After months of dilly-dallying, the Maoists appear to be finally overcoming their fear of elections and trying to iron out a deal that will bring them back into the government.

The main reason for this dramatic change of heart is the conclusion reached by so-called hardliners in the Maoist leadership that postponement of the elections has not helped the party and instead benefited reactionaries.

With the radicals suddenly showing flexibility, the moderate leadership led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai has responded by launching a three-month public relations offensive that they kicked off by meeting senior editors at the Shanker Hotel on Tuesday.

The chairman admitted his party had made mistakes, that high-handedness by some comrades had undermined its prospects in elections, and said the party was now serious about repairing its reputation ahead of elections.

“We need to address our past behaviour, we need to change ourselves, otherwise we are headed towards disaster,” Dahal told editors with uncharacteristic candour, adding: “We are now convinced we need elections and for that we need to reform ourselves and I am asking you for your understanding.”

To be sure, election dates may take some time to be announced because a part of the deal will be the re-entry of the Maoists into government and there will be the usual haggling over portfolios.

But both the NC and Maoist leaders appeared unusually positive and conciliatory after Wednesday’s meetings.

The party leadership has also held meetings with its YCL cadre and warned them: “In a war you can kill people, but not in elections. From now on, no beating up people, no extortion.”

It remains to be seen how much control Dahal has over his cadre units, which have often said they work independently of the central party. The radical trio of Mohan Baidya, Ram Bahadur Thapa and Neta Bickram Chand have been critical of Dahal and Bhattarai since the August plenum and even forced the chairman to apologise for his unilateralism.

They recently also accused Dahal of speaking impulsively and without consultation within the party about issues like the integration of the PLA.

But all three now appear ready for elections. Chand told Nepali Times this week: “If we don’t go for elections now, it will be bad for us.”
**EDITORIAL**

**FOOLING THE PEOPLE ALL THE TIME**

The seven parties deliberated on the extension of UNMSP's mandate until they were blue in the face. What they should have been more worried about was their own mandate. The NC and UML, two putative leaders, either capitulated themselves to power by killing lots of people or had power thrust upon them after the April Uprising. The Six Plus One like you or me, their ultimate responsibility of securing justice was left in the hands of the same criminals during the pro-democracy movement that brought down the king. What they forget is that it was the people who made the sacrifices and they have to go back to the people to seek a fresh mandate. By delaying elections time and again on one pretexts or another have proven themselves to be accountable, irresponsible and devoid of a democratic culture. Of course they have elaborate pretexts: demands for full proportional representation, lack of security, declaring Nepal a republic first because the king will try to rig polls. Actually there is only one reason they don't want elections: because they think they will lose. The Maoists know that they will never have the one third of seats in parliament that they awarded themselves. The NC is sure to lose its commanding position over the government and legislature. Only the UML could be expected from elections, but even they weren't campaigning seriously enough. The problem with this behaviour is that our cynical politicians think they can get away with it, they think they can fool all the people all the time. But just as we didn’t tolerate a royal military dictatorship and rose up against it, the Nepali people will not tolerate an indefinite seven-party dictatorship. The seven-party alliance may have been able to redeem itself and gain a degree of legitimacy, if even it couldn’t hold elections, it showed improved governance and efficient service delivery. But even here it has failed miserably: the tara is out of bounds, laws and order has never been this bad even during the conflict years, the petroleum shortage is growing worse, garbage is piling up and corruption is a way of life. The people's verdict is that this coalition is unfit to govern. The only thing they expect this government to do is to keep its promise to announce an election date and then step down.

**GUEST COLUMN Nilamber Acharya**

The Maoists are not a party that is governed by a belief in elections, and they still believe in the use of physical force. On the other hand, the NC and the UML do not have the power of conviction in themselves as democratic parties to be able to persuade the Maoists to change their ways. The main reason for the current stalemate is therefore not a disagreement about a republic or presidential rule. That is only what appears on the surface. Deep down, the main reason is the gap in trust and the differing political cultures and values of the two sides. So, unless these deep-seated issues are tackled, elections will not happen. And even if they do, the constituent assembly will not be a workable body. There are five ways to end this deadlock:

**First,** the UML must embark on a long-term effort towards unity of democratic forces. What binds them together is the common belief that only a democratic system will strengthen the nation, and their shared belief in the democratic transformation of the Maoists. It is the unity of the NC and the UML that makes seven-party unity possible. Without their unity, we wouldn't have seen an end to the royal dictatorship, nor an end to the 10-year war. With the two parties have allowed themselves to forget the need for their unity and have fallen out, the democratic forces have been weakened and the peace process has started to unravel. Neither party believes in the force of arms. They don't need violence to come to power, and both believe in the parliamentary system and a sovereign people. These common values give their unity a solid strength.

**Second,** the longer this deadlock continues, the more it helps progressive elements. The strategy of both right and left extremists is to weaken the moderate middle path. But what the Maoists must do is understand that they suffer the most from postponed elections and a deadlock will create the conditions for democratic forces to move ahead without the Maoists. **Third,** the NC and the UML must finally realise that neither will benefit from making each other weaker. The more vulnerable the democratic parties, the weaker democracy becomes. **Fourth,** the seven parties must now set up a neutral caretaker government for the elections. This government's main job will be to ensure security and hold elections. The interim parliament must be dissolved and the caretaker government should be small, efficient and streamlined team. **Fifth,** there should be a separation between the head of state and head of government. The two must be different people. This is necessary because of the special circumstances in which we find ourselves and also to ensure judicial independence.

