Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Internal Dimensions

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Introduction

It is no secret that Nepal, a country sandwiched between two Asian giants – India and China, is suffering from the worst political crisis in its history. A constitutional democracy that was established following the 1990 People’s Movement appears to be on the verge of collapse due to continued success of Maoist guerrilla insurgency or "People’s War" that was launched in February of 1996 by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist). The Maoist People’s War has become a direct threat and a death-knell to the government of Nepal.

The CPN-Maoist first fired its salvo of "People’s War" on February 12, 1996 seeking to destroy constitutional monarchy and aiming to establish a Maoist people’s democracy. By the end of December of 2000, the insurgency has taken the life of an estimated 1600 persons (unofficially the figure goes as high as 4,000 dead.) There are four categories of people killed in the process: Maoist guerrillas, police, alleged informers of police, and innocent civilians. Independent observers say that police has killed more innocent civilians in fake "encounters" than the Maoist guerrillas. The police administration is also accused of extra-judicial killings in captivity and disappearance of persons under custody.
Geopolitics of Insurgency and Government Policy: The insurgency that began from 3 mid-western mountain districts of Rolpa, Rukum, and Jajarkot, western district of Gorkha and an eastern district of Sindhuli has now spread to 68 of Nepal’s 75 districts. According to government’s own admission 32 districts are believed to be the hardest hit where guerrillas roam freely and organize open mass meetings. By mid-January 2001, the Maoists have declared the formation of a provisional revolutionary district governments in Rukum, Jajarkot, Sallyan and Rolpa districts.

A close study of insurgent activities in the country show that the most affected area is contiguous and concentrated in the mid-western region. This is one of the most backward and least accessible districts of Nepal. The affected areas are all too close to Kathmandu. Many of the affected areas are spread out along Terai districts close to India. Nepal government officials have reportedly filed a complaint with New Delhi that the Maoists are seeking shelter in India.

The most disturbing situation for the counter-insurgency planners is that many of the Maoist affected areas are inhabited by a large number of well trained retired Indian and British Army Gurkha soldiers. Authorities suspect that some of these retirees are providing training to Maoist guerrillas.

The Maoist insurgency-hit areas cover 165 of the 205 parliamentary electoral constituencies of Nepal. The insurgency has directly affected the lives of roughly two-thirds of the 24 million people of Nepal. The state is on the verge of defeat. The police operations have failed to control guerrillas. There is a widespread realization that if the guerrillas continue to expand their zone of influence at the current speed, they will be able to beat the Nepali State within a short span of time. Such realization is reflected in the government’s recent activation of the National Security Council and its decision to create a para-military force comprising 15,000 men (to be increased to 25,000-men gradually) with modern sophisticated weapons. Although the royal army has not been officially ordered against the guerrillas, the government has decided to establish six new military bases at battalion level around insurgency hit districts. Twenty-five district headquarters are now under Royal Nepali Army (RNA) protection. Another twenty-five district administrators have reportedly sought RNA protection.

Since the start of insurgency in 1996, different governments of Nepal have treated the Maoist war as a ‘law and order’ problem. The government has sought to contain Maoists by means of police operations code named "Operation Romeo," "Kilo Shera Two," "Jungle Search Operation," and "Search and Destroy." The state has justified authoritarian policies in the name of suppressing the insurgency, but without addressing the basic inequalities that plague Nepali society. These police operations have applied the policy of "encircle and kill", a policy similar to China’s Chiang Kai-shek’s "extermination" of communists campaign in 1930s. In the process of this "encircle and kill" policy the police operation has in many places actually killed more innocent civilians than the guerrillas, a fact noted by several human rights organizations including the Amnesty International.
Insurgents’ Strength: Despite the killings of hundreds of Maoists, real or imagined, under the policy of "search and destroy," Maoist insurgency does not appear to be dying. The insurgency, in fact, has appeared in districts which otherwise had been considered an area of influence of constitutional ruling parties. While no one knows exactly how many guerrillas are there in the jungles of Nepal, yet some experts believe that number of full-time guerrillas under arms is around 2000 and another 10,000 irregulars or militias armed with homemade guns. In almost all battles between the police and the Maoist guerrillas, the insurgents have proved their military superiority. These incidents have shaken the whole country and has established the fact that Maoist insurgency is a living reality and that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) is an undeniable political force.

