

***A Kingdom under Siege: Nepal's Maoist insurgency, 1996 to 2003*, edited by Deepak Thapa with Bandita Sijapati. Kathmandu: The Printhouse 2003. xv + 234 pages. ISBN 99933 59 07 6 (pb).**

Reviewed by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Bielefeld

This is one of the very first books analysing the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Since its publication, a number of new studies, written both in Nepali and in English, have provided the readers with more comprehensive and more up-to-date accounts.<sup>1</sup> Still, *A Kingdom under Siege* is an important foundation to the more recent endeavours to capture the causes, the dynamics and the consequences of the Maoist movement that started under this name in 1996 and proved to be more successful – as the authors claim – than the Maoist leaders have ever dared to expect. Containing a number of annexes, tables, figures and boxes listing chronologies of events, the Maoists' demands, as well as charts depicting the spread of the Maoist movement in the Nepalese districts, this book is informative and rich in content.

Besides thought-provoking analyses, the authors also manage to convey an idea of the Nepali people's sufferings when caught between the Maoists and the state forces. Such intense images are painted in the first chapter, and they are taken up again when the costs of this conflict are discussed in chapter six. The authors seek to give a balanced picture, describing incidents of police torture, followed by accounts of atrocities instigated by Maoist leaders and their followers. The authors manage to depict an atmosphere of fear, mistrust and persisting hardships that villagers in many parts of Nepal have to cope with every day. These passages frame an important background to the factual accounts and analyses forming the major part of the book.

The second chapter is, over-ambitiously perhaps, dedicated to a historical account of the Nepalese polity between 1768 and 1996. The first two centuries are squeezed into a few pages, whereas the last decades are dealt with in more detail. Against the background of well-known facts concerning the political changes of 1951, the decade of instability (1951-1960), the panchayat era, and the "second coming of democracy" in the year 1990, the sections describing the negotiations, compromises and conflicts between political parties and their major exponents provide an insightful reading of events. The authors allot sufficient space to the genesis and the formative years of the Communist Party of Nepal. The internal tensions and

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<sup>1</sup> However, the book has recently been updated: *A Kingdom under Siege: Nepal's Maoist insurgency, 1996 to 2004*. London: Zed Books 2004. ISBN 1 84277 571 5 (pb), 1 84277 570 7 (hb).

fissions are interwoven with accounts on this Party's positioning vis-à-vis the Nepali Congress since the former came into existence in 1949. The internal dissent between those forces in favour of joining the mainstream politics at the time of the Delhi compromise (1951) and during the parliamentary election in 1959 on the one hand, and those rejecting participation in the general elections and calling for radicalisation on the other, is a *leitmotif* that re-emerges in post-1990 party politics. The dynamics of realignments of the Communist Party of Nepal culminate in the separation of the CPN (Maoist) in 1995, with the well-known consequences discussed throughout the book.

In the third chapter the authors identify the reasons why the “people's war” started and gained momentum. These are examined against the backdrop of the 40-point charter of Maoist demands presented in 1996, especially those sections dedicated to the slow pace of economic growth, regional disparities, lack of opportunities, marginalisation, as well as the very low standard of social services. The authors see most of the demands as justified, given the lack of opportunities, social injustice and lack of political will to counter-balance these clear-cut tendencies. The growing disappointment with the state's and the large political parties' performance and the latter's inefficiency at the local level are identified as the major reasons why the movement gained large popular support. Impoverished and divided by caste and ethnicity, large numbers of the Nepalese population, particularly the villagers in the western hill districts, were ready to support the movement and join the Maoist efforts to create an alternative political, economic, social and cultural system.

Chapters four and five discuss the growth and expansion of the Maoist movement and the government's failure to respond adequately. The authors describe the Maoist planning and procedure in “six sub-phases” or “tactical stages” geared at establishing a firm base in dozens of Nepalese districts, eventually including the Kathmandu Valley. The second national conference of CPN (Maoist) held in early 2001 is identified as a crucial milestone. This conference gave rise to the “Prachanda Path” and the emergence of the notion of an “interim government” – a step the authors identify as a precondition leading to the first round of negotiations between the Maoist leaders and the government in mid-2001 that eventually failed, resulting in the imposition of the state of emergency.

