Parliamentary arithmetic

There are 10 days to go for Nepal’s Parliament to reconvene as per the Supreme Court verdict on Tuesday. A lot needs to happen in that time, and a lot more is bound to happen. Much of it will depend on what Prime Minister K P Oli decides to do in the coming days. So far, he says he has no intention of resigning as demanded by Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the rival faction within his ruling NCP. If he does not resign, Oli’s only other alternative is to face a confidence motion in House. And here, it will be parliamentary arithmetic that will determine the course of events. Oli is now in the ironical position of masterminding support for a House that he himself dissolved on 20 December. Oli was celebrating his 70th birthday on Tuesday when news came of the Supreme Court’s decision. He continued partying, and has tried to exude confidence. His options, however, are limited. Even if the NCP is not formally split, it is behaving like two parties. There is too much bad blood between Oli and Dahal for the factions to reunite, and both leaders have discounted it. The Lower House has 275 seats, of which the NCP commands 173, the NC has 63, JSP 34, and 4 are with smaller parties. Of the NCP, the Dahal faction has 90 MPs and Oli claims to have 81; three are neutral. The NC commands the swing vote, and its president Sher Bahadur Deuba is being courted as kingmaker by both NCP factions. On Thursday, senior NC leaders met to decide which faction to support, if at all. Many NC leaders say the party should stay away, and focus on elections next year. Meanwhile, a small group of relatively neutral leaders have been trying to patch up Nepal and Oli’s differences to save party unity. Says Sher Bahadur Tamang, a former Oli supporter who defected to the Dahal camp: “There are many moderates who want Oli to propose Nepal as prime minister, and put the past behind. But given the situation, it is not very likely.” These are the possible scenarios:

- Oli resigns, hands over prime ministership to Deuba, and joins a NC-led coalition. Although Deuba likes Oli, the NC rank and file do not. Oli resigns and hands over prime ministership to Mahat Kumar Nepal, whom he considers a lesser evil.
- Dahal-Nepal also court Deuba. Oli would like to pass an ordinance to allow his faction to split, but he does not have the requisite 40% in the Parliamentary Party.
- JSP leader Deuda and other NCP cadre lobby to keep the party united. (But both Oli and Dahal rejected the idea.)
- The Dahal faction prepares a no-confidence vote, but needs to register name of new PM. Will Deuba agree?
- Oli faces a confidence vote in the House, and loses. He resigns and the Dahal faction negotiates to form a new government.
- Oli wins a confidence vote, and vows some Dahal loyalists and the NC to form a government.

The Oli faction is in deep consultation with advisers and senior ministers, and postponed a Standing Committee meeting of its faction on Thursday, ostensibly because of a need to do “additional homework”, according to Oli advisor Surya Thapa.

Says Srijan Adhikari, an expert on constitutional law: “The only way to avoid prolonged political turmoil is the unlikely scenario that ageing leaders in both factions realize that such instability is not in the national interest and hand over the reins to a new generation of young leaders.”

However, the repugnulating in all main parties have shown an inclination to pass on the torch.

Malathi Prabhu

House of cards

EDITORIAL

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Calm before another storm

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House of cards

For the thousand and one times, and more, we have been reading, hearing and discussing how parliament is in a shambles, how a whole year of the most critical session has been wasted, how the government has failed to deliver on its promises, and how trust in institutions has been eroded.

The result of this is a lack of transparency in the workings of the government, a failure to hold the executive accountable, and an erosion of public confidence in the system.

The current situation is a clear indication of the need for a fundamental overhaul of the parliamentary system in Nepal.

There are several possible solutions that could be explored, which would not only benefit the country but also strengthen the democratic institutions. These solutions could include measures to increase public participation in decision-making processes, strengthening the role of the media in holding the government accountable, and promoting a culture of transparency and integrity among elected officials.

In conclusion, the current political crisis in Nepal is a clear indication of the need for urgent action to address the underlying issues. By implementing a range of measures to strengthen the democratic institutions, we can work towards a more transparent and accountable system that serves the best interests of the people.
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“Some industries bouncing back to near pre-Covid levels”


Nepali Times: What is your assessment of Nepal’s macro-economic situation and the risks to the banking sector?

Anirban Ghosh Dasgupta: Nepal’s GDP composition is largely driven by the service sector which amounts to more than half of the pre-pandemic total output. The pandemic has slowed down the service sector which may have caused a majority of the aggregate demand surplus during the peak of the crisis to be met with both consumption and production were impacted since interlinkages between services, agriculture and the manufacturing are very high in our economy. This may have been why our economic growth rates declined drastically during the crisis.

However, inter-linkages to the global economy on both sectors and the recovery are very high. This also may one reason that the credit demand quickly picked up after the lockdown which can be seen from the CEDC ratio in the banking industry – since Nepal’s economy is dependent on drivers that may not need as much time for recovery, like remittances and the service sector, to drive majority of the demand, and imports to drive majority of the supply.

We also saw foreign exchange reserves reaching one of the highest levels with a constant remittance inflow and declining imports. Banks in Nepal are directly impacted by how the economy performs since there are no complex financial instruments in the system that stabilizes or delay the impact of economic shocks. Most real GDP economic forecasts for Nepal have relied on a few assumptions: cases will gradually decline, and the economy will gradually adjust to return to normal starting 2021 which we are witnessing at present. The IMF recently revised GDP forecasts in January 2021: the world outlook remains positive with 5.3% in 2021 with emerging market economies at 6.6%. I feel that the quicker the banking industry adapts to the post-Covid new normal, the faster would be the risk mitigation with better technology and training of macroeconomics and consumer behavior.

Turkish Safe Travels awarded

Nepali Airlines has been awarded the highest level of Diamond status by TLS (Turkish Airlines Passenger Experience Association). This award is in recognition of the airline’s hygiene standards at the airport and during flight. The carrier has also provided customers, drivers, and cabin crew members with personal protective equipment.

