

How Nepal's Ruling Communist Party Is Entrenching Kleptocracy

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Far from being a revolutionary force, the new communist party seems intent on carrying forward the hallowed tradition of the ruling parties in Nepal misusing state treasury to enrich and expand their patronage networks.

Kathmandu: The all-powerful communist government of K.P. Sharma Oli has now completed nearly five months in office. For the first three months, leaders of the then two ruling coalition parties – Oli's Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninists and Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) – were busy giving final shape to their formal merger. Finally, on May 17, [the merger was completed](#), giving birth to the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), a behemoth of an outfit that now commands a nearly two-thirds majority in the federal parliament and, with the help of a few smaller parties, effective control of all seven provinces.

The communist coalition had come to power on the back of its popular twin electoral agendas of 'stability' and 'prosperity'. Nepal desperately needed the first. Before the new communist government took over the reins, governments in Nepal changed, on an average, every nine months. The continuous change of guard meant that no government could effectively pursue its policies and programmes. The seemingly interminable 'political transition' – that started with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the then mainstream parties and the warring Maoists in 2006 – had, in fact, become a handy excuse for all post-2006 governments to deflect blame when their competencies were questioned.

This state of transition came to a definite end with the holding of the federal and provincial elections in 2017, which also marked the start of the implementation of the new constitution that was drafted in 2015. With this, the new 'federal democratic republic' formally came into being. So when the communist coalition got near two-thirds majority, there was a sense of collective relief. For the first time since the 1990 political changes, an elected government in Nepal could be expected to serve out its full five-year term. But there was a wee problem.

Power sans responsibility

The ruling NCP most certainly consolidated its hold on power and will now serve out its term, and thus deliver on its promise of stability. But its commitment to the other electoral agenda of prosperity appears dubious. True, Prime Minister Oli has been making all the right noises. He first went to India and then subsequently welcomed Narendra Modi to Nepal, and the camaraderie between the two was there for everyone to see. After Nepal-India relations hit [rock bottom](#) during Oli's first term as prime minister in 2015-16, culminating in nearly five months of border blockade, there has indeed been a remarkable turnaround in Nepal-India ties recently. After Oli came to power for the second time, major [hydroelectricity deals](#) have been signed along with [an agreement](#) to connect Kathmandu with Indian rail.

Following Modi's Nepal visit in May, [Oli then went to China](#), where President Xi Jinping assured the Nepali prime minister that the Chinese railway that is being extended to Nepal-China border in 2020 would soon after that [arrive in Kathmandu](#). If Kathmandu is connected to both the Indian and Chinese rail networks, the Oli government now assures, Nepal can reap rich rewards as a 'vibrant economic bridge' between the two Asian giants. Interestingly, during his talks with both Modi and Xi, the prime minister of a landlocked Nepal had also raised the prospect of his country maintaining [a fleet of ships](#) in the high seas.

In other words, Oli likes to dream big and he is making a concerted effort to sell this dream to Nepalis. But they are having a hard time buying it as yet. This is because he has so far proved big on commitment and short on delivery. Forget bringing railways and ships, the government has not even been able to mend the [broken roads](#) of Kathmandu, big chunks of which are underwater this monsoon season.

Inflation has rocketed. Vegetables and fruits the Nepali are consuming are [poisoned](#) with dangerous pesticides, and [most brands of milk](#) and bottled water available in the market are tainted with harmful bacteria. Yet the government has done precious little to deal with these issues of direct concern to most Nepalis.

Resist the change

After making a big noise about [removing](#) every kind of cartel and syndicate, in what was another wildly popular declaration, the government, in fact, seems to be sheltering the operators of these cartels, most notably in health, education and transport. The enfeebled main opposition, Nepali Congress, had to [disrupt the parliament](#) to prevent the government from passing a medical education bill that would have undone all recent reforms aimed at bringing cheap and reliable healthcare to all Nepalis. The civil society also came out strongly against this '[autocratic move](#)'.

Suspensions that the Left government is turning authoritarian were further boosted when it declared the popular protest site of Maitighar Mandala in Kathmandu a '[protest-free zone](#)'. Additionally, the government seemed to be in a mood to ram through [a transitional justice bill](#) that would make it easier for most perpetrators of grave human rights violations from conflict period to go unpunished (clearly at the instigation of senior Maoist leaders who still fear prosecution for war crimes). Similarly, Prime Minister Oli did nothing to boost his popularity when he [recently ridiculed](#) Govinda K.C., the orthopaedic surgeon who has repeatedly gone on fast-unto-death for medical education reform.

Then, during a recent gathering of his party's office-bearers, he instructed the party rank and file to [vehemently resist](#) (rather than [heed](#)) any attempt by opposition groups to question the government. Besides these measures, the government has also brought new guidelines to closely monitor foreigners and international non-governmental organisations, thus [spooking](#) the international community.

In the view of many intellectuals, these are all signs of creeping authoritarianism. In reality, the current government in Nepal is more a [kleptocracy](#) than an autocracy. There are many layers of protection against an outright autocracy. A large section of the media remains fiercely independent. There has been a steady increase in the role of the civil society from the time they first rose up against the autocratic King Gyanendra in 2005. Nepali Congress, the main opposition, through enfeebled after the recent elections, is still capable of making the government back down, for instance on the recent watered-down medical education bill. As crucially, the Nepali political parties are well aware that India, traditionally the pre-eminent external power in Nepal, does not want autocracy of any kind here.

What's new?

On the other hand, the ruling party has far too many MPs and ministers who are shareholders in private schools and medical colleges, and thus want to enfeeble public education and health sectors. Many also have a stake in transport syndicates. Oli would have a tough time even if he wanted to rein in their impulse to act in self-interest. But thus far he has shown no real commitment to take them on.

With all the vital reform plans shelved, and with the traditional elites controlling all the major levers of power – the cabinet of ministers as well as all the vital decision-making bodies of the new communist party are [stacked in favour of male Brahmins](#) – and corruption and impunity still rampant, it seems business as usual for most Nepalis.

Little seems to have changed since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Far from being a revolutionary force, the new communist party seems intent on carrying forward the hallowed tradition of the ruling parties in Nepal misusing state treasury to enrich and expand their patronage networks. If certain civil liberties have to be curtailed in the process, so be it. In office for just five months, perhaps it is a little too early to pass definitive judgements on this government. But the omens don't look good.

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