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IDSA COMMENT

Maoist's New Political Line and Challenges

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After seven days of deliberations, the 7th General Convention (GC) of the UCPN (Maoist) party (known as Prachanda faction) adopted the following political line, which will determine its future course of action: The party will adhere to competitive politics (democracy) and work towards consolidation of peace and the drafting of the constitution. It also pledged its commitment to republicanism and 'economic revolution' (development oriented pro-people policy in line with party ideology).

The political line adopted by the party was timely and significant. It has come at a time when Nepal is struggling to find a solution to the ongoing political stalemate since the dissolution of the Constituency Assembly (CA) on 28 May 2012. Over the last nine months, there were efforts/proposals made by the President and major political parties to resolve the constitutional crisis in several ways including reinstatement of the dissolved CA or an "election government" either under a civil society leader or a retired/sitting Chief Justice of Supreme Court. Although the last of these proposals was suggested by many Nepali intellectuals as an adaptation of the Bangladesh model, it gathered momentum only after its endorsement by the Maoist GC. The opposition parties, especially the Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN-UML, look at this fresh proposal of the Maoists as a clever ploy to defer the CA elections.

The GC was attended by 1000s of party cadres from all over Nepal. Its main objectives were to adopt a new political line keeping in view the changing political scenario at the domestic and international levels, the need for restructuring the party as per the party's new political line, and to provide an opportunity to the party leadership to interact with cadres ahead of possible CA elections.

Quite predictably, the participants discussed various issues related to the future political line of the party, especially since the party had organized this convention for the first time after experiencing a vertical spilt in June 2012. There were around 60 groups, with 50 members each, to discuss the document presented by party chairman Prachanda. The GC was reportedly delayed due to differences among the three top leaders of the party—Chairman Prachanda, Vice-Chairmen Baburam Bhattarai and Narayan Kaji Shrestha—over nominating their respective representatives for the above mentioned groups.

It is reported that there were sharp criticisms from the cadres on the political document presented by Prachanda. They asked the chairman to disclose the Bogati-Sherchan committee's report on

corruption at the top level of the party, the status of Prachanda path, the assets and life style of some top leaders, the reasons for the absence of the name of any “*principal enemy*” (earlier India, United States and political parties were termed as enemies that the party had to constantly work against) in the document, the party position on Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA), the achievements of the Baburam Bhattarai government, and the complete silence about the ‘people’s war’ and the sacrifices made by the cadres.

Responding to this, Prime Minister Bhattarai justified the continuation of his government by saying that had they not been in government, plans were being made to take the Maoists to the International Court of Justice in The Hague for human rights violations committed during the people’s war. Some of the participants, in fact, questioned the duplicity of the leaders and alleged that they had betrayed the trust and confidence reposed in them by the cadres. The conclave witnessed serious differences of views between cadres and leaders on certain issues, i.e., the BIPPA and the party’s position on India. Prachanda assured Narayan Kaji Shrestha that the party would decide on India in a plenum after six months.

Some of the cadres held that the Bhattarai government’s policies were pro-India, and that the new political line eroded the ‘revolutionary credentials’ of the party. They criticized the senior party leaders for nominating their near and dear ones as office bearers in the central and local offices of the party. They blamed the top leadership for undermining the grievances of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) combatants in the integration process.

However, despite these differences and heated debates, the party managed to adopt Prachanda’s political line with amendments suggested by Bhattarai and Shrestha. The GC also re-elected Prachanda as the party chairman. Some other important steps taken by the GC are:

- Filling up of key party office bearers and 151 central committee members.
- Reiteration of (MLM), i.e., Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung (interestingly ‘Maoism’ was replaced by Mao Tse Tung here) as the guiding principle.
- Strict measures to maintain fiscal discipline and curb corruption and mismanagement in the party.
- Revival of structures such as the ‘commune’, the communist community centres and parallel governments at the local level (the parallel governments to comprise members of the Young Communist League and former PLA combatants).
- Retain Bhattarai and Shrestha as vice-chairmen and elect pro-Prachanda Post Bahadur Bogati as the general secretary.

The above trends indicate that the party has made an ideological shift from being a revolutionary outfit to a parliamentary party with emphasis on republicanism. The party has also indicated to the international community in general and India in particular that it is committed to competitive democracy and has abandoned its revolutionary agenda. By doing so, it has also established its separate identity vis-à-vis the Mohan Vaidya faction, which is planning for a fresh armed struggle. By taking out the ritualistic mention of India as an enemy from the newly articulated political line, it has also signalled its friendly posture towards India.

However, it remains to be seen whether this new line will survive in the face of multiple challenges the party leadership is confronted with. First, the party has to settle the differences between the cadres and the top leadership by addressing the concerns raised by many participants at the GC. The new reconciliatory line advanced by the leadership may not appeal to the cadres who have been indoctrinated in radical communist ideology for a long time. There is thus a possibility of many deserting the party and joining the Vaidya faction, which has recently identified India as its principal enemy and wants to bring changes in society through ‘protracted armed revolution’. Some media reports from Nepal indicate that many cadres, including six state committee members of the UCPN-Maoist, who came to the convention, have already joined the Vaidya faction.

Secondly, there is a triangular competition for leadership in the party. Although Prachanda has been re-elected as the chairman, his influence in the party has eroded over time. In this context, Bhattarai’s observation that the party should believe in ‘collective leadership’, which is antithetical to the practice of ‘democratic centralism’ and the principle of MLM, deserves attention. Many cadres believe that the Maoist party experienced a vertical split in June 2012 because of its disavowal of the classical principles of MLM. Therefore, some of them apprehend that adoption of a collective leadership arrangement may lead to fragmentation of the party and delay in the decision-making process in future.

Thirdly, the Maoist party’s relationship with India will depend on its commitment to competitive democracy, sensitivity to India’s security interests and behaviour and actions both when in and out of government. It has often been observed that some of the political parties in Nepal have adopted an anti-India stance while out of office and tried to moderate their stance after assuming power. Therefore, the Maoist decision not to portray India as an “enemy” is certainly a positive development. In the past, the party had identified India as the principal enemy even when its top leaders were living in India. Moreover, media reports suggest that there was no consensus within the party on this issue and the party leadership had to defer the decision on BIPPA till the next plenum.

Fourthly, there are serious corruption charges against many central committee members, including Prachanda and Bhattarai. This may affect the trust and confidence of the cadres on the top leadership. Last but not least, the party may find it difficult to keep maintain a distinct position on various socio-economic and political issues— if it adopts a hardline it cannot differentiate its stance from the Vaidya faction, and alternately, if it moderates its stance it runs the risk of imitating the CPN-UML’s line.

On the whole, the GC has certainly raised hopes for a possible consensus between Nepal’s major political parties over identifying a candidate for an ‘election government’. The Maoist proposal on holding elections under an advisory council led by the Supreme Court Chief Justice has not yet been accepted by the other political parties. There are also legal hurdles in the way of any retired or sitting Supreme Court judge assuming such an executive position. Since the suggested time for holding elections (end May 2013) is drawing nearer and almost all other options have so far failed to bring the political parties together, they are faced with the difficult choice of either making minor changes to the Maoist proposal or requesting the President to nominate a neutral candidate to head the election government. If there is any further impasse— given the long

festival seasons after May, and the weather-related issues in winter— Nepal may have to wait for another year before elections can be held.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.