

# **Evolution and escalation of the Maoist conflict in Nepal**

Dr Bishnu Raj Upreti  
51 Sabgam Bindu Marga  
Kathmandu 35-Koteshwor  
P.O. Box 12709, Kathmandu Nepal  
Tel 977-1-4479964  
E-mail: [yamuna@infoclub.com.np](mailto:yamuna@infoclub.com.np)

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## INTRODUCTION

Nepal, previously recognised as a peaceful country, is facing severe violent conflict since 1996 due to the Maoist insurgency. It is not only seriously affecting the life of ordinary people but also creating fear, mistrust, insecurity, civil strife and political instability threatening to the new democracy in Nepal<sup>i</sup> and forcing country into chaos and anarchy<sup>ii</sup>. The Maoist conflict is costing unbearable losses in terms of human casualty and so far more than 7000 people lost their lives<sup>iii</sup>. Current Nepalese polity appears incapable and ineffective to control or contain Maoists' insurgency and maintain security and peace in the country<sup>iv</sup>. The conflict is expanding and getting considerable support from rural communities<sup>v</sup>. The objective of this paper is to analyse the causes of the Maoist conflict in Nepal. In the following section the background reasons and the evolution and escalation of the conflict is analysed.

## BACKGROUND REASONS BEHIND THE CONFLICT

### Geographical disparity

Mid Western and Far Western Regions and remote areas suffer from widespread poverty, disparity in resource distribution and structural inequality, injustice and discrimination have heavily fuelled the Maoists conflict<sup>vi</sup>. Hence, the Maoist insurgency was first started from Mid-Western Region (Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan and Jajarkot). Since then their influence has been spread across the country and now they are virtually present in all 75 districts from rural to urban and hills to Terai areas. The geographical expansion and growth of the Maoist insurgency was sharp and ubiquitous mainly because of two reasons. First, they effectively and successfully utilise media, opinion leaders, frustrated masses (e.g., ex-bounded labourers, unemployed youths, etc.) and poor, marginalised and underprivileged groups. They also created fear of terror that help them to expand their activities<sup>vii</sup>. Second, complete failure of the government to address geographical inequalities and provide regionally balance development opportunities and infrastructures. All the governments have neglected remote areas<sup>viii</sup>.

### Negative impacts of responses of the security forces

In the past the government's decision to increase allowance to police force working in the Maoist affected areas helped to expand Maoists when the police force acted unlawfully to prove that Maoists are active in their working area. Romeo Operation, Kilo Shera-2 and Jungle Search Operations (1998-99) and Silent Kilo Shera-3, Delta and Chakrabihuya Operations (2000-May 2001) did not proved effective<sup>ix</sup>. Instead they helped to escalate conflict from certain geographical areas to across the country. Large numbers of innocent people were victims of these operation, which developed further resentment and feeling of revenge. The government was completely failed to recognise the gravity of the problem of geographically neglected areas. The government is extremely weak in early warning and early response measures in remote backward areas. Furthermore, the rebels were able to give the impression to the general public that they truly represent the interests, needs and aspirations of geographically isolated poor rural population who have been excluded from the economic, political and social opportunities mainly because of staying in geographically remote and backward area<sup>x</sup>. Many people think that many women join the insurgency to take revenge because they were tortured, raped and victimised by the security forces. Many of them from lower caste (especially untouchables) joined the ranks of Maoist insurgency with the hope of their emancipation. Ms Sobha Gautam reporting to the Women's Armed Conflict, WomenWatch of the United Nations wrote<sup>xi</sup>:

'In most effected areas, there are no men. The women are left alone, to deal with the police. Most of the night police enter the houses on the name of the insurgency. At that time, many of the police sexually abuse the village girls. In Maoist affected areas many young girls are sexually abused and some are raped by police. By the cause of police suppression, some women are joining the Maoist guerrillas. Mostly in those effected areas women are most empowered in politics, because of facing so many difficulties'.

### Social exclusion and acute inequalities

Absolute poverty, lack of access to resources and failure of political structures to address these issues made the Nepalese society extremely vulnerable to conflict and mass movements like the Maoists' 'people's war'<sup>xii</sup>. Deep rooted social cleavages in terms of caste, ethnicity, gender and regional, cultural, linguistic and religious forms of discrimination provided fertile ground to escalate

the conflict<sup>xiii</sup>. Maoists successfully capitalised the widely discernible disillusionment of people towards poor performance of current political structure and process, highly unsatisfactory democratic transition of the 1990, spring awakening the expectations regarding the transformation of the state, politics and the society. Dominance of certain groups (e.g., Brahmin, Chhetri and Newar) in all social, political and economic sectors promoted feeling of injustice and revenge as lower caste people strongly believe that they have been excluded from opportunities and resources<sup>xiv</sup>. Maoists tactically utilised this feeling. The emergence of ethnic interest groups, awareness on social exclusion and ethnic inequalities and governance failure fuelled the conflict.

