

Baburam Bhattarai: For a 'New Nepal'

Stephen Mikesell , Mary Des Chene

Baburam Bhattarai is senior standing committee member of the politburo of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In the April 2008 constituent assembly election, he was elected from the Gorkha constituency-2 by an overwhelming margin. In this interview, Bhattarai stresses the need for the people to exert pressure from below, articulates the CPN(M)'s vision of a "new Nepal" and the road to that goal, and foregrounds the need for "land to the tiller" and cooperatives in the transformation of Nepali agriculture. The interview, conducted in Nepal on May 3 by Stephen Mikesell and Mary Des Chene, was originally for WORT-FM community radio, Madison, Wisconsin, United States, portions of which were broadcast on May 4

Q. On May Day what was the message that the party was putting to the workers?

On the historic May Day our message to the working class was, we are making revolution in Nepal in a very indigenous way, but we have a lot of challenges to face. The reactionaries won't leave the stage of history very easily. They'll put up a very strong resistance, so we have to take this challenge very seriously, we have to prepare for a strong resistance from the overthrown feudal and reactionary classes. This is one message we gave to the working class. And the second message was, if we have to build a new Nepal, then we'll have to concentrate on making a new national unity. We need peace, stability, and progress, and for that the working class will take the lead to do away with all remnants of feudalism -- feudal production relations -- and develop industrial relations oriented towards socialism, which will solve the long term demands of the working class. Those are the two messages we conveyed during the May Day programmes.

Q. What's the practical approach that you're going to use to work in that direction?

The first step is, though we have won the election, the reactionary classes are hatching various conspiracies, especially the imperialists. They're trying to instigate the monarchist forces and the bureaucratic bourgeois class, which is strongly aligned with the imperialists. They're instigating them not to hand over power to the Maoists. So for that we may have to go through a process of struggle, for which the working class and all the oppressed masses should be prepared. If need be, we'll have to go to the street to resist this reactionary

backlash. Practically, we appealed to them to get prepared. And secondly, after we form the government under our leadership, then we'll have to provide some immediate relief to the working class and the poor people, those who have suffered all along, they're suffering from poverty, unemployment, and also discrimination. Families of those martyred. They're poor people. Their sons and daughters were martyred so they will need immediate relief. And there are others who were disappeared, and those who were injured. That's one aspect. The other aspect is the real basic poor people, working classes, who need economic relief, immediately. So we are thinking of providing a public distribution system, a network of cooperative stores whereby we can provide basic goods to the working class and the poor people. We want to provide some fund for that. And then, for education and health. Our position has been that education and health and employment should be -- and also shelter and food security -- these should be the fundamental right of the masses of the people. This we have already promised in our manifesto. And partially it has been written in the interim constitution also. So we'll try to put it into practice. And for that, we'll have to prepare a new budget, and appropriate new policy of the new government. The working class and the mass of the poor people should contribute to this process. They should advise our party and the future government, and they should be very vigilant to keep the government in line. If the public and the working class and the poor masses don't put pressure, then the government may not be able to move in the right direction. There are very bad historical experiences in this regard, you see. So until and unless the working class is very vigilant and exercises its power to control the government from below, there are chances of the government deviating, not implementing what it has promised during the elections.

Q. What steps are you taking to give people the means to exert that pressure from below?

Firstly, our party recognizes that even when we participate in the government, this government is not a fully revolutionary government, it is a transitional government. So we'll have to compromise with the other classes. But we would like to take the lead. We would like to transform the state from within. For that we have to create pressure from outside. For that our party's position is that the whole leadership of the party won't join the government. One section of the leadership will join the government, and the other section of the party leadership will remain outside and continue organizing and mobilizing the masses. So the party will take that route. Many of us will be [in the government]. The main form of struggle will be from within the government, to make the new

constitution. But another section will remain outside the government. That's why all of our central leaders didn't participate in the elections. We want to organize and mobilize the masses so that they can put pressure on the government. So this is one aspect. And we want to develop certain institutions.

Though we haven't found the concrete form for them yet, we have made some policy decisions. When we put forth the concept of development of democracy in the 21st century, our slogan was that the government and the party should be constantly supervised by the masses, and the masses should intervene at times if need be. This is our policy. But we have not been able to find the concrete form.