Bold and Beautiful Magpie

Ncell has launched a new version of Magpie’s TV app, which will offer new sports channels and a variety of other content for passengers.

Turkish Airlines Nepal has also signed an agreement with Goas for promoting skills and recruiting Nepali and Indian pilots. This agreement was signed with Abhishek Joshi and Sajal Joshi, who will be responsible for operational support in the aviation sector.

Ncell mobile app

Ncell has launched a new version of the Ncell mobile app, which now includes a feature to order food and make payments, as well as a feature to subscribe to various TV channels and movies.

Sri Lanka service center

Sri Lanka Telecom has launched a new service center to support its customers in the country, with services including customer support, billing, and network troubleshooting.

Mobilink Dhamake

Mobilink has launched a new feature called ‘Dhamake’, which allows customers to order food and make payments through their mobile phones.
Nepal’s wildlife watchdogs honoured

Nepal Police investigators win the UN’s Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for proscribing wildlife traffickers

Sonais Awale

Growing up in a Darchula village near the Tibetan border, a young Bidya Devi Singh Jha was no stranger to wildlife crimes. At teashops and community gatherings, neighbours openly talked about transporting tiger pelts and elephant ivory to traders across the border to China. "They called it a cash crop, but it was also how people in Darchula could make a living. Since then, I had always wanted to grow up to be a cop and arrest the real bad guys," recalls Jha, now 40, and Sub-Inspector at the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) Wildlife Pillar 4 of the Nepal Police.

Now, Jha and his colleagues Inspector Sudan Pahare and Sub-Inspector Kishore Khanal have been awarded the Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for arresting the notorious ring leader of a smuggling network accused of transporting pelts and bones of tigers from India via Nepal to China.

Kunjik Lama (real name Kunjik Teering Tamang) had been in the crosshairs of police in India and Nepal as well as Interpol for two decades. His name appeared in every major seizure of wildlife parts in the region before his arrest by the CIB in June last year.

In 2005, in one of the biggest busts of wildlife contraband in South Asia, a Nepal Army patrol in the Langtang National Park in Rasuwa caught four people with 5 tiger pelts, 36 leopard skins and 133 kg of tiger bones on their way to the Chinese border. Every one of them mentioned Kunjik during the investigation, but it was not until his real identity was verified that the case came to its climax.

"We led this investigation for years, we analysed his property, companies, citizenship and passports, and we found a clue: the personal number he was using at the time was in one of the documents," explains Pahare. "We then found that Kunjik Lama and Kunjik Teering Tamang was the same person."

Tamang is now in custody at the Rasuwa Police Station, after his failed attempt to challenge the Rasuwa District Court’s order at the Patan High Court and a writ of habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court.

Nepal Police has been often criticized for capturing only the small fry in organized crime operations, but with the prosecution of Tamang, the officers say they are closing in on other ring leaders involved in the case in Tibet and New York, aided by new technology to analyze digital footprints and paper trails.

However, a reliable central data system and proper coordination between the police and the forestry and national park officials will further assist in wildlife crime investigation, they say.

But even then, smugglers caught by investigators use legal loopholes, political connections and judicial corruption to get light sentences, jump nominal bail or altogether escape.

"It happens more often than we can count, we dedicate all our time and effort in these investigations but they find one loophole or the other to escape, it is frustrating," admits Jha. "But we don’t let that dishearten us, we learn from each case, we build more evidence and a stronger case for the next time."

Wildlife crime investigators also face personal security threats. Recently, some men who are believed to be involved in wildlife contraband trade visited the school where Jha’s young daughter is enrolled. They claimed that the parents were out of town, so work and were sent to pick up the girl.

 Luckily, Jha’s daughter was back from school half an hour earlier that day.

With the global coronavirus crisis, there has been a sharp rise in wildlife poaching. In April, six musk deer were found dead in traps laid by poachers during Covid-19 lockdown in Sagarmatha National Park.

For the first time in over half a decade, Nepal wasn’t able to celebrate zero-t巘s poaching this year when four adult rhinos were found dead in Chitwan National Park. Recently, the CIB has seized two tiger pelts in Surkhet. So far, 14 people involved in the crimes have been arrested, 12 individuals are on the run.

Police investigations reveal that the big fish are using social media networks to recruit locals who have lost their jobs during the pandemic for killing rhinos, tigers and other wildlife in return for quick cash.

Despite Nepal’s successes in wildlife protection, law enforcement agencies cannot afford to be complacent. And conservationists say recognitions like the Asia Environmental Enforcement Award provide a morale boost.

Satish Pratap Pandey and Bidya Devi Singh Jha (Chief of the Nepal Police Central Investigation Bureau, the recipients of 2021 Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards).

Kunjik Lama (left) was killed in numerous seizures of tiger parts in Nepal and India, and was finally caught in Kathmandu on 25 June 2002.

The team also won the Asia Environmental Enforcement Award in 2018.

"This award is an international acknowledgment of the Central Investigation Bureau’s role in controlling wildlife crime in Nepal," says Tikesh Baburam Thapa, chief of the CIB of the Nepal Police.

Jha, who was also the recipient of the Abraham Conservation Award in 2015: "This award is a reminder that hard work pays off, and for me personally it is a fulfillment of my childhood dream in Darchula. Our job is to catch the culprits, but it is much better if wildlife is as well protected by local people themselves that they are not killed and smuggled in the first place."
Nepal fights infodemic to push vaccine
A more effective communication strategy can turn Nepal into a model for a Covid vaccination drive

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It is far, approximately 450,000 inhabitants in the first dose of Covishield, reaching 87% of the target group in the first six million Covid vaccination drive.

Starting July, 3.7 million Nepal’s above 55 who make up 12% of the total population will get their shots against SARS-CoV-2. Teachers, students, bus drivers and other groups will also be included in the second phase.

On paper, Nepal looks like it is in a better position with vaccination, especially given that more than 100 countries have yet to receive even a single dose.

