

Breakthrough in Nepal

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The election of Jhalanath Khanal as Prime Minister of a majority Left coalition government in Nepal offers the young republic the best chance it has had in 20 months to finish the task of writing a new Constitution and completing its peace process. It is also a virtual slap in the face of those within the Indian establishment who spent the better part of a year working behind the scenes to keep the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) out of power even at the cost of political stability. Nepal's promising political journey, which began five years ago with the signing of the historic 12-point understanding between the Maoists and the other parties, went through twists and turns before and after the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections — and lost its way in the aftermath of the resignation of Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal or 'Prachanda' as Prime Minister in May 2009. Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Unified Marxists-Leninists became Prime Minister with the support of the Nepali Congress and a number of smaller parties but the coalition's adversarial stance towards the Maoists made the new dispensation dysfunctional from the start.

Mr. Nepal's resignation last year should have paved the way for a national consensus government led by the Maoists, the largest party by far in the Constituent Assembly. However, the personal political ambitions of various leaders within the UML, the NC, and the Madhesi factions, the Interim Constitution's rigid rules of business, and the unhelpful attitude of New Delhi combined to produce a repeatedly enacted farce. This involved the CA being asked to vote over and over again for the NC's Ramchandra Poudel, who was never able to muster support from more than half of the required 300 legislators. On Thursday, Prachanda withdrew his name and announced that the Maoists were joining hands with the UML of Mr. Khanal and the new coalition won easily. Top priority must now be given to crafting the new Constitution, which effectively means resolving key issues, notably the new state's federal structure and political system. Of equal importance is the peace process. With the departure of the United Nations from Nepal, the fate of the Maoist cantonments is now entirely in the hands of a special all-party committee headed by the Prime Minister. The fact that the Prime Minister is a leader the Maoists have backed opens a door for the speedy resolution of the integration question. It is in the interests of democracy that Maoist combatants be either integrated into a democratised Nepal army and into the security forces or demobilised and suitably rehabilitated. The NC and some UML leaders opposed integration. The expectation is that Prime Minister Khanal will have a more rational and helpful approach to this vital question.

P.S.

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