



COMMUNIST RIFT PLUNGES NEPAL'S COALITION INTO CRISIS



Pushpa Kamal Dahal

Splits within Nepal's communist-dominated ruling coalition plunged the Himalayan nation into crisis on Monday as a Marxist-Leninist party said it would withdraw support after the Maoist Prime Minister backed an Opposition candidate for the presidency. Elected in December, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' formed a seven-party coalition including his own Maoist Centre party, the Communist Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) party and five other smaller groups. Last week, Mr. Prachanda infuriated the UML by pledging support for the Opposition Nepali Congress's presidential candidate, Ram Chandra Paudel.

Mr. Prachanda had earlier agreed to support a UML candidate for the presidency, according to politicians in the coalition.

Members of both Houses of Parliament and members of seven provincial Assemblies will cast their votes on March 9 to elect the President.

Senior UML figure Bishnu Paudel, who serves as Deputy Prime Minister in charge of finance, said he and all eight Ministers of his party had submitted resignation letters to the Prime Minister as Mr. Prachanda failed to "honour the consensus" that was reached when forming the government.

"We'll also withdraw support to the coalition government," Mr. Paudel said.

3.9 The percentage by which India's fertilizer imports rose in January to 19.04 lakh tonnes compared to the year-ago period, according to the Fertilizer Ministry data. The country imported 18.33 lakh tonnes of fertilizers during January 2022. There has been a falling trend in fertilizer prices in the international market. Urea prices showed a decline of 44.26%. PTI

SC RAPS GOVT. ON PLEA ON ED CHIEF'S TERM

The Supreme Court reacted sharply on Monday that it is not concerned with politics when the government claimed that the opposition to the "piecemeal" tenure extensions granted to Enforcement Directorate Director S.K. Mishra is by members of political parties trying to subvert ongoing investigations against their leaders.

A Bench of Justices B.R. Gavai and Aravind Kumar said the top court, in September 2021, had specifically said there would be no further extensions for Mr. Mishra. However, the government, within two months of the judgment, made amendments to the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) Act by way of promulgation of an ordinance in November 2021.

These amendments had paved the way for the government to stretch Mr. Mishra's tenure by a year till November 2022. On the strength of these changes, the government had again given the 1984-batch Indian Revenue Service officer his third extension in November 2022. He is expected to continue till November 18, 2023.

The petitions filed by Congress party spokesperson Randeep Singh

Surjewala, Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra, social activist and General Secretary of Madhya Pradesh Congress Mahila Committee Jaya Thakur have argued that the "piecemeal" extensions affect "institutional independence".

"All the petitions have been filed by people whose party leaders are facing serious charges," Solicitor General Tushar Mehta submitted.

He said the petitions were filed on the basis of personal motive and oblique interest. "We are not about politics here," the Court responded. The Court's amicus curiae, senior advocate K.V. Vishwanathan, said that this case did not concern just one officer. He said the larger issue was to "protect or insulate the institution from the executive".

"The Union claims there is an amendment to the CVC Act, and there is an extension given on November 17, 2021. My submission is keeping in line the long line of judgments in Vineet Narain, Common Cause cases. The extensions are illegal," he submitted.

The Court listed the case for detailed hearing on March 21.

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AGNIPATH SCHEME IS IN NATIONAL INTEREST, SAYS DELHI HIGH COURT



Short stint: The court stated that the four years' training period would instil a sense of nationalism among the recruits. AFP Court says the scheme is a well-thought-out policy decision of the Centre; it dismisses pleas related to recruitment under previous advertisements

The Delhi High Court on Monday upheld the validity of the Agnipath scheme launched by the Union government for recruitment in the armed forces.

Dismissing a bunch of petitions, a Division Bench of Chief Justice Satish Chandra Sharma and Justice Subramonium Prasad said the scheme was introduced in national interest. It maintained that from the perusal of the material on record, the scheme was a well-thought-out policy decision of the Government of India. "We have extensively gone through the Agnipath Scheme, and can conclusively state that this scheme was made in national interest, to ensure that the armed forces are better equipped," it said.

Responding to the petitions that challenged the constitutional validity of the scheme, the court said "it's needless to state the four years' training would also instil a sense of nationalism in the recruits", which would "prompt

them to use their skills and focus on the development of the country".

