All together now

ANALYSIS by RAJENDRA DAHAL

The week after the resignation of Surya Bahadur Thapa, we are still where we were last Friday. King Gyanendra wants to keep the final authority to select a prime minister, but the political parties are equally determined not to allow him that role.

All three forces (the five party alliance, the RPP and the Deuba Congress) now voice that the king has no right to nominate the prime minister. They want the composition of the dissolved parliament to be the criteria in the selection.

King Gyanendra has met a procession of party leaders and ex-prime ministers who were summoned to the palace for individual royal audiences. They all came out to tell waiting reporters that the king is committed to finding a resolution to the impasse. Girija Prasad Koirala, Madhab Kumar Nepal and Narayan Man Bijukchhe of the five-party alliance were summoned separately this week but refused to go, saying they would only do so if all five could meet the king together.

The king hasn’t said he won’t meet them. But he hasn’t invited them together either. The strategy seems to be to call them to the palace one-by-one on short notice to influence and divide the alliance. The king may now invite the alliance, but also include the RPP, the Deuba Congress and Sadbhavana at the meeting to mute the five parties’ voice.

Koirala and Nepal met on Thursday to make plans in anticipation of a sudden summons from the palace. One of the options being put forward by the Congress and the UML cadre to break the deadlock is for Koirala and Nepal to step aside for second-echelon leaders like Ram Chandra Poudel of the Congress and KP Oli of the UML. The strategy would be to present a united front and arrange a date for elections.

Worryingly, this window of opportunity for a political resolution is narrowing and this will delay resolution of the more serious issue of the Maoist insurgency and weaken the state’s ability to meet the rebels’ threatened escalation of violence in the coming weeks.

BJP OUT

There was mixed reaction in Nepal to the unexpected BJP rout in India’s election. Nepal’s ex-envoy in Delhi, Lok Raj Baral, thinks the return of the Congress will not affect Nepal much. “Secular democratic forces will be encouraged, but Indian parties all hold similar views on neighbours,” he said. But the Congress has had strained relations with Nepal’s royalty, and King Gyanendra has been using the Hindu card for influence in the BJP’s Delhi. Political activist Hari Roka says India’s hardline Hindu groups have been supportive of the king. “The BJP defeat will undermine the king if he continues on a path of democratic reversal,” says Roka, a PhD scholar at JNU in New Delhi.
Given his past reputation and present dealings, for many Nepalis, King Gyanendra’s effort to run the country by fiat is illegitimate and his aspiration for heard-and-seen monarchy suspect. His insistence on having elected representatives, however corrupt, at his beck and call is futile. The slogan of patriotism has bled itself dry for many in Nepal—they want their sovereignty back.

This has not stripped the legitimacy of the monarchy yet, but how long can the king continue to be intransigent while being violently challenged by the Maoists, impatiently sloganised by republican youths and stifled opposition by the parties? Doesn’t he need to prevent irreparable damage to the institution that has made him who he is?

In the short term, he may inflect some broken bones in the streets but this way he and his dynasty stand to lose big time in the long run. All his speeches about the Shah dynasty following the people’s wishes may not be enough to rescue the monarchy if he waits too long.

But the agitating party leaders also have a responsibility to find a way out of this deadlock. The willingness to dash with the police may show moral courage, but is not enough to rescue a failing state with vision, clarity and fortitude. Nor is it enough to convince the common Nepali, disillusioned by a 12-year political circus, to join the struggle for democratic renewal.

Even if their head wounds allow some politicians to atone for their past sins, it will not convince skeptics that they have turned a new leaf. What guarantees are there that they will not engage in the same corruption, willful misconduct and constant, shameless bad-tampering of those in power by those outside the circuit, relentless factional strife and intrigue? The way, for example, that tainted figures have been coddled and sheltered even after CIAA indictments does not bode well.

If the parties have a blueprint for a reformed democracy, they haven’t told us what it is yet. Now that the Surya Bahadur Thapa government has resigned, and they are toggling for berths in a future government, we see the beginnings of the same intrigue and fractiousness that characterised their years in power.

Do they, especially the faction-ridden Congress, have the courage to own up to their lapses and show us that this time it is going to be different? The public doesn’t seem convinced that the past won’t be repeated.

True, as some columnists in this paper have argued, lots of good things happened since 1990. People became sovereign, their enthusiasm rose and democracy created a grassroot demand for elected representatives who performed. Partly fuelled by global trends, Nepal’s with its limited skills are now more than willing to risk journey abras for betterment. But the political leadership lacked the vision and training to channel that optimism to change and uplift Nepal. They became ensnared, and ultimately lost, in their own petty rituals of power.

That said, no matter how much we hate them, the reinstatement and future of democracy lies with these very parties and their untainted leaders. The concession and courageous among them need to step out with specific, detailed and concrete manifestos about the future. For starters: how about throwing out the rotten apples? If the people had a forum, this is what they would be asking the leaders: why should we trust you now?

Nothing is more important than a reaffirmation among the Nepali people of their right to rule themselves through their own elected representatives and to throw the them out in the next election if they don’t like them.


guest column

Pramod Mishra

GUEST COLUMN
Pramod Mishra
A semi-authoritarian route

Freedom can’t be diluted, a country can’t be half-democratic

Now that he has vacated Bahadur Thapa will have enough time to reflect upon the helplessness of prime ministers in this kingdom. During one of his earlier tenures in the Panchayat era, Thapa hinted darkly that an underground mafia ruled the country in the name of the palace. But when the time came to name names, Thapa turned out to be as much as his pancha predecessors. He owes it to the nation to explain why he kept mum.

