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LEFTIZING THE LEFT

THE CHALLENGE OF UNIFYING TWO COMMUNIST PARTIES IN NEPAL

For more than a decade, left parties in Nepal have played an important role in politics. Moreover, there has always been a left majority. But the parties have often been bitter political adversaries and in conflict with each other. Now the two biggest competitors – the Marxist-Leninists and Maoists – have overcome their differences and united into a single party. Critics, however, complain that the unification process was badly prepared and happened without involving supporters and party cadres.

October 3, 2017 has become a historic day in the Nepalese communist movement: For the first time in Nepal's political history, three political parties, namely the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and the *Naya Shakti* Party¹ announced an electoral alliance for the then upcoming election for the Federal House of Representatives and the State Assembly.² A plan of intent and unification was conceived and circulated. However, less than two weeks after the announcement, *Naya Shakti* withdrew. Despite this, the Marxist Leninists and the Maoists decided to continue to work together and won a landslide victory in both federal and state elections. After this success, on May 17, 2018, the two parties formally declared their unification into a new party: the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

THE UNFOLDING OF UNIFICATION

The coming together of the two communist parties for an electoral alliance was in itself a surprise for the nation and even for both parties' leaders, members and voters. The reasons are threefold. Firstly, the two parties had been engaged in personal, political and ideological belligerence for a long time. Secondly, immediately after the local elections, each of the two parties (more accurately, the leadership of those parties) had forged alliances with right-wing political parties and candidates against each other whenever they deemed it useful or in their interest. Thirdly, influential leaders from each party, who "championed" the alliance, were avowedly opposed to bringing the two parties together. In view of these facts, the unification of the two parties seemed anything but possible.

In the two parties' official documents, it was not hard to see that they were separated by a large divide in some of their important theoretical standpoints. The CPN (UML) was unconditionally committed to the peaceful transformation

of Nepali society under the framework of constitutionalism and a multi-party democracy. Its official ideology consists of Marxism, Leninism and a people's multi-party democracy. The CPN (Maoist Centre), on the other hand, reiterated its conviction that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism was a sovereign theory and, accordingly, emphasized the "people's rebellion jolt" (or revolt) as a prerequisite for the decisive victory of the socialist revolution.³

Naturally, these theoretical standpoints had informed the parties' official positions on the eligibility criteria for unification. In line with its position, the CPN (UML) felt that the CPN (Maoist Centre) was freeing itself from ultra-leftism but that the transformation was incomplete. It named "cooperation, struggle and transformation" as the best strategy to engage with the CPN (Maoist Centre). For the CPN (Maoist Centre), as commitment to Maoism was a pre-condition to unification, the CPN (UML) was in no way a party qualified for unification. On the contrary, it was status quoist, inactionist and did not work in favor of the people.⁴ In view of these appraisals, the coming together of the two parties did not appear to be forthcoming.

But, to people's surprise, the "inconceivable" transpired. How and why? An understanding of this can be better furnished by reading through the observations and analyses made by several Marxist scholars.

Renowned Marxist scholar and leader of the then CPN (UML) Ghanashyam Bhusal attributes the electoral alliance to the current need felt by both of the parties.

The CPN (UML), scared by the grand anti-UML alliance in the immediate past local elections, wanted to save itself from a potential bad showing in the upcoming federal and provincial elections. Likewise, the CPN (Maoist Centre) also wanted to rescue itself from the electoral result that might come about as a result of its potential alliance with the Nepali Congress.⁵

Bhusal feels that the two parties were “forced” to come together. This was a negative force at work.

Bhusal, however, also speaks of a positive force that was gaining ground: The two parties had begun to come closer theoretically. In their last national conventions, both concluded that Nepali society was no longer feudal and was predominantly capitalist. In view of this conclusion, the chief revolutionary task for both, despite the different nomenclatures of their theories, consists of developing the economy based on national capital and preparing the ground for socialist transformation. Bhusal concludes that theoretically and practically, similar conclusions and corresponding tasks had prepared the groundwork for unification.⁶ It cannot be denied that theoretical convergence can more naturally facilitate and lead to the unification of parties, but its role can be contested.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE ESTABLISHMENT’S POWER

Marxist scholar and activist Shyam Shrestha claims that the basis for the unity is rooted in the fact that both parties had completely transformed into reformist and “pragmatist” parliamentary parties. According to Shrestha, both parties, ideologically and culturally, had degenerated into a capitalist parliamentary party long before, though they continued to use “socialism” as an important part of their sloganeering for the consumption of their cadres and the public. The cultural, ideological and ethical similarities are what brought them together. He further claims that if either of the two parties had remained truly left, the unity would not have been possible.⁷

These observations, though plausible, are not exhaustive. It should also be emphasized that the intention and ambition of both parties’ establishment leaders to improve and consolidate their political position internally (within the party) and nationally in that context was pivotal. They had made their calculations and come to the realization that without forging alliances or working together in some form, they would be at the losing end of the electoral game. They readied themselves, willingly or unwillingly, to bury their personal and political hatchets for relatively better gains and to enter a “fruitful” agreement, one already made easier by their similarities in their political conduct, behavior and practice, namely, by their rapidly progressing disengagement from leftism and the accompanying adoption of a bourgeois lifestyle backed by illegal earnings as well as capitalist policies and programs.

