The parties are finally moving. There seems to be a recognition that an election-conducive environment must be created relatively quickly. A constant reminder from the parties and civil society is that “no election in Nepal has ever been held under ideal conditions.”

The UML started planning its campaign strategy at its central working committee meeting two weeks ago. The two Congresses are intensifying their unification drive. The Maoists, busy with their verification troubles, are second-guessing the elections based on the ongoing violence in the tarai. But even they are expected to chart out a plan for the elections at their meeting next week of high level party workers and PLA commanders. The janajatis feel they are close to a deal. “The government has assured us that the current electoral law actually works, and for now we are ready to accept that,” Pasang Sherpa, president of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, told us.

The focus is the madhes, though, and Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula’s ultimatum to the armed factions has not been heeded yet. But a strong consensus is emerging among the eight parties that a more diplomatic approach in the tarai could help kickstart those talks. The MJF is talking again with the government this week, and most of its demands have already been fulfilled. With the MJF on board, “the armed factions in the tarai can either be talked to or be bought,” says a commentator.

A flexible approach to negotiations with all agitating fronts accompanied by election programs in the villages could help bring the situation closer to normal. “Security is also psychological,” says Narhari Acharya of the Nepali Congress adding, “security forces alone don’t make people feel safe, the political parties have to go door-to-door to make them feel that this is for real.” At least initially, the eight parties could hold joint programs to build up the psychological momentum for an election.

Editorial

All things considered

Focus on Bangladesh
Interview with Fazle H Abed

The parties are being outwardly cautious about the elections because of the uncertainty of how they will fare. The UML seems to be sensing that the tide is turning in its favour, while the NC and the CPN-M are uncertain. The two Congresses need to be unified, and the Maoists are making overtures to the UML for leftist unity.
ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

We have often said in this space, only half-jokingly, that the person most responsible for pushing this country towards a republic is King Gyanendra himself.

Given the paranoia Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his young comrades are displaying about the king and his dark plots, it seems to be the Maoists who are keeping the monarchy alive. At this rate, the comrades may lose their reason for being if the monarchy should cease to exist.

To be sure, the present monarch could very well be up to his old tricks. At his birthday last week he is reported to have dropped broad hints that he is ready to “strike a deal.” This could mean he is ready to negotiate with the Maoists as a bargaining chip. Despite public calls to abdicate from his staunchest supporter in the eight party government (Prime Minister Koirala himself), even while ally as ambassador James Moriarty, king Gyanendra still doesn’t seem to understand his time is up. The only way to save the monarchy, if at all, is for him and the heir apparent to step aside. But for many people, even that option is just not worth the trouble any more.

In their wisdom, the Nepali people have largely disregarded the republican clamour and are firm in their support for the November election and want to leave that decision to their elected representatives in the constituent assembly. In this period, the king can also be imposed by a two-third majority of parliament if there is any indication of mischief. In the run up to the polls, it should be clear that anyone fomenting violence, disorder, and lawlessness, is not only at risk of royal revisionists, who want an election to an assembly that could vote the monarchy out of business.

It is true that the main political parties warned their hands in the fires of the madhe this winter and enjoyed watching the Maoists squirm. They also cynically used the troubles as an excuse to postpone elections they weren’t ready for. They still aren’t ready, but they’re run out of pretexts. It is crunch time, and they better get their election machinery cranked up.

There are two challenges to free polls: continued Maoist threats against political parties campaigning in rural constituencies and the violence in the east-central tarai. But the parties can say “conditions aren’t right” for polls anymore. They have to make them write.

Although it is highly unlikely that the parties are going to learn from their past mistakes, one thing they should keep in mind is that this is not a general election. It is a mechanism to let the Nepali people decide the future of our state.

All things considered, it is our collective future that is at stake here, not about who wins and who ministers in the next government.

Labour complications

What our embassies should be doing but aren’t

Last month, 127 Nepali workers were deported from Qatar after getting involved in activities that violated domestic laws. Last week, 37 Nepalis stopped working at a factory in Malaysia after not being paid and they were detained.

What is most disturbing about the Qatar incident is that this is the first time such a harsh action has been taken by authorities there against Nepali workers. The fact that ambassadors stationed in Doha was denied permission to even meet the arrested Nepalis is another indication of the government’s diplomatic missions have been handling foreign employment, which is so vital to the economy. Lessons should have been learnt after August 2004 when Nepalis were taken hostage in Iraq and yet we didn’t have a single Arabic-speaking officer on duty who could begin negotiations with the abductors. Our embassadors aren’t well equipped and staffed, budgeted, in scarce, coordination and related tasks are not handled with the utmost concern. In a similar situation, MoFA’s own relations with line ministries is poor.

Worse, promoting foreign employment and facilitating Nepali labour abroad, especially in the Gulf countries, has never been a priority for the government although remittances have clear rural linkages, and is a second major source of revenue. At a time when our exports are declining and tourism is stagnant, remittances from Nepalis abroad is all we have to maintain macroeconomic stability and preventing collapse. However, the effect of remittances is done in itself by steep decline: shrinking to 3.1 percent against the whopping 47 percent growth in 2006 compared to 2005.

The government has announced the opening of a new embassy in Malaysia and one in the countries like South Korea and Israel which are important destinations for Nepali workers. However, no immediate steps towards labour embassies we need, as much as upgrading the quality of service they provide to Nepalis in these places.

Besides widespread exploitation both by domestic middlemen and employers in destination countries, Nepalis are being regularly victimised by our own diplomats. This is particularly the case in the Gulf countries where helpless workers who have spent fortunes to get jobs are cheated and mistreated. There are numerous complaints against Nepali diplomatic staff in host countries, including that they refuse to meet victims and do not even speak decently with them. What an irony that the diplomats’ salaries are paid by the multitude of homes run by those very workers.

There are immediate short-term measures that need to be taken to workers who face problems: attempt to resolve the issue with the employer; after a failure approach the government requesting early settlement of salary, service benefits, arrange dispatch of personal belongings of the deceased, provide passage for the bodies, visit hospitals to meet Nepalis patients; coordinate with local police authorities and immigration on matters relating to labour and welfare, crime and legal offences.

