Nepal
The Maoist Dream
Saif Khalid and Gyanu Adhikari
The hills are not mere hills now
They are red warriors
The jungles are not jungles now
They are mass of people’s armies
The villages are unified
In the camps of retaliation
In this peak of the land
Everest is glowing as red flags

Salute Jelbang

Krishna Sen Ichhuk
CHAPTER 1

Remembering The Rebellion

A memorial erected in Holeri to commemorate the death of a policeman in 2001. It stands on the ruins of a police post that was first attacked by the Maoists in 1996, launching the rebellion [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

THE STUDENT WARRIOR - “I’M READY TO FIGHT AGAIN”

In the suburbs of Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu, a woman tends to vegetables in the farm that surrounds the humble tin-roofed home she shares with two former comrades-in-arms.

Spring is just around the corner and flowers have started to blossom in these fields, over which snow-capped mountains loom.
Sharma’s gaze drifts off towards the peaks. The 34-year-old really ought to be dead. During Nepal’s 10-year long Maoists rebellion, she had a price on her head.

The government had announced that it would pay $10,000 to anybody who delivered her to them, dead or alive.

But she was lucky; she evaded arrest and, unlike the nearly 16,000 others who were killed during a conflict that lasted from 1996 until 2006, escaped death.

Nepal’s civil war pitted the Maoist-led People’s Liberation Army (PLA) against state forces. Rekha was a member of the PLA.

But the gun she used has now been handed in to the government as part of the decommissioning process that began after the war ended. And the party she fought for now sits in the cabinet with those she fought against.

Still, Rekha’s belief in the communist ideals that inspired her then remains firm. “If necessary, I’m ready to fight again,” she says. The two former comrades with whom she now lives - both women of a similar age - nod in agreement.

Like thousands of others, these women were drawn to revolutionary politics because they saw in it an opportunity to challenge a patriarchal system that considered them inferior to men.

About a third of the PLA fighters were women.

Rekha was born into an upper caste Brahmin family as Tika Bastola. Her father, a retired Nepalese army soldier, was a communist. As a child, his ideas inspired her.
Rekha Sharma, a former Maoist fighter, now farms for a living on the outskirts of Kathmandu [Saif Khalid/Al Jazeera]

When the war began, the university student joined the Maoists’ ‘Kathmandu valley task force’ - many members of which would later be killed, tortured or ‘disappeared’.

She admired Mao Zedong, the Chinese communist leader from whom the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), also known as the UCPN (M), drew its inspiration. After several factions of the party reunited in May, the party was renamed the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre).

“An unjust state which wields weapons can be confronted only with weapons,” she says, her eyes still fixed on the distant mountains.

For many, the civil war - referred to as the People’s War by the Maoists - was a fight against discrimination and oppressive social hierarchies - whether based on caste, gender, wealth, ethnicity, religion or even region.

Rekha met her husband, a fellow fighter, during the war. But just 10 months after their marriage, he was arrested and ‘disappeared’. She blames the army, which is thought to have been behind most of the 1,400 suspected cases of enforced disappearances that took place during the conflict.
Rekha almost met the same fate.

She recalls one night in 2001, after the government had imposed a state of emergency, when the army raided her hideout in a busy Kathmandu alley.

With their hearts racing, she and a male friend pretended to be newlyweds enjoying a trip to the capital. The soldiers believed them.

Today, Rekha recalls the cruelty of the war, but also the camaraderie and love between the fighters.

“I am proud of my husband, he gave his life for the nation. He was a brave man,” she says.

She is still waiting to find out exactly what happened to him and the many others like him.

“Even if we have to search for another 50 years for the disappeared persons, we are prepared to do that,” she says.
THE TEACHER SOLDIER - “WE WILL LAUNCH ANOTHER REVOLUTION”

Hundreds of kilometres away from Rekha’s farm, in Ghorahi - one of the largest cities in Nepal’s midwestern region - Kesh Bahadur Batha Magar struggles to contain his excitement. He speaks animatedly when remembering the war, his stories jumping back and forth through time. But they all lead to the same point - for him, the fight is not over.

“We will launch another revolution, but it will not be like the last People's War,” he says.