Nilamber Acharya is a constitutional expert, political thinker and former Nepal ambassador to Sri Lanka.

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**Five-point solution**

There are ways to end the present political deadlock

The present political crisis is not a result of deadlock in parliament. It is because the leaders of the three main parties are unwilling to strike a compromise.

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**Throwing justice to the wind**

Our flawed judiciary lets the kangaroo courts flourish in a vacuum

The plot had all the ingredients of a thriller. A businessman, ditched from a election date and then worse, garbage is piling up and corruption is a way of life. The people’s verdict is that this coalition is unfit to govern. The only thing they expect this government to do is to keep its promise to announce an election date and then step down.

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TARAI
‘Promises unkept’ (#376) is another example of how people of Prashant Jha’s level try to justify the conflict in the tarai. Nepal’s rulers perpetrated injustice not just in the tarai but all over the country. Of course there is discrimination against people of tarai origin, but there is also discrimination against all other marginalised groups. This doesn’t mean you kill innocent people and launch a policy of ethnic cleansing.
Abhi Karki, Pune, India

How will Prashant Jha reconcile his arguments with the reality expressed in the sad story of the Sunsari families who have been displaced by Madhesi Tiger violence ‘Wasn’t the war supposed to be over?’ (#376).
Jyoti Mandal, Kathmandu

The prime minister’s replies to the public’s questions in Biratnagar (‘The prime minister meets the people’, #374) do reflect a genuine attempt to pass the buck, like always. However, it is untrue when Prashant Jha argues that continued pahadi chauvinism is belittling the madhes struggle (‘Promises unkept’, #376). We people of the hills feel the same despair and angst as tarai residents at the state of the country.
Amish Mulmi, email

Kundan Aryal has analysed the situation correctly in ‘Farewell to arms?’ (#376). The Maoists have no options but election or war.
Bishnu Rijal, email

It is unfortunate that commentators like CK Lal have also started to support UNMIN’s ill-intended and unsolicited encroachment into Nepal’s process. It’s time to caution UNMIN and ask it to come up with an exit plan as early as possible.
B Raj, email

UNMIN
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B Raj, email

CK Lal does write sensible things occasionally (this time on UNMIN). As far as I remember he was one of the columnists who envied UNMIN’s expensive SUVs and enlarged role. At least he now concedes that UNMIN has a role to play in taming the increasingly criminalised tarai armed groups and mature tarai politicians (viz R Mahato) trying to fish in muddy waters at times of fluidity. And I appreciate his views on the duplicity of the Indian establishment in (not) helping with these problems.
Sandeep Dhungana, email

VOLUNTEERS
I have in the past helped many young people who were distressed by commercial volunteering firms like the ones written about in ‘Gap year ripoffs’, #372. But I would draw readers’ attention to Students Partnership Worldwide (SPW), which is part of an international organisation with high values and standards. Most Green Clubs are still running after being started by volunteers 10 or 15 years ago. Any young person wanting to help Nepal should join SPW.
Christine Stone, Kathmandu

WORST AIRPORT
I cannot agree more with the descriptions of Tribhuvan International Airport (‘world’s worst airports’, #376) but you could have added the following hard-to-miss features: pan-stained floors courtesy of the security personnel on duty, a huge toilet mug instead of disposable cups at the water filter, and rude salespeople at the duty-free shops who fawn upon foreigners while ignoring Nepalis.
Ram Chaudhary, email

FORESTS
Thanks to Kunda Dixit for the positive and negative sides of community forests (‘Seeing neither forests nor trees’, #375). The government should hand all forests to community users.
Rabi Gharabja, email

CORRECTION
The name of the rawat of elephants in ‘Hefty responsibility’ (#376) should have been Ram Singh Kumal. Shamshere Gaj is not the largest domesticated Asian elephant in South, his father, Shamshere Bahadur, probably was entitled to that status.
Ashutosh Tiwari, CEO Himalmedia: Some say the slide of the dollar is a good thing because other economic powerhouses now rival the US. The jury is still out, the economists haven’t yet given their final verdicts. Himalmedia has invited you here to zoom in on Nepal and see how the slide of the dollar affects our exporters, importers, remittances and the economy. The discussions will be moderated by Sujeev Shakya of Tara Management.

Siddhant Pandey, Ace Development Bank: NRB data show that the rupee has appreciated against the dollar by 15.26 percent in the past year. We have 63 percent of our international trade with India and because of our peg to the Indian rupee we have been insulated from recessionary or inflationary shocks. But others who are dependent on the dollar have been hit. To cover our trade deficit with India, last year we sold $900 million to buy IC. We are selling more dollars to buy less Indian rupees, therefore our reserves are going to be affected. The central bank which is still highly weighted towards the dollar is a lose because it doesn’t have a hedging mechanism. The average Nepali who sends remittances home is definitely going to get less rupees for the dollar, but I believe that if this continues remittances will opt for another currency. Having been a currency trader till a few years ago, I do not believe that the dollar will not depreciate further because $3 trillion are held in international reserves out of which $1.5 trillion is with China. For them to opt out of the dollar at this depreciated rate will mean being hit hard.

