

NEPAL'S COALITION POLITICS, A GAME OF MUSICAL CHAIRS

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Nepal Congress leader Ram Chandra Poudel | Photo Credit: AFP

Coalition politics in Nepal increasingly resembles the game of musical chairs; in Kathmandu too, it is the same cast of characters who have been taking turns for nearly two decades. The tragedy is that scant attention is paid to the critical issues — unemployment, national indebtedness and development challenges.

The last coalition government, formed in December after the elections last November, has lasted just two months. It was stitched together by UML leader [K.P. Sharma Oli](#) with the idea of breaking away the Maoists by promising the prime-ministership to their leader [Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'](#).

Mr. Prachanda had formed an alliance with Mr. Oli in 2018 that broke down in 2020 after a series of decisions by Mr. Oli (he was then Prime Minister) seeking to marginalise Prachanda and other senior leaders. Later, Prachanda and the Madhav Nepal-led breakaway faction of UML, rechristened as the CPN (Unified-Socialist), joined with the Nepali Congress (NC) and formed an electoral alliance in 2022.

The Nepali Congress emerged as the largest party with 89 seats (the House strength is 275) and Maoists were a distant third with 32. Power-sharing talks collapsed because Prachanda insisted on becoming Prime Minister first. Knowing Prachanda's weakness, Mr. Oli made him an offer he could not refuse. On December 26, [Mr. Prachanda was sworn in as Prime Minister](#) and in return, he assured support to the UML for the posts of House Speaker and President. Six other parties had joined the coalition. These included disparate groups such as the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (14 seats) that espouses a pro-monarchy and a pro-Hindutva agenda, and the newly created Rashtriya Swatantra Party (20 seats) consisting of professionals who professed disenchantment with the rampant opportunism in traditional Nepali politics. However, both were tempted with offers of Deputy Prime Minister-ships and Prachanda's cabinet had four deputy Prime Ministers, one each from the Maoists, UML, RSP and RPP.

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Within weeks, Prachanda started chafing as Mr. Oli reverted to his old autocratic ways of calling the shots from behind the scenes. Realising that with the Oli nominees as President and

Speaker he could easily be out manoeuvred, Prachanda reached out to the NC. Anticipating this, NC had voted in support of Prachanda in the confidence vote on January 10, announcing that it had done so in the interests of national consensus governance that could provide stability. Prachanda saw his opportunity to return the favour by espousing the idea of a national consensus presidency and promised support to the NC's candidate Ram Chandra Poudel. The UML called it a "betrayal" and pulled out of the coalition. However, other than the RPP, the other members of the Oli-led coalition declined to follow, announcing their support for Poudel's candidature.

The Election Commission has announced that presidential elections will be held on March 9, followed by elections for the Vice-President on March 17. Since the code of conduct will be in effect till March 19, no overt political activity is possible. Given that Mr. Prachanda is now heading a minority government with 16 vacant cabinet positions, power-sharing talks will gain momentum though the final outcome will remain a matter of speculation.

Mr. Prachanda has till month end to seek a fresh vote of confidence. Once Mr. Poudel is elected, the NC is likely to throw its weight behind Prachanda. The RSP, Janata Samajbadi Party (12 seats), Janmat Party (six seats) and the Nagrik Unmukti Party (three seats), earlier with the Oli coalition, have switched their support to Mr. Poudel. In addition, NC coalition members, the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party (four seats), CPN (U-S) (10 seats) and Rashtriya Janamorcha (one seat) will also support Mr. Poudel.

The UML has put up former Speaker Subas Nembang as its presidential candidate. The electoral college for these elections is made up of 275 members of the House of Representatives and the 59 members of the National Assembly together with the 550 members of the seven provincial assemblies, with votes being weighted. Given the current assurances of support, Mr. Poudel will win with nearly three-fourths of the electoral college. In the election for the Vice-President, it appears that the JSP candidate will obtain the coalition backing.

Prachanda's real challenge will emerge the following week. Managing negotiations between the competing demands of the NC and these seven parties will not be easy. This is his third stint as Prime Minister; his first time in 2008 was the only time he came to power on the basis of his electoral victory but his coalition collapsed in less than a year because he failed to make the transition from being Comrade Prachanda to an elected leader. The second and third times have been purely opportunistic gambles of teaming up with Oli and then getting burnt. After the second time, he even naively merged his party with the UML in 2018. Fortunately for him, the Supreme Court annulled the merger in 2021 giving him a political lifeline. However, he candidly admits to being easily tempted. On the other hand, NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, nearly 78 and a five-time Prime Minister, is convinced that he should be Prime Minister again. Hopefully, the events of the last two months should have a sobering influence on both because while Deuba's intransigence led to the breakdown of talks in December, Prachanda should realise that his bromance with Mr. Oli will always be short lived.

Since 2008, when Nepal declared a republic, the game of political musical chairs has been a regular phenomenon. In 15 years, Nepal has had three NC Prime Ministers (G.P. Koirala, Sushil Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba twice), two Maoist Prime Ministers (Prachanda, now thrice, and Baburam Bhattarai), three UML Prime Ministers (Madhav Nepal, Jhala Nath Khanal and K.P. Oli twice), and a Chief Justice as caretaker Prime Minister in 2013. It is the resulting disenchantment of the electorate that led to new political forces in the 2022 elections.

Normally, it is during these rounds of musical chairs that Nepali politicians start wearing their 'nationalist' colours by looking for the convenient scapegoat of the 'foreign hand'. While India has often been blamed, China has played a visible hand in seeking to keep a united communist

front but has failed to find a compromise between Oli's egoistical tendencies and Prachanda's opportunistic impulses. In recent years, India has retrieved some lost ground by focusing on project implementation, such as the Jayanagar-Bardibas railway and the Motihari-Amlekhgunj oil pipeline. Power export from Nepal has picked up: the agreement for 364 MW signed in June has yielded export earnings of \$60 million in 2022, while looking at increasing power transmission on the 400 kV Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar line to 800 MW. The 900 MW Arun 3 is expected to be operational later in 2023. Meanwhile, some of the high-profile infrastructure projects by China have generated concerns about their economic viability and long-term debt implications.

A good 'neighbourhood first' policy for India is to focus on connectivity and development while letting the Nepali politicians continue with their game of 'musical chairs'.

Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat who has served as Ambassador to Nepal

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