

NEPAL, A CRUCIBLE OF FRAGILE COALITIONS

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'No government formed since the dawn of democracy in Nepal, in 1951, has survived its full term' | Photo Credit: ANI

In a short span of time since being in power from December 25, 2022, [Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'](#), supremo of the Maoist Centre (MC), has had to face a vote of confidence twice — on January 10, 2023 and again on March 20. Though it would seem unusual, it is not an unexpected happening given the state of disarray contemporary Nepali politics is in after the general election in November 2022.

As in the earlier three general elections, the November 2022 election too resulted in a hung Parliament, where the Nepali Congress (NC), the Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) and the MC were placed first, second and third, respectively, in the House of Representatives. The smaller parties and independents have a combined strength of 76 seats.

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The NC-led five-party ruling alliance (formed in July 2021 with the aim of checking the rise of K.P. Oli and his party, the UML) consolidated further with a pre-poll alliance, thus gaining in the elections in two ways. This camp scored a majority, falling short by only two seats, in the 275-member House; the net result is that each of the alliance partners gained more than what they could have achieved in their individual capacity. But when this alliance was about to form a government, things crumbled, which was not unexpected. In the first instance, Sher Bahadur Deuba, President of the NC, did not keep his word in giving 'Prachanda' prominence as head of the post-election government. He relied on Mr. Oli's false assurance to back the NC's plan B, i.e., invoke Article 76(3) of the Constitution that has a provision for the formation of a minority government by the largest party in Parliament.

In the second instance, 'Prachanda' has a track record of being a leader who shifts stands for the sake of power, an example being his move from being a lead actor of a radical/progressive/pro-identity group to admission into the NC-UML-led conservative camp in 2015, at a critical time of Constitution making. There was also a break up of the alliance with the UML in 2016, and again in 2021 (after sensing that Mr. Oli was not honouring an agreement to hand over premiership in his favour) to team up with the NC. There was also a pre-poll alliance with the UML in the 2017 general election despite his party finding a place in the Deuba-led cabinet.

The ambition of 'Prachanda' to become the first Prime Minister in a power-sharing arrangement by rotation of premiership was fulfilled by the UML; consequently, a new seven-party coalition government was formed. This lasted for only two months, which was not unexpected because of the incompatibility within the Prachanda-Oli team.

An ambitious 'Prachanda' had to govern under the shadow of a hawkish Mr. Oli, whose will prevailed in even the distribution of cabinet portfolios (the Prime Minister's party did not get strategic portfolios such as home, finance, and foreign affairs). The UML, with 78 seats in the House, dominated the MC with 32 seats. Fringe coalition partners took sides with Mr. Oli. Surrounded by UML-men in strategic posts such as speaker of the House, chair of the National Assembly, chief justice of the Supreme Court, and even the heads of all 12 constitutional commissions (auxiliary government), Prime Minister 'Prachanda' was close to being a toothless tiger. To counter the UML's high-handedness in state affairs, 'Prachanda' used the election of President to escape, for which he had to breach an earlier agreement to support the UML's candidate.

In a confidence vote in support of 'Prachanda' on January 10, 2023, the NC indicated that it was aligned with the MC's game-plan which, in retrospective, was the first step in damage control, kept it out of power despite being the largest party in the federal Parliament and also with four out of seven provincial Assemblies.

The post of the President of the republic of Nepal has transformed itself to become lucrative. Both Ram Baran Yadav, the first President and former General Secretary of the NC, and his successor, Vidya Devi Bhandari, the former Vice-Chair of the UML, enjoyed power beyond the ceremonial role assigned to the head of state in a parliamentary democracy. There is much evidence to show the President blocking Cabinet decisions on account of the Prime Minister being from a different political affiliation.

'Prachanda' wanted to retain a seven-party coalition government while choosing a person of his choice for presidency — which eventually went to the NC leader, Ram Chandra Poudel. But by withdrawing from the government on February 27, 2023, the UML was seen to have overreacted, paving the way for a change in political equations.

There is also another factor. [Nepal's power politics](#) are not free from the influence of geo-politics. [China's intent is to ensure the return](#) of a Left alliance/government in Nepal so that the Himalayan state moves from a network under the Belt and Road Initiative to become a part of the Global Security Initiative (that was put forth by Chinese President Xi Jinping). The United States and India are aware of the impact of such a possibility in the Asia-Pacific Strategy. It is with reason that a number of high-ranking U.S. officials have been visiting Nepal. The visit by India's Foreign Secretary V.M. Kwatra to Nepal in the second week of March 2023 has had an impact as well.

A 'Prachanda'-led 10-party ruling coalition is in the making. But the question will arise about its survival and longevity. Here, a statement by 'Prachanda' about facing a confidence vote for the second time is noteworthy. When UML lawmakers felt that 'Prachanda' might need to face another confidence vote within the next two months, Mr. Oli said, "We have not promised to never cooperate with the NC." In response, 'Prachanda', while recalling his contributions in making Mr. Oli the Prime Minister twice (in November 2015 and February 2018), and Mr. Oli's support for his election as the Prime Minister in December 2022, said it was the UML that needed to be reminded of reciprocity one more time in the future

This highlights Nepal's past experiences and experiments. No government formed since the dawn of democracy in Nepal, in 1951, has survived its full term. Even the one-party majority

government lasted for 18 months in 1959-1960, and for three years in 1991-1994 and 1999-2002. It has been bad in the case of coalition governments, especially the ones led by the third largest party. It is no exaggeration to say that the average life of a coalition government in Nepal is nine months, and a 'Prachanda'-led coalition government is unlikely to be an exception.

For the sake of a stable government, the architect of the new Constitution in 2015 worked on making a no-confidence motion a complex and complicated process. It could not be entertained in the first two years of the government formation (if it happens any time after two years of rule but fails to endorse such a motion, it cannot be rejuvenated for the next one year. This increases to another one year if there is a failure of such a motion). To do justice to this provision, it is sensible to amend the Constitution to ensure that the Prime Minister of a coalition government should be from the party with the largest number of seats among the alliance partners, in Parliament.

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