

A plot twist makes Pushpa Kamal Dahal prime minister of Nepal

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Dahal, aka 'Prachanda', turned his back on an earlier alliance with the Nepali Congress to side with the CPN-UML. Now he must lead a coalition government with former foes and emergent new parties.

On 25 December, the former Maoist rebel leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a.k.a. 'Prachanda', showed why he is perhaps the most formidable survivor – and opportunist – in Nepali politics. Despite his party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), winning only 32 seats in Nepal's recent general election, Dahal refused to budge from his demand to become prime minister. Earlier, Dahal had an arrangement with Sher Bahadur Deuba, the leader of the Nepali Congress: their two parties joined in an electoral alliance and the two were to rotate the prime ministerial post if the alliance won. But Deuba, after the Congress emerged as the largest party in Parliament, refused to hand the post to Dahal first. So Dahal walked out of the alliance, and instead set up a new alliance with the Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) under K P Oli, as well as several other parties. Dahal is now the prime minister at the head of the resulting coalition government, with a reported understanding that he will cede the post to Oli half-way through the government's stipulated five-year term. All in all, just another day in the wild, unpredictable and morally blank world of Nepali politics.

The big test will come in a month's time, when the new government has to face a floor test in Parliament. The election of a new president in February will require intricate manoeuvring as well. But in the near term, the key challenge facing Nepal's new prime minister will be negotiating the demands of a shaky coalition, some of whose members are his ideological opponents.

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A deal between Oli and Dahal had been on the cards since the end of November, even before the election results were declared. But no one thought Dahal would take the option up. After all, just some two years ago, Dahal and Oli fell out after Oli refused to hand him the prime minister's position as the two had agreed. Oli dissolved Parliament in order to cling to power, and the unified Nepal Communist Party, formed via the merger of the two men's parties, had fractured. After the recent election, the Nepali Congress, the Maoists and assorted smaller parties in the incumbent coalition had already begun discussions on a power-sharing agreement. The only disagreement was over who was to become prime minister – Dahal or Deuba.

With Dahal's U-turn, the Nepali Congress has been left red-faced. But Dahal has what he wanted: he is now prime minister for a third time. Oli has emerged as the kingmaker, and perhaps the biggest victor in these elections. His party has been assured the president's and speaker's positions, and CPN-UML leaders are to hold many key ministerial positions.

New faces, old patterns

The Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML, respectively, emerged as the two largest parties after Nepal voted in November. The country uses a dual electoral system: voters pick a representative for their constituency in a first-past-the-post contest and also vote for a party in general, with those votes translating into a number of nominated seats under a system of proportional representation. The Nepali Congress secured 89 seats across both systems, making it the largest party. The CPN-UML fell to second place with 78 seats, 43 fewer than it polled at the last election in 2017, when it was the largest party. But these parties' relative fortunes tell only half the story.

The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), formed less than six months ago, secured the fourth largest number of votes in its very first electoral outing. Born out of discontent against existing political forces – and opposing Nepal's current system of provincial governments – the RSP now commands 20 seats in Parliament. Many observers believed the RSP would stay in opposition and strengthen its hold as an anti-establishment party, but in an about-turn of its own, the party decided to support the new ruling coalition. Its chair, Rabi Lamichhane, a former TV anchor whose Nepali citizenship is currently under investigation, was appointed deputy prime minister and home minister.

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The roots of the RSP's meteoric success lie in the misgovernance practiced by Nepal's established parties, especially over the past five years – displayed through crony capitalism, mismanagement of COVID-19 and the economy, and the arbitrary dissolution and reinstatement of Parliament, plunging the country into political instability. The RSP became a focal point for multiple strands of discontent – especially among younger voters, whose aspirations and increasing demographic weight were almost completely ignored by traditional parties. Whether its participation in government will dilute its anti-establishment temperament in favour of coalition compromises is one of the key questions the party now confronts. Already there are questions over whether Lamichhane faces a conflict of interest as home minister, given the investigation into his citizenship falls under the purview of his ministry. Nonetheless, the RSP's rapid success will certainly motivate others to throw their hat in the electoral ring next time around, especially if the traditional parties continue to ignore simmering discontent.

