

Nepalese Woes Require Indian Support

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India's neighbours, the two mountain kingdoms -- Nepal and Bhutan -- are a study in contrast. While Bhutan made a peaceful transition to democracy, guided all along by its monarch, Nepal travelled a torturous route from absolute to constitutional monarchy, and finally ordered eviction of its monarch from the royal palace through an elected assembly.

In Bhutan, law and order is barely an issue, Nepal has already plodded through the experiences mirroring a civil war. While Bhutan exports power to India earning substantial revenue, Kathmandu households wobble in darkness. Bhutan offers the world a new methodology of measuring a nation's progress: Gross National Happiness instead of GDP. Nepalese await deliverance from pathological deficits in every walk of life; most of all, a secured future.

Nepal's painful journey to a peaceful developing state remains an elusive dream for its citizens and a seemingly unattainable goal for its elected leadership. The most important event in its history, the exercise in drafting of the Constitution plods along with barely any time left for the instrument to be ready by May 28, the deadline for the project's fruition.

Along with drafting of the Constitution the most pernicious issue that the Nepalese are faced with is the induction of Maoists into the army. With barely 3,000 plus weapons having been surrendered, the call by Maoists to enroll 19,600 men into the army is both unrealistic and amateurish. Add to it the fact that the Maoist Chief Prachanda has already been recorded on video, accepting the fact that the party inflated the numbers of its cadre.

The elections in Nepal did not provide a clear mandate, though the Maoists would have surprised even their own mentors, the intelligence agencies, as also possibly the Nepalese educated middle class by the magnitude of their electoral success. It was a clear reflection of how the rank and file Nepalese

had been denied his basic needs for decades. However, having been sworn in as prime minister, the immature handling of power and the rush with which Prachanda tried to usher in changes that affect the fundamentals of Nepalese social fabric, would have distanced them from the very segment that voted their party to single largest party status.

An equally immature move by the Maoists was the calling of an indefinite general strike recently, which caved in within a week of its initiation. It inconvenienced none more than the poorer sections of Nepalese society. Now, with the Constitution writing process having remained incomplete, Nepal is to decide on either accepting a presidential writ followed by another election, or continue with the present dispensation. Of course, on the sidelines is the threat by Prachanda to unilaterally propound a Maoist-authored Constitution. The implications of such a move can only be more corrosive.

Though the Nepalese prime minister has been categorical about his government not resigning, it may not be altogether unwise to go in for another election rather than continue to remain in power with a wafer thin majority. The primary reason for considering another round of polling stems from the fact that the Maoists seem to have lost the charm that they had, because of their inept conduct, post the formation of the present Parliament. In fact, the Maoists could return with a sizably lesser number of seats; a setback that will induce some realistic thinking in the party.

As far as the possibility of Maoists returning to the jungle and restarting their insurgency is concerned, firstly, returning to the bush has never been an easy option for any insurgent movement whose cadres have lived a comfortable life for some time and whose leadership has been enjoined legitimate political power. Secondly, a fair proportion of arms in its inventory have been surrendered, though, it is of course not possible to believe that all weapons have found their way to government armouries.

Lastly, there would also be dissensions within the party, with some of the leaders perceiving the fact that changes in a party's fundamental strategy for gaining power cannot be undertaken every other day. India influencing events in Nepal has been viewed sceptically for long. As such, the requirement for the Indian establishment is to be muted and circumspect, while addressing the needs of all Nepalese stakeholders, foremost being the people. It needs to be accepted that the transition to democracy and writing a new Constitution, with the backdrop of a strong insurgency with leftist leanings, cannot be achieved so very soon. It will

be best to let Nepal decide its course while facilitating harmonisation between its contesting power blocks.

Simultaneously, it is essential to keep Prachanda from reaching a state of desperation. It would be judicious to relieve him of what weighs on him the most -- the rehabilitation of his party's cadre. However, Prachanda needs to come to terms with the fact that no army can absorb insurgents en masse. The Nepalese Army has not said no to absorb Prachanda's bush fighters.

They want it to be done as per the laid down recruitment standards for Nepalese to join their army. It is definitely not possible to absorb an old insurgent who was given the rank of a brigade commander in Prachanda's force as a brigadier in the Nepal Army. Officers in no professional army can be political appointees. The Nepalese Army also wants other avenues of rehabilitation utilised.

Nepal cannot continue to drift. The volatility shimmering in the mountain kingdom can barely withstand more turmoil. It is in our and Nepalese interests to address the fundamental problems in that state, keeping Nepalese sensitivities at the core. There is the need to facilitate the growth of Nepalese industry, address the population's basic needs like the massive power cuts, revive tourism, deny footholds to fundamentalist elements of Lashkar-e-Tayiba's ilk, and, most of all, create an atmosphere of trust between its domestic political stakeholders.

The trust deficit that we also face in Nepal's streets needs to be addressed through a properly orchestrated information campaign, backed by liberal investments.

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