His party, a breakaway Maoist group called the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), enjoys the support of many former Maoist fighters who believe that the mother party, the CPN (Maoist-Centre), made too many compromises after entering government in 2006.

Kesh Bahadur remembers an attack on a nearby military barracks that he participated in. It was 2001 and the group’s first attack on the army. At least 12 soldiers, including the company commander, were killed.
Kesh Bahadur Batha Magar says he felt forced to join the Maoists after he’d been framed for murder [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

“I was fortunate I did not die,” he reflects.

The last revolution was far from easy, he says. “Without continuous training, it was very hard work to make people ... ready for sacrifice.”

Now his breakaway party, led by Netra Bikram Chand, better known by his nom de guerre, Biplab, is organising similar training, and their rallies in cities and villages across Nepal are drawing large crowds.

Fidgeting, the 50-year-old former mathematics teacher explains what drove him to communism.

Unlike Rekha, who joined voluntarily, he says he was pushed into the war.

He was teaching in Rolpa, the cradle of the Maoist rebellion. The terrain, with its rugged, inaccessible mountain villages, and its ethnic Magar residents, who have a history of grievances against the government, suited the Maoist purpose.

Clashes between communists and activists from the ruling Nepali Congress were frequent there.

Kesh Bahadur says that when a local politician falsely accused him of murder, he was arrested. When he was released on bail, he gave up his teaching job and joined the Maoists.

He rose through the ranks of the PLA, eventually commanding around 1,000 fighters.
A poster by a breakaway Maoist group calls on people in Libang to mark the anniversary of the war [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

The Maoists famously started their rebellion with just two old guns. Kesh Bahadur was one of those responsible for ensuring that they became better equipped. “In the initial phases, I made the Sija gun and bombs,” he explains.

As the war progressed, he says all of the Magar villagers in Rolpa were suspected of being Maoists. Many of Kesh Bahadur’s students and fellow teachers felt compelled to join the war. Not all of them survived.

The midwestern districts of Dang, Rolpa, Rukum, Pyuthan and Bardiya, which had sizable populations of minority ethnic groups like Tharus, Magars, and Dalits - the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy - became Maoist strongholds.
Teachers, like Kesha Bahadur, who were respected by villagers, were well placed to propagate Maoist ideology and to train cadres.

At the height of the war, the Maoists had de facto control over two thirds of the country, where they formed a parallel government headed by Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai.

The war ended after a peace accord was signed in 2006. It allowed the Maoists to join the government and required the PLA fighters to submit to UN-monitored decommissioning.

With 19,000 other soldiers, Kesha Bahadur spent the next five years in military camps as the powers in Kathmandu deliberated over their future. When the PLA was finally disbanded, he rejected an offer to join the army.

“The integration was not my choice,” he says, explaining his decision.

In 2008, the Maoists won the country’s first Constituent Assembly elections, becoming Nepal’s ruling party.
Basic infrastructure, such as roads and transport facilities, are still lacking in Rolpa [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

In its first sitting, it scrapped the 240-year-old Shah monarchy.

The Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known by his nom de guerre, Prachanda, became the first elected prime minister of the republic. But he was forced to resign in 2009 over the sacking of the country’s army chief. Nearly two years later, the Maoists returned to power with Bhattarai becoming prime minister.

But ideological differences within the party tore it apart.

When the Constituent Assembly expired without a constitution in 2012, the Maoist party split into several factions. Recently, the major factions have reunited.

When the second Constituent Assembly promulgated a new constitution in 2015 - a key part of the Maoist agenda - Bhattarai quit the party. He has since launched a new party, Naya Shakti (New Force).
Kesha Bahadur believes the dream of creating a society that will benefit the poor and marginalised is far from being fulfilled.

“The constitution is promulgated but nothing ... [has] changed in the lives of the common people,” he reflects.

Government schools are under-resourced, health facilities are almost non-existent for the poor, and rural areas, where more than 70 percent of Nepalese live, have seen only negligible improvements in public infrastructure, he says.

Still, he does not believe the uprising was in vain. “The war enhanced the political consciousness of the people,” he says. “I feel proud of the war.”

*The Magar ethnic group is a majority in Rolpa district [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]*
THE SOUND OF THE REVOLUTION - “WE SANG PEOPLE’S SORROWS”

Perhaps no instrument beats closer to the hearts of Nepal’s hill people than the small drum known as Madal.

