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Revolutions and Social change

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Myths of revolutions

A Brief History of the People's War in Nepal

Revolutions are always surrounded by myths. In political struggles like revolutions each side utilizes every tool available to grab political recognition, which usually includes shifting responsibility for their failures to outside factors which serve their cause. However, the long line of self-serving, fabricated stories deceive the common people about the real reasons for the outbreak of revolutions. These misconceptions include that oppression and misery results in revolts, which a lot of books and textbooks use as a general explanation for most revolutions. Also, a popular explanation blames foreign intervention. For instance, people still think that Germany led the Bolsheviks to victory, that the CIA started the Cuban uprising, and even that Putin and Obama sent soldiers to Ukraine to start the revolution. Blaming economic turmoil and foreign intervention make the explanation of revolutions very easy, but a popular movement cannot be simplified to this extent. Jack Goldstone set out to determine what the causes of revolutions are according to historical evidence. He summarized his findings about common patterns in revolutions in the book *Revolutions: a very short introduction*.

Of course these myths exist about the Nepali Revolution and Civil War, as well. The general explanation for the war between 1996 and 2006 is that Nepal was merely the political playground between China and India, who used the political turmoil after the Panchayat years to launch the revolution. However, the scholarly writings and my field trip to Nepal with the

class Insurgency & Counterinsurgency led me to a different conclusion. The country before the revolution prospered for a few years after the fall of the Panchayat era, refuting the first myth. Also, the outbreak of the war was not influenced by external powers, and foreign intervention arrived only later in the war. In reality, the war happened due to class differences and for ideological reasons, but in the end it never served the good of the country. The deconstruction of the myths surrounding the Nepalese civil war helps to explore some of the deeper problems in the Nepalese society, which are important to prevent further wars.

First of all, to understand the Nepalese Civil War one has to know the history of the country. The home of the Mount Everest and the birthplace of Buddha is a small country stretched along the southern slopes of the Himalayas. Its history began in the late eighteenth century when the ruler of a small kingdom, Gorkha and his ancestors successfully conquered the neighbouring kingdoms. Later the country led an unsuccessful war against the British, which resulted in a significant decrease in its territories and serious political instability. The end of the war was followed by a long line of court rivalries and intrigues, but in the end one man emerged as the ruler of the independent state in 1885, Jang Bahadur Rana. He focused all the power in his own hands, eliminated the opposition and established a dynasty of absolutist prime ministers, whose 105 years of demagogic oppressive rule “is a dark blot on the history of Nepal” (Thapa 14).

The Rana’s rule was ended by an armed rebellion launched by the newly established Nepali Congress, a rebel political group that aimed at democracy. The movement also found an ally in the King of Nepal, whose power under the Ranas was reduced to being a figurehead. The long awaited change came in 1951, when after three years of armed rebellion an agreement was brokered by India. It allowed the Ranas, the Nepali Congress and the king to participate in a new democratic government, but it did not work out as planned. In the 1959 elections the Nepali Congress gained the clear majority in the parliament, which allowed it to

start a reform program. However, a year later the king, who was reinforcing his political power in the meantime, grabbed control over the government, and turned democracy into monarchy. The following thirty years of the king's domination are called the Panchayat Years.

The Panchayat system failed to deliver any kind of reform in the economy or the society, so Nepal remained in the 19th century in terms of development. In the meantime, countries around it started a rapid development enjoying the freedom from their colonizers. At the turn of the twenty first century Nepal was poorer than most African countries and the poorest outside Africa. The largest economic sectors were agriculture and tourism while the country had no industry. As a result of the bad economic situation lots of Nepalese migrated to the booming Gulf countries in hope of a more prosperous life. The reason why the king stayed in power despite the long lasting economic turmoil was the strong military, which suppressed any kind of challenge to his power.

What changed the king's unquestionable power is that the illegal political parties of the country created a democratic movement to overthrow the king, as "the winds of change that has blown across eastern Europe in 1989 reached Nepal" (Thapa 29). The 1990 democratic movement quickly escalated in the rural areas and reached the capital. The Panchayat system was so weak at this point that it took only a mass protest to end the rule of the king. Several protests happened before 1990 but the army was able to suppress those. However, as a result of the democratic movement, the military started to question the legitimacy of the ruler. If the king wanted to have a say in future politics, he had to turn back to democracy, and to establish a multiparty parliament. Which he did in 1991.

