

Aditya Adhikari. 2014. *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution*. New Delhi: Aleph.

The Bullet and the Ballot Box gives readers the back-story of the Maoist revolution. Aditya Adhikari, the author, does an important work of tracing the lived experiences and journeys of Maoists in various rungs of the party leadership, their motivations and beliefs, and their relationship with local communities and national and international players. To this end, he provides a rich narrative of how and why the People's War took the form it did by drawing on a wide range of sources like Maoist publications, novels, memoirs, diaries, letters, interviews with Maoist cadres, and scholarly and journalistic literature about the Maoist movement. Scholars of Nepal's Maoist Movement and general readers alike will find an invigorating account of the People's War and how it was experienced by people who were deeply embroiled in it. Adhikari is a journalist who has written widely on Nepali politics.

In this book, Adhikari provides a perspective on how the Maoists of Nepal were able to take on what was largely considered a dead ideology worldwide and, within a decade of launching a protracted People's War, be able to capture state power. He argues that this was possible because of the pragmatism of Maoist leaders about their own strengths and weaknesses relative to the state and their ability to take advantage of the contradiction between the monarchy and parliamentary parties. In addition, supporting marginalized groups that did not form a part of the establishment was another key to their success. The freedom afforded by the post 1990s political scene also allowed the movement space to flourish. The weakened legitimacy of the monarchy after the royal massacre and Gyanendra Shah's autocratic takeover of state

power provided fertile ground for Maoists to collaborate with parliamentary parties and influence the later to support their agenda.

The book consists of nine chapters and follows a fairly chronological order. The first chapter goes over how the Cultural Revolution in China, Naxalite movement in India and the dissatisfaction with the Panchayat regime in Nepal worked together to fuel the attraction towards communism and how various Maoists leaders became drawn to the Maoist ideology. The re-introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1990 becomes a letdown for radical Maoist parties as their demand for a constituent assembly (CA) of elected representatives is overridden by the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) in order to appease the king. Chapter 2 argues that political wrangling among the parties during the initial years of parliamentary democracy, which led to ineffective short-lived governments, and the signing of what many considered an unequal treaty with India without broader consultation, drove the Maoists to affirm their distrust of parliamentary parties, who they considered pawns of Indian expansionism. This along with violent clashes in Rolpa between the Maoists and NC supporters and subsequent increased state violence towards Maoist supporters in Rolpa and Rukum pushed the Maoists to launch the People's War.

In Chapter 3 the author focuses on the various strategies that the Maoists deployed to generate support and acquiescence in the rural areas where they established their bases and to cultivate public opinion in Kathmandu. Their major strategy was exploiting the historical contradiction of power-sharing between the parliamentary parties and the palace which controlled the Royal Nepalese Army by attacking only one at a time and widening the rift between them. Chapter 4 goes over the years after the royal massacre when the new King Gyanendra Shah made his political goals covert by aiding and abetting political parties and eventually taking over executive power. Having been betrayed by the king, the Maoists had no choice but to shift their target of attack and they called on parliamentary parties to support them in their demand for an interim government that would hold the CA elections. However the more orthodox Maoists were not happy with this move as they did not trust the parliamentary parties especially with regards to preserving national autonomy.

Chapters 5 and 6 are the most interesting chapters in the book as they capture the experiences of Maoist cadres and their relationship with local

communities. Chapter 5 discusses why young men and women joined the Maoist insurgents and stayed committed despite the challenges. Adhikari argues that whereas the party infused progressive practices like encouraging inter-caste marriages and encouraging widows to re-marry, it nonetheless did not allow cadres complete freedom. On the experiences of Maoist women the author argues that although being a part of the rebellion gave women much needed space, it was hardly as empowering as projected by the top leaders. Chapter 6 focuses on how the Maoists tried to reconcile ethnic demands with class struggle to gain the much needed support of ethnic minorities and the various ways in which people and communities reacted towards the Maoists. The author argues that in the mid-western hills it was the history of state violence and terror that created support for Maoist rule. However it was not always easy for the Maoists to win over support from *Janajāti* leaders and local communities in other areas. With regards to Dalits, although the Maoists' campaign to end caste-based discrimination enticed many Dalits to support the armed rebellion, it also led to a greater dispossession as many were forced to help support the rebellion by contributing their skill and labor.

Chapter 7 details how the ideological tussle within the Maoists, on how to view the monarchy, parliamentary parties and the Indian state, shaped the trajectory of the People's War. This ideological tussle was further complicated by the insecurities of top Maoist leaders which lead them to favor alignment with the monarchy only to be betrayed. After Gyanendra's takeover in 2005, the Maoists had no choice but to do an about-face to appease the parliamentary parties and India. Chapter 8 discusses how the Maoists, parliamentary and prominent civil society activists in Kathmandu came together in 2006 to lead the People's Movement II to bring down the monarchy. The last chapter goes over the post-2006 period in which the CA became the battleground between the Maoists and identity-based federalists on the one hand and parties like NC and UML who were opposed to identity-based federalism.

The use of Maoist literature and journals of Maoist cadres by the author gives good insights into their inner lives. Chapter 5, titled 'Among the Believers,' in which the author talks about the various reasons why men and women joined the insurgency and why they stayed on, could have used more material. It is an important part of the book but sadly leaves the readers wanting to know more. A missed opportunity in this book, especially with Adhikari being a journalist, is a critical look at how mainstream media in

Kathmandu viewed and covered the insurgency and subsequent years in which the Maoists were in power and how they influenced public opinion about the Maoists and their agendas. Apart from commenting on how the insurgency affected the Tharus in Bardiya, and how state violence pushed them to support the Maoists, there is no mention of how the rest of the Madhesh experienced the civil war. They are only ‘present’ after the 2006 Madhesh uprising.

Overall, Adhikari does a good job giving a balanced account of the Maoist insurgency and how it was experienced by Maoists at various levels of leadership, women Maoists and communities in Maoist strongholds. The author highlights the various instances of pragmatism on the part of the Maoists which helped them to gain control over a large portion of Nepal’s rural areas during the civil war, despite their many disadvantages, and in convincing parliamentary parties of their commitment to multi-party democracy. He also explores the contradictions and leadership issues within the Maoists that are crucial to understand the way they functioned during various instances.

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