Leftwing Extremism 2017:
Sparks from a Flailing Revolution

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Leftwing Extremism 2017:
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A trend of declining violence that started in 2015 has been used by the state to reaffirm that it is on the threshold of a splendid triumph on what used to be the most serious internal security challenge.

How is the LWE situation likely to evolve in the country in 2017? This has been analysed from the three important perspectives - state attempts to quell the extremist rebellion, the extremists' attempts to revive and reorganise their fight, and the aspirations of the people - providing a comprehensive account of how the LWE situation may unfold in 2017.

Shrinking presence of the left-wing extremists, their reduced ability to orchestrate attacks and produce dead bodies of civilians and security forces; and the state's ability to find support among the traditional recruitment base of the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) - all these are reasons for official optimism regarding the LWE situation in the country.

A trend of declining violence that started in 2015 has been used by the state to reaffirm that it is on the threshold of a splendid triumph on what used to be the most serious internal security challenge. These affirmations continue to be repeated by the governments in New Delhi and other states that are affected by the problem. And yet, the extremists do manage to carry out intermittent major as well as small scale attacks. Sizeable territory of the country remains under the control of the extremists and the support for the 'revolution' among the tribals and marginalised population in the affected states remain significant.

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The March of the State

The state (New Delhi as well as the governments in affected states) follows a multifarious approach to the LWE challenge. These consist of use of force, initiation and implementation of development schemes, perception management, and political activity in the regions liberated from the extremist control.

1. Under the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, however, use of force has gained pre-eminence. The approach is based on the premise that neutralising the top leadership of the CPI-Maoist would not only weaken the movement but may lead to its complete disintegration. Precedents in Andhra Pradesh (where success was derived by the neutralisation of several top leaders) and West Bengal (where the killing of the senior leader Kishenji led to a total collapse of the movement) form the foundation of such a policy that include: an increase in the deployment of central armed police forces (CAPFs), and effecting a paradigm shift that designates LWE as terrorism. There is little likelihood that an alternate to a predominantly force centric policy would be searched for.

2. Curious it may sound, the state would expect the Maoists to carry on with their violent campaign and use such Intermittent attacks by the CPI-Maoist as an alibi to continue to its force centric approach. Persistent failure in various aspects of counter-insurgency that include police modernisation, intelligence gathering mechanism, coordination between the central and state police forces, will allow the extremists to carry on some level of violence for considerable future. This will facilitate the official clamour for maintaining the LWE-affected status for districts and deployment of central forces that involve generous flow of finance from New Delhi to states.

3. Starting with the Salwa Judum experiment where the Chhattisgarh police supported a vigilante movement until it was dissolved by an order of the Supreme Court, various states have attempted to supplement police operations against the extremists by seeking support of the local people, dependence on the vigilante as well as irregular forces is likely to continue. In Chhattisgarh, the Salwa Judum has been regularised in the name of District Reserve Guards (DRG), who in the recent past have been credited with leading a large number of successful operations against the Maoists. Such
reliance on the irregular forces and vigilante groups, in the absence of police capacities, remains a critical necessity and hence, would continue, even amid the allegations of human rights violations.

4. Under the BJP government, the counter-Maoist operations have continued with less-than-usual focus on human rights violations. Overzealous police officials, especially in Chhattisgarh, in a bid to secure popular support, have used vigilante groups to persecute the activists, lawyers, media personnel in the affected areas. However, such actions have increasingly come under intense scrutiny at the national level requiring judicial intervention. As a result, accused police officials had to be transferred and stripped off their role in such operations. The state's continuing inclination to silence voices that highlight the plight of the tribals caught between the irresponsible and poorly led security forces on the one hand and the Maoists on the other will remain subject to pressures from intense activism. This may lead to some level of moderation in the force-centric COIN approach, albeit at a superficial level.

5. In spite of the drawbacks in training, command and control loopholes and problems of intelligence gathering, significant achievements have been secured by the security forces vis-a-vis the Maoists. Vast stretches of areas have been cleared and several infrastructural projects continue to be implemented due to the dedicated presence of the security forces. Development initiatives of the state in areas freed from LWE control remain key to the future success of the state. And yet, the abysmal quality of governance, lack of a committed bureaucracy and continuing schism between the local population and the bureaucracy will make centralised developmental initiatives attempts subject to tough challenges in 2017. Measures such as filling up posts of doctors and nurses in hospitals in the affected areas, filling up the vacant position in schools, providing road networks would just not be delayed by the threat of the extremists, but also by the lethargy and corrupt practices of the state bureaucracy.

II

Influence of the Extremists

Protagonists of the state would argue that the CPI-Maoist, in the 13th year of its existence, has outlived its utility. None of its actions have benefited the cause of the tribals it professes to be fighting for. At the very best, it has remained a mere hindrance to the development initiatives of the state. Much of this is true.
relevance and (ii) struggle for survival- would dominate the CPI-Maoist's action plan. In terms of details, these may translate into the following.