We have to applaud the government for its effort in bringing the vaccine earlier than expected and for rolling it out efficiently,” says Sammeer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal. “Nepal will be among the first countries to take the vaccine to the majority of the population with the second phase in early March.”

However, the vaccine campaign has been plagued with hesitancy and delay. Even doctors and nurses were reluctant to inoculate themselves, resulting in a low uptake. Failure to communicate, delay concerns about side effects, and ensuring access in remote areas were main roadblocks to better coverage.

“The very fact that the vaccines arrived in Nepal much earlier than we anticipated and once it did, we had to rush to the Fly with the pandemic still going on, leaves us without a proper communication strategy,” admits Buddha Banstey of the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

Covishield, developed by AstraZeneca Oxford University and manufactured by the Serum Institute of India is being used in the UK, the EU, India and Australia starting their vaccination soon. With the efficacy ranging from 70-80%, 6.5ml of 2 doses 4-12 weeks apart, it has been deemed safe with no severe reactions or any death.

In the recent past, local government used to deploy Tele Health Promoters (THP) in neighbourhoods before a vaccination drive for measles, polio and other infections to address the public’s safety concerns.

Another effective communication tool would have been the use of social media platforms and mass media to increase awareness about the vaccine as well as promote its use. Elsewhere in the world, prime ministers and presidents being inoculated were being televised live. Celebrities took to the互联网 to share their experience of vaccination.

“Someone like Nirmal Paj has been asked to promote the campaign and increase the acceptance of the vaccine in the masses with his legions of followers, very Sher Bahadur Pun, a volcanologist at the Sukran Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital. Banstey agrees that Pujra with his international mountaineering fame and Gurkha command background would have also bolstered Nepal’s vaccine diplomacy. “We could be our brand ambassador to take us case to aid agencies given the UK’s stand on vaccine equity while also backing India’s interest to promote neighbourhood first policy with vaccines,” he added.

The government has approved the second dose to be given anywhere between 8-12 weeks of the first one, prioritizing vaccination of as many vulnerable individuals as possible before that.

But the availability of the vaccine will be the main concern as we move on to the next stage of the campaign. With the 1 million dose Covishield grant from India in January, another 2 million that Nepal purchased this week from China. From an institute of India, 2.23 million (with the first 300,000 arriving first) under the COVAX initiative, and 2.5 million from China, the government has a stock of close to six million doses and it is quite possible that 3 million can be vacuumed soon.

“The second phase is as challenging as it is important. But this is also the group likely to have a higher chance of reaction, so we need to be prepared locally to adequately respond, and this is where Shyam Raj Upaty, head of the government’s Covid vaccine strategy. “It is crucial to communicate different types of side-effects and explain that they signify that the immune system is working.”

Around the world, the total number of new coronavirus cases and fatalities is growing. Although India has reported spikes in some states and Nepal will have to keep a close watch on New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Nepal has most likely developed localised immunity.

A Nepali Health Research Council study has revealed that over 85% of hospital staff had developed antibodies by December, adding to the view that we are nearing herd immunity.

“One time we vaccinate a larger risk population, even if there is a smallest chance, it is unlikely to impact much because the group who are not vaccinated will get protected,” adds Dixit.

But even with the vaccine, Nepal will still have to continue precautions. There is still uncertainty about duration of immunity, and whether vaccinated people can spread the virus.

Says Banstey: “This has been a pandemic of misinformation, we have to struggle with that public understands the need. Nepal can draw inspiration from past successful vaccination drives and can become a model for others.”

Everything you wanted to know about vaccines

Recently Nepali Times spoke with three experts with frequently asked questions from readers regarding the Covid-19 vaccination drive in Nepal.

Excels of interviews with virologist Sher Bahadur Pun at the Sukran Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital, Shyam Raj Upaty, head of the Government Covid Vaccine Strategy and Sammeer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamic Nepal.

What are the precautions one should take before and after the injection? Sammeer Mani Dixit: Covishield, the Covid vaccine we are using, is an intramuscular injection. 0.5ml of vaccine is injected into the deltoid muscle. It is administered by a professional and after the jab, one will feel mild pain in the region.

What’s the efficacy rate of the vaccine and how long does it last? Covishield has been used in the UK, EU, India and many other countries. Australia is getting ready to use it. It has passed phase 3 clinical trials with over 12,000 volunteers without any severe reactions or any death. The efficacy ranges from 70-80%.

Once a person is vaccinated, there are antibodies that the body produces and there are memory T and B cells. The lifespan of antibodies is about 3-6 months but we don’t know about the duration of the memory cells since the vaccine has just been developed. The assumption is that it will work from anywhere between 9-12 months but we will know for sure once people who have been vaccinated have passed that stage.

Do we have to get the same vaccine for the second dose? Ideally, the manufacturers of the vaccine suggest we take the same for both doses. But there are instances you may be able to take a different dose from a different company.

How can people with vulnerable family members get the vaccine? Shyam Raj Upaty: We identified health workers as the most vulnerable. We vaccinated them at their locations, and 200. We will do the same for the next vulnerable group, take the vaccine to the communities.

If someone is not on the priority list but still wants to get vaccinated, how can they get it? Can it be bought? It is unlikely for people who are not listed as the priority to get the shot. It is being administered for free for the priority group individuals and cannot be bought.

Do people who have recovered from Covid-19 need to vaccinate? Sher Bahadur Pun: We don’t know exactly how long does the natural infection protect the body. The rough estimation is between 3-6 months. But it varies from one individual to another so it is recommended that people take the shot. Also, two doses provide longer protection.

Can breastfeeding mothers take the vaccine? Manufacturers of Covishield have suggested pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers against taking this vaccine. But Nepal government recently said that those breastfeeding for six months or more could take it, but we don’t have concrete data yet so we don’t recommend it.
South Asia’s vaccine geopolitics

How vaccine access puts Nepal in the crosshairs between China and India

China’s Defence Minister Wei Fenghe with Prime Minister Oli in November in Kathmandu

Christopher Tin in Hong Kong

Covid-19 vaccines have become a means for global powers to flex their muscles to reap geopolitical gains.

