The sight of these two porters carrying computers into the Election Commission building in Kathmandu on Sunday is emblematic of the challenges ahead for Nepal.

The constituent assembly election, a key demand of the Maoists to end their ten-year war, was scheduled for June but the timetable is looking increasingly doubtful. Dilly-dallying on five key pieces of legislation, continuing unrest in the tarai, unending strikes and shutdowns have affected preparations for polls.

“If the government and the parties start working with us immediately we can still hold elections by June, otherwise it will be difficult,” says Chief Election Commissioner, Bhajraj Pokhrel.

This means an interim government should be set up this week, date for polls announced by mid-March, registration of parties by end-March, delineation of constituencies by mid-April, beginning of campaigning in mid-May, and elections by 15 June.

Although the government is dragging its feet on polls, the tempo has picked up on setting up a new government that includes the Maoists. Prime Minister Koirala met the Indian and US ambassadors on Thursday, but cancelled a scheduled meeting with Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Koirala is under pressure to delay inducting the Maoists into the interim government until the Maoists stop using force against opponents.

Dhruba Simkhada

Weekly Internet Poll  # 338
Q. What do you think about an ethnic federalist structure for the Nepali state?
Total votes: 4,083

Getting there

Editorial
Disarming candour  p2
State of the state  Not everything matters  p2
Nation
Peace and poverty  p4

Land Rover
Discovery 3
All Terrain 4WD
Luxurious interior
Matches for all lifestyles

Shikhar Household Insurance
For generations, your dream house for generations to come.

Kiran Pandey
Not everything matters

If we look beyond arms and weapons, we’d see the other dangers

D like for the constituent assembly could be announced any day. Pushpottam Dahal is waiting to hear from Balwatar so he can send his nominees into the interim government. But in the public mind, the fear of Maoist perpetrators persists. The process of arms management and the furloughing of weapons by Maoist cadres has raised questions about the real intentions of the CPN-M. The Nepali people have a hope that the United Nations Mission to Nepal (UNMIN) headed by Ian Martin will follow international standards to ensure that Maoist arms and army are ‘managed’ in a way that the public can go into the constituent assembly elections free of fear and intimidation. This involves both the successful technical task of disarmament as well as monitoring current threat levels Nepalis are exposed to.

Last week, Martin presented a report (see picture) that referred to the completion of the ‘first stage of registration of combatants and weapons’. What that means to us is that the job is not finished. Yet, the impression is given that the figures provided are essentially correct. We are told 3,428 weapons registered by insurgents are in custody. But there are questions UNMIN would nevertheless need to answer to prepare the public for upcoming elections. Where are all the weapons? What about all the pistols? Does UNMIN have a view on the fact that a majority of hardcore guerrillas are not in the cantonments? And how will all this affect the conduct of elections in an environment free of fear and intimidation?

UNMIN’s count of Maoist army combatants in the cantonments is 30,852. We have reported large numbers of civilians joining the Maoists after the Ceasefire Code of Conduct was signed in August. Does UNMIN regard all of them as combatants? If it has yet to ‘verify’ who it calls the Maoist army combatants, how can Martin already call them that and give the impression that whoever the Maoists say are combatants are to be regarded as such?

In the run-up to elections, UNMIN’s task is not just to de-arm society but also to defuse the military mindset of the Maoists. Until a situation evolves where the king and a reactionary army are able to create instability, it is the Maoists who will be seen as the chief threat to peaceful competitive politics.

There may have been a need to deal with the Maoists ginerly in the past as they risked to join the mainstream. UNMIN must now make a more public demand of the former insurgents. This way, it will also help them to evolve into a legitimate political party.

The sooner that happens the better it will be for Nepal’s future.

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A week after UNMIN chief Ian Martin announced the number of Maoist fighters and weapons registered so far is controversy is still raging. The weapons-to-fighter ratio, which is about 1:3, appears too low. Many analysts have questioned how is possible that the Maoists have only 3,500 old weapons and their fighting strength is nearly 32,000? Some experts and politicians are asking whether the ratio is more like 1:7.

This debate, though justified in many ways, misses a few key points about the Maoists. While it is important to account for each and every Maoist fighter and weapon to move the peace process forward, it would be foolhardy to expect that the Maoists will register all weapons in their possession.

No rebel force in the world does that. The level of mistrust between the rebel and government forces is still too high at this early stage of the process for the Maoists not to have concealed some of their weapons. And besides, as anyone who followed the conflict over the years should know, the Maoists’ main weapons were threats, intimidation, socket bombs and other improvised explosives, rather than the antiquated three-shot-threes.

Second, while the number of government weapons lost to Maoist rebels during the conflict and the number of Maoist weapons registered so far by UNMIN do not match exactly, they are tantalisingly close. Little attention has been paid to senior Nepali Army officers who have recently publicly said they are satisfied with the Maoists’ weapons. They say this because the numbers come close to their own figures and also estimates of Maoist weapons by various research and intelligence agencies. There are some weapons which are still missing, of course, but they can be explained: the Maoists too lost some of their weapons, to rebel groups like Jwala Singh and Jai Krishna Goit. Some in the Maoists’ leadership, however, is that even if these numbers appear low, they were enough to hold the country hostage for ten years. The Nepal Army and police forces could not defeat the Maoists despite having superior firepower. And the Maoists didn’t win either. That is why we have this peace process.

Focusimg on low weapons figures is missing the forest for the trees.

None of this means that the Maoists should be left off the hook lightly. The government, UNMIN, and civil society should keep pressing for a full accounting of all their weapons. But realistically speaking, this will only happen when there are no more weapons to be found in the cantonments.

That they haven’t been able to do so points to the continued mistrust. The Maoists don’t trust government security forces to provide them adequate security, and the government doesn’t trust the Maoists to carry their own weapons for security purposes. Until this key agreement is reached, the Maoists will have plausible reasons to continue moving around armed, and UNMIN cannot decertify the weapons registration and storage is over, and we won’t have an interim government to matter won’t be a date for constituent assembly elections, etc, etc.

A state of the state

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UNITY IN DIVERSITY

CK Lal has touched my heart this time (‘The ties that bind’, State of the State #327). I always felt he was against the Nepali identity in his writings (especially for pahadi bahuns like me who are the focus of multipronged attacks in present day Nepal). But being somebody who thinks discrimination can be annihilated by educating people and not by trampling upon the dhaka topi, I totally agree that we need to find common ground amidst our diversity and learn to celebrate both.

