

People's Multi-party Democracy: A Success Story of the Communist Movement of Nepal

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Abstract

The 1990s was a crucial time in the global communist movement that faced a serious setback after the collapse of the USSR and other East European communist and socialist governments. In Nepal, communist parties allied with the Nepali Congress, a democratic party to stage the people's movement to end active monarchy and restore democracy. The call for the people's movement by the parties appealed the people and they took part in the movement in a historic way. That movement succeeded to restore democracy and end the active monarchy. Madan Bhandari, the secretary-general of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist and Leninist) witnessed this unprecedented participation of the people in a peaceful democratic movement and realized the need to democratize the communist movement, so that, they could build people's trust towards communist parties. In the general election held in 1991, communist parties won forty percent of the seats in the parliament and popular votes as well. In this context, Bhandari presented the document of people's multi-party democracy in the fifth national congress of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist and Leninist) held in 1993, and it was passed overwhelmingly in the congress. This article attempts to make a textual analysis of the document of People's multi-party democracy to examine the major aspects of the document and to see how successful it has become in democratizing the communist movement in Nepal.

Keywords: Multi-party, people's democracy, parliament, proletariat, communist party.

Background

The communist movement of Nepal formally started from the period of Second World War. A committee was formed in 1947 and was transformed into the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) in Calcutta on 22 April, 1949 under the leadership of Pushpa Lal Shrestha, the founding father of Nepalese communist movement. The CPN held its first congress in 1953, at which Man Mohan Adhikari was elected as the secretary-general of the party (Nickson, 1992). Similarly, the second congress

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was held in 1957, third congress in 1962, and the fourth congress was held in 1974. It was the largest communist party of Nepal at that time. Even before the fourth congress of CPN ML, there were a number of communist parties existing in Nepal as many splits were experienced in the communist party even within a decade of its establishment due to many reasons. During cold war period, there was a serious rift among the communist leaders who were strongly influenced by the classical Marxist dogmas, “Influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China, and by the teachings of Charu Mazumdar, the architect of the Naxalite uprising in neighboring West Bengal” (Nickson, 1993) and international politics like Eastern Europe and the collapse of Soviet Union. During the May 1990 elections, Gorbachev faced conflicting internal political pressures: Boris Yeltsin and the pluralist movement advocated democratization and rapid economic reforms while the hard-liners wanted to thwart Gorbachev’s reform agenda (Milestone, 1992). It is believed that the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe failed in the 1990s because of the misuse of state power in the name of the working class or people to resolve such conflicts.

Due to the failure of the Jhapa Guerilla Campaign and the faction of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), popularly known as MALE” in 1978, it is believed that the communist party should be reformed. For that, the process of democratization of the communist party was concretized under the leadership of Madan Bhandari, the then secretary general of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), and later CPN (UML) after the fifth National Congress held in 1993. In the congress, three main philosophical views came to the forefront. The first view, led by the then party Secretary-General Madan Bhandari, advocated a people's multi-party democracy to be achieved through peaceful parliamentary revolution, and emphasized the supremacy of the constitution, competitive and periodic election and a mixed economy (including some compensated redistribution of land). This view was overwhelmingly accepted at the party's Fifth General Congress held in 1993 (Pike, 2016). Other two views were rejected at the congress, and people’s multiparty democracy has been established as the party's ideology since that period.

Therefore, this article focuses on the inception and development of the ideology of people’s multi-party democracy initiated by the CPN UML under the leadership of Madan Bhandari. At first, it was undertaken as a program to tackle the questions of the role of a communist party in a parliamentary system at a time when the communist movement was facing a setback after the failure of classical model of Marxism in the Western Europe and the collapse of USSR. Later it has been accepted as a theory in the Nepalese context.

