

Bhattarai Interview on Civilian Supremacy and a New Government

Myrepublica, May 17, 2009

Ghanashyam Ojha of myrepublica.com caught up with Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, finance minister and senior leader of Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), at his ministerial residence in Lalitpur to discuss how the peace process will move ahead amidst his party's continued protests in the streets as well as the parliament. Reprinted from www.baburambhattarai.com

Excerpts of the interview:

Myrepublica.com: How do you justify your party's advocacy for civilian supremacy when there are arguments that the government's move to sack Katawal was not in line with constitutional norms?

Dr Baburam Bhattarai: First of all, we have to see the government's move in the backdrop of years of struggle for democracy in Nepal. So far as Constituent Assembly (CA), republic and civilian supremacy are concerned, these issues should have been raised by capitalist parties. But unfortunately, Maoists had to do this.

The slogan for republic was first raised by the Maoists. In the beginning, all the parliamentary parties were opposed to it, though they finally supported us. Now, when we are raising the issue of civilian supremacy, the same political parties backed by other reactionary forces are protesting it. But we strongly believe that they will ultimately come to our position. It is the reality of Nepali society.

So far as Rookmangud Katawal's issue is concerned, it is not about an individual. The army should always be under the control of an elected government. I stress, the army must act as directed by an elected government. It is a serious question. Since this question was already settled in Europe and America, they don't have this problem. However, barring India, when we look at our neighboring countries, an active army is creating problems for them.

It should be clearly observed that Nepal's army, especially Katawal, who grew up under the patronage of the palace, has not owned the democratic transformation. Nowhere in the world does the army lobby with the national and the international community. In other countries, such an army chief would be court marshaled. But we valued democratic principles, maintained patience and asked for his clarification. However, unfortunately, various national and international forces got involved in the issue overlooking the army's ignorance of civilian supremacy. It is an indication of a looming disaster.

Myrepublica.com: How do you defend the government's action against Rookmangud Katawal while two of the issues on which the government sought clarification were still pending in the Supreme Court and all the allies in the government were opposed to the decision?

Dr Bhattarai: You should see both the form and the content. If you just go by the external form, you can then argue either way. The main thing is that you have to go to the essence. If you go to the essence, Rookmangud Katawal never digested the political change, never digested the republicanism, never digested democracy and he has been indulging in a number of activities against democracy. Hence, this is why our government wanted to take action against him a long time back but since we had to act along with coalition partners, it took some time.

There were a number of valid reasons to take action against him. I would like to give you some examples. He is the same person who issued public statements against democracy time and again. He issued statements against PLA integration, against the spirit of the CPA and he gave a draft of the constitution to the constituent assembly committee against the spirit of the democratic change.

If civilian supremacy is restored and president's unconstitutional move is corrected by sacking the army chief, we, being the largest political party, have the natural right to form the next government. There is no question of Maoists joining the government under the leadership of any other political party.

The army cannot provide a draft of the constitution to the government. And the recruitment issue is clearly against the CPA. Regarding the issue of the retirement of the eight generals, it is not within his purview to reinstate the generals. It should go through the Defense Ministry but he bypassed the ministry and took decision on his own. There are a number of reasons why he needs to be sacked. If this had happened in a foreign country, he would have been court marshaled.

Myrepublica.com: Do you mean to say that the government sensed an imminent threat of a coup from army?

Dr Bhattarai: No, I would not say a military coup. Nepali army will not independently indulge in a military coup. The main question right now in Nepal is the contention between the old reactionary forces who have been dethroned by the democratic movement and the progressive forces who want to bring about changes. The issue of the army should be observed on the basis of the contention between the progressive and status quoists reactionary forces.

If you rise above the surface and go deeper, you will see that the real issue is the fight between old reactionary forces who have been dethroned and the progressive forces who want to institutionalize democracy. The reactionary forces, deeply hurt by the declaration of republic, are trying to activate the army and distort the whole order. The UCPN-Maoist feels that it is its responsibility to fight against the reactionary forces and restore democracy in Nepal.

Myrepublica.com: How can the Maoists claim that it is fighting for civilian supremacy when it ignored the suggestions of the president as well as all the other allies in the government while taking action against Katawal?

Dr Bhattarai: No, this is not true. The issue was discussed widely. We took some four or five months to take the decision. We had already consulted with our allies. CPN-UML and the MPRF had given consent to the government's plan to sack Katawal. Unfortunately, UML and Forum backtracked from their commitment owing to tremendous pressure from some quarters. I am sure the parliamentary parties will realize their foolishness in the future.

