When the going gets tough...

Will the tough get going?

JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI in MAHOTTARI

The only people who say elections can't be held in the tarai are looking for an excuse to defer polls again. That is the prevalent feeling in the madness. The plains may be ravaged by floods and communal extremism, but the situation didn’t seem as precarious as it is made out to be in the Kathmandu press.

“The elections are possible, I now have my citizenship papers and I’m ready to vote,” says Behsan Mukhiya, a Janakpur rickshaw puller. The Election Commission is in place, and UNMIN observers have arrived.

“We are ready,” says Janak Kama of the Election Commission’s Dhanusha unit, who is starting a voters’ education program 18 August-18 October. “But none of the parties have come to ask us about procedures.”

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Local politicians say the floods have delayed things but they intend to plunge headlong into campaigning once relief operations are over. Aid agencies are worried about the difficulty in getting aid to submerged VDCs because of local political interference.

Indeed, the lack of flood relief is of more serious concern at present than security. “Sure there is a climate of fear,” says Janakpur resident Hari Katwal, “but it’s not as bad as it is portrayed in the news.”

“Only well-off pahadis are leaving the tarai, Katuwal says, others aren’t. Janakpur municipality has a population of about 1,05,000 of which roughly 22,000 are of hill origin. Local officials say most of them have no intention of going anywhere.

High-profile kidnappings and assassinations of pahades makes the militant groups look stronger than they actually are,” says a security officer. Threats are made by phone but many have defied them and stayed on without consequences.

(See p8-9)

“There is no communal animosity between the two communities,” insists the UML’s Jha. Local police confirm this, but say they haven’t been able to act on criminal gangs with links to militant groups because Kathmandu doesn’t give them the authority or werewithal.

EDITORIAL

Fleeing the flood After the deluge

Even those who were sceptical about elections being held in November said repolling or phased voting may be required in Siraha and Saptari. Despite the highway blockades, violence, and floods, the tarai seems more eager to vote than people in Kathmandu.

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will be charged.
A far as Kathmandu is concerned, Nepal’s elections allow an urban bias. Indians, talk like Indians, behave like Indians, are pro-Indian. And some would even go so far as to say they are Indians.

What they don’t know is that there is actually resentment in the tani against the Indian government. The madness relationship with India is complex and multi-layered. Madhesis have kinship, cultural, linguistic ties, a hashe-bhise relationship with folks across the border.

And across the border in India there may be begnary sympathy for the madheshi cause, but this has not translated into active support. Indian policymakers do not want the madhesh movement to get internationalised. Even if they would prefer a snappy solution.

Madheshi nepal has never supported them in their struggle for rights, from the days of Vedanand Jha’s Nepal Tamil Congress in the 1950s to the present agitation. They believe New Delhi has taken them for granted, and always used them as a bargaining chip with pahadi rulers in Kathmandu. From Birkanthakar to Bipan, it is common to hear people gripe about India’s unhelpful attitude.

Your editorial ‘No turning back’ is correct when he says that the tarai movement has frustrated the tarai public. The tarai movement has triggered a whole range of new political parties and organisations that are now active in the tarai.

The economic assistance to Nepal was never used its enormous leverage in India’s policy on tarai. Now the Indian media is spelling out the need for a new constitution.

The political situation in Nepal is complex and multi-layered. There are many political parties and organisations that are active in the tarai. The Nepal government has never supported the madheshi cause, and the new constitution is yet to be finalised.

The madhesi perception of India is not what we think it is. The madhesi perception is that India has always been a hindrance to the madhesi cause. The new constitution is yet to be finalised, and the political situation in Nepal is complex and multi-layered.

Direct routes across and understand the issues. There were solid reasons in making the movement, local logisticians continue to voice their support and may have helped madheshi armed groups to gain momentum.

In Patna and Lucknow, awareness of the madhesi issue is increasing, and Madhesis and bureaucrats term madhesi as people of Indian origin. Madheshi outfits have lobbied with politicians across the spectrum, from the ruling JD (United)-BJP coalition to the Samajwadi Party. This has been sympathetic, but there are few signs of active political or financial support by state politicians or governments to madheshi groups.

South Block is anxious. Foreign policy mandarins do not want to see the peace process destabilised. India has invested a lot in the present approachment and Delhi diplomats are more imitated than anything else at this complication. They think the government has bunged up on tani and the fractured nature of madhesis politics do not allow India to benefit.

Indian diplomats are telling the madhesi groups that if they want support, they must form a common understanding and most of the constituent assembly elections. At the same time, there are reports of intelligence agencies keeping channels of communication open with the armed madhesi groups. It is difficult to claim that the government has not translated into support to them.
Polls or bust

Elections will address economic inequality

Persistent political inequality even after the restoration of democracy was what led to the demand for state restructuring. The constituent assembly to be elected in November will have to do much more than decide the fate of a discredited and defunct monarchy.

Frames of our new constitution will have to begin by examining the very organisation of the state. Nepal has been unitary for nearly two-and-a-half centuries and a smooth switchover to a federal structure will need some ingenuity.

Then there are longstanding issues of social exclusion based on caste and creed or gender. There are regional, ethnic, linguistic and cultural aspirations. In their obsession with the past, none of the mainstream parties seem to be aware of the challenges ahead.

If a framework of restrained contestations and consensual decision-making isn’t agreed upon in advance, constituent assembly will end up being a fractious body instead of a uniting one.

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Polls or bust
According to a report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), income inequality in Asian countries has increased over the past decade or so in 15 of the 21 countries it has studied. The three main exceptions are Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the countries worst hit by the 1997 financial crisis. The biggest increases in inequality were in China, Nepal, and Cambodia.

