

Nepali Maoists rejoin interim government to contest elections

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The Nepali Maoists rejoined the country's interim government late last month after a deal with the ruling seven-party alliance to end the country's monarchy. The agreement has cleared the way for postponed elections on April 10 for a constituent assembly that will have to endorse the decision to establish Nepal as a republic.

The deal ended a lengthy standoff since last September when the Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (CPN-M) walked out of the government, demanding the declaration of a republic prior to elections, as well as changes to the voting system. The CPN-M walkout was designed to boost its waning credentials by distancing itself, temporarily at least from the government.

The interim government insisted that a decision to end the monarchy should be made by the constituent assembly as agreed in the original November 2006 deal between the CPN-M and the seven-party alliance. The agreement, under which the Maoists laid down their arms, followed sustained mass protests in April 2006 that forced King Gyanendra to end his autocratic rule and hand power to the opposition parties.

After protracted wrangling over the past few months, a face-saving compromise was reached. The parliament voted to abolish the monarchy and declare Nepal a federal democratic republic state, but the decision will take effect only after its ratification by the constituent assembly. Nominally the assembly is not permitted to amend or reject the motion. Parliament also resolved that Nepal could be declared as a republic by a two-thirds majority of the interim parliament if the king obstructs the assembly election.

The CPN-M dropped its demands for the elections to be held on a proportional basis, in return for an increase in the number of assembly members from 497 to 601.

Concerned that their support is flagging, the Maoists are hoping that smaller electorates will increase their assembly numbers. The government also agreed to try to expedite the integration of an estimated 30,000 Maoist fighters, who have waged a lengthy guerilla war, into the country's army.

The Maoists are now back in the cabinet with five full ministers and three deputy ministers. While the CPN-M had been pushing for prominent posts, the five hold none of the sensitive security, economic or foreign affairs portfolios. The CPN-M announced this week that party leader Pushpa Kamal Dhal, also known as Prachanda, and other senior officials will be candidates in the election.

The US ambassador to Nepal, Nancy Powell, described the return of the CPN-M to the government as a positive move, even though the party remains on Washington's list of foreign terrorist groups. The Bush administration reluctantly accepted the original 2006 agreement, which India had a major role in brokering. Indian external affairs ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna declared the latest deal was "an encouraging development in the right direction".

New Delhi is concerned at the potential for political and social unrest in Nepal spilling over into India, where there are a number of Maoist and separatist guerrilla groups. While the Nepali Maoists have laid down their arms and are under UN supervision, various armed groups have emerged demanding autonomy for the Terai region, home to more than half Nepal's population.

Social discontent is also widespread. Nepal is one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Half the population of 26 million live below the poverty line of less than \$US1 a day. The economically backward rural areas, where the Maoist insurgency was based, are

lacking basic services, including health and education. For the coalition interim government, the Maoists are a useful political safety valve to contain any opposition.

The CPN-M has seized on the decision to declare a republic as a great victory. Party leader Prachanda boasted to the media: “Now there is nothing else that needs to be done. There is no monarchy left in the country.” The comments reflect the limited, nationalist character of the CPN-M’s program.

The CPN-M has been based from the outset on the Stalinist “two-stage” theory, which holds that a prolonged period of democratic capitalism is needed in backward countries like Nepal. Insofar as socialism is referred to at all, it is relegated to a second stage in the distant future. This reactionary outlook has been used to justify joining the interim government and embracing private business.

Addressing the Nepal National Mawari Council (a business association) this month, Prachanda and his deputy, Dr Baburam Bhattarai, reiterated the party’s capitalist program. Bhattarai declared that the CPN-M wanted to “strengthen the capitalist development in Nepal” and had no plans for nationalising private industries and enterprises.

Bhattarai explained that “the party believes that the private sector has an important role to play in the economic development”. To build the country industrially, he said, “the party has adopted the policy of promoting private-public partnership.” Bhattarai also indicated that foreign investment would be necessary for major infrastructure projects such as hydro-electricity.

In the past the CPN-M has championed the rights of landless peasants. Bhattarai explained, however, that “the current agriculture system should be transformed into commercial agriculture system”. He promised the business audience that after the completion of the “political revolution”—the abolition of the monarchy—there would be “an economic revolution”.

Speaking at the same meeting, Prachanda offered the assistance of the Young Communist League “to control the growing insecurity, extortion and abductions suffered by business sector”.

The Maoist program does not represent the interests of working people, whose living standards will inevitably suffer from the proposed “economic revolution”, but a section of Nepal’s ruling elite which

have regarded the monarchy and its close cronies as an obstacle to their business interests. The Maoists, like their counterparts in China, are offering to transform Nepal into a cheap labour platform for foreign and local investors.

Sharp differences remain in Nepali ruling circles over the wisdom of abolishing the monarchy and integrating the Maoist fighters into the military. The king and the army have been crucial political props for capitalist rule. Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, leader of the Nepal Congress Party, has been pushing for the retention of the king as some form of constitutional monarch and only reluctantly agreed to the CPN-M’s demand to establish a republic.

Among the military hierarchy, which has close ties to the monarchy, there is fierce opposition to the inclusion of Maoist fighters. Nepal’s army commander Rookmangud Katuwal told the media on January 6 that no political ideology should be introduced into the army. Two days later, Koirala also ruled out a merger of the Maoist guerrillas with the army on similar grounds.

Prachanda boasted to the media last year that he would be president of the future Nepali republic. It is unlikely, however, that the CPN-M will gain a majority of assembly seats at the election in April. Having joined the government, it is going to be increasingly held responsible for the appalling social conditions facing the majority of the population as well as the repressive methods regularly used to suppress any opposition.



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