In the longer term, the state has to coordinate among line ministries to streamline overseas work so people are not stuck, that dismantling of the rigid maximised through training and workers are apprised of their rights, legal position, and the laws of the country they are going to.

The Labour Act of 1985 officially recognises the potential of migrant labour beyond India. But little has been done since then to develop a coherent labor export policy to back up the sector with training and support packages. The long-lauded labor agreement between Nepal and UAE is expected to guarantee minimum wages as well as legal recognition of Nepali nationals working in the UAE. While similar agreements with other countries will ensure the rights and privileges of Nepalis in Gulf countries like South Korea and Israel which are important destinations for Nepalis workers.

The government is mindful of the need to urge the workers to return home with dignity and pride, but the government has never been a priority for the government.

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MONARCHY
Prime Minister GP Koirala witnessing the Bhoto Jatra paradoxically annuls his much-loved anti-
republican position—his support for a 'ceremonial monarchy.' If the term largely carries religio-cultural responsibilities as Sudhindra Sharma construes (Unceremonial monarchy, 'Guest column', #357).

Sudhindra Sharma's remark that 'the presence of the head of the state in a Hindu-Buddhist religious festival is a setback to the idea of a secular state' is feeble. The basis of his argument is what he calls 'one of the pillars of secularism—the separation of state and religion'. While theoretically secularism postulates the separation of state and religion, it seems impossible pragmatically. Secularism is an antonym of hierocracy, in a hierarchy, religion dictates the affairs of the state, whereas in a secular state it is the contrary.

The key issue between secularism and hierocracy is not of separation of state and religion rather of subordination of religion to state or vice versa. Thus, the head of the state attending the Hindu-Buddhist religious ceremonies does not impede the spirit of secularism as long as it is done indiscriminately (eg, solemnising Christmas or Id), and does not use the state's coffers improperly. Nima Ghising, Jorpati

Sudhindra Sharma incorrectly assumes that there is a contradiction between upholding tradition and pursuing development. It is precisely the lack of traditional values—a sense of duty, sacrifice, honestly, self-control, etc—much of our government (whether the monarchy, politicians, the judiciary) that has most adversely affected the development of the country.

The role of traditional institutions in the so-called Naya Nepal is completely bypassed by our so-called progressive elites. If our Naya Nepal would take a break from making sweeping ideological statements and condemnations from their newspaper columns and engage in dialogue with traditional institutions, we could perhaps understand how modern and traditional forces can work together for the welfare of the country.

The Bhoto Jatra issue is an example of how traditional institutions have been bewilderingly sidelined in what is a very traditional affair. What right do Sudhindra Sharma, Girija Koirala, or Gyanaendra have to dismiss the chief guest? This is not a political issue, it is a religious and ritual issue, and the sole authority should be the local priesthood.

Rishi R Sharma, email

I agree with Sudhindra Sharma that Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is on the one end seeming to break from a tradition that was rooted in hero worship, and on the other seeming to restore it. This double standard is incongruous in a person in whom people have vested their faith. When Girija Ji formalised the ritual, he inhabited a person in whom people have vested their faith. To restore it. This double standard is incongruous in a person in whom people have vested their faith. When Girija Ji formalised the ritual, he inhabited a person in whom people have vested their faith. Nima Ghising, Jorpati

I have no problem with Girija Koirala going to Bhoto Jatra. But they should have got him to voluntarily vacate the palace/property. But they should have got him to voluntarily vacate the palace/property. Sunil Sharma, Teku

I strongly believe that the Maoists are trying to establish a totalitarian communist state. All along they have been saying that their moves to join the mainstream and the seven-party deal are compromises they've made to fulfil their party's ideology. Their commitment to 'competitive democracy' is a front and a farce to grab power after which they want to initiate a structural reform based on class and other Maoist ideologies. Here, the media (who might be out of business if the Maoists succeed), civil society and especially the middle class need to unite and keep up the pressure so this dangerous dream of taking Nepal to the stone age is not fulfilled. We might need a new movement to protest against everything the Maoists are doing now.

Sudhanta Sharma, email

Who among the Nepali people trusts Prachanda? Girija Babu is one of the most honest and reliable people to run Nepal. Oops! I forgive our foreign ambassadors running this country.

Sukhamal, email

MAO & MORIARTY
The interview with Pushpa Kamal Dahal after his visit to Switzerland is hilarious ('Filling reply to those who call us terrorists', From the Nepali Press, #357). Even though politicians are not known to be truthful at all times, Prachanda's forked tongue belittles a snake in words, deeds, and character. He lies about his commitment to the constituent assembly election when the Maoists do not heed the current interim constitution—which they helped formulate—and when the Maoist atrocities and extortion against the Nepali people continue unabated and in violation of the peace treaty they signed.

One true friend of the Nepali people has been the outspoken US ambassador here. He has seen through the Maoist farce and called them what they are: terrorists ('No royal revival', #357). That's why Prachanda wants to get the support of liberal European nations with leftist leanings for his plan which will destroy all traces of democracy and freedom in Nepal. On a personal note, Prachanda, your terrorists have killed an innocent relative of mine, beheading him with a khukuri. His wife and children live in agony to this day. We will never forgive you. You can fool some people some time but you can't fool all the Nepalis all the time.

VT, email

OUTGOING AMBASSADOR MORIARTY was right. I strongly believe that the Maoists are trying to establish a totalitarian communist state. All along they have been saying that their moves to join the mainstream and the seven-party deal are compromises they've made to fulfil their party's ideology. Their commitment to 'competitive democracy' is a front and a farce to grab power after which they want to initiate a structural reform based on class and other Maoist ideologies. Here, the media (who might be out of business if the Maoists succeed), civil society and especially the middle class need to unite and keep up the pressure so this dangerous dream of taking Nepal to the stone age is not fulfilled. We might need a new movement to protest against everything the Maoists are doing now.

James Moriarty has trampled on all diplomatic norms and etiquette. Where in the world do we see an ambassador conducting himself like an elected politician? Now he can go back and ask Prez Bush to step down or 'abdicate' the presidency for failing in Iraq.