In view of the present day political uncertainties characterized by competition for office between and among parties of all shades and sizes, continuing split between and among parliamentary royal communists, and Nepali Congress’s undeclared divorce with socialism, the chances for Maoist politics to reign Nepal appears pretty high. If history is any guide, Nepali communists, no matter how much divided they may be, have never been totally rejected by the electorate. In 1994, Unified Marxist & Leninist (UML) got an opportunity to form the government. The inexperience in ruling the country, on the one hand, and greed for power, on the other led to not only the exit from the government but also the vertical division of the UML party. The vertical split of UML has brought about qualitative as well as quantitative changes in the political balance of the country. The split has also helped in raising the centrality of Maoist movement. In fact, the communist movement has now polarized into Maoist and non-Maoist blocs. This process of polarization is a good source of power to Maoists. The failure of other left groups in forming and maintaining unity has certainly helped Maoists.

Popular Support:

The successive failures of government’s police operations in Maoist insurgency clearly shows that the insurgency is taking momentum with substantial popular support. This is no longer simply a law and order problem. Why are the people in rebel areas providing sanctuaries to insurgents? Why are insurgents finding sanctuaries in areas, which in the past had been strongholds of constitutional parties? Independent observers argue that the government suffers from political instability and rampant corruption. The money allocated for development of interior areas never reaches there. A large number of villages are totally ignored by economic planners. There are no schools, no roads, no electricity, and no medical facilities. At the national level, the educated unemployment is increasing at geometrical proportions. Close to 100,000 rural youths failing high school examination every year have neither a job nor a school to go where they could be kept busy. These unemployed youths, 15 to 18 years in age, are joining the ranks of armed guerrillas. The Maoists, however, have problems of providing arms to these willing recruits.

Background of Communist Movement: Maoist insurgency must be viewed in the light of Nepal’s history of communist movement. The communist movement in Nepal that first appeared in 1949 after the formation of Communist Party of Nepal under the leadership of late Pushpa Lal Shrestha emerged as an intellectual opposition to Nepali Congress’s policy of compromise. Even during the days of king’s absolutism Communist movement was unclear in its goals. A few communist leaders then argued that their main enemy was domestic feudalism led by the king while others insisted that Nepali Congress with its support from expansionist India and imperialist America was the main enemy. As a result, Nepal saw at one moment as many as 19 communist parties!

The Maoist movement has emerged in the background of this history of Nepal’s communist movement. The Naxallite movement of Jhapa in early 1970s, too, had the same background. The Jhapa movement evaporated in a few years due mainly to the suppression of Naxalites in India, youthful inexperience
of leaders expressed in terms of middle class extremism, decline of Maoism in China after Mao’s death in 1976, and lack of Jhapa-type militancy in other districts of Nepal. The leaders of Jhapa movement gradually took to the constitutional path and even participated in Panchayat elections as "pro-people Panchas."

New Realities: The present day Maoist movement, however, must not be viewed in light of Naxalite movement of the early 1970s for several reasons: first, Maoists unlike Jhapa Naxalites do not have the advantage of geographical continuity from India. Second, Maoists do not enjoy the ideological support from Radio Beijing. So the charges of foreign inspiration is a moot point here. Third, Maoists have learnt many lessons from the mistakes of Jhapa uprising. Fourth, the communists of all shades and sizes are now available in every village of Nepal. Many of them are disillusioned with the inability of their leaders who have participated in parliamentary system telling the cadres that there is an alternative to armed revolution.