One of the key statistics in this election was that while half of voters were under the age of 40, two-thirds of all candidates were older than 40 years. None of the numerous corruption cases which made headlines in the past five years emerged as an issue in these polls. Most Nepalis are deeply frustrated by pervasive corruption, experienced in real-time as shoddy government services and the need to grease palms to get any official work done. This is especially felt in more urban areas, where worsening infrastructure combines with governance malpractice to create a sense that the traditional parties and politicians are not interested in making life better for ordinary Nepalis, millions of whom have been forced to look abroad for economic opportunities. With a third of incoming lawmakers being first-time arrivals in Parliament, and many of them below 40 years old, the demographic shift is set to define Nepali politics in the years to come.

In the near term, the key challenge facing Nepal's new prime minister will be negotiating the demands of a shaky coalition, some of whose members are his ideological opponents.

Yet hope for progressive change must be tempered, and not just because avowedly anti-corruption parties such as the RSP have chosen to join hands with the establishment. The Rastriya Prajatantra Party, which continues to root for Nepal's return to Hindu monarchy and had largely been written

off, has re-emerged as a significant player, with 14 seats in Parliament. Yet the RPP has also decided to support the newly formed government under Dahal, who was the primary actor behind the monarchy's fall at the end of Nepal's civil war.

Sadly, the new Parliament mirrors existing societal inequalities as well, with far too few women in the chamber (just nine of them elected directly) and Dalit representation hovering at under six percent, the lowest since the 2008 Constituent Assembly. The dominant Khas community has won 48 percent of seats, continuing patterns of the past. This is not a surprise, given that none of the major parties has prioritised inclusivity beyond paying it lip service.

Political turbulence

The good performance in the recent election of smaller provincial forces such as the Nagarik Unmukti Party, whose support is rooted in the marginalised Tharu community, suggests such groups can still profit from existing parties not paying attention to long-standing grievances. The NUP has lent its support to the UML-Maoist coalition, although it is unclear whether it will formally join the government unless one of its leaders, Resham Chaudhary, is released from prison. Chaudhary is alleged to be the key mastermind behind the 2015 clash in Tikapur, which claimed nine lives. Prior to the political reconfiguration set off by Dahal's surprise twist, the Nepali Congress, at the head of the incumbent government, had rushed through an ordinance to release Chaudhary in order to win his party's support.

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Despite a lacklustre performance by the Maoists that brought them only 32 seats, Dahal now finds himself leading a coalition government. It was the Maoists who brought into the mainstream the idea of a secular and republican Nepal, but their penchant for opportunist politics has turned them into power-brokers in a fragmented polity, little different from the political establishment they once fought to depose. Although the Maoists emerged as the biggest party in the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, they have since then seen their support base either eroded due to disenchantment or succumbing to the opportunities offered by other parties. Now that they are back in the driver's seat, it remains to be seen how the party will negotiate both the demands of the coalition - including the desires of the CPN-UML - and the anti-federalist tendencies shown by the RPP and the RSP.

For the CPN-UML, Dahal's U-turn comes as a blessing. Oli is now the kingmaker despite suffering a heavy defeat and several of his key aides losing their seats in the election. Oli's primary goal had been to break the NC-Maoists coalition, which created a formidable opposition to the UML after he was ousted from power in the aftermath of his fallout with Dahal. But in a clear sign of Oli's political astuteness, he relinquished the prime minister's post to Dahal while ensuring his party did not lose out in the power-sharing arrangement.

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As for the Nepali Congress, the fracas has left the party in disarray. Deuba's unwillingness to cede the prime ministership means the party has lost out on key government positions not just at the national, but also the provincial level. It is now likely that all of Nepal's seven provinces will form UML-Maoist coalition governments. There had already been voices against Deuba within the Congress, and this loss will give them further ammunition.

Nepal's turbulent politics has seen new paradigms emerge this time around, particularly in the rise of forces such as the RSP. However, the ambition to gain a foothold in government means the RSP will face existential questions in the days to come. Its performance will be under acute observation, not just from its opponents but also its supporters. The hope that new political representatives will further a more inclusive society must be tempered, for ambition rather than social justice lies at the heart of Nepali politics, as seen in recent days. Whether this will mean further political instability in the next five years, or whether the ruling coalition can smooth out the differences contained in its patchwork alliance, remains to be seen.

Amish Raj Mulmi is the author of 'All Roads Lead North: Nepal's Turn to China' (2021). His writings have appeared in Al Jazeera, Roads and Kingdoms and Mint Lounge, among others. He is a consulting editor at Writer's Side Literary Agency. Amish covers Nepal as a regular contributor to Himal Briefs.

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