

THE ‘ORGANIZATION REFORM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS’ CAMPAIGN BY THE POLITICAL PARTIES OF NEPAL

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1. Introduction

The effectiveness of democracy depends on the responsibility borne by political parties towards citizens, the role played by party leadership, and institutionalization of inclusive representation. In Nepal’s context, the key question revolves around the readiness of political parties to address the challenges arising from the evolving social and political landscape. The activities carried out by the political parties to engage with voters, keep themselves updated with the contemporary issues, and formulate effective strategies to tackle these challenges are matters of widespread interest.

Immediately after the completion the House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly elections 2022, political parties under different banners have initiated an ‘Organization Reform and Public Relations’ campaigns. This Political Situation Update delves into the multifaceted aspects of this campaign launched by the political parties. For this update, conversations were held with representatives from political parties, and political analysts. It also draws insights from media monitoring and documents produced by the political parties, and captures the developments until mid-September 2023.

2. Background of the Campaign

During the House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly elections held in November, 2022 the political parties entered into coalitions to gain favorable electoral outcomes. On one side, Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) [CPN (Maoist Centre)], Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) [CPN (Unified Socialist)], Loktantrik Samajwadi Party (LSP) and Rastriya Janamorcha Nepal formed a five-party coalition to contest the elections. In contrast, the Communist Party

of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN (UML)], Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP), Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Rastriya Prajatantra Party Nepal, and Nepal Pariwar Dal had formed a separate alliance.

A total of 13 political parties secured seats in the House of Representatives. Nepali Congress emerged as the largest party, securing 88 seats, and CPN (UML) with 79 seats secured the second largest position. CPN (Maoist Centre) secured the third largest position with 32 seats. Similarly, other seats are secured by parties including Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) with 21 seats, RPP with 14 seats, JSP with 12 seats, CPN (Unified Socialists) with 10 seats, Janamat Party with six seats, LSP with four seats, Nagarik Unmukti Party with four seats, Nepal Workers Peasant Party, Rastriya Janamorcha, and Aam Janata Party each securing one seat. Two members of parliament are independent.

Interestingly, the parties that had formed coalitions failed to attain the expected voter support and satisfactory results. In contrast, the parties that had been established recently and had participated in the election without forming any coalitions were able to get relatively better representation in the House of Representatives. Rastriya Swatantra Party, established just five months prior to the elections and Janamat Party, with a three-year history, gained national party status. Despite failing to secure a national party status, Nagarik Unmukti Party which participated in the elections one year after its establishment managed to win four seats in the House of Representatives through the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. This emergence of new political parties and the scale of support they received presented a fresh challenge to the power balance enjoyed by the older parties. The April 2023 by-elections held for three seats of the House of Representatives in Chitwan, Tanahun, and

Bara further showed the excitement of voters towards these new political parties. As a result, while the new parties gained confidence, the voices demanding the old parties reform their organizational structure became stronger.

3. Party Initiatives and Campaigns

The election results of 2022 served as a motivating factor for the new political parties to continue their campaign to connect with the voters and expand their party organization base. However, for the older parties their electoral performance posed the challenge of preserving their influence. Thus, the parties have accelerated their efforts in terms of organizational activities and mobilization of their leaders and cadres. The parties have undertaken this effort as an opportunity to connect and smoothen the relationship between the parties and the voters.

In February, 2023 CPN (UML) started the ‘*Mission Grassroot*’ campaign by assigning leaders to different locations. During this two-month long campaign, leaders ranging from the Politburo to the Central Committee were mobilized to different provincial and local levels. According to a Central Committee member involved with the campaign, they were given 11 different mandates including renewing party membership, finding out the exact number of party members, collecting opinions and suggestions regarding the party, conducting trainings, identifying potential new generation of the party, strengthening the relationship between the party and the voters, identifying the contradictions at the local level, and promoting ideological unity between the party and elected representatives. After completing the ‘*Mission Grassroot*’ campaign on April 23, 2023 CPN (UML) released an action plan focusing on revitalizing the party and preparing for the upcoming elections.¹

Nepali Congress launched an special ‘Organization Reform Campaign’ from July 26, 2023 to August 5, 2023, to revitalize the party’s organizational structure. The party’s spokesperson claimed that the program had been concluded successfully and revealed plans for another campaign to be launched in September 2023. He further added, “We are pushing for the ‘Congress with the Community’ campaign. However, due to the risks of floods and landslides during the rainy season and the threat of dengue which has made it difficult to form larger groups, the campaign has not been able to move forward. This campaign aims to take the leaders to the homes of the voters.”

