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Review of 'The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the 21st Century' edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari

Ches Thurber

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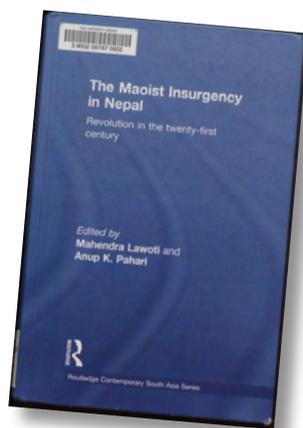
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The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the 21st Century

Edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari. London: Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, 2010. 354 pages. ISBN 978-04-158-0994-8.

Reviewed by Ches Thurber

In the seven years since the end of civil war in Nepal, the attention of scholars and policy analysts has largely moved away from studying the dynamics of that now ‘resolved’ conflict and onto the seemingly new and more contemporary issues of constitution-making, federalism, and the role of identity groups within a pluralistic, democratic state. This greater diversity in the scope of research is urgent and should be applauded as the political challenges facing Nepal are multiple, diverse, and complex. Yet at the same time, the passage of time since the conclusion of armed hostilities makes it possible to assess the civil war with greater depth and perspective—perspective that may be increasingly important as political conditions begin to once again resemble the period of democratic gridlock and popular frustration of the early 1990’s that preceded the outbreak of armed conflict.

Mahendra Lawoti’s and Anup K. Pahari’s edited volume, *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the 21st Century*, brings our attention back to the decade-long ‘People’s War.’ Published in 2010, it provides

analysis with the benefits of greater temporal distance and social scientific methodology than the timely and path-breaking volumes that were published in the heat of conflict (e.g. Michael Hutt, ed. 2004. *Himalayan People’s War: Nepal’s Maoist Rebellion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Arjun Karki and David Seddon, eds. 2003. *The People’s War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. Delhi, India: Adroit Publishers; Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati. 2004. *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal’s Maoist Insurgency, 1996-2004*. Kathmandu, Nepal: The Printhouse). With the Maoists now reeling from division and electoral defeat and searching (as of November 2013) for their next steps forward, its insights are as timely and important as ever.

The strength of *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal* lies in the diversity of disciplinary and methodological perspectives by its constituent authors. Meanwhile they are at the same time bound by a shared commitment to the social scientific tradition and structured to address a common puzzle that defies frequently-peddled theories across many disciplines: “How did the Maoist insurgency develop so much popular support so quickly?” The volume unfolds in 15 chapters divided into eight sections, each focusing on a different dimension of the conflict, from its initial causes to the post-war political, social, and economic aftermath. More than just a collection of journalistic or historical accounts, each chapter presents a complex theoretical

argument backed by statistical, ethnographic, or case-comparative evidence.

Nowhere is this more clearly on display than in the second section of the book. After an introductory chapter by Lawoti that frames the organizing ‘puzzle’ of the volume, Part II brings together four articles that address the Maoists’ ability to recruit members and build support among the rural Nepali population. Kristine Eck (Chapter 2) challenges standard political economy narratives that focus on structural factors such as poverty, geography, and state ‘strength.’ Drawing upon extensive interviews in Maoist-held villages, Eck argues that these background conditions were necessary, but on their own insufficient to explain the Maoists’ meteoric rise. After all, in the previous 50 years, many other leftist groups had failed to muster similar support despite operating in the same economic and geographic context. Instead, Eck shows that Maoist support was the result of the proactive development, dissemination, and application of ideological doctrine that offered a compelling counter-narrative to the status quo and linked long-held grievances with a new plan of action to create social change through armed force.

Monica Mottin (Chapter 3) and Amanda Snellinger (Chapter 4) similarly draw upon evidence gathered through ethnographic field research to argue for the importance of agent-level activity such as ritual, performance, and discourse in

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understanding the Maoist movement. Mottin documents her travels with a Maoist 'cultural troupe' to illustrate how these cadres were able to spread the appeal of Maoist political doctrine by infusing ideological symbols into local folk artistic forms. Snellinger, meanwhile, draws upon interviews with members of the Maoist student front -- the All-Nepal National Independent Students Union - Revolutionary (ANNISU-R)-- to argue that a combination of shared ideology and shared experience form an institutional culture that made the ANNISU-R particularly disciplined, cohesive, and effective as a political front organization.

The section concludes with a chapter by Madhav Joshi (Chapter 5) that contrasts with the previous three both in terms of argument and methodology. Joshi employs statistical analysis of district level development and land tenancy data in service of a structural argument about the role of landholding patterns on the geography of violence during the civil war. He argues that the ability of wealthy landholders to exert coercive pressure on the voting behavior of indebted peasants meant that the elected parliaments of the early 1990s were not responsive to the needs of the rural poor. This gap between heightened expectations following 1990 and the disappointing consequent reality created the popular frustration that would fuel the Maoist insurgency.