Income inequality is usually measured by a country’s Gini coefficient, in which 0 is perfect equality (everyone has the same income) and 1 is perfect inequality (i.e., one household takes everything). China’s Gini coefficient rose from 0.41 in 1993 to 0.47 in 2004, the highest in Asia after Nepal. High and rising inequality played a big role in Nepal’s recent troubles. Rumblings of discontent across the region suggest governments cannot afford to ignore such risks.

On this measure, China has more income inequality than America (whose Gini coefficient is 0.46). Governments in Beijing and elsewhere in Asia like to comfort themselves with the thought that they still have less inequality than Latin America does. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico all have Gini coefficients of considerably over 0.5. Brazil’s is 0.57.

This suggests inequality in many Asian countries could now be matching Latin American levels if measured on a comparable basis. The figures in the chart are for 2004, but inequality has been rising in China, while in Brazil it has been falling over the past decade. Assuming this trend has continued, China’s inequality may be as great as Brazil’s already.

Moreover, in some Asian countries, expenditure figures may underestimate the true extent of inequality. India’s Gini coefficient is in the lower half of the chart, yet health and education measures suggest the country suffers from wide disparities. In the richest 20 percent of households, only 5 percent of children are severely underweight, compared with 28 percent in the poorest 20 percent—a wider gap than in countries which have higher Gini coefficients.

The main cause of increased inequality is the differing fortunes of rural and urban households. A second factor is the widening gap between those with and without skills.

Does rising inequality matter so long as poverty is falling? It is clear that Asia’s poor have not been bypassed by growth—popular claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Even where inequality has increased sharply, the poorest 20 percent of households are still better off in real terms than they were ten years ago everywhere except in Pakistan. The number of people living on less than $1 a day has fallen everywhere except in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Indeed, poverty has fallen by much more in some countries with high and rising inequality than in more egalitarian ones. The share of India’s population living on less than $1 a day fell from 42 percent in 1993 to 35 percent in 2004. China saw a sharper fall, from 28 percent to 11 percent, largely thanks to faster growth.

But even if poverty has continued to fall despite rising inequality, it may not have dropped as fast as it might have if economic gains had been more equally distributed. The other main reason to worry about widening inequality, says the ADB, is that it can threaten growth if it results in social unrest.

What to do?

Populist measures to soak the rich are not the answer: they would stunt growth. The ADB instead recommends governments focus on policies that lift the incomes of the poor, such as improving rural access to health, education, and social protection. More investment in rural infrastructure could boost productivity in farming and increase job opportunities for the poor.

But that is easier said than done. Rajiv Gandhi famously remarked that only 15 percent of government money intended for India’s poor ever reached them. Most of it leaks out in bureaucratic incompetence or corruption— fattening the wallets of those who are already well-to-do. (The Economist)
THT and AP are back

The Himalayan Times and Annapurna Post returned Thursday after Maoists disrupted the distribution of the papers and even entered the newsroom to physically threaten reporters. The closure triggered an unprecedented solidarity from newspapers Thursday after Maoists disrupted the distribution of the papers and even entered the newsroom to physically threaten reporters. The closure triggered an unprecedented solidarity from newspapers across South Asia. In Nepal, every disaster brings in its wake an opportunity to amass funds.

The Himalayan Times, Annapurna

WLC in Nepal

Newspapers from Bhaktapur to Kathmandu also supported the strike and praised the Editors’ Alliance for taking a bold stand. MRP, a pressure group of non-media investors, said they would not buy the papers until they were met or not.

Meanwhile, ten editors of THT, Annapurna Post, Kantipur, The Kathmandu Post, Samaya, Nepal Image Channel, Nepal Samacharpatrika, Himal Khabarpatrika and Nepal Times have set up a pressure group called the Editors’ Alliance to defend press freedom.

ECONOMIC SENSE

Artha Beed

There is a flash flood of flood relief donation drives in the streets of Kathmandu. Many of them are self-declared good samaritans who have left paying jobs, colleges, and politics to raise money for flood victims. All very well and good.

The Fund must be managed more transparently and be freed from the fingers of politicians. The people of Nepal are owed this information from the trustees of this fund, they need to be told about the procedures for allocations, how one is eligible to apply and so forth. At the moment contributing to the Prime Minister’s Fund is like pouring water on the sand.

Some have pre-invested a part of the proceeds into getting matching caps and jackets. Others have printed receipts. Brokering relief has always been a money spinner for governments across South Asia. In Nepal, every disaster brings in its wake an opportunity to amass funds.

The focus is on how to collect the funds, not really on spending it properly. The government, of course, sets the example by showing how one can amass money in the name of relief and use it for purposes that have nothing to do with the disaster for which the money was created.

The apex fund for disaster relief in Nepal is the Prime Minister’s Natural Disaster Relief Fund, which is supposed to distribute the charity to the neediest. Contributions to this fund even enjoy tax breaks making it the most devious route of contribution.

However, till today, we haven’t heard about incoherences and disbursements and to whom. The Beed is given to understand that this Fund is used to dole out pork-barrel funds to political cronies and withdrawals are made in cash. We are waiting to see audited results of the Fund and potential corroboration of data from recipients to check whether the intended purpose was met or not.

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Relief operations require a lot of coordination, and as Nepalis we have a profound dislike towards coordinated efforts. We do not have a nodal agency that has the competency in managing relief. While the Red Cross Society is there politics and infighting in even that non-profit makes one wonder what makes positions in that supposed charity organisation so lucrative.