This is neither pessimistic nor a baseless or prejudiced allegation. The whole process of unification, from beginning to end, was elitist. Only a small clique of party leaders, who were most trusted by and faithful to the establishments of both sides, were involved. Everything revolved around the consolidation and assurance of the position of the establishments on both sides. Inner-party democracy was sidelined. The process picked up momentum only when the consolidation of positions for leaders on both sides was assured. That is precisely why the unification ended up with two co-chairs.

Moreover, after unification, the establishment consolidated their positions by nominating their favorites to the powerful committee acting in the capacity of the Executive Committee. The establishments’ intention of consolidating their positions is also evident in provisions in the party’s Interim 2018 Constitution and the 2018 Rule Book. In the Interim Constitution, the Central Secretariat, customarily considered a managerial body, was vested with enormous

political power and responsibilities. These, *inter alia*, include preparing agendas to be tabled in the meetings of the politburo, and standing and central committees; preparing proposals for central plans and programs; and making decisions on political and organizational issues in the interstice between meetings of the politburo, the standing committee and the central committee.

Similarly, the Rule Book has also given the Central Committee the authority to appoint office bearers of provincial, district, special district and coordination committees, and of other lower committees, class and professional organizations as it deems necessary. Moreover, the Central Committee is too big to have meaningful discussions and is not constitutionally required to meet frequently. Even worse, the current central organs including the Central Committee and the Central Secretariat are heavily lopsided in favor of the establishment. These factors, combined with the already undermined tradition of inner-party democracy, consolidated the establishment’s power in the party in an illegitimate authoritarian way.

THEORY BUILDING SYSTEMATICALLY SIDELINED

Theoretical discussion, as we know, is the lifeblood of a democratic or a left party. Sadly, the unification process was not initiated and forwarded by a systematic attempt to build a rational agreement on important theoretical and organizational questions. It was motivated exclusively by the establishments’ intention to consolidate their positions. Consequently, the establishments on both sides showed no concern for theory; they were, rather, intensely averse to it. Theory building was systematically sidelined or diffused.

The Joint Declaration of Party Unity and subsequent documents clearly shows that no substantive work was done to develop clarity on the theoretical basis of the new party. The Declaration states: “The theoretical and political principles of the People’s Multi-Party Democracy adopted by the CPN (UML) and the Democracy of the Twenty-First Century adopted by the CPN (Maoist Centre) will be developed into a Socialism-Oriented People’s Democracy by transforming and amending them in the changed context.”⁸ The People’s Democracy is vacuous or at least yet to be developed. Similarly, the Interim Constitution proposes that questions concerning the People’s Multi-Party Democracy, Democracy of the Twenty-First Century and Maoism be settled in the forthcoming General Convention.⁹ These documents attest to the fact that unity was accomplished without theoretical preparation, which has been left for future unity conventions.

There are also seemingly serious inconsistencies and confusions in what the Party claims to be its worked-out theory. The party endorses Marxism-Leninism as its guiding principle, while expressing its commitment, among others, to peaceful competition, constitutional supremacy, a pluralist open society, government by elected representatives and the constitutional provision of opposition.¹⁰ How can Leninism – the theory of violent revolution and the dictatorship of proletariat as the sovereign truth of socialist revolution – be reconciled with the universal principles of modern democracy to which the new party is expressly committed?

Inconsistency is also evident in the party’s claim of its class base and representation. The party claims to be “the institution of political representative of the people of the Nepalese proletariat class.” It also claims that “it represents the

interest of workers, peasants, the petty-bourgeoisie [and] the national bourgeoisie.”¹¹ How can the representative of the proletariat be the representative of the bourgeoisie at the same time? The formulation is empty and meaninglessly populist. This is a serious theoretical problem for a communist party. This leads us to a much bigger underlying problem we should not shy away from asking: Is the united party a genuine communist party?

