

Nabiha Gul

POLITICAL TRANSITION IN NEPAL: FROM MAOIST INSURGENCY TO DEMOCRACY

Abstract

The year 2008 brought unprecedented change for Nepal when almost 250-year old monarchy was replaced with a democratically elected government. With that, the world's only Hindu Kingdom came to an end. The country endured years of political crisis that had not only bred economic instability but also social turmoil. The 10-year long struggle against monarchy that started in 1996 in the name of 'Maoist insurgency' did succeed in dethroning the King. However, the country is still in the grip of political differences and yet to adapt to the democratic trends. Nepal's experience from monarchy to democracy has been a history of enduring contradictions. Making process of democratization a reality in Nepal seems to be a formidable task for there still is a power struggle going on among political parties. For a developing country like Nepal, abolition of monarchy and formation of a democratically elected government is not the beginning of a new era but a crucial phase in battered politics where the future of democracy is yet to be decided.

1. Introduction

Nepal has been among the countries of the world which have a history of protracted political instability. For centuries, the country had been ruled by monarchs and remained the world's only Hindu Kingdom till 2006. Meanwhile, there have been several phases in which different forms of governance were employed. From absolute monarchy to a multi-party politics to partyless *panchayat* system and then to multi-party democracy, each kept the powers of the King intact. As a result, on the one hand, power rivalry increased among political elite that gave rise to *factionalism* in political parties, and on the other, led to social fragmentation.

The most contemptuous corollary of political instability was the ten-year long civil war commonly known as Maoist insurgency led by the Maoist faction of the Communist Party of Nepal in 1996. The aim of the Maoists was to acquire due

Nabiha Gul is Cooperative Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, Pakistan. Her e-mail is : coldpath1@gmail.com

share in power and to abolish monarchy in Nepal, thus the authority of the crown was challenged for the first time. Maoists not only gained popularity but also great number of followers. Their cause and struggle against monarchy was widely supported by the anti-King sections as for them it was a struggle for emancipation of the poor, deprived and socially segregated classes. The society which had been battered by years of authoritarian politics further deteriorated.

The struggle against monarchy succeeded in abdication of the monarch. However, the country which was said to be on the path of true democracy is still grappling with institutionalizing democracy. For a developing country like Nepal, the abdication of monarchy is not only the beginning of a new era but also a crucial phase in its politics, for democracy has never been experienced in its letter and spirit before. On the road to democracy, several challenges lie ahead for the leaders as well as the people.

The modest intention of this paper is to analyze the causes and consequences of political instability in Nepal and challenges to the institutionalization of democracy. The paper comprises five sections following the Introduction in section 1. Section 2 deals with the political history of Nepal and identifies the factors and sources of instability. Section 3 covers the origin and development of Maoist insurgency. Section 4 examines the transition of politics in Nepal from insurgency to democracy and the role of regional and extra-regional powers in Nepalese politics. The final section discusses challenges to the process of democratization in Nepal.

2. Political History of Nepal: Inconsistencies and Contradictions¹

Prior to the British conquest of the subcontinent, politics in Nepal had been characterized by the power rivalry between the noble families among which the most prominent royal families were the Ranas and the Shahs. After the British arrival in the region, the Nepalese government led by the Ranas at that time, sought an accommodation with the British to preserve its independence. A *de facto* alliance was formed in 1860, under which Kathmandu allowed the recruitment of Nepalese for the highly valued Gurkha units in the British Indian Army, and also accepted British guidance on Nepalese foreign policy. The British in return permitted virtual autonomy to Kathmandu in domestic affairs and assured the Rana regime of its help against any foreign and domestic incursions.²

¹ The political system in Nepal was termed as nothing but a combination of inconsistencies and contradictions by Professor Dr. Ananta Raj Poudyal in his article "Fifty years of political experience in Nepal", *Liberal Times*, Vol. V, No. 2, February 1997, cited in Fahmida Ashraf, "Maoist Uprising in Nepal", *Strategic Studies*, Islamabad, Vol. XXII, No. 2, Summer 2002, p. 63.

² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Nepal", Macropedia, Vol. 24, 15th Edition, p. 782.

Following the withdrawal of the British in 1947, the Rana regime was deprived of its vital support, and the government was exposed to dangers primarily from domestic front. The anti-Rana elements, including the Nepalese Congress Party (NCP) formed an alliance with King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah. The *Mukti Sena* (Liberation Army) of NCP launched an armed rebellion against the Rana regime in 1950. With diplomatic efforts by the Indian government, a settlement was reached between the Ranas, the NCP and King Tribhuvan in February 1951 that ended the 104-year old rule of Rana family. On 15 February 1951, King Tribhuvan ascended the throne and guaranteed introduction of democratic reforms in the country.³

