

Kathmandu Post

Interview with YCL Chief Ganesh Man Pun



'The polls succeeded because we became Gandhis'

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This week's guest for our Monday Interview is **Ganesh Man Pun** who leads a new but very controversial organization called the Young Communist League (YCL), a sister organization of the CPN (Maoist). The YCL was formed after the Maoists' People's Liberation Army was confined to UN-monitored cantonments. As the head of the organization, Pun, an intermediate in arts from Tribhuvan University, leads one million active cadres who are always on standby to do anything at one command. The Nepali Congress (NC), the CPN-UML and other parties have been criticizing the Maoists for using the YCL as a paramilitary force to intimidate other parties' cadres.

At a time when calls for disbanding the YCL are rising as a precondition for the Maoists leading the next coalition government, Pun spoke to **Puran P Bista** and **Kamal Raj Sigdel** of the *Post* on issues concerning YCL activities, possible reform and where it gets its spending money. **Excerpts:**

Q: The YCL has been a bone of contention perpetuating the present political deadlock. How do you react to other parties' demand for abolition of the YCL as a paramilitary force?

Pun: The NC and the UML have been at the forefront in raising this demand. Their demand is not justified because the YCL is a political organization of progressive youth. It represents the forward moving stream. I admit that there may have been some weaknesses, and we can discuss them. They have lost the CA elections and they are venting their anger at the YCL. This will create hurdles in writing the new constitution. But one thing is clear, and that is we will not dissolve the YCL at any cost.

Q: Their objection is mainly its paramilitary character and its criminal and violent activities rather than the organization itself.

Pun: No, they have formally called for dissolving the YCL. But now they are becoming defensive and talking about camps and paramilitary force. The fact is that the YCL is neither a paramilitary force nor is it housed in camps. This is a political organization of youth, it is a sister organization of the CPN (Maoist). Young people by nature are aggressive. We are different from others because we have thousands of fulltime cadres. They have come together and agreed to work and live together. So their settlement looks like a mass shelter. If that is a problem for other political parties, we are also ready to reorganize their lodging and mobilize them for development works.

We are not a paramilitary institution; we may appear paramilitary in our action and manner because we work and move in a mass or group. We will correct that and we have been saying it. But the other parties are creating problems and raising unnecessary demands. By doing that they are supporting regressive tendencies.

Q: But there is wide criticism that the YCL has arms and its activities are violent. And this is what we have been seeing for a long time.

Pun: I can challenge them to find weapons among the YCL. Actually the Tarun Dal [youth wing of the Nepali Congress Party] has arms. We have found arms with the Tarun Dal chairperson in Sindhupalchok. This is my challenge. We don't need arms, our principles are our arms. Our force is our people. If anyone accuses us of being violent and we possess arms, we vehemently deny that.

Q: You may claim that the YCL does not possess arms and that your cadres' behavior is not violent. But Pushpa Kamal Dahal himself acknowledged as much when he appealed to them to behave like Gandhi for a week.

Pun: Your question itself is wrong. The CA election was successful because we became Gandhis. We lost one and a half dozen YCL cadres, their sacrifices, and the YCL's tolerance made the elections successful. What would have happened if the YCL had reacted? The YCL have not only become Gandhis, they have become Maha Gandhis. We kept quiet even when seven of our members were killed at one single spot. Now we have one million active members. We have enough full-timers and we can deploy them whenever we need to. But we mobilized them to support the peace process which made the CA polls successful. It's not only me who's saying this. International election observers like Jimmy Carter and the leaders of the election observation missions from the EU, the UN and other organizations have said that this was a model election.

If we had wanted to, we could have done anything. If somebody like Khum Bahadur could kill seven of our members in broad daylight, what couldn't we have done? When Pushpa Kamal Dahal told us to become Gandhis, we obeyed him. The Carter Center, the UN and the EU mission told us that the leadership's commitment was good and that we should pass it down to the lower ranks also.

Q: You say you have one million active cadres working in your organization. How do you manage such a large number of people?

Pun: All one million of them are not the full-timers.

Q: How many of them work full-time?

Pun: They are very few in number, maybe 5 or 10 percent.

Q: That means around 20,000 persons?

Pun: Even less than that. We don't have the exact data. That one million is also not the precise figure. There were around six to seven lakh YCL cadres some seven months ago. We expanded the organization's membership during the election, so now the number may be around nine to 10 lakhs.

Q: How do you pay for their living expenses?

Pun: They are volunteers. A few full-timers work in groups and they carry out group programs. For instance, we are doing large-scale commercial farming on leased lands in the eastern tarai. In different places, we do wage labor. And as per our policy, one unit of the YCL should engage in producing one particular product or some income-generating activity. For instance, they can get involved in chicken farming or raising livestock. Others can run shops and such enterprises. And that generates funds.

Q: Do you mean the YCL survives on such income?

Pun: Of course. The money that we earn from these income-generating activities is what sustains our organization.

Q: Alongside carrying out these income-generating activities, the YCL has also been acting like a local authority – passing judgment and punishing the guilty on the basis of applications received. Several people are reported to have been seriously beaten, abducted, intimidated or threatened in the course of enforcing YCL law.

Pun: No we have not done that.

