

Jagannath Adhikari. 2014. *Under the Shadow of the Red Flag: Travels during Nepal's Armed Conflict*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari

Under the Shadow of the Red Flag is a travelogue in which the author provides an insight into the impact the decade-long Maoist conflict had on local communities in remote areas of Nepal. The book is based on personal observations and reflections by the author as he travelled during work assignments as a development consultant between the years 2003 and 2005 in six districts in west and central Nepal (Mugu, Dolakha, Dailekh, Ramechhap, Lamjung and Okhaldhunga) and five in east Nepal (Bhojpur, Dhankuta, Panchthar, Ilam and Jhapa). Jagannath Adhikari is an academic author and a development consultant who has worked with a variety of organizations over the years, including Martin Chautari, the Asian Development Bank and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

2014 has been a prolific year for books written in English dealing with the Maoist conflict in Nepal. Both *Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal* by Prashant Jha and *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution* by Aditya Adhikari, the other two titles on the same topic, analyze the conflict through the behaviors and decisions of the characters active in the process, meaning the role played by the ruling elites, the then Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) and the Maoist leadership. And while both of these books are excellent contributions in their own right, the merit of *Under the Shadow of the Red Flag* is that it provides a unique angle

by focusing on the passive actors in the conflict, the civilian population living on the frontline.

As Adhikari states upfront in the preface, the book has been put together on the back of a compendium of personal notes written with the sole criteria that the events and conversations observed struck him as “unique and interesting” (p. vii). This lack of an ex-ante goal means that the book is less structured than a formal academic or journalistic text which sometimes leads to lines of argumentation getting repeated in different chapters, for example, his observations about the situation of conflict widows in chapters eight and ten. Having said that, those structural issues are minor in comparison to the benefit the reader derives from being provided with testimonies from a wide range of civilian actors, including local NGO workers, porters, farmers and civil servants, from a diverse number of districts and social groups.

The book is divided into 11 chapters, each one covering individual trips and arranged in a chronological order, rather than geographical basis. The first chapter is structured in a more academic way than the rest of the book as it was published previously as a standalone article in this journal (Adikhari 2003). The chapter explores the physical and psychological violence local NGO workers suffered during the conflict by being caught between the warring factions, the RNA and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The fact that these workers had to operate and travel between the areas controlled by the two sides meant that they were continuously under suspicion by both sides of working for the other. How arbitrary behavior by the RNA officials made regular everyday situations suddenly volatile or the different techniques used by locals to avoid suspicion are particularly noteworthy contributions in this chapter.

As the reader goes through the remainder of the book a number of important themes are covered. These provide a valuable picture to better understand the internal dynamics and behaviors of the main actors in the conflict as well as how those impact the life of local communities and how the latter perceived them. These themes can be grouped into social, economic and political blocks.

Among the social themes, a crucial one is the rise of identity politics during the conflict, particularly because of the drive by the Maoists to increase ethnic and caste consciousness among historically discriminated communities. We find this issue discussed in reference to Kiranti politics, in Chapter three, and Magar and Dalit communities, in Chapter ten. The impact

the conflict had on women is also well documented in the book. Chapter three provides first account evidence of harassment of women by the RNA at security checkpoints while Chapter eight and ten discuss the plight of conflict widows from both sides. Internal displacement is always one of the major consequences of armed conflicts and in Chapter eight, the author provides a very valuable set of testimonies from internally displaced people (IDPs) in Ramechhap district. The economic hardship suffered by civilians during the conflict in districts that were already among the poorest in the country is also given pre-eminence in the book. Chapter five describes in detail the desperate situation of impoverished communities in Mugu district as blockades, frequent raids and corruption made staple food scarce and more expensive. Chapter nine describes the shortage of medicines in rural areas in the east of the country. And as the author shows in Chapter ten, hardship resulted in a significant increase in the number of people crossing the border to work in India.

Economically, the war had a devastating effect on development in Nepal. Different chapters discuss how businesses and individuals had to pay taxes to both the government and the Maoists, overburdening them. But also the weakening of the rule of law meant that corruption became rampant at local level, with public funds being misappropriated and infrastructure projects delayed to increase costs to the government by contractors, as is described in chapter seven with regards to the Upper Tamakoshi hydroelectric project.

The book also provides particularly worthy insights into the political situation during the conflict. Chapter three provides ample evidence of the erosion of the popular legitimacy of local government institutions. In the absence of local elections since 1997 the government filled vacant posts with former Panchayat appointees and officials with little knowledge of areas or interest in their development. The situation only gets worse with the 2005 takeover by King Gyanendra, discussed in Chapter nine, particularly with the introduction of royal monitoring teams, tasked with supervising officials' adherence to the monarch's line, repressing the few independent voices left within local government structures. The result of the democratic deficit is a lack of transparency and accountability of state institutions and the consequent increase in corruption. Chapter nine includes details on how the PLA also weakened as an institution. Originally formed by a majority of ideologically-committed cadres, in the latter years of the conflict, it began to corrupt itself as it incorporate more and more local thugs looking to use it as

a tool for extortion. The revolts against the Maoists in Naumule and Dullu, the theme of Chapter ten, also show how heavy-handed tactics by local party leaders meant that the loss of popular legitimacy occurred on both sides.

The book is let down somewhat by the epilogue. The epilogue aims at providing a general picture of the post-conflict situation. It does contain some interesting insights, in particular with regards to the evolution of identity politics and its impact on efforts to turn Nepal into a federal state. However, the author's premise that economic empowerment alone would solve the discriminatory nature of the Nepali state seems far-fetched. Institutionalized discrimination of *jana jātis*, Dalits, Madhesis and women by the Nepali state is a well documented reality. The ongoing debate on the right to citizenship through the mother is a good example of this. Equally, the author's statement that "[u]ltimately, the Maoist movement achieved none of its goals through the armed conflict" (p. 220) is too simplistic. While the Maoists through their insurgency might not have achieved their stated goal of capturing the state, it is hard to see how the abolition of the monarchy or the setting up of the Constituent Assembly (CA) would have occurred without the conflict unmasking the authoritarian inclinations of Gyanendra Shah and the subsequent peace process forcing the mainstream political parties towards federalism. In fact, the current state of constitutional negotiations in the second CA shows that neither the leadership of the Nepali Congress nor of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) have been enthusiastic supporters of a federal Nepal.

The reader would also have benefited from the translation of the different slogans shown in the illustrations, as the book is in English it should be assumed that all its readers might not understand Nepali. Equally, there are inconsistencies in the translation of terms from Nepali to English in the main text, as in some cases this is done and in others it is not. Similarly, references including the Nepali year should have also included the standard one.

Having said that, overall, this is a fine contribution to the academic literature in English on the Maoist conflict which, unlike that in Nepali, lacks firsthand accounts on the impact the conflict had on local communities. Adhikari has therefore filled an important research gap and provided an important reminder for academics studying armed conflicts around the world to not disregard the subaltern, the voiceless majority.

Reference

Adhikari, Jagannath. 2003. Living on a Tightrope: Adaptive Strategies of Grassroots Development Workers in a Maoist-Conflict Area. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 8(2): 369–383.

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