

DEMOCRACY FOR NEPAL (DFN)

Saturday, January 27, 2007

Sahana Pradhan, Sarita Giri, Chitra Lekha Yadav, Prativa Rana

Top women leaders tell of Nepal's struggle for peace and democracy

BY SALLY ACHARYA



Photo by Jeff Watts

Saji Prelis, SIS, left, introduces Nepali political leaders. Left to right, they are Sahana Pradhan, Sarita Giri, Chitra Lekha Yadav, and Prativa Rana.

The people of Nepal were caught for years between a violent Maoist insurgency and a king who reacted by dissolving the parliament and imposing authoritarian rule.

But over the past year, “something very unique has happened in our country,” said Sarita Giri at a panel of top women politicians from Nepal, “Nepal at the Crossroads: The Path to Peace.”

The panel at the School of International Service included the highest-ranking woman in Nepali politics, Chitra Lekha Yadav, reappointed last week as deputy speaker of the House of Representatives.

After a decade of bloodshed, there is now hope that Nepal can become an example of a country where an insurgency ends peacefully when political parties and guerillas find common ground.

A coalition formed by the Maoists and seven mainstream parties led to an outpouring of popular protest last year against the king’s rule, forcing him to relinquish absolute power. Now a cease-fire is in effect as the country prepares for an election that will lead to rewriting the constitution and could redefine, or even abolish, the role of the king.

In effect, “the political parties embraced a long-term demand of the Maoists,” said Yadav, the deputy speaker, who is also a leader of the large Nepali Congress (Democratic) party. The rebels have called for an end to the monarchy, but say they will abide by the results of the “constituent assembly,” or constitutional convention.

“The Nepali people have struggled both against the authoritarianism of the king and against the politics of violence,” said Giri, a leader of the Sadbhavana Party (Anandi Devi), which advocates for the large madhesi ethnic group. “The Nepali people have come to believe that the solution of the conflict lies in having a new constitution . . . and the Maoists also somehow understood their own limitations. They have a correct reading of the world scenario, and what is possible and not possible.”

“The Maoists realized their armed struggle will not work,” agreed Sahana Pradhan. “Ulti-mately it is the peace movement of the people that will work.”

They were looking for a chance to come out and lay down their arms and join democracy.”

Pradhan is a founder of UML, which stands for Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) but is a moderate left party.

Nepal became a democracy with a constitutional monarchy in 1990, but the king remained above the law and retained the right to impose direct rule if he chose, which is what King Gyanendra did in the 2005 “royal coup.”

“People now are thinking the trouble has to do with the monarchy,” Pradhan said. “They want this to be the last struggle.”

Hopes for the future are high. Success, though, will depend on the effectiveness of democratic leaders, who are known for squabbling and “passing the buck,” warned Pratiba Rana, a leader of the pro-monarchy Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which views the tradition of royalty as a unifying force in Nepal. Rana raised concern about the tendency of politicians to blame past rulers for current failures, which, she said, is an easier path than taking responsibility for success in the present.

“There was much bickering among political parties,” agreed Pradhan.

“Democracy did not work as people expected. People would say, ‘what type of democracy is this?’”

The panelists agreed that one key to success will be greater political power for women. Political parties have now pledged to give a third of their tickets to women, who came out in large numbers to demand a restoration of democracy and call for a constitutional assembly.

“Evidence from all over the world shows women are less corrupt,” Giri said.

“We firmly believe that promoting women in political power will definitely lead us to a position of peace and more sustainable democracy.”

The talk was cosponsored by the Peacebuilding and Development Institute at the School of International Service and the Initiative for Inclusive Security at Hunt Alternatives Fund, a foundation that supports leaders of social movements and promotes peace processes. The women have been in the United States for a two-week policy forum in Cambridge, Mass., and Washington, D.C.