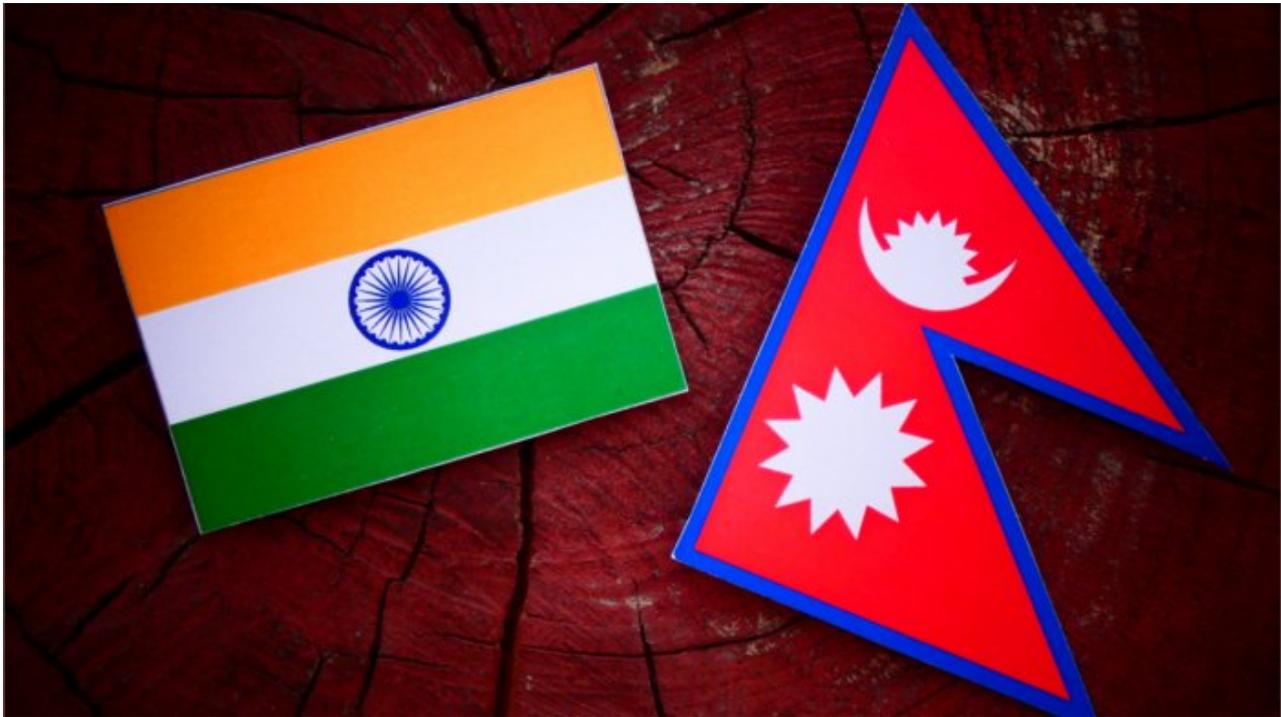


India's influence in Nepal politics shrinks

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At a time when Nepal is battling with the Covid-19 pandemic, its political stability, once again, has been pushed to the brink. Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (K P Oli), the care-taker Prime Minister of Nepal lost a vote of confidence which he sought on May 10, 2021.

Ironically, Oli had dissolved the House of Representatives in December 2020 which was later reinstated by the Supreme Court. In the confidence vote, 93 MPs voted for Oli while 124 were against him.

Out of the total strength of 271 members in the Lower House, 28 members of K P Oli's party, CPN-UML, including two former prime ministers - Jahnath Khanal and Madhav Nepal - remained absent, and 15 other members remained neutral in the voting procedure.

Reappointed as the PM as per Article 76(3) of the Constitution, K P Oli, again, failed to prove majority despite carving out an alliance with a terai-based Madheshi Janata Samajwadi Party.

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As the political scenario turned grim, the President dissolved parliament on May 22 and declared fresh elections to be held on November 12 and 19. While such political fitfulness hardly surprises anymore, factionalism in Nepal politics does not seem to have lost its charm.

Following the promulgation of the Constitution in September 2015 and subsequent parliamentary elections in 2017, the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre led by Prachanda emerged victorious to form a majority government under a merger banner of Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

The merger was perceived as an end to factionalism in Communist politics. The unholy alliance, which could barely last two years, was poised with the personal and competing ambitions.

Within the UML, Oli was constantly threatened by his fellow partymen and former prime ministers Jahnath Khanal and Madhav Nepal. Similarly, Prachanda was also not out of the personal ambition of acquiring the PM position.

The merger was a calculated risk because the UML-led government preceding the present one had collapsed with Prachanda's withdrawal in 2017.

Apart from the constitutional safety net for two years, Oli's assertion of territorial nationalism against India could not yield much to his luck as factionalism only intensified to topple his government.

Factionalism among the Communists in Nepal goes back to the 1960s when the party witnessed splits on the pro-Soviet versus pro-China lines. During the three decades of the panchayat regime, Nepal witnessed seven major Communist parties functioning under the United Left Front (ULF).

The UML— a merger of two important constituents of the ULF— that has headed four governments since 1994, has always been a victim of factionalism. The Maoists have also gone through many episodes of splits.

In its present form, under the leadership of Prachanda, the party does not have the leaders like Baburam Bhattarai. While the role of the Maoists in bringing down the centuries-old monarchy and introducing democracy remain as their most important contributions to the Nepalese state, their current position in Nepal politics has been drastically minimised.

Nepalese media

The (in)direct role of India and China have also been important factors in sustaining factionalism and contributing to political instability in Nepal. In the latest political episode, Nepalese media highlighted active roles that the Chinese and Indian diplomats played in unifying or dividing the political parties.

Similarly, Oli was desperately trying to strike a balance between his pro-Chinese stand and as a new friend of India. A 'Modified' Oli, as Nepalese media observed, was getting closer to India in the last few months. As two Asian giants are into a not-so-discreet confrontation against each other, their roles in contributing to factionalism in Nepal politics cannot be undermined.

The promulgation of the new Constitution in 2015 following years of uncertainty and the subsequent Parliamentary elections were seen as movements towards political stability that the Himalayan state had been aspiring for a long time.

However, the political culture guided by personal ambitions of the political elites leading to extreme factionalism has only contributed to jeopardising the aspirations of common Nepalese. While resorting to anti-Indian rhetoric by the governments in the past and the present one alike has proved to be furthering the political ambitions of the power elite, Nepal still struggles to get a stable government, at least for a five-year term.

The prolonged political instability adds to the already deep-rooted anti-India sentiment among the political elites. With the active involvement of China, India's position in Nepal seems to be shrinking substantially.

As world's largest democracy, India should only support the spirit and principles of democracy that would contribute developing a stable political culture. A stable and democratic Nepal would best serve its citizens and the bilateral interests of India. At this point of time when the political scenario looks precarious, factionalism continues to triumph in Nepal.

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