

## Skewing the Himalayan Revolution

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By GARY LEUPP

Two recent articles in the *New York Times* by Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Jim Yardley draw attention to the mounting [political crisis in Nepal](#). They point out that the fundamental problem is “the unresolved task of merging the two enemy armies” mandated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed by the Maoists and the government in November 2006.

Yardley [notes](#) that the interim constitution composed in January 2007 will expire on May 28, when a new one authored by the Constituent Assembly is supposed to go into effect. But the writing of the new constitution has not been completed, and the peace agreement may fall by the wayside in a few months.

Yardley indicates that both parties are at fault for the impasse. “Many analysts,” he writes (without citing any names), “say the Maoists have maneuvered to keep their army intact as a bargaining chip to influence the constitutional negotiations. At the same time, the Nepalese Army, which before 2006 answered to the king, now deposed, has grudgingly succumbed to civilian control. In January, the defense minister announced that the army was not obligated to accept Maoist soldiers and should be included in civilian negotiations over integration — comments rejected by the prime minister and seized upon by Maoists as evidence of bad faith by the government.”

While superficially “balanced” (there’s no way the *New York Times* is going to take the Maoists’ side here, and yet it’s impossible for anyone familiar with the recent history to assign them entire responsibility for the gridlock) these articles actually imply that the Maoists bear principle responsibility. By treating the PLA’s continued existence as a mere political “maneuver” Yardley ignores the fact that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement explicitly provides for the the Maoists to keep their army intact pending “integration.”

More importantly it avoids what should be obvious: had the Maoists not fought a decade-long People’s War before deciding to suspend it and make the deal with the mainstream political parties in 2006 there would have been no toppling of the monarchy, no proclamation of the republic, no convening of the Constituent Assembly.

Since Yardley provides a very partial, skewed view of the historical context, it’s worth reviewing that history now as Nepal becomes front-page news.

We should first of all wonder why it hasn’t been front-page news for years, because something quite amazing is happening in that country. Something that isn’t *supposed* to be happening. Conventional wisdom has it that communism died with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It *failed*, according to some interpretations, because of its misunderstanding of “human nature” (the positive value of greed in driving economies, and the inherent need for religion), and/or was *defeated* by the

valiant brinkmanship of U.S. statesmen from Harry Truman to John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan. "Even the Chinese communists" it's argued, have come to realize the superiority of capitalism.

But events in Nepal embarrass the theory that communism is dead. (So do events in India, where Maoist-led forces have gained control of huge swathes of territory.) From 1996 to 2006 the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)---now the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)---waged a People's War against the Nepalese government, applying Mao Zedong's principles of guerrilla warfare. Confronting the weak state apparatus, targeting local elites guilty of abuses, organizing women and lower castes to challenge their oppression, the Maoists gained substantial control over about 80 percent of the country's territory by 2006.

This was generally reported in the western press as a movement of thuggish ideologues employing terror and intimidation to realize an antiquated, discredited utopian dream. These Maoists (like Peru's "Shining Path" before them) were likened to Cambodia's Khmer Rouge (who actually weren't Maoists at all) as the embodiment of a far-left savagery that should have disappeared, now that communism was in the dustbin of history.

But the communist movement in its most militant form was really very much alive in the Himalayas. Twice, in late 2001 and summer 2003, the Maoists declared cease-fires from a position of strength and negotiated with the government. Their main demands were an end to the Hindu monarchy (which had been absolute up to 1990), and its replacement with a republic; and the convening of a Constituent Assembly to draw up a new constitution. These needless to say are not specifically "communist" demands but demands for mere modernity. When they were rejected the Maoists returned to the battlefield, where they inflicted shocking defeats on the RNA.

In February 2005 King Gyanendra, frustrated with his government's inability to crush the rebels, dismissed the parliament and cabinet, arrested leading politicians, declared martial law and assumed full executive powers. The king was already highly unpopular, in part because of the antics of his vicious son Prince Paras, in part due to suspicion that he played a role in the sensational killings of his predecessor and brother and his wife and children. Now he became more hated.

The parliamentary parties, the largest being the Nepal Congress Party and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (over half the many political parties in Nepal call themselves "communist" although the Maoists will say they are most certainly *not* that) had opposed the People's War and denounced its leaders. But in the new situation the Maoists did something unexpected, and in the history of the communist movement, quite innovative.

They were poised to attack Katmandu Valley. Classic Maoist strategy is to surround the cities from the countryside, and they had done that. But rather than continue to build for an attack, they offered the political parties now alienated from the king a series of proposals. If the parties would join with the Maoists in organizing street agitation in the capital to bring down the newly-revived absolute monarchy, and agree to elections for a Constituent Assembly to discuss the possibility of proclaiming a republic, the CPN(M) and its PLA would end the People's War, and place their combatants in cantonments under UN supervision pending the merger of the two armies.