Introduction: People's Multi-party Democracy

It is considered that the people's multi-party democracy is the continuation of Marxism–Leninism and was developed by Madan Bhandari, the secretary-general of CPN–UML. Bhandari advocates that people's multi-party democracy attempts to answer the questions of the relevance and role of the communist party in the parliamentary system by offering a comprehensive alternative framework of governance, economic system, education and culture, land reform and proper utilization of foreign assistance. The communist party had to lead the revolution to bring workers, peasants, national capitalists, and patriotic forces together and establish solidarity and cooperation with the world communist and socialist movements. Madan Bhandari defends that people's multi-party democracy is not the opposite of Marxism but both share the same bases, “uniformity between theory and behavior” and “class nature” (Bhandari, 2011). He argues that people's multiparty democracy adopts the essence of Marxism while accepting the changed context of the time and place than that of Karl Marx. He further posits: “In the context of our country (Nepal, which is primarily a pluralist country culturally, ethnically, linguistically and so on [My emphasis]) one-party system is not suitable. So, we are for multi-party system of governance. Considering various aspects of the world context after Marx and Lenin, we are in favor of protecting and developing revolutionary essence through multi-party system” (Bhandari, 2011). He strongly opposes the centralist notion even in the name of the authority of the proletariat: “Even after the success of the revolution or after the communist party taking over the state power, fundamental rights of the people should not be confiscated” (Bhandari, 2011). Political parties should be allowed to compete in the election or state power. People's rights should not be controlled by the party and the state in any form. He strongly states their commitment towards the interest of the masses, “We do not want to establish such an old democracy, where the general public is oppressed for the benefit of a handful of rulers or groups” (2011).

One of the major aspects of the people's multi-party democracy (PMD) is to increase the capacity of the communist party by mobilizing the people in all circumstances and thus lead to the communist movement in a sustainable manner. The supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, multi-party competition, open and plural society, the principle of separation of power, periodic elections and government of party in majority and opposition of the minority are the major bases of the PMD to gain and maintain wider public support and guiding principles of the state. The PMD aims to consolidate the people's democratic movement by eliminating all forms of exploitation and oppression, developing the country both materially and spiritually and creating the ground for social transformation to achieve socialism. The CPN UML has adopted the people's multi-party democracy model as a distinct

feature of a new democratic revolution essential to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country like Nepal (Pandey, 2017).

Philosophical Aspects

The dialectics intrinsic to every object, event, society and idea determines its existence. According to Friedrich Engels, dialecticism is the universal law of nature. It is also found in state power and governance as a form of conflict. A competitive multi-party-political system can manage this conflict by using the theory of dialectical materialism in state governance. One-party system of governance was established by Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and other Marxist leaders in Russia, China, Cuba and other countries which denied other ideologies and multi-party democracy. But people's multiparty democracy believes in social, political and cultural fabrics of plurality which contributes to the enrichment of dialectical materialist philosophy, political economy and scientific socialism. According to the scientific method put forward by V. I. Lenin for the study of Marxism, there are three sources of Marxism: German philosophy, French socialism and British classical economics. Similarly, the three constituent organs of Marxism are dialectical materialism, scientific socialism and political economy (Lenin, 1993).

Two Sources of People's Multi-party Democracy

It is believed that the one-party system of governance and people's dictatorship has failed in Russia and Eastern Europe. Hence, the communist movement of the 21st century can move forward only through a system of multi-party competition and multi-party democracy. The first is the unwavering involvement and commitment of the Communist Party of Nepal towards democratic movement and values, and the second is the historical lesson of the unprecedented setbacks faced by the contemporary global communist movement during the 1990s in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Unwavering Involvement in the Democratic Movement

The Communist Party of Nepal has been steadfast in the democratic movement of Nepal since its inception. In the democratic revolution of the 1950s, the Communist Party of Nepal joined various war fronts in the country. Even after the success of this revolution, the Rana government was formed under the leadership of the ruling Rana ruler Mohan Shamsher JBR for the election of the Constituent Assembly as per the agreement. The Communist Party of Nepal, anticipating the betrayal of the king, launched a peaceful people's movement against the three-party Delhi agreement. The Communist Party of Nepal also supported the revolutionary movements taken place in far west part of the country, under the leadership of

Bhimdatta Panta and in the Midwest, Dr. K. I. Singh (Was there any such region as Midwest at the time?). The government, with the help of the Indian Army, repressed those movements and the Communist Party of Nepal was banned on charges of supporting the insurgency. Under the indirect leadership of the party, mass organizations were mobilized in the country. There was a nationwide agitation under the joint efforts of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal demanding the election of the Constituent Assembly. In the midst of the agitation, the Nepali Congress signed an agreement with the king for parliamentary elections and the election was held in 1958 as per the constitution given by the king. In the election, the Nepali Congress won a two-third majority and formed the government under the premiership of the leader of the Nepali Congress, B. P. Koirala. After B. P. Koirala in the office for 18 months, the King Mahendra used military force to dissolve the parliament and the elected government as well as banned the party politics in the country.

