

Newspaper report on Maoist party's struggle over strategic direction

Plenum Weakens Dahal

My Republica, November 30, 2010

KATHMANDU: "This is the first time in the party's history that your political document has failed. What do you have to say, comrade?"

When a journalist shot this question at Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal during the news conference held at the end of the weeklong party plenum in Gorkha last Saturday, the latter looked disappointed while the face of Vice-chairman Dr Baburam Bhattarai, who was sitting cross-legged nearby, lit up.

Challenged by Senior Vice-chairman Mohan Baidya and Bhattarai simultaneously, Chairman Dahal was pushed into a defensive position. Both the vice-chairmen, who represent two extreme and opposite ideological lines, not only attacked his "centrist line", but also accused him of misusing "power, authority and finances" to increase his hold on the party.

The sixth plenum turned out to be different from those in the past as both Bhattarai and Baidya abandoned their support for Dahal simultaneously, and the two-way intra-party conflict of the past turned triangular. Without the support of Baidya or Bhattarai, the Maoist chairman appeared weak as never before. Result: the sixth plenum rejected Dahal's synthesized political document.

Bhattarai had sharp differences with Dahal on the issue of naming the party's principal enemy, though both leaders shared the ideological view that the party should work to institutionalize the political achievements made so far. While Dahal stated that India should be declared the party's principal enemy, Bhattarai had argued that the party should first defeat "domestic feudalism" instead of launching struggles against India. "We could not agree with the chairman as he prepared his synthesized document, mixing dissimilar ideas. It is an act of eclecticism," says Maoist leader Ram Karki, who is close to Bhattarai.

The Maoist chairman had hoped that he would get the support of Baidya as he had accommodated most of the latter's views in his synthesized document.

The meeting showed that Dahal is also losing his grip on the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA), which is still indirectly headed by Dahal himself.

But Baidya appeared more aggressive than Bhattarai against Dahal. Baidya, who leads the hard-line camp in the party, attacked Dahal for not launching a “people’s revolt” to establish a “People’s Federal Democratic Republic” in Nepal, the line passed by the Kharipati national conclave. He even threatened to take over the party leadership. “We could not agree with the chairman as we not only had sharp ideological differences, but we also saw a gap between the chairman’s words and what he has been doing in practice,” says Maoist leader Khadga Viswakarma, who is close to Baidya.

During the plenum, Baidya had the strongest hold among the cadres, while Dahal’s position weakened significantly. There was no one to speak in favor of Dahal in the party’s foreign affairs department.

The meeting further showed that Dahal is also losing his grip on the Maoist People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which is still indirectly headed by Dahal himself. Despite the chain of command, PLA commanders came out speaking openly in favor of Baidya and Bhattarai and criticize Dahal’s leadership. “It was unthinkable in the past to come forward to side with Baidya and Bhattarai and criticize Dahal,” says a leader close to Baidya.

Bhattarai, who was organizationally weak, also made significant gains during the plenum and even commanded a majority in some state committees, including the Kirat and Abadh committees.

Leaders close to Baidya and Bhattarai claim that the plenum heralded an end to Dahal’s monopoly in the party. Dahal has reigned unchallenged over the party for the last 24 years.

However, those close to Dahal claim that there is still no immediate threat to his leadership, though the party is facing sharp ideological differences. “The ideological differences don’t pose a threat to his leadership. It was just a rumor,” says politburo member Shakti Basnet, who is close to Dahal.

As the plenum failed to pass Dahal’s document, the Maoists have stated that the party will hold a Central Committee (CC) meeting on December 2 to chart out the party’s common action-plan for implementation in the current peace process, while leaving the broad ideological issues to a national conclave or a general convention.

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