I would like to congratulate CK Lal and his analysis on maintaining the integrity of Nepal. We should all respect each one’s uniqueness, but try to bring commonalities in the front if there is an erosion of differences. For co-existence we have to accept common principles. Madhesis were right to bring out their issues. Does it matter if we understand each other’s language the way the dhaka topi is now being treated? I totally agree that we need to find common ground amidst our diversity and learn to celebrate both.

Sandeep Dhungana, Lancashire, UK

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

same anyway.

Re: Mark Turin’s excellent article ‘My tongue or yours?’ (226). The briefest and simplest answer should be an emphatic: ‘BOTH!’ It is unfortunate that language is not the first place a political issue, although it is used and made as such. Language has to do with all that is culture, literature, art, history. It is also about the cognitive process of each individual. Perhaps because the rights of minority languages have been neglected for so long, activists are now set to fight for their rights to the degree of being unreasonable. The reaction of the government to demands for mother tongue education has been changing over the years from definitely negative to carefully positive to even trying to provide education in 12 languages. Indeed, the task is overwhelming it seen from the perspective of a central government: many of the minority languages are not well known in Kathmandu. Even less known are the real needs of the people, because for each language the situation is different, each has a different need. Before any action can be taken, surveys have to be undertaken to assess the language attitudes, the actual situation and the actual need in the mother tongues. It does not hurt the position of Nepali as the prestige language if other languages are also used as medium of instruction. Linguists can testify that many of the languages spoken in Nepal have intuitive mechanisms to coin new words, or fill terms with new content. How much, or rather how little, Nepal is really understood by speakers of other languages is reflected in the high dropout rate of students whose mother tongue is not Nepali. Children can handle several languages at the same time without getting confused, in fact, their cognitive abilities are strengthened compared to monolingual children. Even if the mother tongue is not the language of higher studies, it will not be forgotten if there is a good foundation early on. Education in the mother tongue will be the base of language preservation, and this is what we wish to happen in Nepal where we still have an immense treasure of diverse languages.

ICTA, email

Re: ‘Nepal in New York’ (#337). Is your newspaper a legit news outlet or a gossip mag? This article is pure trash that you would find in grocery line gossip section and is a disgrace.

Name withheld, email

UNION OF BIDESHIS IN NEPAL

In my on-going effort to adapt as much to local culture and customs as possible, and to blend in with and respect local traditions and actions in Nepal, I have decided that it would only be logical to form a union of my own: the first union of Bideshis in Nepal. I say ‘first’, because, as all things in Nepal, it is certain to be copied (perhaps the greatest ‘poverty’ in Nepal is that of initiative, creativity, and professional ethics, among Nepalis and international ‘development’ workers) it is also likely to splinter into a variety of factions with complaints, issues, oppositions, public resolutions, and much tea drinking and speeches between us, while we work as hard as possible to skim as much funds from the community as we can. As an opening action to announce our presence, and demand our rights we demand a 10 percent tax from all Nepalis (in addition to 13 percent VAT). Then we will shop all Nepalis on the road, and demand donations to our various ‘temple construction’ projects. Once unimpressed properly, it would only be natural for us to start back-biting and betraying each other, splinter off in to other groups with similar aims, and compete in declaring nationwide bands.

Someone explain to me how a nation can demand international assistance to improve infrastructure and self-destruction, and in the same breath, demand international assistance to correct those same misguided efforts?

Johnnie C. Blair, email

TRANSFER

Re: ‘Nepal in New York’ (#337). It may be a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their daring agenda four years ago. But then their comeback has been a little worrying, are their daring agenda four years ago. But then their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their daring agenda four years ago. But then their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden comeback has been a little worrying, are their sudden
Nepal’s enormous geographic, ethnic, and biological diversity throws up many opportunities for economic development, such as through hydropower, tourism, agriculture, and the like. Yet most Nepalis today remain as poor as they have been for centuries. Look at the poverty figures and you realise that a New Nepal will not come by dividing the country along the lines of ethnicity, colour or creed, but by addressing this basic inequity.

Our rugged geography and the fact that we are landlocked, our feudal practices, and Kathmandu-centric politics and policies all contribute to our misery. While it is true that Nepalis of madhesi origin have been on the receiving end of much social and economic injustices, so have many other groups not from the tarai. Of the 25 poorest districts, 16 are in the eastern tami. Poverty mapping by using the headcount (percent of people below the poverty line) as a measure of poverty status shows that deprivation is pervasive. From the east to west and includes both the ‘madheshi’ tarai and ‘pahade’ hills’. The districts in the mid-west and the far-west spanning all ecological belts have the most people under poverty. Even the relatively prosperous eastern and central regions have pockets of poor districts in the hill and tarai regions.

Rural Nepal accounts for 83 percent of the total population—some 19 million people. Of these, 35 percent, or seven million fall below the poverty line. The figures for per capita consumption expenditure make more sense if you also look at the disparity within each group in the bar graphs for poverty rate by ethnicity. Many different poor and deprived regardless of their ethnicity.

In absolute terms, the vast majority of hill dalits, taraiis, and lower caste madhesis (2.5 million in all) are under the poverty line. Palade bahuns, chhetris, and janajatis each have more than a million poor. Madhesi Yadavs are doing poorly compared with madhesi bahuns. Ethnically-clustered administrative entities are not a practical way to address the enormous socio-economic imbalances in a diverse population that has 100 ethnic groups and 80 languages. The proposed federal structure on the basis of the five pahad versus madhesi regions also does not take into account comparative advantage, economy of scale, carrying capacity, or the diversity of resources. As an example, what destiny can the people of Humla, Jumla, and Rolpa chart when all they have are rugged mountains? The lumping together of, say, Rai and Magar, dalits and Shepas, Bahuns and the Chhetris would only exacerbate ethnic tensions further and prompt migration down to the plains, should hardships in the hills continue. Will the new state solve such problems by creating a culture of centrally-controlled fiscal handouts?

What is your secretariat’s strategy for dealing with new challenges to the peace process?

Yes, there are challenges to the peace process. The government has already formed a task team to negotiate with the respective groups. The secretariat has been collecting opinions from all sectors. We are doing content and context analysis of the demands of all the working groups, and are you getting the cooperation you need from all quarters?

What would you say are your most difficult obstacles, and are you getting the cooperation you need from all quarters?

