

Violence as Communication: A Study of Propaganda of the Deed under Nepal's Maoist Rebellion

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Abstract

The study focuses on the communication strategy of an insurgent group. It explores and critiques the acts of violence aimed at creating terror employed by the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) during the 10-year-long "People's War" in Nepal. In course of exploring information and communication system maintained by the party and its outreach strategy during the insurgency, the research outlines the features of the then CPN (Maoist) regarding the communication during the period. The process and tools of internal as well as external communication used by a clandestine organization thus become the major study of the work. The study is based on the literature published by the party and interviews with the Maoist leaders. It reveals a well-functioned communication system was its lifeline of the rebel. The mode of the dissemination of favourable message was mainly based on the violence; they use the term red terror.

Keywords: Insurgency, propaganda of deed, total war, terror

Introduction

Declared with two symbolic attacks in the rural area on February 13, 1996, Maoist's "People's War" was a violent internal uprising against the state. After receiving no response to the 40-points demand put forth by the then *Samyukata Janamorcha*, a political wing of the party, CPN (Maoist) officially announced their People's War with the attacks on a police station at Rolpa and Sindhuli Districts. The insurgency that initially opposed the political system and associated laws in place in Nepal at the time culminated in the Comprehensive Peace Accord in November 2006. Maoists prefer to call their insurgency a rebellion. The Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) also uses similar terminology. Gradually it started to communicate terror through violent and brutal activities. Subsequently, the violence began to create a public discourse among the multiple target audiences.

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Even the then CPN (UML) had concluded under the heading of publicity activity that the Maoist has moved forward the publicity campaign in a planned way (UML, BS 2058, p. 24). Over the years it has been clear on the surface that the Maoist publicity was mainly based on violence. Creating immense terror was one of the tactics under the communication strategy of Maoist rebels of Nepal. The individual killing was part of the strategy in Maoist War. The then CPN (Maoist) in the course of forwarding its Peoples War depended on different forms of violence to threaten the people so that they would listen and abide by their instructions. In course of the insurgency aimed at revolution, the Nepali Maoist rebels utilized communication as part of the strategy. Of the total 4839 killings by Maoist from 1996 and 2006 as much as 1366 killings were brutal (INSEC CD-ROM). They had a linear procedure of creating an incident, speeding terror and pose them as effective and influential in the society to draw the attention on them. In summary, Maoist of Nepal had a system of communication-based mainly on the violence as content and propaganda as the tool to establish the image of the party within and outside the country.

The Party has a belief that it could draw national and international attraction by violent acts. It had stated that successful military actions in the form of ambushes, mining, commando attacks and sabotage have been carried out almost daily in different parts of the country. Particularly the ambushes and mining have been so effective that the royal mercenaries have virtually ceased to venture into the rural base areas, except with exceptional preparations (Information Bulletin-8). Against this backdrop, this essay tries to uncover the Maoist communication strategy focusing on their way of spreading propaganda. It tries to record the Maoists efforts to communicate about their war strategies.

Methodologies

The essay discusses the Maoist communication system during the decade long insurgency in Nepal (1996 to 2006). The study adopts two methodologies. First, examine the Maoist communication activities by reviewing the relevant literature. Second, insights are acquired by the key informant interviews from some of the key actors. Third, it analyses the insurgency with the lens of a couple of case-studies. Hence, it is concentrated on the act of violence which was implied by the then CPN (Maoist) under the supreme commandership of Comrade Prachanda (later it was revealed that he was Puspha Kamal Dahal) as one of the major tactics within the overall communication strategy. Generally, during the escalation of violent conflict, the party mobilized different sectors and walks of lives including the professional media. The party runs its newspapers, online portals and radio stations. Thus, it tried to make the optimum use of conventional and new media technologies. In the beginning, it uses

traditional technology, mostly, interpersonal communication to spread messages in both rural and urban areas. But after entering "the phase of strategic balance," the party began to use advanced technology such as the internet and satellite phones. Baral (2012) states that the Party declared that its military strength entered into the phase of strategic balance from the phase of strategic defence after the established to Peoples Liberation Army Nepal in mid-2001 in Ropla under the supreme commandship of Prachanda (p.68). Further, during "the phase of strategic offence," after around mid-20004 according to Baral (p.69), they also organized press conferences to seek coverage in national and international mass media outlets.

Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and communication

The then CPN (Maoist) sees consistent and genuine revolutionary movements all over the world and Prachanda considered such movements as the prognosis of the invincible ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (Prachanda, 2007, p.231). As McKenzie states communist philosophy is based on primary writings of Karl Marx and its translation into the practices. He links communist ideology with the act of communication as follows: The contrast between the ideas of communism and how it has been practised by some governments have at times obscured a tempered study of communist philosophy as it relates to media systems (p.76).

Marx considers communication as the means of cultural production used by the ruling class to serve their ideology. In the former USSR, Following Marxism, Lenin developed and implemented a normative theory, Bolshevik style of functioning of media. Wilbur Schramm terms it as the Soviet Communist Theory (1972). In course of time, Mao accomplished another experiment with the Marxism in China. According to (McKenzie, 1993): Under Mao's leadership, Communist Party ideology was influenced heavily by Leninist Communism, which sought to overthrow capitalism through a workers' revolution and to redistribute the wealth via the working class (pp60-61). McQuail argues that the question of power is central to Marxist interpretations of mass media (2000 p.76). Marx envisions establishing the command of the working class over the media and communication so that they would not be used as the instruments of control for a ruling class. McKenzie, (1993) states that Communist philosophy holds that the role of the state is to be the caretaker for the wellbeing of society" (p.76). In course of analyzing philosophy for media system, he observes that Communist philosophy holds that if individuals work together as a collective whole, then it is possible to achieve an egalitarian society in which there are no wealthy classes and no poverty classes (1993, p.76).

On one hand, Marx doesn't talk about the usage of communication to complement violence, on the other; Mao presented his idea to grab the flow of

communication to create the desired message. The communication system of the Maoists of Nepal is influenced by the strategies and tactics of the revolutions led by Mao Tse-Tung. Prachanda (2007) quotes Mao as who says that weapons are of course the important elements, but not decisive the factor. Mao views that human beings are the decisive factors, not the materials (p.109). Hence, Maoist actively uses extreme means to create propaganda in the belief that such propaganda enhances its outreach. His perception regarding the way of overcoming rumour by that acts of armed resistance manifests in his saying, "Definitely we were capable to rebellion against the rulers, because we have got support form a wider range of people (2007, p.447)

Violence as communication

On the foreword of *Violence as Communication* (1982), Mc Quail (1982) states that the issue leaves little doubt, at the least, that the concept of 'harmful news' has to be taken seriously and that the question of media responsibility at the time of terrorist events is both urgent and hard to deal with. According to him in the public debates of recent years arising from the apparent spread of terroristic activity of all kinds, the role of the news media has been given considerable attention (p.ii). The book is revolving the idea that without communication there can be no terrorism (Schmid and de Graaf (1982, p.9).

Maoist's communication strategy which encompassed propaganda is found to be designed to aggravate its People's War. As Kunczik (1993) says, it is understandable that the party was aware of the fact that "without communication, no society can exist, develop and survive" (p.25). According to Kunczik (1993), for the existence as well as the organization of every society, communication is a fundamental and vital process (p. 25). Stating that every joint action by individuals is based on meanings is communication and shared, Kunczik (1993) mentions that communication means not only transmission but also a community; participation (p.25). Baran and Davis (2000) quote Lasswell in this regard. They state that Lasswell argued that the economic depression and escalating political conflict had induced widespread psychosis and this made people susceptible to even crude forms of propaganda (p.74). According to Lasswell (1950) an eligible target for 'propaganda of the deed' is some personality whose loss will terrorize the enemy and weaken the unity of will of those who uphold an established order (, p. 66). Since politics is about communication and communication is shaped by politics, it is relevant here to cite Meyer (2000, p.14) who says, at all times it has been obvious that communication was one of the crucial constituents of political life. In support of his argument, Meyer quotes the famous German-American Political Scientist Karl W. Deutsche, who says politics is nothing but communication. Thus, all political efforts or moves would be based on communication, either knowingly or

unknowingly (p.14). Hence, the propaganda of deed based mainly on violence has been considered as an effective communication tool by the rebels and insurgents in a different part of the world. Lasswell (1950) states that in terror, as in assassination, propaganda goals are uppermost, and the overt acts are timed to produce the greatest possible psychological effect" (Pp. 67-68). The CPN (Maoist) uses propaganda to influence the political communication as part of its War Thus propaganda is seen as an integral part of its Total War, as Prachanda (2007, p.230) terms, against the state.

