

Next Door Nepal: Breakthrough and challenge

At long last, K P Oli, chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), has taken over as prime minister, the 11th in as many years. President Bidhya Devi Bhandari was visibly considerate towards Oli, her long-time boss in the party: Not only did she administer the oath of office and secrecy even before he was elected leader of the CPN-UML parliamentary party, she also nominated three “expert” members, minutes after they were recommended by the new PM to the upper house of parliament. She had ignored the names recommended by the outgoing prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress, more than two weeks earlier.

A delegation led by Jitjung Basnet, chairman of the youth front of the Nepali Congress, launched a sarcastic protest against the president by presenting her with a copy of the constitution. Bhandari is Oli’s favourite for a second term, for which election is due in a month’s time. But whether she will retain the position of the head of state depends on how Oli manages the factions within his party.

As a precondition for the left unification and creation of the Communist Party of Nepal, the UML and Maoists have agreed that the post of president and the deputy speaker will go to the UML, while those of the vice president and speaker will come to the Maoists. Similarly, the new cabinet will have seven members from the Maoist side and 11 from the UML, with the former pocketing at least two important ministries — home and foreign affairs.

However, despite the unification of the UML and Maoists, and the government formation having moved forward substantially, the latter’s durability is under doubt. The crucial issue of the political principle or ideology that will be acceptable to the two parties that stood on opposite sides of the decade-long insurgency led by the Maoists that ended in April 2006, has yet to be settled.

In the meantime, Dahal will do his best to influence the government to have the war-time human rights abuse cases against him and his party comrades withdrawn. This will make the Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigating such cases worthless, which will clearly flout the letter and spirit of the constitution as well as the peace process. This is a compromise without which Oli cannot survive for long. So, the future of the government will be dictated by how much the Maoists, the junior partner in the cabinet, assert themselves over the constitution.

However, the formation of a legitimate government in Nepal under the new constitution in itself is being seen as a major breakthrough and key international stakeholders, including immediate neighbours, have gone the extra mile to appease Oli. Guo Yezhou, vice minister and member of the Communist Party of China, who was in Nepal when Oli took office, asserted that Nepal’s strategic significance has increased and that political parties should join hands to provide political stability. Clearly, China, happy with a friendly regime’s takeover, is also worried about political fragmentation. This despite the fact that it does not have to worry much given India’s diminishing clout.

Oli, in his first interview after becoming prime minister to the South China Morning Post, said he would award the \$2.5 billion-contract for the Budhi Gandaki hydro project to the Chinese company, Ghezouaba, that the previous government had annulled. He also said that he would take forward the trade and transit agreement that he had signed with China in April 2016, as the then PM.

Oli also seems to be contemplating terminating Gorkha recruitment in the Indian Army. Nepal under Oli no doubt, is as shaky as any of the previous 11 governments since 2006. However, Oli is unlikely to tilt towards India, notwithstanding the olive branch Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has

extended since the election results.

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