CPN (Maoist Centre), has been conducting a campaign titled ‘*Janata Sanga Maobadi Bishesh Rupantaran*’. With ‘*Ghargharma Maobadi, Janjanma Maobadi*’ as the campaign’s slogan, the party has ambitiously targeted to meet 2.5 million voters during the campaign period. The party also aims to increase the party membership to 0.8 million and study the potential for promoting local production and entrepreneurship.² To achieve these goals, the party aims to organize various activities at the local level, including meetings, training sessions, seminars, and interaction programs. In terms of the impact of these activities on organizational reform and expansion of public relations, a Central Committee member of CPN (Maoist Centre) who was actively involved with the campaign said, “The Central Committee members will understand the position of the party at the local level. They will examine whether the party has been listening to the concerns of the voters, the relationship between the party and the voters, and the commitment level of the cadres. This campaign will revitalize the relationship between the party and voters.”

Similarly, the newly emerged political force, RSP has been conducting a ‘*Mission 84*’ campaign. This campaign is targeted to advance the organization formation and expansion process. A Central Committee member of the party explained, “For the purpose of expanding the organizational base, programs are being organized at the local levels. From the attendees, the party committees are being formed by following democratic processes.” According to the member, RSP has formed the party’s organization in 270 local units and has been conducting training programs.

Since July, 2023 Janamat Party has also given speed to formation and reorganization of party committees, training programs and membership distribution activities. The party has managed to conduct training programs in more than 20 districts, and has claimed to be successful in making the party stronger from the ward level. According to a Central Committee member of the party, “The first stage of the campaign started in June 2023. Under this, training programs were conducted in all districts where party organizations exist. A ward level strengthening campaign was also conducted during which Ward level committees were reorganized. After that, the training program was organized for the Central, Provincial, and District level committees. Currently, we have been actively working to expand the party organization.”

Within democracy, political parties going to the voters, and conducting political and organizational activities are

¹ Onlinekhabar. 2023. UML’s conclusion: Reviving the party, preparing for the next election. Available at www.onlinekhabar.com/2023/05/1306320; accessed September 27, 2023.

² Ganesh Pandey. 2023. Maoist’s Special Campaign: Action Plan to Reach 2.5 Million People (Full Text). Ratopati. August 14. Available at www.ratopati.com/story/379213; accessed September 27, 2023.

expected processes. According to a political analyst, the political and intellectual vacuum in older parties, the distrust of the current leadership among the voters, and the emergence of newer parties has forced the older parties to reach out to the voters before the elections.

4. Election-Centric Strategy

Following the 2022 election results, political parties started the organization reform and public relations expansion campaign. At a glance, these initiatives seem like efforts to strengthen and enhance their party organizations. However, a closer look reveals that these efforts are strategic preparations primarily geared toward the upcoming 2027 elections. Despite having the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives, the Nepali Congress has not been able to lead the government. Initially, it had to remain outside the government and it only got the opportunity to participate in the federal to provincial government after the change in the power coalition. Subsequently, there have been reports of an agreement to lead the federal government. It is said that an agreement was made to lead the federal government turn by turn while changing the alliance. The CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) forged an alliance to establish a government, granting the CPN (Maoist Centre) the chance to lead, despite being the third-largest party. However, during the presidential election period, the power dynamics shifted, forming a new alliance with the Nepali Congress. Consequently, the CPN (UML) found itself out of power, relegated to the opposition. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who serves as the Chairman of CPN (Maoist Centre), has expressed uncertainty regarding the duration of his government's tenure.

