

[Interview with Bhattarai on the Political Stalemate in Nepal]

"Find the correct balance of pace for both sides" Maoist vice-chairman Baburam Bhattarai

Man in a hurry



KIRAN PANDAY

LINEAGE, LEFT: Baburam Bhattarai is at home in the company of his fellow ideologues.

Hardliners in each of the three big parties are making it more difficult for the top leadership to find a compromise power-sharing formula, prolonging the stalemate and threatening the peace process. This could be why senior leaders all sounded conciliatory after their numerous one-on-one and joint meetings this week, but came out with uncompromising stands the very next day.

"The problem is not between the political parties, it is within the parties themselves," one senior adviser told *Nepali Times*. For example, the UML has an almost right-wing faction, while the NC has a leftist fringe that is acceptable to the Maoists.

The Maoists, weakened by serious internal rifts, need an acceptable face-saving way out of their 'civilian supremacy' stance. Conservatives in the NC and UML, however, smell blood and don't want to give the Maoists an easy way out. Although the [Kailali incident](#) this week and the vicious Maoist attack on Rukum journalist Tika Bista have sharpened the rhetoric on both sides, the three were said to have edged closer to a formula for an all-party coalition.

Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai (interview below) represents the pragmatic aspect of the Maoist hierarchy, although one wouldn't guess that from what he has to tell us in an extensive interview this week. His clarification that ethnic autonomous regions are just 'symbolic' betrays his party's need to extricate itself from an issue that is spinning out of the leadership's control.

Peeling away the rhetoric, one senses his hurry to resolve the political deadlock to pay attention to the economy and to development. "Our society is afflicted with poverty, unemployment, discrimination, dependency. We have to do away with these as soon as possible. We have to hasten our pace," Bhattarai says.

When asked about how his party's labour militancy is hurting industry, he replies: "National investors and multinational companies are most welcome to invest in Nepal and contribute to the development of the country. We have no policy to discourage investment in the country."

INTERVIEW: BABURAM BHATTARAI

"If you consider all oppressed people Maoists, if you say all 28 million Nepalis are Maoists, we are quite comfortable with that"

Nepali Times spoke to vice-chairman of the UCPN (Maoist) Baburam Bhattarai on Tuesday on federalism, the landless problem, the current political deadlock and ways forward.

Nepali Times: It was reported last week that the politburo will demarcate federal units on the basis of nationality instead of ethnicity. Have the Maoists abandoned the issue of ethnicity?

Baburam Bhattarai: From the very beginning, we have said that the basis of the federal system should be nationality. In Marxist terms, nationality means a common language, geography, economy and psychological make-up. A group of people that shares these qualities is called a nationality. On this basis we have proposed to constitute federal autonomous units in Nepal and we also practiced this during the People's War.



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Let me be clear that translating the word 'nationality' into Hindi it becomes *jatiyeta* (ethnicity), in Nepali it becomes *rastriyata* (nationality). In English, ethnicity is also *jatiyeta*, caste is also *jatiyeta* and nationality is also *jatiyeta*. So there was some confusion. Since the very beginning we have been consistent that federalism should be along the lines of nationality.

Either way, isn't the declaration of autonomous federal states by the party unconstitutional?

Who says? In the interim constitution and Comprehensive Peace Agreement we have already agreed that we will adopt a federal system. In fact those people who are going back on this commitment are violating the spirit of the constitution.

Why did you specifically propose 13 autonomous regions?

This is for political mobilisation of the masses to create consciousness about the modality of the federal restructuring. This is the proposal of our party, not the final product. The final proposal will be worked out by the Constituent Assembly. All the parties will put forward their proposals. So we have put forward this proposal.

What if all political parties start declaring their own federal states?

They are most welcome. That will help the people and engage them in the debate. There will be a good platform for debate and that will help the Constituent Assembly.

There is disagreement within your party over the boundaries of the autonomous regions. Do you think issues like these could lead to ethnic conflict?

There may be certain disputes but they can always be settled through dialogue and consensus.

It is said the Maoists' strategy is to legitimise the autonomous regions that will be announced this week in the long run?

We have been over ground for the last four years. We participated in the elections and were voted in as the largest party by the people. There are some that still doubt our intentions. We can't do anything for such people.

Recent activities by Maoist cadre, for example the Kailali incident, have cast doubt over the Maoists' commitment to democracy and a new constitution. How can you win the people's confidence?

The people are with the Maoists. That was proven in the Constituent Assembly elections and by the massive mass mobilisation you have seen in recent months. The reactionary elements who sided with the monarchy are feeling insecure because the monarchy is gone. My appeal to them is there is no reason to be scared. The Nepali people who have suffered for so long want to introduce a democratic system, restructure the state, and bring about social and economic transformation, which will create peace, stability and prosperity in the country.

Going back to the Kailali incident, do you think it could have been avoided?

Of course it could have been avoided if this criminally minded Home Minister had resisted from shooting the peaceful settlers there. He needs to be prosecuted.

Did the Maoists encourage the landless to occupy government land illegally?

Do you think these landless people, who are in the millions, don't have any rights over the land? These are natural resources given free by nature. Why doesn't this state and government solve the problem of the landless settlers? It is perfectly legitimate for the landless people to ask for their share of land. So we fully support those landless settlers.

The Maoist-affiliated union of squatters was involved in the incident. And now by announcing autonomous states, are you trying to find a way to mobilise your cadres?

First let me tell you if there is squatter problem or not. The landless peasants' problem is a real issue in Nepal. If you don't solve it, they will agitate for their rights. If you consider all these people Maoists, how can you act? Earlier, oppressed people, women, Dalit and other underprivileged people who joined the People's War were branded Maoists. If you want to say all 28 million people of Nepal are Maoists we will be quite comfortable with that.