Sujeev Shakya: What does it really mean for the Nepali exporter importer?

Sujit Mundul, Standard Chartered Bank: What we have to understand is that the Nepali rupee is not linked directly to the dollar, it has an intervening currency, the IC with a fixed peg. This has worked very well till now, but the point is how is it affecting traders? Seventy-two percent of the country’s trade is with India and there is a huge deficit, this has been perennial and it can’t be rectified in the short-term. In India the rupee was at about 45 at the beginning of this year, today it is 39.30. The RBI is intervening because it doesn’t want it to go below the psychological level of 39. The government of India has asked the banks to go in for subsidisation in the form of export credit, so they are getting export working capital at concessional rates. Unfortunately in the case of Nepal the government doesn’t have these mechanisms. It could look at export subsidies to keep this country competitive. I don’t think the dollar is going to come back very strong in the foreseeable future.

Kavindra Nath Thakur, Nepal Carpet Exporters Association: The government has to take some measures as in India to save our exports which have taken a hit due to the sliding dollar. Nepali carpet exports have gone down by 63 percent in the past ten years. But the government hasn’t taken any interest despite the fact that 250,000 people are employed in this industry.

Radhesh Pant, Bank of Kathmandu: We need to do more to help exporters because if I do not believe the dollar will come back in near future. One reason is that the Indian economy is really booming, secondly oil prices are not going to come down drastically and because of the sub-prime disaster people are not going to invest in American debt. The Nepali economy is insulated by the peg. But the economy is being impacted, the remittances are less than before when converted to rupees and exporters need help.

Jaspal Singh Jass, Everest Bank: In India, the slide of the dollar to record lows means imports will be cheaper and exports will be more costly. In Nepal 65 percent of the imports are from India, and because of the peg the fluctuations are not passed on to the consumer. It will only be the importers in dollars from third countries who will benefit. Seventy percent of the exports are to India, but the ones to be adversely affected by the weaker dollar will be exporters to third countries. The dollar may weaken further, but market forces will also play their part. Nepal should think of providing incentives in form of tax concessions and subsidies for those industries which are having dollar transactions.

Suman Joshi, Laxmi Bank: I’m not being critical of the export industry, but if you take an overall view the contribution of exports to the GDP is so small that perhaps that will need to take a back seat. Also, our exports suffering only because of the dollar? Exports were dipping even before the dollar slide. So, do we also need to look at the comparative advantage, or the lack of it?

Ujjwal Thapa, DigitalMax: The economic and political stability of the country and comparative advantage of the country is more important than the value of the dollar. As long as we are competitive, we shouldn’t be that badly affected.

Laxman Rimal, NIC Bank: Some sectors like tourism and handicrafts which procure locally and export are affected badly. But if you see the manufacturing industry like carpets, they are actually import-based. They import wool in dollar terms, and they are being hit only in the value addition part. So it’s not as bad as it is being portrayed. It’s okay to ask for government subsidies for exports, but I don’t think we should look to ask if our exports have problems other than currency.

Anupama Khunjeli, Nabil Bank: We can hedge foreign receivables. US interest rates coming down and the US current account deficit of $2 billion a day have to be factored in. Interest rates in Japan and Eurozone are also going to go higher. Yen and yuan will have to appreciate. Down the lane, the US-dollar will depreciate even more. Such being the case, our exports are going to be hit and they will need help.

Sushiel Joshi, Himalayan Bank: If this country subsidises which is consumed by the rich, or gas which is consumed by the urban middle class, why can’t we subsidise the carpet industry on which 250,000 poor people depend on for jobs and which is adversely affected by the dollar slide?

Sujit Mundul: We can learn from how the Philippines has negotiated with the countries where its workers are based to change remittances from dollars to euros or other currencies. We must look at cross-currency routes. 

Anupama Khunjeli: Nepal’s balance of payments has gone negative. When we were importing oil in dollars our reserves were better six to seven years ago. Now we are buying oil in INR, so the central bank may have to take the Indian side and try to import oil in dollars and use the remittances for that.

Siddhant Pandey: What hasn’t been factored in is that when we start selling dollars to buy Indian rupees, 1.6 becomes must because we are taking a big hit one way or another. There has to be some kind of a basket of currencies to be pegged to rupees.

Sujit Mundul: Let’s assume we unpeg it. Officially inflation is 8 percent, our calculation shows between 10-11 percent and the rupee goes into a realistic equilibrium at 1.2-5, that translates into 25 percent inflation. Can we manage that? India is slowly going into capital account convertibility, they will reach there in three-and-half years. Nepal has to be mindful of this, maybe not in tandem with India’s speed but we need to go in for that. If we adopt that, it will correct the peg by itself.

Sushiel Joshi: We are in a country where the government can’t raise the price of petrol when NOC is bleeding, can we afford 20 percent inflation in this country? Politically can the government take this decision?

Radhesh Pant: From the political standpoint, I would say it’s impossible to change this peg right now or even in the next five years because of our increasing dependence on the Indian economy. But we should try to have a goal like 10-15 years to peg, change it to 1.7 or 1.8.

Laxman Rimal: We could also increase the number of commodities imported from India so it could provide natural hedging, paying out remittance dollar to pay for our imports.