The monarchical system, which was initiated by King Mahendra in 1960 AD, lasted for 30 years. The 1990s People's Movement restored parliamentary democracy under the constitutional monarchy. This movement established a tripartite balance of power in the country among the King, the Nepali Congress and the then Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist). Maintaining national prosperity by restoring the rights of the people through democratic process became the main form of the class struggle since that period. In the first general election held in 1992 AD, the Nepali Congress won a majority and formed the government. During this period, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), Madan Bhandari and the chief of the department of organization, Jibraj Ashrit were murdered by external forces in a made-up accident. Nevertheless, due to the internal conflict of the government and the party, the government declared mid-term election in 1995. As a result, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) became the largest party in the parliament. The government formed under the leadership of communist party, which carried out pro-people and development activities and became widely popular in the country. The opposition parties, reactionary forces within the country and the foreign interventionist forces could not tolerate this situation. The communist-led government was dismissed by the reactionary forces and political instability became a terrible fate of the country. Due to this instability, the Maoist party declared the armed struggle in the country. And, the genocide of King Birendra's dynasty known as Narayanhiti Massacre took place at the Narayanhiti palace on 1 June, 2001, and the king's brother Gyanendra became the king. After becoming the king, he started an autocratic rule in the nation.

In resistance to those activities, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) including Nepali Congress, Nepali Congress (Democratic), Nepal Workers and

Peasants Party, Nepal Goodwill Party (Anandi Devi), United Left Front and People's Front (seven-party alliance) launched the United People's Movement after the CPN (Maoist) agreed to join the movement peacefully through a unilateral ceasefire on the initiative and ceaseless efforts of the CPN (UML), an agreement was made in 2006 AD among the eight parties for a united people's movement. The movement succeeded and declared the end of the monarchy in the country. The first meeting of the Constituent Assembly formally abolished the monarchical system in Nepal and established a federal democratic republic. The Communist Party of Nepal (UML) was unwaveringly involved in all those democratic movements. The ideology of people's multi-party democracy adopted by the party was the major source of 2006's People's Movement to establish the republic in Nepal.

The Lessons Learned from the World Communist Movement

After the failure of the Soviet Union, there were three kinds of reactions in the communist movement of the world. First, the Soviet model of the dictatorship of the proletariat had failed because of the weakness of the working class. Second, socialism has failed because of the communist ideology has lost its legitimacy in the world. Third, the Soviet model of socialism failed because of the failure of the government to establish a broad-based socio-political system in the Soviet Union. The first reaction pushed the communists to the extremes and led them to the conclusion that there was no socialism anywhere in the world. The second reaction was based on the belief that capitalism was immortal. The third reaction concluded that the socialism of the Soviet model was only a failure of the government, not a failure of the communist ideology or Marxism. Failure of this model taught a lesson that no matter how good the system is, if it is not pro-people and not consented by them, its downfall is inevitable—this third idea inspired to formulation of the principle of people's multi-party democracy in the Marxist-Leninist pathway.

Features of People's Multi-party Democracy

Late Secretary General of the party, Madan Bhandari has put forward fourteen major features of the ideology of People's Multi-party Democracy. Constitutional supremacy, pluralistic and open society, the principle of the separation of powers, protection of human rights, system of multi-party competition, periodic elections, the government of the majority and the opposition of the minority, rule of law, strengthening of people's democratic system, foreign capital and technology, compensation (to the landlord), foreign policy, leadership and dictatorship (people's dictatorship instead of proletarian dictatorship) and finally people's multi-party democracy as the program of the communist revolution.

