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The Way-Out:

What is the “Nikas” (way-out) from the current quagmire in Nepal? How can the political parties contain or diffuse the Maoist insurgency? Is democracy under greater threat from the King or the Maoists?

Ram Sharan Mahat, Ph.D., Pradip Nepal, Pashupati Shamsheer Rana, Minendra Rijal, Ph.D., and Pari Thapa*

Ram Sharan Mahat, Ph.D.: *The crown must confine itself constitutionally. The political parties will support a genuine constitutional monarchy.* Pradip Nepal: *Political extremists are surfacing now because mistakes in governing the country after 1990. Unhealthy rivalries between the ruling and the opposition parties, distrust, and totalitarianism were the political refuse that prevailed during democracy in Nepal while accountability deteriorated.* Pashupati Shamsheer Rana: *The way out lies in negotiations toward a thoroughly transformed, fully inclusive Nepal, in which the political parties, the King, and the Maoists can peacefully co-exist.* Minendra Rijal, Ph.D.: *The political parties should learn from their mistakes and develop a common minimum program for the political, social and economic transformation of the country. This could serve as a roadmap that they can offer to both the King and the Maoists as a way out of the current crisis.* Pari Thapa: *The People’s Front Nepal knows the true nature of the Maoist insurgency as they splintered from our party. Unless they correct the error of their extremism they will continue resorting to violence. But we also cannot lose sight of the fact that the political parties manipulated the Maoist insurgency as a means of cornering the opposition. The King has also taken advantage of it.*

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Ram Sharan Mahat, Ph.D.

Neither the King nor the political parties have an immediate solution to the Maoist problem. The Maoists believe they are fighting a winning war that will make history. They consider their struggle to be part of a world proletarian revolution and have no faith in multi-party politics or liberal democracy. We will need a combined political and military approach to confront, weaken, and compel the Maoists to negotiate under reasonable terms and conditions. In the long term, a vibrant democracy with functioning institutions, and *not a monarchy*, is the mechanism needed for reconciliation in order to avoid future conflict. Present solutions are not easy. They will take great effort, energy and time.

Prior to February 1, the political parties were more preoccupied with the power game, and they played both fair and dirty. This gave birth to unstable governments, extra-constitutional coercion by the opposition, rampant corruption and abuse of authority, and intra-party conflict. These ills must be corrected and the political parties realize this, as is evident in the parliamentary action for strong anti-defection legislation and strict laws against corruption.

Capitalizing on the weaknesses of the political parties, however, the Maoists shrewdly exploited the vulnerabilities and fault-lines of Nepalese society to expand their organization. The history of exclusion and neglect of various ethnic communities and caste groups, the monopoly on centralized state power, wide spread poverty, backwardness and unemployment all provided fertile ground for their appeal. Moreover, they took advantage of extremely remote and difficult terrain.

All sides are to blame for this. The state response was slow, and made difficult by frequent changes in governments. When the Government wanted to mobilize the army against the insurgents, the Army chief demanded consensus from all parties and a state of emergency, leading to the resignation of PM Koirala. Looking back on this, the political parties should gear up for a radical political solution, including a constitutional assembly in return for the Maoist commitment to a violence-free liberal democracy. The crown must confine itself constitutionally. If the King is sincere, the political parties will support a constitutional monarchy. The Royal Nepal Army should fight the Maoists but stay loyal to an elected civilian government. India and the international community should use their moral pressure to promote democracy and respect for human rights. Development assistance is also necessary. Leveraging it to promote democracy is acceptable. We must not hesitate to explore possibilities to facilitate peace. But this must be done in a quiet and confidential manner. We must not be a party to anything that could encourage terrorism and consequently strengthen or justify the authoritarian regime. Finally, India's role will be crucial, as most Maoist leaders take shelter there, and there is a link between Maoists in Nepal and terrorist organizations in India.

Pradip Nepal

There are four key factors responsible for the increased strength of the Maoist movement: (1) poverty, inequity and regional patterns of unequal development; (2) the stubborn persistence of feudalism; (3) strife within the Nepali Congress, which formed the majority governments after the 1990 movement; and (4) a conservative bureaucracy that was not willing to identify and tackle problems and find progressive solutions. In order to solve this complex problem now, the Maoists must abandon violence and come to the negotiating table, present their political agenda, participate in peaceful competitive politics, and accept the fact that Nepal's political future rests with a multi-party parliamentary system in which the people are sovereign. The political parties must learn that democracy is for everyone, including those with marginal incomes. The King must go back to being a constitutional monarch and desist from political activities, while the RNA must limit itself to development activities. India and the international community must provide aid after peace and democracy are restored in Nepal.

The ten-year Maoist insurgency has helped the political parties see their roots while the latest steps taken by the King and the current government policy toward the Maoists reveal that the King does not yet understand the rebels. The Maoist problem is not unsolvable. They have already presented their political, economic and social positions. The 38-point demands are reformist demands that can co-exist with any party system. Those who do not accept or refuse to discuss those demands are the members of the royal government, as is evident in the repeated statements by the current ministers.