Just as he carries the cross of the 1980 referendum to this day, history will hold him responsible for helping institutionalise a ‘constructive’ monarchy in place of a constitutional one. King Gyanendra, by taking Nepali politics backwards, has also veered to the right, turning his regressive regime into a formidable force.

King Mahendra swore by the ‘my-country-right-or-wrong’ doctrine to declare all dissenters ‘anti-national elements’. King Gyanendra is for the free market and wants to project a formidable force. King Mahendra is the overfed American teenager stuck on his computer for fear of the street dangers, demanding more and more gadgets to keep his mind at the level of an invertebrate while feeding the consumer market.

Thanks to Malika Browne for investigating the plight of Nepal children in Indian circuses and to your report from Bhairawa that gives this sad story a hopeful end. As long as there are people like Kiran Thapa of the Nepal Child Welfare Society in Bhairawa and Philip Holmes of the Esther Benjamins Trust, we will be reminded in the inherent goodness of human beings and that not everyone is cruel and heartless.

Goma Manandhar, Lazimpat

DWARWIAK DAS

Everyone who knew Dwarka Das Shrestha would like to thank you for your tribute to him (The kings and I (#195). But why is it that people get recognition only after they die? Uday Sunder Shrestha, Saneapa

Correction

In ‘The kings and I’ (#195), the young princes studied at St Joseph’s School, North Point.
The silence of the night is broken by the sound of gunfire, no one knows who is shooting at whom, no one wants to know.
She has had enough

up to seven flights landed in Sanphe every day. Now there are only four charters a week. The tower and the terminal building are still charred hulks. Across the river are the remains of the Water Department, on the opposite hill the shell of the Road Department building and in town the Forest Department signboard remains outside its ruin.

The Maoist blockade has sent prices soaring. A kilo of rice that cost Rs 14 is now Rs 22. Kerosene has shot up to Rs 60 per litre. “The government stated the blockade was not a big deal,” says Mahesh Oli, a volunteer child counselor in Achham. “They have forgotten us.”

There are still satellite antennas and electric wires, but Sanphe hasn’t had electricity for years. At night there is only the flicker of oil lamps. After the Maoists destroyed the telecommunications tower in 2002, Sanphe’s only direct link to the outside world is a single VSAT phone. “Just because the tower might be destroyed again does not mean it shouldn’t be fixed,” says farmer Rakesh Lama.

People here distrust both the king and politicians. No one is interested in or supports the current anti-king agitation, and they don’t think much of elections. “If the government can’t even hold SLC exams, I don’t know how they plan to have elections,” says Khadka.

Shobha’s songs

Shobha is among the brightest students in Bajura: she wins top honours in every poetry, story, quiz and debate contest. She is an active volunteer and works with orphans and AIDS patients in her village. She is also a singer and songwriter, and that is what put the 18-year-old Shobha in danger.

For the past three years, the Maoists have tried to persuade her to join their cultural wing, and when she refused, they threatened to kill her. Shobha promised she would join as soon as her feet healed, an excuse she concocted to buy time. The Maoists left after a warning that they would come back in three months. Like many other young people in the midwest, Shobha had to either join the Maoists or flee. She decided to flee, leaving behind her mother and younger brother.

Shobha’s father works as a watchman in Mumbai. We met Shobha at Sanphe where she was waiting to get on a bus to go to her relatives. “The Maoabadi have taken away many of my friends,” she says. Shobha is anxious about her future: how she’ll fare in her new home and her exam results. “I will do well, but I can’t afford college,” she says. “All I really want is to be a social worker in my village and to sing my songs freely.” (KDS)

Clockwise from bottom l-r: All that’s left of the Forest Department is its signboard, a young girl holds onto her mother, a dish antenna but no electricity on a Sanphe house, children carrying sacks of supplies through the bazar and village women on their way home with meager supplies of grain and cooking oil.
Ruptured artery

The Department of Roads is racing against the monsoon to finish graveling the heavily damaged Mugling–Narayanghat Highway before heavy rains arrive next month. A landslide near central Nepal unleashed 500mm of rain in a 24 hour period last July, triggering more than 70 major landslides along the 36km mountain highway that follows the Narayani gorge. Only a 10km section of the road remained unscathed. Although it was a natural disaster, the government’s response in rebuilding the important artery used by some 5,000 vehicles a day has been slow. Sources told us that budget initially allocated last September for repairs were diverted to a road in the midwest for the royal visit. But faced with the threat of Kathmandu being cut off this monsoon, an additional Rs 35 million has been sanctioned and repair work has resumed on a war footing.

The highway was finished in 1978 with Chinese aid and passes through one of the most geologically unstable areas of the Mahabharat characterised by steep mountainsides and heavy precipitation. “The public doesn’t understand this, and blame us for everything,” lamented Director General Madan Gopal Madhukar of the Department of Roads. “This would have been a major disaster in any country, and would take months to rebuild even with an unlimited budget and the most modern equipment.”

A 120m retaining wall in the worst-affected area at the 2.4km point is already under construction and should be finished in a month. Although rains were mainly to blame, there are also man-made factors like deforestation along the highway caused by the tea shops and lodges mushrooming by the roadside. Mining sand and gravel along the rivers has also increased the speed of the water during monsoons.

“You can have the best highway in the world, but it won’t stand a chance with rains like last year, even without taking the man-made factors into account,” said Bhusnu Shrestha, the senior divisional engineer in charge of the Mugling highway repairs. Asked what are the chances of the highway remaining open during the monsoon, Shrestha is optimistic that if there are no major disruptions like bandas, blockades and heavy pre-monsoon showers, the work should be finished before the main rains arrive. ●

Times 14 - 20 MAY 2004 #196

Vive les femmes

Why don’t the Charitraheen Chelis rip apart their veils and show us who they are?

