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Nepal- Post Elections: The State of the Parties: Update No. 291

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After a delay of over two months, the interim Parliament convened on Jan 22 with the veteran 86 year old Surya Bahadur Thapa in the chair.

In all, 565 out of 601 members took the oath of office in 11 different languages, proving once again that Nepal being a multi ethnic, multi lingual country, multi cultural country, the decision to have a federal constitution appears to be the right choice of the people.

Though all parties vowed to bring in a new constitution within one year, it looks that from the way the parties took their own time to produce their list of candidates for proportional representation, that delayed the convening the parliament, it is very doubtful whether they could arrive at a new draft within the stipulated period. Even the dead line for submitting the list had to be postponed twice by the Election Commission to accommodate the parties!

There were many internal problems in the parties in choosing the candidates for the PR list. There was an acrimonious discussion in the UCPN (M) - (Dahal's) central committee meeting that accused Dahal of having included his own candidates for the list without consulting other senior colleagues like Baburam Bhattarai and Narayan Kaji Shrestha. Seats were supposed to have been sold to the highest bidders in some of the other parties. There appears to be a need to review the entire mode of proportional election system. One way could be for the parties to give a prioritised list even before the elections to avoid "horse trading" that is alleged to have occurred.

The Parties do not seem to understand the urgency of the situation and the mandate given by the people to get on with the constitution making has already been ignored!

Then there was the controversy over who would call for the assembly- the President or the interim Chairman of the council who conducted the elections. This controversy unfortunately was raised by the President's office itself. It was finally discovered that the prerogative is not with the President.

The second issue was whether the President and Vice President could continue in their posts when fresh elections for another interim assembly had taken place. The Supreme Court on a PIL petition filed, declared that the present incumbents President and Vice President could continue till a fresh constitution is in place. Yet the UML and UCPN (M) are bent upon having a fresh election for the post of President and Vice President. The President, Ram Baran Yadav, having served over five years could gracefully leave in view of the controversy surrounding his continuation. Yet he is still digging his heels and this is another controversy that has unnecessarily arisen.

All the parties are having problems in electing their parliamentary leaders and for the Nepali Congress this is crucial as their leader would be the Prime minister being the party with the largest number of candidates.

The top three leaders of the Nepali Congress Sushil Koirala, Sher Bahadur Deuba and Ramachandra Paudel have ambitions of their own to be the next prime minister. Sushil has nothing else to recommend except in carrying the Koirala name, while Deuba had been a prime minister thrice and in one instance was openly declared to be incompetent. Paudel unlike Robert Bruce tried many times to be the Prime minister in the last assembly but failed. The talks amongst the three continued till late night of 25th and no consensus could be arrived at. An election had to be held. With Paudel and thirty of his followers throwing in their lot with Koirala, the latter won with 105 votes as against 89 votes for Deuba.

This election showed that there had been no real merger of the Deuba group with the main Nepali Congress groups and that the patched up merger has shown cracks once again.

With this kind of a split in the ranks of the Nepali Congress one wonders how they are going to carry on the government and produce a constitution within one year as promised. With their house in disorder how do they expect other parties to support them to produce the constitution which is still the main task of the present assembly? It looks that they are out to destroy the immense faith the people have placed on them to provide stability and move on!

It would have been much better and in keeping with the voters' expectations if all the three top leaders had stepped aside and nominated a younger group to run the government. As I had said many times earlier, there is no dearth of young and capable leaders within the Nepali Congress.

The other parties appear to be in no better position and they are also riven by factions.

In the UML which made a surprisingly good showing, there are four leaders vying for the two posts of chairman and leader of the parliamentary party. The four leaders are Madhav Nepal, Jhalanath Khanal, K.P.Oli and Bom Dev Gautam. The last one Gautam who is the least influential is demanding that if he is not allowed the post of party chairman, he should at least be given the post of the parliamentary party leadership. Madhav Nepal has a natural claim as he was unseated by his own colleague Jhalanath Khanal by unfair means in making a deal with the Maoists! It is said that KP Oli has a limited following but will be the most acceptable to the other major party Nepali Congress! Yet, it looks that Madhav Nepal is leading.

The UCPN (M) led by Dahal is also having internal problems. In the central committee meeting held on January 18, Dahal was severely criticised by the party members for the election debacle. Many including Baburam Bhattarai sought a change in the leadership. There was also a demand for decentralization of power within the party. The meeting was held in a bid to reform the party and discuss the political strategy. The political paper presented by Dahal gave 10 external and 10 internal causes for the humiliating defeat. The point that emerged was that Dahal was no longer the “unquestioned chief” of the party” and the possibility of a further split in the party after Baidya’s exit cannot be ruled out.

It is the Madhesi parties that have realised that fragmentation of the Madhesi groups had resulted in their poor showing. Mahanta Thakur admitted that the defeat in the elections has weakened “the Madhesi strength” in the Parliament, but added bravely that they would not stop their struggle for equal rights! Three of the parties- the TMDP, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Nepal and Sadhbhavana party are on the verge of uniting and others may join.

One cannot but remember the efforts of late Gajendra Narain Singh who fought for the rights of Madhesis. In the 12th death anniversary meeting held on 24 January, members of all the major parties attended the function and praised the contributions made by G.N.Singh for the Terain cause. Daman Nath Dungana ex speaker in expressing his anguish over the fragmentation of the Madhesi groups said that another Madhesi movement may be necessary to safeguard the Madhesi interests. The Nepali Congress leader Amresh Kumar Singh said that G.N.Singh’s contribution was unparalleled as he raised the issue of Madhesi identity, citizenship and federalism at a time when talking on such issues was tantamount to challenging the state!

The focus of all the parties should have been in getting the new constitution on time within one year as promised and as expected by the electorate. Instead the parties are indulging in petty squabbling and in pursuit of power, thus forgetting their main task.

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