I wouldn’t call them obstacles, they are challenges. The most pressing one before the secretariat is to streamline the activities of the peace process. Peace is such an alluring subject that everyone wants to be involved. As long as it is at the participation level, it is fine with us. However, institutions seem to be interested to take up the job of the secretariat. We are the focal point for the peace process, we don’t want to be squeezed from any side. And we are sorry if we can’t accommodate everyone.

Different government agencies are entrusted with the activities of the peace process at present. There are areas where we have to coordinate and work together. The secretariat is not an institution with a fixed mandate. It is the focal point for the peace process, we don’t want to be squeezed from any side. And we are sorry if we can’t accommodate everyone.

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Listening in on the conversations in the national media, we hear ‘politics’ and ‘New Nepal’ together all the time. What we don’t hear about is ‘imagination’. This is not surprising. We view imagination as something that belongs to poets and artists, and we think of New Nepal as a project best left to our careerist politicians. But what if the New Nepal needed more imagination and less squabbling party politics?

In a New Yorker article about what distinguishes star performers from those who are competently good, writer Malcolm Gladwell reports that it is imagination which makes all the difference. The best eagerly discuss their mistakes without blaming others, and ‘have the ability to rethink everything that they’ve done and imagine how they might have done it differently’.

Those who perform the best in every domain of human endeavour—the arts, research, sports, business, and politics—as very imaginative people. Yes, they are technically competent. But more than that, they are experts at forming clear pictures in their mind about what they want to accomplish, and how they want to go about achieving their goals. It’s the interplay of that kind of imagination that’s sadly lacking in our public conversations about the New Nepal.

Think, for instance, how at a time when urban Nepalis suffer through power blackouts for up to seven hours a day in this water-rich country, and rural Nepalis’ dreams for better lives end in Malaysian chicken processing factories, our politicians continue to make a fool of themselves by parroting the line about turning Nepal into Switzerland.

What our netas never understand is this Nepalis don’t want a second-rate Switzerland or a duplicate Singapore when they can have a first-rate Nepal. Such a Nepal does not require that musical chairs be played by those who want to replace one self-proclaimed godman with their own parties’ deities. But it does require a sense of contagiously shared imagination about transforming Nepal within a generation.

Imagine, then, providing primary education to every girl child in Nepal. The benefits from completing this goal alone far outweigh those from just about any other bikas work.

Imagine creating diverse institutional spaces that give decentralised national, regional, and local political access to any Nepali child of any caste and region in such a way that she can realistically dream of being the nation’s chief executive someday.

Imagine connectivity as the new mantra, making us connect every village with other villages by roads, cable cars, ropeways, phone lines, and the internet.

Imagine letting diverse, transparent, and effective financial intermediaries flourish in such a way that Nepal’s wealth is converted into usable capital not only for electricity, drinking water, highways, healthcare, and improvement of the arts, but also for insurance, so Nepalis’ deaths do not remain cheap, anonymous, and routine.

Imagine measuring the government’s performance by one primary indicator: the number of jobs it creates to keep the youth off the streets and in the workforce.

Imagine Nepal using its location between the world’s two thriving economies to re-commit itself as the venue for tourism, education, and leisure in South Asia.

It’s possible to imagine all this and more and then achieve it in the New Nepal only if we reframe what’s ahead of us as an opportunity to transform 27 million lives in a country where the median age is just 17.
The missing guns?

Madhab Basnet in Dristi, 27 February

There were 30,852 Maoists registered in cantonments but only 3,428 weapons. And even among these, the number of automatic rifles is negligible. The security forces had told UNMIN that the Maoists had 3,430 of their weapons. The Maoists appear to have handed in just that number. In Butwal Prachanda said: “Some were washed away by rivers, others were reduced to ashes.” The whole process as well as repeated Maoist warnings about resuming their revolution if elections can’t be held by June cast doubts about their integrity. The party needs to get to power by hook or by crook. The third P is posterism and they have draped the country in posters. The fourth P is the forthcoming poll, the party needs to get to power by hook or by crook. The Maoists want to win at any cost. Congratulations to the Maoists & Co Pvt Ltd for carrying all costs. Congratulations to the Maoist CEO, it is no less than the CEO of a multinational company.

According to a source, the Maoists have captured a total of 4,514 weapons from the army, armed police and civil police in the ten years of war. From the Nepal Police they got: 2,365 .303 rifles, 322 Magnums, 291 shotguns, 228 Hornet rifles, 319 Chinese pistols, 159 revolvers. From the armed police they captured 240 SLR, 24 LMG, 24 SMG, 4 two-inch mortars, four .303s, nine pistols, and one Chinese pistol. From the Nepal Army, they captured: 303 SLRs, 204 INSAS rifles, 113 LMGs, 15 81-mm mortars, five GPMGs, one Minimi, 590 SMGs, 11 SWL, two M203 grenade launchers, two Coll commandos, five Galil, 16 M-16s, one G-16 rifle, one Chinese sniper rifle, one Indian sniper rifle, and 25 pistols.

Maoist leader Nandakishore Pun says the numbers of registered weapons are low because some of the captured guns were useless, others were re-captured by the army during battles and some were taken away by deserters. Besides these, the Maoists have also bought a large quantity of weapons in the Indian and Chinese markets, including the AK-47s and M209 grenade launchers, 590 SMGs, 11 SLW, two M203 grenade launchers, 590 SMGs, 11 SLW.

Maobadi & Co, Pvt Ltd

Markan Lamichhane in Abhiyan, 26 February

Many of Nepal’s businessmen are engaged in politics. Which is why so many political parties are doing much better than businesses. This is also the reason why Prachanda, Baburam, Mahara, and company have started a political party instead of a business. In a practical sense, the Maoists operate as a business rather than a political party. In fact, it is proven by the lifestyle of some of its leaders. The watch on his wrist and the fountain pen of the Maoist CEO, it is no less than the CEO of a multinational company.

And just like family-run businesses, leaders’ relatives have important positions in the party. The party is run like Prachanda’s private fiefdom where whatever he decides goes. Such is his personality cult that the party’s mission, vision, and goal are all named after Prachanda himself. Posters depicting Prachandapath are plastered all over the country. Like other companies, the Maoists follow the doctrine of the four “P”s. First is profit, in the pursuit of which they have actually sent a lot of people to the Pearly Gates and threatened, intimidated, extorted just about every other business in this country. This ‘aggressive marketing’ technique has borne results.