There is no use trotting up the excuse that even the US government was blamed for relief post-Hurricane Katrina. There are two sets of problems for Nepal’s relief ‘business’:

a) the growing tendency of using manmade or natural disasters as an excuse to collect money. We can’t turn brokering death and destruction into a job.

b) If this is what we do with a flood that killed 95 imagine what we would do if the Big One struck.

c) Last Saturday, as kids put strings and ropes across Kathmandu’s alleys to forcibly collect donations to lay the mythical demon Ghantakarna to rest, others were stopping vehicles for flood relief.

If it’s this easy to make money, why work for a living? www.artabeed.com
As a photographer, I usually don’t write much, preferring to use pictures. But a recent incident has filled me with so much anger and disgust that I felt I was compelled to write.

As I was heading to work at 11AM on Wednesday, a group of YCL fighters blocked my path in the middle of the road in Lekhnath. They got me after I showed my press pass and managed to reach Koteshwor. There, a furious YCL guerrilla turned towards me as if it was his enemy. “We actually don’t want a Kantipur journalist to pass through,” he spat, “you better get off your motorcycle and walk.” Around me, others had also been forced to walk since none of them had heard of this sudden strike called by the Maoists. After walking about 200 metres, another YCL let me get back on my bike.

Years ago, I had to go through a similar experience during the king’s rule and I brought bad memories. We then had to go through such humiliating experiences at the hands of the security forces in those days, forced to tow our motorcycles past security checkpoints.

At the office, I tried to figure out the differences between these two incidents but found none. The behaviour of the king’s soldiers and the YCL was identical. The same arrogance and rudeness and disregard for the hardships of ordinary people.

During the king’s repressive regime, the newspaper used to treat Kantipur as its own while railing against the king’s repressions. Now we are considered their enemies because we report excesses like this. Their disdain for a free press, what is the difference between Prachandapath and Gyanendrapath?

Chandra Shekhar Karki in Kantipur, 15 August

Editorial in Kantipur, 13 August

More than 15 percent workers to remain on strike with various media houses that treat these journalists as bonded labourers. Among the reasons for the strike is that their owners have not addressed issues like the moratorium tax, the so-called manager, Birendra Dahal has accused the group of unfair treatment by the Maoists, who claim there is Indian agitation in Nepal. The Maoists have filed a habeas corpus case against him. “We had informed the Indian police about those who had fled across the border, but they weren’t handed over to us. On Prakash’s faces criminal charges in Nepal. The Maoists have filed a habeas corpus case against him.”

The Maoists have blamed YCL and have called for the murder of their regional bureau member and YCL central member Biplav and district leaders Mani Bajracharya. They were killed on 13 June in the Marshahar area of the district. The same day also saw the two of them being hidden in India for some time to coordinate the madhesi agitation in Nepal. The Maoists, who claim there is an Indian influence in the madhesi uprising, have now more reason to believe. Maoists leader Pampha Bhusal has proved it’s true.”

According to Bhusal, the Maoists have been in India for some time to coordinate the madhesi agitation in Nepal. The Maoists, who claim there is an Indian influence in the madhesi uprising, have now more reason to believe. Maoists leader Pampha Bhusal has proved it’s true.”

The murder of a Maoists youth leader in broad daylight had joined the Maoists leadership and they had taken it up with the home minister. The Maoists say that the recent amendment, but the media treated like labourers are happy about the recent amendment, but the media houses that treat these journalists as bonded labourers are obviously not so thrilled. In fact, they fear that they will now lose their commercial advantage, which is why they are saying that freedom of press is under attack so that the attention is diverted somewhere else. When reporters at Kathmandu’s HBC FM demanded that the provisions of the bill be implemented, the managers of the FM used the strike as an excuse, accused the Maoists for provoking the workers and the so-called manager, Birendra Dahal went on a hunger strike.

The Act allows working journalists to start trade unions in their media houses, prohibits employing journalists without appointment letters, and does not allow more than 15 percent workers to remain under contract. When the journalists asked for their rights, the media houses say that press freedom is under attack, go to the prime minister and sensationalise the issue.

Acting president of the Revolutionary Journalist Union Gebrinda Acharya says the owners of media houses are spreading rumours about press freedom being under attack, so that the main issue is not discussed. Meanwhile, general secretary of the Working Journalists Union has said that although the passing of the act was a positive step, workers’ discrimination by their owners has still not been addressed.

The agitating workers at HBC FM say that if the provisions of the Working Journalists Act are implemented, they will resume their work. The groups have brought their 18-point demand down to nine points and have clarified that they have not padlocked the news section, just the FM administration section. Similarly when The Himalayan Times and Annapurna Post went on strike demanding increase in salary, identification card be given to the workers, instead of listening to their demands the media house filed an executive with the police and had those who were protesting arrested. It is clear from this move by the APACA House that the owners are not keen on implementing the Act. Workers of Nepal One went on strike with the demands in June, and their demands are yet to be fulfilled. During such uncertain times the Federation of Nepalese Journalists is working against the workers, which has angered many working journalists.

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As we fell off.
1. After the Gaur incident the party failed to make a coordinated effort between struggle and compromise. This was a major mistake.

2. While compromising with the seven parties, the people should’ve been kept abreast of the situation. On the issues of federal set-up and proportional representation, the party failed to communicate its struggles with the seven parties. Especially in madhes, region ten and the opportunists used that weakness to their advantage.

3. After the induction in the interim parliament and the government, the party failed to do enough homework and preparations to ensure that the people were being helped.

