

Nepal: Maoists' bid for reunification: Factors and challenges

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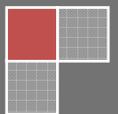
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Three factors are highlighted in particular: the Maoists' defeat in second Constituent Assembly polls, the resistance of both the parties towards formation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission and holding of local body elections, the inter-party division, which is the most serious challenge faced by Prachanda at present.

The paper attempts to explore the possibilities of such a reunification between the UCPN-M and CPN-M. It highlights the challenges faced by the top Maoist brass at present in order to forge a united front for the future. The paper also points out some possible scenarios that would be faced by the Maoists, who remain an important political player in Nepal's polity.



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There is a strong indication of the possible reunification of Nepal's two Maoist parties led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' and Mohan Baidya 'Kiran' in the post Constituent Assemble-II (CA) elections. In March 2014, nearly 21 months after the split, the factions announced a working alliance,¹ which can be considered the first firm step towards the possible merger of the two groups.

In a case that showed serious rift in the party, in August 2014, leaders close to Baburam Bhattarai formed a parallel district committee in Kathmandu. The Bhattarai-led faction of the UCPN (M) announced formation of a 57-member district committee under the chairmanship of Mahendra Shrestha. Claiming that their committee was the legitimate one, they said that the ideological issues raised during party's Biratnagar Convention would be taken for further deliberations in the district committee.² Leaders close to Bhattarai had, in the past, formed parallel committees in Dhanusha, Kaski and other districts as well. It is clear that Bhattarai has shown reluctance to stop his loyalists from forming the committees as his dissatisfaction and clash with the party chairman come to the fore.

The two Maoist parties had split over serious ideological differences in June 2012 when the hardliner faction within the Prachanda-led Unified CPN (Maoist) walked away to form the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist). The leaders of the new party led by Kiran had then stated that the split occurred because the mother party's leadership had "deviated from the revolutionary path" and "annihilated the achievements"³ of the 10-year civil war, which ended in 2006 after claiming 13,000 lives.

The efforts of reunification now has come at a time when the Unified CPN (Maoist) suffered a heavy set-back in the November 2013 Constituent Assembly (CA) elections, where the party secured a remote third position after the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist and Leninist (CPN-UML). The party, which had emerged as the largest force in the 2008 CA polls, managed only 26 seats in the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) category and 54 seats in the Proportional Representation (PR) as compared to 120 under FPTP and 100 in PR in 2008. Among many reasons that led to the Maoist defeat in November last year, the split within the party was seen as a compelling one. The 33-party alliance led by Kiran boycotted the 2013 polls.

The working alliance: Immediate factors

Four immediate factors can be identified for the reunification bid and announcement of the working alliance by the two parties. The first is their combine opposition to the

¹ Kamal Dev Bhattarai, "Marginalised, two Maoist parties looking for merger" Kathmandu Post, March 13, 2014.

<http://www.ekantipur.com/2014/03/13/headlines/Marginalised-two-Maoist-parties-looking-for-merger/386659/>

² "Bhattarai-aligned leaders form parallel committee in Kathmandu," The Kathmandu Post, August 20, 2014,

<http://www.ekantipur.com/2014/08/20/top-story/bhattarai-aligned-leaders-form-parallel-committee-in-ktm/393874.html>

³ "Nepal Maoists: Faction breaks away from governing party," BBC News Asia, June 19 2012,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18504403>

Koirala government's preparations to hold local body elections. In a joint statement issued in March, the two parties threatened to foil such an attempt by the government by launching nationwide protests. The leadership of both the parties feels that since local elections have remained suspended since 2002, it was needless to go for it now. The CPN-Maoist has proposed to form a new high-level political mechanism among all parties and create a national council which could produce a federal, republican constitution and then, on the basis of that constitution, hold local elections. In a recent interview to a national daily, the party spokesperson, Pampha Bhusal, said, "We will have new provinces and those provinces will decide on the delineating areas for constituencies."⁴

Elected local councils were dissolved in July 2002 by the then Sher Bahadur Deuba government. During that time, the CPN-UML had dominant presence at the grassroots. However, since then the Village Development Committees (VDCs), District Development Committees (DDCs) and municipalities have remained without elected representatives to this day.⁵

