Containment

On the cards: everyday politicking and an arms management process that learns as it goes

SHIVA GAUNLE

The next phase begins now for Nepal. The outcome of the coming few months will depend on how party politics plays out in the interim legislature, whether the interim constitution will hold, and how effectively the UN-monitored arms and army management will pave the way for reform of the security sector.

There are already signs that all eight parties are rolling their sleeves up for power struggles and perhaps horse-trading. It took them three days after the interim constitution was promulgated to agree on the Speaker. This was despite the agreement reached on Monday morning in Bahawalpur to appoint an NC prime minister, UML speaker, and a Maoist deputy prime minister.

But the parties are yet to agree on how many deputy prime ministers should be announced, and there is wrangling on the allocation of ministries to parties, as well as appointments to parliamentary committees. Inside parliament, the parties are not in their final configurations. If the NC and NC(D) were to unite, they would have a significant advantage, though that could be countered by an admittedly unlikely Maoist-UML coalition in a parliament that, for the first time in Nepal’s political history, already has a leftists majority. If speculation of a backroom deal between the NC and the Maoists, and possible high-level defections from the UML to the Maoists bears out, the UML will in effect be frozen out. What could result from this is a reasonable-sized opposition, though, which the current parliament lacks.

Parallel to the everyday business of party politics, the critical issue of arms management and verification of fighters has already begun. The criteria for verification are still fuzzy. Not everyone who walks into a camp in uniform will be a bonafide guerrilla, and an inflated count of the Maoist army will affect any proposed integration of PLA members into the Nepal Army. Determining the exact organisation of the PLA is also essential.

If managing both sides’ armies on the cards, there is no information on what will happen to the now-bloated NA. The paramilitary Armed Police Force, which should have limited utility in a post-conflict scenario, is, instead, according to the peace agreement, in readiness to provide election-time security.

With the verification process now started, the monitors will have the chance to clarify a number of these factors, especially with regard to the PLA. The parliamentarians will have to find the time between power struggles to ensure the conditions for a free and fair election.
T
his is not a saga of
torment. To think of it
in those terms would be
an inaccuracy representative
of my life. I was born into an
upper-class Kathmandu family.
My parents were well-researched
in the capital’s professional
and social circuit. I went to
good schools here, moved to India
for higher education, got a job in
Delhi with a Nepal-based
magazine, and have never been
made to feel like an outsider, at
least publicly.
But things are never quite
that simple. My forefathers on
both sides are from Bihar, where
we still have deep family links.
My paternal grandfather settled
in Bhuban, became Nepal’s
citizen six decades ago, and
made the great leap to
Kathmandu as if being out of
the Rana rut in the 50s. I
speak a mix of Hindi, English,
and Maithili at home, in that
order. My spoken Nepali is
heavily interspersed
with English and Hindi words.

As Kathmandu feasted on meat;
differences were too many: we
wanted. By saying it was what my parents
insinuations, I was never
allowed me to escape the
debacle of not being Nepali
enough for the Valley. Besides
the handicap of not being Nepali
belonging.
I was comfortable in
the border, while others’ ancestors
have been in the tarai for
centuries. I was comfortable
in Rajbiraj, became a Nepali
magazine, and have rarely been
spoken of as Kathmandu’s
whores. When I discovered that
seriousness and jest, “You are a
Indian for further education, I
India for further education, I
liberal education and
terms with my identity. My
constantly that you are indeed a
Nepali and the surname, often
heavily interspersed with
English and Hindi words.

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English and Hindi words.
TARAI DEMANDS

Finally, some journalists and politicians have started to accept the fact that madhesis have been discriminated against by Nepal’s rulers. But no one talks about what a solution should be. Nepalís leaders need to design a system in which every dhoti-wearing, dark-skinned, pan-eating, Hindi-speaking, Bihari-looking person with Nepali citizenship is treated as respectfully (both on paper and in practice) as any daura surwal and topi-wearing Bahun or Chhetri. Madhesis wonít feel assured that discrimination has come to an end unless they are given their own stateóI do not mean a separate country. The tarai can be divided into one or more states that have significant powers such as revenue collection, policing, budget decisions, and so on. This is among the JTMM’s main demands, and the Maoists got madhesi support based on this agenda.

The JTMM may not have many supporters willing to die for the cause at the moment, but they do enjoy the tacit support of a significant part of the madhesi population, which by conservative estimates is 35-40 percent of Nepalís population. The longer the rulers in Kathmandu take, the more concessions they will have to make in the future. Just as Gyanendra is on the verge of losing his throne forever, rulers sitting in Kathmandu might soon have to face losing the tarai forever.

Anand Jha, email

ROGUE FORCE

Endorsing a Maoist deputy prime minister would be a blunder we canít afford, considering Prime Minister Koiralaís ill-health and the fact that the interim constitution makes the prime minister irreplaceable. The Maoists still justify their armed revolt and consider being part of the interim parliament as just another platform for their revolution. As a Nepali, I will not endorse a rogue force with blood on its hands. For the sake of peace, the Maoists need a chance to cleanse themselves of their sins, but letís not go so far as to crown the butcher.

Sanjay Tuladhar

NEW PANTHEON

What great satire! The Nepali public reveres the great Prachanda, killer of 14,000 Nepalis, looter of countless persons, destroyer of billions worth of infrastructure, the feared stocky little guy (ëA new pantheoní, Foreign Hand, #331). And the prime minister, how skillfully he and his family have sold off our country to India. Who needs a foreign hand when we can self-destroy?

Rishav, email

CORRECTION

ëTicking awayí (#331) contained the following errors:

- The brochure illustrating the article is distributed by the Mine Action Working Group (a network of 16 NGOs), Red Cross Society, the UN, the Nepal Army, and the PLA.
- UNICEF and INSEC reported 146 civilian casualties in 2006 from victim-activated explosions. Of the 146 casualties, 33 were killed.
- In February 2006 there was at least one explosion every two days.
- The Nepal Army has 15 Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams on standby that can deal with any type of improvised explosive device and landmines. However, the complete clearance of 49 anti-personnel minefields is a huge and very specific task that will probably require additional international support.

