

Indian Stalinists take leading role in New Delhi's efforts to contain Nepal crisis

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The leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is playing a significant role in the Indian government's efforts to shore up bourgeois rule in Nepal. The impoverished Himalayan state has been shaken by mass protests in Katmandu and other urban centres against the authoritarian regime of King Gyanendra and by a Maoist insurgency in the countryside.

CPM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury visited Nepal from Friday, April 28, through Monday, May 1, at the invitation of Nepal's new prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, and the Seven Party Alliance—an alliance of bourgeois parties that opposed the king's February 2005 seizure of all executive power.

A member of the upper house of India's parliament, Yechury visited Nepal as a semi-official representative of India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government. Before flying to Katmandu, he met with Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee. While in Katmandu, he discussed with Koirala and other SPA leaders about Nepal's financial needs.

Speaking like an Indian plenipotentiary, Yechury said that India would not object to the deployment of an international observer force charged with ensuring that elections for a Nepalese constituent assembly could take place free of fear and intimidation. He also said that if the Nepalese government were to request it, New Delhi would likely free the Nepalese Maoists in Indian custody. On his return to India, Yechury announced that Koirala intends to visit New Delhi later this month.

Koirala and the SPA leadership treated Yechury, a rising star in the Stalinist CPM, like an esteemed dignitary. He was given a standing ovation when he attended last Friday's session of the Nepalese parliament, the first to be held since the king ordered its dissolution in 2002, and he attended Koirala's swearing-in ceremony on Sunday at the prime minister's personal invitation.

According to Indian press report, Yechury played a significant role as the anti-king movement reached its peak in the middle of last month, serving as a go-between and mediator between the SPA and the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) as well as between the anti-king Nepalese opposition and the Indian government.

Yechury's efforts were aimed at ensuring that the agreement that the SPA and the Maoists reached last November to work together for the restoration of parliamentary government and the convening of an elected constituent assembly did not collapse and at persuading the UPA government that the best way to bring a quick end to the political upheaval in Nepal was by forcing the king to make major concessions to his opponents, even if that meant accepting a constituent assembly that could abolish the monarchy.

Yechury is said to be known to some of the top Nepalese Maoists,

because they and he both attended New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in the 1970s. In any event, at the very least since May 2005, when CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat spoke with a leader of the Nepalese Maoists at a meeting that was reputedly facilitated by Indian intelligence, there have been significant contacts between the leaders of the decade-old Nepal guerrilla movement and the leadership of the CPM.

In these discussions, the Indian Stalinists have urged the Maoists to follow their own political path and fully integrate themselves into official bourgeois politics. The CPM-led Left Front is sustaining the neo-liberal UPA in office, whilst in West Bengal, the Left Front government is itself imposing pro-investor reforms.

The International Crisis Group, a think tank with intimate ties to Western governments, reports that it was told by an unnamed "senior Indian communist" last October: "The Maoists must be tempted with a CPM-style model. We can try to persuade them with an amnesty and mainstream participation.... [A] long fight can encourage people who are tired of operations to find some face-saving mechanism, such as if they could claim 'victory' on something such as land reform."

With the outbreak of mass protests in Nepal's urban centres last month, Yechury started meeting and otherwise communicating with Indian Defence Minister Mukherjee on a regular basis, while publicly touting the CPM's potential "to facilitate the process of helping the Nepalese people to come out of the present political mess."

Yechury is credited by the Indian press and SPA with drafting a four-stage agenda for the restoration of parliamentary government and the convening of a Nepalese constituent assembly that prevented the SPA-Maoist understanding from unraveling and ultimately won New Delhi's support.

Undoubtedly, the principal purpose of Yechury's visit to Katmandu was to continue to work to bring the Maoists into official Nepalese politics and on terms acceptable to the Indian government.

The Maoists have repeatedly signaled that they are anxious to abandon the armed struggle. Under their agreement with the SPA of last November, they accepted integration into a "competitive multi-party system" and UN or foreign supervision of elections to a constituent assembly. They also pledged friendly relations with the US, while securing no commitment to significant socio-economic reform, let alone radical change.

Nevertheless, there are many obstacles to any lasting partnership between the Maoists and the official bourgeois parties, not least among them the expectations of ordinary Nepalese that their desires for political and social change will at last be realised and real measures taken to eradicate poverty, landlordism, and caste oppression.

The two sides are wary of one another and of the advantages that will accrue to one by virtue of its control of the Katmandu government and to the other by virtue of its political-military domination of much of the countryside.

