Democracy at stake

I can’t articulate this fully because I still don’t know enough, but caste functions something like what we call race in America. There are poor Brahmins and wealthy people who came from nothing. But the mark and habits of caste still ring. Fighting the caste system, the Maoists do not engage in demagoguery against the privileged castes. In place of feudal entitlement, where chauvinistic rules kept state and military jobs in the hands of the privileged, the Maoists have already declared autonomous national territories as part of a federal democratic republic. Their own top leadership is largely from what have been those same privileged castes. The changes they demand are, among other things, exactly to end of that system of straight-up exclusion.

Block anymore constitution through parliamentary tricks (or some form of putsch) in the capital would threaten not only counter- action by the Maoists, but the very people who should be shouting from the rafters that a revolutionary internationalist, secular and people- based movement has caught fire in the Himalayan mountains.

Great powers are allied against this revolution. India, the United States and the entire disinformation machinery we call mainstream media (from left to right) has insisted that communism is done. And can be killed in silence should it raise its face. Here people are doing it. And it is those people who need honest, nay, which is more than anything means letting the world know what is happening.

If the mass media won’t show what is happening, I hope someone is writing it on the walls. There are less than three months until the deadline for the constitution. There is no center to hold. Anyway, with the broad support and curiosity of the people who make up the heart and body of Nepal, missing the way enfranchisement brings a genuine patriotism that can’t be faked, or glossed over by rulers speaking in the name of all.

Resentment isn’t the currency of the communists. There isn’t demagoguery. They are people who make productive national capitalists or the privileged castes. The comprador bourgeoisie, the type who make money selling the rest of the country out to India, and feudal landlords are feeling the heat. Even there the straight-up exclusion.

Complaints from the privileged have the same ring as racial paranoia in America, who still think America is a “white republic”, and that any check on their prerogatives is the end of the world. Upper class advocacy groups using identity politics claim the federal republic would “disintegrate” Nepal, missing the way enfranchisement brings a genuine patriotism that can’t be faked, or glossed over by rulers speaking in the name of all.

The argument for a federalization itself, and its democratic potential, has been wildly popular. Nepalese people are patriotic, no doubt. But they also have a two major religions, a southern Tarai region that was totally excluded from self- determination and dozens of language groups. No other social demand has so frightened the formerly entitled as the Maoist insistence on a federal democratic republic, but attempts to use religion or communal fear have not worked as well in Nepal as in India, where Hindu fundamentalists have an unfortunate mass base in many areas.

The Maoists do not agitate against religion or the religious. They are rational and atheist in a deeply faithful country. Not surprising since Buddha was born in Nepal and wasn’t himself so much for the hocus pocus end of religious practice. The Maoists also believe in introducing atheist in one of their articles. From that position of respect, they advocate for science, technology and Marx’s dialectical materialist understanding of the world. They want schools to be public to educate everyone, not the largely private financial racket they still are here for all but the wealthy. Commitment to science, innovation and human dignity will serve them well.

The People’s Liberation Army adopted the Geneva Conventions just about the time our own country tore them up. For their success, the Maoists have been largely ignored by the very people who should be shouting from the rafters that a revolutionary internationalist, secular and people-based movement has caught fire in the Himalayan mountains.

The Maoists are unorthodox, to be sure. They have defied conventional communist history and determined to solve those real problems through advance and not retreat. They don’t want to be the new bosses. They want communism, socialism and a New Democracy for Nepal. And it’s good to hear, what we can do and not what we have to accept.

Peace to the street, war on the palace.

I’ve only seen one traffic light and it wasn’t lit. The daily load shedding blackout.

Exhaust just hangs in the valley, air still as often as not. Along the main roads, commuters and pedestrians alike wear face masks of all kinds to filter what they can. In any large crowd you can hear coughing, men clearing their throats. The air only clears after rains, which are rare save for the summer monsoon. We did get hail the other day, which tore apart the beautiful aloe plant on the patio where I’m staying. It was a grand dame of an aloe, now pockled with holes as big as dimes.

I have been lucky to have met many children, a few of whom are also friends. I’m listening to Sade, Beirut and Alicia Keys. Drinking with the neighborhood guys on Holi, I got to name the cat from the lodges below Lucia. She is beautiful, with patches of silver and black tiger stripes mixing up her pure white coat. Holi morning, the young men came up the stairs of the building I’m staying in to ambush me on the roof with red powder and buckets of water. Then they hugged me and poured another bucket over my head. Holi is a water balloon fight that doesn’t stop until they start throwing buckets of colorful water and raw pigment, red, green, blue and orange. Best holiday ever. Girls do get pretty soaked though, not so fun sometimes. It’s an occasion for both carnival and hooliganism. Lots of laughing. I tried to ask the guys about the meaning of the holiday and they decided to pour tall glasses of khukuri rum. I do try to oblige.