W hen French women took off their bras and waved them in protest around the Champs Elysées in the 1970s, they were saying enough is enough to male chauvinism. Wearing bras was a symbol of compliance to men. That could be true, but I suppose bras also have gravity-defying attributes and it is also true that with time this lam of upper female undergarment has been imbued with its own erotica. I wonder what would happen if our Charitraheen Chels had marched around Darbar Marg waving their bras on International Women’s Day. Did our clever Chels deliberately not do this because they knew of its failure in Nepali society? Is this why they prefer talking about not wearing undergarments and not actually doing it? So, on International Women’s Day or 8 March, the Charitraheen Chels made public their 40-point Declaration of Independence in these pages (#186).

One of my delighted lady friends in America emailed me that declaration from this paper’s online edition just to make sure that I read it. I had already read it in Nepali and in English. But reading it thrice didn’t help. It raised more questions, and after many sleepless nights I discussed writing this column with my future rebel wife, who lovingly calls me ‘King’ but has made me understand that no means no and when she has a headache, I should reach for Cetamol, not a condom. But she gave me permission to go ahead and write it. “It will be fun. But be ready for some bigger criticism.”

First off, why International Day of Women? How about us guys? They already expect us to be gallant most of the time, if not all the time, offer roses and take them out for a candlelit tête-à-tête dinner on 14 February.

Although their identities are a closely guarded secret, I suspect I know some of the Charitraheen Chels. We have shared several pugs of whisky on the rocks or run with coke and hung out in discos quite late. I have never seen these women feeling uncomfortable to talk about sex, being scared to scold corrupt politicians, fight with nasty and drunk policemen in Thamel or say that the king should make a move to bring the country out of deadlock. All this they do openly, in public. But they prefer to remain anonymous while talking about their 40 points. Why?

Changes come once we know that options exist. Ten years ago, seeing a Nepali couple holding hands would make heads turn. And kissing in public would be science fiction. Today young couples express their love on the streets of Kathmandu openly and spontaneously.

Ten years is not a long time to bring about such changes. I agree the cowards still refuse to change. But they prefer to remain anonymous while talking about their 40 points. Why?

If you can openly speak, write and fight for property or abortion rights then why can’t you just come out on the streets of Kathmandu openly and spontaneously? Ten years is not a long time to bring about such changes. If you agree the cowards still resist, why don’t they move instead of always talking about it? Why don’t the Charitraheen Chelis rip apart their veils and show us who they are?

Does the Charitraheen need to change? Is this why they prefer talking about not wearing undergarments? Obviously, they prefer to remain anonymous while talking about their 40 points. Why?

It might be fun down there but it’s certainly not bad up here, either. You have your reasons to remain anonymous but being someone who firmly believes that progress will be hard and difficult but we can’t achieve unless the status of women is not improved, I simply want to say to the Charitraheen Chelis (Charitraheen or otherwise): you are the ones who can contribute shaping the character of us men who are feeling rather insecure because we don’t have an international day dedicated to us. ●
Hitting rock bottom in Pokhara

Bandas, blockades and the murders of two prominent Ghandruk businessmen has demolished what was left of Pokhara’s tourism

RAMESH POUDEL in POKHARA

Already badly hit by bandas, blockades and political instability the news of the murder of two prominent tourism entrepreneurs in Ghandruk by Maoists has sent Pokhara into deep gloom.

Ghandruk is an important trekking stop on the trails to Ghorepani and Annapurna Base Camp and used to house the headquarters of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which was destroyed by Maoists two years ago.

On Monday, Maoists took five prominent Ghandruk hoteliers hostage. They locked two lodges and transferred guests from one to another. Then came the news that the Maoists had shot and Iswor Gurung, 31. The rebels told villagers not to leave their houses and trekkers are bypassing Ghandruk for now.

“Ghandruk has no trekkers now,” said Ishwor’s cousin Prakash Gurung, a former assistant minister, who lives in Pokhara. “We have not been able to go to the village because of the Maoists.”

The army too has been unable to get to Ghandruk for fear of Maoist ambushes along the way. However, an army official said aerial patrolling of the area had begun.

This is the first time that the Maoists, who claim never to attack tourists, directly attacked the tourism industry. There used to be extortions and earlier they used to demand money in the Ghorepani area, but the murders and abductions in Ghandruk are sure to dampen tourism in the Annapurnas.

Panhaka has already seen a 90 percent drop in tourism in the last few days because of the recent banda. Many had to walk the 35km to Pokhara because of the strike and the Maoist blockade. The Maoists have burnt two taxis on the Baglung highway earlier this week to scare drivers.

“I was very tired and could not walk any more,” said Jurgen, a trekker from Germany. "Luckily I managed to hire an ambulance to bring me here.” Gerry from the UK had to pay for a chartered helicopter from Annapurna base camp. “I didn’t have time to deal with all these uncertainties,” he said.

In effect, tourism business has shrunk significantly despite the number of reservations. “We had reservations of around 100 tourists going to Annapurna base camp,” said Tikaram Sapkota, general secretary of Trekking Agents Association of Nepal in Pokhara. “The blockade and general strike has caused a lot of cancellations.”

Amphibians on Phewa

If all goes well, ultralights will soon be taking off from Pokhara’s lake

SRADDA BANSIYAT in POKHARA

The Annapurnas are its crowning glory. Pokhara’s shimmering lakes are its jewels.

Pokhara’s Avia Club, which has been conducting mountain flights in its ultralight aircraft for the past seven years, plans to use Phewa Lake as a runway to take tourists from the water to the sky in sightseeing trips.

