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Extremist factions derailing peace process, says Nepal Premier

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Nepal's Prime Minister Dr. Baburam Bhattarai has categorically ruled out stepping down from office at a time when a section of his own party has asked for his resignation. In an exclusive conversation with *The Hindu* at his residence on Saturday, the Prime Minister accused the “extreme Right and extreme Left” of wanting to derail the peace and constitutional process by destabilising his government.

The hardline faction of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), led by senior vice-chairperson Mohan Vaidya ‘Kiran’, launched a public campaign on Saturday against party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ and Dr. Bhattarai. They have demanded the Prime Minister's resignation, accusing his government of being “anti-national” and “deviating from the party's core ideology”. At a press conference, party secretary C.P. Gajurel said they would initiate talks with opposition parties to file a no-confidence motion against the government.

Rejecting the demand, the Prime Minister said: “Why should I resign? My government has the mandate of completing the peace and constitutional process. Until there is a credible alternative in place which can fulfil these tasks, I will not shrug off my responsibility.”

Instead, Dr. Bhattarai claimed there was a “gentleman's agreement” with other parties to convert the present government into a national unity government and his efforts were in that direction. “All our discussions are around the peace process, Constitution, and formation of unity government in a package. Once the integration process begins, I am hopeful that the Nepali Congress (NC) and other parties will join the government under my leadership.”

Multiple sources have confirmed to *The Hindu* that the informal understanding at the time of the seven-point peace agreement in November 2011 was that the Maoist-led government would complete the peace and constitutional process, while the NC would then take over and lead the country into the next elections.

The Prime Minister also promised a “quick breakthrough” in the peace process, especially with regard to the integration of former Maoist combatants. In recent weeks, 13 out of the 28 cantonments housing the Maoist combatants have closed down and over 7,000 former fighters who opted for voluntary retirement have gone home.

But the actual integration process has not yet begun due to differences between Maoists and non-Maoist parties on the leadership and structure of the new directorate, and ranks at which Maoist commanders would be accommodated. With the peace process stalled, there is a stalemate on Constitution-writing as opposition parties have made progress on the former a pre-condition to addressing constitutional issues. The Premier, however, expressed optimism that they would be able to complete the twin peace and constitutional processes by May 27 when the term of the Constituent Assembly expires. “There is tremendous public pressure and we must institutionalise the achievements so far. The CA has already gone on for four years. I am confident that we will be able to reach an agreement by the deadline.”

Responding to concerns of regional and ethnic parties that the new Constitution may leave out the issue of federalism, Dr. Bhattarai clarified, “There is no going back on federalism. I don't know where this rumour has come from. This will be a full and final constitution with federal provisions.”

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