

# The Stiff Test for Nepal's New Government

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February 24, 2023

The fact that Nepal's democracy was in jeopardy had been made abundantly evident long before the 2022 elections, which were held in the month of November. The prolonged nature of the talks that followed the close of the polls on Nov. 20 and the release of the results on Dec. 14 underlined once again that the Nepali political establishment preferred personal ambition and a desire for power above the will of the public. The Chinese Communist Party would have welcomed the conclusion, which saw the reunification of Nepal's two major communist parties for the first time since the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) split in 2021, some two weeks later (CCP). This is despite Beijing's legitimate fears about the precarious character of this new partnership. After all, Nepal has long served as a case study highlighting the CCP's limited ability to intervene in the internal affairs of a foreign nation.

Nepali voters, on the other hand, will be the most dissatisfied with the incoming administration. After the election results, it was generally expected that the current prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, would retain his position, with his party, the Nepali Congress, forming a coalition identical to the one that had governed since 2021; however, this victory would not have been possible without the cooperation of the CPN-Maoist Center and its leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Despite gaining slightly more than a third of the Nepali Congress' total seats, Dahal chose to keep the nation hostage, insisting that he leads any new administration, due to which the negotiations between the Nepali Congress and the Maoists dragged on until they finally broke down in the month of November. Dahal became Prime Minister a day later, after unexpectedly reuniting with the second main communist party, the CPN-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML). Unlike Deuba, K. P. Sharma Oli, head of the Marxist-Leninists, was prepared to give up the prime ministership in exchange for his and his party's resurgence.

The judgement might have a significant negative effect on Nepal's already disillusioned voters. Despite winning the most seats and being the only major party without losing any, the Nepali Congress is now in opposition, and the country's new prime minister is from a party that earned just 13% of the vote. Concerns must also be raised about the CCP's probable participation in this reunion, particularly given the extent that Chinese officials went to two years ago to prevent the communists from splitting. In the run-up to the elections, the rise of new parties and politicians seemed to be a reflection of the public's rejection of the old clique of Nepali legislators and established parties. This feeling was personified by Rabi Lamichhane. Lamichhane, a once-popular television personality, founded the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) barely five months before the November elections, rallying support by claiming that the trio of Oli, Deuba, and Dahal was endangering Nepal's democracy. The people backed Lamichhane's beliefs, awarding his party 20 seats and elevating it to the fourth-largest in the nation.

Yet, with the prospect of high-level cabinet positions on the table, Lamichhane dropped his anti-establishment stance, lending significant support to Dahal's new coalition government. This betrayal of pre-election beliefs, however, was short-lived; Lamichhane has since been deprived of his cabinet job and seat in Nepal's parliament due to a citizenship problem. Dahal will now have to convince the Nepalese people that he is the best person to rule them for the next five years. Trust in Nepal's political climate has been eroding in recent years, with no one party managing to complete a full term and voter turnout progressively dropping with each election. Dahal said fifteen years ago that toppling the monarchy would put Nepal on a stable road to economic growth. Nepal, now in his third term as Prime Minister, is still anxiously seeking that good fortune. The country's unemployment statistics are depressing, with a shocking number of disillusioned Nepalis seeking better prospects abroad. In recent years, the Middle East has proved to be an appealing site for such dreams, despite the fact that many migrant workers who have made the journey have endured exploitation and abuse, with some even losing their lives. Dahal and his wobbly coalition will now have a huge task carrying out a viable economic agenda with such a tenuous public mandate.

## The Bigger Perspective of Geopolitics

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Nepal's new administration will signal yet another important change in the country's ties with its two neighbouring neighbors. Since the previous general election in 2017, Kathmandu has had two independent administrations, both of which have sought opposing ties with New Delhi and China. The CCP's delight at the initial union of Marxist-Leninists and Maoists was followed by a deepening of Nepal-China relations. The most noteworthy development was Dahal's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative during his previous tenure as Prime Minister (BRI).