Early on, the Maoists recognised the importance of folk music in appealing to the masses.

Opposite the Maoist office in Libang, the administrative headquarters of Rolpa district, Sita Acharya sits on a raised platform in front of her mud and wood house. She has red vermillion on her forehead, smeared there by her mother to mark the full moon.

Libang, a town of about 20,000 on the banks of the tributary of the Rapti River and surrounded by mountains, was a military fortress during the war - a refuge for anyone fleeing the violence wrought on the villages. The Maoists, too, left it alone for the most part, since it was in a district that gave them shelter.

*Sita Acharya was part of the cultural wing of the Maoist party* [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]
Sita was 20 when she joined the war, leaving her one-year-old daughter, Lichun, behind with her parents. Her task was to go village to village with her group, playing songs and staging ‘song-plays’ that depicted the valour and sacrifices of the Maoists, as well as their dreams for a better future.

“The leaders told me it was easy to produce a leader, but it took special talents to become an artist,” she says.

It was the injustices she witnessed as a child - from the 30 years of royal dictatorship, that ended in 1990, to the confiscation of her father’s land - that inspired her to join the Maoists.

Like Rekha, Sita comes from a Brahmin family, but the poverty of those from the lower castes - along with the discrimination against women - troubled her.

She married a Magar man before joining the war. Inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages are rare today, but they were even rarer then. She became “less pure” in her parents eyes, she says, and her mother still refuses to eat food she has cooked.

“The leadership to fight against the injustice came from the Maoists. That’s why I joined them,” she explains, looking at the dilapidated Maoist office across the street.

As the war raged on, the need for propaganda that would resonate with the people grew greater.

“We turned whatever we saw in villages into songs. We sang of people’s experiences. Their sympathy for us rose since we were singing their sorrows,” she remembers. “Children used to beg us to let them join us.”

For 10 years, she saw her daughter only intermittently during ceasefires in the fighting. “A mother feels the pain the most when leaving her child. I didn’t leave my child out of choice,” she says.

“A lot of friends made much larger sacrifices. Some children had both their parents die in the war.”
She was reunited with her daughter after the peace process began in 2006. Lichun was 11. She is now 21, and while she shares her mother’s looks, she has little interest in politics. Her ambition is to study agriculture and get a government job.

Lichun doesn’t blame her parents for leaving her to fight. “If they left a comfortable life to fight in the jungles, then there must have been some noble cause behind it,” she reflects. “I am proud of them.”

But did the war bring about the change Sita fought for? She is unsure. She feels their leaders “kneeled and surrendered”, she says.

“People thought the war will bring total change, especially for the poor, who would be guaranteed food, shelter, health and employment,” says Sita, who is now a member of the central committee of another breakaway Maoist party headed by Mohan Baidya, who is known by his nom de guerre, Kiran.
Former Maoist fighters may have been divided among factions, but few seem to regret their role in the war. For as long as they were fighting, the hierarchies of class, caste, sex and ethnicity didn’t matter.

A DAUGHTER’S PAIN - “WE LOST OUR NEIGHBOURS AND OUR KIN”

When 37-year-old Shree Kumari Roka’s mother died, the only thing she left Shree of her father’s was his Khukuri, a sharp, curved knife.

Shree Kumari Roka says her father was killed by the Maoists [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

Shree breaks down as she removes it from a bag beneath her bed. It was another Khukuri, wielded, Shree says, by Maoists, that beheaded her father, a cadre of the Nepali Congress (NC) party, in 1997.

“But I never thought of revenge. If I had wanted revenge, I could have gotten Maoists arrested by reporting them to the armed forces. And the armed forces could have killed them,” she says as tears roll down her cheeks.
Shree says she worked with the people who killed her father and had normal relations with them.

Civilians suffered greatly during the war; caught in the crosshairs of the security forces and the Maoists. Rolpa suffered more than other districts as the rivalries between the Maoists and NC spiralled.

“We lost our neighbours and our kin,” she says. “We don’t want such conflict again. We want to live freely.”

After her father’s death, Shree moved to Libang. These days she is an NC district leader.

