

# Nine Years On: The 1999 election and Nepalese politics since the 1990 *janandolan*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In May 1999 Nepal held its third general election since the re-establishment of parliamentary democracy through the 'People's Movement' (*janandolan*) of spring 1990. It was in one way a return to the starting point since, as in the first (1991) election, the Nepali Congress achieved an absolute majority, whilst the party's choice in 1999 for Prime Minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, had led the 1990-91 interim government and would have continued in office had it not been for his personal defeat in Kathmandu-1 constituency. Whilst the leading figure was the same, the circumstances and expectations were, of course, very different. Set against the high hopes of 1990, the nine years of democracy in practice had been a disillusioning experience for most Nepalese, as cynical manoeuvring for power seemed to have replaced any attempt to solve the deep economic and social problems bequeathed by the Panchayat regime. This essay is an attempt to summarize developments up to the recent election, looking at what has apparently gone wrong but also trying to identify some positive achievements.<sup>2</sup>

## The political kaleidoscope

The interim government, which presided over the drafting of the 1990

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Krishna Hachethu for comments on an earlier draft of this paper and for help in collecting materials.

<sup>2</sup> The main political developments up to late 1995 are covered in Brown (1996) and Hoftun *et al.* (1999). A useful discussion of the political situation in the wake of the *janandolan* is Baral (1993), whilst voter opinion is analysed in Borre *et al.* (1994). Major issues under Koirala's first government are treated by contributors to Kumar (1995), and Martinussen (1995) deals with the problems involved in setting up effective local government structures.

constitution and the first general elections under it, was principally a coalition between Congress and the main Communist parties though also containing two royal nominees. The Congress administration under Girija Koirala which succeeded it in May 1991 faced vigorous opposition from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninists) [UML] and the smaller Communist parties, including the repetition on a smaller scale of the street protests which had been used against the old Panchayat administration. Opposition focused on an agreement with India over water resources and on an accusation that the government was involved in the deaths of UML leaders Madan Bhandari and Jivraj Ashrit in summer 1993. The real problem for the government was, however, dissension within its ranks, and, in a miscalculated attempt to impose discipline upon his party, Koirala called mid-term elections for 1994 against the wishes of the party's president, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, and of its senior statesman, Ganesh Man Singh. The elections were held in November, after an unsuccessful legal challenge to the dissolution of parliament, and they left the UML as the largest party (with 88 seats out of 205 in the House of Representatives (Pratinidhi Sabha)) but without an absolute majority. Coalition negotiations were inconclusive and so the UML formed a minority government under clause 41(2) of the constitution, with Man Mohan Adhikari as Prime Minister and general secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal as his deputy. In June 1995, after Congress, supported by the National Democratic Party [NDP] and the Sadbhavana Party, requested a special session of the House of Representatives (Pratinidhi Sabha) to bring a no-confidence motion against the government, Adhikari tried to pre-empt defeat by recommending another dissolution and fresh elections. The king acceded to the request but, in a reversal of the previous year's roles, Congress and its allies asked the Supreme Court to declare his move unconstitutional. The court this time ruled against a Prime Minister and parliament was restored: the rationale was that in 1995, unlike the previous year, there was the possibility of forming a replacement government from within the current parliament and that the right to bring a vote of no-confidence in a special session took precedence over the Prime Minister's right to seek a dissolution.

In September 1995, after Adhikari's government was voted out of office, Sher Bahadur Deuba, who had replaced Koirala as leader of the parliamentary Congress party after the mid-term election, became Prime Minister as head of a coalition with the NDP and Sadbhavana in September 1995. The government was faced from February 1996 by an escalating 'People's War'

launched in the mid-western hills by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN(Maoist)]. Although Deuba did manage to secure ratification of the Mahakali Treaty on water resource sharing with India in September 1996, his ability to handle the country's problems was impeded by the need to concentrate on ensuring the government's own survival. While the NDP's president, Surya Bahadur Thapa, was strongly committed to the alliance with Congress, the leader of the parliamentary party, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, was attracted by the UML's offer to join an alternative coalition under his own leadership. Chand was able to win considerable support amongst NDP MPs, including even ministers in Deuba's government, and no-confidence motions were brought against it in March and December 1996. These involved frantic manoeuvring by both sides to suborn the others' supporters and retain the loyalty of their own, and calculations were complicated by the opportunistic behaviour of a number of independent MPs and members of minor parties. After March, Deuba expanded his cabinet to a record 48 members to accommodate almost every NDP MP. He prepared for the December 1996 vote by sending several unreliable NDP ministers on a government-financed trip to Bangkok for 'medical treatment' and one Sadbhavana waverer to Singapore. He thus ensured they would not be in the House when the vote was taken. The result nevertheless showed that his government was in a minority and he only survived because the opposition had not obtained the legal requirement of 103 votes.<sup>3</sup>

Despite protests from his party, he therefore felt compelled to take back into the government the ministers who had previously resigned and voted with the opposition. However, when he himself sought a vote of confidence in March 1997, two of his own Congress MPs were persuaded to stay away from the House and the government was left without a majority.

After Deuba's resignation, Girija Koirala, who Congress hoped would be more acceptable to Lokendra Bahadur Chand, replaced him as leader of the parliamentary party. In the end, however, Chand rejected overtures from Congress and stuck to his earlier choice of alignment, becoming Prime Minister at the head of an NDP-UML-Sadbhavana coalition. Despite the

<sup>3</sup> For a no-confidence motion to be successful, the constitution (Art.59(3)) requires it to be passed *pratinidhi sabhako sampurna sadasya sankhyako bahumatbata* ('by a majority of the entire number of members in the House of Representatives'). This is interpreted as meaning a majority of the House's prescribed strength of 205, although in December 1996 actual strength was only 200.

NDP's formal predominance, the strongman of the government was the deputy Prime Minister, Bamdev Gautam of the UML. Gautam masterminded a UML victory in local elections during the summer; Maoist activity led to voting being postponed in certain areas and, in those where it went ahead, Congress candidates, who were the main target of Maoist violence, were frequently at a disadvantage.

Surya Bahadur Thapa was able to win back support amongst NDP MPs and the government was defeated in another no-confidence vote in September 1997. Thapa then took office at the head of an NDP-Congress-Sadbhavana coalition but in January 1998, realizing the tide among his own MPs was again flowing Chand's way, he recommended the king to dissolve parliament and hold elections. On the afternoon of the same day, UML members and eight rebel NDP MPs petitioned the palace for a special session of parliament. This time, instead of accepting his Prime Minister's advice and allowing the opposition to make a legal challenge, King Birendra himself asked the Supreme Court for its opinion. This action caused some apprehension that the monarch might again be seeking an active role, but the royal move probably accelerated rather than altered the final outcome. After the Court had ruled in a majority judgement that a dissolution should not be allowed, Thapa faced a no-confidence vote in February 1998. The coalition survived as it retained the support of eleven NDP MPs and was also backed by two from the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party [NWPP].

In accordance with an earlier understanding, though after some squabbling over the exact date, Thapa handed over the leadership of the coalition to Congress in April 1998. Girija Koirala formally terminated the coalition with the NDP and Sadbhavana and formed a minority Congress government. Indignant at being cast aside in this manner, Thapa and his party abstained when Koirala sought a vote of confidence. In contrast, Chand and his supporters, now organized as a separate party, joined the UML in voting for the new government. At the end of May, Koirala launched a large-scale police operation against the Maoist insurgents in the mid-western hills and, although this succeeded in inflicting heavy casualties on the Maoists, the government came under heavy criticism because of deaths amongst innocent civilians. In August the administration appeared to change tack, reaching an agreement with an alliance of nine left-wing groups to compensate the

<sup>4</sup> The parties involved were: Unity Centre, Masal, Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist), Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist-

families of victims and not to proceed with legislation giving the security forces special powers.<sup>4</sup> Four days later the cabinet was expanded to include ministers from the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) [CPN(M-L)], a faction whose leadership included Bamdev Gautam and which had broken away from the UML in March that year.<sup>5</sup> However, demands from the CPN(M-L) for additional ministerial posts and disagreements over policy towards the Maoists led to their resignation from the cabinet in December.

Koirala reacted with an immediate request for a dissolution and, as was now customary, the opposition responded with a demand for a special session. With no need this time to consult the Supreme Court, King Birendra summoned parliament, but the motion of no confidence Bamdev had planned was stymied by an agreement between Congress and the UML to form a coalition to oversee elections. This was in theory to be open to participation by other parties, but in the event only Sadbhavana was actually included. Immediately after obtaining a vote of confidence on 14 January 1999, Girija Koirala applied again for a dissolution and the date for elections was then fixed for 3 May. Both the UML and the parties outside government objected strenuously to the Election Commission's plan, supported by Congress, to hold the elections in two phases on 3 and 17 May. Their argument was partly the legalistic one that this procedure violated the royal order, which referred only to 3 May, but they were chiefly concerned that the delay would increase the scope for electoral malpractice. The Election Commission's case was that because of the threat to security from the Maoist rebels, polls could only be held simultaneously throughout the country if large numbers of temporary police were recruited and that police of this type had previously been shown to be unreliable. The wrangling continued but the Commission went ahead on this basis and the campaign got under way.

