Maoist leader elected as prime minister in Nepal

W.A. Sunil
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After two weeks of wrangling between political parties, Baburam Bhattarai, a vice-chairman of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M), was installed as Nepal's prime minister on August 28. Bhattarai, who is the country's fourth prime minister since elections in 2008, confronts a deeply divided parliament, rifts in his own party and a continuing constitutional crisis.

Central to the political turmoil is the failure to implement a deal reached in 2006 between the UCPN-M and the country's major parliamentary parties—the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML). The Maoists agreed to end their decade-long guerrilla war and join a coalition government following major protests in the capital Kathmandu that forced the country's autocratic monarch, King Gyanendra, to step down.

At the 2008 elections, the Maoists won a plurality in the parliament and led the first coalition. That government, however, quickly came into conflict with the army, which refused to integrate the former Maoist fighters into its ranks under the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. UCPN-M chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal resigned as prime minister, ushering in two unstable CPN-UML led governments.

Bhattarai's predecessor, Jhala Nath Khanal from the CPN-UML, was forced to step down on August 14 when the Maoists withdrew their support for his government. Bhattarai defeated efforts by Nepali Congress, the country's longstanding bourgeois party, to form government. He reached a deal with the Unified Democratic Madhesi Morcha (UDMM)—a grouping of five parties based among the ethnic Madhesi from Nepal's southern plain.

Bhattarai now confronts the same dilemma as Khanal—how to forge an agreement with other parties on a new constitution. An interim constitution agreed between the major parties expired in May 2010. Despite the fact that the interim document only allowed for an extension of three months, parliament has continued to extend the deadline. With the latest deadline expiring on August 31, all parties except the royalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N) voted last Monday for a fourth extension of another three months.

In an effort to break the constitutional and political gridlock, Bhattarai announced that he was seeking to establish a "national unity government" by reaching agreement with other parties on all the major outstanding issues. He has specifically called on the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML to join the government but these parties rejected the appeal. After a week of haggling with his UDMM ally, Bhattarai finally announced his coalition cabinet yesterday.

In a major concession both to the army and the UCPN-M's rivals, Bhattarai's first act was to announce the surrender of most of the weapons of the Maoist guerrillas, previously locked up under supervision, first by United Nations monitors then the Army Interrelation Special Committee (AISC). The arms were kept in containers at seven locations, with the keys held by Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) commanders. After an AISC meeting last Wednesday presided over by Bhattarai, the PLA gave up the keys to five of the containers the following day.

The decision was bitterly criticised by Mohan Baidya, also a UCPN-M vice-chairman, who described it as a "suicidal act" and a move to dissolve the PLA. By handing over most of the PLA's weapons, the party has less bargaining power as it seeks to end the standoff over the integration of former fighters into the army. Some 19,000 ex-guerrillas have been languishing in supervised cantonments for the past five years, leading to mounting anger and discontent. Baidya organised a protest in Kathmandu last Friday against the arms hand-over.

Justifying his decision, Bhattarai told PLA commanders on Wednesday: "They [opposition parties] have been accusing us that we are not sincere about peace and constitution. Handing over of the keys to the Special Committee is our sacrifice. Now they will be responsible for anything bad that happens to the peace process."

In his coalition deal with the UDMM, Bhattarai also made further concessions on the number of ex-guerrillas to be

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integrated into the armed forces. Previously, the Maoists had dropped the number from 19,000 to 8,000. Bhattarai shaved another 1,000 off the figure, indicating a readiness to climb down even further.

The opposition parties and the military will, of course, take all these concessions and demand more. Nepali Congress leader Ram Sharan Mahat cautiously welcomed the arms hand-over, describing it as a positive move, even if belated. The army is still refusing to integrate former Maoists into its ranks, offering only limited positions in auxiliary security forces.

There is no indication that Bhattarai's gesture will break the deadlock over the constitution. The Maoists are demanding an executive presidency, while the Nepal Congress and CPN-UML are calling for a parliamentary form of government. Bhattarai claims that drafting the constitution will be completed within six months but has given no indication as to how the differences will be reconciled.

To reach a deal with the UDMM, Bhattarai agreed to the inclusion of ethnic Madhesis into the country's public services and the army. The UDMM is demanding a federal constitution that would devolve significant powers on a regional basis. UDMM leader Bijaya Gachchedar has been appointed deputy prime minister.

One aspect of the coalition deal—to grant a general amnesty to those accused of human rights abuses during the country's armed conflict—has been criticised by international organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. An estimated 13,000 people died and another 1,300 "disappeared" during the conflict, with gross abuses by the army and the Maoists.

The formation of a second Maoist government has provoked no criticism in Nepali business circles. The UCPN-M has already proven its willingness to defend the interests of the capitalist class, guarantee private property and promote foreign investment. As finance minister in the first Maoist administration, Bhattarai was known for his pro-business credentials. Speaking to the *Nepal Times* after the 2008 election, he said: "We would like to assure everyone that once the Maoists come [to power] the investment climate will be even more favourable. There shouldn't be any unnecessary misunderstanding about that."

Bhattarai's installation has been welcomed by Washington. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland congratulated the Maoist leader and declared that the US looked forward to "continuing the warm and constructive relationship that we've had with Nepal... We're hopeful that his election will give renewed momentum both to the peace process and to constitution drafting."

Before 2006, the US backed the war against the Maoist guerrillas, supplying weapons and other assistance to the Nepalese army. Under the Bush administration, the Maoists were formally listed as a "terrorist organisation" and remain on that list as a means of exerting pressure on the party. Washington is currently seeking closer ties with Nepal as part of its broader strategic ambition to encircle rival China with close partnerships and alliances.

China, which also supplied arms to the Nepalese army to fight the Maoists, has likewise welcomed Bhattarai's appointment. Beijing has been increasing aid and investment in Nepal to boost its political influence and counter similar efforts by the US and India.

New Delhi regards Nepal—which borders both India and China—as being within its sphere of influence. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wrote a personal letter to Bhattarai congratulating him and inviting him to India. Singh declared that India attached the "highest priority" to its relations with Nepal.

The Maoists have previously had a marked anti-Indian element to their nationalist ideology, denouncing Indian dominance of the country. New Delhi is hoping that Bhattarai, who studied and lived in India, will be more sympathetic to Indian interests.

This intense rivalry for influence in Kathmandu can only compound the political crisis confronting the new government. With no means for resolving the country's sharp political divisions, Bhattarai's term as prime minister is likely to be as short-lived as that of his predecessor.

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