Q: Who is doing that then?

Pun: No one is doing that. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the [kangaroo] courts were dissolved. Now we don't do that, we don't examine any cases.

But the truth is that we receive many applications even today. But we do not take any action on them; we have been ignoring them. But if there is any suggestion that we can provide political awareness, we do that. For instance, in corruption cases, we suggest and emphasize strongly that corruption should be eliminated. Being a progressive youth-led organization, we don't do anything except give suggestions wherever appropriate.

Q: You say you are working on leased land. It is said that the Maoists are still keeping much of the land captured during the armed struggle. Are the YCL cadres farming on these same lands?

Pun: If the lands that we are farming had been captured, there would be no need to lease them. We lease the lands and the people are ready to rent them out to us.

The lands that we have captured is a different issue. We have returned all those lands that were captured illegally during wartime. But the subject of the lands that still have not been returned is a little bit complicated. The lands which had been left uncultivated or lands whose landlords have migrated to America or Kathmandu and have been absent for years are being tilled by the tenants.

Q: So you are not dissolving the YCL?

Pun: Why should we dissolve the YCL when it has a big role to play in building a new Nepal? This is a powerful organization moving forward with a progressive agenda. Most other youth organizations are simply following the orders of some corrupt leaders. Other organizations are passive. The YCL is the one that has been taking a firm stand against injustice and corruption. What sort of new Nepal are we going to make if such an organization is to be dissolved?

Q: The UML has formed a youth force to counter YCL excesses. The Tarun Dal is also warning that if the YCL is not dissolved, it will create a similar force. Why do you think they have been compelled to take such steps?

Pun: That is a biased approach. They fared badly in the CA election, and they are taking it out on us. They should look back at the errors they committed during the past, and from where and when the people chased them away.

Q: Tarun Dal leader Poudel said that if the YCL was not dissolved, they would build a similar organization and fight the YCL. Won't that start another conflict?

Pun: That's why we have been requesting them not to do so. Let's work together, let's work for a common cause by building a joint network. I agree that at some places our friends might have beaten up cadres of other parties. But it is also equally true that at other places our cadres too have been beaten up. They show us data [about YCL atrocities], but we too have our own data about their activities. Our cadres have been killed, not beaten, by UML cadres in Arghakhanchi, Dang, Solu and other districts. I agree that a number of such criminal incidents have happened in the past. Let's punish them as per the existing laws. And there have been some mistakes which we must own up and try not to repeat them. Let's make a mechanism extending down to the local level. We have been urging the leaders of other youth organizations to do this. But they are not ready. We call them for a meeting, but they don't show up.

Q: You say the YCL is a political wing of the Maoists, but it is being criticized for occupying government buildings. The NC and the UML say that the YCL has been occupying 64 government buildings in Kathmandu alone.

Pun: They are trying to create confusion. They are showing their own true colors. Their jaundiced eyes see everything wrong about the YCL, they see it occupying 64 government buildings. That is not true. Currently, we are occupying not more than four or five buildings. Some of them are government property, but we have taken over them as per agreements reached. Nothing has been done without an agreement. For instance, they speak of Balaju industrial area, which we have taken on a 20-year lease.

Q: How much rent are you paying for it?

Pun: I am not sure. I think it is around 20 lakhs per year. I am not sure, however.

Q: Whom did you make the agreement with?

Pun: With those who own it.

Q: What about this building we are in? Is this a private or government building?

Pun: You suspect this building too?

Q: No, we are not suspecting anything. But just as an example, how much are you paying for this house?

Pun: I think we are paying Rs 25,000 to 30,000 per month.

Q: Have you been occupying the trolley bus office building?

Pun: No, we have not occupied any such government building. Don't believe what others say.

Q: Do you have any plans to reform the YCL? Your high command too might have given you some suggestions regarding that.

Pun: There are two to three ways to reform this organization. One is to deter those who abuse the YCL. It has been misused in different places. Thugs have been committing crimes in the name of the YCL. We will develop a mechanism to identify real YCL cadres. Next, we will improve our behavior about which many

people and political parties have complained. Next, we will manage our mass shelter; we will manage it in a way which will not trouble other parties. We may get involved in development work.

Q: You say that YCL cadres in the eastern tarai are living on what they make by farming on leased lands. What about your expenses in other areas including the Kathmandu Valley? How do you manage so much money?

Pun: It is the same in Kathmandu [and other places]. For instance, though many of our workers are volunteers, others work as wage laborers in different places. We have local teams everywhere; each team can do one job. And this is done across the country as a movement. And this is how we have been collecting money. We were doing this even during the war. We used to collect large amounts of cash. Nowadays, it is even easier.

Q: You did not mention what is often reported to be your major source of income. What about donations?

Pun: No, we do not collect donations.

Q: Does your party give you money?

Pun: No, it does not. But it is a different thing to give matching funds occasionally.

Q: You have so many fulltime cadres. Does not the party provide them pocket money?

Pun: No, the party does not give us money. We raise it on our own. We are managing our expenses by being economical.

Q: The YCL has been blamed for using school children in its political rallies. Is it good to involve children in politics?

Pun: I don't think that is wrong. We should make them politically aware, but we should make sure that it does not hamper their education.