

BRIEFING NOTE

Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex- Maoist combatants in Nepal

A participatory action research project with ex-PLA fighters in Nepal

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SUMMARY

From being the greatest stumbling block to finalising the peace process only a few years ago, the issue of what the Comprehensive Peace Agreement called the ‘Maoist army’ has now disappeared entirely from the political agenda. Four years ago the Maoist Party finally consented to the dissolution of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) after years of haggling with the other parties over the terms of that process. Today, the senior leaders of the (yet again) newly renamed Maoist Party appear extremely comfortable in the world of corruption and patronage that defines Nepali politics, their days in the hills during the ‘People’s War’ as much forgotten as the young men and women who fought it.

We were interested to know however what happened to the veterans of a conflict that scarred the nation, particularly since many of those veterans – often recruited as young teenagers – were now unemployed, stigmatised and unprepared for a world that valued the education they had missed over their years carrying a gun. To drive a participatory research exercise we trained a group of 12 ex-fighters from 6 districts to interview their ex-comrades about their lives today and the challenges they faced. When we asked the ex-PLA researchers what outcomes they would like to see from the project, they emphasised that they wanted a route to a public voice, to be able to be heard in their communities and the broader nation. To address their invisibility, we supported them to organise at local, regional and national levels, creating the ex-PLA National Network. As such, the project sought not only to understand what had happened to the ex-PLA, but to help them find a voice that they so clearly lacked.

The interviews with 241 ex-PLA fighters, made in 2014-15, paint a picture of how big a price many paid for their involvement with the 'People's War', despite a continuing commitment to the ideals of social justice for which they fought. While the majority of those met left the cantonments in 2012 with substantial cash payments to facilitate their 'voluntary retirement', others were 'disqualified' for having been recruited as minors while others left the cantonments early on Party orders or were never in the cantonments.

Reintegration: Social, economic and political

The idea of reintegration was challenged by the fact that only a minority of ex-combatants had returned to their original homes. Most had left lives of rural poverty and saw the Maoist movement as a route to challenging poverty and social exclusion in their communities. Few were willing to return to their original homes, due both to a lack of opportunities, because their political engagement had built far greater expectations, and because in many cases they faced extreme stigma. Only a quarter of those met had returned to their home communities, while most had either moved to urban areas or to 'new communities' – often close to cantonment sites - in which there was a significant presence of ex-PLA or other Maoist supporters. The stigmatisation that ex-PLA experience has a range of motivations, including having been labelled as 'disqualified', being linked to the behaviour of Maoist cadres during the conflict, and having left their community with great ambition and returning with no discernible social or political change having occurred. Women faced very particular challenges, with marriages made within the Maoist movement, often inter-caste or inter-ethnic, frowned upon by families and communities. More than this, ex-PLA women, having lived with nominal equality have to return to traditional expectations of a woman's domestic role in a rural area. To some extent the result of their moving away from their villages has been to duplicate the ongoing migration of Nepal's youth to urban centres in Nepal and often beyond to the Gulf.

For all, earning a livelihood was a challenge, not least because PLA cadres had largely been recruited as young teenagers and as a result had missed years of education and opportunities to develop skills and experience. Some of those who had received payments used this as capital to buy land, a house or start a small business, while others reported that they spent most of it on medical treatment. The vocational training received in the cantonments was perceived as being of such poor quality it was useless. The most common source (40%) of livelihood was a small business; 20% of ex-PLA were working on either their own or rented land, while 14% were doing daily labour, the latter indicating that a significant fraction was among the poorest of Nepalese. It is perhaps remarkable that so many ex-combatants have apparently achieved a level of livelihood comparable to other Nepalese, despite the huge challenges they faced. However, whilst the ex-PLA may be no poorer than their typical neighbour, their perception of the sacrifice they have made, and their resulting expectations, translate into extreme resentment at their present condition.

For the ex-PLA to be effectively integrated, they must be *politically integrated*, and see the Nepali state as theirs, as much any other citizen does. For the ex-PLA the process of demobilisation is widely seen as a surrender and great humiliation by the Maoist leadership, not least the denial of what was considered 'honourable' integration into the Nepal Army. Most ex-PLA have affirmed their commitment to what they fought for and many have joined one of the radical Maoist factions that have split from the mainstream party. While three-quarters of ex-PLA could foresee the future use of arms for political means, this was always seen as subject to Party discipline. As such, any

“Most PLA spent nearly a decade in war and they have not learned life skills. There is a problem because they have to learn all these skills now.”

“I was fully dedicated for 3-4 years but was tagged with the epithet ‘incapable’ at the last. It is the sad part. After being tagged incapable, I have lost self-confidence to talk anywhere; the tag pulls me back.”