Second, the debacle faced by the Unified CPN-Maoists in the 2013 CA elections has compelled Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal to re-visit the party policies. In the second CA elections in November 2013, the party secured third position, as mentioned earlier. Dahal himself was defeated by a NC candidate, Rajan K.C., by a huge margin of around 8,000 votes in Kathmandu constituency No.10. In the 2008 CA elections, Dahal defeated the same candidate by 11,000 votes, and later became the prime minister for nine months. Seen as sharp and articulate, Dahal had led the Maoists to a majority win in the 2008 polls. But the humiliating defeat in 2013 reflected the public's discontent and sheer anger against the highhandedness, luxurious lifestyles and controversial actions of the Maoist leaders.

The severest blow to Pushpa Kamal Dahal was the split in the party. The vertical split that the party faced in June 2012 weakened Dahal and his party considerably when Kiran walked out along with 45 of the 149 Central Committee members, many of whom were major stalwarts of the people's war days. Stating that both Dahal and the then PM and

⁴ "Two Maoist parties are not yet on the path to unification: Pampha Bhusal", (Interview), Kathmandu Post, March 3, 2014, <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2014/03/23/interview/pampha-bhusal/260784.html>

⁵ Nepal has two-tier system of local governance, with village and municipal bodies as the lower tier and district bodies as the higher. The village bodies are called *Village Development Committees (VDCs)* with municipalities serving the same function in town areas. The district bodies are the *District Development Committees (DDCs)*. The current structure of local governance in Nepal was put in place after the restoration of democracy in 1990 and the current functions, duties, and power of the Local Governance (LG) is in effect after promulgation of Local Self Governance Act in 1999. All VDCs are divided into nine wards. Municipalities are divided into a minimum of nine wards but the maximum number is not specified. Wards are the smallest units of local governance. Each ward has a committee (WC) made up of the five elected members, one of which must be a woman. VDCs and municipal committees run local affairs. Village Councils (VCs) and Municipal Councils (MCs) meet biannually to approve or question VDC and municipality policies, programs and budgets. VDC chairpersons, vice-chairpersons, ward members and six nominated members representing women and disadvantaged groups form the village councils. Municipal councils (MCs) have a similar structure but the number of nominated members can be maximum of twenty. There are 3913 VDCs, 58 Municipalities in 75 districts administered under five developmental regions.

party vice-chairman Baburam Bhattarai had compromised the objectives of the people's revolt, Kiran faction labeled them "red traitors" and "neo-revisionists." 12 out of 19 chiefs of the party's frontal organizations joined the Baidya camp, which later boycotted the 2013 polls claiming that the government of Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi was "illegal in nature."⁶ The party demanded Regmi's resignation for participating in the elections. The other political parties had, however, rejected this demand.

In March this year, Dahal said the split in the party, besides abandoning the party's class character and its flawed policy on national sovereignty, was a major reason for the poor show by his party in the polls.⁷ He stated clearly that there has been a realization that the split was a "mistake" and that this realization was bringing the two parties together. He said that his own party thought that even after the split it would win the election and form a government as the largest party proved wrong. Similarly, the CPN-Maoist thought that a revolt was possible after the split. But they too failed to launch an urban revolt. "The realization that the split was a blunder creates common ground for reviewing our positions. This is the starting point for party unification," Dahal said.⁸

The fourth forceful factor has been the two parties' common concern over the issue of formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission on the Disappeared. Dahal has already stated that the attempts by the new government to revive war-era cases and arrest cadres of both the Maoist parties are "compelling us to get closer."⁹ This indicates that the Maoist leaders are deeply concerned about the possible trail of the party leaders and cadres for wartime crimes. Many leaders fear that they could be made to face the international criminal court as well.