The second P is power under which the party needs to get to power by hook or by crook. The third P is posterism and they have draped the country in posters. The fourth P is the forthcoming poll, which the Maoists want to win at all costs. Congratulations to the Maoists & Co Pvt Ltd for carrying on with such a splendid business and successful business model.
amendment is a precondition to their joining the interim government. Meanwhile, the Maoists behave unjustly with the agitating Madhesi, janajati, and adibasi groups and still think they can get their way through violence, pressure, and threats. The street protests gain strength from the chaos caused by the interim parliament being unable to solve interim problems, or become a place for discussion, national consensus, and camaraderie. The government has not even considered the genuine and hopeful request from the Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities for a roundtable. Because the interim parliament seems unconcerned about bringing lasting peace, fulfilling the people’s demands, and moving towards the constituent assembly election, Nepalis think street action works better than dialogue and the parliament. An interim legislative parliament is not a traditional assembly, it has to deal with a country in crisis. The Maoists aren’t taking it seriously—theyir leaders are not in the House of Representatives—and unconstitutional forces within the Maoists are continuing with threats and pressure, provoking protestors to take to the streets. The interim parliament must urgently take charge to find a peaceful solution out of this mess.

**Revenue**

Sanghri, 26 February

Recent news from the Tatopani customs office, one of the highest revenue earning ports in Nepal, suggests that millions of rupees have been embezzled there. It is understood that Bishnu Khatri, chairman of Himalayan Border Organisation is involved in misappropriating revenue. Instead of Rs 10 million charged for goods brought into Kathmandu, Khatri turned over only one million rupees to the government. A highly placed source tells us that over Rs 4 million went to important politicians to keep the deal under wraps, and Khatri pocketed the remaining Rs 5 million. Once revenue officers place the seal on goods at the border, the shipment is not allowed to be opened again until it reaches its destination, where it will be unsealed by revenue officers. Khatri is using this provision to misappropriate revenue. If the government had given the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority the power to inspect the goods, such misuse would not have happened. Meanwhile, Khatri, also known for smuggling sandalwood, has abandoned smuggling through the Tatopani border and began using a different route. News has it that he transports lots of sandalwood to a place called ‘10 Kilo’. From there, when the time is right, he employs porters to carry the wood to a small bridge east of Kodari, over which it is smuggled into Tibet. He is said to have bribed custom and police officers, and re-uses the same document to take his goods across the border.

**QUOTE OF THE WEEK**

“...If the forum is really fighting for the right to self-determination, why is it interested in forming an alliance with foreign and royal forces, rather than with the Maoists who are fighting for the same cause?”

Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal in Gorkhapatra, 28 February - 14 March
“Safety first,” says Dilip Kumar Rai, strapping himself securely into a harness and swinging onto a sheer 12m high rockface in the Nagarjun Forest. Dilip inches up slowly, looking like nothing so much as a languid spider. In fact, he’s concentrating intensely, exploring the surface of the rock for suitable footholds and handholds that will be strong enough to take his weight and help him move up. His friend Tej belays him and Dilip edges along, keeping the rope through bolts already screwed into the wall. He’s done this before, and pretty soon he’s at the top of the wall waving down at us.

Rai and his friend Tej Khapangi, like other rock climbing enthusiasts, frequent the sanctuary, which is known for low limestone cliffs that are suited to beginners and experts. The friends are river guides by profession, and climb here and in Pharping for love of the sport, not because it’s their job. “Once you get addicted to climbing, it’s very hard to stop,” grins Rai.

“Rock climbing is just catching on,” says Padam Ghale, a pioneer rock climber in Nepal and a member of the original group that developed the Nagarjun route. Compared to other countries, Kathmandu’s routes may seem, well, puny, but they’re great places to start. “Rock climbing in Kathmandu and Nepal is perfect for beginners,” explains Sunar Gurung, president of the Nepal Mountain Guide Association. “Low grade walls and short route lengths allow newbies to learn and perfect the basics.” Ghale and Gurung have been climbing for almost 25 years, exploring and building climbing routes in and around Kathmandu.

The wall at Nagarjun offers 17-18 climbing routes, with varying levels of difficulty, from 5 to 7A grades. There are easy straightforward climbs, but also...
couple of tricky overhangs that more advanced climbers can have some fun with.

The climbing at Pharping is harder, as the walls are steeper, there are numerous overhangs and larger gaps between the bolts. Sheshnagar nearby offers a 6A+ route, while Hattiban offers six routes at the 6A-6B+ grades. The route at Sheshnagar is not very popular, since most people find it too difficult and a little dangerous.

For young beginners, there is a new artificial indoor wall at the Mountaineer’s Memorial Centre in Kakani. This is certainly different from the genuine outdoors experience—the texture you feel is stone and cement, rather than the gritty, sharp limestone and hand- and footholds protrude out from the wall. The 3-5 grade climbs are also where the National Mountaineering Association offers courses.

You meet a small but diverse group of people at Nagarjun and Pharping—trekkers, mountaineers and extreme sport junkies, as well as diplomats, marines, and security workers. For a relatively safe activity in a mountainous country, there seem to be few Nepali takers.

“People think rock climbing is just for mountain climbers,” says Endra Rai of Kathmandu’s Nodan Club. “Sure, it’s the first step to climbing mountains, but it is a challenging and rewarding activity in and of itself too. It’s a social sport and a great way to promote team building and trust,” he adds. Nodan Club runs personality and professional development courses using extreme sports such as climbing, canyoning, and kayaking as a way of personality development.

If you’re a climber tired of Nagarjun head for Tarebhir on Shivapuri—it’s difficult to reach and offers tougher climbs. Outside the Valley, the nine routes at Bimalnagar in Dumre are also popular, and go from a low grade 10m route for beginners to a much harder 60m route for seasoned climbers. The walls at Chewang in Solu and Thame in Khumbu are usually used by experienced climbers to acclimatise for high altitude expeditions.

Nepal’s spectacular landscape has enormous potential for excellent rock climbing. But ironically, in a country known for, well, mountains and climbers, there is very little support for the sport, either financial or moral.

The Ministry for Education and Sports does not even recognise rock climbing as a sport, says Ngunwang Nima Sherpa, head instructor at the NMA. The association says that while its climbing permit royalties do not generate enough funds to explore new regions and develop routes, it does receive support from overseas. The Yves Pollet Villard Foundation, for example, sponsors instructor upgrade courses and rescue training courses for climbers.