Maoist), Communist Party of Nepal (United), Nepal Workers and Peasants' Party, Rastriya Janandolan Sanyojak Samiti (a front for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)), and the United People's Front. The CPN(M-L) and NWPP were the only parties formally represented in parliament but two nominally independent MPs were actually Masal-backed.

<sup>5</sup> Technically speaking, this was not a true coalition (i.e. a government appointed under Art. 41(1) of the constitution in virtue of jointly possessing a majority in the House of Representatives). CPN(M-L) ministers were instead simply added to an existing government formed by Congress under Art.41(2) as the largest party in parliament.

### The parties and the 1999 election campaign

Congress went into the election as the senior partner in the government and, as in previous polls, as the only party to put up candidates in every one of the country's 205 constituencies. Offsetting these advantages was the record of continual internal conflict, which had begun almost immediately after the Congress victory in the 1991 elections and had been the cause of the mid-term elections in 1994 and the resultant instability. The tussle for influence between the senior troika of Girija Koirala, Ganesh Man Singh, and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai had continued as a two-way struggle after Ganesh Man Singh's death in September 1997. There was tension also between the three 'second-generation leaders'—Sher Bahadur Deuba, Ram Chandra Paudel, and Shailaja Acharya. Deuba possibly secured the leadership of the parliamentary party and the premiership in 1995 partly because Koirala believed he would be more tractable than the others. However, especially after Koirala succeeded Bhattarai as party president in May 1996, he disagreed continuously with Deuba over how to manage Congress's relations with its coalition partners. In November one of Koirala's aides complained that the government media were treating the Congress party, and particularly Koirala himself, as the opposition.<sup>6</sup>

Conflicts within Congress were sometimes presented as ideological ones, with opponents accusing Koirala of departing too far from the party's professed socialist principles. In August 1996, Jagannath Acharya, and fellow Congress dissidents who claimed to be acting in support of Ganesh Man Singh, proposed setting up a socialist pressure group within the party, whilst Ganesh Man Singh himself and K.P. Bhattarai both seemed more ready to co-operate with the Communist opposition than did Koirala. More often, however, individuals at all levels argued that they were not receiving due recognition for their abilities or past sacrifices. The argument seemed basically to be one over place and patronage.

The ill-defined division of authority between a Congress Prime Minister at the head of the government and the Congress president in command of the party machine was arguably part of the trouble. It had caused conflict between B.P. Koirala and his half-brother M.P. Koirala in the 1950s as it did between Girija Koirala and K.P. Bhattarai in 1991-94 and between Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba from 1996 onward. However, just as Deng Xiao Ping continued to wield decisive influence within the Chinese

<sup>6</sup>*Spotlight*, 22/11/1996.

Communist Party after he had relinquished all his official posts, an individual could retain authority within Congress whilst technically not in a leadership position and might then still clash with a formal office-holder. Even if a senior figure might personally have preferred to withdraw from the fray, his followers, owing their own position to his earlier efforts, might try to keep him involved in the game. Thus arguments between Girija Prasad Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai over appointments to the Central Committee continued after Bhattarai had handed over the presidency to Koirala in 1996, and even after Koirala, whilst still retaining the presidency, had become parliamentary leader in 1997.

As at earlier elections, the announcement of the party's candidates in February produced strong reactions from those who had been passed over. The selection process involved the submission of recommendations by local-level units but final decision by a committee of senior party figures and, according to one report, local preferences were followed in only 25% of cases.<sup>7</sup> There was a feeling amongst some of Koirala's own close associates that he had not asserted their claims strongly enough: his own daughter, Sujata, publicly protested against her exclusion from the list, whilst Manisha, B.P. Koirala's granddaughter and now a Hindi film star, issued a statement deploring the failure to select her father, Prakash. Shailaja Acharya announced that, in protest, she would turn down the nomination she herself had been given, though she rapidly allowed herself to be persuaded to stand. There was also general criticism of the failure to nominate any member of the occupational castes. It was alleged that both Koirala and Bhattarai had allowed the second-generation leaders to nominate many of their own followers even where stronger candidates would have been available.<sup>8</sup> The party leadership eventually responded to the storm by altering the selection in 21 constituencies.

Despite the controversy, the party was largely able to unite behind the candidates chosen. As before, a number of dissidents did stand as independents but their number was much lower than previously and results were to show that none of them possessed a strong enough local following to prevail over the official candidates. One former dissident, Palten Gurung, who had stood

<sup>7</sup>*Spotlight*, 12/3/1999.

<sup>8</sup>*Saptahik Bimarsha*, 5/3/1999. The paper also criticized the party for failing to select any journalists. *Bimarsha's* editor, Harihar Birahi, had himself been one of the unsuccessful would-be candidates.

successfully against the official candidate in 1994, was awarded the party's nomination this time, but in general those who had violated party discipline were excluded without the party forfeiting local support.<sup>9</sup>

The maintenance of party unity was made much easier by Koirala's key decision, announced in December, to put forward Krishna Prasad Bhattarai as the party's candidate for the premiership in the next parliament. This neutralized the most important cleavage, even though some cynical observers doubted whether Koirala would be content to leave Bhattarai in the driving seat for long.

As well as their previous internal disarray, Congress also faced the danger of being punished by the electorate for the country's disappointing economic record during nine years when the party had been in government for longer than any of its rivals. Koirala's strategy was to blame poor performance on the instability of the coalition governments since 1995 and to argue that Congress could provide sound government if it was given a clear majority. Although Koirala had spoken out in December 1998 against World Bank pressure for privatization of the water supply system and was later to criticize the introduction of VAT in 1997 as an unsuitable foreign imposition, the Congress manifesto included a strong commitment to continuing the policies of economic liberalization. The document's language suggested that the party's de facto abandonment of its original socialist stance was now being more fully reflected in its rhetoric (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 15-16).

In its performance pledges, the manifesto gave no promises of instant transformation, but the party proposed to achieve a 6% annual increase in incomes over the next five years and to raise the average income to US\$700 within twenty years. Congress also promised to seek an all-party consensus on a solution to the Maoist problem and to introduce special assistance, including education programmes, for the areas affected. On the contentious issues in Nepal-India relations, including a review of the 1950 treaty and the alleged Indian incursion at Kalapani, there was simply a pledge to reach solutions through diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

For the country's second party, the UML, internal disputes were also a central problem and had in fact led to an actual split in the party in early 1998. The

<sup>9</sup> *Gorkhapatra*, 25, 26/3/1999 (*Nepal Press Digest* 43: 13).

<sup>10</sup> *Nepal Press Digest* 43: 12.

UML had been formed in 1991 by a merger between the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) ['the MALEHs'], the Leftist grouping with the most extensive network of cadres, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist) [CPN(M)] which, in the persons of its leaders, Man Mohan Adhikari and Sahana Pradhan, represented continuity with the original Communist Party of Nepal.<sup>11</sup> A number of former CPN(M) activists had quit the new party in 1991 to re-found their old organization, but in general the union had worked smoothly, with senior figures from the MALEHs having the most influence and Adhikari providing a dignified figurehead and also mediating internal conflicts. The main cause of tension was the long-standing rivalry between the 'hard-line' and 'soft-line' factions within the MALEHs, these labels being replaced with 'majority' and 'minority' after the hard-liners' victory at the unified party's convention in 1993. The majority group was led by Madan Bhandari until his death in 1993, when he was succeeded as general secretary by another member of the same faction, Madhav Kumar Nepal. The minority group was centred on C.P. Mainali.

After 1996 Mainali found an ally in Bamdev Gautam, who had been appointed deputy general secretary to run the party machine whilst Madhav Kumar Nepal served as deputy Prime Minister in Adhikari's 1994-5 government. Gautam's post was abolished in July 1996 and he subsequently led a campaign to remove M.K. Nepal from the general secretaryship. Rivalry between the opposing groups continued whilst Bamdev had his own turn as deputy Prime Minister in the 1997 coalition with the NDP. It continued up to the party's Nepalgunj convention in January 1998. Tensions were running so high that police had to intervene when rival groups of cadres clashed on the streets. Gautam and Mainali, who now also had the support of Sahana Pradhan, again found themselves with a minority of delegates, although they alleged that this was the result of a rigged selection process. Their demand for a form of proportional representation within the party's institutions was not met and finally on 5 March 1998 they announced a formal split, taking 40 of the party's MPs in the House of Representatives with them. Over most of the country they attracted only a minority of cadres but, probably because of Sahana Pradhan's involvement, support for the dissidents was particularly

<sup>11</sup> For the history of the Communist Party and its fracturing after 1960, see Whelpton (1994: 53-60) and (in Nepali) Rawal (1990/1). Charts of the main schisms and mergers are provided by Rawal, Hoftun *et al.* (1999:391) and, together with a succinct summary focusing particularly on the Maoists, in Mikesell (1996).

strong amongst activists from the Valley's Newar community.<sup>12</sup> The name of the pre-1991 Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) [CPN(M-L)] was resurrected for the new organization.<sup>13</sup>

The move was presented as one over political principles and ideology. The leaders of the new CPN(M-L) attacked their parent party for selling out national interests by supporting ratification of the Mahakali Treaty with India in 1996. They also denounced the failure in the documents passed at the convention to identify the United States and India as principal enemies of the Nepalese people or to accept the probable need for violence in achieving fundamental change in society (CPN(M-L) 1998a: 5-14; CPN(M-L) 1998b). The formulations accepted at the UML's sixth convention in fact represented another stage in the watering down of communist orthodoxy which had begun in the pre-1990 CPN(M-L) and had continued with the acceptance of Madan Bhandari's theory of *bahudaliya janbad* (multi-party people's democracy) at the fifth convention in 1993. C.P. Mainali had actually opposed Bhandari on this issue,<sup>14</sup> but now the new party was accepting *bahudaliya janbad* and arguing that it, not the UML, was the true custodian of Bhandari's legacy.