"Such advantages cannot be overlooked and dislodged on the basis of the apprehension that after four years such individuals may be unemployed or may take to illegal or unethical activities," it said.

Besides the pleas challenging the Agnipath scheme, the court dismissed petitions relating to the recruitment for the armed forces under certain previous advertisements, while clarifying that such candidates do not have the right to seek recruitment.

"The petitioners have no right to claim that the recruitment under the 2019 Notification and CEE Examination needs to be completed. Furthermore, both promissory estoppel and legitimate expectation cannot be applied in the instant case to force the Government to complete the recruitment keeping in mind larger public interest," the court said.

DEADLINE FOR HIGHER PENSION EXTENDED TILL MAY 3; WEB LINK UP

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) on Monday enabled a link on the members' section of its website for employees and pensioners to opt for higher provident fund pension based on actual salary. The EPFO also extended the time for submitting the options till May 3. The deadline set by the Supreme Court was March 3. The decision is part of implementing the Supreme Court verdict on November 4, 2022 allowing pensioners and workers who were members of the Employees Pension Scheme (EPS), 1995 as on September 1, 2014 to opt for higher pension. "The joint option for employees who were in service prior to September 1, 2014, and continued to be in service on or after September 1, 2014, but could not exercise joint option under the Employees' Pension Scheme can do so now on or before May 3, 2023," the EPFO said on its website. There is a separate Web link for employees who retired before

September 1, 2014 to validate their joint options with the employer.

Gurmukh Singh, president, National Confederation of Retirees, which is an all-India federation of associations of retired employees, said in a letter to Central Provident Fund Commissioner Neelam Shami Rao on Monday that forcing about 25,000 pensioners who retired before September 1, 2014 and did not use the then non-existent provisions for submitting joint options under paragraphs 11(3) and 11(4) of the EPS, to verify their joint options is illogical.

"This is surely an action of inconsiderate high handedness on your part and quite unprecedented ever and has been unleashed on old, frail, and poor senior citizens who had all along toiled hard in their working lives to build and strengthen the nation's economy. It is unfair, unethical and devoid of any logic," Mr. Singh said.

THE NEW START TREATY ON PAUSE



War sounds: U.S. President Barack Obama and then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev sign the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in Prague in 2010. AFP

What is the history of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty? What does this decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin mean for the global arms control architecture? What does it mean for other nuclear powers?

The story so far:

On February 23, on the eve of the first anniversary of his country's "special military operation" in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow was unilaterally suspending the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty with the U.S., stating that the West was trying to destroy Russia. Making the announcement at the end of his nearly two-hour-long state of the nation address to Russian lawmakers, Mr. Putin said that Moscow ought to stand ready to resume nuclear weapons tests if the U.S. does. This move would end a global ban in place on nuclear weapons tests since Cold War times. In response, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Mr. Putin's move was "deeply unfortunate and irresponsible".

What is the New START nuclear treaty?

About half a decade before the end of the Cold War, the then leaders of the U.S. and the erstwhile Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, declared in a historic statement: "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

While both Moscow and Washington were aggressive in their one-upmanship of expanding nuclear arsenals in the initial decades of the Cold War, they have engaged in bilateral talks since, albeit rocky ones, and signed multiple treaties to shrink and keep checks on each other's nuclear arsenals. The first formal dialogue, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), started between the two countries under former U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1969. The Anti-Ballistic Missile defence systems Treaty, which provided for the shooting down of incoming missiles, was signed in 1972, but the George W. Bush administration unilaterally pulled out of the pact in 2002.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), signed in 1991, expired in late 2009 and another treaty, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT or Moscow Treaty), was signed in 2002. However, the New START treaty replaced the 2002 pact and was the last remaining nuclear weapons control agreement between the two powers who together hold 90% of the world's nuclear arsenal.

The New START treaty was signed in 2010 by former U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and came into force in February 2011. It was extended for five years when current U.S. President Joe Biden took office in 2021. Under the Treaty, America and Russia cannot deploy more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads and more than 700 long-range missiles and bombers. It also limits each country to 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers and delivery vehicles. Additionally, it allows each side to carry

out up to 18 short-notice (32 hours) on-site inspections of strategic nuclear weapons sites annually to ensure that the other country had not crossed the limits of the treaty.