As a landlocked country sandwiched between China and India, the world’s two largest vaccine manufacturers, Nepal has benefited from their outreach. Attempts by Beijing and Delhi to distribute vaccines to Nepal signify the Himalayan state’s growing strategic importance to both.

India made the first move. In January, New Delhi pledged vaccines before any other country, and promptly dispatched 1 million doses of Covishield manufactured by the Serum Institute of India.

“Nepal is getting the vaccines within a week after India rolled out its vaccination drive, which signifies the friendship between India and Nepal and the importance India attaches to Nepal,” India’s ambassador to Nepal Vikas Swarup said, as the first shipment of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine arrived at Kathmandu airport.

Such a move was no doubt intended to add to the growing tensions between New Delhi and Beijing over their border dispute.

But while Beijing was at it, New Delhi led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi had begun to establish ties with countries in the region.

And so was the case with Nepal.

Not to be outdone in vaccine geopolitics, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali on 5 February, and pledged 100,000 doses of its Sinopharm vaccine. After a long negotiation, the Chinese vaccine finally got approval from Nepal’s Department of Drug Administration last week for emergency use.

The delay in the approval process for the Sinopharm, which has not been approved by the WHO yet, appears to have miffed Beijing. The Indian media played up supposed pressure by the Chinese Embassy to fast-track approval.

Vaccine geopolitics is playing out elsewhere in South Asia. Attempts by China to distribute vaccines to Bangladesh were thwarted after Dhaka refused to contribute to the development costs of the Sinopharm vaccine.

After India donated two million doses of Covishield to Bangladesh, it struck a deal to purchase 30 million doses of the vaccine for the country, enabling Beijing, Chinese state media accused Delhi of depriving Bangladesh of the vaccine.

Pakistan became the first country to receive donated shipments of China’s Sinopharm vaccine, and 3 million doses were pledged.

Along with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan also gifted Covishield to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Seychelles, Mauritius and Burma as part of its “Neighbourhood First” policy.

Nepal took delivery on Sunday of 3 million more Covishield vaccines that it ordered from the Serum Institute of India, and another 3.2 million doses under the WHO’s COVAX initiative will come soon.

China has made strategic gains in the region in recent years to India’s detriment, pouring investment through its Belt and Road Initiative into Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and the Maldives.

With its bureaucracy and weaker spending power, Delhi had not been able to keep up with Beijing’s soft power expansion.

Now, India is using vaccines as the vanguard of its response. The Serum Institute has been producing vaccine supplies at a much faster rate than the Indian government’s inoculation program can distribute them, making it easy for Delhi to send them abroad without suffering political backlash at home.

This has given India new leverage for soft power in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions. Since most of the developing world will not be vaccinated until 2023, demand for vaccines will only rise.

While China’s manufacturing prowess means that it is likely to keep up with demand, regional resistance to its largely un-tested vaccines will complicate efforts to gain approval.

What happens in Nepal over the coming months will be a microcosm of regional vaccine geopolitics. The erosion of Chinese influence with its inability to keep the Nepali government onside, gives an opening for New Delhi to assert itself in Kathmandu.

While China has promised Nepal continued support to help overcome the pandemic, its assistance may not be needed or welcomed if India already fulfills this role.
**Nilima Thapa Shrestha**

For those growing up in the 1980s in Kathmandu, the ‘Green Belt’ became a familiar term as poplars rose up along the Ring Road. Over the years, this strip of green gave Kathmandu some breathing space as the city grew at breakneck speed. Slowly, encroachment, carelessness and road expansion decimated the trees. The poplars were the first to go, then the jeerwals that lined the streets were cut, too.

From a Green Belt, Kathmandu has become a Bust Belt. But all is not lost, the tree-lined Darbar Marg to neighbourhood beautification at Narayani Chaur have shown that if communities get together it is possible to revive the Valley’s lungs.

Kathmandu will benefit from developing a series of linked water bodies, open spaces, parks and patches of urban forests, by not only connecting fragmented green spaces but also increase their ecosystem services, a concept that gives economic value to restoring nature.

Lack of open, green spaces takes a daily toll on the lives of the residents who have limited space for walking or other social activities. The abject lack of greenery in Kathmandu is a contributing factor to not just physiological but also psychological stress.

Sprawling, insensitive and haphazard development over the years has once-our what remained of open spaces. More recently, Kathmandu has experienced annual flooding during monsoon and extreme temperatures, a new phenomenon for the city’s residents.

According to the World Economic Forum, access to green open space and a feeling of social connection creates liveable and vibrant cities. The small open spaces that remain are not a result of planning but due to litigation (Tilkai) or neglect (Thundikhel). But even here, they provide people a place to unwind and distress with friends and family. The new corridor along the Bagmati, Dhulikhel and other tracts have concreted the floodplains, but at least the banks are treelised.

Trees have many obvious positive aspects like emitting oxygen, muffling noise pollution, moderating temperature. But also little-known benefits like releasing essential oils like phytoncides, which help physical and mental wellbeing in humans.

While Kathmandu has not yet seen a campaign that calls for the protection and preservation of nature, we have in the recent years seen some movement around keeping open spaces intact.

For many Kathmandu residents, the realisation task in after the 2015 earthquake. “It is important to tell the masses how our open spaces are being encroached upon and why they should be preserved,” says Vrijesh Shrestha, who coordinated the Occupy Thundikkel campaign.

Organised by a youth group, it was an attempt to spread awareness about the importance of open spaces, of which Thundikkel was a prominent symbol. The historical

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**Bicram Rajal**

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Nepal’s cities are populated more densely than they were before. As people return to their homes, the city must ensure that open spaces are maintained.

“Open spaces are an important part of urban life,” Rajal says. “They provide a place to unwind and distress with friends and family. They also provide a place to escape the hustle and bustle of city life.”