Hugues Laurenge
Mine Action Focal Point, UNICEF

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Nepalis want to stand up and be counted

But the debate between ethnic- and geographic-based federalism has only just begun

N

et all groups calling for greater ethnic- and language-based autonomy are as militant as the Janatantrik Tuki Muki Marcha (JTMM), which is demanding an independent madhesi state. But all debates, radical and moderate, academic and political, turn on the same argument—that if Nepal is to thrive, it would do well to adopt a federal system of governance. The difference is whether these regions should be divided on the basis of ethnicity or geography.

Even the Maoists, who still officially back ethnic autonomy, seem to be behaving second thoughts. The demands of janajati, dalit, and madhesis activists thus appear to be gaining in strength. "We have never formulated a generalised idea of ethnic federalism," says Km. of Nepal's foremost

political analyst says the Maoists have never explained how their ethnic autonomy formula will work. "In theory the Maoists want a forward-looking and modern ethnic state, but in reality the attempt seems to be to mobilise mass support based on a generalised idea of ethnic nationalism," says Shambhhu Sharma, one of Nepal's foremost demographers.

While cautioning that issues of ethnic inclusion need to be addressed, academics express doubt whether autonomous regions based on ethnicity are feasible or desirable in Nepal. "The grievances of janajati and madhesis should be considered, and government policies should favour them. But the crucial issue is whether ethnic autonomy is economically viable," says Deepak Thapao of the Social Science Baha and author of two books on Nepal's Maoist movement.

For one, academics argue, even in the regions designated for particular ethnic groups they do not form a clear numerical majority. Janajati groups want that a certain ethnic group dominating a certain region to have more rights and privileges, whether political or economic, than the minority groups living in the same region. "Such moves, they say would open up dangers of ethnic cleansing by dominant local groups. "One should not, in order to right the wrongs of history, commit more wrongs. This is what will happen once there is a system of disenfranchising other people living in that area," explains Thapa. Sharma concurs, adding that, "the dominance of the Bahun ethos and extremisms cannot be defeated by extremism imposed by the Limbu, Gurung, Newar, or any other ethnic group."

Even some janajati leaders admit there are big risks and challenges and that the future of ethnic federalism is uncertain. In the proposed Tarai-based autonomous region, incorporating the hills of the Baugrai, Narayani and Janakpur zones (excluding the Kathmandu Valley) there is only 13 autonomous regions are based on identity politics that found space after the April Uprising rather than on federal principles committed to devolution.

Status of hill-mountain cohort* in tarai districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Hill upper caste</th>
<th>Tarai upper caste</th>
<th>Total pop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khanu Pradesh</td>
<td>58.77 percent</td>
<td>19.76 percent</td>
<td>15.46 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhesi Pradesh</td>
<td>78.60 percent</td>
<td>15.46 percent</td>
<td>11.57 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Nepal's only regional party, the Nepali Congress failed to come up with a concrete formula. The NC is still not in favour of federalism. Ethnic-based communalism is ramified most militantly by former Maoist factions of the JTMM based in the eastern tarai. "Ethnic identity should not be confused as a simple means of going back to history, which is neither feasible nor possible," Sharma adds. If, says, a Librarian
Against all odds

Nepal needs small entrepreneurs to deliver on the promise of democracy

In high school, I thought my classmate Brajesh Nanda Vaidya would someday be an artist, not the self-made biotech entrepreneur that he is today. After completing higher education in the US, he returned home in the 1990s. Putting his science background to use, he started managing Nepal Biotech Nursery, a 37-person firm that produces tissue-culture high-yield banana and orchid plantlets, which farmers snap up. I recently caught up with Brajesh in Kathmandu, and found out that his business experience is situated right in the middle of many small-business owners.

The beginnings were tough, he said. “I was naive, fresh from the US, and didn’t understand the Nepali system of doing business. I tried to do it the way I had learned it in the US; hire the right people, give the right assignments, watch for results, that sort of thing. None of that worked. I heard the hard way that most people just wanted to take me for a ride. Without bothering to help me run my business, almost everyone, from government bureaucrats to business partners and associates, to workers, just wanted a piece of the pie I was struggling to create. It was both bewildering and frustrating.

It was also difficult to develop an appropriate trust-based long-term support structure, he added. “Often, my own business associates and others would take advantage of my ignorance. They’d say and do things to discourage me I wouldn’t be successful. The level of mistrust and pessimism that pervades most business interactions and the amount of bad-mouthing that goes on is depressingly high. Psychologically, you really have to remain very, very strong to stick to business in Nepal.”

Surely that was not the case in the villages of the hills and the tarai, where he regularly travels to meet farmers and see how their plants are doing? Brajesh said. The point, he said, was to remain strong to withstand the bad-mouthing that goes on, the level of mistrust and pessimism that pervades most business interactions and the amount of bad-mouthing that goes on is depressingly high. Psychologically, you really have to remain very, very strong to stick to business in Nepal.

The overseas Nepali movement has reached a critical mass because of the difficulties of meeting due to work pre-existing dynamics. Some 50 participants attended the San Bernardino, California on 19 January 2007 conference in San Bernardino, California on 19 January 2007. That such a conference was held, and well attended, is an encouraging sign of the growing awareness and understanding of the Nepali situation.

The main purpose of Nepali networking is now to connect to the rest of the diaspora. The meeting also recommended identifying representatives of organisations who could assist in reaching out to the grassroots of the Nepali diaspora.

The overseas Nepali movement reaches out to the diaspora through its National Coordinating Council (NCC) which has been established in more than 20 countries around the world to keep tabs on issues that Nepalis face in their respective countries.

But it hasn’t always been smooth sailing in some countries because of pre-existing dynamics between organisation. Nepal in North America are no different. Challenges arise because of the difficulties of meeting due to work pressures, as well as appreciation that no one organisation will take the lead. Under the leadership of the International Coordination Committee President Uppenda Mahato and International Coordinator Bhim Udai, the meeting supported Nepal American Council (NAC) in coordinating the activities of Nepali organisations in North America through the National Coordination Council of North America.

Some 50 participants attended the San Bernardino conference and suggested ways to connect to the rest of the diaspora. The meeting also recommended identifying representatives of organisations who could assist in reaching out to the grassroots of the Nepali diaspora.

Nepali North Americans

Overseas Nepalis in North America can become a stronger force for social and economic development in their home country only by actively participating in the NRN movement, a meeting of North American Nepalis has concluded.

The Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) invited leaders of 18 organisations representing Nepal in North America for a day-long conference in San Bernadino, California on 6 January to discuss diaspora issues. That such a conference was held, and well attended, points to the fact that the population of overseas Nepalis has reached a critical mass and is enthusiastic to contribute towards Nepali development.

The overseas Nepalis are a unique part of the world to network, and today they are better informed about events and trends in their homeland. This, coupled with the education they have received abroad and their experiences, gives the Nepali diaspora a unique perspective and understanding of the Nepali situation.

The main purpose of Nepali networking is now to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and skills among overseas Nepalis and with those in Nepal.
Interview with Matrika Yadav of Rastriya Mukti Morcha in Samaya, 18 January.

In 2001 Jay Krishna Goit was appointed chairman of the Maoist Madhesi National Liberation Front. Two years later, he was replaced by Matrika Yadav and publicly sidelined. What started as a struggle against the Maoists is now a war against pahadis. Yadav maintains that the JTMM is supported by the palace and India.

Can you comment on the JTMMís communal campaign?

This revolution is misusing the madhes. Nepal is divided into two distinct groups based on colour and communities. But these groups are themselves diverse. There are feudal and oppressive people, as there are victims, in both madhesi and pahadi communities. The JTMM is fighting the Maoist party when all parties, including the Maoists, are fighting against monarchy. If they are against us, they are supporting the royalists.

Why do you accuse the JTMM of being influenced from various quarters?

The JTMM has been directly supported by the palace and India since it launched its war against the Maoist party. Jwala Singhís splinter group is closer to the palace, while Goitís JTMM answers to India. Many in Goitís group are unthinking blind supporters. A pahadi was killed in Sapt ari recentlyówas he an oppressor? Similarly, Govinda Neupane was killed in Sarlahi. If they say ëmadhesi-pahadi bhai bhaií, why are pahadis being systematically killed? JTMM wants to spread the message of communal hatred, which seriously undermines the madhesi revolution.

Are you saying that India does not support the political changes in Nepal?

The JTMM is being supported by those who believe in BJP-style Hindu political power. Look at Nepalganjóthe wrong political elements were involved there and the madhesi movement got a very bad reputation.

Madhesi leaders say such violence was inevitable because their peaceful demands were ignored. The madhes problem started because of the Brahmin-centric attitude that gave birth to Goit. The present campaign was spread by royalty.

Did this all happen because the Maoists couldnít keep a handle on things?

These groups were not born because we couldnít manage people. They were disenchanted and they betrayed us. We admit we have weaknesses, but we are finding a solution. I am trying. I havenít been able to talk to Goit directly, but I have been in touch with his advisors. I have suggested that if he doesnít want to talk to me, Chairman Dahal is ready to talk.

Should the tarai be called the madhes region?

There are discussions about this. I believe that there should be one madhes and there should be various units under this unified region.

Nom de guerre

A name doesnít represent a personís physical qualities or mental status. But when people are called by a certain name, over time, the name eventually becomes a part of them. Pushpa Kamal Dahalís name was perhaps chosen with love and care, but when he went underground and started the ëPeopleís Warí, the Maoist chairman changed his name to Prachanda. Now, the war is over, but he is reluctant to let go of his alias. Is it because he takes more pride in the work he did as Prachanda than as Pushpa Kamal?

Pushpa Kamal Dahal was an admirable student, teacher, and friend. Prachanda ordered bloodshed, destruction, and war in this time of peace, Nepalís expect Dahal to demonstrate the same courage that he did on the battlefield, but channelled into productive ends. It will be difficult for people to trust him if he holds on to his war name. When Pushpa Kamal Dahal lets go of that, people will finally feel that the years of bloodshed are over. And heís not the only one. All Maoist leaders who used an alias during the war need to let go of the past and move on.
Way ahead

Editorial in Kantipur, 16 January
That the Maoists returned to the same House of Representatives they abandoned a decade ago is proof that the country is heading in a new direction. Sustainable peace and political stability will depend on how they play their role as another big parliamentary party, almost as large as the UML.

The Maoists will make their mark on the world if they can successfully participate in a 21st century democratic parliament after waging a war based on 20th century communist ideology. The international community would thank and congratulate Nepal for its stable, modern democracy.

The Maoists must cooperate in the management of their own army. They will find it difficult to run political activities without guns, but the other parties cannot practice free and fair politics unless arms are taken out of the picture.

All parties are responsible for the plans envisaged in the new constitution. The interim government must create an environment for a free and fair election to the constituent assembly.

Trojan horse

Punarjagran, 16 January
The Maoists have formally taken up the parliamentary procedures after 11 years of their ‘People’s War’. Political observers wonder whose victory this change of heart signifies: of parliamentarians over the Maoists, or of the Maoists in bringing the lawmakers over to their agenda.

Many question the government’s willingness to let the Maoists into parliament before they surrendered their arms, and the Maoists’ demand for a constituent assembly election. Never have armed communists demanded such an election. This insistence on the best of democratic exercise by the very Maoists who fought to end democracy sounds like the story of the Trojan War translated into Nepali politics.

Here for good

Budhabhar, 17 January
The 16-year-old constitution has been replaced by a new interim document. For the first time in the history of Nepal, the monarchy is defunct. The king’s constitutional powers have been wiped out and the people’s representatives have written an interim constitution.

Political parties, the international community, and civil society all hope for a better future for the country through this constitution. After this historic event, many believe that this change is here to stay.

Indian rescue

Desfantar, 14 January
Politicians in India are insisting that the monarchy remain in existence. The BJP recently sent a delegation to Nepal. Similarly, royal relative and Indian politician Karan Singh, who was sent to Nepal as a special envoy of the Indian prime minister during the April Uprising, will also arrive this week.

The BJP group led by Suresh Kumar Arora, the party’s foreign affairs head, met Prime Minister Koirala last Friday. The group also met with former prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, RPP chairman Pushpa Bhandari Mahara, and Maoist leaders Krishna Bahadur Mahara and CP Gajurel.

While the BJP wants Nepal to remain a Hindu kingdom, the new interim constitution isolates the king by seizing his constitutional powers. The failure of the king’s 1 February 2005 takeover is largely attributed to the change in the government in India.