Deepti Gurung, sales and promotion manager at Avia, is very excited about this latest initiative. “If we start a new activity here, the good news will travel abroad,” she says. “I’ll be good for everyone in tourism in Nepal. From the airlines to the boat renters on the lake. The service includes a boat ride back to shore.

Not everyone is happy. There are concerns about noise and gasoline leakage on the lake. But Gurung is quick to rule them out. “We are conducting an environmental study and it doesn’t look like a serious problem,” she says.

Capt Alexander Maximov of Avia has been overseeing trials on amphibian ultralights and seems satisfied with flying conditions. Says Gurung, “Capt Maximov has already been flying here for years and knows the landscape and weather patterns. He is really excited about amphibian ultralights and seems satisfied with flying conditions. Says Gurung, “Capt Maximov has already been flying here for years and knows the landscape and weather patterns. He is really excited about amphibian ultralights and seems satisfied with flying conditions.”

Stephen Shrestha, pilot and technical director of Avia, is confident that the noise we’ve been authorised to fly at is low. If sound was really a factor in Pokhara, people should be more worried about Mi-17 helicopters flying low overhead.

The environment ministry will be conducting an environmental examination together with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal on 15 May when Avia Club does another test run of its proposed service. Tourism entrepreneurs here have no doubt the amphibian ultralights will be a hit, but only if Pokhara’s tourism stays above water.

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Accountable to whom?

The auditor general and the CIAA have their annual reports ready, but in the absence of parliament who is supposed to act on them?

They are a vital part of democracy’s check and balance. The auditor general is supposed to look over all the government accounts to see if there are any discrepancies or irregularities and the Commission of Investigation for Abuse of Authority (CIAA) is a corruption watchdog.

But since there is no parliament, the auditor general and the CIAA have handed their reports to the royal palace, which doesn’t seem to know what to do with them.

Now, under donor pressure to make the government accountable, the auditor general is looking at options to make the report available for public scrutiny: hand over to the Upper House, or even make copies available in public libraries.

The Auditor general’s office submitted an annual report 15 months ago. It’s been eight months since they handed over last year’s report. The CIAA confirmed that their reports were given to the palace earlier this year. “First they asked us to wait, then they said we will talk after Dasai, then Tihar, and when the report was finally submitted, the palace was reluctant to accept it,” said an official at the auditor general’s office.

We asked Chief Commissioner Suryanath Upadhyay if he was tracking the progress of his report. All he would say was: “The constitution has a clear provision in this regard and we have already submitted our report to the palace.” An official from the palace press secretariat only commented: “The respective constitutional bodies are competent enough to deal with the issue.”

Clearly, the fact that it is in possession of the reports but not doing anything with it is inconveniencing the palace. The constitution requires the auditor general and the CIAA submit their reports to the king, who redirects the documents to the parliament through the prime minister. Since there is no House of Representatives, the palace has the reports but no one to pass it on to. Unfortunately, the 1990 Constitution did not foresee such a crucial report.

The Nepali people have therefore been deprived of the national audited accounts that include the money paid as tax and reserved in the national coffers. The importance of the CIAA report is similar.

Chief Secretary Bimal Koirala admits: “In the absence of the auditor general’s report, people can question the government’s discipline and transparency.”

Interestingly, in the absence of a parliament, the non-elected government has succeeded in introducing and amending acts, presenting a budget through ordinances, but is neglecting to develop a mechanism to get these reports to the public. “If the government wanted to, the reports could have been brought out through many ways. It would also have won the government and the king popularity,” said a senior auditor.

The attorney general’s office recently gave the government two options to keep the reports at public libraries or present them to the Upper House. “We would have done it already had the prime minister not resigned. We are working at it,” said Attorney General Sushil Pant. But why is the Thapa government only so concerned about the reports now?

Senior finance ministry officials admit it had to do with the Nepal Development Forum (NDF) meeting last week. As it happened, donors did raise the issue during the meeting. At a post-NDF press meet, when donors were asked how they could be confident their aid was not misused in the last two years, Pradip Patel, the World Bank South Asia Vice President, said that the government had been asked to make the reports public at the last minute.

Immediately after Patel’s response, Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lal said that the attorney general’s office was helping to make the reports public.
**DOMESTIC BRIEFS**

**Cairn Energy still interested**

British oil firm Cairn Energy has said that its efforts to launch a pioneering exploration for oil and gas in the Tarai is being held up by political unrest in the country. Mike Watts, exploration director, told shareholders at the company’s annual meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland, last week that the difficulties in Nepal had so far prevented the cabinet from concluding negotiations for an agreement on the split of any future oil finds without which Cairn could not begin work. However, the company, which bid last year for five giant exploration blocks covering 35,000 sq km in Nepal, confirmed its enthusiasm for the proposed project and said it hoped to at least initial the necessary production sharing contracts in the near future. Cairn has been catapulted into the international big time this year by a series of large production sharing contracts in the near future. Cairn has been the proposed project and said it hoped to at least initial the necessary production sharing contracts in the near future.

**STRICTLY BUSINESS**

**Ashtosh Tiwari**

A VCO International even bagged an award from the parent company. Dhiren Tamang, director at A VCO, the sole distributor of Hyundai in the kingdom, talked to Nepali Times about success, saturation and hard sell.

**Banda-aid**

Let’s make national shutdowns too costly for the organisers

Earlier this week, private-sector firms suffered through a two-day banda. Next week, there is going to be a three-day banda. The firms give in to these calls for total shutdowns not out of love for the finer points of democracy, republicanism, class struggle, party-political loyalty or whatsoever your reason here.

To be fair, they do give in because of fear. In the absence of a risk-minimising insurance schemes and any credible opposition to bandas, they have no choice but to halt work.

As things stand, the cost of being at the receiving end of hurled stones, angry mobs and even bomb blasts is much higher for most business owners than any benefit they may derive by keeping the machines and the workers productive on banda days.

