

Nepal: Peace In, Terrorism Out?

Murari R. Sharma | November 27, 2006

The agreement reached on November 8, 2006 between the ruling seven-party alliance (SPA) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) holds the promise of ending the decade-long bloody conflict in Nepal. For years, the Maoist guerrillas have struggled to seize power by force of arms. Their decision to support a political resolution to the current conflict is comparable to the peaceful transformations of the Irish Republican Army and the African National Congress.

Washington has supported the accord, but with some hesitation. Over the last year or so the United States has lost considerable influence in Nepal. It has no one to blame but itself. Washington failed to strongly condemn King Gyanendra when he ditched the democratic government and grabbed power in February 2005. Although it stopped military assistance to the royal regime, America continued to pressure political parties to compromise with the king to defeat the Maoist insurgency by military force.

The parties tried to work with the monarch but the latter refused to engage with them. Frustrated, the ruling SPA persuaded the Maoists, who want to abolish the monarchy, to sign last year's 12-point agreement, which stressed the importance of elections and the restoration of the parliament. This unprecedented agreement energized people against the king and forced him to retreat in April 2006, before the United States could shift its position. Even the November 8 agreement, which has far-reaching consequences for Nepal, South Asia, and the United States, has no U.S. fingerprints.

Washington should be more forthcoming and assist Nepal in its post-conflict transition ahead. A stable and democratic Nepal will be not only in the interest of Nepali citizens but also an important asset in the global struggle against terrorism.

Achieving Consensus

Under the recent agreement, Maoist combatants will camp in 28 cantonments, where they will lock their weapons and have them sealed by the UN. An interim constitution will establish a 330-member interim assembly, and the Maoist people's government and courts will cease to exist. By December 1, an interim council of ministers with Maoist participation will be

formed to conduct next year's constituent assembly elections, which will decide the future of the monarchy and write a new constitution. A truth-and-reconciliation commission will dispense transitional justice.

Both the Nepali people and the international community have warmly welcomed this big leap of faith. In Kathmandu, newspapers headlined the pact as "historic" and "a new beginning." Ordinary people have reportedly been speaking euphorically about it in towns and villages. The Maoists have been holding rallies across the country.

Some friends of Nepal have received the accord more fervently than others. India, the next-door neighbor reeling from its own Maoist insurgency, has called it a "victory for Nepali people." European countries and the UN have also greeted the pact with fervor. The United States has given it an uneasy welcome.

Amid this generally jubilant mood, there is some murmur of caution in the air. The decade-long conflict cannot dissipate without leaving behind a legacy of lingering troubles. These problems include the frayed social and economic fabrics, the residual violence, and the broken families of the 13,000 people who lost their lives in the conflict. Such troubles can cause the relapse of conflict within a few years, as has happened elsewhere.

Also still remaining are such daunting challenges as conducting peaceful elections to the constituent assembly, disarming the Maoist fighters and integrating them in society, and settling the issue of the monarchy. And there is the question of restructuring the country to empower people, which the Maoists want to do along ethnic lines. Empowering people is a goal worth pursuing. But Nepal's potpourri of different



ances and ethnic groups will make it extremely difficult to draw provincial boundaries acceptable to all groups.

These issues will have to be tackled as they arise. For the moment, the Nepali people can take pride in having resolved a complex armed insurgency on their own, without external facilitation or mediation. Also, it would be rather unique in history that a Maoist party has been instrumental in saving democracy from the clutches of a despot and in advancing democratic values. If the November 8 agreement holds, Nepal will have produced a new contender for the Nobel Peace Prize, Prime Minister Girija Koirala, for his pivotal role in the peace process.

U.S. Role

Given the decade-long bloodshed and breakdown in the social milieu, Nepal might not be able to restore its once famous Shangri-La image. Yet, the Nepali people want to save whatever they can by giving the Maoists a chance to change their heart and join democratic politics. The United States can benefit by supporting their aspirations.

South Asia is an important front in the U.S. war on terror. The region is riddled with several terrorist groups from Kabul to Kashmir to Colombo, and Nepal happens to be at the crossroads. The resolution of the Maoist problem will strengthen Nepal and close the door of the country as a terrorist safe haven. The Maoists have engaged in terrorist activi-

ties in the past and have not stopped at abduction and extortion. There is no excuse for such acts.

However, if the Maoists want to renounce violence and join the multiparty democratic system, they should be allowed and encouraged to do so. In this context, the United States should support the SPA, remove the terrorist tag from the Maoists, and engage with them. Supporting the Maoist decision may also inspire other terrorist outfits to shun violence and seek political settlement. The United States can thereby help close the books on one of the most successful armed groups in South Asia that has been operating too close to Afghanistan for comfort.

Nepal is writing history. At this critical juncture, the United States can preserve and shape its influence in Kathmandu only by getting involved in the peace process, not by standing on the sideline, maintaining its hostility toward the Maoist insurgency, or preparing for the renewal of conflict. As Washington prepares for a new political reality in the wake of the November 7 elections, the Bush administration and the new Congress should promote the peace process in Nepal as part of their new emphasis on non-military solutions to conflict.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Murari R. Sharma, "Nepal: Peace In, Terrorism Out?" (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, November 27, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3729>

Production Information:

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