Similarly, the CCP's dismay at the CPN's eventual separation in 2021 was understandable. After all, the Nepali Congress, headed by pro-India, pro-US Prime Minister Deuba, took over from the now-fractured communists in the decades that followed. Deuba's leadership prioritised New Delhi and Washington over China, ignoring the BRI in favour of US-backed incentives. An Indian corporation was also given lucrative hydropower projects from formerly held areas by China. As a result, when word broke that the Nepali Congress had won the most seats in the November elections, India seemed to be the happier of the two neighbours. This, however, was contingent on the revival of the Nepali Congress and Maoist cooperation, which did not occur. However, Nepal's communist reunification was complete on the date of Mao Zedong's birth, with the CCP even hailing the "smooth" character of the polls. That's an odd emotion given that the decision was made in secret discussions rather than at the polls.

After the short formalities, the CCP quickly returned to business. A day after the new prime minister was sworn in, the Chinese embassy in Nepal took to Twitter to announce the arrival of a "professional team for the feasibility investigation and survey of "pro China-Nepal cross-border railway." The previous government announced the infrastructure project, which would connect Nepal with China via a 170-kilometer railway

passing through Tibet, in August of last year; however, it is unsurprising that the first real steps to begin the construction process were taken just a day after a more China-focused regime took power. After all, the project would be sponsored by the CCP and included in the BRI, something Deuba and the Nepali Congress were concerned about.

China hopes to develop long-lasting physical links between the two nations that will eventually be able to withstand changes in leadership in Kathmandu. Improved transportation connections will inspire successive Nepali administrations to strengthen relations with China, even if such moves contradict their own ideological viewpoint. This will reduce the chance of future CPN schism and the revival of the more anti-China Nepali Congress. In sharp contrast to these advances, India's Narendra Modi administration may struggle to achieve comparable bilateral triumphs with Dahal in charge. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, both New Delhi and Washington will be dismayed by the idea of re-establishing relations with a leader who has previously referred to India as an "expansionist" force and the United States as an "imperialist power." Similarly, Oli, the Marxist-Leninists' leader, presided over a considerable deterioration in ties between India and Nepal during his last stint in government, as shown by the publication of a map asserting Nepali sovereignty over 150 square miles of land also claimed by India. The gap between Dahal and Oli's views on India and China suggests that Nepal will be looking north significantly more than south in the next five years.

## **Taking the Next Step**

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In the near term, much to China's dismay, political instability in Nepal is likely to remain, negating the CCP's hard work in facilitating the formation of the new administration. The present coalition's opportunistic orientation does not augur well for its longevity, particularly given that significantly stronger administrations with genuine majorities have been unable to finish a full term in office since 2008. The previous schism between Dahal and Oli was caused by personal conflicts between prominent members of the two parties, not intellectual issues. Yet, as previously said, the CCP will work hard to keep this precarious accord in place long enough for Beijing to cement its own control over the nation and bring in increased Chinese participation in Nepal's internal and foreign affairs. In the United States, numerous high-level diplomats visited Nepal in early 2023, voicing their frustrations and attempting to persuade the incoming Nepali leadership of the importance of the two nations' alliance. Domestically, although the current election witnessed the growth of younger, more independent political parties, such as the RSP, many voters who perceived a chance to move beyond the Deuba-Oli-Dahal monopoly of the previous decade would certainly be disappointed. While the bigger parties were not defeated in this election, there is overwhelming evidence that the two main communist parties are on a downward spiral. Despite establishing a government, the Marxist-Leninists and Maoists lost a total of 64 seats compared to 2017, while the Nepali Congress gained just 24.

In contrast, two of the new parties, the RSP and the Janamat Party, gained a total of 26 seats, laying a strong foundation from which both may develop momentum in future elections. Members of both chambers, as well as the seven provincial legislatures, will now focus on the impending presidential election on March 9.

[Representational image by Ramesh Yadav, via Wikimedia Commons]

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