

Damian Williams
New School of Social Research
Richard J Bernstein: 'Hannah Arendt'

An Arendtian Beginning: Nepal, 1996

In recent history, we have seen the birth of a democratic nation in Nepal, after years of war between Maoist revolutionaries and the prior Monarchic State. Of course, the war was violent, there remain questions on human rights abuses, and, there had been a significant loss of civilian lives during the process. Indeed, to the Maoist, war in Nepal was part of *their* struggle, in what they called the 'People's War'. The struggle was borne out of much more than mere dissatisfaction with the prior status quo. It was a *resistance to non-democratic* conditions within Nepali political life. The Maoist viewed democratic governance and citizen's rights as intrinsic to Nepali life. Of course, historically speaking, there had been no time before the Maoist struggle where Nepali life seemed all that democratic, nor did Nepali citizens ever enjoy any basic rights to speak of. Nevertheless, the Maoists saw such conditions as inextricably linked to Nepali political life. The claim that the Maoists made was that the prior status quo *had* to be brought to an end, and that the struggle to do so could require permanent revolution. That is, the struggle would not stop until success had been achieved, success being the formation of a new democratic state. Of course, the Maoists—being Maoists—were claiming to see the revolution to an end beyond democracy: to communist society. However, the tenets of communism have had very little to do with the Maoist revolution, as the outcome since is far more representative of a Federal Constitutional Democracy. Nevertheless, what the Maoist undertook, on behalf of all Nepali people, was to cause a severe departure from the past; to instigate a new state under new conditions and within a structure that is viable and sustainable. In light of Hannah Arendt's discussions on revolution, the beginnings of the Maoist Revolution are very interesting. Indeed,

they appear to be emblematic of the sort of ‘founding’ that was seen in the American Revolution. The Maoists had organized themselves, had given serious thought to the reasons behind their common plea, had sought to justify the demand for a change in the political order on a theoretical basis, through analytics taken from Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist thought, and, they had adopted a military strategy for bringing about the conditions which they demanded. They also had not separated themselves from the ‘people’. That is, it was not as though the Maoists were attempting to take over society via Maoist ideology. They knew that the Maoist ideology was not ubiquitous in Nepali society. Thus, as Maoists, they appealed to the ‘masses’ by pointing out the then present *undemocratic*, and impoverished conditions that *all* Nepali people lived in, save for the Monarch, certain privileged classes, and foreign financial interests. The Maoist appeal was to awaken sympathy for ongoing struggle against the then present conditions in Nepal. This struggle was revolutionary; indeed it *was* the birth of the Nepali Revolution. It bore all the hallmarks of revolution the Arendt describes, and it provides material for analysis in accord with Arendt’s exposition on *Revolution*. Why are the origins—or *beginnings*—of the revolution so interesting here? As Arendt points out, to venture in such revolution is to venture to entirely disrupt an entire way of life that in terms of history, seems to flow out of the past as does a long chain of ‘cause and effect’. This is no small feat. Arendt analyses revolutionary origins in terms of revolutionary success, and thus, the beginnings of the Nepali Revolution, and later the beginnings of the Democratic Republic of Nepal provide ample material for investigating the revolutionary phenomenon that Arendt speaks of. Therefore, in this work, I examine Arendt’s work on revolutionary beginnings and use it for an analysis of the Nepali Revolution’s origins. I take three key foundational documents of the Nepali Revolution and assess the character of its beginning in accord with Arendt’s discussions on beginnings. Of course, as with Arendt, I do

not refer to paltry notions of beginning, like ‘the beginning of a song,’ or ‘the beginning of a verse.’ By an *Arendtian* Beginning, I refer to the momentous: the beginnings of resistance to the old and the now-historic beginnings of a new political order. I find Arendt’s insights to be valuable in assessing the Nepali Revolution; and, I find the study of the Nepali Revolution gives insight into Arendt’s discussion on revolution and especially, revolutionary *beginnings*. Given that the foundational documents to which I refer have not yet been widely published, I have included them in an appendix to this work. These documents were sourced via the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) website, and can be found there as well, among other key documents relating to the Revolution.