What will be the way of intervening in case the government deviates? What will be the form of putting pressure, apart from public demonstrations? How will they intervene in the state system? That mechanism we are trying to work out.

Q. What about means for the masses to supervise the constituent assembly?

The immediate task will be to make the new constitution with the full participation of the real masses of the people in making their constitution.

Q. But there are very practical issues of organization. All the forms of relation between the people and the constituent assembly have yet to be determined, and there's no assurance that effective mechanisms will be established.

We can formulate rules and regulations. The interim constitution is quite open on that issue. We can develop some modalities whereby the committees being formed within the constituent assembly will be required to go to different places and organize mass meetings, collect the opinion of the masses. That type of mechanism will have to be developed. At least our party will propose that. . . . If need be there could even be a referendum on certain articles. We'll try to develop a consensus even within the political parties and then, if not, we'll go for a two thirds majority, and in case needed, for certain issues, we could go to a referendum. Our approach will be to involve the maximum number of the mass of the people in the decision making process.

Q. How are you dealing with the challenge of bringing in international capital and retaining domestic capital within the country, in a way that is in keeping with your own economic policy?

Our main emphasis will be mobilizing internal resources. Until and unless we can mobilize internal resources, at least for basic needs, then we'll always be blackmailed by the international capital. So our first priority would be to mobilize our internal resources. But even then, in the immediate sense, we'll need some foreign capital. At least for long term economic development we have to make investment in basic infrastructure, and so on, using international capital. For that we're trying to re-negotiate with the international agencies. Of course they will try to put pressure. But we are already in contact with some of them. And they also have their own compulsions, you see. If they don't cooperate, they will also face the resistance of the people. They all have their strategic interests. Nepal being located in a very strategic place between China and India, and these forces, I think they have their eyes on the big markets of India and China, and if there is not a favorable situation in Nepal, they will be hurt, you see -- not immediately, but in the long term strategic sense. In that way they also have their certain interest in Nepal. So that, if we negotiate very carefully, though they will try to bring pressure -- we know it, this is the nature of international capital, to twist the arms of the poor countries and poor people -- even then, I think if we move very carefully, we can take some liberties out of that.

Q. Moving back to labor issues again, how are you involving the working class and in particular your unions in the economic policy of the country?

Our unions are the strongest in Nepal. We came into this [peace] process two years ago. In almost all the factories and workplaces, we have organized the workers, and our trade union is the strongest in the country. Wherever there have been [union] elections, we have won almost all of them. It may sound anachronistic, but just to give you an example, in the 5 star hotels where there were elections, we won all of them. Our trade unions got strong because they bargained with the management for the rights of the workers. To increase pay and provide benefits and facilities according to law. They were not paid earlier, and they were not provided with facilities. So the management were forced to pay. And there was a lot of attraction of workers to our trade unions. But on the other side, the reactionaries are instigating the management, saying that the Maoist trade unions are putting undue pressure, so there is no conducive environment for investment, and in this way they're encouraging capital flight. Some capital has fled also, so we have to make that [. . .]. Just the other day we

were at a gathering of nationalist [capitalists] and traders and we tried to show them that our main focus right now is to do away with feudalism and do away with the feudal relations of production, and the very dependent capitalism, not national and international capitalism. So we try to distinguish between these. Firstly, we want to do away with feudalism. Then we want to develop our productive investment capital, not the very parasitic capital we have right now. This is what we call comprador and bureaucratic capitalism which doesn't promote production, and doesn't promote employment. It is only that type of distorted, dependent capitalism, which is developing in the country, that we are against. We are not against productive and industrial capitalism, you know, which provides goods, provides jobs, creates value within the country, and at least resists the imperialist interventions within the country. That type of national capitalism we promote. We tried to convince the nationalists and traders that we'll create a favorable environment.

Q. What's your position on Nepal's WTO membership in this context? There are a lot of conditions within the WTO membership that preclude some of the things you're saying.

Yes. That problem is there. It's very difficult to totally come out of the WTO. You can't be within the WTO, you can't come out of it. That dilemma is there.

Q. So the CPN(Maoist) doesn't have a formal position on this issue?

We haven't made a formal position on this so far.

