

Deepak Thapa with Bandita Sijapati. 2003. *A Kingdom under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003*. Kathmandu: The Printhouse.

For obvious reasons, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal has drawn the attention of various types of analysts. In addition to a large repertoire of journalistic writings in Nepali we are now seeing in print articles by various scholars and para-academics. Until 2001, for readers who had no access to writings in Nepali, reports and commentaries in the English press and Maoist statements designed for international consumption provided the main materials through which one could try to make sense of the insurgency. There were also the writings of Li Onesto and Anand Swaroop Verma (whose booklet first published in Hindi was translated as *Maoist Movement in Nepal* in 2001) although they were useful more to learn the anxieties of the international far left movement bent on making a success of the 'revolution' in Nepal than to learn what was happening in the country.

However in the past two years, there have been important additions. First was the volume of writings edited by Arjun Karki and David Seddon, *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives* (2003, Delhi, Adroit Publishers). In addition to an editorial introduction and overview of the insurgency, this volume contained over 200 pages of Maoist texts followed by about 200 pages of analyses from various Nepali leftists including Maoist-friendly Govinda Neupane and arch-enemies Mohan

Bikram Singh and Pradip Nepal (the other two chapters were by Sujita Shakya and Arjun Karki). That was followed by the theoretically and politically eclectic collection, *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal* edited by Deepak Thapa (2003, Kathmandu, Martin Chautari/CSRD). This volume brought together writings predating the beginning of the insurgency in 1996 and about 250 pages of analyses of the situation since then.

While other academic articles continue to appear - and no doubt edited volumes and monographs are under preparation, *A Kingdom under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003* written by Deepak Thapa with Bandita Sijapati arrived at the Kathmandu bookstands in late August 2003. This book of about 250 pages (including the front matter) begins with a chapter entitled "Life and Death in the Time of War" where through some poignant writing and excerpts from the writings of others, the authors evoke the painful ethos of our contemporary moment. In the next chapter, we find both a succinct description of the successive realignments of the Communist Party of Nepal out of which the CPN (Maoist) emerged in 1995 and the political instability at the centre.

This is followed by chapter three called "Understanding the Causes of the 'People's War'." The authors conclude that economic and social inequalities ("pronounced ethnic and class dimension to the problem of poverty") are the fundamental causes behind the rise of the Maoists in Nepal. Combined with the efficacy of organizational activism of the far left in mid-western hills under the tutelage of Mohan Bikram Singh and the ineptitude of successive Nepali Congress governments in dealing with the "initial rumblings" of the Maoists, the authors conclude that structural inequalities in the system provided the fertile grounds for Maoist "ideas to grow." Therefore Maoists "found ready support for their promises of an alternative to an economically, socially, culturally and politically flawed system that they sought to replace" (p. 63). Hence Thapa and Sijapati's understanding of the Maoist rebellion falls in what experts in conflict studies would call the 'grievance theory' of insurgency. In other words the perception of the rebellion as a conduit to rectify existing grievances and seek justice for Nepal's downtrodden suffuses the narrative and prevents the authors from considering some other interpretive possibilities, especially after the initial phase of the rebellion was over.

Subsequent two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the growth of the Maoist insurgency through the course of the State of Emergency in 2002. There is first a narrative of the disarray that characterized the state at the centre as it faced a determined CPN (Maoist) and its strategy woven

around its party, army and the united front. The authors also discuss the 'six sub-phases' (or 'tactical stages') of the Maoists' plan, and the largely counter-productive 1998 police response known as Kilo Sierra Two. In Chapter five the authors discuss the second national conference (in early 2001) of CPN (Maoist) that gave rise to 'Prachanda Path' and the emergence of the idea of an 'interim government'. They consider this to be an important development leading to the first round of negotiations in mid 2001. The ensuing failure and the imposition of the state of emergency deepened the country's troubles. In these two chapters, instead of providing an argument as such, the narrative assumes the nature of a blow-by-blow account, especially useful to readers who are unfamiliar with the political trajectory of the insurgency.

The final two chapters discuss the cost of the conflict and the dynamics of the last ceasefire as it could be perceived in early summer 2003 when the book was completed. Here the authors' document the macroeconomic costs of the conflict and also discuss the opportunity cost of the newly acquired security orientation of the government's expenditure. They also portray the crises of human rights in the country since late 2001. Here they note that the security operations have "killed more innocent civilians than rebels" (p. 151). They further add, "It did not help that initially human rights organizations...generally kept silence, while the media too was compromised after a grouping of publishers and editors of influential newspapers undertook to support the government's fight against the rebels" (p. 151).

The strength of this book is that it provides readers – both those familiar to Nepal's most recent political history and the uninitiated – a very readable account of the circumstances in which the Maoist insurgency started and grew to seize the political agenda of the kingdom as it were. It encompasses the materials available in the public domain that have been produced by journalists, academics, CPN (Maoist), political parties, human rights organizations, and the Nepali state very competently.

That said we must also recognize its weakness in the form of its over-commitment to the grievance model as discussed above. While the strong formulation of the alternative 'greed model' of conflicts (in which it is postulated that civil wars are motivated by the desire to acquire wealth especially in the form of natural resources) does not apply for our case, an argument can certainly be made for its weak formulation in which the opportunity for rebellion is tied to risks associated with accessing finances (domestic and international) through the deployment of youth

available in large numbers for recruitment. If postulated this way, one can certainly make the case that while the Maoist rebellion was started by a core group of ideologues and guerrillas who believed in seeking redress to social injustice, its sustenance and growth has been made possible by agencies who, deliberately or otherwise, contributed to the reduction of risks associated with its ability to finance itself and recruit cadres.

Put this way, the non-involvement of the Royal Nepal Army in the Nepali state's responses to the insurgency before 2001 forces us to examine the post-1990 Nepali state as a constellation of not only inept political parties but also an obstructive semi-constitutional monarchy with a tight hold on the use of the army as a credible state institution affecting the risk calculus of the insurgents. In addition it would also mean revisiting the trajectory of the insurgency and asking in each of its moments questions regarding the cost-benefit calculus of various 'stakeholders', both domestic and international. Such a line of inquiry would have forced the authors to tell us a more compelling story of, for example, the fiasco at Holeri and the 2001 rendezvous of Prachanda with Nepali left leaders in the Indian town of Siliguri. But then these are also topics for further research, some of which is already being pursued by other analysts.

Another area of weakness in this book is its inability to fully ground its argument regarding the economic and social inequalities that existed in Nepal of the 1990s in the politics and policies of the Panchayat era. If there is a relatively large mass of semi-educated youths willing to fill the ranks of the Maoists, they were certainly not created, in the main, by the politics and politicians of the 1990s. Also important to explore would be linkages between the versions of nationalism propagated during the Panchayat era and Maoist 'readiness' to die for the country.

Despite these reservations, I am certain that this book will be a standard reference work for the political history of post-1990 Nepal. The terrain it has made visible for us will, no doubt, make the work of future researchers both more easy and challenging.¹

Pratyoush Onta
Martin Chautari and CSRD

1 A shorter version of this review appeared as 'A kingdom to win or spoil' in *The Kathmandu Post*, 19 October 2003, p. 6.