I

In *On Revolution*, Arendt devotes seven sections to the notion of ‘beginning’—a moment in which longstanding, past political forms are disrupted by a *new*, emergent, and transformational collectivity of events that will come to be seen as foundational; so foundational that those who would partake in *that* new beginning may identify themselves as, and *will* be regarded as ‘founders’.¹ To Arendt, *beginnings* are foundational, absolute, uniquely human, and when revolutionary, inescapably violent. It is out of beginnings that all subsequent events will flow and remain distinct from *that* moment of beginning. When foundational, the task of founding a new order has been enacted, thereby establishing an authority distinct from the past, yet sufficient to convince the people to yield to, from out of the state of nature or out of under a previous regime.² In this instance, the people refer to the ‘collective’ or ‘multitude’ which stand in relation to an existent authority and who can resist such an authority—indeed to give action to establishing a political order anew through revolution. To Arendt, the task of beginning establishes absolutes anew; the ‘new beginning’ becomes the reference point in which outcomes

will be measured.³ Thus, the revolution can be measured by its adherence—or faith—to its origins, or, ‘beginning’. Arendt points out that prior to there being revolution the human capacity for beginning was “shrouded in mystery;”⁴ whereas now, and since the American and French Revolutions, such foundational, absolute-forming beginnings occur in “broad daylight to be witnessed by all who [are] present.”⁵ As such, Revolution is that “legendary hiatus between end and beginning, between a no-longer and a not yet.”⁶ That is, it is Revolution that gives end to the old and beginning to the new—indeed Revolution *is* beginning. In democratic terms, it is the collective that bears the power to instigate such an end and a beginning, and as such, it is Revolution that is as momentous as having the ability to entirely disrupt, or rupture the past from the future—to cause a break in historical time.⁷ Obviously, the ability to create anew is uniquely human; to bear witness to such a moment is to be exhilarated by this human capacity.⁸ However, this exhilaration is tempered by the sheer importance of the moment—the moment in which all is at stake, and, in which an oncoming, new political structure *could* be unstable and fragile.⁹ Here, Arendt impressively illustrates a perceptual observation of the moment in which a revolutionary beginning is occurring. That is, she practically explains ‘what it feels like’ when in the presence of a revolutionary beginning. Of course, Arendt speaks of a *legitimate* revolution, and as such, legitimacy is of chief importance for a beginning to be *that* beginning and for revolution to be *that* revolution rather than a minor uprising. A revolutionary beginning’s legitimacy can be measured by how representative it is of the collective in terms of its objectives and by the level of adherence to origins that can be seen in subsequent events borne out of the beginnings of revolution. That is, the quality of revolution can be assessed by its beginnings and subsequent adherence to the ethos of those beginnings. This sort of beginning isn’t the whimsical, precarious, and arbitrary event of the seemingly new, but is instead an event

reoccurring in the events that continuously flow out of. That is, if one saw it, they would know that it was it—indeed the moment is so violently juxtaposed to the past that it is in of itself inextricably linked to violence. The association between violence and beginnings is accounted for in the “legendary beginnings” out of antiquity (e.g., “Cain slew Abel”).¹⁰ As such, revolutionary beginnings are no different—violence is apparently assured or is natural to the event.

II

In 1996, after several attempts to achieve liberation from a monarch and to instigate the beginnings of a new Nepali Republic, Nepali Maoists initiated a revolution which resulted in decade-long war, but ultimately led to the King’s divestiture of powers, the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Accord, the adoption of an Interim Constitution, the establishment of a First and Second Constituent Assembly, and is now attempting to draft a Nepali Constitution. That is, this revolution brought about the end to 240-years of monarchic rule and established The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal—seemingly a *beginning* in Arendtian terms. Indeed, the beginnings of the revolution were legendary in of themselves. The United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) (“UCPNM”) had established what they believed to be a theoretical premise for initiating a ‘People’s War’, which was purportedly based in ‘Marxist-Leninist-Maoist’ thought.¹¹ Thereafter, they armed themselves, mobilized, and delivered a list of demands to the government, entitled the *40 Point Demand*, which of course meant war if were not met. Nine days later, the Maoists mass-distributed leaflets appealing to the Nepali people and initiated what is termed by outsiders as the Nepalese Civil War. The demands were peculiar if not remarkable. They were broadly categorized into three groups: nationality, people’s democracy, and livelihood. Regarding nationality, demands included abrogation of treaties with India; the