4. Similarly, there were weaknesses in internal and external communication, madhes, and in economic sector.

**Maoist paradox**

**Dhankuta, 14 August**

The contradictions in the Maoist line:

- Abandon violence
  - Use threats and violence
- Peaceful transformation
  - Threaten to return to jungle
- Keep the PLA in camps
  - Keep military wing active
- Committed to CA
  - CA won’t happen
- CA decides on monarchy
  - Declare republic before CA
- Stay in government
  - Quit government
- Insist on proportional representation
  - Oppose proportional system
- Mobilise army against madhes uprising
  - Against army bodyguards
- Label India ‘expansionist’
  - Meet Indians in Siliguri
- For ceasefire and peace process
  - For ‘urban uprising’
- Decision-making with Congress
  - Left party unity

**Provocations**

Main news in Janakpur Today, 12 August

In the capital’s New Baneswor chok, some anti-social elements targeted madhesi entrepreneurs and looted their shops. According to UML Dhanusha leader Chandrahdev Rawat at around 5:30 in the evening, a group of robbers in the hundreds, looted and mercilessly beat madhesis. Rawat, who claims to be an eye-witness, said the group has been active for some time and that it has been targeting madhesi community. Pro-palace forces are trying disrupt the polls by stoking communal fires, Rawat said, adding that if madhesis are mistreated in Kathmandu, there could be reprisals in tarai. The leaders and activists of The Chure Bhabar Ekata Samaj who are in the capital, are believed to behind such incidents.

**QUOTE OF THE WEEK**

“The politicians have only paid lip-service to the problems of the indigenous people.”

National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities’ Om Gurung, in an interview with Budhabar, 15 August

**Maoist paradox**

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FLOOD OF 2007

After the deluge

ARUNA UPRETY in MAHOTTARI

The dalit families have been living on road embankments ever since the flood waters inundated their homes in this eastern tarai district two weeks ago. They had just started going back to their homes when the floods receded on Wednesday. The CDO was here to distribute blue plastic sheets, and tried to get them to move back so the children would not get hit by passing trucks. But the villagers were reluctant to go back because their houses have been washed off, or they are near collapse.

“Dalits are the last to receive relief,” says a resident. “We are used to living on roadsides, so we try to live here.”

New Round

Santosh Jha of Tulsiyahi Jabdi VDC was marooned with his wife and three children in his house for over two weeks. His house is badly damaged, crops are washed away, and the granary destroyed.

As the immediate emergency recedes, a food and health crisis is erupting. “There is food only for five more days, my roof is leaking, and my house is about to collapse,” laments 30-year-old Jha. Children are falling sick due to contaminated water.

The real crisis begins after the flood waters recede

Now that the flood waters are receding, it is disease and hunger that are of immediate concern. But the villagers also need to rebuild their houses and their landlords are willing to loan them money at 36 percent interest.

The villagers didn’t know about the government’s announced grants scheme under which they are entitled to Rs 15,000 if the houses are completely destroyed and Rs 5,000 if partially destroyed. The water from the Musteri, Mandir, and Tomati streams is reported to be contaminated, and the women are boiling the water before drinking it.

A three-month old baby of another destitute family nearby is being bottle-fed because her mother is sick. Flies are swarming all over the nipple of the bottle which is lying on the ground. The child’s 13-year-old sister is baby-sitting and puts the bottle in the baby’s mouth so she’ll stop crying.

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The priority here is shelter, food, medicines, credit and long-term flood mitigation,” says the head of an NGO here, “please don’t send us what we don’t need. And don’t forget that the real misery begins when the waters recede, when the floods are not in the headlines anymore.”

The waters have not extinguished the fire

JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI in DHANUSHA

These are the worst floods in living memory. And just as the waters receded and people starting going back to their homes, there was another wave of flooding early this week. Bad weather and flooded roads hamper relief, but it is the security situation that is worrying relief officials.

“It should be distributed solely on the basis of need, independently of all political, communal and other considerations.”

The UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) which has pledged food for 60,000 people in the worst affected VDCs for three months says Nepal Red Cross is having problems with delivery.

“If we don’t get safe and unhindered access, we will be unable to provide much needed food assistance,” WFP’s Nepal director Richard Ragan said Thursday.

Santosh Jha of Tulsiyahi Jabdi VDC was marooned with his wife and three children in his house for over two weeks. His house is badly damaged, crops are washed away, and the granary destroyed.

As the immediate emergency recedes, a food and health crisis is erupting. “There is food only for five more days, my roof is leaking, and my house is about to collapse,” laments 30-year-old Jha. Children are falling sick due to contaminated water.
are leading the relief efforts, have finally reached Jha’s village. They seem to be doing their best, but in most places the relief arrived only on 8 August, nearly a month after the floods first struck the eastern tarai. “It is true, the help arrived late,” admits rescue and relief coordinator, Rajan Ghimire of Caritas, “in many places it was just impossible to get to.”

Eighty percent of the farms in Dhanusa and Mahottari have been washed off. Some farmers want to salvage this year’s monsoon season and replant rice, but there is a scarcity of seedlings. Relief efforts have also been hampered by the eight parties’ political King and dysfunctional inter-agency coordination. Political parties are pressuring relief workers to list their own constituents as “flood affected” which entitles villagers to government compensation of up to Rs 10,000 each.

At one eight-party and inter-government agency meeting in Jaleswor, the CDO’s relief efforts were at the mercy of a Department of Roads engineer who wouldn’t build even one diversion. Another engineer at the Waterborne Disaster Center told the meeting he couldn’t repair the embankments without approval from Kathmandu. Armed groups in the tarai continued to threaten government staff, and civil servants use that as the excuse not to do anything.