Q. Following up on the role of the trade unions, theoretically in communism and socialism the working class are the rulers. So how do the trade unions insert themselves into the party policy and your state policy?

So far, our trade unions are highly politicized. Our workers have very good political consciousness. When they put demands, for the most part they know they are fighting for political and state power. We have tried to inculcate in the working class that unless and until you have state power in your hands, whatever economic gains you get, you won't be able to defend. It is the first thing we try to inculcate in the working class. So the trade unions are highly politically conscious. But apart from that we have to make a balance also, because if we don't make economic demands then a large section of the working class wouldn't attain a very high level of political consciousness -- they won't be organized. So that balance we have to make, between political and economic demands. We are

trying to create a balance. And within the factories we try to create -- though we haven't called the system a soviet formally -- but in general since most of the workers, the majority of the workers are organized in our trade unions, they've been able to assert their position within the factories, so the management is forced to take the working class into confidence while making big policy decisions. So that has been achieved. Not formally in the sense of a soviet -- we haven't been able to organize as a political power in the factories. But because of their strong presence, they have been quite successful in exerting pressure and influencing the decision making within the factories.

Q. Most of Nepal's workers are not within the industrial or formal sector. Most of them are in the, you could say, peasantry. So what's the position of the party on the peasantry and its role in the party and in the state?

Mostly ours is a peasant-based economy, because two thirds of the workforce is engaged in agriculture. So in that sense our most important sector is the agronomic sector. And most of them are poor peasants. You see the pattern of landholding. It's called owner peasant. Those who own less than 0.5 hectares of land, around 70% of the peasants own less than 1 hectare, and around 50% own less than 0.5 hectare. So there's a very small land ownership. The totally landless peasants are about 10-15% of the total. We are trying to organize the peasants into peasant associations, and within the peasant associations we try to organize the poor peasants and landless peasants separately. Also, there have been some movements, the seizing of land from the feudal landlords and the redistribution among the peasants. That has happened.

Q. At the same time , now there are pressures and promises about returning property seized during the armed struggle, and your party has also made some [post-election] statements about carrying through with land reform.

Yes, this is one of the sticking points in the peace process, because the landlord's lands were seized by the peasants during the People's War. In the peace accord, there was quite an ambiguous provision. The land which was seized unjustifiably, that will be returned. This is the word -- 'unjustifiably', 'unjustifiably'. It is very ambiguous. That is why it has not been resolved. This has been the sticking point. Our peasants are not returning the land because they think it is rightful seizure, because the landlord had in fact always seized it from the peasants, you see. So they have seized it back. This is the argument of the peasants. And on the landlord side, they would say it is the right to private property, so that is the encouragement of the democratic [bourgeois] sides. So

that type of struggle is going on. But in the interim constitution we put a provision for making scientific land reform. Though we wanted to put the word 'radical' or 'revolutionary', we had to compromise on the term 'scientific' land reform. So there is again an ambiguity there -- what do we mean by 'scientific land reform'? Our interpretation is revolutionary land reform based on the principle of land to the tiller. Those who are actually tilling the land should own the land. This has been our interpretation. The other side is trying to interpret it differently. So there is also contention going on over this issue.

Q. In Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx made the point that if you just have straight redistribution into small plots it actually becomes a process of even more land consolidation because the small plots are facing a very concentrated capital, and it's very hard for them to survive.

That's why we're trying to promote cooperatives. You see, one of our slogans has been that the small peasants should organize in cooperatives and the state should provide certain specific facilities and rights to the cooperatives. If they're working and organized in cooperatives, then they can compete, or they can at least defend themselves from the encroachment of capital, and big capital.

Q. That's an example of something that could be included in the interim constitution in some form, that could have significant progressive consequences. But as the numbers have turned out, even if all the left forces unite, there is not quite the required two-thirds majority to pass a constitutional provision, there's about sixty percent only. So there's a real dilemma about how the assembly can proceed in a way that will produce, even if it's a compromise, a constitution that's genuinely progressive.

