

Democracy at stake

I can't articulate this fully because I still don't know enough, but caste functions something like what we call race in America. There are poor Brahmins and wealthy people who came from nothing. But the mark and habits of caste still ring. Fighting the caste system, the Maoists do not engage in demagoguery against the privileged castes. In place of feudal entitlement, where chauvinistic rules kept state and military jobs in the hands of the privileged, the Maoists have already declared autonomous national territories as part of a federal democratic republic. Their own top leadership is largely from what have been those same privileged castes. The changes they demand are, among other things, exactly to end of that system of straight-up exclusion.

Blocking a constitution through parliamentary tricks (or some form of putsch) in the capital would threaten not only counteraction by the Maoists, but popular uprisings with their own characteristics from the peoples most to benefit from constitution that is secular in fact as well as word. Any effort of the old structure to perpetuate itself will be broadly seen for a direct attack on Nepal's heretofore excluded peoples. Kathmandu hosts the broken constituent assembly, but the crisis is national.

Complaints from the privileged have the same ring as racial paranoids in America, who still think America is a "white republic", and that any check on their prerogatives are the end of the world. Upper class advocacy groups using identity politics claim that a federal republic will "disintegrate" Nepal, missing the way enfranchisement brings a genuine patriotism that can't be faked, or glossed over by rulers speaking in the name of all.

Resentment isn't the currency of the communists. There isn't demagoguery whipping people up against productive national capitalists or the privileged castes. The comprador bourgeoisie, the type who make money selling the rest of the country out to India, and feudal landlords are feeling the heat. Even there the point is to change the power arrangement not "go get 'em".

The argument for a federalization itself, and its democratic potential, has been wildly popular. Nepalese people are patriotic, no doubt. But they also have a two major religions, a southern Tarai region that was totally excluded from self-determination and dozens of language groups. No other social demand has so frightened the formerly entitled as the Maoist insistence on a federal democratic republic, but attempts to use religion or communal fear have not worked as well in Nepal as India, where Hindutva fascists have an unfortunate mass base in many areas.

The Maoists do not agitate against religion or the religious. They are rational and atheist in a deeply faithful country. Not

surprising since Buddha was born in Nepal and wasn't himself so much for the hocus pocus end of religious practice. The Maoists credit Buddha with introducing atheism in one of their articles. From that position of respect, they advocate for science, technology and Marx's dialectical materialist understanding of the world. They want schools to be public to educate everyone, not the largely private financial rackets they still are here for all but the wealthy. Commitment to science, innovation and human dignity will serve them well.

The People's Liberation Army adopted the Geneva Conventions just about the time our own country tore them up. They built base areas in the countryside and advanced towards the capital. For their success, the Maoists have been largely ignored by the very people who should be shouting from the rafters that a revolutionary internationalist, secular and people-based movement has caught fire in the Himalayan mountains.

Great powers are allied against this revolution. India, the United States and the entire disinformation machinery we call mainstream media (from left to right) has insisted that communism is done. And can be killed in silence should it raise its face. Here people are doing it. And it is those people who need honest solidarity, which more than anything means letting the world know what is happening.

If the mass media won't show what is happening, I hope someone is writing it on the walls. There are less than three months until the deadline for the constitution. There is no center to hold. Word must get out.

I know folks want a lot of local color, or novel dish of some sort. It is so different here and people are really so much the same. Laughter. Silliness. What the world calls football. For myself, I have laughed every day and cried a few times, which reminds me of nothing so much as my mother, who could laugh and cry at the same time, and who loved a good fight.

So yes, I am impressed. I'm no fortune teller. Who knows how things will go. The Maoists have a track record that has won them the respect of their countrymen. They are self-critical of communist history and determined to solve those real problems through advance and not retreat. They don't want to be the new boss. They want communism, socialism and a New Democracy for Nepal. And it's good to hear, what we can do and not what we have to accept.

Peace to the street, war on the palace.

Jed Brandt

P.S.: Did I mention that nobody in Nepal even knows who Glenn Beck is?