One might question why the 1996 counter revolution broke out when there was already a democratic system in power. The newly established democratic state in Nepal is

reminiscent of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917. It created a democratic system, but ultimately it could not deliver the promises of grand reforms and had several structural and transient issues that led to its doom. To analyse the situation, Jack Goldstone's book about revolutions provides a useful framework. He suggests that the general causation of revolutions goes far beyond just misery, and he identifies common patterns among unstable countries: "Economic or fiscal strain, alienation and opposition among elites, widespread popular anger at injustice, a persuasive shared narrative of resistance" (Goldstone 19). These patterns are usually the result of various structural issues including demographic changes, shifts in international politics, uneven economic growth, discrimination against certain groups and the evolution of a personalist regime. A few of these factors combined can destroy "resilience to restore social order in face of a crises" (Goldstone 25). Goldstone's theory can easily be applied to the Nepalese Civil War.

One of the major problems in Nepal was the inequality in society due to the traditional caste system and both ethnic and religious diversity. The top class in the Nepalese society are the Brahmin caste. They are the descendants of the Indian lords, who fled from the Muslim conquerors and took control over Nepal. Below them is the soldier caste and the merchant's caste. On the bottom, we can find the untouchables, and the non-Hindus: the Muslims and the generally Buddhist indigenous Nepalese. The caste system was banned in 1962, but it still determines the everyday life in Nepal. During my trip, I heard for instance from our guide that many still believe any interaction with the untouchables brings bad luck, and for instance that most of the soldiers come from the soldier caste. Also, the Brahmins made up most of the parliament, which manifested in the fact that political decisions usually favoured their caste. Many found it unjust that most of the tax income was spent on the Kathmandu valley, where the Brahmins lived, while the more rural areas were neglected.

The situation screamed for a revolution by Goldstone's theory. Although, the 1990 democratic movement abolished the personalist regime, the other factor's remained present. The caste system still led to uneven economic development, discrimination against certain groups, which ultimately led to a shared narrative among the oppressed and widespread anger against injustice later on. The elite was separated between the king's supporters and the democrats. The democratic system led to economic growth with nine percent GDP growth in some years. This growth resulted in a sudden demographic growth but the rapid expansion of the economy stopped in 1995 creating widespread disappointment in the regime. However, these factors alone do not create a revolution.

Most importantly, people started believing that "these conditions are not inevitable but arise from the faults of the regime" (Goldstone 11). India and China became role models for Nepal because of the vast progress they underwent in terms of social equality and economy. The regimes of these two countries successfully transformed themselves from backward, agricultural countries into developing and industrial nations. And the Maoist Communists promised to follow these countries' successes. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was founded in 1949, but then the different branches went into different directions due to their ideologies. The Maoist branch proved the strongest among all and led the Left but the party remained an insignificant political force until 1996. The people of Nepal believed that the CPN using communist and Maoist strategy could achieve the same for Nepal as Mao could for China. The communists promised to address all the issues at once by modernizing the country, introducing real democracy, improving the economy, giving rights to women and by finally abolishing the caste system.

The violence the government favoured to resolve problems, also created many enemies. When the promised land reforms failed to appear, in 1992 people in some districts started to organize the enactment of their own land reform and to gain some power over their

lives in the face of usurious landlords. However, this movement was repressed by the Nepali government, in "Operation Romeo" and "Operation Kilo Sera II", which took the lives of many of the leading activists of the struggle but 'innocents' as well. As a result, many witnesses to this repression became radicalized and joined the opposition. One of these people was Prachanda, whom "the bullet made" into the visionary leader of the CPN after an unsuccessful assassination (Prachanda). Bhattarai, a top student at that time, accompanied him as the organizational leader after seeing the tragedies of the killings. We had the opportunity to talk to both leaders during our field trip, and they both emphasized the importance of these events in joining the counterrevolutionary movement. The intimidated people joined the Maoists, because they felt that the Communists can provide the security the government fails to give them. This "accidental guerrilla" phenomenon, in which the counterinsurgent technically creates his own enemies was a major factor in the government's loss in the war (Kilcullen 1).

The popular belief about the outbreak of the 1996 revolution and civil war is that the main spark was international politics. The lazy explanation for the Nepali revolution is that it is only the political game between the country's two enormous neighbours: India and China. The ideology of the revolution -Maoism- suggests that China created the rebel groups and if one looks at the map it becomes obvious why. If it manages to seize Nepal, it will gain a military position that allows it to aim its guns and rockets at the most populous areas of India in case of a war between the two rising giants. However, if we look at the economic relation between India and Nepal we discover that the Nepali hydroelectric power plants are crucial to the Indian economy. Also, their similar culture would allow India the seizure of Nepal with little opposition. The previous factors might seem obvious and logical, but while most scholarly books mention the two neighbours, they do not attribute much importance to them

for the outbreak of the war. My interviewed people also supported the view that the CPN was not supported by any foreign organizations at the time of the outbreak of the war.