Bhanu Kandel, Global Bank/IME: We are hiding our weakness as a nation by pegging our rupee to the INR. Why shouldn’t we be more practical and make necessary corrections in time, otherwise our situation may be like the rupee in future. I think the peg should be revised and revisited and repegged.

Prahlad Neupane, Annapurna Travels/Western Union

There is some impact of falling dollar value on remittance, but we do not need to feel discouraged at the moment. Whether the dollar value goes up or slides down, they need to send money to their families anyway. They are not concerned with dollar value but are worried about how fast and reliably they can send money home.

The important point is how the country is using the remittances, is it being used in productive areas?

Bandana Thapa, Nepal Investment Bank

Changing the peg between Indian and Nepali currency is such a sensitive issue that the moment you change it there is going to be chaos. We won’t benefit by changing it. Remittances are in decline, if this continues the dollar inflow will go down.
Hydropower

Hydro solutions was formally inaugurated on 2 November by Andre Boulanger, president of Hydro-Quebec Distribution Canada. Hydro-Quebec is the world’s largest producer of hydroelectric power with a total installed capacity of about 40,000 MW. Hydro Solutions is a one-stop-shop for all hydropower business, providing comprehensive advisory, planning and execution solutions form a single platform, the first of its kind in Nepal.

NIC award

NIC Bank has been awarded the Bank of the Year 2007 Nepal by The Banker magazine, Financial Times Group, London. NIC Bank will be profiled in The Banker’s magazine issue. NIC was the first bank in Nepal avail a line of credit under IFC’s Global Trade Finance Program and the first to be ISO 9001:2000 certified for the Quality Management System.

Food court

The Bluebird Food Court celebrated its first anniversary on 30 November with a festival that had food decorations, a 15 percent discount on the menu and various activities for children.

Laser beauty

The first lasertherapy and skin rejuvenation clinic, TouchBeauty, has opened at Old Baneshwor. This beauty clinic is equipped with the latest laser beauty equipment and has been launched by Agio Countertrade, in association with TouchBeauty USA.

New products

BURN: A new DVD/CD burner from LaCie is being marketed by CAS Trading House. This burner is fully mobile and burns disks with the help of Toast 8 Titanium, a special burning software for MAC users. The burner will help you design and etch your own labels onto specially coated discs with the Light Scribe labeling technology.
Interview with Baburam Bhattarai in Himal Khabarpatrika, 2-15 December

Himal Khabarpatrika: You are ready for a new agreement. As of 29 November 6PM, what progress has there been?

Baburam Bhattarai: We're moving ahead. We're trying to find out what we lacked in the 12-point agreement, trying to figure out its kinks and how to iron them out. It is commonly understood that we need to keep the peace process strong while keeping eight-party unity intact.

NC is trying to speed up the entire process by putting proportional representation, the election date and the declaration of a republic into one package. First, whatever the interim government was instructed to do should be done: a republic and proportional representation. Secondly, care of the PLA, compensation for martyrs' families, a search for those who have disappeared, treatment for those injured—all of which are present in the peace agreement—should be implemented immediately. Third, the merger of the PLA and the Nepal Army has not been started, as mentioned in the interim constitution. And finally, if we are pushing ahead with a specific date for the elections then we should also change the interim government.

Have you talked to Koirala about these points?

All these four points are on our agenda. We have discussed it with Koirala and he has agreed to talk it over and return to us with an answer. As long as the monarchy remains, it will find new obstacles and will not let the elections take place. That is why we need to get rid of the monarchy now. But what the Congress thinks is that if we get rid of the monarchy now, it will lead to problems later. But we have discussed it and we have nearly reached an agreement that the monarchy cannot stay. If a republic is declared, the current deadlock will be dissolved.

Have you become a bit more flexible concerning the proportional representation system?

Right now, the system is only half-representative. What we want and what the interim agenda dictates is a fully proportional system. Not just the political parties, but even the madhesis, janajatis, dalits, women and all citizens should make a collective decision. If we are able to reach a conclusion on the republic issue and are able to solve issues of the comprehensive peace agreement properly, then we must also find a way to solve this problem.

A common view is that even if all these conditions are met, the Maoists will still not be ready for elections. We fought a 10-year war with the idea of a constituent assembly election. It was because of the Maoists that the elections were included in the national agenda. Now people think that the Maoists don’t want to be a part of the same constituent assembly? The Maoists want this election because it will usher in a new political establishment. How can the Maoists not want to be a part of this?

Suppose everything goes according to how you want it, would the Maoists then be ready to have elections within five months?

Of course. If the conditions and the environment for the elections are all satisfactory then we will willingly have elections. Then we will show everyone the power that we have, the same power that we got sacrificing ourselves in the 10-year war. The Maoists will triumph magnificently in the elections. There is no doubt about that.

You have also started to demand reform of the government.

Whatever the interim executive directs, it is the government’s duty to follow through. If that happens then the government will be reformed under Koirala’s direction. But if the executive’s direction is not followed, then the leadership of the government will not rest with the NC. There will be a search within the seven parties for new leadership and the government will be reformed.
Corrupt Kodari
Editorial in Naya Patrika, 2 December
Smugglers now control the entire Kodari highway to China. Since the smuggling of red sandalwood became public knowledge, it has become clear that this highway’s police, tax department, customs and forestry departments are all easily influenced by smugglers. After Tatopani customs officials, hand in glove with smugglers, closed down the customs office for seven days, it got to the point where a customs department investigation team was threatened. Police are being transferred according to the whim of the smugglers, and at eight or ten places along the road there are ruffians who are there only for route clearance. Those who have spoken out against the current situation are running for their lives. Who’s running the Home Ministry, Sitaula sir?

