Nepal’s monarchy was separated from its political and military links in the past year, now its cultural ties to Nepal’s festivals and rituals are also being taken away.

In his budget presented to parliament on Thursday afternoon, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat axed the salaries the king, queen, crown prince, and princess used to get from the state coffers, saving the tax payers Rs 40 million a year. Some of these savings will go towards the elections, for which the budget has set aside Rs 6 billion.

Snapping the monarchy’s ties to tradition seems to be indirectly affecting the Kumari custom. In one week, Nepal’s living goddess tradition was broken twice. The Patan goddess, 13-year-old Chanira Bajracharya, had to bless the prime minister instead of the king at Bhoto Jatra in Jawalakhel on Sunday. Not everyone in Patan was happy—even if the king couldn’t come they thought it inappropriate that a bahun prime minister should take over the monarch’s ceremonial function.

Also last week, ten-year-old Sajani Shakya, the Bhaktapur Kumari, was fired from her job for travelling ‘across the black waters’ to the United States to release her documentary, Living Goddess. Sajani’s parents say the Taleju priests knew of her trip in advance and did not object. Guthi Sansthan member Jaya Prasad Regmi says the trust is dismissing Sajani “following the wishes of devotees”. Sajani is now in India with a companion waiting for the fuss to die down. Her mother Rukmani insists that the family has not been officially informed about the Kumari’s dismissal.

Kiran Panday
FOUR MONTHS TO GO

It’s not by chance that the budget presented to parliament on Thursday is being received with a big national yawn. The people have concluded that in the past 100 years this government has delivered little, and is unlikely to do so in the next 100. Only good sign was money set aside for elections in four months.

The Maoists have argued that enacting the monarchy will solve everything. Wish it was that simple.

Declaring Nepal a republic is not going to remove the risk of anarchy, separatism, and ethnic fragmentation. Even janajati and madhesi activists demanding full proportional representation in the June polls now sound like moderates compared to a new breed of ultra-radicals who see the end of the Nepali monarchy as an opportunity to scrap all treaties their territories or ethnicities negotiated with Prithivi Narayan Shah.

The current uncertainty is bringing out the most dangerous bigotry and fanaticism in Nepal. Such extremism and intolerance will jeopardise not just the peace process but undermine this nation’s reason for being. Elections are the only antidote to this insecure interregnum.

We shouldn’t be asking whether the constituent assembly elections can be held on 21 May, but what we can collectively do to ensure that it does. For Nepals the polls are synonymous with peace. Scrapping the polls or postponing it once again will create socio-political turbulence that could spiral out of control.

If only the political players in the fray looked beyond immediate tactical gains to the larger national interest, they could easily create the conditions for elections four times a year.

Even if the security situation doesn’t improve, elections can still be held in 80 percent of the country. Most jainajati and madhesi activists are now committed not to let their demands for a fully proportional representation be the reason for delayed elections. That leaves the tara armed groups and young communists, both of which can be brought in line if the 7+1 parties show a unity of purpose. The anarchy in the eastern tarai is due more to the absence of the state than the political parties and the political forces than the criminalisation of political factions there.

At the moment, the UML is most enthusiastic about polls because it rates its chances as high. The Maoists are damned if they do and damned if they don’t, but the longer this uncertainty drags on the worse it is for them. The NC is losing ground and is least keen, so it is dragging on the worse it is for them. The NC is least keen, so it is

The royal family has seriously undermined the king’s role at the Bhoto Jatra festival Koirala has been reduced to the ceremonial monarch amidst a rising tide of republicanism. The king has been reduced to a constitutional monarch and the state is no longer a ceremonial state, but a modern institution asserting to portray its association with tradition.

Nepal’s monarchy is in animated suspension, its fate to be decided by an elected constituent assembly. The prime minister is now head of state and head of government. Under normal circumstances, he should have been elected, but this prime minister emerged from a mass movement. Even so, prime ministers should have fixed term, and their rule must be mandated through periodic elections. It is not a hereditary office, nor is it associated with tradition. It is an instrument of state that serves the people’s aspirations to a better life.

In mature democracies with constitutional monarchies such as in Europe, the line between tradition and the links they have forged with establishment are blurred.

It needs a courageous leader to solve everything. Wish it was that simple.
MONARCHIES

In the Guest Column ‘2007 to 2007’ (#356), the text made reference to the top nine UNDP HDI ranked countries (and the 20 on the HDI scores, but the accompanying table was shortened to 15 countries due to space limits. Since the selective shorter list may have confused readers, below is the full list of the top 20 HDI ranked countries. Nine of these 20 are independent monarchies (M); and three more are Commonwealth Realm constitutional monarchies (CR). The other eight are republics.