Jed's writings are posted at:
jedbrandt.net

This essay is also available (with other key materials on Nepal's revolution):
kasamaproject.org

A Letter from Kathmandu

by Jed Brandt

March 7, 2010 - I can't leave home for a few weeks without everything going crazy.

It took a bit for my time to adjust, to see things as they are coming here and where they're coming from. Not the instant back-and-forth rhythm of New York multi-tasking anxiety time. Most days the electricity is out in Kathmandu. You can hear chickens in the morning, children playing after school and quiet talk at night when the old women laugh and call across the rooftops. Blackouts make working a computer hard, but the pace of people living by hands and minds alone, without so much mediation, is not a place I've ever spent much time. And I do love it here. The city is dirty. The people are upright, direct and curious. I've made friends quickly, though I've gotten the impression its easier to get married than find a date.

Kathmandu is a valley. The Tanglang range of the Himalaya is the wall in the sky that separates South Asia from the Tibetan plateau to the north. The white caps are breathtaking when you can see them. Pollution is horrible. Cars only arrived in Kathmandu 20 years ago. Most of the city is built for footpaths, but that doesn't stop every sort of vehicle from ripping through trying to cut around the traffic jams. It's some kind of anarchy on the streets. People complain about it, then go do it themselves. I've seen three people hit by cars, none of which stopped. Motorcycles are everywhere and drive as they want.

Did I mention there is a revolution going on?



We haven't seen a revolution in our lifetime. Not a communist revolution anyway, with broad support and participation sustained, growing over such a short period of time.

The Maoists are unorthodox, to be sure. They have defied everyone's expectations, friend and foe alike. To their credit, they haven't let their enemies tell them who they are or been confined to some historical script handed down by the Comintern in 1930-whatever. After a 10-year People's War,

I've only seen one traffic light and it wasn't lit. The daily load shedding blackout.

Exhaust just hangs in the valley, air still as often as not. Along the main roads, commuters and pedestrians alike wear face masks of all kinds to filter out what they can. In any large crowd you can hear coughing, men clearing their throats. The air only clears after rains, which are rare save for the summer monsoon. We did get hail the other day, which tore apart the beautiful aloe plant on the patio where I'm staying. It was a grand dame of an aloe, now pocked with holes as big as dimes.

I have been lucky to have met many children, a few of whom are also friends. I'm listening to Sade, Beirut and Alicia Keys. Drinking with the neighborhood guys on Holi, I got to name the cat from the bodega below Lucita. She is beautiful, with patches of silver and black tiger stripes mixing up her pure white coat. Holi morning, the young men came up the stairs of the building I'm staying in to ambush me on the roof with red powder and buckets of water. Then they hugged me and poured another bucket over my head. Holi is a water balloon fight that doesn't stop until they start throwing buckets of colorful water and raw pigment, red, green, blue and orange. Best holiday ever. Girls do get pretty soaked though, not so fun sometimes. It's an occasion for both carnival and hooliganism. Lots of laughing. I tried to ask the guys about the meaning of the holiday and they decided to pour tall glasses of khukuri rum. I do try to oblige.

starting in 1996, they grew exponentially among the rural people who make up the heart and body of Nepal.

People were fed up with the absolute poverty, a despotic monarchy and the whole system that didn't let them advance no matter how hard they worked. It was the Maoists who saw in that backwardness the semi-feudal, semi-colonial predicament of their country, a resonance they share for all the many other differences with pre-revolutionary China.

Millions cast their lot with the communist promise that it was they themselves who could fix what the ruling classes plainly didn't want to. Starting with two guns. Two guns. They neither sought nor accepted shady foreign sponsors and still brought a king down. That was people, and a determined, revolutionary leadership. Violence was not the issue.

"The masses are the makers of history," is how Mao put it, advice Prachanda's party apparently heard well.

When organized revolutionaries grew into a people who could not endure the old order, the very horizon of the possible shifted. The US state department calls that terrorism, and under Obama has continued to put the Maoist party on its list of certified terrorists even after they fought for and won Nepal's first democratic elections. Terror is not a word any honest person could use to describe what is happening here. People are unafraid, and if anything impatient things haven't gone further. The communists were transformed, and so were the broad masses of people. They said: "We had to unlearn our slogans to start the People's War," which meant, I think, that they are not disciples of doctrine, or simple prophets of rage. Terrorism is a politics of fear. The communists have fought a People's War, and their spirit is light.