Dips-in-waiting
Jana Aastha, 5 December
The Maoists are the driving force behind demands for a republic. But ironically, the ambassadors that the Maoists nominated will present their credentials to kings and queens, not presidents or prime ministers. Ambassador designate to Malaysia, Rishi Adhikari, will be presenting his credentials to the Malaysian king, one of the nine that is rotated in that country. Vijay Kanta Lal Karna, ambassador to Denmark, will be presenting his credentials to Queen Margrethe II. Yogendra Dhakal, senior Maoist translation editor, is nominated ambassador to Australia, of which Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain is also queen. The only nation in the Maoist quota which is not a monarchy is France.
When Kishor Kayastha was nine years old and growing up in Bhaktapur, he took his father’s precious box camera out of the wall cabinet while his parents were out and snapped his first picture. He was grounded and not allowed to touch the camera for some time. But the young boy’s passion for the image meant he started helping out at his father’s Nilkamal Studio in Bhaktapur.

And it was clear from very early on that Kishor was an artist, a photographer who saw beyond the two dimensions of celluloid. Living in the ancient city and his interest in the architecture and life of his people shaped his mind’s eye. And when digital photography came along Kishor took to the new technology and used its flexibility to full artistic advantage.

Kishor Kayastha’s famous panoramas are on display at the Indigo Art Galley for a month beginning this week and some of them are being sold as limited edition 2008 calendars. This is the second time Indigo is displaying his photographs after a successful exhibition in 2005 (‘The bromide canvas’ #225, www.nepalitimes.com/issue/225/Review/1520)

“I wanted to make them exclusive and also to give the photograph a time element,” says Kishor, explaining why he chose the digitally printed calendar format.

Kishor’s panoramas are multiple exposures of urban vistas that are digitally pasted together and he has no problems with the technique. “If it is possible to do digitally, why should any purist have any problems with it?” he asks.

Indeed, seeing the end result of the 360 degrees of bahal or the Himalayan horizon as seen from Nagarkot, even the skeptic will be impressed. The Himalayan sky doesn’t look as striking as the wide angle of Bhaktapur’s alleys.

“I was always struck by how you could take the narrow world of the streets and the bahals and widen them into cinemascope,” explains Kishor. “The collective and the communal can then be spliced into individual elements and everyone in the photograph then looks like they exist in a separate universe while being a part of a larger whole.”

One picture of golden heaps of harvested rice being dried in the sun in a chok in Bhaktapur can be broken down into many separate elements and is sure to be the most popular photograph in the exhibition.

Besides his wide-format strip panoramas, Kishor explores other motifs. His most dramatic recent works concern monsoon Kathmandu as seen through the wet windscreens of vehicles in the streets. The everyday image of shimmering wet lights are turned into moving colour stills that evoke a drippy and watery world.

Kishor has also been taking close-ups of the walls of homes and temples in Bhaktapur, and by going close enough to bring out the textures and colours, the effect is impressionistic. One can’t wait to see where Kishor’s eyes will take him next, and wherever they go the results are bound to be mesmerizing.

Larger than Life—Panoramic Photos by Kishor Kayastha
Sale of the 2008 Panoramic Calendar
Daily 9 am to 6 pm
Indigo Art Gallery, Naxal, 441-3580
Winter vacation...
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ALL PICS: KISHOR KAYASTHA
Hydropowered education

Colleges in eastern Nepal are paying staff by selling power to the government

SHAILEE BASNET in SANKHUWASABHA

N epal has lots of potential for small hydropower schemes. But there isn’t enough money to run proper schools and colleges in rural areas. So what can be done? Why not sell electricity to fund higher education?

A simple power-for-education formula that is being successfully implemented in Nepal’s eastern district of Sankhuwasabha by the private company Samudayik Siksha Bikash Jalbiddut, which means ‘community education through electricity’.

“It’s such a simple idea, we often wonder why we didn’t think of it before,” says Hari Bairagi, the former UML member of parliament from the district. “Everyone knows you need education for development, but we have turned that around. We are using development to finance education.”

The 250-megawatt Nigure micro-hydropower scheme was built 20 years ago during the Panchayat regime as part of the government’s mission to light up the district headquarters. In 2002 the station was blown up by the Maoists and for more than a year it lay in ruins. In April 2003 three local colleges — Barun Multiple Campus, Maid Multiple Campus and Chainpur Multiple Campus — linked up to revive the power station with a loan of Rs 10.8 million and assistance from German aid agency GTZ and energy group Windm. Experts say the power plant can easily double its capacity and increase income.

Tulsi Prasad Neupane, the company’s president, says: “It’s really working well. We sell electricity to the NEA grid and with the money run the colleges.” In 17 months, the company has already generated Rs 3.9 million in cash from the NEA. There are still loans to be paid off, but the colleges already have a revenue stream for scholarships for needy students and to pay teachers’ salaries.

Most of the families here are poor. They can’t afford school fees, so the scholarship fund means a lot to the community and for our college,” says Parsuram Dahal, principal of Maid Multiple Campus. All three colleges plan to invest more on increasing student capacity as they earn more profit.