Top 20 HDI Ranked countries in order: Norway (M), Iceland, Australia (CR), Ireland, Sweden (M), Canada (CR), Japan (M), United States, Switzerland (M), Finland, Luxembourg (M), Belgium (M), Austria, Denmark (M), France, Italy, United Kingdom (M), Spain (M), New Zealand (CR), Another European monarchy, Lichtenstein would also feature in the Top 20 list, but UNDP does not compute HDI scores for Lichtenstein and Monaco. In addition to these nine monarchies in the top 20 list (and Lichtenstein and Monaco), there are only 18 other clearly recognised independent monarchies. That list, with their HDI rank in 2006 in brackets, is: Brunei (33) Qatar (40) UAE (41) Bahrain (43) Kuwait (44) Tonga (54) Malaysia (61) Oman (71) Thailand (73) Samoa (74) Saudi Arabia (77) Jordan (83) Monaco (124) Cambodia (133) Bhutan (134) Nepal (136) Swaziland (142) Lesotho (149). Putting the two lists together, it is evident that the facts clearly are that monarchies are over-represented in the top 20 (and also absent from the bottom 20 list). Conclusion: there clearly are no economic developments gains to the general public from abolishing an existing monarchy. So it is only private gains to specific political players that is making monarchy or republics the unnecessary local point of the CA agenda?

Prem J Thapa, Australia

REFUGEES

Your editorial ‘Chance of a lifetime’ (#356) is a surprising turn about the stand your prestigious media house has long taken on the Bhutan refugee issue. How can you say that third-country resettlement is a chance for refugees to rebuild their lives? It is ruthless to assume poor people are ready to be the servants of rich people. Nepalis have no money. Had you ever been a refugee, you would know this. The Nepalis of Nepal may be treating their nationality, but Bhutan Nepalis are hungry for our nationality and identity, not money. Don’t tell us what to do. I feel that going west is the start of a new life, you go abroad. Nepalis, the original inhabitants of the Himalaya, are being removed from their land through Indian-designed plans, and we ourselves are encouraging it. Not just the Nepali government, but renowned journalists have surrendered to a mini-tyrant like Jigmee Singye. Shame.

Kajal Malabung, Biratnagar

● The people living in the refugee camps in Nepal claiming to be Bhutanis should take the chance offered by Western countries. We know that thousands of people from Nepal have already emigrated to western countries in the name of Bhutan. People in the camps should decide for a better future rather than listening to a few self-representatives who don’t care for their suffering. I say take the chance for a better future. Opportunity only strikes once. Then there are more than 2 million ethnic Nepalis in Nepal and around—no scarcity of the Himalayan regions.

Gangtergi, email

GO ELECTRIC

While it is great news that the government is taking huge steps in hydropower development (‘White gold’ #356), it would also be great if the government opened its eyes on the very important issue of the import of electric vehicles. Like the Japanese government, the Nepali government has to relax its taxing system, or even make EVs tax-free (as in the case of Safa temps). It will be seven years before the first of the hydro projects will be completed. The government has to look at the future demand for electricity once EVs can be imported easily. In the long term, the money it loses by relaxing taxation can be made up by the increased demand for electricity. A major benefit will be a cleaner environment.

E Avani, email

● The government should increase the price of petroleum to lower use, and decrease the price of electricity and electric goods. One big advantage is that we wouldn’t have to beg other countries for power. The next plus is that electricity is pollution-free. The list goes on as the government is doing just opposite—it subsidises petrol and makes electricity expensive. It takes electric cars higher than regular ones. It banned electric bikes and doesn’t assist Safa tempo and trolley buses.

Saurav Sharma, email

UNREPENTANT

CK Lal sounds like another angry madhe (‘The unrepentant state’, State of the State, #356). I consider him an analyst above region, caste, and similar prejudices, and his angry outbursts do no good to his credibility as a political analyst.

That said, I fully agree that the Maoists are to be blamed for the confrontationist attitudes in the talari. It is also true that the political parties never seriously discussed this issue in the past and do not seem to have started new either. One reason is that in the past nobody talking sensibly about the talari and madness was branded a RAW agent. Unfortunately, that political trap of the panchayal era was never shaken off. This tendency is widespread among the political cadre as well as civil society. Unless it is shaken off, there can be no meaningful discussion of the problems, leave alone solutions.

KK, USA

RIDE

By declining the invitation to the king’s birthday party, Nepal’s diplomatic corps have clearly made a political statement and their blash and wayward behaviour is undiplomatic and deplorable.

SK Aryal, email

I was surprised by the results of your last poll on rudeness among the diplomats. I think the only real option was ‘Who cares’. Really, who cares. The country is in such a distressing state, we should focus on getting it back on track.

N Ghale, email

The Bhatkpur Kumari has been stripped of her ‘title’ after she visited the US to promote a documentary because she is now considered impure. Those to whom the Kumari tradition should be respected.

FILM REVIEW

Dwai KC is a film critic par excellence (‘World within world’, Critical cinema, #356). Where did you find him?!

Sashin Joshi, Kathmandu

Dwai KC is an excellent addition to your generally witty paper. He expands amusingly on the cattiness in the ‘Happenings’ captions. Your History for winners caption (Happenings, #356) was great—lots of information that I didn’t know. Glad you balanced it out with the rude reference to wire instruments, though, or it might have come off as know-it-all.

Thomas R, email

CLARIFICATION

Reg ‘Taxing business’ (Strictly Business, Ashutosh Tiwari, #356): The government aims to collect Rs 85.5 billion in the current fiscal year. Experts say that the amount could be increased by an additional Rs 25 billion to about Rs 110 billion by introducing general reform measures. The most recent three-member Tax Settlement Commission added Rs 3 billion to the government’s coffers by assessing the tax obligations of about 2,000 out of tens of thousands of taxpayers in nine months.