R Rana, email

MESSY MIDDLE
'Communist Quackland' (State of the State, #356) was a rare disappointing article from CK Lal. It was confusing and full of rhetoric, and the message got lost somewhere. He addresses both sides of the argument, but does justice to neither. Seems like dictatorial control is catching up with our handful of good writers.

Name withheld, email

I think 'Under My Hat' was much more real and funny than your new satire under 'Backside'. I don't know whether it is a clever piece of satire or a flippant effort to prove that you are above the government. At least let us see a story with a moral, please. The message got lost somewhere. He addresses both sides of the argument, but does justice to neither. Seems like dictatorial control is catching up with our handful of good writers.

B Raj Giri, email
Ashutosh Tiwari: What development changes have you seen in Bangladesh since the first decade of its birth?

Fazle Hasan Abed: Bangladesh has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. Life expectancy at birth used to be 47. Today it is 68. Infant mortality rate was 142, and under-five mortality rate was 252. Today, they are 27 and 174 respectively.

Bangladesh used to produce 15 million tons of paddy for 74 million people on nine million hectares of land. On eight million hectares today, it produces 40 million tons for 143 million people.

Seventy-six percent of the population was under the poverty line in 1976. Today, that is down to 40 percent, though the number of poor is similar. With poverty declining at 2.2 percent every year, Bangladesh can expect to be a middle-income country in about 20 years.

One of BRAC’s early work involved immunising children. How did that come about?

I was struck that New York City, in 1900 and Bangladesh in the late 1970s had the same infant mortality rate. From 1903 to 1925, New York’s infant mortality declined last. They started supplying chlorinated piped water to households. They rebuilt their sanitation systems. They introduced universal primary education. They spread knowledge about the nutritional value of food through mass media. They vaccinated everyone. On learning this, I decided to start a children’s immunisation programs in Bangladesh. Immunisation was the most cost-effective public health intervention my small NGO could handle at the time. Besides, it was 1979, which the UN had declared the Year of the Child.

Persuading the government to help you must have been easy, since your work would reach out to millions.

Not quite. To reduce the rate of infant mortality, I needed to vaccinate children in all the villages to store the vaccines, but most rural regions were not electrified. I needed all the health workers in the country mobilised to administer the vaccine. But the government said, “We have waited hundreds of thousands of years for vaccination. Why don’t we wait for five more years when all the villages will have electricity?” Meanwhile, you can do something else.” So, we visited households door-to-door—13 million of them—to teach village women how to make oral rehydration fluids by themselves with salt, sugar, and water in the right ratios. This bit of simple knowledge had the potential to save lives every year.

How did BRAC become the world’s largest NGO?

The oral rehydration intervention was BRAC’s first national program. Encouraged by its success, I convinced UNICEF to supply vaccines to start a national immunisation program. BRAC took charge of mobilising health workers and immunising half the country’s children, while the government took responsibility for the other half. In four years, millions of children were vaccinated against childhood diseases. BRAC’s nationwide success with immunisation programs gave it tremendous self-confidence. We then thought: Why not also take agricultural, educational, healthcare and livestock-related services to the poor? That is how BRAC grew. In the late 1980s, we had about 5,000 staff. By the late 90s, that number was 20,000. Now we have about 48,000 full-time staff in Bangladesh, and that number excludes the staff of the 60,000 one-teacher schools that we run.

What are one-teacher schools?

Of the 19 million Bangladesh children, 16 million are enrolled in schools. Of the remaining 3 million, BRAC has taken in about 1.6 million as students at its one-teacher schools. The model is that we have one teacher for about thirty children of different ages and skills. This arrangement seems to work well for children who, for various reasons, are not enrolled at formal schools. A variation of this model also seems to work well in isolated communities where there is a handful of children, not enough to open an entire school. In desert communities in Rajasthan, India, I saw that they gathered children of various ages and skills and gave them their basic worth of literacy skills in one year. There are isolated communities in Nepal too. Using this model in those communities could be a way Nepal could work toward its Millennium Development Goals.

BRAC is known for bundling microfinance services for the poor with market access. How does this approach work?

Microfinance is BRAC’s largest program. This year, we have given out $900 million to 6 million borrowers, most of whom are women. Next year, we expect to give out more than a billion dollars as loans. Our borrowers meet our staff every month to pay their installments. What we have done is connect our borrowers to income-generating activities. For instance, a borrower may buy 5,000 chicks, and have trained women to offer vaccination services in villages. Our chicken lays 240 eggs a year compared to the 40 a year a duck bird lays, thereby fetching farmers more money. We thus see microfinance as a tool to raise the income and quality of life of the poor by connecting them to the market.

Under BRAC’s umbrella are vegetable packages, fashion and handicraft retail outlets, green agriculture, internet service providers, a university. What are you doing right that most donor agencies are not?

My view is that most donor agencies do not understand development. Development is about human beings, about individuals, their families, their livelihoods. At most agencies, doing development is a job, and they do good professional work. But until you thinking is in terms of how your actions affect other human beings, you are not doing development. You are doing a job. Every time I go to Arungu, our retail outlet, for example, I ask a salesgirl, “How much have you sold in the last two months?” She will say something like, “18,000 taka worth of goods. Tell her that a third of it goes to the producer in village. That means one village woman is employed for a month. This sort of thinking—making rural producers the centre of what we do—has served us well.

How should you manage your organisation in terms of recruiting and retaining staff?

We do not pay high salaries. Most of our recruits are from local colleges, people who appreciate our values and share our concern for the poor. Most grow in their roles and stay with us for years. We put an emphasis on training, on continuous skill development, and on value development. That’s the way you build a full, unlike most NGOs, we also do research. We have a large research wing. Creating new knowledge and continuously learning from what worked, what didn’t work, and why, is important for our growth and success.

Next in Focus on Bangladesh: Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank

In the last few years, BRAC has set up branches in Afghanistan and in parts of Africa. What motivated you to do that?