The party dominated Rolpa politics before the Maoists, and is now second to them in popularity in the district.

Political violence became frequent when the Maoist United People's Front (Samyukta Jana Morcha) challenged the NC after multi-party democracy was revived in 1990.

“Based on cases filed by NC supporters, police tortured, terrorised and killed some Front supporters,” Shree explains. And since the NC was identified with state power, their cadres and leaders became a target of Maoist attacks.

The violence continued throughout the war.

“The state, mainly the armed forces, used to go into villages and torture, kill, threaten to kill the family members of Maoist members, PLA fighters, and their supporters just on the basis of information from their spies,” she says.

Shree feels the victims are still ignored, and that the true extent of the war crimes committed remains hidden. “The rape victims have not made their cases public. Almost all such rape cases were committed by the armed forces,” she says.
“Victims have not come forward as justice is not guaranteed and there is the possibility of social exclusion if they speak out,” she explains.

She has urged the government, and her party, to do more for the victims, including providing free education for their children.

“Some ... [people] lost everything due to the conflict,” she reflects.

Did the war change the country for the better? Shree doesn’t think so.

“First, Maoists tried to win people’s hearts. If they failed, they used force, such as kidnapping or killing,” she says.

She believes that the Maoist leaders have been the only ones to benefit from the war, while the “colourful dreams” of their cadres about ending discrimination remain unfulfilled.

Many of Shree’s childhood friends joined the Maoists. She says there was a gulf between what the Maoists said they would do and what they actually did.
“Many things changed after the Maoist movement,” she reflects. “But it is not true that Maoist action alone decreased social discrimination. The rise in education is another factor.”

Her society has changed profoundly over the last 20 years, as has her life.

She now lives with her husband, who has returned after spending more than 10 years working in the Middle East. But jobs are still hard to come by in this nation of about 30 million, so he plans to return there soon - this time to Israel, where he hopes to find work on a farm.
Lautan Kumari Chaudhury’s husband was “disappeared” 14 years ago. She hopes one day to learn what happened to him [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

THE WIDOW - “WHAT HAPPENED TO MY HUSBAND?”

Lautan Kumari Chaudhary remembers the knock on her door. It was 3am on April 11, 2002, and three people had come looking for her husband in Mangalpur, their village in Bardiya district’s Rajapur.

“We were sleeping. Somebody called, 'Comrade! Open the door!' I opened the door. Three people - two were in army uniform - entered,” says Lautan, who, like her husband, belongs to the historically persecuted indigenous Tharu ethnic group.

Located on a dense delta created by the River Karnali and extending to the border with India in the south, Rajapur is predominantly populated by ethnic Tharu people. Until a year ago, the region could only be accessed by boat, but the government has
now built a bridge.

Landlessness has long been common among the Tharus and, before the war, many worked as bonded labourers for upper caste landlords.

“The Maoist war changed the landlord-labour relations. Tharus began to assert as Maoists raised their issues. Many of the Zamindars who exploited them fled the areas, selling their land,” explains local activist Bhagiram Chaudhary.

“They tied both hands of my husband and took him away,” Lautan remembers. “My [four-year-old] son woke up and started to cry.”

She never saw her husband again, and says he wasn’t a Maoist.

Two other men were also picked up from the neighbourhood that night. They, too, never returned.

At least 15 members of the Tharu community - including Bhagiram’s brother and sister-in-law - “disappeared” from the villages of Rajapur.

Bhagiram says the Tharus were “systematically targeted”.

Nationwide, nearly 1,400 people were “disappeared” during the war. According to the UN, more than 250 cases of enforced disappearances were reported in Bardiya district alone - the highest number in a single district.
Ram Kumar Bhandari says his father was “disappeared” by the army [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

Nearly 85 percent of those who “disappeared” in Bardiya were Tharus.

Lautan, like many other war widows, was forced to fend for herself and her son after her husband, until then the only breadwinner in their family, “disappeared”. She took up tailoring. Her son is now training to be a paramedic.

The security forces assured Lautan, then 19, that her husband would be returned after “normal inquiry”, but 14 years on, she has found no trace of him.

“Nothing has been found,” she says, nervously scratching at the wooden base of her sewing machine.

Lautan says she just wants closure.