LETTERS

Nepali Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms are accepted, we provide our readers with their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with letter to the editor in the subject line.

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Poll-itical solution
For a credible election, the government must fix the tarai’s security mess

JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

The political agitation in the tarai is being overtaken by criminal elements. The government is floundering on negotiable issues, missing chances to talk, and can’t keep up with the fluid situation. This is a serious bottleneck on the road to elections.

Most of the twelve armed groups identified by the Home Ministry are operating in the tarai’s highway belt, frequently crippling Nepal’s economic artery. Insec records 76 conflict-related deaths in tarai since January. The East-West highway is regularly shut down—in the three weeks from 15 June-5 July, some parts of the eastern tarai were closed for up to 18 days. The six serial bomb blasts that rocked Birganj last week weren’t a surprise.

The situation will only change if political progress is made. Madhesi groups are willing to talk, and it is a positive sign that the announcement of an electoral system giving madhesis 31 percent representation in the CA was not met with a public outcry from any side. But madhesis, like other underrepresented groups, were not consulted during the drafting of the law, and want to be assured it will work. They also see the law as a starting point for talks on institutional, and not just electoral, reforms.

The government, particularly the Home and Peace and Reconstruction ministries, are treating the situation largely as a problem of law and order. Home Minister Sitaula is sending out the APF to deal with groups that, even if they are armed, have a political core. Ram Chandra Poudel invites the armed groups in the tarai to the table through television interviews, but sources close to some of the groups, including JTMM-Goit, say these offers are never followed up-off screen. A recent attempt at behind-the-scenes negotiations with the JTMM-Jwala failed because the government talks team refused to provide safe passage to the talks to Singh and his team, who are under threat from the Maoists, or waive the murder charges against Singh.

Every new or splinter group, such as the Bisbot faction of the JTMM and the Tari Cubone, is taking a hardline position on autonomy and threatening secession. Moderate madhesis see this position as a bargaining chip. “The secessionist talk by the armed groups is an articulation of pent-up frustration about continuing discrimination. But the gist of madhesi demand is: treat us like Nepalis, we don’t want to be Indians, or anything else,” says Vijay Kant Karra, a political analyst and activist with Jaghrit Nepal. He is convinced that even the radical groups will sit down to talk if they feel the government is honest about righting the wrongs.

The government has been conducting stop-and-go negotiations with the MJF on proportional representation and a federal set-up with the right to self-determination, but these have hit a roadblock, says Sarita Poudel, of the Human Rights and Peace Society. Dahal and his team recently returned from a 20-district assessment tour.

The election has to be credible. “The idea has not taken off. The government looks set to push ahead with election preparations, whether or not all of the tarai is on board. The home and peace ministries can’t keep up with the changing situation on the ground. The Forum has weakened in recent months, and analysts say talks will only be productive if all groups, armed or not, are engaged with. Madhesi analysts concede that the lack of a unified front and credible leadership is a problem, as is the inability of the moderate to fill the vacuum created by the ebbing political bases of the main parties, including the Maoists and the MJF. There is no critical player in the tarai and that the situation could tip in any direction, says a researcher. Most madhesi factions, including the armed groups, met in Patna last month to build an alliance. So far, the idea has not taken off.

The government looks set to push ahead with election preparations, whether or not all of the tarai is on board.

The government is overstretched.

The government, particularly the Home and Peace and Reconstruction ministries, are treating the situation largely as a problem of law and order.
Everest Bank’s 21st branch started in Birtamod, making Everest the private commercial bank with the largest branch network in Nepal. The bank also plans to start using the financing software Fincare in February 2008 and will offer travelling banking to customers from Sanischare to Kakarvitta serving them from vehicles. EBL has tie-ups with Punjab National Bank and the SCT Network. Its debit card works at all ATMs of the SCT network, over 500 merchant outlets in Nepal, and over 1,000 PNB bank machines across India.

Wipro gets Unza

Wipro Consumer Care and Lighting has acquired 100 percent ownership of Unza Holdings, a Singapore-based fast moving consumer goods company for $246 million. The transaction is expected to be closed by this month. Unza is South Asia’s largest manufacturer of personal care products, with operations in over 40 countries. Unza markets the Enhancer, Salt, Romano, Izi, Vigor, and Maxkieen brands of personal care products.

Golfing Laxmi

Laxmi Bank is sponsoring pro golfer Deepak Thapa Magar to participate in the 2007/08 Professional Golf Tour India. Thapa, who turned pro in 1993, became the first Nepali to win the Surya Nepal Masters this year. Laxmi Bank is also supporting Shiva Ram Shrestha, a 19-year-old caddy-turned-golfing prodigy. The bank was established in April 2002 and currently has nine branches around the country.

NEW PRODUCTS

ARMY FRAGRANCES: The Swiss Army Company has launched three brands of Swiss Army fragrances in Nepal—the Swiss Army classic, Swiss Army Altitude, and Swiss Army for Her. Founded in 1884, the Swiss Army company is most famous for its multi-function knives. The perfumes are being marketed by United Marketing in Nepal.

PERFUMED KILLER: Overseas International is importing a new brand of air freshener, RS Air Fresheners, which also doubles as a mosquito repellent. Made from citronella, the air freshener is available in 12 different fragrances, at prices ranging from Rs 175-325. The product is being marketed by Bishes Marketing.