Economist and former water resources minister Dipak Gyawali says the Sankhuwasabha example has turned development in its head. “In previous development models, revenue flowed from the village to the centre. This is an excellent example of how villages earn from the centre.”

Sankhuwasabha’s success has inspired others to replicate the model elsewhere in the country, not just to use hydropower for education but also to run hospitals and microcredit cooperatives. Even in Sankhuwasabha, there are several other small hydropower sites which have signed power purchase agreements with the NEA.

“There cannot be a better source of long term income for institutes like colleges, hospitals and others,” says Hari Bairagi. “Water is the raw material, no transport is required, and the national grid is right there to buy the product. All you need is initiative.” Dahal thinks the model works best locally, but could also be the way to go nationally, with income from hydro power generation funding a nationwide upgrading of education and health facilities.

The Sankhuwasabha model is an example of how a ruined hydropower scheme can rise from the ashes of war to improve people’s lives in peacetime, but it is not yet crisis-free.

Having once bombed the power plant during the conflict, local YCL cadres are now using extortion to demand a ‘revolutionary tax’ of 25 per cent of the profit that should be funding the colleges.

Last year the Maoists locked the power house for a week, but it was reopened after teachers and students from the three colleges retaliated by locking the Maoist office in Khandbari. Negotiations are still continuing.

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Last month, I had the chance to visit the Karnali region for the first time. I was thrilled to be leaving Kathmandu’s light pollution for the clear skies of Jumla. But although I had a confirmed air ticket, I had to wait at Nepalganj airport for seven hours, which killed some of my initial enthusiasm. At last, just after sunset, we landed at Jumla and I found myself in the land of my dreams. I looked towards the cloudless sky to find a magnificent crescent moon hanging above the horizon.

Next day I was in Lamra village, some 10km south of Jumla Bajar. We stayed at a hotel belonging to Balram Sah, a science teacher from Saptari who had settled in Lamra after marrying a local woman. In the evening I asked him how he teaches astronomy to his rural students. He teaches pupils in Grades 7 to 10, but cannot identify the stars and planets in the sky. I pointed out a star-like object on the western horizon and told him it was the giant planet Jupiter. His eyes widened in astonishment.

Early the following morning, I woke at 4AM and looked up at the sky. The great celestial dome was above me with the stars and constellations clearly visible. Venus was dazzling in the eastern sky. Mars, the red planet, was overhead and the great Saptarshi (Big Dipper) was to the north.

Sah told me the weather generally remains clear in Jumla all year round, come rain or snow. I imagine the Karnali region has great potential for stargazing. Later, in Mugu, we were guests of a local army unit at Rara Lake, where the major told us that observing the full moon rising above the lake offered the experience of a lifetime.

Back to business. In December, we have the winter solstice on 22 December, which is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. During the evening, you can see the constellations Gemini, Taurus, Aries, Pisces and Aquarius along the Zodiac from east to west. Just south of Gemini is the great winter constellation Orion, popularly known as Teen-Tare here in Nepal. To the north of Taurus and Aries is the constellation of Perseus, where Comet Holmes has been putting on a spectacular show since October. With binoculars, enjoy the brilliant Pleiades (Seven Sisters), a cluster of tiny but brilliant stars in the Taurus constellation.

Of the planets, Mercury is behind the Sun on 17 December, so we won’t be able to see it all this month. Venus, in Virgo, rises in the east at about 4AM and appears as an intensely bright morning ‘star’. Mars, in Gemini, will be at opposition (to the Sun) on 24 December and hence is very well placed for observation. It will be the closest it has been to us for the past two years. Jupiter is behind the Sun on 23 December and will not be visible for the whole month. Saturn, in Leo, is rising in the east in the late evening and is high in the southern sky by dawn.

The Geminids meteor shower, the best of the year, peaks on the night of 13-14 December, when we might expect to see one meteor every couple of minutes. On new year’s eve, you might also catch the Quadrantids shower, which peaks in early January.

kedarbadu(at)gmail.com
The falling dollar has emerged as a source of profound global macroeconomic distress. The question now is how bad that distress will become.

There are two possibilities. If global savers and investors expect the dollar’s depreciation to continue, they will flee the currency unless they are compensated appropriately for keeping their money in the US and its assets, implying that the gap between US and foreign interest rates will widen. As a result, the cost of capital in the US will soar, discouraging investment and reducing consumption spending as high interest rates depress the value of households’ principal assets: their houses. The resulting recession might fuel further pessimism and cutbacks in spending, deepening the downturn. A US in recession would no longer serve as the world’s importer of last resort, which might send the rest of the world into recession as well. A world in which everybody expects a falling dollar is a world in economic crisis.

By contrast, a world in which the dollar has already fallen is one that may see economic turmoil, but not an economic crisis. If the dollar has already fallen—and nobody expects it to fall much more—then there is no reason to compensate global savers and investors for holding US assets.

On the contrary, in this scenario there are opportunities: the dollar, after all, might rise, US interest rates will at normal levels, asset values will not be unduly depressed, and investment spending will not be affected by financial turmoil. Of course, there may well be turbulence: when US wage levels appear low because of a weak dollar, it is hard to export to America, and other countries must rely on other sources of demand to maintain full employment. The government may have to shore up the financial system if the changes in asset prices that undermined the dollar stick.