Did I mention there is a revolution going on?

by Jed Brandt

Jed’s writings are posted at: jedbrandt.net

This essay is also available (with other key materials on Nepal’s revolution):

kasamaportal.org

March 7, 2010 - I can’t leave home for a few weeks without everything going crazy.

It took a bit for my lime to adjust, to see things as they are coming here and where they’re coming from. Not the instant back-and-forth rhythm of New York multi-tasking anxiety time. Most days the electricity is out in Kathmandu. You can hear chickens in the morning, children playing after school and quiet talk at night when the old women laugh and call across the rooftops. Blackouts make working a computer hard, but the pace of people living by hands and minds alone, without so much mediation, is not a place I’ve ever spent much time. And I do love it here. The city is dirty. The people are upright, direct and curious. I’ve made friends quickly, though I’ve gotten the impression its easier to get married than find a date.

Kathmandu is a valley. The Tanglang range of the Himalaya is the wall in the sky that separates South Asia from the Tibetan plateau to the north. The white caps are breathtaking when you can see them. Pollution is horrible. Cars only arrived in Kathmandu 20 years ago. Most of the city is built for footpaths, but that doesn’t stop every sort of vehicle from ripping through trying to cut around the traffic jams. It’s some kind of anarchy on the streets. People complain about it, then go do it themselves. I’ve seen three people hit by cars, none of which stopped. Motorcycles are everywhere and drive as they want.

We haven’t seen a revolution in our lifetime. Not a communist revolution at least, although I’m not sure of the other one. The Maoists have a track record that has won the respect of the country. They haven’t let their enemies tell them who they are or been confined to some historical script handed down by the Comintern in 1930-whatever. After a 10-Year People’s War, starting in 1996, they grew exponentially among the rural poor and made up the “terrorist” body of Nepal.

People were fed up with the absolute poverty, a despotic monarchy and the whole system that didn’t let them advance no matter how hard they worked. It was the Maoists who saw that backwardness the semi-feudal, semi-colonial predicament of their country, a resonance they share for all the many others with pre-revolutionary China.

P.S.: Did I mention that nobody in Nepal even knows who Glenn Beck is?
Millions cast their lot with the communist promise that it was they themselves who could fix what the ruling classes plainly didn’t want done. They signed up in droves, they neither sought nor accepted shady foreign sponsors and still brought a king down. That was people, and a determined, revolutionary leadership. Violence was not the issue.

“The masses are the makers of history,” is how Mao put it, advice Prachanda’s party apparently heard well.

When organized revolutions grew into a people who could not endure the old order for a moment, the US state department calls that terrorism, and under Obama has continued to put the Maoist party on its list of certified terrorists even after they fought for and won Nepal’s first democratic elections. Terror is not a word any honest person could use to describe what is happening here. People are unafraid, and if anything impatient things haven’t gone further. The communists were transformed, and so were the broad masses of people. They said: “We had to unravel our slogans to start the People’s War,” which meant, I think, that they are not disciples of doctrine, or simple prophets of rage. Terrorism is a politics of fear. The communists have fought a People’s War, and their spirit is light.

For a new mainstream

Refusing offers to become another parliamentary party, who are widely despised for their profound corruption, the Maoists demanded nothing less than a constituent assembly to draft a constitution, through which the entire body of the People’s War, despite flexibility on almost everything else, the Maoists never departed from the seat Prachanda vacated over the issue of whether the old constitution included those farming on his land, and that when he went to talk with them they worked out a deal of some kind. I was kind of stunned that he just went and talked. “I knew them,” he said. He still has his family home, now repaired. He’s kind of sore about it. They did blow up part of his house, which ratted him no doubt. Provocations and dress rehearsals

In their heyday, the Maoists have looked back at previous attempts to build socialism in Nepal, and while they have criticized them for not being democratic, for not beinganswerable to the people, that is still not clear, not even to them. They launched a war, they won an election and they left. They have fought for and won.

The current prime minister from UML was unelected. He took the seat Prachanda vacated over the issue of whether the royal army would accept civilian control, which is to say by the elected Maoists. Prachanda fired the former commander of the National Army, who refused to step down. The unelected “democratic” figures abided a soft coup, with the UML’s leader and the pro-Indian, ceremonial President Yadav prancing around these last few months as if they were a government. It has not been a gift. But there is a fluid split between the careersists and the stoutest revolutionaries in the UML. How they will act when the chips are down is still not clear, not even to them.