For a new mainstream

Refusing offers to become another parliamentary party, who are widely despised for their profound corruption, the Maoists demanded nothing less than a constituent assembly to draft a constitution. Through the course of the People's War, despite flexibility on almost everything else, the Maoists never departed from this insistence. And they got that much. I tried to think what could happen if we had our own constituent assembly, a constitution not written by slave-traders to protect their own entitlement. It's not just radical in Nepal, this idea people constitute governments. It's as unheard of in Bloomberg's New York as in twisted hereditary monarchy of North Korea.

Red flags are everywhere. From the moment I arrived and everywhere I've been. They fly alongside Nepal's unique two-pointed flag at the national stadium. Set in rows along the fences of the National Army's central, public training grounds, all over. When I'm reading in restaurants, the times I've had a book by the Maoists, three different waiters have commented that they were the "real government." Prachanda is especially admired, since it was his leadership that broke the old patterns of impotent protest followed by corrupt cooptation.

No one will admit to liking Congress, but I've met supporters from the currently governing UML. Decent people. Reformist, if none to happy about the Maoists' initiative. Imagine Todd Gitlin merged in a lab with Gus Hall and you'll have some idea what creeps their top leaders are. That said, the regular activists are mostly the sort of NGO professionals we have back in the states. Well-suckled by the foundation tit, their method was to keep popular mobilization in the range of complaint and petition, and at the leading levels are not interested any change not brokered through their coffers.

The current prime minister from UML was unelected. He took the seat Prachanda vacated over the issue of whether the old royal army would accept civilian control, which is to say by the elected Maoists. Prachanda fired the former commander of the National Army, who refused to step down. The unelected "democratic" figures abided a soft coup, with the UML's leader

and the pro-Indian, ceremonial President Yadev prancing around these last few months as if they were a government. There is a fluid split between the careerists and the honest revolutionaries in the UML. How they will act when the chips are down is still not clear, not even to them.

I talked with one couple, the husband from a leading UML family and the wife with a significant government job directing cultural activities. The husband denounced the Maoists, who had not learned that liberal democracy was the only way the world could be, that even China had embraced capitalism. He said UML was not communist, despite their full name United Marxists and Leninists, but that it was "tradition." His wife smiled and said that many "patriots" were Maoists, though not her, and that while she was not herself any longer in the UML, she was hopeful for the future "no matter how it goes". I think the husband was embarrassed, which amused her, so he told me the Maoists had bombed his family home in the south a few years back. He had share croppers on his land. The Maoists apparently organized them to squat the same land. He lived in Kathmandu, earning income from from the tenant farmers and keeping a seasonal residence, while his child studied in at college out of the country.

It turned out that the Maoists included those farming on his land, and that when he went to talk with them they worked out a deal of some kind. I was kind of stunned that he just went and talked. "I knew them," he said. He still has his family home, now repaired. He's kind of sore about it. They did blow up part of his house, which rattled him no doubt.

Provocations and dress rehearsals

Nepal's revolution is not over. The old army, bureaucracy and foreign treaties are still in effect. That said, no work can be done without the sanction of the Maoists - not construction, not constitution or transportation throughout the length of the country. This is what Lenin called "dual power", not to be confused with the the sometimes usage by American radicals to mean oppositional mutual aid or serve-the-people programs. Here there are two armies and no real government, a situation of increasing pressure where one side or the other will decide to act decisively.

The government tried to smuggle in some arms and explosives after working out arrangements with the Indian government. They couldn't even sneak them in. Young Communist League members assembled 200 unarmed activists and blockaded the convoy. They alerted the UN and media, and in turn were attacked by armed police reinforcements. A few people were injured including a Maoist rep in the Constituent Assembly.



text and photos by Jed Brandt

What I picked up in that incident was that the Maoists have the organizational capacity to act, and that even the National Army and police may not be reliable should they be called out against the people. After all, how did these Maoists even know about the arms shipment arranged behind closed doors by the president, the unelected prime minister and the Indian military?