As Nwogbaga, (2016) argues, in the context of violent conflict either parties began to believe that the extent to which public opinions reflect realities on the grounds of politics largely depends on how the waves of propaganda blow the perceptions of the people. The Maoist Party of Nepal resembles with anon-state groups which pursue 'terror' tactics against governments, soldiers and civilians of their own or other countries.

Bob (2005) argues that most local movements, having far fewer resources, labour alone to attract media coverage. For them, a frequent and relatively cheap strategy is political "spectacle," a major, highly visible, sometimes novel event. Common forms include strikes, mass marches, and land invasions. Violence and terror, which often attract the media more effectively than peaceful events, may also be considered forms of spectacle. Whether violent or nonviolent, however, the key is action grabbing media attention and dramatically encapsulating a challenger's identity, grievances, and demands. Without such a spectacle, the likelihood of sustained and substantial media attention is small (p.26). McNair (2011) presenting his observation about the category of political organization which pursues its objectives by illegal, often violent means, states that "Terror", in this context, includes bombings, assassination, kidnappings, and hostage-taking – actions which will in most cases be of minor military value, being designed rather communicate political messages of various kinds. Terror, in this sense, is a form of political communication, pursued outside the realm of constitutional procedures (p.167).

Their deeds of propaganda

Maoist creates violence for the sake of publicity. The Party creates a pseudo atmosphere where they appeared as a strong force. Activities of the then CPN (Maoist) manifests a strategy of disseminating clear messages with individual killing, in several cases. Subsequently, the Party shows its involvement in manipulating the media by obtaining significant coverage.

Janadesh weekly was running under the editorship of Krishna Sen., a forefront Maoist leader in the sector of publicity, with the legal registration number 41/047/48 in Kathmandu District Administration office. on 5 January 1999, The Weekly publishes

news, with a banner headline describing the Maoist attack over a police station in the rural part of Lalitpur. The headline read: "Courageous Attack over Bhattedanda Police Station." Teaser headlines of the news were, "Bravery Day got success historically", "Two policemen dead, four injured" and "Four 3-0-3 Rifles and two hundred bullets were captured." The presentation can be taken as an example of the inherent relationship between the act and the propaganda.

Many a time, Maoist created terror by attacking the relatively soft target. For instance, on January 26, 2003. The head of Nepal's armed police force, Krishna Mohan Shrestha, his wife and his bodyguard were shot dead this morning by the Maoist rebels in Kathmandu ("Nepal Police...", 2003). One battalion commander of Maoist Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) justified his version with the following words: "Cleansing of Krishna Mohan compelled the government to declare a cease-fire and start the talks" (Atom, BS 2064, p.6). Thus The Maoist Party disseminates the desired message through the violent act time and again during the insurgency. One of the distinct examples of such an effort to attract the attention towards them was the killing of Krishna Mohan Shrestha, Inspector General of Armed Police Force (APF) while he was in morning walk in plain cloth. It was Maoist's strategy to spread propaganda by its deeds from the very beginning.

In a quest to disseminate the WAR, the rebel Maoist documented the battle in camera and produced the copies of VCD to publicize their activities in several incidences. They captured the preparation of the attack, the speech before sending the troops to the battle and moment of attack depicting that they are winning the war. They organized the public show of those kinds of publicity-documentary across the remote villages.

One of such VCD, entitled *Pratyakaraman* [Counter attack], was publicly distributed by the central broadcasting department of the then CPN (Maoist). That documentary comprises of March Past of Maoist insurgents and the scenes of battles from Palpa, Butwal and Taulihawa. Difficult routes covered with snow and their struggle to go forward, leaders providing consolations to the injured insurgents and the scene of jailbreak and the moment of the freedom for the prisoners were the glimpses of the documentaries. They also documented the interviews with the captured security personal.

One of the documentaries reveals that when they assume that the government agencies knew the plan and date of Butawal attack, they change the date. It also reveals that they travelled 21 KM on the vehicle to attack Taulihawa. The documentary shows that they returned on the vehicle in the daylight after the attack. Similarly, they have shown their combatants dancing on the highway after getting success and March Pass. After the Palapa attack, they have shown the use of satellite phone saying that Chairman

Prachand is eager to know about the success. The documentaries depicted the use of SAT phone by the leaders during their activities.

