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Narratives on Nepal's Coalition Politics

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ABSTRACT

On 2nd July 2024, the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML) struck a power-sharing deal with its earlier nemesis, the Nepali Congress (NC), and formed a new coalition. Surprisingly, UML left its ruling ally, the Maoist Center (MC) barely four months after joining hands. Coalition politics in Nepal ages old but this newly formed coalition nonplussed the analyst and political sphere. There are scattered and obstinate market narratives regarding this coalition. A gap exists in thematically framing those narrations. Therefore, this paper thematically presents those scattered narrations under three levels: individual, state, and system. At the individual level, the insecure leadership of Deuba and Oli alongside the contemptuous leadership of Oli and Prachanda paved the way for this coalition. At the state level, unstable politics and governance are greases towards this coalition. At the system level, geopolitics mustered NC and UML leaders to ally to form this coalition. This paper uses an inductive method and develops themes by analyzing secondary data from expert interviews.

Keywords: Coalition, Nepal, United Marxist Leninist, Nepali Congress, Politics

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I Introduction

On 2nd June 2024, the Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) left its ally Maoist Center (MC) and joined hands with the Nepali Congress (NC) to form a new coalition government. This abrupt coalition surprised the political sphere although hasty coalition changes are old political practice in Nepal.

In the 2017 AD general election, UML and MC allied and formed the government under Prime Minister K P Oli (chairperson of UML). In 2021 AD, this coalition broke undergoing interparty rifts and differences in power sharing. The NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba became the new Prime Minister with support from MC and a fraction of UML parliamentarians (myRepublica, 2021). This coalition continued until the 2022 AD general elections.

In the general elections, the Democrat and Left alliance was formed by NC with MC and other smaller left parties (The Kathmandu Post, 2022). This coalition won the maximum seats with NC becoming the largest party and MC securing the third position.

Surprisingly, MC chairperson Prachanda renounced the electoral coalition with NC and became the Prime Minister with support from electoral rival UML (Reuters, 2022). After three months, on March 2023, Prachanda broke the coalition with UML and formed a new government with support from NC and other small parties (myRepublica, 2024). Unsurprisingly, Prachanda again left this coalition with NC after one year. In March 2024, he formed a new left-dominated government with support from UML, Rashtriya Swatanta Party (RSP), and other smaller parties (Ranjan & Bhattarai, 2024).

Prachanda has flip-flopped coalition partners thrice after the 2022 AD general elections. During this turnaround, he secured the Chief Executive position of the country with support from either the largest party NC, or the second largest UML.

Contrary to Prachanda's consistent switch, two major parties UML and NC formed a coalition and toppled Prachanda's government supporting K P Oli as the new Prime Minister. This new coalition consists of the two largest political parties agreeing to share the post of Prime Minister after two years (PTI, 2024).

The two major parties haven't proffered significant reasons behind the necessity of this coalition. The market is filled with diverse narratives from political analysts, journalists, politicians, and businesspersons. These diverse opinions are disorganized and lack a systematic

exploration. This paper attempts to fill this gap by thematically analyzing those narrations and categorizing them into three layers: individual, state, and system. It strives to answer the distributed narrations of the market.

II Literature Review and Methodology

Altman's (2000) study of Latin America explains coalition politics as the temporal collaboration of parliamentary parties to pursue specific objectives through agreed-upon actions (p.13). Oyugi's (2006) study in Africa shows that parties collaborate due to the lack of a dominant party in the legislative assembly (p. 58). Singh has studied the development of coalition politics in India and argues today's multilayered caste and religious society cull a "Common Minimum Program" to form the government (Singh, 2019, p. 19). Adeney & Saez argue that ethnic diversity in India especially undermines the notion of unified "ethnicity" or "nationalism" and makes compromises more likely (Adeney & Saez, 2005, p. 8). While studying the coalition in Nepal's neighboring states Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Paul Brass (1968) argues that inter-party ideological differences are less decisive in the formation and breakup of government than intra-party divisions (p. 1187).

However, there are limited studies about Nepal's coalition politics. Krishna Hachhethu justifies coalition as a tool in the quest for power (Hachhethu, 2006, p. 33). He exemplifies the coalition between Left, Right, and Center from 1994 AD to 1999 AD; narrowing down ideological differences to form the government. Healy & Moktan (2023) link the length of a coalition with Nepal's political instability. Bharati accuses Nepali coalition politics of creating uncertainties by focusing on power-sharing and survival (Bharati, 2024). Former Indian ambassador to Nepal, Rakesh Sood, analogizes Nepal's coalition politics with the game of musical chairs (Sood, 2023). He diplomatically explains coalition as an instrument of sharing power. Major research defines a coalition as a tool to form the government and exercise power. However, these studies undermine the changing context of Nepali politics, especially after the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 AD. The new political parties Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and Janamat Party have a strong presence in the parliament. New corruption cases are unfolding and youth use social media to cast their prompt opinion on political issues. Regionally, China's visible influence and India's reluctance are equally influential. This paper fills the gap and attempts to accommodate these changing contexts focusing on the current NC-UML coalition.