Myrepublica.com: You mean to say that Jhala Nath Khanal and Upendra Yadav betrayed the Maoists?

Dr Bhattarai: Yes, there was tremendous pressure on them. I wouldn't say they betrayed us but they couldn't stand the pressure applied on them. It's the weakness of democracy in our country. Mainly, the reactionary forces inside the country and outside the country simply created so much pressure on these parties that they succumbed to it. It's only our party which stood the pressure. Therefore, we are facing this problem.

Myrepublica.com: Can you name those forces?

Dr Bhattarai: Everybody knows those forces. There is no need to mention names. The forces who don't want change in Nepal, who don't want peace and democracy and socio-economic transformation in Nepal but want to maintain the old order.

Myrepublica.com: Are you referring to NC inside the country and India outside the country?

Dr Bhattarai: No, I would not take names. The external forces have always been applying pressure on the governments in Nepal. Even the previous governments and political leaders have succumbed time and again to the pressure that was against national interests. Within the country, there are feudal compradors who are against this democratic change in Nepal. They have aligned to stop the democratic march in the country.

Myrepublica.com: Doesn't the government's decision to sack the army chief violate the Military Act?

Dr Bhattarai: No, there is no such provision in the constitution. It's the government's exclusive right to take action against the army chief. The council of ministers can take action against an erring army chief. You may be referring to clause four in the Military Act. But the government can sack the army chief by giving him a chance for clarification. The clause states that the government can sack the army chief who has been appointed before the promulgation of the constitution.

Myrepublica.com: Since the PM has already resigned, how long will the country remain under a caretaker government?

Dr Bhattarai: You have to see why we resigned. We were not reduced to a minority government. As I am talking to you, we are still in the majority. But we resigned on moral ground.

If you see the resignation issued by the prime minister, he has clearly stated that he did so because two power centers emerged—one headed by the prime minister and the other by the president. The prime minister felt that such a situation should not be allowed to continue. Otherwise, there was a danger of a violent clash.

Just to avoid such a clash and to continue the political struggle against the conspiracy on democracy and an elected government, we resigned. We opted to go to the people to educate them on this grave crisis faced by the country.

Myrepublica.com: Your party seems to be obstructing the process of forming a new government as your lawmakers have brought the parliament to a complete standstill.

Dr Bhattarai: No, we won't obstruct the formation of a new government. They can form the government. Formation of government is not an issue anyway. Our main concern is the peace process and drafting a new constitution. Whether or not we are in the government is not a major issue.

But the problem is that the president has transgressed his right given to him by the constitution. He has totally violated the constitution. And until and unless that is corrected and civilian supremacy is maintained by practically sacking the army chief, we don't think we will be a part of the government. We won't cooperate with the government. If that happens, the whole peace process will get derailed.

If anybody wants to form the government, let them form it. But we will maintain this stance. The Damocles' sword of the military will continue hanging on any future government. If the government is formed without settling the issue of dual power centers, created by the president, democracy will always remain in danger in Nepal.

Myrepublica.com: Since you have been raising the issue of civilian supremacy, why don't the Maoists wait for the court's decision since the judiciary is the final authority to protect civilian supremacy?

Dr Bhattarai: This is a political issue and it should be settled politically. Exercising the right not given by the constitution is a sort of coup by the president. So this issue should be settled politically. It can't be a legal issue.

Myrepublica.com: According to you, if any political party proves their majority to form the next government, your party won't allow the proposal to be discussed in the parliament until the president apologizes, right?

Dr Bhattarai: This should be corrected first. We want to settle the issue whether in a political manner or through the legislative parliament. However, this issue must be settled before the next government is formed.

Myrepublica.com: You are saying that the Maoists won't allow the formation of the next government until the president's issue is settled?

Dr Bhattarai: It's not the question of forming a government. It's something more serious, which will have a long-term negative impact for democracy. We will continue maintaining our stance. We will go to the people, agitate them to raise their voice against this onslaught on democracy. And we are in favor of consulting with political parties and others concerned to settle this issue politically. I am confident that it will be settled politically.

Myrepublica.com: So, there is no chance of forming the next government any time soon?

Dr Bhattarai: By just dwelling on the legal aspects, we are not going into the core issue. The core issue is that the current political crisis must be settled politically. Until it is settled, there is no meaning in forming the next government. This is the stance of our party. In most of the third world countries, coup and counter-coups have happened when the government failed to settle such serious issues.