This useful account of the movement's progress according to the designed logistics is accompanied by a narrative of the subsequent governments' inability to respond to its escalation. The readers are given the opportunity to follow a series of failures on the side of the government to adequately grasp the challenge at an early stage of the movement. The authors use rather harsh words for some of the politicians. They denounce “the kind of politicking that went on in Kathmandu [and] bolstered the Maoists' argument that parliamentary democracy was a sham that could not

work for the benefit of the people” (p. 87), and they argue that “the seed of instability and unprincipled opportunism were sown early on when Girija Prasad Koirala became prime minister in 1991, and the subsequent infighting that broke out within the Nepali Congress over government appointments” (ibid.).

The two final chapters tackle the consequences of the movement as they could be perceived by mid-2003 when the book was ready for publication. In the macro-dimension, the economic costs are assessed. These are striking indeed, given the severely decreased pace of economic growth and the decline in investments, as well as the general shift in allotting a growing share of public expenditure for security purposes. Another crucial dimension is the deteriorating human rights conditions with the security forces being held responsible for the larger share of the killings and torture of persons in police custody. Some critical remarks are addressed to the civil society and its public sphere: during the initial years of the movement, human rights organisations and the mass media have generally kept silent regarding the numerous human rights abuses while uncritically supporting the government’s fight against the rebels.

Writing a review some 18 months after this book’s going into print, it is easy to point to some of its weaknesses. For instance, at present we know significantly more about the military strength and about the strategic aspects of the Maoist movement. More accounts are available today on the personal losses due to the conflict, even if detailed reports from areas under the Maoist control and from those regions caught in-between the fronts are still lacking. Nevertheless, the diverse experiences with the *jana sarkār* (Maoist government) as well as the exposed position of the teachers in rural Nepal would round up the picture provided in *A Kingdom under Siege*. Three further issues should have received more attention.

First, the Maoists’ nationalist orientation. Having drawn the readers’ attention to the 40-point charter of demands presented by the Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai to Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1996, the authors fail to discuss the powerful nationalist discourse that Maoists have embraced (chapter 3, points 1 to 9).

Second, the Maoist stance vis-à-vis the ethnic groups. While the authors introduce ethnicity and inherent inequalities when discussing the causes for the movement’s gaining momentum, little space is given to the plans for dividing Nepal’s territory into autonomous regions. Also, the highly contradictory policies embraced by the Maoists regarding ethnic customs, such as worship, drinking and food habits as well as performing rituals should have been discussed in more detail.

Third, the authors fail to grasp the dynamic character of the movement. As is the case with all prolonged conflicts, new dynamics and new rationalities have come into play in the course of time. While chapter 3

attempts to analyse the initial impetus of the “people’s war”, seeing its causes in the dismay generated by socio-economic and political conditions, insufficient space is devoted to the internal conflicts and fissions within the movement caused by its individual leaders’ strategies at the later stages. The authors fail to perceive the vested interests inducing the movements’ exponents to carry on their battle. One is tempted to add that the Maoist movement in Nepal has been beneficial to a significantly larger number of actors, including those outside the movement, than it has been acknowledged so far – an issue not addressed in this publication.

Despite these omissions, Thapa’s and Sijapati’s is a very useful and readable book. It provides us with crucial insights into the complexities of the current Nepalese society and its polity, and above all, it indicates the horrendous costs women, men and children in Nepal have had to bear so far.

***Forget Kathmandu: An elegy for democracy* by Manjushree Thapa. New Delhi: Penguin 2005. 260 pages. ISBN 0-67-005812-2.**

Reviewed by Elvira Graner, Heidelberg

Manjushree Thapa has taken up a courageous enterprise by publishing her “private search” (p. 6) about “what has gone wrong” in Nepal. In doing so, she voices her deep concerns about “floundering democracy” and “bad politics” (p. 6) and presents a vigorous, enlightening and at the same time highly-sensitive piece on the current political situation in the country. By adding one more voice to what she calls the “cacophony of public discourse” (p. 5) she has further established her reputation. Not only is she one of the few English-writing Nepalese novelists, but in the present work she also provides evidence for her skill at social and political analyses. Her style is innovative in this book, which she calls “a mongrel of historiography, reportage, travel writing and journal writing”.

The first chapter, on “the coup that did not happen,” is a lively and rather personal account of how she and her friends in Kathmandu experienced the “royal massacre” of June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001. By recollecting the scene on the streets during the first days and weeks along with the rumours, lack