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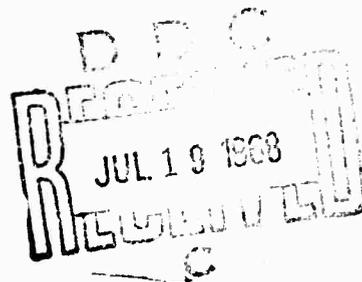
Summary Technical Report

HIMALAYAN BORDER COUNTRIES PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

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SYNOPSIS

The technical summary report, "The Defense and Security System in Sikkim" forms part of a ten-chapter study on the politics of Sikkim by the author under the Himalayan Border Countries Project research program. Field work was conducted in Sikkim in 1965 and 1966 with the assistance of the Institute of International Studies and in 1968 under the RPA contract.

According to the 1950 Indo-Sikkimese Treaty, responsibility for the defense and security of Sikkim is vested in the Government of India. Since 1959, however, the Sikkim Government has been attempting to expand its capacity to contribute to the defense of the State, with at best the reluctant cooperation of New Delhi. The first part of this paper consists of an analysis of the internal and external factors behind these developments.

The latter section of the paper deals with the role of the Sino-Indian dispute in the defense and security of Sikkim. The question of external subversion, primarily from extremist Communist elements in India and Nepal, is also considered.

"THE DEFENSE AND SECURITY SYSTEM IN SIKKIM"

by

Leo E. Rose

Defense and Security System

Shortly after regaining independence in 1947, India assumed the responsibility for the defense of Sikkim that had previously been a British prerogative. It was not until mid-1949, however, that a small Indian army detachment was finally stationed in Sikkim on a continuing basis, and this was in response to internal disorders within the State rather than to an external threat. The 1950 Indo-Sikkimese Treaty formalized India's responsibility for the defense of Sikkim and, furthermore, provided New Delhi with the sole authority to determine the size and the location of Indian military forces in that State.

In an address to the Indian Parliament on 6 December, 1950--i.e., shortly after the Communist regime in China had commenced a military campaign against Tibet--Prime Minister Nehru stated unequivocally that India would regard an attack on Nepal, Sikkim or Bhutan as an attack against India and would come to the defense of these states. Similar statements have been repeated periodically by high Indian officials, most specifically with reference to Sikkim during Prime Minister Nehru's visit to Gangtok in April 1952.

Despite these assurances from New Delhi, the Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet in 1951 and the establishment later of a substantial military encampment at Phari, in the immediate vicinity of the Sikkim border, did not engender much of a response from India. Very little was done between 1950 and 1959 to enhance India's defense capacity in Sikkim. The few significant exceptions, such as the road construction projects to the Nathu La and the Jelep La on the border, only got underway toward the latter part of the decade. Moreover, these were given a relatively low priority in the first two Five-Year Plans--and this in the face of intensive Chinese road construction programs to the north of the Himalaya. No attempt was even made to establish check posts near the border passes except at the two major access routes from Tibet through which most of the trade and traffic passed. The only police checkpost for northern Sikkim, for instance, was at Chungthang, which is closer to Gangtok than to the border in the Lachen and Lachung valley areas.

The unexpected and sudden deterioration in Sino-Indian relations in 1959, therefore, found India in a comparatively disadvantageous position vis-a-vis China, in Sikkim as elsewhere along the Himalayan border. The Indian and Sikkimese governments moved as rapidly as possible thereafter to improve the situation on this vulnerable section of the frontier, and with considerable success. Primary emphasis was placed on the development of communications, and the tempo of the road construction program was greatly accelerated.

The then Crown Prince of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal, visited New Delhi in October 1959 to discuss defense questions with the Indian government. One result of these consultations was the decision to entrust security arrangements along the Sikkim-Tibet border directly to the Indian Army, and

to expand the size of the Indian military establishment in Sikkim substantially.¹ Military encampments and supply bases are now scattered throughout the country, particularly in the northern and northeastern border areas and along the vital lines of communications up the Tista river valley from Siliguri to Nathu La and from Kalimpong to Jelep La. It is probable that the largest commitment of troops and supplies in the entire hill frontier region is in Sikkim and Darjeeling district, an indication of India's determination to defend this area with all the strength at its command.