Popular during the last days of Panchayat, Nepal-wide bandas have since mutated into a familiar evil. So present are they that Nepal media headlines invariably say that the bands ‘passed peacefully’ with a picture of boys playing football or cricket on some deserted street.

Occasionally, there may be news reports, quoting intellectuals who bemoan the loss of productivity and calculate the money that the bandas supposedly suck out of our total domestic output. Opinion-makers tick off the reasons why bandas are against most Nepal’s interest and why they must be stopped immediately.

Yet, amid all these hand-wringing rituals, two questions remain: Why do bandas continue to take place? And is there any way to discourage them?

Bandas continue to take place in Nepal because they cost their producers almost nothing. If you are thinking of producing one, all you need to do is pick out the dates, let word of mouth circulate the decision and disappear behind your party’s flag. On appointed days, the invisible hand, in its ironically decentralized avatar, whips up enough fear to make shops remain closed, wheels grind to a halt and people to stay home.

In this scenario, your production costs are almost zero because the real cost is borne by millions of Nepalis, each of whom does feel the pain, but apparently not deep enough to form groups to defy the calls for bandas. The public bears the cost, giving up their productivity and income. As a result, producers have every incentive not to call for bandas.

Broadly, there are three policy solutions, with varying degrees of effectiveness. All three solutions require an elected government and public money.

First, the government can pass laws and enforce them, with high fines extracted from those who call for bandas, even from political parties.

Second, whichever party gets to run Singh Darbar can continue with its policies aimed at market reforms, even in villages. With millions more Nepalis connected to one another through the complex web of market transactions, they will increasingly find bandas too costly to take part in, even involuntarily. That means, just like businesses in Thamel once did, they will start coming together to defy the calls for bandas.

The third way is for the government to co-opt the bandas. It can organise village bhangi, street festivals and other such ‘public benefit’ activities, thereby hijacking the organisers’ agenda for its own PR purposes.

Outrage against bandas is fine. But to have fewer bandas, let’s look for ways to bring in the costs associated with bandas within the framework of market-based supply and demand. This way, to most people’s relief, producers will start finding the cost of producing bandas too high to handle.

**“We dominate the small car market”**

Last year, Hyundai cars did exceptionally well in Nepal. The sales were so spectacular that AVCO International even bagged an award from the parent company. Dhiren Tamang, director at AVCO, the sole distributor of Hyundai in the kingdom, talked to Nepali Times about success, saturation and hard sell.

Nepali Times: Why did AVCO deserve the award?

Dhiren Tamang: We were honoured because we increased our market share substantially. Generally, Hyundai distributors have around 20 percent market share in countries where they are not even performing at their best. Here in Nepal, we occupy over 30 percent.

What kind of numbers are we talking about?

We started with the sale of 50 cars in 1999. Last year, we sold 750. The Santro comes from India, the rest from South Korea.

But isn’t the small car market saturated?

The small car segment is quite lucrative. That’s why you see so many new brands, so we are becoming more defensive. Considering the price factor and the roads and parking areas in Kathmandu, these cars are more in demand. Our Santro dominates the market.

What other models do you have in your stable?

We have B1 segment cars, under which we recently introduced the Getz, which is a kind of upgrade for Santro drivers. These customers are our biggest base for the segment. On the slightly higher side, we have the Matrix, a multipurpose diesel vehicle with the latest technology. We imported 25 Getz cars and they all sold out. We have already sold 150 Matrix cars.

What is the resale value of these models?

Santro has a very good resale value, with instant buyers. The depreciation is very low.

And spare parts?

We have a vast network of workshops and dealers across the country. Our dealers are well versed with the cars and can repair them at very low prices. We also distributors are well versed with the cars and can repair them at very low prices. We also have a large stock of spares, so we can deliver them quickly.

Is such growth even sustainable in Kathmandu?

Congestion and the environment are real problems. But Hyundai has a good focus on minimising emissions. We spend a lot on research and development, and now all Hyundai cars exported to Nepal are Euro III standard, even though the government’s requirement is Euro I. As far as congestion is concerned, we cannot do much. But we focus on compact cars. It helps in places like ours.

We hear of motor companies forming cartels internationally to prevent governments from investing in public transportation systems. This is not happening in Nepal because the volumes of sales here would not justify such a move. We recently celebrated the sale of the 2,000th Hyundai car. While that’s something big for us, for a global company like Hyundai, it isn’t very much.
INVESTIGATION

Handcuffed at home

They prop up our economy, but Nepal’s overseas workers are hounded and duped by fellow-Nepalis every step of the way.

On 23 April, 54 Nepalis wearing identical caps and T-shirts left Kathmandu and, after a transit in Dhaka, flew to Kuala Lumpur. They were there to work for a computer company called PCA Hardware, but then immigration authorities at Kuala Lumpur airport checked their visas in a laser scanner and pronounced them fake. They spent four days inside the airport, hungry, tired and worried, and were then flown back to Nepal. But instead of finding justice in their homeland, they were handcuffed and treated like criminals upon landing in Kathmandu and taken to Hanuman Dhoka police station to be locked up.

Twice victimised

The crooks go scot-free, but the Nepalis they cheated are in handcuffs.
disappeared. Stories like these are common among the tens of thousands of Nepali overseas workers. They sell off ancestral property to pay labour agencies in Kathmandu, and often end up being cheated, almost never getting the salary promised, spend up to a year in as a bonded labourer to pay off the agent and are harassed by immigration officials at the airport in Kathmandu while leaving or returning.