Public spaces are part of the infrastructure of democracy. They provide a platform for dialogue and discussion, and they help to create a sense of community. They are also important for mental health, providing a space for people to relax and de-stress.

However, the city is facing a challenge. As the population grows, open spaces are becoming scarce. This is a problem, particularly in Kathmandu, where the population has increased by 50% in the last decade.

The city is working to address this issue. The government has set aside a number of open spaces, and the municipality is working to maintain them. However, there is still more work to be done.

Open spaces are not just for recreation; they are also important for the economy. They provide a space for businesses to thrive, and they help to attract tourists. However, they also have a social function. They provide a space for people to come together and share ideas, and they help to create a sense of community.

As the city continues to grow, it is important that we ensure that open spaces are maintained. They are an important part of the city’s infrastructure, and they play a vital role in the city’s social and economic well-being.
In the latest episode of Saglo Samaj, Kanak Mani Dixit speaks to Renchin Yonjan, the originator of the Maitighar Mandala project nearly 20 years ago. Yonjan is happy the open space provides an oasis of tranquility in the middle of the city. The Kathmandu Valley Development Authority has identified 887 open spaces within the Kathmandu Valley: 468 sites in Kathmandu, 145 in Lalitpur, and 53 in Bhaktapur. Among these, 58% of the area is usable for public activities. These open spaces vary in size, services, and function. But identifying open spaces alone cannot guarantee their protection unless the feeling of ownership can be developed among the communities.

Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC160) has been developing a plan to carve out 30 parks of varying sizes and services in the city, in collaboration with 11 municipalities to develop other green spaces around the valley. So far, nearly 60% of the area has been restricted to maps and their sustainable management will be a challenge. Issues of ownership are unclear, and the lack of belongingness can lead to poor maintenance, commercialization, and encroachment.

In some cases, open space development has turned into beautification environmentalism—with high boundary walls, restricted opening times, and fees that favour a few well-off people. This deprives ordinary citizens from access to greenery. The valley’s open spaces are fragmented and imply urbanization has left them disconnected with each other. They can be linked through ecological corridors that help plants and animals spread, migrate, as well as rehabilitate environments.

Channels, waterways, and small fields also provide a continuous shaded path connecting urban amenities like theatres, universities, libraries, shopping malls, and offices with parks and water bodies, improving walkability.

Kathmandu's shrinking open spaces is due not only to encroachment but also to a lack of proper regulation. In 2017, the National Urban Development Strategy identified 1,212 open spaces and fragmented policies and regulations as the major causes and pointed out the need for plans and projects incorporating nature and more green spaces.

Creating Kathmandu’s green necklace requires political buy-in and support from communities. Unfortunately, politicians are often focused on flashy infrastructure projects that are visible enough to win votes, but have no patience to wait for a tree to grow.

For many residents who have lost hope of any significant progress in this city, a green necklace might seem too ambitious. But cities around the world have greenized their landscapes by de-paving hard spaces, developing parks and riverfronts, adding greenery to streets, encouraging gardening in schools and residential neighborhoods, and preserving the urban woodlands.

Kathmandu’s river corridors have been designed purely for vehicular traffic. However, we can develop riverbanks as green corridors—which could also help reduce flooding. Last spring’s colourful blossoms along the river corridor show the lack of channelization.

Likewise, Kathmandu’s Ring Road and major roads networks can create and connect green spaces. Tree-lined streetscapes will create an ecological corridor, providing a continuous shaded path to the urban population, and a movement corridor for birds, insects, and small creatures.

Technically, connecting green spaces is possible if the city’s environment department stops upgrinding against destructive development. The bigger challenge is a social and political willingness to participate in preserving and taking ownership of nature’s aesthetics.

Nima Thapa Shrestha is an activist and urban planner.

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society

Kanak Mani Dixit: How did the idea of constructing this Mandala come about?

Renchin Yonjan: Originally it was called “Garden of Hope” to give Kathmandu residents a small slice of beauty at a time when its heritage was disappearing. The mandala was added later. It was meant to be a symbol of improvement and that if we do not protect it, aesthetic beauty can be ephemeral. And for the past 20 years, Kathmandu’s communities have passed this site every day and experienced that moment of peace. How does that make you feel?

There is a sense of satisfaction, but also dissatisfaction. The upkeep is not as we had intended it to be. There was supposed to be water, the stones sparkly and dry, the grass supposed to be green. Still, I am glad that there is this sight for sore eyes amidst Kathmandu’s chaos and urbanisation.

Originally, we had planned to plant only white flowers at the location, to spread the message of peace. Now they have planted flowers in all colours. But the sudden thing is the addition of those garish coloured rose lights.

I do not like them at all. When I pass the Mandala at night, it looks like a red light district in Thailand. We could have lights that imitate oil lamps to give it that devotional look. But these sh*ty lights, snaking around in blue, red, yellow...

Can you what did you with the Mandala be an example for other neighborhoods to revive open spaces?

Definitely. And it is not even that expensive to carry out. Just needs imagination. The Municipality is now considering this space, but the idea should not be to make money out of it, but to think how it can provide comfort and peace to this city’s residents. I used to think of all those commuters in crowded buses on hot days, and how people may get a tinge of pleasure as they pass the garden and flowers so that when they reach their office or home they will feel less stressed and happy.

Yes, let us hope the Mandala can inspire other neighborhoods to also do the same.

Yes, and my request would be that whoever uses these open spaces, they keep it clean. There are discarded plastic water bottles and trash here. It would be best if everyone treated this space as their own.

KATHMANDU MANDALA

In the latest episode of Saglo Samaj, Kanak Mani Dixit, a Nepali TV personality, expressed his concerns about the Kathmandu Mandala project nearly 20 years ago. Dixit’s worries about the project include the lack of proper regulation, the transgression of democratic and spatial order, and the political leadership of whatever juste just want to control the land without taking responsibility. The goal is to ensure that the residents of the city can enjoy the Mandala project’s greenery.