As defense is solely the responsibility of the Indian government under the 1950 Treaty, Sikkim's participation in the security system along its own border has been necessarily minimal. The check posts in the vicinity of the border had been manned entirely by the Sikkimese police until 1960, but subsequently they have shared this duty with Indian Army units under the direct jurisdiction of the Indian commander in the area. As of 1959, the only regular Sikkimese military force was the Sikkim Guard, at that time a company-strength unit traditionally recruited from the Bhutia/Lepcha community. The Sikkim State Police, which then numbered slightly under 300 men, was supplemented in the northern Sikkim border area by the small, ill-trained "levy police" in Lachen and Lachung. The Intelligence Branch of the Sikkim police consisted of one Inspector and five Constables, at a time when infiltration by Chinese agents was a chronic problem.²

Even before India's dispute with China had reached serious proportions, the Sikkim Darbar had expressed its interest in expanding the Sikkimese role in defense and security provisions,³ but had not been given much of a hearing in New Delhi. With the sudden increase in the demands made upon the Indian Army after 1960, however, the Indian government found the proposal more attractive. Crown Prince Palden Thondup visited New Delhi in November 1960 for talks with Nehru and External Affairs Ministry

¹It should be remembered in this respect that, for its size, Sikkim makes a major contribution to the Indian Army. Several thousand Sikkimese have been enlisted in the regular army, including the famous Gurkha Battalions, and in the Assam Rifles or special frontier police units. In proportion of servicemen to population, Sikkim is certainly the equivalent of any Indian state. The Chogyal, Palden Thondup Namgyal, has held the honorary rank of Major-General in the Indian Army since his coronation in 1965. He had previously had the honorary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel conferred on him while he was still the Crown Prince.

²Sikkim Council Proceedings, May 14, 1959.

³In a reference to the Sikkimese plan for the establishment of a paramilitary force, Prime Minister Nehru told Parliament on 19 April, 1961, that this was an "old proposal." How old was not made clear, but from the context it would appear that the subject had first been broached with the Indian government several years earlier.

officials, and formally suggested the creation of a battalion-strength militia in Sikkim. He claimed shortly thereafter that the Indian government had given its approval "in principle" to his proposal, although he admitted that details regarding implementation were still to be finalized.⁴

A political furor erupted almost immediately in Sikkim when the Darbar's proposal to New Delhi was made public. Political factions divided into two clearly-defined camps in the debate that raged for several months. The pro-Palace Sikkim National Party and most Bhutia political leaders demanded the creation of a home guard or militia that would be organized and trained by members of the Sikkim Guard and/or Sikkimese ex-Servicemen, under the direct command of the Sikkim government. Indian Army control over these para-military units would thus have been exercised through the Sikkim Darbar rather than directly.

The opposition-oriented political parties, the Sikkim State Congress and the Sikkim National Congress, were strongly opposed to the Darbar's plan. Apparently, the parties feared that any home guard system under the control of the Palace might be used against the opposition in a political crisis. The Nepali Sikkimese also suspected that a militia organized and trained by the Sikkim Guard would discriminate in favor of Lepchas and Bhutias and against the Nepali community. The critics of the proposal tended to oppose the very concept of a home guard or militia, and preferred to have the matter dropped entirely. If the Sikkimese and Indian authorities insisted upon the creation of a para-military unit, the opposition leaders were determined that it would be organized, trained, and commanded by Indian Army officers, and thus isolated from any substantial role in local Sikkimese politics.

After an initial commitment to the raising of a militia battalion in Sikkim, the Indian government wavered in its support of the program. Presumably, this was due both to the intensity of domestic Sikkimese opposition⁵ and to questions raised in the Indian Parliament and press concerning the long-term significance of this proposal. The vacillation on the part of New Delhi was clearly evident in the first half of 1961. In January of that year, Chogyal Tashi Nangyal made one of his rare trips to the Indian capital for discussions with the Government of India. He told newsmen there that India had accepted the principle of "our association with the defence of Sikkim," although it was still to be determined whether this would take the form of a militia or "Territorial Army."⁶ Three months

⁴The New York Times, 11 December, 1960, 28:2.

⁵However, some high Sikkimese officials maintain that the opposition within Sikkim to the militia had been encouraged by the Indian Political Officer, Apu Pant.