All three of these mentioned parties share a strong ambition to secure the position of the largest and most influential party in the forthcoming 2027 elections. With this objective in mind, they are actively engaging with the public through a range of programs.

KP Sharma Oli, the President of CPN (UML) has requested the party leaders and cadres to think of the 2027 elections as Mission 51 percent. He has directed the party members to work so as to win 83 out of 165 seats through FPTP in the House of Representatives and 56 seats of the available proportional 110 seats. During the 7th meeting of the Bagmati Province Organization Committee held on July 11, 2023 Oli said, "Let us work with excitement and self-confidence for Mission 84. Like how Arjun only focused on the bird's eyes, instead of focusing on the trees, branches, and the bird, we should also move forward with focusing only on receiving more than 51 percent of the

votes. Let us be active instead of being passive. I would like to request everyone to stop being idle and work with energy and passion."³

CPN (Maoist Centre)'s leadership have repeatedly mentioned that the party should return to the position it had after the Constituent Assembly elections held in 2008. During that election, CPN (Maoist Centre) alone had won 120 out of 240 seats through the FPTP system and 100 out of 335 seats through the proportional system. During a program held on September 2, 2023 Prachanda, the Chairperson of CPN (Maoist Centre) shared that there were people who had expressed fear that Maoists were turning towards 2008. The program had been organized as part of the three month long 'Janata Sanga Maobadi Bishesh Rupantaran' event.⁴

Nepali Congress has not yet stated that its mission is for the upcoming elections. According to a Central Committee member of the party, since the party is currently a large party, there is no need for the party to make a specific program targeting the next elections. "A country that has lost the World Cup this time will create a plan to win the World Cup next time. However, if a country wins the World Cup, it does not have to plan for winning the World Cup next time since it has already won. Therefore, if the party does good work in the remaining four years, the election results in 2027 will automatically be good. This is the current strategy of the party."

The motivation behind the parties' recent outreach to the public and making their organization base active is directly linked to creating a strong presence in the parliament and being involved in the government. As per a political analyst, the established parties have initiated outreach programs to connect with the masses due to a perceived decline in their influence since the 2022 elections. He explained, "The parties have sensed a weakening of their position due to the diminishing vote share and parliamentary seats obtained in the last election. Consequently, they are striving to revitalize their parties through various campaigns. Notably, figures like Ravi Lamichhane and Balendra (Balen) Saha have seen a surge in popularity. The older parties are apprehensive about the threat this poses to their future prospects. They also harbor concerns about potential setbacks in the 2027 elections. However, older parties have the power at centre, corruption is rampant, resources have been used indiscriminately, and their performance has

³ Canada Nepal. 2023. KP Oli's speech at the meeting of CPN-UML Bagmati Province Organization Committee. July 11. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU2OY1rTkps; accessed September 25, 2023.

⁴ Nepalkhabar. 2023. Some People are Terrified that Maoists will be back to 2008 Strength: Prachanda. Available at <https://nepalkhabar.com/politics/176772-2023-9-2-15-25-0>; accessed September 25, 2023.

not been effective. At the local level, they are talking to the people about Maoist, grassroots mission, organization strengthening, etc. These efforts are not liable to give fruitful results.”

Newly established political parties are also actively engaged in multifaceted campaigns, by strategically aligning it with the forthcoming elections. Ravi Lamichhane, the Chairman of the RSP, has boldly asserted his intention to secure a majority and lead the government in the next election. He draws confidence from the public sentiment of 2022, which suggests a favorable outcome in the 2027 election. On the party’s foundation day, June 22, 2023, he encouraged the party supporters to share the slogans ‘*Bajyo Ghanti!*’, ‘*Ava dui tihai*’ through their social media handles. Similarly, the Janamat Party is actively undertaking various initiatives to undermine the established political parties in Madhesh with an eye on the 2027 elections. They had initially aimed to amass a membership of at least 2 million people nationwide by that time. A central member of the party expressed satisfaction in surpassing their expectations, stating, “We currently have around 0.75 to 0.8 million members. We continue to enroll new members each year, with our target being 2 million by 2027. We have successfully completed the first phase of our program in the Madhesh, Lumbini, and Koshi provinces, and we are planning similar programs in other provinces. We are committed to achieving favorable results in 2027, without any unnecessary extravagance.”

