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Nepal: Oli Resigns: Dahal of CPN- MC Poised to Take Over- Update No. 336

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Maoist Chief Dahal is poised to take over as Prime Minister in place of Oli. Till the time of writing no other leader has registered for election to the post of Prime Minister, though there were reports from the valley that the former Speaker Nembang may be put up as a candidate from the UML.

Oli Resigns:

On the 25th of July, moments before the voting of the No confidence motion in the Assembly, Oli tendered his resignation. The President had given a week's time to the parties to decide on the future Prime Minister.

Oli was bitter. He had reasons to be bitter as both the Nepali Congress and the CPN Maoist Centre- particularly the latter had let him down. In his 110 minute farewell address he described the manner by which he was toppled as "unprincipled and unwarranted."

It is only nine months since Oli took over as prime minister. The problems he faced were all inherited from his predecessors who now accuse him of inefficiency and non governance. At any rate by resigning and not fighting to the end, he has emerged as the hero to many in the valley. If there is one contribution he has made to Nepali politics- it could be to the complete polarisation of Nepali Politics into Pahad-Madhesi politics.

I would also add that another notable contribution of his would be the irreparable damage he has done to Indo Nepal relations and in this he was ably assisted by Indian policy makers too. This was unfortunate as Oli is perhaps the best of the top three triumvirate- Khanal, Madhav

Nepal and he. Yet his strong antipathy towards the Madhesis and the Madhesi cause is not understandable.

Oli will also be remembered as the father of the attempts of Nepal to reduce its over dependence on India and make an opening to China. While this may not succeed in the near or medium term, his efforts will certainly be seen with admiration in the valley after the four and a half months of blockade experienced during the Madhesi agitation.

Dahal's Challenges:

Dahal's tasks in the next eleven months of his Prime ministership are many and challenging. Since it is only an informal understanding between him and the Nepali Congress, he may or may not hand over power after eleven months. Even if he does- it is not certain that Nepali Congress will do better in the last eleven months before the next elections. The present leadership does not appear to be equal to the task.

* First and foremost, Dahal's main problem will be to form a "consensus government." The UML is not only not going to cooperate but obstruct his efforts if any to make constitutional amendments to make coalition work.

* Second will be the Truth and Reconciliation Commission- while Dahal's very purpose of assuming prime minister ship is to white wash the atrocities committed during the insurgency (Deuba will be equally interested), the victims of the insurgency who number in thousands will not let him get away so easily.

* the third and most difficult will be to meet the Madhesi grievances particularly on the delineation of the federal boundaries. For making constitutional amendments, the cooperation of UML is a must and may not be forthcoming. For that matter many in the ruling coalition may not themselves be enthusiastic about the amendments. The Nepali Congress and the Maoist centre are said to have agreed in principle to find a political solution in exchange for support and categorical assurances on the revision of federal boundaries on the basis of identity and capability.

* The next problem will be conducting elections at the local, regional levels and finally the national level before the mandatory deadline towards end of January 2018. 300 laws will have to be revised and another 150 enacted. Problems have already started with the recommendations of the local bodies restructuring commission- that proposed 175 for local wards for Terai, 275 in the hills and 100 in the mountain region. The Terain leadership wants more local wards in the Terai in proportion to their population. This demand in my view is unreasonable as there are many other factors to decide on the number. Budget allocation from the centre is not the only one.

Having emerged from the shadows as a hero soon after the civil war, one would have expected Dahal to conduct himself as a nation wide Statesman to provide stability and economic progress to the country. At one point he was thought to be next only to G.P. Koirala in terms of

national leadership. But he has been a disappointment so far though not a disaster as yet. He has been found to be wily, opportunistic and frequently shifting the goal posts to suit his needs.

In terms of position in the political spectrum also, Dahal seems to have lost out. His earlier ideological position has been taken over by Mohan Baidya and his company and the liberal position has been hijacked by Dr. Bhattarai. The centrist position is already occupied by the UML group.

It will therefore be interesting to see whether Dahal will be able to reinvent himself and become an all Nepal leader or go back to his old days to lead a small faction of the Maoists with an ideology that is fast becoming irrelevant in Nepal.

Nepal Congress:

The Nepali Congress is in no better position and the fault lines between the old Koirala group and that of Deuba are still present and visible. There is already a competition in getting the Home ministership with many including Situala vying for the post. There is also the demand that the proportion within the cabinet allotted to the Nepali Congress should be 60 and 40 between the two groups! The common perception in the valley is that Deuba is too close to India though it is not the real position. The younger leadership is yet to get an opportunity to prove itself.

The Madhesi Groups:

The Madhesi groups are in a real dilemma. They are not united and they would never be. There is some temptation to join the alliance and at least give outside support. Will they get anything substantial be it the Maoists or the Nepali Congress? Highly doubtful. Any accommodation with the new dispensation without getting some visible concession will be suicidal for them and will only encourage demand for secession.

Nepal will continue to have political instability for the next few months. Some substantial progress can be made in the restructuring and rehabilitation in the earthquake affected area if a sincere effort is made. Progress can also be achieved in transitional justice if the leaders really want it.

It will be interesting to see how Dahal is going to meet all these challenges.

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