While discussing the pluralistic open society as the second feature of PMD, Madan Bhandari argues that one should be able to speak against the government

and the party. He further said that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Conversely, no matter how good it may be on other sides, the system of any speaking positively about the party and the ruling class and never raising an objection cannot last. He added, “everyone should be allowed to speak freely about the government, political parties, social organization and rights. “Pluralist and openness were absent in several communist-ruled nations, and the outcome was negative. We support an open society and pluralism (qtd. in Baral, 2019) The people’s multi-party democracy is a philosophical concept that explains the dialectics of state power. Generally, the state power can be characterized as a power of social nature, an organized power, expressing and realizing the will of the governors as a general obligatory will, a coercive power, unique within the state, or a sovereign power (HLIPCA, 2017). It is an objective and human phenomenon that originated after the origin of the class with opposite interests in the society and the state power will continue to exist as long as such classes exist. So, the communist party must adapt to the nature of the society and accept to follow the multi-party democracy within the party and the government. The Communist Party of Nepal (UML) has been following it since 1992, which has the following main features: 1. The Supremacy of the People in Every Field

For a long time after the origin of the state, the source of state power was considered to be kings, emperors and supernatural beings. When the people shattered the belief in supernatural power by eliminating the kings and emperors, it has been concluded that the people are the source of the state power. The people are more powerful than any political party, the state power and state apparatus or any other national or international body. Therefore, the supremacy of the people should be maintained in every field of the state. Now, the people have established their supremacy through various means like people's movement, people's war, people's revolt, people's voices expressed in the elections and referendums etc. The people are not only the subject but also the productive forces, and they range from the proletariat to the working class to the investor. It is also the most correct idea to have the same people in the highest position. Even the party that has already led the revolution should place the people in the highest position even after the success of the revolution. That is why the people’s multi-party democracy has established the supremacy of the people in every field.

2. Democratization of the Communist Party

In a democratic society, the people are free to establish and run their own political parties and contest in elections, which should be conducted in a free and fair condition to all contestants. In a communist society, however, the government

is generally controlled by one political party, and political dissent is not tolerated. (https://www.diffen.com/difference/Communism_vs_Democracy). The PMD has put forward some norms and values to democratize the communist party. The communist party should not be a military or state party; should be political; should be a party of people-based cadres, not just leaders; should be a party with people's elected leaders and it must be repeatedly approved by the people.” (PMD, 1993). Not only that, in a country where women make up half of the population, the party should be built in such a way that they are gradually proportionally represented, etc.” These are the basic principles of democratizing the communist party. The democratization of the communist party is not only a matter of structural change. The essence of the communist party is the idea of the proletariat or the working class. The communist party is the representative party of the proletariat class or the workers. The communist party is a party guided by Marxist and Leninist ideologies. Democratization does not mean a change in their ideologies. The communist party is revolutionary. Democratization does not mean a change in this character as well. The communist party cannot function in the traditional way alone. It needs to be democratized. Democratization of a party or organization means self-conscious discipline. This kind of democratization is an important feature of the communist party.

3. The System of Governance of Multi-party Competition

Another important feature of people's multi-party democracy is the system of multi-party competition. If it is removed, people's multi-party democracy will be just a skeleton without a heart. The system of multi-party competition is not only the popular system of today, but Marxism and Leninism is the contemporary system of scientific socialism of the 21st century. They can only effectively maintain the dialectic nature of state power scientifically. Bhandari plainly postulates multi-party competition as the main essence of people's multi-party democracy: “Our political program is multi-party democracy. It means a democratic state with a multi-party-political system of governance” (2011) in which the government of the majority and the opposition of the minority prevails.

The system of multi-party competition was first developed by the capitalists in Europe. They have developed this system in the context of supporting the people against feudalism. Due to the wrongful and practice and misuse of multi-party competition by the bourgeois party, the scientific aspect of this system was veiled for a long time. The communist party has not been able to adopt this system for a long time as the same radical ideology or misunderstanding about it is still ingrained in some communist parties in Nepal even at present. However, tactically, the same system has not ceased to be a weapon against autocracy.

In the international communist movement, the work of denial of multi-party competition went on for a long time one after the other. In Soviet Russia, the existence of anyone but communist was beyond imagination. Other European and Latin American socialist countries also adopted similar views and opinions. Once the revolution was led and became successful, no provision was made for it to be approved by the people time and again. Once the communist party won a referendum or a revolution, it was considered a permanent endorsement. The practice of announcing oneself victorious without an opponent in the election prevailed almost everywhere under communist rule.

