

Nepal plunges deeper into political crisis as pandemic rages across the country

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16 June 2021

The Nepal Supreme Court has begun hearing 30 petitions, opposing the dissolution of the country's parliament by President Bidya Devi Bhandari, an action taken at the request of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.

Last week, the five-judge Supreme Court bench that is hearing the case issued “show cause notices” to the office of the president, prime minister, and the cabinet, giving them 15 days to reply to the petitions challenging the constitutionality of the president's dissolution order.

A longtime political associate and ally of Oli, President Bhandari dissolved parliament on May 21—almost 18 months before the end of its term. National elections are now scheduled for November 12 and 19.

It is uncertain when the Supreme Court will deliver its verdict. But whatever the ruling, it will not and cannot solve the political crisis that has sharply divided and splintered Nepal's faction-ridden ruling elite. Whilst various privileged factions are jockeying for power, the crisis is fundamentally rooted in mass popular alienation from the entire establishment, due to Nepal's chronic backwardness and endemic poverty. This has only been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the Himalayan country's emergence as a major arena of strategic competition between the US and India, on the one hand, and China on the other.

Last December, President Bhandari shut down parliament, on the advice of Oli. This was legally challenged by the opposition, and in late February, the Supreme Court overturned the dissolution, ruling it unconstitutional.

Oli attempted to form a new government, but was defeated in a no-confidence vote in parliament on May 10. President Bhandari set May 21 as the deadline for the establishment of a new administration. While both Oli and the opposition Nepali Congress (NC) leader Sher Bahadur Deuba insisted they had the support of a majority of MPs, President Bhandari suddenly decided to end the parliament without testing their rival claims.

One hundred and forty-six opposition MPs and some members of other political organisations have petitioned the

Supreme Court, accusing the Nepali president of siding with Oli and acting unconstitutionally. The hearing, which was due to begin on June 6, was delayed after senior lawyers questioned the “impartiality” of the bench, appointed by Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana.

The bitter infighting is an expression of deep political instability. There have been twelve governments and nine prime ministers since the end of monarchical rule and the establishment of the “Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal” in 2008.

Amid the continuing turmoil, two Stalinist parties—the Oli-led Communist Party of Nepal-UML (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal Maoist Centre (CPNMC), which was involved in a decade-long insurgency that ended in 2006—fused together, and contested the 2017 election as the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). The CPN won government, claiming it would bring political stability to the country. In February 2018 Oli became prime minister.

Unable to fulfill its election pledges to improve the social conditions of the masses, the CPN became embroiled in faction fighting over government positions. Maoist Centre leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal demanded to be appointed prime minister, in line with a previous unity agreement. Oli refused and the ruling party split into two.

To oust Oli, the Maoist Centre and its splinter groups have united with the National Congress, the country's traditional right-wing bourgeois party, and are supporting NC leader S. Deuba's bid to become prime minister.

The geopolitical tensions in the region are a major factor intensifying the political crisis in land-locked Nepal, which borders India and China's Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Due to the inhospitable geography, Nepal's access to the outside world is primarily through its long border with India. The Indian bourgeoisie, which contemptuously considers Nepal as its backyard, has long used Nepal's dependence on access to India to influence and bully successive regimes in Kathmandu, the country's capital.

Washington and Delhi regard Nepal as crucial to their drive to strategically isolate and encircle China. Beijing has

responded by stepping up its efforts to develop close relations with Kathmandu, including through the development of a railway, linking the two countries and other infrastructure projects.

This strategic rivalry has impacted the conflict between Oli and his UML faction of the CPN, and Dahal's Maoist Centre, over the prime minister's post.

Last December, China sent high-profile officials to Kathmandu, hoping to patch-up these differences. This included a delegation led by Guo Yezhou, vice-minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party, who met with Oli and Dahal.

Seeking to maintain and strengthen its interests, India countered by sending the head of its intelligence apparatus, Samant Goel, and Army Chief Mukund Naravane, for talks in Kathmandu.

In 2017-18, Oli whipped up anti-Indian nationalism, exploiting popular anger over the devastating months-long blockade that India imposed on Nepal in 2015, in a bid to force changes to its constitution. However, apparently out of fear that China was supporting his rival Dahal, Oli has shifted closer to New Delhi and Washington, in an attempt to secure his political survival.

According to Indian media reports, the decision by a faction of the People's Socialist Party, represented by Mahantha Thakur and Rajendra Mahato, to give support to Oli, is the outcome of manoeuvres undertaken by New Delhi. On June 4, Oli appointed Mahato deputy prime minister, as well as eight ministers and two state ministers from Mahato's faction, to bolster his caretaker government.

The India-based *Diplomat* commented on May 16: "Recent developments suggest that India is silently supporting Oli. The United States also seems to favour Oli."

Last year, a majority of the CPN central committee opposed the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact for Nepal, saying that it opened the way for greater US influence, and delayed submitting it to the parliament. In April this year, Oli nonetheless insisted that the speaker should bring the MCC compact to parliament immediately.

Commenting on this shift, Hari Roka, a political commentator, told the *Kathmandu Post*: "Both India and the US have their own interests in Nepal. Oli is an old ally of India and now, with the MCC endorsement, he wants to demonstrate that he is not going to antagonise the US in the context of the US-India alliance."

The political crisis gripping Nepal's ruling elite is occurring as COVID-19 infections soar across the Himalayan country of 28 million people. The government's criminal mishandling of the pandemic is provoking widespread opposition amongst workers and the poor. According to yesterday's official—grossly

understated—figures, more than 614,200 people have been infected and more than 8,500 have died from COVID-19. The far more infectious and lethal Delta or B.1.617.2 coronavirus variant, first identified in India, is now running rampant in Nepal.

Currently, only symptomatic cases are being screened, due to the shortage of testing equipment. Dr. Samir Kumar Adhikari, the health ministry's chief spokesperson, recently admitted: "Our medical infrastructure is in crisis. The oxygen supply-demand gap is huge. We also have no more vaccines." Hospitals have run out of intensive care beds and ventilators, and, as Adhikari's remarks suggest, there is an acute shortage of oxygen all over the country.

The Oli administration, which failed to make any serious medical preparations for the pandemic, despite numerous warnings last year from public health experts, is overseeing an escalating social and economic crisis.

According to a recent World Bank survey, the Nepali economy contracted by 1.9 percent in 2020, with major falls in jobs and incomes. The survey notes that two in every five economically active workers report that they lost jobs or suffered prolonged work absence. "Women, young workers, and those engaged in nonagricultural activities have been the most severely affected," it said.

Torn by political instability and nervous about the political implications of the deepening social crisis, sections of the ruling elite are desperately calling for the parliamentary parties to work together. An editorial in Monday's English-language *Himalayan Times* declared: "Let the intra and interparty hostility not spill out onto the streets and jeopardise the ongoing efforts to contain the virus."

The principal concern of the Nepali capitalist class and all its political parties, however, is not COVID-19 but the eruption of mass struggles. Having faced a popular uprising in 2006 that led to the end of monarchical rule, the political forces that allied to dissipate that movement and establish a bourgeois republic—the NC, CPN-UML, and the Maoists—and the various other bourgeois factions, fear they will not be able to contain future mass struggles.



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