The UML argued in reply that there were no real differences of ideology between the new party's line and its own, but merely differences in emphasis. The author of one party pamphlet argued that the UML still regarded the US as the "centre of world imperialism" but that there was no purpose in tougher rhetoric when both the UML and the CPN(M-L) sought peaceful relations with the two countries (Neupane 1998: 26-7). The UML also pointed out that whilst Bamdev had opposed the Mahakali Treaty at the time of ratification and was doing so again now, he had been perfectly willing to accept it when in government during 1997.

Whilst allowing for partisan exaggeration, the dispute was almost certainly about power within the party rather than about the party's fundamental direction. As one journalist sympathetic to the UML allowed, Sahana Pradhan in

<sup>12</sup> One of the few major Newar figures in the UML to side with the party leadership was the leader of the sweeper caste in Kathmandu. His wish to undermine the CPN(M-L)-aligned head of the municipality was probably a factor in a strike which badly affected the city's garbage disposal system.

<sup>13</sup> The older and newer parties are differentiated in this paper by using the abbreviations 'the MALEHs' and 'CPN(M-L)'. In Nepali, *male* is generally used to refer to either of them.

<sup>14</sup> For the evolution of the concept of *naulo janbad*/*bahudaliya janbad* see Whelpton (1994: 55-57) and for Mainali's 1993 arguments Hoftun *et al.* (1999: 241).

particular may indeed have had genuine misgivings about the playing-down of the role of violence in social change (Dixit 1998a), but her new party was certainly not urging violence now. Their argument was rather that Communists should try to proceed peacefully but must expect that their opponents would eventually turn to violence to oppose them: non-violent transformation could be seen as a theoretical possibility but not presented as the most likely future scenario (CPN(M-L) 1998a: 11; CPN(M-L) 1998b: 18). This difference in long-term perspective would not have prevented the factions continuing working together if other, more urgent factors had not been present.

In its election manifesto, the UML highlighted very specific performance pledges, including the elimination of illiteracy within five years and the trebling of real individual incomes within twenty years. The party was more cautious over economic liberalism than Congress, without totally rejecting the approach: it condemned "indiscriminate liberalization and privatization" but announced its own intention to carry out "selective privatization" (CPN (UML) 1999: 12, 36). The UML adopted a similarly guarded attitude to the VAT controversy, criticizing Congress for introducing the tax without proper preparation, but not opposing it in principle. On relations with India its language was slightly tougher than that of Congress, but did not, of course, go to the extremes that the CPN(M-L) had been calling for.

The party put forward as prime ministerial candidate its veteran leader, Man Mohan Adhikari. Worries were expressed over his continuing health problems but the choice was probably dictated by the need to evade an early decision between the claims of Madhav Kumar Nepal and Khadga Prasad Oli. The party was also able to capitalize on the generally good impression made by Adhikari's short-lived, populist government in 1994-95; an opinion survey conducted in a number of different districts in February showed that he was regarded as the best of the post-1990 Prime Ministers.<sup>15</sup>

In addition his stance of 'extreme moderation', whilst annoying to some radicals, probably served to reassure more centrist voters. Despite his frailty, Adhikari campaigned across the country until collapsing after a rally in

<sup>15</sup> HIMAL-MARG Opinion Poll, surveying almost 8,000 voters in 104 constituencies in February/March 1999. Results, published in full in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, were summarized in *Spotlight*, 23/5/1999. Adhikari was named as their preference for Prime Minister by 31% of respondents, compared with 14.3% for Girija Koirala and 13.0% for Krishna Prasad Bhattarai. 40% named Adhikari's government as the best since 1990, with Koirala's administrations selected by only 17%.

Kathmandu. His death seven days later on 26 April took much of the heat out of the campaign in the Valley and also meant that polling was automatically postponed in the Kathmandu-1 and 3 constituencies, which he had been contesting.

After splitting from the UML in March 1998, the CPN(M-L) had adopted two conflicting strategies: seeking to establish themselves as a more radical Leftist force than the parent party, but also strengthening their position by becoming the Nepali Congress's junior partner in government. Their inability to gain the concessions they wanted from Congress led to their resignation in December. Whilst still expressing opposition to the Maoist insurgency, Bamdev Gautam became increasingly strident in expressing support for its long-term objectives and in his condemnation of excesses by the security forces. As his political opponents eagerly pointed out, this marked a dramatic volte-face from his stance when deputy Prime Minister and home minister in 1997. He had then been one of the staunchest advocates of legislation to give the police special powers to deal with the insurgency, a proposal abandoned in the face of widespread protests by human rights activists and many Leftist groups.

The Marxist-Leninists also accused their former colleagues of corruption, and Gautam declared publicly that members of the UML were responsible for the deaths of Madan Bhandari and Jivraj Ashrit at Dasdhunga in 1993.<sup>16</sup> All such allegations tended to rebound on the heads of people who had so recently been part of what they were now condemning. The party's credibility cannot have been enhanced by Gautam's claim that he had known the truth about Dasdhunga in 1993 but had been unable to speak out as a party member. The same could be said for C.P. Mainali's reported admission that he had taken 'commission' as a minister because he had been instructed to do so by the party. Nor, finally, did the Marxist-Leninists' own recent record in government help much, since many believed they had been involved in one of the recurring scandals over the procurement of aircraft for the national airline, RNAC.

To the left of both the UML and the Marxist-Leninists were three groups

<sup>16</sup> As part of their propaganda campaign before the UML's January 1998 convention, Gautam and his allies had apparently arranged the publication of an article accusing Madhav Kumar Nepal and Khadga Prasad Oli of involvement (Neupane 1998: 19). Madan Bhandari's brother, Prem, supported the allegations, but his widow, now a UML MP, sided with the UML leadership.

which all traced their origins to a faction led by Mohan Bikram Singh, one of the leaders of the pre-1960 Communist Party of Nepal. The first of these groups, known as Masal, was composed of Singh himself and his rump followers. They had boycotted the 1991 elections but backed a number of independent candidates in 1994, of whom two were elected to parliament. Singh still preferred to operate 'underground' but, in order to take part in electoral politics, had set up the National People's Front [NPF] or Rastriya Jana Manch.

The second group was the Unity Centre, which for some time before the 1999 election had been co-operating quite closely with Masal. The Unity Centre, too, was an 'underground' party using an alias—United Popular Front (Pokhrel) [UPF]<sup>17</sup>—for its more conventional activities.

Finally, there was the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which was now conducting an insurgency in several hill districts. The party's general-secretary, Pushpa Kumar Dahal ('Prachand') and its most prominent politburo member, Baburam Bhattarai, had until a split in 1994 been working with Lilamani Pokhrel inside the Unity Centre/United Popular Front, and the UPF had been the third largest party in the 1991-94 parliament. The Maoists possessed two front organizations: the United Popular Front (Bhattarai), which was now itself essentially a clandestine group, and the Rastriya Janandolan Sanyojak Samiti or National People's Movement Organization Committee, which took part openly in agitational activity with other left-wing parties.

Singh, Pokhrel, Prachand, and Bhattarai all concurred in rejecting the legitimacy of parliamentary politics and, although only the last two made explicit use of the label 'Maoist', all of them retained the Maoist ideology abandoned by the UML. The differences between them were largely tactical. Singh and Pokhrel were willing to contest elections as part of an effort to 'expose' the inadequacy of the system. In contrast, Prachand and Bhattarai had rejected the electoral path in favour of what they termed 'People's War' but others,

<sup>17</sup> The reference to the party leader, Lilamani Pokhrel, is necessary to avoid confusion with the UPF (Bhattarai), but Pokhrel's party is now referred to by the Election Commission simply as 'United Popular Front', since the courts ruled in 1994 that it, rather than Bhattarai's organisation, was the legitimate successor to the pre-1994 party. However, because Baburam Bhattarai was the figure who was more in the public eye, media reports before and just after the start of the 'People's War' frequently used 'United People's Front' on its own to refer to his group. The Pokhrel group was also at one time known as the 'UPF(Vaidya)' and Bhattarai's as the 'UPF(Bhusal)'.

including many Leftist factions, described as 'individual murder and terrorism.'<sup>18</sup> There had from time to time been rumours of disagreement between the two men, with Bhattarai favouring a more moderate approach. However, there was no hard evidence of this and towards the end of 1998 Bhattarai himself quashed rumours that the Maoists were considering participating in the coming election. A meeting of the Maoists' central committee in autumn 1998 had confirmed Prachand's position as party supremo as well as deciding to move to the establishment of 'base areas.' In October, Prachand set forth his uncompromising political views in an extended interview with the Maoist-aligned weekly *Janadesh*.<sup>19</sup>

The NPF fielded 53 candidates in the election and the UPF(Pokhrel) 40. Although they had significant ideological differences with the UML, both were able to reach limited seat-sharing agreements with it. The UML withdrew in favour of the National People's Front in six constituencies in return for support in seven, and backed the UPF (Pokhrel) in three in return for support in four. Pokhrel's group also made similar arrangements in some areas with the Marxist-Leninists.

