

A chancy tryst with democracy

In giving electoral victory to the Maoists the Nepalese people expect political savvy from the revolutionaries, comments *N.V. Subramanian*



The Maoists' victory in Nepal's Constituent Assembly elections makes it nearly certain that they will enforce their campaign demand for a presidential system of government for the former Hindu kingdom. It means Gyanendra will be the last king of Nepal, with little to no possibility of restoration of the 240-year-old monarchy. And Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal), the leader of the Maoists, will likely be the first president, fashioning himself more after the recently demitted Fidel Castro or Hugo Chavez, than a democratically minded elected head of government.

In doing so, the Maoists will sow the seeds of discontent, which though not resulting in any return of royalty, will lead to a clamour for the old ways of parliamentary democracy. This process may begin in Prachanda's presidential term if he is elected to the post, or eventually. While the voters have made

the Maoists victorious they have denied them a majority. The Maoists' totalitarian accent would therefore have to be tempered by the moderation of the simultaneously elected centrist/Left-centre groupings like the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal.

In this tempering, Prachanda as president may lose his appeal to the hardline Maoist cadres, who are anyway not comfortable with him. If he becomes Chavez II or Fidel, he risks alienating the majority of Nepal's electorate. To read their recent verdict truly, yes, they are tired of the corrupt parliamentary democracy practised by the NC and others. It is because parliamentary democracy did not pull the country out of poverty and backwardness that voters have sought executive powers to be concentrated in one individual, the core of the Maoists' campaign. Even so, the



Prachanda addressing supporters during an election rally in Kathmandu

voters do not seek an authoritarian president. They have rejected an authoritarian monarchy already.

The first test for the Maoists, therefore, is: can they make the transition to democracy? Can Prachanda be a democratic president? Prachanda says the election verdict sets Nepal in the direction of a 'bourgeois democratic revolution'. This is typically for the consumption of restive Maoist cadres but is wrong tactic. Once the Maoists and Prachanda have entered the electoral or democratic process, no turning back is possible. It is dangerous to give false

hopes of 'revolution' to cadres.

Prachanda is asking Gyanendra to leave with grace, suggesting that the Nepalese have forgiven him, and commence a new chapter. Baburam Bhattarai, Prachanda's number two, is playing the bad cop, determined to snuff out the monarchy. Between them, they see success for any Maoist dispensation if the king is banished from home and memory. But the king alone does not stand in the way of Maoist dictatorship. If anything, the king and the Maoists represent competing dictatorships. The people are the Maoists' problem, and the

centrist parties. If the Maoists do not change, they will be forced to return to their former life, and that will effectively nullify the election results and the move towards democracy, and return Nepal to the past. In that event, with the support of the army and the backing of the centrist parties Gyanendra might attempt a comeback.

To divert attention from the crisis breeding within the Maoist establishment, Prachanda & Co. are likely to attempt to prick India, on issues such as the India-Nepal Friendship Treaty, river waters sharing, border transiting, and so on. This would be vintage Chavez. For India it would be best not to be provoked, bear Prachanda patiently, and while the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) is in power, resist his attempts to divide the government by using fellow-travellers in the CPI-M. The CPI-M (Communist Party of India, Marxist) is likely to canvass for extraordinary concessions for the Maoist dispensation. The Maoists' strongest ally will be the Chinese, who need a hedge against infiltration and exfiltration in Tibet. Nepal succumbed to Chinese demands against the Tibetans recently, including Chinese guards to be deployed on the Nepalese side of the border facing Tibet, because of the Maoists. This China connection the Maoists will exploit in their relations with the Indian government.

The Maoist dispensation, unless it changes and moderates itself, will, however, be over sooner than expected. Fidel Castro's longevity is hard to repeat, and Nepal does not have Venezuela's or Russia's oil wealth to disdain internal democracy. It is crushingly backward, land-locked, and at India's mercy to access the sea. It was blocking that access that nudged Nepal towards the first experimentation in parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s.

A near mandate exists in Nepal for a presidential form of government. But if Prachanda, to keep his support with the Maoist cadres intact, lurches towards dictatorship, that could unravel subsequent elections, and create positive nostalgia for a monarchy-guided parliamentary democracy. Democracy has never appeared chancier in Nepal.

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