Heavy rainfall was only one of the causes of the floods. Deforestation in the Chure silted up the river beds, making them overflow. New roads and irrigation canals that cut east-west across the plains act as dams impounding water for weeks on end. “Riverbeds are rising every year and in many places they have risen higher than the farms on either side,” says Dhanusa CDO Ram Sharan Chimoriya.

As narrated by Uddhab Khadka to Rupa Joshi on returning from a monitoring trip to Kailali district last week, Khadka is senior program assistant with UNICEF Nepal.

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M athura Pariyar, 28, a week away from childbirth, was tending her two girls in the village of Thapapur in Kailali when flood waters crept into the village. It had been raining incessantly for days and the nearby river was rising. Even when they were knee-deep the villagers didn’t want to leave their homes. They piled cots and secured sleeping babies and children so that they would not fall into the water.

By morning the water was up to Mathura’s waist. It had leaked into the granary and was gnawing away at the mud walls of their house. That is when the families decided to leave for higher ground. Mathura, heavily pregnant, gathered her girls and started wading towards Bhajani village, a day’s walk away.

The villagers took whatever they could carry on their heads, on bicycles or bullock carts. Those who left early could take their livestock too. Those who waited too long lost their animals.

When Mathura reached Bhajani she found more than 300 other families already there. She found a small spot inside Classroom No 9 of the Mahanail Higher Secondary School where a dozen other families were crammed. Livestock were tethered to trees in the school playground.

A week after her arrival at the school, Mathura gave birth to a baby girl. Laxmi Shah, a Female Community Health Volunteer from Thapapur had also fled the flood and urged Mathura to go to the health post for delivery, but Mathura wanted to be with her family. The baby was Mathura’s fourth offspring, her son and husband are away working in Mumbai.

When we arrived four days later, Mathura was weak with malnutrition and we tried to convince her to go to the health post, but she was worried about leaving her two girls behind. While the women stayed at the school, the men made multiple trips to their submerged village salvaging what they could.

When we left her, Mathura was weak and anemic. She wasn’t producing enough milk to breastfeed her baby. Her hands and feet were swollen, and her lips looked pale. Like the other women at Classroom No. 9, she was waiting for the flood waters to recede so she could get back home.

As narrated by Uddhab Khadka to Rupa Joshi on returning from a monitoring trip to Kailali district last week.
Revolt is not reform
Convert popular anger into good government

The political change in April 2006 was a revolt that reflected the Nepalese people’s mounting frustration with the lack of progress in political, social, and economic development of the country. Yet, fifteen months after the event, one can’t shake a feeling that things have slid back to the old ways. How to convert popular anger into good government?

Where will the sustained energy to establish transparency and accountability in politics and government come from? There are two: communities and leadership. In Nepal, many community-based programs have delivered impressive development results: community forestry, women’s groups, community-based rural drinking water programs, micro-hydro projects, community management of schools, and the Poverty Alleviation Fund.

This is not to say such programs have been free from elite capture and exclusion of certain groups, but overall results have been impressive. But such programs are critical not only for development in a narrow sense, but also for a more profound social transformation. In fact, that is probably why they work well. In a typical community-based program, a user group is formed. It receives a block grant from the government or a donor agency, mobilises its own resources, makes a collective decision on creation of public goods, and executes the project.

What fascinates me is that this is precisely what a local government is designed to do. The only difference is it seems to work even better, though on a much smaller scale. CDCs and VDCs have not been able to mobilise much in the way of local taxes, many user groups have been very successful in doing so. This difference is telling.

Many Nepalis are not sure their taxes will benefit them through public services. But, the members of many user groups are confident that their common investment will benefit them because they must feel they have the power to hold leaders accountable.

In short, such a user group is a functioning micro-government, and there are thousands of them across Nepal. At higher levels of government, public common citizens are still unable to overcome the old system of hierarchy and patronage. That should not be surprising in a society that is bound by centuries of feudal traditions. So, why not start the process of establishing democracy from where it actually works?

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India’s thali democracy

At 60, India’s castes, creeds, colours, cultures, cuisines, convictions, costumes, and customs rally around a democratic consensus

T

the India that emerged from the wreckage of the British Raj is the world’s largest democracy, poised after years of rapid economic growth to take its place as one of the great powers of the twenty-first century. A country whose very survival seemed in doubt at its founding offers striking lessons in constructing, against all odds, a working democracy.

No other country endorses such an extraordinary profusion of ethnic groups, mutually incomprehensible languages, religions, and cultural practices, as well as variations of topography, climate, and levels of economic development.

In 1947, India’s leaders faced a country with a million dead, 13 million displaced, billions of rupees worth of property damage, and the wounds of sectarian violence still bleeding.

But India made a strength out of its major weakness. Instead of suppressing its diversity in the name of national unity, India acknowledged its pluralism in its name of national unity, India suppressing its diversity in the face of its major weakness. Instead of suppressing its diversity in the name of national unity, India suppressed its diversity in the face of its major weakness. Instead of suppressing its diversity in the name of national unity, India suppressed its diversity in the face of its major weakness. Instead of suppressing its diversity in the name of national unity, India suppressed its diversity in the face of its major weakness.

This wasn’t always easy.

India never forgot that he derived his power from India’s people, to whom he remained astonishingly accessible.

It helped that India’s founding fathers, from Mahatma Gandhi on, were convinced democrats.

It helped that India’s founding fathers, from Mahatma Gandhi on, were convinced democrats. India’s first and longest-serving prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, spent his political career instilling in his people the habits of democracy: disdain for dictators, respect for parliamentary procedures, and abiding faith in the constitutional system.

For example, on the occasion that he publicly criticized a judge, he apologized the next day and wrote an abject letter to India’s Chief Justice.