The India factor

Pushpa Kamal Dahal stated soon after the defeat in the polls that his party's approach to national sovereignty was also flawed. Sovereignty in Nepali context is usually referred to anti-Indianism in political discourse, mainly in the left orientation. He said, "We gave more priority to diplomatic solution to issues related to sovereignty but failed to communicate to the people and mobilise the masses."¹⁰

Although India played a significant role in bringing the erstwhile Maoists to the political mainstream by brokering the historic 12-point agreement between the rebels and the seven-party alliance in New Delhi in 2005, the hardliner faction continued to view India with suspicion. When Baidya formed the new party and presented a demand list to the

⁶ Manesh Shrestha, "Nepal's breakaway Maoists to boycott polls", Times of India, July 25, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Nepals-breakaway-Maoists-to-boycott-polls/articleshow/21345137.cms>

⁷ "Events favour merger of two parties: Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Interview), Kathmandu Post, March 15, 2013, <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2014/03/15/news/interview-pushpa-kamal-dahal/260447.html>

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

then government of Bhattarai, India was, needless to say, the “enemy number one.” Prachanda too had after resigning in May 2009 blamed the other political parties and “foreign powers”. New Delhi, without being named, was accused of intervention in Nepal’s internal affairs. India clearly sided with the Nepal Army when Dahal’s government attempted to sack the then army chief Rookmangud Katawal. Pushpa Kamal Dahal had to resign in the face of heavy backlash.

Dahal subtly hinted his anger against India when he said immediately after the defeat in 2013 polls that there were “external factors also in play.” He said, “We have concluded there was a big conspiracy to marginalise the Maoist party by status-quoist forces.”

Thus the two Maoist forces could find unity based on nationalism and sovereignty.

Challenges

Although the two parties have common grounds to come together to strengthen the Maoist force, there are many challenges in this regard. As things stand now, unification of the parties is easier said than done. There are serious ideological differences between the two parties. The hardliner position is not one which is going to be redundant any time soon. Even if Dahal (Prachanda) and Baidya decide to unify the parties, there will always be chances of further splits. A more radical group may emerge that will seek to wage another round of insurgency in future, if not at immediate present. From the Indian standpoint too although the unification does not have direct implications for India, if the parties unify and a radical group splits, it may launch an insurgency in the future. That will affect India. The radical force may seek alliance with the Indian Maoists. So far, both Dahal and Baidya have maintained distance from the Indian extremists. They may have ideological similarities but there has been no coordinated effort to seek some sort of an alliance with the Indian extremist groups.

Second, one of the most contentious issues in the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement was the matter of setting up the TRC, which could not be established due to political infighting over the question of impunity. But after the UCPN-Maoist’s defeat in the 2013 polls, the TRC Bill was passed by the Legislature Parliament on April 2014¹¹ despite strong opposition from both Baidya and Dahal.

The process of drafting a bill to establish a TRC began in 2007, but from the outset it has been fraught with problems and controversies, often focused on granting a blanket amnesty and giving the Attorney General, a political appointee, too much power over decisions to prosecute or not. Then, in a major victory for victims and their families, the

¹¹ “House passes TRC, CID Bill”, Himalayan Times, April 26, 2014, <http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=House+passes+TRC%E2%80%9A+CID+Bill&NewsID=412897>

Nepal Supreme Court decreed on January 2 this year that a blanket amnesty in serious cases of human rights violations would be unacceptable.

According to the Nepal National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), more than 17,000 people were killed in the conflict, while thousands more were tortured. Over 3,000 cases of severe human rights abuse have been registered with the NHRC, and around 850 cases of enforced disappearance have also been registered and are under investigation.

Third, the two parties' opposition to local body polls too does not stand ground. The two Maoist parties have opposed local body elections even when there is huge discontentment among the people due to absence of democracy at the local level for over a decade. In various surveys carried out lately by some Nepal-based groups and media, it has been widely seen that this is one of the topmost issues breeding dissatisfaction amongst the Nepalese people today. The ruling NC and ally CPN-UML are both keen to hold the elections to revive their 1990s stronghold in the grassroots level. Prachanda does not have the numbers in the parliament to prevent this.

Inter-party division

Dahal (Prachanda) is faced with sever inter-party feud. The personality clash between Dahal and Bhattarai was evident when the latter walked out of the Central Committee (CC) meeting held in May 2014 in Biratnagar. Although Bhattarai joined the CC few days later and Dahal was re-elected as the Party's chairman for 23rd consecutive year¹², Bhattarai has been demanding reforms and change in party hierarchy, which has created tremendous pressure on Dahal.

The Bhattarai faction is thoroughly disappointed with the party leadership at present. And although Bhattarai may not break the party immediately, the strong division within the party has left Pushpa Kamal Dahal in a quagmire.