Had the political parties not made mistakes in running the country after the 1990 movement, the extremists on both the right and left of the political spectrum would not be surfacing now. Unhealthy rivalries between ruling and opposition parties, distrust, and totalitarianism were the political refuse that prevailed during democracy in Nepal while accountability deteriorated. This made the government the master of the people rather than its servant, emulating a form of dictatorship. The political parties have recognized their mistakes, to a certain extent, and have demonstrated a commitment to correct them. No one can predict the future, but we now have to hope that the parties will be true to their commitment.

Pashupati Shamsheer Rana

The way out lies in negotiations toward a thoroughly transformed, fully inclusive Nepal, in which the political parties, the King, and the Maoists can peacefully co-exist. The Maoist problem can only be resolved via sincere cooperation between the King and the political parties. We should rise above all these differences and difficulties to surmount the national crisis and meet the needs of the people.

Minendra Rijal, Ph.D.

There are no easy answers to our problem. Only through dialogue and the peace process can each side better understand and appreciate the other side's position and be able to propose imaginative solutions. The political parties and the King have an obligation to negotiate a resolution together and propose a solution to the Maoist problem. One such solution could be the establishment of an interim government to hold elections for the constituent assembly, which would then draft a new constitution that preserves Nepal's traditions, ensures a constitutional monarchy, and further strengthens and consolidates the democratic characteristics of the current constitution.

The political parties should recognize their past mistakes and develop a common minimum program for the political, social and economic transformation of the country. This could serve as a roadmap that they can offer to both the King and the Maoists as a way out of the current crisis. India and the rest of the international community should continue to exert moral pressure on the King, and should use whatever leverage they have with the Maoists to convince them to renounce violence and pursue their agenda through peaceful and democratic means.

Nepal has a long history of political and marginalization and social inequality. With the advent of democracy, there were great expectations that these problems would soon be addressed. Understandably, there were no quick fixes. However, the political parties failed to establish even a clear roadmap that would address these problems. Moreover, the political parties exacerbated the problems by exhibiting an inability to understand the heterogeneity of Nepali society, a lack of political tolerance, poor governance, corruption, an inability to decentralize the structure of government, development programs with inherent and undue bias toward the urban and modern sector of the economy, and a lack of transparency and intra-party democracy. Unless we are prepared for a peaceful yet revolutionary restructuring of our state to generate a sense of belonging among Nepalis of all identities (gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, caste, economic status, etc.), we will simply not have a way out of the present crisis.

Pari Thapa

There is no ready-made Nikas ("way out") in the present complicated and chaotic situation. Regarding the Maoists, they should lay down their arms or at least demonstrate their willingness for a ceasefire. The mainstream political parties are seeking a solution through a meaningful peace dialogue. Regarding the King and the RNA, we do not see the RNA as a distinct body from the King himself – they are two sides of the same coin. Individually, the RNA has nothing to do with the current crisis. If the King genuinely acts towards resolving the crisis, the RNA follow and be part of the solution.

India's importance is evident because it is Nepal's neighbour. The pro-democracy forces in Nepal anticipate India's positive influence in restoring democracy. The international community should play a supportive

role in favor of democracy by pressuring the King to retreat from his regressive, authoritarian posture.

The People's Front Nepal knows the true nature of the Maoist insurgency since they splintered from our party. Unless the Maoists correct their error of their extremism they will continue resorting to violence. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that the political parties also manipulated the Maoist problem as a means of cornering the opposition. The King has also taken advantage of it. After all, the Maoist insurgency provides a ready pretext for the King to usurp power and establish his brand of authoritarian "peace." But, this kind of peace has nothing to do with the broader masses of people who are longing for a real and lasting peace, a dynamic society, and full-fledged democracy.

The political parties should coordinate a criticism of the Maoists as an aberration of the 'ultra-left'. Our party is doing so. If the mainstream political parties are ready to build an environment conducive to elections and a constituent assembly, a coordinated criticism of the Maoists will be a moderate way of bringing the Maoists back to mainstream politics and hopefully get them to engage in peaceful democratic politics.

There are no reasons to believe that the King will solve the problem in a better way. The monarchy is historically an isolating institution. It maintains narrow ideological boundaries that prevent it from looking beyond a handful of former orthodox Panchas. It is so conservative that it was unable to incorporate even the liberals among the Panchas.

Yes, the parties have made serious mistakes, especially those in power over the last fifteen years. After the historic people's movement, Panchayat was ousted and a multi-party pluralistic system was introduced. However, we simply copied the Westminster parliamentary system, i.e., a first-past-the-post and winner-takes-all kind of majoritarian system. In other words, it is a system in which the strongest contender has the only real opportunity to capture all the resources (and the eventual winners drove the chariot of state power in a careless manner). Therein lies one of the immense errors. Nepal is a heterogeneous society with diverse cultural identities, not to mention vast social and economic differences. In short, Nepal is not the United Kingdom. Therefore, Nepal requires different electoral institutions. A bold and enthusiastic step is now essential to give the people true ownership of the state, and the political parties should lead the way by taking corrective measures that remedy their past errors and mistakes.