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Democracy in India is not an elite preoccupation, but matters most to the underprivileged masses. As a result, the explosive potential of caste division also has been channeled through the ballot box, with the lowest of the low attaining high office.

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By his personal example, democratic values became so entrenched that when his own daughter, Indira Gandhi, suspended India’s freedoms in 1975 with a 21-month State of Emergency, she felt compelled to return to the Indian people for vindication. Having imbibed the most important of her father’s values, she held a free election, which she overwhelmingly lost.

Democracy in India is not an elite preoccupation, but matters most to the underprivileged masses. As a result, the explosive potential of caste division also has been channeled through the ballot box, with the lowest of the low attaining high office.

Mayawati, a dalit woman, has ruled India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, as chief minister three times, and now enjoys a secure majority.

Democracy has sustained an India that safeguards the common space available to each identity. That idea has knit together a country that many thought would not survive, and whose 60th birthday is therefore well worth celebrating.

Shashi Tharoor

Shashi Tharoor is a former Under Secretary General of the United Nations.
A new biography of King Birendra by his professor at Harvard

A king who could do no wrong

For Francis G Hutchins, author of Democratizing Monarch - A Memoir of King Birendra, his pupil at Harvard during the academic year 1967-68 could do no wrong.

The late king, then crown prince, won a good student "always affable, polite and attentive, deferential toward his parents, wore jeans like other students at Harvard at the time, and retained his remarkable modesty even after he returned to Nepal and became officially...both an emperor and a god, albeit of a benign and approachable sort."

Small wonder that the late king became "part of (the author's)... life."

King Birendra was a cut above lesser mortals but, whether Aristotle would have been as unctual of Alexander had Aristotle outlived his pupil of another time and place, will remain one of history's mysteries. The Aristotle-Alexander reference is derived from Hutchins' fascination with that tutor-king relationship.

Professor Hutchins has delved deep into Nepal's history and assisted by Fr Ludwig Stiller's seminal works has used state-of-the-art analytical tools developed and used at Harvard's Department of Government to assess King Birendra's three-decade reign. He places King Birendra as a successor to Kings Tribhuvan and Mahendra, and above all to his father, King Birendra, his pupil at Harvard during the academic year 1967-68.

Hutchins contends that the late king was neither a "great" nor a "good" ruler but a "pioneering" one, a "constitutional monarch as a dynamic pre-modern empire more socially progressive than any seen before" become even more complicated and difficult during the five-decade restoration of Shah rule 1951-2001. With "Mao's China having swallowed Tibet in 1959" and relations with India having "necessitated greater vigilance," even greater than toward China to "forestall cultural or not political absorption."

In such an adverse geopolitical environment, one would have thought that the right strategy would have been to examine alternatives to forestall hostile military action. King Birendra chose to have one kind of relationship with India, based on the shared practices of Hinduism and India as the transit country for international trade and a strategic relationship. With China, it was the Himalayas as the boundary and the Tibetan culture and way of life common to the peoples on either side of the mountains.

In other words, he chose to go it alone, but it could well have been that with a better appreciation of the postwar role of the United States he could have looked to a partnership which could have guaranteed the preservation of Nepal's sovereignty.

The author is critical of US actions in general and of China's policies and Indian behaviour toward Nepal specifically. In stark contrast, his analysis is one of high appreciation of the efforts of King Birendra and his ancestors in preserving Nepal as a country where no foreign flag has ever been allowed to fly while continuing with a tradition of constitutional monarchy as formulated in Dhaka.

The book is not without lighter moments. The author's bizarre three-way exchanges with Lord Carey (one-time governor of Bengal) and Lowell Thomas (the pioneering TV explorer) during King Birendra's wedding celebrations in 1970 and the description of Imelda Marcos and Lord Mountbatten's (failure as the last viceroy of India). Hutchins attended both the wedding and King Birendra's coronation as guest of his pupil-King. The author's knowledge of Sanskrit seen in the translation of the epic Hitopadesha provide depth and relevance to the book. His exposition is manifest in pithy but eye-opening analyses of much of contemporary significance in South Asia, such as his view on the appropriate solution of the Kashmir problem. Unfortunately, in peddling a refutation of populist gossip of the palace massacre of 1 June 2001, the author inserts a discordant note to the otherwise even tenor of the major part of his work. He would have risen to the book's general lofty level had he, for example, put the massacre in the perspective of the assassinations of three Gandhis (the Mahatma, Indira and Rajiv) which surely is within his area of research competence. But his object of love is "the last great Shah ruler, Birendra, a pivotal figure in 20th-century Nepal and always a deeply constitutional ruler."

Chiran S Thapa was advisor and secretary to King Birendra and is currently a freelance writer and commentator on political and economic issues.

Chiran S Thapa

Phoebe’s libraries

Phoebe Cobum may be little but she has a big heart. The 14-year old from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in the United States is leading a library project to bring books to Nepal. She and her friend Lielis Clark thought up the Magic Yeli Library that is already running in Khumjung and has more than 1,000 Nepali and English titles. Clark is an Emmy-nominated film director.

After Clark promised to back the project, Phoebe launched a book drive in her hometown and sent out emails for financial assistance. Cobum raised enough money from the Alex Lowe Foundation, Room to Read, and others for nearly 700kg of books, with enough for library renovation and the salary of a full-time librarian in Khumjung.