Though the BJP openly supports the king, the Indian government is silent on this matter and has made no statement about its views. India says it will accept the wishes of the Nepali people and political parties. Political analysts believe India’s stance on the monarchy will play an important role in the king’s survival.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

‘The Maoists have accepted change in principle, but they have yet to prove the same in their behaviour.’

Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat in Himal, 15-29 January
As the sun sets behind the hills, Patan’s Darbar Square slowly goes back to the people who live around it. The tourist leave and the antique sellers are packing up. The cafés are seeing an end-of-day spurt and Krishna Mandir, bathed in the light of butter lamps, looks other worldly. Strains of music waft through and there is laughter and conversation as people gather in groups and talk about their day. Students still in their uniforms snack on peanuts and watch the neighbourhood go by.

These days, though, the crowds are bigger, the teashops have expanded into full-fledged food stalls, and there are vendors of not just vegetables and pote, but everything from electronic goods, to clothing, to books.

Since last summer, a vibrant night market has sprung up here from the southern end of the path leading to Krishna Mandir and all the way down to the waterspout. Vendors like Binita Dulal sell whatever they can get their hands on, leading to interesting product mixes, like the fake designer t-shirts, facelocks, flashlights, table lamps, and battery-operated radios.

Some are hawk-eyed for a find and ready for a good bargaining session. Others are content to soak up the good mood and twinkling lights as an antidote to the chilly winter evening. “The evenings are colourful and pleasant,” says Sheela Timilsina as she sips tea from a disposable plastic cup.

Nearby the Mobile Momo Store has a banner boasting of the best momos and chicken wings in the Valley. Fried sausage, fish, tofu, potatoes, drumsticks, and spring rolls are displayed under a partitioned glass counter. People are gathered four deep around the stall, and the shopkeeper tells us that more than 150 people eat his food every night. The food is cheap—Rs 10 for sausage-on-a-stick, Rs 5 for roast potato skewers—and relatively fresh because of the high turnover. The oil may be yesterday’s, but the meat is not. Basic teashalls cater to those who huddle together to analyse the state of the state.

Purna Kumari Shrestha, who has been selling peanuts at the square for 20 years, thinks the night market is a natural extension of the role the square plays in the lives of Patan residents. “We’ve gathered around here for a long time, and I have customers who’ve been buying peanuts from me for years,” she says.

There is a real camaraderie between Shrestha and her customers. By the light of her lantern, they exchange witty repartee even as off to the side her teenage daughter keeps a sharp eye on the accounts.

While most people we spoke to thought the market added some much-needed life to the square, some are uneasy about the change. "It’s a bit of a mess," says one regular, who prefers the quiet of the square.

To market, to market, MALLIKA ARYAL
needed fun to community life, some of the old guard were not quite as happy. Every evening, Krishna Dutta Malla and his friends sit and chat quietly on the benches outside Patan Museum. It used to be peaceful and low-key, but now, he complains, “they sell goods, fry all kinds of meat, and play music in front of a holy place.”

Since the market came up shortly after Jana Andolan II, the Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City, which used to strictly enforce a no-stall rule in front of the old darbar (now Patan Museum) because it is a World Heritage Site, has not paid the vendors a single visit.

Basantapur shows how night markets can be better managed. For the last five years, the Kathmandu Metropolitan City has rented out stalls to vendors on the tiled path leading to the square. Looking down on the market from a nearby highrise is a brilliant sight, and the lights from shops and cars make the bajar look like a long, glowing caterpillar under the shadowy outlines of the old palace. With its neat rows of well-lit stalls, the market is a pleasant contrast to the higgledy-piggledy—albeit atmospheric—mess of Patan’s night bajar, though overcrowding is becoming a real danger as cars and motorcycles have free passage through Basantapur.

The vendors here focus on fashion, rather than household appliances. Between the lights of the cafés and ice cream shops that flank them, the stalls glitter with earrings, hair clips, sunglasses, scarves, bric-a-brac, colourful mirrored bags, Indian slippers, purses, winter coats, shirts, and trousers. It’s heaven for street fashion junkies who like to bargain. Young women in particular come to buy clothes imported from Bangkok and China. Bhawana Kandel’s jewellery stall, for example, regularly attracts designers and models on the lookout for inexpensive jewellery for photo shoots and fashion shows.

Veteran salesman Susan Pradhan says price is a great attraction here. “We can afford to sell cheap because we save on rent,” he explains. Depending on the size of the stalls the vendors pay the municipality up to Rs 3,500 per month.

Night markets are turning into a fundraising venture too. The JP School in Thamel rents out its grounds to stalls every evening. In exchange, the vendors are to pave the premises. The main attraction here are the bands that play covers of contemporary Nepali rock tunes. The merchandise is similar to that in Basantapur, but a bit more up-to-date—funkier purses, skimpier summer dresses, better cosmetics. It hasn’t quite come to life yet, but the vendors are wildly optimistic. “This is the perfect place for an open night market,” says stall owner Rosi Gurung. “There is so much space for music, shops, and food, and I bet in a few months this place will be bustling with people.”

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Cold to death

Every winter there are reports of death due to ékodi, usually from tarai districts. But a coldwave death has usually been long in the making. Acute respiratory infections including cough and cold, fever, and pneumonia affect nearly a million children under five and thousands of elderly people every year in Nepal. Such infections and malnourishment depress the immune systems of children and older people, and in the severe cold, respiratory infections take a turn for the worse. This is what kills people in the tarai and mountain regions in the winter.

In the past month, there have been reports of nearly 20 deaths due to cold in Dhanusa, Bara, and Rautahat, but the Department of Health in Kathmandu says it has not received credible information to that effect.

One of the major documented challenges in delivering appropriate health services to the districts has been an inefficient system of reporting and recording causes of death. Health experts say thousands of deaths in the mountainous areas there is a high incidence of child mortality due to respiratory infection éonéro unreported and under-investigated by government health agencies.

Hazren flewan.

Counting vultures

In June 2006, the anti-inflammatory analgesic drug diclofenac was banned for veterinary use in Nepal, because vultures were dying after ingesting it from livestock carcasses. Conservation experts say diclofenac is still on the shelves, and that illegal production and import continues. CTA, Pharmaceutical Society of England, produces the drug under the name Molfen, says BCN. A recent survey by Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) found that CTUs brand of diclofenac, Molfen, was still being sold in veterinary drug stores in Banke, Kanchanpur, Rupendahi, Dang, and Kailali.