“If my husband is alive they should bring him here. If he’s dead, they should show me where he is buried. They should show us his bones,” she says, wiping away her tears.
Ram Kumar Bhandari, whose father was “disappeared”, has travelled across the country, bringing together families of victims of atrocities committed by both sides in the war.

He says 90 percent of “disappearances” were carried out by the police and army.

Last year, the government established the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), beginning a long-delayed process of providing transitional justice.

But in April this year, when the two commissions finally began registering complaints from victims, Ram Kumar says some of those who had filed cases were threatened by the accused.
He believes the Maoists have “betrayed” the victims of war crimes by promoting security personnel suspected of involvement in enforced disappearances once they were in government.

A memorial gate for Krishna Sen Ichhuk has been erected in Ardhakhanchi, his ancestral village [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

That impression was further compounded when, in May of this year, the Maoists, led by Prachanda, prevailed upon the then government to provide amnesty to alleged perpetrators. The move has been criticised by human rights organisations.

“If the existing law is not amended, if there is no significant pressure from all sides, including the international community, then I am personally not much hopeful that justice will be served to conflict victims,” explains Rameshwar Nepal, the national director of Amnesty International Nepal.

So far, the government has provided compensation of $500,000 Nepali rupees
(around $4,705) to the affected families and scholarships to the children of the “disappeared”.

But today, relations between Tharus and people from the hills of Nepal, known as Pahadis, who have traditionally been better represented by the ruling elite, remain fraught.

In 2015, protests by Tharus who were dissatisfied with the country’s new constitution, in the district of Kailali, resulted in the deaths of eight police officers. In response, a Pahadi mob burned down dozens of Tharu houses, as security forces looked on. Thousands of Tharu men fled their villages fearing retaliation.

A community radio station run by Tharu people in Tikapur was burned down last September following anti-constitution protests [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

Ram Kumar says taking on the powerful has not been easy, and that he has faced intimidation from the security forces and the Maoists.
“I openly challenged them. I am not afraid to die. We have died many times,” he says.

“I know the perpetrator of my father’s disappearance, even the National Human Rights Commission named him. My father did not take up arms and was not an active member of the Maoists.”

Tara Bahadur Karki, a spokesperson for Nepal’s army, says: “The army has provided all the material it has concerning disappearances to TRC through the defence ministry.

“The army has helped fully to support TRC and the investigation of the disappeared from its side and will continue to do so.”

Traditional wall art by the Tharu community in Kailali district [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]
The hilly terrain of Rolpa district became the ground zero of the Maoist rebellion [Prabhat Jha/Al Jazeera]

THE STRATEGIST - “IF WE HAD NOT COMPROMISED, IT COULD HAVE ENDED VERY BADLY”

“Prachanda was [a] master tactician, the pragmatic politician, the charismatic but mysterious leader, the motivator-in-chief, the lead military planner – all rolled into one - of the Nepali revolution.” Prashant Jha in Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal.
The mild-mannered man sitting on the leather sofa in a blue suit and tie barely resembles the image of a feared and mysterious military leader. But that is what he once was.

Sixty-one-year-old Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who is better known by his nom de guerre, Prachanda, is the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) and the current prime minister of Nepal.

He led the Maoists during the war and, for decades, lived in hiding.


Now he explains his party’s change in tactics. “Struggle is necessary but the form of struggle should be changed in a peaceful and democratic way,” he says, smiling.

But 10 years after the war ended, the hopes of millions of Nepalese who rallied behind the Maoists, have given way to pessimism and distrust, as their demands for a more inclusive economic and political structure remain unmet.

Ethnic minorities, such as the Madhesi and Tharus, say the new constitution, passed in September, ignores their demands and that the Maoists have betrayed them.

But Prachanda defends his party’s position on the constitution. “The issue of constitution is republicanism, federalism and secularism and inclusive representation of the marginalised people; all these major issues have been addressed in the new constitution,” he says, adding that the constitution could still be amended to address the grievances of those dissatisfied with it.
In 2008, the Maoists, who dominated the first Constituent Assembly (CA), removed the monarchy in its first sitting and declared Nepal a secular republic. But since then the wheels of change seem to have stalled.