⁶The National Herald, (Lucknow), November 4, 1962, 5:4

later, however, Prime Minister Nehru informed the Indian Parliament that the Sikkim Darbar's proposal was still "under consideration." He assured one member, moreover, that any Sikkimese militia would have to be raised, officered and trained by the Indian Army as there were no Sikkimese officers available to undertake this task. Nehru also expressed a preference for the term home guard (i.e., Lok Sahayak Sena) rather than militia in describing the proposed para-military unit.⁷

In view of the basic disagreement between the different political factions in Sikkim and the Government of India's uncertainty over the militia issue, it was finally decided in mid-1962 to shelve the entire program, at least temporarily, in favor of an expansion of the Sikkim Guards. It was agreed that an additional company of the Sikkim Guards would be raised, and that training and arms would be supplied by India. However, the Indian authorities apparently had second thought even on this question,⁸ and wanted to limit the size of the Guards to one company. But by this time recruitment had already started for the second company, and what emerged eventually was a single company that was twice the usual size.

An Indian Army training mission has supervised the organization and training of the Sikkim Guard. India has also supplied a limited amount of arms, but according to Sikkimese sources it has been necessary to supplement these with arms acquired through Sikkimese resources. The cost of maintaining the Sikkim Guard is borne entirely by the Sikkim government.⁹ Command positions within the Guard are divided between Indians and Sikkimese,

⁷Asian Recorder, VII:20 (May 14-20, 1961), pp. 3950-1.

⁸The Government of India, according to a knowledgeable Sikkimese source, at one point even questioned the legitimacy of the existing Sikkim Guard unit. The Darbar pointed out that Sikkim had always had an armed force and that this had been accepted by the British and Indian authorities. About three years back, the Indian Political Officer even boycotted the presentation of the colors ceremony of the Sikkim Guards as a sign of his displeasure, and other Indians in Sikkim were instructed not to attend. This policy was not maintained by his successor, however, and the 1967 ceremony was well-attended by the Indians in Gangtok.

⁹The budget for the Sikkim Guards in 1967/68 is Rs. 800,000 (\$115,000), all of which is met from the normal (i.e., non-development) budget. Sikkim Council Proceedings, 18 August, 1967.

with a Lt. Colonel of the Indian Army as the Commanding Officer.¹⁰ Until recently, the Indian government had shown some reluctance to accept Sikkim Guard personnel for the Indian Army officer training program, but this policy has now been modified. Three Sikkimese have been enrolled at the National Defence Academy in India and more will be in the near future.¹¹ Furthermore, several Sikkimese serving in Indian army units have received officer training and a sufficient number of retired Sikkimese Junior Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers with a similar background are available for Sikkim Guard service.

The traditional policy under which recruitment into the Sikkim Guards was restricted to the Bhutia/Lepcha community has been revised and now all Sikkim subjects are eligible on an equal basis. According to one Sikkimese source, approximately half of the personnel of the Guards is now Nepali Sikkimese.¹² The Sikkim Guard is not under the command of the Indian Army nor is it used as a security force on the border. In times of emergency, however, such as during the border firings in September 1967, the Guards are available for defense purposes--presumably under the command of the Indian Army commander in the area.

Despite the expansion of the Sikkim Guard, the Sikkim government would still like to organize a home guard unit. In the context of the Sino-Indian hostilities in the fall of 1962, the Darbar renewed its efforts to gain New Delhi's agreement to this program. Crown Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal was

¹⁰The first Indian commanding officer of the Sikkim Guard held the rank of major. The Sikkim government requested the appointment of a Lt. Colonel as his successor, but the Indian Army decided to send a Captain instead. Annoyed with this, the Sikkim government wrote saying that it was not necessary to send any commanding officer as it planned to appoint a retired Indian Colonel to this post. The Indian government then applied the clause of the 1950 Treaty banning the employment of foreigners by Sikkim to forestall the appointment of the Indian Colonel, but did send a Lt. Colonel as commanding officer.

¹¹A Sikkim Government Notice was published in February 1968 announcing that "seats have been reserved with the assistance of the Government of India to train officers for the Sikkim Guards at the National Defence Academy, Khadakwaslat, India in the 3 year course commencing in July, 1968." Sikkim, II:16 (March 5, 1968) p. 3.

