

What is Delaying the Left Merger in Nepal?

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Both Prime Minister Oli and CPN-Maoist Centre leader Prachanda need each other's help to maintain the strength of the government and the unified party.

Kathmandu: In October 2017, Nepal's two main communist forces— the Communist Party of Nepal- Unified Marxists Leninists (UML) the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)—announced their electoral alliance, and an eventual merger, ahead of the two-phase provincial and federal elections. Eleven years in the making, the proposed merger was widely welcomed in Nepal, as it promised a long-eluded political stability if the alliance could get two-third majority in the elections, which it did. But the formal merger, which Nepalis were told would take place soon after the elections, has not materialised in seven months.

As the pressure for unification mounted, the long delay, it was announced, would finally end on April 22, the birthday of Vladimir Lenin and the day Nepal's first communist party was founded in 1949. But it wasn't meant to be. This in turn has spawned many speculations about the proposed merger and the fate of the Left government in Kathmandu. And it will be difficult for both KP Sharma Oli, the prime minister and chairman of UML and Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', the Maoist chief, to back down from the merger, after securing two-thirds vote on the popular planks of 'stability' and 'prosperity'.

Moreover, Oli needs Prachanda to continue to be the leader of a strong government with two-thirds majority as much as Prachanda needs Oli, as at the time of the announcement of the electoral alliance, it was reported the Maoist chairman would lead the new party while Oli ran the government. And this is why, even though there was no formal merger on April 22, the two of them took great pains to convince their sceptical countrymen that it would happen sooner rather than later.

Merger between 'equals'

One of the reasons for the delay is the immense pressure that Prachanda has faced from his party rank and file, who want the merger on 'equal terms' rather than the earlier '60-40' formula devised for selection of electoral candidates, with 60% of nominations going to the UML and 40% to the Maoists. The leaders in the 1099-member Maoist central committee fear 'demotion' in the new party which, according to UML-Maoist merger agreement, will have only 299 members in its central committee. The Maoist party members want a larger share in the new outfit's decision-making pie.

But Oli reckons that such a demand is unjustified as even within the left alliance, UML had emerged by far the largest party in the country after the 2017 elections and hence it deserves to have more members in the decision-making bodies. Prachanda, for his part, wants a clear, written assurance that he will either get to become the prime minister after two and half years of Oli's reign or that he will get to lead the combined communist party after its general convention. Oli is reluctant to offer any such written assurances.

But even if there was a written assurance, it might be meaningless, as the new party chairman will

be chosen by the delegates to the future national convention via a secret ballot, and they might easily opt for someone other than Prachanda. There is also no guarantee that senior UML leaders will accept Prachanda as their prime minister.

Prachanda has of late become quite suspicious of Oli, especially after the prime minister transferred senior government bureaucrats without consulting him. He fears that Oli could strike a deal with Madhav Kumar Nepal, former prime minister and UML second-in-command, making arrangements for Nepal to be the new party chairman. And if Oli refuses to resign as prime minister, Prachanda will be left out in the cold.

All options open

Prachanda wants to retain the possibility of breaking away from the new party open, should Oli and UML renege on their promise. But according to electoral laws he will need the support of at least 40% of the central committee members to form a separate party. This is another reason why he is pitching for a near 50-50 UML-Maoist split in all important decision-making bodies.

Yet another bone of contention is whether to formally recognise the decade-long 'people's war' in which nearly 16,000 people were killed. The Maoists credit the war as a harbinger the federal, republican Nepal, and its recognition in the new party's statute is seen as mandatory. But UML fears the new party will be discredited, both nationally and internationally, if it formally recognises the 'murder' of so many people.

So there are some fundamental differences between the two sides. Yet there are also some compelling portents in favour of the merger. For instance, it had long been assumed here in Kathmandu that New Delhi was against the left alliance, which, in its reckoning, had Beijing's imprimatur. But during his recent visit to India, Oli is said to have gotten a clear message from Narendra Modi that India too backs the left merger. "It looked like Modi was keen to have the soon-to-be-formed unified left party on his side before it had had a chance to cozy up to China," according to a top Oli aide.

Placating Prachanda's ego

Oli is reportedly keen on completing the merger before Modi's planned trip to Nepal on May 11, to prevent suspicion that India had any role in it. Interestingly, the news of Modi's Nepal trip came out on the same day the Nepali foreign minister, Pradeep Gyawali, had returned from an official visit to China to lay the ground for PM Oli's formal visit. Perhaps Modi wanted to preempt Oli's proposed China visit, which will now be impossible before the end of May for domestic reasons.

A formal merger may soon be announced. But its longevity will rest largely on how secure Prachanda feels within the new party, particularly if he doesn't get to lead it. In recent interviews Prachanda, who has continuously held party leadership positions since 1994, has consistently maintained that he is not used to being a 'second man'.

How the new party handles relations with India and China, and how that plays out among the broader public, which is still largely sympathetic to China and wary of India, will be another big determinant of its longevity.

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