And both the SPA and Maoists are fearful that the king or the army or both will, with the backing of the US or even at a future point India, attempt to scuttle their alliance and try anew to crush the Maoist insurgency by razing the Nepalese countryside.

Until two weeks ago, Washington was strongly supportive of the king, likening his stand against the Maoists to the Bush administration's own worldwide anti-terrorism crusade. Although not condemning outright the efforts of the new SPA-government to reach an accommodation with the Maoists, James Moriarty, the US ambassador to Nepal, announced last Thursday that Washington would continue to categorise the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) as a "terrorist organisation" until the Maoists "changed their behavior." Speaking on Nepalese television, Moriarty counseled the SPA against allowing the Maoists to participate in any constituent assembly election unless they first "lay down their arms and renounce violence."

India's ruling elite, like the colonial overlords of the British Raj, view Nepal as part of their sphere of strategic dominance.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's response to a question last month about the possibility of Indian military intervention in Nepal typifies the establishment view: "Peace and stability in Nepal is a concern for India. It has not reached a stage of sending peacekeeping forces to Nepal."

The two countries have close economic ties, with India accounting for 50 percent of Nepal's foreign investment and 70 percent of its trade.

Two major concerns have driven India's reaction to the deepening political crisis in Nepal.

First, India has been determined to ensure that neither China nor the US supplants it as the dominant geo-political force in Nepal. A related concern has been that traditional archrival Pakistan not be allowed to use the crisis in Nepal to gain greater influence in Katmandu.

China, like India, borders Nepal, although the Himalayan state's historic and contemporary economic and transport links have been much greater with India than with the power to the north. In accordance with its overall policy of seeking rapprochement with India, China has not aggressively challenged India in Nepal. But, to New Delhi's consternation, it did respond to King Gyanendra's overtures when India cut off military aid in response to his February 2005 power grab.

Because of Nepal's proximity to the troubled Tibet region of China, Washington has shown a growing interest in the Himalayan state. There is much evidence to suggest that India believes Washington was much too encouraging of the king in his attempts to sideline the traditional parties while seeking a purely military solution to the Maoist insurgency.

New Delhi, at the very least, tacitly supported last November's agreement between the SPA and the Maoists, as is suggested by the fact that the agreement was worked out in New Delhi and by the Indian government's facilitation of meetings between the Maoist leaders in attendance and various Indian politicians.

However, the UPA government's first response to last month's political upheaval in Nepal was to close ranks with Washington in an attempt to find a solution to the crisis. Only when it became clear that the king's April 21 announcement, which left all effective power in

his hands, had failed to stem the mass protests did New Delhi demand that the king agree to immediately transfer executive power to a parliamentary government.

New Delhi's response to the Nepal crisis, which has been criticised by much of the Indian press as flat-footed, if not damaging, no doubt reflected its fear of clashing with Washington. The next two months are seen by New Delhi as especially crucial to US-Indian ties as they will likely see the Indo-US nuclear accord, which gives India a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime, put to the vote in the US Congress.

The second strategic concern driving India's response to events in Nepal has been the impact of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal on the various and much smaller Maoist/Naxhalite guerrilla campaigns in India.

After more than a quarter century of decline, recent years have seen a major expansion of Naxhalite activity. According to the Indian government, a quarter of India's 602 administrative districts are currently affected by Naxhalite unrest. Behind this resurgence lies the acute distress that prevails over much of rural India, and especially in so-called tribal regions, after 15 years of neo-liberal economic restructuring.

An important section of the Indian political establishment, with the CPM in the lead, argues that engineering the Nepalese Maoists' entry into the official politics assists, rather than contradicts, efforts to combat Indian Naxhalism through increased repression. Their hope is that through the Nepalese Maoists, at least some of the Naxhalites can be persuaded and pressured, as have other previous Naxhalite insurgents, to join official Indian politics.

Explained Yechury in a recent interview with the *Indian Express*, "Drawing the [Nepalese] Maoists into the democratic mainstream is the biggest advantage that India will have in tackling its own internal Maoist problem."

By no means do all sections of India's political establishment agree with this stratagem. Sections of the corporate media argue that allowing the Nepalese Maoists to "join the mainstream" constitutes "rewarding violence." The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party accuses the government of being "soft on Maoist terrorism." According to press reports, there are sharp divisions within the foreign and home ministries and the security forces over the wisdom of supporting the SPA-Maoist agreement in Nepal.

Be that as it may, the role of the CPM in the elaborating the Indian government's response to the popular upheaval in Nepal underscores that the Stalinists' function as an integral part of the Indian political establishment—one trusted to uphold and further the interests and geo-political ambitions of the Indian bourgeoisie and its state.



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