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Nepal

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The Maoists won a spectacular victory in the Nepalese elections.

In a shock for regional and global powers, the Prime Minister as well as ministers of Finance, Defence and the Interior, will now belong to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) who received over a third of the votes. Bear in mind the humiliation, given that the US Embassy had predicted the Maoists would get at most 8-10 per cent of the vote. Workers and poor in Nepal, however, should not expect socialist policies from their new leaders.

By Monday 21 April, the CPN-M had won 120 seats out of 239 so far counted for the new Constituent Assembly (CA). The Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML, the two parties that have dominated most governments since 1990, had 37 and 33 seats respectively. Royalist parties have no seats so far, while new parties representing the Terai population in the South, have almost 40 seats. The Maoists have won half of the 240 directly elected seats. In total the CA will have 601 delegates, of which 335 are proportional and 26 allocated by the interim government.

When the counting is finished, the Maoists are forecast to have about 33 per cent of the proportional votes and more than a third of all seats. In their strongholds in western Nepal, especially Rolpa and Rokum, the Maoists as expected won all seats, but even in Kathmandu, the capital, they secured seven out of the 15 directly elected seats.

More than 2,000 election observers were in place and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the poll as "orderly and peaceful". The Maoist leader received congratulations from the ambassadors of India, Japan and other countries.

It is a remarkable sea-change when the CPN (M) leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal - known as

'Prachanda' - is the most likely future president of a Nepali republic. Only a few years ago, the government issued a 5 million rupee reward for him, dead or alive. Even earlier, before the start of the 'People's War' in 1996, the party could "hardly muster a presence at its public meetings" (Deepak Thapa, "A Kingdom Under Siege"). It is also only three years since King Gyanendra in a coup, abolished government and parliament in an attempt to re-establish the absolute monarchy.

The Nepalese Congress Party and the Communist Party (Unified Marxist-Leninists) that have dominated governments since the 1990 people's power revolt, and up to now have been described as the "main parties", are now in deep crisis. The CPN-UML has already announced they are resigning from government.

Enthusiasm and hopes are widespread in Nepal as well as in neighbouring India, especially in the countryside. The Maoists are seen as fighters for land reform and known for cancelling poor families' debts when they controlled areas of the country. At the same time, governments and capitalists are fearful for what kind of model the Maoists will follow now.

More farsighted analysts, however, stress that the Maoists are the 'new mainstream', indicated by Prachanda's conciliatory victory speech. He underlined the need for "good neighbourly relations" with India and China. Meetings between the Maoists and US ambassador, Nancy Powell, have also been reported. "We are trying to establish close links with the US", commented Maoist central committee member C. P. Gajurel. "Nepal Maoist win rings false alarm bells abroad", concluded Reuters, the news agency, while the ultra-capitalist Economist stated "there are grounds for enthusiasm". This on the basis that the Maoists "are above all

nationalists, not leftists” with economic policies that “seem quite liberal”. Monday 21 April, a business website reported, “Nepal’s stock market has recovered as the reconciliatory rebels pledged to promote a pro-industry, capitalist economy”.

The war years

The Maoists launched their ‘People’s War’ in February 1996, but especially since 2001 their intention had been to reach a negotiated settlement. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) that year launched the Prachanda path as an amendment to Maoism. One of its cornerstones was “dialogue” with other parties and even the monarchy! By then, the Maoists had already established strongholds particularly in the west, but found it harder to find new fighters. The pressure for the fighting to end was strong. The Maoists and the government conducted several rounds of talks in 2001-03.

It was particularly the ‘9/11’ events in the US that prolonged the war, with Western governments supporting the Nepalese government’s own ‘war on terror’. The same year, in June, king Birendra and his whole family were killed in a massacre. He was replaced by his more confrontational brother, Gyanendra. In November 2001 the Royal Army entered the war. The army was expanded from 50,000 to 75,000 troops and received major support from the US, Britain, India and China.

It is often repeated that 13,000 people were killed in the war 1996-2006, but 10,000 of these were after 2001, when the army launched its offensive. State forces killed four times as many as the Maoists. Many of the army’s victims were civilian supporters of the Maoists. Especially in the beginning of the war, the established parties, particularly Congress, were responsible for torture, arrests of journalists and police campaigns.

The peak of the state’s armed offensive was the king’s coup in 2005. The coup was in response to a strong mass movement in April 2004, when more than ten people were killed in daily clashes in Kathmandu, but also as a reaction to previous governments’ failure to crush the Maoists. However, the King’s power was finished within a year by the “April revolution” of 2006, a mass movement that surprised all parties, including the

Maoists. In November the same year, the established parties and the Maoists agreed to a Seven-Party Alliance which established a coalition government and a temporary parliament.