The UML Prime Minister said the weapons were for "training police." He didn't explain what kind of police work required explosives, wires and other bomb-making materials. Nor was this egregious violation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, supposedly providing for the constitutional framework, noted by the international press. It was certainly noticed here.

Should the current, unelected President Yadev and some section of the National Army attempt a military coup, backed by India, the Maoists are quite sure that the entire population would rise up. Since the first democratic uprising here in 1990, called Jana Andolan I through the People's War and up to the 2006 Jana Andolan II that overthrew the king, there are expectations of a breakthrough far beyond the ranks of committed revolutionary communists.

Not the old playbook

I've been surprised to find the complaints of some American radicals online, who are convinced that participating in elections and attempting to bring in the broadest range of support are some kind of sell out. The facts are these: the Maoists have made every effort to complete a democratic revolution, which ain't nothing, but have not limited themselves to what the semi-feudal, semi-colonial system can bear. They maintain their People's Liberation Army. The Young Communist League is the most powerful social action force in the country, unarmed but disciplined. The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) already left the government they were elected to lead rather than pretend that "representation" was enough when the National Army and bureaucracy resisted transformation and civilian control.

Prachanda, Bhattarai and the Maoist leadership already had the chance to become broker-politicians, and they said no thank you. They launched a war, they won an election and they left the government rather than fake it. Which brings us to now.

Audacious as can be, they returned to their base and have launched a series of mobilizations and public education forums that will escalate provided a constitution to their liking is not delivered. They are the largest party, the legal and extra-legal opposition to an unelected government wrapped around what's left of the deposed monarchy's state apparatus. The next major mobilization is for International Women's Day.

May 28 is the deadline for Nepal's constitution to be delivered. That doesn't look likely due to substantial interference from foreign powers and the parliamentary cretinism of the corrupt political class.

The only way it could come to pass is if the UML reformists (called here status quo-ists) were to unite with the Maoists. Leftist parties of one stripe or another won 62% of seats in the Constituent Assembly, enough to ratify a "people-centered" constitution. UML leaders Oli & PM Nepal have ruled that out unless the Maoists disband the PLA and YCL, which they say will not happen until the new constitution is ratified to their satisfaction and under their leadership, if at all. For its part, Nepal Congress party, formerly the parliamentary apparatus and spoils system of the monarchy, is utterly despised as a tool of India and the landlords. Congress received around 10% of the vote, act like king-makers and keep forgetting that crown lies in the gutter.

The terms are set and the time frame known.

May 28 - deadline for the constitution

Every event, each provocation and mobilization is about contesting the allegiance of the broad mass of people. Prachanda capped a training session for 5,000 cadre in the walled city of Bhaktapur that if a constitution isn't ratified to guarantee social transformation and national sovereignty that the people will revolt and that his party is prepared to lead it.

Nepalis are famously gentle people, which is not to say they don't fight. They are known throughout the world for that as well. Prachanda's name means, alternatively, "the fierce one" or "the awesome one." He's usually smiling, and shows emotion on his face. What stands out most about the Maoists isn't just their character. The world is full of upright people. These Maoists have looked back at previous attempts to build socialism and learned uncommon lessons.

What they've come up with, and this has been noted in every conversation I've had, is that without revolution coming from the conscious activity of the most oppressed, the working people and democratic intellectuals freed up from the feudal autocracy, communism would not be worth the word. That's what they learned from 20th Century socialism, and its good to hear from the leaders and member of a communist party contending for power.

This is something I may have hoped for, glimmers of it got me here. But the depth of that commitment, among cadre and common people alike, it is still startling. I could get used to it, I think the world could, too. Nepal is confirming to me that all rumors to the contrary, people aren't stupid. When they can stand on their own feet, organize and fight: people will embrace a force that gives them dignity and refuses the narrow confines of "what's in it for me and mine." Their secret weapon is their open spirit, which are my words, not theirs; and true nonetheless.