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Q&A: Baburam Bhattarai, United Communist Party

'We don't look at the chinese as maoists'

Jyoti Malhotra / New Delhi May 29, 2011, 0:49 IST

Jyoti Malhotra met Vice-Chairman of the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) **Baburam Bhattarai** in Kathmandu a few days ago, where he spoke frankly about India's role in Nepal's political crisis.

How do you look at the political situation in Nepal today?

In the Constituent Assembly elections held in April 2008, we made substantial gains. All the major political parties such as the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) realised they would have to ally with us. Unfortunately, after the elections, India became unhappy and it was very difficult for Delhi to accept our leadership. It took us four months to form the government.

Where does the problem lie?

The problem lies both with India and us. We were too ambitious... we thought we could do things on our own, while India underestimated our strength. This came to a head over the appointment of the army chief. We wanted to establish a civilian authority and so, we wanted former army chief Rookmangud Katuwal to resign. For two years, there was a deadlock in the completion of the peace process and writing of the Constitution.

So, what are the conclusions you have arrived at?

The conclusion is that we need the understanding of all the major political parties in Nepal such as the Nepali Congress and UML as well as New Delhi. We must abide by the 12-point understanding brokered by India in 2005.

What is your view of the Indian establishment?

We can't change our neighbour. We have to depend upon India, both economically and geographically. There is now some tacit understanding within our party in this regard. We have reached a certain stage in the life of our movement... India helped broker the 12-point understanding between the Maoists and the erstwhile monarchy in Nepal, and, subsequently, was even supportive of the people's wishes for a democratic and republican Nepal. This was seen during the 'Jan Andolan', or the people's movement, in April 2006.

But in the last few years, there was a great deal of mistrust between the Maoists and Delhi?

Yes. When our government was forced to resign after only 10 months of being in power, we suspected undue interference from New Delhi.

And, now?

India is a regional power. It has its own responsibilities. We have tried to mend fences (with

India). There has been substantial progress in recent months. All sides, including the Nepali Congress, should take responsibility for what has happened.

Who should take the most responsibility?

The onus is on us. We want to undertake fundamental changes in society and, therefore, we should take more responsibility. Accordingly, we have taken the initiative to start a dialogue with the political parties, have a national unity government and begin the process of integrating the Maoist combatants into a paramilitary force or the Nepali army.

What kind of state do you want Nepal to be in?

The Nepali Congress wants a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. We would like a federal state, keeping in mind the geo-political situation, as we are situated between two great powers, India and China, with substantial devolution of power to the provinces. However, along with federalism, we also want a presidential form of government. The problem was that in the post-conflict situation, we were the biggest party to have emerged in the elections, but this was abandoned in favour of a consensus.

Today, we still want a national unity government. We would like to extend the Constituent Assembly for another year. Even Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal, the leader of UML, wants this government to continue in a national unity government. It will be good if all the parties come together, especially the Nepali Congress and the Maoists.

What should be done with the peace process?

We are ready to abide by the 12-point agreement brokered by India. The integration of the Maoist combatants into the army as well as the writing of the Constitution, both of which are stalled, should take place simultaneously. There should be no time frame. Both are part of the peace process.

How do you want to integrate the Maoist combatants into the army?

There are several modalities of integration. The democratisation of the old, royalist army and the integration of the combatants into a new force, either paramilitary or into the army itself, must happen. Nepal faces a unique situation, we have to find unique solutions.

Where does India fit in?

We want to have good relations with India. There may be ideological differences, but we have to persevere. Look at the history: less than three years after India brokered the 12-point agreement, the political understanding broke down. It failed on three fronts — army integration, power-sharing and writing the Constitution.

After relations soured, India thought we were pro-Chinese. But we don't look at the Chinese as Maoists. There is a fundamental difference between the Maoists and what the Chinese have become today. (Once upon a time), they used to be ideologically driven, too.

The reality is that we have to deal with India. However, as Nepal is a sovereign power, we would like to deal with both India and China. How can we be anti-India? We may be against some

policies of Indian government such as small border disputes, but we want good relations with India.

Do you welcome Indian investment?

Yes, of course. And, we agree that the initiative should be taken by Nepal.

In retrospect, what are the mistakes you think you may have made?

When we came to power, we should not have continued to act like an insurgent group. We could have suggested dialogue as a way to resolve issues, instead of making pronouncements from a public platform.

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