

## Will left parties merge before new govt?



Chances of the planned merger between the CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist Center) concluding before the formation of the new government look slim as Nepal's two main left parties struggle to find a middle point to end the deadlock over the leadership and organization of the new party.

After their resounding victory in the parliamentary and provincial elections, UML and Maoist Center had announced to strike a deal on the much-hyped merger before the formation of the new government.

But leaders from both parties are now giving up hopes for the merger ahead of the government formation with interlocutors failing to break the ice on a long list of thorny issues including chairmanship of the new party.

The process of the formation of the new government is expected to start after the conclusion of the national assembly polls planned for February 7.

While the Maoist Center has insisted that there should be at least 'a framework agreement' on the planned unity, UML appears to be in the mood to resume negotiation on the merger only after resolving differences over other contentious issues including the sharing of power in the provincial governments. Negotiators from the two parties are currently working on giving the final touch to the power-sharing deal for six provinces where the left is expected to form the government.

Despite rounds of formal and informal negotiation at various levels, the two parties still appear poles apart on leadership, organization and ideology of the merged entity.

Leaders said that the biggest contention is over the leadership of the new party and other key portfolios.

Maoist Center Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who has publicly staked claim to the premiership, has said that Oli should also be ready to rotate the party chairmanship. UML leadership, though positive about rotating the government leadership, has put forth party chairmanship as a non-negotiable issue.

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According to leaders involved in the negotiation, UML leaders have offered to create a special portfolio for Dahal which would be the second highest position in the party structure. Dahal has rejected the idea, according to three leaders of his party. Maoist Center leader Mahendra Bahadur Shahi on Saturday said that there would be no merger if Oli refuses to rotate party chairmanship with Dahal.

Besides leadership, the two parties also face some challenge to manage the second rung leaders. In absence of a clear second-in-command, several leaders in both parties have long been projecting themselves as the potential leader. The parties seek to seal a deal on organization with 60:40 spilled in the organization from the lower committee to the higher order.

With both sides expressing readiness to give space to the philosophy of Maoism and Marxism, the two parties are expected to face little disputes over the ideology of the merged entity.

With the self-imposed deadline for the merger looming closer, Maoist leaders are stressing the need for finalizing the issues of merger and power-sharing simultaneously.

Talking to reporters at an interaction in Chitwan on Saturday, Maoist Center Chairman Dahal reiterated that the unification should take place before the formation of the new government.

"Completing the unification process before the government formation would be in line with the spirit of the public mandate and our joint manifesto," said Dahal.

Maoists' desperation to strike a deal on unification before the formation of the new government is understandable as many in the party think that the talks on the merger after the formation of the new government would reduce the former rebel party's bargaining power.

Many in UML think that it will be easier to press the Maoists to agree to the terms and conditions of party unification once there is an agreement on government formation. The Maoist Center won't be able to break the alliance at least for two years once the new government sees daylight.

A UML standing committee member close to Oli said that the party is not in a mood to share the leadership of the unified party.

"It won't happen. Even our chairman agrees to this as the entire party rank and file is against it. It would be a political suicide if Oli agrees to rotate the party chairmanship between him and Dahal," said the leader.

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