Commentary

Nepal: Quest for Elusive Peace

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Amidst the continuously expanding sphere of Maoist influence, political uncertainties and growing international interest, Nepal continues to remain one of the most volatile countries in South Asia. Recent developments have, once again, reconfirmed that while the Maoists have been successful in gradually pushing their agenda through violence and intimidation, the four-party coalition government led by Sher Bahadur Deuba is increasingly finding it difficult to evolve a coherent strategy to counter it. In fact, ever since his reinstatement on June 2, 2004, Deuba has been trying to work out a framework to deal with the eight-year old insurgency, which has claimed approximately 10,000 lives. However, the limited success of counter-insurgency operations, the government's inability to forge consensus on the peace process, the continued opposition by the Nepali Congress-led political front, the emerging differences within the government, the withdrawal/collapse of state institutions and a sustained Maoist offensive have made the government increasingly vulnerable and catapulted the Maoists into the political centrestage.

In this context, Deuba's visit to India from September 8-12, 2004, was an attempt to strengthen his regime both politically and militarily. According to the joint statement issued on September 12, 2004, both the countries viewed the Maoist insurgency as a common threat and agreed to further intensify cooperation in curbing their activities. India reassured more assistance to Nepal's security forces in addition to existing support in terms of arms, ammunition, helicopters, intelligence sharing and training. At the same time, India also reportedly pointed out that there is no military solution to the Maoist problem and the government should initiate a meaningful dialogue process. However, Deuba's success on this front will be determined, to a great extent, by his ability to retain the legitimacy of his regime and strike a balance between the key players in Nepal's politics - the King, the political parties and the Maoists.

The Maoists' predominance in Nepali politics has been facilitated by the inability of successive governments in addressing the basic problems such as poverty,

Strategic Analysis, Vol. 28, No. 3, Jul-Sep 2004

Revised paper received on September 17, 2004

underdevelopment and discriminatory social order. A fractured polity, the absence of an elected government and continuous power struggle between the King and the major political parties have provided the Maoists with an opportunity to control approximately half of the territory. Besides, the near collapse of development work and civil governance in violence-affected areas, breakdown of the rule of law, and lack of democratisation at the grassroots level sustain the Maoist activities.

Consequently, the Maoists have not only set up parallel structures of governance in many parts of the country including their own visa and taxation system but have also been able to exert considerable influence in urban centres for example, the week-long blockade of the Kathmandu Valley imposed on August 18, 2004. Though the visible impact of the blockade was not significant because the Maoists 'suspended it for one month' on August 24, 2004, they were, nonetheless, able to gain significant psychological advantage particularly the capability to cut off links to the capital city at will. The deteriorating situation was further aggravated when the Maoist-affiliated All Nepal Trade Union Federation (ANTUF) enforced indefinite closure of 47 industrial establishments, hotels and transport services to press for their demands, which include among others, making public the whereabouts of its workers and leaders who have allegedly disappeared from government custody, compensation to the families of those killed by the state, removal of the terrorist tag slapped on them and increased wages and facilities to workers. Though the ANTUF agreed to withdraw its call on September 15, 2004, after the government agreed to release two of its detained leaders and make available information on the whereabouts of people 'disappeared' from custody within one month beginning September 22, 2004, it is unlikely to restore the confidence of the business community due to continued threat of extortion and the government's inability to provide protection to industries. Simultaneously, the Maoists continued with their violent campaign, attacking district headquarters, government infrastructure, security forces and civilian population. On September 10, 2004, the Maoists were reported to have exploded two bombs at the American Information Center at Gyaneshwar in Kathmandu. No one was injured in the incident after which the US government decided to suspend all Peace Corps activities.

The absence of a comprehensive counter-insurgency doctrine has enabled the Maoists to grow from strength to strength. The main thrust of counter-insurgency operations has been the excessive use of force and towards that end the government has worked on a policy of strengthening the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) with sophisticated weapons from India, the US, the UK, Belgium and other countries.

It is estimated that approximately 25 per cent of the total national budget is now allocated to security. However, despite considerable augmentation of the strength of the RNA, the situation on the ground remains alarming. Though the security forces have achieved some success in counter-insurgency operations, the task is becoming difficult due to lack of adequate state presence in the violence-affected areas. As a result, the government has not been able to supplement the success of counter-insurgency in one area with strengthening/restoration of civil governance, institutions of law enforcement and democratic process. The experience of the counter-insurgency operation has, therefore, necessitated an assessment of the broad direction of government policy and implications of continuous strengthening of the RNA. There is an apprehension that while the continuation of this approach may not be able to contain the Maoists militarily, it might catapult the RNA into an important player in Nepali politics with its own stake. It might further strengthen the King and weaken the democratic government and its ability to pursue a meaningful peace process.