Do you think the constitution will be written within six months?

The constitution should be written on time. The only problem is these people, who were defeated in the CA elections and rejected by the mass of the people, are trying to take revenge against the people by making this CA defunct and dissolve it so they can restore the status quo or their own reactionary old set-up.

Political leaders are frequenting the president's residence lately. What's your take?

We have seen some disconcerting signs recently. The legal advisor to the president wrote an article in a national daily arguing if the constitution is not written on time, power will automatically go to the president. They are encouraging the president to assume all power and institute a formal dictatorship in the country. Such elements are trying to provoke the president and we hope he won't be provoked.

What should be done to end the current political deadlock?

I think we should go to the root cause of the problem instead of beating about the bush. We should have worked out the modality of taking decisions through consensus and making the government through consensus. But when the Maoists emerged as the largest party, some of the old parliamentary parties went against that principle of consensus and opted for a majority system. Such a system invites the dirty game of pulling down and making new governments. The writing of the constitution will be overshadowed. We had warned about this before, and look at the results. Only after the new constitution was written should we have competed with each other and opted for a majority system. This is not a normal time, it's a transitional period. We can only enter competitive politics after writing the constitution.

What is preventing a consensus?

It is the mentality of political parties. In the 12-point understanding we had committed to go for peaceful politics and they had committed to create a new political mainstream, not the old parliamentary mainstream. Instead of creating a new political system with a new socioeconomic chain in society they are trying to impose the old parliamentary system. That was never the agreement.

Are the Maoists not responsible for the deadlock at all?

We are responsible in the sense that we are the largest party. We should be capable enough to carry along all the parties along with us. You can find fault with us also. We don't totally deny that. The current clash is between these two forces, those who want to bring about changes in society and those who resist it. The challenge now is to find a correct balance of pace for both sides. You can blame us for trying to move too fast. But the major problem is other forces are too slow to bring about change in society. Our society is afflicted with poverty, unemployment, discrimination, dependency. We have to do away with these as soon as possible.

You have made a unilateral decision to release unqualified combatants. Do you have support from UMNIN?

We have already made our commission for disqualified PLA combatants to be discharged. It is our duty to comply with that agreement and I don't think anybody should have any objection to that.

What about the rehabilitation package for them?

Yes, we wanted a certain package for rehabilitation but the government did not pay attention. The international community hasn't come up with a reasonable package either. So we were forced to act unilaterally and discharge them.

Other political parties have been arguing that the Maoists want to use the PLA as a bargaining tool.

In the CPA, we made a commitment to integrate and rehabilitate the PLA and democratise the NA. That's the only way you can create a new national army and complete the peace process. Look at what happened when we tried to democratise the NA and took action against Rukmangud Katawal.

How optimistic are you that the third round of protests will achieve your goal?

I am a revolutionary optimist. Society moves ahead. Nobody can block the forward march of society. People may be able to slow the process but they cannot stop the forward march of history. Sooner or later we have to find the solution.

Will it happen sooner or later?

The sooner the better. But we have to be patient as it will take some more time.

Is it true that your name was proposed for the post of prime minister in a new coalition government to give a way to the current political deadlock?

That is not our concern right now. Our concern is that civilian supremacy be established in the country, and that peace and the constitution are guaranteed. You need a national coalition government to facilitate this. Being the largest party, naturally we have the right to lead that government. First let this peace process be settled, then only will we talk about who will lead the government.

The government has been asking you to bring a majority and form the government.

This is a very irresponsible thing to say. As I told you earlier, this is not the time to play the numbers game. We are in a transitional phase and we should go through a national consensus. Only after making the constitution should we can enter that competitive phase.

What about the hardline faction of your party?

There are hundreds of thousands of members in our party and they are very patient and disciplined. We have a clear-cut ideology and a very unified organisational structure. We don't have such disputes as you see in other parties. Whatever debate and discussion we have within the party, we are able to settle the issues very amicably. Right now, too, if we have discussions on the federal system, I am confident we can reach a consensus.

How will the current political deadlock end? Will the Maoists lead the government?

The first part of the solution is to establish civilian supremacy, the second part is make peace and write the constitution, the third part is to form a national coalition government.

So you think the Maoists should lead the government?

This is the mandate of the people. We are largest party with 239 seats whereas the second largest party has 114 seats and the third has 109 seats. Even the second and third party combined are smaller than us. Where on earth do you make a coalition government and not have it led by the largest party?

You are facing difficulties in getting back into government. Do you regret leaving the government?

No, we did the right thing. We established a very high level political standard, a high level of political morality. This has set a standard for others to follow. So we are very proud of that.

It is said the Nepali political parties cannot decide on their own and that's why a consensus has not been reached.

Political parties should make their own decisions in the interest of the people of the country. They are the leaders of the country. If the leaders cannot take decisions then that will be very unfortunate. I suppose this is not the case, and it should not be.

But you raise the issue of foreign interference at times?

When you squabble within your house then your neighbours will try to take advantage of it, that is the natural law. So we should not blame the neighbours. You should blame yourself.

International donors recently asked for reassurance that the [Basic Operating Guidelines](#) will be respected, citing incidents of extortion and threat. Are you aware of such activities?

We fully abide by the guidelines. Some foreign donors approached us and we reiterated our commitment. There will be no extortion of anybody and especially the foreign donors and NGOs and INGOs. If there are any specific complaints, we are always ready to look into that and take appropriate action against the culprits.

<http://www.nepalitimes.com.np/issue/2009/12/14/Headline/16572>