Political Reformation: A Myth

With the supremacy of the Crown retained, institutionalization of democratic system proved a formidable task for King Tribhuvan. The country had been only accustomed to autocracy, and adoption of democratic values was an equal challenge both for the state and the society. However, there was great optimism among the people that King Tribhuvan would bring political reforms and their country would follow democratic norms, but no such reforms took place. After King Tribhuvan's death in 1955, his son Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah was enthroned. King Mahendra followed the legacy of his father and a constitution was approved in 1959 under which the first-ever general election was held in the country. The NCP won the election and formed the government with the constitutional monarchy in place. However, controversies between the cabinet and the King continued and King Mahendra dismissed the NCP government in December 1960. The constitution of 1959 was abolished and a new constitution was promulgated in 1962.⁴

Panchayat System

Under the new constitution, the King exercised the sole power and a non-party system was established in the country. However, *Rashtrya Panchayat* was also formed after the election to the panchayat in 1963. All kinds of political activities by political parties were banned. Internal opposition to this system was weak and disorganized. King Mahendra died in January 1972 and his son Birendra Bir Bikram Shah was crowned in 1975. King Birendra, after assuming power, tried to expedite economic development programmes while maintaining panchayat system instituted by his father. His efforts proved fruitless and the country faced systematic political crisis in 1979. A national referendum was conducted in May 1980 to decide between non-party and multi-party system. The

³ Karl Heinz-Kraemer, "The revolution of 1950/51", available at: www.nepalresearch.com/history, accessed on 13 April 2009.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, *op. cit.*

result showed a tilt towards existing system. However, King Birendra decided to retain the 1962 constitution but liberalized the political system by providing political space to political parties while retaining the partyless system. The arrangement did not satisfy the political parties and the NCP began a civil disobedience in 1985 for restoration of multi-party system.⁵

Jana Andolan (People's Movement)

The supporters of multi-party system – a coalition of leftist and centrist opposition forces, began a campaign demanding political reforms in 1990. Nation-wide protests, demonstrations and strikes were held for months. The King tried to suppress the movement through force but in vain. Ultimately, the ban on political parties was lifted and the King appointed a coalition interim government led by the NCP and the Unified Leftist Front (ULF) - a faction of communist party. In November 1990, a new constitution was promulgated that provided for both constitutional monarchy and a multi-party parliamentary political system. On 12 May 1991, general election was held in which the NCP won by a majority and formed the government. On the other hand, a faction of the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist-Leninist (UML) emerged as the strong opposition to the newly formed government.⁶ The NCP government introduced political and economic reforms but kept a patronizing attitude. Several political parties and their factions, for instance, the Nepalese Democratic Party (NDP), Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Rastriya Jana Morcha (RJM), Sadbhavana Party (SP), and Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party (NWPP),⁷ were dissatisfied on the agenda and policies of the NCP government.

What followed the *Jana Andolan* was largely the routine political course. No fundamental change was brought in, and the greater objective of *Jana Andolan* to bring change in Nepalese politics was not fulfilled. The leaders either acted on their party directives or followed the power struggle.

A fair analysis of the history of Nepal establishes a fact that political system in the country has never been consistent. There had been predominantly King's rule in Nepal. However, there have been test and trial of some other forms of governance as well. With powers of the King intact, the country experienced absolute monarchy to a multi-party politics to partyless *panchayat* system and then to multi-party democracy. There have been contradictions as well in terms of theory and practice of each system of governance that was established in the country in different eras. An important dimension of political structure in Nepal is the caste-based political elite. Nepal is predominantly a Hindu but heterogeneous

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 783.

⁷ Bertil Litner, "Nepal struggles to cope with diehard Maoist violence", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 1999, cited in Fahmida Ashraf, *op. cit.*

society that has more than 52 castes and 44 ethnic groups.⁸ These castes have rather political connotations than the social ones. Political elite has been formed by the upper-caste Hindus and lower castes are segregated politically as well as socially. Stability of a political system depends upon the leadership, which was ever-lacking phenomenon in case of Nepal. The political elite has always been interested in ‘power’ and the result was political instability and inconsistency. The causes of political instability, therefore, were:

- long-standing rule of the crown;
- power struggle among political elite;
- lack of sincere leadership; and
- political segregation of lower castes.

The consequences of the political inconsistency and instability were political and social fragmentation and civil discontentment. Not only it marred the socio-economic condition that ultimately bred anti-state sentiments among people and led the society towards political chaos. Moreover, it fashioned the ever-growing gap between state and society. Another important consequence was division of political parties into several factions. Above all, the most contemptuous consequence was the emergence of revolutionary faction of Communist Party of Nepal that led a ten-year long civil war against the throne.