Risk-loving or imprudent lenders.

But these are, or ought to be, problems that we can solve. By contrast, sky-high US interest rates produced by a general expectation of a massive ongoing dollar decline is a macroeconomic problem without a solution.

Yet so far there are no signs that global savers and investors expect a dollar decline. The large gap between US and foreign long-term interest rates that should emerge from and signal expectations of a falling dollar does not exist. And the $65 billion needed every month to fund the US current-account deficit continues to flow in. Thus, the world economy may dodge yet another potential catastrophe.

That may still prove to be wishful thinking. After all, America’s still-large current-account deficit guarantees that the dollar will continue to fall. Even so, the macroeconomic logic that large current-account deficits signal that currencies are overvalued continues to escape the world’s international financial investors and speculators.

On one level, this is very frustrating: we economists believe that people are smart enough to understand their situation and capable enough to pursue their own interests. Yet the typical investor in dollar-denominated assets—whether a rich private individual, a pension fund, or a central bank—has not taken the steps to protect themselves against the very likely dollar decline in our future.

In this case, what is bad for economists is good for the world economy: we may be facing a mere episode of financial distress in the US rather than sky-high long-term interest rates and a depression. The fact that economists can’t explain it is no reason not to be thankful.

J. Bradford DeLong, Professor of Economics at the University of California at Berkeley.
Miriam Ferrer. However, the army appears to think it can break the back of the NPA with its own intelligence breakthroughs. NPA guerrillas, who in the past were politically well indoctrinated in the Maoist mass line, have been accused of indulging in criminal activities. Just as in Nepal, there are frequent reports of extortion by the NPA.

Satur Ocampo, veteran communist leader and member of the Philippine Congress from the Bayan Muna party, says: “The NPA not only wants to achieve extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Peru, of course, is a country where just being labelled communist is enough for a person to be branded and killed,” says Ferrer. With a strong anti-communist, conservative government and a rebel force determined to wage both a military and political struggle, the insurgency looks set to thrive even though neither side sees an outright victory.

Nepal’s difference from the Philippines is that our Maoists have fled the YCL to stage confrontations, while the PLA is in an unconditional ceasefire with the government and there is an effective ceasefire.

While no two situations are alike, the Philippine case study shows that if the ceasefire does break down, Nepal’s Maoists could theoretically fall back on a war-without-peace strategy.

The longer the political deadlock and transition drag on, the greater is this possibility.

O all the films in this year’s Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF), none quite matches the charm of Narayan Berhas’ documentary Thin Ice.

Set in Ladakh, its subject is the plucky young student Dolkar, an aspiring athlete, who says her life would be “halved” if she didn’t play ice hockey. In her effort to start a women’s ice hockey team to challenge for the national championship, her biggest hurdle is the patronising chauvinism of the men who find women’s sports less worthy of investment than men’s. In Dekker’s study of discrimination and intimidation against the odds, Berhas crafts a small gem that works the heart.

A change frequently levied against documentaries is that they are now so often preachy and unbalanced. So director Fulvio Mariani has impressive access to both sides of the border. But one major problem is the way the film notes, but then scurries away from, the major problem is the way the film notes, but then scurries away from, the issue of women’s investments.

The filmmakers only mention this in the closing minutes.

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GEOGRAPHICALLY, THE MALAYSIAN insurgent is that of the Philippines. The army's response of not yet disarming the people. The longer the political deadlock and transition drag on, the greater is this possibility.
EXHIBITIONS
- The Mithila Cosmos an exhibition by SC Suman, from 7 December, at Siddhartha Art Gallery.
- The China Tibet Photography Exhibition at the Nepal Tourism Board, 9-15 December.
- Larger than Life panoramas by Kishor Kayastha, exhibition and sale, until 10 January. AM1-6PM at the Indigo Gallery, 4413910.
- Park Art Fair hundreds of prints at affordable prices, at the Park Gallery. Fri.-Sun. 1-10 December. From 10AM-6PM, 5525307.
- Exhibition of contemporary and Tangka paintings by Kathmandu Gallery at the Patan Museum, until December 30. 4249094.
- Enchanting Life with Light photo show by Rocky Pratap at The Bakery Cafe, Pufchowk till 10 December. 9651041930.

EVENTS
- Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival organized by Himal Association, 7-11 December at the Hastinra Sabin Ghira and the Nepal Tourism Board.
- The Kathmandu Chorale presents its winter concert at The British School, Jorpati, December 3-30 PM and 6PM. Free admission.
- Dr Kanak staging by Aashan-Gurukul, everyday except Mondays at 4.30 PM, at The Rimal Theatre, Gurukul, until 8 November. 4468956
- The Return of the Sacred the language of religion and the fear of democracy in a post-secular world by Aish Nandy. 2.30 PM, 13 December at the Russian Culture Centre, Kamalpokhari.
- Free children’s party at Welcome Food Plaza, Kathmandu. Free with children’s bingo, face painting, 15 and 24 December. 3307201.

MUSIC
- Forget Paris theme party at the newest trendy Cube Bar. Sportsbar premises, Kamalbari JPM onwards. Rs 500 ticket includes 2 complimentary Carnegies.
- Bobin Bajracharya live 8 December, 7PM at Jatra Bar and Cafe, Thamel.
- Special Jam Night with international jazz/funk trio Beja with Yanki and Bar. Desert Moon, 7 December. Bar, 6.30 PM.
- Live Sufi music at Khushbu’s Kitchen, The Organic Bistro, every Friday evening.
- Ciney Gurung: every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408.