“Rock climbing is like meditation,” says Padam Ghale, “Both my mind and body need to be firmly under control and when I’m finished, I feel relaxed and at peace.”
Thinking that Nepal will fall apart or be colonised is pure hysteria

Among the dire warnings of doom bandied about by those afraid of Nepal’s current ferment is that the nation will “break up” or will be “taken over” by India.

One of the things we know for sure is that Nepal is here to stay. It will be no break up, no shattering into Janajatistan or Madhesis. We can also predict with absolute certainty that India is not going to take over. Ever. It won’t happen.

Let’s consider the break-up canard first. It’s presented as a fear, or a criticism, by those who object to the demands of excluded groups for political autonomy. People in the tarai or Kathmandu Valley or the far west can’t have a province or state with its own regional government because that will lead to the entire nation falling apart into ethnic and geographic units. This is patent nonsense, in defiance of history, geography, and reality. Modern nation-states don’t just disappear or break-up because of internal crises. Yugoslavia never made sense and its tragic demise was hugely mishandled by the international community. Iraq may shatter because of the sectarian madness unleashed by the botched US-led invasion but equally, it may not. The map of Africa is dotted with post-colonial concoctions that make no political or ethnic sense, and are frequently riven by strife and imbalances of power, yet borders are not redrawn and nation-states stagger on.

Czechoslovakia broke into two ethnically-based nations after the collapse of Soviet communism in the final years of the 20th century. But its people always maintained that there was an uneasy union, forced upon them by external forces and never a situation worth defending against aggression or foreign pressure.

Nepal is not some fragile ornament left to a squabbling family by a departing colonial power. It is a nation that has existed for nearly three centuries—as long as or longer than many of the world’s leading countries today.

Devolution of power and federalism is far more likely to strengthen the bonds of nationhood. Federal units like states or provinces provide stability by giving people the means to address local grievances quickly through the ballot box and regional political process. Political talent is developed by the need to balance local demands and build consensus on complex issues. States compete with each other for investment, inward migration and attention from the national capital.

There are always challenges and grievances that never disappear. In fact, they multiply when the system opens up and provides opportunities for redressal. That’s the business of politics: governing and balancing. It’s about more than power and ideology—governing and balancing. It’s about more than power and ideology.

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Meeting a small-time revolutionary in a small town hotel

Jhalak Singh, real name Nagendra Paswan, proves that you do not have to climb very high to become a powerful dalit in Nepal. In this case, the head of the most violent—but not the most important or largest—faction of the JTMM.

Recently we met Paswan in a bare hotel room off a muddy street in small-town Bihar, where everything he and his two companions had could fit into a small holdall. Out of consideration for his guests he left the room to smoke, though he had no compunction about spitting in the corner. He invited us to join him under blankets on the bed, and passed around an old studio shot of himself, declining to be photographed as he currently appears.

Talking to Paswan is strikingly similar to speaking with a district level Maoist leader—allbeit an especially friendly one—during the conflict. He reeled off the short list of killings and attacks he has committed with apparent indifference.

Paswan started out as a journalist, mainly for leftist publications. For a while he ran his own newspaper, and was vice-president of the Siraha commission with apparent indifference.

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he narrow gullies are dark brown mud and chilly even on hot afternoons, with all sunlight blocked out by the tall, narrow houses squashed together on either side.

The side paths lead to small chowks enclosed by new and old buildings, some four storeys tall, stuck close together. The bul kale open onto serpentine alleys, barely broad enough for two people to walk side by side. Sunlight, fresh air, and open spaces are rarities.

So is safety. These houses in Putan’s Naag Bahal were not around during the 1934 Nepal-Bihar earthquake, but few if any escaped the 1989 earthquake unaffected. But disaster management specialists continue to warn, as they have done for some years that when the Big One strikes, as it surely will some time soon, areas like Naag Bahal will be unable to effectively rescue and fire-fighting in them will be difficult, and disease will spread unchecked.

We worry that more lives will be lost because people are buried under the debris,” says Niyam Maharan of Lalitpur’s Earthquake Safety Section.

Lalitpur district lives insist on minimum standards as laid out in the 1998 Building Code, but Kathmandu does not. For older buildings, earthquake retrofitting, as offered by the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET), is a good idea.

New retrofitting technology offers two economical solutions for masonry buildings: splint and bandage, and PP band retrofitting. In the first, which is advised for buildings taller than two storeys, vertical and horizontal steel bar mesh are affixed to the exterior so the corners, wall and ceiling, floor and ceiling stay together—like with a splint and bandage.

PP band is the security tape used to seal luggage at airports. For retrofitting, the tape is woven into a net and affixed to both sides of walls. The two layers are tied together through holes drilled into the wall, and the walls are then plastered. NSET has used the splint and bandage method, which costs over 20 percent of the building cost of a structure, to strengthen schools here. The newer PP tape technology, successfully retrofitted in earthquake areas of Pakistan, is much cheaper—a single-level house can be retrofitted for about Rs 2,000, says Ramesh Guragain of NSET.

The Institute of Engineering’s Centre for Disaster Studies recently developed a similar technology for use in rural Nepali homes. A grid of holes is punched into walls which are then coated with bamboo mesh on both sides. The net is secured to the wall using galvanized wire which is passed through the holes twice and fastened tightly. The mesh is then plastered with mud to ensure a longer lifespan.

“We wanted to develop a technology strong enough to withstand at least that first blow of the earthquake, and give people enough time to leave their houses and find a safe spot,” says Jhia Raj Pokhrel, who studies the technology and has launched pilot projects in five districts. It’s a good solution, he says, because the only direct cost is for the wire, since bamboo and mud are available locally. The gabion wire is already distributed to villagers during the monsoon in areas prone to flash floods.

But though people in Kathmandu are considerably more aware about the dangers of earthquakes now than they were a few years ago, most still do not earthquake-proof their homes. One reason is cost—larger urban houses are expensive to retrofit.

“There’s no incentive either for people to proof their homes,” says Guragain. He suggests tax breaks or subsidies to owners interested in retrofitting their buildings.

