

Tunnel Vision: US Policy towards Nepal

During his visit to India in early March, President Bush said: "On Nepal, we [the US and Indian governments] agreed that the Maoists should abandon violence and that the King should reach out to the political parties to restore democratic institutions." This brief comment suggested the existence of a common India-US policy on Nepal. Even at the time, however, it was evident that this was not the case. The fact that little has changed since then is deeply worrying for those who recognise the importance of a joined-up approach on the part of the international community vis-à-vis Nepal.

On 8 February the US State Department released a statement asserting that 'Nepal's municipal elections called by the King today represented a hollow attempt to legitimize his power'. Condemnation of Nepal's municipal polls came from across the globe, including the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), UK, Japan and India. But the US statement, unambiguously entitled 'Nepal Municipal Elections Lack Public Support', was the first reaction, and arguably the fiercest.

Yet just a week later came the first (public) sign of divergence. Addressing a talk programme on Nepal's political crisis, US Ambassador to Nepal, James F Moriarty, described the 12-point understanding reached between the agitating seven-party alliance (SPA) and Maoist rebels in November 2005 as "wrongheaded" and "fraught with danger for the political parties themselves and for the future of the Nepalese people." The UK and EU view the 12-point understanding as a positive development towards conflict resolution. Moreover, India not only welcomed the understanding, but actually gave its silent consent to talks in Delhi between the seven parties and Maoists that led to its creation.

Although for several weeks prior to this had some diplomats privately expressed their unease at the direction US policy towards Nepal was heading, many were surprised at how aggressive the US had suddenly become regarding the 12-point understanding. This was compounded by Ambassador Moriarty's appearance on Kantipur TV's 'Frontline' political show on 26 February. The Ambassador told the host, Vijay Kumar Pandey, that the understanding had "left open the option of violence on the part of the Maoists... [who are] attempting to gain the parties' support for their use of violence." His comments prompted a critical response not only from the SPA and Maoists, but also from Nepal's independent media and non-governmental organizations involved in human rights and conflict resolution.

Ambassador Moriarty could not have been any clearer. But it was Donald Camp, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, who was able to shed light on the US government's thinking behind this distinct shift away from the stance of other key players in the international community. About a week after President Bush's visit to South Asia, Camp visited Kathmandu where he was forced to deny reports that the US government was considering renewing military assistance (cut following the King's autocratic seizure of power on 1 February 2005) to Nepal, asserting that the "Leahy amendment prohibits financing security assistance to Nepal until Nepal has returned to democracy and certain conditions on human rights have been fulfilled." Camp failed to explain how this permitted the US to provide military assistance to Nepal before the royal coup, when there was no democratically-elected government and the state security forces had a dreadful human rights record (or indeed how this permits the US from providing military assistance to countries such as Colombia, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan). On the contrary, Camp coolly informed reporters that the Department of State "would like to see a return to the situation of pre-February 1 where we [the US government] were contributors to the security assistance [of Nepal]."

The US government is genuinely concerned about the King's move of February last year and his royal government's subsequent attacks on civil and political rights. At the same time, the Bush Administration believes that the Maoists represent both a new generation of Communists attempting to revive the ideological battle of the Cold War and one of many foreign-based terrorist groups. In other words, to Moriarty and his masters in Washington DC, the Maoists are a combination of two demons. This Maoist-phobia is the reason the US has

stuck so closely to the notion of 'twin-pillar theory', i.e. that Nepal needs multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy, feeling that only this would prevent a Maoist takeover, which, as Camp informed the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the House Committee on International Relations on 15 March, "would almost certainly lead to instability in a region of great importance to the United States." And for twin-pillar theory to survive, the US believes that the political parties must reconcile with the King.

What about the violent conflict that has claimed over 13,500 lives to date? The US does not seem to care for the fact that a just and lasting peace in Nepal is impossible without dialogue with the Maoists. The 12-point understanding saw the Maoists commit to multiparty democracy for the first time. They have subsequently publicly acknowledged that 20th century Communism was flawed and said that they would accept a monarch in Nepal if a Constituent Assembly (allowed for in the understanding) were to opt for one.

On top of this, the Maoists have at last accepted that no military victory for either side is possible. Unfortunately the royal government has yet to follow suit, despite the fact that Nepali and foreign defense analysts alike have been arguing this point for several years now. However, it is extremely difficult to imagine a situation where the Maoists will give up their arms unless a clear 'roadmap' is in place that offers them a 'safe landing'. From a purely strategic perspective, the Maoists' ability to employ violence gives them an advantage that the political parties do not possess. The senior Maoist leadership needs to sell the idea of peace to its cadres, and only a plan that gives them the opportunity to say that their 'People's War' achieved something tangible (such as elections to a Constituent Assembly) will allow them to do this. It must not be forgotten that there are examples (Northern Ireland, South Africa and Aceh to name three in different continents) where arms were not surrendered before peace negotiations commenced. Of course, peace negotiations do require properly monitored ceasefires. Sadly the royal government has not been interested in reciprocating recent Maoist ceasefires and, unlike the insurgents, has no interest in the UN (or any other competent and independent foreign organization) playing a role in conflict resolution.

In the meantime, the Maoists fully understand that the SPA does not condone its use of force. To do so would amount to suicide - both political and literal - rendering Ambassador Moriarty's claim on 'Frontline' nothing short of ridiculous. This does not mean that everything the Maoists say should be taken at face value. It is right to question their commitment to multiparty democracy. It is vital to criticize their abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law. In addition, it is important to further debate the issues where the 12-point understanding is vague, particularly on matters of process (of arms decommissioning, downsizing of the Royal Nepalese Army and elections to a Constituent Assembly) and the key matter of impunity. Yet all this must be done in an impartial fashion.

The US government's hysterical anti-Communism does not help in the slightest. In recent months the Maoists have made a substantial effort to curb their ideological excesses, with the hope of ending their political isolation. Slamming the door in their faces would be disastrous for Nepalis, especially poor and excluded people who are the most vulnerable. Rather, the rebels should be further encouraged to continue to move towards peaceful politics, and tested all along the way. The 12-point understanding is a step down this path. Now it must be built upon.

Despite their numerous flaws, the Maoists have raised massive social, economic, political and security questions. The palace and political parties have traditionally ignored these difficult questions, even after Nepal's return to multiparty democracy in 1990. This shows that multiparty democracy in itself is not enough. For people to be truly free from fear and free from want, governance needs to be just and democratic. The misery that the supposedly great democracies of the 'North' - including the US - have imposed on their own people, as well as on foreigners, proves this.

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