

Interview with Dr. Bhattarai on Election Results and Plans for Future

Dr Bhattarai spoke with Prateek Pradhan, Ghanashyam Ojha and Puran P Bista of The Kathmandu Post, April 2008

Q: Your party appears to have emerged as the largest one. How would you proceed with your political agenda?

Dr Baburam Bhattarai: We had always pushed for the CA election, which was finally held last week. During the interim period, the Seven-Party Alliance government had already made certain political commitments. One of them was that we would reach a political consensus to form the government. All the political parties that have participated in the CA polls will join the government. Now, the question is who will head it. Obviously, the largest political party will lead the new government. So, naturally, the CPN (Maoist) has to head the coalition government.

Q: Who will head the CPN (Maoist)? Could you name the captain of your party?

Dr Bhattarai: I can't tell you right now. We have to discuss and decide who should be the leader. We have to prepare a draft of the new political system. We have to decide the fate of the monarchy. And only then we can think of who will head the CPN (Maoist). Our intention is to establish a presidential system. But we can't be sure as we have to discuss the matter with other political forces too. We must reach a political consensus because the constitution would need to be amended to set up a presidential system. Unless we have a political consensus, we can't amend the constitution. So, we can't simply go for an executive president. In case of political differences, we may have to follow the present form of governance.

Q: How would the CPN (Maoist), being the largest political force, approach other political parties in order to form the government, abolish monarchy and declare Nepal a republic?

Dr Bhattarai: First, we are going to hold discussions with the major political parties. We would need to seek their opinion and views before forming the government. We would have to work under the Interim Constitution for the time being which would require a political consensus. We shall move forward on this basis. The first sitting of the CA will declare this country a federal republic. For that, we have to develop a political consensus. After that the question would be forming the new government which will be done again on the basis of political consensus. And then we will proceed with the drafting of the new constitution of Nepal.

Besides these issues, there are other political commitments such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, rehabilitation of displaced persons and revamping and integration of the security forces. I think there will be several challenges and questions. We have to review four things immediately – security, political structure, the economy and international relation. Such issues require a national consensus.

Q: How do you assess the election results? Did you expect that you would make such a strong showing?

Dr Bhattarai: The people were looking for total change. We advanced the political agenda for total change during the decade-long people's war. We have people from different castes, ethnicities, genders and people from different regions. The main agenda of the people's war was to restructure the state. It took 10 years of the people's war to establish our political agenda. The people felt that the country's socio-political and economic structure needed a complete overhaul. So we couldn't look at things through our old lenses. The media and the elite missed the picture. As a result, the CA results surprised many. The ground realities had changed and they helped us to emerge as the largest party.

Q: Do you think that the people's support that you have garnered is more than what you expected?

Dr Bhattarai: We had thought that we would come out as the largest party, and that we might, if we reached a consensus, form the next government. But the manner in which we have clinched victory in the CA polls makes us feel that we have achieved more than what we expected to.

Nevertheless, we did think that the results would be in our favor. I have observed how people's waves have swept parliamentary elections in India. In 1977, Indira Gandhi was defeated. Similarly, sympathy votes after her tragic death helped Rajiv Gandhi to sweep the 1985 parliamentary elections. I had seen such mass hysteria earlier. I personally visited 22 districts and assessed the situation three weeks before the CA polls. I could foresee a massive wave rising in our support.

Unfortunately, the media saw things the opposite way. And we also could not convince the media until the CA results showed that the people had voted for us.

Q: You told a local FM station this morning that you have now been burdened by greater responsibilities. What do you mean by that?

Dr Bhattarai: I take it as a great responsibility because we have to restructure the 250-year-old feudal system. You cannot expect it to happen overnight. Secondly, while restructuring the state, we have to take into account different aspects such as poverty, illiteracy, health and others. We don't have enough resources and skill to reorganize the country in a way we want to. It may take at least 10-15 years to do it. There are mounting challenges ahead.

Q: How can you restructure the state and achieve economic growth in a short span of time?

Dr Bhattarai: What we need right now is political stability. We cannot think of rapid economic growth sans political stability. Now the CA results have given some hope for political stability. Secondly, there must be a strong leadership. Above all, we have yet to start restructuring the state. So, how can we think of the economy? The 30-year-long panchayat system promised us that it would deliver the people's needs, but it could not do so as it was a political system imposed by the royal regime to serve its own interests.

The post-1990 parliamentary system created a sort of anarchy. It neither had any clear political vision nor could it deliver anything. During this interim period, it would be difficult to think of economic prosperity. We can only think of economic growth in the post-CA period. This mandate has just opened the door to a future Nepal. Now the job is to garner the support of all the political parties and maintain political stability. This would be the beginning.