After the 1989 quake, state efforts expanded beyond merely commemorating the victims of the 15 January 1934 trembler, says Armit Man Tuladhar of Department of Urban Development and Building Construction. Now, he says, the focus is shifting again because the department is, together with municipalities, training architects and mid-level technical staffs and masons all over Nepal in earthquake-proofing. Government offices are also being fixed up. The Lalitpur Municipality is working on a disaster preparedness plan and has identified evacuation sites all over the area.

“We’re perhaps the only country in South Asia developing and developing precautionary measures before the big quake happens,” says Guragain. “But, planning is not enough—the government needs to start implementing the recommendations.”

chapter of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists for six years. Paswan then had a stint with the Maoists, splitting from the Goit group in 2004 over the appointment of Matrika Yadav as head of the Maoist-affiliated Tarai Manch. Paswan soon parted ways with Goit who, he says, “was already 80, always sick, he couldn’t make any liberation of the tarai.”

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T is in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador a new left is thought to be coming into being. Their presidents call it “21st century socialism”, but it seems to be replicating the self-destructive policies that have brought such agony to Cuba.

**Analysis**

Roberto Laserna

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, Bolivian Evo Morales, and Ecuadorian Rafael Correa came to power through the ballot box. Once in power, they have appealed to the masses and called for constitutional reforms to enlarge their powers.

Chávez has strengthened his political position through a constituent assembly that changed the constitution. Morales has managed to impose a similar assembly, though with uncertain results, and Correa is wielding the threat of constitutional change against “the traditional parties, the native oligarchies, and the empire”—the common enemies of all three presidents.

The CA approach has so far proven very effective in helping these new caudillos (strongmen) consolidate their power. Because the process calls for total reform, it helps them avoid debates about specific changes. Instead, social change is muddled with institutional reforms in ways incomprehensible to voters. For example, Chávez’s and Morales’ assemblies are attractive not only to Venezuela’s or Bolivia’s radical groups that want to re-form their republics and re-invent history, but also to those who want a forum for democratic deliberation. But as they deliberate, more and more power is concentrated in the new caudillos.

The process frustrates both radical and democratic forces. The radicals soon discover that changing norms is not enough to change reality, while the democrats find that heightened social mobilisation makes dialogue impossible. Most find that when the assembly gets to deal with specifics, its actions are determined by which new proposals are disagreeable.

The establishment of a constituent assembly upsets all other institutions. Since the focus is on the “law of laws,” the assembly implicitly questions the status of all public norms and bodies, thus eroding the political system. It strengthens the presidency, enabling the incumbent’s transformation into a caudillo.

Those who promote the concentration of power find justification for their acts in the revolutionary need to change structures, liberate the nation, and overcome poverty. But when this concentrated power begins to take action, the confusions of the left come back to life.

The most flagrant conflates state and nation. Transferring resources to the state is seen as putting them in the hands of the nation. Thus, Venezuelans and Bolivians enthusiastically support the rebirth of state companies, with few state companies ever realizing themselves of bureaucratic inefficiency or corruption.

Another, perhaps more dangerous, confusion conflates “the people” with the so-called “masses or social movements.” The logic of such mobilisation is that resources are directed to the groups that shout the loudest and call for the most conflict. Attention is thus diverted from the weakest and those most in need to those already are well-off enough to be organised. Often it is the state itself, controlled by a powerful president, which mobilises these groups, aided by the concentration of control over the organs in the strongman’s hands which comes from greater state intervention in the economy.

The fight to control oil and gas revenues is particularly intense. The hope of increased investment of Venezuela’s export earnings comes from these sectors, which provide about half of government revenue. In Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia, income from oil and gas is more modest, but still account for the largest share of total exports and provide about one-third of government revenue.

This concentration of revenues radically changes the relationship between society and the state. The government’s financial situation does not depend on the economic fate of companies or workers. On the contrary, companies and workers depend on public services and the subsidies that the government provides with oil and gas revenues.

When social organisations are limited and weak, as in Venezuela, the establishment of a constituent assembly has concentrated political power perpetuates itself by reducing huge parts of the economy to dependant clients. When social organisations are strong, conflict arises to control public resources. In both cases, independent institutions are perceived as enemies, which the caudillos and their client corporate groups seek to destroy.

**Project Syndicate**

Roberto Laserna is a social science researcher at CERES and Fundacín Milenio, Cochabamba, Bolivia.

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**No alternative**

Energy independence is a dangerous fantasy

An energy crisis in this case is almost certain if those pushing for energy independence fail to provide a timely, workable alternative. But these efforts are not market-driven and require heavy subsidies, which mean they will almost surely not replace oil anytime soon.

Confronted by politicians’ hostile rhetoric, oil producers have a strong incentive to increase production to lower oil prices to levels which undermine the economic feasibility of alternative energy sources. A collapse in oil prices would be a death sentence for new energy technologies, and would increase demand for oil.

Even if producing countries do not intentionally bring about an oil price collapse, they might accelerate production in the short term, while oil still has some value. But lower oil prices, coupled with expectations of a decline in demand, would put pressure on oil-producing countries to re-plan investments in production capacity or even postpone major projects, as they have done in the past, leading to a decline in oil supplies.

If alternative energy technologies did not come on-line by the time oil production started to fall, global shortages would be inevitable, and closing the investment deficit would take years, even in the face of rising oil prices.

Despite these possibilities, let’s assume that plans for energy independence succeed, and that several European countries, the United States, Japan, China, and India become self-sufficient. Major oil exporters could then use their new lower-valued oil at home as cheap fuel for an expanded heavy industrial sector. Instead of exporting oil directly, they could export their energy embedded in metals, chemicals, and manufactured products at prices that undercut anything producers in the oil-consuming countries, especially Europe and the US, could match, given their dependence on higher-cost alternative energy sources.

Energy independence could destroy entire industries, especially petrochemicals, aluminium, and steel. Cheap energy in oil-producing countries might make their new industries competitive with those in China, India, and Southeast Asia. The net result would be a loss of jobs and weakened economies. Countries might end up energy-independent, only to become steel-dependent or petrochemical-dependent.

Oil is a finite resource. Only long-term, market-oriented, economically sound and sustainable energy options can ensure economic growth in both producing and consuming countries. Isolationalist policies always lead to shortages and discontent. **Project Syndicate**

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Gavin Longmuir is a petroleum engineer with the International Petroleum Consultants Association.