3. The Maoist Phenomenon: Origin and Development

Given the political inconsistencies spanning more than four decades and dissatisfactory role of the democratically elected government, the Maoist faction of Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-Maoist) emerged as a rebellion group and launched an armed struggle against the King and the government in 1996. As analyzed by Karl H. Kraemer,

In practice the politicians have not been able to implement many aspects of the constitution. Even fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, like that of equality of all citizens, have not legally been realized. Corruption and selfishness of the politicians and traditional ways of thinking must be regarded as the main reasons for such short-comings. The poor state of affairs is reflected by the instability of governments. It opens room for the development of radical forces like that of Maoists who reject the constitution and fight a violent war.⁹

Communist Party of Nepal

The Communist Party of Nepal was founded in Calcutta in September 1949 by Pushpa Lal Shrestha. The main slogan of the party was “civil liberties for all,

⁸ Gilles Booquerat, “Ethnicity and Maoism in Nepal”, *Strategic Studies*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, Spring 2006, p. 79.

⁹ “Nepal Index”, available at: www.uni-wuerzburg.de/law, quoted in Fahmida Ashraf, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

let us form Revolutionary Civil Liberty Committee”, published in the pamphlet issued at the occasion of the formation of the party.¹⁰ The Communist Party was not granted legal status by the government. It, however, continued to oppose the autocratic rule in the country. As observed by Dr. Chitra K. Tiwari,

The communist movement in Nepal that appeared after the formation of the Communist Party emerged as an intellectual opposition to Nepali Congress's policy of compromise. A few communist leaders 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 participating intellectuals in this movement had comprised of upper caste Brahmin, Chhetri and Newar (BCN).¹¹

Furthermore, past movements by the communists and others were basically the movements against BCN ruling elite by the BCN non-ruling elite and there was always a scope of mediation and compromise due to network of family relations. However, since the inception of Maoist movement, the scenario has changed. There is a great level of participation of people from lower castes, especially the untouchable that made it difficult to resolve certain issues due to the particular mind-set of ruling elite.¹²

Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist

The origin of present day Maoists can be traced from CPN's Fourth Convention in 1975. The Convention strongly advocated the removal of absolute monarchy. For nearly ten years, the Fourth Convention represented the radical left in Nepal. The top leaders like Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Maoist supremo called as Prachanda), Dr. Baburam Bhattarai and other well-known leaders came from the Communist Party. By the time of the political change in 1990, the CPN-Mashal had been founded with Prachanda as the General Secretary. The CPN-Mashal got together with other factions to fight the general election of 1991 and floated a political wing, the Samyukta Jana Morcha (United People's Front) whose Chairman was Baburam Bhattarai. The United People's Front (UPF) emerged as the third major party in the Nepalese parliament. However, it split into two following the radicalization of the revolutionary wing, and in 1995, Prachanda

¹⁰ “History of Communist Party of Nepal”, available at: www.cpunml.org/history, accessed on 30 November 2009.

¹¹ Chitra K. Tiwari, “Maoist insurgency in Nepal: Internal Dimension”, South Asia Group Analysis Papers, Paper No. 187, available at: www.southasiaanalysis.org, accessed on 10 March 2009.

¹² *Ibid.*

and Baburam Bhattraï formed the Maoist faction of the Communist Party of Nepal.¹³

Jana Yudh (People's War) - the Maoist Insurgency

After its inception, the CPN-Maoist remained underground for almost one year and on 12 February 1996, they proclaimed 'Jana Yudh' seeking to destroy the autocracy and establishing people's government. The Maoists had presented a 40-point document of demands in early February to the then government headed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. These demands included drafting of a new constitution, declaring Nepal a secular state, abrogation of number of treaties, including Mahakali Treaty with India, fulfillment of socio-economic requirements of poor classes, nationalization and redistribution of land and property.¹⁴ The Maoists gave a deadline of 17 February 1996 to the government to fulfill these demands. However, five days before the deadline the armed clashes broke out.¹⁵ The insurgency was neither a temporary nor an ordinary phenomenon as it survived 10-year period. It challenged the authority of the King aiming to bridge the ethnic and state-society divide. Ideologically, it was not strong but politically it was well-organized, which not only emerged as a force but changed the dynamics and entire context of politics in Nepal. Their struggle undoubtedly was violent and challenged the state's writ. However, for the beneficiaries and supporters it was the manifestation of revolutionary change in Nepal.

The organizational structure of CPN-Maoist had two fronts - the political front and the military front. The political front was responsible to create awareness about the communist ideology among common masses. The Maoist force comprised of socially segregated people, unemployed and mostly uneducated youth of 15-18 years and suppressed women. The guerillas used the military techniques of Mao Tse Tung, and were also trained on the strategies of the Chinese Military strategist 'Sanju'.¹⁶ The forests and mountainous range were best used by the guerillas to hide in. The military front had comprised of around 5000 armed personnel, including militia.¹⁷

¹³ Deepak Thapa, "Maoist insurgency", *The Frontier Post* (Peshawar), 21 September 2001.

¹⁴ Deepak Thapa (ed.), *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, Kathmandu, Martin Chautari, 2003, pp. 391, quoted in "South Asia Intelligence Review", available at: www.satp.org, accessed on 12 March 2010.

¹⁵ Deepak Thapa, "Maoist insurgency", *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Anju Alex, "Maoists of Nepal", available at: www.nepalcentral.com/maoists.html, accessed on 22 February 2010.