Second, the resources we have include land, water, jungle, herbs and people. I do not think that we run short of resources, but we need external support for technology and skills. We need foreign investments. I am sure if we really work together, we can achieve rapid economic growth in a short span of time.

Q: China has adopted a liberal economic policy. It has achieved remarkable economic growth in the past 30 years. To what extent do you think we can follow China's model?

Dr Bhattarai: China eliminated the feudal system during Mao's regime. It established a solid foundation for economic growth. We could have thought of making rapid economic progress had the country been liberated from the age-old feudal system. When you inject new technology after the foundation for economic growth has been established, you can achieve such development. We don't have such a foundation now. Once we restructure the state and involve the private sector, it will be possible to achieve rapid economic growth. We would implement a transitional economic policy during such an interim period which involves public and private partnership.

Q: Currently we are seeing a pattern of capital flight. How are you going to halt this?

Dr Bhattarai: We can't think of developing this country in the absence of domestic and foreign investments. Technological inputs are of equal importance. So, we will follow the policy of attracting domestic and foreign investments. For that to happen, we have to put an end to political instability. From our side, we have to provide security to investors and create a conducive environment for domestic and foreign financiers. And I also think that we will be able to resolve the differences between labor and management. Unless we resolve such issues, we cannot create a better investment atmosphere. In a nutshell, we recognize the legitimacy of management and the participation of labor in management.

Secondly, we have to identify areas for investment and create the necessary infrastructure. We have to focus on productive sectors. We don't want to encourage assembly industries. Business activities should raise productivity and generate employment.

Q: You mean the state's involvement in economic activities will increase from now on?

Dr Bhattarai: The state will play the role of facilitator. The state cannot intervene in business activities. It will encourage investors to raise productivity and generate employment opportunities.

Q: We have seen – especially after the restoration of democracy in 1990 – how political parties rewarded their cadres with jobs in the bureaucracy and other social sectors. How are you planning to restructure the bureaucracy and other sectors?

Dr Bhattarai: We have to, at all costs, restructure the bureaucracy and the judiciary as they have always been tools of the monarchy. But we have to follow certain norms. So let us leave it open. But we have to think of revamping the security forces as integrating the People's Liberation Army and the Nepal Army is part of the peace process. We can think of starting the restructuring process only after the monarchy has been removed. But it will be open to discussion. We want to reform the bureaucracy and other sectors in a democratic manner.

Q: You once said that Nepal did not need a huge security force. But if you integrate the Maoist combatants and the army, you are going to have a huge security force. Do you think Nepal needs such a large army?

Dr Bhattarai: The strength of the security forces after the two are combined would be roughly over 100,000. Going by the country's population, such a number may appear necessary. But we have to reduce the size of the army in the long term. I think that instead of having such a huge number of army, we could go for trained militias who would defend the country at times of war. I think it would be useful to train such a force. We should mobilize them during emergencies.

Q: The UML fared badly in the CA polls. Do you foresee a single communist party in the near future?

Dr Bhattarai: Until recently, there were three political forces – royalists, social democrats (who represent the bourgeoisie) and leftists. I think there will be only two forces in the future – the Nepali Congress, which represents the rich, and the left, which represents the poor. The NC has its own political stand. It's not going to lose its identity as it has a clear vision and policy.

But the CPN-UML does not have any political position. It neither represents the rich nor the masses. It is a eunuch though it continues to be identified as a communist party. It has lost its identity. It can't stand any longer. Now the CPN (Maoist) has established itself as a communist party. We welcome committed communist cadres of the CPN-UML to our party.

Q: How long will it take to draft the new constitution?

Dr Bhattarai: It will take roughly two years. But how we proceed will depend on other political forces as well. We must finish the new constitution as early as possible so that we can focus on the economy.

Q: Some still argue that the Maoists may retain the monarchy in a ceremonial form. What do you think?

Dr Bhattarai: What surprises us is why people think that we will retain the monarchy when it has ceased to exist. There is no question of retaining the monarchy.

We did approach some nationalist royalists to join us. That does not mean we are going to keep the monarchy. It is not possible to save it in any form. It has ceased to exist in our minds.

Q: When will the king move out of Narayanhiti Palace?

Dr Bhattarai: The king has to quit Narayanhiti Palace immediately after we declare Nepal a republic. This is the understanding of the Seven-Party Alliance. He should leave the palace immediately after the first sitting of the CA.