That the Maoist insurgency has survived five-year period and continues to enter into news phases is in itself a clear indication that the movement is no longer a temporary phenomenon without social bases. The official approach of viewing Maoist movement as an activity of individual killing and pure terrorism has not helped to solve the problem. While it is true that there is middle-class extremism inside the Maoist movement but it is not the extremism directed by indiscriminate terrorism. The terrorist acts perpetuated by insurgents are carefully selective and are limited to the killings of alleged police spies and informers who are also notorious in the villages. In the past such extremism used to evaporate within a short span of time but there is no indication of such evaporation this time around anywhere near the sight. In fact, it is on the march towards new stages with each day passing.

New Characteristics: Broadly speaking, communist movement in Nepal in the past has been left-intellectual movement. The participating intellectuals in this movement had comprised of upper caste (Brahmin-Chhetri-Newar-BCN). In other words, past movements were basically the movements against BCN ruling elite by the BCN non-ruling elite. That scenario, however, has changed now in view of the broader participation of persons from other castes particularly the untouchable castes such as Kami, Sarki, Damai, etc. In the past when non-ruling BCNs were fighting the ruling BCNs there was always scope for mediation and compromise due to the network of family relations. No such network of family relations exists now between BCN elite and guerrillas coming from untouchable lower castes, which narrows the chances of mediation and compromise.

Another notable characteristic of Maoist movement is the degree of women’s participation in guerrilla ranks. Women’s political participation in the past had been limited to electoral areas, especially, in voting and occasional candidacy in elections. It is a big surprise that Nepali women now have joined guerrilla organization under arms. More than a dozen women have already given their lives while fighting the police operations. According to an estimate about 30% of Maoist guerrillas comprise of women. This is totally a new phenomenon in Nepal, which must not be taken lightly.

Furthermore, more and more persons from Janajati people (Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, etc) are joining the ranks of Maoist insurgency in the hope that they will be "emancipated" from the "clutches" of BCN. Although it is not quite clear whether these Janajatis will remain loyal to Maoist cause in the aftermath of the success of Maoist people’s war, suffice it to say here that a peaceful settlement of the problem is no where near the sight.

Summary and Conclusion: Fighting a guerrilla war is an expensive proposition for any state. Guerrilla war has no front lines. Guerrillas operate in the midst of, and often hidden or protected by, civilian populations. The purpose of guerrilla war is not to engage an enemy army in direct confrontation, but rather to harass and punish it so as to gradually limit its operation and effectively liberate territory from its control. Efforts to combat such a guerrilla army- counterinsurgency- often include programs to "win the hearts and minds" of rural populations so that they stop sheltering the guerrillas. In guerrilla
war, there is much territory that neither side controls; both sides exert military leverage over the same place at the same time. This makes guerrilla wars extremely painful for civilian population because the government armed forces fighting against guerrillas often do not distinguish them from civilians, and so strike both together.

Nepali strategic planners have failed to find a way in which people would stop giving sanctuaries to guerrillas. This could have been done by means of massive economic development package to people in the early period of insurgency. The relief package that the government has allocated after so much of killings has become irrelevant. Counter-insurgency measures require civil-military coordination in which clean civil administrators are expected to disburse economic development package. Here lies the problem. Nepal’s problem is not the Maoist war but an entrenched coalition of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats that profits from Maoist war. It is very much likely that the economic relief package announced to combat insurgency could be yet another opportunity to corrupt civilian as well as military authorities for embezzlement. Counter-insurgency measure, if applied and executed by clean hands, will help minimize the distribution crisis, which in turn, will help to neutralize popular support to guerrillas. Otherwise, it remains a protracted problem and there is no way to obstruct Maoist revolution. The government forces, under the present policies, could win couple of battles here and there but will never win the war. The best they could expect is a negotiation for the safe passage with the victorious Maoist People’s Guerrilla Army in years to come.

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