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**INTERNATIONAL**

Two leftist governments show that a constituent assembly can be a bad idea

Dissembling
In the early morning hours of 4 March, the Full Moon will be eclipsed by the Earth’s shadow for about four hours. The event starts at 01:14:52, when the Moon moves into the Earth’s shadow (umbra). The Moon will enter completely into the deep darkness of the umbra at 04:28:37 and take more than an hour to pass through this shadow until the northeast part of the Moon begins to emerge at 05:42:49. The time of greatest eclipse will occur at 05:05:44. In Nepal, though, we’ll have to watch the eclipse at 05:05:44. The event will be visible at 05:22:03, the maximum eclipse will be at 07:22:03, and the Sun will set before sunrise.

Other highlights for March:
The Sun is in the constellation of Aquarius at the start of March, moving into Pisces on 12 March. The Spring Equinox falls on 21 March, when the Sun will cross the celestial equator from south to north at 05:52, making the day equal to the night in the northern hemisphere. This event signals the start of spring in the Northern Hemisphere, and is also called the Spring (or Vernal) Equinox.

Mercury is at its greatest elongation westwards from the Sun on 22 March which means that, in principle, it should be visible in the east before dawn. However, as it comes up just half-an-hour before the Sun, we’re unlikely to see this elusive little planet this month.

Venus is a brilliant Evening Star, visible in the west after sunset every day. It doesn’t set until three or four hours after sunset, by which time the sky is quite dark. Venus is more likely to be mistaken for an airplane, or a UFO.

Mars is still low in the south-eastern sky at dawn, and difficult to see, because it rises only an hour before the Sun.

Jupiter, in Ophiuchus, rises in the south-east about 3AM. By the end of the month, it will be coming up before 01:30 and by dawn almost due south, though still not very high in the sky.

Saturn, in Leo, is the planet best placed for viewing in the evening sky this month, high in the south-east at dusk and setting after sunrise.

The Viridian shower is usually active during March and April, and you may see some meteors they appear to radiate outwards from the constellation of Virgo.
**EXHIBITIONS**
- Ek Raaat: an exhibition of paintings based on BP Koirala’s short story, at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited, until 11 March. 11AM-6PM. 4218040

**EVENTS**
- Laxmipati Holi Festival: holi celebration and food festival at the Scouting Ground, Laxmipati, on 3 March.
- *Viva Chaatar! Shringhala on Fujii Purnima*: 3 March, 3-5PM at Martin Chautari. 4107599
- Cellarby: how to practice it talk program, 5 March, 1PM at Mind Body Library, Triptureswar. 4279712
- Mangalbarie Discussion Series: on the portrayal of women in Nepali drama, 3PM at Martin Chautari. 4288050
- The art of loving lecture series, 2:30 PM on 5-6 March at Mind Body Library, Triptureswar. 4571212
- Building a Bridge over the Cultural Gap: CSGN monthly lecture on 2 March, 9.30 AM at the Shanker Hotel.
- Civic Concerns: an effort to assess youth concerns and share views and ideas, 10 March, 10.30 AM-5.30 PM at PIC, Heritage Plaza. Rs 100 for registration. 4107599
- Toastmasters communication and leadership program, every Wednesday 6PM at the Institute of Environmental Management, Triptureswar.

**MUSIC**
- Inner Groove live at Moksh, 2 March at 8PM. 4551021
- Holi Gazal Night at Jatra Café and Bar, 3 March, 6:30-9:30 PM. 4451041
- Yala Maya Classic: classical music series at Yala Maya Kendra, Panauti Dhopa. 5PM onwards on the second of every Nepali month. Rs 100 entrance. 5532703
- Live Music: by Giney Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Gurung every Friday. 7PM onwards at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayaniti Complex. 5523480
- Fusion and classical Nepali music by Rudra live at the Courtyard, Le Meridien, Gokarna every Friday. 7-9PM onwards. Rs 800. 4451012
- Open Mic Night at Va’Va Café, Thamel every Friday, 8PM.
- Gaine (Gandarbhas) perform at every lunch and dinner, Club Himalaya Nagarkot. 6608800

**DINING**
- Walk and lunch every Saturday until 31 March at the Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841371927
- Delightful weekend special with terkua, bara, and barbari, every Friday at Ambassador Garden House, Laxmipati. 5.30 PM onwards. 4411706
- Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate cordon bleu meals at La SoNo, Pulchok, behind the Egyptian embassy. 5537166
- Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kilroy’s, Thamel. 4250440.
- Shop Talk and Dine at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Radisson Hotel. 4412988
- Cafe Bahal at Kathmandu Guest House. 4706032.
- Smorgasbord lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4375280
- Gyakok lunch and dinner at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La. minimum of four guests at Rs 450 per person, two hours order in advance.
- Retro brunch barbecue with the Crossfire Band at The Poolside, Le Meridien, Gokarna from 12 noon-4PM. Rs 1,000 inclusive of swimming and complimentary drink. 4479488
- International brunch weekends: 11AM-3PM for Rs 499 per person (Rs 299 for children) at Hotel Himalaya. 5523900
- Te Tibetan delicacies at Nepal’s first noodle bar, Bluebird Mall Food Court.
- Calcutta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- Japanese Food at the Coffee Shop at Hotel Shangri’ra, 12-3PM. Rs 499 per person. 4412999
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4425259.
- Some Like It Hot: live music from Side B every Friday at Fusion—the bar at Dwarika’s. Rs 799 includes BBQ dinner. 4479488
- Soul Warmers Inner Groove live at Fusion—the bar at Dwarika’s. Rs 599 includes a Fusion platter and cocktail. 4479488
- Woodfired Pizzas at Roadhouse Café, Thamel. 4262768, Bhaktapur 4425587 and Pulchok. 5532175
- Cocktails and Mocktails: Daily happy hour, 4-7PM at Kathmandu Revolving Restaurant, Ratna Plaza, New Road

**GETAWAYS**
- Weekend package at Le Meridien Kathmandu Gokarna Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,888 and one night two days at Rs 4,444. 4451212
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FLAG-WAVING: Flags of SAARC member states at the Soaltee Crowne Plaza where trade ministers met on Monday to discuss the South Asian Free Trade Area. The meeting was deadlocked because of differences between India and Pakistan.

TWO WHEELS BAD: Activists of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities stopped even bicycles from plying on the roads and vandalised cars to enforce their strike call on Wednesday. Diplomatic and tourist vehicles were allowed to ply. They later claimed the shutdown was “successful”.

