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The Coalition Government led by K.P. Oli has finally decided to move amendments to constitution. These relate to two of the three major issues that had led to the present agitation. These amendments were suggested by the former Sushil Koirala led government but held in abeyance for over a month for reasons best known to them.

The incidents in Rajbiraj on the 23rd of this month must have finally moved the government to proceed with the amendments. Over 54 lives have been lost so far in this agitation.

These amendments relate to inclusive and proportional representation of Madhesi communities in all state organs and demarcation of electoral constituencies on the basis of population.

Media reports indicate that the Madhes centred groups have informally agreed to the amendments, though the groups themselves claim that the issue of delimitation of provincial boundaries is yet to be settled. The agitation is therefore likely to continue unless good sense prevails on both sides to quickly resolve the remaining issue.

Upendra Yadav has declared that the bottom line for the agitation to be ended is the demarcation of the federal boundaries. Surprisingly, he has opposed the idea of a referendum in the five disputed districts of Kailali, Kanchanpur, Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa districts. This suggestion of a referendum was mooted by the Maoist group led by Dahal. Another suggestion of the division of the five disputed districts has met with strong resistance from the people of the districts themselves!

While one cannot be sure of the western districts of Kailali and Kanchanpur, it is most likely that in any referendum while Sunsari may vote for the Madhes province, the other two Jhapa and Morang may vote to remain with the other hill districts. This is perhaps the reason why Upendra Yadav appears to be strongly opposed.

Referendum would have been the best solution and this was suggested by me long ago even before the new constitution was promulgated. But then the idea of a "Federal Commission" was mischievously suggested just to postpone a decision on the whole issue!

Rajbiraj under siege:

Eye witness accounts say that Rajbiraj which appears to be the centre for the current agitation is in a state of siege and Police are said to be on a rampage. Innocent villagers are being mercilessly beaten by the Police. The death toll on the incidents on 23rd was said to be ten and not three as admitted by the Police.

Thousands of agitators were said to have defied the curfew- a government building was set fire to. An ambulance carrying a patient and a truck carrying medicines was also attacked. A large number of Policemen and the agitators have been injured.

On Nepali Congress worker Dilip Kumar Sah, who had nothing to do with the agitation and who was peacefully sitting on the terrace of his house was shot dead by the Police in Rajbiraj. The Nepali Congress has demanded a probe on his killing.

Rajbiraj is said to be returning to normal today but all accounts from various quarters indicate that Police was using excessive force in dealing with the incidents. If this continues, the movement will go into the hands of extremists and the situation will get out of control. The people are seething with anger.

Talks with Madhesi Groups Fail:

On 18th November, talks between the Madhesi Parties mainly the SLMM and the major political parties failed with each side sticking to their positions. Internally, both the Nepali Congress and the UML are opposed to any further demarcation of the political boundaries while the Madhesi Groups may not discontinue their agitation even after the two constitutional amendments are passed.

Meantime, UCPN-M leader Dahal has taken the initiative to find some solution to the ongoing problems. One suggestion was to have two provinces in the south with a second Tharu dominated one, from Bardiya to Nawal Parasi. A second suggestion was to revisit the present boundaries and split some districts.

Both the proposals are not acceptable to both the UML and the Nepali Congress. They would prefer that any demarcation should be only through a political and technical panel. This will take a long time and is not acceptable to the Madhesi groups who are otherwise willing to accept a package deal.

UCPN M leader Narayan Kaji Shrestha has rightly pointed out that the UML and the Nepali Congress have not comprehended the real issues behind inclusion and federalism.

Spat with India Continues:

India bashing continues, though trucks carrying fuel and other commodities continue to come in from other checkpoints like Jogbani and Kakarbhita. Trucks carrying essential medicines are also coming through.

Another serious incident that is likely to increase the bitterness between the two countries occurred when the SSB on the Indian border is said to have fired yesterday and injured four Nepali citizens in Sunsari border. Details of the incident are not clear but there has been firing by the SSB guards on smugglers from across the border.

It has come to light that the deal with China over supply of oil and oil products has not yet been signed. There are some problems still to be solved on the question of price and the custom duties. A team of technical experts of the NOC has left for Beijing on 23rd to formalise the deal with Petro China co. ltd. One should welcome the deal and encourage Nepal to diversify its trade.

Conclusion

It is more than hundred days since the agitation started. The fragile and battered economy that has not recovered from the after effects of the earthquake is getting adversely affected and the overall growth this year is likely to be negative. Rampant hoarding and blackmarketing of essential goods is prevailing in Kathmandu valley. No action is being taken and the government appears to be too busy otherwise!

The agitation has to end and for this both the opposing groups should come down from their rigid stand. The Indo Nepal ties have also taken a beating. But there is a lesson for India too. It is time that Nepal is treated as an independent and sovereign country and the existing treaty provisions should be reviewed.

Special relations have lost their meaning. Some media reports made a preposterous statement that India is after Nepal's hydro power and its fresh water. Nothing could be farther from truth. In India, for future projections of power requirements, Nepal's hydro power potential has not been factored into at all.

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