Under the agreement, Russia and the U.S. exchange data twice a year on ballistic missiles under the treaty's purview and on bombers, test sites, nuclear bases etc. The treaty also mandates the two parties to send notifications within five days if they change or update something in their stockpile, like moving missiles to a new base or deploying a new warhead to the system. According to The Washington Post, after first coming into effect, the pact gave Washington and Moscow seven years to reduce their stockpiles, including nuclear warheads that are launched using long-range missiles, submarines, and bombers. In 2018, both nations met the arms limits prescribed by the pact.

Inspections under the treaty, however, have stalled in the past three years. They were first put on hold in March 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moscow and Washington were due to discuss the restarting of inspections in November 2022, but this was postponed by Mr. Putin. There has been no development in this regard since.

Why did the Russian President suspend New START?

"I am forced to announce today that Russia is suspending its participation in the strategic offensive arms treaty," Mr. Putin said on February 23. He said the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the U.S. wanted to "inflict 'strategic defeat' on Russia and "try to get to our nuclear facilities at the same time."

Mr. Putin argued that while the U.S. had pushed for the resumption of inspections of Russian nuclear facilities under the treaty, NATO allies were helping Ukraine mount drone attacks on Russian air bases hosting nuclear-capable strategic bombers. In December, the Russian military had said it shot down the drones that struck two bomber bases deep inside the country.

Mr. Putin also mocked NATO's statement urging Russia to allow the resumption of the U.S. inspections as "some kind of theatre of the absurd." "The drones used for it were equipped and modernised with NATO's expert assistance," Mr. Putin said. "And now they want to inspect our defence facilities?" He also put another condition on the table before any return could be made to negotiations. He said that the nuclear weapons of Britain and France were part of NATO's nuclear capability but weren't included in the U.S.-Russian pact. "They are also aimed against us. They are aimed against Russia," he said. "Before we return to discussing the treaty, we need to understand what the aspirations of NATO members Britain and France are and how we take it into account their strategic arsenals..."

The Russian President also accused the U.S. of rejecting Russian requests for visits to specific U.S. facilities. Meanwhile, in its New START annual implementation report 2023, the U.S. State Department stated that Moscow was not complying with the pact as it had not let Washington carry out on-site inspections.

Will it trigger an arms race?

Notably, since Mr. Putin has not withdrawn from the treaty and just 'suspended' it, which is a term not defined in the official pact, analysts are saying the move would not immediately trigger an arms race between the two powers, and could be a part of Russia's political messaging amid the West's massive assistance to Ukraine amid the year-long conflict. Evidently, the Russian administration also announced that it does not plan to breach the limits on warheads prescribed in New START. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that it would continue notifying Washington of planned test launches of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

John Erath, senior policy director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, told The Washington Post that Mr. Putin's move was entirely symbolic, adding that Russia had already not been permitting inspections. Mr. Erath said the suspension seemed to be targeted at putting pressure on President Biden and European allies "so Russia can dictate the terms under which" the war would come to an end.

Sarah Bidgood, of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, told NPR that Russia's move is linked to the Ukraine conflict, indicating that the country no longer thinks that nuclear arms control is a separate issue from the ups and downs of bilateral relations.

What does the suspension mean for global arms control?

Following Mr. Putin's announcement, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the move had made the world a more dangerous place, adding that "with today's decision on New START, full arms control architecture has been

dismantled.”

Observers say the move not only disturbs the fragile calculus of nuclear arms controls between the two largest nuclear powers but could also give an opportunity to other nuclear-armed countries, especially China and others like Pakistan, Iran, Israel, and India among others, to increase their arsenals.

UNPACKING THE NEW SET OF E-WASTE RULES

Manika Malhotra Jain is Research Associate and Coordinator, Policy Perspectives Foundation

The burgeoning problem of managing e-waste is a cross cutting and persisting challenge in an era of rapid urbanisation, digitalisation and population growth. The first set of e-waste Rules was notified in 2011 and came into effect in 2012. An important component of the Rules (2011) was the introduction of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). Under EPR compliance, ‘producers’ are responsible for the safe disposal of electronic and electric products once the consumer discards them. E-waste rules 2016, which were amended in 2018, were comprehensive and included provisions to promote ‘authorisation’ and ‘product stewardship’. Other categories of stakeholders such ‘Producer Responsibility Organisations (PRO) were also introduced in these rules.