¹⁷ "UML report on Maoists, 2001", available at: www.nepalcentral.com/maoists.html, accessed on 30 November 2009.

King Birendra, considering the Maoist attacks as terrorism and law and order problem, ordered the police only to deal with the rebellion. He was against deploying the RNA to counter the attacks. A series of clashes between the Maoist guerillas and police and law enforcement agencies began and claimed more than 4000 lives till early 2001. The Maoists had started insurgency from the western districts of Rolpa and Rukum, and by 2003 they had gained control of 68 out total 75 districts in Nepal, while rest of the districts were also affected by the fighting. The influence of the Maoists was the strongest in the economically and socially deprived northern and western parts of the country.¹⁸ They established regional governments and local courts restricting the control of Kathmandu authorities to districts capitals.¹⁹

Support from Locals

Some analysts identify social segregation as having a role in generating support for Maoists, some identify unemployment and poverty as a reason for locals to join Maoists, and to some it was ethnic and political marginalization of large sections of society that generated support for the insurgents. Largely Maoists attempted to mobilize grievances by appealing to ethnic communities suffering discrimination. The movement had also a strong support base among rural women because of Maoists' focus on agenda of women's rights.²⁰ The Maoists promised self-rule and autonomy to various ethnic groups and influence to join their movement. Moreover, as part of their 40-point demand draft, they had stressed upon the end to the caste system and untouchability of dalits once and for all.²¹ The Maoists' main support forces consist of Magars, Tharus, Janjatis (Gurungs, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Dalits), Brahmins and Chhetris - the last two also provided political and military leadership.²²

As in the case of conflicts in many other parts of the world, Nepalese society was largely divided on the issue of Maoist insurgency. If a large section of society was supporting Maoists, on the one hand, then on the other, almost equal was the number of pro-king people who were opposing the insurgency and had termed the violent actions by Maoists as terrorist activities. Some people however, held neutral views.

¹⁸ Segufta Hossain, "Maoist People's War in Nepal: Issues and Concerns", *BISS Journal*, Dhaka, Vol. 27, No. 1, January 2006, p. 26.

¹⁹ Stuart Gordon, "Evaluating Nepal's integrated "security" and "development" policy", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLV, No. 4, July/August 2005, p. 581.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

²¹ Segufta Hossain, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Sources of Arms Supply

In the beginning of their armed struggle, Maoists had no real weaponry. Gradually, they started making their own muskets, snatching licensed shotguns and other weapons from local residents and capturing 303 rifles from the police. Later on, they enhanced their arsenal, primarily by capturing weapons from the security forces, including sophisticated automatic weapons, explosives and mortars. They also purchased arms, in particular from the black market in Indian state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.²³ They had concentrated on buying detonators, explosives and bullets rather than guns. The Maoists had skilled bomb-makers who initially made some types of homemade explosives and gradually became more skilled in electronically detonated landmines.²⁴

Support from International Allies

Nepalese Maoists are believed to have links with India's People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Coordination Centre (MCC), which are active in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar.²⁵ Moreover, the Crisis Group Asia Report, 2007, identified two groups as important in providing international backing for the Maoists - Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM) and Coordinating Committee of Maoist Parties and Organizations of South Asia (COMPOSA). The RIM considers itself the custodian of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism's guiding principles. It was established in 1984 by groups in China wishing to protect Mao Zedong's legacy. The CPN-Maoist is only RIM member whose aim of revolution has been put into practice. On the other hand, COMPOSA was formed in 2001 by nine Maoist outfits from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The Nepalese Maoists have played a significant role in its leadership.²⁶

Changing Agenda of Maoists

At the start of People's War, the Maoists' agenda was to overthrow monarchy and bring 'new democracy', which will give way to socialism and ultimately communism. However, with the prolonged conflict and change in socio-political context, they reviewed their agenda and focused on three policies - a constituent assembly; democratic republic; and a multi-party system.²⁷ The change in their agenda was inevitable as after eight years of struggle, they had started losing

²³ "Nepal's Maoists: Their aims, structure and strategy", The International Crisis Group, *Asia Report*, No. 104, 27 October 2005, quoted in *ibid*.

²⁴ Segufta Hossain, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁵ Anju Alex, *op. cit.*

²⁶ "Nepal's Maoists: Purists or Pragmatists?", The International Crisis Group, *Asia Report*, No. 132, 18 May 2007, available at: www.crisisgroup.org, accessed on 13 April 2009.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

public support. People wanted Maoists to put down arms and to help establish what they have been calling the 'people's government'.

Post-Royal Massacre, Political Changes and the Insurgency

By 2001, the insurgency had been advanced and had spread to most parts of the country. The CPN-Maoist established its People's Liberation Army comprising thousands of Maoist soldiers. In June 2001, in a bizarre event King Birendra along with the Queen and some other family members were massacred in the Royal Palace, allegedly by Crown Prince Dipendra, who shot himself as well after shooting his family. It was not only an unfortunate event but also changed the course of politics in Nepal in the coming years.

