



Nepal's unfinished revolution

Uncertainty looms in Himalayan nation as government's extension of constituent assembly is struck down by court.

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Almost six years after the beginning of a people's revolution which overthrew Nepal's 240-year-old monarchy, political stability and economic progress still elude this small South Asian nation of 29 million inhabitants.

Two basic tasks - the writing of the new constitution and the completion of the peace process - have been delayed since the 2008 formation of a constituent assembly, reportedly due to distrust and differences among and between the major parties.

After four extensions - and as many prime ministers - the assembly, which doubles as parliament, has been under huge pressure to come up with at least a rough draft of a constitution by the deadline of Sunday, May 27.

Leaders of major political parties joined a government of national unity under Maoist Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai in the first week of May, and last week reached an agreement on the contentious issues of federalism and the future form of government.

However, the deal, which called for a directly elected president and a prime minister indirectly elected by parliament, was unclear on the division of power between the state and the country's regions - a topic which has polarised Nepali politics.

Thousands of Nepalis have hit the streets in recent weeks to voice their opposition to **LANKMARK DATES** the proposals of the fledgeling unity government, demanding a federal structure along ethnic lines. There are more than 100 ethnic groups - speaking some 90 languages - in a country slightly larger than the US state of Arkansas, and some have demanded indigenous recognition and autonomous provinces.

In the wake of the nationwide backlash, the Bhattarai government decided to extend the term of constituent assembly for a further three months, ostensibly to study popular grievances.

But this week, just three days before the May 27 deadline, the Supreme Court struck down the extension - sending

the country into a fresh political crisis.

The initial euphoria of the 2006 uprising, which came after a bloody, decade-long civil war between Maoist forces and the state, has since dissipated, with many in the ravaged nation feeling let down by the political class.

The promise of revolution has failed to make a dent in Nepal's rampant poverty. An increasing number of young people have been forced to travel thousands of kilometres from their homeland in search of jobs.

"All these years, after the revolution, what has changed for common people like us?" asked Khem Bahadur Thapa, a Nepali who works as a security guard in Qatar, who asked that his real name not be used.

"There is no hope for me in Nepal," he told Al Jazeera. "I have been forced to work outside the country because of lack of opportunities in my own country."

The dearth of jobs has forced more than three million Nepalis out of the country. These include many Nepali women who are trafficked across the border, reportedly into brothels in neighbouring India.

It is not just the financial insecurity that worries Thapa. "I visit my country every two years. My wife eloped, leaving behind my two-year-old daughter, but I could not afford to go back home," Thapa said.

"Who will look after my daughter? I feel so helpless," he said.

Sagging economy

Economic activity has been sliding down the slopes of this impoverished Himalayan nation, in part due to political bickering and party politics.

Thapa's personal tragedy is lost in a daily quest for survival in a country where more than a quarter of the population live on less than one dollar a day.

"Post-revolution Nepal has been beset with political quagmire," Chandan Sapkota, a researcher at South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment, told Al Jazeera.

"[The] government came up with industrial policies in 2010, but none of them have been implemented so far," said Sapkota, a trade and economics specialist.

"The uncertainty has had a bearing on the economy. The foreign direct investment in the country is very low. It was a meagre \$39m in 2010 - Bangladesh, in comparison, attracted nearly \$1bn."

And there seems to be little hope of economic revival in the short-term.

"Trade unions have burgeoned," said Sapkota. "Many of them have become a political tool in the hands of the political parties. There are 286 trade unions, of which 86 came up just last year."

"Many multinational companies, like Colgate-Palmolive and Wal-Mart, **withdrew** their operations from the country due to **labour issues**."

Yuburaj Ghimire, a political commentator based in Kathmandu, echoed Sapkota's sentiments on trade unions: "After 2006, industry has not been revived and coercive **strikes** have further worsened the economic outlook."

"Maoists destroyed [a] whole lot of infrastructure across the country. As a result, tourism - one of the key sectors - suffered," he told Al Jazeera.

Revolving-door governments seem to have made the situation even worse, resulting in a lack of clarity on major political and economic issues.

The major political parties - the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), and Madhesi blocs (which represent southern areas) - have been divided on almost all major issues.

"Politicians' entire focus has been to grab power, and politics is bereft of any ideology and agenda," Ghimire told Al Jazeera.

Anurag Acharya, a young Nepali journalist at the *Nepali Times* newspaper, said: "Politics in Nepal is highly polarised, with radical left pitted against liberal and centrist positions."

"We need somebody to rise above party politics and take along all dissenting voices under one umbrella."

Lack of political consensus

But what has prevented parties from arriving at a consensus on major political issues?

"The political parties did not do enough homework," said Krishna Khanal, a professor at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University.

"Nepali politics is complex, as there are diverse political groups with differing opinions on vexed issues like constitution writing and [the] peace process, and what has further made things difficult is that no political formation has absolute majority," he said.

Ghimire blamed the Maoists for the current political deadlock.

The Maoists, who have emerged as the largest force in post-revolution Nepal, pushed to abolish the monarchy and declared Nepal a republic in 2008.

"The sudden removal of King [Gyanendra] created a void in Nepali politics, leading to the collapse of the authority of the state," Ghimire said.

"The 2006 peoples' movement ended on a conciliatory note: the King would have declared elections and the constituent assembly would have decided the future of Nepal. But Maoists forced the ousting of the monarchy."

Ever since Bhattarai first came to power in August 2011, the peace process has started again to slowly move forward.

The process, which involves making decisions on the fate of about 19,000 Maoist combatants stationed in cantonments, seems to be on track as the Nepali army appears to have shown some flexibility and pragmatism.

In February, about 7,000 former Maoist troopers chose to retire voluntarily, while most of the remaining 9,700 have opted to be integrated into the Nepal Army in a specially created division. That number, however, reportedly dropped to fewer than 5,000 - over the issue of the ranks at which they were to be commissioned.

Not only are the Maoists the country's largest political force after they joined mainstream politics, they have also pushed for their fighters to either be integrated into the army or duly compensated for laying down arms.

Some political parties, especially Congress and the Communist party, have been wary of folding armed groups with particular political loyalties into a non-partisan professional national force.

"If you endorse a unit integration of political cadres, other parties may also demand the same," said Acharya - who added that he welcomed the integration as a political compromise.

There are already calls for quotas in the army to make it more representative of the nation's complex ethnic makeup. The Madhesi political bloc, for example, which has long complained of under-representation in the army, has already demanded quotas for people from their region.

Public debates have been noisy, and at times slanted by regional and ethnic lines - but by now, as many Nepalis realise, building the bridges of democracy will be as difficult as dismantling the foundations of monarchy.

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