

WHAT IS BEHIND PM OLI'S MOVE TO CALL FOR SNAP POLLS?

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K.P. Sharma Oli

The year 2020 was planned as the 'Visit Nepal Year' by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli. Supported by a good flow of remittances and robust forex reserves, Nepal was looking forward to make the most out of the year. It expected to capitalise on the tourism sector and planned to declare itself as a Himalayan power with a brand new global think tank meeting called 'Sagarmatha Samvaad'. At the end, however, COVID-19 and a political crisis within the ruling Nepal Communist Party prompted Mr. Oli to take an unscripted path. Why did Prime Minister Oli dissolve Parliament when the House had two more years to serve?

One of the main issues was the growing dissatisfaction over Mr. Oli's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drew relentless criticism from his party colleagues, especially from stalwart leaders in the central committee and the standing committee. Together, these committees work like the polit bureau of a typical communist party.

The COVID-19 factor

One of the first to criticise the Nepal government's handling of COVID-19 was Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'. Mr. Prachanda raised strong criticism of the government and mentioned the need to investigate reported irregularities in his Parliament speeches. He kept reminding the country of the need to have a wider discussion on COVID-19 even during the vote and discussion on the Kalapani dispute in Parliament.

PM Oli hit back at his critics on the COVID-19 issue in his own style and cited the "southern border" of Nepal — a synonym for India — as the reason for the increasing COVID-19 count. His critics pointed at a hint of scandal in the health sector because of the government's allegedly non-transparent purchases to deal with the pandemic requirements. Nepal is yet to zero in on a viable vaccine as a result of the disorder in this crucial matter.

As COVID-19 infections increased in Nepal, Mr. Prachanda kept up his attack on the Prime Minister. Mr. Oli responded by resorting to diversionary tactics. He repeatedly raked up the 'Indian hand' issue, and even went to the extent of claiming that the existence of the "real" Ayodhya is inside Nepalese territory.

Sensing an opportunity, the critics in the standing committee of the party, led by Mr. Prachanda and former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, urged Mr. Oli to agree to the "one man, one post" formula. Under this, Prime Minister Oli would cease to be a co-chair of the party and give organisational control to the other co-chair, Mr. Prachanda. Both the leaders held around a dozen meetings on this issue, which, however, failed to reach any consensus. In the face of a continued deadlock, the standing committee, with its block of pro-Prachanda members, repeatedly summoned the PM to explain the government's functioning, but Mr. Oli, on more than one occasion, skipped such consultations.

Hunger for power

“The breakdown in the political dialogue within the Nepal Communist Party is largely because of Mr. Oli’s hunger for power,” said Swarnim Wagle, who chairs the Kathmandu-based Institute for Integrated Development Studies. “It’s a suicidal move for PM Oli to call for election as there is no scope for such a move under the Constitution. At least eight writ petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court already and there is no way that he can win a case in the court.”

At the end, Mr. Oli failed the test set up by powerful members within the party, such as Mr. Prachanda, which led to his lack of majority in the parliamentary party of the NCP. He has, therefore, acted to avert a no-confidence motion that was being mooted by some of his colleagues. Mr. Oli made the first move and has succeeded with help from the President. But for the success of his “coup”, he also requires support from the judiciary and parts of the NCP. The coming days will determine if Mr. Oli will pass the biggest test of his career.

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