The impetus to the peace process is being reinforced by the realisation that there cannot be a purely military solution to the problem. The Maoists are in a stronger position as is evident from their tough stand on talks. Reports in the first week of September 2004 said, the Maoists have ruled out the possibility of dialogue with the Deuba government favouring instead direct negotiations with King Gyanendra and have reiterated their demand for a Constituent Assembly election under the aegis of the UN. It is clear that the present Maoist demand will further strengthen the King and reinforce the perception that the government is not in a position to play a decisive role. Consequently, the role of the monarchy becomes important. When King Gyanendra appointed Deuba in June 2004, he had spelt out three tasks before him: to take on board all major political parties on important national issues, find ways to deal with the Maoist insurgency and prepare the nation for elections. If Deuba fails to deliver on these counts, the King might be compelled to remove him from office. Given the fact that an extreme Right Wing opinion within the political spectrum wants the King to play a more active role, the success of the present government will depend largely on the King whose inflexible approach has thus far only complicated the problem.

The differences within the mainstream political formations have only added to the complications. While Deuba has been able to form a coalition government with the help of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), he has failed to evolve a consensus even within the ruling coalition on issues such as ceasefire, external mediation and elections to the Constituent

Assembly. The UML reportedly favours unilateral ceasefire by the government as a prelude to the resumption of negotiations while Deuba insists that unless the Maoists show any sincere commitment towards a result oriented peace process; declaration of a unilateral ceasefire would be meaningless. On the question of the Constituent Assembly, the UML has hinted that the issue is not closed and could be addressed during the peace talks. In January 2004, the UML presented a nine-point roadmap favouring either amendments to the new Constitution or the preparation by the House of Representative. On the question of external mediation involving the UN, Deuba has rejected the idea on the ground that the issue was an internal one; the UML, on the other hand, incorporated a possible UN role in its nine-point roadmap. However, it has yet to expand on the type of role it envisages for the UN in the conflict.

Outside the government, the four-party alliance led by the Nepali Congress has refused to participate in the peace process and has announced fresh agitation against what they call 'regression'. Members of this alliance have been pressing for the restoration of parliament and a consensus government that should initiate dialogue with the rebels. They argue that the new government will command more credibility and legitimacy, and certainly strengthen the government at the time of the talks with the Maoists. Nepali Congress Chief G.P. Koirala has refused to participate or nominate a representative for the high-level peace committee formed on August 12, 2004, under the leadership of the Prime Minister. The objective of the committee is to coordinate the peace process and finalise the political agendas for negotiations. Reports suggest that he is holding a parallel dialogue with the Maoists in order to bring them to the political mainstream.

While there appears to be a broad consensus on negotiating with the Maoists, it, however, cannot be achieved until the political parties bridge their own political differences and evolve an effective negotiating strategy. In the light of this, a pertinent question emerges: does Nepal need external mediation to break the deadlock. Those who favour external mediation argue that despite two rounds of ceasefire and negotiations in 2001 and 2003, the government and the Maoists failed to reach a minimum consensus, hence an impartial body like the UN could play a vital role in facilitating the peace talks. The UN system has, on a number of occasions, expressed its desire facilitate peace talks and has sent special emissaries to explore the possibilities of securing a role. But the government has shown little inclination for any external mediation.

Does India have a role to play in breaking the deadlock? India's concerns at the stalemate between the Nepalese government and the Maoist insurgents are

growing. The geo-strategic position of Nepal, open borders and a history of good relations makes Nepal important in India's strategic calculations. Internal instability in Nepal will have serious security implications for India. The exploitation of open India-Nepal borders by the Maoists, their deepening linkages with Indian left-wing extremist groups such as the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (People's War), the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) and the Northeast insurgent groups and the unbridled use of India-Nepal open border for shelter, training, supplies and arms smuggling pose serious security threat to India. Further, there is apprehension that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), active in border areas, could forge links with the Maoists to de-estabilise the region. Therefore, India needs to ensure that its core interests are not hurt in the confrontation between the Deuba government and the Maoists. India has been providing military assistance to Nepal based on assessments that the RNA was the only force capable of keeping the Maoists at bay. India has also taken a number of steps to contain Maoist activities on its soil and strengthen coordinated security strategies on both sides of the border.

Conceding that it may not be possible to defeat the Maoists militarily, it is in India's interest to ensure that the Maoists should not be able to exploit a divided polity. While supporting the Constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy in Nepal, India has repeatedly emphasised that only the monarchy and Nepal's democratically elected parties can solve the Maoist problem, provided they work in unison. Towards this end, it is in India's interest to facilitate a peace process with an aim to restore and strengthen a viable and sustainable democratic government in Nepal.

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