securitization and regulation of the border with India; that British military recruitment of Gurkha people cease; that Nepali workers be given priority over foreign capital; that foreign investment be removed from Nepali industry; that a customs policy be adopted in order to bring about Nepali self-reliance; that colonial culture such as “Hindi films” be banned; and, that the “invasion” of duplicitous NGOs be “stopped.”¹² In regards to people’s democracy, demands included the drafting of a constitution by elected representatives; that the monarchic privileges and powers cease; that military and police be brought under “people’s control;” that “repressive acts” be repealed; that political arrests and charges be withdrawn; that “repression and state-sponsored terror” cease; that cases of ‘disappeared persons’ while in police custody be investigated and that families be compensated; that the nation be secular; that discrimination against women ceases; that discrimination against the “downtrodden and backward” ceases; freedom of speech and press; scholarly freedom; regional discrimination be ended; and, that local government be “empowered and appropriately equipped.”¹³ Lastly, in regards to livelihood, demands included lands be confiscated from owners and be distributed to the “landless and homeless;” that the property of capitalists (or the wealthy) be confiscated and reinvested into Nepal; guaranteed employment for all; that a minimum wage be established; that the “homeless be rehabilitated;” that small farmers be forgiven of existent loans; that fertilizer and seed costs be lowered; that natural disaster relief be provided for victims; that healthcare and education be free; that “inflation be checked;” that “[d]rinking water, roads, and electricity” be provided to villagers; that domestic industry be protected; that “[c]orruption, smuggling, black marketing, bribery, and the practices of middlemen” ceases; and, that “[o]rphans, the disabled, the elderly and children should be duly honoured and protected.”¹⁴ The Maoists contended that the aforementioned demands were “inextricably linked with the Nepali nation and the life of the

people;”¹⁵ that is, that basic rights, separation of powers, freedom from foreign manipulation and intervention, and that freedom from corruption and crime were fundamental and essential to Nepali citizens—needs that are justifiable and reasonable. As such, the demand is ever so politely closed with the threat: “[i]f there are no positive indications towards this from the government . . . we would like to inform you that we will be forced to adopt the path of armed struggle against the existing state power.”¹⁶ These are the origins of the Nepali Revolution—the beginning of the beginning: the rupture between the past and the future at that now-historical moment.

III

Clearly, the Maoists were not going at this in a random or chaotic manner. From documentary evidence, it appears as though they set out on a course that was—to them at least—as a finely tuned and coordinated plan with bases in theory and justified by the lens in which *they* saw history. Indeed, it was as though the Maoists considered *themselves* to be founders and were setting about to establish absolutes—principles in which all subsequent events would be later judged by. The military mobilization and implementation of delivery of the *40 Point Demand* to government weren’t theatrics, but were instead thought to be justified in theory. In the *Plan for the Historic Initiation of the People’s War*, the UCPNM set out such theoretical bases. First, it is made clear from the outset that the Party identified with Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism; as such the Party pledged an “eternal commitment to the theory of People’s War developed by Mao as the universal and invincible Marxist theory of war.”¹⁷ Thus, the core premise for instigating the revolution is stated:

This plan would be based on the aim of completing the new democratic revolution after the destruction of feudalism and imperialism, then immediately moving towards socialism, and, by way of cultural revolutions

based on the theory of continuous revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, marching to communism - the golden future of the whole humanity. We are firm that it is a crime against the proletariat and the general masses of the people to start an armed struggle without the firm conviction of carrying it out to the end. We shall never allow this struggle to become a mere instrument for introducing partial reforms in the condition of the people, or terminating in a simple compromise by exerting pressure on the reactionary classes. Thus, our armed struggle will be totally free of all sorts of petty bourgeois, narrow nationalist, religion-communal and casteist illusions.¹⁸

It was this ideology that spurred the revolution and gave rise to the birth of a *democratic* Nepali Republic, and, by all appearances, the UCPNM now partakes in the democratic processes within Nepal *as though* the nation will evolve into socialism and communism thereafter. Nevertheless, in accords with the credo above, the Maoists were setting about in establishing the foundational, the absolute, which would be carried out by insurgency, but would result in a new political structure. With such fine-tuned precision in their planning, and a commitment to continuing on in war until success, it would appear that the Maoists had accounted for a structure that would be stable and durable—indeed faith to the theoretical origins in Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist thought. As such, the Maoists stipulate that “everything is an illusion except state power,”¹⁹ and therefore, “the party expresses its firm commitment to wage relentless struggle against all forms of deviationist thoughts and trends including economism, reformism, and anarchism.”²⁰ Further, the Maoists did not perceive the revolution to be a uniquely Nepali occurrence; they saw this revolution as part of the world-wide struggle to break with the past: to permanently subvert the feudal and imperialist past.²¹ The *new* beginning that the Party set out to establish wasn’t local or regional, but part of the greater effort to “create a New International.”²² The Party also pledged to conduct “inner-party struggle” as a means of self-regulating, in a “dialectical manner according to the principle of universality of contradictions.”²³ These structures within structures of progressing, implementing, and self-regulating appear to be of such a nature where Arendt