In November 2022, the Ministry of Environment and Forests further notified a new set of e-waste rules, which will come into force from April 1, 2023. These rules address some of the critical issues but are silent on others. The first main chapter of the E-Waste (Management) Rules 2022 includes the provision of an EPR framework, the foremost requirement being the ‘Registration of Stakeholders’ (manufacturer, producer, refurbisher and recycler). The earlier rules placed importance on seeking authorisation by stakeholders, but a weak monitoring system and a lack of transparency resulted in inadequacy in compliance. Most of the ‘refurbishers’ or the ‘repair shops’ operating in Delhi are not authorised under the Central Pollution Control Board of India.

Further, many formal recyclers undertake activities only up to the pre-processing or segregation stage, and thereafter channelise e-waste to the informal sector, which is a pure violation of law. A ‘digitalized systems approach’, introduced in the new rules (2022), may now address these challenges. Standardising the e-waste value chain through a common digital ‘portal’ may ensure transparency and is crucial to reduce the frequency of ‘paper trading’ or ‘false trail’, i.e., a practice of falsely revealing 100% collection on paper while collecting and/or weighing ‘scrap’ to meet targets.

Myopic with the informal sector left out

Two important stages of ‘efficient’ e-waste recycling are ‘component recovery’ (adequate and efficient recoveries of rare earth metals in order to reduce dependence on virgin resources) and ‘residual disposal’ (safe disposal of the leftover ‘residual’ during e-waste recycling). The rules briefly touch upon the two aspects, but do not clearly state the requirement for ensuring the ‘recovery tangent’. Therefore, in order to ensure maximum efficiency, the activities of the recyclers must be recorded in the system and the authorities should periodically trace the quantity of e-waste that went for recycling vis-à-vis the ‘recovery’ towards the end. Further, the new notification does away with PRO and dismant-

A Reuters analysis quoted Tong Zhao, U.S.-based nuclear expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as saying that the move could hamper arms control cooperation between the U.S. and China. “This is only going to make China even less interested in pursuing cooperative nuclear security with the United States,” Mr. Zhao said. “Now even this last example of arms control cooperation is being seriously undermined.”

lers and vests all the responsibility of recycling with authorised recyclers; they will have to collect a quantity of waste, recycle them and generate digital certificates through the portal. This move seems to be a bit myopic and can cause initial turbulence, where the informal channels may try and seek benefits from. PROs acted as an intermediary between producers and formal recyclers by bidding for contracts from producers and arranging for ‘certified and authorised’ recycling. Fresh challenges might emerge as companies are no longer required to engage with PROs and dismantlers, who partially ensured ‘double verification’ in terms of quantity and quality of recycling.

The informal sector, which plays a crucial role in e-waste handling, draws no recognition in the new rules which could be on account of its ‘illegality’. The informal sector is the ‘face’ of e-waste disposal in India as 95% of e-waste is channelised to the sector. Therefore, they also hold immense potential to improve the state of e-waste management. In the hierarchical process of e-waste collection, segregation and recycling in the informal sector, it is the last stage that poses a major concern where e-waste is handed over to the informal dismantlers/recyclers. The rest of the stages (collection of mixed waste, segregation of e-waste, clustered accumulation of e-waste according to their type) do not involve any hazardous practices and should in fact be strategically utilised for better collection of e-waste. For instance, ‘Karo Sambhav’, a Delhi-based PRO, has integrated informal aggregators in its collection mechanism. Through this initiative, e-waste is entered in a safe and structured system and the informal sector also has an advantage in terms of financial and legal security.

The consumer knows little

Many producers in Delhi have still not set up collection centres and some brands have labelled their head office (located on the outskirts of Delhi) as the ‘only’ collection point. Similarly, formal companies, low in number and clustered in the metropolises, also fail to provide doorstep collection to consumers when the quantum of e-waste is not enough to meet their overhead expenses or transport. On the other hand, consumers lack awareness and information about the existence of any such services.