Bibek Rijal is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Nepal University. Credits.
**EVENTS**

Revamp Nepal

In an attempt to enable venues to directly connect and interact with prospective customers, clients, and partners, Revamp Nepal will host a series of live events, ideas, and initiatives every Friday in the coming weeks. For more information, visit nepalrevamp.com.

Hike for Nepal

Join the first-ever Nepal hiking campaign that will take you on a journey to explore the country’s unique culture, history, and landscapes. This month’s hike will be from Swayambhunath to Boudha and will include stops at local temples and shrines.

Okta Jatra Expo

Override your Newar heritage by participating in a full day of epic revelry at the Okta Jatra. This year, the event will feature traditional music, dance, and food stalls, as well as a variety of local artisans and craft vendors.

Art Exhibition

A unique month-long exhibition, "Tulikaa's Khil: 2.0 - A Cycle Of Life," will be held in Nepal this month, showcasing the best of Nepal's contemporary art. The exhibition will feature works by over 50 artists, including solo and group shows.

**ONLINE ARCHIVES**

**DINING**

**PHOTO MUSEUM NEPAL**

Take a look at the historic photographs from throughout Nepal’s history and learn the stories behind the photographs.

**BOTANICAL GARDEN TOUR**

Google Earth's Step and Smell the Flowers is a journey through 100 of the most breathtaking botanical gardens and arboretums around the world from countries like Russia, Sweden, and Canada, to the Netherlands.

**DIGITAL ARCHEOLOGY FOUNDATION**

Look at the historic photographs from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur’s cultural squares, and watch over 300 restored videos of temples, around Nepal. Visit the Digital Archeology Foundation website for more details.

**NEWA LAHANA**

Experience Newa hospitality and culture at Newa Lahana with food prepared by women from Newa households in Kathmandu, while you enjoy the view of the ancient city.

**THE SOCIAL CAFE**

Order The Social Cafe’s delicious chaat-style meal at a starter or enjoy a variety of evening snacks with some chilled beer or a glass of wine.

**PHO99**

Enjoy a wide variety of Chinese food prepared with fresh ingredients, including rice, noodles, deep fried spring rolls, dumplings, soups and curries, as well as desserts.

**EDADFAME**

Experience modern Korean food at EdADFAME, starting with the flaming salmon, one of the highlights of the night. Call and book in advance—the restaurant has a bustling business.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 February

**OUR PICK**

In post-pandemic Snowpiercer, the momentum of humanity live in a perpetually moving car that circles the globe every seven years. A reframed world. At the same time, the passengers grapple with their own personal and political struggles.

**Kholeo**

A CYCLE OF LIFE

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

PRAJWAL BHATTARAI

FEB 26 - MAR 3

Van Gogh Gallery

BHAKTAPUR, GORE, TAHTANGRAKA

GALLERY TIME: 11 AM - 7 PM

**NEYAPOL SANKARKUP TARKADAR SUCCHANA TATHA PRASARAN VIBHAG**

बालबालीको माध्यम हुने हिंसा, दु:खवाद, शोगन मण्डले, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थाको रहने को बालबालीको उद्घोषण भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाईनको पलन निर्णायक गर्ने हो।

फोन: नं. १७०९ मा खाच गरी।
Calm before another storm
Nine days before House reconvenes, political forces jostle to form new government

A
d
The Nepal’s Supreme Court reinstated the Lower House that had been dissolved by Prime Minister K P Oli two months ago, the mood in Kathmandu is of a calm before another storm.

The past two months since the House dissolution on 20 December had been punctuated with daily demonstrations and rallies on the streets by supporters of Oli and his arch-rival in the Nepal Communist Party, Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

At the start of the crisis, PM Oli had been given the upper hand after the Supreme Court had restored his dissolved House. Oli’s victory had come as a shock to Dahal and the other political forces in the country who had been working to make the NC-led government stable and viable.

However, as the end of the Oli-led government draws near, the political landscape is now set up for a power struggle. The Supreme Court has ruled that the Oli-led government should be dissolved and that a new election should be held.

The political forces are now jostling for position, with some hoping to form a government led by Oli, while others are looking to form a government led by Dahal. The political landscape is now set up for a power struggle, with some hoping to form a government led by Oli, while others are looking to form a government led by Dahal.
THERE IS NEVER A PERFECT TIME TO HAVE CHILDREN

There is never a perfect time to have children because there is always something happening in your life. Either they are too young or too old, they are not financially stable enough or ready for the responsibilities or want to travel.

LIFE TIME
Anjana Rajbhandary

No one else but the woman should decide when it is the right time to have children. Sometimes, telling a woman that there is no right time may end up in her having children at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. Many of us knew someone who decided to have a baby to save their marriage or to societal expectations.

“Women are born with a certain number of eggs and as women age, it is harder for women to conceive due to a decrease in the number considerably. Also, women may have a certain percentage of eggs that are damaged or abnormal,” explains physician Sujoy Rajbhandary. “It does become difficult for women to conceive after the age of 35, not saying that it is impossible or hopeless, but the probability of having a successful pregnancy is much higher at 25 or 30 compared to 35 or 40.”

It is important to consider nature and biology when it comes to having children, although the magic of modern science has made many things possible. I know women who have had their first child at 40 and I know women who have struggled to have children in their 20s—these experiences are subjective. Biologically speaking, a woman is physically healthy to be a child from her late teens to her early 20s. Fertility can also depend on age and genetics, so the sooner a woman can decide what she wants or does not want, the easier it is for her to work towards it.

Preserving her fertility, or learning if she has any health issues such as polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis or genetic history of reproductive issues, may affect her ability to get pregnant as discovered by many women. If you know you want children in the future, it helps to know the best time to start freezing your eggs.

There are ways of having children in the late 30s and 40s, but it may be more expensive and difficult because fertility treatments and In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) may not always be successful. Another important factor is that if you have a male partner, age gap will also affect his fertility and that may determine whether you can have kids.

