

Elections in Nepal and Questions for People's Struggles


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The recent elections in Nepal appear to spell a heavy retreat for the country's Maoist movement. After initiating a People's War in 1996 that lasted ten years and saw it in control of the majority of the countryside, the popular Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) formed a front with mainstream political parties to overthrow the monarchy and institute a democratic republic in the 2006 People's Movement. Thereafter, the CPN (Maoist) emerged as the largest party in the 2008 Constituent Assembly (CA) elections. The National Youth People's Volunteers (NYPV), youth wing of revolutionary Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist, marched in Kathmandu in late August, 2013, to protest the upcoming elections. [Photo: [Bikkil Sthapit](#)].

However, by November 19, 2013, the date of the second set of CA elections, the party had split into two factions that both appeared to have failed in their goals. On one hand, the reformist, electoral Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or UCPN (Maoist), lost much of its support and was reduced to third-party status in the new assembly. On the other hand, the election boycott called by the revolutionary Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist) is alleged to have failed, seeing as there was a "record" turnout of voters (as we will see, the reality is more complex). 

Meanwhile, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (UML), which despite its name does not pretend to have revolutionary or even broadly progressive politics, has come in second place after the Nepali Congress, whose politics is hard to tell apart from that of the UML. Their victory then seems like a gain for the right in Nepal.

Understanding Politics in Nepal

But putting elections at the centre of our analysis can take away from understanding politics in Nepal. Dramatic changes in Nepal's recent political history have occurred as a result of non-electoral politics that have often been spearheaded by or have involved considerable popular communist agitation. What's more, Maoists came third in the 1991 elections (with 9 seats) and boycotted elections in 1994 and 1999, but that didn't stop them from becoming the country's largest and most influential political force by 2006.

Let us then turn to understanding four questions: First, what led to one Maoist faction engaging in elections and the other deciding to boycott the CA process in its entirety? Second, what were the reasons for the boycott called by the CPN-Maoist? Third, why did UCPN (Maoist) lose the elections? Fourth, was the CPN-Maoist boycott a failure?

1. Why Did the Maoists Split?

In order to overthrow the monarchy and establish a republic, the Maoist leadership, particularly the reformist faction led by Chairman Prachanda and Vice-Chairman Baburam Bhattarai, entered into a compromising peace process with the mainstream political parties (Congress and UML). The Maoists also compromised on their own revolutionary ideals, a betrayal that greatly disappointed core supporters and non-core swing supporters, not to mention the radicals in the Maoist party.

The reformist Maoist leaders pushed to dismantle the system of popular power they had developed in villages across Nepal in the course of the ten-year People's War. Rather than people having to go to district capitals to settle their disputes in formal courts, an arduous and expensive process, the Maoists had developed people's courts that would settle disputes quickly and usually fairly. Ordinary people were brought into people's committees with Party cadre in order to make decisions about village affairs. In many places, semi-feudal landlords were driven out of villages and land was redistributed among the landless. This is not to romanticize what the Maoists achieved, certainly these developments were uneven and not all rosy - yet they were real gains that made Maoists popular among broad masses. These achievements were actively reversed in order to enter into the peace process that led to the CA elections.

Upon forming government, the Maoists found that the institutions of the state were not in their favour, as these institutions are heavily structured by Nepal's ruling classes and foreign domination. The Maoists resigned in protest in 2009 as they could not exercise civilian control over the chief of the Army, which was backed by the United States and India. The Maoists did not take the reigns of government again until 2011, only to soon dissolve the CA in 2012. Out of five years of the CA, the Maoists governed more-or-less for two years, where the institutions of the bourgeois, neo-colonial state were hostile to them. Clearly, this wasn't going to help the masses build confidence in the CA or in the Maoists as an electoral party.

To be clear, the first government of the Maoists was widely applauded due to Bhattarai's finance ministry, which controlled prices of some commodities, in part by extracting greater tax revenue than had ever been extracted before - and in the process, further antagonized the corrupt bureaucracy. Yet, the second government was led by Bhattarai as prime minister, and this time there was no plan to combat inflation, to safeguard Nepal's economic sovereignty against Indian and Western intervention, or to put a hold on neoliberal capitalism. Instead, Maoist leaders - especially those who had seats in the CA - were seen to have become increasingly corrupt, enriching themselves off of deals with contractors and real estate developers. "They used to be thin during the People's War," someone told me back in 2010. "But now in the cities they have become fat."