Future sights

There’s a whole new world out there if you look ahead creatively

Traveling is always a chance to learn a lot, particularly when you go to countries of hope, innovation, and aspiration. In Vietnam, companies are developing infrastructure as part of a three decade plan. In Singapore there is a perpetual desire to do something new and different, to improve one’s life. The president gets a seven-figure corporate salary, be better earn it. Thailand, it is said, is the Argentina of the East—three steps forward, two steps back. The underlying lesson in all cases is that you do not mess around too much with political structures. Going from Nepal, the other striking thing you notice is how forward-looking countries can be. It’s good to have tradition but we are mired in our heritage, looking for state structures from the time of Rama or before the unification of Nepal at any rate. The world benefits from moving towards a regulated market economy and outsourcing services, but we continue to live in the belief (and hope) that the state should do business, that all employees should have tenure for life, and that unions will solve everything. In many countries you can buy prepaid electricity cards with no strings attached. It’s the one thing you notice is how forward-looking countries can be.

First, of course, stop craning our necks to look into the past and instead turn our gaze to the future. Second, we need to think innovatively about the future. For instance, out-of-the-box-crusader Anil Chitrakar and the Beed have discussed allowing SMS voting for the upcoming elections to the constituent assembly. Nepal will go through a period of elections in the near future. The CA election will be followed by the national election, then elections in the federated provinces, for local government, and so on. Given the South Asian love for coalitions, most of these will not last the full term. We should distribute mobile handsets so people can vote without having to disrupt their daily lives. The software can ensure that no one votes more than once, and the hardware providers will be happy to look at a market of 15 million. This phone can then be used for multiple purposes—microcredit transfers, rural banking, and so on. In Kenya, Vodafone has made money transfers possible through mobile phones. Think of the savings on infrastructure, security, and personnel costs. The initial investment—the cost of the phone sets, the software, security features—will be lower than all the above. There is unlimited potential for advertisers and content providers, whether radio, multimedia news, education programs, or whatever else strikes your fancy.

We don’t need bizarre ideas, just an innovative look at existing processes. It’s the one thing that could move us into a whole other league. —Artha Beed
Puspha Kamal Dahal in interview in Maoist paper, Janadesh, 10 July
Janadesh: Lenin wrote his 'April Thesis' while traveling clandestinely by train from Moscow to Switzerland. Did you also draw up a new outline for the revolution during your plane trip to Switzerland?

Pushpa Kamal Dahal: Not exactly. But we did see the place where Lenin stayed, and this certainly made me think about our revolution but this wasn’t exactly the right moment to write a thesis.

What about the discussions on security sector reforms?

We had memorable discussions at the Democratic Forum for Control of Armed Forces in Geneva. Their main understanding was DDR [demobilisation, disarmament, and rehabilitation] like in other countries. But we were able to convince them that we are not going from armed struggle to politics, but that politics and armed struggle are related. We tried to explain to them our position on the political revolution we are embarked in and how it is possible to have a political transformation in Nepal.

How do the European governments and people look at the Maoist uprising in Nepal?

Europe is positive. It doesn’t want the peace process to collapse. Neutral Europeans are even more positive about the Maoist uprising. I told the press conference that the Europeans don’t come forward the peace process could be disturbed because the superpowers don’t want peace in Nepal. I said this could lead to a big crisis. I appealed to the Europeans to take the lead.

Can Europe cross out the Americans?

I don’t think so. But even so, the Europeans have their own culture, tradition, and ideology and they could make a positive impact.

So what were the main achievements of your visit?

We managed to dispel some of the falsehoods about the People’s War and the CPN-M. The fact that we first went to Switzerland sent a message to Europe and to the world that we don’t want to be mixed up in any geopolitical blocs. We learnt about how to engage in development and political transformation by looking at a country with similar topography to ours. We gave a fitting reply to those who call us terrorists.

Did you find any confusion about the Maoists?

Yes, there is some confusion. Some people seemed to think that we don’t want the constituent assembly elections. We cleared up that confusion. Baburam Bhattarai’s visit to Oslo for an international meeting was also useful in clearing confusion. All in all, we made a positive intervention in Europe.

Minister of Education and Sports Pradeep Nepal said he was not aware that teachers are being displaced from both the tarai and the hill regions. "I am in touch regularly with district education officers, but have not received such information about the displacement of teachers," he said.

KIRAN PANDAY

PICS: DEBENDRA BHATTARAI

Harsh lessons

Nepal, 8 July

Six months ago, Krishna Prasad Baral (pictured), a teacher at Himalaya Secondary School in Mainakaderi, Saptari, was threatened by the JTMM and was forced to flee to Damak, Jhapa.

"I was the only pahadi in the entire school. When the JTMM threatened to abduct me, I had to flee. Now I have no job and a family to support," said Baral. He started being threatened after other teachers at the school were targeted. Shivdhan Rai had been abducted, and Shantiram Adhikari was told to leave the village within five weeks. Baral says the principal of the school, the district education officer, and local human rights activists were aware that Baral was being threatened.

