

Nepal's Maoists suffer landslide election defeat

By W.A. Sunil
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Nepal's elections held on November 19 resulted in a humiliating defeat for the United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) when results were announced on Tuesday. The Maoists won just 80 of the 601 seats compared to 220 seats in 2008 election when they became the largest party in the constituent assembly.

Two parties of the Kathmandu establishment won the lion's share of the seats. Nepal Congress (NC), the traditional party of Nepali bourgeoisie, won 196 seats, ahead of the Stalinist Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), which gained 175 seats. Congress has called for talks with other parties to form a new government. The constituent assembly not only functions as a parliament, but is tasked with writing a new constitution within a year.

The election follows five years of political turmoil, with six different governments, during which the constituent assembly failed to agree on a new constitution despite repeated deadline extensions. The assembly was dissolved last year by Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, a Maoist leader, who declared himself head of a caretaker government. Bhattarai was replaced by the country's chief justice, Khil Raj Regmi, in March this year to head an interim coalition government to prepare last month's poll.

Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dhal, also known as Prachanda, blamed the UCPN-M's devastating defeat on "irregularities in the election" and "a conspiracy" against the party by foreign powers, without elaborating further. Prachanda declared that his party will not participate in the constituent assembly unless an independent probe into election rigging is established. However, a senior party leader, Narayan Kaji Shrestha, told AFP that the party will "accept the people's mandate" and will be "part of the

[constitutional] process."

Undoubtedly the electoral process in Nepal involves ballot stuffing, vote buying and other irregularities—by all parties. The collapse of the UCPN-M vote, however, is a reflection of widespread disillusionment and hostility among broad layers of the population who five years ago voted against the corrupt establishment parties in the hope that the Maoists would improve living standards.

In 2006, the Maoist party abandoned a decade-long guerilla struggle and struck an agreement with a seven-party coalition, headed by Nepal Congress. Brokered by India, the deal was known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The UCPN-M feared it would be targeted by the US Bush administration, which had branded it a "terrorist organisation."

The "peace" deal was aimed at ending the Maoist insurgency and heading off a popular uprising against King Gyanendra. Backed by the army, he had dismissed parliament and was ruling as an absolute monarch. The ruling elites were forced to turn to the Maoists under conditions where Nepal Congress and its allies were utterly discredited.

The UCPN-M insisted on the abolition of the monarchy and won the 2008 election by promising to carry out land reforms and address a long list of social grievances. Prachanda headed the first government, but that collapsed after the army refused point blank to integrate former Maoist guerrillas into its ranks, as outlined in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Far from improving the lot of the working class and rural poor, the Maoists, in office first under Prachanda, then in 2011 under Baburam Bhattarai, operated in the interests of business and foreign investors. They implemented the demands of the International

Monetary Fund and World Bank for pro-market restructuring, including tax concessions for investors, and shelved their promise of land reform for the rural poor.

The Maoist-led governments enacted laws banning strikes in essential services and established industrial zones as cheap labour platforms for foreign investment. As part of the “peace” deal, former Maoist guerrillas surrendered their weapons and were confined to encampments. Out of 19,000 former fighters, only 3,000 were finally recruited to the Nepali army under the stringent conditions set by the top army officers. The rest were cut adrift with minimal compensation, generating broad opposition in the UCPN-M’s ranks that led to a split last year. The so-called hard-line faction formed its own party, which boycotted the election.

The integration of the Maoists into the Kathmandu political establishment is not the product of individual leaders, but flows directly from the bankrupt Stalinist “two-stage” theory that has always justified alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie and its parties. UCPN-M is thoroughly mired in reactionary Nepali nationalism, directed in particular against India.

Kathmandu is a hotbed of intrigue as Washington, New Delhi and Beijing all compete for influence in the mountain nation perched between India and China.

Nepal Congress is closely allied with the Indian political establishment, which has always regarded Nepal as part of its sphere of influence. India is determined to limit China’s influence in Nepali affairs. India’s external affairs ministry issued a statement on election day praising the “democratic process” and urging the “early promulgation of a new constitution.”

China, which had no compunction about providing arms for the Nepali army as it sought to suppress the Maoist insurgency, sought to boost its influence under the Maoist governments. Over the past few years, Beijing has funded major infrastructure projects in Nepal.

The US, which has a strategic partnership with India, is keen to boost its presence in Nepal as part of its wider “pivot” to Asia aimed at encircling China and undermining its influence. On Tuesday, US ambassador Charles Carwile met with Nepal Congress vice president Paudel for discussions over the next government and its policies.

The Nepali business elite welcomed the election victory by Nepal Congress and the CPN-UML over the Maoists. Following the election, share prices passed the local stock exchange’s 700-point mark for the first time in 51 months. Over the past five years, despite the promises of successive governments led the Maoists, Congress and the CPN-UML, the conditions facing ordinary working people have continued to deteriorate.

According to the latest World Bank figures updated in October, the country’s overall growth rate declined to an estimated 3.6 percent for 2013, down from 4.9 percent in 2012. The overall official inflation rate has hit 9.9 percent, but actual price rises are likely to be higher.

Nepal remains one of the world’s poorest countries, ranking 157 out of 187 countries. More than 30 percent of people live on less than \$US14 per month while the overall poverty rate remains at 25 percent. For the country’s mid-western and far western regions, this figure is 45 and 46 percent respectively. Some 80 percent of the population lives in rural areas and depends on subsistence farming. Each day, about 1,600 people migrate to look for jobs, an indication of growing poverty and unemployment.

Whatever parties form the next government, the worsening living conditions will fuel further political upheavals.

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