“We have proof to show that Molfen is still being produced,” says Hem Sagar Baral, chief executive of BCN. Molfen packaging in the possession of BCN has dates of production as recently as September 2006.

Why is the government not going after people involved in the production and import of an illegal drug?” asks Baral. Baral says it will take a few decades for the vulture population to come back to the size it was 25 years ago—diseases such as those from diclofenac are stopped.

Seven years ago, when the vultures in South Asia suddenly started dying, at different times the use of pesticides and lack of food were blamed. In late 2003, American researchers in Pakistan found the problem was connected. At a meeting in Kathmandu in February 2004, South Asian countries pledged to ban the drug. A new non-toxic drug, meloxicam, found to be safe for livestock and vultures, was to be used instead. But a year ago it came into effect in Nepal, diclofenac producer Medivet started manufacturing meloxicam instead. (See also “Soaring again” #286 and “No more circling” #185.)

Mallika Aryal

Spiltist tendencies

During Jana Andolan II there were seven communist parties. These have split and divided variously, and there are now 12 communist parties in Nepal. Except for the UML, the Maoists and the Nepal Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party), all the others have divided since parliament was reinstated.

“Outsider all the others when it comes to divisiveness is CPN (Unified). This party has split three times, under the leadership of Mohan Bikram Singh, Prakash, and Rijiji, though it retained the same name,” and also under Bijaya Kumar as CPN 2006, Jana Morcha Nepal. Nepal has also broken up into three different parties. Other such parties include the CPN (ML) under CP Mainali and Rishi Kafle, and the CPN (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) under Krishna Das Shrestha and Sitaram Tamang. Also on the verge of division is the CPN (Unified Marxists) led by Prabhu Narayan Chaudhary, a minister in the reinstated parliament.

Rishi Kumar Kafle points out, even the best dialysis facilities are essentially a stopgap. Kidney failure is uncontrollable, and patients usually need dialysis twice a week to filter blood and remove extra fluid and toxins. This means that even though there are millions of people in Nepal, there are only a few thousand dialysis facilities, which means, they’re still seeing less than 200 patients. It also means these patients are paying over Rs 2,000,000 a year for dialysis, just to survive. Lab tests, hormone injections, and medication for secondary illnesses can double that cost.

“Transplants are the best option,” says Kafle, “most people can’t support lifetime dialysis, and transplants allow them to become fully productive members of society.” The centre, on average, refers two patients for transplants in India every week. Though the procedure is expensive—between Rs 700,000 to Rs 800,000 plus expensive post-op immunosuppressants—the great advantage of transplant is that it makes in worthwhile.

The next logical step, says Kafle and Dalal, is to start doing transplants in Nepal. “I’m confident we are competent to do transplants,” Kafle says. None of the attempts so far have been successful, but he argues that the major obstacles are more bureaucratic and legal than technical. The Nepali “Transplant Act” puts doctors at risk of hefty fines and jail time if a patient dies.

Until legislation changes, for patients like 26-year-old former policeman Ramesh Poudel. (“Staying alive,” #200). survival is the focus. A transplant seems unlikely and he’s been on dialysis for six years now. He lives alone in Samakhi and makes the stressful trip to the National Kidney Centre twice a week. “Well, I’m still alive,” he says, lying still as tubes of blood run between him and the dialysis machine. 

Rishi Kumar Kafle

Life transfusion

Good dialysis facilities are important, but transplants even more so.

JEMIMA SHERPA

In Nepal, you don’t often see newspapers as impressive as this one (below), which shows the dramatic line rise in haemodialysis sessions over the last ten years conducted at the National Kidney Centre (NKC).

The centre is a textbook example of the progress that can be made in health care sector despite challenges. From humble beginnings a decade ago—with four-hand-sewn dialysis machines and a single rented floor in Putalikot, the centre now has 30 machines and accommodates nearly 1,400 haemodialysis sessions a month, and has a brand new facility with over eighty staff in Vanasthal.

The centre uses its new facility, originally intended as a hotel, efficiently. As an NGO, it runs primarily on patient fees, with technical support from a group of German organisations and individuals. Overheads are high—in addition to rent, electricity bills run to over Rs 110,000 a month, and the centre uses as much as 30,000 litres of water a day—but the cost of dialysis sessions has reduced from Rs 3,500 per three to four-hour session in 1997 to Rs 2,000 today.

The centre also runs an outpatient department for people with kidney problems and follow-ups with transplant patients, and provides heavily subsidised blood and urine tests and ultrasounds. In contrast, the government-run Bir Hospital has just five working dialysis machines. The centre has also donated two dialysis machines to Nepalgunj Medical College and came to Birman’s B.P. Koirala Health Science Institute to run on a non-profit basis.

Dr Rami Krishna Dalal, the centre’s administrative director and public health specialist, says that isn’t enough. “I’ve never seen this kind of growth,” he explains. “More are being reported because of increased doctor and patient awareness, but there’s also a genuine rise in the number of cases.” Dalal suggests that this is largely due to increasingly unhealthy urban lifestyles that contribute to diabetes and hypertension, two major causes of chronic kidney failure. Some 2.6 million Nepalis are estimated to suffer from kidney disease, and there are over 10,000 kidney failure cases each year. Rather than expanding further, the centre plans to instead spread prevention messages and support centres outside Kathmandu.

As the centre’s chief nephrologist Dr Rishi Kumar Kafle points out, even the best dialysis facilities are essentially a stopgap. Kidney failure is uncontrollable, and patients usually need dialysis twice a week to filter blood and remove extra fluid and toxins. This means that even though there are millions of people in Nepal, there are only a few thousand dialysis facilities, which means, they’re still seeing less than 200 patients. It also means these patients are paying over Rs 2,000,000 a year for dialysis, just to survive. Lab tests, hormone injections, and medication for secondary illnesses can double that cost.

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Dumb and dumber

Now, our prime minister and lawmakers can do just about anything they want

Make no mistake. The interim constitution promulgated Monday is ‘interim’ in name only. It will be in force until a new constitution, written by an elected constitution assembly is drafted, approved and put into effect—a timeline that could stretch to three years. But, this document is certain to provide the blueprint for the new one.