discusses the *arbitrariness* of beginnings. It is as though the Maoists were incorporating manners that would equip them for dealing with every contingency while partaking in, or engaging in the establishment of a new order—to them, so momentous as the establishment of a new *world* order. In accord with their ideological tradition, the Maoists also identify their conscripts: “the labouring masses, particularly the poor peasants.”²⁴ These are the justifications for the Maoists’ actions to bring about the revolutionary beginning—the foundational and even legendary beginnings that Arendt speaks of. In no way does the preparation for the event seem whimsical; the Maoists spoke with certainty as though they *knew* success would be assured.

IV

What I find most interesting of the Maoists’ foundational documents is the *Appeal of the C.P.N. (Maoist) to the People*. In this document, the Maoists present an open letter to the collective, with the salutation: “Dear masses of the people.”²⁵ Here, the then present conditions are put forth to the people. Given that this bore such an effect on the Nepali people, it is difficult to simply declare this propagandist literature. Clearly, the conditions that are described resonated with many of the ‘masses’, as the revolution was ultimately successful. The Maoists point out that Nepal was then the second poorest nation in the world and that the economy was in the hands of a “dozen families of the foreign compradors and bureaucratic capitalists;”²⁶ that the burden of the nation had fallen to the poorest 90%²⁷; that there was widespread discrimination of women as a product of the cultural hegemony leftover from colonial subjugation²⁸; that the state had provided for the degradation of Nepali values in its efforts to create automaton slaves to the state²⁹; that the state was conducting warfare against its own people by providing for plunder for foreigners and enslavement of citizens who are deprived of any means to ‘fix’ what is before them—indeed, “reform has now become a mere chimera.”³⁰

As such, the people are told that the only means to escape what had been the way of Nepali life for so long was to wage “just war against this unjust war”³¹ for the origins of the Nepali people’s plight were “sown in Nepalese history [a] long time back.”³² Here, the Maoists endeavored to speak on the behalf of the entire Nepalese society. This wasn’t an appeal for reform, but instead one to establish a democratic state anew—to disrupt the then present state of Nepali life with the course that it was on, given the societal inequity within Nepal. It is interesting to note that the Maoist appeal speaks nothing of establishing the new but rather to point out the conditions which necessarily should be brought to an end. However, key to this appeal and to the changes to come is that the subsequent revolutionary actions of the Maoists were indeed enacted on behalf of the *people*; indeed, the legitimacy of the revolution is dependent upon it being representative of the people’s wishes. Yet this appeal does not appear to play to the inflaming of anti-monarch sentiment or to even more extremist ideology. Rather it is calm, concerted pleas to have the people observe their *own* current condition. And, this too was not an attempt to indoctrinate the people. Again, the Maoists simply make observation of the then current conditions in Nepal through the lens of the ‘masses’. It is here that the revolutionaries describe what would become the past—indeed that which the revolution *ought to* bring to an end. It is as though this is now an artifact of the time immediately prior to the hiatus—the revolution—between ending and new beginning. Now, it is not as though present-day Nepal is entirely free of foreign influence, poverty, or remnants of a colonial past. However, it is fundamental that Nepal is now a democratic political order, whereby voting and elections are routinely carried out. Indeed, on account of the Carter Center, the Nepalese have gotten good at it, with a historic recent vote establishing the Second Constituent Assembly, with a turnout of greater than 70% and additionally by most accounts, fair and unencumbered electoral proceedings. Further, present-

day Nepal is a far cry from some communist society *par excellence*. The nation faces trade deficits, infrastructural problems, and rising food costs just as most poor nations do.

Nevertheless, the state's powers now reside with the people. That is, State Power—the only truism according to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought is now at least thought to be of the people, and is executed through democratic means. Thus, if the historic endings somewhat bear the origins of the oncoming, new beginning, this appeal to the people—made on February 13, 1996, marked the very end of the past, as the war was initiated that very day. There and for another decade, the revolutionary hiatus—indeed violent—had occurred in Nepal.