¹²According to Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, discriminatory recruitment for the Sikkim Guard had ended at the time land revenue assessments were equalized between Bhutia/Lepchas and Nepali Sikkimese. He explained that part of the justification of the lower land revenue rates for Bhutia/Lepchas had been based upon their obligations to service in the Sikkim Guards. (Interview, Calcutta, 29 January, 1968)

reported to have told newsmen on November 3, 1962, that a "National Volunteer's Rifle" unit would be formed shortly with the assistance of the Indian government,¹³ but this also proved abortive. During the Indo-Pak crisis in the fall of 1965, the Sikkim government again approached New Delhi on the issue, and was again rejected.¹⁴ The war, and the Chinese ultimatum on the Sikkim border defenses, however, provided the Sikkim Darbar with the opportunity to establish some sort of substitute for the home guard. The government ordered the appointment of "Vigilance Squads" throughout Sikkim to meet the threat of Chinese aggression.

In its instructions to district-level officials, the Secretariat defined the functions of the Vigilance Squads in the following terms:

1. to serve as the eyes and ears of the government and to cooperate wholeheartedly with government officials;
2. to report the movement of "strangers or persons of doubtful character" to the nearest police station or official;
3. to counteract all rumors or propaganda "calculated to create panic in the minds of the people";
4. to prevent "conversation and gossip" that might be beneficial to the enemy;
5. to cooperate with the government in checking black marketing and profiteering;
6. to cooperate with government officials and civil defense arrangements in case of air attack or fire;
7. "But the most important function...will be to guard the vital installations like a water reservoir, pipeline, power house, roads and bridges so that the enemies may not be able to disrupt these vital installations."¹⁵

¹³The National Herald (Lucknow), November 4, 1962, 5:4.

¹⁴At a meeting of the Sikkim People's Consultative Committee on August 15, 1965, it was revealed that the Darbar was again in correspondence with the Government of India on the establishment of a home guard. Kanchenjangha, (Nepali monthly from Gangtok), 1 September, 1965

¹⁵Sikkim Civil Defense News, I:3 (September 23, 1965)

According to reports, Vigilance Squads were organized in virtually every bazaar and in many village Block areas under the supervision of the District Officers. In the process, civil defense arrangements were removed from the jurisdiction of the Civil Defence Sub-Committee of the party-dominated Sikkim People's Consultative Committee, where it had been placed following the 1962 border war, and were now delegated to a newly-created Civil Defence Commissioner within the Sikkim Secretariat. The District Officers were designated as Civil Defence Officers in their respective areas, and were given authority over all civil defense arrangements including the Vigilance Squads. In bazaars and district headquarters, the Vigilance Squads consisted of a number of wardens who were assisted in their wards by volunteer groups with specific assignments--first aid, fire-fighting, welfare, etc. Such an elaborate structure was not considered necessary in the villages, where usually several Block Mandals (headmen) in an area were brought together into a single Vigilance Squad.

The easing of the tension on the Sikkim-Tibet border following the Indo-Pak ceasefire in 1965 did not bring to a halt the government's efforts to organize Vigilance Squads. Indeed, the Civil Defence Commissioner, M. M. Rasaily, emphasized that the Darbar viewed these committees as permanent bodies with continuing functions. He told a meeting at Geyzing in Western Sikkim that:

It is not because there is any danger of an attack on our borders by the enemy that we are going ahead with Civil Defence works, but because we want to see that the people in the village are forever prepared for any emergency like burglary or fire or quarrels amongst the villagers or giving first aid whenever accidents occur. It is for their benefit and to help them solve their problems in a methodical way that the Government is taking such pains to organize these vigilance squads even in the villages and remote areas.¹⁶

Thus, while the Darbar was frustrated in its efforts to organize a home guard, it was able to create an alternate body which could serve some of the purposes of a para-military unit from its point of view. And it was able to accomplish this without arousing serious opposition or criticism within Sikkim. This was due, presumably, to the tense conditions under which the Vigilance Squads were organized and to the fact that Sikkimese from all communities were equally involved in their formation and operations.