There has been intense criticism of the interim constitution from many quarters. The lawyers and judiciary say that because the constitution is executive-centric and demolishes the independence of the judiciary. Janjatis, madhesis, and dalits can’t stand it because of the meagre representation it prescribes for them in the future constituent assembly. Lawmakers are critical because the legislature now has no means to remove the prime minister.

These are all valid arguments, and a document that will govern Nepal for almost three years needs to be scrutinised and its kinks ironed out. But what did Prime Minister Koirala, his governing SPA alliance and the Maoists say to all these voices?

“You’re right, but we don’t have time to address all these issues. We are tied down by this artificial timeline we brought upon ourselves, so we have to promulgate this constitution on 15 January. Only then can we hold the all-important constituent assembly election by mid-June. Please allow us to promulgate this constitution now. We promise to look into your grievances and amend the document as we go along.”

We, the people, being so trusting of our politicians, have given them the benefit of the doubt. Not that it matters, because the party-appointed parliamentarians would have approved the document anyway whether we agreed or disagreed.

What can we do about this amateur document foisted upon our lives for three years?

There’s nothing much we can do, actually, other than hope that Koirala and others deliver on the promises they made. Because, if you read the document carefully, you will see that the notion of accountability has been jettisoned. No one is really answerable to anyone.

We have, in our hour of national delirium, put everything in the hands of one man: a frail 84-year-old who has repeatedly shown how lacking in vision he can be. The instability of the 1990s stemmed directly from his refusal to compromise with his party colleagues, and later with the communists. The appointments he made over the years to government and party positions unwittingly reinforced how insensitive he can be to minority communities.

And now, since Koirala is unsure how long his health will hold out, the country is set on an unnatural timeline for constituent assembly polls by mid-June. That madhesi, janjati and dalit concerns for greater representation are being sacrificed at this altar is the biggest irony of this new inclusive democracy we are supposedly living in.

How much dumber can we get?
Strategic aid

Japan is revising the objectives of its overseas development aid (ODA) program to help improve Japan’s global visibility and maintain the regional security it needs for its own progress. Officials say the focus will now be on issues such as peacebuilding in the Middle East; regional rather than bilateral initiatives such as the Mekong regional development program; and promoting trade and investment to strengthen the role of the private sector in reducing poverty in developing countries.

Analysts say the revisions are to counter the growing aid contributions of emerging powers such as China and India, and to strengthen ties with the US and Europe, particularly in light of the North Korean nuclear threat. The strategy also includes debt relief to Iraq and reopening debate on the prohibition on Japanese military involvement overseas.

Japan’s ODA program was launched in 1954, and was one of the world’s largest in the 1990s. Despite cuts over the last nine years, there has been an almost four percent reduction from the 2005 level alone. Its aid budget still stands at $6.13 billion. The majority of Japanese aid goes to southeast and east Asia, followed by south Asia and Africa.

Addressing concerns that recent ODA decisions stray from international aid objectives, foreign ministry officials say that while Japan won’t increase its budget to meet the UN goal of donors spending 0.7 percent of Gross National Income on aid, there will still be significant contributions to the millennium development goals for poverty reduction.

Japan spends around 0.2 percent of its GDP on assistance programs, more than the US, but far behind the Nordic donors, France, and Germany, which give around 5 percent each.

Queen bees, wannabes

Women bosses are significantly more likely than men to discriminate against female employees, recent research suggests. The study by a group of psychologists at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin found that when presented with applications for promotion, women were more likely than men to assess the female candidate as less qualified than the male one. They were also more likely to make women’s prospects for promotion and to assess them as more controlling than men in their management style.

The findings, based on experiments carried out among more than 700 people, suggest that the “Queen bee syndrome” of female rivalry in the workplace may sometimes be as important as sexism in holding back women’s careers.

Female and older participants showed more prejudice against the idea of a female leader than male and younger participants,” said Rocio Garcia-Retamero, lead author of the report.

The study showed female participants had a stronger tendency than males to view the female candidate as less qualified. The female participants also thought that the female candidate would fare worse in her job in the future.

Recent cases that have illustrated this problem include that of Helen Green, 36, a Deutsche Bank employee from London, who was awarded nearly $1.5 million after two years of bullying by four female colleagues.

FACING THE PAST: This heritage site reminds South Africans of the human rights violations during the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, which was investigated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998.

At peace with the past

Truth and forgiveness free societies to move forward

South Africa is now beginning to contemplate the retirement of Thabo Mbeki, its second president since the end of the apartheid era. This is an opportune moment to assess our achievements, note our failures, and see what elements in our reasonably peaceful transition from repression to democracy may be applied elsewhere.

We all remember the first days of that transfer of power to the black majority when most people believed that democracy was finally within our reach. We were blessed that he guided us through a ghastly racial bloodbath. It was a desperate time, brief but seared in our memories, when indiscriminate killings on trains, in taxis, and on buses were common, a time of massacres at regular intervals, often owing to the bloody rivalry between the African National Congress and the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party.

But catastrophe was avoided and, instead, the world was awed by the spectacle of long lines of South Africans of every race snaking their way slowly to polling booths on 27 April, 1994.

Of course, part of South Africa’s transition success was due to the moral colossus that is Nelson Mandela, whose calm and capacity, and status as an icon of forgiveness, compassion, magnanimity, and reconciliation make us the envy of every nation. We were blessed that he guided us through our state through its rebirth. And we must also thank F.W. de Klerk, the last ruler of the dying apartheid regime, and his exhibition of moral courage by setting in motion our liberating revolution.

But ordinary South Africans should also be proud of themselves, their self-discipline, decency, and ability to forgive prevented a bloodbath. They are a model for other troubled parts of the world.

We, especially white South Africans, have tended to be dismissive of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which allowed those who had committed great crimes under apartheid to confess their acts and avoid prosecution. Truth, not punishment, is the goal. Around the world, the TRC is considered a benchmark against which other efforts to move from dictatorship to democracy must be judged.

Yes, the TRC was flawed—as are all human enterprises. But it was a remarkable institution, for many had thought a black-led government would signal the onset of an orgy of revenge and retribution against whites for all the degradation blacks. South Africans had suffered from colonial times to the apartheid era. Instead, the world saw nobility of spirit displayed every time the TRC defended black victims or raised their voices at the trial of the worst. It was spared the horrors of that era than we would, had we not embarked on the road to reconciliation.