Prepare for further turn to the right

An election is now being held now for a Constituent Assembly in which the Maoists will be the biggest party. The comments of Baburam Bhattarai, number two in the hierarchy of CPN(M), in an interview with Indian journalists indicate the Maoists are preparing for further shifts to the right.

First, Bhattarai plays down the historic significance of the Maoists’ election victory: “I have observed how popular waves have swept parliamentary elections in India. In 1977, Indira Gandhi was defeated. Similarly, sympathy votes after her tragic death helped Rajiv Gandhi to sweep the 1985 parliamentary elections. I had seen such mass hysteria earlier.”

Baburam Bhattarai then stresses the Constituent Assembly will work under an Interim Constitution from 2007 that demands political ‘consensuses’. The Maoists stress they want a coalition government with all parties in the Assembly. This Assembly, according to Bhattarai, will work for two years to draft a new constitution. Apart from deciding for a republic and asking the king to leave his palace, in one of its first sessions, the Assembly will work slowly.

“I take it as a great responsibility because we have to restructure the 250-year-old feudal system. You cannot expect it to happen overnight. Secondly, while restructuring the state, we have to take into account different aspects such as poverty, illiteracy, health and others. We don’t have enough resources and skill to reorganise the country in the way we want to. It may take at least 10-15 years to do it”, Bhattarai stated.

It is true that Nepal is a poor country with a small working class, and the masses will not expect miracles. However, waiting “at least 10-15 years” is not part of a successful revolutionary process in any country. The Russian Revolution in 1917 showed the way forward and the decisive role of the proletariat. While the tsar was overthrown in February, all major democratic tasks of the revolution were still unsolved – there was no land reform, the war with all its sufferings

continued and the national oppression was actually increased. Lenin and Trotsky in the leadership of the Bolsheviks explained that the working class taking power was the only solution. The landlords, the capitalists and imperialist powers were all intertwined and united against the workers and peasants. The democratic tasks of the revolution were therefore closely linked to the socialist. The working class in the cities, above all in Petrograd, were won to this revolutionary programme, and supported by the mighty uprisings on the countryside, they could establish a workers' government. All along, the Bolsheviks also emphasised that the socialist revolution is an international revolution, especially crucial in underdeveloped Russia. These lessons from the Russian Revolution were summarised in advance in Leon Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution.

While the accumulation of contradictions and dissatisfaction in Nepal can take some time, it is rather the rapid events involving the masses that have changed the country. The struggles in the end of the 1940s and early 50s, then again in 1990 and 2006, achieved more than decades of 'gradualism'.

The movement in Nepal in April 2006 "had many classical revolutionary features. A general strike originally called for 6-9 April was extended indefinitely, involving civil servants and bank, telecommunication, education and health service workers. "Porters, street-vendors, taxi-drivers, factory-workers and small farmers have put their work aside to take part," reported Nepalese journalist, Anuj Mishra.

The general strike gave confidence to the masses of youth, poor and peasants to participate in demonstrations in Pokhara, Chitwan and other towns. When the answer from the regime was shoot-to-kill curfews and brutal attacks on peaceful demonstrations "something snapped", Times of India concluded in an editorial. It became "a popular insurrection" (Financial Times) with the aim to reach the royal palace in Kathmandu and overthrow monarchy. Staff from the cabinet secretariat, "business associations... and even the families of security personnel ... started supporting the movement" (International Crisis Group, ICC). In total, six million people participated." (From Socialism Today, May 2006).

Today, Bhattarai wants patience while negotiating with corrupt party leaders in the Assembly. "What we need right now is political stability", he says. But for any party calling itself socialist or communist, the question of democratic control from below is a key factor..

The state

This is particularly the case since the old economic and state powers are fundamentally intact. During their 'People's War' campaign, the Maoists established a de facto separate state apparatus in areas under their control. Their armed forces ruled through 'people's committees' and a number of front organisations, such as the 'All Nepal Women's Organisation' and liberation fronts for minorities. In this way, the Maoists were able to abolish feudal powers and rules; cooperatives and collective farms were introduced; a third of the Maoist fighters were female in a country with the biggest inequality between the sexes in South Asia; debts were abolished; workers' received support in their struggle for higher wages; ethnic groups and castes that had been discriminated against were promoted. These attractive pro-poor policies could only be achieved through struggle against the ruling elite. Now, however, the Maoist leadership seem to believe they can cooperate with the economic and political elite.