We went to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Donors were ready to fund programs, but there was a need for a BRAC-like entity that could provide development services. We thought we could help them with our Bangladesh experiences. Today BRAC Afghanistan provides financial transfers to save seeds to the poor. It runs on an annual budget of $80 million and has about 6000 staff, most of whom are Afghani women.

Last year, we decided that we should also be in Africa to replicate our Bangladesh experiences. We want to make a difference in the lives of the poor in Africa. Donors are confident about our approach, and we have already in southern Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

What is Nepal’s experience with microfinance?

Nepal’s experience with microfinance has been a mixed bag. It’s hard to provide microfinance services in thinly populated hilly areas. The operating costs are too high, and there is no provision for related services, such as training. Often, the problem may not be with microfinance per se. It might be with how the poor people are in the first place. In Bangladesh, we have found that microfinance doesn’t work for the ultra poor. These are the people who can hardly afford two meals a day. They have malnourished children. They have no social support. They are doomed to stay poor generation after generation. In 2001, I decided to help the ultra poor by giving them outright grants. The idea was to make one-time asset transfer that allowed them to have regular stipends for meals, access to medical services, schooling for children, and income-generating activities. We looked for ways to reduce their vulnerabilities and strengthened their ties to the better-off people in their villages. We have found that after two years of handholding and confidence-building, most of these people can get out of chronic poverty, and graduate to a level where they can merge with the microfinance group. We have helped hundreds of thousands of families break the cycle of poverty in this manner, and today we run what is considered to be the world’s most effective program for the ultra poor.

With such a diverse portfolio, people might say you are running a parallel government.

I don’t think BRAC is running a parallel government. It is only our work is already doing. Some government officers like our work, and some feel threatened. That’s the way it goes.

How do you manage your organisation in terms of recruiting and retaining staff?

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Next in Focus on Bangladesh: Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank
In 2006, the market capitalisation of Rs 20 billion worth of shares was Rs 87 billion. This year capitalisation is just 10 percent higher, but share values have hit Rs 1.18 trillion. For example, Standard Chartered shares valued at Rs 3,800 each a year ago have today hit Rs 5,000. Most experts say this growth can’t last long and that the stresses of the transitional phase will calm things down. Shambhu Prasad Panta, assistant manager of NEPSE, has a gloomier outlook. He says the rush to invest in shares has been in the hope of a November election. A postponement would push NEPSE to the brink of collapse. In addition, the financial sector and market insiders are talking a lot of “new money and new faces” in the share market. One analyst explains that the new faces are entrepreneurs with good credit at banks, manpower companies, and Maoists. The new money is that borrowed on low interest from banks, deposits from manpower companies, or ‘donations’.

April this year, Nepal Rastra Bank directed every bank and financial institution to increase its paid-up capital within six years. The new requirement is Rs 2 billion for commercial banks, Rs 640 million for development banks, and Rs 200 million for finance companies. To achieve the goal every financial institution has to increase its capital deposit by 20 percent each year.

The Nepali stock market right now seems to be driven almost entirely by rumour and speculation. The currency in the capital market does not correspond to the number of shares. In the Nepali capital market, the number of transactions do not square with the jump in index growth. As of last week, share values increased this year by Rs 27 billion, while actual transactions totalled only Rs 7 billion. Financial analyst Sujeev Shakya says this is a bad sign: “In a healthy, transparent stock market, there should be a parity between the market price and the transactions.”

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PICS: MIN BAJRACHARYA
Labour reform

Editorial in Abhayan, 16-22 July

It is probably because Nepal's political parties used the labour movement to do politics that the unions have not been able to rise above politics. That is why instead of working for the rights of the workers and industrialisation, the unions are just political pawns of their matter parties. Worse, the unions have been used to disturb industrial security which has affected not just industrial productivity but in the long term the nation's economy. The environment today is worse than even during the conflict years. Proof is in the number of companies, even multinationals, that have quit the after the peace process. Not only is this a waste of investment, but it also ruins the lives of workers and undermines national revenue. The interventional by the labour unions are not in the interest of the labour force.

In most industrialised countries labour unions represent the interests of workers and the industries, not political parties. In Nepal, the unions haven't spared the essential services sector, which in many countries are out of bounds. It is clear that Nepal's labour movement is so politicised that it is not in the interest of the citizens and the nation.

The latest target of the unions is the banking sector, where in the name of labour rights there is an increased risk of anarchy. In many of these institutions, union representatives use party pressure to get jobs just to collect their paychecks and sow disorder. The most negative effect of this is on fellow-workers in those companies.

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From the Nepali Press

Quote of the Week

"We think foreigners are smarter"

UML general secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal in Nepal, 15 July

What is the level of foreign influence in Nepali politics?

In their interaction with our party, there is no interference. If the state is weak, it becomes vulnerable to interference. Right now Nepal is in a special situation, so international assistance is of utmost importance. But Nepalis have to make sure our country does not become a playground for foreigners. The international community’s will have more confidence in us if our actions show that there are no activities against them here.

The prime minister meets foreign envoys before making big decisions, and the parties are also meeting foreign ambassadors. I cannot answer why the prime minister is meeting the envoys. But I can say that our party is not being pressured by foreigners or seeking unsolicited advice. We may have failed to react when the envoys commented on internal affairs, especially relating to the Bhutanese refugee issue, or on our resources. But whatever we do, we have to make sure it is benefits the nation.

What was India’s role in the 12-point agreement?

I don’t know what India’s role was. I did not tell anyone in India I was talking with the Maoists. We did consult many groups in India before the meeting to make sure we would not be arrested during our meetings with the Maoists. In that sense, India helped us but the agreement took place because of our own initiative.

Why are politicians so dependent on New Delhi?

When we are weak we have to get the approval of the international community even for small changes. Sometimes we are compelled to listen because we may not use our bargaining power. We also think foreigners are smarter, stronger, and better decision-makers than us.

Was your recent trip to New Delhi in search of support?

If I have the support of Nepali people, the rest of the world will have to agree.

The UML used to call India and the US imperialist and expansionist. This is not the time to call names. We are heading towards an election, we have to cooperate, work hard to gain support. We do not want to have preconceived ideas about anyone. We will evaluate the way foreigners behave with us in a global context.