It is probably wrong to interpret the interest that the Sikkim Darbar has displayed in the creation of some kind of local para-military unit as a step in the direction of the modification of existing defense and security arrangements with India, and even less as an indication of Sikkim's determination to assume these responsibilities itself. Throughout the

¹⁶Ibid.

difficult and dangerous period of Sino-Indian hostility, Chogyal Palden Thondup has repeatedly stressed in the clearest terms possible that he has no serious objections to this aspect of Indo-Sikkimese relations, and there is no reason to assume that he was not being entirely frank in making these statements.

To the Darbar, therefore, a home guard or militia would be useful primarily for internal security purposes. Given the belligerent stance of the Chinese in recent years and the deterioration in the political situation in Darjeeling district of West Bengal, internal security might well become an increasingly difficult problem in Sikkim. Neither the Indian Army nor the Sikkim Guard or police are trained to handle such situations, and it would seem obvious that a new institutional arrangement is required. There is, furthermore, reason to expect that the home guard would not now meet the same kind of opposition from the political parties that it faced in 1961, particularly if it was made clear from the very beginning that all communities would be encouraged to participate in the program on an equal basis as is now the case with the Sikkim Guard.

SIKKIM AND THE SINO-INDIAN DISPUTE

The Sino-Indian dispute over the Himalayan border was already well advanced before the Sikkim-Tibet boundary emerged as one center of controversy. Indeed, viewed from the strictly legal and historical perspective, there is little substance to the dispute in this area, which is the only section of the Himalayan frontier that was both formally delimited by treaty and demarcated on the ground. The 1890 Convention between the British Government of India and the Ch'ing rulers of China included the following provision:

The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nepal territory.¹⁷

In another provision of this treaty, China recognized the British protectorate over Sikkim, and agreed that "except through and with the permission of the British Government neither the Ruler of the State nor any of its

¹⁷Rana Satya Paul, Op. cit. Appendix No. 4, pp. 496-7

officers shall have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country."¹⁸

On several occasions since 1950, the Chinese Communist regime has reaffirmed their acceptance of the 1890 Convention, including the Sikkim-Tibet boundary. As late as December 26, 1959, in a note to the Indian Government, Peking stated that: "...the boundary between China and Sikkim has long been formally delimited and there is neither any discrepancy between the maps nor any disputes in practice."¹⁹ The Chinese have usually been more evasive, however, on the question of whether the Indian Government, as the successor to the British, is the paramount authority in Sikkim recognized in the 1890 Convention. Prior to 1960, Chinese statements implied a recognition of the Indian protectorate over Sikkim, but were never completely explicit on this subject. As long as relations between the two governments were friendly, New Delhi was not excessively concerned with this as on several occasions, including the 1954 Sino-Indian Treaty on Tibet, China recognized the Indian government's de facto status as the successor to British Government of India.

These Chinese reassurances, both explicit and implicit, seemingly should have excluded the emergence of a dispute over the Sikkim-Tibet border. Obviously this has not been the case, however, as the incidents on the Sikkim border since 1962 have clearly demonstrated. What is it that makes the Sikkim situation critical? In strategic terms the routes from the Chumbi valley through Sikkim and Darjeeling district are the shortest and, from the topographical viewpoint, the easiest between Tibet and the Gangetic plains. The passes on this section of the border are low--in Himalayan terms--and often not impassably snowbound during the winter months. Once the border passes have been crossed, the Tista river valley provides a comparatively easy access route to the plains, and one in which there is a well-developed communication network. Furthermore, on reaching the plains of West Bengal, a Chinese force would be only a few miles from the East Pakistan border where, under existing circumstances, it might will receive a friendly welcome and support. Once this had been accomplished, the Chinese would have cut off Bhutan, Assam and the hill areas surrounding the Brahmaputra valley--not to mention Burma--from the rest of India. It

¹⁸loc. cit.

¹⁹Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged between the Governments of India and China, White Paper No. III. 1963, p. 77.

is with this contingency in mind, presumably, that Indian defense plans for the eastern sector of the frontier place primary emphasis upon Sikkim and relegate Bhutan and NEFA to an important but subsidiary status.