## **That was the Deal**

The Maoists were, in the eyes of supporters around the world who'd been inspired by their success---by the (valid) perception that they were "keeping the Red Flag flying"---taking a big risk. Maybe even blowing the opportunity to seize state power. Criticism from the fraternal Communist Party of India (Maoist) has been substantive, while the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (long the main supporter of Nepal's Maoists in this country) has denounced the abandonment of armed struggle as capitulation. (The Nepali Maoists have responded politely that their foreign critics don't understand Nepal's circumstances but are merely dogmatically citing Marxist texts pertaining to past revolutions.)

As things worked out, the mass movement (*andolan*) of 2006 brought down the king. The Maoists, able organizers, brought in some of their own people to agitate and to join others struggling for their own reasons to end Gyanendra's dictatorship. They used the opportunity to expand their political base in the city, among its workers and middle class.

The "Prachanda Path" outlined by party leader Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal) has for some years posited that the revolution in Nepal will combine the two great twentieth century revolutionary models: the People's War of China, and the October Revolution of Russia. There will have to be a general urban insurrection in Katmandu. The party has hinted that it assessed there was inadequate basis for that four years ago, but that by forming a strategic alliance with the parliamentary parties against the king it could massively increase its presence in the valley and develop that basis.

The king was in fact forced in the wake of massive protests to rescind martial law and restore power to parliament. There was an election for a constituent assembly in the spring of 2008 and shortly afterwards Gyanendra was unceremoniously deposed, ending the 239-year old monarchy.

The elections for the assembly, replacing the parliament, were internationally monitored (pronounced free and fair by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter among others). The Maoists won twice as many votes as their nearest rivals. They won fully half the directly-elected seats and 30% of those elected proportionately and wound up with 40% of the total seats. (Yardley merely notes that they "took control of the government.")

Party chair Prachanda became Prime Minister, while a Nepal Congress Party politician became President. As debate over the constitution continued between August 2008 and May 2009, Prachanda explored the limits of his authority as head of government. The Maoists were very conscious of the fact they had not seized state power, in the Marxist-Leninist sense; they had indeed entered a power structure that they might use towards their revolutionary goals, but it was one not entirely amenable to their objectives.

The Comprehensive Agreement had stated that the two armies must be integrated. That was really its core. Political power really *does* grow out of the barrel of a gun, and Maoist guns (and the judicial suspension of their use guided by politics) had produced the current situation.

The officer corps of the Royal Nepali Army (simply the Nepali Army after May 2008) have not been happy campers in this revolutionary period. *They* were not party to the 2006 Agreement, and have expressed opposition to the integration of "indoctrinated" troops into their professional national force. Most are themselves of high caste, many intermarried with the royal family, indoctrinated with their own ideology of loyalty to the King, avatar of the god Vishnu. They have violated the terms of the Comprehensive Agreement, recruiting new

soldiers since 2006 and importing arms. The United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) has confirmed this and protested to the Nepalese government.

Prime Minister Prachanda tried to fire the Army chief in May 2009 for insubordination, due to his unwillingness to comply with the terms of the agreement. The president, however, with likely backing from New Delhi, backed the Army chief. Thereupon the Maoists once again made a surprising move: Prachanda resigned.

Well aware that he was the most popular figure in the country, and that his message would be heard sympathetically, Prachanda addressed the nation. He explained that he was unable, as head of government, to force out the head of the military. He called for "civilian supremacy" versus "military supremacy." (Again, needless to say, this is not a specifically "communist" demand but a populist and commonsense one.) He intimated that India (widely suspected in Nepal of having expansionist designs on the country) and the India-aligned Congress Party were working against the 2006 agreement. Leaving government he vowed to take the struggle back to the streets, where it has been with a passion ever since.

Yardley doesn't quite capture the context when he writes, "the [Maoists withdrew from the government](#) after the president overruled the Maoist prime minister's firing of the army chief..." He's accurate in observing that they've "spent the ensuing months trying to destabilize the coalition government that replaced them." But he might point out that they are trying to bring it down precisely *because it's reneging on the agreement about integration of the PLA* and being swayed by the political influence of the Nepali Army. The Maoists call the current regime illegitimate because it reflects military supremacy.

"Now," writes Yardley, "the Maoists want to replace the country's existing parliamentary-style democracy and produce a constitution based on a directly elected, powerful executive. Rival parties say the Maoists oppose a true multiparty democracy and are trying to insert elements of a Communist system into the Constitution."

It actually wouldn't be surprising if real communists were trying to insert elements of a "Communist system" into a constitution that's being written because of their own hard-earned efforts, in a Constituent Assembly they dominate because they won the vote. But what *is* "a Communist system" that might be politically "inserted" into the Constitution? The directly elected, powerful executive is a feature of the U.S., French and other bourgeois-democratic systems and has nothing to do *per se* with "communism."

