

Political standoff in Nepal over constitution

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Political tensions in Nepal are rising as the May 28 deadline for drawing up a new constitution approaches. The fragile ruling coalition is deadlocked in disagreement with the Maoist opposition, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, over a number of key constitutional questions. At the same time, no resolution has been reached over the integration of thousands of former Maoists guerrillas into the country's regular army.

In a speech last Thursday in Kathmandu, UN Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe warned that there was “a sense of deep concern, a fear that Nepal's opportunity for a durable and transformative peace could slip away unless actions are taken urgently to restore momentum”. While carefully avoiding the suggestion that renewed civil war was imminent, he said: “Nepal remains suspended at a delicate point along the nation's journey from war to peace.”

The so-called peace process followed the eruption of a mass popular movement in April 2006 that brought an end to the autocratic rule of King Gyanendra. The Maoists, who were instrumental in containing the political eruption, signed a deal with the existing establishment parties, including Nepal Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal-UML (CPN-UML), in December 2006 to end their guerrilla war and enter into the political mainstream. The agreement initiated by India was backed by the major powers and the UN, which supervised the disarmament of Maoist fighters and their confinement to camps.

The Maoists won the largest bloc of seats in elections in April 2008—a measure of popular hostility both to the monarchy and the establishment parties. The parliament, which is also functioning as a constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution, formally abolished the monarchy and declared the country to be a “federal democratic republic”. The Maoist-led government, however, proved to be short-lived and collapsed last May after a constitutional standoff over its decision to sack the head of the army. The current ruling coalition of 22 parties is headed by the CPN-UML of Prime Minister Madhav Kumar.

Last year's standoff between the Maoist government and General Rookmangud Katawal highlighted the central role of the army, which was the central prop of the monarchy. The

army chief repeatedly refused to integrate any of the former Maoists guerrillas. The government's attempt to sack him was overruled by the country's president, and the Maoists quit office in protest. The episode only further strengthened the army's defiance of any attempt to subordinate it to government or parliamentary control.

In his comments last week, UN official Pascoe warned that the integration of Maoist guerrillas into society was a key element of the peace process. “Unfortunately, Nepal today still has two armies, and no agreed strategy for what to do about this. Thousands of former Maoist combatants remain in camps that were intended to last only a few months.”

However, Pascoe's plea for a resolution was immediately rebuffed by the present army chief, General Chhatraman Singh Gurung, who declared that the former Maoists fighters would not be enlisted “en masse” because it would “divide the security agency on political lines and ultimately disintegrate the country”. He said some Maoist cadres could be recruited into the police, the border security force and other non-military agencies, while remainder could be sent overseas to get jobs.

The army is increasingly flexing its political muscle. The *Nepal Telegraph* reported on Monday that the top generals from five districts were due to hold an “emergency meeting” yesterday to “discuss strategies” in the event that **“Nepal's political actors fail to draft the constitution on time”**. **The outcome of that meeting was of course to be “kept a guarded secret”**.

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group highlighted the army's “more overt, assertive political role” in a report entitled “Nepal's Future: In Whose Hands?” published last August. Speaking of the army, the report stated: “It is encouraged and supported by many who see it as the only credible opposition to the Maoists. It not only survived the republican transition but has thrived. Helped by timorous [political] parties, it has successfully pushed for a substantial budgetary increase, protected its de facto autonomy, retained its full strength and pressed for new lethal arms imports—in breach of the ceasefire.”

The resurgence of the military is also a direct product of the

failure of Maoists or the present government to address the pressing social needs of the majority of the population. Amid the global economic crisis, unemployment in the country rose from 42 percent in 2008 to 46 percent in 2009. Nearly 40 percent of the population live below the official poverty line. Conditions in many rural areas are primitive, without access to electricity, clean water and basic health care and education.

Far from challenging capitalist rule in Nepal, the Maoists through the 2006 agreement integrated themselves into the capitalist state and, while in government, did everything possible to reassure big business and bolster private profit. Their orientation is the outcome of their reactionary Stalinist “two-stage” theory, which confined political opposition to abolishing the monarchy and put off any struggle for socialism to the “second stage”—that is, to the indefinite future.

The result has been growing popular disaffection with the Maoists, for whom many people voted in 2008 hoping for a better future, and a revival of the political fortunes of right-wing royalists, no doubt backed by the army, who have been quick to exploit the situation. On February 22, the previously marginalised Rastriya Prajantara Party (RPP) called a strike that paralysed much of Kathmandu to demand a referendum over bringing back the monarchy.

As the deadline for a new constitution draws closer, the political tensions will only increase. Current discussions in the constituent assembly are deadlocked over basic issues, including the type of federal framework and the relationship of the president to parliament. The Maoists have called for a federal structure based on ethnicity, whereas the government coalition supports one based on geographic regions. The Maoists favour an executive presidency, which they think they will win election to, while their opponents back a parliamentary system. The entire debate is driven purely by political expediency, not any concern for the democratic rights of working people.

While there is provision in the interim constitution to extend the constituent assembly for another six months, all sides are positioning themselves for a political crisis. While the generals secretly discuss their strategies, the Maoists are warning of a “revolt” if no constitution is drawn up, and denouncing “international conspiracies” against the country—a reference to India in particular. While a renewed guerrilla struggle cannot be ruled out, the Maoist rhetoric is in large measure empty bluster—while speaking of “revolt”, the party’s main demand is to be included in the ruling coalition.

Political tensions in Kathmandu are only compounded by growing rivalry between the major and regional powers for influence in Nepal—particularly between India and China. Both

countries are providing economic aid to Nepal and are courting various political parties and actors, including the military, in a bid to secure their economic and strategic interests. India has long regarded Nepal as being within its sphere of influence, while China is concerned to protect border areas, especially politically sensitive Tibet.

India helped initiate and backed the peace deal in 2006, but never envisaged that the Maoists would win the 2008 election. Relations with the Maoists frayed even further when they whipped up Nepali nationalism by criticising Indian “interference” and forged closer ties with Beijing. New Delhi is also concerned that Maoist political influence in Nepal will encourage various guerrilla insurgencies inside India itself.

As last August’s International Crisis Group report explained: “Never able to digest the Maoist [election] victory and uncomfortable with popular demands for change, it [India] has pursued increasingly interventionist tactics through proxies in Nepali political parties while continuing its policy of ring-fencing the army as the most reliable bastion against Maoist takeover or anarchy. Its resolute opposition to all but token People’s Liberation Army [Maoist guerrillas] integration has unbalanced the peace equation without offering an alternative.”

China, on the other hand, has maintained ties not only with the Maoists but also with the present government and the army. Senior delegations of the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML have been invited to Beijing. It should be recalled that during the country’s civil war China had no qualms about supplying the Nepalese army with arms to fight the Maoists. China is particularly sensitive to the activities of Tibetan exiles in Nepal, which could trigger renewed unrest over the border in Tibet itself.

This international rivalry can only further inflame the political crisis in Kathmandu that is certain to intensify in coming weeks and months.



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