed by monarchist forces. Political initiatives successfully brought the CPN (Maoist) and seven other major political parties to the negotiating table, resulting in a 12-point agreement that created a supportive environment for non-violent popular uprising. The slogan of constituent assembly began to capture the popular imagination as a peaceful means to settle the issues underlying the decade-long violent conflict between the state and the CPN (Maoist). In this charged environment, the slogan of democratic republic emerged as the embodiment of the aspirations of the peasantry, proletariat and all conscious citizens for breaking the fetters of the old feudal state. {{Bourgeoisie at the crossroads}}

It must be noted in the present context that both the slogans and agenda of constituent assembly and democratic republic were articulated and argued by the revolutionary left. Half a century ago the bourgeois forces agreed to halt the 1950 revolution when an offer of constituent assembly was made at the negotiating table. The question of a constituent assembly remained a demand of bourgeois monarchists for a decade, but was abandoned when they accepted a constitution produced by the monarchy and old feudal forces. The left continued with it as its own agenda. But later, the reformist left also dropped it, following the example of the bourgeois-monarchists. From that time forward it was solely the revolutionary left who carried on with the slogan and agenda of a democratic republic and a constituent assembly -- for which it rightfully deserves credit. The recent course of events in Nepal not only revived the agenda of constituent assembly, it also forced the agenda of democratic republic upon the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Hesitantly and cautiously they began making the transition from bourgeois-monarchist to bourgeois-democrat, weaning themselves away from the theory of the monarchy and the bourgeoisie as Siamese twins and, at least

formally, dropping the agenda of constitutional monarchy. This transition was in part made possible by the sharpening contradiction and power contestation between these two forces, pushing the bourgeoisie toward collaboration with the left. Nepali history has more than once demonstrated that when the bourgeoisie and the left collaborate, as in 1990 and 2006, they can win key battles with monarchist forces. The tremendous efforts of imperialist and Indian regressive forces to prevent the bourgeois-left alliances that created the peace process and restoration of civil government, and are taking Nepal to the constituent assembly election, must also be understood in this light. The second major adaptation in bourgeois attitude was the transition from insistence on a majority rule system to reluctant consideration of inclusive and proportionate democratic rule. For more than two centuries, the ethnic, linguistic and regional diversity of Nepal has been deliberately suppressed by the centralised feudal state. The struggle for identity and equal rights along these lines, together with the struggles of women, dalits and marginalised communities is carving out a new system of political rule. Federalism, autonomy, right to self-determination, proportional representation, and inclusive democracy are but a few of the concepts now shaping the consciousness of the Nepali people. The left, as always, is more open and sensitive to these newer concepts. The bourgeoisie, in keeping with its own character, is taking them cautiously and hesitantly, even though they are familiar bourgeois-democratic concepts established by their own predecessors in other parts of the globe. Although the Nepali bourgeoisie has collaborated with the left against monarchical rule, by its very nature it is reluctant to complete the democratic revolution. It rather opts not to sweep away all remnants of the past. As Lenin put it in 1905: 'It is to the advantage of the bourgeoisie to rely on certain remnants of the past, as against the proletariat, for instance on the monarchy, the standing army, etc.' It is not unlikely that the Nepali bourgeoisie may betray its own self - the cause of liberty. Will it follow that traditional path of betrayal or will it forge a new alliance in the face of the ravages of capitalism in the age of globalisation? The alliances made during and after the election of the constituent assembly will indicate which turn the bourgeoisie may take in future, and whether it will yet again fall to the Nepali proletariat to paralyse the bourgeois instability.

Conjectures and speculations

At present, bourgeois democrats appear more likely to ally with the reformist left, rather than with the discredited monarchy. However, it is certain that policy intended to appease the monarchy will be continued so that its military loyalists are not antagonised. The question in Nepal at present seems not to be whether there will be a democratic republic, but rather what kind of democratic republic it will be. Bourgeois-democrats would want to preserve its capitalistic character embedded in the matrix of hyper-capitalism under globalisation. The revolutionary left, on the other hand, will make every effort to give it a transitional character to usher in the phase of socialist revolution. The reformist left, it can confidently be speculated, will vacillate between the two courses but predominantly forge alliances with bourgeois democrats, as it continues to make its own transition to social democracy.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that in the process of pre- and post-constituent assembly polarisation and realignments, some bourgeois-democratic forces would opt to stand against the forces of globalisation and militarisation, upholding the values of social justice and democracy as the

revolutionary republicans will do. Likewise from within the ranks of the reformist left many may refuse to adopt social democratic revisionism, opting instead to work more closely with the masses. The revolutionary left should have no hesitation in forging alliances with these forces along with the mass of peasantry and petty bourgeoisie.

Whether one of these configurations develops, or whether the regressive forces of the country are given yet another chance to reconsolidate power may depend vitally on the ability of the revolutionary left to translate its theoretical understanding into concrete practice. The vacillating tendency of the reformist left is hardly new. The revolutionary left must prove itself capable at this crucial juncture to bring that force into alliance. Similarly, the emergent pro-republican tendencies of the bourgeois forces must be skilfully and effectively encouraged in an environment where domestic and international regressive elements are doing their utmost to bring the bourgeoisie back into their fold. As CPN (Unity Centre) and People's Front have been emphasising, the present situation demands tactical alliance not merely of the revolutionary left, but of all republican forces.

Serve the people

With hindsight, it can be said that by arousing the peasant masses through rural class struggle and Maoist people's war, the revolutionary left has achieved considerable success in paralysing bourgeois instability and crushing the resistance of autocracy by force, thus clearing the ground for the unprecedented spectacle of mass protests and popular demonstrations witnessed by the whole world in 2006. The combined effort of national and international reactionary forces was able to prevent the final culmination of the peaceful uprising -- the armed revolt -- only by opting to compromise and not through military suppression of the popular movement.

It has taken two turbulent years for the constituent assembly election to materialise, now due to be held on April 10, 2008. For the revolutionary left it is a hard won victory and epoch-making event which can help speed the completion of the democratic revolution. They can be expected to make a sincere effort to win the hearts and trust of the people for their candidates and to win a majority of the seats. But it should also be kept in mind that revolutionaries do not participate in elections in a desperate bid to win seats. When they participate in elections it is to make their agenda clear, and to educate the people about the probable course of history.

For the CPN (Maoist), the occasion is an added opportunity to rectify its past mistakes, and atone for atrocities committed during the people's war. It is also an opportunity to gain strength by revisiting the masses on a different footing, and to emerge as a more mature political force, freed from the tendency to militarism. It would not be out of place, I believe, to remind the revolutionary left of the spirit of **serve the people'' and the eight points of conduct''** so eloquently put forward by Mao as they present themselves to the people as their true representatives in the elections to the constituent assembly. Such an effort may hasten the pace of completion of the first tactical phase of revolution as articulated by Lenin, and prepare them for the second.

P.S.

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