Meanwhile in the hills, many madhesi teachers are being forced to leave. Durga Sinha, 24 (pictured) was transferred to Tapericha Lower Secondary School in Dolpa three years ago. She was earning a good living teaching at the school and giving private classes. As a single mother she had to support two children who were studying in Kathmandu.

"When madhesis did not let pahadis live in the tarai, pahadis started doing the same thing with madhesis in pahadi-dominated areas," says Sinha. She says that both local Maoists and the school administration were responsible for spreading fear in the region.

Sinha, who now lives in Kathmandu, no longer has a regular source of income and has been compelled to pull her kids out of school in Kathmandu and send them to her parents in Srinagar. She says madhesi teachers from other schools have also fled due to fear and intimidation from pahadi groups.

Minister of Education and Sports Pradeep Nepal said he was not aware that teachers are being displaced from both the tarai and the hill regions. "I am in touch regularly with district education officers, but have not received such information about the displacement of teachers," he said.

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Forest and trees

Forestry expert Narayankaji Shrestha in Hiraul Khatupatiya, 1-15 July

The Forestry Minister has stopped the handing over of community forests in the tarai saying he wants to stop the logging being carried out by poachers in cahoots with rural big shots and the bureaucracy. But the Federation of Forestry User Groups says this goes against the principle that communities should benefit from local forest conservation and have threatened to bring the country to a halt if this is implemented. Both may be right, but neither side is trying to resolve the issue by looking at the root of the problem.

Nepal’s community forest success story is premised on participation and consensus, transparency, local decision-making and management and ownership. That is why there are provisions for the marginalised to also benefit from the handover of community forests. The Forestry Master Plan of 1990 laid out these principles and they have been followed till now.

Today, many of these principles are being violated. Forests are being handed over without consensus and participation to smugglers and poachers with local connivance. Local bureaucrats were never comfortable with decentralised decision-making on community forests. They were never converted from ‘technical experts’ to ‘social experts’ as envisaged in the Master Plan. Donor experts assigned to this sector are also not knowledgeable or committed as they used to be. They are more interested in the ‘inclusion’ mantra than on the crisis in the forest management system that is threatening to undermine past gains. Donor-funded NGOs are similarly only involved in patchwork damage control. The minister shouldn’t just pass an edict to stop handovers, but discuss the problems with the stakeholders first.

There is an urgent need to make the Forest Coordination Committee more inclusive and effective, scrap the contradictory rules and laws imposed after 1999, hold the fifth national conference in 2008 to evaluate the provisions for the marginalised principles are being violated.

Committee more inclusive and effective, scrap the contradictory rules and laws imposed after 1999, hold the fifth national conference in 2008 to evaluate the community forestry sector, aim to have a new Master Plan by 2010 crafted by Nepalis to conserve Nepal’s forests.

 JTMM-Jwala leader Nagendra Prasad Paswan, ‘Jwala Singh’ in an interview with Naya Patrika, 12 July

Now the only thing we can talk about is how to delineate the borders of the two countries [Nepal and Madhes].

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

Selected material translated every week from the Nepali Press
H igh in the Shivapuri hills at Sundarijal, a crystalline spring drips into a stream, forming the Bagmati river. Once you've tasted the cool, crisp water up there it is difficult to grasp that this is the same river you see down in Chabahil, Pashupati, Baneswor, and beyond.

By the time the river reaches Thapathali, the water is a murky brown, sluggish, and viscous, polluted with a torrid mix of the decaying remains of slaughtered animals, urine, faeces, household waste, industrial sewage, and garbage. In the summer, the stench makes you retch. The river exits the Valley past Chobar as a foul sewer. No fish survive here, and humans who take a dip in the Bagmati are likely to contract serious dermatological problems.

Kathmandu Valley is home to over two million people, and produces more than 750 cubic metres of waste every year. Almost a quarter of the 100 or so tons of waste generated daily is left to decay on the streets or tossed casually into rivers and streams. Every morning hundreds of open drains and sewers dump raw untreated yellow-green sewage into the Bagmati. Adding to the river’s problems is the unregulated and rampant sand mining, which has greatly demurred the river bed, weakened the bases of the bridges and dams, and exposed the underlying clay.

The Bagmati is the grid on which the Valley’s traditional cultural life is mapped. Along it are ghats, temples, and choks. Like the river, they too are falling apart. Riverbank encroachment has led to the narrowing of the Bagmati, making it deeper and creating a canyon of crevices at different places. The river has been forced to recede so much that the bridges, especially the one at Tikamge, are already weak. The sloppily constructed buildings and flimsy squatter settlements will be washed away just as easily as they were constructed.

Fifteen years ago, the river broke through the dam below the bridge at New Baneswor. The dam was rebuilt, but instead of taking steps to ensure that it wouldn't collapse again, the government allowed settlement along the riverbank, and itself built a police station there. Just three years later, there was another flood, and everything on the banks—including the police station—was destroyed.

PRANAYA SJB RANA

Pollution and encroachment have destroyed the Valley’s historic river

MARRED VISTA: This 150-year-old painting by British doctor Henry Ambrose Oldfield (left) shows the unmarred panorama of the Chobar gorge. The photo taken this week shows a road bridge under construction next to the old suspension bridge. When complete it will destroy the natural and cultural heritage of Chobar, the hill Marjushree is said to have sliced to let out the water of the valley’s prehistoric lake. Chobar is one of three remaining gorges in Kathmandu. The other two are at Gokarna and Phasupati. The fourth at Kodka was destroyed by stone mining.