1. The outfit would attempt to mix defensive as well as offensive manoeuvres to preserve its cadres and inflict casualties on the adversary. Occasional bigger attacks would continue with an objective of reversing its declining fortunes. Much of its attacks, however, would remain low scale and would essentially target the state sympathisers within the tribal population. Killing of alleged police informers is likely to increase as a result.

2. History of LWE in general and that of the CPI-Maoist in particular has been marked by an ideological tussle between leaders suggesting a slow process of revolution with popular participation and those professing an instant revolution using armed cadres. Although the CPI-Maoist led by its general secretary Ganapathy more or less settled for the latter, the contestation between its political wing and its military wing over the pace of its war, trajectory of its violence, and the targets chosen continued. In its weakened state the CPI-Maoist is likely to override any such distinction and opt for a strategy that seeks to make a violent war its only path for redemption.

3. The quality of large attacks carried on the security forces is also likely to improve. In the past years the CPI-Maoist has fallen largely back on innovative techniques such as planting explosives inside the bodies of killed security forces, planting explosives on trees etc. to inflict casualties on the forces. Huge amount of explosives in single attacks have been used to overcome the resistance offered by mine proof vehicles. In recent attacks such as the one that took place in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district, explosives mounted on arrows were used. The CPI-Maoist has used the L and S-shaped hilly areas to carry out attacks in the past. The same technique is now being used to its advantage in flat terrains as well.

4. Programmes for consolidating support among its traditional base, i.e. the tribal population would remain a critical pillar for the CPI-Maoist's attempts of maintaining its relevance. The outfit uses a carefully constructed strategy of communication, assisted largely by voluntary efforts, to deride the state and promote itself as the liberator of the marginalised class. Using the contemporary political developments in the country, especially the pro-market economic policies of successive governments as well as the surge in right wing politics as ideological underpinnings, it constantly calls for unity of purpose among the tribals, working class, trade unions and even sympathetic urban intelligentsia. Such efforts would continue and may even assume the form of greater emphasis on communication through electronic and international media. Developments such as human rights violations by the security forces, excesses committed by the vigilante forces, and
persecution of the NGO activists and journalists would form important contents of such communication.

5. Expanding the area under its influence, especially to overcome the challenges of shrinking dominance, would be a strategic objective for the CPI-Maoist. Narratives in the past have pointed at Maoist activities in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. Much of such efforts, in the short term, would be based on strategic requirements of finding hiding space as well as dividing the attention of the security forces. How do the states unfamiliar with the Maoist expansion techniques respond to such slow and essentially violence free attempts of finding influence would define the state's success against the extremists.

III
Aspirations of the affected populace

Even with a shrinking LWE presence, lives of tribals as well non-tribal population in the extremist affected areas continue to be affected. Aspirations of such people can be summed up in three following ways: to live without fear, for better governance, and recognition of their rights. However, such aspirations may continue to be affected in the following ways in 2017.

1. Amid the contestation between the state and the extremists to win over their trust, the tribal population remains subject to immense pressure. As pointed earlier, the CPI-Maoist will implement actions against the 'police informers' threatening, killing, maiming civilians. Grass root level politicians will be warned against any association with the state and non-compliance may lead to their killing by the extremists. Similarly, any association with the extremists, even if involuntary, will attract punishment from the state.

2. On the other hand, tribals as well as non-tribals can expect to benefit from a number of infrastructural and developmental schemes implemented by the state under protection provided by the security agencies. The scheduled completion of the bridge over Gurupriya river in Odisha's Malkanagiri district, a much delayed project, will connect villagers of more than 150 hamlets with the district headquarter. Road building projects in Chattisgarh may allow remote areas to access health and education facilities available in nearby towns.

3. Any hope for immediate redressal of grievances and fulfilment of the rights of the tribals may, however, be delayed by lethargic bureaucracy and systemic failures to fast track development in affected areas. While official narratives blame extremists for the delay of road building projects, albeit for some valid reasons, attempts at filling up posts of doctors, nurses, teachers in such
areas will continue to be affected amid some half-hearted measures to incentivize such postings. Moreover, the very nature of economic policy of the government in general and land acquisition policies in particular that result in displacement and lack of adequate compensation to affected people will continue to make tribals suspicious of the official moves.

4. Government’s attempts to win over the trust of the tribals on the one hand and its systemic attempts to prosecute NGOs, activists, and lawyers working for the affected tribals affected by excesses committed by the security forces will make the critical task of winning the hearts and minds of the tribals difficult. Similarly, extremist attempts to emerge as the liberator of the tribals and at the same time its violent actions against the alleged ‘police informers’ will make tribals lives vulnerable to a regime of immense fear and absolute lack of exercise of free will.

IV
Conclusion

The state will continue to gain comparative military upper hand over the extremists. However, the CPI-Maoist will not be completely decimated. Retreating extremists as a result of a force centric approach will lead to the creation of areas where the state exercises its control only through its security arm. It will, however, a temporary phase where the balance will be tilted in favour of the state.

Without adequate implementation of governance schemes whereby the population of these areas are won over, there will always be a danger of such areas relapsing into extremism as soon as the forces pull out.

About the author

Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director, Mantaraya, an independent research forum that seeks to make constructive contributions in the realm of strategy, innovation and alternatives.

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