I talked with one couple, the husband from a leading UML family and the wife with a significant government job directing cultural activities. The husband denounced the Maoists, who had not learned that liberal democracy was the only way the world could be, that even China had embraced capitalism. He said UML was not communist, despite their full name United Maoists and Leninists, but that it was “tradition.” His wife smiled and said that many “patriots” were Maoists, though not her, and that while she was not herself any longer in the UML, she was hopeful for the future “no matter how it goes.” I think the husband was embarrassed, which amused her, so he told me of a recent family visit to his family home in the south a few years back. He had share croppers on his land. The Maoists apparently organized them to squat the same land. He lived in Kathmandu, earning income from the tenant farmers and keeping a seasonal residence, while his child studied in college out of the country.

It turned out that the Maoists included those farming on his land, and that when he went to talk with them they worked out a deal of some kind. I was kind of stunned that he just went and talked. “I knew them,” he said. He still has his family home, now repaired. He’s kind of sore about it. They did blow up part of his house, which ratted him no doubt. Provocations and dress rehearsals

In their heyday, the Maoists have looked back at previous attempts to build socialism in Nepal, and while they have criticized them for not being democratic, for not beinganswerable to the people, that is still not clear, not even to them. They launched a war, they won an election and they left. They have fought for and won. They said: “We had to unlearn our consciousness and the old way of thinking. We had to learn some new things, and to do that we had to think the way the Maoists thought.” That’s what they learned from 20th Century socialism, and its good to hear from the leaders and members of a communist party contending for power.

May 28 - deadline for the constitution

Every event, each provocation and mobilization is about contesting the allegiance of the broad masses of people. Prachanda and the Maoists share the experience of having lived in the walled city of Bhaktapur that if a constitution isn’t ratified it guarantee social transformation and national sovereignty that has already been won.

The UML Prime Minister said the weapons were for “training police.” He didn’t explain what kind of police work required explosives, wires and other bomb-making materials. Nor was this egregious violation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, supposedly providing for the constitutional framework, noted by the international press. It was certainly noticed here.

Should the current, unelected President Yadav and some section of the National Army attempt a military coup, backed by India, the Maoists are quite sure that the entire population would rise up. Since the first democratic uprising here in 1990, called Jana Andolan I through the People’s War and up to the 2006, Jana Andolan II that overthrew the king, there are expectations of a breakthrough far beyond the ranks of committed revolutionary communists.

Not the old playbook

I’ve been surprised to find some of the complaints of some Americans radicals online, who are convinced that participating in elections and attempting to bring in the broadest range of support are some kind of sell out. The facts are these: the Maoists can be more effective because they can unify a democratic revolution, which isn’t nothing, but have not limited themselves to what the semi-feudal, semi-colonial system can bear. They maintain their People’s Liberation Army. The Young Communist League is the most powerful social action force in the country, unarmed but disciplined. The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) already left the government they were elected to lead rather than pretend that “representation” was enough when the National Army and bureaucratic resistance from army and civilian control. Prachanda, Bhattarai and the Maoist leadership already had the chance to become broker-politicians, and they said no thank you. They launched a war, they won an election and they left the government rather than fake it. Which brings us to now. Audacious as can be, they returned to their base and have launched a series of mobilizations and public education forums that are the state programs again delivered. They are the largest, the legal and extra-legal opposition to an unelected government wrapped around what’s left of the defeated monarchy’s apparatus. The next major mobilization is for International Women’s Day.

May 28 is the deadline for Nepal’s constitution to be delivered. That doesn’t look like due to substantial interference from foreign powers and the parliamentary leadership of the corrupt UML party. The only way it could come to pass is if the UML reformists (called here status quo-ists) are unite with the Maoists. Leftist parties of one stripe or another won 62% of seats in the Constituent Assembly, enough to ratify a “people-centered” constitution. UML leaders Oli & PM Nepal have ruled that out unless the Maoists disband the PL and YCL, which they say will not happen until the new constitution is ratified to their satisfaction and under their leadership, if at all. For its part, Nepal Congress party, formerly the parliamentary apparatus and spoils system of the monarchy, is utterly despised as a tool of the power brokers. Congress received around 10% of the vote, act like king-makers and keep forgetting that crown lies in the gutter.

The terms are set and the time frame known.