MARRED VISTA: This 150-year-old painting by British doctor Henry Ambrose Oldfield (left) shows the unmarred panorama of the Chobar gorge. The photo taken this week shows a road bridge under construction next to the old suspension bridge. When complete it will destroy the natural and cultural heritage of Chobar, the hill Marjushree is said to have sliced to let out the water of the valley’s prehistoric lake.
Old man river

“We cannot control nature,” says Bagmati activist, Huta Ram Baidya, “we must work together with nature to preserve the river and our culture.”

Baidya, who turned 87 on Monday, calls the Valley a part of the ‘Bagmati Valley Civilisation’. But he is not very optimistic about the condition of the river. He realises that some things have changed permanently, but is disheartened that the Bagmati remains as polluted as ever. The problem now, as he sees it, is that efforts to deal with pollution and urbanisation will have their own negative consequences. The proposal of building sewer drains parallel to the river to manage waste will destroy the ghats just as roads along the west bank of the Bishnumati have.
At the end of his three-year tenure America's outspoken ambassador to Nepal, James F Moriarty talked with Nepali Times about being misled by the king, his continued mistrust of the Maoists, and the need to get Bhutani refugees out of camps.

Nepali Times: In hindsight, do you think you and the international community gave the king too much benefit of the doubt in February 2005?

James Moriarty: At the beginning after he took over, we all hoped he would move back towards democracy and he didn't. I myself, the British ambassador, and the Indian ambassador did everything possible to tell the king that this was a very ill-advised move. He warned us in November [2004] that he was thinking about it, but we all said it was a horrible idea. In December he assured us he wasn't going to do it...I want to make the historical record clear: we did everything possible to tell the king that doing the reaching out, maybe I'll find a bit of fault there. But I really did not do or say anything to welcome a royal revival.

You have always been very outspoken against the Maoists. Why were you so certain about where they were going?

I'm a China hand and the Maoists are, from my perspective, Marxists. From a lot of Nepal's perspectives, they are just another political party going through teething problems, pointing to insurgencies and murderous tactics used by other parties in the past. That never made sense to me. I saw an insurgency that had made huge progress, was committed, and was using roadmaps handed down by Lenin and Mao. Maoists said tactical flexibility is fine, but never lose sight of the end goal. Until I begin to see something that indicates that they are willing to abandon those roadmaps and that end goal, absolute power, I have to consider them Marxists.

If you could do it over, would you be more diplomatic?

No. I think your country is going through a huge, huge transition. The outcome is still uncertain. It could end up being very positive but I felt that my lack of doing something let it drift in the wrong direction. I'd never forgive myself. The downside of not proclaiming the dangers is much greater than that of some people saying I'm not very diplomatic.

Pressing need

Why a free press matters for Nepal

"Be assured, there will be no anti-press activities on our behalf. We are committed to press freedom, freedom of expression, and loktantra." This statement by Pushpa Kamal Dahal to the Federation of Nepali Journalists last September brought hope of a new golden age for press freedom. Journaлистs had weathered a terrible storm the past ten years, with reporters intimidated, harassed, fired, kidnapped, and even murdered by both the state and the Maoists in one of the most dangerous journalistic environments in the world. Now more assassins lurk on the doorstep after a too-brief respite. The elimination of independent media has long been a favoured tactic of regimes that wish to suppress free speech, and it is disheartening to see these dark forces return. A competitive and free press provides an essential function in a healthy democracy as a check on the power of the corrupt and incompetent. As the proverbial 'fourth estate', an independent press provides a voice for the voiceless. But now, Maoist-supported groups and others are attempting to stifle dissenting voices through intimidation. Samacharpatra and Mahanagar have returned to the newsstands, but independent newspapers within and outside the capital are increasingly being pressured to be political mouthpieces, with warnings of dire results if they do not comply. This is added to a disturbing larger trend gaining ground.
royal revival"

Have you considered that the (Maoist) leadership is trying to move into the mainstream, but is having a hard time controlling a radicalised cadre? That’s the issue. If people want to see a few nice words as an indicator that they’ve made that leap, I can quote you just as many tough things they’ve said that make it clear they have no intention of settling for anything less than power. We’re hoping they will eventually recognise that “Oops, we’ve gone as far as we can go with this revolution, our best bet is staying within the system accountable, and that if the second-most important issue. The human rights tragedy has to be addressed first. I’ve been down to the camps a lot and you don’t want to be second generation, born in a camp where you have no future. I tell these refugees leaders that the working journalist’s job is keeping the issue the focus of international attention, the best way to do it is to get 40 or 60 or 70,000 refugees in the United States and others abroad, writing to their congressmen and senators saying they were victims of ethnic cleansing. Then you get congressmen asking what the government of Bhutan is doing to rectify the situation. I also want to stress that the 60,000 figure is not a scam. We will consider anybody who wants to come. How seriously do you take the sometimes violent activism against resettlement? It raises a big question—to what degree do the Maoists influence particularly the more violent of the pro-separationist types. I think most Bhutanese know that the camps can be worked with, but I worry that there might be a hardcore of total rejects. I hope we can steer them away from violence and into letting the other refugees exercise their freedom of choice.

