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Merger of the two left-wing government parties¹

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When the two parties CPN-UML and CPN-MC formed a Left Alliance in early October 2017 in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, many observers doubted that this alliance would work. Cooperation between these parties had always proved difficult in the past. Even then, the leading politicians declared that they actually wanted to form a single party. On May 17, 2018, this merger to the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) took place after a long struggle for details and questions of power within the party.

Even the formation of the left-wing electoral platform had not turned out to be quite easy. In particular, the significant reduction of the available election mandates was a major point of contention, but was ultimately handled in a surprisingly disciplined manner by the two party leaders. This was a prerequisite for the overwhelming success of the Left Alliance in direct elections.



Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli on the merger of the left-wing parties (Kathmandu Post, 17/05/2018)

¹ A German version of this article has been published in the journal *Südasiens*, 2/2018, June 2018

On 15 February 2018, the two Left Alliance parties formed the central government with Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli as prime minister. The executive branch in six of the seven provinces is also in their hands, as, with the exception of Province 2, they have full absolute majorities everywhere.

Difficult preliminary talks

Since then, however, the process of the complete merger of the two left-wing parties has stagnated. Data mentioned in this regard elapsed repeatedly. It was clear that, against the background of the imminent dissolution of the old party structures and committees, various power issues had to be clarified. In contrast to the selection of candidates for the elections, the political future of those politicians who previously saw themselves more or less safely established at the upper levels of their parties was often at stake.

A particular focus of this discussion was how many politicians from each of the two parties should be considered. Originally a share of 60:40 had been mentioned in favor of the previous CPN-UML. The closer the decision came, the clearer the CPN-MC politicians spoke of a 50:50 ratio. CPN-MC had received only about one third of the votes in recent elections compared to UML. In the end, they agreed on a middle course. For example, the Central Committee (CC) of the new party was formed with 441 persons, 241 of whom came from the previous CPN-UML. The new NCP will be led by a dual leadership, KP Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal, until the next party conference. Only then will new elections take place regardless of the current party background.

But these were all decisions made by the two party leaders Oli and Dahal. Dissatisfaction in both parties was high in the ranks behind and discussions are likely to continue for some time. They could be a breeding ground for intra-party factional struggles that are so typical of all Nepalese parties.

Failed social inclusion

What is far more serious is that there can be no talk at all of appropriate inclusion of all social groups within the upper levels of the new NCP. Both mother parties, like all Nepalese parties, were dominated by men from the upper Hindu monarchs, especially Bahuns. These have identified the now lower number of items among themselves. For example, although the constitution stipulates that at least 33 percent of a party's Central Committee members must be women, in the new NCP this is just 16 percent. Of course, the party leaders also have an excuse for this: This would now be a special situation. The required number would only be reached with the new elections at the first party congress. It remains to be said, in fairness: In the other political parties the situation is not much different.

The disproportion also applies to the ethnic composition of the CC of the new NCP. More than 40 percent of the members come from the upper Hindu castes (Bahun and Chhetri). Dalits, Madheshi, Muslims and ethnic marginal groups are hardly represented. The same applies to the composition of the Council of Ministers.

It is still unclear whether the party name can remain. For the moment, it looks that way. Nepal Communist Party is the name of the party that was founded in exile in India in 1949. It was only around 1990 that the English name Communist Party of Nepal, combined with various additions, became established in all of Nepal's then numerous communist parties. In Nepali, however, all these parties have remained true to their original names. The problem today is that a small and completely insignificant political party is already registered with the Electoral Commission under this very name. Nevertheless, the latter Commission has registered the new party at least in the same way.

What are the consequences of the merger?

In modern Nepal, no party has yet managed to achieve such numerical dominance. These majorities could therefore be a good prerequisite for making a real difference. The Tarai party Federal Socialist Forum-Nepal (FSFN) has also been a member of the government since June 1, 2018. This means that it now actually has a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives and could therefore amend the Constitution. The latter has long been the concern of the Tarai parties and the NCP has made a commitment to this effect to the FSFN.



Modi and Oli in Maithili dress in Janakpur (Nagarik, 12/05/2018)

But it should also be noted that after 100 days in office, the new government has so far set in motion very little of what is urgently needed to actually institutionalise the new federal system and make it operational. So far, the focus has been on the merger of the two parties of the Left Alliance and foreign policy relations.

According to tradition, Prime Minister Oli first visited India in early April. India's Prime Minister Modi returned the visit a month later. At first glance, the relationship between the two countries seems relaxed, in contrast to Oli's first term of office, which was marked by the border blockades of 2015/6. However, I would not describe the relationship between the two countries as particularly cordial today either.

Oli's state visit to China is scheduled for June. The latter has been becoming increasingly active in terms of infrastructure development in Nepal for years. Against the background of discussions on road construction, power stations, airports and a connection to the Tibet Railway, expectations were raised.

The draft budget just presented for the coming financial year, the first since the introduction of the federal system, has provoked mixed reactions, even among members of the ruling party. It is said that what the country needs is a quantum leap in the economy, not incremental change. But that is probably utopian.