

NEPAL ON THE BRINK, AGAIN

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The resignation of Nepali prime-minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal “Prachanda” on 4 May is a lethal blow to the Nepali peace process. Prachanda’s announcement was made in protest at President Ram Baran Yadav’s move to reverse the Maoist-led government’s decision to sack the head of the Nepali Army (NA) General Rookmangud Katawal on the grounds of failing to integrate People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers into the NA.

While Prachanda’s resignation was surprising, it is not totally unexpected. Amalgamating the NA and PLA has been an agonisingly slow process, primarily because of unrelenting suspicion and mistrust between the Army and United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) cadres. However, the frustration felt by the Maoist leadership over integration is indicative of their general impatience over implementing deeper, wider-ranging reforms in Nepal. This is a problem both of the Maoist’s own volition and of spoiling efforts by rival political parties. On the one hand, the UCPN-M has failed to make a complete transformation to peaceful and competitive democratic practices. For example, rather than dismantling their paramilitary structure, the Youth Communist League (YCL), the Maoists have sustained the YCL which continues to undertake violent land seizures from wealthy landowners and terrorize ordinary Nepalis for the Maoists political purposes. Conversely, rival political parties such the Nepali Congress (NC), must be held accountable for their inability to help build the consensus required to secure stability. Moreover, the NA has also been a profoundly destabilising presence over the course of the peace process, failing to make itself more transparent and accountable to civilian authorities in Kathmandu, since the CPA was agreed on.

The implications of this episode have ushered a fresh wave of dirty politics in Kathmandu. In the wake of his departure, a video was released - of Prachanda speaking last year exaggerating the strength of his forces prior to the verification process of 31,000 PLA monitored by the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in 2007 - primarily to discredit the legitimacy of both the UCPN-M and UNMIN. With UNMIN’s reputation in tatters, the luxury of having a respected international and neutral mediator in the midst of the peace process has now been lost.

So what does the future hold? The difficulty of answering this question, as prominent Nepali journalist Prashant Jha notes, is that “most observers...fail in assessing the Maoists correctly because [they] end up using the same categories, attribute the same motivations, and expect similar tactics from them as from other political actors.” Certainly, the desire of dogmatic Maoist cadres to implement a people’s republic, which contradicts the very essence of competitive democracy, renders power-sharing and compromise with other political parties extremely difficult.

However, once in power the Maoists have showed themselves to be flexible. The key

now is to encourage the UCPN-M to make the complete transformation to a democratic player and cease its unrelenting ambitions for a one-party state. This process will be made much easier if symbolic action is taken against the NA, and Katawal be forced to resign. Without the Maoists in government, outstanding aspects of the process, in particular drafting a new constitution, will not be completed. As they have demonstrated through boycotting the CA since Prachanda's resignation, the UCPN-N has the capacity to cause considerable disruption in Kathmandu, even if they will not return to the gun.

After frantic attempts by the Nepali Congress and UML to secure 301 votes in the Constituent Assembly, a new government coalition led by the United Marxist-Leninist's (UML) Madhav Kumar Nepal is close to being formed, although division within the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) over whether to launch a leadership of their own may delay or scupper this agreement. Whether or not an agreement is reached, however, without a mandate from the Nepali electorate and political road map for the future of Nepal, the coalition is unlikely to be either effective or last for any significant period of time. Things are going to get worse before they get better.

This crisis has prompted renewed interest from regional and international observers and it is especially important to note the role played by India. Although the Indian government rarely intervenes directly in Nepalese affairs, New Delhi is adamant that the independence of the NA must be maintained in order to provide a counter-balance to the Maoists' power. India is also worried by Beijing's increasing influence, illustrated by the zero-tolerance policy towards pro-Tibet protesters over the last twelve months.

To this end, India organised several key diplomatic visits to facilitate an agreement between the Army and the Maoists. Rather than diffuse the tensions, personality clashes and suspicion between Indian diplomats and the Nepali officials only served to worsen the relationship, not only between the NA and UCPN-M but also between New Delhi and the Maoist leadership. Yet improved India-Maoist relations are essential if the UCPN-M is to be brought back into the coalition and reignite the peace process. Prachanda's admission after leaving office that he sought assistance from India over army integration shortly before his resignation indicates that, in spite of their rhetoric, the Maoists recognise that Indian support is essential for the long-term stability of Nepal. Moreover, and in contradiction to what many analysts in New Delhi may argue, assisting the UCPN-M is beneficial for Indian interests, especially in light of its growing demand for electricity which can be served by Nepal's considerable resources of hydroelectric power.