“The new democratic revolution was meant to smash feudalism and imperialism, but we could not completely smash feudalism,” Prachanda admits.

**The Maoist leader has been accused of compromising on a number of the party’s wartime demands. But, he says, “If we had not compromised, signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and entered electoral politics, the communist movement could have been sabotaged, or it could have ended very badly”.

The former guerrilla leader who once led a simple life in the hills of Nepal has been criticised for allegedly developing a taste for luxury in the years since the war.

His mansion in the upscale Lazimpat area of Kathmandu is guarded by commandos from the same army that for 10 years he fought.
Born into a lower middle class, upper caste Brahmin family in Kaski district, Prachanda had once toyed with the idea of joining the Royal Nepalese Army after completing his secondary education.

But, instead, he attended an agriculture college in Chitwan. There, he was influenced by the writings of Marx, Stalin and Mao.

He became a teacher, and like many of his comrades joined an underground communist movement that wanted to abolish Nepal’s repressive feudal structure.

In 1979, he left his teaching job and became a full-time political activist. Seven years later, the Communist Party of Nepal (Mashal), of which he was a member, launched an armed attack against the government. But with few military capabilities and little experience, it failed.

Kiran, the then leader of the party, resigned and nominated Prachanda as its new leader in 1989.

When Prachanda took over the reigns, the party was a marginal political player. But his organisational skills and revolutionary rhetoric helped to galvanise thousands of Nepalese, particularly those from minority ethnic groups, behind it.

“There was little understanding that all these ethnic and cultural groups were severely underrepresented in the state structure,” explains Aditya Adhikari, author of The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of the Maoist Revolution.

Adhikari says the Maoists exploited the historical grievances of ethnic minorities that traditional democratic parties had failed to acknowledge.

Inspired by Peru’s Shining Path guerrillas, the Maoists launched the war on February 13, 1996. They had just two guns at the time - rifles that had been supplied to Tibetan rebels by the CIA in 1961.

In 2012, Kiran told journalist and author Prashant Jha why he’d chosen Prachanda to replace him: “He was a young revolutionary talent. I recognised it.”
But post-war, Prachanda developed serious ideological differences with his political mentor Kiran, who left the party in 2012. The Maoist leader finally managed to bring other factions back in May of this year, when some splinter groups reunited under his leadership.

Heavily influenced by Chinese leader Mao Zedong, Prachanda advanced his own ideology, called Prachandapath, which was adopted as the official party line in 2001.

But his transition from leading a successful armed rebellion to the messy and often divisive politics of Kathmandu has been anything but smooth.

He became prime minister after the first post-war election in 2008, but his decision to sack the then army chief saw his tenure end abruptly the following year.

What many considered the two most urgent tasks facing the new government - settling the fate of thousands of Maoist combatants and writing a new constitution - seemed to take a back seat as Prachanda and the party became embroiled in one controversy after another.

In 2013, when the second post-war Constituent Assembly elections were held, the Maoists lost.

“If Prachanda had focused on trying to complete the peace process and then work to complete the constitution, it would have sealed his place in history,” says Prashant Jha.

“Their mistake was why did they open so many political fronts up. They picked the wrong battles. What was the reason to sack the army chief?” he asks.

The Maoists may be down but Prachanda believes they are not yet out.

“Implementation of the constitution and initiating the process of economic development is our top priority,” he says.
THE IDEOLOGUE - “NEPAL WILL BE THE MOST DEVELOPED COUNTRY IN SOUTH ASIA”

On February 4, 1996, Maoist leaders Baburam Bhattarai and Pampha Bhusal met Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in Kathmandu. They handed over a letter containing 40 demands and set February 17 as the deadline for the government to accept them or face war.

But four days before the deadline was to expire, the Maoists launched a series of attacks on police posts across Nepal, initiating the decade-long armed rebellion that was to follow.

“[The] Maoist party was a vehicle to wage war against the old feudal autocratic state,” explains Bhattarai, who was the Maoist party’s theorist and ideologue during the war, from his residence in the Lalitpur area of Kathmandu valley.

Baburam Bhattarai is a former prime minister and Maoist ideologue. He has since left the Maoist party and launched a new party [Saif Khalid/Al Jazeera]
Like many of his comrades, Bhattarai was deeply concerned about debilitating poverty, economic inequality and mass illiteracy in the country.