You are very right. In fact the path won't be easy, it will be a big struggle that we'll have to face for making the new constitution. That we know. But one good thing is, since we have got 37% of the seats in the constituent assembly, which is more than one-third, we have the veto power you see. They don't have two thirds without us. At least we can resist a very reactionary constitution. If they won't allow us to form a very progressive constitution, still we can prevent them from creating a very reactionary constitution. So that will be a big stalemate. It will be difficult for us to win, but we won't lose, you see. We can't lose. But they won't want to let us win either. That's the thing.

Q. Because you have veto power, maybe they'll also be forced to give in a bit too. Though they can also play the dynamic that's been played with this past

government, where stalemates and therefore continuing lack of change may then get blamed on you -- I'm not saying fairly so -- because you're the force that's preventing a decision from being made. And those kinds of politics were played quite effectively by the king, for example, over a few years, even with these Congress governments and so on.

That's the thing you see, with this triangular contention in Nepal, between feudalism and monarchy, the parliamentary bourgeois forces, and the proletarian left forces. First we want to do away with feudalism and monarchy. Then the contention between the bourgeois forces and the proletarian left forces will be sharpened in the days to come. In fact we have prepared ourselves for that. In case they don't allow us to assume the leadership and implement progressive measures, then we'll resist. Our main weapon will be to mobilize the masses. As I said earlier, one section of the party will constantly engage in mobilizing the masses. This has been our strategy. In the central committee meeting we have decided that. We'll follow a two-pronged approach. We'll try to intervene maximally from within the state. We'll try to lead the state. We'll try to implement progressive programmes. But we know there'll be a lot of resistance. To counter that, we have to mobilize and organize the masses. We have already given instructions to the party, to the lower levels, that they should organize themselves and instruct the masses. At any time they may have to come to the street and resist.

Q. How are you thinking now about the role for YCL (Young Communist League), both in that kind of mobilizing you're talking about and the kind of immediate relief you were talking about earlier in the interview, the need for really immediate relief. Do you see a role for YCL there as well?

The YCL will play a very important role. The reactionaries are very frightened of the YCL. They are right in that sense, because, though it is not true that they are using any force illegally or otherwise, it is a very dedicated political force. During the election and earlier they played a very important role in organizing the masses and resisting the intimidating tactics of the reactionary classes. All these years, the reactionary classes have been intimidating the poor masses of the people, not letting them vote, you see. It has happened earlier, but this time the YCL resisted that. And then the reactionaries made a big hue and cry: "The YCL intimidated!" The YCL didn't intimidate, but, in fact, the YCL prevented the intimidation practiced by the reactionary classes all these years, throughout history. This is known to all. So in the days to come one of the functions of the YCL will be to resist any reactionary onslaught of the feudal,

and monarchist, and the reactionary classes and to defend the masses of the people. The second part will be to mobilize and engage themselves in production activities and providing relief to the masses of the people.

Q. When they are involved in production activities they could also be involved in teaching circles and teaching about the constitutional assembly.

Yes, yes, that is the way of thinking: we will train our YCL cadres to organize the masses, to engage in education and health service, and in construction and production activities.

Q. Is it the Congress or CPN(UML), one of the two, is setting as a condition for being part of a coalition government that the YCL be dissolved.

That shows their reactionary character, you see. Because all these years they have practiced rigging and [. . .]. The YCL prevented that, they know it, so that's why they are asking for that. So there is no chance of considering such a stupid and reactionary line. The YCL will defend the masses of the people. If they don't want to, then let them not join. We say, if you want to join the government, then join. We will lead the government as part of a coalition. If they are not ready for that, being the single largest party we will form the government. If they don't allow that, then we'll go to the masses of the people and bring out another movement. Those are the three choices we have. But we won't compromise on basic issues. No. Because people want change, they have given us a mandate for change. If the reactionary forces don't allow us to put this mandate into practice, then we will go to the masses of the people, rather than succumbing to the pressure of the reactionaries.

Q: And this mandate for change has been taking the form of the slogan of a "New Nepal". What exactly is meant by that and how is it expected to come about?