We have not forgotten what was done to ordinary black people in the name of apartheid. Indeed, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we have begun to contemplate the lessons we have learned, and to embrace our opportunities and our responsibilities to build a better world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace.
If Nepal is to belong to all Nepalis, now’s the time to get started

A moment of truth

The word ‘feudalism’ is bandied about a lot. As a famous wit observed, everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it. Well it’s about time Nepal took a long look at what feudalism and what isn’t, and evolved a consensus on getting something done.

To be feudal is to have a vertical power structure, where birth and inheritance matter, and merit does not. There are no fresh opportunities in feudalism, just duties and burdens for the excluded, benefits for those born into privilege. Patronage is excluded, benefits for those born and duties and burdens for the opportunities in feudalism, just merit does not. There are no fresh birth and inheritance matter, and vertical power structure, where something done.

This society remains mired in feudalism, despite its layers of apparent modernity. Beyond a few cutting edge business enterprises, and some arts and crafts, merit still means little here. Birth, access to power, and tradition are everything. Feudalism has governed this place since it became a nation. First the Shah family, then the Ranas, and latterly political parties that behave like royal courts, encouraging cynophagy, dynasties, and unaccountability. Instead of a single king, we had dozens, each with its own fawning coterie. Elections provided cover for misgovernance and gave the illusion of accountability. In the jangles, another form of feudalism grew in Maoist ranks, homage to a discredited historical outlook, impunity in the name of People’s War. Meanwhile, the royal palace burned, plowed and manuring seeds of discord. Intrigue is, after all, what feudalism does best. A patron-in-chief supported by a network of troublemaking cronies stirred an already simmering pot. Political parties were split and civil unrest was famed. Diplomacy and government policy were second-guessed, even undermined. A discredited-elite that lost much power in 1990 was hard at work to restore a hated status quo.

They succeeded in October of 2005, and controlled their position in 2005. Gyanendra’s direct rule was the jewel in their crown. Again, the palace was at the centre of things, commanding the army directly and making executive decisions about press censorship and suppression of human rights.

For a time, Nepal was a theme park for tin pot feudalism. Military loyalties to ‘king and country’, in that order, were rewarded with even more medals and ribbons that bespoke nothing of substance. King and Crown Prince hurtled obliviously around a bemused, increasingly angry country. The world looked on, first with horror then with growing hope, as the Maoists made common ground with democrats, jumpstarting a long overdue suppression of human rights. For a time, Nepal was a theme park for tin pot feudalism. Military loyalties to ‘king and country’, in that order, were rewarded with even more medals and ribbons that bespoke nothing of substance. King and Crown Prince hurtled oblivious to the rage of the people’s movement for sanity.

Even the former king of Bhutan, whatever his other sins, ordered his own feudal elite to make way for democracy, trusting in public that “you never know if you’re going to get a bad king.” At least a bad prime minister can be voted out, shamed in the press.

So with a new parliament in place, let the debate begin. Does feudalism belong in the ‘New Nepal’? In palaces or political parties? If so, please justify. If not, what are we waiting for?

In the wake of Nepal’s 1 February, 2005 takeover, and the subsequent upheaval that followed, many bloggers have weighed in on the topic of feudalism and its impact on Nepali society.

For example, Subhash Shah on Madhesi- United We Stand writes:

“This society remains mired in feudalism, despite its layers of apparent modernity. Beyond a few cutting edge business enterprises, and some arts and crafts, merit still means little here. Birth, access to power, and tradition are everything.”

Another blogger, Aazaad on Madhes Blog, notes:

“Feudalism has governed this place since it became a nation. First the Shah family, then the Ranas, and latterly political parties that behave like royal courts, encouraging cynophagy, dynasties, and unaccountability.”

These are just a few examples of the many bloggers who have discussed the issue of feudalism in Nepal.

In conclusion, it is clear that feudalism is a significant issue in Nepal, and that it continues to have a profound impact on the country’s society and politics. It is important for the country to work towards a more equitable and just society, free from the influence of feudalism and its negative consequences.”
EXHIBITIONS
- Tantric Sculptures and Nude Croquis (Sketches)
- Mixed media artworks by Park Geun Yong, until 23 January at Siddhartha Art Gallery.

EVENTS
- Vipassana Meditation talk program at The Quest, Stadium Gate, Tripureswor, 1PM on 20 January.
- Children in the Shadows film festival until 20 January, information at www.childreninshadows.com
- Shastrartha on Tamerí’s rights in the context of the WTO’ at Martin Chautari, 20 January at 3:5PM, 4283050
- Dialogue Session on ‘The Root of Our Problems’ at The Quest, Stadium Gate, Tripureswor, 1PM on 22 January.
- Book Fair 2007 at the United School, Saltibabato, on 23 January.
- Mangalbare Discussion Series at Martin Chautari on Nepalí economic agenda with Dilip Raj Khanal, 23 January at 3PM.
- Youth Discussion Series at Martin Chautari on Challenges and Opportunities of Youth in Journalism, 26 January at 3PM.
- British Film Festival 2007 at Kopi Kopi, 26 January in Pokhara.
- Kathmandu Chorale rehearsals at the British School, every Monday 7-9 PM from 29 January. 5347373
- Singing Bowl Demonstration and Concert at the Shankar Hotel, Lazimpat, 5:30PM on 31 January.
- Salsa Workshop weekday and weekend classes available at Salsa Dance Academy, Bhat Bhaktesi, 4422019.
- Hata Yoga classes for a 40 percent discount at The Self Awakening Centre, Baber Mahal Revisited. 4256618

MUSIC
- Fusion and Classical Nepali music by Rudra live at the Country Club, every Monday, 7PM onwards, Rs 800.
- Open Mic Night at Viva Café, Thamel every Friday, 8PM.
- Classical Fusion Music at Jatra, every Saturday, 7PM onwards.
- Gaite (Gandarbhas) perform at every lunch and dinner, Club Himalaya Nagarkot. 6680080

