

## President's dinner party triggers political speculations



President Bidya Devi Bhandari's move to host a dinner party for the entire family of CPN (Maoist Center) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal and other leaders of the left alliance has triggered speculations in the political fraternity. Her "dinner policy" has been construed as a strategy of lobbying for a second term as the president.

Some people have interpreted the timing of her offer for the party to political leaders as a move to prolong her stay in office as she started hosting such parties just two months before her tenure ends. Speculations are rife also because KP Sharma Oli, chairman of the CPN-UML, President Bhandari's former party, is reportedly for continuing her as the president for another term "because she has served in the position just for two years whereas the first president remained in the position for seven years."

Officials at the secretariat at of the president's office, however, refuted that her dinner party was driven by any political intentions.

Bhandari's invitation to the Dahal family for dinner came at a time when Dahal-led Maoist Center and CPN-UML have begun talks on finding candidates for key political posts such as president, vice-president, prime minister, speaker and ministers to be picked in the next few weeks and months. Since the alliance of the two left political parties - CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist Center) - won majority seats in the recently held elections, they are most likely going to form the government and elect their candidates for the top political posts.

A team of 15 members from the Dahal family including Dahal's spouse Sita, two daughters, son-in-laws, daughter in law and grand children were invited to the president's office for dinner on Friday evening.

The President had invited a dozen of key leaders from the two left parties earlier on Sunday and had also invited vice president Nanda Bahadur Pun's family earlier this week.

According to knowledgeable sources, though President Bhandari used to invite leaders and their spouses for lunch and dinner meetings, invitation for the entire family for dinner is a 'rare' practice in Sheetal Niwas. Hosting a party for the entire family was a rare practice also during the tenure of the first President Ram Baran Yadav, they said.

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Surya Dhungel, who had worked in the secretariat team of former President Ram Barayan Yadav for seven years said that such meetings should be interpreted based on the context and motive. "We should study the objectives and context of such meetings. The President can invite her relatives and friends and sometime leaders for political consultations and meetings," said Dhungel.

With the term of President Bhandari expected to expire in around two months, some politicians and public have interpreted such meetings in the context of political parties searching candidates for the top post. But, dismissing such speculations, press advisor to President Bhandari, Madhav Sharma said that the president's meeting with the Dahal family was merely a personal dinner meeting with the family.

"Dahal's family has been recovering from the grief of their son who died just a few months ago. The President invited them to express her sympathy to the family. Interpreting it as political lobbying is ill-intended," Sharma said. He further added that Bhandari has never expressed her interest in a second term to anyone. "If the leaders find her deserving and realized her need yet again, they could ask her about her interest but President Bhandari will never come forward for lobbying to repeat her term," added Sharma.

According to sources, UML leadership is divided over whether to give continuity to President Bhandari or replace her with a new face. UML Chair Oli is said to be in the mood to give continuity to Bhandari, who has to leave the post within two years due to constitutional provision of early election, while many others including his close aides have stood in favor of giving a chance to other leaders.

Sources said UML leaders including Ishwar Pokharel and Bishnu Paudel, who are close to Oli, have urged the party chief to choose either Madhav Nepal or Jhahnath Khanal for presidency arguing that the management of two leaders is crucial for the smooth functioning of the party.

They are of the view that delays in giving a dignified exit to Nepal and Khanal would widen the factional divisions in the party and could possibly put the party establishment in a difficult position after the planned merger with CPN (Maoist Center). Former speaker Subash Nembang, who also headed the Constituent Assembly, is also said to be eyeing the post of President.

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