The rebels have obtained considerable supports from ethnic community. They were successful in utilising the dichotomised group identities such as oppressed-oppressor, ruler-ruled, poor-rich, landlord-landless, patriot-non patriot, etc. to establish political, social, cultural, and economic cleavages. These dichotomies were heavily channelled that sensitively fuelled the already developed feeling of injustice and frustrations of the Nepalese people to escalate conflict. The emergence of the Khumbuwan Mukti Morcha (an ethnic group emerged from the Eastern Nepal) is just an example. The government and other political parties also channelled the image of the Maoists as in humane, brutal, terrorist, anti-people, etc. All these blames and counter blames channelled through various means are playing mighty role in the conflict dynamics in Nepal.

#### **Power struggle in political parties:**

Though warfare is currently dominant, the present conflict is basically a political one. It is fundamentally a competition between the government and the insurgents to control the state. The current conflict is an outcome of the failure of the political parties and their successive governments to govern the country according to the democratic ideals and the constitutional provisions detailed in the Constitution of Nepal 1990<sup>xv</sup>. The Maoists found the failure of governance as a mighty ground to undertake armed rebellion and started the insurgency in 1996<sup>xvi</sup>. The explicit aim of Maoists is to control state power and civil society. There is distinctly different perception of Maoists and the government (and other political parties operating under the present constitution) on the legitimate authority and representation. The constitutional parties feel that the current system fully represents the people and the insurgents view the opposite.

#### ***Nepali Congress party:***

It is widely recognised that Nepali Congress Party (NCP), who ruled the country for more than 10 out of 12 years of democracy, is totally failed to govern<sup>xvii</sup>. It has no rational concepts and perspectives to governance reform, poverty reduction or to facilitate peace process. Instead, it is solely engaged in power struggle within the party. Role of Girija Prasad Koirala, the chairman of the ruling party is not only always controversial but also inconsistent and deterrent. Other party leaders followed the same. The politically motivated actions of the then Prime Minister Ser Bahadur Deuba to dissolve the elected representatives of the local governments (Village Development Committees and District Development Committees) and rule these units with the government bureaucrats was severely criticised by public, political parties and donor community. Deuba government was not ready to hold the local government as well as to let the elected representatives to govern the local bodies.

#### ***Opposition parties:***

The role of opposition parties, especially the main opposition party towards the Maoist issue is controversial and ambivalent, opportunistic, inconsistent and politically ill motivated. The main opposition party is not playing a constructive role at all to resolve conflict due to a deep fear of political outflank by Maoist<sup>xviii</sup>. It was and is extremely impatient to go to the power for which it wants to make army, international community and royal palace happy instead to play constrictive role in resolving conflict. The second time approval of the extension of the State of Emergency (SoE) by the Communist party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) was an example of how the CPN-UML wants to solve the problem. The reports of the High Commission formed by the CPN-UML party clearly indicates its intention to crack down the insurgents through military measure rather than political means. The CPN-UML says one thing (the Maoist conflict is political one) and does another thing (support the SoE and military intervention). The role of Rastrya Prajatantra Party (RPP) is than the other two main political parties in this conflict. Other small leftist political parties are relatively closer or sympathetic to the Maoists compared to other parties. They are not supporting the government at crucial events lie the imposition of the SoE. Likewise, the Maoists are weak in their political substances, as there is wider gap between their rhetoric and pragmatic possibility to implement their aspiration to establish the communist state<sup>xix</sup>. The military thinking is strongly dominating the political thinking in the Maoists movement, as they grow and succeeded to attack the large military camps.

### **Bureaucracy and public administration:**

The civil administration does not have the factual competence to implement reform agenda. Instead, they are widely perceived to be corrupt, inefficient and useless. The main political parties absurdly using bureaucracy to fulfil their personal and party interests, which are often contradictory to the will of general public<sup>xx</sup>. The bureaucracy is using the political intervention as an opportunity to collect illicit revenue through corruption.

