

A defeat foretold

Maoists must abandon armed struggle and enter the democratic process

In yet another blow to the Maoists, 31 of their cadre, including senior members, were killed in a firefight with security forces on Friday in Abujmadh, the unsurveyed and forested stretch in south Chhattisgarh that is considered the last bastion of the insurgents. Scores of left-wing extremist cadres have been killed in “encounters” in Chhattisgarh and other States in recent months, as coordinated actions by various paramilitary forces and the police have intensified following significant attacks by the Maoists in recent years. The security forces are cognisant of the fact that while the Maoists have likely lost much of their clout and presence across jungles in central and eastern India, their remaining firepower poses a threat in places where they remain active. The intensified campaigns, supported fully by the Union Home Ministry, have dealt blow after blow to the insurgents, leading to numerous surrenders. It should also be noted that the setbacks to the Maoists would not have been possible if the people in tribal areas, where the insurgents have mounted a guerrilla struggle, had adhered to the Maoist cause. After years of putting tribal people in India’s remotest areas in harm’s way, the Maoists are now facing fatigue from them, as well as alienation.

There are several problems with Maoist theory and political practice that suggest that the weakening of the insurgency was always on the cards. Similar insurgencies in Peru, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Colombia also failed. For the Indian Maoists, an over-dependence on militarism to pursue political aims and the subordination of political-ideological work, resulting in a spiral of violence, have turned away potential supporters, mostly poor tribal people. The adherence to an anachronistic ideology of Maoism in a diverse country where the terrain and political system bear little resemblance to 1920s China combined with an inability to recognise the resilience of electoral democratic institutions and the nature of the Indian state are other factors. These issues have led the Maoists to neglect the opportunities available within Indian democracy, despite its flaws. In an unsigned pamphlet released in August to mark 20 years of the movement since the formation of the CPI (Maoist), following the merger of the two strongest remnants of the Naxalite movement, the Maoists lamented their weakening and setbacks but doubled down on their ideological intent. This shows their unwillingness to learn from their own experiences. For the sake of the tribal people, whose interests they claim to represent, the Maoists must abandon arms and enter the democratic process.