One would think the overseas workers who prop up the Nepali economy with their annual combined remittances of about $1 billion would be treated as national heroes. But instead of finding them good, well-paying jobs, simplifying and streamlining procedures and cracking down on those who cheat them, the workers are hounded and paid Rs 60,000 to Roshan Upreti of Nepal Gulf Overseas in 2002 who promised him a job. The company couldn’t find him a placement, but wouldn’t give him his money back either. Hikmat has been going to the Labour Department since January, and after six months of persistence, it finally looks like he will get his money. Hikmat’s case has a rare happy ending.

Gembu Rai was not so lucky. He used to run a small shop in Kharikhola near Lukla and decided to go find work in Malaysia with his brother, Dorje Rai, a primary school teacher. After borrowing Rs 200,000 from villagers at 48 percent interest, they left home in March 2003. Their agent, Dhan Prasad Yonghang from Panchthar, took them to New Delhi with a batch of 20 other workers bound for Malaysia and the Gulf. The brothers only discovered they had been given expired visitors’ visas when they were not allowed to board their Kuala Lumpur flight and returned to Nepal.

Today, the Rai brothers are living in Koteswor. Gembu doesn’t want his brother to go back home, fearing the Maoists may recruit him. They have no choice but to borrow another Rs 200,000 to try for another visa and start work in Malaysia to clear their debt.

Like the Rais, many Nepalis have no other option. They flee from the Maoists by borrowing money to come to Kathmandu, where they then become easy prey for unscrupulous middlemen. The government’s laws don’t actually protect them, and in many cases government officials are in cahoots with the crooks.
Centralised attack

Ujjir Magar in Nepal, 16 May

GuMi—Until a few years ago he used New Delhi, India’s capital, as his base, but now Bam Deb Chetri’s home district of Gumi in mid-west Nepal is a secure Maoist stronghold. This central party member is unafraid to make his presence felt at every assembly, held almost daily, flanked by battle-hardened guerrillas.

Chetri was arrested by the Indian authorities in New Delhi nearly two-and-a-half years ago and handed to the Nepali government in an effort to show that India was not being used as a safe haven. Chetri was released from custody last year during the ceasefire as a government gesture of ‘flexibility’ and ‘goodwill’.

He was suspended from the party for six months along with four other central leaders of the Maoist party who were released with him. Under the chairmanship of Sudhanath Baral, a ‘district people’s government’ was recently declared in Gumi, Netra Bikram Chanda, ‘Biplab’, a Maoist party’s special sector incharge and western division commissioner of the ‘people’s army’, inaugurated the announcement ceremony.

Now the Maoists are running a ‘special military campaign’ in their special sectors, including Gumi, under the party’s western central command. They claim to have consolidated their military might significantly since the Myagdi attacks.

Commissioner Abhinash of the third battalion explained that they are capable of capturing nearly five district headquarters in the midwest, a plan that has come under serious criticism. “We have enough firepower to do this,” he said. The third battalion comes under the ‘Mangaisen first brigade’ that was involved in the recent attacks on Myagdi.

According to Maoist claims, with the policy of mass militarisation, they have started preparing for a massive centralised attack. They are certain that they have now crossed the level of ‘decentralised’, ‘relatively centralised’ and ‘centralised attack’. They describe Myagdi attacks as the last of the ‘decentralised unified action’. They are certain that they have now already crossed the level of ‘decentralised’, ‘relatively centralised’ and ‘centralised attack’. The security personnel of Myagdi are asked to prepare for ‘people’s war’.

The Maoists say they lost 62 fighters. Under the special military preparations are underway for a centralised attack. They are certain that they have now already crossed the level of ‘decentralised’, ‘relatively centralised’ and ‘centralised attack’. They are certain that they have now already crossed the level of ‘decentralised’, ‘relatively centralised’ and ‘centralised attack’. By the looks of it, the Maoists are certain that they have now already crossed the level of ‘decentralised’, ‘relatively centralised’ and ‘centralised attack’.

Biren Drangair—The state’s insensitivity towards educational institutions is clearly evident in the way it allows security forces to bombard schools for offices and barracks. “We will all be forced to quit our studies soon,” says a student of Multiple Campus. A month ago, the Armed Police Force (APF) moved its regional office from Nepalgunj and placed it near the campus. Students are under severe pressure from the ear-splitting noise of helicopters that constantly fly in the area. “It will worsen after more helicopters are stationed here once the office of the District Inspector General is added,” says Dhanakeyam Pandey of the Independent Student’s Union. The students are also constantly unsure about walking through the APF barracks to get to their classes. Female students are often subject to eve teasing by the security personnel. “All the students are traumatised by their presence and we will pressurise the government to promote our safety,” says Tej Bikram Baranet, a student leader of Education Campus, also located near the APF-regional office. Over 3,000 students from Dailekh, Kalikot, Achham, Bardia and Jumla districts travel from their villages to get a college degree. Most despaired, saying that completing their education will be impossible.

Aiding AIDS

Juwaharan, 6 May

The AIDS issue featured distinctively way during the Nepal Development Forums (NDF) Bill when the meeting started at BICC. AIDS victims and their supporters turned up in the streets and chanted slogans against foreign aid, saying such assistance did little to help them. They also planned to submit a memorandum to Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, but could not alter police intervention. Then, the protesters reached the entrance gate of Soaltee Hotel where most NDF participants were staying. They carried banners and placards that read ‘You talk, we die’, blew whistles and staged a sit-in. Once again the police intervened and they were forced to go away. The protest was organised by Nava Kiran Plus and coordinated by Raju Kafle who said that the idea behind the rally was to let donors know that the money they gave for AIDS went to corrupt government officials.

For the people?