The Maoist leadership has been facing the dilemma to balance the moderate and hardliner factions ever since 2006 when it joined the mainstream politics in Nepal. When Bhattarai's line of peace and constitution prevailed, the party split. But unification with the Baidya hardliners would require a compromise on its political line. It is to be seen which line will prevail and which way Dahal will go this time.

But it is to be noted that this is a strong factor why Dahal has taken initiative towards unification of the two parties. The internal strength of three leaders – Dahal , Bhattarai and Narayan Kaji Shrestha alias Prakash – in the UCPN-Maoist is worth mentioning in

¹² "Dahal re-elected party chair", Nepal Times, May 07, 2014, <http://www.nepalitimes.com/blogs/thebrief/2014/05/07/dahal-re-elected-party-chair/>

^{xiii} Khimlala Devkota, "Comedy of Errors", Republica, June 04, 2014, http://myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=76259

this context. After the recent elections, of the total 151 CC members, 15 are from Prakash panel, 28 from Bhattarai and rest are with Dahal. There are 51 members in the party's politburo – 8 from Baburam's side, 4 from Kaji's and rest from the Chairman's panel. Prakash is the deputy leader of the parliamentary party of unified maoist

What kind of political line the party should adopt has always remained a subject of debate in the UCPN-Maoist party. Main leadership opposed peace and constitution when the party had 40 percent strength in CA I, but has again adopted it now when the party's strength is reduced to 14 percent in CA II. ^{xii} This is considered confusing by many second-rung leaders of the party. The party's general convention has passed the line of peace and constitution with economic development. The question before the party is whether to stick to political line passed by Hetauda convention or revert to line of revolt passed by Palungtar plenum.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that although the Maoist leaders sense that there is little option to unification of the two Maoist parties, there are major challenges ahead, mainly for Dahal who will have to leave the line of peace and reconciliation in order to unify with the Baidya led party since the latter has indicated that such a unification will not be possible if Dahal fails to embrace the line of urban revolt advocated by CPN-Maoist.

Much will also depend on the constitution writing process underway at present. Dahal has assured the CPN-Maoist leaders that his lawmakers will resign en mass if the CA fails to produce an inclusive constitution and if it departs from the core issues that the Maoist party has been demanding since the formation of the first CA. Dahal faces intense differences with party ideologue, Bhattarai. If the Prachanda fails to sort out his differences with Bhattarai, the unification will be more difficult.

The unification is also dependent on Dahal's position over India and whether he is willing to harden his position against India. Since the new Indian government under Narendra Modi is most likely to follow a pragmatic path vis-à-vis its neighbours, including Nepal, it would be more challenging for Dahal to harden its position against India.

In such circumstances, an immediate unification of the two Maoist parties seems much difficult. It is to be seen which way Dahal would swing this time around.

In this situation, three likely scenarios may emerge in the immediate future. In the first scenario, Prachanda may become successful in reaching out to the Baidya side by once again compromising the line of peace and constitution, but thereby alienating Bhattarai in the bargain. In such a scenario, Bhattarai will break away.

In the second case, Dahal emerges successful to address the concerns of both the hardliners and the moderates and strikes a mid-path to balance the two factions thereby ideally retaining leadership position and letting a new compromised Marxist ideological line to flourish.

The third scenario could be when all the factions inside the UCPN-Maoist and the CPN-Maoist maintain status quo till the draft of the new constitution is formulated and accepted by the CA. Since the first and second scenarios could have serious repercussions for the UCPN-M in general and Prachanda's leadership in particular, it is most likely that the third scenario will unfold.

It is highly possible that Dahal may unite with Baidya once the draft of the constitution is formulated. But in this case, Bhattarai will split from the party. This may unfold in early 2015.

Akanshya Shah is a Senior Nepali Journalist with more than ten years of research and reportage experience. She has been associated with New Delhi based public policy think-tank Observer Research Foundation. Her research interests are Nepalese Politics & Foreign Policy issues and India China relations. Shah has also been actively associated with Nepalese print and web media such as Republica, Nagarik, Newsfront, Himalayan Times and Annapurna Post, among others.

The views expressed in this article are solely that of the author.

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