DINING
- Shop Talk drink and dine at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Radisson Hotel.
- Gyakok lunch and dinner at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shankari. Minimum of 4 guests at Rs 450 per person.
- Walk and Lunch every Saturday until 27 January at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841371927
- Retro Brunch Barbeque at The Poolside with the Crossfire Band, Le Meridien from 12 noon-4PM, Rs 1000 inclusive of swimming and complimentary drink.
- International 16-17 weekend lunches, 11AM-3PM for Rs 499 per person (Rs 299 for children) at Hotel Himalaya. 5523900
- Farmhouse Café at Park Village Resort. Dine alfresco with the birds and the butterflies. 4373380
- To savour Tibetan delicacies at the new Tibetan restaurant and Nepali first noodle bar, Bluebird Mall Food Court.
- Café Cultus Famous rolls, buns, kebabs, and Indian cuisine at Sathwark, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741003735
- Japanese Food at the Coffee Shop, Hotel Shankari, 12 noon till 3PM, Rs 499 per person. 4412999
- Pizza straight from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519
- Some Like It Hot cozy winter cocktails with live music from Side B every Wednesday at Fusioninfile Bar at Dwarikas.
- Woodfired Pizzas at Roadside Café, Thamel, 426768, Bhat Bhaktesi 4425868 and Pulchok. 5521755
- AKA Pizza at Moksh, delivery available. 5526212
- Mono and Sekuwa Revolution every Saturday at the Tea House Inn, Nagarkot. 6680048
- Cocktails and Mocktails happy hour every day 4-7PM at Kathmandu Revolving Restaurant, Raina Plaza, New Road.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com

PUSHKAR HILLS
KATHMANDU VALLEY

Nepali weather
by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

It’s going to get colder. This Wednesday was the coldest of the season so far, with frost overnight in parts of the Valley. There is normally snowfall and winter rain this month, and mercury levels in towns like Jumla, Jomsom, and Jiri are well below freezing in the mornings. Thursdayís satellite picture shows a fresh westerly front heading towards the central Himalaya and a persistent low over eastern Tibet that is pulling it in. This could mean light freezing in the mornings. The Western tarai will again see thick fog.

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BBC Weather

20.45-21.15 on 102.4

It's a perfect winter day for skiing. The slopes are clear with blue skies and a gentle breeze. The perfect conditions for a day on the slopes. The temperature is around freezing and there is a light snowfall. A great day for skiing or snowboarding.

About Town

- Experiences and Events
- Music
- Dining

For more information, visit www.nepalitimes.com

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Mixed media artworks by Park Geun Yong, until 23 January at Siddhartha Art Gallery.

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TIME
GOING GREY: (l-r) Khadka Bahadur Biswokarma, Lokendra Bista, Hisila Yami, Krishna Bahadur Mahara (standing), Deb Gurung, and Janardhan Sharma at a program to honouring the new Maoist MPs at Basantapur’s Shiva Parbati Dabali on Thursday.

LEGAL: Newly-elected president of the Nepal Bar Association, Bishwokanta Mainali (centre), talks to journalists outside the NBA office after winning the election on Wednesday.

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY: NC lawmaker Mahadev Gurung takes pictures of the parliament building to set as a wallpaper for his mobile phone on Wednesday.
The Gallery Baithak was where the Ranas used to watch dances, plays, and movies. The seating was segregated, with queens, princesses, ladies-in-waiting, and concubines in a separate enclosure. The Nautch Ghar has obviously seen better days and should perhaps be turned into an art museum, definitely not a parliament for a country of 27 million. The only reason the honourable members didn’t keel over with hypothermia on Monday night was because they were stacked cheek to jowl and forced to share body heat. How this building is going to seat 425 members of the constituent assembly this summer is anybody’s guess. Maybe Nepal should have a three-tier parliamentary system with the Upper Berth, Middle Berth, and Lower Berth.

Tip Top Tailors on New Road worked overtime to finish grey blazers for the 73-member Maoist team in parliament, but could get only 41 ready by the time the session started and that was only because the proceedings were delayed by six hours. And in the spirit of gender empowerment that has become a hallmark of the Maoist movement, female comrade members got first crack at the rather fetching coats. Although the temperature inside the legislature probably made them wish they could have donned their knockoff North Face fleeces instead.

And who was that suited booted guy in the Maoist ranks? None other than Major General Kumar Phudung of our own ex-Royal Nepal Army. Eyebrows have been raised about how someone so close to former Chief of Army Staff General Satcith SJBRI agreed to be a hand-picked Maoist nominee, and speculation is rife that he may have been a DPA all along. But Phudung told colleagues that the Maoists approached him saying they needed advice on restructuring the armed forces and he felt it was his duty to the nation to help. Whatever the case, getting Phudung was quite a coup for the comrades. The other seven parties didn’t show any such imagination.

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And who was that suited booted guy in the Maoist ranks? None other than Major General Kumar Phudung of our own ex-Royal Nepal Army. Eyebrows have been raised about how someone so close to former Chief of Army Staff General Satcith SJBRI agreed to be a hand-picked Maoist nominee, and speculation is rife that he may have been a DPA all along. But Phudung told colleagues that the Maoists approached him saying they needed advice on restructuring the armed forces and he felt it was his duty to the nation to help. Whatever the case, getting Phudung was quite a coup for the comrades. The other seven parties didn’t show any such imagination.

The reason Krishna Sitaula, Pradeep Gyawali and Deb Gurung were looking under the weather was not just because of the cold, the Ass understands. All three have been suffering from suspected jaundice. Since they were part of the government-Maoist negotiating process, it should be fairly easy to trace the five-star establishment where kitchen staff are hygienically challenged.

It wasn’t just the Ass freezing his ass off on Monday. Also caught unawares by the frigid ambience inside the chambers were Kathmandu-based ambassadors, who were huddled together for warmth in their balcony seats. Some were spotted sneaking off to the parking lot for smokes at regular intervals. But when they found out that 18 members were listed to speak and the microphone had malfunctioned, many dips called it a day and went home to watch the Ash-Abhishek engagement live on TV instead. One of the few who stayed till the end was Big Brother Mukherje, silhouetted spookily against a backlit balcony.

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Bal Bahadur Rai first entered the Gallery Baithak as an elected member of parliament after the election in 1959. Being seniormost, it fell upon him to lead the collective oath-taking. Members duly fulfilled repeated after him Ido solemnly swear abide by the norms and rules of the house. When Rai got to the part ‘as god is my witness’ the Asses in the media gallery noticed that the first row of Maoist atheists didn’t repeat that sentence. Backbencher comrades, however, seemed to have no qualms about invoking god.

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