Bhattarai speaks about a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' as well as "integration of the security force". The latter is a long standing demand from the Maoists, of a merger between their 29,000-strong People's Liberation Army and the former Royal Army with 100,000 troops. Previous statements from the Maoists against the need for a big army are now changed. "The strength of the security forces after the two are combined would be roughly over 100,000. Going by the country's population, such a number may appear necessary. But we have to reduce the size of the army in the long term. I think that instead of having such a huge number of army, we could go for trained militias who would defend the country at times of war. I think it would be useful to train such a force. We should mobilise them during emergencies", Bhattarai says. A costly army of 100,000 in one of the poorest countries in the world and militias to be mobilised "during emergencies"! Not a word about

democratic control or what kind of “emergencies”. The officers of the national army (the title ‘Royal’ was abolished last year) have been trained in the war against the Maoists. In any capitalist country, the role of the army is to be the final defender of the capitalists’ power and a constant threat against movements from below. In South Africa, the real role of the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ was to give the impression that the old oppressors would be dealt with and the poor masses would gain something. In fact, it was a cover for a new layer of capitalists developing from those who claimed to represent the workers and poor who had done away with the old regime. For the Maoists in Nepal, it also seems to be an attempt to escape their ‘terrorist’ label internationally.

Maoism

Nepal is a very poor country, ranked 158 out of 179 in GDP per capita, according to the World Bank. Its GDP per capita is only a fifth of China’s and less than half of India’s. The total state budget is only 1.2 billion US dollars, of which western aid accounts for 30 per cent. Hundreds of thousands of young people can not find jobs, and 80 per cent still work in agriculture. One third of the population of 27-29 million, live on less than one dollar a day.

This is what global capitalism has offered Nepal. The Maoists have never understood or advocated the need for a publicly owned, democratically planned economy. Essentially, Maoism is a variant of Stalinism. Stalinism, in turn, was a u-turn away from Marxism and Bolshevism in order to preserve the power of Stalin and the bureaucracy that arose after the isolation and exhaustion of the Russian Revolution.

Stalinist policies in the neo-colonial world are marked by several key features. One is nationalism, including the absence of a perspective of spreading the struggle against capitalism beyond national borders. Secondly there is the idea that the revolution has two stages - first, a democratic stage conducted in alliance with the ‘national democratic’ capitalists, taking precedence over the supposedly later, socialist phase. Thirdly, it involves party and state structures that allow for no democracy or real debate and decision-making in the hands of the working class.

In Nepal, the first communists, as well as the Nepal Congress, started with armed struggle in the late 1940s (they were labelled ‘terrorists’ by the British colonial power). In 1959, the monarchy had to accept the election of a Congress government. But only 18 months later, the king established his dictatorship, ‘panchayat’ that lasted until 1990. Initially, The Moscow bureaucracy and leading Nepali communists supported the King’s coup against the Congress. This led to a split in their ranks and subsequently to a series of communist parties that looked to China as a model.

Traditionally, communist parties in Nepal have emphasised the demand for a Constituent Assembly and a republic, and opposed to India’s dominance and the monarchy. While many politicians in today’s Congress Party participated in the ‘panchayat’ system, the communists were totally opposed. To the state’s slogan of ‘one nation, one language’ in a country with more than 40 ethnic groups and many languages, the small communist parties counter-posed the demand for autonomy and rights for minorities.

Just before the movement that overthrew the panchayat system in 1990, there were three Maoist parties. Prachanda had become leader in one of them in 1989, while Baburam Bhattarai was in one of the others. However, they played little or no role in the movement and failed to make gains in the coming elections despite their criticism of Congress’ and CPN(UML)’s compromises with the king.

The new CPN(M) party in 1995 had a traditional Maoist-Stalinist programme. They wanted to achieve a “new democratic state” and pointed at six groups in society as their allies. After the working class and poor peasants, they also wanted an alliance with “rich peasants” and “the national bourgeoisie”, the latter as opposed to the comprador bourgeoisie or direct brokers of imperialism, and the bureaucratic king. At that stage, they named the Congress leader Girija Prasad Koirala, a “Nepali Hitler”. Ironically, since 2007, Koirala has been prime minister in a government with five Maoist ministers.

The CPN (M)’s 40-point charter from the start of its ‘People’s War’ in 1996 included key democratic demands against discrimination and for improved living standards. How these could be implemented, however, was left open. Demands

for nationalisation included only the “comprodor capitalists”.

The economy

The vagueness of the Maoists in the 1990s regarding economic and explicitly socialist demands has today been replaced with an open call for alliances with capitalists. Bhattarai wants to follow a Chinese capitalist model, but says the “age-old feudal system” will limit the possibilities for “rapid economic progress”. He does not hesitate on what road to take: “Once we restructure the state and involve the private sector, it will be possible to achieve rapid economic growth. We would implement a transitional economic policy during such an interim period which involves public and private partnership... So, we will follow the policy of attracting domestic and foreign investments... From our side, we have to provide security to investors and create a conducive environment for domestic and foreign financiers.”

The Maoists do not advocate nationalisation or a planned economy: “The state will play the role of facilitator. The state cannot intervene in business activities. It will encourage investors to raise productivity and generate employment opportunities.”