It is important to respect a woman’s privacy because some women may be trying to conceive without telling their family and friends, they may have suffered miscarriage or encountered unsuccessful IVF treatments. So telling them there is no right time, without even knowing what they have been through, would be cruel and heartless. We can only pray and control so much about having a baby, the rest is up to chance.

Also, it is important that you and your partner are on the same page about having and raising a baby, so you must consider if they want to be a parent too. The help and support of family do affect a woman’s ability to raise a child because affluent families have more resources to raise kids compared to someone from a lower socioeconomic background.

In Nepal, the pressure on women to have made children to continue in family lineage is just as great. Maya, 32, is a successful working professional who has been married for five years. “I got pressure from my in-laws to have a child, preferably male. It makes me feel like everything I have done so far is in vain. First it was the pressure to marry and now to have a child. Should I have a child for society? Do I have no desire to be a mother?” she questions.

Are you willing to give up your spontaneous life of socialising to wake up in the middle of the night for a baby? Are you willing to give up the joys of being a mother to have a successful and happy career? There are sacrifices and losses on both sides and understanding what they entail would help a woman decide.

If you did not want children for years and suddenly decide at 50 or 60 that you want to be a mother, you may be able to adopt a baby, but you must consider. If it is in the best interest of the child, it is not enough to want to be a mother, but also important to be a good mother.

Every decision related to having a baby has consequences. Fertility, such as age and genetics, and financial, social, family, ambitions and how much are you willing to give up for what you want should be taken into account. This major decision can cause confusion and anxiety, and clash with each other expectations.

It is easy to allow society, parents, or your own biological clock to tell you that time is running out and feel guilty and shame for not wanting what a woman ‘should’ want. What other people say or what you read may influence your thoughts and views. But, you have to be honest with yourself, take the time to listen to your inner voice and do what you know is right for yourself.

Anjana Rajbhandary is the deputy managing editor at Nepal Times. She writes about lifestyle, beauty, mental health, and physical health.
Harnessing the sun to pump water

Solar irrigation can help Nepal’s subsistence farmers improve yield, cope with the climate and Covid crises

Usha Manandhar

The answer to low agricultural productivity made worse by the climate crisis is simple: water. But the challenge has always been to find the energy to pump water to rain-fed terraces.

Now, rapid advancement solar panel efficiency and falling costs have made it an attractive option for pumping water for irrigation for higher and sustainable agricultural yield.

Solar-powered water pumps in fact have the potential to lift Nepal families from subsistence agriculture and poverty, which has been exacerbated by climate-induced water shortage and the economic fallout of the pandemic.

Solar power has become a necessity to shift to higher-value crops and transform livelihoods of subsistence and smallholder farmers. This is why it has become the government’s priority to promote solar irrigation to address the food-energy-water nexus and its climate interlinkages.

As of August 2015, Nepal had already installed 1,600 solar irrigation systems worth $8 million all over the country. More than 75% of these were financed by the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPC), an apex body on renewables promoting solar irrigation under the Renewable Energy Subsidy Policy (2008) and Sadelly Delivery Mechanism Guidelines (2018).

Collectively, these systems irrigate 990 hectares of farmland and generate 2.5 megawatt of energy.

In a nation where only a quarter of the 3.5 million hectares of cultivable land is irrigated, and two-thirds of farms depend on the rains, solar irrigation systems are crucial for expanding acreage.

There is great potential for solar irrigation systems as a solution to food security for smallholders because it can increase agricultural production to keep pace with food demand while at the same time adapting to changes in weather patterns due to climate change.

This in turn will lead to improved livelihoods and help in poverty alleviation. The use of clean energy also removes expenditure for diesel used in pumps, and reduces Nepal’s petroleum import bill.

Much of the effort so far has been concentrated on improving access to solar technologies through innovation in infrastructure and financial instruments. There is now a need for concurrent investment in optimisation of energy generated through solar irrigation systems.

Appropriate technologies could translate excess energy generated by solar systems beyond irrigation.

A solar irrigation facility in Darchula Municipality of Nawalpari district shows that, on average, only 39% of the 22.4kW energy generated is used for pumping water and the rest is wasted. An estimated $198,737 worth of valuable energy goes down the drain.

There are at least three ways to use the energy generated by solar irrigation systems for economically productive and socially valuable outcomes. First, we could sell back excess energy to the utility for feed-in tariff as long as the fuel–emission costs out of metering are foreseen.

Secondly, irrigated water could also be sold to other farmers as long as they are nearby, the timing of local needs is compatible, and the availability of diesel-powered tubewells.

Third, and most importantly, the energy that is presently being wasted could be used more productively by introducing innovation in the agricultural value chain. We call this “enhancing the social value of energy”.

Market-based solutions such as post-harvest processing are Narendra, to improving energy utilisation and add greater value for the farmer. Innovations in agro-processing technologies can open opportunities for local communities to improve their livelihoods and better respond in the times of crises like climate and Covid-19.

Greater attention to innovation, both social and technological, is critical in ensuring the full benefits of solar irrigation systems.

Proprietors of Nepal’s solar energy need to move away from the traditional prioritisation given to technocentric strategies to find ways to efficiently use up the excess energy.

Usha Manandhar is with Mitig and works with gender and social inclusion on energy and environmental issues. She is also a PhD candidate at the University of the West of England in the UK and a professor at the School of Future Innovation at Asia Life University in Japan.

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Nepal’s mega-dam is a ....

The Budi Gandaki project will be Nepal’s biggest and displace 50,000 people

Budi Gandaki

Inauguration: 1200 MW
Start target: 2023
Renewal target: 2028

Budi Gandaki is one of the major projects of Nepal’s mega-dam projects that is expected to be completed by 2023 and will have a total capacity of 1,200 MW. The project involves the construction of a dam on the Budi Gandaki river, which is a tributary of the Trishuli river. The dam will have a reservoir capacity of 120 million cubic meters and will displace around 50,000 people from the surrounding areas. The project is expected to provide electricity to the southern parts of Nepal and improve the country’s energy security.