The notion of terror was at the heart of the communication strategy of Maoist. One of the decisions taken in the meeting of the Party Politburo held in late 2001, after the emergency declared by the government, was a clear indication of belief over the notion of terror. The decision reads: To make guerrilla action rapid and effective in *Tarai*, major cities and urban areas it is essential to concentrate all the strength and fully demoralize the enemy and fortified the base of the rebellion by making the enemy entirely harassed (Baral, 68). The strategy was to spread 'red terror' against the 'white terror' spread by the state.

According to Prachand (2007), they spread red terror as per the necessity. He thinks it happens occasionally during the revolution. He cites one example as they attacked a police station at Thankot, Kathmandu. He opines that casualties could be less or more, but when terror is essential we need to create it (p.222). The party was committed to making people feel about their strong presence through acts of violence. In a bid to describe his War's prominence a year after its inception, Prachand (2007) counts the acts such as special action against "feudal" their agents and capitalists and around 6000 actions within a fortnight across the country (p.182). The Maoists exploited various rhetorical components such as definitions, labels and symbolism following acts of terror. Thus, in retrospective, the Maoist Peoples War" demonstrates a relationship between their acts of terror and communication and public psyche.

What they say

Krishna Bahadur Mahara, a senior negotiator from Maoist party during the talks, says in an interview for this write up that the aim of publicity was only to assist and achieve the goal of people's war which was our mission; we developed our means for publicity. He adds that because of their activities; the national and international media were attracted towards them. According to Mahara, during the last phases of strategic balance and strategic offence, the party began to organize press conferences to disseminate information through the media available in the open market which are supposed to be more effective than their publications, for the wider audience. He reveals that in the beginning, they published handwritten publications from different places, later they used radio and online as tools for the same purpose.

According to Mahara, they were not up to the level of the perception that the Maoist media strategy was stronger. He says that as the perception about the Maoist was different, the People's War was considered as a mystery world outside the country. According to him, that was the cause of why they were at the centre of attraction for the

media and their benefit media started giving more priority to the news related to their activities.

Mahara explains the Maoist way of the flow of information as follows: "We disseminated our decisions through a press release and statements during a certain period. I started disseminating decisions when I was made a spokesperson. According to him the information related to the party and other committees were used to be made public by the Publicity Department. He says that the duty of the Publicity Department was to publicize and elaborate on the decisions made by the committees and the party. He adds that initially the Party's decisions were made public through statements by the head-quarter and later on, the job was entrusted to the Publicity Department and the Spokesperson.

Senior Maoist leader Mahara, in an interview for this study, says that principally they were oriented to spread such propaganda for the sake of class-interest. He further adds that however, they could not push it to the extent we wanted it to. According to him, they failed to manage the propaganda campaign properly. Likewise, the then Maoist leader Rabindra Shrestha, who was the chief of the publicity wing once, explained the meaning of publicity for the party firstly as publicity of its vision and thought. He adds, second, publicity of exposure of ideologies and practices of the opposition parties and the government. As third observation he presents the alternative reality, broaching the alternate. He says fourth, to help the war directly. Central point was to win the people's heart by winning them ideologically, then only it was possible to win in other fronts such as military and economic. Shrestha concludes him in a personal interview that Job of the publicity was primarily related to the ideology. Shrestha, on the question about killing of Krishna Mohan and her wife, says in the personal interview that the action was followed by the government's message for a proposal for talks. According to Shrestha it shows an example of wining in terms of psychology. He then adds it shows the state's tendency to ignore when the low-level personnel were killed but started to present themselves more politically or hurriedly to resolve the problem politically when higher-level personnel were targeted. He terms such action, killing of Krishna Mohan, as the annihilation of the top leaders of the time. He further explains that if the damage in the leadership level in our part continued and no significant loss in the enemy side meant an obvious imbalance in the strength of the force. He further elaborates, that the party needs to take care of self-esteem. According to him, otherwise, such incidences diminish the self-esteem of the soldiers. He argues that imbalance of strength was obvious if we were capable to incur damage only to the level of low ranking personnel and no loss at a higher level. He further explains that it is insufficient to hand down actions only against the lower ranks and avail the objectives

of the People's War. Political pressure amply when, the action is taken against the core cluster.