In words, this does not differentiate the Maoists from most governments. Remaining on the capitalist path, in order to attract foreign investments, Nepal will have to offer low wages and bribes to transnational companies. Experience, however, shows that improvements in the lives of ordinary people have come only as a result of struggle against local and global powers.

In a further astonishing statement, Bhattarai says, “And I also think that we will be able to resolve the differences between labour and management.” He does not elaborate how this will be achieved. The conflict between the capitalist class and the working class is the main political conflict in capitalist society. It is not a ‘technical’ issue between “labour and management” that a government can solve, especially if the government does not clearly take the side of the working class.

Maoist government

Are the Maoists a completely different party? Are

they only taking a “tactical pause” before pushing ahead to abolish capitalism? Has Nepal been changed forever by these elections?

On the first question, the Maoists will for a long time claim to be different. The Constituent Assembly will decide on the republic which will symbolise a big change and a victory for the Maoists. The CA might also pave the way for Prachanda as president. If other parties object, or, as in the case of CPN (UML), maybe leave the government, the Maoists will no doubt threaten to use their traditional methods of mass protests. They will also be imprecise on whether at some stage they again can take up armed struggle.

The Maoists can, for a while, rest upon the hatred against the other parties. The movement in 1990, however, holds many lessons for the coming period. Congress and especially the CPN (UML) had strong support for a period. But their neo-liberal policies increased the gap between rich and poor. “It was as if the 1990 movement, which people expected so much of, had never happened”, Deepak Thapa writes in his book. Already in 1992, a People’s Movement Day was organised, with a bandh (general strike). More than ten people were killed in clashes with the police.

1990 to 2003 saw thirteen governments in Nepal, all of them extremely corrupt and incompetent. The trend of increased inequality has never been broken. In absolute numbers, there were more poor people in 1999 than in 1970. Today, the problems of infrastructure, agriculture, industry are more acute than ever.

In decisive fields, the Maoist leadership have proven that in policies they are not so different from other parties; they will try to use a coalition government and demands for consensus to say they can’t implement the policies they really stand for. But as shown above, their policies on the state and the economy are almost the same as other parties.

Over the last weeks, police in Kathmandu have several times clashed with Tibetan demonstrators. Most recently, Nepali police announced they will ‘shoot to kill’ any protesters that try to climb Mount Everest, where the Olympic torch will be go on its global relay. The Maoists have sided with the state forces and criticised the Ti-

betan demonstrators. Despite their previous view that China is capitalist, they now repeat their admiration for Mao – and China.

The question of autonomy for ethnic groups will also be a litmus test for the Maoists. There were strikes for more than two weeks in February in the Terai area on the border with India. The Terai/Madhesi people, which account for half Nepal's total population, have never had any influence on politics in Kathmandu. In this election, there were strong calls for a boycott, but the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum and Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party contested after receiving promises of autonomy. Whether a Maoist-led government will grant this remains to be seen. More likely is that the Terai will be the region where struggle and problems for the new government will occur first.

There are no signs of the Maoists just taking a "tactical pause", as some people would credit them with. Even if Mao himself in the 30s made deals with Chiang Kai-shek's capitalist regime, against imperialism, he never gave up his armed forces or areas under his control. When Mao came to power in 1949, he soon found out that his power was incompatible with the remains of capitalism. Today, the Maoists in Nepal, on the contrary, seem to believe they can stay in power by not breaking with global capitalism.

Real Marxists, as opposed to Maoists and Stalinists, would follow the tradition of Lenin and the Russian Revolution. They would have the declared aim, basing themselves on the small but decisive working class, of carrying through the full programme of socialist transformation and spreading the idea to the workers of neighbouring countries and beyond. If temporary tactical retreats and compromises on implementing this programme were necessary, then they should not be concealed, or presented as something else. They should be openly explained and discussed in the party and among the organised masses of the people. If the masses in Nepal believe the Maoists have full control and a secret tactic, and only 'appear' capitalist to fool the enemy, this will only act to confuse and pacify them.

Pressure from the masses and the global economic downturn may put pressure on the Maoists to turn to the left again. It could also lead to splits among them, with rank and file forces de-

manding land reform and nationalisations. A big obstacle on this road, however, is the military, bureaucratic tradition of decision-making within the Maoist movement. Real socialist forces of workers and youth will therefore be needed to challenge the new government.

Despite its relatively small population compared to its neighbours India and China, events in Nepal have an important influence in Asia, as an example of mass struggle overthrowing a brutal dictatorship. This is also the reason behind the interest in the elections from world powers. Basically, these election results are like a roar expressing the hatred of the masses towards capitalism and the established powers, as well as the urgent need for revolutionary parties for workers and poor peasants fighting to abolish capitalism and establish socialism throughout South Asia. Nepal shows the potential for such forces.