Late King Birendra's brother, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah was crowned as the King of Nepal, although he was considered responsible for the Royal massacre. In dealing with Maoist insurgents, after a short period of ceasefire and negotiations, King Gyanendra called out full force of the Royal Nepalese Army against the Maoists - an option late King Birendra had never opted for.²⁸ The deployment of Army only led the situation from bad to worse as Maoists were not deterred by the Army and their movement kept advancing. The following years saw intense political rift among political elite and other political parties on political reforms and government's inability to deal with the Maoist problem. The insurgency by then had spread to all districts of Nepal, only excluding Kathmandu.

The following years saw a clear picture: a state within a state in Nepal. On the one hand, 'new organs of power' grew up. Maoists established people's courts involving the villagers to settle disputes. Child marriage was made illegal and discrimination against so-called lower castes was banned following which young people began to choose their partners without reference to caste. The production and sale of alcohol was restricted. Women had been provided with a right of due share in property.²⁹ On the other hand, the insurgents committed gross human rights violations, including kidnapping, indiscriminate bombings, torture and rape. Moreover, the Nepalese military was also found involved in arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, torture, rape, and targeting of civilian population.³⁰

²⁸ "The 12th Anniversary of the People's War in Nepal and its unsettled outcome", *Revolution No. 121*, February 2008, available at: <http://revcom.us>, accessed on 13 April 2009.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Segufta Hossain, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Royal Coup 2005

The conflict continued to escalate and the government increased raids on Maoists and in exchange armed attacks between the Maoists and the Army increased the number of casualties. Alongside domestic uproar over government's inability to control civil crisis, there was an outside pressure as well on King Gyanendra to establish government's writ and to introduce democratic reforms. Political parties appeared divided on the issue of Maoists and were also demanding political reforms. Faced with real political upheaval and apparently unable to manage with it, King Gyanendra dissolved the parliament and instituted direct 'emergency rule' of the King in February 2005. The leaders of political parties were put under house arrest and severe clashes broke out between the Army and the Maoist rebels. Furthermore, the King orchestrated municipal polls which were not accepted by the people.³¹

The Royal coup came as a blow to the already battered politics in Nepal. It provided the revolutionaries with a stronger reason to continue their fight against the 250-year old monarchy more aggressively. They had been able to secure support from some other parties and hence seven major parties of Nepal went under an agreement with the Maoists. The alliance named Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) and CPN-Maoist resolved to join hands against the monarch for some common goals such as resumption of the parliament and democracy. For this, they concluded a 12-point understanding for *loktantra* (democracy), peace, forward thinking, and national independence. The understanding generated a nation-wide wave which completely defeated the settlements reached after the February polls. The understanding not only received national support from all quarters, but was also welcomed at the international level.³²

Loktantra Andolan: 2006 Civil Crisis

Under the 12-point agreement, the SPA launched nation-wide campaign and called for rallies and demonstrations against the absolute Royal rule. They demanded reinstatement of the parliament and restoration of multi-party system. By March 2006, the protests against the King turned into mass movement which was quite similar to that of *Jana Andolan* in 1990. Several analysts called the democratic movement *Jana Andolan II*. People from almost all walks of life participated in the protest rallies. General strike was observed in early May.³³ The country faced another wave of severe civil crisis. Government used strict measures against the protestors. Several people died in armed clashes between the Army and the protestors. However, the King was unable to suppress the mass

³¹ Available at: www.advocaynet.org, accessed on 12 March 2010.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *The News* (Karachi), 2 May 2006.

movement. In a 19-day long protest from 6-24 April 2006,³⁴ the King bowed to the pressure and announced to revive the parliament.

An interim government was established in May 2006.³⁵ In an unprecedented move, the parliament cut down the powers of the King, and the throne was made symbolic in role. A bill was adopted that included unanimous agreement on placing taxes on the royal family and its assets, ending the Raj Parishad (the Royal advisory council), declaring Nepal a secular country, not a Hindu Kingdom and scrapping the King's position as the Supreme Commander of the Royal Army. Moreover, the 'Royal' title was taken off from several institutions. The Kingdom was named Government of Nepal, and the RNA was named 'Nepali Army'. The interim government announced to hold elections for the Constituent Assembly in 2007.³⁶

End of Insurgency

Following the establishment of the interim government, the foremost concern was to settle the Maoist issue. The government held negotiations for the peaceful resolution of this issue. On 21 November 2006, the government and the Maoist leaders signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), ending the 10-year long insurgency.³⁷ Under the CPA, the Maoists agreed to continue with the peace process and conflict management. The parties resolved to reform Royal army and adopt a new constitution thereby instituting the process of democracy in Nepal.