Editorial in Kathmandu, 11 May

The government, the Maoists, the five parties and now the donor agencies are working out strategies to make the lives of rural Nepalis more difficult. For the last two weeks, since the Maoists announced indefinite road blockades in Accham, life has suddenly become much tougher. Their movement is restricted and food and essentials are in short supply. The Maoist threat has led to the closure of the Tapnepur border, and we suffer a revenue loss of Rs 4-1 million everyday. The rebels have also stopped the Baglung-Buckhumbung and the Baglung-Kusmi road funded by the Asian Development Bank. The five parties made it tougher for the ordinary people by launching atwo-day nationwide strike. These parties that held significant roles in governing the country should be more responsible for the sake of public good. The strike only proves that they are not so different from the Maoists—both are insensitive towards the needs and rights of the people. And although their motives may be to target powerful forces, it is highly unlikely that the latter is affected at all, whereas ordinary Nepalis suffer.

In developed nations, political bodies do not organise protest programs that jeopardise the daily lives of the people or cause loss to the country’s financial sector. Such activities only engender vengeance and fury among those who bear the losses. It is true that the Maoist activities endangered development projects in rural areas, but donor agencies chose the wrong time to suspend their work in the country’s most impoverished and underdeveloped regions. Agencies like the GTZ, DANIDA, DDB, AID, SVN Nepal, ICA, CIDA, EU and FINNIDA recently suspended their support. They cite insecurity and threats towards their staff, knowing fully well that their decision will affect only the beneficiaries in poor communities in Kalahai, Jumla, Humla, Mugu and Dolpa.

Bigger army

Dhhrubhari Adhikar in Nepal

Samacharpatra, 11 May

Until a few years ago, the Royal Nepal Army had 9,000 soldiers. Now, the figure has reached 78,000 and there are plans to increase it up to 100,000, according to army spokesman Rajendra Thapa.

The issue needs serious thought and consideration, otherwise the country will end up bearing not only added financial burden but also a host of other problems. The security forces are fighting Maoist rebels, which may justify additional numbers. But what will happen...
since the Maoist problem is solved? How can we sustain and engage such a large army? It cannot be done solely on foreign aid. It would be foolishly for the RNA to become dependent on such assistance. This increase comes at a time of force reduction internationally and in the region. It is better to have a smaller, better trained force. Pakistan cut 50,000 soldiers and India is looking to streamline its military. China is also following the same route. We must try and learn from our neighbours. The government cannot establish a temporary militia by recruiting retired soldiers and police. There must be thousands of Nepalis Godtaitas who served in the armed forces in Nepal, the UK and India. We can use them to meet our immediate needs. We don’t need a big ‘standby army’.

Permission to wed

Rajdhani, 11 May

DALELISH Villagers need permission from the Maoists to get married. In Bhalukot village, the rebels abducted four couples, all newly married, until three Brunban priests. Their crime was marrying without the permission of the local people’s government, making them liable for punishment. The Maoists are now going to every village with the message that no one can marry without their approval. They also threatened the people against reporting abductions, especially to the press.

Good man

Kampti, 12 May

RAWSWA-Bhiraj Himal was a popular man. He was popular because he was a fearless activist who kept in touch with his constituents. He was that rare breed of politician who actually fulfilled his electoral promises. He planned to bring a motorable road to Thambukot Tatopani and was working closely with the Climine Hydropower Project to get electricity for the whole district. Himal wanted to promote more tourism to Langtang and Rasuwa because he believed it was the best way to get his people out of poverty. He arranged for easy access to main trekking routes and trained locals in cooking, English, as guides and to make souvenirs. Born in Tanahun and with family in Mustang, Himal came to Rasuwa to start a business but ended up putting down permanent roots as he married a Rasuwa woman and was elected district chairman. Regarded as a good leader and friend, Himal spent more time with the people than with his party. He gave up his business because he thought it was unethical for a politician. He tried to set an example that Nepalis can alleviate poverty and sponsored the education of many poor children. He also initiated a rehabilitation club for local delinquents. He cared for his people, and his people had affection for him. That is why it came as such a shock when the Maoists killed him. He refused to resign from his post and pay the Rs 50,000 they demanded. His body was found mutilated and beheaded under a bridge, 16km from the district headquarters of Darchane.

A fearless UML activist, Himal was visited by the Maoists in his districts, even those where Maoists were active like Yarsa, Bhotekoshi, Dangkapan and Samarthal. “I can handle two to four Maoists if they attack me,” Himal used to tell everyone. “I’m certain they would not hurt someone working for the welfare of the people.” He was wrong. Himal was survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

Soldiering on

June 13, 12 May

Nepalis in Kabul are exploited and looked down upon. They find themselves in the lowest position in the US Army. All former Gurkhas, ex RNA soldiers, Nepal Police personnel and other Nepalis are security guards for American residences, police training centres and other units established by the US Army. The Nepalis were contracted for the jobs through DynCorp, America’s most controversial private military corporation. According to reports, about 102 Nepalis currently working under Coalition Forces received crimes courses and are now armed with M16 rifles. Besides a modest salary package, they get 20 days leave every six months.

In the UK, there are concerns for the future of British Gurkhas once their pensions became redundant. The British Home Ministry was interested in approving permanent residency for the soldiers, but the senior brigade commanders of the British Army are pressuring Home Minister David Blunkett to reverse the proposal. The UK government failed to even approve work permits for these soldiers who dedicated their lives to British causes overseas.
Democracy shining

The number 13 has turned out to be unlucky for Vajpayee

T he number 13 finally proved to be unlucky for Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as also the BJP, which once boasted that it didn’t find that number unlucky. The first time BJP came to power in 1998 it lasted for EXACTLY 13 days. The next time it got to government in New Delhi in 1998, the BJP-led coalition’s tenure lasted 13 months. It came to power again in 1999, emerging triumphant in the 13th Lok Sabha, with Vajpayee assuming office on 13 October, causing the BJP leaders to be carried away by the ‘magic’ of 13.