In these four chapters, we see both the strength and weaknesses of the

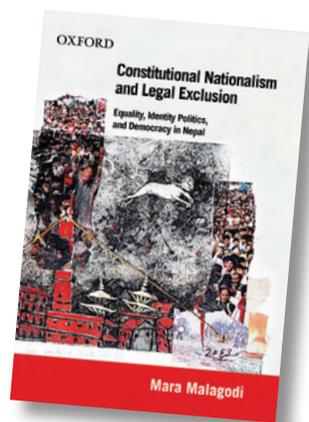
entire volume. By bringing together such a diverse set of chapters, we get a rich set of quantitative and qualitative evidence on a variety of aspects of the civil war. However, at times, the authors fall victim to exaggerating the impact of the variables that their particular research traditions are best suited to measure while overlooking possible alternative explanations. The differences in methodology make it difficult to test competing arguments against each other. The reader is still left wondering, for example, how much of the origins of the conflict can be attributed to the nature of the particular characteristics of the Maoist organization itself versus the political and economic context of the entire country at that time. Each research tradition favors a different answer.

Subsequent sections of the book maintain the same commitment to disciplinary and methodological diversity while tackling additional important dimensions of the conflict. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (Chapter 6) provides a rich detailed portrait of life in a village under the control of rebel Maoist governance. Lawoti (Chapter 7) analyzes the role of ethnicity in Nepal's conflict with useful comparison to Maoist conflicts in India and Peru, while Pramod K. Kantha (Chapter 8) assesses the relationship between the Maoists and Madhesi political groups. Additional chapters cover topics from the role of state repression (Chapter 9) to foreign involvement (Chapter 11) to post-conflict dynamics

(Chapter 14). While they are valuable contributions in their own right and add to the breadth of the volume, these latter sections lack the same level of thematic cohesion and hence dialogue between chapters that was the strength of the first half of the book.

The editors conclude the volume with an awkwardly titled final chapter (15) that claims to attempt to weigh the 'costs and benefits' of the Maoist rebellion. It is nevertheless an apt conclusion that soberly and fairly presents evidence of the loss of life and human rights abuses that occurred as a result of the war as well as the advances in democratic governance and social inclusion that occurred in its aftermath. They are careful to accept neither the Maoist argument that the advances were only attainable through insurgency nor the regime argument that the degree of violence was an inevitable consequence of the Maoists' decision to take up arms.

Seven years after the conclusion of hostilities, the same issues of economic inequality, social justice, and political frustration that sparked the war continue to be present in Nepali society and have prevented the country from being able to move forward in the establishment of a constitution and the creation of a stable political order. In detailing from many angles the ways in which the Maoists were able to galvanize these economic, social, and political grievances into mobilization for armed conflict, this



volume offers important lessons for Nepali political leaders today. Moreover, this volume will likely be a valuable resource for those interested in the comparative study of revolutionary movements as well.

Ches Thurber is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His current book project, Between Mao and Gandhi: Strategies of Violence and Nonviolence in Revolutionary Movements, examines the strategic decision-making of political movements in Nepal.

Constitutional Nationalism and Legal Exclusion: Equality, Identity Politics, and Democracy in Nepal

Mara Malagodi. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. 316 pages. ISBN 978-01-980-8291-0.

Reviewed by Dannah K. Dennis

In light of Nepal's recent elections for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, Mara Malagodi's book is a timely and relevant exploration of the political and legal dynamics surrounding the writing of Nepal's 1990 constitution, a key moment in Nepal's recent history which set the stage for the current constitutional drama. This interdisciplinary work is perhaps best described as a constitutional ethnography. It draws on an extensive analysis of primary sources and interviews with a wide range of key players in Nepali politics to answer two main research questions. First, "if the pro-democracy movement that led to the drafting and promulgation of a new constitution in 1990 seemed to have an interest in fostering the principle of equality amongst Nepalis, then why did the 1990 Constitution end up articulating a monolithic and exclusionary constitutional definition of the nation?" (p. 3). Second, how did the Articles of the 1990 constitution which defined the Nepali nation as a Hindu, Nepali-speaking monarchy result in *substantive* political exclusion, rather than merely *symbolic* exclusion?

In answering these questions, Malagodi takes an approach that she describes as path-dependent, meaning that she attends to the ways in which current options are necessarily limited by past choices and events. This analysis of historical contingency focuses on the role of institutions in defining the ethnocultural terms of Nepali national identity, while still recognizing the agency of individuals within that process. She provides a cogent historical summary of the development of the Nepali nation, demonstrating that Nepali national identity from the 18th century onward was constructed around the three pillars of the Shah monarchy, state Hinduism, and the Nepali language. Thus, the writers of the 1990 constitution were constrained by historical precedent in their formulation of Nepali national identity. While proclaiming a return to democracy and asserting as a first principle that all Nepali citizens are equal, the 1990 constitution retained many features of earlier Nepali constitutions that validated a system of social and legal exclusions on the basis of gender, ethnicity, caste, and language. The tension between these constitutional principles, combined with a rising tide of ethnic identity politics throughout the 1990's, contributed to the following two decades of political instability, Maoist insurgency, and royal autocratic takeovers that finally culminated, in 2008, with the expulsion of the last king of Nepal.

The heart of the book rests in Chapter 4, in which Malagodi analyzes key