4. Nepal: On the Road to Democracy

The abdication of the monarch followed by the general election was indeed a milestone in a country battered by almost 250-year rule of monarchy and the Maoist insurgency. For supporters of democracy in Nepal, it was an unprecedented event as they had hardly envisaged a 'monarch free' political system in Nepal. For international community on the other hand, it was undoubtedly a remarkable achievement by Nepalese people as they were the real force in making the *Loktantra Andolan* a success. As for Nepalese people, there were multiple reasons to participate in *Loktantra Andolan*. One, they had lost trust in the King, as King Gyanendra was already suspected of having involved in Royal massacre and then the Royal coup was strongly disapproved by large number of people. Moreover, King's inability to contain civil war also made people lose their faith in the throne. Second, the people wanted an end to the insurgency. They had been exposed to severe militancy for so many years and they were demanding the politics of rivalry and bloodshed to get over. Third, they had been motivated by the spirit of bringing change in their society. They wanted

³⁴ "Jana Andolan II", available at: www.himrights.org, accessed on 25 May 2010.

³⁵ *The News*, 3 May 2006.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 May 2006.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 November 2006.

the autocratic and instable political system to be replaced by democracy for they were in a dire need of socio-political emancipation.

Nepal's experience from monarchy to democracy has been a history of enduring contradictions. In addition, the years of insurgency were of bloodshed and political unrest. Keeping in view the complicated history of Nepal, the democratization of state and society seems to be a formidable task. The country that has always been under an authoritarian rule and where politics was dominated by the so-called upper caste political elite is predominantly undemocratic. To turn democratization into a reality, political will and commitment to peace are needed. With the general election and a multi-party political setup in place, Nepal was said to have been on the road to democracy. However, the resignations of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal in May 2009,³⁸ and the then Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal in June 2010,³⁹ have brought the country's newly democratic setup on the verge of turmoil. In Nepal, the process of democratization has yet to begin.

External Influences in Nepalese Politics

The external powers' influence in Nepalese politics has been regarded by certain quarters as one of the major destabilizing factors. Geographically, Nepal is sandwiched between two regional giants-India and China. Politically, since the departure of the British from the region, India, China and the US have influenced Nepalese politics in which India has always been viewed as patronizing the Palace.

India as a Factor in Nepalese Politics

India has been the key external player in Nepalese politics. Several quarters view political instability in Nepal as a result of Indian involvement and dominance in the country's politics. The monarchs have always been supported by the Indian government. Since the inception of People's War, Indian government explicitly expressed its anti-Maoist stand as the country itself faces the Maoist problem inside its land. The Nepalese government was also provided by India with weaponry against the Maoists. It is due to the consistent support from India to the Royal Palace that discriminatory treaties like the Mahakali Treaty (water treaty) between Nepal and India were not objected by the Nepalese government. Anti-king elements, including Maoists always raised voice against such issues and the Indian involvement in Nepalese politics. Not only India's role has been crucial in every major political change and the sustenance of such changes that Nepal has witness since the late 1940s, but many believe that it also

³⁸ *Dawn* (Pakistan), 5 May 2009.

³⁹ Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 30 June 2009, accessed on 12 April 2010.

played a central role in the collapse of the Royal regime in 1990.⁴⁰ India also stopped supply of weapons to the RNA following the Royal coup in 2005.

Apparently, India calls for 'independent and democratic' Nepal. However, constitutional monarchy is what India has always favoured for Nepal. Moreover, any assertion by Kathmandu is taken as anti-Indian stand. The dependency of Nepalese people on India, their relationship, the close people-to-people contacts make Nepal India's natural ally but the country must have the right to decide about the fate of its people and its territory without any external influence.⁴¹

China as a Factor in Nepalese Politics

China views political and economic stability in Nepal imperative to regional stability as it serves as a buffer between China and India. Nepal also has been careful to maintain friendly relationship with China both for economic and political reasons and also to counterbalance Indian predominance in the country. It has also been the recipient of tacit but significant arms supply from China. For certain political changes, such as the institution of Panchayat system, the Nepalese government had the consent of Chinese government along with Indian support.⁴² Chinese government never owned the Nepalese Maoists as the followers of their revolutionary leader Mao Tse Tung. Instead, Beijing always stood by Nepalese monarch against the Maoists fighters. Following the Royal coup in 2005, Chinese government continued its arms supply to Nepal even when Indian government had stopped arms supply to RNA.⁴³ However, Chinese role in Nepalese politics does not supersede Indian influence. Some sections in Nepalese leadership strongly favour close ties with China.

It was a tradition for every new Nepalese government to pay a courtesy visit to New Delhi. However, unlike his predecessors, Prime Minister Dahal had started off by visiting Beijing. The Chinese government, on the other hand, not only limited its contacts to the Maoist rulers in Kathmandu, but it also approached leaders from across political spectrum.⁴⁴ With the change in the government once again, the tilt of Nepalese government is expected to remain towards India but Kathmandu is also likely to keep closer ties with China to counterbalance New Delhi's influence in future.