Prachanda in a bid to describe the success of his party's violent actions, states that only one month after the start there was a big national debate about the question of People's War. Every newspaper, every radio, everybody in the country was asking: what is this People's War, what is this Maoist party? "He further expresses pride on the deeds: " In one push, the party was established in a big and national way and it was in the centre of the debate, after only one month" ("Special to RW", 2010). Though Maoist chairman claims there was no policy to kill people, he explains that "In times of war, in difficult circumstances, things might not work as planned and at times, even though we might have wanted, we might not have managed to organize things the right way. But in general, according to him, from our side, there has been and there will be no force on people" ("Prachanda interview", BBC, 2010). He adds that the policy of his party is that informants of the army, the ones who work as spies and have committed the crime of killing people, then there would be action against them. He states that there is a policy to act against them. He clarifies the context as follows: But there is no policy that we kill people generally on the basis that they have helped the royal army. According to him, it was unfortunate if such an incident does happen. He states that they have been admitting to this and publicly apologized for it. Whenever such a mistake is made and someone loses their life outside of our policy, they have asked for a pardon from the people ("Prachanda interview", 2010).

To the question, is not it that murder drive gained momentum when the hostage police of Chiraghat Police Post in Dang was a murder at the beginning of the People's War and the party was unable to hand down punishment to the offenders even though the issue was raised and discussed in the central committee meeting, Mahara replies: Kill or be killed is but a natural phenomenon in direct-war. But it was not our party policy to kill any of the hostages. He states that the incident of Chiraghat of March 3, 1999, was taken by the leaders responsibly and they reviewed the incident as their weaknesses, however, at some occasion, the self-actuated local level cadres took the elimination drive in their hand under the presumption that it could be done before the higher-level leaders knew it.

Shrestha claims that the casualty incurred on both sides during battles was palpable. He states that they have examples of releasing the police hostages without harming them once we controlled the targets. However, in the case of Chiraghat, Dang Shrestha continues: It could be because of the poor level of understanding of the field commanders or the result of a heavy loss that further forced them to reprisal. He further says that the trend of the killing of the hostage after gaining control over the posts surged up as in the action taken at Chiraghat of Dang. According to him in the action,

some of the police constables were killed in presence of Pasangjee and Barshamanjee after the police post was taken under our control. Shrestha further states in this regard, the leaders, the central committee members, may not be aware of the reality at once. Briefing the incident he says that when they get the news on the paper, they thought they were killed in the encounter. However, he reveals that later on, they came to learn that order was given to kill them. Some of the leaders who were involved apologized for their mistake.

Conclusions

The Maoist propaganda tactics based on the terror is observed as the effort to mould public opinion. Maoist uses terror through violence as one of the prominent instruments for propaganda. The Party mainly uses violence to create fear to ensure that the people do not oppose the Party. Hence, the individual killings are seen as the part of the communication strategy in Maoist War. For instance, Krishna Mohan was made a target for the propaganda of the deed. Albeit CPN (Maoist), upheld an ideology comprised of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, its drive for power was supplemented by the act of violence and consequent terror.

As mentioned above, the party demonstrates the characteristics of propaganda in several cases to complement its armed actions. Moreover, it lured the international community, threatened the state, and ruled over the mindsets a significant population with the help of propaganda. One of the instances Maoist tries to spread propaganda by creating hype of their strength was the attack on a nearly abandoned police station at Bhattedanda, Lalitpur during the earlier phase of its War.

In the context of Maoist insurgency, the term "action", refers to violent acts. Apart from its presence throughout the country, Maoist creates impact through actions with the motif of propaganda. That said, "Prachanda Path", or the official program of the party, had no separate and clear communication policy. However, the party had created a functional communication system as part of the "People's War". During the period, it issues press statements, sets up newspapers, radio, and websites and received fairly wide coverage in both national and international media. Apart from running the organization in clandestine mode, the party disseminates the messages forcefully through various violent performances.

Hence the decade long Maoist insurgency follows a range of tactics, from cultural performances to military attacks, abduction and killing aimed at assisting in availing the goal of the Maoist's People's War in line with the party's publicity and communication strategy. Withholding information that could damage the image of the Party was also a tactic. 'Hubbub in the East and strike in the West' was another tactic

within guerrilla warfare tradition. The tactic proves to be useful for the party in covering some important military activities, particularly, sensitive locations. The Maoist approach of communication comprises of two major factors a) capability of destruction and, b) capability of conducting propaganda by communication the effects of destruction. The two factors are seen to be places as cardinal in Maoist communication strategy. The then CPN (Maoists) under the leadership of Prachand largely gains control over the flow of information on its activities during its People's War. The party, with the instruments of violence, conveys its message of terror not only to the enemy but also to people who are seen reluctant to support their activities. The terror escalates the Maoist influence in every aspect of the Nepali society for about a decade.

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