Myrepublica.com: If this issue is settled, will Maoists take the initiative to form the government under their leadership?

Dr Bhattarai: If this issue is settled, we can discuss forming the next government. And being the largest party, it is our right and duty to form the next government.

Myrepublica.com: According to rumors, the next government will be formed under Maoist leadership and you will head the government?

Dr Bhattarai: No, we haven't thought about individuals yet. Let the issue of civilian supremacy and the violation of constitution by the president be settled first. We have many leaders in the party to take charge. That is not the issue at this moment.

Myrepublica.com: Won't you stake claim for premiership?

Dr Bhattarai: I won't talk about myself. It's the party and the people to decide. I am ready to serve the country and people a role in any capacity. So far, I haven't hankered for any post. I think I have done my job with honesty and integrity and to the best of my ability. In the future too, I want to serve my country. Right now, the main issue is the restoration of civilian supremacy. The party will decide the individual for heading the government.

Myrepublica.com: You said that the Maoist won't support the new government if it is formed without settling the question of civilian supremacy. In that case, will the Nepali people get their new constitution on time?

Dr Bhattarai: What is the point of forming a new constitution when the interim constitution has been

violated and blatantly raped? I don't think the new constitution can be written by ignoring such serious issues. In fact, the peace process has already been derailed.

Myrepublica.com: Do you think the Maoists will join the government under the leadership of any other political party?

Dr Bhattarai: If civilian supremacy is restored and president's unconstitutional move is corrected by sacking the army chief, we, being the largest political party, have the natural right to form the next government. There is no question of Maoists joining the government under the leadership of any other political party.

Myrepublica.com: Lately, the animosity between the Maoists and the UML has intensified. What is the reason for the animosity between two major communist parties?

Dr Bhattarai: The UML leadership is always vacillating. They don't stand on crucial issues. This has been the character of UML. They vacillate between the right and the wrong. In this case too, they are doing the same thing. We are not criticizing their vacillating character but we are appealing to them to stand in defense of democracy and change.

Myrepublica.com: How do you defend the video tape in which your chairman was persuading the cadres to capture power through revolt?

Dr Bhattarai: We have already clarified this issue. The video tape has no relevance now. It was recorded at a time when there was fear whether or not the CA elections will happen. There was conspiracy from reactionary forces including the palace against the peace process and the elections. So we had to persuade our cadres to mount pressure for holding elections and taking the peace process forward.

But the context has changed. Peace process has moved ahead and the elections have already taken place. Instead, the major issue now is: why did the tape come out at this time? In fact, Rookmangud Katawal distributed the tape to divert the issue and to justify the unconstitutional move of the president.

Myrepublica.com: How will you convince the international community about the Maoist's commitment to democracy and peace process after the video scandal?

Dr Bhattarai: There were certain doubts in the international community. We have attempted to explain them. I think they are satisfied. Even the UNMIN had raised this issue and we have explained it to them.

Myrepublica.com: The video tape conspicuously states that the real size of PLA was only about 7,000. Don't you think the Maoist betrayed the UNMIN and that the UNMIN will have to re-verify the PLA combatants?

Dr Bhattarai: There is no question of re-verifying the PLA combatants. UNMIN has already done its job. And we have already said that during insurgency, nobody knows the exact number of combatants. We have several types of forces—central force, regional force and militia. Combined, we may have some 100,000 combatants. Unfortunately, our militia was not included in the verification process.

UNMIN has been acting impartially so far. It is our home-grown process and UNMIN can act only in consensus. Nobody can act arbitrarily whether it is UNMIN or political parties or anyone else. UNMIN hasn't yet shown signs that they are not satisfied with the verification process. In fact, they are completely satisfied.

Myrepublica.com: Your chairman accuses other political parties of being foreign stooges but he, in an interview with the Hindu, has said he sought help from Indian ambassador Rakesh Sood while taking action against Katawal. Doesn't this contradict with what he says during his fiery

speeches?

Dr Bhattarai: You know that we have to act very diplomatically to run the government. You have to understand that our country is in a very difficult geo-political state. International powers should also be taken into confidence. Various powers nationally and internationally should be taken into consideration while taking major decisions.

In that respect, we discussed this issue not only with India but with various other diplomatic missions. But it is the sole authority of an elected government to take action against the army chief. We are not blaming other countries. Nepali people should be allowed to exercise their sovereign rights. Nobody should interfere in the internal affairs of Nepal.