Two years into the war, Bhattarai wrote a paper - The politico-economic rationale of people’s war in Nepal - in which he criticised the country’s highly unequal land distribution and mass poverty.

The establishment of a new democratic socio-economic system and state, he wrote, was the goal of the war.

But did it achieve those goals?

“I think we achieved something and could not achieve some other things. So, in balance, I think it was a positive development in the history of Nepal,” Bhattarai reflects.

“With the passing of the new constitution through the Constituent Assembly and declaring the country a federal democratic republic, most of the political demands were fulfilled,” he explains, adding that “the economic part of the revolution is still to be completed.”

Bhattarai began to gravitate towards left wing politics after reading communist literature. It was a gradual process.

He was born in 1954, the same year as Prachanda, in Gorkha district, to a poor agricultural Brahmin family. Education was then mostly the preserve of the urban elite, but he was fortunate to be sent to a Christian missionary school.

A brilliant student, Bhattarai earned a scholarship to study architecture in the Indian city of Chandigarh. He completed his Masters in New Delhi, where he met his wife and future comrade – Hisila Yami.

But it was at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, where he completed his PhD in 1986, that he began to move towards Marxism.
His PhD thesis - The nature of underdevelopment and regional structures of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis – became a political and economic manifesto for the “People’s War”.

While in India, he formed the All India Nepalese Students’ Association.

In 1991, when Nepalese democracy was revived by King Birendra after street protests, he became the leader of Samyukta Jana Morcha – the overground front for the Maoist party.

Prachanda, then a mysterious figure, anchored the Maoist party’s military strategy. After war was declared, both moved to neighbouring India, only to return in the last phase of the conflict in 2004.

During the war he was also the Maoist party’s main interlocutor and a conduit to Kathmandu’s media.

Bhattarai believed the monarchy was the crux of the country’s problems. His public opposition to many of Prachanda’s ideas, such as opening communication with the monarchy during the war rather than forging an alliance with traditional democratic parties, did not go down well with the hardline faction of the party leadership.

In 2004, he was suspended from the party and put under house arrest, allegedly at the behest of Prachanda.
The following year, the Maoists suffered a huge military setback in Rukum district’s Khara village. The losses prompted Prachanda to make peace with Bhattarai.

In October 2005, Maoists met in Rolpa district’s Chunbang, where the party’s political objective was changed from forming a people’s republic to a democratic republic in line with what Bhattarai had been advocating.

Prachanda was a man of action while Bhattarai’s strength stemmed from his deep theoretical understanding of Nepal’s socio-economic situation. Together, they led one of the most successful revolutions of modern times.

“It was a relationship of cooperation and competition, a relationship in which both deeply resented each other’s qualities but recognised that they were incomplete separately,” wrote Prashant Jha.
Bhattarai was one of the key negotiators for the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord and it was under his prime ministership that the peace process - primarily the integration of the Maoist fighters - was finalised.

He served as finance minister in the first Maoist government, which was led by Prachanda.

When the country’s new constitution was passed under his chairmanship, he admitted that ethnic and indigenous minorities had been given a raw deal.

He has spoken out publicly in support of the agitation by the Madhesis, when most parties have either dithered or resorted to nationalistic rhetoric in response.

Bhattarai quit the Maoist party after the constitution was passed, stressing that the biggest challenge facing Nepal is economic prosperity.

“To bring about economic development ... the Maoist vehicle is not very appropriate given the national and international situation,” he explains, looking at a framed portrait of Lenin in his living room, which declares in Nepali: “Final victory will be ours.”

Bhattarai has formed a new party called Naya Shakti (New Force) that he believes will “embark on a path of fast economic development”.

“Though there are certain challenges right now, if we succeed in mobilising a large section of people and unite them under the banner of [an] alternative new political force, in a few decades Nepal will be the most developed country in South Asia,” Bhattarai says forcefully.

**THE CHRONICLER - “THE PEOPLE’S WAR WAS A DREAM THAT THE MAOISTS MADE A REALITY”**

At a roadside cafe in Kathmandu’s Chabahil area, Khagendra Sangroula sits alone at a table, smoking and sipping tea.
Sangroula is Nepal’s leading Marxist literary figure. His books, essays and columns have been widely read and he has received literary accolades.

