

Maoists emerge as largest parliamentary bloc in Nepal

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The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) was the clear winner after provisional results in the country's April 10 election for a Constituent Assembly were announced yesterday. As well as gaining 120 of the 240 directly-elected seats, the Maoists secured 97 of the 335 seats elected on a proportionate base. The overall national vote for the CPN-M was 29.27 percent.

While lacking an outright majority in the 601-seat assembly, the CPN-M is well ahead of its nearest rivals. The Nepali Congress (NC) and Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) obtained only 37 and 33 directly-elected seats, respectively, but boosted their result by securing 21.14 percent and 20.33 percent of the national vote. The NC will have 107 assembly seats and the CPN-UML will have 101.

Two groupings based on ethnic minorities—the Madhesi Peoples Rights Forum (MPRF) and the Tarai-Madhes Democratic Party (TMDP)—won the next largest national votes, 6.32 percent and 3.16 percent respectively. Their final tally of seats will be about 51 and 20.

The final number of proportional seats allocated to each party may vary slightly as quotas have been set for women, lower castes and ethnic minorities. The remaining 26 seats will be filled by nominees of the new cabinet, when it is formed.

Significantly, the three royalist parties that back King Gyanendra and the retention of the monarchy have been virtually obliterated. These parties won none of the directly elected seats and secured only a handful of proportional seats. The Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP)—received the highest vote of just 263,431, or 2.45 percent of more than 10 million votes cast, and will have 8 assembly seats.

Royalist politicians were prominent in the unelected cabinets appointed by Gyanendra that provoked sustained mass protests in April 2006, forcing the king to hand power to an interim seven-party coalition administration

headed by the NC and CPN-UML. Widespread opposition to the monarchy, hostility to the traditional parties and a deepening social crisis fuelled by rising food prices contributed to the large vote for the Maoists.

CPN-M leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, declared yesterday: “The first meeting of the Constituent Assembly will end the monarchy and establish a republic—there will be no compromise.” The Maoists insisted last December on a motion to establish a republic as a condition of their participation in the election. Final ratification without amendment is due to be voted on by the incoming assembly.

Prachanda earlier issued an ultimatum to the king to step down within a month or face possible punitive measures. At the same time, the CPN-M has indicated that it would allow Gyanendra to step aside “gracefully”, live as an ordinary citizen and retain all his considerable private property and business interests. Prachanda has announced his willingness to hold talks with the king.

Gyanendra is particularly despised because of his autocratic methods of rule and rumours of his involvement in the bizarre palace massacre in 2001 that led to the death of his brother, King Birendra. On Monday, a palace spokesman dismissed media speculation that Gyanendra intended to flee to India as “malicious”.

Despite holding the largest number of seats, the CPN-M faces obstacles in forming a new government. Maoist leaders have appealed for a broad coalition involving the seven-party alliance, including the NC and CPN-UML, as well as the MPRF. However, the NC and CPN-UML have expressed reluctance to join a government dominated by the Maoists, fearing they will be overshadowed.

NC leader Shekhar Koirala told the media on Tuesday: “Congress leaders are sharply divided over the issue.” He said the party would only join the government if it “adheres strictly to [the] peace agreement, [including] the

return of all seized property and dissolution of the parallel state mechanism.” Koirala did not explain what he meant by “parallel state mechanism” but it appears to be the Young Communist League (YCL), which has been accused of election violence.

The CPN-UML announced it was pulling out of the seven-party alliance. Party leader Pradip Nepal said: “The seven-party alliance has an agreement to work together on the new constitution, and we will.” However, he continued, that could be done from inside the government or outside.

The election outcome came as a shock to the NC and CPN-UML, which had calculated that the Maoists would be incorporated as a relatively minor partner in the next government. The Maoists first entered the coalition government in November 2006 after reaching an agreement to end their protracted guerrilla war, lay down their arms and consign their fighters to UN-supervised cantonments.

It remains to be seen how the army would react to a Maoist-dominated government. The CPN-M is demanding the integration of its fighters in the military, which has opposed such a move outright. Army spokesman Ramindra Chhetri reiterated this week: “The army is an apolitical organisation and this special characteristic has to be respected by all stake holders.” In fact, the army has been the backbone of the monarchy. It is notorious for its repressive methods during the civil war that began in 1996 and claimed an estimated 13,000 lives.

Even before forming government, the Maoists are bending over backwards to reassure the Nepali ruling elites and the major powers that their interests will be safeguarded.

CPN-M leaders met for a second time on Wednesday with representatives of the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FNCCI). Prachanda restated the party’s support for capitalism and foreign investment. “Maoists give first priority to the domestic investors, but our party heartily welcomes foreign investors in the country,” he said.

According to the *Himalayan Times*, the CPN-M chairman “recounted the facts that his party workers, in the pretext of trade union [work], hampered work at industries in the past and reassured the business community that they wouldn’t repeat it in the future.” Baburam Bhattarai, another senior Maoist leader, called for the private sector to take the lead in the country’s “economic revolution”.

Having the CPN-M removed from the US list of

terrorist organisations is a high priority for the Maoists. CPN-M international bureau chief C.P. Gujurel appealed to Washington on Monday, declaring the party was “trying to establish close links with the US. Talks are going on in several fronts in this regards. Our doors are always open to all US officials if they want to talk us.”

The US ambassador to Nepal, Nancy Powell, attended a meeting of donor countries and agencies on Thursday with Maoist leaders, but made no comment. There have been no immediate steps to take the CPN-M off the terrorist list. State Department spokesman Tom Casey remained non-committal on Monday, saying only that Washington would look at a review if “any movement ends its association with terrorism”.

The Bush administration is no doubt trying to calculate whether a Maoist-dominated government could be exploited to further US strategic interests. In recent years, the US stepped up its presence in Kathmandu and provided weapons to the Nepalese army as part of a broader strategy to counter Chinese influence. Far from being a natural ally of the CPN-M, Beijing is reassessing its strategy after providing arms and backing to the monarchy to crush the Maoist insurgency.

Millions of voters supported the Maoists, hoping that it would improve the desperate conditions facing Nepal’s urban and rural poor. The Maoists, however, are already trying to dampen down expectations. CPN-M leader Ram Bahadur Thapa told the *Himalayan Times* that price rises were driven by international market forces and thus beyond the government’s control. Rural debt relief would be limited. “We may not fully waive the loans of the downtrodden, but will try to fully exempt the loans of those who are on the verge of losing property because of bad debt,” he said.

Under conditions where more than 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, the pro-business policies of the Maoists are likely to have explosive political consequences sooner, rather than later.



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