5. Political Party Organization and Mobilization

CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) leadership acknowledged that their party committees, from central to the lower levels, have become sizable and inefficient. A central committee member of CPN (UML) argued that this not only created challenges to efficient organization, but also ‘paralyzed the collective leadership system due to the centralization of power and decision making’. Similarly, leaders of CPN (Maoist Centre) also emphasized that organizational inactivity stands as one of the major concerns, and they intend to address this issue during the party’s upcoming statute session. Their aim is to create smaller and more efficient party structures. A leader of the CPN (Maoist Centre) stated that if the party statute session scheduled for November 2023, fails to devise a concrete plan and strategy for streamlining the party organizations to enhance efficiency, it could undermine the effectiveness of the party’s grassroots campaign activities. The Spokesperson of Nepali Congress claimed that the ‘organization reform’

campaign has helped to make the organization more dynamic. He argued that after the election, there had been a confusion within the organization that caused disappointment among the cadres and supporters. He argued that there was confusion among the party cadres who had started raising questions against the leadership after the elections, which were cleared with the campaign activities.

CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) have claimed that they have disseminated the message that the party membership renewal should be done by the members themselves by paying the required fee to the lower levels of the party organization. The party leaders believe that this will create a sense of ownership and accountability among the party membership.

6. Targeting the New Generation

Each periodic election witnesses a significant influx of new voters. However, the outcomes of local, provincial, and House of Representatives elections reveal a prevalent sense of profound discontent and mistrust, particularly among young voters, directed toward the established parties and their leadership. Recognizing the youthful demographic of Nepal, political parties have made concerted efforts to address this discontent among the new generation. In the political report presented at the first full meeting of the political committee organized by the Nepal Samajwadi Party on January 8, 2023, immediately after the completion of the House of Representatives and Provincial assembly elections, the new generation’s discontent is mentioned as follows:

“...The prominent older political parties failed to formulate a comprehensive strategy aimed at winning the hearts of the 3.6 million new-generation voters, who came into the fold after the 2022 and 2017 House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly elections. As the majority of leaders from these established parties continue to exhibit traits such as arrogance, incompetence, and questionable ethics, the discontent among the younger generation has been steadily mounting. There is a looming possibility that this discontent may escalate into outright rebellion before the next election. From the last elections, the results have indicated the same. It seems that distrust, general disappointment and disgust towards the parties is increasing. As a result, it was seen that the attraction of independent candidates increased among the voters.”⁵

Likewise, in the political report delivered by Chairman KP Sharma Oli during the fifth plenary session of the Central

⁵ Nepal Samajwadi Party. 2023. Need for a Socialist Coalition. Kathmandu: Nepal Samajwadi Party.

Committee of the CPN (UML) held on May 11–13, 2023, a notable concern was raised regarding the declining appeal of the party among the youth. The report emphasized, “The emergence of populist forces in electoral politics and the growing influence of conventional right-wing parties represent a novel and noteworthy phenomenon. ‘Populism’ wields considerable influence, particularly among young voters, urban public sentiment, and Nepali migrants abroad. It is imperative that we delve deep into the analysis of this trend.”⁶

While the older political parties have openly acknowledged the waning appeal they hold among the youth, they appear to lack a clear roadmap for engaging

and organizing this demographic. Concurrently, the new generation continues to exert influence on the traditional support base of these parties. Integrating this tech-savvy new generation, which has access to both national and international information through advanced technology, into the party’s existing organizational framework presents a formidable challenge. Furthermore, it is evident that this emerging generation places greater emphasis on priorities such as good governance, corruption reduction, efficient service delivery, and job creation rather than strict ideological commitment. Failing to demonstrate tangible efforts toward meeting these aspirations could potentially undermine the effectiveness of the political parties’ campaigns, yielding results below their expectations.

⁶ CPN (UML). 2023. The Political document presented by Chairman KP Sharma Oli of the Fifth Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee. CPN (UML), Kathmandu.



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