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Nepal's Revolution

Armed Struggle Made Free and Fair Elections Possible

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The peaceful mass participation in the elections for a Constituent Assembly ("CA") in Nepal on April 10, 2008 was not only an historic achievement of the Nepalese people, but a reminder that the revolutionary process in Nepal deserves the close attention and eager assistance of every sincere Marxist.

This election was not an exercise due to some number of years having passed since the last, nor the result of some legislators bribed to cross the floor or stay away. The demand for elections to a CA was raised by the revolutionary left in Nepal immediately on the murder of king Birendra and his family on June 1, 2001. It was a demand raised both by the CPN (Maoist) engaged in armed struggle and the CPN (Unity Centre) with its parliamentary front ("Janamorcha Nepal") — who was first is for historians to determine. The point was that the monarchy had now truly come to an end, its legitimacy gone for good. Of course even then the feudal ruling class was an anachronism, but the royal institution in the person of Birendra had continued to resist domination of Nepal by the rulers of India and therefore had a meaningful claim as "national symbol." When Birendra was murdered and the grinning thug of a new crown prince Paras emerged unscathed from the massacre scene, the monarchy might still command hired guns but its legitimate historical role and all claims to allegiance were gone.

When the new king Gyanendra threw the Royal Nepal Army ("RNA") into combat against the revolutionary youth in the hills, Nepal's sovereignty was at stake. The people of Nepal would seize sovereignty in combat or it would disappear, as surely as it has in Sikkim or Panama. The fighters of the People's Liberation Army ("PLA") — and the revolutionary community in which they were based — fought, and were tortured and murdered when captured by the U.S.-"advised" RNA, to end the monarchy and for free elections to a CA.

The "12 point agreement" (set out in these pages in our December 2005 edition), in which the CPN(Maoist) reached agreement with the parliamentary parties for a joint struggle against the Gyanendra regime, set as its goal "to end autocratic monarchy and establish lasting peace through election to constituent assembly." In the "Janandolan 2" of April, 2006 when the Nepalese urban population of all walks of life bravely challenged "shoot-to-kill" curfews until soldiers refused the orders to fire, they risked their lives for an end to the monarchy and elections to a Constituent Assembly. These were no ordinary elections.

The November 8, 2006 agreement between the parliamentary parties and the CPN(Maoist) formally ended the revolutionary civil war, sidelined a king deprived of all authority, placed both the RNA (now Nepal Army or "NA") and PLA alike in barracks, required that the NA be democratized (not yet achieved even now), provided for an interim coalition government including the CPN(Maoist) to conduct CA elections, and set out the terms on which the election would take place. For the first time in South Asian political history it was agreed that the party lists for the election would proportionally include women, the leading ethnic groups, and the marginalised and discriminated against peoples.

The initial date set for the election and the original details of the makeup of the CA were changed in the intervening year and a half, primarily due to an outbreak of communalist violence in the Terai, beyond doubt with assistance from foreign intelligence services but not without some roots in the legitimate demands of the Madhesi people. In the event, the CA elected on April 10th consists of 240 members from "First Past The Post" ("FPTP") single member constituencies, and 335 members elected by proportional representation from party lists required to be half women, and to contain in proportion to their share of the population dalits, those whom in India would be termed adivasis, and other language and ethnic groupings.

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Whether by design or fortunate happenstance, the Nepal election commission had modern voting machines sufficient for only one FPTP constituency and chose the richest district in the capital, Kathmandu 1. As a result only one result was announced on Friday the 11th, and not surprisingly in Kathmandu 1 the candidate of the Nepal Congress, the party of property owners, won decisively. Also on Friday, April 11th, all reputable observers, as evidenced by statements from the UN, European Union, China, India, and ex-President of the United States Jimmy Carter, agreed that the Thursday, April 10th elections were fair and that their results should be respected. Carter was quoted as saying that the elections were "free and fair with some minor discrepancies that did not interfere with the ability of the people to make their choices for leadership."

