Left Alliance forms government in Nepal amidst growing geopolitical tensions

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Left Alliance leader K. P. Sharma Oli was appointed Nepal's new prime minister in February, almost three months after the organisation won the December elections and amidst deepening social problems and intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the US and India on one hand and China on the other.

The Communist Party of Nepal United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), which is headed by Oli, and the Communist Party of Nepal Maoist Centre (Maoist Centre), led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, established the Left Alliance in October 2017. In the 275-member parliament the CPN-UML won 121 seats and the Maoist Centre 53. The country's traditional conservative bourgeois party, the National Congress of Nepal (NCP), has only 63 seats.

The devastating defeat of the former NCP-led government was a result of mass opposition to the ongoing poverty and social deprivation throughout Nepal. The CPN-UML and Maoist Center, which have ruled the country in rotation over the past decade, however, are equally responsible for the plight of workers and the poor.

Oli is currently attempting to win the support of several minor parties, which would give the Left Alliance a two-thirds parliamentary majority and the power to amend the country's constitution. The Sanghya Samakbodi Forum, which has 16 seats, and the Rastriya Janata Party with 17, have declared their support. Both formations are based on the Madhesi people from the Nepal's southern Terai region.

On March 11, Prime Minister Oli won a confidence vote endorsed by 208 MPs in the parliament and two days later party nominee Bidya Devi Bhandari was overwhelmingly re-elected Nepal president ensuring the speedy approval of future decisions by the government.

Oli has also secured wide-ranging power related to foreign policy, national security and finances and will appoint a host of think-tanks to advise him. According to the *Kathmandu Post*, the prime minister's office "will direct, control and conduct Nepal's governance system."

The Left Alliance and Oli are acutely sensitive to the destabilising effects of geopolitical rivalry between major powers, who are all vying for influence in Nepal, and fearful of mass opposition to its economic policies.

According to a recent International Labour Organisation report, 20 to 35 percent of Nepali workers are living on less than $US3.10, or about 320 Nepal rupees per day, with deepgoing poverty in rural areas. The World Bank predicts that Nepal's growth rate will only be around 3 percent on average from 2017 to 2030.

The CPN-UML and Maoist Centre have shared cabinet posts in the new government and prior to the elections said they would merge the two parties under the name of Communist Party of Nepal. The two were bitter rivals in the past and it is entirely unclear how the unification process will occur.

The CPN-UML and Maoist Centre claim that they are "preparing a basis for communist-oriented socialism by enhancing nationalism, democracy, social justice, and social transformation." The "guiding principles" of the new party, they have said, will be "Marxism-Leninism" and the adoption of "a multi-party democratic system."

This bogus and pompous phraseology is another attempt to hoodwink Nepal's working people, who face extreme poverty, social inequality and the suppression of democratic rights. Both parties, which have their origin in Stalinism and are the antithesis of Marxism and socialist internationalism, speak for Nepal's bourgeois establishment and the interests of

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international capitalism.

During the election, New Delhi covertly backed the pro-Indian NCP, regarding Oli and the Left Alliance as pro-Chinese. After the ballots were counted, the Indian ruling elite calculated that it was necessary to re-forge relations with the Left Alliance and prevent a further tilt towards China.

During his swearing in, Prime Minister Oli declared: "We have great connectivity with India and an open border. All that's fine and we'll increase connectivity even further, but we can't forget that we have two neighbors … We don't want to depend on one country or have one option."

Oli has indicated that his government will review the 1950 "Indo-Nepal peace and friendship treaty," which was mainly used to maintain New Delhi's influence on Nepal economically, politically and militarily. India, however, will aggressively oppose any move to "review" the decades-long agreement. Oli also said that he would move to end the long-established practice of Nepali soldiers serving in India's armed forces.

India was hostile towards the government Oli formed in November 2015 and which developed close ties with Beijing. New Delhi backed ethnic Madhesi agitation for more political power in the Terai region and imposed a five-month fuel blockade starting in September 2015. New Delhi also manipulated support from the Nepal Maoists and, with NPC support, toppled the Oli government in July 2016.

Oli turned to China during that crisis, signing several agreements with Beijing, including for emergency fuel supplies. China also promised to build the $US2.5 billion dollar Budhi Gandaki hydropower station. During his brief rule as prime minister—from mid-2017 to February 2018—pro-Indian PNC Prime Minister Sher Bahdur Dueba cancelled the hydro project. Oli, however, recently told the *South China Morning Post* that his government will restart the project.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken over the phone with Oli three times since the elections and Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj travelled to Kathmandu in early February to meet with Oli and other political leaders. Modi is also expected to visit the country soon.

The Modi government, with the strategic backing of United States, is aggressively pursuing its geopolitical interests and seeking to undermine Beijing's relations in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Over the past year there has been a military standoff between India and China over the Doklam Plateau in the Himalayas.

For its part, Beijing has announced that Xi Jinping will visit Nepal in the coming months. Soon after Left Alliance's election victory, Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the Communist Party of China's international department visited Kathmandu to congratulate Oli. He said that Nepal's strategic significance had increased and that Beijing was ready to provide every assistance.

On February 26, *Global Times* columnist Cheng Xizhong wrote, "Oli has sent an important signal to the global community that the new Nepali government will strive to free the country from India's control to enhance its independent status and develop ties with China to shake off backwardness."

China has decided to complete and extend the Qinghai-Tibet Railway to Kathmandu by 2020 as part of its One Belt, One Road policy. Its completion will further reduce Nepal's infrastructure dependence on India. Last month Nepal joined with China's Internet service, ending India's monopoly on cyber connectivity in the country.

Oli has declared that his aim is to promote "peace, stability and development" throughout Nepal. The reality is that Nepali workers and peasants will face increasing attacks on their living and social conditions and be dragged into the intensifying geopolitical storm between India and US and China.

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