The remaining left-wing group with a real possibility of winning seats was the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party [NWPP]. Despite its small size, it had some political importance because of the hold on the loyalties of the Newar cultivators of Bhaktapur enjoyed by its leader, Narayan Bijukche ('Comrade Rohit'). Ideologically, it was quite close to Masal and the Masal-derived parties since it had never officially renounced Maoism. However, it tended in practice to have a slightly more accommodationist approach to the parliamentary system. The party had won four seats in 1994 on a very small share of the popular vote, since its support was geographically concentrated in its Bhaktapur home base and in Jumla. The hung parliament, however, had exposed the group's members to enticement from other parties anxious to win more support. One MP had defected to the UML at an early stage, whilst Bhakta Bahadur Rokaya had stayed away from the House, despite party instructions to vote for the December 1996 no-confidence motion against the

<sup>18</sup> The phrase used in the manifesto of the Marxist-Leninists (CPN(M-L) 1998b: 10).

<sup>19</sup> *Janadesh*, 3/11/1998. Prachand's singling out of politburo member 'Kiran' (Mohan Baidya) as a colleague to whom he was particularly close was seen by some as an indication of coolness towards Bhattarai. Nevertheless, Bhattarai's column in the same issue of the paper enthusiastically backs the party line, hailing the insurgents' creation of 'base areas' as the first step in a worldwide communist revolution.

Deuba government, and had then been given a post in Deuba's cabinet. A third MP also showed signs of rebellion, leaving Rohit himself the party's only reliable representative in parliament. There were problems, too, in the party organization, culminating in the NWPP's vice-president and the treasurer of the Jumla unit leading a breakaway faction. Rohit himself continued to soldier on and was calling in January 1999 for an alliance of Leftist groups to promote 'revolutionary parliamentarianism'.

The party's manifesto did in fact argue that parliamentary action alone could not bring about a fundamental change in society, but it also proposed a number of specific reform measures and highlighted its own previous role in pressing for legislation to protect the country's cultural heritage. It took a hard line against privatization and the acceptance of foreign capital and advocated improving the performance of public corporations by strengthening discipline over their management rather than selling them off (NWPP 1999: 22).

The split in the National Democratic Party had not been unexpected. Surya Bahadur Thapa and Lokendra Bahadur Chand, bitter rivals in the Panchayat period, had always found it difficult to work in tandem and had not been able to unite their followers in a single party until after they had contested the 1991 election separately. Tension between them increased when the election of a hung parliament allowed the NDP to play a balancing role between the two major parties, with Thapa becoming an advocate of co-operation with Congress while Chand was won over by the UML. After Thapa had engineered the fall of the Chand-led UML-NPD coalition in September and Chand's ally Rajeshwor Devkota had failed in his challenge to Thapa's leadership at the January 1998 party convention, the split was formalized. Thapa's supporters were recognized as the legal continuation of the original party and Chand's styled themselves the 'NDP(Chand)', reviving the name under which they had fought the 1991 election.<sup>20</sup>

Both parties had handicaps in common. The first was the difficulty of establishing a distinct character in the minds of the electorate. The two were most clearly distinguished in foreign policy: Thapa had generally been seen as more sympathetic to India, whilst Chand stood for a more assertive Nepali

<sup>20</sup> Immediately after the split the Chand group used the name 'New NDP'. The media sometimes refer to the Thapa faction simply as the 'NDP' and sometimes as the 'NDP(Thapa).'

nationalism, a factor which had made co-operation with the UML easier. However, once Congress had abandoned its alliance with the NDP in April 1998, Chand appeared to move towards Congress, the more pro-Indian of the two major parties, whilst Thapa became closer to the UML. In addition, both Thapa and Chand were tainted by the role of individual members of the pre-split NDP in creating the instability of the Deuba period. The records of some MPs had been unsavoury in other respects. The Thapa faction's Mirja Dilsad Beg, MP for Lumbini-4, who had associations with the Bombay underworld and was wanted by the Indian police, had been assassinated in Kathmandu in summer 1998, apparently on the orders of an Indian gang boss. One of the NDP(Chand)'s MPs, Khobari Ray, had been arrested in September the same year for the attempted murder of a security guard at a Kathmandu disco. As in India, criminal connections did not necessarily preclude an individual retaining support in his own area, but they hardly enhanced the party's popularity in the country generally. The NDP factions had been handicapped in 1991 by their association with the sins of the Panchayat period, but now they were also identified with the worst excesses of the post-Panchayat era.

The remaining serious electoral contender in 1999 was the Nepal Sadbhavana ('Goodwill') Party, normally known simply as Sadbhavana. With three MPs in the 1994-99 parliament, this group did have the advantage of a clear platform as a Tarai regionalist party. It advocated regional autonomy, reservations for Tarai people in the public services, and the rapid grant of citizenship certificates to all those who were resident in the Tarai when the 1990 constitution came into force.<sup>21</sup> In addition, its leader, Gajendra Narayan Singh, had obtained maximum advantage from the hung parliament, serving as a member of every coalition government since 1994 except for the brief Congress-M-L partnership. However, as was the case with Comrade Rohit's NWPP, a small party's ability to play a balancing role also meant that individual members were exposed to temptation. Hridayesh Tripathi, the best-known personality in the party after Singh himself, had at one point set up a breakaway group with the help of a Sadbhavana representative in the upper house. This organization, the Nepal Samajbadi Janata Dal, was only

<sup>21</sup> The 1990 constitution simply reaffirmed Panchayat-era constitutional provisions and legislation, which allowed citizenship to those born in Nepal or with at least one Nepal-born parent. In the absence of a comprehensive birth registration scheme, this posed problems for many individuals. Sadbhavana wished instead to use the electoral roll for the 1980 referendum as evidence of pre-1990 residence.

formally reunited with Sadbhavana in November 1997. The party's third MP, Anish Ansari, had also struck out on his own when the Deuba government was under challenge at the end of 1996, and had finally been expelled from the party in January 1999. Tripathi and, to a lesser extent, Ansari had both enjoyed government positions despite their disagreements with Singh.

In its election manifesto the party sought to broaden its appeal by calling for the reservation of 30% of public posts for members of the hill ethnic minorities as well as 50% for the Madheshis and also by simply advocating the use of 'local languages' rather than specifically mentioning Hindi. However, in addition to his party's opportunist image, Singh himself also had the disadvantage of his Rajput caste, which could be a liability with other sections of the Madheshi population. Among non-Madheshis he suffered, of course, from being seen as too closely linked with India.<sup>22</sup> Finally, though Sadbhavana MPs had had considerable success advancing their personal careers, they had not been able to secure concessions on their central demands, whether in office or staging theatrical protests such as their burning of the constitution in autumn 1998.

### The issues

In the election campaign, the question of Nepal's relations with India was, as usual, given a lot of attention by the politicians. The terms on which India and Nepal agreed to develop and share the water of the rivers flowing through the Nepalese hills towards the Ganges had always been a source of controversy in Nepalese politics. As it is by far the stronger party, India was inevitably in the driving seat and any agreement was regularly denounced as a sell out by opposition groups in Nepal, particularly those on the Left. Girija Prasad Koirala's 1991-94 government had run into stiff opposition, including violent street protests, when it tried to argue that an agreement with India concerning the Tanakpur project was only a minor one and therefore exempt from the constitutional requirement for ratification by a two-thirds majority of the combined Houses of Parliament. Further negotiations with

<sup>22</sup> It was rumoured in Kathmandu that he had deserted the Deuba administration in March 1997 on Indian instructions because New Delhi, having neutralized opposition to its economic objectives from Madhav Kumar Nepal, now wanted to win over Bamdev Gautam by allowing him a spell in power as Chand's deputy. Perhaps more plausible, however, is the suggestion that Singh waited to see which way the political wind was blowing and then made sure he ended up on the winning side (*Saptahik Bimarsha* 7/13/1997).

India under both the 1994-95 UML administration and the Deuba coalition government had combined this issue with other projects on the Mahakali River. When the resulting Mahakali Treaty was presented for ratification in September 1996 the UML had only decided to support the agreement after a disputed vote on its central committee. Bamdev Gautam had been a leading opponent of ratification and the issue became, as has been seen, a major plank in the platform on which the Marxist-Leninists split from the UML.

