

Nepali Maoists hold protests to demand a place in government

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24 December 2009

The opposition Maoist party in Nepal ended a three-day protest strike on Tuesday to demand the formation of a national unity government by January 24. The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) is threatening indefinite strike action unless the government agrees.

The CPN-M won last year's national elections and formed a coalition government. In May, however, Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal quit as prime minister in protest over then president Ram Baran Yadav's decision to overrule his sacking of army chief General Rookmangud Katawal. After weeks of political manoeuvring, the Communist Party of Nepal-UML (CPN-UML) formed a shaky coalition with the Nepal Congress (NC) and 20 other parties.

The Maoists continue to insist that the president's decision was unconstitutional and demand its overturning. The immediate reason for the clash over General Katawal was the latter's refusal to incorporate thousands of former Maoist guerrillas into the regular army. More broadly, however, the CPN-M's posturing was a bid to bolster its waning support after failing to address the country's worsening economic and social crisis.

The CPN-M has boycotted parliament since May, effectively bringing parliamentary business to a halt. Now the CPN-M is seeking to exploit popular discontent and channel it behind its demand to rejoin and lead a bourgeois "national unity" government. Prime Minister Madhev Kumar Nepal, who is leader of the CPN-UML, has offered to include Maoists in his cabinet but has refused to step aside in favour of Dahal.

Since December 11, the CPN-M has been declaring various areas of the country to be "autonomous regions". The purely symbolic character of this gesture was underscored by a statement declaring the CPN-M had "no intention to run a parallel government whatsoever".

On Sunday, the Maoists launched their three-day strike and mobilised thousands of supporters in street protests in the capital, Kathmandu. Shops, schools and government offices were closed and transport disrupted. Police armed with batons and tear gas clashed with protesters on Sunday who had blocked roads. About 70 people were arrested and 100 injured.

Addressing a rally of around 10,000 on Tuesday, Dahal warned of a "storm of protests" that would "sweep the government away" if the CPN-M's demands were not met. Seeking to whip up Nepali nationalism, the Maoist leader denounced the "remote-controlled robot government here that is controlled by India" and demanded the renegotiation of "unequal treaties" between the two countries.

Dahal's anti-Indian demagoguery is aimed at exploiting growing rivalry between India and China. India has long regarded Nepal as part of its sphere of influence, but China is seeking to establish its own ties in a country that lies on its southern border. Beijing, which provided arms to the Nepalese army during its protracted war with the Maoist guerrillas, has been wary about relying on the CPN-M.

For all of its rhetoric about sweeping the government away, the CPN-M has been engaged in behind-the-scenes talks with government parties. Dahal met with

G.P. Koirala, the leader of the conservative Nepal Congress, in Singapore last month to discuss “the formation of a high-level political mechanism to find a way out of the prevailing political stand-off in the country”. The Maoists lifted their parliamentary boycott for three days in November to allow the government to pass its budget.

Dahal met Koirala again last Friday to discuss ending the political deadlock. *Nepalnews.com* reported that the Maoist leader also met secretly with the prime minister on Tuesday evening, just hours after denouncing the government as a “robot” of India. Whether a deal is finally reached or not, the CPN-M has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness over the past two years to function as a responsible party in maintaining capitalist rule.

The Maoists played a vital role in helping to contain the protest movement that erupted in April 2006 against King Gyanendra’s autocratic rule and finally forced the monarch to step aside. The CPN-M formed a seven-party coalition with the corrupt parliamentary parties of the Nepali establishment, including Nepal Congress and the CPN-UML. In December 2006, the Maoists laid down their weapons after 10 years of guerrilla war and entered an interim government in preparation for the election of a constituent assembly.

Having won the largest bloc of seats in the election in April 2008, the Maoists engaged in months of sordid horse-trading to form a government. After much reluctance, the Nepal Congress and CPN-UML voted with the CPN-M to abolish the monarchy and declare Nepal a “federal democratic republic”. But the other main parties were reluctant to enter a CPN-M government without guarantees. Under the pressure of the major powers, particularly India, the CPN-M, CPN-UML and MPRF finally agreed to form a government.

The coalition government was based on a 19-point common minimum program that, while paying lip service to democratic rights and improved living standards, guaranteed the continuation of capitalist property relations and private profit—the source of social inequality and oppression. Its ability to make even cosmetic reforms was blocked by the ruling elites.

Its plans for land reform were opposed by the powerful landlord class. The army refused to integrate former Maoist fighters, who continue to languish in holding camps after giving up their arms.

Having quit the government in May, the CPN-M is using the latest round of protests to demonstrate its usefulness to the ruling class in containing growing social discontent. The economy is slowing from 5.3 percent growth in 2008 to an estimated 3.8 percent this year. The latest quarterly central bank report revealed falling exports and a record balance of payments deficit.

Social conditions are worsening. Nepal is one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. A recent Asian Development Bank report found that 55 percent of the population live below the poverty line of less than \$US1.25 per day. World Food Program official Dominique Hyde recently told the media that the number of people at risk of hunger had tripled to more than 3.7 million, or 16.7 percent, since the end of the civil war. The country has one of the highest levels of child malnutrition, with 48 percent under the age of 5 considered to be inadequately fed.

Under these conditions, the Maoists are once again offering their political services to the country’s ruling elites.



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