What are your parting thoughts on leaving Nepal? I’m glad, particularly because I hope and I pray that the November election is going to come off. It will be the most important step forward on the road to democracy. The thought that I’m going to miss that brings me a lot of regret.

The US is ready to take 60,000 Bhutanese refugees, but doesn’t this let off the Thimpu regime scot free? Bhutan’s regime has been let off scot free for 16 years now. Nothing happening now is holding them through this trend will require information and Communications Minister Krishna Bahadur Mahara to take three courageous steps. First, he should use his leadership position to work with Labour and Transport Minister Ramechhup Lekhak to publicly and universally disown violence of any form against news organisations or those who work for them. This means serving as an honest broker for legitimate labour movements representing those mistreated by media outlets, but also condemning the strong-arm tactics of the Maoist-influenced All-Nepal Communication, Press, and Publications Trade Union, and actively prosecuting those who use violence as a means of action. Members of any organisation have the right to assemble and demonstrate peacefully if their political demands are not met. Second, Mahara needs to take a leading and visible role in ensuring all media personnel can do their job in the run-up to the elections without fear of reprisal. There will be tremendous pressure to harass and threaten journalists from all sides of the political spectrum, and the time is now to set a strong public policy that explicitly ensures journalistic freedom. That is growing concern that government outlets will be used as propaganda tools, and many Maoists Om Sharma and Rashar Bai as part of the state newspaper and TV stations do not instil confidence in impartiality. Allowing the opposition to make its voice heard is important for those both within and outside Nepal that the CPM is interested in democracy as much as its own power.

Thirth, Mahara should ensure that the Working Journalist Act of 2051 is effectively enforced and also updated to protect those in radio, TV, internet, and government-run media outlets as well. Third, there should be a law to legally protect those who agree or dissent, from Royalist to Maoist. Publicly supporting even a single journalist who disagrees with the Maoist/Marxist political line would deliver a powerful message of legitimisation not only to voters and to a still-sceptical assembly, but also to an international community that desperately wishes for a fully democratic Nepal. Upholding the rights of all journalists would teach that victimisation of those in the media is never acceptable. Now is your chance to prove the detractors and diplomats wrong, Mr Mahara, Nepal, and the world, is watching and waiting for your leadership.

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Embracing Empire

The west is misguided in its reading of radical Islam as apocalyptic

by Ian Buruma

Those who shirk their duty to support such force are no better than collaborators.

Now it was less haunted by memories of appeasing the Nazi regime and the ensuing genocide, people might not be as concerned about human rights. And by no means do all those who work to protect the rights of others invoke the horrors of the Third Reich. Any force is justified to avoid another Shoah.

FASCISM UBER ALLEH: The fact that the SS made a concerted effort to recruit Muslims, particularly Europeans, is for some commentators today evidence of the roots of ‘Islamofascism’.

So why the high alarm about European appeasement, especially among neo-conservatives? Why the easy equation of Islamism with Nazism? Israel is often mentioned as a reason. But Israel means different things to different people. To certain evangelical Christians, it is the holy site of the Second Coming of the Messiah. To many Jews, it is the one state that will always offer refuge. To neon ideologues, it is the democratic oasis in a desert of tyrants. Defending Israel against its Islamic enemies may be a factor in the existential alarm that underlies the ‘war on terror.’ A nuclear-armed Iran would make Israel feel more vulnerable. But as an explanation it is overstated. Kucinich did not advocate Western intervention in Bosnia or Kosovo because of Israel. If concern for Israel led Kucinich and Paul Wolfowitz’s advocacy of war in Iraq, it was probably a minor one. The common concerns were for human rights and democracy, and perhaps a suspicion that Islamic rhetoric, adopted by Ahmedinejad among others, is deliberately designed to stir up memories of the Shoah. So perhaps the existential fear of some Western intellectuals is easier to explain than their remarkability, sometimes law-breaking trust in the US government to save the world by force.

The explanation of this mysterious trust may lie elsewhere. Many neocons emerged from a leftist past, in which a belief in revolution from above was commonplace: “people’s democracies” yesterday, “liberal democracies” today. Among Jews and other minorities, historical memory of protection from the imperial state may also play a part. Austrian and Hungarian Jews were among fiercely loyal subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor because he shielded them from the violent nationalism of the majority populations. Early in the communist era, Polish and Russian Jews were among fiercely loyal subjects of the communist state, because it promised (falsely) to protect them against the violence of anti-Semitic nationalism.

If it were really true that the fundamental existence of the democratic Western world were about to be destroyed by an Islamist revolution, it would only make sense to seek protection from the war against the entire Islamic empire. But if one sees our current problems in less apocalyptic terms, then the rather kind of fashion des clercs comes into view: the belief in revolution from above was sometimes foolish military power in unnecessary wars that cost more lives than they were intended to save.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Ian Buruma’s most recent book is Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Politics of Tolerance. He is a professor of human rights at Bard College.
Learned behaviour

The stage doesn’t translate perfectly into cinema—and that’s not always a bad thing

After moderate success on Broadway, Nicholas Hytner, director of Alan Bennett’s witty play about middle-class ambitions in ‘80s Britain, quickly shot The History Boys for screen. The boys in question are eight brilliant overachievers at a grammar school. The school authorities see the boys’ zest for self-assurance as an opportunity to break into the Oxford/Cambridge scene. What ensues is an epigrammatic debate over how this can be achieved and what wisdom means.