In order to ensure the efficient implementation of the law, stakeholders must have the right information and intent to safely dispose of e-waste. There is a need for simultaneous and consistent efforts towards increasing consumer awareness, strengthening reverse logistics, building capacity of stakeholders, improving existing infrastructure, enhancing product designing, rationalising input control (by defining ‘rare earth elements’ as ‘critical raw materials’), and adopting green procurement practices. This should be supplemented by establishing a robust collection and recycling system on the ground, making it responsive to meet legislative requirements.

ITALIAN PM MELONI TO BE CHIEF GUEST AT 8TH RAISINA DIALOGUE

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni will visit India on March 2 and 3, along with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajan and a high-powered business delegation, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Monday.

Ms. Meloni will be the chief guest and keynote speaker at the 8th Raisina Dialogue. This is the first prime ministerial visit from Italy in five years.

A bilateral defence cooperation agreement is likely to be announced that will also have a framework for government-to-government deals, official sources said. “Prime Minister Meloni’s visit is expected to further strengthen and deepen the long-standing relationship between India and Italy,” the Ministry said in a statement. Both sides will take stock of the progress on the key outcomes of the November 2020 Summit, strengthen security and defence cooperation, work towards closer economic ties, enhance opportunity for mobility of talent and give strategic guidance to ongoing collaboration in science and technology.

Defence deal

The bilateral defence agreement to expand defence cooperation has been in the works for a few years which, sources said, would lay the ground for taking forward cooperation into new domains, including co-development and co-production of military platforms. It will also have a framework for inter-governmental agreements, a source said.



Giorgia Meloni

UNPACKING THE NEW SET OF E-WASTE RULES

Growth pangs

Public sector banks increased their credit portfolio by 15.7% during the year 2022 (4.7% in 2021)

- Growth for private sector banks remained higher at 19.1% (13.1% a year earlier)
- Current and savings deposits recorded growth of 4.6% and 7.3%, respectively, in quarter ended December 2022
- Deposit mobilisation by public sector banks improved to 8.8% growth (6.9% a year earlier)
- Private banks saw 13.2% expansion



Aggregate deposits rose 10.3%; growth in credit was led by branches in metropolitan centres, which account for almost 60% of total bank credit, data released by the central bank show

Bank credit growth slowed down to 16.8% in the October-December 2022 period from a year earlier, RBI data showed. This compares with 17.2% seen in the previous quarter, according to the quarterly statistics on bank deposits and credit, released by the Reserve Bank of India on Monday. A year earlier, credit growth was 8.4%. "Growth in credit was led by bank branches in metropolitan centres, which account for nearly 60% of the total credit by SCBs [scheduled commercial banks] and recorded 17.2% rise (y-o-y) in lending; urban, semi-urban and rural centres also recorded double digit credit growth," the RBI said. Public sector banks increased their credit portfolio by 15.7% during calendar 2022 (4.7% in 2021); corresponding growth for private banks, however, remained higher at 19.1% (13.1%), it said.

Aggregate deposits rose 10.3% (y-o-y) in the December quarter, led by a 13.2% rise in term deposits; current and savings deposits recorded moderate growth of 4.6% and 7.3%, respectively. Deposit mobilisation by public sector banks improved to 8.8% growth in the quarter (6.9% a year earlier). Private banks saw 13.2% expansion.

RAJYA SABHA PANEL SEEKS EXPLANATION FROM 13 MPs

The Privileges Committee of the Rajya Sabha, headed by Deputy Chairman Harivansh, sought an explanation from 13 Opposition members, including suspended Congress member Rajni Patil, for disorderly conduct during the first half of the Budget Session.

Ms. Patil was suspended for shooting a video of the House proceedings on her phone.

On February 20, the Rajya Sabha Secretariat named Syed Nasir Hussain,

Shaktisinh Gohil, Imran Pratapgarhi, L. Hanumanthaiah, Kumar Ketkar, Jebi Mather, Ranjeet Ranjan, Phulo Devi Netam, and Naranbhai J. Rathwa of the Congress, and Sanjay Singh, Sandeep Kumar Pathak and Sushil Kumar Gupta of the AAP for violating the rules of the House and obstructing the proceedings, compelling the Chair to repeatedly adjourn the sitting.

The Secretariat also informed that Mr. Sanjay Singh's conduct would also be investigated for "repeated submission of identical notices under Rule 267".

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