In February of 1996 the Nepali Civil War began. The Maoists assembled the 40-point charter of demands, which included all the modern reforms that would have improved the country. When the perfect time arrived in 1996, Bhattarai led a delegation to Prime Minister Deuba to present their demands. If not fulfilled in ten days, the Maoist would begin an armed struggle against the government. Deuba took the threat too lightly and ignored the list. But the CPN was not bluffing. The points were more of a provocation since such reforms cannot be implemented in ten days. Also, days after the deadline, the Maoists lead a successful raid on a bank, which they had to plan for a long time. The leaders of the movement revealed to us that they had planned the revolution for a long time, but the economic situation was just too good. Once they saw a sudden drop in the country's performance in 1995, they knew that this might be their only chance to launch the revolution and they attacked. However, even the bank raid did not provoke a strong response from the government, which allowed the small movement to gain momentum. "The Maoists borrowed their battle strategy from Mao Tse-tung", who successfully overthrew the Chinese government in a similar guerrilla war (Thapa 98).

Following Mao's advice based on the Chinese revolution in the first phase of the guerrilla war ("strategic defence") the rebels aimed at disrupting the government's work while with aggressive propaganda starting to recruit sympathizers and to build its power base. They led further smaller attacks on police stations, power plants and other banks. According to Goldstone, "a revolution begins when the government loses control of a portion of its population and territory", which in this case happened in Rolpa. The Maoists found widespread support in the oppressed regions, which are generally covered by forests or are mountainous. Here the population and the terrain provided cover from the government forces,

which allowed them to build a base. The party immediately began to build People's Courts after 1998 to gain legitimacy as a parallel state and to persuade people of its competence.

The government's actions are a perfect example what not to do as a counterinsurgent. First of all, they misjudged the strength and the potential of the Maoist movement leaving time for them to gain a head start. Next, "there has always been a strong lobby in the government that favoured using brute force" even though military experience has shown that the foremost task of the counterinsurgent should be the provision of security and the separation of the insurgents from the population (Thapa 88). They had absolutely no intelligence when going on search and kill missions against the guerrillas, so inevitably they killed a lot of innocents. With this kind of indiscriminate killing just like with Operation Romeo and Kilo Serra Two, they created fear among the population, as people could not know if they could trust the government or not. This further alienated the population from the government side. Also, their armed forces had limited mobility for many reasons, so keeping the element of surprise was hard. As Gurung, one of the main leaders of the parliamentary forces said, the training for the counterinsurgent soldiers was conventional training, and their operations were also only suitable for conventional war. However, the first stage of the rebellion would have required a very different anti-guerrilla approach. On top of all these, the army can hardly be called a learning organization as they continued making the same mistakes throughout the conflict.

While it is true that foreign intervention did not affect the outbreak of the war, it did have some role in the war later on. As throughout Nepal's history, during the war "India was a major direct and indirect factor in shaping the choices of all three domestic factors" (Jha 65). However, India was not consistent with its decisions. There were parties and agencies that supported the governmental side with weapons, while others supported the Maoists

(sometimes at the same time). Often the “Maoist leaders used India as a safe heaven” and they directed the army operations from abroad (172). India was not the only intervener and after 9/11 the USA also became actively engaged in the conflict, since they believed that the CPN was a terrorist organization. The US army organized army trainings and shipped weapons to the government. Surprisingly, “China did not worry about political dynamics in Nepal” (Jha 352). It did not invest into the conflict other than a small amount of weapon supplies. China remained mainly neutral because its plan was to challenge the Indian hegemony in Nepal with increasing economic activity instead of politics in Nepal. This means that China did not affect the CPN and the outbreak of the conflict reflected more the wants of the people of Nepal.

The second stage of a Maoist insurgency arrived very soon. In the next stage, the stalemate, the two opponents are approximately of the same strength. In the Nepalese Civil War the 2001 Palace Massacre was the turning point, when the mentally unstable crown prince murdered his close family with the king and himself together. Some blame a Maoist conspiracy for the events, but one of his guards at that time, who is currently a researcher at NYU confirmed that the incidence was unrelated to the Maoists. This sudden shock to the country pushed both the government and the monarchy even deeper into turmoil, transforming people’s perception about the kingdom. They quickly found a new and strong king, but even this could not change the fact that the government could not take up the fight with the popular rebellion and could not protect its civilians against the Maoists.