MIN BAJRACHARYA

The Nepal Army will never compromise on terrorism and extremism.

Army chief Rukmangad Katuwal in Nepal, 15 July

‘In New York dai and I walked inside a giant statue’

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Sign: Election
Red boat: Government
Orange boat: YCL

Nepal, 22 July

"We think foreigners are smarter"
Monsoon mountain madness

Being a little adventurous and less hysterical about leeches has unexpected rewards

Typically, people think of trekking in the monsoon as a pain. There are unpredictable sporadic showers that become torrential in minutes, the trails are slippery, there are landslides, and the leeches can find their way anywhere.

But there are beautiful sights you take in only during the monsoon: huge fields of blossoming wildflowers, wild mushrooms as big as your head, the mountains rising majestically from a garland of clouds.

You just have to know how to do it. Some of the many monsoon trekking routes do get more difficult at this time of the year, so added vigilance is good. And it can be hard to preserve one’s equanimity in the mud. It gets into your boots, up your pants, and in your hair if you fall. Soon, you will loathe the mud or love it. You slip, fall, get up, walk, and fall again. The cycle continues.

But the rain brings with it freshness. After a heavy rainfall, everything smells clean and in the hills, away from the stench of the city, this is invigorating and worth all the trouble. And the view. Nothing beats a monsoon view. After pouring their guts out, the clouds are faint and wispy, and rising above them the mountains look more like the mysterious abode of the gods than ever—beautiful, imposing, and pure. The fields are a patchwork of colours, with flowers of every shape, size, and hue in full bloom. The hills are a lush green, compared to the gold brown of the summer and winter.

The mud and leeches soon become minor annoyances. Even a route travelled many times before becomes fresh and new. The rain is energising, unlike the bitter cold winters, and the suffocating muggy summers.

PRANAYA SJB RANA
Ravishing rainy day routes:

Muktinath
In the monsoon, the trail from Beni to Jomsom in Nepal’s most celebrated rainshadow area is pleasantly bereft of travellers. The well-preserved villages of Marpha and Tukuche, the wide, leech-safe trail that is actually a mule highway and the looming sight of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna massifs towering 5km over you make the walk up as dramatic as Muktinath’s sacred flame. Cross the Thorong La into Manang if you want to—and it’s a pleasure in the monsoon to not have to fight the hundreds of trekkers who cross over the pass everyday in peak season—or just fly out of Jomsom.

RISHI AMATYA

Mustang
You could avoid the rain almost entirely by flying into Jomsom and heading through Upper Mustang to Lo Manthang. You might have to wade through some pretty wide streams at this time of year, but keep a sure footing and enjoy the bracing water. The magnificent Kali Gandaki keeps you company for the first two days, past Chele (3300m). Be careful from Chele to Ghemi where the rocky, narrow trail can get slippery after a rare rainfall. The next day you reach Lo Manthang (3760m), the walled capital of the Loba Bista kings that is rich in well-preserved local architecture, monasteries, and some rather curious people.

Nar Phu
The recently-opened areas of Nar and Phu valleys are perfect for the adventurous traveller. In five to seven days you get from the roadhead just past Besishahar to Phu (3761m) through increasingly rugged and uninhabited terrain. This is no apple pie trail, but the monsoon view of the 6,981m Kanguru is priceless. A one-day trip to Nar and then over the Kang La (5,240m) brings you back to the Annapurna Circuit. If you haven’t had enough, you can spend a day in Manang, then up Thorong La (5,416m), and down the other side to Muktinath. And forget about leeches at this altitude.

Gosainkunda
Less than a day’s bus ride brings you to Churikh, and from there it’s a couple of days up to the holy lake of Gosainkunda (4,000m). When the clouds give you a break, they reveal the breathtaking Ganesh range. Take a dip in the crystalline, freezing waters, feel cleansed of all sin, and then either continue northeast to the Langtang Valley and down to Kathmandu, or walk through Helambu coming down to Sundarijal in two days.
The tussles over security sector reform have only just begun

The verification of Maoist combatants, stalled for close to three weeks, is likely to resume in a few days. But the underlying problems in verification, namely the future of the people in the camps, will not go away. Neither will the bigger concerns over reform of Nepal’s security sector.

The Maoists, who say they see signs of a ‘disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration’ (DDR) in UNMIN’s verification process, want discussions to start right away on a broader and more equitable model, as they see it, of reform and restructuring of the security sector. The Maoist leadership is concerned it will have less bargaining power in the SSR process if the verification reduces the size of the PLA substantially. Military rank and size will factor in significantly in any restructuring of the security forces.

After yesterday’s Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee meeting, Maoist member Nanda Kishore Pun said his party’s “disagreement” with UNMIN would be discussed in greater detail at talks between the CPN-M and UNMIN top brass, and after extensive consultation with PLA commanders in the cantonments.

The pressure has also been mounting on the Maoist leadership from their fighters. The combatants have been living in poor and restricted camp conditions through last winter and now the monsoon, and are getting restive. The strict questioning in the verification process is not helping. “Most of our company commanders have been disqualified, and those found qualified have been categorised as recruits. They feel humiliated and degraded,” says an irked senior commander. Pun downplays the tensions within the party but admits there is a lot of “positive pressure” from the camps.

Sources in the Nepal Army and some of the parties say they are not buying the SSR model for dealing with the former PLA. A Nepali Congress leader said his party flat out rejects any suggestion of an integration of the two armies. “The Maoists have been staking claims to senior titles in the Nepal Army for their military commanders,” says a former NA major familiar with the SSR discussion, adding “That will be very hard to sell.”

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement states that the interim government must constitute a committee to deal with the fighters in the camps. Top Maoist commanders met Minister for Peace and Reconstruction on Thursday morning to ask that the already-constituted Maoist Combatant Integration and Rehabilitation Special Committee be activated.