### **Assertiveness of the King:**

The power struggle between the NCP Chairman Girija Koirala and the Prime Minister Deuba has resulted into the dissolution of the parliament (in July 2002) and the breakdown of the NC Party. The dissolution of the parliament by the Deuba without getting approval from the ruling party fuelled the conflict within the constitutional parties. This situation further helped the Maoists. The Prime Minister dissolved the parliament when the ruling party decided to withdraw the State of Emergency against the will of the Deuba and declared the date election of the Parliament for Nov 13. After some weeks the Maoists declared the national strike on the Election Day. The government ultimately declared its inability to accomplish the election. The failure of the government to accomplish the parliamentary election in November 13 put country into constitutional crisis. The constitutional political parties had violated the constitutional provision of compulsorily holding the Parliamentary Election within 6 months of its dissolution by allowing Deuba to postpone it at the last stage. When Deuba recommended the Kings to postpone the election for 14 months the King sacked him saying he is incapable and resumed the executive power. The action of the King was severely criticised by the political parties but they did not co-operate the King to settle the crisis<sup>xxi</sup>. The King asked them to send their representative to form a new government, who are not corrupt, politically clean and not willing to participate in the election. They did not send their representative. After 7 days the King formed a care taker government, which was again vehemently objected by the political parties. But these political parties have no common opinion about the solution that they would want from the King. The mainstream NCP wants to reinstall the dissolved Parliament, the CPN-UML wants to form a national government and the breakaway Deuba faction wants to reinstall his government.

Royal massacre added another uncertainty in the crisis. Though the King several times publicly stated his firm commitment to multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy, the CPN-UML, the NCP and other small parties strongly suspect his intention and actions as a main threat to infant democracy. They are now blaming the King as a terminator of the democratic system in Nepal. Conflict between the king and constitutional parties is widening, which is ultimately giving more advantages to the insurgents.

### **Ideological dimension of the conflict**

There is a strong ideological dimension in this conflict. The rebels are following the Mao's ideology and strategy. The Maoists perceived that the deep-rooted oppression coupled with the feudalistic mode of production relations and unequal power structures, monarchy and the capitalistic democratic system are the problems and the communism is the solution<sup>xxii</sup>. This is playing a mighty background role in emergence and escalation of conflict. In contrary, the government, the ruling party and the main opposition party believe on multi-party democracy and constitutional monarchy<sup>xxiii</sup>. These two seemingly opposite ideologies are leading to ideological conflict between warring parties. In the past the subsequent governments had treated Maoists as heinous, criminal and directed towards damaging the norms and values of the democratic system of governance, which law and order can counter. The ruling and the main opposition parties are either confused or unwilling to realise the ideological dimension of the Maoist insurgency. However, the wider sympathy of general public to the Maoists may not be because of ideology but the pertinent issues directly related to their livelihoods raised by the rebels. However, overtime the public support could turn into fear, insecurity and violence and the insurgents may not entertain the level of public support they are getting at present.

A notable characteristic of Maoist insurgency is the degree of participation of women. Even many women are in guerrilla ranks. Previously women's participation in political sphere was limited to electoral candidacy to meet the minimal constitutional condition by the political parties. But the Maoist insurgency surprisingly attracted large number of Nepalese women to join arm rebellion. It is estimated that about 30% of Maoist guerrillas comprise of women.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal is the symptoms of the centuries old problems. It is basically a political conflict and not the terrorist act as of *Al Qaeda*. Therefore, military confrontation is not

longer a sustainable long-term solution of the current conflict. Instead, a multi-track diplomacy involving government, multilateral agencies, international economic and scientific institutions, humanitarian organisations, creative and credible individuals, specialised NGOs, and professional conflict advisors could help to resolve conflict and achieve long lasting peace in the country.

Rampant poverty, structural inequality, political oppression, social discrimination against certain groups like Kamaya, women, Dalit, etc., failure of the public administration, wide spread corruption and continuous failure of the successive governments to address these structural problems are the root causes of the current conflict in Nepal. The Maoist insurgency is only the manifestation or intermediate result of these problems. Feudal legacy, political instability, dependency syndromes, lack of transparency and the social exclusion are further contributing to fuel conflict. In addition, growing awareness of the Nepalese people about the poverty, inequality, discrimination, corruption and lack of employment opportunities are contributing to the conflict. It is important to note that there is a wider consensus at both international and domestic levels on the legitimacy of the most of the demands made by the Maoists. In sum people's frustrations and poor performance of the successive governments have played major role than the Maoists' ideology or anything else.

### **Acknowledgement**

I owe special thanks to SDC for providing me the resources for this study and its staff Guenther Baechler, Esther Schaufelberger, Markus Schafer Paul Eager, Anton Hagan, Karl Shuler, and Dibya Gurung for their inputs. I would like to thank Yamuna, Asmita and Ayush for their help and co-operation.

### **Bibliographical statement**

Bishnu Raj Upreti, a Nepalese national, holds PhD in resources conflict from Wageningen University the Netherlands. He is working in resource management and conflict analysis since 21 years. Currently he is working as Research Associate in Kings College London. He has published two books on social and resource conflict, wrote chapters in edited books and published various articles in refereed journals.

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