This paper is qualitative, follows thematic analysis, and utilizes an inductive method. It collects secondary data from television interviews. It selects interviews with experts from diverse fields relevant to coalition politics. The following are a few experts considered for this paper: Puranjan Acharya (Political Analyst), Sudheer Sharma (Editor), Arun Subedi (Businessperson and Geopolitics Expert), Shekhar Koirala (Central Member of NC), Shankar Pokharel (General Secretary of UML), Bhimarjun Acharya (Constitutional Expert and Political Analyst), and Sanjeev Pokharel (Anthropologist). This paper collects narratives from these experts and thematically comprehends them at individual, state, and system levels. At the individual level, it analyzes the leadership and its implications for the coalition between NC and UML. At the state level, the paper analyzes internal party politics, social perception, and its implication on coalition formation. At the state level, the paper examines the role of external powers China, India, and the United States in forming this coalition.

III Individual Level

The first theme at the individual level is insecure leadership. Political analyst Puranjan Acharya questions NC Chairperson Deuba and his wife's sprint visit to UML chairperson Oli's house without inter-party discussions. He hints that Deuba's rush is a threat after the arrest of Bechan Jha and Pratik Thapa (Tikaram Yatri, 2024a). Author and ex-editor Sudheer Sharma second Acharya's viewpoint. Sharma argues that the arrest of Bechan Jha is the reason behind NC chairperson Deuba's rush to meet UML chairperson Oli and form this new coalition (Sudheer Sharma, 2024).

Bechan Jha was a wanted criminal for his involvement as a liaison between politicians and bureaucrats in the Bhutanese refugee scam. The police arrested Bechan Jha on 29th June 2024. Sudheer Sharma and Puranjan Acharya connected Jha's arrest with Dr. Araju Rana, NC chairperson Deuba's wife, who is implicated in the fake Bhutanese refugee scam (Poudel, 2023). Henceforth, Jha's arrest developed insecurity in Deuba. , they rushed to meet with UML chairperson Oli and formed a new coalition to protect themselves from possible corruption charges. Sharma and Acharya's opinion was validated after the coalition transferred the police officer investigating the scam and responsible for arresting Bechan Jha (Nepalkhabar.com, 2024).

Similarly, another form of political insecurity is seen in UML chairperson Oli. There were media reports that former president and UML leader Bidhya Devi Bhandari renewed her party membership and plans to return to UML politics (Bhattarai, 2024). Bhandari was also perceived as a threat to Oli and second-generation leadership. Sudheer Sharma said Bhandari was interested in the left alliance government including the Maoist Center (Sudheer Sharma, 2024). Henceforth, Oli's insecurity inside the party inspired him to break the existing coalition with MC and return to power.

The second theme at the individual level is the contemptuous leadership by Maoist Chairperson Prachanda and UML Chairperson Oli. Prachanda dealt with two major parties with total contempt. He frequently changed sides between NC and UML and made a mockery of democracy (Global TV HD, 2024b). His statements of having a "magic number" in the parliament and bringing havoc in the country (myRepublica, 2024) defy his party's third position in the parliament. Sudheer Sharma also agrees with Acharya but contemplates Prachanda's behavior as "ambitious". He argues that Prachanda wasn't mandated to become Prime Minister as people voted his party third in general elections (Sudheer Sharma, 2024). However, Prachanda switched the top two parties to remain in the position of Prime Minister.

The UML Chairperson Oli also had a history of contemptuous leadership. Historically, his taunts, speeches, and activities have dwarfed his partners. Furthermore, Puranjan Acharya states Oli has a vendetta against the Maoists. He recalls his political advisor tenure with Prime Minister Girija Koirala when Oli advised Koirala to use more force against Maoists to wipe them out (Tikaram Yatri, 2024a). Oli and Prachada feel uncomfortable with each other as they are from different universities (Tikaram Yatri, 2024a, 3:10).

Their differences derailed the selection of the chief of SEBON (Security Board of Nepal) (The Kathmandu Post, 2024, p. 3). Oli also criticized the fiscal budget and asked for its theoretical orientation (The Kathmandu Post, 2024). Sudheer Sharma adds a brick to this contemptuous leadership. Oli was furious and retorted when Prachanda asked him to coordinate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Sudheer Sharma, 2024). Their contemptuous leadership and corresponding differences paved the way for the new coalition of NC and UML.