By Saturday morning, April 12th, it became clear that the CPN(Maoist) had won the election. While final results are still uncertain as of the date of writing, it is certain that the CPN(Maoist) shall be by far the largest party in the CA, indeed as large or larger than the other two major parties—the Nepal Congress and the CPN(UML) — combined.

Perhaps not surprisingly, after the results became clear the U.S. mouthpiece Voice of America quoted a U.S. government-funded outfit calling itself "Asian Network for Free Elections" as saying that "it is premature to declare Nepal's balloting free and fair." Amusingly, the same outfit had called the elections "successful and credible" before having its leash pulled from Washington. This sinister buffoonery serves to remind that Nepal still has a deadly enemy in the rulers of the United States, who continue to term the CPN(Maoist) "terrorists" and continue to control the commanding officers of the Nepal Army.

Prachanda, leader of the CPN(Maoist), in his first comment after his party's victory said:

"We will work together with not only the seven parties but also the new parties that will be established through this election and the old parties in existence in the forthcoming constitution making process.

"All eyes are upon us. This is a positive challenge for us. I want to clarify that the path of cooperation that we adopted since 12-point agreement will continue.

"For the international community and especially our neighbors India and China, I want to say that our party wants good relations with all of them and is willing to work together on development cooperation and peace process. "Our commitment on multi party democracy has been expressed through this election as well.

"I have taken this victory as the people's mandate to us to consolidate lasting peace. We will remain honest to that mandate."

The coalition government may continue, but where previously the Nepal Congress had been the dominating coalition partner, from today forward it shall be the CPN(Maoist). Yet this is only to recognise at governmental level the social reality. The Constituent Assembly is the achievement of the People's War and of the ordinary people of Nepal.

No honest Nepali would deny that this has been the first truly free and fair election in the country's history. In the past the presence of brutal police, manipulation from district headquarters, and all the pressures of a feudal clientelist system denied any real freedom of choice to many Nepalis. The hill and mountain district of Sindhupalchowk not far from the capital Kathmandu has been for decades a virtual fief of the great feudal lord Pashupati Shumsher Rana, married to a Scindia, father-in-law to Prince Aishwarya Singh, and a cousin of the king. He effortlessly won election after election to the royal parliament by the votes of his innumerable clients. But today, in the CA election results from his district Sindhupalchowk 3, the great lord ran a poor third behind the Maoist Dawa Tamang and UML candidate Sher Bahadur Tamang. Something fundamental has changed.

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The CPN(Maoist) launched armed struggle on February 13, 1996, in opposition to comrades who urged that the time was not right, "objective" conditions did not exist, and that the electoral path should be pursued. But the leadership insisted that only by making a revolutionary break with pre-existing legality could the ordinary people learn their own strength, drive out the hated police and the landlords and usurers, and begin the process of learning how to become the ruling class. In the ten years of People's War a great number of young people of both sexes and all communities, including the most downtrodden, have made themselves into the seeds of the new society. When in 2006 the CPN(Maoist) returned to the path of civil peace and electoral democracy they did so from a position of immense strength. Dawa Tamang was 22 years old when the People's War began; before Dawa Tamang could even imagine defeating Pashupati Shumsher Rana in a free election it would be necessary to learn how to defeat his guards, police, and soldiers in armed struggle.

There has been no readymade formula for the tasks that have been successfully accomplished, even less so for the tasks that lie ahead. The immediate problem of food supply and the longer-term question of economic development are daunting. But for those of us who believe that politics must be in command, the events in Nepal are of the greatest significance. In 2003 the CPN(Maoist) adopted a resolution entitled "Development of Socialism in 21st Century." It looked toward multiparty competition organised under a constitutional framework of a firmly proletarian and people's democratic nature. Randhir Singh has written that achieving socialist democracy "must be viewed not as a destination but as a never-ending historical process involving constant struggle and ever greater democracy" (Crisis of Socialism, Amit Atwal, 2006, p.818). The CA election marks the next stage in the emergence in Nepal of a revolutionary socialist democracy, an event of world historic importance.

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