V

The above expositions on the Maoists' foundational documents were used for purposes of identifying such a 'beginning' that Arendt discusses. As Arendt makes clear, and I believe rightly so, to speak of a beginning—or at least of the sort of beginning of the birth of a democratic nation—is in no way to touch upon an idea that is trivial or uninteresting. That is, the ramifications of there being a *new* beginning are of a legendary, historic nature in of themselves. To knowingly bring about the ending of a prior *order*—a political way of life shared by an unwittingly co-dependent and participative collective—and to venture to establish society anew is no minor feat at all; to the contrary, it is to confront the past and to separate it from *its* future. It is to attempt to deviate the course of 'mankind' as it were. Where bringing about an end to the past, and to establish the foundational anew, and via revolution, and to prompt the establishment of a new political order predicated on bestowing greater freedoms upon the *people*, that moment is of the very true revolutionary beginnings that Arendt speaks of. Of course, as an outsider, one can only assess the successfulness of the revolution in hindsight. That is, Arendt has given me a sense of what to look for when observing a political order that is disjointed from the previous

political order. In the case of the Nepal Revolution, and by virtue of the fact that the last 15 years plus have been historic and unprecedented in Nepali 'history', I believe that this is *that* revolution that Arendt speaks of, and is very much akin to the events surrounding the American Revolution. The signed are there by pondering the revolution's beginnings. These beginnings, to me, are foundational, have carried with them certain absolutist principles, are indicative of a uniquely human and very impressive capacity to rupture a *way* of life with *its* future, were brought about in revolution, and indeed, this revolution is strongly associated with violence—both by the revolutionaries and the previous state order. Arendt illustrates how this sort of events can seemingly break apart historical time; that is, if one perceives historical time as a continuous flow out of an earlier beginning, when that continuous flow is violently brought to an end and that a new foundation is established and will certainly produce an *alternative* flow of historical time out of, it is as though there has been a disruption in historical time. Of course, this bears implications on concepts of historical time, but in this instance—in the case of Nepal—this break in time appears to have happened. After all, prior to 2006, the people of the Nepali nation had been subject to monarch, empire, or colonial oppressor; never in Nepal's history did state power reside in Nepal, and, the historical record of Nepal in regards to any political structure goes back to the 4th century A.D. Hence, to put it bluntly, the Nepali Revolution was truly a *big* deal. So, why does the work of Arendt matter in this instance? Arendt keenly observed the origins of revolution in terms of their ramification for those who would partake in the process of founding a new political structure. Arendt took notice of a revolution's beginnings—its origins—and used such origins to assess the quality of the entire revolution. She ties the legitimacy of a revolution (if it weren't legitimate it wouldn't really be a revolution) to its faithfulness to its origins, and, in the case of Nepal, we see what appears to be a strong example of precisely what Arendt was

talking about. Today's Nepal is indeed that of a very young democracy, and to think that there haven't been problems would be wrong. It is true that the leaders of the revolution have since all had their share at leading the country, and, deadlock in key institutions like the Nepali Congress and both the failed and new Constituent Assemblies. Poverty is still a serious issue in the nation, and there is ample evidence that the governments of India and China are vying for greater influence in the nation. However, what is so very new now is that all these matters are being compromised upon, mitigated upon, or even argued upon through *voting*. That is, the nation has undertaken to set its future path *democratically*. If one's political ideology sets humankind's 'golden moment' in democracy, then Nepal has achieved this. This is not to say that in Nepal, there is the communal council system that Arendt speaks of; but, it is to say that the state power is in the hands of the people and is verifiably so. The nation now operates as a democratic nation *should*, and therefore, the Nepali revolution is of exceptional analytic quality for students of Arendt, politics, and revolution. Further, the revolution and subsequent events is exemplar of the more modern revolutionary phenomenon, and of course, the Nepali revolution is unique from the American and French Revolutions in myriad ways. Nevertheless, to speak of the beginnings of a democratic Nepal is to speak of an *Arendtian* beginning; the revolution was of the quality reminiscent of the 'legendary hiatus' between ending and beginning. That is, in very recent history, we have seen another example of revolution that Arendt describes and we may now witness the beginnings of a new, secular political order.

¹ Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, Pg. 196-197

² Id. at Pg. 28-29

³ Id. at Pg. 196-197

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Id. at Pg. 197-198

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Id. at Pg. 215

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Id. at Pg. 10

¹¹ Theoretical Premises for the Historic Initiation of the People's War (1995)

¹² 40 Point Demand (1996)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Theoretical Premises for the Historic Initiation of the People's War

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Appeal of the C.P.N. (Maoist) to the People (1996)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.