

Nepali Maoists call general strike against government

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An indefinite general strike called by the opposition Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) in Nepal has paralysed the capital of Kathmandu and other parts of the country for the past three days. The Maoists are calling for the ouster of Prime Minister Madhev Kumar Nepal and the formation of a “national unity government” headed by UCPN-M leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

The strike began on Sunday following a May Day rally in Kathmandu the previous day, attended by at least 150,000 people. The capital’s commercial and industrial activities, transport and schools have been all but shut down. Shops are only open for two hours daily to allow people to purchase essentials, but stocks are running low. The government has mobilised thousands of armed police and put the country’s military on alert.

The UCPN-M is exploiting growing anti-government discontent that is being fuelled by deteriorating living standards. With around 40 percent of the population already living below the poverty line, inflation has hit more than 13 percent and higher for food prices. The unemployment rate is estimated at 46 percent. At least 1.5 million Nepalis, in a total population of about 29 million, work overseas.

The Maoists are offering no solutions to the immense social problems confronting Nepali workers and youth. Rather, the UCPN-M is seeking to regain power as the dominant party in a coalition government that will impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis on working people. The parliament, which also functions as a constituent assembly, is charged with drawing up a new constitution by May 28.

Speaking on May Day, Maoist leader Dahal apologetically declared: “We don’t want to call a strike. But we have no option.” Whipping up anti-Indian sentiment, he accused New Delhi of “propping up” its “puppet” government in Nepal. He appealed to the army, which is deeply hostile to the UCPN-M, not to follow the orders of the “unholy and unnatural” government but to support “the people’s aspirations”. He also appealed to the major powers, saying that they “misunderstand” his party, which was “committed to peace, democracy and has embraced multiparty competition”.

Prime Minister Nepal has refused to resign, declaring that the government could be changed “only through legal parliamentary process”. Talks broke down last weekend between the Maoists and the major partners in the ruling coalition—the prime minister’s Communist Party of Nepal-UML (CPN-UML) and the Nepal Congress (NC).

The present political impasse follows four years of turmoil. The Maoists played a major role in scuttling the mass protest movement that erupted in 2006 against the autocratic rule of King Gyanendra. As part of a peace process sponsored by India, the UCPN-M reached a deal with the establishment parties to end its decade-long guerrilla war and to join a coalition government to establish a republic.

In elections held in April 2008, the Maoists won a clear victory to become the largest party in the new constituent assembly with 40 percent of the 601 seats. A UCPN-M-led coalition was formed with Dahal as prime minister, which guaranteed to safeguard business and foreign investors.

The government, however, quickly came into conflict with the army, which is deeply hostile to a key element of the 2006 agreement—the integration of former Maoist guerrillas into its ranks. Currently around 19,000 fighters continued to be housed in UN-supervised cantonments around the country with no guarantees for their future.

The standoff between the army and the UCPN-M came to a head last May when Prime Minister Dahal sacked the former army chief, Rookmangud Katawal, over his refusal to induct former Maoists. Dahal, however, was overruled by the country's president and resigned in protest. His government was replaced by the present unwieldy 22-party coalition led by the CPN-UML.

The present confrontation threatens to provoke a constitutional crisis and undermine the entire “peace process”. If the May 28 deadline for a new constitution is not met, the constituent assembly can extend its deliberations for one year, but only if there is a consensus of all parties. Otherwise the president can impose a state of emergency for up to six months—a step that would only exacerbate the political crisis.

Pressure is growing on the government for a compromise. Sixty leading members of the ruling CPN-UML have submitted a memorandum to party head Jhalanath Khanal, calling for Nepal to step down. “[W]e strongly advise Prime Minister comrade Madhav Kumar Nepal to immediately resign from his post and pave the way for national consensus,” it stated.

The army is making its own threats. Chief of Army Staff Chhatraman Singh Gurung has issued a circular putting the military on high alert. He expressed “serious concerns” that the activities of the Maoists were “intended to tarnish the image of the Nepal Army”. General Gurung has warned the Maoists not take the army's “patience as a [sign of] weakness”.

The continuing turmoil in Nepal is provoking international unease. Indian ambassador Rakesh Sood told the *Times of India* that he had met with Maoist leader Dahal recently to express concerns over delays

in the drafting of a constitution and the UCPN-M's anti-Indian rhetoric. However, both India and China, which are regional rivals for influence in Kathmandu, are generally taking a low-key stance. China's foreign spokeswoman, Jiang Yu, yesterday called on all parties to “properly handle the differences” to safeguard Nepal's interests and “for regional stability”.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Robert Blake, visited Nepal last week and spoke to the leaders of all the major political parties, including the Maoists. However, he maintained Washington's stance that it would only remove the UCPN-M from its list of terrorist organisations if the Maoists “completely renounce violence”. In 2006, the US only reluctantly supported the Indian-sponsored peace process.

While the general strike has created a sharp political crisis, the aims of the Maoists are very limited—to form a new government with the very parties that comprise the present “unholy and unnatural” ruling coalition. Far from seeking to overthrow Nepali capitalism, they are thrusting themselves forward as the best means to save it from widespread popular discontent.



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