The country had “three different prime ministers in as many years” and the economy was on the edge of collapse because of the increased military spending and the drastic decrease of the revenue from tourism (Jha XIV). The only reason why the country did not go bankrupt was the steady inflow of foreign currency thanks to the large Nepali workforce in the Gulf countries. On top of this, the government had internal conflicts and protests took

place at the same time demanding a peaceful end to the war. In 2001 and 2003 the government and the new king initiated peace talks, but they could not agree with the CPN so the ceasefires were constantly broken. To counter the strengthening Maoists, the international community sent some modest supplies to the parliamentary forces, and the king deployed the Royal Army, which he withheld until that point.

However, the king's was not the only side suffering. The CPN significantly lost of its momentum, less and less people joined the cause, and they did not see the end of the war. Neither side could gain a decisive advantage at this point. Although the Maoist held 80% of the country, this excluded all the major cities and administrative centers and the middle class did not support them either. The protection of these areas was the only task suitable for the conventional police and the military forces, which could repel the Maoist attacks. As a result, guerrilla tactics, quick raids and bombings characterized this phase of the war, as well. On top of all this, the CPN did not enjoy the support of foreign nations. The Communists had to realize that they would not be able to progress into the third phase of the Maoist insurgency (the strategic offense), so they had to change tactics.

The CPN aimed instead of total military victory at a diplomatic peace, which they succeeded at after a series of fortunate events. In 2005 the king dissolved the parliament and all parties, banned all news and declared martial law reasoning that civil politicians cannot handle the situation. This fired up the opposition parties, who regrouped and started negotiating with each other and with the CPN against the king's renowned autocracy. The Seven Party Alliance of parliamentary parties and the Communist Party of Nepal agreed on a 12-point memorandum of understanding for peace and democracy. The memorandum called for a protest movement, which lead to the countrywide uprising called the Loktantra Andolan. The people's participation was so monumental that the king had no choice but to resign and

reintroduce the parliament. “Nepal’s peace process was both led and driven by Nepali” with little foreign mediation (Thapa 143). The parliament and the Maoists immediately started the peace negotiations, and in the same year they signed the Comprehensive Peace Accords. This realized the ten years old 40-point charter of demands and allowed the CPN to participate in the government.

One battlefield closed but another opened. The Maoist and parliamentary armed forces stopped fighting but the battle for the detailed conditions of peace and the new government continued in the parliament. The crafting of the constitution is ten years after the war still ongoing with debates about ethnicities, administrative division and spending. In this political fighting the government side has the upper hand with its experienced politicians. At this point in 2015, it seems that the CPN is losing the battle. First of all, many of their believers think that they betrayed the cause by the negotiated peace and that they lost the battle when they signed the treaty without precise conditions. Did they agree on the details of the peace, the politics could focus on the actual issues of the country. Secondly, after they won the first elections, they could not implement many of the promised reforms, which disappointed people and they lost the second election. Their political base gradually contracts with every election. Currently they are only the third largest party well after the democratic party that was on power in 1990s, which provoked some debate about the party’s future.

The outcome of the revolution is highly questionable. Kanak Dixit the famous journalist told during the interview my class conducted with him, that the civil war was not People’s war, it was a battle fought by a selfish group of people leading to the unnecessary bloodshed and the displacement of tens of thousands. The war stopped the economic development and Nepal is still one of the poorest countries on Earth and it still does not have a constitution. The problem with the current politics is that instead of real problems “the

power games and the peace process occupy the politicians” (Jha 308). Many of the scars that the war has left on the people cannot be healed quickly. There was already a democratic system in place in the early 1990s, which could have achieved more in the last twenty years than the war has achieved.

On the other hand, we will never know, maybe without the war the king would have retaken the power as he did many times. In this respect, “Nepal’s gradual revolution - through a mix of war, popular political mobilization, alliances, peace pacts and the democratic method of the ballot - had managed to defeat a 240 years old institution” (Jha 280). After the war people knew that “Nepal’s monarchy was dead [and] the Palace would soon become a museum” (Jha 296). The monarchy got abolished in 2008 and the door became open to a democratic development but the country badly needs the right leadership to move forward. If the war has winners it is the minorities and the lower castes, for whom the Maoists opened up many opportunities by the promotion of equality and by opening up their eyes. The society is not quite there yet in terms of the minorities’ acceptance but there is definitely positive progress.

Nepal’s future is highly unpredictable. Its destiny depends on whether the politics can put the country on a developing trajectory utilizing the many natural resources the land offers first of all for the tourist and energy industry. My class went into the details of the Nepalese history helping to unfold the reality of the Civil War. The field trip at the end of the course allowed me to take a detailed look at different layers of the Nepalese society and reinforced the ideas we studied about by meeting prime ministers, soldiers and citizens. The revolution and the civil war definitely worsened the living standards in the country. But the real test of the new system is how it manages to deal with the recent catastrophic earthquake and what one will see in twenty years, when he visits the country.

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