The independent left author and activist Rajendra Maharjan contended that the two parties that united to form a single party were phony communists.¹² He argued that a party cannot be held to be left merely on the basis of its name, election manifesto or what is presented in public speeches; it should be judged on the basis of its actual ideology, policies, programs, intention, conduct and culture. Unfortunately, both parties, according to Maharjan, badly fail this test. The reason they still carry the signboard of “communist party” is that socialism, leftism and communism still commands popularity in Nepal.¹³ If the two parties were phony communists, as Maharjan contends, the united party’s genuineness is also questionable.

Mohan Bikram Singh, the supreme leader of the fringe Communist Party of Nepal (Masal), a noted Marxist and the mentor of many communist leaders including those of CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre), argues that from the perspective of communist unity, the unification of the two parties does not count as the formation of a united communist party because this is the coming together of parties which have deviated from the fundamental principles of Marxism and Leninism.¹⁴

COMMUNISM WITHOUT SUBSTANTIVE MEANING

The criticism that the united party is not a genuine communist party is easily dismissed by its supporters, particularly when it comes from outside the party. They, however, remain surprisingly silent on a similar observation by Khadga Prasad Oli, the then chairperson of the CPN (UML) and now co-chair of Nepal Communist Party and Prime Minister of the country. In an interview before the unification with journalist Vijaya Kumar, Oli was asked: “Is this a left alliance or a communist alliance?” and Oli categorically answered, “As a matter of fact, it is neither a left alliance nor a communist alliance.” Oli rhetorically asked the journalist: “Does your name Vijaya [whose literal meaning is victorious] mean that you are always victorious?”¹⁵ The implication was clear – though the party’s name is communist, the term “communist” does not have any meaning.

Oli attempted to further clarify by categorizing the communists into three types: philosophical, ideological and political. He claimed that most of the communists today in Nepal and in the world are political, i.e. those who have become communist out of necessity and for personal benefit and aggrandizement.¹⁶

Ghanashyam Bhusal, the then Deputy Secretary General of the CPN (UML), makes it even clearer by making a self-critical and bold assessment: “Based on the class status of its members, parties can be distinguished as characteristically representing workers or capitalists or the middle class. At present, there is no difference in the class status between the members of the communist parties and of the Nepali Congress which was described as the party of bureaucratic and comprador capitalists (that support profits being made

in Nepal to flow out of the country). Almost all leaders are similar in terms of their economic status, ideology, conduct and lifestyle.”¹⁷

Bhusal further says that each party has factions and sub-factions which have very weak ideological and political agendas and are turned into the management committees of private interests. Judging by the changed economic status of our leaders, the grip of comprador capital in our politics is evident.¹⁸ He draws an unpalatable conclusion about where the two communist parties stand in the current class struggle: Assuming that class does determine social outlook, in the past we belonged to the lower class and, therefore, had contradictions with the upper class; now, we have transformed into upper class, and therefore, have contradictions with the lower class.¹⁹ If Oli and Bhusal are correct, is the united party a communist party? Sadly, the truth of these observations cannot be denied empirically.

The unification can and must also be examined from the standpoint of Marxist social ontology. According to this ontology, a communist party is an association of a class or classes with similar interests or positions, and accordingly, the unification of communist parties is the unification of a class or classes. This can be done only when interests of a class or classes can be materially identified and explained. If the unity of the oppressed classes is not predicated on the potentially or objectively existing interests, the attempt to secure unity ends up being utopian and idealist and is bound to fail. But, as is well known, no theoretical attempt was made in this direction. To put it another way, no attempt was made to analyze how different oppressed classes and their interests can converge into a collective class will. Arguably, for this reason, the workers and laborers did not see the unification as the unification of their interests.

As mentioned above, the united party has a confused understanding of class base and representation. Looked at from a theoretical and practical viewpoint, the confusion in the present context implies disassociation from the class or classes it is historically supposed to organize and represent. In addition, the muddle is nothing but the expression of theorylessness; such a chaotic position ceases to represent and guide the specific class or classes, and consequently, ceases to be their theory. Jumbled theory, however, can be useful for opportunism and status quoism.

Apart from these abstract and theoretical examinations, the class-sidedness of the united party can also be empirically assessed by looking into the performance of the government which is running parliament with a two-thirds majority. So far, the government has not legislated or implemented new policies and programs which are characteristically left nor has it enforced already existing laws to bring about desired reforms and changes that were promised during the elections. Moreover, policies and programs that traditionally represent the interests of the working population and qualify as left do not seem to be coming in the near future. On the contrary, in most cases, it has continued the neo-liberal policies that have been imposed on Nepal since 1990. Consequently, it failed to enliven the optimism and enthusiasm of the public, left-voters and the cadres.