Yes, "New Nepal" has been a very effective slogan given by our party during the election. "New thought and new leadership for a new Nepal," that was our basic slogan. And I think that people took it very well, and that is why they voted for us. So by New Nepal, what we mean is, first, politically, we want to dismantle all the feudal political, economic, social and cultural relations. That will be one aspect of New Nepal. The other aspect of New Nepal will be making drastic socioeconomic transformation in a progressive way. The one is destruction of the old, the other will be construction of the new. There will be two aspects. And

our basic focus will be on economic activities: the transforming of the agriculture sector, and then developing productive forces, industrial relations, so that the workers and the youth will be provided employment. And that will create a basis for going toward socialism. Our economic slogan that we gave was: "New transitional economic policy." That means industrial capitalism -- development of industrial capitalism -- oriented towards socialism. This has been our work for the interim period.

Q: Going back to the topic of agriculture for a moment -- in your dissertation, the indicators you used for measuring development seem to be kind of mainstream indicators of fertilizer, application of machines and land-holding concentration. Do you think that this is actually something that fits in Nepal?

No, I understand. I was forced to do this because of lack of statistical data, you see. I couldn't manufacture my own data, I had to rely on the given data and the given framework in which it was available. Because of that constraint, I had to use those indicators. That's why I was only able to give an approximation, not real averages, but just approximations. That I mentioned in my dissertation.

Q. So now in thinking about transforming agriculture, which is one base of the economy, what kinds of things would you be concentrating on now? Say you can take power in the government and set agricultural policy, what are your top three moves?

Well firstly, in the agricultural sector, we are going to change the production relations, and land-holding patterns we want to change. Especially in the plain areas; landlordism is there. The absentee landlords who own land, thousands of hectares of land they would own: they live in cities, they don't invest, they don't manage the production, so that way they exploit the poor peasants who till the land. The peasants are exploited and the productivity is also very low. So we want to abolish that type of absentee landlordism and enforce the principle of land to the tiller. That land which is tilled will be redistributed. So we will put a ceiling, say of some four or five hectares and above that land will be confiscated and redistributed to the peasants. So this is one aspect of land reform. The other will be that we are going to organize the poor peasants, because many of them will be very small landholders. I've already told you, less than 0.5 hectares. And they engage very much in subsistence farming. So with that individual cultivation and farming, they can never improve their economic lot. We want to organize these poor peasants into cooperatives. That is the second aspect. And

thirdly, we want to modernize agriculture -- mechanization, modern irrigation, and so on.

Q. And on the question of agriculture that is focused on food security within the country versus export economy agriculture, what's your view?

Our emphasis will be different from the economic policy determined by the World Bank and FAO, which has been export oriented, and peasants are not encouraged to produce food crops, they have been encouraged to produce cash crops for export. The dependency has been increased, the food security has decreased, so you see the food crisis increasing. This is one of the consequences of the World Bank policy -- wrong policy. So we wouldn't like to just blindly follow that policy. Firstly, the peasants' food security will be given high priority. They should produce food and cater to the needs of the internal market. And then secondly only, they can produce for export. So that will be our priority.

Q. We know that you have to go. Is there anything you want to say to the Left in North America?

You see the crisis is international in scale: there is a direct fight between the proletarian ideology and imperialist ideology. This is in the whole of this so-called globalization. Globalization has given this sharp class contradiction, of two classes. So North America being the center of imperialism, the working class and Left forces there, I think they should organize themselves and the stronger the movement against imperialism there, that will be helpful for the Left and proletarian movement in the Third World countries, because the Third World countries are the most oppressed by imperialism. If there is a strong working class movement and Left movement in the imperialist countries, that will directly help the revolutionary movement in the Third World countries. That way we appeal to our friends in North America. They should sharpen their struggle against imperialism. That will help our movement in our countries.

Q. The workers there see themselves as being forced into competition with workers in Third World countries because all their jobs, that is, capital, is moving to the Third World and leaving them unemployed.

That is because of the nature of imperialism, you see. It is not the fault of the Third World countries. They want to exploit the Third World countries more.

Q. Exactly. They want to use these countries to weaken the workers in the. . . .

They want to use the workers of the poor countries against the workers of the rich countries. Instead of that, I think that we should have international working class solidarity, and we have to coordinate the policy against imperialism. When you don't have this political sharpness and political consciousness, the working class in the imperialist countries will think workers of the dependent countries or Third World countries are their enemy, you see. Workers are not their enemy; imperialism is their enemy. So I think this consciousness should be developed among the workers of the imperialist countries.