To the resources problem was added the continuing call for a revision of the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty which the Rana government had signed with India when facing growing opposition from dissidents. This gave nationals of each country the right to live and work in the other, and clashed with the desire of many Nepalese to control the border—both to protect the employment opportunities of Nepalese citizens and to allow Nepal greater control over her own economy. There was also resentment over provisions in the treaty and in letters exchanged in association with its signing which implied Nepalese acceptance of inclusion in India's security sphere.<sup>23</sup>

Long-standing complaints had been aggravated by the recent discovery that Indian troops had apparently been in occupation of a small area at Kalapani in the north-west corner of the country for many years. The dispute here turned on whether the stream to the west or the east of the area was to be regarded as the main course of the Mahakali, which formed the recognized border between the two countries. Finally, there was the issue of the ethnic Nepalese 'cleansed' from Bhutan and now housed in refugee camps in the south-east of the country.<sup>24</sup>

Amongst Nepali intellectuals and political activists, particularly those on the Left, these issues were of the greatest importance, and this explains the central role of the Mahakali Treaty controversy in the polemics which accompanied the split in the UML. Demands for the annulling or re-negotiation of agreements with India had also been among those put to the government in 1996 just before the Maoists launched their 'People's War'. They were

<sup>23</sup> Article 3 of the treaty committed both governments "to inform each other of any serious friction or misunderstanding with any neighbouring State likely to cause any breach in the friendly relations subsisting between the two governments." The accompanying letter provided that "the Governments shall consult with each other and devise effective counter-measures" (Jha 1975: 37-39).

<sup>24</sup> For background on the Bhutanese refugee issue see Hutt (1996). A good collection of Nepalese viewpoints on Nepal-India relations generally is Dhruva Kumar (1992).

similarly amongst the objectives of the coalition of nine smaller Leftist groups which organized against the Congress government in 1998. Relations with India, therefore, played a significant part in the parties' campaign rhetoric.

Amongst parties contesting the election, the greatest concern was shown by the more radical left-wing groups and by the NDP(Chand), all of which denounced the Mahakali agreement in their election manifestos. The most extreme stance was possibly that of the UPF, who saw Nepal facing the threat of 'Sikkimization' (absorption into India as had happened to the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim in 1974). The UPF and the CPN(M-L) called for a work permit system to control the influx of Indian labour. On the other hand, Congress and the UML placed little emphasis on such issues, in contrast to previous elections when divergent approaches to relations with India had been a major point of disagreement between the two main parties (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 19).

Another issue which, like the Indian question, touched on national security, was the Maoist insurgency. This was at its most severe in four core districts—Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot, and Salyana—but was affecting 35 of the country's 75 districts and around 25% of the population in some degree or other (Tiwari 1999). Official government figures released in February 1999 put the total number of dead at 616, of whom 35 were policemen, 112 unarmed citizens, and the remainder supposedly insurgents.<sup>25</sup> In the April 1999 edition of their annual human rights yearbook, a reputable NGO, the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) gave a total of 538 deaths up to the end of 1998, including 129 killings by the Maoists and 409 by the police.<sup>26</sup> Estimating the Maoists' actual strength was difficult, especially since actual fighters were backed by a larger number of supporters and sympathizers. One very detailed 1997 newspaper report put the number of guerrillas at 1,600,<sup>27</sup> whilst in campaign speeches in 1999 Bamdev Gautam used a figure of 4,000.

<sup>25</sup> *Kathmandu Post*, 13/2/1999.

<sup>26</sup> INSEC (1999: 134) provides figures for each month from February 1996 to December 1998 but also implies that some deaths may have gone unrecorded. Official sources put the death toll during the May-November 1998 police operation alone at 227 (Amnesty International 1999: 4).

<sup>27</sup> *Gorkha Express*, 17/10/1997 (*Nepal Press Digest* 41: 43). The report also claimed that the guerrillas were supported by a 'militant group' of 200, a 4,000-strong 'security group', 1,200 in a 'volunteers' group', 10,000 ordinary members, 400 intellectuals, 30 journalists, 38 engineers, and 12 medical practitioners.

As a direct influence on the elections the Maoists were important, first of all, because their activities might restrict the ability of candidates to campaign in certain areas, particularly in the case of Congress workers, who had been the principal targets of Maoist violence in the past. Their call for a boycott of the elections might also substantially affect the turn out and therefore the credibility of the results. Their hold over local people was based to a considerable extent on intimidation in areas where the state's own presence had normally been weak, but they did also enjoy some genuine support. Their propaganda laid particular stress on ethnic minority (*janajati*) issues and, at least at the start of the insurgency, their fighters seemed to be recruited especially from amongst the Kham Magars, a group less well integrated into mainstream Nepalese society than Magars generally.<sup>28</sup> According to INSEC's analysis, out of the 409 persons killed by the police by the end of 1998, 149 were Magars, compared with 86 Chetris and 42 Brahmins.<sup>29</sup> In autumn 1998, when it was believed that the Maoists might decide to reverse their previous policy and take part in the election, a Home Ministry intelligence report had apparently estimated they would emerge as the country's third-largest party with between 20 and 25 seats.<sup>30</sup> It was against this background that the Marxist-Leninists made their sympathetic statements about the Maoists and even one or two NDP candidates seemed at times to be angling for their local support.

Amongst Kathmandu intellectuals, the principal concern was often not so

<sup>28</sup> A sadly plausible description of the situation in Rolpa shortly before the outbreak of the 'war' is provided by a foreign observer who had herself been brought up in a communist state: "The problem lies in the situation many young Magars are in. Education in the Magar areas is bad to non-existent, the health status in parts catastrophic and no interest from the official side in improving anything or even lending an open ear to their problems and needs. Money and big projects are brought to the lower areas but never reach the Magars. So they see their only hope in a radical solution which they think the [Maoists] can bring. Like in most 'revolutions' they are being misled and misused and afterwards they will be thrown by the wayside" (Hughes 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Tiwari (1999) implies that by 1999 the occupational castes were a major support base and a speaker at a Kathmandu seminar in spring 1999 claimed that 54 Dalits ('oppressed ones', the name which lower caste activists have adopted from their Indian counterparts) had been among those killed by the police as Maoists. (*Kathmandu Post*, 1/4/1999). INSEC give a figure of 34 Dalits killed by December 1998.

<sup>30</sup> *Asan Bazar*, 31/10/1999. Slightly varying versions of the Home Ministry survey results were given in different newspapers.

much the Maoist activities themselves as the methods the police were using to counter them. As argued in Amnesty International's April 1999 report, there was little doubt that many of those supposedly killed by the police in 'encounters' had in fact been extra-judicially executed. It was also probable that the security forces had sometimes killed innocent persons who were then simply claimed to be guerrillas (Des Chene 1999). With the police already exceeding their legal authority, the proposals to increase that authority by fresh legislation or by amendment of existing laws had met strenuous opposition. There was also concern about action taken against people who were sympathetic to the 'People's War' but not actively involved in it; an example was the raiding of Maoist newspapers and the detention of some of their staff. The human rights aspects of the government's anti-insurgency measures thus continued to arouse controversy.

Against this background, reports from Nepal in the international media sometimes gave the impression that the insurgency was the key issue in the campaign.<sup>31</sup> It is probable, however, that its importance in the mind of the average Nepalese voter was considerably less. The February-March 1999 HIMAL-MARG survey (see above, n. 12), which sampled opinion in half the constituencies across the country, found that only just over two per cent of the voters questioned regarded the Maoist problem as the main one facing the country. This ranking put the issue on a par with pollution and the Bhutanese refugees. The reason for this relative lack of concern was, presumably, that outside the most-heavily influenced areas, there was not enough Maoist activity to rival the many other difficulties with which ordinary Nepalese were daily confronted.

The 'ethnic' question also probably generated less enthusiasm at grassroots level than amongst the intelligentsia.<sup>32</sup> Activists had, nevertheless, continued to highlight the issue and operated in a plethora of different organizations, many of them, like Gopal Khambu Rai's Khambuwan Rastriya Morcha and

<sup>31</sup> For example, Peter Popham, 'Maoist terror in Shangri-la' *South China Morning Post*, 16/5/1999 (originally published in *The Independent* (UK)). Kedar Man Singh, in 'Back to the Centre' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3/6/1999, published after the election, also suggests that concern with the Maoist problem was a key influence on the result.