Budi Gandaki: A major project

The Budi Gandaki project is one of the major hydroelectric projects in Nepal, which is expected to be completed by 2023. The project involves the construction of a dam on the Budi Gandaki river and is expected to have a total capacity of 1,200 MW. The project is expected to displace around 50,000 people from the surrounding areas and provide electricity to the southern parts of Nepal.

Budi Gandaki: Displacement of 50,000 people

The Budi Gandaki project is expected to displace around 50,000 people from the surrounding areas of the dam site. The project is expected to be completed by 2023 and will have a total capacity of 1,200 MW. The dam will have a reservoir capacity of 120 million cubic meters.

Budi Gandaki: Displacement of 50,000 people

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involved in Nepal’s hydropower, but in Budi Gandaki they would get bumper returns for free,” he added.

India had said it was not interested in investing in or building the Budi Gandaki project, and withdrew from bilateral talks in the late 90s.

Another water expert, Dipak Gyawali, headed a review committee formed by the government to look at the design, and says: “About 150,000 hectares of land in Nuwakot and Chitwan districts downstream could have benefited in Nepal. The water that flows in dry months from the reservoir is produced by submerging our land. If India uses this water then we should get financial return.”

Gyawali also says the project is located close to the epicenter of the 2015 earthquake and may not be able to withstand another such event. “For a seismically active region like Nepal, rock filled dams are better than concrete double arch dams as proposed on the design,” he said.

Laxmi Devkota, the former Chair of the Budi Gandaki Development Committee, says it has been designed by international seismic resistance parameters. The delays could make the Budi Gandaki project financially unviable. Costs are plummeting for renewable like solar, wind power, and emerging hydrogen energy technology.

According to the Asia Foundation report, solar electricity tariffs in Rajasthan, India, fell from more than 10 cents per unit in 2010 to 3.8 cents, and wind energy was 3.7 cents. Nepal’s hydropower costs 7 cents per unit to produce.

India, which is Nepal’s energy export market, is ramping up renewable energy capacity with 37 gigawatts of solar and 39 gigawatts in wind by 2030.

However, Budi Gandaki’s output is planned for domestic use and not to compete directly in the regional market. Nonetheless, the costs make its value questionable, even for domestic use.

“If we can develop this project within five years then we will definitely save some money, but if it is the next 20 years than it would be a hotspot of corruption for politicians and bureaucrats. It looks like this project is losing its technical strength in terms of cost already,” said Dipendra Bhattarai, an energy expert.

Nepal doubled its electricity production from 700MW in 2010 to 1400MW in 2014. Another 700MW is likely to be added in the next couple of years.

However, Nepal has been importing about 600 megawatts from India in the dry, winter months (November to April) to meet peak demand as the smaller run-of-the-river projects struggle when water levels are low—one motivation to build a big reservoir.

The Budi Gandaki dam should have been completed by 2022. In 2015, the cost was estimated at $2.5 billion—more than one fourth of Nepal’s total budget that year.

Says Radhika Devkota: “We have already lost about half a billion dollars in the last four years if we consider just 10% inflation rate. We could have also earned another $1.5 billion by selling electricity in the four years that were delayed.”
NEPAL'S FIRST
DRY HOPPED
PILSNER BIER
WITH 100% GERMAN MALT

Kiss and make up

The Ass is on the verge of throwing in the towel. Step me before I quit. With so many professional stand-up comedians in the government, and given all the clowns who hold senior positions in the political parties, I give up. There is just too much competition. These guys are really good, they keep the entire population entertained all the time, and they are putting amateurs like us out of business.

The past year has just been one long slapsketch show. Every time Oli gets up to speak, he has us in stitches. And when Comrade Awesome delivers one of his monologues, he has us ROFL, LMFAO, LOLZ, LQTM, LMHD, not to mention OMG and WTF.

And this week was the climax of the show. If you had not been following the news, here is a brief recap: MKN and PKD went to Calcutta for another ‘We Are Here’ rally, but then came news from the SC that CJBR had declared KPO’s dissolution of Parliament null and void. The flag hit the sun. On Thursday evening, MKN and PKD fed each other’s lexicon, called SRO on the phone, and headed back to KTM. Meanwhile KPO was too busy blowing out happy birthday candles at Salluwara in the company of PKG, RFT, IP, SP and BR to notice that there was a national emergency about. Prezidnace dose wonders to make one lose track of reality.

Wednesday morning, MKN and PKD go off to Mahendranagar to try to convince SRO to join a Congress Coalition (CCC). SRO says he’s got it, but he also has BCP in content with. Soon after, they also meet JNK, NKS, BMP, GB, SB, SR, J, PB, FP at Paris Mills in strategy. On Thursday MKN, PKD, JNK, RCF, NKS all met once more and at the time of going to press, the gathering had expanded to include ABC, DIF, MNO, IQPS, and KXY.

Still with me? OK, let’s summarise the story so far:

Two years ago, KPO and PKD agreed to take turns being PM. But PKD changed his mind. PKD realised that KPO’s fourth kidney was chugging along better than predicted, and the man was much bolder and heartier than he had been led to believe. So he got MKN and JNK to poke KPO, who displayed no reaction. PKD got BCP into the Upper House with the help of NKS. JNK and MKN. KPO quickly dumped some carrots in front of BCP, who started waggling his tail. Said carrots were also waved at RFT, TBR and LBR, who said yes sir, yes sir, three bags full. Still feeling outnumbered, KPO decided he is a staunch secular Hindu, and started Pushupati to drop in to gold. BCP and RFT by now are both so desperate to be PM they will kill anyone, even GSNY, SDP or Lord Shiva.

Because the friend of your enemy is your enemy, KPO is locking to mend fences with MKN. After all, PKD and MKN are scratching each other’s backs. MKN suspects PKD will dump him the instant he becomes PM, but wants to succeed IDB as Poor. JNK also wants to be Pres. But PKD himself nurses an ambition to be Executive Pres. (To be continued)