IV State Level

The first theme at the state level is political instability. Nepal has been facing dire political instability at the federal and provincial levels. Frequent government changes, power

sharing between political parties, and unfolding corruption cases have enraged the general public. The coalition partners accuse the constitution of this instability (Image Channel HD, 2024).

Puranjan Acharya claims people will tear down this constitution (Tikara Yatri, 2024). Analysts and politicians blame the constitutional arrangement for political instability (Image Channel HD, 2024; Tikaram Yatri, 2024b). The general secretary of UML, Shankar Pokharel, blames proportional representation for political instability (Image Channel HD, 2024). He claims low threshold and proportional representation are forming small parties. Small parties are impeding two-party political stability. Politician Pokharel advocates that stability is achieved by transforming the proportional representation and upgrading the threshold to 5% via constitutional amendment (Image Channel HD, 2024, 37:00). Politician Pokharel believes in the two-party system and blames small parties for the instability. However, anthropologist Sanjeev Pokharel claims that politicians aren't implementing the provisions of proportional representation and federalism; rather they are narrating constitutional flaws to justify their coalition (Kantipur TV HD, 2024a). Constitutional expert Bhimarjun Acharya accuses the NC and UML of their incompetency in implementing the inclusive constitution (Kantipur TV HD, 2024b). He claims the big parties are narrating constitutional amendments for political stability to hide their incapacibilities. But politician Shekhar Koirala differs from Acharya and Pokharel. He agrees that a politically stable government is required to manage constitutional discrepancies, and economic development issues (Sajha Katha, 2024). Although there are different interpretations, political instability has greased NC and UML to come together and form a coalition. However, only time will tell if they could amend the constitution.

The second theme narrated in the market for this coalition is good governance to avoid political threats. For years, Nepal has failed to spend capital budget. Lagging infrastructure projects and mass outward migration for jobs and education are the sources of discontent. Businessman Arun Subedi demonstrates slug economic condition and a timid business sector behind the people's dissatisfaction (Global TV HD, 2024). Public Purchase Act, Foreign Investment Act, and many policies require amendments. Subedi argues that the Prachanda-led coalition of small parties couldn't manage economic harshness. Good governance requires comprehension among the largest political parties.

Puranjan Acharya highlights the maladministration and corruption in the provinces. The provincial government is blindly allocating funds to different religious federations. They are building temples and religious institutions (Tikaram Yatri, 2024a, 34:00). Such chaos and disorder require major political parties' intervention to amend existing laws and policies. In addition, such chaos develops challenges for existing political parties. New political forces rise amid dissatisfaction from people. In the 2022 AD general elections, new political forces like Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP), and Janamat Party (JP) won prominent positions. Similarly, independent Mayor Balen Shah defeated major political party candidates in the capital city. Henceforth, this NC-UML coalition paved the way to serve public dissatisfaction and provide better governance.

V System Level

At the system level, the market narrates geopolitics as a theme for the NC-UML coalition. The rise of China and its visible influence raised concerns for the southern neighbor. Puranjan Acharya says Sher Bahadur Deuba, the chairperson of NC, was waiting for signals from India to topple the Prachanda-led government and form the NC-UML coalition. Without any international “signal” Deuba won’t rush to meet with Oli before party discussion (Global TV HD, 2024a, 32:00). Sudheer Sharma links the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and “controlled stability” vis-a-vis coalition politics. China wants Nepal to sign the BRI implementation agreement. On one end, Prachanda convinced Indian Prime Minister Modi that Nepal would stay away from BRI. On the other hand, the BRI implementation agreement was on the discussion agenda of a foreign secretary meeting between Nepal and China (Sudheer Sharma, 2024, 20:00; The Kathmandu Post, 2024). India’s reluctance towards BRI and Nepal’s ambition to sign the implementation agreement toppled the existing government and formed the NC-UML coalition. Arun Subedi defies this “controlled stability” theory. He argues this coalition is formed to tackle existing international “political engineering”. Unlike Acharya and Sharma, he says a stable domestic coalition feebles international influence and encourages Nepal’s better hand in international negotiations (Global TV HD, 2024). Politician Sekhar Koirala also presents this coalition as an opportunity to enhance Nepal’s international prestige (Sajha Katha, 2024). There are two interpretations of the geopolitical theme. One narrates this NC-UML coalition is a result of international influence whereas the other explains this coalition is formed to feeble the influence.

VI Conclusion

Individual insecure and contemptuous leadership stimulated this NC-UML coalition. There are also narratives of geopolitics responsible for this coalition. These narrations present a selfish and opportunistic leadership of NC and UML. However, there are also optimistic narrations of political stability, development, and good governance at the state level. Only time will tell if the NC-UML coalition is to secure the self-interest of the leadership or if they aspire to work toward stability, development, and good governance.

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