Meanwhile, the peace agreement held that the Maoists' People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be integrated into the Nepal Army. The goal was to integrate entire units, yet the actual integration took the form of individuals being recruited into the Army. Some former PLA soldiers were given jobs like park rangers, while others were given cash payments to demobilize entirely. The integration turned out to be a sham, and an affront to the dignity and sacrifices of far too many PLA fighters. Over 14,000 people died in the ten-year People's War, most of them as a result of the violence of the state.

The reversal of popular power and other gains of the revolution, the increasing corruption in the ranks of the party, and the undignified assault on and dissolution of the PLA were not taken well by the rank-and-file of the party or by the more radical leadership, headed by Vice-Chairman Kiran - who had been protesting the turn of events in the party for many years. In a bid to maintain party unity, radicals held on until 2012, but increasing differences finally led to a split. The UCPN (Maoist), by now, had decided to continue on to the electoral process in order to achieve a "capitalist revolution." The CPN-Maoist, however, decided to stick to the line of "new democratic revolution," building the power of the working-class and the peasantry in a way that would lead to socialism.

2. Why Boycott a New Constituent Assembly?

Nepal's politics and economy have historically been dominated by external powers, particularly India to its south. Western powers have come to exercise considerable influence in Nepal through foreign aid and NGOs. What international powers want in Nepal is for there to be no radical social and economic transformation. In India, Maoists constitute the severest "internal security threat" to the ruling classes - a communist revolution in Nepal would reverberate not only in India, but across the region and across the world as the first successful socialist revolution since 1979.

Yet, international powers also have no desire to address the factors that led to the insurgency and revolution in the first place - underdevelopment, widespread poverty and inequality, caste and gender discrimination, ethno-national oppression, and so on. What they would like is a pastiche of India, a liberal, parliamentary democratic set up with no real substantive transformation of society. Due to this external influence, Nepal has not been able to engage in autonomous development.

The Nepali Congress and UML are close to India and have no agenda for autonomous development in Nepal, and the reformist factions of the Maoist leadership have become more in tune with neoliberal capitalism - and more in tune with India. (In fact, Bhattarai's government entered into even more unequal treaties with India, among other things resulting in the further opening up of Nepal's hydroelectric potential to Indian exploitation.)

In four years of the CA, the constant political posturing and bickering of the parties (with four prime ministers in four years) was stoked by constant meddling by India and other foreign powers, seeking to secure their own interests in Nepal. Rather than the CA as a whole, responsibility for decision-making was delegated to party leaderships who would conduct negotiations to reach a consensus. Most of the articles of the constitution had been agreed upon, with only a few issues outstanding - mainly on how to set up a proposed federal structure, and with what number and kind of new provinces to be created. No consensus was reached before the final deadline as set by the Supreme Court.

The four "big" parties - UCPN (Maoist), Congress, UML and the United Democratic Madheshi Forum - decided to turn over the government to the Chief Justice (against the terms of the Interim Constitution of 2007) to supervise a new round of CA elections.

For the CPN-Maoist, this was an absurd proposition. The Chief Justice - notoriously anti-Maoist - was undemocratically and unconstitutionally appointed prime minister by fiat (remember, the CA had been dissolved). In fact, the appointment of the Chief Justice was heavily favoured by the international powers as well. Moreover, what would a new CA do to resolve the political differences that led to the failure of the last one? Instead, the CPN-

Maoist, leading an alliance of 33 parties also represented in the first CA, called for a round-table conference of all political parties to hammer out the outstanding issues and then take a constitution to the masses for ratification.

Rejecting this, the four mainstream parties and the international powers pushed ahead with the second CA elections. As a result, the CPN-Maoist and the 33-party alliance called for a boycott. Fifty-two election observation NGOs became operational, the seven largest of which are funded by Western donors – for example, the National Election Observation Committee (NEOC) is [funded by the UK](#) Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Union – the very donors pushing hard for elections. In violation of the peace agreement of 2006, the Nepal Army – backed and trained by the U.S. and India – took to the streets to guarantee that the elections took place. The mainstream parties and international powers cannot abide a power vacuum in Nepal that may open up opportunities for popular revolutionary mobilization.

3. Electoral Failure of UCPN (Maoist)

The Maoists' personal sacrifice and simple lifestyles, which were then translated into systems of popular power, brought hope for a new form of political engagement throughout the country. In parliament, the reformist factions lost their discipline and degenerated into a corrupt, purely electoral formation. If there was no alternative to be expected from the electoral activities of the Maoists, then the non-core voters who supported them in 2008 had no reason to support them again. Congress and UML could play the game of mainstream politics far better – and that might explain why these elections have seen a reversion to the mainstream parties, especially in urban centres.

