

Bhattarai Interview after Constituent Assembly Elections

Nepali Times, April 16, 2008

Nepali Times: How does it feel to arrive here after the long journey from a village in Gorkha?

Baburam Bhattarai: There is a deep sense of responsibility, and that comes from the fact that I was born in an ordinary village family, my mother can't read or write, my father is a farmer. As a child I used to tend livestock and help in the farm, and when I went to high school I had to carry water and cook for myself. From that to be able to go to a good school and be educated, and to have that contrast in one lifetime is fascinating in a way. But now we have been brought to this position where we have to try to resolve issues of national importance, there are enormous aspirations, there is lots to do but we have very little time and resources. It makes us somewhat anxious, thinking about whether we can do it or not. There are sleepless nights, getting up at three in the morning and not being able to go back to sleep.

But luckily we have a lot of experience, we engaged in open politics, then we went underground for ten years then we engaged in an armed struggle. This gives us the capacity to deal with challenges, and personally I have always been very committed and that is why I think we can handle the challenges before us.

Did you ever have a sense of destiny? That this is where you wanted to go.

No, I didn't. You were born and raised here in the city, but as a child in my village there was no way I could imagine I would ever end up where I am now. Even the background of (my wife) Hisilaji is different, and when we take our daughter to my home village she is surprised at the conditions there. If I hadn't had the chance to have the schooling I did, I am sure I would still be there.

I used to get very emotional back then when I saw the poverty, discrimination and disparities all around me in the village. And what was I going to do about it, those feelings did touch me at an early age. But what are the ways to deal with it, how can these problems be solved, I started thinking about those things in my college days when I finished architecture and started working on my PhD in JNU where I analysed the problems from a Marxist perspective.

Marx said there is always a combination of necessity and chance. I had a realization about the social conditions of my community, the poverty. I knew that the feudal monarchy had to be ended. But I never knew how it was going to happen, how we were going to go about it, who would come to the forefront to lead it.

This week when the first results started coming in, weren't you surprised?

Not so much. You are all in the media, you do political analysis, I have the feeling you may have been a bit out of touch with the reality in the countryside. The ground had shifted in the past 10 years of conflict. The marginalized and deprived women, janjatis and Dalits were really suffering, and city-based people couldn't really understand how bad things were. There was all this about how the Maoists were spreading terror and fear, but we understood

what was happening in the hinterland. We used to go back and forth from Gorkha and Rolpa.

We were convinced the people wanted change, and we knew they would let us lead them. We knew we'd be the largest party, but we didn't know exactly how many seats we would win. That is why we were surprised that everyone, including the media doubted us. The middle class and the city elite were shocked by the result because they'd never understood what was happening in the villages.

Everyone got it wrong. We have been meeting members of the diplomatic community this past week, and they have told us that there was intelligence failure. But we are people who fought a war, for us getting things wrong by a minute or by a metre was a question of life or death, so we had told our cadre to carry out a very concrete analysis for the elections.

The really oppressed groups like the Tamangs and Tharus voted for us in large numbers. In the Tamang belt we have won 24 of the 27 seats and in the Tharuwan, of the 22 seats we have won 20. Of the 24 women who have won, 20 are Maoist women. But even the traditionally-vacillating urban middle class, the 20-30 percent, who make up their minds at the last moment came over to our side.

Was the price the Nepali people had to pay in terms of lives lost and destruction, was the revolution worthwhile?

We are still in a revolution. The elections were part of our revolution. It's not just an armed struggle that is a revolution. Revolution means a radical rapid change in the socio-economic structure, that can happen through violent or non-violent means. At some point in a revolution, violent means need to be adopted. This election was part of the revolution to end the feudal monarchy. If we hadn't waged the People's War to weaken the state and empower the masses, the conditions would not have been created for the elections alone to achieve the goal.

So, it's not true that we abandoned the bullet to come to the ballot. We used both the bullet and the ballot in this revolution. You couldn't win with only bullets, and you couldn't win with only the ballot. Nepal's revolution has been completed in this unique manner.

After a ten year war, 15,000 killed, don't you think these elections were like coming back to square one?

No. If you don't mind, that is where you are wrong. This was a constituent assembly election. Earlier elections were parliamentary elections granted by a king. There was no structural change, sovereignty was not with the people. This time we are drafting a new constitution. And it wasn't possible without an armed struggle.

There are reports of widespread threats and intimidation by your cadre during the election campaign?

It is possible that happened in some places. But it would not be possible to do it from Jhapa to Kanchanpur and from villages to the cities. The main factor is that the people wanted change, and they wanted relative change and to give a chance to a new party.

When are you going to turn your attention to the economy?

Our goal is economic development. For an economic revolution to succeed, we have to complete this political revolution by writing a new constitution. There is of course the need

to provide immediate relief. There are the victims of the war, those affected by inflation, corruption those things needs to be addressed urgently. But the foundations also need to be laid for structural changes required for an economic transformation.

Can these things be achieved in two years? How will you deal with inflation?

Unless you pay attention to the structural reforms in the economy, superficial interventions won't help. You can give subsidies and get over the immediate problem, but we also have to address the roots of the crisis which is that a subsistence agricultural economy on which two-thirds of our population depends. That will not lead to economic development. There has to be a total transformation of the economy.