But there are concerns that this committee too, like the other five headed by Minister Poudel—who is also second in government, his party’s general secretary, and head of the government negotiating team—will be slow to act. Critics say Poudel is overstretched, and point to the madhesi and janajati negotiations, which have been stalled for close to six weeks. “Verification may resume, but the sticking points will remain,” says an army-watch. •
Despite polls announced for 22 November, the carnival atmosphere that normally accompanies elections in the Stagnating World is noticeably absent. Fears of instability, ‘donation terror’, and YCL abuse weigh heavily on the populace, as many worry election fever could easily turn viral. With the tarai in flames, guns everywhere, and a barely functioning government it’s hard to imagine a free and fair anything taking place.

The fact that nobody understands what a ‘Constitutional Assembly Election’ actually means is the least of our worries, since it appears that the country faces a no-win dilemma however this turns out. Much of the problem lies with the reality gap between truth and propaganda. While there’s a chance the Maoist leadership can distinguish actuality from dogma and wishful thinking (though we’ve seen little evidence of this), the same cannot be said of the cadre. Any conversation with party activists reveals they are fully convinced 80 percent of the citizens back them, and that this is sure to result in a massive triumph at the polls.

In fact, all indicators point to a Maoist support level of 15 to 20 percent on a good day. This disparity between perception and reality will likely lead to trouble as the following scenarios describe:

The comrades have always employed threats and bullying to get their way and are unlikely to change tactics now. Their catchy election slogan ‘Vote for Us or Die’ has already been delivered personally to each house in the districts, and should the Maoists achieve a strong result through such coercion, the UN will notice. Reports by international observers exposing electoral fraud are sure to be rejected, the Maoists will claim historical victory, and a nasty confrontation becomes inevitable.

The next option is not much more comforting. Should the polls be held in a free and fair atmosphere, and the Maoists accrue less than 25 percent of the vote, reducing their influence from the one-third of seats they presently hold in parliament, they are sure to cry foul. Such a result may reflect the aspirations of the people but is unlikely to be accepted by the party and it will accuse royalists, regressive forces, and Foreign Hands of manipulating the vote.

Since Maoist doctrine considers elections as a bourgeois tool used to keep the people down (don’t ask me how) anyway, it will be easy for the party to backtrack on their shaky commitment to parliamentary politics. Unable to admit failure or mistakes and convinced of their role as the people’s saviour, the party’s fundamental belief that democracy is pointless will be confirmed if the voters refuse to do their bidding.

Any other reaction could lead to self-doubt and the nagging suspicion that their decade-long civil war was a colossal waste of time and lives, home truths seen as self-evident by most but still beyond the comprehension of the comrades. Whichever way it goes, the quandary remains. In one case we have the Maoists fiercely defending election results skewed in their favour through intimidation. In the other we have them rejecting with equal fervour any outcome that doesn’t meet their delusional expectations. Take your pick.
There is little in the history of liberal theory to help with immigration. As a result, in Europe and the United States, the debate over immigration is dominated by illiberal voices, the most insistent are those of politicians promising to protect the homeland’s cultural integrity against the presumed degeneracy of the alien.

**Openness is a two-way street in a liberal society**

Immanuel Kant said the circumstances in which we find ourselves must be judged against the circumstances in which, but for chance, we might have found ourselves. It is unfair that someone born in the US is likely to live longer and better than someone born in Kenya. This doesn’t mean the US must open its borders to everyone from Kenya but it does mean that a New Yorker should recognize that advantages he may have over a Nairobi are due to an accident of birth, rather than merit. From the perspective of Kantian cosmopolitanism, the least an American can do is to welcome a certain amount of immigration from Africa.

One can understand why, living in a foreign country they may perceive as hostile, some immigrants close themselves off, and that some host countries, such as France, are too busy in demanding that immigrants accept new ways of life. But living a closed life in an open society is self-defeating and not something a liberal society should encourage. An example of the cosmopolitanism bargain came in 2006, when Britain’s former foreign minister Jack Straw raised concerns about the nijab, the full-head covering worn by some Muslim women. Straw defended women’s right to wear less intrusive headscarves, but argued that something is seriously wrong when, in conversation with another person, one cannot engage in face-to-face interaction.

Straw was saying that to wear the nijab is a decision to close yourself off from those around you. He was not making a xenophobic argument that Muslims do not belong in Britain, or a multiculturalist one that Muslims be allowed wear whatever traditional garb best expresses their cultural and religious sensibilities. Nor was he asking for full assimilation of immigrants to British customs. Instead, Straw was carefully illustrating what it means to be open to others while expecting openness in return.

Some argued that Straw was interfering with religious freedom. In fact, liberal values sometimes contradict others. Islam, for example, has historically permitted certain forms of polygamy, but no liberal society is obliged to extend religious freedom in ways that undermine its commitment to gender equality. Straw pointed out that wearing the nijab is not commanded by the Koran and is a cultural choice, not a religious duty. So long as other ways are available for Muslim women to cover their heads, not wearing the nijab is a way of signalling one’s membership in a liberal society at minimal cost to one’s religious commitments.

For liberals, a society open to all would have no rights worth protecting, while a society closed to all would have no rights worth enunciating. But a liberal society will allow people in and make exceptions for conditions under which they must be kept out, not keep people out and make exceptions for when they should be allowed in. A liberal society will view the world as teeming with potential that, though threatening to ways of life taken for granted, forces people to adapt to new challenges rather than protect themselves against the foreign and unknown.

A liberal society will not focus on what we can offer immigrants, but on what they can offer us. The goal of openness implied by immigration is worth preserving, especially if both its demands and promise apply across the board. —(Project Syndicate)

Voila! The baby Radcliffe is finally an adult. Last we heard of him, he was already shedding clothes for a theatre production of Equus. In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, the fifth instalment of the omnipresent series, you can see him with a full boost of angst, and—let’s face it—testosterone.

Potter’s transformation is not subtle. In The Goblet of Fire he was still a callow, insecure wizard, looking outward for help. In The Order of the Phoenix, Harry is a teacher, a leader preparing for imminent vanguardism, whose biggest troubles are internal. New director David Yates has also given up the fanciful tricks and games of the previous instalments to focus squarely on JK Rowling’s vivid political iconography.