They started boasting that now their rule would last for a minimum period of 13 years. When the Election Commission, while announcing the poll schedule, said that counting would be held on 13 May, there was a perceptible glee in the saffron camp. The second time India conducted nuclear tests in Pokhran, a matter of pride for the BJP, were conducted on 11 May and 13 May 1998. This 13 May, however, the explosion was of a different kind.

In a stunning electoral verdict, the BJP-led NDA was voted out of power on Thursday to pave the way for the return of the Congress Party at the helm of the national affairs after eight years in the wilderness. The Congress and its allies such as DMK, MDMK, PMK, TRS and RJD appeared set to capture approximately 225 seats which could mean that the alliance led by Sonia Gandhi has pushed for a secular India in contrast to the BJP's Hindu nationalist message. Her two children, Rahul and Priyanka, are up-and-coming politicians and Rahul expects to be elected to parliament.

Drawing the line

Torture and the politics of ambiguity

E ach new revelation of physical abuse, maltreatment and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers shocks international public opinion, leaving officials to scramble desperately to contain the damage. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warns that more documentary evidence of wrongdoing at Abu Ghraib prison lies in store, evidently in the preemptive hope that the outrages stopped there.

As a former US military intelligence interrogator, I am convinced that the images from Abu Ghraib are just the beginning. The wanting cruelty there is all too clearly symptomatic of a systemic failure. But what system failed? Was it a failure of discipline and training—the result of sending inexperienced and unworried recruits into poor conditions, abruptly extending their deployments, and then leaving them understaffed in the face of a growing influx of captured insurgents? Or did the pattern of abuse amount to so many orders from superior to “soften up” prisoners for interrogation?

The answer is most likely both and neither.

Ultimately, what gives rise to abuses such as occurred at Abu Ghraib is a policy of deliberate ambiguity concerning how to handle detainees. The pressure in a war setting to get information that could save lives is immense. But, just as understandably, senior political and military officials—particularly in democracies—prefer to avoid any association with torture. Ambiguity is thus a political strategy that encourages the spread of implicit, informal rules of behavior, thereby shifting accountability onto the lowest ranking, least powerful and most expendable soldiers.

I completed the US Army’s three-month basic interrogation course in the late 1980’s, after studying Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. The course was rigorous—only seven of 33 students finished it—and it required mastering the technical minutiae of collecting, crosschecking, standardizing and reporting enormous masses of information. But the curriculum was much less meticulous concerning interrogation techniques. An interrogation, we were instructed, should begin with polite, direct questioning, because a certain number of detainees simply want to unburden themselves. If more persuasion was needed, we could offer rewards for cooperation— anything from cigarettes to political asylum. Beyond this, we were taught that we could “apply pressure.”

The term was never defined in any formal setting, but the concept was not difficult to decipher. As US Army General Antonio Taguba’s report on the abuses at Abu Ghraib put it, the “guard force” was “actively engaged in setting the conditions for successful exploitation of the interrogates.”

This obvious violation of the army’s rule prohibiting participation by military police in interrogation sessions does not surprise me. I was never taught that military police came under a separate chain of command. On the contrary, between classes, during breaks in field training and in other informal settings, some of our instructors—typically older, more experienced interrogators—let it be known through insinuation and innuendo that we could have the guards beat uncooperative subjects.

This was never said in the classroom, but even there, it was made clear that the role of military police was to serve the interrogators. After all, an interrogator’s effectiveness depends on convincing the detainee of his omnipotence. If an interrogator promises better food or an extra

India doesn’t shine

There were early signs of the BJP’s fall, and it wasn’t just the incumbency factor

ANDERS LOMHOLT

Starchest Canada. The reason for my call is that we have selected you for a grand new long distance saving plan. The woman at the other end of the line hangs up but Nicholson is not too concerned about a few non-responsive customers. He makes $3 for every sale, and his boss Vijay...
Singh recently bought his first car and plans to expand the business. There is still good potential for an outsourcing industry that currently employs around 200,000 Indians. That figure is expected to pass the one million mark by 2006.

Vijay Singh has no doubts about what icon to click on the electronic voting machine. “The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of course. The economic boom is a result of the current government. They deserve another five years in power,” he told us. This confidence is what the BJP and Atal Bihari Vajpayee banked on.

The picture changed after the Gujarat pogroms in the BJP-led state of Gujarat in 2002. But hordes of volunteers from the BJP-related Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were mobilised. Early one morning in Lucknow, Vajpayee’s constituency, we saw 19 men assemble for Shakti exercises. Most of them are highly motivated and disciplined, but with more than 40,000 such groups and millions of activists, the RSS’ strength lies in numbers. “We’ll do everything to ensure Vajpayee continues as prime minister,” says Shakti leader Rama K. Jaisw. The group pledges allegiance to the motherland in front of a national flag followed by a military drill before finally settling down for tea at a corner shop surrounded by BJP propagandas. One demands a temple be built on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, another vociferously criticises Congress-leader Sonia Gandhi’s Italian origin and praises Vajpayee for being a strong leader with the courage to use nuclear bombs, if the need arose.

That might not be the decisive argument for poverty stricken Indias or Muslims. Memory is long, especially concerning atrocities like the RSS involvement in anti-Muslim pogroms in the BJP-led state of Gujarat in 2002. But hordes of dedicated BJP-campaigners on door-to-door campaigns all over Indiasan hardly be underestimated.

Those who foretold a predictable election in favour of the BJP were wrong. In the world’s largest democracy with 670 million potential voters, there is no easy victory.