DINING
- Steak Escape with premium beef steaks at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Radisson Hotel, until 23 December.
- Saturday Special barbeque, teekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday.
- Weeklong festivities with Bellis Italia on Monday, enchanting Asia on Wednesday and Mongolian BBQ on Friday at the Hotel Himalaya. 7PM.
- BBQ Unlimited at Splash Bar & Grill Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, every Friday 6.30 PM, Rs 899 nett.
- Cocktails and jazz with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion – The Bar at Dwarika’s. 4479448
- Starr Night Barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Ciney Gurung. Rs 660.00 nett per person, at the Shabala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4432612.
- Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841250848.
- BBQ, grated, whisked, cocktials and live music at the Kausi Restaurant and Bar, Darbar Marg, 6218490.
- Pizza from the wood-fired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519.

ABOUT TOWN
- The satellite picture taken in Thursday morning shows a long swath of high-altitude clouds riding the jetstream right across the Arabian Sea approaching from the west. A low pressure trough over central India could drift over Nepal over the weekend. These systems can bring snow flurries over the high valleys, the ensuing cloud cover will bring down the maximum temperature an occasional passing showers in western Nepal. But once this system passes, the temperature in Kathmandu Valley will plummet to lows of 3-4 degrees in the morning with thick fog by night.

WEAKEND WEATHER
by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

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TAKING A PUNT: Enterprising adventurers brave the hazards of the Kosi River in Bhojpur on Monday to float a raft of newly cut bamboo to markets downstream.

CRAFTY GIFT: John Fry, country manager of the British Council in Nepal, presents a book on British arts and crafts to Narayan Khadka for the Kathmandu Valley Public Library on Wednesday. The British Council is transferring its book lending section to Bhrikuti Mandap.

FULL STEAM AHEAD: Children of parents infected with HIV enjoy themselves at Hotel Shangrila during the launch of a new partnership between government and donors.

TROIKA IN THE BLUE ROOM: Pedro Moitinho de Almeida, head of the EU troika delegation (third from left), meets Maoist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai on Wednesday at their office in Budhanagar. Charge d’affairs of the Slovenian Embassy in New Delhi, Miklavz Borstnik, examines a portrait of Stalin on the wall.
The bottom line

It’s when the great revolutionary Lekhnath Neupane appears on the TV show hosted by the openly bisexual Ujju Darling that you know that the Maoists are finally ready for Constituent Assembly elections.

Yes, it took them time. Yes, they held and hawed. But the comrades finally realised they were making asses of themselves by finding excuses not to face the polls. Which is why the Fierce One has been reading the riot act to the YCLs lately.

In a meeting last week in Balaju, he told Comrade Sagar’s Alsatian puppies that if they didn’t behave themselves and didn’t stop harassing people he’d personally spank them on their buttocks. That bottom line really scared the hell out of the ex-gorillas. And then Fearsomeji flew to Biratnagar and told the YCL Local Chapter there he was sick and tired of apologising all the time for their excesses.

“Look at me,” he told them. “During the war I was a healthy man. Now that we have made a successful soft belly-landing you are giving me all this stress.”

Given the kind of pressure that Comrade Chairman had to face in the August plenum from these very same young comrades it took a lot of guts for him to say what he did. But the turning point seems to have come with the ultra-hardliners having finally agreed (with a bit of prodding this week by a fraternal delegation from Mao’s own country) that by trying to put off elections the comrades had only strengthened their enemies. As part of the deal, a new government will be announced and the Maoists are already licking their chops since the defence, home and finance ministries will reportedly be divided up between the Big Three.

The Chairman’s charm offensive went into overdrive this week as the comrades launched what could be the first salvo of their election campaign in front of selected editors by admitting past mistakes, promising to reign in the YCLs, making cooing noises that royals aren’t so bad after all, and even admitting that Uncle Joe had committed grievous errors by killing 20 million Soviets. So, when are they going to stop brandishing Comrade Stalin’s portrait at their mass gatherings? The top comrades have realised they have run out of excuses not to have elections and, besides, the tactic has benefited just about everyone except themselves. So, for the first time the comrades are worried about public opinion and have launched a three-month campaign to win hearts and minds. If they’d only come to that conclusion last year, by now the Maoists would be a formidable political party. But, better late than never.

So Shalaja Di finally got the nod from the Indians for her ambassadorship, but it looks like even Uncle GP has decided she is losing her marbles and has asked Shital Nibas to hold her appointment. The Ass takes no pleasure in being proved right and braying itself hoarse that sending First Niece to Delhi was a bad idea all along. But Sanobuwa himself is not doing too well, and it may be best for him to get out of Kathmandu’s winter smog and retire while he still has a legacy.

Meanwhile, Kingji’s own relatives in India have invited him over for a royal family wedding in January and Girjau has been convinced to be magnanimous and let Gyan go and stretch his legs a bit. May do him some good to exchange notes with Jwaisa’b the Maharajah of Kashmir and Yasho Rajya Lakshmi about how to make a smooth transition from Sri Paunch to just Sri.