Second, we need massive job creation for which we need investment in hydropower, tourism and its optimum utilization. This will lay the foundation for long-term economic development.

Your election manifesto also talks about land reform. What kind of land reform are you talking about?

The simple universal principle of land-reform is land to the tiller. In mountains, the owners are also tillers but in the Tarai there is a lot of absentee landlordism and productivity is low. There has to be redistribution and modernization of the methods of cultivation.

But Mao's collectivization and the kolkhozes of the Soviet Union which led to famines and were a disaster. Can we afford to experiment?

There has been some exaggeration here. In China and Russia there may have been some problems, but in other Third World countries it worked. And if the Chinese and the Russians hadn't totally dismantled the feudal structures, they wouldn't have achieved the growth that they have today.

When we say we want to end feudalism, we don't mean we want to end private ownership. Our economic development is in our language bourgeoisie democratic revolution, in other words, collectivization, socialisation and nationalisation is not our current agenda. All we mean to say is that for a weak and backward economy like ours the state must play a facilitating and regulatory role. Without monetary and tax policies foreign interests may be more dominant, so the state has to protect the domestic private sector and the free market.

Yet, the business community is not yet comfortable with the Maoist win mainly because of their experience over the past two years. Do you have words of assurance for them?

We would like to assure everyone that once the Maoists come (into government) the investment climate will be even more favourable. There shouldn't be any unnecessary misunderstanding about that. The rumours in the press about our intention are wrong, there are reports of capital flight, but this shouldn't happen. And the other aspect is that once there is political stability, the investment climate will be even better. Our other agenda is economic development and for this we want to mobilise domestic resources and capital, and also welcome private foreign direct investment. The only thing we ask is to be allowed to define our national priorities.

We want to fully assure international investors already in Nepal that we welcome them here, and we will work to make the investment climate even better than it is now. Just watch, the labour-mangement climate will improve in our time in office. What happened in the past two

years with the unions happened during a transition phase, but the business sector also hasn't identified the other factors that are causing them losses.

What do you mean by national industrial capitalism?

Local development is important. Every state wants to give priority or protection to its own industry. Otherwise why have a state? When we allow foreign direct investment we will give priority to those who have a local partnership. That way the national entrepreneurial class will also develop and the national economy will benefit.

How about the hydropower deals that have already been agreed on?

The ones that have been signed needn't have been done in a hush-hush manner, after all we were in an interim period and we could agree on it collectively. By agreeing to these projects a day before we returned to government has aroused suspicions. But we understand that big hydro projects are not possible without foreign investment. The deals could have been negotiated in a more open manner. If there has been major irregularities, we need to investigate them, correct the decision-making process but we don't want to discourage investors by shutting down projects.

The time has come to deliver on the promises. There are very high expectations.

That is true, but the bigger challenge is to maintain national unity. Let's have political competition, but for the next 10-15 years let's cooperate, let's agree on a common minimum program. That will bring political stability, allow us to make optimum use of our domestic resources and bring in investment and make progress in the elimination of absolute poverty. If we can achieve these things in a fairly short timeframe, it will give the people patience and lay the groundwork for further development.

Our main worry now is the culture of disunity that results in political instability. All the parties must work together until the new constitution is written. The parties shouldn't react emotionally and say they'll leave the government.

Have you been offered the prime ministership?

(Laughs) Can't say now. We have been advocating a presidential system, but need to make provision for that, and then we will divide up our work among us depending on who is more capable of completing the task at hand. As we say, it is everyone according to their need and their capacity. Because of my interest in development planning, maybe my work will be in that field.

Everything is reaching a crisis point. There are big expectations and hope, people need to see immediate changes?

The first thing we want to stop is corruption and leakage. That itself will bring big relief to the people. Like Marx said, if everyone lived in huts people are satisfied. It is when someone builds a village among the hovels that there is expectation. We have to meet basic needs of people first, that is our priority. Our economic agenda has growth with employment. Like our plans for infrastructure development, this creates immediate jobs and also gets things built. We have to take advantage of the fact that we are located between China and India. These two countries are the next two superpowers and we are in the middle. In the past we were seen as a buffer state, now we can be a vibrant bridge between them and benefit from the comparative advantage. For this we need infrastructure development and connectivity on both sides. For this we have the labour and for capital we can raise the money from the

wasted investment in unproductive sectors. For large-scale investment we will have to rely on outside investors and for that we can use the BOOT model.

Your party has served in government in the interim period. You understand it from within, which aspects of it would you like to change?

One thing is that there is no coordination between ministries. Everyone is doing their own thing, that just won't do. They should be operating according to the state's main policies and coordinate activities. Secondly, the bureaucracy is lethargic and corruption-ridden. Unless that is changed the ministries won't be effective. A lot of ministries overlap, and we need to restructure them.

Your own subject is urban planning. How are you going to control this unplanned centralized growth in Kathmandu?

You see on this map the various federal units, we need to spread out the economic activity so jobs are available outside Kathmandu. The fast track highway (to Hetauda) will shift the population out, and we have to plan the growth of Kathmandu properly with zooming and the outer ring road. No where in the world is urban growth as unplanned as it is here.

With all these problems, do you think the other parties just gave up and said let the Maoists handle it?

(Laughs). Maybe. Maybe they think let's see how the Maoists do it. The cynical ones would probably say it.