

Oli's challenge

The appointment of K P Oli as Prime Minister on Thursday, three months after the completion of Parliament elections, is expected to enable a stable government in Nepal. The Left alliance, including Oli's own party, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist, and ally, the CPN-Maoist Centre, had won a total of 174 seats in the 275-member Parliament. Oli's elevation to the PM's office was delayed only because the Election Commission had waited for elections to the upper house to conclude before declaring the final results. The Oli-led CPN-UML with 121 seats finished short of a simple majority and is dependent on the Maoists to stay in office. Party leaders had announced before the elections that the two parties would merge to form a united communist party, which hasn't happened yet. There are ideological and leadership issues that need to be settled before the merger can take place. The stability of the government will depend on the two parties working together.

Oli's immediate challenge is the implementation of the Constitution, which is increasingly contested by many groups. He will need to build and consolidate a consensus among various sections of the society on key provisions including the republican character of the country and the relations between the Centre and provinces. This is essential to contain the discontent among those who disagree with the new Constitution, essential to rebuild Nepal. The political instability in Nepal since the bloody civil war ended in 2006 had much to do with the failure of parties to negotiate differences and arrive at a consensual middle path. Institutional promises like that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to ensure justice to war victims have floundered because major political parties differ on their objectives. Politicisation of the judiciary and widespread corruption have triggered public unrest and mobilisation. Restoring public confidence in institutions and rebuilding them could prove to be more challenging than winning elections.

Oli's success in the November elections was credited to the anti-India rhetoric in his campaign. He grew in stature during 2015-16, when he, then the PM, identified with the national sentiment, which blamed New Delhi for the blockade on the India-Nepal border. As PM, he will now need to build bridges with India. Geography, religion, political history and culture tie Nepal to India, which no amount of Chinese aid can replace. Oli needs to balance Kathmandu's ties with New Delhi and Beijing instead of tilting to one side or playing one against the other. On its part, India seems keen on engaging with the new government. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's goodwill visit earlier this month indicates its resolve to respect Nepal's mandate. Oli, a practical politician, should be able to read the signs.

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