

Nepalese Maoists quit government in bid to stem waning support

W.A. Sunil

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Nepal's interim parliament was shut down last week until after October 29, following the failure to resolve a political deadlock between the government and the Maoist opposition. The Maoists, which had been part of the ruling coalition, abruptly quit last month and demanded a parliamentary debate on their conditions for the holding of elections for a constituent assembly.

The Maoists are demanding the immediate abolition of the monarchy and for the poll to be held on the basis of proportional representation. In response, the government headed by Prime Minister G.P. Koirala has postponed the election indefinitely. It was to be held on November 22. Closed-door meetings involving the major parties have failed to reach a compromise.

The entire exercise is a desperate effort by the Maoists to bolster their flagging credentials among ordinary working people. Over the past year, disillusionment has been spreading as the Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (CPN-M) has proven to be no different from the corrupt seven-party alliance that it joined and helped to prop up.

The interim government was formed in the aftermath of mass protests in Katmandu in April last year that forced King Gyanendra to end his autocratic rule and hand over to the seven opposition parties. The alliance, headed by Nepali Congress leader Koirala, has relied heavily on the assistance of the Maoists to stem the continuing political turmoil and channel discontent into safe parliamentary waters.

Last November the CPN-M, which had fought a bloody guerrilla war for more than a decade, reached an agreement with the seven-party alliance to lay down its arms and join the interim government. Part of the deal was the convening of a constituent assembly that would decide on the future of the monarchy and establish a new constitution for the country.

For the CPN-M, the agreement represented the realisation of their Stalinist two-stage program, which

called for the abolition of the monarchy, the establishment of a republic and the maintenance of capitalism. Socialism was always relegated to the distant future. The Nepalese Maoists became the latest in a long line of guerrilla outfits around the world to trade their Kalashnikovs for a place in official politics.

The CPN-M joined the interim parliament and government with 83 MPs and five cabinet portfolios. Members of the party's guerilla force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), were cordoned into camps under UN supervision. However, the dominant parties continue to be those on which the Nepalese ruling elites have relied in the past—Nepalese Congress with 133 seats and Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninists) with 83 seats.

The latest crisis emerged after a CPN-M Central Committee meeting in August, which elaborated 22 demands to the interim government. The two central issues were the immediate abolition of the monarchy and an election based on proportional representation. The purpose of the first demand was to revive the party's image as the staunchest opponent of the unpopular king, while the second sought to ensure the CPN-M's maximum representation in the constituent assembly.

The other demands were also pitched at reviving the CPN-M's waning support. These included the nationalisation of the king's property, immediate relief to families of those killed in the civil war, land distribution, a commission to search for disappeared people and better benefits for PLA members confined to camps. A press release acknowledged that party leaders had made "self criticism" over "mistakes" and "weaknesses" committed while participating in the government.

As part of its campaign for these demands, the CPN-M quit the cabinet on September 19. CPN-M leader Pushpa Kamal Dhal, also known as Prachanda, admitted to *kantipuonline* that party members had been asking if the

leadership was about to “follow the path of deviation like CPN-UML while staying in Kathmandu and enjoying the vehicle ride.” The CPN-UML is notorious for years of corrupt parliamentary wheeling and dealing.

In the same interview, Prachanda acknowledged that the CPN-M “might lose” the election for the constituent assembly. While he blamed “feudalists and imperialist-reactionary forces” for marginalising the CPN-M, the reality is that the party has failed to live up to its own promises to improve living standards, particularly in poor rural areas where it was largely based.

An estimated 31 percent of Nepalese live below the poverty line. In many mountain and hill districts, villagers do not have enough food. Half of the children under five are under-nourished. Infant mortality rate is 52 per thousand. Overall, 85 percent of homes do not have electricity. In rural areas, the figure is 97 percent. Only 44 percent of the population is literate.

Frustration has clearly been rising among CPN-M members, particularly the tens of thousands of PLA fighters who have been confined to camps. Complaints include lack of food, drinking water, health care and the non-payment of monthly allowances.

“The camp conditions are really bad. At times I feel very frustrated,” Bishnu Pariyar, a 28-year-old PLA soldier at Jhyalthung Danda camp, told AFP. A deputy division commander said: “We are facing constant pressure from our soldiers to leave the camps and protest.” More than 1,000 PLA fighters have fled from a camp in the Nawalparasi district over the past month.

The CPN-M has never had a significant base of support among the urban workers, students and professionals who took to the streets last year in sustained protests against the king. In fact, the demonstrations took the Maoists largely by surprise. For these layers, the CPN-M has become part of the government that has failed to address any of their demands for democratic rights and improved pay and conditions.

A series of strikes point to growing discontent among workers. In May, thousands of teachers in private and government schools stopped work throughout the country for a week, demanding higher pay and better working conditions. In August, postal employees and water corporation workers struck over similar issues.

India, which played a key role in cementing the agreement between the Maoists and the seven-party alliance, has been attempting to mend relations. Foreign secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and special envoy Shyam Saran have both visited Kathmandu over the past two

months. New Delhi wants to maintain its dominant economic and political role in Nepal against regional rivals, China and Pakistan. Also, by ending the guerrilla war in Nepal, the Indian government is hoping to defuse Maoist insurgencies in parts of rural India.

Saran met the Nepali prime minister, as well as Maoist and CPN-UML leaders, earlier this month in a bid to resolve the current standoff. At a press conference on October 12, he supported the stance of the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML, calling for early elections and for the issue of the monarchy to be resolved by the constituent assembly. The Maoists are also under pressure from the US and European Union, which have criticised their demands and the postponement of constituent assembly elections.

Hovering in the background is the king, who still has the strong backing of the military. The parliament has stripped the monarchy of its previous powers and privileges, including control over the army, legal immunity, tax exemptions and a veto over new laws. But sections of the ruling elite are reluctant to completely abolish the monarchy, which has been a crucial prop for the often crisis-ridden social order in Nepal.

The CPN-M’s present posturing over the immediate end to the monarchy has nothing to do with addressing any of the underlying social needs and democratic aspirations of the working class and poor. Rather the Maoists are seeking to negotiate a more favourable position for themselves within the political establishment, which they have helped to restabilise. In doing so, they are reopening the door for the reemergence of the most reactionary elements of Nepalese society centred on the king and the army.



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