“I was inspired by communism and began writing,” he explains.

“In the beginning I wrote about Dalits, the poor and backward,” he continues, the cafe’s makeshift tarpaulin roof flapping vigorously in the wind.

From the excesses of the monarchy during the Panchayat era to the revival of democracy in the 1990s and from the armed Maoist rebellion to the overthrow of the king in 2008 – Sangroula’s pen has documented it all.

He has written 14 books, including three novels that have told the tale of Nepal’s oppressive caste hierarchy.

He has also translated Marxist literature into Nepali, including the works of Mao, which inspired thousands of young Nepalese, particularly those from marginalised communities.

In his book, Prashant Jha explained how Prachanda used to say: “Dai (Brother), we grew up reading your work.”

Born in 1946, in the Panchthar district of eastern Nepal, Sangroula moved to Kathmandu in 1967 to pursue his studies. It was there that he was drawn towards anti-monarchy activism.
Khagendra Sangroula is Nepal’s leading Marxist literary figure. He has translated dozens of communist revolutionary novels into Nepali [Saif Khalid/Al Jazeera]

His interest in Marxism developed in the capital as he came into contact with other young leftists. Global events, such as the war in Vietnam and the experience of communism in Russia and China, helped to mould his perspectives.

He started working with Niranjan Govind Baidya, a senior communist party leader who also ran a bookshop in Kathmandu.

Sangroula’s first novel, Chetana Ko Pahilo Daak, (The call of first consciousness) which he wrote in 1971, dealt with the theme of communist ideology and revolution.

Since 1971, he has translated 30 books into Nepali. The first was a novel by Ngoc Nguyen set in Vietnam called The Village That Would Not Die.

Most of the books he has translated have been Russian and Chinese revolutionary novels that have played a role in propagating communist ideology in Nepal.
“Mao Zedong’s New Democracy was the holy book of Nepal’s communists,” he says, adding that Leninist and Maoist literature first came to Nepal - in the Hindi language - via India.

“The Chinese and Russian communist literatures were translated into Nepali much later,” explains the bespectacled septuagenarian writer.

Sangroula describes how a communist armed rebellion in India, called the Naxalite movement, influenced Nepal’s communists.

“KP Sharma Oli, the former prime minister, came from that movement of [Nepalese inspired by the Naxalites in] 1971,” he says.

His 1999 novel, Junkiriko Sangeet (Music of Fireflies), depicted relations between Dalits and upper caste Nepalese during the Panchayat era. It was praised in literary circles but wasn’t warmly received by the Maoists.

“Junkiriko Sangeet was on the plight of Dalits,” he explains.

But the Maoists felt that it gave too much credit to NGOs for helping the marginalised and oppressed.

“[It seems it was] written to make fun of Marxism, the communist party, class struggle, people’s resistance and revolution,” wrote Prachanda of the book.

But, Sangroula insists, the communists did not address the everyday issues facing the people, such as health, education and employment opportunities.

“They only talked about big political agendas. Communists want to capture the state and they think that everything will be solved after that,” he says with a smile.

But, he adds of the communist parties and their grassroots work, “they made people aware of their rights”.

Despite his close relations with many communist and Maoist leaders across generations, he hasn’t been hesitant in critiquing them.
“I never formally joined any party. I always worked from the side. That’s why I had the space to criticise the communists,” he explains.

“In some places they call me a friend of Baburam and Prachanda. They think I am also a Maoist,” he says, smiling.

But in his long career as a writer and activist, Sangroula has always been on the more moderate side - and has sometimes been attacked by Maoists for that.

“I never was extreme in my ideas, that’s probably why I have still survived as a writer,” the 70-year-old reflects.

Still, the Marxist author acknowledges the contribution of Maoists.

“A lot has changed,” he says. “The People’s War was a dream but the Maoists made it a reality.”

“Dalits, Tharus, Janajatis, women and Madhesis rose against the state for their rights, which they could have never imagined doing before.”

But, Sangroula believes the Maoists were coopted after coming to power.

“Maoist are no longer Maoists,” he concludes. “They are nationalists.”

THE END