

The Telegraph (Kolkata, India)

Nepal Maoists on bullet & ballot road



The Telegraph, Calcutta, December 10, 2009

Kathmandu: He is late on account of an eddy of his own making — one of an interminable string of Maoist road blockades that daily make a grinding mess of downtown Kathmandu.

When he finally arrives, he looks like a travesty of his calling card — a tiny man in a cheap windcheater and even cheaper shoes with a grubby helmet in hand, more like the hundreds of faceless office clerks that populate Singha Durbar, Nepal's sprawling seat of government.

It is only when he begins to reveal his assured tone and his organised mind that Ganesh Man Pun slowly evolves into the image of who he really is — chief of the Young Communist League (YCL), the Nepali Maoists' much vaunted and much feared apparatchik wing.

Not so long ago, Pun was public enemy number one, he'd never have stirred near these precincts. Today, he's remarkably at ease in the high halls of the state he still wants to pull down. "The revolution is not over," Pun says as an explanation of current tactics and future objectives, "but we realise that in the 21st century, we must employ a mix of the bullet and the ballot, political action and military action have to be fused. The guerrilla war phase of our struggle is over and we are in the mainstream. We think we can achieve our aims with mass mobilisation but if the forces of feudalism and imperialism resist the kind of state we want, we shall have to use force." Assurance inlaid with warning. Bluntly put, give us the state peacefully, or we are capable of taking it by force.

Pun, a Magar tribal from the remote and deprived north-western hills of Nepal, is no coarse roughneck as conventional wisdom about the YCL in Kathmandu might expect him to be, not some goon in command of a maverick bunch that insists on wanton thuggery. Far from it, he is a man of calm, even sophisticated, thought and tenor, patient to questioning, skilled in responding.

You won't catch him issuing random reasoning or rash threats. You won't catch him discomfited over his oft-maligned reputation either. Put it to him that the YCL uses violence as a standard technique to intimidate and prevail, and he'd say: "We would not have come this far if we had not used violence as a means, you know how powerful the interests of status quo can be, and nobody talks about the violence they have unleashed on the people over centuries. This is a struggle for revolutionary changes, violence will happen. Having said that, we function under the disciplines of ideology and line, what we do is for our political and social objectives."

The YCL is verily the political and social muscle of the Maoists, an ideologically indoctrinated and a militarily trained force that is both the steel-grid of overground expansion and a formidable fallback should something provoke a resort to armed tactics.

Their strength remains a matter of avid speculation — conservative estimates say a hundred thousand, Pun himself claims a strength 10 times that — but few would question their nationwide presence and storm-trooper potential.

"Since the Maoists came overground, the YCL has become the single-most important factor in their civilian expansion," says a political analyst. "They are committed boys, they inspire both awe and admiration, depending on your viewpoint, they totally dominate the competition with their reputation, other political youth wings are just vanishing because the YCL are the tough and happening guys."

A senior officer of the Nepali Army sounds not so enamoured of the YCL's political prowess, although he wouldn't risk underestimating the influence they have come to wield. "These are hardcore military guys, or at least their commanders are," he says.

"During the transition, the Maoists cleverly deputed some of the best People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters to the YCL under civilian garb. They are trained, they are armed, they represent a persistent threat to the democratic order. We are apolitical soldiers, they are not, that is the danger of having them floating all around, and that is why the Maoists have kept them close at hand."

Pun himself is least bothered about concealing his membership of the PLA; by the time he is done with a summary re-telling of his career, he's left you with the impression his PLA exploits couldn't have made him prouder. A convert to the revolution while still in middle-school — "my teachers all read Mao's Red Book and wore Mao pendants to class" — he joined Prachanda's forces in his early teens and commanded the first major assaults on police posts in the remote mountains of Rukum and Rolpa which would become an impregnable Maoist stronghold by the mid-1990s.

He was arrested while on a secret mission to Nepalganj in the southern Terai in 2003, but escaped with the help of an urban guerrilla unit four years later while recovering from an appendix extraction in hospital. He would become the political commissar and military commander of the 4th Division of the PLA and lead many successful battles in the western Nepal plains and mountains. "Those were tough days," he remembers, "but also very heady, we were always convinced of victory."

He breaks into a disarming smile when asked whether victory has been achieved. "Well, we are here now," he says, as if to emphasise the significance of his presence inside Singha Durbar, "and we will see the peoples' revolution through."

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