<sup>32</sup> On ethnicity as a factor in Nepalese politics see Gellner *et al.* (1997) and Hoftun *et al.* (1999: 311-40). Useful presentations of the *janajati* activist and of more sceptical, 'mainstream' views are provided by Krishna Bhattachan (1995) and Dilli Ram Dahal (1995) respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Ethnic autonomy or full self-determination had been a key part of the Maoists' platform

Bir Nemwang's Limbuwan Mukti Morcha, allied to the Maoists.<sup>33</sup> There was an on-going controversy over the use of regional languages, highlighted by a March 1998 Supreme Court ruling against the employment of Newari by the Kathmandu municipality and of Maithili in the Tarai districts of Dhanusha and Rajbiraj. Despite this, there were signs that the whole problem might be becoming less of an issue between parties. In particular, Congress, which had earlier been opposed to the whole concept of 'reservations', was softening its stance. The common programme announced by the NPD-Congress-Sadbhavana coalition after the expansion of Surya Bahadur Thapa's cabinet in October 1997 included quotas for lower castes in medical and technical institutes. In addition, Girija Prasad Koirala appeared to endorse preferential treatment for the local Magar community in teacher recruitment during a visit to Maoist-affected areas in May 1998 (Subedi 1998). One intellectual associated with *janajati* causes actually suggested that the Congress election manifesto contained more on the *janajati* issue than many of the left-wing groups traditionally more identified with it.<sup>34</sup>

However, whilst a consensus might have been emerging between the two main parties, a number of smaller parties continued to take a more radical line. The CPN(M-L), the UPF and, more surprisingly, the NDP all advocated the conversion of Nepal's Upper House, the Rastriya Sabha, into a 'House of Nationalities' representing the different ethnic groups. The CPN(M-L) and UPF also made manifesto commitments to grant autonomy to ethnic communities.<sup>35</sup> On the issue of mother-tongue education, Sadbhavana arguably went further than any other party, promising to introduce such a system rather than simply recognize the right to it (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 18; Sadbhavana 1999: 13).

The issue of corruption had attracted great attention in the media throughout

from the beginning and was strongly emphasized in Prachand's November 1998 *Janadesh* interview.

<sup>34</sup> Speech by Krishna Bhattachan at a Nepal Janajati Mahasangh function, reported in *Kathmandu Post*, 17/4/1999.

<sup>35</sup> The practical difficulties of such autonomy were perhaps reflected in the somewhat tortuous wording adopted by the CPN(M-L): "making the necessary arrangements for granting the right of autonomous administration through self-determination in districts or regions with ethnic geographical composition, diversity, and distinctive local characteristics" (*jatiya bhaugolik banaut, vividhata ra sthaniya vishishtata raheka jilla wa kshetrama atmanirnaya antargat swayatta shasanko adhikar dina awashyak vyavastha garnu*) (CPN(M-L) 1999: 39).

the nineties, and had come to a head in 1998 with the 'red passport' scandal, involving MPs allowing improper use of their diplomatic passports. Corruption within the administration had also been the subject of increasing public complaint by aid donors. Yet, again, the HIMAL-MARG poll suggested it was not a central concern for most electors: only 7% selected it as the major problem facing the country.<sup>36</sup> One suspects that many electors, whilst certainly not approving of it, simply took it for granted as an inherent part of the social system.

The answer to the question of what was uppermost in voters' minds was quite simple: to borrow a slogan from the 1992 USA presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid!" Local lack of development was cited by 29% of respondents to the poll, rising prices by 28%, and unemployment by 18%. To attract votes, therefore, a party needed to appear able to improve the general economic situation, but, most importantly, to offer direct benefits to the voter and his community. This is not really inconsistent with evidence from a 1994 opinion survey that a candidate's *aphno manche* status or caste was even more important than the offer of a development project (SEARCH 1994: 91; Hoftun *et al.* 1999: 249). Someone closely connected to the voter would be thought more likely to steer benefits his or her way.

The parties offered contrasting prescriptions on how the benefits of development were to be achieved. As has already been seen, Congress was now identified more than ever with economic liberalism, whilst the UML, though not offering full-blooded socialist alternatives, wanted a larger role for the state sector. The NDP was nearer to Congress on the economy generally but it complained in its manifesto of the lack of transparency with which privatization had been conducted and also advocated curbs on the growing commercialization of education (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 17). On this second point the NDP appeared more distrustful of the private sector than the UML, which merely promised 'harmonization' of private and public education. The smaller Leftist parties continued to take a traditional communist stance.

### The conduct of the election

The campaigning process itself involved candidates representing 39 political parties (out of a total of 96 who had registered with the Election Commission) and 633 independents. There were, as in previous elections, a number

<sup>36</sup> *Spotlight*, 23/5/1999 (see fn. 12 above).

of violent clashes between party activists but the most serious disruption was the work of the Maoist insurgents. In March, the UML candidate in Rukum-2, who had himself previously been a Maoist, was murdered by his former comrades; and in neighbouring Rolpa district eight UML activists died when persons thought to be Maoists set fire to the house they were in.<sup>37</sup> It was also reported that police actually advised candidates in Rolpa to remain at district headquarters because they could not guarantee their safety if they visited the villages.

It was originally intended that polling would take place in 93 constituencies, including the Maoist-affected districts and the Kathmandu Valley, on May 3, and in the remaining 112 on 17 May. In the event, the deaths of Man Mohan Adhikari and of two other candidates resulted in postponed voting in Kathmandu-1 and 3 (8 June), Siraha-5 (19 June), and Sunsari-3 (26 June). Out of 13,518,839 registered voters, 8,649,664 or 65.79% cast their ballots. This compared with 62.01% in 1991 and 65.15% in 1994.

Voting was judged largely free and fair by most observers, but, as usual, there were irregularities in some areas and re-polling had to be ordered at 101 booths, compared with 51 in 1991 and 81 in 1994 (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 22). This was despite the fact that, in the interests of security, the number of booths had been reduced. This change in itself made it more difficult for individuals in remote areas to cast their votes and also increased the danger of others voting fraudulently in their name (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 9-10). Opposition parties claimed that Congress was guilty of widespread rigging, but there were also accusations against the UML, with the CPN(M-L) in particular alleging that it had been the victim of both major parties. In September 1999, a government minister was reported as admitting at a government seminar that rigging had taken place in 10% of cases, and that in his own constituency he had rigged in one village and his opponent had rigged in another!<sup>38</sup>

Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's government resisted opposition demands for a parliamentary investigation into past irregularities but, following a boycott of

<sup>37</sup> Prachand subsequently promised 'investigations' into the incident whilst Baburam Bhattarai (*Deshantar*, 21/3/1999, in *Nepal Press Digest* 43: 13) appeared to deny outright that the perpetrators were Maoists.

<sup>38</sup> The minister, Govinda Bahadur Shah, had defeated the UML's Bim Bahadur Rawal in Accham-1 in far-western Nepal. The reported admission was made at a Kathmandu seminar organized by Amnesty International (*Kathmandu Post*, 11/9/1999).

parliament in August by the UML, it did agree to the formation of a committee to consider ways of improving the conduct of future elections.

The 1999 election was also sometimes marred by violent clashes between party workers. The most serious led to the deaths of five persons in Rautahat district where the UML general secretary, Madhav Kumar Nepal, was contesting from constituencies 1 and 4. There were also widespread violations of the Election Commission's limits on election expenditure. These varied in different regions, with a maximum of 275,000 rupees allowed for each candidate in the Kathmandu Valley. At a seminar after the election, a member of the UML's central committee, Keshab Badal, suggested that the actual expenditure probably averaged between two and three million rupees, whilst the CPN(M-L)'s Hiranya Lal Shrestha alleged that one individual had spent over ten million (Khanal and Hachhethu 1999: 36).

By and large, the Maoists did not try to disrupt voting, whether because of the enhanced security measures or, as Prachand claimed, because it had never been their intention to do this. However, there was an unsuccessful attempt to seize a ballot box on its way to district headquarters in Rukum, whilst two Maoists were beaten to death when they allegedly first scolded and then physically attacked a group of voters returning from a polling station in Salyan. In addition, in the first reported attack by the insurgents on army personnel, two soldiers guarding a ballot box at a village in Rolpa were killed on 9 May. Turnout fell to around one third of the electorate in the areas where the Maoists were strongest, and there were also reports that some of those voting did so only under pressure from the authorities.

### The results and pointers for the future

The counting of votes began when the polls closed on 17 May and, contrary to most analysts' expectations of another hung parliament, Congress emerged as the clear winner with 110 seats (111 after the June polling) and 36.5% of the popular vote. This was just slightly more than the 35.4% it had obtained in Nepal's first parliamentary election in 1959 and slightly less than the 37.8% which secured it 110 seats in 1991. The UML won 71 seats as against the 69 won in 1991, its share of the vote being now 30.74% in comparison with 27.98% then. However, the return to the 1991 starting line in terms of numbers of seats obscured a rather different voting pattern. The total vote won by Leftist factions was more than 3% above the Congress total (see Table 3) and the party's victory was due principally to the split in the

UML in 1998. Although the Marxist-Leninists failed to gain a single seat, they secured 6.38% of the total vote. Had this gone instead to the UML candidates, the parent party would have won an additional 43 seats—40 from Congress and 3 from the NDP—thus gaining a comfortable overall majority.

Two other Communist factions, the NPF and the UPF, won five and one seat respectively, the winning candidate in every case having benefited from the UML's agreement to withdraw in his favour. The sole UPF winner was the party leader, Lilamani Pokhrel, while the successful NPF candidates included the two nominally independent Masal supporters who had been members of the previous parliament.