With the magical thrills slashed down, a lot of fans will find this film to be less of a Harry Potter experience than they are used to, and pernickety moms will probably feel alienated as the Potter enterprise disconnects from its previous innocence and playfulness. But many others are perhaps ready for this darker, danker turn. After all, we are to believe that our young hero will vanquish authoritarianism and racism in the end.

Since the return of Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes), the world of Harry Potter is troubled by increasing repression. Voldemort’s army is on the move, as the wizard government attempts to extend its executive power. Terror is pervasive and, just like in the real world, has come to bite principles such as equality and liberty in the behind. Reminiscent of any of the insidious fascist regimes of the 20th century, ‘disappearances’ galore occur and ordinary people cling on to the status quo, apathetically looking away. Epitomising this trend is the toad-faced Dark Arts teacher Dolores Umbridge, a brutal, self-assured disciplinarian (played flawlessly by Imelda Staunton). Umbridge is the most formidable character in The Order of the Phoenix, all the more creepy for an uncanny resemblance to someone you know in real life.

Rowling’s response to all this is a radical resistance. Harry and his friends’ commitment to collective action and their talk about “fighting for a cause” form an irrefutably left-leaning venture. But leftists searching for cultural icons in this gargantuan Hollywood enterprise will have to be satisfied with the knowledge that while Harry and Dumbledore could stand up against hegemony, they are hardly revolutionaries.

David Yates deserves credit for being able to keep up with Rowling’s prolific symbolism, and for not reducing them to simple binary formulas. In this regard, the choices he and screenplay adapter Michael Goldenberg made in truncating the book seem reasonable. Unfortunately, the narration is patchy and omissions glaring. The shockingly treatments of the fatality of Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) and the predicament of Cho Chang (Katie Leung), for example, speak of a negligence that makes the movie experience feel stingy. Ron (Rupert Grint) and Hermione (Emma Watson) have barely anything to do. The new characters look compelling, but again are underdeveloped.

On the whole though, the picture manages to sustain the Harry Potter allure. And even if by itself The Order of the Phoenix isn’t an outstanding piece of work, it does triumphantly pique one’s interest about future instalments (and of course the final book coming out tomorrow).

EXHIBITIONS
 pä Amalgam a group exhibition of paintings by national and international artists at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal
 Revisited, 20 July-20 August, 11AM-6PM, 4218048
 pä Heartbeat Series a group art exhibition by 12 young artists, 14.30 PM till 2 August at Bagyo Fiesta, Nagald, 9811002929

EVENTS
 pä Freedom Writers starring Hilary Swank and Patrick Dempsey, 20 July, 6.45PM at Lazimpit Gallery Cafe, 4428549
 pä Grand Yathung Horse racing festival, part of Destination Manang 2007, till 22 July in Manang, 4428463
 pä 7th Bagmati River Festival heritage walk along the river starting from Kalmoghan Ghat, Tiku, 25 July, and clean-up campaign at Chobar, 28 July, 7-10AM, 9811031431
 pä HIV and AIDS: a social issue a Youth Initiative workshop, 26 July, 10AM-5PM at PJC, Heritage Plaza, Kathmandu. Rs 100, 23 July deadline. 4107599
 pä School Bullying a workshop by Niti Rana, 28 and 29 July at The New Era, Battispulati, 9811023958
 pä Pottery classes one month course in coil and slab methods and two month course in wheel work, starting 1 August. 9851101857
 pä Film South Asia Festival Asian documentaries, 11-14 October. www.fimsouthasia.org
 pä Toastmasters a communication and leadership program, organised by Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDD) building, Tripureswor.

MUSIC
 pä Moha live presents Inner Groove and friends, 20 July, 8.30 PM at the Moksh Bar, Pulchock. 9812603212
 pä Free music workshop by KCJ faculty, 21 July, 1PM at Gyanodaya College, Jhamkhel. 5528362
 pä Jazz at Jatra every Saturday 7PM onwards, at Jatra Cafe and Bar, Thamel.
 pä Soul of Naga live classical and fusion music, every Friday night at Nhucreta’s Kitchen, The Organic Bistro. 4499003.
 pä Open mic night at Via Via Cafe, every Friday, 8PM onwards.
 pä Live music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yurk and Zigma Lepcha, 4410707
 pä Cinem Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar. Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
 pä DJ Raju and the Cloudwalkers live at the Rux Bar, Hyatt Regency, every Friday and Saturday. 4491234

DINING
 pä Starry night BBQ with live music by Ciney Gurung at The Shambhala Garden Cafe, Hotel Shangri-La, every Friday 7PM, Rs 666 inclusive of a beer. 4412999
 pä 5th Annual Monsoon Wine Festival 16 wines at Rs 150 a glass and Rs 1,000 a bottle, at Kilty’s of Kathmandu, Thamel. 4259040.
 pä Monsoon Magic live jazz by Inner Groove and a variety of cocktails from the summer special menu, every Wednesday, Rs 599 at Fusion – the Bar at Dwarika’s. 4497448
 pä Friday evening BBQ with live music, at the Hotel Himalaya, 7PM, Rs 499 net. 5529003
 pä Wall and lunch every Saturday at the Shivaiput Heights Cottage. 9841371927
 pä Fresh summer bites salads, soups, sandwiches, and sorbets at Hotel Shangri-La daily 12-3PM and 6-9PM. 9882683.
 pä Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841296019
 pä Krishnarpan live at the Hotel Narayani Complex, starting 1 August, Rs 666 inclusive of a beer. 4412999
 pä Weekend special with sekuwa, bara, barbeque, Fridays at Ambassador Garden House, Lazimpit. 5.30 PM onwards. 441706
 pä Flavours of the Middle East every Friday and the taste of Thailand every Wednesday at The Cafe, Hyatt Regency, Boudha. 4491234
 pä Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate cold beet meals at La Soo, Pulchok, behind the Egyptian embassy. 5537166
 pä Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kilty’s, Thamel. 4259040
 pä Smorgasbord lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4372260
 pä Retro brunch barbecue with Crossfire Band at Le Meridien, Gokarna from 12-4PM, Rs 1,000 including swimming. 4451212
 pä Caflotta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
 pä Woodfired pizzas at the Roadhouse Cafe, Thamel 4262768, Bhadrahati 425857 and Pulchock 5521755
 pä Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519
 pä Jazzzbel cafe enjoy great food, exotic cocktails and music, Chalukpat, Patan. 3110757