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Once upon a time: Fourteen-year-old Phoebe Cobum reading with visitors at the Magic Yeli Library in Khumjung. Her project is building three more libraries in Mustang, Gorkha, and Syangja. Cobun is no stranger to Nepal, she spent two years here as a pre-schooler and grew up with tales of the country from her father, Brot Cobun, author of Nepali Ama and Everest: Mountain Without Mercy. Brot helped his daughter get the books to Nepal and oversaw the building of the library.

The Magic Yeli in Khumjung is just the first of three other libraries that Phoebe is setting up: Tsarang in Mustang, Nubri in Gorkha, and Syangja where Ama in Brot’s book was born.

I live here and I have strong links to Nepal,” explains Phoebe when asked about why she is doing it, “I felt like we should give something back.”

Phoebe is herself an avid reader, and places the Harry Potter series books and stories like Uglies, Twilight, The Diary of Anne Frank and The Lord of the Rings on her list of favourites. Says Phoebe: “I want to share my passion for reading with my Nepali friends.”

www.alexlowe.org/magic_yeli.shtml

Phoebe’s libraries

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Phoebe’s libraries
warika Das Shrestha took thousands of photographs during his lifetime but never held an exhibition of his work, except for displaying them at his studio, Das Photo Store. When he died in 2004, he left behind a rich collection of images documenting the people and places of Nepal.

Landscape of memory

In these fast-changing times when urban landscapes are transformed from week to week, the photographs suddenly have great archival and artistic value. So, Dwarika Das’ grandson Kashish Das Shrestha has become the curator of his grandfather’s works in an exhibition at the Nepal Art Council from this weekend. “My grandfather would be 75, and this is a tribute to his passion, which was photography,” says Kashish. Dwarika Das used Hasselblad, Linhof, and Nikon. Although he enjoyed experimenting with slides and color film, for the most part he stuck to black and white.

All the photos will be auctioned throughout the exhibition period and 25 percent of the sales will go to the ASMAN Art Fund that supports the work of talented but underprivileged art students.

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**EXHIBITIONS**
- Anamal: an exhibition of paintings by national and international artists at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babor Mahal, Reviwed, until 20 August, 11AM-6PM. 4219484
- A moment in time: 1904-2007 photos by Dwarka Das Shrestha, Gunapala and Kunapo Das Shrestha, at the Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal, 11AM-5PM, 18-23 August, 2324495
- Drisha: a solo art exhibition by Pratima Bajracharya, starting 16-27 August at Jatra Cafe and Bar, Thamel. 4256822

**EVENTS**

**MUSIC**
- 16th Yara Maya Classic with a performance by Sangpeta Rana, 19 August, 5PM onwards at Yara Maya Café, Patan Dinchha, 553767
- A rhythmic experience of fusion with sarangi, flute, ghottam, frame drum, capo, and gutar, 21 August, 8:30 PM at Mohek Bar. 5526872
- Rudra Nite at Lahurdin, fusion and classical Nepali music by Biryan Nepali, every Friday, Rs 800 nett. 4451212
- Jazz at Jatra every Saturday 7PM onwards, at Jatra Cafe and Bar, Thamel.
- Soul of Raga live classical and fusion music, every Friday night at Nuchhsa’s Kitchen. The Organis Bag. 4459893
- Open mic night at Via Via Café, every Friday, 8PM onwards.
- Live music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yanki and Zims Lepcha. 4416071
- Ciney Gurung at The Shambala Cafe, Jawalakhel, 11.30 AM-10PM. 5523900
- BBQ Unlimited at Splash Bar & Grill Radisson Hotel, Lazimpait, every Friday 6.30 PM, Rs. 899 nett.
- 5th Annual Monsoon Wine Festival 16 wines at Rs 150 a glass and Rs 600 a bottle, at Kandy’s of Kathmandu, Thamel. 4250440
- 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 Dwarka’s. 4479448
- Lajawab curry, kebab and biryani festival, every Friday, 7PM onwards at Cafe Horizon, Hotel Himalaya. 5523900
- Walk and lunch every Saturday at the Shivalik Heights Cottage. 9841578927
- Shangri-La’s pasta, pizza, pie, and pool a special swimming package with a complimentary beer, Rs 650 nett per person, every Saturday and Sunday at Shangri-La Hotel. 4419999
- Kababs and curries at the Obaha, Thapathali. 9841206819
- Krishna Narayan Nepal specially restaurant at Dwarka’s Hotel, six to 22 course ceremonial luch and dinner. 4479448
- Weekend special with sekews, bara, barbeque, Fridays at Ambassador Garden House, Lazimpait, 5:30 PM onwards. 4411706
- Flavours of the Midddle East every Friday and the taste of Thailand every Wednesday at The Cafe, Hayy Regency, Boudha. 4412434
- Light noodle snacks and nanaksho combi meals at La’Soon, Pulshok, against the Egyptian embassy. 5537166
- Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kinky’s Thamel. 4250440
- Smorgasbord lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4735208
- Calcutta’s roli, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9710007925
- Rediscover fine Italian cuisine at La Dolce Vita, Thamel, all new exciting menu. 4706812
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

**DINING**
- Mango Elaine: taste mango crepes suzette, bread scones with mango ice cream at The Lounge, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Jazz in Patan with coffee, food, drinks, and dessert at the New Orleans Cafe, Jawalakhel, 11:30 AM-10PM. 5523799
- Starry night BBQ with live music by Ciney Gurung at The Shambala Garden Cafe, Hotel Shangri-La, every Friday 7PM, Rs 666 inclusive of a beer. 4412999
- BBQ Unlimited at Splash Bar & Grill Radisson Hotel, Lazimpait, every Friday 6.30 PM, Rs. 899 nett.
- Weekend package at La Meridien Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,986 and one night two days at Rs 4,419, all inclusive of 10% discount. 4412912
- Monsoon madness two nights three days package at Rs 5,999 for a couple at Shangri-La Village, Pokhara. 4412959
- Experience Hyatt one night stay double occupancy, full buffet breakfast at The Cafe and access to Club Oasis, Rs 5000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepali and local residents. 441234
- Overnight package at Dwarka’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Dhulikhel, includes accommodation, snacks, dinner and breakfast. 4479448