The NDP gained 11 seats, one more than its strength after the defection of the Chand group, and retained its status as third party. Like the Marxist-Leninists, the NDP(Chand) failed to gain any seats but affected the result by taking votes away from the parent party. In some cases the two factions had managed to agree on letting the other have a clear run, but in five constituencies their rivalry let in a candidate from a third party. The NDP leader, Surya Bahadur Thapa, lost to Sadbhavana in Sarlahi-2 for this reason, but managed to return to parliament by winning narrowly in Dhankuta-2 thanks to the ML/UML split. Another casualty was the NDP's Prakash Lohani, who lost to the UML by 15 votes. The NDP(Chand) itself missed victory in three seats (including both the Rupandehi constituencies contested by Deepak Bohora) because of votes going to NDP candidates. The NDP should have won the Sunsari-3 seat in June, since the UML had promised to back its candidate there in return for support in the other three constituencies voting that month. However, almost 6,000 UML voters disregarded their party's instructions and voted for the UML's own candidate, whose name remained on the ballot paper.<sup>39</sup>

Sadbhavana had mixed fortunes, increasing its number of MPs from three to five but suffering a decline in its total share of the vote and also the loss of Gajendra Narayan Singh's own seat in Saptari-2. His place as leader of the parliamentary party was taken by Badri Prasad Mandal, who defeated Shailaja Acharya, one of the three 'second-generation leaders' of Congress, in Morang-7.

<sup>39</sup> This was a repeat performance of what had happened in the by-elections at the beginning of 1997, when the UML had promised to support an NDP candidate in Baitadi-1 but failed to deliver on the bargain.

Looking at the overall voting pattern, the most significant feature is perhaps the emergence of the Left parties as the block with the highest popular support. This was not translated into a majority of seats, partly because of the general vagaries of the electoral system but principally because of the rivalry between the UML and ML. Apart from those who rejected participation in elections altogether, the Leftist groups all paid lip service to the principle of *ek tham ek bam* (a single Leftist candidate for each constituency). However, failure to achieve this in 1991 and 1994 had cost the Left as a whole 14 and 8 seats respectively; this figure had now increased to 42. The inability of the Marxist-Leninists to establish themselves as a credible force should mean, however, that many of their voters are likely to support the UML next time round, though some might, of course, become disillusioned with electoral politics altogether. The decline in votes going to the Left as a whole between 1991 and 1994 was due principally to the decision of the Prachand-Bhattarai group to abandon conventional politics.

A long-term drift towards the Left, with the UML its main beneficiary, is also predictable from the nature of the party's support base. A 1991 voter study highlighted the tendency of younger voters to support the Left (Ore *et al.* 1994: 63-4) and a later comparative analysis of election results suggested that a 1% increase in the 18-25 age-group boosted the communist vote by 2.36%.<sup>40</sup>

This does not, of course, necessarily argue that Nepali government policy will change radically, since the UML itself has moved towards the centre. It is likely, however, that the Communist 'trademark' will become increasingly attractive.

<sup>40</sup> According to an IDFS study, 'Third general election: emerging scenario'.

TABLE 1: 1999 ELECTION RESULTS:<sup>41</sup>

Party	Seats contested	Seats won	percentage of total seats	percentage of total votes
Nepali Congress	205	111	54.15	36.14
Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)	193	71	34.63	30.74
National Democratic Party	195	11	5.37	10.14
Nepal Sadbhavana Party	68	5	2.44	3.13
National People's Front	53	5	2.44	1.37
United People's Front	40	1	0.49	0.84
Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party	41	1	0.49	0.55
Communist Party of Nepal Marxist-Leninist	197	0	-	6.38
National Democratic Party (Chand)	184	0	-	3.33
Rastriya Janamukti Party	130	0	-	1.07
Nepal Janata Dal	24	0	-	0.13
Janamukti Party Nepal	26	0	-	0.11
Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist)	28	0	-	0.09
Nepal Dalit Shramik Morcha	22	0	-	0.08
Hariyali Nepal Party	45	0	-	0.07
Nepal Janata Party Rastriya Sambridibad	15	0	-	0.06

<sup>41</sup> Based on the Election Commission's website ([www.cybermatha.net/ec/](http://www.cybermatha.net/ec/)). Figures for the number of seats contested may be slightly different in other sources, presumably because of nominations being made and then withdrawn before polling.

Party	Seats contested	Seats won	percentage of total seats	percentage of total votes
Communist Party of Nepal (United)	19	0	-	0.06
Rastriya Janata Parishad	39	0	-	0.04
Shivasena Nepal	25	0	-	0.02
Jana Congress	12	0	-	0.02
Nepal Praja Parishad	8	0	-	0.01
Nepal Socialist Party	6	0	-	0.01
Bahujan Samaj Party Nepal	3	0	-	0.01
Nepal Janahit Party	1	0	-	-
Liberal Democratic Party	1	0	-	-
Sanyukta Prajatantra Pty	2	0	-	-
Nepal Rastriya Ekta Pty	1	0	-	-
Prajatantra Sagarmatha Dal	1	0	-	-
Save the Nation Movement	3	0	-	-
Samajbadi Garib Party	2	0	-	-
Socialist Democratic Party	3	0	-	-
Pragatishil Upayog Tatto Nepal	1	0	-	-
Mechi Mahakali Jana Samanvaya Dal	1	0	-	-
Nepal Samyabadi Party (Marxist-Leninist -Maoist)	3	0	-	-
Nepal Janabhavana Party	1	0	-	-
Nepal Rastrabadi Dal	1	0	-	-
Prajatantrik Nepali Janata Party	1	0	-	-
Nepal Suraksha Party	1	0	-	-
Rastrabadi Janata Party	1	0	-	-
Independents	633	0	-	2.83
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2238</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>97.25</b>

TABLE 2: SEATS WON IN SUCCESSIVE ELECTIONS

	1991	1994	1999
Nepali Congress	110	83	111
Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)	69	88	71
National Democratic Party	[4] <sup>42</sup>	20	11
Nepal Sadbhavana Party	6	3	5
United People's Front	9	-	1
National People's Front	-	[2] <sup>43</sup>	5
Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party	2	4	1
Communist Party of Nepal (United) <sup>44</sup>	2	-	-
Independents	4	7	-

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF VOTE OBTAINED BY MAJOR BLOCKS

	1991	1994	1999
Congress	37.75	33.85	36.14
The Left	36.82	34.40 <sup>45</sup>	39.48
UML	27.98	30.85	30.74
ML	-	-	6.38
Others	8.83	3.55	2.36
NDP	11.94	17.93	13.47
Thapa	5.38	-	10.14
Chand	6.56	-	3.33
Ethnic	4.57	4.54	4.20
Sadbhavana	4.10	3.49	3.13
RJMP <sup>46</sup>	0.47	1.05	1.07

<sup>42</sup> In 1991 Surya Bahadur Thapa and Lokendra Chand, having failed to agree on terms for establishing a single party, led separate organizations, viz. the National Democratic Party (Thapa) and the National Democratic Party (Chand).

<sup>43</sup> The Communist Party of Nepal (Masal), for which the National People's Front is simply an electoral vehicle, did not formally contest in 1994 but backed a number of nominally independent candidates, two of whom were elected.

<sup>44</sup> This party, originally the Manandhar faction of Keshar Jung Rayamajhi's pro-Soviet communist party, contested the 1991 election as the Communist Party of Nepal (Democratic), but adopted the new name at its merger with Tulsī Lal Amatya's and

Analyses of the working of the Nepalese political system, whether during the period of parliamentary experimentation in the 1950s, under the Panchayat regime, or after the 1990 return to democracy, normally emphasize the continuation of a personalized, patronage-based brand of politics, regardless of the constitutional form in which it is clothed.<sup>47</sup>

There is, of course, a danger in this line of argument since there is an implied contrast with a presumed 'modern' system in which ideology is all-important. Political systems in developed countries do not all operate on this pattern. One has only to think of the importance of factions led by powerful individuals within the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan, or of the American Democratic and Republican Parties, which do not possess coherent and contrasting ideologies in the same way as 'classic' European parties of the Right or Left. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in Nepal, as in developing countries generally, patronage networks do play a particularly important role. This is a continuation of the traditional way of doing things and is also reinforced by the divide between the traditional and modern sectors of the economy. Those operating at village level will tend to look to patrons with access to the modern sector and the ability to ensure that some of its benefits are passed down to village level.

In this kind of environment, behaviour stigmatizable as favoritism and corruption readily arises, and the situation worsened during the 1994-99 hung parliament. The constant changes in the administration as each set of new leaders sought to place its own people in influential or lucrative positions attracted a stream of criticism from the media and increasingly public protests from aid donors. It was widely argued that the situation was aggravated by successive rulings from the Supreme Court, which prevented an incumbent Prime Minister from calling mid-term elections so long as there was the possibility of forming a new government from within the current parliament. However, more frequent elections would not necessarily solve the problem

Krishna Verma's groups and retained it after the other groups again separated from it.

<sup>45</sup> This figure does not include votes obtained by independent candidates backed by the Masal group, two of whom were elected. Masal had boycotted the 1991 election while in 1999 it participated through its front organization, the NPF.

<sup>46</sup> I.e. the Rastriya Janamukti Party which claimed to represent the hill 'tribals'.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the final chapter of Joshi and Rose (1966), Bergström (1980), or Hoftun *et al.* (1999: 247-51).

because they might result in another hung parliament, as the 1999 election itself had been expected to do. The basic problem is that if the political system makes frequent changes of government likely, it becomes important to insulate the civil service to some extent from political appointments.