While a full-scale Chinese invasion and conquest of India via Sikkim or for that matter any other access route, seems beyond the realm of possibility under present conditions, this does not exclude a limited Chinese military venture, similar to that launched in 1962, in which Sikkim would be the primary locus of activity. This would have limited political and military objectives in mind--perhaps support for a communist revolutionary base or for tribal-based rebellions in eastern India. Obviously, the governments of India and Sikkim cannot operate on the assumption that such a move is beyond China's physical capacity; and certainly few would now argue that the concept of "peaceful coexistence" or opposition to "big power chauvinism" would deter Peking if the political situation seemed auspicious and China's interests could be promoted thereby.

Furthermore, in some respects Sikkim is as vulnerable politically as it is militarily, another factor that might encourage Peking to focus some attention upon this region. Sikkim's long and difficult border with Chinese-occupied Tibet is perhaps the lesser danger in this instance, as infiltration by Chinese or Tibetan communist agents could probably be controlled by the Sikkimese and Indian authorities with relative ease. Far more serious is the infiltration and subversion potential from Darjeeling district and eastern Nepal. The Darjeeling tea estate labor force, largely Nepali with close ties to the Nepali community in Sikkim has long been under strong communist influence. In recent years, this had been counterbalanced to some extent by unions affiliated with the Congress and the Praja Socialist parties, supported by one faction of the Gurkha League, the principal Nepali political body in the Darjeeling area. But political developments in West Bengal since the 1967 general elections have enabled the "pro-Peking" Communist Party of India (Marxist)--the CPI(M)--to expand its influence within Darjeeling district.

To make the situation even more explosive, the local leadership in the areas adjacent to Darjeeling constitute the most intransigently extremist element in the CPI(M). This was evident in the Communist-directed rebellion of Santal tribes-people in the Naxalbari area of Darjeeling district in mid-1967. Naxalbari is located in Siliguri sub-district, to the south and southwest of Darjeeling, and is the channel for India's vital communications to Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam. The incident caused a crisis in the CPI(M)'s relationship with other members of the West Bengal "United Front" coalition of non-Congress parties. The CPI(M) Executive Committee reluctantly agreed to reprimand their local cadres in Naxalbari for their precipitous activities. The latter, however, refused to backtrack on their stated aim to establish a revolutionary base--referred to as a "Yenan"--and eventually set up a parallel organization. In arguing their case within the Party, the dissident

faction reportedly admitted to Maoist inspiration and claimed that China had promised to support their revolutionary endeavors.²⁰

If Government of India allegations as well as non-official reports are correct, the CPI(M) dissidents had direct contact with Chinese agents in Jhapa district of eastern Nepal and in East Pakistan, both of which have common borders with Naxalbari. Direct access to the Chinese in Tibet would be possible--although not easy on a continuous basis--through the eastern Nepal hill districts inhabited by the autonomy-minded Limbu community. We can presume that Naxalbari would be an eminently satisfactory area for revolutionary activity from Peking's point of view, as trouble there could undermine India's defense position throughout the entire eastern Himalaya.

Obviously, the Naxalbari incidents were of the gravest importance to the Indian, Sikkimese, and Bhutani governments. Sikkim's relative isolation from Communist political activity is unlikely to continue unless Communist--and particularly CPI(M)--influence in Darjeeling, Naxalbari and Sigiuri is successfully contained or neutralized. Sikkim is thus dangerously exposed both politically and militarily. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the Sikkim Darbar is considering several alternatives to its present relationship with India. And indeed, future developments in West Bengal are likely to influence the course of events in Sikkim as much as any other single factor.

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It has been reported that the Naxalbari uprising had been approved by the state-level CPI(M) leadership prior to the 1967 general elections, and scheduled to commence after the elections in which the Congress Party had been expected to be returned to power. The defeat of the Congress and the success of the opposition parties in forging a coalition government persuaded the CPI(M) leadership that a change in tactics was necessary. The local Party workers in Naxalbari, however, refused to cancel or even to postpone the anti-government movement, even though the CPI(M) was now part of that government. According to Indian authorities at the central level, the dissident faction in the party was acting under Chinese instruction in this instance. A member of the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi, who later became persona non grata in India, allegedly met with the CPI(M) dissidents in Calcutta prior to their decision to reject the policy of the Party's state-level leadership.

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 CHOGYAL PALDEN THONDUP NAMGYAL
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