Finally, in the name of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, attempts were made to push the whole country towards the medieval direction, and bureaucracies were established in every part of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for the same purpose. In Cambodia, the communist party was accused of even being inhumane. Proletarian dictatorship serves to explain the character of the proletarian-working-class state. It does not only approve of one-party and autocratic regimes, but also it cannot eradicate all classes and ideas in the society. Although the proletariat is a class, it is divided into many groups in terms of various kinds of production, distribution, research, and class struggle. Many ideas and opinions are active in many groups, and they must be organized. From this political parties are born. Direct or indirect competition is inevitable in them. There are ideological and political struggles among them. In such a situation, trying to maintain a one-party autocracy in the name of the supremacy of the proletariat cannot comply with Marxism and Leninism. Learning from all these experiences and lessons, the proper alternative to minimize the conflict is to adopt the system of multi-party competition. These findings are the most important features of people's multi-party democracy.

Madan Bhandari's Views on Party Building

After the introduction of people's multi-party democracy as a principle for advancing the communist movement based on the characteristics of the 21st century, the formation of a communist party that could implement people's multi-party democracy in real sense became a necessity. It was certain that it would not be possible for the old-fashioned and classical communist party to lead the proletarian movement in a new way. People's multi-party democracy placed the task of democratization of the society ahead of anything else. It replaced the ubiquitous rules of dialectical materialism in state power. In this situation, democratization of the party became mandatory for the communist party as well. The undemocratic communist party would not be in a position to lead a democratic society. That is why Madan Bhandari put forward a policy and plan for building a communist party based on new values and beliefs of multi-party democracy. Madan Bhandari presented a new approach to party building.

According to him, the party should play an effective role in the current political situation. We want to provide capable leadership to the people's movements. What kind of party should be developed for that? Now this issue has become a matter of great interest within the party. If we want to work properly in the current national situation, taking into account the current world situation, we must not look at the old clouds. We must find new ways to form a government. We want to maintain the system. It should guide the thinking and working of our party building (CPN, UML, 1993). For him, party building based on the principles and values of multi-party democracy and democratization of the party is key to addressing the setback faced by the contemporary global communist movement and providing hope to the proletarian class. He further added that the communist party should be the leader of a certain class of people. It should be a political organization, not a military or a state organization. What forms and methods of struggle and organization to be adopted should be based on the reality of country, time, and situation to provide political and practical leadership. He also mentioned the criteria for a people-based communist party in the context of Nepal. He described the parliamentary system and the role of the communist party, the revolutionary ideas of the communist party, the criteria of leader, cadres, and members and minimum qualities, standards, and criteria for membership, differences to other parties of Nepal, collective leadership, etc. According to him, strengthening the party now means a commitment to principles, confidence in policies, organizational democratic centralism, people-wide party expansion, mobilization of the masses with concrete objectives, development of efficiency and training of necessary manpower, and proper fulfillment of people's trust. These are the views and perspectives put forward by Madan Bhandari on party building while presenting the principle of multi-party democracy to the people.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of Marxism and communist movement, there was a debate whether a communist party can be democratic or not and whether communist parties should believe on election and people's mandate expressed through ballots. Classically, communists believe in forceful and armed revolution to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, but later this view also came under attack by the democratic world. Besides the communist-led governments, most of which had been established through violent and forceful revolutions, started to collapse in Europe and Latin America that left the communist movement and communist parties to defensive side. At the same time, communist parties and democratic parties were becoming successful to overturn authoritarian regimes and to establish democratic government in some countries like Nepal. In this context, the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist and Leninist) adopted people's multi-party democracy in the leadership of Madan Bhandari as its strategic program to democratize the communist

party and to answer the accusation made to the communist party. Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist and Leninist) later adopted people's multi-party democracy as its main principle and kept on democratizing the party. The party has established itself as a major democratic party having unwavering belief in democratic principles and values.

People's multi-party democracy put forward by Madan Bhandari with major features of constitutional supremacy, pluralistic and open society, principle of the separation of powers, protection of human rights, system of multi-party competition, periodic elections, government of the majority and the opposition of the minority, rule of law, strengthening of people's democratic system, foreign capital and technology, compensation (to landlord), foreign policy, people's dictatorship instead of proletarian dictatorship has established itself as a new form of people's democracy in twenty-first century not only in the communist movement of Nepal but also global communist movement.

However, in this process of democratization of the party and participating in parliamentary practices, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist and Leninist) has sometimes been offtrack of the main responsibility of the party. As a political party with the blend of the favoritism of the proletariat and unwavering belief on people's multi-party democracy, democratic principles and values and democratization of the party, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist and Leninist) could establish itself as the epitome of freedom, social welfare, development and social justice.

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