

Nepal's Maoist prime minister steps down

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A fresh political crisis erupted in Nepal when the Maoist-led government collapsed last Sunday, just nine months after it took office. Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (also known as Prachanda) resigned as prime minister on Monday.

The ruling coalition broke up after Dahal attempted to sack army chief General Rookmangud Katawal, accusing him of “insubordination” to civilian rule. The CPN-M’s allies, including the Communist Party of Nepal UML (CPUML), pulled out of the coalition, leaving it without a parliamentary majority.

General Katawal refused to accept his dismissal, declaring the prime minister had no such authority. Under the country’s interim constitution, power over the army formally resides with the president—Ram Baran Yadav, a leader of the conservative Nepali Congress Party (NCP). Yadav overruled the prime minister’s decision and accused the Maoists of acting “unilaterally”.

Dahal denounced the president’s action as “unconstitutional and undemocratic” and accused “opposition parties and foreign powers” of precipitating the crisis. He made no hint of returning to the armed struggle, but instead declared that he was stepping down to “create a conducive environment and save the peace process”.

President Yadav called for a new government to be formed by Saturday, but it is doubtful whether the more than 20 opposition parties can establish a stable coalition. With 248 seats, the Maoists dominate the 601-seat national assembly, which is also drawing up the country’s new constitution. A two-thirds majority is required to ratify the constitution.

Dahal declared yesterday that his party was ready to

form a new government, but only if the president “corrected” his unconstitutional step. Pro- and anti-Maoist protests have taken place in Kathmandu since Sunday. On Monday, police banned demonstrations in the capital and clashed with Maoists protesters on Tuesday and Wednesday, arresting scores.

The enmity between the Maoists and the army officer caste stems from the country’s protracted civil war. Under a deal reached in 2006 after a popular movement against King Gyanendra, the Maoists agreed to lay down their arms, enter an interim government and participate in elections in April 2008. The new national assembly abolished the monarchy and in August the Maoists formed a government.

The underlying tensions continued, however. The army, which was the chief prop of the monarchy, has been openly provocative toward the government. General Katawal repeatedly refused to absorb thousands of former Maoist fighters into the army’s ranks as required under the 2006 peace deal. The government’s decision to sack the general came after the army enlisted a further 3,000 recruits without considering the former guerrillas.

Conservative layers of the Nepali establishment remain deeply hostile to the Maoists despite the latter’s free market agenda and efforts to attract foreign investment. The government banned strikes and imposed a budget that was hailed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for its economic responsibility.

The CPN-M effectively jettisoned all its election promises to improve the lot of the country’s impoverished rural masses through land reform, jobs for young people and subsidies for the poor. Per capita income remains at around \$US250, one of the lowest in the world. An estimated 55 percent of the population live below the poverty line.

Over the past year, the country's economic and social crisis only worsened. Food and fuel are in short supply. The capital is without electricity for much of the day. The inflation rate was 13.7 percent in March. The global downturn has undermined garment exports, tourism and remittances from Nepali migrant workers in other countries.

India has backed the stand of Nepal's president and army chief. Behind the scenes, New Delhi's envoy to Kathmandu, Rakesh Sood met Dahal, pressured the government not to sack General Katawal. India supports the army and Nepali establishment as a means of reining in Maoist influence.

India played a major role in brokering the 2006 peace deal, in part as a means of containing Maoist insurgencies at home. New Delhi was also concerned to prevent China, which opposed the Nepali Maoists, from gaining ground in Kathmandu. While having no close ties to Beijing, the CPN-M has always been hostile to India's dominant role in Nepali affairs.

An Indian external affairs official told the *Times of India* this week: "In the past, China quickly stepped into the vacuum created by India's hesitation in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and other countries. With Prachanda in power, Nepal was also heading the same way."

The US has not issued any statement on the present crisis. However, the Obama administration in its country report on Nepal last month pointedly noted that the CPN-M "remained a US-designated terrorist entity".

Under the Bush administration, the US vehemently opposed the Maoists and only reluctantly accepted the Indian-brokered peace deal in 2006. That policy is being continued under the Obama administration, which has ignored various attempts by the Nepali Maoists to appease Washington.

Guided by the reactionary Stalinist two-stage theory, the Maoists claim to be carrying out the "bourgeois democratic revolution," sweeping away feudal relics, entrenching bourgeois democracy and carrying out national economic development by allowing capitalism to flourish.

Far from setting the stage for a new period of peace,

democracy and prosperity, however, the CPN-M government has contained the mass movement that erupted in 2006 and allowed the most right-wing elements of the Nepali establishment centred on the army to regroup for a counter-offensive.

General Katawal's rejection of the government's orders provoked a wave of speculation that the army was preparing a coup. Army spokesman Brigadier Ramindra Chhettri was forced to issue a statement on April 26 declaring: "The rumours of coup and curfew are totally baseless. The Nepal Army will not stage a coup. The NA has always been committed to the democratic system and will remain so."

The army, however, has a long history of backing the autocratic rule of the monarchy and suppressing any opposition through the most ruthless methods. Backed by the conservative parties, the business elite, the state apparatus and the media, the generals are obviously biding their time, seeking to capitalise on popular disenchantment with the economic policies of the Maoists.

Whatever government emerges out of the present political crisis, the army is quite prepared to use whatever means are necessary to buttress bourgeois rule in Nepal. Its measures will not be directed simply against the Maoists, but at suppressing any opposition, particularly by the working class and oppressed masses.



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