As with civil service appointments, there was great difficulty in many other spheres in getting all sides to abide by agreed 'rules of the game'. This was particularly evident in the conduct of elections, since the party in power was sometimes guilty of putting improper pressure on the officials supervising the polls, and was certainly always suspected by its opponents of so doing. At local level, in cases where one party was considerably stronger than the others, activists would sometimes use their numerical superiority to take over polling stations and not allow supporters of other parties to vote freely. These practices were less common than the supporters of losing parties made out. However, they did exist and they contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust and to the belief that it was sensible to break the rules when one could get away with it as the other side would certainly do so.

The 'People's War' can be seen in one sense as an extension of such practices, with the insurgents not just trying to distort the rules of the system but to disregard them altogether. As with less dramatic forms of extra-legal activity, a vicious cycle is set up in which violence by one side justifies violence by the other. This had begun in Rolpa district even before the official start of the 'War'. In autumn 1995, after the fall of the UML government and the formation of Deuba's Congress-NDP-Sadbhavana coalition, there were serious clashes between the Maoists' activists and those of other parties, and also with the police, who had been drafted into the area in a special security operation. Both the Bhattarai group and a number of other Leftist parties accused the security forces of bringing false charges and torturing detainees, but there was certainly also intimidation of opponents by the Maoists.<sup>48</sup>

The insurgency which commenced in February 1996, though undeniably an important new development, was also an escalation of a problem which already existed.

<sup>48</sup> Des Chene (1998: 46) focuses on a major police operation in the run-up to the November 1994 elections. However, the 1995 clashes attracted by far the most media attention, and there may be some confusion between the two episodes.

Estimates of the seriousness of the current situation vary widely. Except when trying to make the case for extra powers for the security forces, governments have generally tended to stress that the problem is largely under control. Others sometimes speak and write as if it portends the total collapse of the present Nepalese state structure. In fact, it is probably still best regarded as a central phenomenon in marginal areas but a marginal force in the central ones, an aspect well brought out by Gyawali (1998). Rural-based guerilla movements have often been able to supplant regular state authority in areas of the countryside but generally fail to gain control of the major, urban centres of power unless other factors come into play. The classic example is Mao's own movement, which could probably have maintained itself indefinitely in Yanan but would not have made itself master of China without the situation produced by the Japanese assault on China and the subsuming of this struggle into a world war.<sup>49</sup>

The Maoists have been able to gain a hold on Rolpa and other backward areas precisely because they are not of crucial economic importance and were only weakly penetrated by the Nepalese state. The government had hitherto relied on a small number of local 'big men', who owed their influence partly to state patronage but were also chosen partly because they were already influential. Social control was maintained by these individuals and also through the self-regulating mechanisms of village communities. The traditional order has broken down with an increasing imbalance between resources and population, and as local people become increasingly aware of the benefits available through 'development' but enjoy little personal access to them. In this situation it was possible for would-be revolutionaries to win over recruits and to supplant rival wielders of influence, whether they be local landowners or government-appointed school teachers.

In dealing with the security aspect of the problem, there are two theoretical alternatives available to the government. The first, which has been put into practice intermittently, is to rely on intensive, large-scale military action against areas where insurgents are based in large numbers.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Dixit (1998b) provides a detailed comparison of the Nepalese situation with that in China and elsewhere, arguing that the conditions that have enabled armed revolutionaries to triumph in certain countries do not exist in Nepal.

<sup>50</sup> The word used should perhaps be 'para-military' rather than 'military' since under existing legislation the police, not the army, has to deal with the situation and any change in this policy would be highly controversial politically.

This approach almost inevitably leads to casualties among the general population and to widespread human rights abuses. The method can work, nevertheless, and it enabled Chiang Kai Shek to force Mao and his comrades out of their original base in southern China. It was also used successfully by Mao himself against the Tibetans in 1959 and, arguably, by the Indian government to break the back of Sikh separatism in the Panjab. In his 1998 *Janadesh* interview, Prachand appeared aware of this possibility but seemed confident that left-wing forces generally would be sufficiently powerful to stop the state bringing its full force to bear against the rebels.

The second approach would be more surgical, with lower intensity but longer-term operations and a greater reliance on intelligence gathering at village level and on special-forces operations against insurgents in the jungles. This would not automatically prevent human rights abuses but it would reduce them. It would need to go hand-in-hand with efforts to improve facilities in the affected areas: for governments, as indeed for insurgents themselves, sticks and carrots are not exclusive alternatives but complementary measures. It might be possible to secure a consensus between the two main political parties to back such a policy, with a renewed emphasis on the rule of law. This would imply the UML and the constitutional Left backing firm action against law breaking by would-be revolutionaries whilst the new Congress government made a greater effort to bring police behaviour more into line with the laws theoretically controlling it. Given the ethos common in police forces throughout South Asia, this will not be easy, but a start could and should be made.

Despite the 'People's War' and many other problems, the record of multi-party democracy since 1990 does have some positive aspects. Though the trend was obscured by events in the two years before the 1999 election, a stable three-party or perhaps just two-party system appears to be developing. After their recent *débat*, the CPN(M-L) and the NDP(Chand) are likely to see the bulk of their activists returning to their parent organizations, whilst many of those in either of the NDP factions may be considering a move to one of the two main parties. Minor parties are unlikely to be eliminated altogether but their role will probably remain minor. Should the Maoists at some point abandon the use of force they would probably be accommodated within the system as a new third party, supplanting (and probably hastening the decline of) the NDP.

In addition, although worries have sometimes been expressed about the palace attempting to claw back some of the power surrendered in 1990, the constitutional monarchy has worked reasonably well over the last nine years. In particular, the Supreme Court has been accepted as the referee by all parties and, whether or not one likes the restraints it has imposed on prime ministerial power, the rule is now clear for everyone to see.

A second cause for mild self-congratulation is that the ethnic and religious divisions within the country, though certainly of some political importance, do not seem likely to split it asunder. The overwhelming majority of voters opted for mainstream parties with support throughout the country. Even the tendency for Congress to be more popular in the west and the UML in the east, which seemed to be emerging in 1991, was weakened in 1994. Though the 1999 results seemed at first sight partly to restore it, this is really only because of the distorting effects of the UML/Marxist-Leninist split. It is only in a small number of constituencies right along the western border that one can still discern a 'Congress belt', possibly connected with the ascendancy in this region of Sher Bahadur Deuba, who won in his own Dadeldhura constituency by the widest margin of the election (20,811 votes).

Parties appealing specifically to particular ethnic groups, regions, or religious communities do exist but have attracted minimal support. Gore Bahadur Khapangi's Rastriya Janamukti Morcha, formed to advance the interests of the hill 'tribals', had never been a credible force. The upward trend in its vote (from 0.47% in 1991 to 1.07% in 1999) was simply the result of its putting up more candidates to lose for it at successive elections. In fact, the sheer variety of ethnic groups in the hills and their generally interspersed settlement patterns, plus the fact that the Nepali language and Parbatiya culture formed the one framework which linked them all, meant that the prospects for any 'ethnic' party were limited. In the Tarai the use of Hindi as a link language and the cross-border nature of the main castes and ethnic groups made regionalism a theoretical possibility, but Sadbhavana was clearly failing to capitalize on it. The 1990s saw occasional trouble between Hindus and Muslims in Tarai districts where the latter were settled in large numbers, whilst Hindu traditionalists quite frequently voiced complaints about Christian proselytization. However, none of this had any significant effect on the election campaign, and Shivasena Nepal, modeled on the genuinely menacing Maharashtrian prototype, found few to vote for its 25 candidates.

These reasons for cautious optimism should not, of course, detract attention from democratic Nepal's failure to meet the economic expectations of 1990. The liberalization policy followed by Congress governments appeared to have some success in increasing investment in the early nineties, but the growth rate fell to under 4% in 1997 and around 2% in 1998.<sup>51</sup>

Agricultural productivity remained low, despite the priority given to boosting this in the 'Agricultural Perspective Plan' adopted in 1995.<sup>52</sup>

To date (October 1999), the Bhattarai government, dominated by familiar faces and hampered by the old tension between party and government, has shown little sign of being able to tackle this fundamental problem. Nevertheless, despite the desperate position in which many of the poorest find themselves, the majority of the rural population are still managing to 'get by' with a variety of strategies, including reliance on foreign remittance earnings, which may amount to as much as 25% of recorded GNP (Seddon *et al.* 1998: 5). Failure to achieve a real breakthrough on the economic front is unlikely to result in an apocalyptic collapse of the Nepalese state of the type many seem to fear (and for which some on the radical Left may hope) but will continue to blight individual lives. It remains to be seen whether the government, and the political parties generally, will be able to marshal the will needed to make real progress.

<sup>51</sup>Figures from a report by the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, cited in *Rising Nepal*. 9/4/1999 (*Nepal Press Digest*, 43: 15).

<sup>52</sup> The strategy, set out in detail in APROSC and JMA (1995), includes plans to boost irrigation, fertilizer and extension service inputs as well as road construction. A summary extract is given in *Nepal South Asia Centre* (1998: 218) and a critical discussion is provided by Cameron (1998).

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