⁴⁰ Rabindra Mishra, "India's key role in Nepal affairs", 22 November 2005, available at: <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk>, accessed on 6 May 2010.

⁴¹ Vidya Bhushan Rawat, "New democracy in Nepal", 28 August 2008, available at: www.countercurrents.org, accessed on 10 April 2010.

⁴² *Encyclopedia Britannica, op. cit.*, p. 782.

⁴³ Available at: <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk> accessed on 7 May 2010.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

US Role in Nepalese Politics

The US foreign policy interests in Nepal 'seek to prevent the collapse of Nepal which, should it become a failed state, could provide operational or support territory for terrorists.' The US became Nepal's first bilateral aid donor in January 1951 and has since contributed more than 1.4 billion dollars bilaterally or multilaterally to Kathmandu.⁴⁵ The US support to Nepalese government has mostly been non-military assistance, though the country provided Nepal with light weaponry and other military assistance in its fight against the Maoists. The CPN-Maoist has been listed as Other Terrorist Organization by the US. During People's War, 'strengthening Nepal to prevent a Maoist takeover was key to achieving US regional and bilateral goals'.⁴⁶ Moreover, the US apparently supported India in taking a lead role in the situation in Nepal in the wake of takeover by the King in 2005.⁴⁷ The political elite also tends to believe in providing more space for influence to India in Nepal against China.

5. Emerging Realities and Challenges to Democracy

Apparently, Nepal has transcended the authoritarian barrier in its politics. However, there are some emerging realities that define the course of politics in Nepal today. Along with that, the challenges to the system pose a threat to the smooth activity of newly established 'democratic' setup. For many analysts, the idea of democracy itself is a challenge to take its roots in unequal societies like Nepal.

Democracy today is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere in the world it is upheld as an ideal and yet nowhere is there enough of it... there is dissatisfaction with its operation. No doubt this is partly to do with the inherent difficulties of institutionalizing 'rule by the people' in complex and unequal societies....⁴⁸

The foremost is the legal power and emancipation of the Maoists. The party that had been recognized as a 'militant' or 'terrorist' group was elected to rule and then within nine months its government was dissolved. The Maoists, during the insurgency, had got hold of almost every region in the country. And now again, they have been protesting against the government which is at large a destabilizing factor. Secondly, ethnic minorities have learned lessons from Maoists' experience and they also are raising their voices for socio-political emancipation. This factor can become a force of instability for a democratic

⁴⁵ Bruce Vaughn, 'Nepal: Background and US relations', *CRS Report for Congress*, February 2006, available at: www.fas.org, accessed on 30 November 2009.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ A. Agarwal, C. Britt and K. Kanel, *Decentralization in Nepal: A Comparative Analysis*, Oakland: ICS Press, 1999, quoted in David Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu (eds.), *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2008, p. 13.

setup. Thirdly, there is a great change in the approach of vast majority of people. No matter how divided their opinion might be on certain socio-political issues but as a political system vast majority wants only democratic government in place. The inability of the government in bringing socio-economic stability in the country or reversal to the old-styled autocratic regime can have drastic consequences. Fourthly, the international community is seeking 'a new Nepal' to deal with and expecting the government to institute some concrete strategy for democracy-related reforms in the country.

As discussed earlier, a country like Nepal that has been predominantly undemocratic, institution of democratic system is actually a beginning of a crucial era where the state is faced with several challenges. The challenges that the government faces, during the course of democratization, seem difficult to be dealt with as the former Prime Minister Dahal had been quoted as saying that 'running a country is harder than running a guerilla war'.⁴⁹ Following the resignation of Prime Minister of Nepal in June in 2010, the foremost challenge now appears to be the election of a new Prime Minister. Twelve rounds of parliamentary polls have been conducted but in vain. The parliament has been unable to elect a prime minister. As a result, there appeared a political vacuum and political instability continues.

The second fundamental challenge for the government is to evolve a consensus on the draft of a new constitution. Initially, following the formation of the democratic government, the elected leaders were given 30-month time to promulgate a new constitution with the national consensus. Then the deadline was extended with a fresh one when the Constituent Assembly (CA) was to draft a new constitution by 28 May 2010, which it failed to meet.⁵⁰ Several domestic issues mar the progress on the new constitution as leaders appear less competent, and there is fundamental disagreement among them on various issues. The devolution of power must be given prime consideration in the debate over the new constitution and leaders must be rational in deciding upon the issue of devolution of power constitutionally.

Third challenge is the question of the PLA. According to the CPA, members of the PLA were to be included in the Nepalese army or to find new jobs. However, progress on the management of Maoist combatants remained stagnant. Currently, around 24,000-strong PLA is corralled under the UN supervision and the national army.⁵¹ The devolution, demobilization and decommissioning of Maoist cadres remains a crucial issue. The PLA members are well-trained and have access to arms; thus the Nepalese society is still vulnerable to ethnic and

⁴⁹ *The Economist* (London), 28 March-3 April 2009.