THE NEED FOR INNER-PARTY DEMOCRACY

If the test of truth is practice, the united party’s leftness is not proving itself. Can we then pessimistically conclude that the future of left party and politics in Nepal is in many ways hope-

less and bleak? The answer is a qualified “no.” Objectively, there are existing conditions that call for and favor left politics in Nepal. First, the vast majority of the Nepalese public still has faith in left ideology and politics and, therefore, is looking for a genuine left party to emerge. Secondly, the aspirations of Nepalese people for a just, equitable and prosperous society, which is also enshrined in the Constitution of Nepal, can be materialized only by implementing a left agenda not by adopting and effecting capitalism. Thirdly, though the united party has failed the test of its leftness on several important occasions, it has brought a huge number of hitherto isolated and unfriendly left cadres and intellectuals to a common platform and has provided them with opportunities for interaction and discourse from which a genuine left force can emerge and develop. But the emergence of that force will not happen by itself.

As a potential progressive and revolutionary force, the Nepalese left has two tasks: (i) to develop forces of production in agriculture, industry, tourism etc.; and (ii) to ensure just and equitable distribution of resources, income and welfare provisions for its citizens. It is important to note that these tasks must be carried out not in a sequential or chronological order but at the same time. The first task, owing to our dependent status in the global capitalist system, consists mainly of the rapid transformation of comprador capital (unproductive and out-flowing) into productive and domestically-accumulating capital. Only a successful journey on this path can create jobs and wealth and will contribute to setting up and sustaining welfare provisions and distributions. The second task is a characteristically socialist one which, in the main, consists of democratizing the production and the distribution of wealth; setting up public institutions to ensure more equitable distribution of basic provisions; and bringing capital under democratic control. The execution of these tasks is demanding and daunting as the left will necessarily confront the power of local, national and global capital.

In terms of theory and practice, the immediate political tasks of the Nepalese left, therefore, includes: (i) developing theoretical clarity as to the political and economic nature of Nepalese society vis-à-vis global capitalism, and figuring out what revolutionary tasks are feasible and desirable; (ii) clearly identifying a class or classes which it can potentially represent and organize; and (iii) establishing inner-party democ-

racy in the party and the movement to create a vibrant left party.

The third task is seminal and perennially important as well as challenging. It is important because the left movement and left party without it lose their democratic character. To be a genuine left party, it must be democratic.

The task is challenging because the meaningful practice of inner-party democracy and undertaking serious theoretical discussions has been systematically and effectively undermined in both communist parties establishments’ for quite a long time. This is so obvious that it has even been admitted in the official documents of both parties. It seems that in the new party too, this trend will continue: The party’s Interim Constitution and the Rule Book, which were briefly discussed above, are designed to concentrate power in a few hands. One can already see that in the current power game members of the new party are interested exclusively in consolidating their positions and therefore undermining inner-party democracy. In this situation, inner-party democracy, if practiced at all, will be ritualistic at best. This is thus the most urgent and principal task – restoring and reclaiming the space of inner-party democracy is most pivotal in *leftizing* the new party.

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1 The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) abbreviated to CPN (UML) has been a parliamentary party since 1991. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) abbreviated to CPN (MC) was the largest offshoot of the CPN (Maoist) which led armed insurrection from 1996 to 2006. It was formed in 2106 after the merging of multiple communist parties and is led by Puspa Kamal Dahal also known as Prachanda. The Naya Shakti Party (literally the New Force Party) was founded in 2016 under the leadership of a former Maoist leader Dr. Baburam Bhattarai. **2** The Constitution of Nepal 2072 has provisions for three tiers of government: federal, state (provincial) and local. The legislature of the first two are respectively called the House of Representatives and the State Assembly. **3** The Political Report passed by the Seventh National Unity Convention, February 2-6, 2013; 61 (translation by author). **4** The Political and Organization Proposal passed by First National Conference, May 1-6, 2014; 9 (translation by author). **5** The Kantipur Dainik (Nepali); October 11, 2017 (translation by author). **6** Ibid. **7** The Kantipur Dainik, May 22, 2018 (translation by author). **8** May 17, 2018 (translation by author). **9** July 20, 2018; 5 (translation by author). **10** The Joint Declaration of Party Unity, May 17, 2018 (translation by author). **11** The Interim Constitution; 1 (translation by author). **12** The Kantipur Dainik, October 10, 2017 (translation by author). **13** Ibid. **14** Emisionkhabar.com, June 6, 2018 (translation by author). **15** It was a TV interview and later came out in print in the Annapurna Post, December 1, 2017 (translation by author). **16** Ibid. **17** The Kantipur Dainik, October 11, 2017 (translation by author). **18** Ibid. **19** Ibid.

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