

Political crisis deepens after Nepali parliament dissolved

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Political turmoil has intensified in Nepal following dissolution of the parliamentary lower house by President Bidya Devi Bandari on December 20, two years ahead of its scheduled term.

Bandari declared the dissolution at the request of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, with fresh elections to be held on April 30 and May 10 next year.

Oli, with the approval of his cabinet, initiated the anti-democratic operation even though his ruling Stalinist Nepal Communist Party (NCP) had an overwhelming majority of 174 in the 275 members in the lower house. It followed his attempts to prorogue parliament in July to avert a planned no-confidence vote. The no-confidence proposal was initiated by a faction of the NCP headed by its co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

In 2017, the two Stalinist parties—the Oli-led Nepal United Marxist-Leninist and Dahal’s Communist Party of Nepal Maoist Centre—united during the national election. In 2018, they merged in the NCP in the hope of diverting growing social opposition across the country.

The conflict erupted after Dahal requested he be made prime minister in line with a unity agreement struck by the two parties. Under that deal, Dahal would assume the prime ministership two and half years after the 2017 election victory.

The split within the ruling party is not simply over ministerial positions but is driven by the escalating economic and social crisis within the landlocked Himalayan country, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and growing geo-political tensions across the region. As of yesterday and according to understated official data, over 260,000 people have been infected and 1,847 have died.

A total of 12 petitions have been filed in Nepal’s supreme courts by supporters of the Dahal faction

within the NCP and several activists challenging the dissolution of parliament. They claim the dissolution was anti-democratic, undermines the constitution and branded it a “constitutional coup.”

The NCP is on the verge of open split, with Oli, on one side, and Dahal and former prime minister and Stalinist leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, who control the parliamentary majority, on the other. Both factions have begun counter moves to control the party apparatus.

There are no fundamental political differences between these factions. Both have worked together to implement pro-market reforms and are responsible for the social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the factions, which have previously ruled the country, defend big business profits.

Oli’s dissolution of parliament has seen protests and demonstrations erupt across the country, including in the capital Kathmandu. On Monday, tens of thousands participated in a demonstration in Kathmandu organised by the Dahal-led NCP faction.

“The prime minister has no authority to dissolve the parliament under the constitution. Therefore, he should reverse his decision immediately,” Rajesh Thapa, a 19-year-old student, told the Aljazeera news agency.

Police have been mobilised to crack down on protesters. Sixteen human rights activists and leaders of various civil rights groups were arrested at a demonstration in the capital on December 21.

In 2017, the united Stalinist parties promised democracy and “prosperity” to workers and youth while attempting to divert growing social opposition into a nationalist anti-Indian campaign.

The election of the NCP government in 2017, however, resolved none of the social problems confronting the masses. The Dahal faction and its

allies, in an attempt to deny their own role, claim that the country's mounting economic problems are simply the result of Oli's corruption and autocratic measures.

The widely discredited, conservative pro-Indian Nepali Congress Party is seeking to exploit the political crisis. Having quietly supported the Oli regime in recent months, on December 14 it shifted course and held rallies over 70 districts, including in Kathmandu.

While the country's economy is in tatters, Nepal's wage workers have increased by four million between 2008 and 2018. Every faction of the ruling elite is nervous about a social explosion.

According to a World Bank report issued in October, Nepal's economic growth will only be 0.2 percent this year and 0.6 percent in 2021. Last year Nepal recorded 5.7 percent economic growth. An assessment in May by the International Labor Organisation found that "between 1.6 million and 2 million jobs are likely to be disrupted in Nepal in the current crisis, either with complete job loss or reduced working hours and wages."

Tourism, which employed over half a million people and earned \$US2 billion as foreign exchange annually, has collapsed, while the pandemic has seen a drastic cut in income from the country's 3.5 million migrant workers.

Media reports are scanty but in recent months there have been many protests and strikes by health workers in Nepal demanding payment of outstanding wages and allowances, proper health facilities and protective clothing to combat the pandemic.

In September, thousands of young people demonstrated in Kathmandu opposing the government's move to use low cost and less effective rapid antigen COVID-19 tests and demanding the use of the more accurate PCR tests. The protests forced the government to resume PCR testing.

In mid-December, 100,000 sugarcane farmers resumed protests over outstanding payments. The demonstrations were halted in March because of the national coronavirus lockdown. These poor farmers are owed a total of 800 million rupees (around \$US7 million) from mill owners and a 1 billion-rupee subsidy from the government.

India and China both are intensifying the efforts to maintain influence in Kathmandu.

China, which has boosted its role in Nepal during

Oli's administration, recently sent a high-level delegation led by Guo Yezhou, vice-minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party, to Kathmandu.

During his four-day visit Guo met with leaders of rival factions, including Oli, Dahal and President Bandari, to try and patch up the rift, and also held talks with Congress party leaders. Late last month, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe also visited Nepal to try and heal the divisions between the two factions. Facing increasing US aggression, Beijing is keen to enhance its relations with Nepal.

India regards Nepal as part of its traditional backyard and is hostile to Beijing's growing influence in Kathmandu. The US, which is promoting India as its strategic partner, is also anxious about Chinese influence in Nepal.

Indian media commentators have praised the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government for not making "public comments" on the NCP's factional conflict. Delhi, however, has been busy mending its relations with Nepal's ruling NCP and other factions of the ruling elite.

In mid-October, three top Indian officials visited Nepal. They included Indian intelligence chief Samant Goel, Army Commander General Manoj Mukund Naravane and Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

India is determined to bring the strategically-located Nepal under its sway. This is not just for its own strategic aims but as a frontline state for US imperialism and its confrontation with China.



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