⁵⁰ Nishchal Nath Pandey, "Nepal: What Next?", available at: www.ipcs.org/articles, accessed on. 1 June 2010.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

political differences. Moreover, the Nepalese Army wants PLA members entirely disarmed.⁵² The integration process has, however, failed to reach any logical conclusion with every initiative stalled by the lack of consensus among the political parties and their growing mistrust.⁵³ In the long run, this issue, if not managed in time, is going to create trouble for the process of democratization.

Fourth, the loyalty of Nepalese army to the throne is still a critical issue. Constitutionally, the role of the RNA was to defend and respect the throne. The RNA has never been assertive as a military force prior to King Gyanendra's ruling to use military actions against the Maoists. The RNA has a strong role in supporting the throne and to maintain a pro-king lobby. Question arises about their reliability and loyalty whether the once pro-king force will be equally loyal to the democratic leadership. Moreover, keeping in view the past role of the RNA, the reintegration of the PLA with the national army seems to be a difficult task. The government needs to be cautious enough in dealing with this challenge because it holds great potential of turning into a conflict.

Fifth, Nepal has a multi-ethnic and traditionalist society where social fabric is designed on caste-based norms and values. Since the time of insurgency, ethnic minorities and minor castes were ensured equal rights and social emancipation after the establishment of democratic setup. The fact remains that politics in Nepal has always been dominated by a few socio-ethnic groups. The participation of different minorities in governance and decision making process becomes an important aspect of democratic system. In the past, these minorities have been assured of socio-political representation on an equal basis but it was rarely implemented.⁵⁴ Elimination of discrimination against ethnic minorities and regional rights to self-determination must be considered as the foremost task by the government, otherwise any further discrimination or suppression of rights may cause violence and instability.

Sixth, the Nepalese society has badly been exposed to arms and armaments during the course of ten-year long insurgency. Especially the youth is now quite fascinated with the idea of use of force in order to fulfill their demands. Disarming the Maoist cadres and also the whole society is a real task. The United Nations is supporting the Nepalese government in the management of PLA cadres; however, this is a problem that has been ingrained in Nepalese society.⁵⁵ Following the dissolution of Maoist government and the protests by the Maoists against the new government, the PLA cadres came out of their cantonments and

⁵² Segufta Hossain and M. Jasim Uddin, "Political Developments in Nepal, 2006-07: An Assessment", *BIISS Journal*, Dhaka, Vol. 28, No. 3, July 2007, p. 319.

⁵³ "South Asia Intelligence Review", Vol. 8, No. 45, 17 May 2010, available at: www.satp.org, accessed on 20 May 2010.

⁵⁴ Hossain and Uddin, *op.cit.* p., 316.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

assaulted locals, especially in Kailali District.⁵⁶ The show and use of arms by the PLA cadres not only pose a threat to the fragile democratic setup, but the very presence of great number of arms in the society is a constant threat to security and political stability in the country. Moreover, it increases the risk of any potential conflict in the conflict prone local districts. There is a need for a concrete strategy by a government to be in place to deal with this challenge as well.

Lastly, the permanence and preservation of peace process is also a challenge. The CPA is largely respected, owned and so far followed by the political leaders and the Maoists themselves. However, since the time the Maoist prime minister has resigned, the country has faced yet another spate of protests and strikes. Difference of opinion and lack of consensus on all the pressing issues among coalition parties is bringing them to a standoff. Conscious and careful efforts are required to encourage a long-lasting peace process in order to maintain democracy.

6. Conclusion: Whither Democracy in Nepal?

Democracy refers to a system that is established on the basis of plurality, equality, justice and freedom for all. It is characterized as a system that intends to eliminate social exclusion, discrimination and injustice from socio-political practices. For countries where democracy is instituted through revolution or transition from autocratic regime, democratization of state and society brings several challenges and thus proves to be a formidable task than a mere change.

In Nepal, keeping in view the challenges that the country is faced with in the course of establishing democratic system, the future of democracy remains to be vulnerable. The country experienced enduring centralized socio-political system under monarchy for decades. There are several other factors as well due to which the country suffered systematic underdevelopment, poverty and political instability. Now there is a conscious effort on part of the people and leaders to promote democracy in Nepal. For the Nepalese, this must not be considered as only the beginning of a new era but it is the beginning of the real task. If abolition of monarchy was a challenge, so is the establishment of democracy. Not only challenges but several risk factors are also involved. State and society both need reforms in entirety. A slight mishandling of the system or miscalculation of policies may have grave consequences. To maintain and promote the democratic trend, responsibility lies with both government and society. The government needs to dissolve their differences and work in harmony. People, on the other hand need to own the system, shun the practices of discrimination based on castes and ethnic backgrounds, and develop adaptability to the newer norms. Democracy in Nepal can only work and sustain if both leaders and people turn sincere and demonstrate political will to bring the real change by strengthening democratic setup.

⁵⁶ "South Asia Intelligence Review", Vol. 8, No. 45, *op. cit.*