After the party split I stayed silent and passive, but felt psychologically ill and didn't find a place to share my feelings. Now I feel relief that I found members with similar experiences and stories that make me smile, [...] It helped me reduce the stigma I faced, feeling that I am not alone and isolated."

future security threat from ex-PLA is currently constrained by the presence of the chains of command of the various Maoist Parties.

Ex-PLA as actors for peace

The mobilisation of this project to create the Ex-PLA National Network began from networks at the district level, built up to create a model for a regional and national structure that can serve to represent all ex-PLA. District groups seek to play a role as peace actors in their local communities, advancing their agenda through dialogue, direct meetings and the media. The first national assembly of ex-PLA representatives was held in Kailali in February 2015 and led to the adoption of a common national document. The activities of the district groups include both internal dialogue to provide solidarity and support to ex-combatants, and community dialogue that brings ex-PLA, community members and local officials together to resolve difference and build reconciliation, including at Local Peace Committee meetings. The aim at both local and national levels is for the ex-PLA Network to be an actor that can play a role in peacebuilding and creating a new post-conflict role for ex-combatants driving positive, peaceful change.

Conclusions

This study confirms that the process of demobilising the PLA was one led by the political imperatives of the leaders of dominant political parties, rather than the interests of the nation or ex-combatants themselves. As a result, there was no process of reintegration for ex-PLA leaving cantonments beyond cash payments. Almost half of those initially in the cantonment – and probably a greater fraction of those who had been associated in any way with the PLA – were not addressed in any way by the demobilisation. The greatest challenge to the process was and is the large gap between the expectations of ex-PLA and what they received on demobilisation.

Nepal is still seeking to deal with its violent past, not least through a long stalled and highly flawed transitional justice process. However, the principle lens through which the past is seen remains one of victims and perpetrators: since the ex-PLA see themselves as neither, they are marginalised from this. It is important that either dedicated processes are created to address the issues of ex-combatants or existing mechanisms – such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - seek to ensure that ex-PLA are not side-lined from them. Beyond this, there remains a need for ex-combatants and Nepalese more broadly to engage with their past, through non-institutional truth-telling processes: the experiences of the ex-PLA will be crucial to these.

In the light of the results of the study, the authors – in conjunction with ex-PLA peer researchers - make the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Economic integration

- *Civil society and authorities* to consider ex-PLA as an independent category of potential beneficiaries of livelihood and income generation programmes;

Social integration

- *Local authorities* in areas where large numbers of ex-PLA have settled to seek to promote inclusive community dialogues at the village, VDC and district levels, in which stigma and a lack of understanding between ex-PLA and others can be discussed and addressed;
- *National authorities* to consider formally withdrawing the description of the discharged PLA as *ayogya* (unqualified);

- *Civil society and local authorities* to consider the Ex-PLA National Network a partner in any work it does at community level around reconciliation and peacebuilding;
- *Civil society and local authorities* to consider ways in which female ex-combatants who face discrimination as a result of their gender and their engagement with the Maoist movement can challenge the disempowerment they have faced on their return. In particular, gender programmes to address the 'rolling back' of female empowerment seen in many communities since the end of the conflict;
- *Civil society* to seek to find routes to support ex-PLA who may be suffering mental illness or the impact of trauma as a result of their experiences during the conflict, and in particular those recruited into the PLA as minors;
- *Civil society and national and local authorities* to consider how existing and future programmes can help the thousands of ex-PLA who suffer from disability as a result of injuries received during the conflict, including considering the possibility of creating a national rehabilitation centre to support them;

Political integration

- *Local Peace Committees* to consider inviting ex-PLA representatives to attend meetings to ensure that their perspectives and interests are considered in any discussion that concern them;
- *National and local authorities and civil society* to acknowledge the Ex-PLA National Network as the legitimate representative of ex-PLA nationally and where possible to support them and consider them as partners in their activities;
- *National authorities* to consider ways in which the role played by PLA cadres in driving change in Nepal can be recognised. This could be – as suggested by the Network – through the distribution of a letter acknowledging their role in creating the republic, or through the consideration of the status of national martyrs to PLA who dies in the conflict;

Truth-telling and memory

- *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* to ensure that ex-PLA are invited to contribute to truth-telling in both public hearings and private testimony, including discussion of violations to which they were subject as minor ex-combatants;
- *Civil society* to promote informal truth-telling at the local level through memory work that can bring ex-PLA, victims of the Maoists and other community members together construct shared narratives of the past;
- *National and local authorities* to consider the creation of sites of memory that can serve as places where divergent memories of the conflict are negotiated to create common understanding for the future. These to include the perspectives of all actors involved, including the ex-PLA;
- *National authorities* to address the absence of discussion of the conflict from school textbooks. This to involve the broadest engagement with the range of views that exist, and to use the findings of the TRC as a basis for the development of educational materials;

The full report is available at: <http://www.simonrobins.com/Robins%20et%20al%20-%20Reintegration%20challenges%20of%20ex-Maoist%20combatants%20in%20Nepal.pdf>

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