GETAWAYS
 pä Weekend package at Le Meridien Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,888 and one night two days at Rs 4,444, 4451212
 pä Wet and wild package at Godawari Resort, every Saturday and Sunday, unlimited swimming, buffet lunch with a beer, Rs 699. 5590976
 pä Monsoon madness two nights three days package at Rs 9999 for a couple at Shankar-la Village, Pokhara. 4412999

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

Harry Potter returns for his fifth year at Hogwarts still shaken by the tragedy of the previous year’s Triwizard Tournament. With the Ministry of Magic denying the truth about Lord Voldemort’s (Ralph Fiennes) return, Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) has come under suspicion from the wizarding community. As Harry struggles with the truth about Lord Voldemort’s (Ralph Fiennes) return, he tries to learn more about the mysterious Order of the Phoenix and their role in the fight against the Dark Lord.

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Weekend Weather
It's a tragic monsoon irony—a series of cloudbursts kills 50 people in west Nepal the same week farmers in other parts of the country are desperately wishing for rain. The Valley has already been drenched just a third of its usual July quota so far. Thursday afternoon's satellite picture suggests that respite is on its way. The low-pressure trough over the Bay is being charged and the moisture-rich clouds of the system should pass through the foothills, bringing vigorous rain along the southern Mahabharat and those parts of the midhills that remain thirsty. The Valley will probably receive a significant portion of its July quota of moisture in the coming week. Expect muggy days and temporary showers punctuated by scorching sun.
HAPPENINGS

NATIONAL MOURNING: Sushila Koirala, wife of the late BP Koirala, passed away on Friday. Those who paid their respects spanned the political spectrum, and included Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula and Speaker Subhas Nembang.

LONG WAY TO GO: Jagadish Pokhrel, vice chair of the National Planning Commission, releases the UNDP report on Millennium Development Goals, Progress and Challenges in South Asia, 2007 on Friday. He is flanked by Junko Sazaki, acting resident coordinator of UNDP (right) and Frances Turner, deputy regional director of UNICEF ROSA.

TALK SHOP: Addressing the Constituent Assembly Discussion Group about the challenges ahead were Ian Martin, CP Mainali, Anil Jha, CP Gajurel, Lila Mani Pokharel, Bimalendra Nidhi, and Jhalanath Khanal. Kanak Mani Dixit moderated, at Yala Maya Kendra on Thursday evening.

HALF-FREE: Kamaiyas freed seven years ago protesting that the land and employment long promised to them has still not materialised, at the Malligara Mandala on Wednesday.

GET YOURS NOW: The post-SLC rush by colleges to admit students was at its peak on Friday despite a partial banda.
The only thing more embarrassing than not being able to appoint Nepali ambassadors for over a year is the fact that we still don’t have a national anthem. So, while the Marseilles played at the Bastille Day celebrations last week, we didn’t have our own anathema. No one listens to us Asses, but in a previous column we had recommended announcing Resam Firiri as our interim anthem at least until Byakul Maila’s lyrics are put into song. But given the vacillation on ambassadorships, how can one be sure the eight parties will like the new national tune and actually adopt it?

Anyone who was stranded last week at the airport because of the lightning strike by taxi drivers will have used a lot of bad words unprintable here (like *&% of a $#@+ or even ?^&~=*) to describe the drivers of the 50-year-old taxis who blocked the entrance to the country’s only international aviation gateway. One of Kathmandu’s major tourist attractions are these vintage Datsuns and antique Toyopets which charge you an arm and a leg to take you downtown, unless of course you lose some more limbs along the way.

The Ass has uncovered the real reason: the government wants to scrap the taxis, but the owners want to buy non-Indian brand taxis above 1,000 cc for the same duty waiver as Indian-made Marutis get. So the fight is between powerful lobbies of Japanese and Korean cars against the even more powerful importers of Indian cars.

If this is what they do over cars, imagine what will happen when the dogfight between Airbus and Boeing really starts over Nepal Airline’s fleet expansion plans: pilots parking their planes haphazardly all over the runway to shut the airport down? Anything is possible in the New Nepal.

Among the people who were stuck at the airport last Friday were various arriving and departing Kathmandu-based dips, peacekeepers, warmongers and our very own Matrika Yadav. The Ass has given the Deforestation Minister a lot of grief in the past months over his affinity for logging, but the man deserves a medal for refusing to fly business class to and from Bangkok on his health checkup. Comrades Blooming Lotus and Red Flag had no such qualms on their recent jaunts to Switzerland and Norway, nor Comrade Ananta to Hong Kong. Wonder, though, if Matrika’s was put off by the fact that Thai calls the front of its plane ‘Royal Orchid’. Being the champions of national capitalists, maybe the entire politburo should now stop driving around in stolen Boleros and switch to Made in Biratnagar Hulas Sherpa SUVs (also known as ‘Nepali Humvees’).

The other folks complaining about having to use Tata Pickups instead of Toyota Landcruisers are UN arms monitors. On one particularly hot afternoon somewhere in the southwestern sector recently, UNMIN staff actually took their eyes off the CCTV cameras to emerge from their air-conditioned trailers to admire a convoy of Japanese automatic suspension 4WDs belonging to INGOs.

It’s business-as-usual in the four-star party. Looks like efforts to unite the party by BP Day on the 21st is coming to nought mainly because GP can’t forgive The Sher for doublecrossing him, and joining Gyancha in 2002.

Over at Balkhu HQ Makunay survived his party’s CentCom meeting despite Jhallu’s spirited effort to dislodge him. Guess what they were arguing about: Makunay had analysed that Nepal’s polity was divided into four groups: royalists, capitalists, lefties, and ultras. Jhallu’s take was there are only three groups and that the Maoists are also socialists. Comrade ‘Leftist God’ Bam Deb disagreed with both and postulated that Nepalis are either republicans or monarchists. Given the number of pure bajes in the UML politburo it’s not surprising they’re splitting hairs.

Resam Firiri

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