ONE NIGHT: The theatre group Sarvanam performed BP Koirala’s short story Ek Raa at the BICC on Friday. the play was directed by Ashesh Malla and was supported by the BP Koiral India-Nepal Foundation.

YOUTH POWER: Members of the Maoist Communist Youth League remove buses that were used to block the road in Kopundole on Tuesday to protest the beating up of a driver. The Maoists also attacked bus drivers with khukuris, wounding two, and damaged dozens of vehicles for daring to protest.

A star turn

P awankali’s story is pretty typical. A young woman from a village in west Nepal fails class nine and decides to make a future for herself in Kathmandu. In the city, she still wears chaubandi cholo and fariya and likes to chat with guests.

And this is where her story gets un-typical. This sassy, brassy woman interviews people from all walks of life and in her forthright manner asks them whatever she feels like. Politicians squirm and pop stars break out into a sweat on Pawankali’s show, and audiences split their sides laughing, both because she researches her guests thoroughly and asks sharply funny questions, and because she says what is on everyone’s mind.

Pawankali has an amusing riff on the ‘village bumpkin’ stereotype: she speaks in a rural accent and exaggerates her rustic personality. She uses this lack of affectation to expose people’s hypocrisies, often by intentionally misunderstanding their responses. A memorable episode was when she waylaid Pushpa Kamal Dahal at an early public appearance last November, made him blush a she openly flirted with him.

If Pawankali looks different today than she did then, that’s because the character is in her third incarnation. Played by Loonibha Tuladhar (‘Hen-pecked,’ #252), Tara Kandel and now Mampi Ghosh, the fictional character is always supposed to be as much a star as her interviewees. Soon after it went on air last year, the show shot up into Kantipur Television’s top ten. “We wanted a show that would depict a certain kind of Nepali culture. Pawankali’s also the answer to all those who believe mistakenly that TV hosts have to be glamorous, show some skin, and wear modern clothes,” says Ghosh.

That’s not to say television hasn’t changed her, though. Since she moved to Kathmandu, Pawankali’s world and dreams have become bigger. She talks about going to the salon and complains about living in an old house.

Those who tune in to the show every Sunday at 7:30 PM for the celebrity factor needn’t worry, though: Pawankali still wants to chat with GPL, MKN, PKD, and maybe even KPB.

“Pawankali can ask you anything, and you have to be like Pawankali to talk to her,” says Pradeep Kasal, producer of the show. “She is direct and bold, yet there is a kind of innocence about her, which makes the show special.” ● Mallika Aryal

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CHEENI HOINA, DABUR HONEY, HEALTHY CHA. TASTY CHA.
While we in Nepal are trying to figure out what to do with the one king we have, we hear that in the Happy Kingdom of Bhutan there are now two kings. Until his abdication takes effect Jigme the Glad is known as the ‘Fourth King’ and his son, Jigme Jr, is known as the ‘Fifth King’. So if you are ever in Thimpu don’t just say ‘His Majesty’, specify fourth or fifth. Much simpler here in Nepal, we simply call ours the ‘The Last King’. 

Even the proposal to skip Paras (he’s just bought himself a Great Dane to keep him company) and go straight to Hridayendra is now unlikely to save our monarchy. Bringing back Birendra’s bloodline with its only remaining member would do the trick, but will three generations of go-getting incumbents at Narayanhiti allow that to happen? Likely not.

Who needs royalty when we will soon have a Comrade President for our Federal Democratic Republic of Utopia? It’s getting to be a race against time for the Maobaddies to get themselves into an interim government and have Ram Bahadur Thapa in place as deputy prime minister before the old man kicks it. Otherwise all their carefully laid out plans will go awry.

His Awfulness bad mouthed the media and did some damage control in the tarai this week, but his hard work was undone by his own cadre who roughed up a few Madhesis. In Kopundole micro-bus drivers audacious enough to protest Maoist high-handedness were slashed with khukuris and hospitalised. Most Nepalis know the leopard hasn’t changed his spots and not all the guns are in the containers.

But the Maoists know we know that they know the UN knows that there are quite a few PLA with their SLRs and INSASs missing. When the Nepali language press grilled UNMIN about it, including how many of the registered guerrillas were women, Ian Sah’b said they weren’t ‘verified’ yet. You mean you don’t know if they’re boys or girls?

So when Prachandaji says that some of the guns were ‘washed away by the river and others were reduced to ashes in a fire’ the media went ‘yeah, sure’. Everyone is playing along with the charade, however. That is the price of peace. Contrary to reports the Maoists were buying ‘crummy’ guns in Darbhanga, it seems some were caught on candid camera selling off some of the 5.56 caliber rifles for which they have no ammo.

Comrades on a recent junket to Switzerland to learn about federalism told their hosts in Interlaken: ‘This is what a Marxist utopia will look like.’ Yup, a worker’s paradise, and the Swiss cantonments didn’t even need communism to build it.

Trust the Kathmandu-based donor community to keep tabs on all the Bunds and Chukker Jams. We Nepalis would be completely in the dark about all the overlapping hartals if it wasn’t for this careful tabulation circulated by the UN:

- The Madhesi Mukti Morcha’s transport strike and customs blockade till 5 March and an indefinite tarai bund after 6 March
- Three-day tarai bund called by the JTMG-Goi
- JTM-Jwala’s protest rallies to culminate in a khukuri rally on 7 March
- Superimposed on these were NEFIN’s own hartals on 22, 24, 26 February in various parts of the country climaxing with the country-wide bund on Wednesday
- Coincidentally the Maoist Tamang Autonomous Democratic Front was also blocking the entry points to the Valley on Tuesday
- And, oh yes, the hitherto Chure and Bhabar Ekata Samaj shut down Sindhuli, Sarlahi and Makwanpur on the same days
- Not to be outdone, the Maoist trade union announced a three-day bund in eastern Nepal on top of all the other bunds

And we haven’t even heard from the dalits, women and Karnail yet. Stay tuned for next week’s Loktantrik Bund Update. Same time same station.

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**The Republic of Utopia**

While we in Nepal are trying to figure out what to do with the one king we have, we hear that in the Happy Kingdom of Bhutan there are now two kings. Until his abdication takes effect Jigme the Glad is known as the ‘Fourth King’ and his son, Jigme Jr, is known as the ‘Fifth King’. So if you are ever in Thimpu don’t just say ‘His Majesty’, specify fourth or fifth. Much simpler here in Nepal, we simply call ours the ‘The Last King’.

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