Ironically, the reversal of land reforms and institutions of popular power in the countryside might have helped Congress and UML win in the rural centres as well. Relatively powerful landowners can influence and facilitate access to governmental and judicial services. This political monopoly over state patronage is what got Congress and UML elected in previous elections. Even if feudalism as it once existed was greatly weakened after the People's War, reconfigurations of power relations were probably much better exploited by the mainstream parties, with their long experience in the matters, than the UCPN (Maoist).

Crucially, at least part of the collapse of the electoral UCPN (Maoist) has to be explained by the CPN-Maoist call for boycott. The core electoral base of the Maoists appears to have decided not to vote at all, or were prevented from voting – leading to the UCPN (Maoist)'s dismal showing. Thawang, a village in district Rolpa that has been the epicentre of peasant revolt and Maoist support, recorded zero votes.

In sum, the electoral failure of the reformist, electoral UCPN (Maoist) has to be attributed to its reneging on revolutionary politics, reversing the political and economic gains of the revolutionary process, and its increasing greed. Indeed, in general, the Maoists achieved great victories when they produced new rules themselves based on popular power. They lost when they submitted themselves to the rules set up by the ruling classes and imperialists. This understanding is what led the revolutionary CPN-Maoist to boycott the elections.

4. Failure of CPN-Maoist Boycott?

The boycott led by the revolutionary CPN-Maoist was widely declared a failure by

mainstream media because there was a “record” 70 per cent voter turnout. But in number terms, there were well over one million less people voting in this election than the last one. Five million less people even registered to vote in this election. Part of this lower registration was apparently due to tighter control over voter registration by electoral bodies, but at least part of the lower registration can be explained by the political skepticism that runs deep in the Nepalese population. I wouldn’t be surprised if many people who did vote in this election have very little faith in it actually achieving much.

In these senses, the CPN-Maoist led boycott did in fact tap into a great vein of disappointment among the population, and especially the electoral base of the Maoists. This is a slap in the face of the UCPN (Maoist) that vindicates the CPN-Maoist line of boycott.

Moreover, the fact that one of the largest political forces in the country, the CPN-Maoist, has stayed out of the CA process (and seems intent on staying out of it) calls into question the very credibility of the CA. After all, the goal of a CA is to form a constitution, and that requires the participation of a wide range of political opinions in the country – not least one of the largest and influential ones.

The idea that the CPN-Maoist, by rejecting the elections and promoting a boycott, were engaged in anti-democratic behaviour is absurd. The entire political process in Nepal has been characterized by politicking that violates previously agreed-to rules and liberal democratic norms – such as the separation of powers between the judiciary and executive, the primacy of parliament, the demobilization of the Nepal Army, the immense foreign interference, and so on.

What the boycott failed to do was to stop the elections altogether. This was certainly a goal of the revolutionary Maoists and they did not achieve it, but it was also an important method for them to assess the spread of support and influence they have in the country. In February 2013, a senior revolutionary Maoist leader told me that if they stopped the elections, we could expect a quicker path to revolution, and if they did not, we could expect a more protracted approach. In other words, the boycott is a tactic in a developing and shifting strategy.

Indeed, when the united Maoist party entered into the peace process in 2006 and elections in 2008, these were also seen as tactical moves – not as a strategy for achieving socialism. Despite their overwhelming control of the countryside, Maoists could not enter the cities due to their being heavily guarded by the Royal Nepal Army – funded and backed by the U.S. and India. Their idea was thus to use a peace deal to enter into the cities and rebuild organizations there, for an eventual urban insurrection to overthrow the government. The insurrection nearly materialized in 2010, with Kathmandu shut down by a general strike organized by the Maoists. Yet, the reformists in the leadership decided to call the general strike off to return to electoral politics.

The electoral loss of the UCPN (Maoist) will likely lead many rank-and-file cadre to reconsider their engagement with the reformist leadership and question whether or not the electoral path is the best means of achieving socialism. They may well swell the ranks of the revolutionary CPN-Maoist – very important as the party seeks to restructure, re-strategize, and regain the confidence of the masses after the betrayals of the reformist leadership of the UCPN (Maoist). Meanwhile, that UCPN (Maoist) leadership has been forced to understand that it cannot play by the rules of the ruling classes and the imperialists. It remains to be seen whether they can throw off the ideological cobwebs induced by mysticism of class

collaboration and return to the revolutionary road of class struggle. •

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