The press will handily ease, execution tools are bound to see A pure and simple vick toree. The brightest future every known, is just about to dawn. What is this? A grammar school. The school authorities see the boys’ zesty self-confidence every round corner be. They’re supping all the beer and ale in every district bar. But we can feel the western ass, just wait and see how far.

Our propaganda is the best, our legs are quite superb. We have the finest spin about for serving up this blur. And if this fails the VBC is there to force our hand with ample stocks of guns and bombs buried in the land. The CA polls have yet to come fore parliaments our toy. We must manipulate the vote, to win it fair and free. Despite these nuisance monitors round every corner be. We can feel the western ass, just wait and see how far.

The stage doesn’t translate perfectly into cinema—and that’s not always a bad thing.
EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY: Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat flanked by Home Minister Krishna Sitaula, Minister for Education and Sports Pradeep Nepal, Minister for Peace and Reconstruction Ram Chandra Poudel, and Agriculture Minister Chhabilal Brawarkarma. Royal allowances were slashed, even as a large election budget was announced.

CEREMONIAL PRIME MINISTER: Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala takes the salute from an army guard at the BhojJastra festival on Sunday in Jawalakhel. For the first time, the king of Nepal did not attend this ceremony.

DIPLOMATIC CORE: Kathmandu-based ambassadors were summoned to the Election Commission on Tuesday for a briefing on preparations for polls planned for 22 November.

RAILROADED: Indian ambassador Shiv Shankar Mukherjee speaking at a function on Friday to mark the opening of an office to sell tickets for Indian Railways in Kathmandu.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: A porter carrying construction material on Darbar Marg as supporters and opponents of monarchy prepared to march to the royal palace on Saturday on king Gyanendra’s birthday.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: A porter carrying construction material on Darbar Marg as supporters and opponents of monarchy prepared to march to the royal palace on Saturday on king Gyanendra’s birthday.
Towards a cashless society

Good to know that Doha’s The Peninsula in its Saturday edition prominently carried the news that Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani had sent a cable congratulating His Majesty the King of Nepal on his happy birthday. What’s more, the paper duly noted that the Qatari heir apparent, His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani also sent a congratulatory telegram to HM the K of N.

Not to be outcooped, down the Gulf Coast the Khaleej Times of Dubai also carried a front page item about His Highness Shaikh Mohammad bin Rashid of the United Arab Emirates congratulating our kingji on his birthday.

The Ass was struck by two things when he spied these items. One, they still send telegrams? And two, why did the heir apparent send the cable to Gyennama and not to our heir apparent, Paras. A hidden message there from oil sheikhs to our sheikhs?Apparently.

Either way, the news item made some of us here slightly nostalgic for the good old days when The Rising Nepal used to reserve a space on the upper left-hand corner of page one every day for similar congratulatory messages sent by our majesty to other majesties, potentates, fellow tinpot dictators, and other tyrants.

The Ass is glad to note that these loktantrick times, the space on The Rising Nepal these days is about Crown Prince and Heir Apparent Prakash being feted in the People’s Republic of China. Or news items headlined: 'Govt Takes Decisions', 'Condolences Expressed', or 'Scribes’ Body Revived'. Who says we haven’t made progress towards a New Nepal? But to give credit where it is due, the Ass felicitates The Rising Nepal for turning a new leaf, coming out in a new slicker design and cutting down on newsprint in these austere times by trimming size. But most of all, we are happy we no longer have to read verbatim transcripts of congratulatory royal telegrams to the Swazi king anymore.

Nothing proves the resilient spirit of us Nepalis more than the way we can grin and bear every new shortage. When the government said, sorry, no electricity we said fine we’ll make do with candles. Then the taps went dry and we said who needs water anyway, we’ll just use toilet paper. When the 7+1 government said, oops, no petroleum we dutifully queued in lines so long that the cars waiting at Sajha in Pulchok, snaked right down to Narayangadh, back to Patan Dhoka, cut across Krishna Galli until the tail got entangled with the head and no one could make head or tail of where it started and where it ended. There is still no petrol, but instead of rioting, we open the hatch on our Marutis and play marriage with other taxi-drivers.

Now it looks like there is a shortage of cash. Since the governor of Rastra Bank has been framed and arrested there is no one to sign the new banknotes (being printed in Indonesia) so there will be a huge cash crunch. Which is a good thing because with nothing to buy, who needs cash anyway?

Getting difficult to keep track of all these new outfits springing up in the eastern tarai. It was bad enough with the Madhes Tiger, Tarai Cobra, Python X, Jwala, and Goit. At the rate they are splintering into criminal gangs, it wouldn’t surprise us to have new militant groups called Rautahat Rhinos, Hosiarpur Hornbills, or Siraha Scorpions.

And just as UNMIN is getting ready to destroy the maobadi IEDs comes news of yet another faction of the JTMM calling itself ‘Bisfot’. This is the story of Nepal these days: you defuse one bomb and another one goes off under our collective asses.