**WEEKEND WEATHER**

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The two low pressure systems we mentioned last week actually merged over the Indo-Gangetic plains bringing more heavy rain over the Mahabharat last week. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows the system now breaking in two which may give us a brief respite on Friday before the heavy showers return over the weekend. Drawn by a big low pressure trough over Bihar moisture laden clouds will be shaded rain as they move from east to west. It is when these monsoon pulses get stuck and linger that we have cloudbursts like the one over Midwestern Nepal on Sunday, it will be a white before the sun comes out.

**GETAWAYS**
- Weekend package at La Meridien Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,986 and one night two days at Rs 4,419, all inclusive of 10% discount. 4412912
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For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@inalpaitimes.com
AND LET ME SAY THIS: Activist Gagan Thapa addressing a student meeting at Tri-Chandra Campus on Thursday in which he called the Maoists the “biggest royalists” because he said their activities were anti-democratic.

GARbage IN Garbage out: The garbage piling up outside Bir Hospital in Kathmandu’s city centre as the dispute between contractors and the municipality dragged for a week. The issue has been partially resolved, but the trash is becoming a serious health hazard.

Victorious celebrities: The team of celebrity rock stars, sportsmen, and actors giving a victory yell after defeating the media team 4-3 at a charity match to raise money for flood victims. The match on Saturday was organised by Himalmedia WAVE magazine.

Cover feature: Who will be a new Nepali?
- Towards 22 November
- Deepak Thapa
- A tryst with Nepali destiny
- Karak Mani Datta
- Mothers rise
- Prasram Jha
- Bidesi in Nepal
- C K Lai, Bishal Rab

Also in the August issue:
- Boots, breads, bugs and bombs
- by Suman Shrestha
- Manhandling manpower in Bangladesh
- by Sad Ex-hamadi
- Nautam trouble in Mizoram
- by Linda Chhalu Maki, James Lasikumana
- Kodarikulam goes nuclear
- by M V Ramana, Manju Manon
- Elisha’s embarking mindset
- by Eishak Kumar Matha
- Poona and Laila
- by Suman Shrestha
- Natives cut of fantasy
- by Aju Mehta

Himal Southasian’s August issue is now on stands!
Given the bruising process by which India recently selected its new president (the new one is one step ahead of her astrophysicist predecessor because she believes in astrology) one wonders what will happen after Nepal declares itself a republic in January 2008. Also, is President Patil a Rastrapati or Rastrapatni?

The Moustachioed One has said he wouldn’t mind being prez “for a while”. Oh sure. Given his striking resemblance to Uncle Joe and his avowed revulsion to Khrushchev it is the Ass’ bet that like comrades everywhere he will either have to be bodily removed or die a natural death before someone succeeds him.

Chairman Lotus Flower didn't have an easy time during last week’s Balaju assemblage. When Biplob publicly chided him for his junket in Switzerland and the Bolero Culture, he was visibly disturbed and retorted: “I'd rather die than be called a bourgeois revisionist, or be labeled a Khrushchev, or be called a UML.” And at this point he choked and wiped a tear or two with his handkerchief, thus joining the constellation of Nepali luminaries who specialise in crying in public.

Even if Makunay took umbrage at that remark about the UML, he doesn’t seem to have brought it up with the Chairman when the two had a private tête-à-tête at Gunther’s bash at the Summit. Probably not. But Awesome apparently did broach his brainwave idea to carve up the elections so his chaps are guaranteed at least 30 percent of the seats in November. The two comrades have reason to band together especially if Sushil and Deuba patch up their differences. Now, with First Daughter Sujata working on kangresi unity it may actually happen.

But it’s not at all a foregone conclusion who will be president. Comrade Cloud has been mysteriously quiet this whole time. Given that he is such a charismatic speaker the Dahal-Bhattarai duo makes sure he doesn’t get out in public much. And is that why the increasingly presidential-looking Cloudy One was at Baluwatar recently waiting patiently for an appointment with the prime minister only to be stood up?

Stil, Badal asserted himself during the just-concluded plenum and even shook Comrade Chairman’s hand to loud applause probably to allay suspicions of a major Bahun-Magar falling out in top management. Wonder if we’ll ever have a Rastrapati Ram Bahadur someday?

Even if SPAM can agree on ambassadors, which seems highly unlikely, it may be difficult to get other countries to accept baddies as envoys. Comrade Gajruel is the Maoists’ shadow foreign minister, so the fact that he was refused a Japanese visa last week should send a strong signal. The man is jinxed: he served three years behind bars in Chennai after being caught trying to fly to London on a forged passport. And this just in: Comrade Chintan has decided to stay back in London and retire from activism. Baddie candidate for the Court of St James?

Meanwhile, out at Naryanhiti kingji has cleared his electricity dues and is now sending feelers to see if he can take queenji to India for a long-overdue medical checkup-cum-pilgrimage. Such a trip before elections would also be a face-saving compromise for all sides to get top royals out of the way and put the monarchy in deep freeze until such time as it can be taken out and thawed.

There are still two journalists NOMIN hasn’t yet poached from the Nepali media. They are Min Bahadur Shahi and Min Bajracharya. What’s wrong? Does Un-Min have anything against people whose first names are Min?