Really what the Maoists are trying to do---and they seem very flexible about the *means*---is to lead a country steeped in what we might loosely call "feudal" institutions and practices, with rudimentary industry and only a nascent industrial working class, into a new period in which it won't be a satrapy of imperialist powers, its development dictated by the requirements of multinational corporations, but enjoy genuine independence allowing for economic growth producing benefits for ordinary people.

The Maoists debate among themselves the applicability of Chairman Mao's concept of "New Democracy" in China right after the revolution of 1949, which involved an alliance of workers, peasants, petty-bourgeoisie and nationalist capitalists. It is one option. The goal---as it has always been for communists, back to the *Manifesto* of 1848, and for that matter (as the French philosopher Alain Badiou points out) back to Plato---is social equality, which you may find a profoundly inspiring or deeply disturbing ideal, depending on who you are in this world.

The timing for the transition from the present semi-feudal system to a socialist system integrating a lot of private enterprise, to a system in which private profit ceases to drive economic activity (as posited by Marxist theory as the real "end of history")---this is a matter for discussion among the people. And left out of the discussion for ages, the people are rallying to the Maoist cause.

The Maoists are not calling at this point for "all power to the workers' and peasants' soviets" or drawing unimaginatively on the poetry of past communist-led revolutions. They're talking about civilian sovereignty and respect for the 2006 agreement which enjoys widespread support. But insistence on such modest points alone may well bring them to power. They have already won a war and an election. Now (perhaps---I'm merely viewing from afar) for the urban insurrection.

*Andolan* III (following the mass movements of 1990 and 2006) began in November with a massive march on the capital, surrounding the Singha Durbar, the seat of (illegitimate) government, paralyzing activity. It was preceded by an evening torch-lit procession. There were some clashes with police but the demonstrators stood their ground; there was a dramatic confrontation between number two Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai captured on video. He and those he led pressed past the police.

Prachanda spoke to the crowd. He cited the recent report of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon noting that the Nepalese government wasn't observing the 2006 agreement with respect to the integration of the two armies. He wasn't calling for communist revolution but simply for implementation of the agreement. And (again) some international communists, or those who see themselves as such, are criticizing his party for dwelling on this narrow legal issue rather than the grand issue of revolutionary seizure of power *à la* 1917 or 1949.

Maybe such critics gesticulating from the sidelines don't get it. Every revolution is different. If it succeeds, it does because it responds to concrete conditions.

When the Maoists laid down their arms in 2006, they told the world: we're confident we can move on from here, using these tactics, to plant the red flag of real people's power over Mt. Everest. They forced their foes into an agreement that the latter are now reneging on. The Maoists probably expected that. Meanwhile the PLA has not been wasting time but (as Yardley documents) training, politically and militarily---either for integration into a truly national army accountable to the people, or for renewed confrontation with the army. (I'd imagine some Maoists are also volunteering the army, about 100,000 strong, as it recruits new troops in violation of the accord, in order to influence it and undermine it. The Maoists meanwhile express indignation that in a poor country of Nepal's size such a large army even exists and advocate its replacement by a popular militia.)

There is a crisis. The government has shown bad faith. It has not asserted civilian supremacy over the military and been unable to implement the 2006 agreement. Because power really does grow out of the barrel of a gun, and the army hasn't in fact despite Yardley's contention "grudgingly succumbed to civilian control." And while the Maoists have shown they can both fight on the battlefield, and win an election, in the end they may need to resort to violent means again. This time on an urban battlefield, with masses in the streets, while the PLA stands by attentively, country-wide, ready to serve the cause.

The most thoughtful communists in the world today have put an awful lot of thought into their unfolding strategy. Those on the outside looking in, persuaded this can't be happening, scratch their heads and come up with explanations for the Maoists' "maneuverings." As

though the Maoists were U.S. politicians, deviously seeking to maintain or acquire power by trading votes on this or that. As though they were opportunists, asking for anything other than what is theirs following the People's War, the 2006 Peace Agreement, the 2008 election, proclamation of the republic, abolition of the monarchy, convening of the Constituent Assembly---all due, let us repeat, to their efforts.

They asked that the People's Liberation Army be united with the national army, the former Royal Nepalese Army, to end the war. They've also made it clear all along that if that project is thwarted they're prepared to resume the war. Their recent mass demonstrations in Katmandu, and proclamation of autonomous provinces within a federal Nepal, and even the postponed plans to shut down the international airport, indicate that they are serious about demonstrating their power among the masses and challenging their opponents to muster forces against them.

Both the Maoists and their opponents think they're right, and as Marx once wrote, "Between equal rights force decides." We will see. But our vision of what's happening will be clouded as much as clarified by the *New York Times*.

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