Nepal’s prime minister steps down

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Nepal’s prime minister, K.P. Oli, resigned last Sunday, as he faced certain defeat in a no-confidence motion filed by the pro-India Nepali Congress (NC) and the Maoist United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M).

India undoubtedly had a significant hand in toppling the Oli government. New Delhi is determined to undercut Beijing’s growing influence on Nepal, which is wedged between India and China. The Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is working closely with the US in support of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” policy directed against China.

In a deal with the NC, the Maoists withdrew from Oli’s ruling Communist Party of Nepal UML (CPNUML)-led coalition on July 12 and filed the no-confidence motion. The United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) backed the move. It is an alliance of Madhesi parties, which are demanding greater autonomy in Nepal’s southern Terai region, bordering India. The UDMF said it would support the formation of a new government only if it receives a written promise to address their demands.

Oli’s administration was the eighth government since 2006 when the Maoist party abandoned its rural guerrilla movement and joined the NC and the UPNUML to scuttle mass struggles against Nepal’s monarchy. India supported that manoeuvre as part of its efforts to keep the country under its sway.

Announcing his resignation after a three-day parliamentary debate, Oli said he had maintained “international relationships with India and China based on national independence and sealing some trade agreements with China, thereby ending dependence on a single nation [India] for trade and commerce.” He spoke of thereby transforming the nation from “land-locked” to “land-linked.”

In his resignation speech, Oli described the “game” to change the government as “mysterious,” but did not elaborate. Earlier, however, on July 14, addressing a National Security conference in Kathmandu, Oli directly accused India of engineering the operation. After declaring that he “never compromised on the national interest,” Oli said: “India used the Nepali Congress and Maoists against my government and is trying to topple it.”

India has denied any responsibility. On July 10, speaking to visiting Nepali parliamentarians, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj asked them not to “drag” India into Nepal’s internal affairs. However, she went on to accuse Oli of not keeping promises made to the Indian prime minister.

The Maoist party’s deal with the NC stipulated that its leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) would become prime minister for nine months and then hand over to Congress leader Sher Bahdur Deuba. Addressing the parliament, Dahal made a thinly-veiled reference to the tensions between India and China, saying: “Given our geopolitical realities, we have to make fair and balanced relations with our neighbors. So we have to strengthen our internal national unity.”

The *Hindu* and the *Times of India* reported that after withdrawing support from the Oli government, Dahal sent a party leader, Matrika Yadev, to New Delhi to secure its support. According to the *Times*, Yadev “did not just meet MEA [ministry of external affairs] officials, but also Janatha Dal MP Sarad Yadev and National Congress Party MP D.P. Tripathi.” They met to “allay” Indian concerns about Dahal’s past pro-China policies, the *Times* reported.

Oli accused India of making a similar regime-change attempt in May. New Delhi officials and Deuba reportedly persuaded Dahal to quit the government but he changed his mind at the last moment. In return, Oli promised to withdraw criminal charges against Maoist party members allegedly involved in the decade-long

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insurgency from 1996 to 2006 and expedite reconstruction work in the country, which was devastated by a deadly earthquake early last year.

In retaliation for India's intervention, Oli recalled Nepal's envoy to New Delhi, saying the ambassador was part of the conspiracy, and cancelled a visit to India by Nepal's president.

During the past year, India has increasingly pressed Nepal to distance itself from China. Sections of Nepal's elite had sought to lessen the country's dependence on India, seeing it as limiting the pursuit of their own interests.

As part of India's response, last September New Delhi backed the Madhesi parties' agitation for greater regional powers in Nepal's new constitution. India effectively supported the Madhesi parties' disruption of supplies from India to Nepal. The blockade, which dragged for five months, resulted in serious shortages of fuel, medicine and other essentials, compounding the impoverished conditions facing the masses.

Oli ultimately made constitutional amendments to give limited concessions to the Madhesis, but Modi pressed for further concessions. The Indian government had no concern for the democratic rights of the Madhesi people but exploited the issue as a lever to influence Kathmandu.

In March, Oli made a five-day visit to China and signed several trade and investment agreements, including for China to open more transit points for Nepal. China also agreed to build an oil pipeline from China to Nepal, an international airport for the city of Pokhara and a new bridge at the border town of Hilsa. China surpassed India as the top donor to Nepal.

Oli's government was toppled just as the *South China Morning Post* reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping was planning to visit Nepal in October. The newspaper said the visit was "widely seen as a key to China's outreach in South Asia as it battles for influence in the region." Since the Oli government's collapse, Beijing has yet to make a statement on Xi's visit.

In another sign of the intensifying geopolitical tensions, Oli's communication minister, Sherdhan Rai, accused the Maoists of making their move "at the behest of external forces, who are interested in stalling the Chinese president's visit."

The collapse of the Oli government has only deepened the political instability in Nepal. None of the parties in the political establishment has the slightest concern for the interests of the workers and poor. The population is being dragged into a dangerous maelstrom, driven by the moves against China by India and the US.

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